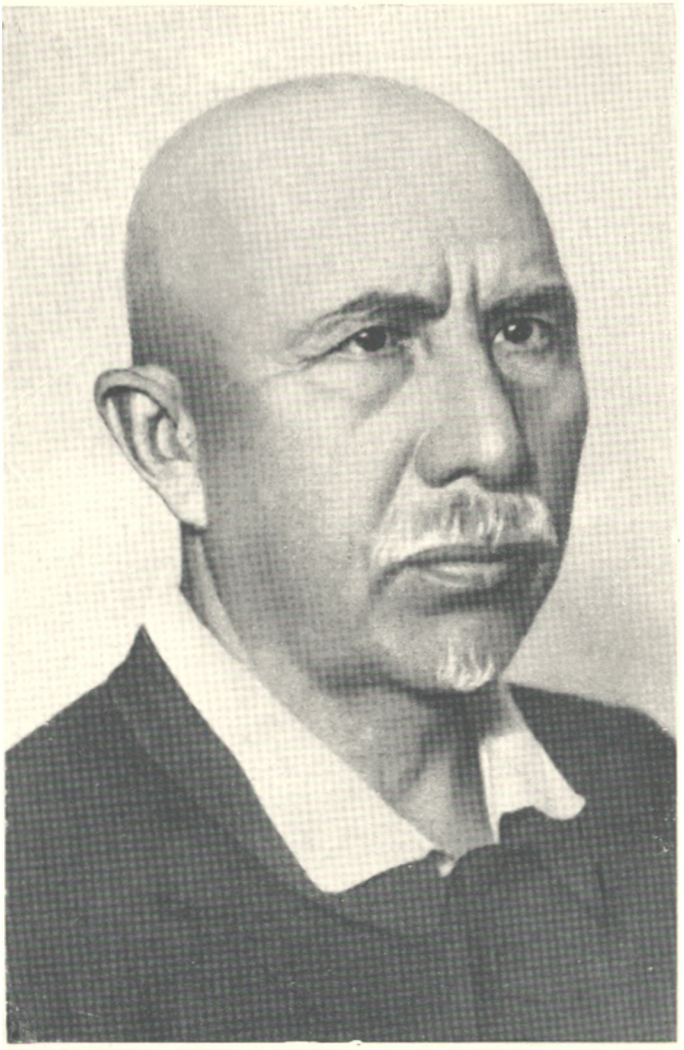
THE IRON FLOOD

THE IRON FLOOD



A. SERAFIMOVICH

THE IRON FLOOD

By

A. SERAFIMOVICH

Translated from the Russian

NEW YORK · 1935

INTERNATIONAL PUBLISHERS

First Published by
Co-operative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the U.S.S.R.

Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

THE IRON FLOOD

THE IRON FLOOD

CHAPTER I

Dense clouds of hot dust enveloped the cossack village, smothering its gardens and cottages, its streets and fences, leaving visible only the sharp, dark tops of the tapering poplars.

From all sides came the din of voices, the barking of dogs and whinneying of horses, the ring and rattle of metal, the crying of children, the rough swearing of men, shouts of women, and hoarse, drunken singing to the accompaniment of an accordion.

Stifling confusion and dust obliterated the steppe to the very windmills on the old Scythian grave mounds; and there, too, rose the same tumult of a many-voiced horde.

Only the river beyond the village, foaming with the cold waters from the mass of blue mountains which blocked half the distant sky, baffled the stifling dust.

Out of the blinding brightness of the day, hawks—brown robbers of the steppe—sailed inquisitively towards the commotion, turning their hooked beaks to right and to left, but making nothing of it, for such a thing had never happened before.

Was it a country fair? Where, then, were the tents and traders with their heaped merchandise?

Could it be a caravan of emigrants? But why the guns and limbers, the army gigs and the stacked rifles?

Was it an army . . . ?

But there were babies crying all over the place. . . .

young mothers suckled them; napkins were hung upon rifles, drying, and cradles swung suspended from the muzzles of guns . . . cows munched hay beside the artillery horses . . . women and girls with tanned faces fixed kettles of millet and suet over the reeky and odorous *kisiak* *. . . .

Confusion, dimness, dust, disorder; all drowned in the tumult and din of voices.

In the village itself there were only cossack wives together with the old women and children. Not one cossack had remained. These had all vanished as if the earth had swallowed them.

And the cossack women, peering out through their little cottage windows on the Sodom and Gomorrah which ran wild in their dust-choked streets and narrow lanes, hissed:

"A curse on their brazen eyes . . . !"

* *Kisiak*—dried dung used as fuel.

CHAPTER II

Above the lowing of the cows, the crowing of cocks, the general hubbub, the voices of the steppe people rang out, hoarse, vibrant:

"Come to the meeting, comrades!"

"Hey, boys . . . hurry up! Over by the windmills!"

As the sun gradually cooled, the hot dust settled and the tapering poplars appeared in their towering grandeur. As far as the eye could see gardens emerged and cottages loomed dimly white; the village streets and lanes were blocked from end to end with carts and *arbas*,* limbers, horses and cows which crowded into the gardens, filling all the space to the very windmills themselves that pointed in all directions with their long, webbed fingers. . . .

And from around the windmills, with a noisy tumult of voices, a sea of people spread out, its edges broken into scattered groups of bronzed faces, old men with grizzled beards, women with worn faces, young girls with merry eyes, boys darting between legs, panting dogs with tongues lolling, all those were drowned in the surging mass of soldiers . . . soldiers in high and shaggy sheepskin hats, crumpled peaked caps, Caucasian felt hats with hanging brims . . . soldiers in ragged tunics, faded print shirts, Circassian coats; some were stripped to the waist, cartridge belts slung crosswise over their bronzed and muscular bodies . . . bayonets bristling above the soldiers' heads.

* *Arba*—hooded two-wheeled cart.

The windmills, dark with age, stared as if struck with amazement; never before had there been such a sight.

On the mounds by the windmills, commanders, battalion and company leaders gathered. Who are these? Tsarist officers who had risen from the ranks, barbers, coopers, carpenters, sailors, fishermen from towns and steppe villages, chiefs of small Red detachments which they had mustered from their own villages, hamlets, streets or farms. There was also among them a sprinkling of regular officers who had gone over to the revolution.

Vorobiev, the broad-shouldered regimental commander whose moustache was half a foot long, climbed upon the turning-beam of one of the windmills and lifted his powerful voice:

"Comrades!"

But his roar seemed puny and insignificant before the thousands of bronzed faces, the thousands of eyes staring at him. The commanding staff clustered around him.

"Comrades . . . !"

"Go to hell!"

"Down with him!"

"The lousy bastard!"

"Hey, boss . . . go to your * * * * mother!"

"Let him speak. . . ."

"Didn't you once wear epaulettes, you traitor?"

"He's just cut them off."

"What are you shouting about?"

"Bash 'em all to hell!"

Over the sea of faces waved a forest of clenched fists. The shouts mingled into a roar.

Close to the windmill stood a short, stocky man, with a square, hard-set jaw. His small, grey, gimlet eyes glittered under his heavy brows as he surveyed the scene, missing

nothing. His squat shadow lay on the ground, the shadow of his head trampled by the feet of his neighbours.

The long-moustached fellow, half-crouching on the beam, again lifted his voice:

"Hear me out, comrades . . .. we must discuss our position. . . ."

"Go to your * * * * mother!"

His voice was drowned in the tumult of oaths.

A woman thrust her bony, toil-worn and sun-scorched arm up amid the tangle of threatening fists; her voice quavered as she screamed:

"Stop your croaking! We won't listen. You horse dung . .. .. ! Ah! I had a cow and a pair of oxen, a cottage and a samovar . . . where are they now . . . ?"

Again the crowd became frenzied, everybody shouting, nobody listening. . . .

"I'd have bread now if I'd had the chance to gather the harvest. . . ."

"They said we must push on towards Rostov."

"Where are the tunics you promised, the *portianki* * and boots?"

The man on the beam shouted:

"Why did you all come flocking along? If you had—"

The crowd became infuriated.

"You're to blame, you bloody swine! You lied to us! Had we all stayed at home our barns would have been full and our houses trim; now we roam the steppe, like a lot of homeless dogs. . . ."

"You made fools of us," the soldiers roared, clutching their rifles threateningly.

* *Portianki*—Russian peasants and soldiers used to wear inside their top boots pieces of coarse cloth which they wound round their feet and legs about half way up their calves.

"Where are we going now?"

"To Ekaterinodar."

"But the Cadets are there!"

"There's nowhere else to go. . . ."

The man by the windmill with the iron jaws and gimlet eyes stood motionless.

A cry of anguish burst from the crowd:

"We're betrayed!"

The cry was caught up and spread far back among the carts, cradles and horses. Those who could not make out the word divined its meaning. A shudder ran through the crowd; it began to breathe heavily. Suddenly the hysterical wail of a woman pierced the air. But no woman had vented it. It came from a little beak-nosed soldier who was stripped to the waist and shod in big, oversized top-boots.

"They sell us like stinking cattle!"

A man with a handsome face and a small black moustache, head and shoulders taller than the rest, wearing a sailor's cap with two short ribbons which fluttered behind his long sunburned neck, began to elbow his way through the crowd. He kept his eyes fixed on the group of commanders and tightly gripped his gleaming rifle.

"Well, we'll put an end to it. . . ."

The man with the iron jaws clenched them still more firmly. But there was anxiety in the look he cast over the tumultuous sea of faces, at the black, howling mouths, the dark red faces, the threatening eyes glowering beneath the lowered brows.

"Where is my wife?" he thought.

The man in the sailor cap with the fluttering ribbons was now quite near, gripping his rifle and steadily staring as if he were afraid of losing sight of his target, working

his elbows as he pushed his way through the dense crowd which pressed against him, swaying as it shouted.

The man with the iron jaws felt particularly bitter; the tall youth had fought shoulder to shoulder with him as a machine-gunner on the Turkish front. Seas of blood . . . thousands of deaths . . . those last months together they had fought the Cadets, cossacks, generals in Eisk, Temriuk, Taman and the Kuban villages.

He unlocked his jaws and spoke in a strong, calm voice which dominated the hubbub and was heard by all:

"You know me, comrades. We shed our blood together. You, yourselves, made me your commander. But, now, if you go on like this, we shall all be done for. Cossacks and Cadets are pressing upon us from every direction. Each hour counts."

He spoke in the Ukrainian language, which disposed the crowd towards him.

"You wore epaulettes!" shrieked the little, half-naked soldier.

"Did I ask for them? You know I fought at the front and the officers shoved them on to me. You know I belong where you belong. Haven't I endured poverty, bent my back under the load of toil, strained like an ox? Haven't I ploughed and sown with you . . . ?"

"That's true!" The words resounded in the wavering din. "He's one of us!"

The tall man in the sailor cap had extricated himself from the crowd. He leaped forward, still with those staring eyes and without a word, swung back his bayonet for the lunge with all his strength, knocking someone behind him with the butt end of his rifle. The man with the iron jaws made no attempt to avoid the blow aimed at him. A

shudder, that was half a smile, rippled his face which had suddenly gone pale, like yellow leather.

But the little, naked soldier had quickly bent his head like a bullock and flung himself against the sailor, striking him under the elbow with his shoulder and shouting:

"None o' that, you fool!"

Jerked aside, the bayonet missed the man with the iron jaws and ran to its socket into the belly of a young battalion commander alongside. He gasped hoarsely like escaping steam and lurched over on his back. The tall man made furious attempts to withdraw his bayonet, the point of which had stuck in the spinal column of his victim.

The company commander, a young man with a hairless, girlish face, grasped an arm of the windmill and began to scramble up, but, with a creak, it swung down and he found himself again on the ground. The others, with the exception of the man with the iron jaws, whipped out their revolvers, despair on their pale, frightened faces.

Other staring, wild-eyed men, tightly gripping their rifles, began to push their way out of the crowd towards the windmills.

"Dogs . . . dogs they are . . . as dogs they'll die!"

"Kill 'em . . . leave none alive to breed their kind. . . ."

Suddenly the tumult ceased. All heads turned, all eyes looked in the one direction.

Across the steppe a black horse galloped, its body stretched into a line close to the stubble. The rider, in a red-dappled shirt, lay with his face in the horse's mane, his arms hanging loosely on either side. The horse approached rapidly, straining desperately, mad with fear, leaving behind it clouds of dust. Clots of white foam

flecked its black chest, its sweating sides were heaving. The rider, his head against the mane, swayed to the rhythm of its hooves.

Then another dark spot appeared in the steppe.

A murmur ran through the crowd:

"Look! another horseman!"

"He's coming hell for leather. . . ."

The black horse galloping towards them, snorting and shedding flecks of white foam, suddenly stumbled and fell to the ground, rolling on its hind legs. The rider in the red-dappled shirt slid over the horse's head like a sack of meal and, flopping with a hollow thump upon the earth, lay there with his arms outstretched and his head at an unnatural angle.

Several ran from the crowd towards the fallen figure, others made for the struggling horse whose black flanks glistened with bloody smears.

"It's Okhrim!" they cried as they reached him. Tenderly they handled the dying man. A long sword wound gaped in his chest and shoulder and in his back was a small black spot of clotted blood.

A chill apprehension seized them; it spread behind the windmills, between the carts, the streets and lanes.

"The cossacks have cut him to pieces!"

"Woe to us!"

"Which Okhrim?"

"You know him . . . the Pavlovsky Okhrim who lives in the hut above the ravine. . . ."

The other horseman galloped up. He was bespattered with blood—his face, his sweat-soaked shirt, his trousers and bare feet. Wide-eyed, he leapt from his quivering horse and flung himself towards the prostrate man whose

face had the waxy translucence of death and over whose eyes the flies were already crawling.

"Okhrim!"

The second horseman knelt quickly and put his ear to the bloody chest of the dead man. Then he rose to his feet and stood over the body bowed with grief.

"My son . . . my little son!"

A muffled, hollow murmur came from the crowd.

"Dead!"

For a while the man did not move. Then, suddenly, he cried aloud in a voice which, although hoarse from exposure, carried to the farthest cottage and amongst the carts:

"Slavansky, Poltavsky and Petrovsky villages have revolted. They have built gallows in the squares before the churches, and they hang everybody they can catch. Cadets have come to Stiblievsky village, stabbing, shooting, hanging . . . hunting everybody, driving them off into the Kuban. They have no mercy on newcomers from other places . . . neither for old men nor women. They treat all alike, declaring them Bolsheviks. Old Opanas who grew melons and whose house stands opposite the place of the old witch, Yavdokha——"

"We know him," the crowd shouted.

". . . Old Opanas begged for mercy . . . crawled on his knees, but they hanged him. And they have plenty of arms. The cossack women and children dig in the orchards and vegetable gardens, hauling out rifles and machine-guns; from the hay-ricks they bring out boxes of ammunition and cartridges . . . hoarded war supplies from the Turkish front. There's no end to what they had hidden. Heavy guns, too. So I was told. They've run amuck. All of Kuban is in flames. They torture those of

us who are in the army, hang us on trees. Some of our detachments are fighting their way through to Ekaterinodar, others to the sea, or to Rostov. All our people are hacked down by cossack swords. . . ."

He was silent again and stood with his head bowed over the body of his son. And in the stillness all eyes were turned upon him.

He swayed, fumbled with his hands; then he seized the bridle of his horse and made to mount it. The beast's sweaty flanks were still heaving heavily, its nostrils distending with spasmodic breathing.

"Here, Pavlo, you're mad! Where are you going . . . ?"

"Stop! Come back, Pavlo!"

"Hold him!"

But Pavlo lashed his horse, which laid back its ears and with outstretched neck went off at full gallop; the long and slanting shadows of the windmills seemed to chase him over the wide expanse of the steppe.

"He's going to his death . . . uselessly!"

"But his family's over there . . . here, his son lies dead. . . ."

The man with the iron jaws said with slow deliberation:

"Now you see for yourselves what's happened. . . ."

The crowd answered grimly:

"Of course, we see. We're not blind."

"You have heard what he said?"

And as grimly as before they answered:

"We heard. What about it?"

The iron jaws went on, grinding like millstones:

"Comrades, now we have nowhere to go. Death awaits us, before us, behind us. Those there"—he nodded towards the now rose-tinted cossack cottages, the abundant orchards, the tall poplars that cast long slanting shadows—

"those there may, perhaps, think to cut throats tonight. Yet we have no sentry, not a single lookout. We have nobody in command. We must retreat. But where to . . . ? First of all, we must reorganize the army. We must elect chiefs. But this time it must be for good and all. Whoever we elect must have the power of life and death over us. There must be iron discipline. That alone can save us. We'll fight our way to our main forces. Then a helping hand can be stretched out to us from Russia. Do you agree . . . ?"

"We agree!" The cry of assent burst out over the steppe, swelling up from among the carts in the streets and by-lanes, from the orchards and through the village to the very outskirts by the river.

"Good. Let us begin the election at once. After that we'll reorganize all our units. The baggage must be separated from the fighting units. Commanders must be appointed to each unit."

"We all agree!" The words rolled of one accord over the steppe.

The slightly hoarse voice of a staid, bearded man rose above the general clamour.

"But where shall we go and what good will come of it? Everywhere is ruin. We have abandoned everything, our cattle, our farms. . . ."

It was like a heavy stone flung into a pond. The crowd paused and murmurs began to run like water rippling in circles.

"And where would you go? Back on your tracks? Do you want us all to be killed?"

The staid, bearded man answered:

"Why should they kill us if we go to them of our own accord and give up our weapons? They are not wild

beasts. The Mokrushinsky peasants have submitted, fifty men of them; they surrendered their arms, rifles and cartridges. The cossacks did not harm a hair of their heads. Today those peasants are ploughing."

"But they were kulaks!"

They turned upon him with flushed, angry faces, shaking their fists and shouting abuse.

"You son of a bitch!"

"The dirty dogs would hang us just the same."

"Who should we plough for?" shrieked the women. "For cossacks and officers . . . ?"

"Do you want to be a slave again?"

"He wants us to be lashed by the cossacks. He wants us to serve officers and generals!"

"Clear off, you traitor, while you're safe!"

"Beat him up! He'd sell his own kith and kin."

The bearded man went on:

"Listen to me, instead of barking like dogs."

"Shut your mouth, windbag!"

Red, angry faces turned to one another, as if to see that they were all equally indignant; eyes flashed, fists were shaken. A blow was struck. Someone was being dragged by the neck to the village. . . .

"Stop that . . . why do you go for me? Let go! I'm not a sheaf of wheat to be dragged about."

The man with the iron jaws intervened.

"Comrades, that's enough. Let him go. We must set to work. We have got to choose a commander. Then he must appoint his staff. Who's your choice?"

For a moment there was utter silence. Then a mass of horny hands went up and a name was spoken. It went like thunder over the steppe, through the village with its endless orchards, beyond the river.

"Kojukh!"

The echo in the blue hills caught it up.

"Uk-ukh!"

Kojukh snapped his iron jaws and saluted, working the muscles of his face. He approached the two dead bodies and took off his dirty straw hat. Following his action, the crowd bared their heads. The women began to weep. Kojukh stood for a moment with his head bowed.

"Let us bury our comrades with honour. Take them up."

Two grey coats were laid on the ground. The tall youth with the sailor's cap and fluttering ribbons approached the body of the battalion commander on whose tunic a wide bloody stain had congealed; silently he bent over him and very carefully, as if afraid of hurting him, lifted him in his arms. Others lifted Okhrim from the ground and the two bodies were borne away.

The crowd opened, giving place to their dead, and then streamed after them in a solemn procession with bared heads, followed by their own long and slanting shadows, which were trampled by those that marched behind.

A youthful and mellow voice intoned sorrowfully:

Though now you have fallen in desperate fight. . . .

Other voices joined in, rough and untrained, out of time and tune, disconnecting and distorting the words. Louder resounded the discordant

. . . Your name shines forth e-ter-nal-ly. . . .

Disjointed and dissonant, it, nevertheless, impressed one with a sadness which was in harmony with the forlornness of the dreaming steppe, the grey, old windmills, the tall poplars, now delicately touched with gold, the white cot-

tages with their endless orchards by which the procession was passing, carrying their dead as if this were the country of their birth, dear and familiar, the place where they had lived and would die.

The blue of the hills deepened.

Granny Gorpino, the woman who had raised in the forest of hands even her bony arm, was mopping with the hem of her shabby skirt her streaming red eyes and her face, in every wrinkle of which the dust had plastered. Shaken with sobs, she crossed herself repeatedly, murmuring:

"Holy Lord, immortal and strong, have mercy upon us. . . . Holy Lord, immortal and strong. . . ."

And in her emotion every now and then she blew her nose in her skirt.

The soldiers marched with a swinging gait, solemnly, with knit brows, the neat dark rows of their bayonets swaying.

You've given your all to break thro' the black night. . . .

The light dust, which had settled with the early evening, rose again in slowly drifting clouds and obliterated all around.

One could now see nothing, could only hear the beat of feet and

"Holy Lord, immortal and strong. . . ."

. . . tortured and jailed you . . . in vain. . . .

The dark, massed mountains, in their night attire, hid from sight the first stars.

Wooden crosses. Some had fallen, others tilted. Heathland, overgrown with scrub, spread indefinitely. An owl flew by silently. Bats flitted hither and thither. Now and

then the gleam of marble with gold lettering showed in the evening dusk, revealing the tombs of prosperous cossacks and merchants, memorials of shrewd, acquisitive lives, of customs that had seemed hard and fast. By these tombs the procession streamed, singing:

. . . rise with new strength out of slavery's shame. . . . .

Side by side two fresh graves were dug. New and fragrant boards were hastily knocked together for coffins. In them the dead bodies were laid.

Kojukh ascended the heap of freshly shovelled earth and bared his head.

"Comrades, our comrades are dead . . . and we must honour them. . . . They died for us. Yes. . . . This is what I want to say. What did they die for? Comrades . . . Soviet Russia is not dead. It will live till the end of time. Comrades, we are in a trap here. Yonder is Soviet Russia and Moscow . . . Russia, where the workers and peasants have the power. That power will settle everything. We are being attacked by the Cadets, that is, by the generals and landlords, by the capitalists, bloodsuckers and scoundrels. To hell with them, we shan't give in! We'll show them our mettle! Comrades, let us throw earth on the coffins of our comrades and swear by their graves to support the power of the Soviets. . . ."

The coffins were lowered. Granny Gorpino, pressing her hand against her mouth, burst into noisy tears, uttering now and then little cries that sounded like the whining of a puppy. Another woman and then another also began to sob. The cemetery was filled with the voices and lamentations of women, who pushed forward and bent over the graves, scooping up earth and throwing it in.

A man whispered into Kojukh's ear:

"How many rounds shall we fire?"

"A dozen."

"That's not much!"

"We are short of cartridges. We must be careful of them."

A thin volley was fired . . . a second . . . a third . . . the flashes lit up for an instant the wooden crosses, the quickly moving spades, the dark faces. . . . Silence ensued, merging into the quietness of the falling night, heavy with the smell of warm dust and filled with the continuous murmur of water which lulled them as in a dream, confusedly reminiscent of something indefinable . . . and beyond the river, the heavy zigzags of the now black mountains lay across the dark sky.

CHAPTER III

The small black windows stared into the darkness; there was something sinister in their aloofness.

The tin lamp, without a chimney and set on a stool, sent quivering coils of black smoke to the ceiling. The air was thick with tobacco smoke. Over the floor was spread a carpet of fantastic design of lines, green and blue stains, black patterns and numberless marks—in fact, a huge map of the Caucasus.

The commanding staff, in beltless shirts and bare feet, crawled over it cautiously on all fours, absorbed in their study of the map. Those who smoked were careful to avoid dropping ashes upon it. Kojukh, his jaws set, his clear, gimlet eyes looking askance, squatted there silently in deep thought. Blue tobacco smoke enveloped the whole group.

Through the windows came the unremitting and threatening murmur of the river.

Although the owners had been ejected from this and the neighbouring cottages, the men spoke in cautious half-whispers.

"We're done for here. No ordinance is obeyed. You can see it."

"You can't do anything with the soldiers."

"Then they'll perish—the cossacks will cut them to pieces."

"They won't move before disaster comes."

"It's damned well come already. The whole neighbourhood's afire."

"But you can't make them see it."

"We must occupy Novorossisk and wait."

"There can't be any question of Novorossisk," said a clean-shaven man in a well-laundered shirt. "I have a report from Comrade Skorniak. It's a hell of a mess there: swarms of Germans, Turks, Mensheviks, Cadets and our revolutionary committee . . . all hold meetings, all discuss and wrangle, call endless conferences, work out thousands of plans to save the situation, and it's all useless talk. To take the army there would hasten its ruin."

A distant pistol shot was heard through the grumbling of the river. The sound was distinct but faint. The dark little windows seemed alert and as if they would express the thought: "things are stirring. . . ."

Those in the room strained their ears to the utmost, but continued outwardly unconcerned, drawing at their cigarettes and following with their fingers the lines on the map.

Notwithstanding the intentness with which they studied the map, they could alter nothing: to the left the blue patch of the sea was like a gateless wall; higher up to the right was a jumble of hostile villages and farms; lower down to the south the way was barred by reddish chains of mountains; it was as if they were in a trap.

There, on the map, was the turbulent, winding river which grumbled through the little black windows. In the ravines, reedy marshes, forests, steppes, in all the farms and villages shown on the map, cossacks were prowling. Hitherto, uprisings in the separate villages and farms had been more or less successfully suppressed. But now the flames of revolt had enveloped the whole of the vast Kuban. The Soviet power was swept away; its representatives in the farms and villages had been done to death,

and the gallows stood as thick as gravestones in a cemetery. Every Bolshevik—most of whom had come from other places—was hanged. True, some of them had been local cossacks. But all, without distinction, had been killed. Where could one retreat? Where could one find safety?

"It's obvious that we must make for Tikhoretzkaia, from there to Sviatoy Krest, and from there again we'll get into Russia."

"Sviatoy Krest, you blockhead! How will you reach it through the rebel Kuban, without cartridges or shells?"

"We must join our main forces. . . ."

"But where are our main forces? If you've had a message, say so. . . ."

"My firm opinion is that we should occupy Novorossisk, and then wait there for reinforcements from Russia."

Underlying the words of each was the implication that had he been entrusted with the command he would have worked out a sure plan for saving everyone. . . .

Another distant shot was heard above the rumble of the river; then followed two shots, then one again, and suddenly, a whole burst of them, followed by silence.

All turned their heads to the little black windows. A cock crowed from behind a nearby wall.

"Comrade Prikhodko," said Kojukh, "go and see what's happening."

A sparely built young Kuban cossack with a good-looking, slightly pock-marked face, his narrow waist tightly belted over his long Tatar coat, went out cautiously on his bare feet.

"What I say is—"

"Pardon me, comrade," cut in the clean-shaven man. He was standing and looked down calmly on the other officers, all of them soldiers of peasant origin, coopers, carpenters, hairdressers and the like who had risen from

the ranks during the war, whereas he had had military training. "It's impossible to lead troops reduced to the state ours are in; they are not troops but gangs, continually holding meetings. It's imperative to reorganize them. Besides, all these thousands of refugee carts bind us hand and foot. They must be separated from the army—let them go where they like, return to their homes, anywhere . . . but the army must be free and untrammelled. Therefore, I propose that we draft an ordinance to say we are stopping in this village two days for the purpose of reorganization."

Underlying his words was the thought:

"I possess wide knowledge, I can combine theory with practice, I have studied military matters from an historical angle. Crowds are blind, ever ready to. . . ."

"What are you talking about?" said Kojukh in a rusty voice. "Each soldier has relatives in the baggage train, either his mother, father, sweetheart or whole family. D'you think he'll leave them? If we stay here and wait we'll die by the cossack swords. We must go on and on. We shall reorganize on the march. We must pass the town quickly without stopping and keep to the coast. We'll reach Tuapse, follow the highroad across the mountains and rejoin our main forces. They can't have gone far. Each day here means death."

Then all spoke at once, each offering a suggestion which seemed brilliant to himself and futile to the rest of them.

Kojukh rose to his feet. The muscles of his face worked as he glanced piercingly at his audience.

"We march tomorrow . . . at dawn," he said.

But behind his decision was the thought: they won't obey, the devils!

They became silent and their silence said:

"What can one expect of a fool?"

CHAPTER IV

Alexey Prikhodko stepped out of the cottage into the darkness which resounded with the tumult of the water. At the door stood a black, stubby machine-gun. Beside it were two black figures with fixed bayonets.

Prikhodko moved on, peering around. The night was heavy with oppressive clouds. From all sides came the tireless barking of dogs. Anon these would stop, as if listening to the tumult of the river, and then start anew, obstinately, exasperatingly.

The cottages loomed mysteriously, dimly white. The streets were black with cumbrous shapes. If you looked intently at them they turned out to be carts, from which came sounds of snoring and heavy breathing. Prostrate forms lay everywhere. A dark poplar seemed to lower in the middle of the street . . . or a church steeple—but it was only the raised shaft of some cart. Horses munched in a measured, lazy fashion; the cows breathed heavily.

Alexey stepped over the sleepers cautiously, seeing his way by the glow of his cigarette. All was quiet and peaceful. Nevertheless, he felt tensely expectant. Maybe he awaited another distant rifle shot . . . maybe two shots in quick succession . . . ?

"Who's there?"

"Friend."

"Who's there . . . devil take you!"

Two hardly discernible bayonets touched his arms.

„Company commander," he said and then bending forward he whispered:

"Gun-carriage."

"Correct."

"Response?"

One of the soldiers, tickling Alexey's ear with his wiry moustache, and breathing upon him a strong smell of spirits, whispered hoarsely: "Tether."

Alexey resumed his way amidst the vague cart shapes, the champing horses and heavy sleepers, the tumult of the water and the insistent barking of dogs, carefully stepping over arms and legs. Here and there from a cart he heard wakeful soldiers talking with their wives and, from beneath the fences, suggestive bursts of laughter or suppressed giggling of sweethearts.

"Having a good time, the rascals, no matter how drunk. Gulped all the cossacks' booze, I'll bet. That's all right if they keep their heads. . . . How is it that the cossacks haven't slaughtered us all? Because they're fools . . . !" He could discern something white nearby . . . a narrow hut . . . perhaps, a piece of white cloth.

". . . not too late for them to do it now. We have about ten cartridges apiece, and perhaps fifteen shells to every gun, whereas they. . . ."

The white object stirred.

"Is that you, Anka?"

"Why are you roaming about in the night?"

A black horse was champing at hay strewn over some shafts. . . . Alexey began to roll a fresh cigarette. The girl, steadying herself against a cart, scratched her bare leg with her toe. From a horse blanket spread under the cart came deep snoring—the girl's father was plunged in sleep.

"Are we going to stay here long?"

"No, we're moving very soon," answered Alexey, drawing at his cigarette.

Its glowing end lit up a fraction of his nose, the tips of his tobacco-stained fingers; it lit up momentarily the girl's sparkling eyes, her strong neck rising above the white shirt and strings of glass beads; then darkness closed in again with the uncouth silhouettes of carts, the breathing of the cows, the champing of horses and the noise of the river. Why didn't that rifle pop. . . .

"It would be easy to marry this girl," he thought.

And immediately, as always, he saw in his mind's eye the neck, delicate and smooth as a flower, of an unknown girl, her blue eyes, her flimsy bluish frock . . . graduated from high-school . . . not his wife but his betrothed . . . a girl he had never met, a girl who must exist somewhere. . . .

"If the cossaks pounce upon us, I'll stab myself through the heart."

She plunged her hand into her bosom and produced a dimly glittering object.

"It's sharp . . . you try it. . . ."

Ti-li-li-li-li.

One of the ravishing sounds of night: it pulled at your heartstrings, but it was not the cry of an infant; probably an owl.

"Well, I must be pushing on; no good wasting time here." But his feet seemed to have taken root; he could not tear himself from the spot. To compel himself to move away he began to disparage the girl:

"She's like a cow, scratching her ear with her hind foot."

But that didn't help; he remained standing there, drawing at his cigarette . . . and again from the darkness

appeared a fraction of her nose, her fingers, her strong neck with a slight hollow, glass beads . . . youthful breasts giving shape to her white embroidered shirt . . . and then again darkness, the noise of the river, human breathing.

His face was close to her eyes. Their sparkle stung him, ran over him like needles. He caught hold of her elbow.

"Anka!"

She smelt the tobacco on him and sensed his strong, young body.

"Anka, let's go to the orchard and sit together a little. . . ."

Pressing both her hands against his chest she jerked herself away from him with such violence that he staggered back, stepping on somebody's arms and legs. Her white form whisked into the creaky cart and then came a short, challenging laugh that died quickly. Granny Gorpino raised her head from her pillow, sat upright in the cart and began to scratch herself vigorously.

"You night bird! I wish you'd settle down to sleep. Who's there?"

"It's me, granny."

"Ah, Aloshenko! What do you want? I didn't know it was you, sonny. Oh, our life is bad. Our cup is bitter. My heart scents evil. When we started, first thing a cat ran across the road. Such a huge cat, pregnant she was. And then a rabbit scurried after her. God have mercy on us! What do the Bolsheviks think they are up to? All our property is lost. When my parents married me to my old man my mother said 'Here's a samovar for you, keep it as the apple of your eye for your children and grandchildren to have when you are dead.' I was thinking of giving it to Anka when she married. And now we've abandoned everything, all our hard-earned goods. What

do the Bolsheviks think they're doing? What's the Soviet power going to do? Let it vanish as my samovar has vanished! 'Turn out for three days,' they said, 'and after three days you may all come back again!' And here we are knocking about for a whole week, like lost souls. What kind of power is this Soviet power that can't do anything for us? A dog's power! The cossacks have risen, like the devils they are! My heart aches for my people, for Okhrim . . . he was so young. . . . Oh, dear Lord!"

Granny Gorpino went on scratching herself. In the pauses of her lament, the mumbling of the river filled the vastness of the night.

"Ah! granny, no use grumbling. That won't bring you luck."

He drew at his cigarette, pre-occupied with his own thoughts. He would remain at the head of his company or with the staff of headquarters. But where, in these circumstances, would he meet the blue-eyed, slender-necked girl?

Granny wasn't to be quieted easily. She had behind her a long life, and she was miserable. She had lost two sons on the Turkish front, and now the other two were in the army, handling rifles. Her old man was snoring under the cart and that flibbertigibbet of an Anka was now as still as a mouse . . . asleep, perhaps, but who could tell? Oh, life was hard! It had strained all the sinews of her body, nigh sixty years old. And the old man, and her sons . . . how they had bent their backs, toiling and toiling! For whose benefit, she'd like to know? For the cossacks and their generals and officers. . . . Oh desolation! They had worked with their eyes fixed on the soil, like oxen. Daily, in the morning and at night, she had mentioned the

tsar in her prayers—her parents first, then the tsar, then her children and then all Christians of the orthodox faith. And he was no tsar after all, only a grey dog, so they kicked him out. . . . Oh, the desolation of it; she had trembled in every fibre, had been terrified when she heard the tsar had been kicked out, and then she had thought that it served him right—he was a dog, a mere dog. . . .

"There's swarms of fleas in this beastly place. . . ."

Granny grumbled and peered into the darkness. The river roared. She made the sign of the cross.

"It will soon be morning."

She lay down again, but sleep had abandoned her. So long as one is alive, there's something hovering over one, something that cannot be evaded. There it is, silent, seeming to disappear, but it always comes back. . . .

"The Bolsheviks don't believe in God. . . . Well, maybe they know what they're about. They came and overthrew everything. The officers and landowners ran away quick enough. That made the cossacks wild. Oh Lord, grant the Bolsheviks strength . . . never mind their disbelief in heaven. After all they're not pagans. If they'd turned up sooner there wouldn't have been this accursed war and my two sons would have been alive. . . . Now they sleep in Turkish soil. . . . Where did these Bolsheviks come from? Some say they were bred in Moscow, others say in Germany: the German tsar bred them and sent them against Russia. And when they came everybody cried in one voice: 'the land must belong to the people and the people must work for themselves and not for the cossacks.' They are good men . . . but why did I have to lose my samovar . . . ?"

