

NIGHT DUTY

by

Alexander Kuprin

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NIGHT DUTY

The evening roll-call had long been over and the prayers chanted in Number Eight Company's barracks. It was already past ten but the men were in no hurry to undress. The following day was a Sunday, when all but those on duty rose one hour later than usual.

Private Luka Merkulov had just gone on duty. He had to keep awake till two o'clock past midnight, making the round of the barracks in greatcoat and cap, with bayonet at his side, and see that everything was in order—that nothing was stolen, that the men did not go out in underwear, that no outsiders got into the barracks. If a superior came round, he would have to report on the state of the camp and to give an account of everything that had happened.

Merkulov had been put on duty out of turn, by way of punishment, because on the previous Monday, during shooting drill, his rolled-up greatcoat had been tied by a string instead of the regulation strap, which had been stolen. This was the third time in five days that he had had to do extra duty, and always at night, which made it even worse.

He was a poor parade-ground soldier. Not that he was lazy or careless. He just could not master, much as he tried, the difficult art of arms drill, of keeping his toes down on the march, of "thrusting his whole body forward," and of "holding

his breath at the right moment when pulling the trigger." Nevertheless, he was known as a serious and proper soldier; he kept his uniform trim, used comparatively little foul language, drank no vodka except what was issued to him on grand holidays, and in his spare time slowly and painstakingly made high boots, never more than one pair a month, but what boots! They called them Merkulov boots—huge, heavy, wearproof.

His rough, grey face, matching the colour of his greatcoat, had that shade of dirty pallor which the air of barracks, prisons and hospitals gives to peasant faces. What struck you as strange and somehow out of place in it was his slightly protruding eyes, of an amazingly delicate and pure colour—kind as a child's and so limpid that they seemed to shine. His thick lips were those of a simple-hearted man, especially the upper one with the sparse, brownish down on it lying flat as if it had been wetted.

The barracks were full of uproar. The smoky reddish light of four tin night-lamps, hooked on the wall in the quarters of each platoon, barely illuminated the four long adjoining rooms. Two continuous rows of plank beds, covered with hay mattresses, stretched down the middle of the rooms. The walls were whitewashed, their lower part painted brown. Shapely rows of rifles stood in long wooden racks against the walls; above them hung framed paintings and prints crudely representing the whole of soldierly knowledge.

Merkulov walked slowly from platoon to platoon. He was lonesome and sleepy, and he envied these men clamouring and laughing in the heavy gloom of the barracks. They all had so many hours of sleep ahead of them that they did not mind staying up a few minutes longer. But what agonized and galled him most was that half an hour later the whole company would fall silent and drop off to sleep, and that he would be the only one to remain awake, wretched and forgotten, all alone among a hundred men, whom some unearthly, mysterious power would have wafted away into an unknown world.

About a dozen soldiers were huddled together in Two Platoon. They were sitting or sprawling so close to each other on the plank beds that you could not tell at once which arms and legs belonged to which heads or backs. Now and then a hand-rolled cigarette glowed red in the darkness. Sitting cross-legged in the middle of the group was Private Zamoshnikov, or Uncle Zarnoshnikov, as he was called in the company. Everybody liked the undersized, lively old soldier, who usually led the singing and was always ready to amuse the others. He was now spinning a yarn, rocking back and forth and rubbing his knees with his palms; he spoke in a steady, deliberate undertone that seemed to have a note of wonderment in it. The soldiers were listening in tense silence. Occasionally one of them, carried away by the narrative and unable to check himself, would burst out into a loud oath of admiration.

Merkulov halted near the group and listened indifferently.

"So that there Turkish Sultan sends him a great big barrel of poppy seed and with it there's a letter: 'Your Ex'lency, glorious and brave General Skobelev! I gives you three days and three nights to count every seed that's in this here barrel. And let me tell you that I've got as many soldiers in my army as you'll count seeds in the barrel.' Well, General Skobelev read the Sultan's letter and he wasn't scared a bit. Not him! He just sent the Turkish Sultan a handful of pepper pods. 'I haven't got half so many soldiers as you've got,' he says, 'just this little handful here, but you try and chew 'em!' "

"That was smart of him!" a voice commented behind Zamoshnikov's back.

