

CHAPTER VIII

The last of the infantry hurriedly crossed the bridge, squeezing together as they approached it as if passing through a funnel. At last the baggage wagons had all crossed, the crush was less, and the last battalion came onto the bridge. Only Denísov's squadron of hussars remained on the farther side of the bridge facing the enemy, who could be seen from the hill on the opposite bank but was not yet visible from the bridge, for the horizon as seen from the valley through which the river flowed was formed by the rising ground only half a mile away. At the foot of the hill lay wasteland over which a few groups of our Cossack scouts were moving. Suddenly on the road at the top of the high ground, artillery and troops in blue uniform were seen. These were the French. A group of Cossack scouts retired down the hill at a trot. All the officers and men of Denísov's squadron, though they tried to talk of other things and to look in other directions, thought only of what was there on the hilltop, and kept constantly looking at the patches appearing on the skyline, which they knew to be the enemy's troops. The weather had cleared again since noon and the sun was descending brightly upon the Danube and the dark hills around it. It was calm, and at intervals the bugle calls and the shouts of the enemy could be heard from the hill. There was no one now between the squadron and the enemy except a few scattered skirmishers. An empty space of some seven hundred yards was all that separated them. The enemy ceased firing, and that stern, threatening, inaccessible, and intangible line which separates two hostile armies was all the more clearly felt.

“One step beyond that boundary line which resembles the line dividing the living from the dead lies uncertainty, suffering, and death. And what is there? Who is there?—there beyond that field, that tree, that roof lit up by the sun? No one knows, but one wants to know. You fear and yet long to cross that line, and know that sooner or later it must be crossed and you will have to find out what is there, just as you will inevitably have to learn what lies the other side of death. But you are strong, healthy, cheerful, and excited, and are surrounded by other such excitedly animated and healthy men.” So thinks, or at any rate feels, anyone who comes in sight of the enemy, and that feeling gives a particular glamour and glad keenness of impression to everything that takes place at such moments.

On the high ground where the enemy was, the smoke of a cannon rose, and a ball flew whistling over the heads of the hussar squadron. The officers who had been standing together rode off to their places. The hussars began carefully aligning their horses. Silence fell on the whole squadron. All were looking at the enemy in front and at the squadron commander, awaiting the word of command. A second and a third cannon ball flew past. Evidently they were firing at the hussars, but the balls with rapid rhythmic whistle flew over the heads of the horsemen and fell somewhere beyond them. The hussars did not look round, but at the sound of each shot, as at the word of command, the whole squadron with its rows of faces so alike yet so different, holding its breath while the ball flew past, rose in the stirrups and sank back again. The soldiers without turning their heads glanced at one another, curious to see their

comrades' impression. Every face, from Denísov's to that of the bugler, showed one common expression of conflict, irritation, and excitement, around chin and mouth. The quartermaster frowned, looking at the soldiers as if threatening to punish them. Cadet Mirónov ducked every time a ball flew past. Rostóv on the left flank, mounted on his Rook—a handsome horse despite its game leg—had the happy air of a schoolboy called up before a large audience for an examination in which he feels sure he will distinguish himself. He was glancing at everyone with a clear, bright expression, as if asking them to notice how calmly he sat under fire. But despite himself, on his face too that same indication of something new and stern showed round the mouth.

“Who's that curtseying there? Cadet Miwónov! That's not wight! Look at me,” cried Denísov who, unable to keep still on one spot, kept turning his horse in front of the squadron.

The black, hairy, snub-nosed face of Váška Denísov, and his whole short sturdy figure with the sinewy hairy hand and stumpy fingers in which he held the hilt of his naked saber, looked just as it usually did, especially toward evening when he had emptied his second bottle; he was only redder than usual. With his shaggy head thrown back like birds when they drink, pressing his spurs mercilessly into the sides of his good horse, Bedouin, and sitting as though falling backwards in the saddle, he galloped to the other flank of the squadron and shouted in a hoarse voice to the men to look to their pistols. He rode up to Kírsten. The staff captain on his broad-backed, steady mare came at a walk to meet him. His face with its long mustache was serious as always, only his eyes were brighter than usual.