Granny's mumbling faded away and ceased. She had dozed off.

Dawn was approaching.

* * *

Life is full of variety. You'd have thought doves were cooing. But why should doves coo in the night under a cart by the fence; why should they make bubbles with a tiny mouth? "vvvva-va" and "uv-vv-va. . . ." But it sounded delightfully sweet to somebody! And, in fact, the rich, mellow voice of a young mother also cooed:

"What is it, my precious little flower? Well, have some more. Why do you turn away? You know the trick. Raise your head a little and put your tongue under mummy's nipple. . . ."

She gave such a happy and catching laugh that light seemed to break in the darkness around. One could not see her; but one visualized her black eyebrows and the dimly glittering silver earrings in her small ears.

"Had enough? Is that so, Tiny One? Oh, he's in a temper! Slaps mummy's breast with his little hand. And his nails are like tissue paper. Let me kiss every rosy finger! *Tck*—one and *tck*—there's another; then, a third *tck!* Oh! what big bubbles he's making. Sure he'll be a great man. And mummy will be old, and toothless and her son will say: 'Well, granny, sit at the table and I'll give you kasha and *salomata* *. . . . Stepan, Stepan, you've slept enough! Wake up . . . your son is wide awake. . . ."

"Don't do that! . . . leave off . . . let me be. . . ."

"Stepan . . . you must wake up. Your son is wide awake! Now . . . clumsy! Here, I'm putting your son at your side. Have a go at him, little son, pull his nose, and

* *Salomata*—Ukrainian dainty.

his lip. . . . That's it . . . fine! Your father hasn't yet had the wit to grow a beard for you to play with, so tug at his lip, tug away. . . ."

And a man's voice, sleepy at first, then joyous and suggestive of smiles, began to speak in the dark.

"There, little son, lie here beside me. We've no time to play with women, we two serious men. We'll go to the war together; then, together, we'll till the good earth . . . hoo! Look at you! What d'ye mean by that deluge . . .?"

The young mother burst into an inexpressibly merry laugh.

* * *

Prikhodko went on, cautiously stepping over human legs, wagon shafts, horse-collars, sacks. Now and then his cigarette glowed brightly as he drew at it.

Everything was quiet. Darkness reigned. Even the little family under the cart by the fence slumbered. The dogs were silent. The river rumbled on, but more sedately, as if from a distance. Sleep, the invincible, ruled the breathing of the thousands of soldiers and refugees.

Prikhodka continued his round, no longer alert for rifle shots. His eyes were heavy. Already the rugged outline of the mountains was faintly discernible in the sky.

"It's usually at dawn that attacks begin. . . ."

He turned back, reported to Kojukh, then groped for a cart and scrambled into it. The cart creaked and swayed. He wished to think, but of what should he think? He closed his heavy eyes for a moment and at once fell into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER V

Clatter of iron, clanking, crashing, cries. . . .

Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat. . . .

"What's up . . . what's the matter? Hold on! What's that flaring in the sky? Is it a fire? Is it the dawn?"

"First company . . . at the double . . . quick march!"

Rooks swarmed in the blazing sky chorusing their alarm.

The hurried harnessing of the horses had begun in the twilight before dawn broke, the thrusting on of collars, the hasty tying of the *dugas.**

Refugees and the men of the baggage train got into each other's way and swore savagely.

Boom! Boom!

The harnessing went on feverishly; hubs collided, horses were whipped up and the caravan set off at a reckless speed, with ill-adjusted wheels, across the bridge; every moment carts locked together and blocked the traffic.

Rat-tat-tat-tat . . . boom . . . boom!

The artillerymen frantically hooked the traces to the limbers. A little pop-eyed soldier wearing only a short tunic ran by with bare hairy legs, trailing two rifles and crying:

"Where's my company? Where's my company?"

Behind him in pursuit a bare-headed, dishevelled woman screamed after him:

* *Dugas*—a high wooden arch which connects and holds rigid the two shafts of Russian vehicles.

"Vasil! Vasil! Vasil!"

Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat . . . boom!

It had begun in earnest; over the trees and cottages at the end of the village burst huge columns of smoke. The cattle were bellowing.

Had the night gone? A moment ago thousands of people slumbered in the tepid darkness with the river rushing and the black mountains lying invisibly on the edge of the world. These had become blue, then rose coloured. But they were negligible now, unheeded like the rumbling of the river which was drowned in the feverish activity, the clatter and bustle, the creaking of baggage carts and that rolling *rat-tat-tat-tat* which put anxiety and qualms of fear into every heart. And even this became puny and futile beside the roar of the heavy guns.

Boom-bla-a-ach!

Kojukh sat before a hut. His sallow face was calm; as if someone were preparing to leave by train: all about him was bustle and hurry; presently the train would pull out and everything would be quiet again, calm and commonplace. Each moment people ran to him or galloped up on foam-flecked horses with reports. His adjutant and orderlies stood beside him, awaiting commands.

As the sun rose higher the rifle and machine-gun fire became intense. To all reports he gave the one answer:

"Don't waste your cartridges. Fire only when you must. Let the enemy approach, and when he is near enough, rush at him. On no account let him penetrate into the gardens. Detach two companies from the first regiment and recapture the windmills. Station machine-guns."

Most of the reports were alarming. But his sallow face remained stolid, save that the muscles of his jaws knotted under the leathery skin. A voice within him seemed to

say cheerfully: "That's fine, my boys . . . fine!" Perhaps in an hour . . . or less . . . the cossacks would break through and begin slashing with their swords. Yes, that was the possibility . . . but he saw, too, how obediently, how promptly, all his orders were carried out, how valorously the battalions and companies were fighting which yesterday had been more like a mob of anarchists, roaring songs, who didn't give a damn for their commanders, who busied themselves only with drinking and women; he saw with what precision the commanders executed his orders, the same commanders who had been unanimous in their contempt of him overnight.

A soldier whom the cossacks had taken prisoner and then set free was brought to him. The soldier's ears, nose, tongue and fingers had been cut off and on his chest was written in blood:

"This is how we shall treat all you Bolshevik swine!"

"That's fine, my boys . . . fine!" the voice within Kojukh seemed to repeat.

The cossacks attacked furiously.

Then a breathless messenger from the rear reported:

"They're fighting at the bridge . . . the baggage train and the refugees. . . ."

Kojukh's tanned face went as yellow as a lemon. He hurried to the spot. It was pandemonium. In a frenzied congestion at the approach to the bridge people were hacking with axes at the wheels of one another's carts, falling upon each other with poles and whips; roars, imprecations, shrieks, the dirge-like wailing of women, the whimpering of infants; the bridge itself was blocked with carts locked together, snorting horses, trapped people and children moaning and crying in anguish . . . unable to go

either back or forward . . . and from behind the orchards came the menacing *rat-tat-tat-tat*. . . .

"S-t-o-p! . . . Stop!" roared Kojukh in a voice that grated like iron. But nobody in the mob heard him. He shot the nearest horse in the ear. The peasants turned upon him savagely with their poles.

"You devil's bastard! Kill our horses, would you! Bash him, kick him!"

Kojukh with his adjutant and two soldiers retreated to the river, poles swishing through the air above their heads.

"Bring a machine-gun," he ordered hoarsely.

The adjutant slipped like an eel under carts and the bellies of horses. Presently a machine-gun and a platoon of soldiers came running up.

The peasants roared like wounded bulls.

"Go for them!" they cried, attacking viciously with their poles, trying to knock the rifles from the hands of the soldiers who, unable to shoot at their own people, began to use their butt-ends to good purpose.

Kojukh, agile as a cat, leapt to the machine-gun, adjusted it and fired several bursts over the mob. The deadly rattling of the gun terrified the peasants and they fell back.

Kojukh left the gun and began to abuse the peasants at the top of his voice. They submitted to his authority. Some carts were inextricably locked together on the bridge; he ordered them thrown into the river. They obeyed. He posted a platoon of soldiers at the approach to the bridge and the adjutant began sending the carts across in some semblance of order.

They raced over the bridge, three abreast with the cows tied behind, skipping and tossing their heads; pigs, squealing and straining on their leads, broke into a panicky

gallop; the planks of the bridge rose and fell, clattering like the keyboard of a stringless piano; the hullaballoo of it all drowned the roar of the river, the turbulent waters of which flashed blindingly under the high sun.

Over the bridge and beyond the river the baggage carts hurried, smothered in clouds of dust. The squares, streets and lanes of the village gradually emptied till the place began to look abandoned.

The cossacks surrounded the village in a wide semicircle both ends of which rested on the river. Steadily they pressed in, drawing closer to the village orchards and to the baggage train which continuously rattled over the bridge. The soldiers fought resolutely, defending every foot of land, defending their children, fathers, mothers. They used their cartridges sparingly; each shot they fired made orphans of cossack children and brought sorrow to a cossack family.

The cossacks drew nearer and nearer, reaching the orchards, appearing from behind trees, fences, bushes. The soldiers, saving their cartridges, caused a lull in the fighting; they lay under cover watching the cossacks and being watched by them; sniffing the air they recognized the odour of vodka which was wafted over to them from the cossack lines.

"They've got booze, the dirty dogs . . . gallons of it!"

Suddenly a voice in which joyful excitement mingled with beastly hatred burst from the cossack lines:

"Look there, if that's not Khomka!"

A string of bitter cossack oaths followed.

And from behind a tree, in utter disregard of caution, stepped a young cossack, his eyes staring wide with surprise and disgust. His exact counterpart crawled out from the soldiers' ranks.

"So it's you, Vanka!" the young soldier cried, with as good an admixture of curses.

They belonged to the same village and street. Their cottages stood door to door under big willows. In the morning, when the cows were taken to pasture, their mothers met by the fence and gossiped. It was but a few years since they had been small boys together, galloping along the lanes astride sticks, catching crawfish in the sparkling Kuban river, bathing endlessly together, singing the delightful Ukrainian songs with the girls . . . then they had been mobilized together, and under a hail of exploding shells had desperately fought the Turks. . . .

And now . . . ?

The youthful cossack cried:

"What are you doing here, you dirty rat? Why have you joined the Bolsheviks, you bare-bellied bandit?"

"I'm a bandit, am I, you bastard? Your father was a rotten skinflint and you are a filthy louse."

"I'm a louse, am I, you . . . !"

Flinging down his rifle he rushed forward with clenched fists and landed a mighty punch on Khomka's nose. Khomka swung his arm savagely and closed one of Vanka's eyes.

"Ugh . . . son of a bitch! Take that . . . !"

They gripped each other and went at it strenuously.

The cossacks began to roar and stamp like bulls; they hurled themselves forward with clenched fists and bestial eyes, their breath stinking with vodka. The soldiers, catching the infection of the fury, discarded their rifles and, jumping from cover, met them fist for fist . . . as if they had never set eyes on fire-arms. . . .

And, what a fury of a fight! Bashed faces, broken noses, heavy punches on the throat, on the jaw . . . crunching

bones . . . gasping, grunting, cursing . . . a mass of punching, struggling, interlocked men. . . .

The cossack officers and the commanders of the soldiers, hoarse from shouting curses, ran hither and thither with revolvers in vain attempts to separate the fighters and make them take up their rifles again; the officers dared not shoot into the mêlée of their own and alien men.

"Drunken dogs," bawled the soldiers. "You need more than vodka to beat us. . . ."

"Peasant swine! Vodka's too good for you!" yelled the cossacks, with filthy allusions to the soldiers' parentage.

And they pounced upon one another in a frantic grip. Their mutually savage hatred would brook nothing between them and their foes; they wanted the immediate physical contact of their traditional enmity, exulting in the possibility of kneading, throttling, punching; the feel of flesh under their fists, of a squashed, bleeding face. . . .

Like wildcats they fought, hour after hour, hammering, pulping, choking, yelling curses. Darkness took them unawares. Two soldiers, writhing together, groaning and swearing, slackened their grip for a moment and each peered into the face of his adversary.

"It's you, Oponas! Why the hell are you hitting me?"

"Christ, Mikolka! I thought you were a cossack. You've bashed my face in, you damned lunatic!"

Mopping their bleeding faces and swearing in disgust they both went back to cover and began to hunt for their rifles.

Near them two cossacks, wrestling and muttering, had fought like devils, alternately sitting on each other's backs. Finally they caught sight of each other's faces.

"What the hell you doing . . . riding on me like I was a gelding?"

"I didn't know it was you, Garaska! Why didn't you speak?"

They, too, mopped their faces and retired to the cossack rear. At last the battle of fists died out and one could again hear the rushing river and the drumming of the planks of the bridge under the endless passage of the baggage carts. Overhead the dark edges of the clouds were shot with faint crimson from the western sky. The soldiers lay in rows along the orchards; outside, in the steppe, circled the cossack lines. All were silent and sore, bandaging swollen and disfigured faces.

The rumbling on the bridge and the tumult of the water continued. The village was cleared before dawn. When the last squadron had passed over its resounding planks, the bridge was sent up in flames. From the village volleys of rifle and machine-gun fire were poured after the disappearing soldiers.

CHAPTER VI

Along the village streets the cossacks marched, swinging the skirts of their long, tightly belted Tatar coats and singing. Their shaggy, black sheepskin caps were decked with white ribbons. Their faces were extraordinary; one had a purple swelling where his eye should be; his neighbour's nose was a raw and bleeding lump, another had an enormous cheek and unsightly swollen lips. Not a face among them was undamaged or unbruised.

Nevertheless, they trooped along merrily in crowds, kicking up eddies of dust with their sturdy feet and singing in time with their steps:

If we had not wished to
Rise in the revolt—

Their rich, sonorous voices rang through the village and orchards, beyond the orchards, soaring over the steppe:

We'd have lost forever
The Ukraine. . . .

Cossack women ran out to meet them, each looking for her man and joyously rushing to him or, suddenly, wringing her hands, drowning the song in shrieks. Here and there an old mother fell in a fit, beating the ground with her head and tearing her hair. Powerful arms lifted these up and carried them into their cottages.

Rise in the revolt. . . .

Cossack children came skipping along, crowds of them. Where on earth had they come from? Nobody had seen anything of them for days. They shouted:

"Daddy! Daddy!"

"Uncle Mikola! Uncle Mikola!"

"The Reds have eaten our bull-calf."

"I knocked out the eye of a soldier with my shot gun. He was drunk and sleeping in our orchard."

Other campers, very different from those of yesterday and welcome to the inhabitants, filled the village streets and lanes. Small, out-door cooking stoves for summer use steamed in all the yards. The cossack women had much to do. The cows hidden in the steppe were driven back; domestic fowl appeared. Roasting and stewing was in full swing.

On the river bank feverish activity developed; resounding axe-blows drowned the rumbling of the water and sent white chips flying in all directions and flashing in the sun: the cossacks were working feverishly on the new bridge to replace the one burnt down; over it they would rush after the enemy.

Neither was the village idle. New cossack units were being formed. Officers walked about, notebook in hand. Clerks sat at tables in the middle of the street and compared lists. The roll was called.

The cossacks quietly regarded the officers as they strolled by, their shoulder straps glittering in the sun. Not so long ago—six or seven months—things had been very different: in the market place, in the streets and lanes of the village, officers like these had been lying dead, their straps torn from their shoulders, their bodies like butcher's meat. Those hiding at the farms, in the steppe and the ravines, had been brought to the village and mercilessly beaten, and after that left for days dangling from trees, food for the ravens.

That was a year ago when the great conflagration swept over all Russia to the Turkish front itself.

And who started it . . . ?

Nobody could tell. Unknown Bolsheviks had suddenly turned up. And it had been as if a film was removed from people's eyes. They had seen all at once that which for ages they had been unable to see, but nevertheless had been keenly aware of—the generals, officers, judges, chiefs, the big army of officials and the intolerable, ruinous military service. Each cossack had had to equip his sons for military service at his own expense; after buying a horse, saddle, rifle and equipment for three or four sons, he was ruined. Things were otherwise for peasants. They had gone to the wars empty handed and had been given all they needed, equipped from head to foot. The mass of cossacks had grown steadily poorer, dividing into layers, the well-to-do cossacks rising to the top, gaining in strength and influence, the others gradually sinking lower.

* * *

The high sun burned strongly over the land which shimmered in a blaze of heat.

"There is no land so beautiful as ours," said the people.

There was a blinding sheen on the shallow sea. Small green ripples lazily lapped the coast sands. The sea teemed with fish.

Beyond the shallows stretched the illimitable and bottomless expanse which mirrored the radiant blue sky. It sparkled intensely under the sun, making one's eyes ache. Far away on the blue horizon rose tufts of smoke, smoke from long black steamers which came to buy corn and carried the money to pay for it.

Mighty snow-capped mountains bordered the sea, deep blue mountains with age-old crevices.

The endless mountain forests, ravines and valleys, the plateau and ridges were alive with creatures of the wild, bird and beast, even to the rare aurochs which makes its home only in this terrain.

The corroded and riddled bowels of these great mountains yield copper, silver, zinc, lead, cement. All manner of riches. Oil oozes like dark blood from the earth; brooks and streams are irridescent with a delicate spreading film of oil and carry the odour of petrol.

Wonderland of riches. . . .

From the mountains and the sea stretch the steppes, so vast that they seem without limit or boundaries.

"They have no end, no confines!"

The waving silken wheat is endless, endless the green hayfields, the green reeds over the marshes. The villages, hamlets and farms wreathed in orchards, make bright white patches in the endless green sea. Tall tapering poplars reach towards the hot skies above them and on the Scythian grave mounds that quiver in the heat the old windmills stretch out their grey sails.

Herds of motionless, closely packed sheep dot the steppe with grey; over them hums a frail swarm of flies and midges.

Cattle, stand knee-deep in the crystal lakes of the steppes, indolently reflected in them. Horses trail in the ravines, tossing their manes.

And over all hangs the languid, insistent heat.

The heads of the horses that thrust along the roads drawing carriages are protected by straw hats, else they would be stricken by the sun's deadly glare. Such in-

cautious people as go bare-headed drop with purple faces and glazed eyes into the hot dust of the road. . . .

When, drawn by six or eight oxen with sharp, curved horns, the heavy ploughs cut furrows in the illimitable steppe, the rich and fertile soil which the glistening shares turn seems more like black butter than earth. It looks good enough to eat. No matter how deep the shares may dig, they never reach clay; always they turn over the incomparable, unique black soil, the like of which is to be found nowhere else. And the fertility of it is abounding. A playing child sticks into this earth some discarded rod; and, lo, it sprouts, it becomes a tree, crowned with waving branches! The abundant fruits of it—grapes, melons, apricots, tomatoes, eggplant, are beyond compare, no fruits match the size of them, they are incredible, supernatural.

Clouds swell up over the mountain tops, loom over the steppe, burst into beneficent rain which the black earth drinks thirstily; and the sun pours down and draws forth a prodigious harvest,

"There is no land so beautiful as ours!"

And, who are the lords of this beautiful country?

The Kuban cossacks own it. And they have labourers, as numerous as themselves, labourers who likewise sing Ukrainian songs and speak Ukrainian as their native tongue.

These two peoples are blood brothers—both came from the lovely Ukraine.

The cossacks came not of their own will; the tsarina Katka * drove them here a hundred and fifty years ago. She dissolved the free cossacks' settlement of Zaporozhye

* Catherine II.

and gave them this, at that time, a savage and fearsome region. Her gift brought bitterness and sorrow to the cossacks, homesick for their Ukraine. Yellow fever crept out of the reedy bogs and sucked pitilessly at the life of both the old and the young. The predatory Circassians received the unwilling newcomers with sharp daggers and unerring bullets. Day and night, thinking of their birthplace on the Dneiper, the cossacks wept bloody tears and fought against the yellow fever, against Circassians and the savage soil whose age-old expanse, hitherto untrod by man, they even lacked the implements to till.

And now—now?

"There is no land so beautiful as ours."

And now all hands itched for this land brimming over with incredible riches. Driven by necessity, the poor and the naked trailed with their children and miserable belongings from the Kharkov, Poltava, Ekaterinoslav and Kiev governments, scattered in the cossack settlements, snapped their teeth like hungry wolves at the sight of the wonderful land.

Easy, friends! This land is not for you!

These immigrants became the hired labourers of the cossacks and were called "aliens." The cossacks oppressed them in every imaginable way, did not admit their children to cossack schools, drove them like slaves. They charged them exorbitantly for the land, for their cottages and orchards, for the lease of fields, put upon their shoulders the burden of the whole community's expenses, contemptuously called them "devil's souls," "Satan's offal," "filthy intruders" and the like.

Grimly resolute the landless "aliens" turned to every sort of craft and industry; they were resourceful, eager for knowledge and culture, hankered after schools and re-

paid the cossacks in their own coin, calling them "kulaks" and "nightbirds." Hatred and contempt between them was mutually bitter and the tsarist government, the generals, officers and landlords, eagerly fanned the flames of this animal hostility.

A beautiful country, smouldering with hatred, contempt, malignity.

But not all cossacks and not all aliens nursed this hostile attitude. Those aliens who had conquered necessity and want by dint of acumen, perseverance and relentless toil became respectable in the eyes of the rich cossacks. They leased cossack mills and many rich acres of cossack land. They had hinds of their own, drawn from among the poor aliens, they had money in the bank and traded in corn. They were honoured by those cossacks who lived in houses with iron roofs and whose barns were bursting with corn.

Ravens do not peck out one another's eyes.

* * *

Cossacks in long-skirted Circassian coats and with their shaggy fur caps pushed back rakishly from their foreheads, galloped along the village streets, the hooves of their horses scattering the deep liquid mud. They whooped and whistled shrilly, fired shots into the blue spring sky. Was it a holiday? Church bells sent their happy ringing over the villages, farms and settlements. The population, both cossack and alien, was in holiday attire; all the girls and children, all the grey old men and the toothless old women with shrunken mouths poured out into the joyous streets.

Could it be Easter? No, the people were not celebrating a church feast. This was a human feast, the first of its

kind in the long ages. The first since the creation of the world.

Down with war!

Cossacks embraced one another, they embraced aliens. Aliens embraced cossacks. There were no longer either cossacks or aliens—only *citizens*. There were no longer "kulaks" nor "devil's offal." All were citizens.

Down with war!

In February the tsar had been driven away. Then, in October, in far-off Russia, something else had happened. What it was nobody could tell exactly, but it was something which had gone deep into every heart. . . .

Down with war!

Deep into the heart and instinctively understood.

Regiment after regiment streamed back from the Turkish front: cossack cavalry, dense battalions of cossacks, infantry regiments of aliens, briskly marching, the mounted artillery rumbling; all poured back in a continuous stream to their homes in the Kuban, to the familiar villages, taking along with them their arms, supplies and equipment, baggage trains; on their way they raided and demolished distilleries and stores, drank themselves insensible, were drowned in seas of spirits, were burnt alive in conflagrations. Those who remained whole pushed on determinedly to their villages and farms.

In Kuban the Soviet power had already been proclaimed. Into Kuban swarmed workers from the towns and sailors from sunken ships, who made everything clear and convincing to the population: they explained what "landlords" and "bourgeois" and "atamans" meant, how the tsarist government had sown discord and hatred among the cossacks and aliens and among all the people of the Caucasus. So the heads of the officers were cut off,

or they were put into sacks and the sacks were thrown into the river.

It was necessary to plough, necessary to sow, for the wonderful southern sun was growing hotter towards the harvest time.

"Well, how shall we plough? We must divide the land and there's no time to lose," said the aliens to the cossacks.

"You want land!" said the cossacks with black looks at the aliens. The joyous aspect of the revolution was dimmed.

"You want land . . . you paupers!"

The cossacks stopped killing their officers and generals. And these crawled out from their hiding-places to secret cossack meetings, beating their breasts and saying things to kindle the cossacks' passions.

"The Bolsheviks have issued a decree to take the land from the cossacks and give it to the aliens. Cossacks are to be made labourers. Those who object will be sent to Siberia and have all their property confiscated anyway. . . ."

The brightness died out of Kuban, the tongues of a secret fire, burning low, licked the steppes, the ravines, the reeds, the suburbs of settlements and the farms.

"There is no land so beautiful as ours!"

The cossacks again became "kulaks" and "nightbirds."

"There is no land so beautiful . . . as this land!"

The festive board had been laid joyously enough in March 1918, the guests touched the hot victuals in August, when the sun was still sultry and clouds of dust dimmed the light.

But the Kuban river cannot flow up the mountain, the past cannot return. The cossacks did not salute the officers and sometimes they eyed them suspiciously, remem-

bering their bullying and how they had made the officers into mincemeat. However, now they heeded them and obeyed their orders.

So the axes struck, the white chips flew and the new bridge spanned the river. The cavalry passed over it swiftly. The cossacks were in great haste to pursue the retreating Reds.

CHAPTER VII

The soldiers marched beside the creaking baggage carts, swinging their arms. Most of their faces were damaged; that one had a black eye, another a misshapen nose the colour of a plum, a third's cheeks were bruised and swollen. They advanced with swinging arms and boasted with satisfaction:

"I punched him good and hard in the guts and knocked him out."

"I got his head between my knees and bashed the hell out of him . . . the bastard bit my——"

"Ho! ho! Hah, hah, hah!" roared the nearest ranks.

"What will your wife say?"

Merrily they related why, instead of stabbing and killing, they had savagely and exultantly hammered with their fists.

Four cossacks captured in the village marched with them. They had swollen eyes and disfigured faces, which created a bond between them and the soldiers.

"What was the idea, you sons of bitches, of trying to knock off our noses? Didn't you have any rifles?"

"We were boozed; the whole lot of us," the cossacks said guiltily, hunching up their shoulders and looking away.

The eyes of the soldiers glittered.

"Where did you get the stuff?"

"The officers found it . . . about twenty-five barrels buried in the ground in a nearby village. Perhaps our own people brought it from Armenia when they looted a

distillery, and buried it. The officers lined us up and said that if we took the village they'd let us have the booze. We said: give it to us now and we'll make short work of taking the village. Well, they gave us two bottles apiece and we drank them off; to keep us fierce they wouldn't let us eat. It made us mad to get at you. As our rifles hampered us, we threw them aside."

"You bloody pigs!" cried a soldier, jumping at them with his arm raised threateningly. Other soldiers restrained him.

"Leave 'em alone! It wasn't their fault. The officers egged them on!"

At a bend in the road the column stopped and the cossacks began to dig a common grave for themselves.

The baggage train moved on, creaking, raising blinding clouds of dust, winding for scores of kilometres along the roads. Blue mountains loomed in the distance. The carts were packed with bright red cushions, rakes, shovels, barrels, mirrors and samovars glittered and from among the litter of blankets, clothes and rugs peeped the curly heads of children or the ears of cats. Fowls clucked in their wicker baskets. Cows walked behind some of the carts, attached by ropes; panting dogs with lolling tongues and burrs in their shaggy coats went loping along, trying to keep in the narrow strip of shade. The procession of carts laden with household goods creaked on endlessly; the peasants had piled into them everything they could when, threatened by the cossack rebels, they had to forsake their cottages.

It was not the first time the "aliens" had had to abandon their homes. Uprisings of groups of cossacks against the Soviet power had more than once sent them roam-

ing, but never for more than a few days; the Reds had unfailingly come and restored order and all had then gone back. But now things were perplexingly going from bad to worse. The cossack revolt grew more furious. Terrifying rumours came of gallows erected in the villages and of aliens being hanged. When would there be an end to that? And what would become of the abandoned homes?

The carts and wagons creaked, the mirrors flashed in the sun, the chubby faces of infants nodded among the cushions and the soldiers tramped, a jumbled crowd, along the road and beside it over the cultivated patches of land stripped clean of their watermelons, pumpkins and sunflowers. There were no longer companies, battalions or regiments, all had become mixed and muddled. Each man did as he chose. Some sang, others squabbled, shouted or cursed; some climbed into the carts and dozed, their heads jolting from side to side.

Nobody bothered about danger, nobody heeded the commanders. If one of them attempted to restore some semblance of order in the motley rout of humanity, he received a shower of abuse; the men carried their rifles, butt end up like sticks, smoked pipes, yelled bawdy songs; such people as commanders had to bear in mind that the old regime was a thing of the past.

Kojukh felt swamped in the incessantly flowing stream: his heart was like a taut spring in his breast. He realized that if the cossacks attacked then, the column would be wiped out. Nevertheless, he hoped that at the first warning of danger the soldiers would obediently form ranks, as they had done yesterday, and fight for their lives. But might it not be too late? In his desperation he wished some sobering bolt from the blue would fall quickly.

This undisciplined, roaring torrent in the main comprised demobilized men from the tsarist army who had been recruited into the Red Army, and others who had joined the Red troops, mostly small craftsmen, coopers, locksmiths, tinkers, carpenters, cobblers, hairdressers and, more numerous than any, fishermen. All these were "aliens" accustomed to living from hand to mouth, hard-working people for whom the coming of the Soviet power had pushed ajar the closed door of life, had made them think that life itself could be rendered less drab than it had always been. The overwhelming majority of these troops were peasants. With few exceptions they had all risen in defence of their homes. Only the well-to-do had remained static, the officers and rich cossacks did not molest them.

Strange by contrast, and pleasing to the eye, were the slim, narrow-waisted figures of the Kuban cossacks, dressed in long Circassian coats and mounted on sturdy horses. These were revolutionary cossacks, poorer cossacks, mostly soldiers who had been at the front and upon whose hearts the undying spark of revolution had fallen through the smoke, fire and ravages of war. With red ribbons in their shaggy fur hats they rode on, squadron after squadron; rifles held upright, their silver hilted and inlaid swords and daggers shining in the sun, their sturdy horses tossing their heads, these alone held to discipline in the ragged, disorderly pouring stream.

These men would fight their fathers and brothers. They had abandoned their cottages, cattle, household goods—their houses were devastated. Slim and agile, they sat their horses with natural grace, the flaring red bows tied by some beloved hand on their hats, singing, as they rode, in strong, youthful voices the songs of the Ukraine.

Kujukh watched them lovingly. Splendid lads . . . the centre of his hopes. But his glance was even warmer as it fell on the bedraggled horde of barefooted "aliens" that tramped along somehow in clouds of dust. Kojukh himself was one of these.

Memories of his life trailed after him like a long, slanting shadow, which one may look beyond but never can discard. The most commonplace, toiling, hungry, drab, illiterate shadow of a life. His mother's face, although she was still young in years, had been furrowed by deep wrinkles, like a hard-ridden hag. She had had many children to care for; there had always been an infant in her arms and other little ones pulling at her skirt. His father had worked all his life as a hired labourer, toiling like a slave; they had lived in dire poverty. . . .

When Kojukh was six he had been sent to work as shepherd to the communal herd. The steppe, ravines, forests, cows, the sailing clouds in the sky and the long shadows on the soil were his teachers.

Later, a bright and quick-witted lad, he was hired by the village kulak as assistant salesman in the shop; stealthily he had taught himself to read and write. Then came military service, the war, the Turkish front. He rose to be a chief machine-gunner. Once he climbed a mountain with his command of machine-gunners and got into the rear of the enemy: the Turks retreated higher up the mountain; he had worked his machine-gun like a fury, mowing them down: they fell in neat rows like grass and warm blood had poured down upon him. He had never before imagined that one could literally stand knee-deep in human blood—but that had been Turkish blood and he had soon forgotten it.

As a reward for his great courage he had been sent to

the School of Ensigns. That was terrible. He had thought his head would split. He went on learning, overcoming difficulties with the obstinacy of a bull, but he failed at the examinations. The officers laughed at him, both officer-tutors and officer-teachers; the Cadets also laughed. A peasant trying to become an officer! Such a dull, colourless fellow, too! Ha, ha!

He hated them, had set his teeth and looked from under his brows. He had been returned to his regiment as unfit for the school.

Shrapnel again, thousands of deaths, blood, agony. Again his machine-guns had done their grim work and the rows of human bodies had been cut down like grass. For he'd had a wonderfully true eye. For whose sake, in those days of superhuman strain, with death perpetually beside him, for whose sake had this knee-deep blood been shed? Was it for the tsar, the fatherland, the orthodox faith? Perhaps, he asked, but he never found a definite answer. What he'd thought of mainly was clear and precise: to become an officer, to scramble away from the groans and anguish, from death and the welter of blood, even as he had become a salesman after being a shepherd. . . . He had set his teeth and worked his guns, imperturbably calm where shell rained most, as calm as if he were cutting grass in his own field.

For a second time he'd been sent to the School of Ensigns. There was a shortage of officers; there were always too few officers in the battles; and, indeed, he had acted as one, sometimes commanding an important detachment and never suffering defeat. He was at one with the soldiers; had sprung from the earth like them, had toiled at it as they had toiled; therefore the soldiers had followed him without question, their gnarled leader with the iron

jaws who stopped at nothing. For whose sake did they do it? Was it for the tsar, the fatherland, the orthodox faith? Maybe. But that was remote, perceived as through a bloody mist. What was immediate and imperative was to advance, to advance at all costs. If they stopped they'd have been shot from behind. It was safer to move on with their own gnarled, peasant leader. . . .

How hard, how bitterly hard it all was. Yes . . . his head had seemed to split. It was far more difficult to master decimal fractions than to face death in a storm of gunfire.

The officers had rocked and held their sides, the officers who'd packed themselves into the school in superfluous numbers. Safety first. The rear was always a snug place, flooded with those eager to avoid the risks of the battle-front and for whom countless useless functions had always been created. The officers had rocked and held their sides: fancy, a peasant, a gawky rustic, one of the despised rabble . . . ! They had derided him, had failed him for answers which, with intense effort, he had managed to get right. And they had sent him back, sent him to his regiment for mental incapacity . . . !

Bursts of gunfire, exploding shrapnel, monotonous rattling of machine-guns, flaming red hurricane and death, death, death. . . . And he in the midst of it all, a capable peasant.

This capable peasant had the obstinacy of an ox and pressed on indomitably. It was not for nothing that he was a Ukrainian, that his brow shelved over his eyes, his small gimlet eyes.

And for his capability he was relieved a third time from his deadly work and, for the third time, sent to the school.

And again the officers had rocked and held their sides

That peasant, that gawky rustic, one of the rabble, had turned up again like a bad penny! And once more they had sent him back to the regiment for mental incapacity. . . .

Then headquarters had interfered and written in irritation: "Promote him from the ranks . . . officers are dangerously scarce. . . ."

Scarce, were they? Yes, in battles—because of the rush to the rear. So Kojukh had been contemptuously commissioned. When he returned to his regiment bright straps glittered on his shoulders. He had won his place. He had felt exultant and bitter.

Exultant because he had got what he wanted by dint of a tremendous, superhuman effort. Bitter because the glittering shoulder straps separated him from his kind, from the field labourers, the plain soldiers and, separated from these, he was no nearer the officers. A void encircled him.

The officers did not say outright the words "peasant," "rustic," "rabble," but in the bivouacs, mess rooms, tents, in all the places where the men with shoulder straps gathered, he had felt a void around him. But what they did not utter with their tongues they had said with their eyes and faces, with their every gesture: "a peasant, one of the filthy rabble, a gawky rustic."

He had loathed them from the core of his being. He had despised them, outwardly calm and stony. He had shielded himself from them and from the aloofness of the soldiers behind a cold fearlessness amidst the dying and dead.

And suddenly everything had reeled: the mountains of Armenia, the Turkish division, the soldiers, the generals with bewildered and uncomprehending faces, the silent

guns, the March snow on the high summits—it was as if space had been rent asunder and something unspeakably wonderful had appeared in the rift, something which had always been there, lurking in mysterious depths, nameless, but which now revealed itself, something simple, obvious, inevitable.