The other listeners chuckled.

"Yes. Try and chew 'em,' he says!" repeated Zamoshnikov, loth to part with the lucky phrase. "The Sultan, he sent him a barrel of poppy seed, see, and the general sent him back a handful of pepper. 'You try and chew that!' he says. That's what our Skobelev told him—that there Turkish Sultan. 'I've only got a handful of soldiers,' he says, 'but see if you can chew 'em!' "

"Is that the end of the story, Uncle Zamoshnikov?" asked an impatient listener timidly. . "Don't you be in such a hurry, my lad," Zamoshnikov snapped, annoyed. "I'll take my time, if you don't mind. Telling a story's not the same as catching fleas, you know." He paused to regain his composure, and then resumed the story, "Yes, as I was saying. 'It's only a little handful, to be sure,' he says, 'but try and chew 'em.' So the Turkish Sultan read Skobelev's letter, and wrote him another one back: 'You'd better get that fine army of yours out of my Turkish land,' he says, 'because if you don't, I'll give my soldiers a glass of vodka apiece, and that'll make 'em angry and they'll chase all your army out of Turkey in three days.' But Skobelev had his answer ready: 'O great and glorious Sultan of Turkey, how dare you, you freak-faced Turk, write me words like that? Think you can scare me, do you? 'I'll give 'em a glass of vodka apiece!' Well, and I won't give my soldiers any grub to eat for three days and they'll swallow you up, you son of a gun, alive, with all your army. And they won't bring you up again, either, so you'll just be reported missing, you dog, you pig-eared beast!' Well, the moment that there Turkish Sultan heard this he started wobbling at the knees and spoke up for peace right away. 'Go along,' he says, 'and take your army with you. Here's a million rubles cash down, please take it like a good fella and leave me alone.'"

Zamoshnikov paused, then said briefly, "That's all, lads."

As the listeners came back to life the group stirred. Gruff exclamations of approval were heard from all sides.

"Showed him up proper, didn't he!"

"One in the eye for him, that was."

"Not half it was. 'I won't give my soldiers any grub for three days,' he says, 'and they'll swallow you alive, you dirty dog.' Was that how he said it, Uncle Zamoshnikov? Eh, Uncle Zamoshnikov?"

Zamoshnikov repeated the sentence word for word.

"They're no good against us!" cried boastful voices.

"Bah! As if they could be, against the Russians!"

"You'd better think twice, old man, before you take us on."

"Yes, and think hard—Before you start a thing like that you'd better have a good pray and eat a lot."

Zamoshnikov reached for the cigarette glowing beside him, and said carelessly, "Give us a pull, mate. I'm dying for a smoke."

He took several strong pulls one after the other, blowing out the smoke through his nostrils in two straight, powerful jets. His face, particularly his chin and lips, would light up for a moment in the red glow, then vanish again into the darkness. A hand reached for the cigarette in his mouth, and a voice begged, "Come on, Uncle Zamoshnikov, leave something for me to smoke."

"Some'll do the smoking and some the spitting," Zamoshnikov replied curtly.

The soldiers laughed.

"That Zamoshnikov—he's always ready with his tongue!"

The encouraged Zamoshnikov went on cracking his jokes.

"You know how a chap offers you a smoke nowadays, don't you? You give the paper and let me have your baccy, and then we'll have a smoke—that's how."

Still he thrust the fag-end into the outstretched hand and spat aside, leaning over someone's back.

"Here's another story, lads," he said. "Perhaps you've heard it. I mean the one about the soldier who put on a pair of iron claws and climbed a tower to see a princess. I'd rather not tell it if you know it already."

"No, we don't—shoot it! Nobody's heard it."

"Well, it starts this way. Once upon a time there was a man, Yashka by name, soldier by fame. And he was an amazing fella, was that soldier."

