

CHAPTER VI

After talking for some time with the esaul about next day's attack, which now, seeing how near they were to the French, he seemed to have definitely decided on, Denísov turned his horse and rode back.

"Now, my lad, we'll go and get dwy," he said to Pétya.

As they approached the watchhouse Denísov stopped, peering into the forest. Among the trees a man with long legs and long, swinging arms, wearing a short jacket, bast shoes, and a Kazán hat, was approaching with long, light steps. He had a musketoon over his shoulder and an ax stuck in his girdle. When he espied Denísov he hastily threw something into the bushes, removed his sodden hat by its floppy brim, and approached his commander. It was Tíkhon. His wrinkled and pockmarked face and narrow little eyes beamed with self-satisfied merriment. He lifted his head high and gazed at Denísov as if repressing a laugh.

"Well, where did you disappear to?" inquired Denísov.

"Where did I disappear to? I went to get Frenchmen," answered Tíkhon boldly and hurriedly, in a husky but melodious bass voice.

"Why did you push yourself in there by daylight? You ass! Well, why haven't you taken one?"

"Oh, I took one all right," said Tíkhon.

"Where is he?"

"You see, I took him first thing at dawn," Tíkhon continued, spreading out his flat feet with outturned toes in their bast shoes. "I took him into the forest. Then I see he's no good and think I'll go and fetch a likelier one."

"You see?... What a wogue—it's just as I thought," said Denísov to the esaul. "Why didn't you bwing that one?"

"What was the good of bringing him?" Tíkhon interrupted hastily and angrily—"that one wouldn't have done for you. As if I don't know what sort you want!"

"What a bwute you are!... Well?"

"I went for another one," Tíkhon continued, "and I crept like this through the wood and lay down." (He suddenly lay down on his stomach with a supple movement to show how he had done it.) "One turned up and I grabbed him, like this." (He jumped up quickly and lightly.) "'Come along to the colonel,' I said. He starts yelling, and suddenly there were four of them. They rushed at me with their little swords. So I went for them with my ax, this way: 'What are you up to?' says I. 'Christ be with you!'" shouted Tíkhon, waving his arms with an angry scowl and throwing out his chest.

“Yes, we saw from the hill how you took to your heels through the puddles!” said the esaul, screwing up his glittering eyes.

Pétya badly wanted to laugh, but noticed that they all refrained from laughing. He turned his eyes rapidly from Tíkhon’s face to the esaul’s and Denísov’s, unable to make out what it all meant.

“Don’t play the fool!” said Denísov, coughing angrily. “Why didn’t you bring the first one?”

Tíkhon scratched his back with one hand and his head with the other, then suddenly his whole face expanded into a beaming, foolish grin, disclosing a gap where he had lost a tooth (that was why he was called Shcherbáty—the gap-toothed). Denísov smiled, and Pétya burst into a peal of merry laughter in which Tíkhon himself joined.

“Oh, but he was a regular good-for-nothing,” said Tíkhon. “The clothes on him—poor stuff! How could I bring him? And so rude, your honor! Why, he says: ‘I’m a general’s son myself, I won’t go!’ he says.”

“You are a bwute!” said Denísov. “I wanted to question...”

“But I questioned him,” said Tíkhon. “He said he didn’t know much. ‘There are a lot of us,’ he says, ‘but all poor stuff—only soldiers in name,’ he says. ‘Shout loud at them,’ he says, ‘and you’ll take them all,’” Tíkhon concluded, looking cheerfully and resolutely into Denísov’s eyes.

“I’ll give you a hundwed sharp lashes—that’ll teach you to play the fool!” said Denísov severely.

“But why are you angry?” remonstrated Tíkhon, “just as if I’d never seen your Frenchmen! Only wait till it gets dark and I’ll fetch you any of them you want—three if you like.”

“Well, let’s go,” said Denísov, and rode all the way to the watchhouse in silence and frowning angrily.

Tíkhon followed behind and Pétya heard the Cossacks laughing with him and at him, about some pair of boots he had thrown into the bushes.

When the fit of laughter that had seized him at Tíkhon’s words and smile had passed and Pétya realized for a moment that this Tíkhon had killed a man, he felt uneasy. He looked round at the captive drummer boy and felt a pang in his heart. But this uneasiness lasted only a moment. He felt it necessary to hold his head higher, to brace himself, and to question the esaul with an air of importance about tomorrow’s undertaking, that he might not be unworthy of the company in which he found himself.

The officer who had been sent to inquire met Denísov on the way with the news that Dólokhov was soon coming and that all was well with him.

Denísov at once cheered up and, calling Pétya to him, said: “Well, tell

me about yourself.”