People came, ordinary people with the lean, yellow faces of factory workers, who began to widen the rent more and more. And from it had flowed age-long hatred, age-long oppression, age-long rebellious slavery.

And for the first time Kojukh had regretted the straps on his shoulders for which he had so grimly striven, regretted them because they marked him as an enemy of the workers, peasants and soldiers.

When the reverberation of the October thunder reached him, he had torn off his straps and flung them from him with loathing. Caught up by the irresistible tumultuous stream of homeward-bound soldiers, he concealed himself in the corner of a cattle truck packed to bursting point. Shouting songs the drunken soldiers looked for escaping officers. He never could have saved his skin had he been discovered.

When he reached his native village, everything had gone to pieces; what had superseded the old order in human relations was confused and uncertain. The cossacks embraced the aliens and hunted officers whom they destroyed.

Workers from the factories and revolutionary sailors who had sunk their ships came to the Kuban. They were like yeast in dough: the whole region fermented and rose. The Soviet power was proclaimed in all settlements, villages and farms.

Although Kojukh lacked the new political phrases—

classes, class struggle, class relations—he understood what the workers said, understood intuitively. His stony hate of officers faded almost to nothing before his deep instinct for the class struggle—he realized that officers, as officers, were merely pitiable hirelings of the landlords and bourgeoisie. The shoulder straps he had won by dogged pertinacity seemed to have branded him. The peasants knew that he belonged to them, but still looked at him askance. He determined to eradicate the stigma, to devote the whole of his grim Ukrainian pertinacity to it; he'd burn it out with red-hot iron, cleanse it with his blood in the service of the poor masses with whom he was indissolubly at one, as he had never been before.

Extraordinary things had happened: the poor peasants had set their hands to wiping out the bourgeoisie and as all who possessed a second pair of trousers were suspected, they went from house to house, broke open lockers and boxes, hauled out their contents and divided them among themselves, donning what they got on the spot. This was their idea of establishing equality.

They had visited Kojukh's cottage in his absence and taken his clothes. When he returned in his ragged tunic and battered straw hat with pieces of cloth bound round his feet and legs, he had found nothing into which he could change; his wife, too, had been left with only one skirt. This he had not heeded; one instinct alone, one obsessing thought, had filled his soul to the exclusion of all else.

The revolutionary peasants then began to equalize the cossacks. But when it came to taking the land—the Kuban boiled over and the Soviet power was swept away.

So Kojukh had gone forth to wander with the creaking carts, the noisy rout of refugees, the eternal clouds of dust.

CHAPTER VIII

The last station at the foot of the mountains was a scene of incredible confusion: the straggling remains of military units and separate groups of soldiers were raising hell; there was a roar of shouting, weeping, swearing. From behind the station came firing and hubbub.

Now and again heavy guns boomed.

Kojukh had come up with his column of soldiers and refugees. Smolokurov followed with another column. Detachments with other refugees, harassed by cossacks, incessantly poured in. Tens of thousands of doomed people were huddled together in that last narrow space; all knew that neither Cadets nor cossacks would give quarter, that all would be killed by rifle, sword or machine-gun, or else be hanged, thrown into deep ravines, buried alive.

More than once the desperate plaint was spread: "We are lost . . . our commanders have sold us for booze!" And when the artillery fire became more menacing, the cry rose like a burst of flame:

"Save yourselves if you can! Run, lads!"

The men in Kojukh's column strove their utmost to beat back the cossacks and restrain the panic, they felt that the worst could happen at any moment. The commanders spent their time in consultations which led to nothing. None could tell what surprise the next moment might spring.

Then Kojukh said:

"Our one chance is to cross the mountains and make

a forced march along the sea coast, thus circuitously joining our main forces. I'll start this minute. . . ."

"If you attempt such a thing, I'll open fire on your column," said Smolokurov, a giant with a black spade-shaped beard and flashing white teeth. "We must defend ourselves honourably and not flee."

Half an hour later Kojukh's column set out and nobody dared hinder it. The moment it moved off tens of thousands of soldiers and refugees, seized by panic, followed in its wake with their carts and cattle, blocking up the highway, striving to outspeed one another and throwing into ditches those who were in their way.

And the huge agglomeration of human beings with their belongings began to creep up the mountain like a monstrous snake.

CHAPTER IX

They marched all day and through the night. Before dawn, unhitching their horses, the column extending along many versts of the highroad, stopped. Above the brow of the mountain, seeming quite near, big stars winked. The gurgle and chatter of water in the ravines was incessant. Everywhere mist and stillness enwrapped the mountains, forests, precipices.

Only the champing of the horses could be heard. Then the stars, vivid a moment before, faded; wooded outlines became apparent; the white mists sank into the ravines. The caravan stirred and again began to creep, verst on verst, along the highroad.

The rising sun poured its blinding radiance from behind the mountain range, throwing long blue shadows upon the slopes. The head of the column reached the brow of the mountain and stopped in astonishment. Before them yawned a dizzy abyss and in the misty distance lay a white town. And beyond the town rose, unexpectedly, the infinite blue wall of the sea, an immense wall whose deep hue was reflected in all their eyes.

"Look! The sea!"

"But why does it stand up like a wall?"

"We'll have to climb over it."

"But why, when you stand on the shore it lies flat to its very end?"

"Haven't you heard that when Moses led the Hebrews out of bondage to the Egyptians, as we are now being led, the sea stood up like a wall and they passed dry-shod."

"But it looks as if it's barring our way instead of opening before us."

"It's all through Garaska. He has fine new shoes that mustn't be damaged."

"Pity there's no priest to explain it."

"Damn all priests. . . ."

They went down towards the town, cheerfully swinging their arms, talking, laughter rippling in their ranks. Lower and lower the column descended, nobody giving a thought to the German battleship which, looking like a black and gigantic flatiron, defiled with its smoke the blue radiance of the bay. Around it, resembling thin bits of stick, lay some Turkish destroyers, which also emitted black smoke.

Over the brow of the mountain came rank upon rank of cheerful marching soldiers. All in succession were astonished by the deep blue wall of the sea, all caught the reflection of it in their eyes and swung their arms excitedly as with wide elastic strides they descended the white, looping highway.

Then came the baggage train: the horses, their collars riding up to their ears, shaking their heads, the cows running at a graceful trot, boys alongside bestriding sticks. The men hastily took hold of the carts and pulled back against them to stem their speed downhill. All, swaying and turning with the twists of the road, trooped down in high spirits to what fate had in store.

And behind them the great mountain ridge filled half the sky.

The head of the endless, snake-like column rounded the town, passing the bay and the cement factories, and trailed off as a narrow band into the distance: on the one side were the barren, rocky mountains rising from the coast,

on the other, the thrilling spectacle of the incredibly blue, gentle and empty sea.

There was neither smoke nor a single sail: only transparent foam endlessly tracing designs of delicate lace on the wet beach stones; and in the fathomless silence sounded the primeval song of nature, possessing every heart.

"Look . . . the sea is lying flat again!"

"Did you think it would stand up like a wall forever?"

"It was poking fun at us when we were on the mountain. How could anyone go over it if it stood on end?"

"Hey, Garaska . . . that's bad for your smart shoes; they'll be soaked when you march into the sea!"

Garaska, his rifle on his shoulder, gaily tramped on, barefooted. Good-natured laughter burst in the ranks; those too far away to hear what the joke was about took it on trust and roared appreciatively.

Then a grim voice was raised:

"It's all one . . . there's no way for us now to wriggle out. Water here, mountains there, and behind us—cossacks. If we wished to take another road, we couldn't. Only thing to do is to forge ahead!"

The vanguard of the column stretched far ahead along the narrow bank, then disappeared behind some projecting rocks, its body endlessly rounding the town while its rear was still winding gaily down the highroad that led in loops from the mountains.

The German commander, who happened to be on the battleship, observing the movement of crowds in this foreign town which he still held under the control of the kaiser's guns, resented it as a sign of disorder and issued a command that these unknown people, these carts, soldiers, women and children, this great crowd hurrying past the town, must halt immediately, must deliver all their

arms, forage, food supplies, and await his further instructions.

But the dusty grey serpent continued to glide away, making good speed; the cows went ambling on with concerned faces, the children, holding on to the carts with one hand, pattered alongside as quickly as their little legs would carry them, the men whipped their straining horses. A continuous din, echoing back from the mountains, hung over the column and the blinding white dust rose in clouds.

From the town came another stream of loaded vans which began to crash into this main stream with a breaking of wheels and axles, screams and curses. This considerable tributary consisted mainly of sturdy, burly sailors who reeked of spirits. They wore white sailor jackets with turned down blue collars, round caps with black ribbons dangling behind and gold lettering in front. A thousand different vehicles—carts, vans, droshkies, phaetons, open carriages with a cargo of painted women—and about five thousand sailors, using vile language, poured into the baggage train.

The German commander waited in vain for them to stop.

Then, breaking the blue stillness, came a boom from the battleship, roaring and breaking against the mountains, in the precipices and ravines, as if huge fragments of iron were being dumped. Echo sent the crash back into the far distance of the tranquil blue.

Over the gliding human snake mysteriously and unobtrusively appeared a white puff, followed by a heavy crash; the white puff, gently floating sideways, began to melt.

A sorrel gelding reared and thumped heavily to the ground, breaking both the shafts of the cart he was

hitched to. A score of people rushed to him, seized his mane, tail, legs, ears, forelock and dragged him from the highroad into the ditch where they dumped the cart after him, so that the baggage train which proceeded three carts abreast, taking up the whole width of the road, should not be for a moment delayed. Weeping, Granny Gorpino and Anka snatched what they could from the upturned cart, threw their rescued belongings into the nearest vehicles and tramped along on foot; the old man hurriedly and with shaking hands cut the harness from the dead horse and dragged off its collar.

Another huge, blinding tongue flashed on the battleship, once more a crash shook the town, rolled among the mountains and echoed back from behind the smooth sea; again a snowy white puff appeared in the sparkling blue sky and people fell moaning in several places. In a cart an infant greedily sucking the breast of a young woman with black eyebrows and rings in her ears, suddenly became limp, his little hands fell away from the breast, his lips opened and let go of the nipple.

The mother gave a savage, animal cry. People rushed to her but she pushed them away fiercely and obstinately squeezed her nipple, from which the milk was dripping in warm white drops, into the baby's tiny mouth. The little face, with upturned eyes which had lost the sparkle of life, was already turning yellow.

The serpent went on gliding round and past the town. Then high up on the brow of the mountain, in the light of the setting sun, appeared people and horses. They were tiny, hardly discernible—the size of a thumbnail. They were desperately busy at something, darting about near their horses, then suddenly they froze still.

And almost immediately came four booms in quick succession which rolled and echoed in the mountains, while down below, on both sides of the highroad and in the air white puffs formed quickly, exploding high at first, then lower and lower, always nearer to the road; and here and there people, cows and horses began to fall, moaning. The people were at once picked up heedless of their groans and put into carts, the horses and cattle were dragged out of the way and the serpent glided on and on without breaking, vehicle on vehicle.

The kaiser's commander felt outraged. Women and children he might shoot to maintain order, but others must not do that without his permission! The long trunk of the gun on the battleship rose, boomed, putting out a huge flaming tongue. High up over the blue abyss, over the baggage trains, over the mountains, something flew hissing and landed with a crash on the ridge where the people who were no bigger than a thumbnail stood with their horses and guns. And again these began to dart hither and thither. Their battery of four cannon began to retort to the commander and it became the *Goeben*'s turn to have puffs of white smoke forming in the air above her.

The *Goeben* fell into a moody silence. Her funnels belched great clouds of smoke. Grimly and heavily she sailed out of the blue bay into the deeper blue of the sea, turned and. . . .

. . . the sky and the sea seemed shattered. The sea's blue was dimmed. The earth shook underfoot. People felt a horrible weight on their chests and brains, the doors and windows of houses burst open, and for the moment all creatures became deaf.

On the mountain ridge, a dense, ghastly green mass, impermeable to the sun's rays, began to rise, gathering into a rounded cloud. A few cossacks who had escaped with their lives frantically whipped their horses through its poisonous smoke, urging them at a gallop up hill with their one remaining gun. In a twinkling they disappeared behind the ridge. And the ghastly green cloud still hovered, slowly dispersing.

The inhuman shock opened fissures in the ground and set graves gaping; on all the streets appeared ghosts of men with waxy faces, black holes for eyes, in ragged, foul smelling underwear; they dragged themselves along, crawled or hobbled with sticks, all drawn to the one place—the highroad. Some moved silently, with concentrated faces and unwavering staring eyes, painfully dragging themselves; others, taking wide strides with their crutches, swung forward, their legless bodies making better speed than many, others again ran shouting incomprehensible words in hoarse and breaking voices.

And thinly came the cry, like that of a wounded bird, from somewhere in space:

"Water, water, wa-a-ter!" The cry of a wounded bird in a parched field.

A young man in tattered linen through which his yellow body showed, stumbled forward on benumbed legs, staring ahead but seeing nothing with his feverish eyes:

"Water, wa-a-ter!"

A nurse, her hair cropped short like a boy's in the manner of the factory girls, a faded red cross on her ragged sleeve, ran after him on bare feet. . . .

"Stop, Mitya. Where are you going? I'll give you water,

but stop . . . let us turn back. They are not beasts after all. . . ."

"Water, wa-a-ter!"

The townsfolk hastily closed the doors and windows of their houses. People were shot in the back from attics and from behind fences. The lazarets, hospitals and private houses were disgorging their inmates: these crept out of the doors, climbed out of the windows and crawled or dragged themselves after the moving baggage train.

Legless, armless, with roughly bandaged jaws, with turbans of bloody rags on their heads and bound bellies, they hastened, sullen faced, grim, staring ahead, their feverish eyes intent on the highroad. And the air rang with their persistent, imploring cries:

"Brothers . . . ! brothers . . . ! Comrades . . . !"

Hoarse, broken or piercingly ringing voices came from all sides and were heard at the very foot of the mountains:

"Comrades, I haven't got typhus . . . not typhus . . . I'm wounded, comrades. . . ."

"Nor I, comrades. . . . I haven't got typhus!"

"Nor I. . . ."

"Nor I. . . ."

But the carts went on.

One of them gripped with both hands the frame of a hooded cart piled high with household goods and children, and hopped along beside it on one leg. The owner of the cart, a man with greying moustaches and a dark, weather-beaten face, bent down, seized the cripple by his only leg and hoisted him into the cart on top of the children who at once burst out into cries.

"Look what you're doing . . . squashing the children!" protested an old woman in an untidy kerchief.

The one-legged man's face was wreathed in smiles; he felt himself the happiest mortal on earth.

People streamed along the highroad, stumbling, falling, picking themselves up again or remaining motionless, white objects by the ditch. . . .

"Brothers, we'd take you all with us if we could. But we can't. There's so many wounded of our own and nothing to eat. . . . You'd die with us. It makes our hearts bleed to leave you. . . ."

The women blew their noses and wiped away the tears that welled up into their eyes.

A very tall soldier with a grim face and only one leg, his eyes fixed ahead, jerked himself forward on his crutches with big, determined strides, indefatigably advancing along the highroad and muttering:

"To hell with the lot of you . . . to hell . . . !"

The baggage train gradually disappeared from view. One could see only the dust raised by the wheels of the last carts and hear faintly the creaking of the iron axles. The town and the bay lay far behind. There was only the highroad left and, at wide intervals, the men like corpses slowly trailing after the vanished column. One by one they gave up helplessly, sitting down or stretching themselves out on the bank by the roadside, their dull eyes turning to where the last cart had disappeared. The dust, reddened by the rays of the sinking sun, slowly settled.

Only the one-legged giant on crutches continued to jerk his body forward on the empty highroad, muttering as he went:

"To hell with the lot of you. We shed our blood for you . . . to hell . . . !"

Cossacks entered the town from the opposite end.

CHAPTER X

The night dragged through wearily and the black stream of humanity poured on and on, never stopping, never slackening its noisy progress.

The stars began to wane. The bluff arid mountains, the ravines and crevices, took shape in dim outlines.

With each moment the sky grew lighter and the boundless expanse of the ever changing sea appeared, now delicately tinted with lilac, now smokily white, anon glazed over with the blue of the sky.

As the light increased in the mountains, dark, swaying bayonets became discernible.

There were vineyards on the craggy ravines, descending to the very highroad, and gleaming white summer residences and empty villas; and here and there stood men in homemade straw hats, who rested on their spades and picks as they gazed at the columns of soldiers passing with swinging arms and countless bristling, swaying bayonets.

Who were they? Whence had they come? Whither marched they, without ever stopping, wearily swinging their arms? Their faces were yellow like tanned hide; they were bedraggled and dusty, their eyes dark-rimmed. The carts creaked to the thud of weary hooves; the children looking out of the carts, they too had had no rest; the heads of the exhausted horses hung low.

The men on the mountain slope resumed their work, digging the earth. What did they care for these people? But when, after long effort, they paused to straighten their

backs, they could still see the column patiently twisting along the winding coast, tramping on and on with swaying bayonets. . . .

The sun, high above the mountains, impregnated the earth with heat and the sparkle of the sea made one's eyes ache. Hour after hour they tramped on, marching, marching. People began to stagger, horses stopped.

"This Kojukh must be a madman!"

Cursing became general.

An orderly reported to Kojukh that two of Smolokurov's columns which had joined them with their baggage trains had stopped behind for the night in a roadside village, so that now the highroad was empty for a stretch of some ten versts behind the marchers. Kojukh's small eyes narrowed, as if to extinguish their ironic gleam. But he said nothing. The column tramped on and on.

"He'll be the death of us!"

"Why does he push us like this? There's the sea on our right, mountains on our left. Who can attack us? This strain is worse than the cossacks, we'll die of fatigue. We've already left five horses on the road and people are dropping out. . . ."

"Why obey him?" cried the sailors; they were all armed with revolvers, bombs and belts of cartridges. They looked into the moving carts and mixed with the marchers.

"Can't you see he's got his own plan? Wasn't he once an officer? And he's still one. Mark what we say. He'll take you to disaster. You'll see, when it's too late. . . ."

When the sun was in its zenith, they halted for fifteen minutes to water the horses. The sweat-soaked people also drank and then resumed their march along the burning

road. They could scarcely drag their leaden limbs and the breeze that fanned them was sultry.

On and on they went, no longer suppressing their murmurings which flared up and began to breed disorder in the ranks. Some battalion and company commanders declared to Kojukh that they would detach their units, give them a rest and go independently.

Kojukh's face darkened but he gave them no answer. The column went on and on.

At night they stopped. Their campfires shone through the darkness for tens of versts along the highroad. The gnarled and stunted scrub was cut—there were no forests in that desert region—fences round the gardens of the summer residences were pulled down, window frames and furniture were burnt. Over the fires hung kettles of food.

After their superhuman strain, all might have dropped and slept like logs. But the illumined space around the fires was alive with excited people. There was talk, laughter, and the sound of accordions. The soldiers joked together, pushing one another into the fires. They went to the baggage train and joked with the girls. Kasha was boiling in small kettles. Here and there field kitchens sent up smoke.

The huge camp looked as if it had come to stay.

CHAPTER XI

The night, while they marched, had been of a piece. When they stopped it broke into fragments, each filled with its own individuality.

Granny Gorpino squatted beside a small fire over which the kettle, she had rescued from the abandoned cart, was boiling. She was dishevelled and looked like a witch in the glow. Beside her lay her husband asleep on a drab woollen cloak, a corner of which he had thrown over his face, notwithstanding the warm night. Gazing into the fire Baba Gorpino complained:

"I have no dish or spoon. And I had to leave my barrel on the road. Who'll pick it up? It was a good barrel, made of maple wood. And shall we ever have a horse like our sorrel? He always went stoutly, never wanted the whip. Old man, sit up and eat."

"Don't want to eat," said the old man hoarsely, from under the cloak.

"What's that you say? If you don't eat you'll be ill. Do you expect me to carry you along in my arms?"

The old man remained silent, keeping his face covered and turned to the dark.

A little distance off on the highroad the slim, white figure of a girl stood beside a cart. And her young voice was heard entreating:

"Why, dearie, you must give him up. You can't go on like that. . . . "

Other female figures in white moved around the cart and several voices added simultaneously:

"You must give him up. The angel's little body must be buried. The Lord will have his soul."

Men were standing by but did not speak.

The women continued:

"Her breasts are so hard. You can't press out the milk."

They put out their hands to feel the swollen breasts which resisted the pressure of their fingers. The young mother, with streaming hair, and eyes that shone in the dark like a cat's, bent her head over her breast which protruded from her blouse and taking the nipple between her fingers, introduced it tenderly into her baby's cold mouth.

"She seems turned to stone."

"The body stinks already. It's impossible to stand here. . . ."

Some of the men raised their voices:

"It's no use talking to her . . . take it away."

"It will spread disease! It can't go on like that! It's necessary to bury him."

Two men attempted to take the body, forcibly opening the mother's arms. The darkness was torn by an animal, insane cry; it rang out over the fires that ran like a chain along the highroad, resounding over the dim, invisible sea and in the mountain fastness. The cart rocked with the violent struggling.

"Biting . . . !"

"The devil of a woman dug her teeth to the bone in my hand!"

The men retreated. The women stood by sorrowfully for a while and then went away one by one. Others came up. They, too, felt the swollen breasts.

"She will die. Her milk is clotted."

"The mother sat in the cart, ragged and dishevelled, turned her shaggy head to right and left, glaring guarded-

ly with dry animal eyes, ready at the least attempt to defend herself fiercely, and at intervals tenderly putting her breast to her dead baby's mouth.

The fires flickered and diminished in the invading darkness.

"My heart, my precious, let me take him! He is dead. We shall bury him and you will weep. Why can't you weep?"

The young girl pressed to her bosom the agonizing head with streaming hair and wolfish eyes that glowed in the night. And she, the mother, gently pushed the girl aside, saying in a hoarse voice:

"Sh—sh. . . . Speak softly, Anka . . . he is asleep, don't disturb him. He has slept the whole night and in the morning he'll be up and playing, waiting for Stepan. When Stepan comes he'll begin to make bubbles with his little mouth and kick his little legs and chirp. He is a darling child, so good and so knowing. . . ."

She gave a soft, tender laugh.

"Sh—sh . . . !"

"Anka," cried Granny Gorpino from the fire. "Can't you come and eat your supper? The old man won't budge and you've run away . . . you quick-eyed, capering goat! The kasha is drying up."

The women continued to come up, feeling the mother's breasts and sorrowing, then departing or standing with their chins cupped in one hand supported at the elbow by the other, and looking on. At a loss the men stood about, kindling their pipes which momentarily lit up their hairy faces with a red glow.

"We must send for Stepan, else the child will rot in her arms . . . maggots will get into it."

"Stepan's been sent for."

"Lame Mikitka will bring him."

CHAPTER XII

These other campfires were unusual, different in the talk and laughter around them, in the playful shrieks of the women, in the cursing and the clinking of bottles. An improvised band of mandolins, guitars and balalaikas suddenly burst into tune which dispersed the darkness and made a new liveliness around the chain of fires. The black mountains sat immobile and the invisible sea was silent.

And the people were different, big and broad shouldered; their gestures denoted self-reliance. When they entered the red, flickering light of their fires they stood revealed as well-fed, bronzed men in wide bottomed trousers with white sailor's shirts opened low on their tanned chests, and hats with ribbons which dangled on the napes of their necks. Their words and gestures were accompanied with oaths.

The women, when the light of the fires picked them from the darkness, made vivid patches of colour. There was laughter, squealing and amorous play. Girls in gaudy skirts squatted before the fire, cooking or singing tipsily. Square white table cloths were spread on the ground and there were tins of caviar, sardines, salmon, bottles of wine, jam, pastry, sweetmeats, honey. This camp was marked by the din of its voices, its bursts of merriment, wrangling, shouting and sudden melodious, silvery snatches of songs played on mandolins and balalaikas. Now and again there were bursts of drunken harmony which suddenly stopped short. Yes . . . they could sing well . . . they could do

everything well! Clinking glasses, laughter, squeals, coarse amorous words. . . .

"Comrades . . . !"

"Hey!"

"Heave ho!"

"Have a good time and. . . ."

A torrent of gratuitous oaths.

"Oh! Cambus! You've broken my bracelet, you silly devil, my bracelet. . . ."

There was a catch in the complaining voice.

Then suddenly: "Comrades, how are we treated here? Has the epoch of officers come back? Why does Kojukh order us about? Who made him general? Comrades, this is exploitation of the toiling masses. They're enemies and exploiters. . . ."

"Let's go for 'em. . . ."

Then together, melodiously, they sang:

Advance with courage, together in step,
By struggle we shall find our strength.

CHAPTER XIII

A man sat motionlessly in the light of the fire, his hands clasping his knees. From the darkness behind him a horse thrust its head into the circle of red light. It picked with its soft lips at the hay strewn on the ground and munched audibly. Its eyes, big, dark with violet glints, were intelligent and wise.

"That's how things are," said the man, nursing his knees in meditation and gazing steadily at the restless fire. "They have driven about fifteen hundred soldiers there, collected all they could lay hands upon. The sailors are fools. 'We are seamen,' they thought; 'we know all about the sea, nobody will molest us.' All the same, they were driven there, posted, and they'll be told to dig. And there are machine guns all around, two heavy guns, cossacks with rifles. The unfortunates who are already there dig, swing their spades. All young, strong men. The mountain's covered with people, half-way up it. The women weep. Officers go about with revolvers shooting those who don't use their spades smart enough, shooting them in the belly for them to suffer longer. Well, they dig and dig and those who have bullets in their bellies crawl about, bleeding and moaning. The people sigh. The officers shout: 'Silence, you sons of bitches . . . !'"

He went on with his narrative, all listening in silence, understanding what he did not say but which they all somehow knew.

The listeners stood around the fire in its red glow, bareheaded, leaning on their bayonets, some lying on the

ground, drinkjng in his words. Out of the darkness peered intent, shaggy heads supported on fists. Bearded old men drew in their necks and bent their brows. Women in white huddled together sorrowfully.

When the firelight was low all seemed to disappear except this lonely man, sitting with his hands clasping his knees. The head of the horse emerged for an instant behind him, then it rose into the darkness, munching audibly. The dark eyes of the animal shone, full of intelligence and attention. The man seemed alone in the immeasurable darkness. But a haunting memory hung in the minds of the unseen bystanders: the steppe, windmills on old grave mounds and over the steppe a galloping horse; it stops . . . a man drops heavily from it, bleeding from many deep wounds. . . . Another man, this one here, coming hell for leather on another horse . . . he alights . . . lays his ear to the chest of the rider. . . . "My son . . . my little son . . . !"

Somebody fed the dying fire with dry twisted twigs of the derji tree. The fire blazed up, pushing back the barrier of darkness and again the bystanders appeared, leaning on their rifles, the older men with bent brows, the women sorrowfully stooping, the prone listeners with their heads supported in their hands.

"How they tortured that girl, the things they did to her! Cossacks, a hundred of them, violated her by turns. She died under them. She was a nurse in a hospital . . . short cropped hair like a boy and always in bare feet. A factory girl. So active and clever. Wouldn't forsake the wounded. There was nobody to look after them, to give them a drink of water . . . heaps of them ill with typhus. They all perished by the sword. Some twenty thousand of them . . . thrown out of windows on to the

pavement. The officers and cossacks hunted over the whole town killing . . . blood streamed. . . ."

The starry night and the black mountains were forgotten; there rang out the haunting cry: "Comrades! comrades . . . I am not ill with typhus, I am wounded. . . ." Those unfortunates now seemed to be standing there by the camp fire. . . .

Then the darkness returned and the stars twinkled overhead and the man went on in measured tones and again the listeners knew that which he left unsaid: the head of his twelve year old son was crushed in with the butts of rifles, his old mother was lashed to death, his wife was violated over and over again and then hanged from the beam over the well. His two youngest children could be found nowhere. He said no word of these things but all the listeners were aware of them.

There was a strange affinity between the deep silence in the mysterious darkness of the black mountains and that unseen expanse of sea—both without sound, without light.

The red reflection of the fire flickered, making the circle of invading blackness dance. The man sat, embracing his drawn-up knees. His horse munched audibly.

All of a sudden a young man, leaning on his rifle, burst out laughing, his bright teeth gleaming in his hairless face with the red of the fire.

"In our village, when the cossacks came back from the front, they immediately seized their officers, dragged them to the town, to the very sea. They stood them on the pier, tied stones around their necks and pushed them from the pier into the sea. Oh, how they splashed into the water and went down, down; one could see it all, the water was blue and clear, like crystal. True to god. I was

there. They were long reaching the bottom, wriggling their arms and legs, like crayfish wriggling their tails."

He again burst out laughing and showed his white teeth with the red glow on them. The man sat before the fire with his hands holding his knees. The darkness blinking red encircled them and the listening crowd grew.

"And when they reached the bottom, they caught hold of one another convulsively and remained like that, huddled together. One could see everything. It was so funny!"

All listened intently. From the distance came melody that pulled at the hearers' heartstrings. Mellow concerted singing.

"The sailors," someone remarked.

"In our village the cossacks shoved the officers into sacks, tied the sacks and threw them into the water."

"Why did they drown them in sacks?" complained a voice with the husky steppe accent. The unseen speaker was silent a moment, then added grimly:

"Sacks can't be got now, and we're in sore need of them for our grain. Nobody sends sacks from Russia."

There was another silence. Maybe the cause of it was this man sitting before the fire with hands clasped about his knees.

"In Russia there is the Soviet power. . . ."

"In Moscow."

"Where there are peasants, there is this power."

"Workers came to our places, they proclaimed liberty, put soviets in the villages, said that the land would be taken."

"They brought class consciousness and the bourgeois fled. . . ."

"But aren't the workers of peasant stock? Think how many of our own folk work at the cement factories, in the

creameries, in machine-building plants and in all the mills in towns."

Then faintly, a child's voice cried:

"Oh! mummy. . . ."

An infant began to whimper, followed by a woman's soothing voice, possibly in one of those dimly discernible carts on the highroad.

The man unclasped his hands from his knees and standing sideways to the red glow of the fire, seizing the lowered head of his horse by the forelock, he slipped on the bridle, picked from the ground a sack with the remaining hay, took up his rifle, jumped into the saddle and vanished to the sound of his horse's hooves which faded in the distance and died out.

And again to the mind's eye there was no darkness, but a limitless steppe and windmills . . . stamping hooves that came from the windmills, long slanting shadows chasing the man. . . . Where to? . . . He's mad . . . ! Come back . . . ! But his family is there and here his son lies dead. . . .

"Second company. . . ."

The darkness reasserted itself with the campfires burning in a long chain.

"He's gone to report to Kojukh—he knows all about the cossacks."

"And he's killed many of them. Women and children, too. . . ."

"He's dressed like a cossack from head to foot, Circassian coat, boots, fur cap. They take him for one of themselves. 'What regiment?' they say. 'Such and such,' he answers, and rides on. If he meets a woman he cuts off her head with his sword, a little child, he stabs with his dagger. When he can ambush himself behind a hay-

rick or some corner, he shoots a cossack. He knows everything about them, how many there are, where they camp, and reports everything to Kojukh."

"What have the children done? They are innocent," said a woman with a sigh. Sad-faced, she rested her cheek on the palm of her hand, supporting her elbow with the other.

"Second company turned deaf, have you?"

Those who were reclining stood up leisurely, stretched themselves, yawned and walked away. Above the mountain the stars were split over the sky. The men sat on the ground around the kettles and began to eat their soup.

Pressing together they dipped their spoons into the company kettle, carried them hastily to their mouths, burning their lips, tongues, throats; it hurt, but they persisted, hurriedly, diving their spoons into the steaming kettle. Sometimes a lucky fellow fished out a piece of meat, which he quickly removed from the spoon and put into his pocket to eat later, watched enviously by his less fortunate but equally active mates.

CHAPTER XIV

Even in the darkness one could feel that the confused, pale blur yonder was a rowdy crowd advancing. Their excited voices, raucous both from exposure to bad weather and recent drinking, proceeded them, burdened with oaths.

"The sailors!"

"Restless fellows . . . can't keep quiet a minute."

The sailors came up with a chorus of abuse.

"Loafing wasters! Here you are, wolfing grub, not caring a straw about the revolution. You spit on the revolution. You bourgeois scum . . . !"

"Shut your jaws . . . barking at us? Windbags!"

The soldiers glared at the sailors, also aware that the latter were heavily armed with revolvers, bombs and belts of cartridges.

"Where's your Kojukh taking you? Have you thought of that? We started the revolution. We sunk the fleet, regardless of Moscow's instructions. The Bolsheviks are messing about with the German kaiser, making secret plans, but we shan't allow the people to be betrayed. If a man betrays the people, he'll be shot on the spot. Who's your Kojukh? An officer! And you are sheep staggering along, all huddled together. Bloody idiots!"

From the fire which licked the sides of the big company kettle a voice retorted:

"You've come with a lot of whores, scores of them."

"It's no concern of yours. Envy us, do you? Don't poke your noses where you're not wanted, it might be bad for you. What we have we have earned. Who was it

started the revolution? The sailors. Who did the tsar shoot? Who did he drown? Who did he tie with ropes? The sailors. Who brought literature from abroad? The sailors. Who beat the bourgeois and the priests? The sailors. You only begin to see daylight, whereas we sailors have shed our blood in the struggle. And while we were shedding our blood for the revolution who but you fell upon us with your tsarist bayonets? You're no bloody good to anybody . . . !"

Some soldiers put down their wooden spoons, took their rifles and stood up. The darkness around deepened and the fires seemed to have been swallowed up by the earth.

"Boys . . . let's go for these whoremongers!"

They held their rifles ready.

The sailors whipped out their revolvers and began quickly to unfasten bombs.

A grey-moustached Ukrainian, who had fought throughout the imperialist war on the western front and had been made sergeant for his fearlessness and who, when the revolution broke out, had killed the officers of his company, took a mouthful of hot kasha, tapped his dripping spoon over the rim of the kettle and wiped his moustache.

"Cockerels!" he cried at the sailors, "Co-co-co-co! Why don't you crow?"

His sally produced shouts of laughter.

"Why do they treat us like dirt?" said the soldiers angrily, turning to the grey-moustached man.

Again the long string of fires flashed to the eye. The sailors began to put their revolvers into their holsters and reattach their bombs.

"Bah . . . you bastards are not worth troubling about!"

They moved away, a riotous horde, dimly white in the dusk, and vanished. The string of fires stretched after

them. When they were gone, as a backwash of their visit, dim thoughts stirred.

"They must have barrels of booze."

"Looted it from the cossacks."

"Did they? But they pay for all they take."

"They roll in gold."

"They looted all the ships."

"Why should the money sink with the ships? Who'd be better off for it?"

"When they came to our village they made quick work of the bourgeoisie. Put everything in the hands of the poorer peasants and sent the bourgeois flying, shot some, hanged the others."

"Our priest," a merry, youthful voice put in, speaking quickly for fear of being interrupted, "had just come down from the pulpit when they grabbed him and bumped him off! That was the last of him. He lay there in front of the church, stinking. Nobody bothered to bury him."

The youthful voice laughed hurriedly, as if to forestall interruption. All joined in the laugh.

"Oh, look! a falling star!"

Suddenly all strained their ears: from yonder, where there was no human being or thing, but only night and immeasurable emptiness, came a sound, the voice of the invisible sea.

The silence lingered.

"They're right, the sailors are. Take us, for instance. What are we roaming about for? Better for us if we had remained where we belong, each of us would have had bread, cattle . . . and now. . . ."

"That's what I say, too. We followed an officer to look for what we can't get hold of."

"He's no officer. He's a man like you and me."

"But why doesn't the Soviet power help us? There they sit in Moscow, fooling, while we reap the bitter fruit of what they've done. . . ."

