

CHAPTER XIV

It was nearly three o'clock but no one was yet asleep, when the quartermaster appeared with an order to move on to the little town of Ostróvna. Still laughing and talking, the officers began hurriedly getting ready and again boiled some muddy water in the samovar. But Rostóv went off to his squadron without waiting for tea. Day was breaking, the rain had ceased, and the clouds were dispersing. It felt damp and cold, especially in clothes that were still moist. As they left the tavern in the twilight of the dawn, Rostóv and Ilyín both glanced under the wet and glistening leather hood of the doctor's cart, from under the apron of which his feet were sticking out, and in the middle of which his wife's nightcap was visible and her sleepy breathing audible.

"She really is a dear little thing," said Rostóv to Ilyín, who was following him.

"A charming woman!" said Ilyín, with all the gravity of a boy of sixteen.

Half an hour later the squadron was lined up on the road. The command was heard to "mount" and the soldiers crossed themselves and mounted. Rostóv riding in front gave the order "Forward!" and the hussars, with clanking sabers and subdued talk, their horses' hoofs splashing in the mud, defiled in fours and moved along the broad road planted with birch trees on each side, following the infantry and a battery that had gone on in front.

Tattered, blue-purple clouds, reddening in the east, were scudding before the wind. It was growing lighter and lighter. That curly grass which always grows by country roadsides became clearly visible, still wet with the night's rain; the drooping branches of the birches, also wet, swayed in the wind and flung down bright drops of water to one side. The soldiers' faces were more and more clearly visible. Rostóv, always closely followed by Ilyín, rode along the side of the road between two rows of birch trees.

When campaigning, Rostóv allowed himself the indulgence of riding not a regimental but a Cossack horse. A judge of horses and a sportsman, he had lately procured himself a large, fine, mettlesome, Donéts horse, dun-colored, with light mane and tail, and when he rode it no one could outgallop him. To ride this horse was a pleasure to him, and he thought of the horse, of the morning, of the doctor's wife, but not once of the impending danger.

Formerly, when going into action, Rostóv had felt afraid; now he had not the least feeling of fear. He was fearless, not because he had grown used to being under fire (one cannot grow used to danger), but because he had learned how to manage his thoughts when in danger. He had grown accustomed when going into action to think about anything but what would seem most likely to interest him—the impending danger. During the first period of his service, hard as he tried and much as he reproached

himself with cowardice, he had not been able to do this, but with time it had come of itself. Now he rode beside Ilyín under the birch trees, occasionally plucking leaves from a branch that met his hand, sometimes touching his horse's side with his foot, or, without turning round, handing a pipe he had finished to an hussar riding behind him, with as calm and careless an air as though he were merely out for a ride. He glanced with pity at the excited face of Ilyín, who talked much and in great agitation. He knew from experience the tormenting expectation of terror and death the cornet was suffering and knew that only time could help him.

As soon as the sun appeared in a clear strip of sky beneath the clouds, the wind fell, as if it dared not spoil the beauty of the summer morning after the storm; drops still continued to fall, but vertically now, and all was still. The whole sun appeared on the horizon and disappeared behind a long narrow cloud that hung above it. A few minutes later it reappeared brighter still from behind the top of the cloud, tearing its edge. Everything grew bright and glittered. And with that light, and as if in reply to it, came the sound of guns ahead of them.

Before Rostóv had had time to consider and determine the distance of that firing, Count Ostermann-Tolstóy's adjutant came galloping from Vítebsk with orders to advance at a trot along the road.

The squadron overtook and passed the infantry and the battery—which had also quickened their pace—rode down a hill, and passing through an empty and deserted village again ascended. The horses began to lather and the men to flush.

“Halt! Dress your ranks!” the order of the regimental commander was heard ahead. “Forward by the left. Walk, march!” came the order from in front.

And the hussars, passing along the line of troops on the left flank of our position, halted behind our Uhlans who were in the front line. To the right stood our infantry in a dense column: they were the reserve. Higher up the hill, on the very horizon, our guns were visible through the wonderfully clear air, brightly illuminated by slanting morning sunbeams. In front, beyond a hollow dale, could be seen the enemy's columns and guns. Our advanced line, already in action, could be heard briskly exchanging shots with the enemy in the dale.

At these sounds, long unheard, Rostóv's spirits rose, as at the strains of the merriest music. Trap-ta-ta-tap! cracked the shots, now together, now several quickly one after another. Again all was silent and then again it sounded as if someone were walking on detonators and exploding them.

The hussars remained in the same place for about an hour. A cannonade began. Count Ostermann with his suite rode up behind the squadron, halted, spoke to the commander of the regiment, and rode up the hill to the guns.

After Ostermann had gone, a command rang out to the Uhlans.

“Form column! Prepare to charge!”

The infantry in front of them parted into platoons to allow the cavalry to pass. The Uhlans started, the streamers on their spears fluttering, and trotted downhill toward the French cavalry which was seen below to the left.

As soon as the Uhlans descended the hill, the hussars were ordered up the hill to support the battery. As they took the places vacated by the Uhlans, bullets came from the front, whining and whistling, but fell spent without taking effect.

The sounds, which he had not heard for so long, had an even more pleasurable and exhilarating effect on Rostóv than the previous sounds of firing. Drawing himself up, he viewed the field of battle opening out before him from the hill, and with his whole soul followed the movement of the Uhlans. They swooped down close to the French dragoons, something confused happened there amid the smoke, and five minutes later our Uhlans were galloping back, not to the place they had occupied but more to the left, and among the orange-colored Uhlans on chestnut horses and behind them, in a large group, blue French dragoons on gray horses could be seen.