“Well, what about it?” said he to Denísov. “It won't come to a fight. You'll see—we shall retire.”

“The devil only knows what they're about!” muttered Denísov. “Ah, Wostóv,” he cried noticing the cadet's bright face, “you've got it at last.”

And he smiled approvingly, evidently pleased with the cadet. Rostóv felt perfectly happy. Just then the commander appeared on the bridge. Denísov galloped up to him.

“Your excellency! Let us attack them! I'll dwive them off.”

“Attack indeed!” said the colonel in a bored voice, puckering up his face as if driving off a troublesome fly. “And why are you stopping here? Don't you see the skirmishers are retreating? Lead the squadron back.”

The squadron crossed the bridge and drew out of range of fire without having lost a single man. The second squadron that had been in the front line followed them across and the last Cossacks quitted the farther side of the river.

The two Pávlograd squadrons, having crossed the bridge, retired up the hill one after the other. Their colonel, Karl Bogdánich Schubert, came

up to Denísov's squadron and rode at a footpace not far from Rostóv, without taking any notice of him although they were now meeting for the first time since their encounter concerning Telyánin. Rostóv, feeling that he was at the front and in the power of a man toward whom he now admitted that he had been to blame, did not lift his eyes from the colonel's athletic back, his nape covered with light hair, and his red neck. It seemed to Rostóv that Bogdánich was only pretending not to notice him, and that his whole aim now was to test the cadet's courage, so he drew himself up and looked around him merrily; then it seemed to him that Bogdánich rode so near in order to show him his courage. Next he thought that his enemy would send the squadron on a desperate attack just to punish him—Rostóv. Then he imagined how, after the attack, Bogdánich would come up to him as he lay wounded and would magnanimously extend the hand of reconciliation.

The high-shouldered figure of Zherkóv, familiar to the Pávlograds as he had but recently left their regiment, rode up to the colonel. After his dismissal from headquarters Zherkóv had not remained in the regiment, saying he was not such a fool as to slave at the front when he could get more rewards by doing nothing on the staff, and had succeeded in attaching himself as an orderly officer to Prince Bagratión. He now came to his former chief with an order from the commander of the rear guard.

“Colonel,” he said, addressing Rostóv's enemy with an air of gloomy gravity and glancing round at his comrades, “there is an order to stop and fire the bridge.”

“An order to who?” asked the colonel morosely.

“I don't myself know ‘to who,’” replied the cornet in a serious tone, “but the prince told me to ‘go and tell the colonel that the hussars must return quickly and fire the bridge.’”

Zherkóv was followed by an officer of the suite who rode up to the colonel of hussars with the same order. After him the stout Nesvítski came galloping up on a Cossack horse that could scarcely carry his weight.

“How's this, Colonel?” he shouted as he approached. “I told you to fire the bridge, and now someone has gone and blundered; they are all beside themselves over there and one can't make anything out.”

The colonel deliberately stopped the regiment and turned to Nesvítski.

“You spoke to me of inflammable material,” said he, “but you said nothing about firing it.”

“But, my dear sir,” said Nesvítski as he drew up, taking off his cap and smoothing his hair wet with perspiration with his plump hand, “wasn't I telling you to fire the bridge, when inflammable material had been put in position?”

“I am not your ‘dear sir,’ Mr. Staff Officer, and you did not tell

me to burn the bridge! I know the service, and it is my habit orders strictly to obey. You said the bridge would be burned, but who would burn it, I could not know by the holy spirit!"

"Ah, that's always the way!" said Nesvítski with a wave of the hand. "How did you get here?" said he, turning to Zherkóv.

"On the same business. But you are damp! Let me wring you out!"

"You were saying, Mr. Staff Officer..." continued the colonel in an offended tone.

"Colonel," interrupted the officer of the suite, "You must be quick or the enemy will bring up his guns to use grapeshot."