From the distance, near the low burning fires, came the sound of voices as the sailors noisily proceeded on their way from fire to fire, from unit to unit.

CHAPTER XV

Night came into its own at last. The campfires died out one by one until the whole bright chain of them disappeared, leaving only the soft darkness and silence. No human voices. One sound alone filled the night—the munching of the horses.

The dark figure of a man hurriedly threaded his way among the black, silent carts; wherever it was possible he ran along the edge of the highroad, jumping over the prone bodies of the sleeping campers. He was followed by another strange, dark figure, limping on one foot. Now and then one of the sleepers near the carts would waken, raise his head and follow with his eye the quickly vanishing figures.

"What are they after? Who are they? Maybe spies! Ought to jump up and stop them. . . ."

But sleep prevailed and the raised head sank down again.

In the pitch black silence those two went running, jumping and picking their way through the congestion. The horses, pricking up their ears, stopped champing and listened.

There was a distant shot; the sound came from the front to the right, probably from the mountainside. It sounded lonely and intrusive amid the tranquillity, the peaceful champing of the horses and the darkness. Yet, it seemed to linger in the stillness, like something tangible that refused to dissolve.

Those two dark figures ran the faster.

Three more shots. From the same spot, from the mountainside to the right. Even in the darkness one could make out the blackness of the gaping ravine. Then suddenly came the rattle of a machine-gun, each sound tumbling over the next. *Tat-tat-tat* and, as an afterthought: *ta-ta-a.*

A black head lifted, then another. A black form sat up; another jumped to his feet and groped among the stacked rifles for his particular rifle, then gave up.

"Eh, Gritzko, d'you hear that? D'you hear . . . ?"

"Shut up!"

"But d'you hear . . . the cossacks!"

"Shut up, you fool, or you'll get it in the neck."

The first speaker turned his head about, scratched his loins and back, then took a few steps to where a grey coat was spread on the ground, and lay down in it snuggling himself into a tolerably comfortable position.

Tat-tat-tat.

Again three sharp clean shots.

Tiny flashes, like pinpricks, showed for a split second in the gaping darkness of the ravine.

"To hell with them! Can't they stop! People are dog tired, just settled down for a rest and there they go potting at them, the swine. Wish somebody'd do the same to them, curse 'em! When there's a fight, do your damnedest, fight till you drop, tooth and nail, but when people are sleeping, leave 'em alone. You get nothing by it, only waste your cartridges, that's all . . . breaking people's rest. . . ."

And a moment later the regular breathing of another sleeping man mingled with the munching of the horses.

CHAPTER XVI

The foremost of the two running figures drew a hard breath and said:

"But where are they?"

His companion answered without stopping:

"Quite near. Under that tree, there, on the highroad."

He cried out:

"Granny Gorpino!"

From the darkness came the query:

"What do you want?"

"Are you there?"

"We're here all right."

"Where's the cart?"

"Here, quite close to you. To the right, over the ditch."

Then out of the darkness came a dove-like voice broken with sudden tears.

"Oh, Stepan . . . Stepa-an . . . he is dead . . . !"

The young mother held out her arms and surrendered her baby. Stepan took the strangely cold bundle that gave out a heavy smell. She pressed her head against Stepan's chest and the darkness rang with her heartrending sobs.

"He is dead, Stepan. . . ."

Her women friends gathered around her, held back neither by fatigue nor sleep. Their dim silhouettes stood about the cart. They crossed themselves, sighed, offered advice.

"It's the first time that she has wept."

"She'll feel better after it."

"Yes . . . she'll feel better. . . ."

"Her milk must be sucked away, or she'll go mad."

The women hastened to feel her distended breasts.

"Hard as stone."

Then, crossing themselves and muttering prayers, they put their lips to her nipples and drew at them devoutly, spitting out the milk in three different directions and making the sign of the cross.

The men began to dig in the darkness among the grappling, low-growing, prickly bushes of the derji tree; they threw up the earth, placed the bundle in the hole and filled it in.

"He is dead, Stepan . . . !"

Dimly visible in the darkness the black figure of the man took up an armful of the prickly branches, uttering low sounds of grief. And the woman clung with her arms about his neck, crying and choking with tears:

"Oh Stepan . . . Stepan . . . Stepan!"

CHAPTER XVII

Night was supreme. No fires, no voices. Only the munching of the horses. And soon even they were still, some of them lying down. One felt the approach of dawn. Under the black silent mountains sprawled the huge, sleeping camp.

But to one spot only the night's darkness failed to carry its spell of irresistible sleep. A light shone through the trees of a quiet garden. One man kept vigil for all the rest.

In a great, oak-panelled room, hung with valuable pictures which had been prodded and torn with bayonets and which was dimly lit by a candle sealed to the table, soldiers lay asleep and snoring, in varied postures, on the luxurious draperies which had been torn from the windows and doors. Saddles were heaped and rifles were stacked in all the corners. The air was heavy with the smell of human sweat and the sweat of horses.

A machine-gun in the doorway seemed to peer out into the darkness with narrowed eyes.

Kojukh bent over the carved oak table which occupied almost the whole length of the great dining room, his small, gimlet eyes glued to a map. The candle flickered, throwing live shadows upon the floor, walls and faces.

His adjutant also stooped over the blue sea and mountain ranges that looked like twisting millipedes.

An orderly with a leather satchel, his rifle slung behind his back, his sword strapped to his hip, stood awaiting

orders. The flickering candle cast dancing shadows upon him.

For the moment the candle burned low and all the shadows became still.

"From this ravine here," said the adjutant, poking his finger into the millipede, "they can still attack us."

"Here, they can't break through. The mountains are high and impassable and they can't reach them from the other slopes to get at us."

The adjutant dropped some hot wax on his hand.

"We must get to this turning here; that will put us out of their reach. To do that we must make a forced march."

"No grub."

"What of that? Staying here won't give us any. The only way to save ourselves is to move on. Have the commanders been sent for?"

"They're coming," said the orderly with a forward movement which set the shadows dancing on his face and neck.

In the tall windows alone the pitch darkness remained undisturbed.

Tat-tat-a-a-a-a-a.

The distant echoing rattle from the black ravine again filled the night with threats.

Heavy footsteps on the stairs, across the veranda and then into the dining-room seemed to carry that threat or news of it with them. Even the thin flame of the candle flared up when the dusty, begrimed commanders entered. Their faces were sharp and drawn from the heat and exhaustion, the continuous marching.

"What's the position now?" asked Kojukh.

"We drove them off."

Everything was dim and confused in the great room

"They can do nothing," said another man in a thick, husky voice. "It'ud be different if they had artillery."

"They've only got one machine-gun and have to haul it themselves!"

Kojukh's face seemed to be carved in stone. He frowned deeply and his heavy brow almost covered his eyes. All of them knew that it was not the cossack attack which troubled him.

They crowded round the table, some smoking, some munching crusts of bread, others, utterly spent, were gazing abstractedly at the map which made a motley patch on the table.

Kojukh spoke through clenched teeth:

"You don't obey orders."

At once shadows began to flit over the exhausted faces and grimy necks; the room was full of loud voices accustomed to shouting orders in open spaces:

"You take no care of the men. . . ."

"My unit is worn out, I can't make them march. . . ."

"When we halted my men simply dropped to the ground. Didn't even attempt to light fires. They were utterly worn out."

"Such marches are unthinkable. If you go on like this you'll ruin the army in no time."

"Absolutely. . . ."

Kojukh's face remained impassive. From beneath his heavy brows his small eyes did not so much look at as listen to them in expectation. The darkness stood unstirring in the tall open windows; behind it the utterly weary night dozed after the anxious strain. No further shots came from the black ravine; but its darkness seemed the more intense.

"I, for one, don't intend to ruin my unit!" bawled a

colonel as if he were shouting a command. "I am morally responsible for the life, health and fate of the men entrusted to me."

"Quite," agreed a brigade commander, conspicuous for his bulk, self-assurance and compelling manner.

He had been an officer of the regular army and felt that now was the time to show his weight and all the higher gifts that had been so unreasonably and unprofitably kept under the bushel by the pundits of the tsarist army.

"Quite . . . and moreover the plan of campaign has not been properly worked out. The units should be differently placed—they are in constant danger of being cut off."

"Well, if I was a cossack," interrupted the commander of the Kuban hundred, excitedly, a tall, slender man in a Circassian coat with a silver dagger passed slantways through the belt around his narrow waist, and his fur hat set rakishly upon his head: "Well, if I were a cossack I'd have pounced out of the ravine and our solitary gun would have disappeared before we knew anything was happening."

"And that absence of plans and orders! Do you think we're merely a lot of bandits—a disorderly horde?"

Then Kojukh spoke very slowly and distinctly:

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

His words hung heavily in the disturbed atmosphere of the big room. His small gimlet eyes had still that look of expectation but not for any answer that he awaited.

Again the shadows danced, changing the expression of faces, changing the faces themselves. And again hoarse, unnecessarily loud voices filled the room.

"We commanders also bear a burden of responsibility and a heavy one."

"Even under the tsar officers were consulted in moments of stress, and this is revolution!"

The purport of this was:

"You are an uncouth simpleton, a son of the earth and do not, cannot, fathom the complexity of the situation. You earned your rank at the front, where, when regular officers are scarce, any idiot is promoted to fill a gap. Now the masses have elected you, but the masses are blind. . . ."

Thus said the eyes, the faces, the attitude of the professional officers of the old army. Whereas the commanders that were recently coopers, carpenters, tinkers or hairdressers seemed to say:

"You're one of us, and no better than us! Why should you be in command instead of us? We could do the job better. . . ."

Kojukh was aware of these trains of thought. He sensed the unuttered criticism and with narrowed eyes kept listening to the darkness behind the windows. Listening and biding his time.

And his patience was rewarded.

Far away, in some corner of the darkness, a faint hollow noise arose. It gained in strength, intensity and clearness. The night began to swell heavily with the sound of feet pounding in the darkness. The pounding rolled up to the steps, lost its measured rhythm, got muddled. Men were ascending the veranda, crowding it, and into the dimly lit dining-room a continuous stream of soldiers began to pour through the blankly staring doorway. They came until they filled the room. They were hardly discernible, one could only feel that they were numerous and all alike. The commanders pressed together at the end of the table on which lay the map. The almost burnt-out candle gave little light.

In the murk the soldiers cleared their throats, blew their noses, spat on the floor, rubbing the spittle with boots, and rolled cigarettes. Evil-smelling smoke spread over the confused crowd.

"Comrades!"

Silence fell in the darkened, crowded room.

"Comrades!"

Kojukh forced the words out through his clenched teeth.

"You must know, comrade representatives of the companies, and you, comrade commanders, how we stand. The town behind us and the port are occupied by cossacks. About twenty thousand wounded Red soldiers remained there but all of them have been killed by order of the cossack officers. They'll deal with us in the same way. The cossacks are close upon the heels of our third column. To our right we have the sea, to our left, the mountains. At the foot of the mountains the land dips and in that dip of land we now stand. The cossacks come down the mountains, reaching at us through the ravines, and we have to beat them back every minute. They'll continue to attack us till we get to where the mountain range turns away from the sea—there are deep valleys there where we shall be out of the cossacks' reach. Therefore we must follow the coast to Tuapse, three hundred versts from here. There we'll take the highroad across the mountains, and so cross back to the Kuban where our main forces are concentrated. It's our one chance. We must make a forced march. We have food for five days, after that we starve. We must march, must run for all we are worth, without stopping to drink or sleep. We must run desperately—in this lies salvation; and if our way is blocked we must push through it."

He stopped, without looking at anyone in particular.

Silence held the crowded room, silence and the shadows from the dim light of the nearly burnt out candle. And silence held the immeasurable night behind the black windows and the vast sea.

Hundreds of eyes gazed fixedly at Kojukh's face. There were clustered tiny white bubbles of saliva on his clenched teeth.

"You'll find no bread or forage on the road; we must run till we get to the plain."

And he was silent; then he lowered his eyes and said:

"Elect another commander. I resign."

The candle died out; there was darkness and silence.

"Where's another candle?"

"I have one," said the adjutant. He struck a match which flared up, bringing into being the hundreds of eyes fixed on Kojukh, and then burnt low, again drowning all in darkness. When at last a thin wax taper was lighted, a spell seemed to break. The men began to talk, stir, clear their throats, blow their noses, spit, rubbing the spittle with their boots and looking around.

"Comrade Kojukh," said the brigade commander in a conversational voice and not as if he were shouting orders, "we know the difficulties, the terrible obstacles in our way. Behind us stands destruction and again, if we dally, we shall face destruction. It is imperative to move on with the utmost possible speed. You alone have sufficient energy and resources to lead the army out of its plight. I hope I express the opinion of all my comrades. . . ."

"Right! We all agree. We beg you to remain in command . . . !" cried all the commanders eagerly and as with one voice.

Hundreds of pairs of eyes gazed fixedly at Kojukh from the dimly lit mass of soldiers.

"How can you think of resigning," said the commander of the cavalry detachment, pushing his fur hat to the back of his head. "You were elected by the masses."

Silently the soldiers gazed with shining eyes.

Kojukh glanced up obdurately from under his heavy brows.

"All right, comrades. But I'll make one condition for you all to sign: if an order is disobeyed, even slightly, the penalty is death. The culprit shall be shot. You will sign to that effect."

"Well, of course. . . ."

"Why should we?"

"Why shouldn't we?"

"As it is we are always ready. . . ."

The commanders began to mumble confusedly.

"Lads!" said Kojukh, clenching his iron jaws. "Lads! What do you think?"

"Death!" cried hundreds of voices that seemed to burst the room. "He shall be shot, damn him! What's the good of having a man who doesn't obey orders? He must be shot."

The soldiers, as if shackles had been suddenly struck from them, began to stir again, looking at one another, jostling, gesticulating, blowing their noses, hurriedly finishing their cigarettes and stamping with their feet on the smouldering stubs.

Kojukh, his iron jaws set, repeated his condition, impressing his words into their brains:

". . . any man who breaks discipline, be he a commander or a rank and file soldier, is liable to be shot."

"And shot he'll be! He must be shot, the son of a bitch, commander or soldier, it's all one . . . !"

It was as if the great room itself had shouted this. Again

it seemed too small for the voices and sent them rolling out into the open.

"Good. Comrade Ivanko, put it down in writing and let the commanders sign it: Capital punishment without trial for any disobedience to orders, be it ever so light, or for any criticism. . . ."

The adjutant produced a scrap of paper from his pocket and having made a space for himself close to the taper, began to write.

"And you, comrades, fall out. Announce the passing of this decree to your companies: Iron discipline and no mercy."

The soldiers, crowding and jostling one another and taking a last pull at their cigarettes, poured out upon the veranda and down into the garden. Further and further away the night became alive with their voices.

Dawn began to break over the sea.

The commanders suddenly felt that a load had been lifted from their shoulders. Now everything was definite, clear, simple; they began to speak banteringly and to laugh. In turns they came up to the table and signed the death warrant.

Kojukh, with knit brows, gave them laconic orders, as if what had just happened had no relation to the great and weighty task he was called to fulfil.

"Comrade Vostrotin, take a company and. . . ."

From within the great room the sound of a horse galloping was heard; it drew up by the veranda; then the horse, evidently being tethered, snorted and shook itself violently, making the stirrups clank.

A Kuban cossack, wearing a tall fur hat, appeared in the flickering semi-darkness of the room.

"Comrade Kojukh," he said, "the second and third col-

umns have made a halt for the night ten versts from here. The commander sends you word to wait till his columns catch up with you in order that all can march together."

Kojukh turned to him a face of stone.

"What's that?"

"Sailors walked in groups among the soldiers and baggage carts, yelling and spreading sedition. They say there's no sense in obeying the commanders, and that the soldiers must take control; they say that Kojukh must be killed."

"Go on."

"The cossacks have been driven out of the ravine. Our fusiliers climbed up the ravine and chased them to the opposite slope. We have three wounded and one killed."

Kojukh was silent.

"Good, you may go."

In the dining-room the walls and faces had already grown lighter. In the picture frames the sea, created by a magic brush, was faintly blue, and the real sea appeared wonderfully blue in the open casements.

"Comrade commanders, in one hour you must start, and force the pace. Halt only for the men to water the horses. In every ravine a squad of men with a machine gun must be posted. The units must follow one another closely. In no locality are the inhabitants to be molested. Mounted messengers must frequently be sent to me with reports on the situation in the units."

"It shall be so," the commanders answered.

"Comrade Vostrotin, take your company to the rear, cut off the sailors and don't allow them to march with the units. They may follow the lagging columns if they like."

"I understand."

"Take machine-guns and, if need be, use them against them."

"I understand."

The commanders all moved to the doorway.

Kojukh began dictating to the adjutant as to which of them should be degraded, transferred or promoted to a higher command.

Then the adjutant folded the map and left together with Kojukh.

The flame of the candle trembled and flickered in the great empty room, the floor of which was covered with spittle and cigarette ends. The air was still and heavy with the smell of people, the spot on the table where the candle wick still burnt in a little puddle of hot wax was beginning to char, sending up a faint line of smoke. All the rifles and saddles had disappeared.

The big opened doors looked out upon the blue haze, the early sun was drawing out of the sea.

Drum beats to awaken the men rolled along the mountainous coast. Bugles sounded like cries from strange brass swans, the clash of brass echoed in the mountains, ravines, along the coasts and died in the sea which was now visible to the horizon. Over the beautiful abandoned villa a thick column of smoke was rising majestically—the candle-end had made the most of its opportunity.

CHAPTER XVIII

The second and third columns which followed that of Kojukh were lagging far behind. Nobody had the heart to make a strenuous effort—the heat and exhaustion were unconquerable. The men halted early for the night and started late in the morning. On the highroad the white, empty space between the head and rear columns steadily lengthened.

At night the camp again stretched for several versts along the highroad between the mountains and the coast. The bedraggled men, spent with the heat and fatigue, again built fires; again the chorus of talk, laughter and accordions arose, again the lovely songs of the Ukraine, tender and melancholy, or stern and wrathful as the history of the people themselves, floated in the air.

The sailors, driven from the first column, still bristling with bombs and revolvers, again walked between the fires, saying with curses:

"You are no better than sheep. Who is your leader? A gold epauletted officer of the tsarist army. Who's your Kojukh? Did he serve the tsar? He did, and now he's turned Bolshevik. And do you know what Bolsheviks are? They were sent from Germany in sealed railway carriages to reconnoitre, and there are fools in Russia who swarm around them like flies round honey. And these Bolsheviks have a secret agreement with the German kaiser. That's it, you sheep! You are ruining Russia, you are ruining the people. We Socialist-Revolutionaries stick at nothing. The Bolshevik government sent us orders from Moscow to de-

liver the fleet to the Germans. But we knew better, we sank the fleet. If they don't like it, let them. . . . You are a herd of ignorant riff-raff that plod on with bent heads. We tell you they have a secret understanding. The Bolsheviks have sold Russia to the kaiser. They received a whole train of carriages loaded with German gold. You are a lousy mob. . . . ."

"Shut your mouths . . . yapping at us like dogs. Get out of here. . .!"

The soldiers glared and cursed but when the sailors were gone, they began to follow their lead.

"That's true. . . . Sailors are liars, but there's something in what these chaps say. Why don't the Bolsheviks help us? They let the cossacks attack us and never think of sending help from Moscow—they look after themselves, and don't give a damn about us. . . ."

As on the previous night, from the ravine, blacker than the surrounding darkness, came shots, sparks flashed and went out in various places; a machine-gun pattered desultorily, then the camp began to sink slowly into sleep and quietness.

As on the previous night, a conference was held in an empty villa with a veranda looking out upon the now invisible sea. The commanding staff of the two lagging columns had assembled. They delayed the conference till a horseman galloped up with a pack of stearin candles obtained in the village. As before, a map was spread on the dining-room table, the parquet floor was likewise strewn with cigarette ends and on the walls hung valuable pictures which had been damaged.

Smolokurov, enormous, black-bearded and good-natured, encumbered by the very excess of his physical strength, and wearing a white sailor jacket, was sitting

with his knees wide apart, drinking tea. The commanders of different units stood around him.

From the way they smoked, exchanged desultory remarks, crushed out cigarette ends under their boots, it was obvious that none of them knew how to set the ball rolling.

And here again, each of the assembled commanders considered himself designed by his uncommon ability to save the multitude in the camp, to lead them.

Where to . . . ?

The situation was confused and uncertain. None could tell what awaited them if they went forward. But all knew that to retrace their steps would mean perdition.

"It's imperative that we elect a general chief—for all the three columns," one commander suggested.

"You're right! That's what we should do," they all responded.

Each was burning to say: "I'm the man," but none could say it.

Since each thought himself the only possible candidate, they all kept silent, and went on smoking, avoiding one another's eyes.

"We must do something, we must elect somebody. I suggest Smolokurov."

"Smolokurov! . . . Smolokurov!"

An issue had suddenly been found. Each thought. "Smolokurov is a good companion. The hail-fellow-well-met sort, a true-blue revolutionary with a stentorian voice to roar at meetings in the best style, but he's sure to make a mess of things as commander-in-chief and then—then's my chance. . . ."

Again all cried in one voice:

"Smolokurov!. . . Smolokurov!"

Smolokurov made a gesture of confusion with his huge arms.

"I—as you all know—am a seaman. On the sea I'd sink a dreadnought if need be, but we are on land. . . ."

"Smolokurov! . . . Smolokurov!"

"Well, if you wish, I'll tackle this job. But you must help me, all of you. Because if you let me down—well, all right. Tomorrow we march. Draft the orders."

All knew that orders or no orders they'd have to go on marching. What else could they do? They could neither stop nor turn back to be destroyed by the cossacks. All realized that they had no choice and need only to wait till Smolokurov made a mess of things and had to be removed. And what particular mess could he make? The only course was to drag along in the wake of Kojukh's column.

Somebody said:

"Kojukh must be told that a new commander has been elected."

"He won't care a straw, he'll go on doing what he thinks best," everybody cried.

Smolokurov banged his fist on the table with mighty force.

"I'll make him submit. I'll make him! He led his column out of the town, he fled. He ought to have remained and offered armed resistance, laid down his life with honour on the field of battle. . . ."

Their eyes rested upon Smolokurov who had risen to his full height. It was not the words he uttered but his colossal figure and the magnificent gesture of his outstretched hand that brought conviction to their minds. They all felt that an outlet had been found: Kojukh was the culprit, always rushing headlong, never giving a fel-

low a chance to show his mettle and put to use his military gifts. Now every effort should be directed towards a struggle against Kojukh.

Many activities were at once developed. An orderly was sent galloping off to Kojukh. Headquarters were organized. Typewriters were found and office clerks nominated. That would make things hum.

Appeals to the soldiers, calculated to educate them politically and instill into them a sense of organization, were typed:

"Soldiers, we do not fear the enemy."

"Remember, comrades, that our army scorns danger. . . ."

These papers were mimeographed and read out in companies and squadrons. The soldiers listened without stirring or flickering an eyelash, and then scrambled to secure them, smoothing them out on their laps, tearing them into neat squares, rolling in them coarse tobacco and having a good smoke.

Orders were sent flying after Kojukh, but he kept moving further and further every day; the empty stretch on the road between his column and the two following columns lengthened. It was very provoking.

"Comrade Smolokurov, Kojukh makes light of all your injunctions and forges along," said the commanders: "he does not seem to care a damn."

"What can I do?" answered Smolokurov with a good-natured laugh. "I'm no good on land, I belong to the sea."

"But you're commander-in-chief of the army. You have been elected to that post, and Kojukh is your subordinate."

Smolokurov kept silent for a while, wrath welling up in him, filling his colossal chest.

"I'll show him his place! I'll tie him into knots!"

"Why do we drag along in his wake? We must work out a plan of our own. He means to follow the coast till he reaches the highroad which leads across the mountains to the Kuban steppe, whereas we shall immediately cross the mountains by way of the Dolinovka. There is an old road, and the shorter way."

"Send word immediately to Kojukh that he must at once stop his column and report here for a conference," roared Smolokurov. "The army shall proceed from here across the mountains. If Kojukh disregards my orders I shall destroy his column with artillery fire."

Kojukh did not report, and continued his onward progress. He remained out of reach.

Smolokurov issued an order to his army to commence the ascent. But his chief of staff, who had been through the military academy and could appraise the situation, choosing a moment when Smolokurov was alone (in the presence of the commanders, Smolokurov was invariably intractable) said: "If we cross the mountain range from here we shall lose our baggage train, the refugees, and most important of all, our artillery, because there is no road, only a mountain path. Kojukh is acting wisely. Without our artillery we shall be defenceless. The cossacks will capture us barehanded. Moreover, they'll defeat us while we're isolated from Kojukh."

The argument was clear. But it was less the force of it that convinced Smolokurov, than the fact that his chief of staff spoke in guarded and considerate tones and did not lay boastful emphasis on his having been through the military academy.

"Send an order to continue marching along the highroad," said Smolokurov with a dark frown.

And again soldiers, refugees and baggage trains moved on noisily, disorderly.

CHAPTER XIX

As always, Kojukh's column when camping for the night forgot about rest and sleep. The darkness was resonant with voices, and the music of balalaikas and accordions. The laughter of girls filled the night, making it pulse with life; harmonies, charged with youthful resilience, mysterious significance and expanding strength, floated through the air.

Mountains sigh and mountains groan
Near the deep blue sea,
Cossack women weep and moan
In captivity.

The voices soared and sank in waves of melody, swelling, receding in the night . . . the heartache of young cossack women, who, fleeing from the captivity imposed upon them by officers, generals and bourgeois, were sallying forth to struggle for freedom. Their grief, mingled with joy, filled the darkness.

Near the deep blue sea. . . .

The real sea was close to them, at their very feet, but it remained silent and invisible.

And harmonizing with their grief and joy for freedom, the edges of the mountains became delicately golden, making the mass of the range seem blacker, more mournful.

Through the dips, crevices and ravines the moonlight, diffuse and powdery, showed the dark shadows of the trees and the dark ruggedness of the mountain peaks.

Heralded by its uncertain light the moon appeared, generously bright, creating the world anew. The men stopped singing. The moon revealed the sea below the rocks and made it wonderfully bright; molten gold streaming over it endlessly, to the far horizon. Its splendour was dazzling.

"It seems alive," someone said.

"People say God made it."

"How is it that if you sail on it you get to Roumania, Odessa, and even to Sebastopol—you follow the compass and you get to a place. . . ."

"Ah . . . at the Turkish front, my lads, every time a battle was on, the priest began to sing psalms. But however much he sang, heaps and heaps of bodies remained on the field. . . ."

Powdery blue strips of moonlight spread over the steep slopes, broke over the shelving rocks, snatched out from a mountain a white angular cliff, branches of trees like outstretched arms, a precipice with corroded rocky sides, showing them in sharp contrast, thrusting them into life.

From the highroad came a tumult of voices, the sound of many feet, curses.

All heads turned in the direction of it.

"Who's this cursing mob?"

"The sailors. A foul-mouthed lot."

The sailors were marching along, a rugged, disorderly crowd, at times bathed in moonlight, at others hidden in black shadow and like a dense, evil, stifling cloud over them, hung the filthy words they were shouting. They were inimical. The girls and lads felt suddenly tired, yawned, stretched themselves and began to scatter.

"Time to go to sleep. . . ."

Hooting, shouting and swearing, the sailors approached

a rocky shelf. In the shadow, hidden from the moon, stood the cart in which Kojukh slept.

"What do you want?"

Two sentinels barred access with their rifles.

"Where's the commander?"

Kojukh had already jumped to his feet, and his eyes gleamed in the darkness.

The sentinels pointed with their rifles:

"Step back or we shoot."

Kojukh spoke from the darkness.

"What do you want?"

"We have come to speak to you, commander. Our forces have run out. Do you expect us to die of starvation? There are five thousand of us. We have sacrificed everything for the revolution and must we now starve like dogs?"

Kojukh's face was invisible in the black shadow, but all could see the gleam in his eyes.

"Join the army. You shall be put on the ration strength and given rifles. We have little food left. We only supply those who carry rifles. It's our only way to get through. Even those who fight have a bare ration."

"Do you think we're not fighters? Why d'you want to force us into your ranks? We know best how to act. When it comes to fighting we'll fight no worse than you. We'll fight better. You have no business to dictate to tried revolutionaries like us. Where were you when we smashed the tsar? You were an officer in the tsar's army. Now you want us to perish after we've given everything to the revolution. First come, first served! Fifteen hundred of our boys have laid down their lives in the town. With these hands we buried the officers alive, and now. . . ."

"Those fifteen hundred laid down their lives, and you are here with a lot of women. . . ."

The sailors roared like a herd of bulls:

"You dare to taunt us fighters for the revolution!"

They roared and gesticulated menacingly before the sentinels. But Kojukh's gleaming eyes could not be eluded; they saw everything; saw these gesticulating men, saw also the isolated figures who were creeping up from every side, crouching as they crossed the opalescent strips of moonlight and unfastening bombs as they came. And these, suddenly, all rushed upon the besieged cart.

At that moment a machine-gun began to rattle. It flashed in the cart, obedient to the gleaming eyes above it so that in the tangle of darkness dappled with moonlight not a single bullet missed its man; there came a deathly wind that stirred the caps of the sailors who staggered away scattering.

"The devil! . . . And clever, no denying it. . . . That's the sort of machine-gunner one would like to have. . . ."

In the great space under the moonlight the camp slept. The mountains, bathed in the light, also slept. Across the sea shimmered the wide golden road of the moon's reflection.

CHAPTER XX

As soon as it became light the column began to creep along the highroad.

To the right lay the blue expanse of the sea, to the left towered the wooded mountains crowned by barren rocks.

From over the ragged peaks poured the steadily growing heat of the morning. The highroad was clouded with dust. Multitudes of flies pestered both people and beasts, familiar flies, from the Kuban steppe; they had accompanied the retreating masses from their very thresholds, they camped at night with them, and rose with them at dawn.

Twisting like a white snake, the highroad, deep in dust, wound into the thick forest. There it was still and cool with shade; rocks were visible through the tangle of trees; a few paces from the highroad the jungle was impassable; vines and lianas curled over every branch and stem. The spears of the derji tree bristled on every side and the hooked thorns of hidden shrubs clutched those who passed too near. It was the haunt of the bear, polecat, wild goat, deer and of the mewing lynx. No human being for hundreds of versts. No traces of cossacks.

Once Circassians lived here, on the mountain sides. Paths wound among rocks and through the forest, scattered here and there; grey huts, small and far-between; in a clearing near the water there are patches of maize and carefully tended gardens.

Seventy years ago the tsarist government drove the

Circassians to Turkey. Since then, the paths became choked with weeds, the gardens grew wild, for hundreds of versts it became the haunt of wild beasts.

The men tightened the cords round their waists—the rations distributed at halts had dwindled.

The carts creaked, the wounded holding on to them dragged themselves along, the heads of the children bobbed, the lean artillery horses drawing the solitary gun strained their utmost at the traces.

The winding highroad began to twist down to the sea. The shimmering glare of the sun lay across the blue expanse.

Translucid ripples continually lapped the pebbly shore.

The column crept along the highroad without a minute's rest, the younger men, girls, children and the wounded who could walk, scrambled down the slope, stripping off their rags as they went, trousers, skirts, shirts, hastily stacked their rifles and plunged into the clear water. The impact of their bodies sent up glittering splashes which scintillated into broken rainbows. And the bathers vented their joy in laughter, cries and shouts that gave a meaning to the coast.

The sea, like a huge beast with gentle and wide wrinkles on its broad face, placidly approved of the splashing, shouting and hooting and blandly licked the animated coast and the yellow human bodies performing their vigorous antics.

On and on crept the column.

The bathers jumped out of the water, snatched up their garments and rifles, and ran, holding under their arms their smelly rags, irridescent drops of brine trembling on their tanned bodies. When they caught up with the marchers on the highroad they quickly slipped on their

sweat-soaked things, the object of bawdy jests and roars of laughter.

And immediately their example was followed by others who also ran down, flung off their clothes and splashed boisterously while the placid beast with the gentle and wise wrinkles blandly licked their bodies.

On and on went the column.

White summer villas were scattered here and there on the barren coast, along the highroad; everything looked hemmed in against the narrow bank of the roadway, the only means of communication among the forests, cliffs, and crags.

The men ran into the villas, searched them through, but found nothing save emptiness and desolation.

There were sunburnt Greeks in the small town, Greeks with big noses and eyes like shining black plums. Their faces were sullen with lurking hostility.

"We have no bread . . . no bread. . . . We ourselves are starving."

They knew not who these soldiers were, whence they had come, whither they were going. They asked no questions and were sullenly hostile.

The soldiers searched—and in truth there was nothing. But they guessed from the faces of the Greeks that they had hidden food. Because they were Greeks and not their own people the soldiers took away all the goats, ignoring the cries of the dark-eyed women.

In a wide ravine which severed the mountains they came upon an unexpected Russian village. A clear and sparkling river twisted through it. White-washed huts, cattle. One slope of the mountain was partly covered with patches of stubble and ploughed fields. Wheat was being

sown. The inhabitants were people from Poltava who spoke their dialect.

These ungrudgingly shared their wheat and millet with the soldiers, and beset them with questions. They had heard that the tsar was kicked from his throne and that the Bolsheviks came to power, but they did not know how things stood. The soldiers enlightened them and although it seemed a pity to do it, these villagers being their own people, they took all the chickens, geese and ducks while the village women stood by lamenting.

The column moved on without halting.

"Time we had some grub," said the men tightening the cords round their waists.

Small detachments rummaged in villas and finally found a gramophone and a pile of records. They fixed it to a spare saddle and over the wooded stillness, across the face of the bare cliffs and through the clouds of white dust, a rusty, reminiscently human voice screeched:

Flea! a flea! Ha! Ha!

The men stamped and shook with laughter.

"Well, flea, have another go!"

They listened with relish to several other records, popular or artistic. Suddenly the gramophone entoned:

God save the tsar....

A tumult arose.

"To hell with him and down with god!"

They snatched the record and flung it upon the road to be trampled by the thousands of marchers.

From the moment of its discovery the gramophone was in constant demand. Come early dawn, come deepest

night, it strained and wheezed out songs and snatches of opera.

Squadrons and companies enjoyed it by turns; in some units its stay was unduly prolonged. It was a general favourite and the men fought over it. It was regarded as something that was alive.

CHAPTER XXI

A Kuban horseman, bending low in the saddle, his fur hat pushed to the back of his head, came galloping full tilt towards the moving horde.

"Where's the *batka*?" *

His face streamed with sweat, and the wet sides of his horse heaved heavily.

Huge, dazzling white clouds appeared over the wooded mountains and beamed down upon the highroad.

"Looks like there'll be a thunderstorm. . . ."

Beyond a bend in the highroad the van of the column suddenly stopped; the infantry ranks closed up; the baggage train drivers pulled on the reins, straining up the heads of their horses; and the carts coming behind jammed against those in front of them; presently the whole train was at a standstill.

"What's up? It's too soon for a halt!"

The streaming face of the horseman, the heaving sides of his mount, and the unwonted halt evoked anxiety, which was intensified, charged with a sinister meaning, when from far ahead came the faint sound of firing. These ceased, but their sound left a lingering impression in the stillness that had suddenly fallen, and this impression could not be dispelled.

Even the gramophone was silent. Kojukh drove past in a britzska, hastening to rejoin the head of the column.

* *Batka* means father in the Ukrainian language; the word is applied to leaders.

Then horsemen galloped up and barred the way peremptorily, with curses.

"Stop! Turn back. If you don't, we shoot. . . . Damn you! You're not allowed to go on. There'll be a battle presently, there up the road! It's orders. Kojukh told us to shoot those who disobey. . . ."

Alarm spread. The women, old people, young girls and children raised pitiful wails and cries.