Merkulov moved listlessly away. At some other time he would have been only too glad to listen to Zamoshnikov's yarns, but now he thought it strange that the others should listen so eagerly to stories which were quite unamusing and, moreover, obviously invented.

"They've forgotten all about sleep, the bastards," he said to himself angrily. "They've got all night to snore."

He walked up to a window. The panes were misted over on the inside, and every now and then a drop of water trickled down. He wiped the pane with the sleeve of his coat, pressed his forehead to it, and cupped his hands round his eyes to keep out the reflected light of the lamp. It was a black, rainy autumn night. The light from the window fell on the ground in a long slanting rectangle and in it he could see a large puddle wrinkling and rippling. Far ahead and below, the lights of the little town glimmered faintly, as if they were on the very edge of the world. His eyes could make out nothing else in the rainy darkness.

After lingering awhile at the window Merkulov made the round of Four Platoon, and wandered slowly on along the windows on the other side. Swinging their feet from the corner of the row of plank beds sat two soldiers, Panchuk and Koval. A small wooden chest with a padlock attached to it by rings stood between them. On the chest lay a loaf of rye bread, sliced up into thick hunks, five onions, a lump of bacon, and some coarse grey salt in a clean rag. Panchuk and Koval were linked to each other by a strange, silent friendship based on an extraordinary voracity. Their bread ration, three pounds apiece, did not satisfy them; every day they bought extra bread from their fellow soldiers, and always ate it together, usually in the evening, without ever exchanging a single word. They both came of prosperous families and received from home a monthly allowance of one or even two rubles each.

Using a narrow knife, so worn by sharpening that its blade had become curved, they took turns to cut off a few slices of bacon, thin as cigarette paper, and neatly spread them out between two pieces of bread, well salted on both sides. Then they silently and slowly set about munching the huge sandwiches, lazily dangling their feet.

Merkulov stopped in front of them and looked dully on. The sight of bacon made his mouth water, but he did not venture to ask for some; he knew they would refuse and jeer at him. Nevertheless, he said in an unsteady, almost pleading voice, "Have a good meal, lads."

"What I eat is my own, and you can stand and look on," Koval replied, without a hint of derision in his voice. Without glancing at Merkulov, he skinned the

brown peel off an onion with the knife, cut it in four, dipped one of the pieces into the salt, and started to crunch it with relish.

Panchuk did not say anything but stared at Merkulov's face with drowsy, stupid eyes. He was champing loudly, the knots of muscles on his heavy cheek-bones straining and rolling under the taut skin.

For a few minutes none of the three spoke a word. Finally Panchuk gulped down a big mouthful, and asked in a thick, indifferent voice, "On duty, are you?"

He knew very well that Merkulov was on duty, and he had asked the question for no special reason, without the least curiosity—it just came of itself. And Merkulov, just as indifferently, uttered for an answer a long string of foul words that might have been intended for the two soldiers who could afford to eat their fill of bread and bacon, or equally well for his commanding officer who had put him on extra duty.

He walked away from the two friends, who continued their silent, unhurried eating. The damp barracks filled rapidly with the warmth of human breathing. Merkulov even felt hot in his greatcoat. He made the round of all the platoons several times, listening in boredom to the talk, the loud laughter, the swearing and singing that seemed as if it would never cease. Nothing made him laugh or amused him, but deep in his heart he longed for the noise to go on till very late, possibly till the morning, so that he might not be left alone in the murky stillness of the sleeping barracks.

At one end of Number One Platoon stood a separate plank bed, occupied by Warrant Officer Noga, Merkulov's immediate superior. Noga was a notorious fop and lady-killer, very talkative and well off. The hay mattress on his bed was covered with a quilted blanket, made of coloured squares and triangles. A small, round looking-glass with a crack in the middle was pasted to the wooden back of the bed with a lump of bread.

Having discarded his uniform and boots, Noga was lying back on the magnificent quilt, his hands under his head and his feet up, one of them propped against the wall and the other slung across it. A reed holder with a lighted cigarette in it protruded from the corner of his mouth. Standing in front of him like a huge dispirited ape was Kamafutdinov, a private of his platoon. A pallid, dirty, doltish Tatar who in the three years of his military service had hardly learned a word of Russian, Kamafutdinov was the laughing-stock of the company and the horror and shame of inspection parades.

