

CHAPTER XV

Rostóv, with his keen sportsman's eye, was one of the first to catch sight of these blue French dragoons pursuing our Uhlans. Nearer and nearer in disorderly crowds came the Uhlans and the French dragoons pursuing them. He could already see how these men, who looked so small at the foot of the hill, jostled and overtook one another, waving their arms and their sabers in the air.

Rostóv gazed at what was happening before him as at a hunt. He felt instinctively that if the hussars struck at the French dragoons now, the latter could not withstand them, but if a charge was to be made it must be done now, at that very moment, or it would be too late. He looked around. A captain, standing beside him, was gazing like himself with eyes fixed on the cavalry below them.

“Andrew Sevastyánych!” said Rostóv. “You know, we could crush them....”

“A fine thing too!” replied the captain, “and really...”

Rostóv, without waiting to hear him out, touched his horse, galloped to the front of his squadron, and before he had time to finish giving the word of command, the whole squadron, sharing his feeling, was following him. Rostóv himself did not know how or why he did it. He acted as he did when hunting, without reflecting or considering. He saw the dragoons near and that they were galloping in disorder; he knew they could not withstand an attack—knew there was only that moment and that if he let it slip it would not return. The bullets were whining and whistling so stimulatingly around him and his horse was so eager to go that he could not restrain himself. He touched his horse, gave the word of command, and immediately, hearing behind him the tramp of the horses of his deployed squadron, rode at full trot downhill toward the dragoons. Hardly had they reached the bottom of the hill before their pace instinctively changed to a gallop, which grew faster and faster as they drew nearer to our Uhlans and the French dragoons who galloped after them. The dragoons were now close at hand. On seeing the hussars, the foremost began to turn, while those behind began to halt. With the same feeling with which he had galloped across the path of a wolf, Rostóv gave rein to his Donéts horse and galloped to intersect the path of the dragoons' disordered lines. One Uhlan stopped, another who was on foot flung himself to the ground to avoid being knocked over, and a riderless horse fell in among the hussars. Nearly all the French dragoons were galloping back. Rostóv, picking out one on a gray horse, dashed after him. On the way he came upon a bush, his gallant horse cleared it, and almost before he had righted himself in his saddle he saw that he would immediately overtake the enemy he had selected. That Frenchman, by his uniform an officer, was going at a gallop, crouching on his gray horse and urging it on with his saber. In another moment Rostóv's horse dashed its breast against the hindquarters of the officer's horse, almost knocking it over, and at the same instant Rostóv, without knowing why, raised his saber and struck the Frenchman with it.

The instant he had done this, all Rostóv's animation vanished. The

officer fell, not so much from the blow—which had but slightly cut his arm above the elbow—as from the shock to his horse and from fright. Rostóv reined in his horse, and his eyes sought his foe to see whom he had vanquished. The French dragoon officer was hopping with one foot on the ground, the other being caught in the stirrup. His eyes, screwed up with fear as if he every moment expected another blow, gazed up at Rostóv with shrinking terror. His pale and mud-stained face—fair and young, with a dimple in the chin and light-blue eyes—was not an enemy's face at all suited to a battlefield, but a most ordinary, homelike face. Before Rostóv had decided what to do with him, the officer cried, "I surrender!" He hurriedly but vainly tried to get his foot out of the stirrup and did not remove his frightened blue eyes from Rostóv's face. Some hussars who galloped up disengaged his foot and helped him into the saddle. On all sides, the hussars were busy with the dragoons; one was wounded, but though his face was bleeding, he would not give up his horse; another was perched up behind an hussar with his arms round him; a third was being helped by an hussar to mount his horse. In front, the French infantry were firing as they ran. The hussars galloped hastily back with their prisoners. Rostóv galloped back with the rest, aware of an unpleasant feeling of depression in his heart. Something vague and confused, which he could not at all account for, had come over him with the capture of that officer and the blow he had dealt him.

Count Ostermann-Tolstóy met the returning hussars, sent for Rostóv, thanked him, and said he would report his gallant deed to the Emperor and would recommend him for a St. George's Cross. When sent for by Count Ostermann, Rostóv, remembering that he had charged without orders, felt sure his commander was sending for him to punish him for breach of discipline. Ostermann's flattering words and promise of a reward should therefore have struck him all the more pleasantly, but he still felt that same vaguely disagreeable feeling of moral nausea. "But what on earth is worrying me?" he asked himself as he rode back from the general. "Ilyín? No, he's safe. Have I disgraced myself in any way? No, that's not it." Something else, resembling remorse, tormented him. "Yes, oh yes, that French officer with the dimple. And I remember how my arm paused when I raised it."

Rostóv saw the prisoners being led away and galloped after them to have a look at his Frenchman with the dimple on his chin. He was sitting in his foreign uniform on an hussar packhorse and looked anxiously about him. The sword cut on his arm could scarcely be called a wound. He glanced at Rostóv with a feigned smile and waved his hand in greeting. Rostóv still had the same indefinite feeling, as of shame.

All that day and the next his friends and comrades noticed that Rostóv, without being dull or angry, was silent, thoughtful, and preoccupied. He drank reluctantly, tried to remain alone, and kept turning something over in his mind.

Rostóv was always thinking about that brilliant exploit of his, which to his amazement had gained him the St. George's Cross and even given him a reputation for bravery, and there was something he could not at all understand. "So others are even more afraid than I am!" he thought. "So that's all there is in what is called heroism! And did I do it for my

country's sake? And how was he to blame, with his dimple and blue eyes? And how frightened he was! He thought that I should kill him. Why should I kill him? My hand trembled. And they have given me a St. George's Cross.... I can't make it out at all."

But while Nicholas was considering these questions and still could reach no clear solution of what puzzled him so, the wheel of fortune in the service, as often happens, turned in his favor. After the affair at Ostróvna he was brought into notice, received command of an hussar battalion, and when a brave officer was needed he was chosen.