"What are you doing to us? Why do you hold us back? What are we to do? We are with you. If it's death, we'll all die together."

The horsemen were obdurate.

"Kojukh said there must be a distance of five versts between you and the soldiers. You're in the way. Understand? A hindrance in battle."

"But those ahead are our people. My Ivan is there."

"And my Mikita."

"And my Opanas."

"If you go away and we remain . . . you'll abandon us."

"Have you no brains? We've got to fight to save you. When the road's clear, you'll come on behind us. But now there's going to be a fight you're in the way."

The carts, so far as the eye could see, were jammed together, those on foot and the wounded making a dense crowd. The wails of the women filled the air. The highroad was blocked for several versts, the baggage train frozen still. The flies alighted in swarms on the backs, sides and necks of the horses, the children were black with them. The horses desperately tossed their heads, kicking at their bellies with their hooves. There were glimpses of the blue sea through the foliage. All eyes were on the section of the highroad where the horsemen barred

the way. Beyond the horsemen were the soldiers, their own, dear, plain peasant lads and men, carrying rifles, there they were rolling dry grass into leaves, and smoking them as cigarettes.

Presently the soldiers rose and marched away. The dusty stretch of highroad widened more and more; and as it widened the menace of a mysterious danger grew.

The horsemen were deaf to entreaties. An hour passed, then another. The swollen-eyed women sobbed and lamented. The empty highroad assumed a deathly whiteness. Through the foliage the sea was blue, clouds hung above the wooded mountains.

From nowhere in particular came a resilient burst of artillery, a second, a third. Volleys roared, rolling and echoing in the mountains, the hills and ravines. A machine-gun began its deadly, dispassionate rattling.

Then all who had a whip in their hands began desperately to lash their horses. The animals sprang forward, but the mounted soldiers, cursing angrily, also began to lash the cart horses, raining blows at their heads, eyes, ears, beating them back. The beasts snorted, tossed their heads, dilated their bleeding nostrils, rolled their eyes wildly, kicked against the shafts, reared and pawed. From behind came the drivers of other carts, hooting and hallooing their utmost and lashing the horses with their whips. The children, screaming as if they were being butchered, also flogged the horses with switches of bush, aiming at their legs and bellies, doing their best to hurt them. The women uttered piercing cries and pulled at the reins with all their strength, the wounded hopped around on their crutches trying to help.

The maddened beasts jerked forward, trampling,

breaking through and scattering Kojukh's horsemen; straining in their shabby harness they bolted along the highroad, with outstretched necks and flattened ears. The peasants jumped into the carts, the wounded holding on tried to run, fell, were dragged along, and then, losing hold, were rolled into the roadside ditches.

The wheels rumbled through whirlpools of white dust; the empty pails hanging under the carts made a terrific rattle; the men clucked their tongues and hooted to encourage the horses. Through the foliage flashed glimpses of the blue sea.

Not until they had caught up with the infantry did they slow down and proceed at a normal pace.

Nobody knew anything. Some said cossacks were ahead. But how could there be cossacks ahead; hadn't they been left behind in the huge range of mountains? Some said there were Circassians, or perhaps Kalmucks, or Georgians, or people of an unknown nationality, swarms, hordes of them. All of this brought the carts of the refugees with greater insistance to the immediate vicinity of the fighting units—there was no earthly means of driving them back short of shooting them dead, every one of them.

Cossacks or no Cossacks, Georgians or no Georgians, life had to go on. The gramophone sang again:

Let my passion be quenched....

Here and there the men broke into song. They straggled along the highroad, some leaving it to scramble up to the slopes, where the brambles and thorns wrought havoc to their miserable clothes, to look for apples, albeit small and wild apples, intolerably acid. They winced, made wry faces, but filled their bellies with the unpalatable stuff.

They also collected acorns under oak trees, chewed them, bitter saliva streaming down their chins. Then they would get out of the thicket, naked, their skin torn and bleeding, wrapping what was left of their rags around their loins.

Women, girls and children—all went into the thicket, shouting, laughing, crying when the thorns tore their bodies and the brambles held them fast. But their hunger was strong and compelled them.

They passed some valleys and on a slope came upon a patch of ripening maize, sign of some small village perched in the vicinity. The patch of maize was at once covered with people, thick as locusts. The soldiers broke off the green heads and ran down to the highroad rubbing them between their palms, picking out what grains they could find, filling their mouths and chewing greedily.

The mothers also collected maize, and chewed it patiently, then, with their warm tongues they pushed the soft mass, diluted with saliva, into the tiny mouths of their young.

From ahead again came the sound of shots and the rattle of machine-guns, but nobody heeded it; all were accustomed to it. Then the noise ceased. The gramophone screeched:

I don't believe your words of love....

The refugees called to one another, laughed in the forest, and the singing of the soldiers rang out. The train of refugees was indivisibly attached to the tail of the infantry, all moved along the highroad without respite in endless clouds of dust.

CHAPTER XXII

For the first time the enemy barred their progress. A new enemy.

What for? What do they want?

Kojukh saw that it was a deadlock; mountains to the left, the sea on the right, and between these the narrow highroad. On the highroad a sort of railway bridge spanned a foaming mountain stream. There was no avoiding the bridge. Before it were posted machine-guns and cannon. The airy construction, trellised with rods of steel, was a trap for an army. How good it would have been to deploy his ranks! But the broad steppe was the place for doing that!

Instructions from Smolokurov's headquarters as to how he should act if he met the enemy were delivered to him. His face turned the colour of a lemon and his jaw set. He crumpled the sheet, and flung it to the ground. The soldiers picked it up, carefully smoothed it out, rolled dry leaves into it, and smoked.

Kojukh's army stretched along the highroad. He gazed at it: ragged, barefoot men; half of them had two or three cartridges each, the rest had rifles but no ammunition. One cannon and sixteen shells, all told. But Kojukh looked at the soldiers as if each had several hundred cartridges and as if his batteries were standing in stern array with full caissons behind them. Around them he envisioned his native steppe in which an advance in the open is a simple and natural thing.

His eyes full of his vision, he said:

"Comrades! We've fought the cossacks and Cadets. We know why we fought: it was because they wanted to strangle the revolution. . . ."

The soldiers looked sullenly up at him, and their eyes said plainly:

"No need to speak. We know. But what of it? We're not going into the trap of that bridge."

"We have escaped from the cossacks. The mountains fence us away from them. We have a respite. But a new enemy has crossed our path. Who are they? Georgian Mensheviks. And Mensheviks and Cadets are all one, they side with the bourgeoisie. Their dream is to destroy the Soviet power. . . ."

The soldiers answered with their eyes:

"Gloat over the Soviet power to your heart's content. We are barefoot and naked, and have nothing to eat."

Kojukh read the words in their eyes and understood that it meant perdition.

He played his last trump and addressed the cavalry:

"Comrades, it is up to you to take the bridge at once by mounted attack."

The cavalry, every man of them, realized that the commander was giving them an insane order to gallop in single file over the narrow bridge under machine-gun fire. There was no room for several horsemen abreast. It meant strewing half the space with dead bodies, thus obstructing the way over the second half for those who were unscathed, and who, having no possibility of advancing, would be shot in their attempt to retreat.

But they looked so smart in their Circassian coats, their silver mounted arms—heirlooms in their families—shone so brightly, their high Circassian fur hats and astrakhan Kuban hats were so good to look at and had such a chal-

lenging air, their splendid horses, hailing from the Kuban steppes, tossed their heads and strained the bridle in such a spirited fashion and everybody was so obviously gazing in admiration upon them, that they cried in one voice:

"We'll do it, Comrade Kojukh!"

From its place of concealment Kojukh's cannon began to fire at the spot beyond the bridge among the rocks where machine-guns were hidden, filling the ravines and mountains with its monstrously swelling echo; and the cavalrymen, having adjusted their hats, without shouts or shots, dashed out from behind a bend in the road. Their terrified horses, with outstretched necks, flattened ears and red distended nostrils, carried them at a gallop to the bridge and across it.

The Georgian machine-gunners crouching under the pelting hail of shrapnel were deafened by the wild roaring of guns, endlessly multiplied by the mountain echo. For a moment they were dumbfounded by the unexpected foolhardiness of Kojukh's cavalry, but they recovered themselves and set their machine-guns barking . . . one horse fell, a second, a third, but the other riders had already reached the middle of the bridge, and in a second were at the end of it. Kojukh's last shell burst, and . . . his cavalry were over the bridge!

"Hurrah! Hurrah!"

Right and left they slashed with their sabres. The Georgian units, some distance from the bridge, were forced back and rapidly retreated, vanishing from sight behind a bend in the highroad.

The Georgians who had been guarding the bridge, and were now cut off from the rest of their force, fled towards the sea. But their officers had got to the launches before them and were already racing towards the steamers. The

funnels were belching dense black smoke and soon the steamers began to glide away towards the open sea.

Neck deep in the water, the Georgian soldiers stood with arms outstretched towards the vanishing steamers. They shouted and cursed, they implored mercy for the sake of their children, but it was of no avail. Swift sabres cleaved their necks, heads, shoulders, staining the water with blood.

The steamers, dark spots on the horizon, vanished and there were none left to implore or curse them.

CHAPTER XXIII

The forests and ravines were surmounted by rocky peaks. When the wind blew down from them the air became fresh; but the wind did not reach the highroad which remained a prey to dust, flies and heat.

Suddenly the highroad penetrated into a narrow passage between vertical rocks, over which hung bare, snakelike roots of trees. The bends and twists in the road made it impossible for any section of the column to see what those before or behind it were doing. To back out of the gorge and turn aside from it was impossible. On and on the human stream poured relentlessly, with no choice but steady advance. The rocks hid the sea.

Sometimes, unaccountably, the forward movement stopped. Carts, people and horses stood for hours, exasperated. Then again they moved, again stopped. Why, nobody knew. And nobody could see anything except carts, and further on a bend and a wall. Overhead a strip of blue sky.

A shrill feeble voice cried:

"Mamma, apples."

And from another cart:

"Ma-a-mma!"

And so on, from almost every cart.

"Shut up! Where can I get apples . . . . Can't climb that wall! See, there are walls everywhere!"

But the children could not be quiet. They whimpered and cried, lifting their shrill little voices desperately.

"Mamma! Give me maize ! . . . Give me apples . . . apples . . . maize."

The mothers' eyes flashed. Like she-wolves at bay they glanced round wildly, began to beat their children.

"Stop that! Can't you be still. I wish you'd die! I'm sick of the sight of you!"

They shed weak, impotent, angry tears.

The muffled sound of shots came from afar. Nobody minded them, nobody felt curious about them.

They stopped for an hour or two, then moved on and again stopped.

"Mamma ! . . . maize!"

The exasperated mothers, ready to kill anybody, rummaged in the carts, snarling at one another. They pulled the stalks of young maize, chewed them long and painfully, digging their teeth into them till their gums were raw and bleeding. Then they bent over the small, hungry mouths, and pushed the stuff into them with their warm tongues. The children received it greedily, attempted to swallow, but the straw pricked their throats. They coughed, choked, spat it out and began to cry.

"Don't want it! Don't want it."

The mothers, in a fury, smacked them.

"What the hell d'ye want?"

The children smeared their tears over their grimy little faces, choked, and tried to swallow.

* * *

Kojukh, his jaws set, examined the enemy's position through his field glasses. The commanders crowded around him and also peered through field glasses; the soldiers screwed up their eyes and saw as well as if they had had binoculars.

After a final bend the gorge widened. Through its opening remote blue mountains were seen in the distance. Vast, dense forest descended to a solid massif directly opposite the mouth of the gorge. The mountain top was stony, its peak formed by a vertical rock thirty feet high. At the bottom of this precipice were enemy trenches, and sixteen guns trained on the highroad where it debouched from the gorge. When the column attempted to pass out of the rocky gate, the batteries and machine-guns showered shells and bullets, so that the soldiers promptly retired behind the rocks. Kojukh grasped the situation: it was desperate, a bird could not have flown through it. The only way to the highroad led to certain death. He glanced down at the little town that lay white in the distance, and at the blue bay dotted with black Georgian steamers. He had to find some new way of escape—but how could he find it?

Some unprecedented manoeuvre had to be improvised—but what kind of manoeuvre? He dropped on his knees, and began crawling about the map that was spread on the dusty highroad, examining all its tortuous lines, each fold and each footpath.

"Comrade Kojukh!"

He raised his head. Two merry soldiers were standing before him on wobbly legs.

Kojukh thought: "Drunk, the fools . . . but how could they manage it."

But he looked into their faces silently.

"You see how things stand, Comrade Kojukh, to try to go out along the highroad would be no good. Georgians would kill the whole lot of us. But we have just been reconnoitering, you might say . . . as volunteers. . . ."

Kojukh kept his eyes glued on their faces.

"Breathe out. Don't draw your breath in. Breathe out. You know what the penalty for this is? The firing squad."

"True to god it's the forest air. We walked through the forest and, well, we got our lungs full of it."

"There are no pubs here, nothing of the sort!" explained one of the men who had the shrewd merry eyes of a Ukrainian. "There are only trees in the forest, nothing but trees."

"Talk sense."

"That's how it was, Comrade Kojukh. We were walking there, the two of us, speaking of serious matters. We could either all perish here on the highroad, or turn back and fall into the hands of the cossacks. Neither way was tempting. What could we do? And, behold! behind the trees was a pub! We crawled up: four Georgians were drinking wine and eating *shashlick*.* You know that Georgians are boozers. Well, we held our noses till we could stand it no longer. They had revolvers. We jumped out, shot two of them dead. 'Don't stir. You are surrounded! Hands up!' . . . They lost their wits. Never expected anything of the sort. We shot the third man and tied the hands of this fellow. The proprietor was more dead than alive. Well, it's the truth, we ate what the Georgians left of the *shashlick* but we never touched the wine, because—well, you had forbidden it.

"To hell with the booze! Let my face be twisted sideways if I so much as sniffed it. Let all my innards—"

"Get back to the point."

"We dragged the dead bodies into the forest, took their arms and brought the remaining Georgian here, and the proprietor also, for fear he'd talk. We came across five

* Pieces of mutton roasted on a spit and highly spiced with pepper.

men with women and girls, natives, from the town below, Russians, our own people, who have a holding near the town. The Georgians are Asiatics, with dark faces, don't belong to our race and are fond of white women. Well, they rushed towards us and explained that we could get round the town by following footpaths. Very difficult it would be, they said. Abysses, thickets, precipices, ravines, but it could be managed. Now, to go straight on, they said, was unthinkable. They know all the paths like the fingers on their hands. Well, it's a hard job. The hell of a thing, but you can go round . . . ."

"Where are they?"

"Here."

A battalion commander came forward.

"Comrade Kojukh, we have just examined the coast, it is impossible to go that way. Steep cliffs rise from the water."

"Is the water deep?"

"Waist-deep near the cliffs; in some places it comes up to your neck, in others it covers your head."

"What of that?" said a soldier who had been listening intently. He carried a rifle and was in tatters. "There are stony bits of rock that have rolled from the mountains into the sea. We can jump from stone to stone."

Everybody offered suggestions, information, explanations, plans, some of them daring and clever. The general situation took on a clearer aspect.

Kojukh called a meeting of commanders. His jaw was set, his eyes under the heavy brows were like gimlets, and his face inscrutable.

"Comrades, what I have to say is that all four squadrons must go round the town. It's a stiff job. They'll have to follow footpaths, pierce thickets, surmount ravines,

and in the night, at that. But this job must be done at any cost. I say *done* . . . ."

The eyes of the commanders revealed the thought their tongues dared not utter:

"We'll all perish, not a horse will come back . . . ."

". . . We have five guides, Russians, living here. They have a grudge against the Georgians. They have families. They have been told that their families will be held as hostages. You must get into the town from the rear, burst into it . . . ."

He became silent, gazing into the dusk that gathered in the ravine, then added laconically:

"All must be destroyed!"

The cavalrymen adjusted their hats at a rakish angle.

"It shall be done, Comrade Kojukh." They gallantly sprang into their saddles.

Kojukh went on:

"The infantry regiment . . . Comrade Khronov, take your regiment down through the ravine, and get over the rocks to the port. At dawn attack without firing a shot, seize the moored steamers."

Again after a silence he said:

"All must be destroyed!"

The commanders thought:

"If the Georgians put a single rifleman in the proper spot, he'll be able to shoot every man in the regiment as he appears on the rocks."

But aloud they answered unanimously:

"We'll obey, Comrade Kojukh."

"Two regiments must be prepared to make a frontal attack."

The crimson patches on the highest peaks began to fade out one after the other. The deeper blue of evening

spread everywhere. Night crept between the rocks.

Kojukh said:

"I shall lead the attack."

On the minds of them all, standing there silently before him, the surrounding landscape made a deep impression: the dense forest, the stony ascent beyond it and then, like a symbol of finality, the vertical rock . . . there it towered for a while and was swallowed in the darkness. Night settled. Kojukh climbed upon a shelf of rock. Beneath him stood the blurred, dark ranks of ragged, barefooted men, an unkempt crowd bristling with menacing bayonets.

All eyes were on him. It was up to him to solve questions on which their lives depended. He had to find an outlet for a situation without issue. Had to. That was obvious to all.

Raised above his ordinary powers by the force of these thousands of compelling eyes, feeling that he had the key to a mystery which at his will would mean life or death, Kojukh said:

"Comrades! We have no choice. We must all perish here, suffer torture and death at the hands of the cossacks who'll catch up with us soon. The difficulties that beset us are almost insurmountable: we have no cartridges, no shells for our guns, we must fight bare-handed, and we have to face sixteen enemy cannon. But if we are all at one. . . ."

He stopped for a second, his stern face set like a rock, and shouted in a savage voice, a voice not his own that sent a shuddering thrill through his hearers:

"If we all rush like one man, the road that will lead us to our own people is open!"

What he said was not extraordinary. All knew it be-

forehand to the last soldier, but when he proclaimed it in that strange voice, they were struck by the surprising novelty of his words, and the soldiers roared in answer:

"Like one man! We'll rush through, or die!"

The last white stain vanished from the rocks. Nothing more could be discerned; the massif, cliffs and forest were swallowed in the darkness. The last groups of the horses disappeared. One could not see the soldiers descending along the bed of a dried-up stream, clutching at one another's tattered clothing to keep their foothold. One could hear pebbles rolling. The last ranks of two regiments were swallowed up in the dense forest over which rose that symbol of finality, the vertical rock, invisible now, but ponderously present.

The baggage train was plunged in heavy silence; no fires, talk or laughter revealed what life pulsed in it.

Even the children uttered no sound as they lay with starved shrunken faces.

Silence . . . darkness . . . .

CHAPTER XXIV

A Georgian officer with a curled moustache and black almond-shaped eyes that made havoc, as he well knew, among the womenfolk, was strolling along the plateau on the massif. He wore a red Circassian coat that set off his narrow waist. On his shoulders were gold straps. Now and then he threw a glance around him. What he saw were trenches, ramparts and well-hidden machine-guns.

Forty-five yards away was the edge of the vertical precipice. It ended at the top of a steep gradient rising from impenetrable forest. Beneath the forest was a gorge from which issued a vacant white highroad. It was towards this highroad that the concealed guns on the plateau were pointed. The enemy was there.

Sentries were walking back and forth with measured steps beside the machine-guns. Smart, spick sentries.

The ragged mob down below had been given a sharp warning when they had attempted to poke their noses out of the gorge into the highroad. They'd not forget it.

It was he, Colonel Mikheladze (so young and already a colonel!), who had chosen this position in the pass. At headquarters he had insisted on the need to occupy it, a key position which kept the whole coast securely guarded.

Again he looked around the plateau, glanced at the edge of the precipice, and the coast cliffs standing vertically in the water. Everything might have been deliberately combined to stop the advance of any army.

But to stop their advance was not sufficient, they had to

be destroyed. He had already drawn up a plan: he'd get into their rear, send steamers to that part of the highroad which closely followed the coastline, then fire at them from the sea, land a detachment, and trap this stinking rabble at both ends, killing them like rats in a trap.

He, Prince Mikheladze, owner of a charming, small landed estate near Kutais, would cut off at a stroke the head of the venomous reptile which crept along the coast. The Russians were the enemies of Georgia, lovely, cultured, glorious Georgia, enemies on a level with the Armenians, Turks, Azerbaijanians, Tatars, and Abkhasians. The Bolsheviks were the enemies of mankind, of world culture. He himself, Mikheladze, was a socialist, but he (should he send for that Greek girl? . . . Better not . . . on account of the soldiers here. . .) but he was a genuine socialist, with a deep realization of the historic aspect of events, a confirmed despiser of all adventurers who fanned into flame the lowest passions of the masses under the guise of socialism.

He was in no wise bloodthirsty, he had a distaste for shedding blood, but when it came to world culture, to the greatness or welfare of his native people—well, he could be merciless, and those yonder should be destroyed to a man.

He strolled along examining through his field glasses the formidable precipice, the impenetrable forests, the twisted white ribbon of the highroad issuing from the gorge, the eventide blush on the mountain peaks; and he listened to the stillness, the gentle peacefulness of the quiet, deepening evening.

His smart coat which showed off to such advantage his graceful figure and was made of the finest material, his costly dagger and revolver which were inlaid with gold

and ornamented with black enamel, his snow-white fur hat, one of the masterpieces of Osman, that justly famous furrier who had no equal in the Caucasus, all these embellishments bound him to perform a feat of valour, a unique kind of feat. They set a barrier between him and the rest; between him and the soldiers who stood at attention before him, between him and the other officers who lacked his knowledge and experience, and as he strolled along so slim and straight he felt the weight of his loneliness.

"Eh! you there!"

His orderly, a young Georgian with irregular features, open yellow face and liquid black eyes like his colonel's, straightened himself up and saluted.

"Yes, sir?"

It was on the tip of the colonel's tongue to say, "Bring that girl . . . you . . . the Greek girl. . . ."

But he did not say it and gave the orderly a stern look instead.

"Supper ready?"

"Yes, sir. The officers are waiting."

The colonel majestically passed by the soldiers who jumped up and stood at attention. Their faces were thin. Transport supplies had been stopped and the soldiers were starved on only a handful of maize per day. They saluted, followed the colonel with their eyes, whereas he negligently flicked a white glove with his fingers half in it. He passed by the open fires, which gave out blue smoke and burned low as always in the evenings, by the stacked rifles of the infantry, and entered a long white tent in which a dazzling table loaded with bottles, plates, glasses, caviar, cheese and fruit stretched from end to end.

Talk at once died out among the groups of officers who,

young as their colonel, were equally smart, in tight-waisted, Circassian coats. All stood up.

"Let's have our supper, gentlemen," said the colonel, and all took their seats at the table.

When he was preparing for bed in his tent the colonel felt pleasantly dizzy. He stretched forth his legs for the orderly to pull off his well-polished patent leather boots and thought:

"Why didn't I send for that Greek girl. . . ? But, well, after all, it was wiser not to do it."

CHAPTER XXV

The vast night swallowed up the mountains, cliffs and the formidable precipice which in daytime hung from the plateau. The dense forests at its foot had also disappeared in the engulfing darkness. Not a thing could be seen.

Along the breastwork passed a sentry, himself as black as all in that velvety blackness. He slowly went ten paces, turned on his heel and walked slowly back. When he moved in one direction he dimly saw the outline of a machine gun, when he moved in the opposite direction he felt the nearness of the precipice filled to its edge with impenetrable darkness. And the fact that this unseen vertical precipice was there gave him a sense of security and assurance; it was too steep for even a lizard to climb.

With steady monotony he slowly made his ten forward paces, slowly turned, and went back again.

In his native village he had a small orchard and a small field of maize. There was Nina, his wife, in her arms little Sergo, his son. When he was leaving them little Sergo had looked at him with his black plum eyes and then leapt in his mother's arms, stretched out his plump little arms and smiled, making bubbles with his tiny, toothless mouth. And when he took him from Nina, little Sergo had pressed his open mouth against his father's face, wetting him with his saliva. Now on the dark plateau he could see before him that sweet toothless smile and those bubbles.

Ten slow steps, the faintly outlined machine gun, the slow return to the divined edge of the gaping precipice. . . .

The Bolsheviks hadn't done him any wrong. . . . But he'd shoot at them from this height. A lizard could not crawl out on the highroad without being seen. . . . The Bolsheviks had done away with their tsar, and the tsar had drained Georgia of its life force . . . served him right . . . in Russia, people said the land would be given to the peasants. . . . He sighed. He had been mobilized, and would shoot, when he was ordered to do it, at those yonder below the cliffs——

And again, before his eyes sprang the vision of little Sergo's toothless smile and bubbles; his heart felt warm and, inwardly, he smiled, but his dark face remained serious.

'Undisturbed the night's stillness filled all space. He thought it must be near dawn, because the stillness had deepened. His head felt terribly heavy and began to bend lower and lower, and then jerk up again. The mountains were darker than the dark night. In the ragged spaces between twinkled solitary stars.

From the distance came the weird unfamiliar cry of a night bird. Such weird cries were never heard in Georgia.

All seemed heavily weighted down by something, all was motionless, yet it floated towards him, like an ocean of darkness. And in some way it seemed natural that all should be motionless and float towards him.

"Nina you? . . . and where's Sergo . . . ?"

He opened his eyes and found himself leaning against the breastwork, his head helplessly and shakily hanging on his chest. The last impression snatched from his dream floated before his eyes in the vastness of the night.

He tossed his head, and all became fixed. He peered suspiciously: the still obscurity, the dimly discernible breastwork, the edge of the precipice, the machine-gun, more felt than seen, were unchanged. Far away a bird cried. There were no such birds in Georgia.

He gazed into the darkness—ragged blackness in the folds of which faintly twinkled the paling stars, scattered in a different pattern than when he last saw them. Before him an ocean of mute obscurity, hiding in its depths, as he well knew, impenetrable forests. He yawned and thought: "I must walk about, or else. . . ." But the thought remained unfinished; again motionless darkness, endless and unconquerable, began floating out from the precipice, and a nostalgic ache made him feel sick at heart.

He asked:

"Can the night's darkness float?"

And somebody answered:

"It can."

But this answer was not shaped in words; it came as laughter from between toothless gums.

He felt momentarily struck by that toothless, soft mouth. He reached out his hand, and Nina dropped the head of the infant. The grey head rolled (he caught his breath) but stopped still at the very edge of the precipice . . . his wife was in wild terror—ah! . . . but not with what had happened. Something else was making her distracted: in the diluted twilight—forerunner of dawn—multitudes of grey heads appeared at the edge of the precipice towards which they had probably rolled . . . they rose higher and higher, necks appeared and arms were flung out, shoulders were raised and a rusty, iron voice as if straining from between clenched jaws rent the stillness and numbness around.

"Forward! . . . Attack!"

Intolerable roaring as of savage beasts shattered all things; the Georgian fired a shot, toppled to the ground, and with a pang of unutterable pain the child that had been jerking in its mother's embrace, flinging out its arms and making bubbles with its smiling mouth, which consisted of gums only, faded out.

CHAPTER XXVI

The colonel rushed out of his tent and ran desperately downhill towards the harbour. All around, leaping over rocks and fallen bodies, soldiers were emerging in the growing light of dawn. From behind him, urging him on, came rolling an inhuman roar, more terrible than the wildest imaginings of a lunatic. Horses were breaking their halters and bolting in frantic stampede.

Springing over stones and bushes like an agile youth the colonel went at such a pace that every now and again his heart missed a beat. In his mind's eye was the harbour . . . the ships . . . salvation. Keeping time with his rapid feet, thoughts flashed through his brain, rather through his entire body.

"If only . . . if only . . . if only . . . they don't kill me . . . if only they'd give me quarter. I'd do anything for them . . . tend their cattle, fowl . . . wash their pots . . . dig the earth . . . cart the manure . . . if only they'd grant me life . . . if only they don't kill me. . . . Oh, Lord! Life is precious—"

And as if to emphasize the terror of the roaring, a dry ripping sound came every now and again: crack! crack! He realized that rifle butts were splitting skulls like nutshells. There were also short, gasping cries of agony; the bayonets doing their work.

He tore on, with set, desperate features, hot breath blowing from his nostrils.

"To live . . . not to lose one's life . . . I'll renounce my fatherland, my mother . . . my honour . . . love . . . if

only I'm granted life . . . later on all could be regained . . . I must, must live. . . ."

All his strength seemed to be spent, but he drew in his head, clenched his fists, tautened his dangling arms and flew on with such terrified impetus that wind brushed his face and ears, and his madly rushing soldiers began to lag behind. Their cries of agony lent wings to the fleeing colonel.

Crack . . . ! crack . . . ! But the harbour was now in full view . . . the ships. . . . Oh! Salvation!

He ran down to the gangway and stopped for a second.

Crack! . . . Crack. . . ! It came from all sides.

He was dumbfounded. Here, too, was that relentless, brain-shattering roar and the sharp crack! . . . crack! Here, too, screams of agony went up like flame and quickly died out.

He swung around and flew with still greater agility and speed from the harbour. The sea's infinite blue expanse flashed for the last time at him from beyond the mob.

He flew past the low white houses that stared at him dispassionately out of their mute dark windows, towards the end of the town where stretched the highroad, white and placid, leading to Georgia. Not to mighty Georgia, dispenser of culture, not to the Georgia where he had been promoted colonel, but to dear, unique, friendly Georgia, where blossoming trees are so fragrant in spring and snowcapped mountains appear above wooded slopes, and the air is warm and perfumed; the Georgia of Tiflis with its gay main street and the foaming Kura. . . . In Tiflis he used to run and play when he was a small boy.

"Oh, to live . . . to live! . . ."

Now the houses were farther between, and interspersed

with vineyards. The road, that awful roar, the sound of shooting was distant, it came from the sea below!

Saved. . . ?

At that instant the streets in the town filled with the clatter of galloping troops, from round the corner horsemen appeared, and with them came rolling that same appalling deathly roar. The narrow blades of their swords swished in the air.

"Save me, save me!"

Holding his breath he ran headlong towards a street in the heart of the town. Twice he knocked on the small door in a gate, but it was tightly shut with iron bars as was also the door of the house. There was no sign of life: the inhabitants were monstrously indifferent to what was going on in the street.

Then he had a revelation: his only chance of life lay with the Greek girl. She was awaiting him, her shining black eyes full of pity. She was the only person on earth for him now. He would marry her, give her his land, his money, kiss the hem of her dress—

His thoughts scattered into fragments.

At that moment his head was split open by a flashing sword and his brains were dashed out.

CHAPTER XXVII

The heat was becoming fierce. Haze hung over the town. The streets, squares, quays, the mole, yards and highroad were strewn with dead bodies. They lay in heaps in the most varied postures. Some had their heads twisted, others were without heads. Brains were splashed over the pavement like jelly. As in a slaughter house, dark clotted blood lay in pools along the houses and stone fences, blood trickled through the cracks under the gates.

They lay in the ships, on the decks and in the staterooms, holds, stokeholds, engine rooms. Men with fine chiselled faces and youthful moustaches. They hung motionless over the parapet of the quay, and if you looked into the clear blue water, you could see many of them, peacefully lying on the slimy greenish stones, with shoals of grey fish swimming in mid-water above them.

From the heart of the town came rifle fire and the insistent rattle of a machine-gun; a company of Georgians mustered around the cathedral were dying heroically. But there, too, silence soon prevailed.

The dead lay neglected, and the invaders filled to overflowing the town, streets, yards, quays . . . the suburbs, highroad, mountainsides and ravines were thickly covered with carts, people and horses. Exclamations, shouts, laughter, a general uproar made the air alive.

Through these streets of the dead and of the living, Kojukh rode.

"Victory, comrades, victory!"

And as if there had been no lives lost, no blood spilt, the boisterous answer rolled:

"Hurrah!"

It echoed in the distant blue mountains and died far away beyond the mole, beyond the ships and the bay in the humid blue.

In the market place, in the shops and stores, feverish activities were in full swing. Wooden boxes were burst open, rolls of stuff were eagerly grabbed, pieces of cloth, linen, blankets, ties, eye-glasses, skirts.

Sailors arrived in swarms, they were all over the place, everywhere, strong and sinewy men in naval jackets, funnel shaped trousers and round hats with fluttering ribbons. They shouted uproariously.

"Row away!"

"Moor!"

"Unload this shelf!"

They made quick work of it. One man had adjusted on his head a beribboned and befeathered hat and was tying a veil over his coarse face, another strutted about flaunting a silk parasol trimmed with lace.

The soldiers, in indescribable rags, with blistered, grimy feet, manifested a zestful acquisitiveness. They were more keen on the cloth and rolls of linen, bleached or unbleached, for their wives and children.

One of them had pulled out of a cardboard box a starched shirt. He spread it out holding the sleeves well apart, and burst into laughter.

"Look, lads! a shirt! . . . but I'll be damned if it looks like one!"

He arranged it in the shape of a horse collar, and poked his head through.

"Why don't it bend? It's like wood!"

He stooped forward, then straightened himself up, staring down at his chest like a ram preparing to butt.

"God's truth, it won't bend! There are springs in it."

"Idiot. It's starch."

"What's starch?"

"Made from potatoes. The gents put it on their chests to make 'em stick out."

A tall gaunt fellow, his dark lean flesh showing through his rags, had secured a fashionable swallow-tail coat. He examined it very carefully, then resolutely threw off his rags. When he was stark naked he thrust his long apelike arms into the sleeves, which reached only to his elbows, and fastened the coat over his belly. He looked down at himself with a smirk.

"Now for a pair of trousers!"

He hunted eagerly, but with no success. All the trousers had been taken. Undaunted, he searched the linen department, got hold of a cardboard box from which he produced some unusual articles of clothing. He unfolded them and smirked again:

"Funny! Looks like a sort of small trousers, but it's mighty thin. Fedor, is this a new kind of trousers?"

But Fedor had other fish to fry—he was hunting for cotton dresses for his wife and children. They had not a stitch on them.

The fellow in the swallow-tail coat knitted his brows and resolutely drew on the thing he was holding over his long, brown, muscular legs. What he had put on spread in lacy frills high above his knees.

Fedor looked round and rocked with laughter.

"Hey, boys, look at Opanas!"

Roars of laughter shook the walls of the store.

"Those are women's bags!"

"What's wrong then? Isn't a woman a human being?"

"You can't go about like that. It's all split up and shows everything."

Opanas looked crestfallen.

"True. What idiots they must be to make trousers this shape! Waste, I call it."

He shook the whole contents from the box, and began donning in succession six pairs of ladies' knickers. The lace frothed luxuriantly over his grimy knees.

All of a sudden the sailors pricked up their ears, stood still a moment and then dashed to the windows and doors. From outside came hooting and swearing, the beat of horses' hooves, the swish of whips on flesh. The soldiers, too, crowded to the windows. Across the market place sailors were running full tilt in endeavours to retain their loot. Cavalrymen on excited horses were dealing blows with their whips right and left, mercilessly, tearing the clothes on the sailors' backs, raising weals on their unprotected faces from which the blood ran.

The fleeing sailors were glancing around like beasts at bay; finally they dropped their heavy loads, the lashing was too severe, and scattered in all directions.

A drum beat furiously. A bugle sounded.

Presently the market place was full of soldiers standing in ordered ranks with solemn faces. Their very solemnity threw into sharp relief the grotesqueness of their attire. Some were still clothed in their old sweat-soaked rags, others were wearing studless boiled shirts which bulged open over their chests and were tied at the waist with pieces of string. Others wore ladies' nightgowns or bodices out of which their grimy necks, arms and heads protruded incongruously. The file leader of the company, a tall, gaunt, grim fellow, wore an evening coat next to

his bare skin, with sleeves hardly reaching to his elbows. Above his knees rose clouds of white lace.

Kojukh appeared with set jaws, his grey eyes ominously bright. He was followed by the commanders in fine Georgian fur caps and crimson coats. Silver mounted and black-enamelled daggers shone at their belts.