Noga did not feel like sleeping and was making use of the opportunity to "coach" Kamafutdinov. The mental effort had brought out beads of sweat on the Tatar's temples and the tip of his nose. From time to time he pulled a dirty rag out of his pocket to wipe his swollen, purulent eyes, affected by trachoma.

"You Turkish idiot!" Noga fumed. "You fish-face! What did I ask you? Well? What did I ask you, you blockhead?"

Kamafutdinov made no reply.

"You unwashed monkey! What's your rifle called? Tell me what your rifle's called, you Tatar beast!"

Kamafutdinov rubbed his sore eyes, shifting from one foot to the other, but made no reply.

"Why, you—! What am I to do with you! Here, repeat after me." Noga began aloud, pronouncing each syllable with the utmost clarity, "Small-bore, quick-firing—"

"Esmol-boor kick-fie—" Kamafutdinov repeated, with terrified haste.
"Fool! Don't hurry. Say it again: small-bore, quick-firing—"
"Semol-bor—kivick-firy—"
"Ugh! You Tatar monkey!" Noga gave him a terrible scowl. "All right, damn you. Go on, repeat: infantry rifle—"
"Infat rifil—"
"With sliding bolt—"
"Visselidin boolt—"
"Berdan's type, number two."
"Beerdan sipe, numba two."
"Good. Now start from the beginning."
Kamafutdinov fidgeted and got his rag out again.
"Well? Speak up, damn you!"
"Ismolboor—visselidin—" Kamafutdinov blurted out the syllables that occurred to him first.

"'Visselidin!'" Noga cut in. "Visselidin yourself! I can't be bothered to get up, or I'd polish your mug for you! You're spoiling all the beauty of my platoon. Do you think I'm not told off on your account? I am, my lad, I am indeed! Well, say it again: small-bore, quick-firing—"

At the other end of Number One Platoon, three old soldiers lay sprawling on the plank beds near the iron stove, their heads together. They were singing in an undertone, but with great feeling and apparent pleasure, a peasant song from "back home." The first singer led in the sad melody in a soft high-pitched falsetto, slurring his words and putting in extra vowels for greater sonority. Another singer accompanied him in a husky but pleasant and mellow little tenor, with a slight twang. The third sang an octave below the first, in a flat, colourless voice; occasionally he would fall silent, miss a couple of beats and suddenly chime in again and overtake his partners in a sort of fugue.

*Goodbye, my love! My life, goodbye!
My eyes will never dry.
My sweetheart now I'll never see,
My own true-oo-oo—*

The first two voices drew it out in beautiful harmony, and the third, which had stopped after the words "never see," suddenly joined in again with a strong and resolute:

—true love is leaving me.

And then all the three sang together:

*I'll never see my love come home,
In lovers' lanes we'll never roam.*

Having finished one verse, the first singer, who had sung the melody, suddenly struck a terribly high note and drew it out infinitely, his mouth wide open, his eyes closed, and his nose wrinkled with the effort. Then, breaking off abruptly, as if he

had finished with it for ever, he made a brief pause, cleared his throat, and began afresh:

*All through the ni-ight my eyes are we-et,
A wink of slee-eeep I cannot ge-et.
I can't forget, I ca-an't forge-et—*

"No, sir, I can't forget!" the third suddenly cut in, in a confident recitative, and the trio continued:

*Oh, never now shall I forget
Your loving eyes, your tender gaze,
Your merry talk, your taking ways.*

Merkulov had heard the song in his home village and he listened to it with deep attention. He thought how nice it would have been to be lying down undressed, with his greatcoat over him up to his ears, thinking of his village and his folk until sleep gently and caressingly closed his eyes.