The colonel looked silently at the officer of the suite, at the stout staff officer, and at Zherkóv, and he frowned.

"I will the bridge fire," he said in a solemn tone as if to announce that in spite of all the unpleasantness he had to endure he would still do the right thing.

Striking his horse with his long muscular legs as if it were to blame for everything, the colonel moved forward and ordered the second squadron, that in which Rostóv was serving under Denísov, to return to the bridge.

"There, it's just as I thought," said Rostóv to himself. "He wishes to test me!" His heart contracted and the blood rushed to his face. "Let him see whether I am a coward!" he thought.

Again on all the bright faces of the squadron the serious expression appeared that they had worn when under fire. Rostóv watched his enemy, the colonel, closely—to find in his face confirmation of his own conjecture, but the colonel did not once glance at Rostóv, and looked as he always did when at the front, solemn and stern. Then came the word of command.

"Look sharp! Look sharp!" several voices repeated around him.

Their sabers catching in the bridles and their spurs jingling, the hussars hastily dismounted, not knowing what they were to do. The men were crossing themselves. Rostóv no longer looked at the colonel, he had no time. He was afraid of falling behind the hussars, so much afraid that his heart stood still. His hand trembled as he gave his horse into an orderly's charge, and he felt the blood rush to his heart with a thud. Denísov rode past him, leaning back and shouting something. Rostóv saw nothing but the hussars running all around him, their spurs catching and their sabers clattering.

"Stretchers!" shouted someone behind him.

Rostóv did not think what this call for stretchers meant; he ran on, trying only to be ahead of the others; but just at the bridge, not

looking at the ground, he came on some sticky, trodden mud, stumbled, and fell on his hands. The others outstripped him.

“At boss zides, Captain,” he heard the voice of the colonel, who, having ridden ahead, had pulled up his horse near the bridge, with a triumphant, cheerful face.

Rostóv wiping his muddy hands on his breeches looked at his enemy and was about to run on, thinking that the farther he went to the front the better. But Bogdánich, without looking at or recognizing Rostóv, shouted to him:

“Who’s that running on the middle of the bridge? To the right! Come back, Cadet!” he cried angrily; and turning to Denísov, who, showing off his courage, had ridden on to the planks of the bridge:

“Why run risks, Captain? You should dismount,” he said.

“Oh, every bullet has its billet,” answered Váska Denísov, turning in his saddle.

Meanwhile Nesvítski, Zherkóv, and the officer of the suite were standing together out of range of the shots, watching, now the small group of men with yellow shakos, dark-green jackets braided with cord, and blue riding breeches, who were swarming near the bridge, and then at what was approaching in the distance from the opposite side—the blue uniforms and groups with horses, easily recognizable as artillery.

“Will they burn the bridge or not? Who’ll get there first? Will they get there and fire the bridge or will the French get within grapeshot range and wipe them out?” These were the questions each man of the troops on the high ground above the bridge involuntarily asked himself with a sinking heart—watching the bridge and the hussars in the bright evening light and the blue tunics advancing from the other side with their bayonets and guns.

“Ugh. The hussars will get it hot!” said Nesvítski; “they are within grapeshot range now.”

“He shouldn’t have taken so many men,” said the officer of the suite.

“True enough,” answered Nesvítski; “two smart fellows could have done the job just as well.”

“Ah, your excellency,” put in Zherkóv, his eyes fixed on the hussars, but still with that naïve air that made it impossible to know whether he was speaking in jest or in earnest. “Ah, your excellency! How you look at things! Send two men? And who then would give us the Vladímir medal and ribbon? But now, even if they do get peppered, the squadron may be recommended for honors and he may get a ribbon. Our Bogdánich knows how things are done.”

“There now!” said the officer of the suite, “that’s grapeshot.”

He pointed to the French guns, the limbers of which were being detached and hurriedly removed.

On the French side, amid the groups with cannon, a cloud of smoke appeared, then a second and a third almost simultaneously, and at the moment when the first report was heard a fourth was seen. Then two reports one after another, and a third.