Kojukh allowed some minutes to elapse while his gimlet eyes studied the incongruous ranks.

"Comrades!"

His voice had the same sound of rusty iron as when he had cried in the night, "Forward! . . . attack!"

"Comrades, we are a revolutionary army, we fight for our children, wives, our old fathers and mothers, for the revolution and our own land. And who has given the land to us?"

He paused, as if waiting for a reply which he knew would not be given. The ranks were motionless and mute.

"Who gave us the land? The Soviet power. And what have you done? You have turned robbers, you loot!"

The silence was strained. The rusty iron voice went on:

"I, the commander of the column, order that every man guilty of looting, even if it's only a reel of thread, shall be punished with twenty-five stripes."

All stared intently at him. He was bedraggled, his trousers hung in ribbons, his dirty slouched straw hat was battered out of shape.

"All those who have looted, whatever it is, take two paces forward!"

An instant of heavy silence in which nobody stirred.

Then suddenly the earth resounded . . . one, two, three . . . hollow, rhythmical steps. Only a few ragged

men, in their original tatters, remained standing where they were.

"All that's been taken in the town is common property; it shall be distributed to your wives and children. Put down on the ground in front of you what you have taken."

The man in the foremost rank began to lay in a heap before him rolls of cloth and canvas, others divested themselves of their boiled shirts, bodices and nightgowns, and stood with their naked tanned bodies displayed to view. The gaunt, raw-boned file leader in the evening dress and befrilled knickers also disrobed.

A cart full of long birch switches drove up.

Kojukh said to the file leader:

"Down on your face!"

The man sank on all fours, then clumsily lay prone with his face in the heap of befrilled knickers, the sun baking his naked back.

"Down, all of you!"

All lay prone, exposing their backs and posteriors to the fierce sun.

Kojukh looked on stonily. These people, in rowdy crowds, had appointed him commander. These people had yelled at him, had shouted that he'd sold them for booze! They had abused him according to their mood. There had been a time when they wanted to stab him with their bayonets.

And now there they were, naked, submissive, prone.

A thrill of strength and elation, like that which had borne him up when his ambition was bent on obtaining the rank of an officer, raised him now to an undreamed of sense of power. But this was a different thrill; the ambition that now inspired him was of another quality;

now he would save, lead out to liberty, these prone men, awaiting blows. Submissively they lay, but if he had ventured to cry out, "mates, we're turning back to surrender to the cossacks and officers," they'd have run their bayonets through his body.

Suddenly Kojukh's rusty voice rent the air with the command:

"Dress!"

All jumped to their feet and began to put on again their boiled shirts and nightgowns; the file leader donned his evening coat and six pairs of knickers.

Kojukh signalled with his hand and two soldiers, their faces alight with relief, threw back into the cart the heap of unwanted switches. Then the cart drove slowly between the ranks and all the men eagerly swung into it their rolls of cloth, canvas, satinette. . . .

CHAPTER XXIX.

Low red flames leapt in the velvet darkness, lighting up faces that looked as if they had been cut from a sheet of cardboard, so flat were they facing the glow: standing figures, a slant of cart, the head of a horse. The night was alive with voices, the din of exclamations and laughter. Snatches of song rang out; someone struck up on a balalaika; now and then an accordion was played. Glowing fires here, there, and as far as one could see.

And the night was full of another thing of which all were loath to think. . . .

Over the town there was the halo of electric light.

The red glow of a crackling fire shone upon an old, familiar face. Hail, Granny Gorpino! Her husband lay on the ground on a sheepskin, silent. Around the fire sat soldiers, red lights playing over their faces, all of them from Granny Gorpino's village. Pots had been set to boil, but there was only water in them.

Granny Gorpino lamented:

"Oh, Lord and Mary, Queen of Heaven, what a life this is! We have travelled and travelled, and get nothing for our pains. Death, I call it. Nothing to eat. Strange kind of new rulers we have, who can't give us bread. Not the rulers we want . . . Anka is nowhere to be found, the old man won't talk. . . ."

By the fire, but out of its light, a soldier lay on his back, his arms flung above his head, his eyes fixed on the dark vault of the sky. But he was heedless of the stars. He seemed to strive to remember something he could not

get hold of, his soul in distress. There he lay, arms flung above his head, pursuing some deep thought of his own, his youthful melancholy voice floating like a reverie:

Take you, your little wife....

The water boiled bravely in the kettle.

Granny Gorpino could not hold her peace.

"Who has ever heard of such a thing? They have brought us here to perish. Water only swells your belly, however long you boil it."

"Look!" said the soldier, stretching out his booted leg towards the red glow of the fire. The boot was of English make and the riding-breeches above it brand new.

At the next bonfire an accordion burst into playful music. The chain of fires, with its intervals of darkness, extended indefinitely.

"No Anka! Where can she be? What can she be after? You ought to give her a good shaking, old man, and pull her hair. There you lie like a log. Can't you talk to a body?"

"Give me my pipe and tobacco. . . ."

The soldier turned over on to his belly, his red face cupped in his hands. He stared into the fire.

The accordion was playing cheerily. Laughter, talk and songs sparkled in the night at the fires.

"They were all human beings, and each of them had a mother. . . ."

He spoke at large in his youthful voice, and silence spread around, extinguishing the talk and laughter; all suddenly became aware of the heavy stench of putrefaction coming from the massif where the dead bodies were most numerous.

An elderly soldier stood up to look at the youth who

had spoken. He spat into the fire, which hissed for a moment. The silence might have lingered, but for the sudden onrush of excited shouts.

"What's that?"

"Who's there?"

All heads turned in the direction whence a voice said: "Get along, you rat!"

A small crowd of excited soldiers entered the disk of light around the fire; from the darkness appeared glimpses of red faces, upraised hands, bayonets. In their midst, and alien to the surroundings, glittered the golden straps on the shoulders of a slim Georgian, a mere lad in a tightly girded Circassian coat.

Like an animal at bay he glanced at his captors with big, dark eyes that would have graced the face of a girl; on his long eyelashes trembling drops of blood hung like tears. It looked as if he were on the point of crying out: "Mamma!" But he spoke no word, and merely looked around.

"He was hidden in a bush," a soldier cried in uncontrollable excitement. "Found him by chance. I went into the shrubs to make myself comfortable, and our boys shouted after me: 'Go farther away, you son of a bitch, farther away from here.' I got into the shrubs and saw something black. Thought it was a stone, felt with my hand. It was him. Well, I went for him with the butt of my rifle."

"Stab him, what are you waiting for!" cried a little soldier ready to lunge with his bayonet.

"Stop. . . . Wait!" shouted the people around. "You must report to the commander."

The Georgian lad said imploringly:

"I was mobilized . . . mobilized . . . couldn't do anything . . . I was sent here. I have a mother."

Fresh red tears hung from his eyelashes, trickling down from his broken head. The soldiers were standing around, their heads resting on the muzzles of their guns, their faces sullen.

The soldier lying on his belly and staring into the fire said:

"He's a child . . . he can't be sixteen. . . ."

Several voices burst out at once:

"Who are you? A boss . . . ? Our fight's with the Cadets, why do the Georgians get into our way? Who asked them to interfere? We fight cossacks to the death and don't want any interference. If you poke your nose into our business, you'll lose your head."

From every side excited and angry voices were raised. People were crowding up from other fires.

"Who's that?"

"Just a kid . . . the milk's still wet on his lips."

"To hell with him!"

A soldier swore foully and reached for the kettle. A commander stepped forth. He threw a casual glance at the captive and swung round so that the Georgian boy might not hear and said in a low voice:

"To the dung heap."

"Come along," said two soldiers gruffly, shouldering their rifles, and looking away from the Georgian.

"Where are you taking me?"

All three began to walk. From the darkness came the answer:

"To headquarters . . . for enquiry . . . you'll sleep here."

A minute later a rifle shot was heard. It rolled and

echoed in the mountains and died away . . . but the night remained dazed by the sound. The two soldiers returned with averted eyes. The night seemed to brood over this unforgettable shot.

As if eager to drown its lingering echo, all began to talk at once, more loudly and with greater animation than before. Someone started playing a lively tune on the accordion and a balalaika twanged.

". . . as we made our way through the forest to that rock, we felt that all was lost . . . that we couldn't climb up and couldn't get away. The sun was rising, we'd all be shot. . . ."

"A bloody fix," said someone, and laughed.

". . . we felt sure they were only pretending to be asleep, the sons of bitches, and would soon begin to pour lead into us. And from above there, ten riflemen posted could have wiped out both regiments, like so many flies. Well, we climbed, stepping on one another's shoulders and heads."

"Where was the batko?"

"He was there, climbing with us. When we were almost at the top, with only fifteen feet of rock above us, the rock stuck up like a wall. What could we do? Nothing! We were all disheartened. Then the batko snatched a rifle from a soldier, jammed the bayonet into a crack, and climbed along the rifle. And after him we all stuck our bayonets into cracks and hoisted ourselves up to the top.

"A whole platoon of ours fell into the sea. We were jumping from stone to stone. It was dark. They lost their foothold, and toppled over, one after the other. All were drowned."

But try as they could to talk with animation in the light of the fires, the surrounding darkness remained

filled with something which all wanted to forget, and the deathly smell floated over with unremitting insistence.

Suddenly Granny Gorpino said, pointing with her finger:

"What can that be?"

All heads turned. In the black distance where they knew stood the massif, smoking torches could be seen moving and flickering at different levels.

A familiar youthful voice spoke out of the darkness:

"It's our own soldiers and some of the local people taking away the dead bodies. They have been doing it all day."

Silence fell.

CHAPTER XXX

Sunshine again. The sea was dazzlingly bright, the outlines of the mountains were a powdery blue. They seemed gradually to lower themselves as the main road twisted up, higher and higher.

Far below, the town became a tiny white patch which gradually disappeared. The blue bay was framed with piers like straight pencil lines. The abandoned Georgian ships were like black dots. Pity the Red soldiers could not take them along.

Nevertheless, they had managed to secure abundant miscellaneous booty; now they had six hundred shells, three hundred thousand cartridges. Fine Georgian horses straining at their shiny black traces were drawing sixteen Georgian guns. Georgian carts were loaded with diverse war supplies; field telephones, tents, barbed wire, and medicines. Ambulances were a welcome addition to the baggage train. No end of things had been taken, but two were lacking: wheat and hay.

Patiently the horses plodded on, now and then giving an angry toss of their heads in protest against their hunger. The soldiers tightened their belts. They were in good spirits, each of them now having two or three hundred cartridges in his belt. Sturdily they marched under a canopy of flies through the clouds of hot dust. Flies had become inseparable from the campaign. There was singing under the dazzling sun:

The proprietor's wife has little vodka,
Hardly any beer or mead....

The carts, gigs, vans, creaked along. Amid red pillows the heads of the emaciated children joggled People on foot made short-cuts to avoid the windings of the high-road. Along narrow paths, in single file, weary, wearing thin old caps or battered, slouched hats of straw or felt, they proceeded, leaning on sticks. The women's feet were bare and their skirts ragged. They no longer needed to bother about their cattle or fowl straying—not a cow, pig or chicken had survived. Hunger had even caused the dogs to disappear.

The endlessly winding stream of people resumed the uphill crawl amid arid rocks, along precipices and ravines in order to reach the top of the range and then again descend to the steppe where the food and forage would be abundant, where their own people awaited them. . . .

We'll till the fields
And eat and drink. . . .
Toreador, oh! brave toreador. . . .

New records had been found in the town.

Inaccessible peaks rose against the blue sky.

The small town, down below, lay in a blue haze. The contours of the bay were blurred. The sea rising like a blue wall disappeared behind the tops of the trees that bordered the highroad. Dust, heat, flies, landfalls, along the highroad, virgin forests, the kingdom of beasts. . . .

In the evening an endless wailing drowned the creaking of the carts in the baggage train:

"Mamma . . . I want to eat . . . to eat . . . eat. . . ."

The mothers, their faces dark, peaked, birdlike, craned their necks and stared with inflamed eyes at the sharp bends of the ascending highroad as they hurried with bare

feet beside the moving carts; they had nothing to say to the children—

Higher and higher they climbed. The forest became less dense and finally was left behind. Overhanging cliffs, deep gorges, huge overtowering rocks that seemed to be falling upon them. Each sound, each beat of the horses' hooves, the creaking of wheels, reverberated everywhere, increasing and drowning out the chorus of human voices. Now and then it was necessary to avoid the carcasses of horses on the road.

Suddenly the temperature dropped. From the peaks blew a soft breeze, a grey twilight fell. Then it became unexpectedly dark and from the black sky torrents came pouring. It was not rain but a roaring flood that swept people off their feet, and filled the swirling darkness with furious watery vortices. It burst from above, from below, from all sides. Water cascaded down the ragged clothing of the marchers, over the spokes of the wheels that had become stuck in the mud. The column lost its bearings; people, carts and horses straggled, were cut off from one another by driving torrents, neither seeing nor knowing what was going on around them.

Somebody was swept away . . . somebody was screaming. But the screams were drowned in the storm's fury. The water rushed, the wind seemed to bring the sky and the mountain tops down upon the heads of the climbers. . . . Or perhaps—who could tell?—the whole train, with its carts and horses, was being swept away. . . .

"Help!"

"It's the end of the world!"

They cried out aloud, but it was as though they merely whispered through their quivering blue lips.

Two horses, helpless against the onrush of the torrent,

fell into an abyss, dragging after them a cart full of young children; the people behind struggled on believing that the cart was still in front.

In other carts the children buried themselves in the drenched pillows and rags.

"Mamma . . . mamma . . . daddy. . . . !"

Their desperate screaming was unheard against the water that roared and fell solidly from the invisible rocks above to the stones below, unheard against the wind that bawled with a thousand voices as it emptied itself of water.

Suddenly the infinite blackness of the night was lit by a dazzling blue shimmer. The outlines of the distant mountains became clear and sharp, the indentations of the overhanging cliffs, the edge of the precipice, the horses, carts . . . it hurt one's eyes to look at them; and everything was deathly still in that madly quivering light.

The slanting stripes of the downpour were motionless in mid-air, motionless were the foaming streams, motionless the horses each with a raised and bent foreleg; motionless the people in their interrupted march, the dark mouths open in unfinished speech, motionless the tiny bluish hands of the children amidst the soaked pillows. All was frozen still in the silent, spasmodic tremor of light.

It seemed as if this deathly blue tremor would continue through the night, but it disappeared as suddenly as it had come, lasting a second.

The black vastness of the night engulfed everything and suddenly annihilating this orgy of uncanniness, the mountainside crashed open and its entrails rolled out with a terrific roar seeming too big even for the vastness of the night to hold; it split into great rounded fragments

that went on exploding and rolling in all directions, gaining strength as they rolled and filling all the abysses, ravines and forests. People were deafened, the children lay as if they had been struck dead.

The baggage train, the army, artillery, ammunition wagons, refugees, carts stood stock-still, people and wagons surrendered to the fierce torrents, the wind, the roaring, the deathly quivering of the lightning. The energy of the marchers had been overtaxed. The horses were knee-deep in rushing water. There was no end or limit to the terrific pranks of this night.

And in the morning the sun shone radiantly; the washed air was translucid, the blue mountains vaporous. The humans alone were black, their faces peaked, their eyes sunken; summoning the last reserves of their strength they helped the horses on the upward gradient. And the horses' heads were bony, their ribs stuck out like the hoops of barrels and the hair on their hides was washed clean.

The casualties were reported to Kojukh.

"It's like this, Comrade Kojukh; three carts have been swept away, people and all, into the precipice. A gig has been smashed by a rock. Two men were struck by lightning. Two others from the third company are missing. Scores of fallen horses lie on the highroad."

Kojukh gazed at the water-washed highroad and at the craggy rocks.

"We shall not halt for the night," he said, "the march must be continued day and night. We must go on and on."

"The horses can't do it, Comrade Kojukh. There isn't a handful of hay. When we went through forests we

could give them leaves to eat, now we're surrounded with bare stones."

Kojukh was silent for a moment.

"Go on without a moment's rest," he said. "If we stop all the horses will perish. Write out the orders."

The mountain air was crystal pure, to breathe it was sheer joy, but for these tens of thousands of people the air held no fascination. They marched silently with lowered eyes beside the carts or guns, keeping to one side of the road. Dismounted cavalrymen drew their horses after them by their bridles.

All around were barren and wild cliffs, the deep abysses gaping as if awaiting their prey. Mist crept in the ravines.

The dark ravines and crevices echoed with the insistent, never-ending creaking of carts, the rumbling of wheels, the beat of hooves, rattling and clanking of all sorts; the din, reverberating a thousandfold, waxed into a continuous roar. All moved in silence; if one had uttered a cry it would have been drowned in this huge noisy procession which stretched over tens of versts.

Even the little children did not cry or ask for bread. Their heads joggled listlessly. There was no need for the mothers to quiet them, and the mothers neither petted nor nursed them, they walked beside the carts, intently gazing at the loops of the crowded highroad ascending into the clouds. Their eyes were dry.

When a horse stopped, an overwhelming, wild terror possessed everyone. With savage frenzy those around seized the wheels, put their shoulders to the cart, swished their whips frantically, shouted in almost inhuman voices, but their effort, their desperate straining, was lost in all that eternal creaking, multiplied a thousandfold, of the countless wheels.

A horse walked a pace or two, swayed and dropped in its tracks, breaking a shaft, and none could help it up again; its legs were stretched out stiff, its teeth were bared, the light of day was no longer reflected in its purplish eyes.

The children were taken out of the cart. The mother, beating furiously at the older ones to make them walk, took the little ones in her arms and on her back. In such cases . . . well, when there were several the mother left one, and sometimes two of the smallest in the abandoned cart, and walked on with hard dry eyes, without looking back. Behind her walked other people, without looking, the moving carts going round the abandoned cart, the live horses shying away from the dead horse, the live children passing by the abandoned live children—and that incessant, magnified creaking seemed to swallow up what had happened.

A mother who had carried her child several versts began to sway, her knees sagged, the highroad, carts and rocks floated in a mist about her.

"I'll never get there. . . ."

She sat on a heap of rubble by the roadside and gazed at her baby which she rocked in her arms as the carts endlessly passed by.

Her baby's tiny dry mouth was dark coloured and open. Its cornflower blue eyes had a fixed gaze.

She was desperate.

"But I have no milk, my heart, my treasure, my little blossom!"

She covered with mad kisses this child who was her life, her joy. But her eyes were dry.

The tiny dark mouth was rigid and a white film had

crept over the gazing eyes. She pressed to her breast the small precious mouth, now growing cold.

"Little blossom, little treasure, you shall not suffer any more, waiting for death to take you. . . ."

The little body in her arms slowly stiffened.

She made a hole in the rubble, deposited her treasure in it, took from her neck her baptismal cross and passed the sweat-drenched piece of tape over the heavy little head, making the sign of the cross over it again and again.

People passed on without looking. The carts trailed by endlessly, and the multi-voiced, hungry creaking was echoed by the hungry rocks.

Far ahead, in the foremost ranks of the column, walked dismounted horsemen, dragging their tottering horses after them by the bridles. The horses' ears lopped like those of dogs.

The heat grew. Swarms of flies that had disappeared during the storm—sheltering under the carts, settling on the poles beneath—made the atmosphere black and thick.

"Hey, boys! why do you slink along like cats afraid to hold up your tails?"

Nobody responded. All continued to step along slowly and wearily, the cavalrymen dragging their horses after them.

"To hell with the lot of you. Turn on the gramophone, let it play. . . ."

He rummaged in a bag for records, pulled out one at random, and began to spell out the words:

"'B—bi—bim, bum-bo-bom' . . . What the hell can that be? . . . 'c—clo—owns . . . artists who'll m-ma-make you l-laugh'. . . . Queer! Well, play away!"

He wound up the gramophone that swayed on the back of a pack-horse and adjusted the record.

For a second or so his face expressed genuine amazement, then his eyes narrowed into slits and he grinned from ear to ear, showing every tooth in his head until he was rocking in a fit of infectious, uncontrollable laughter. Instead of singing a song the gramophone was sending out of its trumpet staggering peals of laughter. Two people were laughing, first one, then the other, then both together. Laughing in the most extraordinary way, sometimes thinly, like little boys when they are tickled, sometimes in roars so that everything around shook. They laughed, choked, one could imagine them waving their arms helplessly; they laughed hysterically, like women in fits of nerves; they split their sides, sounding as if they could never stop.

The dismounted cavalrymen began to smile, glancing at the trumpet which could laugh so madly in all sorts of ways. Laughter spread in the ranks, people began to join in the merriment of the trumpet, and the laughter grew, swelling, invading the crowd.

It rolled down to the slowly marching infantry. There, too, the men laughed, ignorant of the cause that had released all this jubilation; they laughed because the laughter all around infected them, and without check or restraint, the laughter was caught up by the rear.

"What the hell are they splitting their sides for?" people asked and themselves went off, waving their hands and wagging their heads in paroxysm of laughter.

The whole infantry laughed, and the baggage train, the refugees, the mothers with mad terror lurking in their eyes; laughter had taken possession of people on a stretch of over fifteen versts and was shaking them to the inces-

sant accompaniment of the hungrily creaking wheels amid those barren rocks.

When this wave of laughter rolled down to Kojukh, his face became the colour of tanned leather, then, for the first time in the campaign, it became white.

"What's that?"

The adjutant, trying to restrain the laughter that was shaking him, said:

"Who can tell! They're mad. I'll go and inquire at once."

Kojukh snatched the whip out of the adjutant's hand, gripped the bridle of his horse and clumsily got into the saddle. He lashed the horse's ribs without mercy. The gaunt animal slowly walked on with lopped ears while the whip cut it to the raw, and then it managed to break into a kind of jog-trot.

All around him was laughter.

Kojukh felt the muscles of his own face twitch and resolutely clenched his teeth. At last he rode up to the laughing vanguard. Uttering a curse he brought his whip down upon the record with force.

"Stop that!"

The damaged record squeaked and became silent. And silence spread down the ranks extinguishing the laughter, leaving only the maddening, eternal creaking and rumbling which, echoing a thousandfold, filled the air. The bare rocks and cliffs of the hungry precipices went slowly by.

Somebody cried out:

"The top of the range!"

The highroad bent and began to twist downward.

CHAPTER XXXI

"How many of them?"

"Five people."

The forest, sky and remote mountains floated desolately in the haze of heat.

"In a row?"

"In a row. . . ."

The Kubanian patrolman, sweat streaming down his face, did not finish but bent his head to the mane of his rearing horse. Its sides were covered with foam, the flies maddened it and it was tossing its head trying to pull its bridle from its rider's hands.

Kojukh was sitting in a *britzska* * with his adjutant and driver. Their faces were dusky red as if they had just come from a steam bath. Save for the patrolman there was not a living soul around.

"How far is it from the highroad?"

The Kubanian pointed to the left with his whip.

"Ten or fifteen versts, beyond the copse."

"Is there a side road?"

"Yes."

"No cossacks about?"

"No cossacks. Our people have ridden twenty versts ahead, no smell of cossacks. At the farms they say the cossacks are digging trenches beyond the river thirty versts from here."

The muscles were working in Kojukh's face, which had suddenly became calm and yellow again.

* Carriage.

"Stop the vanguard, turn the whole column into the path and make all regiments, refugees and baggage trains file past those five."

The Kubanian bent slightly over the pommel of his saddle and said deferentially, for he had no intention of breaking discipline:

"It will take us far out of our way . . . as it is people are dropping on the road . . . it's hot . . . they have no food. . . ."

Kojukh's gimlet eyes piercing the quivering distance became thoughtful. Three days. . . . Their faces were sunken, there was a hungry gleam in their eyes. They had not eaten for three days. The mountains had been crossed but one must still drive on to get out of the barren foothills, to reach the villages and find food for the people and horses. And one had to make haste, one could not let the cossacks entrench themselves . . . could not afford to lose a minute . . . could not make a detour of ten or fifteen versts. . . .

He looked at the youthful face of the Kubanian, black from the heat and hunger. His eyes flashed, and he said through clenched teeth:

"Turn the army into the by-road and let them see what's there."

"All right."

The Kubanian adjusted his sweat-soaked astrakhan hat, lashed his blameless horse, which became at once forgetful of the heat, the swarms of flies, and began to prance and trotted briskly off along the highroad.

There was, so to speak, no highroad now, but, in its stead, eddies of grey-white dust that rose above the tree tops and disappeared in the hills behind. And in those

whirling eddies one could feel the presence of thousands of hunger-driven human beings.

Kojukh's *britzska,* all the wooden fittings of which were scorchingly hot, went on and after it followed a ringing clattering. From under his seat the burning hot nose of a machine-gun peeped out.

The Kubanian rode into the thick stifling clouds. Nothing could be seen distinctly, but one could hear a host moving in ragged, straggling, weary and broken ranks. Horsemen rode on, carts creaked. Sweat pouring down the dark tanned faces put a dim gloss over them.

Nobody spoke, nobody laughed. They only moved dragging their vocal silence along with them. And that heavy, stifling silence seemed to hold together the disorderly shuffling of weary feet, weary hooves and the desolate creaking of the carts.

The horses moved along with low bent heads and drooping ears.

The heads of the children rocked listlessly in the carts at every jerk and their bared white teeth glistened dimly.

"Drink . . . drink. . . ."

The choking, white dust floated in the air, covering all, and in it moved the hidden ranks of pedestrians, in it rode the horsemen and the slow creaking carts. Maybe there was no implacable heat, no floating white dust, but only general despair. Hope had fled, thought had been stifled, the inexorable alone remained. The iron bond forged between these people when they entered the narrow passage dividing the sea from the mountains, had now become a threatening rod. They were starved, barefoot, exhausted, ragged and the sun tortured them. And somewhere ahead were well-fed, fully armed, solidly entrenched cossack regiments and rapacious generals. . . .

The Kubanian rode through the dismally creaking atmosphere calling out to know which units were passing.

Now and then the grey mist opened and in the rent quivered the outlines of the hills, gleamed the langourous blue sky. The sun blazed furiously into the inflamed faces of the soldiers. But back again floated the mist, muffling the sound of shuffling feet, the irregular beat of hooves, the weary, hopeless creaking of the carts. Along the roadside, dimly discernible through the floating clouds, sat or lay the utterly exhausted, their heads thrown back, their parched mouths open, the flies swarming about them.

Stumbling against people and horses, the Kubanian reached the vanguard, bent down on his horse and spoke with the commander. The latter frowned, glanced at the confused, moving mass from which men were incessantly dropped out, and shouted in a hoarse voice:

"Regiment . . . halt!"

The stifling dust muffled his words, but they nevertheless reached the ears of those for whom they were meant and fading in the distance orders were shouted in various accents:

"Battalion, halt!"

"Company, halt!"

Somewhere very far away a barely audible "halt!" hung in the air and died out.

At the head of the column the stamping of feet stopped, and in quiet waves the cessation of all movement spread. In the confused, furnace-hot mist came a moment when utter quietness, the unfathomable quietness of endless exhaustion and submission to heat, fell. Then the men suddenly began to blow their noses, to cough up the stifling dust, to curse. They rolled themselves cigarettes of grass.

The dust settled upon their faces, upon the faces of the horses and upon the carts.

The men sat down on the banks of the ditches along the highroad, holding between their knees their rifles.

The horses stood limply, with their heads down, submissive even to the plague of flies.

"Here . . . get up, all of you!"

Nobody stirred. On the highroad people, horses and carts remained where they were. It looked as if no force on earth could raise these people weighted with the heat.

"Get up. . . . What the devil do you think you're doing?"

They rose one by one, by twos and threes, as if they had heard their death sentence; they did not fall into any kind of formation. Neither did they wait for a command; they wearily plodded on again, shouldering their heavy rifles and looking before them with inflamed eyes.

They straggled along in the middle of the highroad, along the bordering banks and the slopes of the hills. The carts again began their eternal creaking and the clouds of flies again gathered fussily.

The whites of eyes gleamed in charred faces. Instead of hats against the fearful sun the marchers wore on their heads burdock leaves, twigs, ropes of twisted straw. Their feet were bare, torn, black. Some were stark naked, black as negroes, with mere ragged bits of cloth dangling in strips about their loins. Their dry, emaciated sinews protruded from under their black skin as they tramped on, their heads thrown back, carrying their rifles on their shoulders, their eyes screwed up to tiny slits, their parched mouths open. A dishevelled, bedraggled, black, naked horde, followed by the merciless heat, bearing with them hunger and despair. Again the white clouds rose, and from

the very mountains down into the steppe the highroad crept, an endless cloud of dust.

Suddenly the unexpected command rang out.

"Right turn!"

Each unit as it came up heard in bewilderment:

"Right turn . . . right . . . right. . . ."

They ran down to the by-road first in amazed and then in willing crowds. The by-road was stony, there was no dust on it, and one could see the units hurriedly turning down into it, the cavalry, then the creaking, heavily swaying baggage train, then the gigs. A wide vista opened, copses, glades and blue mountains. The sun still quivered in a fever of heat. The flies in thick, black swarms also took the by-road. The slowly settling clouds of dust, the stifling silence, were left behind, the cross-road became alive with voices, exclamations, laughter.

"Where are they taking us?"

"Perhaps into a forest, to moisten our parched throats a little."

"Idiot! . . . They've got a feather bed in the woods for you to stretch yourself out upon."

"They've got baked dumplings with cream. . . ."

"And butter. . . ."

"Thick clotted cream. . . ."

"And honey. . . ."

"And a cool water-melon. . . ."

A tall, bony man in a tattered, sweat-soaked evening coat and remnants of dirty white lace that covered nothing, spat angrily.

"Shut your noise, you dogs . . . shut up! . . ."

He tightened his belt fiercely, drew in his belly to his ribs and wrathfully changed his rifle from one bruised shoulder to the other.

Bursts of laughter disturbed the storm of flies.

"Opanas, why have you covered your behind and left your front parts exposed? Turn your pants around else the women in the village won't give you any *vareniki.** they'll look the other way when you come up.

"Ha—ha—ha! ho—ho—ho!"

"Boys, this means we're going to camp."

"But there are no villages here, I know."

"You can see telegraph posts going down from the highroad. They must lead to some village."

"Hey, cavalry! You must earn the bread you eat. Give us some music!"

From a pack saddle on the back of a horse the gramaphone sent out huskily:

Whither have you gone
You golden days of spring . . . ?

The words floated in the air, torrid and full of wavering black clouds of flies, over the tired but cheerily marching crowd. The people were caked in white dust, ragged, naked and the sun glared at them with determined indifference. A man, whose legs felt as if molten lead had been pumped into them, lifted his high, creaking tenor voice in a song:

The good housewife knew it well. . . .

His voice broke—his dry throat could not manage it. Other hoarse, cracked voices took up the song:

Knew well the soldiers' wants,
She only waited for the drum
Waited till it came a-drumming
Waited till it came. . . .

* Cheese pies served with a dressing of melted butter and clotted cream.

"Var-re-ni-ki, var-re-ni-ki" mingled incongruously with "Whither have you gone, you golden days of spring. . . ."

"Look, there's our batko!"

All as they passed turned their heads to look. Yes, there he was, unchanged, stocky, sturdy, his battered grimy straw hat made him look like a mushroom. He watched them. One could see his hairy chest through the rents in his sweat-sodden tunic. His trousers were in rags and his blistered feet almost bare.

"Boys, our batko is like a bandit. If anybody met him in the forest, they'd run away from him!"

They gazed at him lovingly and laughed.

He watched the ragged, weary, noisy crowd as they passed him and his small observant eyes shone in his grim face.

"They're just a horde of bandits," he thought; "if the cossacks attacked us now, all would be lost . . . they're just a horde. . . !"

"What's that? What's that . . . ?" The crowd began anxiously to ask, forgetting all above "vareniki" and the "golden days of spring."

They were silent, only the tramping of feet was heard; all heads turned, all eyes looked in the one direction, towards the straight line of the telegraph posts which dwindled into the distance, the last of them being no taller than pencils. From the four nearest posts four naked men were hanging. The air around them was black with flies. Their heads were bent low, as if they were pressing down with their youthful chins the nooses that had strangled them; their teeth were bare, the empty sockets of their eyes, which the ravens had pecked out, were black. From their bellies, also pecked and torn, the

greenish and slimy entrails had been dragged. The skin on their sides and legs was broken and bore black scars where they had been scourged with ramrods. At the approach of the crowd the ravens flew off a little and alighted on the tops of the posts, looking down sideways.

Four men . . . and there was a fifth figure, naked, that of a girl, the breasts had been torn out and the body was already turned black.

"Regiment, halt!"

To the first post a sheet of white paper had been nailed.

"Battalion, halt!"

"Company, halt. . . !"

The order was passed along the whole column, its resonance dying out in the distance.

From those five descended silence and the faintly sweet smell of putrefaction.

Kojukh took off his battered hat. Those who possessed hats also doffed them. Those who were hatless removed the protecting straw, grass or twigs rolled about their heads.

The sun glared.

The faintly sweet nauseating smell became palpable.

"Comrade, give me that," said Kojukh.

The adjutant tore off the sheet of white paper nailed beside the hip of one of the dead men and handed it to him.

Kojukh clenched his jaws and spoke, flourishing the paper.

"Comrades, this is what the general wished to convey to you. General Pokrovsky writes, 'All persons guilty of having any kind of intercourse with Bolsheviks shall be as ruthlessly executed as these five scoundrels from the

Maikop factory.'" After a short pause Kojukh added: "Your brothers . . . your sisters. . . ."

Here he shut his mouth upon the words that he would have uttered. Words, he felt, would be useless.

Thousands of fevered eyes stared unblinkingly. A single heart, superhumanly huge, was beating.

The fetid stench floated in the air.

From the empty eye-sockets black drops were falling.

The ringing in the torrid air, the buzzing of the swarms of flies, gave way to stillness. Graveyard stillness and the piquant fetid smell. Black drops kept falling.

"Fall in! March!"

The pounding of heavy feet broke the silence; it filled the torrid day with a new rhythm, like the advance of a solitary man of inconceivable height and immeasurable weight, the beating of a superhumanly big heart.

They marched unaware of the quickening in their heavy resounding steps, unaware that they were marching with a swing. The sun glared down cruelly.

In the first platoon a man with a little black moustache staggered, dropped his rifle and fell down heavily. His purple face swelled, the veins in his neck became taut and the pupils of his eyes rolled up under his open eyelids exposing red balls. The sun stared at him.

Nobody stopped, nobody slackened his pace—all went on still more swingingly, with greater zest, looking ahead with shining eyes, looking into the torrid, rippling distance.

"Stretcher bearer!"

A gig drove up and the man was lifted into it—the sun had killed him.

Presently another man fell, then two others.

"Gig!"

Then came the command:

"Cover your heads!"

Those who had hats put them on. Some opened ladies' parasols. Those who had nothing snatched handfuls of dry grass as they went and improvised some sort of head covering. Without stopping they tore from their bodies their sweaty tattered clothes, gritty with dust, slipped off their trousers, tore them to pieces, made kerchiefs of them, tying them around their heads as women do, and marched on, with mighty swinging strides, devouring the highroad that stretched under their feet.

Kojukh endeavoured to catch up with the ván of the column in his *britzska*. The driver, his lobster eyes popping from excessive heat, whipped the horses, leaving sweaty stripes across their cruppers. The foam-flecked animals broke into a trot but to no avail—the ponderous ranks went ever faster and with a greater swing.

"They must be mad . . . rushing like hares. . . !"

He lashed his spent horses anew, and jerked at the reins.

"Fine, my lads, fine. . . !" Kojukh thought, looking at them from under his heavy brows, his eyes the colour of blue steel, "At that rate we'll make seventy versts a day. . . ."

He got down and marched, straining every muscle not to lag behind the others and was soon lost in the briskly marching ranks.