The three soldiers stopped singing. Merkulov waited long for them to start again; he liked the vague sadness and self-pity which mournful melodies always aroused in him. But the soldiers lay flat on their bellies, head to head, without moving; they too must have been cast by the plaintive song into silent melancholy. Merkulov drew a deep sigh, scratched his itching chest vigorously with a suffering expression on his face, and walked slowly away from the singers.

Gradually a hush spread over the barracks. Only from Two Platoon did there come frequent bursts of noisy Laughter. Zamoshnikov had finished his story about the iron-clawed soldier and was now "performing." He did both the improvising and the acting. His favourite theme, which he was now rendering, was the regimental inspection, as taken by the exacting "General Zamoshnikov." In the course of the show he alternately appeared as a fat general suffering from asthma, the regimental commander, Junior Captain Glazunov, Sergeant-Major Taras Gavrilovich, an old Ukrainian countrywoman who had just come to town and who had "not seen a Moskal [[A Ukrainian nickname for a Russian.—Tr.](#)] for eighteen years," the bow-legged, squint-eyed Private Tverdokhle, a crying child, an angry lady with a lap-dog, Kamafutdinov the Tatar, an entire battalion, a brass band, and the regimental surgeon. Each of the listeners must have attended Zamoshnikov's "performances" at least a dozen times, but their interest never flagged, the more so as Zamoshnikov always embellished his dialogue anew with brisk rhymes and a joke here and there, each joke being more of a surprise and more ribald than its predecessor.

Zamoshnikov was performing in the passage between the plank beds and the windows, his audience sitting or lying about on the beds.

"Muze-zicians fo-orward!" he commanded in a hoarse, purposely muffled voice, opening his mouth wider than necessary and throwing back his head. He was naturally afraid to shout and used the mimicry to make up in some degree for the regimental commander's deafening bawl.

"Re-egiment! 'Shun! Present a-a-arms! Band, strike up! Tram-pa-pim-ta-ti-ram!"

Zamoshnikov trumpeted a march, blowing up his cheeks and whanging them with his palms as he might a drum. Then he said in a glib patter:

"Here comes the brave General Zamoshnikov riding on a white horse. He has an eagle eye, and holds his head high. His decorations glitter and put you in a twitter. 'I salute you, my brave men!' 'We salute Your Ex'cy!' 'Well done, men!' 'Doing our best, Your Ex'cy!' And now comes the regimental commander to report: 'I have the honour to report to Your Excellency, the glorious and brave General Zamoshnikov. Everything is in order in the jolly old Nizhny-Lom Regiment. A full thousand soldiers are on the list. A hundred are sick and in bed, a hundred more tight and half dead, and as many (away who've fled. Fifty men are propping the fence, another fifty're held for offence, and fifty more drunk—no pretence. Two hundred have gone a-begging, the rest are limp as a legging. They're unshaved and awful hairy, and their faces bruised and scary. For a whole year they took no food—just went on strolls with girls and cooed. There's no regiment on earth merrier'n ours!' That's the stuff, men, thank you, my heroes!' 'Doing our best, Your Ex'cy!' 'Any complaints?' 'No complaints, Your Ex'cy!' Do you get enough bread?' 'Yes, sir, Your Ex'cy, an awful lot. It sets our tongues clacking and our bellies cracking.' 'Bully for you, men. That's the way. Sing, my men, as hard as you can, keep your chins up and don't ask for grub. Each man shall have a mess-tinful of vodka and a pound of tobacco, and half a ruble to top it.' Thank you ever so much, Your Ex'cy.'

"Then the regimental commander rides up. 'Regiment will march past by companies, at a distance of two platoons. Number One Company, forward march!' Music. Ta-ra-ram-ta-ram. There they go—left right, left right!'

And all of a sudden: 'Halt! Back! As you were!' 'What's the m-matter?' 'Which company is this, colonel?' The Topsy Eighth, Your Ex'cy. 'And who's that wry-faced rooky in the ranks?' 'Private Tverdokhle, Your Ex'cy.' 'Send him off parade and give him fifty of the best.' "

The soldiers guffawed, and Private Tverdokhle, nudged in the ribs from every side, laughed louder than anybody. Then there came the usual story of how "General Zamoshnikov" had lunch with the regimental commander after the inspection.