“Oh! Oh!” groaned Nesvítski as if in fierce pain, seizing the officer of the suite by the arm. “Look! A man has fallen! Fallen, fallen!”

“Two, I think.”

“If I were Tsar I would never go to war,” said Nesvítski, turning away.

The French guns were hastily reloaded. The infantry in their blue uniforms advanced toward the bridge at a run. Smoke appeared again but at irregular intervals, and grapeshot cracked and rattled onto the bridge. But this time Nesvítski could not see what was happening there, as a dense cloud of smoke arose from it. The hussars had succeeded in setting it on fire and the French batteries were now firing at them, no longer to hinder them but because the guns were trained and there was someone to fire at.

The French had time to fire three rounds of grapeshot before the hussars got back to their horses. Two were misdirected and the shot went too high, but the last round fell in the midst of a group of hussars and knocked three of them over.

Rostóv, absorbed by his relations with Bogdánich, had paused on the bridge not knowing what to do. There was no one to hew down (as he had always imagined battles to himself), nor could he help to fire the bridge because he had not brought any burning straw with him like the other soldiers. He stood looking about him, when suddenly he heard a rattle on the bridge as if nuts were being spilt, and the hussar nearest to him fell against the rails with a groan. Rostóv ran up to him with the others. Again someone shouted, “Stretchers!” Four men seized the hussar and began lifting him.

“Oooh! For Christ’s sake let me alone!” cried the wounded man, but still he was lifted and laid on the stretcher.

Nicholas Rostóv turned away and, as if searching for something, gazed into the distance, at the waters of the Danube, at the sky, and at the sun. How beautiful the sky looked; how blue, how calm, and how deep! How bright and glorious was the setting sun! With what soft glitter the waters of the distant Danube shone. And fairer still were the faraway blue mountains beyond the river, the nunnery, the mysterious gorges, and the pine forests veiled in the mist of their summits... There was peace

and happiness... “I should wish for nothing else, nothing, if only I were there,” thought Rostóv. “In myself alone and in that sunshine there is so much happiness; but here... groans, suffering, fear, and this uncertainty and hurry... There—they are shouting again, and again are all running back somewhere, and I shall run with them, and it, death, is here above me and around... Another instant and I shall never again see the sun, this water, that gorge!...”

At that instant the sun began to hide behind the clouds, and other stretchers came into view before Rostóv. And the fear of death and of the stretchers, and love of the sun and of life, all merged into one feeling of sickening agitation.

“O Lord God! Thou who art in that heaven, save, forgive, and protect me!” Rostóv whispered.

The hussars ran back to the men who held their horses; their voices sounded louder and calmer, the stretchers disappeared from sight.

“Well, fwiend? So you’ve smelt powdah!” shouted Váska Denísov just above his ear.

“It’s all over; but I am a coward—yes, a coward!” thought Rostóv, and sighing deeply he took Rook, his horse, which stood resting one foot, from the orderly and began to mount.

“Was that grapeshot?” he asked Denísov.

“Yes and no mistake!” cried Denísov. “You worked like wegular bwicks and it’s nasty work! An attack’s pleasant work! Hacking away at the dogs! But this sort of thing is the very devil, with them shooting at you like a target.”

And Denísov rode up to a group that had stopped near Rostóv, composed of the colonel, Nesvítski, Zherkóv, and the officer from the suite.

“Well, it seems that no one has noticed,” thought Rostóv. And this was true. No one had taken any notice, for everyone knew the sensation which the cadet under fire for the first time had experienced.

“Here’s something for you to report,” said Zherkóv. “See if I don’t get promoted to a sublieutenancy.”

“Inform the prince that I the bridge fired!” said the colonel triumphantly and gaily.

“And if he asks about the losses?”

“A trifle,” said the colonel in his bass voice: “two hussars wounded, and one knocked out,” he added, unable to restrain a happy smile, and pronouncing the phrase “knocked out” with ringing distinctness.