The telegraph posts, solitary and empty, disappeared into the distance. The head of the column turned to the right to the highroad and was once more enveloped in its stifling clouds of dust. One could see nothing. A heavy, rhythmical, measured beat of footsteps filled the smothering clouds that rolled hurriedly forward.

To those first gruesome telegraph posts other units came up in turns. Each halted.

The stillness of the grave likewise fell upon them. The commanders read out the general's paper. Thousands of fevered eyes stared unblinkingly. A single heart, superhumanly big, beat. . . .

Those five up there, motionless. Under the nooses their black flesh decomposed and the bones showing white.

On the tops of the posts the ravens look sideways out of shining eyes. The air is permeated by the heavy, faintly sweet, nauseating smell of roasted flesh.

With measured tramp the feet of these other units likewise beat faster and faster. Unconsciously, without awaiting a command, they, too, fell into serried ranks, and marched on, their heads bare, seeing no longer the telegraph posts that stretched so orderly in the distance, heedless of the short, sharply black noon shadows, fixing their eyes ahead on the remote torrid shimmer.

Then came the command:

"Cover your heads!"

They marched quicker and quicker, ever more swingingly in solid ranks, turning to the right and pouring themselves back into the highroad, being again swallowed in clouds of dust that rolled on together with them.

Thousands, tens of thousands, passed. After the platoons, companies, battalions, regiments, there came the huge, motley mass. It moved with numberless steps, looked with countless eyes, responded in its turn to the beat of an immense heart.

And these, too, as one man, kept their unwavering glance fixed on the torrid distance.

* * *

Long slanting shadows fell. A blue mist blurred the mountains. The weary sun, no longer fierce, had sunk behind them. The carts, open or hooded, full of children and wounded, dragged heavily on.

Now and again people stopped and said:

"Your own kith and kin. . . . The general's doing. . . ."

They moved on and nothing but the creaking of wheels was to be heard. The children asked in frightened whispers:

"Mamma, will the dead come to us in the night?"

The women crossed themselves, blew their noses in their skirts, wiped their eyes, and said:

"You poor little mites!"

Old people walked beside the carts. Everything became mysterious. There were telegraph posts no longer; instead in the darkness stood huge pillars supporting the sky. And the entire sky broke into innumerable twinklings, but it did not send down more light. It seemed as if the mountains were darker; but, in truth, these were only foothills, the great peaks having already been screened away by the night; and all around one felt the expanding of the unknown, mysterious plain on which anything might happen.

And suddenly a woman shrieked so loudly that the stars seemed to shy away to one side of the sky.

"Oh, oh, oh, what have they done to them. . . . The beasts . . . the madmen! Help! Kind people . . . look at them. . . !"

She clutched a post, embraced the cold feet, pressed against them the young tresses of her dishevelled hair.

Powerful hands forced her from the post, and dragged

her to a cart. She twisted herself free, rushed again to embrace the putrid corpses and again shrieked out:

"Where is your mother? Where are your sisters? Why did you not wish to live? Where are your clear eyes, your strength, your living speech? Oh, you poor creatures, you unfortunates! There is nobody to mourn by you, nobody to sorrow over you . . . nobody's tears to fall upon your bodies. . . ."

Again people held her, again she writhed free and shrieked:

"What have they done. . . . They've eaten my son! They have eaten my Stepan, they have eaten you! Devour us all at once, blood and flesh, devour us, and choke, fill your bellies with human flesh, bones, eyes and brains. . . ."

"*Tphu.* . . . She's crazy . . . !"

The carts could not stop, they creaked on. Her cart also had moved away. Other people seized her, but she tore herself free from them, and again her screams rent the darkness.

Only the rearguard, when passing, overpowered her. They tied her to the last cart, and moved on.

And behind them they left desolation and the smell of putrefaction.

CHAPTER XXXII

Where the highroad left the mountains the cossacks were waiting. Ever since the revolt swept over the whole of the Kuban, everywhere the Bolshevik forces had retreated before the cossack regiments, the units of officer volunteers, the Cadets; nowhere had they been able to entrench themselves and check the frenzied onslaught of the generals. They surrendered town after town, village after village.

At the beginning of the revolt part of the Bolshevik forces had slipped out of the iron ring of the rebels and fled in a huge disorganized horde with thousands of refugees and thousands of carts along the narrow strip between the sea and the mountains. Their speed had been such that they could not be caught. But now, for these, the cossack regiments were lying low and waiting.

The cossacks had been informed that the horde that was pouring down the mountains carried with them incalculable treasures which they had looted: gold, precious stones, clothes, gramophones, innumerable arms and war supplies, notwithstanding that their heads and feet were bare and their bodies clothed in rags, this fact merely being evidence of their addiction to vagrancy and disorderly living. The mouths of both the generals and of the rank and file cossacks watered in anticipation.

Of itself all this wealth, all these looted treasures, were being brought into their hands.

General Denikin entrusted General Pokrovsky with the task of forming military units in Ekaterinodar for surrounding the horde as it came down from the mountains. Not a single man was to be allowed to escape alive.

Pokrovsky formed excellently equipped corps and barred the road along the river Belaya,* so named because of the foam borne down from the mountains.

The cossacks rode bravely with hats askew, on sturdy, well-fed and well-groomed horses that tossed their heads, impatient of restraint. Their finely-tempered swords rattled and glittered in the sun; the skirts of their Circassian coats, tightly belted, swayed gracefully and they had white ribbons as a decoration in their fur hats.

They sang as they rode through the villages, and the cossack women presented them, their men in service, with good baked and roasted meats, while the old men rolled out barrels of wine for them.

"Bring us one Bolshevik at least, just for us to look at; we want to see what he's like, fresh from the mountains."

"We'll bring you one all right. Get a gallows ready for him."

The cossacks were good at drinking and wielding their swords.

In the distance gigantic clouds of white dust swirled.

"Aha! there they are!"

Yes . . . there they were . . . ragged, grimy, in hanging tatters, with grass and straw instead of hats.

The cossacks adjusted their fur hats, drew their sabres which flashed with a short vibrating sound, bent towards

* *Belaya* means *white* in Russian.

the pommels of their saddles and gave rein to their horses, the wind singing in their ears.

"They'll know what a cossack can do with a sword!"

"Hurrah!"

But all in a few minutes something monstrous and unexpected happened; the cossacks charged, grappled, and began to fall from their horses with slashed fur hats and gashed necks, horses and riders bayonetted. They turned their horses, galloped away, bending so low that they could not be seen, and the wind whistled louder in their ears, but they were taken off their horses by singing bullets. The bare-footed horde pressed on in pursuit for two, three, five, ten versts—the only hope for the cossacks was the fact that the horses of their enemy were spent.

The cossacks careered through the village. But those others also burst into it and began to snatch fresh mounts, and mow with their swords right and left such as refused to give them horses from their stables. Then again they were off in pursuit and many cossack hats with their white cockades rolled over the steppe, many Circassian coats, held at the waist by silver and black enamelled belts, made dark patches on the blue mounds, in the yellow stubble and the rich green grass in the copses.

Only by reaching the front position of their strongly entrenched troops did the cossack remnant wrest itself from pursuit.

The naked and barefoot infantry, that had descended the hills, breathlessly rushed after their squadrons. Guns began to boom, machine-guns rattled.

Kojukh considered it unwise to deploy his army in the daytime. He knew the enemy had a considerable ad-

vantage in numbers and did not wish to disclose to them the size of his own forces. He would wait till dark. And in the dead of night a repetition of the day's event took place: not men, but devils, rushed the cossack position. The cossacks hacked and jabbed with sword and bayonet, mowed down rows of them with machine guns; nevertheless, the cossacks soon began to melt, their heavy guns boomed less frequently and shot out fewer fiery tongues, their machine-guns rattled at longer intervals, and at last their rifles became silent. The cossacks were lying low.

They did not lie long; they soon rose and fled. The darkness helped them but little. They fell in rows from the swords and bayonets. Then they straggled, each shifting for himself, abandoning artillery, machine-guns, munitions; in the dark they scattered through the copses and ravines, bewildered by the diabolical force that made a mock of them.

And when the sun rose above the hills and over the limitless steppe it shone upon the corpses of many cossacks with long black moustaches.

* * *

In the baggage train at the rear the refugees had kindled fires and were cooking food in kettles. The horses were munching hay and oats. In the distance cannon were roaring; nobody heeded the noise, because they had become accustomed to it. When it ceased someone from the front appeared; maybe a mounted orderly carrying instructions, or a forager, or a soldier surreptitiously visiting his family. From all sides women with dark, tortured faces would rush towards him, clutching at his stirrups or bridle:

"How is my man?"

"Is he alive?"

Their eyes implored, full of horror and hope.

And the man would go at a jog-trot, slightly waving his whip and dropping his news to the women as they approached:

"Alive . . . he's alive . . . wounded . . . wounded . . . killed, they're bringing him here."

He passed; some women with joyous faces would make the sign of the cross, others would wail and lament or give a gasping sigh and fall senseless to the ground, and those around would pour water over their faces.

When wounded men arrived at the camp their mothers, sisters, neighbours and sweethearts attended to them. When the bodies of the dead were brought in, the women convulsively sobbing, flung themselves upon them and their prolonged lamentations and despairing cries were heard far over the plain.

Mounted men at once started in quest of a priest.

"Can't let them be buried like dumb beasts, without crosses and incense."

The priest raised objections and said that his head ached.

"Aha! your head aches, does it? You don't wish to come? Well, here's your medicine. . . ."

They lifted their horsewhips. The priest jumped up with alacrity, thoroughly willing. Told to put on his vestments, he poked his head through the wide opening of a black chasuble with white braid—it stuck out around him as if on hoops—and put on an appropriate stole. He pulled his long hair out from beneath it. He was then ordered to take a cross, thurible and incense.

They hunted out a deacon, a huge, alcoholic fellow. He

too donned vestments for a funeral service. His face was red. The sexton was a lean man.

When they were ready they were told to march. The horses of the soldiers ambled. Priest, deacon and sexton had to step briskly. The horses tossed their heads, and the horsemen flourished their whips.

Behind the refugee camp in the shaded cemetery an enormous and expectant crowd had gathered. When they saw the approaching messengers they cried:

"Look, look! They're driving a priest here."

The women began to cross themselves.

"Thank God, they'll have a decent funeral."

"Look, they've brought a deacon and a sexton, too," the soldiers added.

"The deacon's fine. His belly's like a boar's."

The three came up hastily, out of breath, sweat streaming from their faces. The sexton quickly kindled the coals in the thurible. The dead lay with their hands across their chests.

"Blessed be the Lord—"

The deacon intoned wearily in a low voice while the sexton mumbled rapidly, speaking through his nose:

"Holy God, holy and mighty immortal and—"

Blue smoke rose in a narrow ribbon from the thurible. The women gave vent to half-stifled sobs. The dark emaciated faces of the soldiers were stern—they could not hear the words of the service.

The Kubanian who had brought the priest sat bareheaded on a big sorrel horse. He touched the beast, which went forward a step or two; bending towards the priest, he said in a loud whisper which everybody heard:

"If you go on singing like a starved pig, I'll flay you alive."

The priest, deacon and sexton eyed him in horror.

The deacon at once began to sing the service in a thundering bass which sent the ravens flustering noisily into the air from all corners of the cemetery; the priest joined in zestfully in a high tenor and the sexton, standing on tip-toe, turned up his eyes and chanted falsetto tremolos.

"Grant that they rest with the saints—"

The Kubanian backed his horse and sat in his saddle with knit brows, immovable as a statue. Everybody began to make the sign of the cross and to bow low from the waist.

When the earth was being thrown into the graves three salvoes were fired. The women blew their noses, wiped their tear-filled eyes and repeated:

"The priest sang a beautiful service; heartfelt and. . . .

CHAPTER XXXIII

The night swallowed the huge expanse of steppe, the slopes, the accursed mountains which had loomed blue on the horizon during the day, and the village on the enemy side: there was not a single fire, or a sound; the village might not have existed. Even the dogs were silent from the fright the daytime cannonade had given them. Only the river was noisy.

All day, from beyond the now invisible river, from behind the cossack trenches, there had been the shattering booming of guns. The fire had been continuous, the shells used unsparingly; innumerable white puffs bursting over the steppe, in the orchards and ravines. The response to them had been meagre, weary, reluctant.

"—Ah—Ah—Ah!" the cossack artilleryman had repeated with malicious exultation: "It gets them on the raw. . . ."

Then they had rushed to the guns, rolled them forward, and a fresh shell had sung through the air.

The position seemed plain to them: the other side was spent, weak, already they no longer responded with shot for shot. In the late afternoon the ragamuffins had attempted an attack from beyond the river, but they had got it hot—their ranks broke, they lay on the ground where they could. Pity the night had fallen, else they would have been cut up. Well, there was the morning to look forward to. . . .

The river clamoured, it filled the darkness with sound. Kojukh felt pleased, his tiny eyes had hard, steel-like

glints in them. He felt pleased; in his hands the army was an obedient, pliant instrument. Before sundown he had sent a regiment forward with instructions to make a weak attack and then to lie low. And as he made his night's round in the velvety darkness, all were at their posts, above the river; and beneath the fifty-foot precipice the water was roaring, and its roaring brought back the memory of that other noisy river, and that other night when everything had started.

Each soldier crept through the darkness, felt with his hands the edge of the precipice, estimated its depth. All those prone soldiers knew their places which they had examined well. They did not wait like sheep to be ordered by commanders and told what to do.

Rain had been falling in the mountains; in the daytime the river had rushed along foaming, now it was roaring. The soldiers knew that now the river was five or six feet deep—they had contrived devices for measuring it; in places they would have to swim; that was nothing, it could be done. Before dark, when they had been lying in dips, hollows, bushes and the tall grass, under incessant shrapnel fire, each had chosen the particular bit of the enemy trench he was to attack.

To the left two bridges spanned the river: an iron railway bridge and another of wood. Neither could be seen in the darkness. On them the cossacks had planted cannon and machine guns—these also were invisible.

And in the depth of the night so full of the noise of the water, regiments of cavalry and infantry were standing motionless by Kojukh's orders; only the noise of the invisible running water monotonously filled the vast vacancy of the dark.

The cossacks sat in their trenches; they listened to the

sound of the rushing water without putting down their rifles although they knew that the barefoot horde would not venture to cross the river at night—they had been punished enough. The cossacks waited. The night flowed on slowly.

The soldiers lay like badgers at the edge of the precipice; their heads hung over it in the dark as they listened to the cossacks and to the noise of the rushing water. That for which they waited and which seemed never to come, drew on: slowly and with reluctance the dawn began to break.

Nothing could be discerned—neither colours nor outlines, but the darkness was changing, becoming translucid. The pre-dawn vigil was languid.

Something elusive ran along to the left, like an electric impulse, perhaps a silent covey of swallows. . . .

From the fifty-foot height, as from a sack, soldiers scrambled down together with fragments of crumbling clay, sand and pebbles . . . the river was roaring. . . .

Thousands of bodies made thousands of splashes, thousands of splashes muffled by the voice of the river. . . the river roaring, in a continuous monotone. . . .

A forest of bayonets grew into shape before the amazed cossacks in the dawn's grey dusk; activity suddenly seethed with a roar, with groans and curses. There were no longer human beings but interlocked bloody beasts swarming there. The cossacks struck them down in scores and themselves fell in hundreds. The diabolic force, come whence none could tell, once more crashed against them. Could these be the Bolsheviks they had pursued over the Kuban? No, these were different. Not for nothing were they black and naked and in rags.

Immediately the savage uproar broke out on the right

bank of the river, the artillery and machine-guns began to rain lead over the heads of their own ranks, and a cavalry regiment charged furiously across the bridges, breathlessly followed by the infantry. The cossack cannon and machine-guns were seized and squadrons poured into the village. In the dawn twilight the soldiers saw something white flash from a hut and disappear with desperate speed on an unsaddled horse.

The huts, poplars, the dimly white church, all were emerging more and more distinctly from the twilight. Behind the orchards the dawn was rose-tinted.

From the priest's house people with ashen faces and golden shoulder-straps were being led—part of the cossack headquarters' staff had been taken. Their heads were cut off in the vicinity of the priest's stable, and blood soaked the dung.

The din of the firing, the shouts, curses and groans stifled the noise of the river.

The house of the village ataman was found. It was searched from basement to attic—he was nowhere to be found. He had fled. Then the soldiers called out:

"If you do not show yourself we shall kill your children."

The ataman did not appear.

They began to slaughter the children. The ataman's wife crawled on her knees, with streaming hair, clinging to one of the soldiers' legs.

He slashed at the little girl and then split open the skull of the wildly laughing mother.

Near a hut with shattered glass strewn on the earth a group of railwaymen had gathered.

"General Pokrovsky slept here. You just missed him. When he heard you, he tore out the window, jumped in

his shirt and without any trousers upon an unsaddled horse and galloped away."

A cavalryman said grimly:

"Why hadn't he got trousers? Had he been at the *banya*?" *

"He had been sleeping."

"What! Sleeping without his trousers! How is that possible?"

"Gents always do. Doctors recommend it."

"Reptiles! They can't even sleep like human beings."

The cossacks had fled. Seven hundred of them lay in heaps in the trenches and in a long line across the steppe. The dead alone.

And those cossacks who fled, even as they strained to save themselves, marvelled at this satanic force which had overwhelmed them.

But two days previously this cossack village had been occupied by the main Bolshevik forces. The cossacks had dislodged them with a rush, had pursued them and were even now pursuing other units that had come later. From where then had these come? Was not Satan himself their ally. . . ?

The sun, rising over the far horizon of the steppe, blinded the pursued with low, slanting rays.

* * *

The baggage train and the refugees spread far over the steppe, in the groves and the undulations of the plain. Again there was blue smoke over the fires, again one saw the scarcely human sight of children's bony little heads on necks too thin to support them. Again, on white Georgian tents spread upon the ground, dead men lay

* Russian steam baths.

with crossed arms and beside them were prostrate women hysterically beating the earth and tearing their hair.

Soldiers crowded around some horsemen.

"Where are you going?"

"To get a priest."

"* * * this priest of yours."

"But what can we do? We can't manage without a priest."

"Kojukh ordered that the band captured from the cossacks should play."

"What's the good of a band? It's only a lot of brass trumpets, whereas the priest has a live throat."

"What the devil do we want with his live throat? His voice gives you the bellyache. Anyway, the band is a military unit."

"The band . . . the band!"

"A priest . . . a priest!"

"To hell with your priest!"

They wrangled over the band or the priest with much cursing. The women got wind of the dispute and ran up, crying frantically:

"A priest! A priest!"

Young soldiers who had also run up, clamoured:

"The band! The band!"

Eventually, the band got the upper hand.

The horsemen began to dismount.

Refugees and soldiers went in solemn procession behind the band which lifted its brazen voices to the brazen sky expressing sorrow and strength.

CHAPTER XXXIV

The cossacks were beaten, but Kojukh did not move, although to advance was imperative. Scouts and friends among the local population reported that the cossacks were again concentrating and organizing themselves; that they were being steadily reinforced from Ekaterinodar: rumbling batteries were being drawn together; battalions of officers were marching menacingly in serried ranks, new cossack hundreds were continually coming up—things looked very threatening indeed around Kojukh. The surrounding district was busy with a huge accumulating force. It was necessary to get away! It was vital. There was still a possibility of breaking through, the main forces were still not too far off, but Kojukh—did not move.

He had no heart to abandon the columns which had lagged behind. He knew they were weak, that if left to their own resources they would be destroyed. And their destruction would besmirch what honour the future held for Kojukh as the saviour of many thousands of people.

He waited while the cossacks rallied their army: the iron encirclement was being effected with mighty force; and, confirming this, enemy guns began to roar, shaking the sky heavily and the steppe; shrapnel exploded ceaselessly, raining iron splinters on the people. Kojukh issued the order to open fire in response, but did not march. Over both lines of trenches white puffs burst forth uninterruptedly and gently melted in the air, and each moment of the night the darkness opened as with a

gaping fiery throat and one could no longer hear the noise of the water.

A day passed and a night. The guns roared and their steel was hot, but the lagging columns did not come. A second day passed and a third, still no sign of the columns. Cartridges and shells became scarce. Kojukh gave orders to fire sparingly. The cossacks took heart when their fire was more seldom returned and the enemy made no advance; they decided that Kojukh's army was tired, and began to prepare for a massed attack.

For three nights Kojukh had not slept; his face was like a tanned sheepskin coat; at every step he felt as if his legs sank up to his knees in the ground. The fourth night closed in, flaring constantly with gunfire.

"I'll lie down for an hour," said Kojukh. "Wake me at once if anything happens."

His eyes were barely closed when people came running.

"Comrade Kojukh! Comrade Kojukh! The position is bad. . . ."

Kojukh sprung up, not knowing where he was or what was happening to him. He passed his hand over his face and was suddenly struck by the silence—the guns which day and night had been like rolling thunder were silent, only the clatter of rifle fire filled the darkness. The position was serious—it signified hand to hand fighting. Perhaps the front was broken . . . he heard the noise of the river. . . .

He ran to headquarters—saw that all their faces were grey. He lifted the telephone.

"It's me—the commander."

A voice like the squeak of a mouse spoke to him:

"Comrade Kojukh, send reinforcements. I cannot hold my position. A massed attack. Officer units."

Kojukh answered stonily into the receiver:

"I cannot send reinforcements. Hold on to the last man."

"I can't," was the reply. "The attack concentrates on me, do not let me down. . . ."

"Hold on as you are told. We have no reserves. I am coming presently."

Kojukh no longer heard the noise of the river. He heard only the rolling in the dark before him, to right and left the clatter of rifle-fire.

Kojukh began to give an order but did not finish it:

"A-a-a—"

Despite the darkness things were clear to him—the cossacks had broken through, hacking right and left—there was a break—a cavalry unit had given away.

Kojukh darted forward and collided with the commander with whom he had just spoken.

"Comrade Kojukh—"

"Why are you here?"

"I cannot hold out any longer—there is a break—"

"How dare you desert your unit?"

"Comrade Kojukh, I have come personally to ask for reinforcements."

"You shall be arrested."

Out of the inky night came shouts, sounds of crushed bones, firing. From behind carts, bales, the black shapes of the houses, revolver and rifle flashes stabbed the darkness.

"Where are our people? Where are the aliens? Who the devil can tell? Perhaps our people are destroying one another . . . perhaps it's all a nightmare. . . ?"

The adjutant approached; Kojukh could make out his figure in the darkness.

"Comrade Kojukh. . . ."

His voice was agitated . . . the fellow wished to live. . . .

And suddenly the adjutant heard:

"Well . . . it's the end, is it?"

An unusual voice, an unusual voice for Kojukh! Shots, shouts, groans . . . and somewhere in the depths of him, unconsciously, instantaneous as a flash, somewhat malicious, the adjutant had a thought:

"Ha . . . so you are like the rest of us—you wish to live."

But that was only for an instant. It was dark, one could see nothing, one could only sense the stoniness of Kojukh's face from his voice which came like rusty iron through his clenched teeth.

"A machine-gun must be placed in the breach at once. Gather all the staff workers, baggage men; beat back the cossacks to the carts as far as you can. The squadron must attack the right flank. . . ."

"All right!"

The adjutant vanished into the night. The shouting, firing, groaning and trampling continued. Kojukh broke into a run. Right and left rifles flashed; darkness spread for a hundred yards around where the cossacks had broken through; but the soldiers had not scattered, they had retired and, lying under what cover they could find, were firing back. In the blackness one could discern groups of them running forward, nearer and nearer . . . then they lay down and aimed at the tiny fiery tongues which stabbed the darkness.

Headquarters machine-gun was dragged up. Kojukh ordered them to cease fire and to shoot only when told. He seated himself behind the machine-gun and was at

once in his element. Right and left were flashes and clattering. When the soldiers hung fire the enemy chain rushed forward, shouting hurrah! They came near; separate figures were discernible, running forward in crouching postures grasping their rifles.

Kojukh gave a command:

"In batches!"

He fired the machine-gun.

Trrr-trrr-trrr. . . .

And like black ninepins the figures toppled over. The enemy chain shivered, broke . . . ran back, thinning. Impervious darkness again. The firing slackened and gradually the noise of the river became audible, gathering volume.

And behind, in the depths of the darkness, the firing and the cries also grew fainter—the cossacks having no support, scattered, abandoned their houses, crawled under carts, scrambled into the black huts. Ten of them were taken alive. They were slashed with swords across their mouths which smelt of vodka.

When the grey dawn broke a platoon of soldiers led the arrested cossack commander to the cemetery. They came back without him.

The sun rose and shone on the irregular chain of dead bodies; they looked as if they had been left by an unevenly receding tide. Where Kojukh had stood in the night they lay in heaps. A brief armistice was arranged, Kojukh allowing the bodies to be taken away lest, rotting in the ardent sun, they brought pestilence.

When the dead had been removed the guns again began to talk, again the inhuman clamour rocked steppe and sky and beat heavily upon one's breast and brain.

Steel exploded, steel splinters and lead rained in the

blue; the people went about with their mouths open to relieve the strain on their ears; the motionless dead waited to be taken to the rear.

Though the cartridges began to dwindle and the caissons were becoming empty, Kojukh did not move. . . . There was still no evidence of the lagging columns. He hesitated before the responsibility of deciding what to do and called a conference: to remain meant death for all; to break through meant death for the lagging columns. . . .

CHAPTER XXXV

Far behind, on the illimitable steppe, carts, horses, old people, children, wounded: talk and din in the twilight. The twilight was blue, and the smoke of the campfires was blue.

No matter what was happening fifteen versts ahead, beyond the rim of the steppe—the ground shuddered underfoot heavily and continuously with the remote clamour; it shuddered, but one was used to it, one ceased to notice it.

The dawn was blue, the smoke was blue, the distant forest was blue.

And between the forest and the carts the abandoned field was mysteriously blue.

Talk and clamour, the voices of beasts, the rattling of pails, the crying of infants and the red glow of innumerable campfires.

Into this peaceful, domestic confusion came something born of the forest, something strange and remote and alien.

At first it was a faint long-drawn a-a-a-a! From the confusion of the twilight, from the confusion of the forests . . . a-a-a! Then something black appeared which separated itself from the forest—a clot, then another, a third . . . and the black shadows unfolded, drew themselves into a continuous wavering line along by the forest, rolling towards the camp, growing in size, and with it came rolling, growing, swelling with alarm, that sound—a-a-a. . . !

All heads, of people and beasts, turned to the confused forest whence rolled that dark uneven strip towards the camp, and from which came instantaneous flashes.

Heads were turned, the campfires glowed red.

All heard it . . . the earth was filling with the heavy stamping of horses' hooves which drowned the remote shuddering booming of the guns.

"A-a-a-a-a. . . ."

Amidst wheels, shafts, campfires, voices tossed full of foreboding.

"The cossacks . . . cossacks . . . cos . . . sacks!"

The horses stopped munching, pricked up their ears, dogs came nobody knew whence and crouched under the carts.

None fled, nobody attempted to save his life, all gazed into the deepening twilight at the dark oncoming avalanche.

The great stillness, resounding with the hollow stamping of horses, was pierced by the cry of a mother. She seized her child, the last that remained to her, and pressing it to her bosom rushed to meet the avalanche that came on with the stamping of hooves.

"Death! . . . Death! . . . Death is coming! . . ."

As an infection the cry flew and was taken up by thousands of people.

All of them seized what came to their hand, a stick, a handful of hay, a *duga*,* a kaftan, a branch, the wounded their crutches—all in a frenzy of terror waving these sham weapons in the air, surged forward to meet death.

"Death . . . death. . . ."

* *Duga*—wooden arch fixed to shafts of Russian carts.

Children ran, clinging to their mothers' skirts, crying in thin voices:

"Death . . . death. . . ."

Out of the deepening dusk the galloping cossacks, grasping their merciless swords, discerned countless rows of swaying infantry moving towards them like a tremendous tide, countless raised rifles and black banners swaying, they heard a great rolling animal roar:

"Death. . . !"

Instinctively, without command, the reins taut as bowstrings, the galloping horses stopped, tossing their heads, flexing their hind legs. The cossacks became silent, stood in their stirrups and sharply examined the black oncoming rows. They knew the habits of these devils—to charge breast to breast without a shot and then to begin hellish bayonet work. So it had been since their appearance from the mountains, ending with night attacks when these devils silently appeared in the trenches. Many cossacks had fallen in their native steppes.

And from behind the carts, the numberless campfires, where the cossacks thought to find crowds of unarmed, defenceless old men and women, to spread panic like wildfire from the rear in all the units of the enemy—ever new military masses came pouring and their ominous cry filled the darkening night:

"Death. . . !"

Seeing that there was neither end nor limit to it the cossacks turned, lashed their horses with their whips, and the scrub and trees crackled in the forest.

The first ranks of the running women, children, wounded and old people stopped with the sweat on their faces: before them was only the black, silent, empty forest.

CHAPTER XXXVI

Four days the guns had roared when scouts reported that a new general with cavalry and artillery had joined the enemy from Maikop. At a conference it was decided to force through in the night and to move on without waiting for the lagging columns.

Kojukh issued the following orders: first, gradually to cease fire towards evening so as to lull the fears of the enemy; second, to carefully sight the guns on the enemy trenches, fix the sighting and stop firing for the night; third, in the darkness to move the regiments in files closer to the heights and the enemy trenches, being careful to raise no alarm, and to lie there; fourth, to complete all movements of the units by 1:30 a.m.; at 1:45 a.m. to open a running fire of ten shots each from all sighted guns; fifth, after the last shot at 2 a.m. to make a general infantry attack on the trenches. The cavalry regiment would remain in reserve to support the units and pursue the enemy.

Huge black and sagging clouds appeared and hung motionless over the steppe. On both sides the guns fell strangely silent; the rifles were mute and the noise of the river was heard.

Kojukh listened to that noise—something serious had happened. Not a single shot, whereas during the previous days and nights cannon and rifle fire had been incessant. Perhaps the enemy intended to do what he himself had planned—their two attacks would meet, the advantage

of surprise would be lost, they would break against each other.

"Comrade Kojukh. . . ."

The adjutant entered the log house, after him came two soldiers with rifles and between them a disarmed, pale and low-statured soldier.

"What's that?"

"From the enemy—a letter from General Pokrovsky."

Kojukh sharply scrutinized the little soldier with narrowed eyes. The latter, with a sigh of relief, thrust his hand into his shirt searching for something.

"I was taken prisoner," he said. "Our people were retreating—well, seven of us were taken prisoners. The others were tortured to death. . . ."

He was silent a moment; one could hear the noise of the river, beyond the windows was darkness.

"Here's a letter. General Pokrovsky—he swore at me like hell," and he added bashfully: "and he swore at you, comrade. 'There,' he said, 'give the bastard that.'"

The light of satisfaction played in Kojukh's eyes as he hurriedly read the lines General Pokrovsky had written:

"You, scoundrel, who dishonoured all the officers of the Russian army and fleet by joining the ranks of the Bolsheviks, thieves and ragamuffins, keep in mind, bandit, that it is the end of you and your ragamuffins: you shall go no further, because you are surrounded by my armies and the armies of General Heimann. We have got you, scoundrel, in our gripping hands and we shall not let you go. If you crave mercy, which means to be sent for your misdeeds only to the punitive company, I command you to execute this order of mine as here stated not later than today. You must pile all your arms

at the Boloretchinskaya station, and take your disarmed horde to a distance of five versts west of the station; when that is done advise me at once at the 4th railway siding."

Kojukh looked at his watch and at the darkness beyond the windows.

Ten minutes past one. "That's why the cossacks hung fire, the general awaits an answer." Messengers came continually with reports—all the units had got close to the enemy positions and were lying ready.

"Good . . . good. . . ."

Kojukh thought to himself and silently, calmly, stonily regarded them with narrowed eyes. In the darkness beyond the windows the hurried clatter of a galloping horse merged into the noise of the river. Kojukh's heart beat.

Somebody dismounted from a snorting horse.

"Comrade Kojukh," said a Kubanian breathing with effort, and wiping the sweat from his face, "the lagging column is coming up."

Then Kojukh saw everything in a new light, the events of that night, the enemy's position, General Pokrovsky and his letter, remote Turkey where his, Kojukh's, machine-gun had mowed down thousands of men while he, Kojukh, had remained unscathed to lead his comrades out . . . now he would save not only his own column but also the thousands who, helplessly following behind, had seemed doomed to the cossacks.

* * *

Two black horses raced through the night. The black ranks of an army began to enter the village.

Kojukh dismounted and went directly into the brightly lit up house of a rich cossack.

At the table, bolt upright in all his giant's stature, stood Smolokurov drinking strong tea from a glass. His black beard was set off handsomely by his trim sailor outfit.

"Hail, brother," he said in his smooth bass voice, looking down from his height at Kojukh. "Would you like some tea?"

"In ten minutes my people attack. The units lie against the very trenches. The guns are sighted. Order your second column to attack on both flanks and victory is certain."

"I shall not give the order."

Kojukh snapped his jaws:

"Why?"

"Because they have not come," said Smolokurov good-naturedly and mockingly looking down on the short, ragged man.

"The second column is entering the village. I have just seen it myself."

"Well, I shall not give the order."

"Why?"

"Why, why, you are just whying!" said Smolokurov in his rich, bass voice: "The men are tired, and must rest. Were you born yesterday? Can't you understand?"

"If I beat them," Kojukh thought, "I'll beat them alone. . . ." He was dominated by the emotion of the thought.

"Well," he said, quietly, "at least lead them into the station as a reserve, and I'll use my own reserves to reinforce the attacking units."

"I shall not give the order. My word is sacred, you know that."

The sailor paced from one corner to the other, and his

huge figure and previously good-natured face wore an expression of mulish obstinacy.

Nothing would hammer common sense into him now. Kojukh was aware of that; he said to the adjutant:

"Let's go."

"One moment." The chief of the staff rose and going up to Smolokurov said persuasively:

"Jeremy Alexeich, you could send them to the station, they would be in reserve, anyway."

Behind his words was the thought: "If Kojukh is beaten we shall all be slaughtered."

"Well, what—I was just—in fact I have nothing against it. . . . Take the units that have come up."

Nothing could move Smolokurov when he was set on a thing. But pressure from an unexpected quarter caused him at once to surrender.

His black bearded face relaxed good-naturedly. He clapped his huge paw on the shoulder of the shorter man.

"Well, brother, how are things? You understand, brother, we are seawolves and on the sea we can do anything—turn the devil himself inside out, but on land we know no more than pigs know about oranges."

And he burst out laughing showing dazzling teeth from under his black moustaches.

"Want some tea?"

"Comrade Kojukh," said the chief of the staff in a friendly tone, "I shall write out the orders at once, and the column will be moved to the station to act as reserves for you."

The implication in his mind, was, "Well, brother, whatever you did you couldn't manage without us."

Kojukh went out to the horses and in the dark said to the adjutant in a low voice:

"Remain here. You've got to go to the station with the column. Report to me from there. They are an unscrupulous lot and can't be trusted."

* * *

The soldiers lay in long rows close to the hard earth, the heavy night pressing down upon them. Thousands of eyes, keen as those of beasts, stared into the darkness, but all was quiet in the cossack trenches. Only the river was heard.

The soldiers had no watches, but in each of them the tension of expectancy coiled ever tighter. The night was heavy and quiet and each felt the dragging slowness of the two hours. In the incessant clamour of the water time was flowing.

And although all awaited this very thing—the night was suddenly and unexpectedly rent by fiery purple explosions. Thirty guns roared, full throated and without rest; the cossack trenches, invisible in the night, were marked by a continuously breaking necklace of blinding shrapnel bursts which revealed the irregular line along which men were dying.

"That's enough of it . . . enough . . . !" was the tortured thought of the cossacks who pressed close to the dry walls of their trenches, expecting every moment the broken night to close once again over the nerve racking clamour. But the purple flashes continued, the same roar reverberated heavily in the earth, chest and brain, the same sudden groaning of writhing people here and there. . . .

