

CHAPTER VII

Pétya, having left his people after their departure from Moscow, joined his regiment and was soon taken as orderly by a general commanding a large guerrilla detachment. From the time he received his commission, and especially since he had joined the active army and taken part in the battle of Vyázma, Pétya had been in a constant state of blissful excitement at being grown-up and in a perpetual ecstatic hurry not to miss any chance to do something really heroic. He was highly delighted with what he saw and experienced in the army, but at the same time it always seemed to him that the really heroic exploits were being performed just where he did not happen to be. And he was always in a hurry to get where he was not.

When on the twenty-first of October his general expressed a wish to send somebody to Denísov's detachment, Pétya begged so piteously to be sent that the general could not refuse. But when dispatching him he recalled Pétya's mad action at the battle of Vyázma, where instead of riding by the road to the place to which he had been sent, he had galloped to the advanced line under the fire of the French and had there twice fired his pistol. So now the general explicitly forbade his taking part in any action whatever of Denísov's. That was why Pétya had blushed and grown confused when Denísov asked him whether he could stay. Before they had ridden to the outskirts of the forest Pétya had considered he must carry out his instructions strictly and return at once. But when he saw the French and saw Tíkhon and learned that there would certainly be an attack that night, he decided, with the rapidity with which young people change their views, that the general, whom he had greatly respected till then, was a rubbishy German, that Denísov was a hero, the esaul a hero, and Tíkhon a hero too, and that it would be shameful for him to leave them at a moment of difficulty.

It was already growing dusk when Denísov, Pétya, and the esaul rode up to the watchhouse. In the twilight saddled horses could be seen, and Cossacks and hussars who had rigged up rough shelters in the glade and were kindling glowing fires in a hollow of the forest where the French could not see the smoke. In the passage of the small watchhouse a Cossack with sleeves rolled up was chopping some mutton. In the room three officers of Denísov's band were converting a door into a tabletop. Pétya took off his wet clothes, gave them to be dried, and at once began helping the officers to fix up the dinner table.

In ten minutes the table was ready and a napkin spread on it. On the table were vodka, a flask of rum, white bread, roast mutton, and salt.

Sitting at table with the officers and tearing the fat savory mutton with his hands, down which the grease trickled, Pétya was in an ecstatic childish state of love for all men, and consequently of confidence that others loved him in the same way.

“So then what do you think, Vasíli Dmítrich?” said he to Denísov. “It's all right my staying a day with you?” And not waiting for a reply he answered his own question: “You see I was told to find out—well, I am

finding out.... Only do let me into the very... into the chief... I don't want a reward.... But I want..."

Pétya clenched his teeth and looked around, throwing back his head and flourishing his arms.

"Into the vevy chief..." Denísov repeated with a smile.

"Only, please let me command something, so that I may really command..." Pétya went on. "What would it be to you?... Oh, you want a knife?" he said, turning to an officer who wished to cut himself a piece of mutton.

And he handed him his clasp knife. The officer admired it.

"Please keep it. I have several like it," said Pétya, blushing. "Heavens! I was quite forgetting!" he suddenly cried. "I have some raisins, fine ones; you know, seedless ones. We have a new sutler and he has such capital things. I bought ten pounds. I am used to something sweet. Would you like some?..." and Pétya ran out into the passage to his Cossack and brought back some bags which contained about five pounds of raisins. "Have some, gentlemen, have some!"

"You want a coffeepot, don't you?" he asked the esaul. "I bought a capital one from our sutler! He has splendid things. And he's very honest, that's the chief thing. I'll be sure to send it to you. Or perhaps your flints are giving out, or are worn out—that happens sometimes, you know. I have brought some with me, here they are"—and he showed a bag—"a hundred flints. I bought them very cheap. Please take as many as you want, or all if you like..."

Then suddenly, dismayed lest he had said too much, Pétya stopped and blushed.

He tried to remember whether he had not done anything else that was foolish. And running over the events of the day he remembered the French drummer boy. "It's capital for us here, but what of him? Where have they put him? Have they fed him? Haven't they hurt his feelings?" he thought. But having caught himself saying too much about the flints, he was now afraid to speak out.

"I might ask," he thought, "but they'll say: 'He's a boy himself and so he pities the boy.' I'll show them tomorrow whether I'm a boy. Will it seem odd if I ask?" Pétya thought. "Well, never mind!" and immediately, blushing and looking anxiously at the officers to see if they appeared ironical, he said:

"May I call in that boy who was taken prisoner and give him something to eat?... Perhaps..."

"Yes, he's a poor little fellow," said Denísov, who evidently saw nothing shameful in this reminder. "Call him in. His name is Vincent Bosse. Have him fetched."

"I'll call him," said Pétya.

“Yes, yes, call him. A poor little fellow,” Denísov repeated.

Pétya was standing at the door when Denísov said this. He slipped in between the officers, came close to Denísov, and said:

“Let me kiss you, dear old fellow! Oh, how fine, how splendid!”

And having kissed Denísov he ran out of the hut.

“Bosse! Vincent!” Pétya cried, stopping outside the door.

“Who do you want, sir?” asked a voice in the darkness.

Pétya replied that he wanted the French lad who had been captured that day.

“Ah, Vesénny?” said a Cossack.

Vincent, the boy’s name, had already been changed by the Cossacks into Vesénny (vernal) and into Vesénya by the peasants and soldiers. In both these adaptations the reference to spring (vesná) matched the impression made by the young lad.

“He is warming himself there by the bonfire. Ho, Vesénya! Vesénya!—Vesénny!” laughing voices were heard calling to one another in the darkness.

“He’s a smart lad,” said an hussar standing near Pétya. “We gave him something to eat a while ago. He was awfully hungry!”

The sound of bare feet splashing through the mud was heard in the darkness, and the drummer boy came to the door.

“Ah, c’est vous!” said Pétya. “Voulez-vous manger? N’ayez pas peur, on ne vous fera pas de mal,” * he added shyly and affectionately, touching the boy’s hand. “Entrez, entrez.” *(2)

* “Ah, it’s you! Do you want something to eat? Don’t be afraid, they won’t hurt you.”

* (2) “Come in, come in.”

“Merci, monsieur,” * said the drummer boy in a trembling almost childish voice, and he began scraping his dirty feet on the threshold.

* “Thank you, sir.”

There were many things Pétya wanted to say to the drummer boy, but did not dare to. He stood irresolutely beside him in the passage. Then in the darkness he took the boy’s hand and pressed it.

“Come in, come in!” he repeated in a gentle whisper. “Oh, what can I do for him?” he thought, and opening the door he let the boy pass in first.

When the boy had entered the hut, Pétya sat down at a distance from him, considering it beneath his dignity to pay attention to him. But he fingered the money in his pocket and wondered whether it would seem ridiculous to give some to the drummer boy.