" 'Will you have cabbage or potato soup, Your Ex'cy?' 'Give me both—a lot of both.' 'How about some vodka, Your Ex'cy?' 'Ahem. Yes, I'll have some—a tumblerful.' Then there followed a refined conversation with the colonel's daughter. Treat me to a little kiss, dear miss.' 'Oh, no, sir, how could I, with my father about? He might see it.' 'So you can't, eh?' 'Ah! absolutely impossible.' 'In that case kindly grant your tiny hand.' 'Yes, you may take that.' "

But Zamoshnikov had no chance to finish his "performance." The door was suddenly thrown open and the figure of Sergeant-Major Taras Gavrilovich loomed in the doorway with nothing on but his underwear, his bare feet in slippers, and a pair of spectacles on his nose.

"What's the idea of neighing like stallions in a stall?" his angry old man's voice rang out. "When are you going to stop this noise? Want me to lay my fist across your big mouths? Get into bed, and look lively!"

The soldiers scattered, slowly and reluctantly. Quite soon, in about five minutes, the barracks lapsed into silence. Someone whispered a hurried prayer: 'O mighty God, Jesus Christ— Son of God, have mercy upon us— Father, Son and Holy Ghost, have mercy upon us!' Someone else dropped his high boots one after

the other on the asphalt floor with a thud. A third coughed a deep, facking cough—it might have been a sheep coughing! Life stopped all at once.

Merkulov continued his round of the barracks. He paced along the wall, mechanically picking chips of paint off it with his thumb nail. The soldiers lay on the plank beds, huddled together under their greatcoats. In the dim, smoky light of the night-lamps the outlines of the sleeping men had lost their sharpness and looked blurred, as if it were not men lying, but monotonous, still, grey heaps of coats.

For lack of anything better to do, Merkulov peered at the men. One of them was lying on his back with his knees in the air, breathing deeply and evenly, his mouth half open; a foolish expression lingered on his calm face. Another was sleeping face downwards, his head buried in the crook of his left arm, while his right arm stretched along his body, with the palm upturned. His bare feet stuck out from under the short greatcoat; the calves were taut, and the toes were contracted as if gripped by cramp. There was the twisted form of Private Yestifeyev, a fellow-villager of Merkulov's and his neighbour in the file. He could hardly have taken a more unnatural posture; his head was thrust deep under the greasy red calico pillow, his knees drawn up nearly to his chin. The blood must have rushed to his head, for long, painful groans came from under the pillow.

Merkulov had an uncanny, oppressive feeling. But a few minutes before, a hundred men had been moving about, laughing, talking, wrangling, and now here they were, all of them, lying motionless, groaning or snoring, overpowered and borne away into another life that was quite unaccountable and mysterious. For them there was no longer any military service with its hardships and affected gaiety, the dreary gloom of the barracks, the sleeping men tossing their heads restlessly on each other's chests, Merkulov wandering all alone with his melancholy. And a dark terror crept into Merkulov's heart that made the hair bristle on his scalp and sent cold shivers down his spine.

He stopped in front of the clock hanging in Number Three Platoon under the night-lamp, and stared at it for some time. He was no good at telling the time, but he knew—the man on duty before him had explained that to him patiently and at great length—that when the big hand pointed straight up and the small one formed almost a right angle with it, that would be the time for him to be relieved. It was an ordinary two-ruble clock with a white square dial and little roses painted in the corners; it had two brass weights with a stone and an iron bolt tied to one of them by a piece of string, and a time-battered brass pendulum that looked as if someone had been chewing it.

"Tick-tock, tick-tock," the pendulum counted in the stillness, and Merkulov listened to it attentively. The first tick was weaker and clearer, while the second rang out dully, with an effort, as if something checked it within; and a chain could be heard scraping inside the clock between the two ticks. "Tick-tock, tick-tock."