Then, as suddenly as it had been torn open, the darkness closed again, shutting down with instant silence upon the quivering purple flashes and the inhuman roar of the guns. Above the trenches sprung up a black stock-

ade of figures and a new roar, a living, animal roar, burst forth. The cossacks staggered out of the trenches, they were not keen on having anything to do with the evil power, but it was too late: the trenches began to overflow with bodies. Then they manfully faced their enemy, and began to use their swords.

Yes, it was a devilish power; for fifteen versts they followed in pursuit, covering those fifteen versts at a run in an hour and a half.

General Pokrovsky mustered the remnants of his cossacks, platoons and officer battalions, and led them, enfeebled and bewildered, towards Ekaterinodar, leaving the way clear for the ragamuffins.

CHAPTER XXXVII

Straining their whole strength, hollowly beating the earth, the serried, ragged, smoke-begrimed ranks marched with brows knit and covered with dust. And beneath their brows burned the tiny dots of pupils, fixed on the hot quivering edge of the desert steppe.

The hastening guns clattered heavily. The horses tossed their heads impatiently in the clouds of dust. The gunners had their eyes intent on the remote blue horizon line.

With continuous din the baggage train dragged on endlessly. Lonely mothers walked by strange carts, making the dust fly with their bare hurrying feet. On their dark faces shone everlastingly the dry glitter of unshed tears. They, too, did not take their eyes from the remote blueness of the steppe.

The wounded tramped on, caught up in the general haste: one limped on a foot bandaged in grimy rags; another, feverishly working his shoulders, took big strides with his crutches; yet another clung exhausted, with bony hands, to a cart—but all kept their eyes intent upon the blue distance.

Tens of thousands of inflamed eyes strained forward: there lay happiness, there lay the end of their torture and fatigue.

The native sun of the Kuban glared.

One heard neither song, voice, nor the gramophone. And all of it—the endless creaking in clouds of whirling dust, the hollow pounding of horses' hooves, the re-

verberant tread of heavy feet, the anxious swarms of flies—all of it flowed for tens of versts in a rapid stream towards the alluring mysterious blue distance, which, at any moment, might have held what they looked for, causing them to cry out: "Our people!"

But no matter how long they marched, however numerous the villages, farms, settlements, and hamlets—it was always the same thing, always the blue distance receding further and further, always remaining as mysterious and inaccessible as before. Everywhere they passed, they were told the same:

"Yes . . . they have been here, now they are gone. They were here the day before yesterday, then they suddenly bustled, rose and departed. . . ."

Yes, they had been here: one could see tethers; everywhere hay lay scattered; everywhere there was horse dung, but now there was emptiness. . . .

Here the artillery had made a halt, there remained the grey ashes of cold fires, and the heavy tracks of artillery wheels turned from the village to the road.

The old tapering poplars on the roadside showed deep white wounds where the bark had been torn, where the axles of the carts had grazed them.

All, everything testified to the fact that they had recently been there, to join those who had marched through the shrapnel of the German battleship, had fought the Georgians, had lost their children in the mountains, had furiously fought the cossacks—but always, incomprehensibly, the blue distance receded. As before there was a hurried sound of hooves, a creaking of hastening baggage vans, swarms of pursuing flies. A hollow, unquenchable noise of endless footsteps, the dust, hardly keeping pace, rose in clouds over the streaming of tens of

thousands of eyes rivetted on the limit of the steppe.

An emaciated Kojukh, with charred skin, rode grimly in his *tarantass*,* his small grey eyes narrowly screwed up, peering at the remote line of the horizon. For him, too, it mysteriously and incomprehensibly remained blank.

His jaw was tightly set.

So village after village and farm after farm; day after day passed, spent with exhaustion.

Cossack women came out to meet them and bowed low, in their kindly welcoming eyes hatred smouldered. And when they had passed, these women followed them with wonder in their eyes that these people had neither killed nor robbed, although they were brutes loathsome to behold.

During the night halts Kojukh heard reports: always the same thing—ahead the cossack units gave right of way without firing a shot, neither by day nor by night, closing together behind them when they had passed.

"Good! They have been scalded," said Kojukh, working the muscles of his face.

He issued orders:

"Send mounted messengers to the baggage train and to all units, telling them not to lag. All halts are forbidden. They must move on and on. Allow only three hours for rest in the night."

And again the creaking baggage train struggled on, the spent horses pulled on the traces, the artillery guns rumbled with ponderous haste through sultry noonday dust, under the star bestrewn darkness of the night and in the

* *Tarantass*—four-wheeled, springless vehicle.

early drowsy dawn, trailed the eternal din over the Kuban steppes.

"The horses drop from exhaustion, there are laggards in the units," they told Kojukh.

And through clenched teeth he ordered:

"Abandon the carts. Put the loads on other carts. Keep an eye on the laggards, pick them up. Push the speed. We must move on and on!"

And again tens of thousands of eyes were riveted on the distant line, which day and night encircled the steppe, hard and yellow after the harvest. And as before in villages and farms, the cossack women, concealing their hatred, said pleasantly:

"They're gone—they came here yesterday. . . ."

They looked around with aching hearts—yes, it was always the same, the cold remains of fires, littered hay and dung.

Then suddenly along the baggage train, through all the units, among the women and children the news crept:

"The bridges are being blown up . . . they are going away; blowing up bridges behind them. . . ."

Granny Gorpino, her eyes staring in terror, muttered through her parched lips:

"They destroy the bridges. They are going away and destroying the bridges after them."

The soldiers, holding their rifles in petrified hands, said in hollow voices:

"They've blown up the bridges . . . they're running away from us and have blown up the bridges. . . ."

When the head of the column came to a river, brook, precipice or marshy place—all saw gaping boarding and splintered piles sticking out like black teeth—the road

was suddenly broken before them and hopeless despair began to seize them.

Kojukh, with knit brows, issued commands:

"Repair the bridges, organize crossings, collect all who can use an axe. Send 'em ahead with the vanguard. Take beams, planks and girders from the population, and carry them to the head of the column."

Axes began to knock, white chips flew glittering in the sun. And across the swaying, creaking, roughly erected bridge again streamed the crowd, thousands strong, the endless baggage trains, the ponderous artillery, horses snorting and squinting in fear at the water on both sides. Endlesssly flowed the human stream and, as before, all eyes once again turned to the spot where the line separated the steppe from the sky.

Kojukh assembled the commanding staff and said quickly, the muscles of his face working:

"Comrades, our own people are running away from us as fast as they can."

Grimly they answered him:

"Yes . . . we do not understand it."

"They are going away and tearing down the bridges. In these circumstances we cannot hold our own long, scores of horses are dropping dead. The people leave the ranks, lag behind, and the cossacks will cut to pieces all the laggards. For the time being we have taught the cossacks a lesson, they are afraid, they leave the road open to us, the generals take their armies out of our way. All the same, we are in an iron circle, and if things go on like this, it will soon finish us. We are not rich in cartridges and shells are scarce. We've got to wrench ourselves out of this."

He looked around at them with sharp, narrowed eyes. All were silent.

Then Kojukh said emphatically, speaking through his teeth:

"We must break through. If we send a cavalry unit the cossacks will cut them to pieces, because our horses are worn out. Any success will give the cossacks heart to fall upon us from all sides. We must do something else. Somebody must break through and let them know we're behind."

In the silence Kojukh said:

"Who volunteers?"

A young man rose.

"Comrade Selivanov, take two soldiers, and go in the automobile, all out! Break through at any cost. Tell them there, it's us. Why are they running from us? Is it our doom they desire?"

Within an hour the car stood waiting at the headquarters' hut. It carried two machine-guns, one fore and one aft. The driver in a greasy tunic, intent and restrained, with a cigarette in his mouth, busied himself around his machine, making final adjustments. Selivanov and the two soldiers had young faces and strain lay deep in their eyes.

The car sputtered, pulled out and raced off, raising dust and boring into the distance, becoming all the time smaller, till it dwindled into a spot and vanished.

And the endless crowds, the endless baggage trains, the endless horses streamed on, knowing nothing of the automobile, streamed on without stopping, peering grimly into the far blue distance, sometimes with hope, sometimes with despair.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

The storm tearing to meet them howled. On both sides of them cottages, roadside poplars, wattle fences and distant churches flashed by and disappeared instantly.

In the streets, in the steppe, in the villages and along the road, people, horses and cattle had barely manifested their fear when there was nothing, only dust whirling on some straw which had been caught up.

The cossack women shook their heads.

"They must be mad. Whose car is it?"

Cossack scouts, horse patrols and units let the furiously tearing automobile pass, taking it for one of their own, for who else would get themselves into the thick of them? Sometimes, as an afterthought, they fired a shot or two at it, but what of that? It only bored into the air in the distance and spent itself, and that was all.

Thus, amid din and whistling, mile after mile, league after league, flew past. If a tyre had burst or something had broken, it would have been the end of them. The two machine-guns looked out intently, and four pairs of eyes intently watched the road that raced towards them.

In the clamour, its furious breathing merged into a thin wail, the automobile raced on. The occupants were scared when they came to a river littered with splintered piles. Then they darted off again, made an enormous detour until they found a crossing that had been knocked together roughly by the population.

In the late afternoon the belfry of a big white village church loomed ahead. Orchards and poplars quickly emerged and grew, white cottages ran up to meet them.

Suddenly the little soldier began to shout and turned to his companion, his expression completely changed.

"Our pe-o-ple!"

"Where? where? What are you saying?"

But even the roar of the racing automobile could not drown the soldier's voice.

"Our people! Our people! Over there!"

Selivanov sat up angrily, not to be disappointed if it should be a mistake.

Towards them a patrol was riding with red stars flaring like poppies on their hats.

At the same instant above their ears sang the familiar, thin *dzeee-ee-ee* again and again, like the sound of mosquitoes. And from the green orchards, from behind the wattles, from behind the cottages came the echo of rifle fire.

In Selivanov's mind flashed the thought, "brothers against brothers." And desperately waving his hat he screamed out in a breaking voice:

"Friends . . . friends!"

Fool, as if in the tumult of the racing automobile one could hear anything. He himself understood it and gripped the driver's shoulder:

"Stop, stop! Put on the brakes!"

The little soldiers crouched behind the machine-guns. The chauffeur, whose face had become drawn in these few seconds, clamped on the brakes, the automobile was suddenly wrapped in smoke and dust, and its occupants thrown forward, while two singing bullets went slap into the upholstering.

"Friends! friends!" the four yelled at the top of their voices.

The shooting continued. The horse-patrol, taking the carbines from their shoulders, were galloping, shooting from the saddle, keeping their horses away from the road to leave a clear range for invisible riflemen firing from the orchards.

"They'll kill us," said the chauffeur through white lips, stopping the automobile and leaving the wheel.

The patrol dashed up at a gallop—ten black muzzles point-blank. Some of the cavalrymen, their faces distorted with fear, flung themselves from their horses, swearing savagely:

"Hands up . . . get away from the machine-guns! Get out!"

Others, with pale faces, leapt from their horses, shouting:

"Cut 'em to bits! What are you waiting for? They're officers. . . !"

Unsheathed sabres flashed.

"They'll kill us." Selivanov, the two soldiers and the chauffeur, instantly jumped out of the automobile. When they were in the midst of the excited horses' heads, raised sabres and pointed rifles, the tenseness relaxed, because the four men had left the machine-guns the sight of which had infuriated the cavalrymen.

Then, in their turn, Selivanov's party let their curses fly:

"You're crazy—we're your own people—your eyes must be in your backsides. You might have killed us and that's something you couldn't have undone. To hell with the lot of you. . . ."

The cavalrymen cooled down.

"But who are you?"

"Who-o! Ask first, then shoot. Take us to headquarters."

"How could we tell?" said the cavalrymen, somewhat crestfallen, again mounting their horses. "Last week an armoured car dashed up and began shooting. It created a panic! Get in."

The four again got into their automobile. Two cavalrymen climbed in with them, the others prudently surrounded them with carbines in their hands.

"Comrades, don't go too fast with your automobile else we can't keep up with you—our horses are spent."

They approached the orchards and entered the village street. Soldiers on the way stopped and shouted with oaths:

"Kill 'em! Where are you taking them?"

The shadows of the warm evening were long and slanting. There was the sound of drunken singing. Along the road, from behind the trees, gaped the frameless windows of dilapidated cossack cottages. The abandoned carcass of a horse emitted a foul stench. The street was littered with hastily piled and scattered hay. Behind the wattles were bare, disfigured fruit trees with broken branches. During the drive through the village not a chicken, not a pig, could be seen either in the long street or in the yards.

They stopped at headquarters which was in the spacious house of the priest. In a dense growth of nettles by the porch, two drunken men lay snoring. Soldiers were playing the balalaika in the square.

They pushed through the crowd into the presence of the chief of the detachment.

Selivanov, happy and excited by his recent experiences,

told of the campaign and the battles with the Georgians and the cossacks; in his eagerness to relate all that bubbled up in him, he skipped from one thing to another.

"Mothers . . . children over the precipices . . . carts into the ravines . . . all cartridges spent . . . barehanded. . . ."

And suddenly he stopped short; the chief, his hand over his stubby chin and long moustaches, sat hunched up without interrupting or taking his eyes off him.

The commanding staff, all young men with tanned faces, stood or sat around listening with unsmiling stony faces.

Selivanov felt the blood flush his neck, throat and ears, and came to an abrupt stop, saying in a suddenly hoarse voice: "Here are documents." He thrust his papers towards the chief.

The chief pushed them towards his assistant, who began to examine them casually but with a pre-determined air. The chief, who did not take his eyes off Selivanov, said with emphasis:

"We have absolutely contrary information."

"Excuse me," said Selivanov, his face suffused with blood. "Do you take us for. . . ."

"We have absolutely contrary information," the other went on quietly and with insistence, ignoring the interruption, his eyes steadily observant, his hand still over his chin and long moustaches. "We have precise information. The entire army that marched out of the Taman peninsula perished on the Black Sea coast, destroyed to a man."

Silence ensued. Through the open windows from the direction of the church came loud cursing and the drunken voices of soldiers.

"They are demoralized," thought Selivanov with a strange satisfaction.

"So documents prove nothing to you? Is this the way to treat us? We break through to our own people with incredible effort, after an inhuman struggle, and here. . . ."

"Nikita." The chief spoke quietly, taking his hand from his chin. He rose, straightened his body and stood in thought, his long moustaches drooping.

"What is it?"

"Find the order."

The assistant rummaged in his portfolio, produced a paper and handed it to the chief who laid it on the table and, standing erect, began to read it aloud. He read it in such a way as to emphasize the foregone conclusion of all those present, himself included.

COMMANDER'S ORDER NO. 73

A radio telegram of General Pokrovsky to General Denikin has been seized. It reports that from the sea and the direction of Tuapse an innumerable horde of ragamuffins is advancing. This savage horde consists of Russian prisoners back from Germany, and sailors. They are well armed, have many guns and supplies and a great quantity of valuable loot. These armed swine defeat and sweep away all in their path: the best cossack and officer units, Cadets, Mensheviks and Bolsheviks. . . ."

The big man covered the paper with the palm of his hand which he rested firmly on the table, and fixing his gaze upon Selivanov he repeated with emphasis:

"And Bolsheviks!"

Then he lifted his hand, and still erect, resumed reading.

"In view of this I order you to continue the retreat without a halt. To tear up the bridges behind you, to destroy all means of crossing, to take the boats to the opposite bank and burn them to the last bit of timber. The unit commanders are responsible for the good order of the retreat. . . ."

Looking intently into Selivanov's face without giving him time to say a word, the chief added:

"That's what it is, comrade. I have no suspicion of you, but you must know my position. We meet for the first time, and you understand what the report implies. We have no right . . . masses have been entrusted to us, we should be criminals if we—"

"But they are waiting there!" exclaimed Selivanov in despair.

"I quite understand. Don't get excited. I suggest that we have something to eat. I dare say you are hungry and your lads shall be taken to. . . ."

"He wishes to interrogate us separately," thought Selivanov, and suddenly he felt an overwhelming desire to sleep.

During the meal a handsome cossack woman set on the bare boards a hot tureen of *shchi*,* with a film of fat on it which kept the steam in.

"Eat, my dearies."

"Well, you witch, first gulp down some of it yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"Go on, go on!"

She made the sign of the cross, took a spoon and dipped it into the *shchi* which at once sent forth steam; she blew and began to drink carefully from the spoon.

"Take more than that! We know your ways. Several of our people have been poisoned. Beasts! Bring the wine."

After the meal it was agreed that Selivanov should ride back in his automobile with a squadron to accompany him to verify his statements.

The automobile returned slower than it had come, the

* Cabbage soup

familiar villages and farms receding in inverted order. Selivanov sat between two cavalrymen—their faces were strained and they held their revolvers ready. And all around, in front, behind and on either side, the cavalrymen's bodies rose and fell heavily in the wide saddles, and the horses under them trotted with flashing hooves.

The automobile snorted in low gear, the unit trotted behind it without haste.

Little by little the strain disappeared from the faces of the cavalrymen in the car and to the accompaniment of the engine, they began trustingly to tell their tale of woe to Selivanov: everything was slack, fighting orders were not carried out, they fled before small groups of cossacks; men deserted in batches from the demoralized units and went where it suited their fancy.

Selivanov lowered his head.

"So. . . . If we meet any cossacks, all is lost. . . ."

CHAPTER XXXIX

Not a star, and because of that the soft velvet swallowed everything—one saw neither the walls, streets, tapering poplars, cottages nor orchards. Small fires were scattered irregularly.

In the vast soft darkness one sensed an invisibly spreading human immensity. Nobody slept. Now and then a pail knocked by somebody in the dark clattered, now and then horses engaged in a fight, bit one another and—"whoa-a, steady, you devils!"

Now and then the voice of a mother lulled on two notes: "A—y—y! a—y—y! a—y—y!"

A distant shot, but you knew it for one of your own, a friendly shot. The din and voices grew louder, maybe in a friendly argument, a friendly encounter; it quietened down—and again there was only the darkness. And a sleepy voice sang:

The last day I walked with you. . . .

Why couldn't one sleep?

Far away—or maybe it was under the very window—there was the crunching sound of wheels on the sand.

"Where are you going? Our people are in camp over there."

But one could see nothing—all was black velvet.

Strange that they were not weary. For had not anxious eyes peered day by day at the remote horizon?

It was as if this September velvet, the invisible wattles,

the smell of dry dung belonged to one, were domestic, familiar, precious, had been longingly awaited.

Tomorrow beyond the village there would be the brotherly meeting with the troops of the main forces. Hence the flowing movement of the night, the sounds of hooves, voices, rustle, the crunching of wheels, smiles, tired, drowsy smiles.

* * *

Through the open door a strip of light fell upon the earth, broke across the wattle and ran far out over the trampled vegetable garden.

In the cossack cottage the samovar boiled. The dishes were set. White bread. A clean table-cloth.

On the bench sat Kojukh; he had removed his belt; his hairy chest was exposed. His shoulders drooped, his arms hung relaxed, his head was bent. He might have been a husbandman back from the field, who had paced the live-long day, turning over with his bright ploughshares the fat black layers, and now his arms and legs tingled pleasantly and his woman was preparing supper, and there was food on the table, and on the wall, slightly smoking, glowed the little tiny lamp. He felt a husbandman's weariness, was tired with the weariness of labour.

His brother was beside him. He, too, wore no arms. In a carefree way he had taken off his boots and was examining with concentration a completely dilapidated boot. With a thrifty gesture Kojukh's wife raised the lid of the samovar—a cloud of steam rose from it, she took out a heavy steaming towel, picked the eggs from it and arranged them on a plate where they lay round and white. In the corner there were dark icons. It was quiet in the master's part of the house.

"Well, sit at the table. . . ."

But, as if they had been stabbed, all three turned their heads; in the shaft of light outside flitted past one round cap with ribbons, another, and yet another.

The butt ends of rifles clattered and there was cursing.

Alexey immediately sprang up saying:

"Follow me!"

He dashed out like a buffalo. The butt end of a rifle struck his shoulder. He swayed, but kept his feet: the bridge of a nose crunched under his heavy fist and its owner crashed down with groans and curses.

Alexey leaped over him.

"Follow me!"

He plunged out of the light into the dark and raced in bounds over the beds, breaking the tall stems of sunflowers.

The butt ends of rifles struck Kojukh as he dashed out after him. He went down behind the wattle; about him sailors spoke excitedly:

"Aha! There he is, hit him!"

Behind, from the cottage, came the piercing cry: "Help. . . !"

The blows rained upon Kojukh increased his strength tenfold. He rolled out of the shaft of light, sprang to his feet, and guided by the sounds raced after his brother. Close upon his heels, heavy tramping followed in pursuit and a voice broken with quick, hoarse breathing, cried:

"Don't shoot, that will bring them running here. Hit with the butts of your rifles! There he is . . . after him!"

A fence grew up blacker than the darkness. The planks cracked. Alexey leaped over it. With the resilience of a youth, Kojukh also leaped, and both found themselves in a medley of shouts, blows, curses, rifle butts, bayonets—

on the other side of the fence people had been waiting for them.

"Bash the officers! Stick 'em up on your bayonets!"

"Don't hit . . . don't shoot!"

"Caught, the swine! Stab 'em dead!"

"Must take 'em to headquarters. They'll be interrogated —then we'll roast the soles of their feet."

"Kill 'em now!"

"To headquarters! To headquarters!"

Kojukh and Alexey's voices were drowned in the black riotous whirlpool. They could not hear themselves in the raging and twisting tangle.

Amid a shouting babel of voices and gross insults they were led on; the crowd jostled them, pressed against them. There was clanking and swaying of dark bayonets and cursing.

"Have I swum out of it?" The question hung greedily in Kojukh's mind; he kept his eyes steadily on the light which poured from the windows of the big two-storied school building now being used as headquarters.

As they entered into the shaft of light all opened their mouths and stared pop-eyed.

"Why . . . it's the batko!"

"What's come over you," said Kojukh quietly, the muscles of his face twitching; "are you all mad?"

"But we—how could it happen! It's the sailors. They came and said 'We've found two officers, cossack spies, who want to kill Kojukh; they must be bumped off. We'll drive out the officers,' they said, 'and you must mount guard behind the fence; when they start running, stick your bayonets in their behinds, that will make them sit down. No good taking them to headquarters. There are

traitors there who'll let 'em go. You finish 'em quick.' Well, we believed them, and it was dark."

"Well, now you go for the sailors with your rifle-butts," said Kojukh.

The soldiers dashed furiously in different directions; and out of the darkness came a calm voice:

"They've scattered. Not such fools as to wait to be killed."

"Let's go and drink tea," said Kojukh to his brother, wiping the blood from his gashed face, adding: "Post sentries."

"All right."

CHAPTER XL

The Caucasian sun, although it was autumn, was hot. But the steppe was translucid, the steppe was blue. Spiderwebs glittered delicately. Poplars with thinning leaves stood in meditation. The orchards were slightly tinted with yellow. The steeple gleamed white.

And in the steppe beyond the orchard was a human sea, like that at the opening of the campaign. But there was something new over it. The innumerable carts of the refugees were the same, but why was the light of inextinguishable assurance shining as a reflection in all their faces?

Here was the same horde of bedraggled, ragged, naked, barefoot soldiers—but why had they silently arrayed themselves in endless files as straight as a taut thread, why did their emaciated faces look as if they had been forged from black iron, and why did the dark bayonets sway as to the rhythm of music?

And why, facing these, did the long ranks of the clothed and shod soldiers stand loosely in irregular disorder, with bayonets askew; why was both confusion and expectancy stamped on their faces?

As before, there abounded illimitable dust, but it settled under the autumn heaviness, the steppe was clear and translucid, the features of every face could be seen.

In the centre of that first surging human sea there had been an untenanted green mound set with black windmills; but now in the midst of this sea of faces, there was an empty space in which stood a dark cart.

The sea of humans then had surged over the steppe, whereas now it was calm and silent, as if bounded by an iron coast.

They were waiting. A soundless, wordless sense as of triumphant music pulsed in the blue sky, over the blue steppe and through the golden heat above the vast crowd.

A small group of men appeared. Those who stood in ordered ranks with dark faces recognized in the advancing group their commanders, all as emaciated and as black as themselves. And those who stood in irregular ranks facing these others, also recognized their commanders, well-clothed and with healthy, weathered faces, like their own.

And in front of the first walked Kojukh, low of stature, black to the bone, emaciated to the bone, ragged as a gamin, and on his feet broken gaping boots which showed his splayed black toes. On his head slouched the ragged dirty brim of what had been his straw hat.

They came up and gathered around the cart. Kojukh climbed into the cart, pulled from his head the relic of plaited straw and ran his eyes over his iron ranks, over the numberless carts that trailed off into the steppe, over the multitude of sorrowful, horseless refugees, and then he looked at the ranks of the main forces. There was something wabbly in these last. He felt stirred with deep, concealed satisfaction, which he would not confess to himself.

"Decaying—"

All had their eyes upon him.

"Comrades. . . ." he began.

They all knew what he was going to say, nevertheless an instantaneous spark lit in them.

"Comrades . . . we walked five hundred versts, hungry, cold, barefoot. The cossacks came after us like maniacs. There were no supplies, neither bread nor forage. People died, rolled down the slopes, fell by enemy bullets, there were no cartridges, we were barehanded. . . ."

And although they knew it all—had experienced it, and although the others knew it from a thousand tales—Kojukh's words shone with a revealing novelty.

"Children were left in the precipices."

And over all heads, over all this vast human sea a moan passed and sank into the heart, sank and quivered:

"Our children. . . . Oh, woe to us!"

From end to end the sea of humans was stirred.

"Our children . . . our children!"

He looked stonily at them, paused, and resumed:

"And how many of our people lie slain by bullets in the steppe, the forests and mountains, lie for ever, and ever. . . ?"

All heads were bared, and over the vast crowd to its fringe descended a graveyard silence, and in this silence the low sobbing of the women was like a memorial chant, like graveyard flowers.

Kojukh stood for a while with bowed head; then he raised his head and glancing over this great gathering, asked:

"For whose sake did thousands, tens of thousands of our people suffer torture? For whose sake?"

He again glanced at them and suddenly said unexpectedly:

"For one thing—for the sake of the Soviet power,

because it is the power of the peasants and workers. They have nothing besides that."

A sigh escaped from countless breasts, it was more than they could bear; solitary tears crept down iron faces, slowly crept down the weathered faces of the welcomers, down old faces, and the eyes of the young girls became bright with tears.

"Long live the peasants and workers!"

"That's what it is! For that we struggled, fell, perished, lost our children!"

It was as if the eyes of all were opened wide, as if they were hearing a mystery for the first time.

"Good people, let me speak," Granny Gorpino cried bitterly, blowing her nose and elbowing her way to the cart, clasping at the wheels: "Let me speak!"

"Wait a bit, Granny Gorpino, let the batko finish, let him say what he's got to say. You'll speak after him!"

"Don't you touch me," said the old woman, fighting with her elbows and pushing on obstinately—nothing could stop her now.

And she cried out, her kerchief awry and dishevelled wisps of grey hair tumbling in disorder:

"Listen, good people, listen! We abandoned our samovar in our house. When the time came for me to get married, my mother gave it to me as my dowry. She said: 'Mind it, as the apple of your eye.' but we lost it . . . well, let it be lost! Long live our power and our country! All our lives we bent our backs and knew no joy. And my sons, my sons. . . ."

The old woman began to sob and gasp, shedding long suppressed tears over her unforgettable grief or, maybe, crying with vague joy, unintelligible to her, as yet.

Again the human sea gave a deep-drawn and joyous sigh, which rippled to the very verge of the steppe. Gloomily, silently, Gorpino's old man climbed up into the cart. And they could not very well drag this old man down, this sturdy ancient; tar and the blackness of the earth had eaten into the core of him, and his hands were like hooves.

He climbed up and was astonished to find himself so high, but at once forgot about it; his rough loud voice creaked like an ungreased cart.

"Our horse was old, but it drew the loads well. The gypsies, you know that, understand horses, they looked into his mouth and under his tail and said he was ten years old but he was twenty-three! His teeth were so sound!"

The old man laughed, laughed for the first time, gathered around his eyes a multitude of radiating wrinkles and burst into a cunning childish, mischievous laugh that ill befitted his cloddy, earthy figure.

And Granny Gorpino clapped her thighs in bewilderment.

"Dear Lord! Look you, good people, what has happened. He kept silent, silent all his life, silently he married me, silently he loved me, silently he beat me, and now he has started talking! What's going to happen? He must be off his chump!"

The old man at once chased away his wrinkles, knit his beetling brows, and again the ungreased cart filled the steppes with its creaking.

"The horse was killed, it perished! I lost all that was in the cart, it was thrown away. We went on foot, I cut off the harness and had to throw that away also. The

wife's samovar and all the household rubbish has been abandoned, and I, true to God," he roared in a stentorian voice, "don't regret it. Let it be so, I don't regret it! Because now it is our peasant power. Without it we are dead carcasses and stink like that dead thing under the fence." Then he began to cry, dropping scanty tears like a dog.

A swell rose, a tempest swept over them all:

"Ha! it is our mass, our own power! Long live the Soviet power!"

"That's what happiness is!" The feeling was like fire in Kojukh's breast and his jaw quivered.

"That's what it is!" It flared up with the deep joy of unexpectedness in the iron ranks of the emaciated, ragged people. "It was for the sake of this that we were hungry, cold, exhausted, not merely to save our skins!"

And mothers with broken hearts and undrying tears—yes, they would never forget the hungry, snarling precipices, never! But even those awful places, the terrible memory of them, had been transmuted into meek sorrow, had found a place in that solemn and majestic something which thrilled this human mass there, on the steppe.

And those who stood clothed and well-nourished, confronting the iron ranks of the emaciated naked people, were like orphans before this triumph which they had not experienced, and without shame, tears welled up into their eyes and they broke their ranks, pressing forward, moving like an avalanche towards the cart on which stood the ragged, but barefoot and emaciated Kojukh. And to the verge of the steppe their cry sounded:

"Our father . . . lead us where you will! We will give our lives. . . ."

Thousands of hands stretched out to him. They pulled him down, lifted him over their heads, and carried him. And the steppe was shaken for tens of versts, shaken by innumerable voices.

"Hurrah—a—ah! Hurra—a—a—ah for batko Kojukh!"

Kojukh was carried to where the orderly ranks and the artillery stood, he was carried between the horses of the squadrons, and the horsemen turned in their saddles and with shining faces and wide open mouths shouted continuously.

He was carried to the refugees among the carts, and the mothers held out their children to him.

They carried him back again and set him upon the cart. Kojukh opened his mouth to speak and all gasped as if they were seeing him for the first time.

"Look . . . his eyes are blue!"

They did not cry this aloud because they were too simple to put words to their emotions, but indeed his eyes had turned out to be blue and gentle and with the smile in them of a child—they did not cry this aloud, but roared:

"Hurrah—rah—rah for our batko! Long life to him! We'll follow him to the end of the world. We'll fight for the Soviet power. We'll fight the landowners, generals, officers. . . ."

And Kojukh looked out of his blue eyes upon them while in his heart the thought was like a fire:

"I have neither father, mother, wife. . . . I have only these whom I have led from death. I, I myself have led them. And there are millions of such people, and I shall fight for them. These are my father, my house, my mother, my wife, my children. I, I, I have saved them from death in a terrible situation. . . ."

It beat in his heart in letters of fire, while his lips were saying:

"Comrades!"

But he had no time to say more. Pushing the crowd of soldiers right and left, a mass of sailors rushed forward. Everywhere were their round caps and fluttering ribbons. They elbowed their way irresistibly nearer and nearer to the cart.

Kojukh gazed quietly at them; his eyes were grey with glints of steel in them, his face was of iron and his jaws were set.

They came closer till only a thin line of jostled soldiers divided him from them. Then they flooded everything around, everywhere there were only the round caps with fluttering ribbons; the dark cart with Kojukh in it was like an island among them.

A huge, broad-shouldered sailor wearing a cartridge belt, two revolvers and hung over with hand grenades, seized the cart. It lurched and creaked. He climbed into it, stood next to Kojukh, took off his round cap, waving the ribbons, and in a hoarse voice reminiscent of the sea wind and briny expanse, of foolhardiness, drunkenness, riotous living, he roared:

"Comrades! We sailors, revolutionaries, confess our guilt towards Kojukh and you. We did him injury while he was saving the people, we did not help him, we criticized him, and now we see that we did wrong. All of us sailors gathered here bow low to Comrade Kojukh, and say from the bottom of our hearts: we are guilty, don't be angry with us."

A great chorus of sailor voices roared:

"We are guilty, Comrade Kojukh, guilty, don't be angry with us!"

Powerful hands grabbed Kojukh and began to toss him. Kojukh went flying aloft, dropping, disappearing among arms, flying up again—and the steppe, the sky and the people seemed to be turning cartwheels.

"I am done for, the sons of bitches will turn all my innards upside down."

And from end to end thundered shatteringly:

"Hurra—a—ah for our batko! Hurra—a—ah!"

When he was again set on the cart Kojukh swayed slightly and his blue eyes narrowed, smiling a sly Ukrainian smile.

"The dirty dogs, they've wriggled out of it. But if I'd met them in another place they'd have flayed me alive."

Aloud he said in his rusty voice:

"Let us forget the past."

"Ho—ho—ho! Ha—ha—ha! Hurra—a—ah!"

Many orators awaited their turn. Each wished to express what he thought so important and valuable that if he were not allowed to say it everything would fail. And the mass listened. Those who crowded closely around the cart heard it. Those farther off caught only isolated fragments. At the fringe of the mass nothing was heard, but all listened with equal eagerness, craning their necks, straining with their ears. The women tucked their empty breasts into the mouths of their infants, or rocked them quickly, patting them, and craned their necks to listen, holding their faces up sideways.

And strange as it may seem, although they could not hear, or caught only scraps of phrases now and again, they finally grasped the import of what was being said.

"D'you hear, the Czecho-Sobaks* reached Moscow

* Play on words: 'sobaka' means 'dog' in Russian.

itself, but there they got a good smashing and fled to Siberia."

"The landowners are again astir, want their land back."

"They could kiss my behind but I'd never give it back."

"Have you heard, Panasyuka, there's a Red army in Russia."

"How so?"

"It's red—red trousers, red shirts, red caps. Red from behind and red in front, red all through like a boiled lobster."

"Stop your lies."

"I swear it's true. The orator just said so."

"What I heard was this: there are no more soldiers, they are all called Red Army men."

"Maybe we'll also be given red trousers."

"And they say the discipline is very strict."

"It can't be stricter than what we have here: when batko decided to give us hell we all behaved as if we were bridled. Just look, we march in ranks as straight as a tight string. And when we passed through the villages none of us cried or moaned."

They bandied words, catching fragments from the orators, not knowing how to express themselves but feeling that, cut off though they were by immeasurable steppes, impassable mountains, age-old forests, they too, were creating upon a smaller scale the same thing that was being created there, in Russia, on a world scale, that starved, naked and barefoot, without political guidance, without material means or any assistance whatsoever, they were creating it here, alone.

They did not understand, they did not know how to express it, but they felt it.

The orators spoke until the evening deepened, one after another. As their narrative unfolded the inexpressibly blissful feeling that they were linked with the hugeness they knew, and did not know, which was called Soviet Russia, kept growing in them.

* * *

Innumerable fires shone in the darkness, and above them twinkled the countless stars.

The smoke rose gently. Ragged soldiers, ragged women, old people, children, sat wearily around the campfires.

As the veil of smoke vanished towards the star-bestrewn sky so their jubilation waned into intangible weariness around the fires, and the great sea of people fell gently to sleep, smiling.

The fires went out. It was quiet. The night was blue.