And Merkulov whispered to the rhythm of the ticking clock, "Tough luck, tough luck." There was a strange spiritual connection between the clock and Merkulov on his night watch, as if both of them—alone in the barracks—had been condemned by some cruel power drearily to mark off the seconds and suffer in long solitude. "Tough luck, tough luck," whispered the pendulum, with weary monotony. It was dull and eerie in the barracks, with the night-lamps hardly giving any light and ugly shadows crammed into the corners, and Merkulov drowsily whispered, together with the pendulum, "Tough luck."

Then he went into the far corner of Number One Platoon and sat down between the stove and a rifle stack, on a high stool with a shiny, time-blackened seat. A faint warmth, mingled with the smell of coal-gas, came from the stove. Merkulov dug his hands deep into his sleeves and pondered.

He recalled the letter he had received from his "homeland" the other day. The letter had been read to him aloud: first by the platoon warrant officer; then by the company's orderly-room clerk, and lastly by all his fellow-villagers who could read, so that by now Merkulov knew the letter by heart and could even prompt readers whenever they reached an illegible passage.

"This letter is for a soldier, an infantryman, and very important. Posted from the village of Mokriye Verkhi, on September 20th this year. From your father.

"Our dear son, Luka Moiseyevich, first we send you our parental blessing and wish you in the name of the Lord speedy and happy success in your affairs, and advise you that your mother Lukerya Trofimovna and myself are, thank God, in good health, which we wish you too. Also, your loving wife, Tatyana Ivanovna, sends you her regards, the respect of a true and loving wife and best wishes with love, and she would have you well and happy in God's name. Also, your dear father-in-law, Ivan Fedoseyevich, with wife and children, sends you his regards and wishes you success in your affairs. Also, your brother Nikolai Moiseyevich, with wife and children, sends you his regards and wishes you all the best in God's name.

"Everything here is all right, thank God, and may it be so with you too. In the village everything is the same as usual. On Lady Day Nikolai Ivanov's house on the highway burnt down. Must have been Matyushka set fire to it; that's what the police said too. Dear Luka, I beg you to please write clearly, I couldn't make out anything in your letter because it was poorly written and nobody could read it. And let me know who wrote it and who wrote the address, nobody can make out the hand, but what we could follow was all a lot of nonsense that nobody could believe. Hereupon I remain your loving father M. Merkulov, who being illiterate had the letter signed for him by Anany Klimov."

"It's bad, vary bad," Merkulov whispered, shaking his head and clicking his tongue sorrowfully. He was thinking that it would be more than two years before he finished "doing his duty for his country," and also how difficult, how hard it was to live far from home; he was thinking of his wife, too. "She's a young woman, gay and pampered. I suppose it isn't easy for her, either, to have to live without her husband four years. A soldier's wife. I know what they're like, those soldiers' wives. Lieutenant Zabiyaikin's always ragging me. 'Are you married?' he asks. 'Yes, sir, I am.' 'Well, wait till you get back from service—you'll find some additions to your family.' Hm. It's all very well for him to laugh. He's sleek and fat. Gets up in the morning and has his tea with a roll. Then his orderly brings him his boots, all polished and shining. And during drill all he has to do is smoke cigarettes. But you, Merkulov, must sit up all night. Ah, it's bad, very, very ba-ad!" Merkulov whispered, winding up his last word with a long, deep yawn that brought tears to his eyes.

Never before had he felt such an outcast, so forlorn and wretched. He would have liked to talk to some kindly silent man and tell the plaintive tale of all his sorrows and cares, and he would have liked that kindly silent man to listen attentively, understand everything, and sympathize with him. But where was there such a man? Everybody was taken up with himself and his own cares and worries.

"What a life, brother!" Merkulov thought, shaking his head, and then said aloud, drawing out the words in a singsong fashion, "O-oh what a li-i-ife!"

And gradually he began to sing under his breath. At first there were hardly any words in his song. It was something dismal, sad and incoherent, yet it softened and stirred his soul agreeably, "O-o-oh, my-y, wha-at a li-i-ife!" Then the words began to form—soft, touching words:

*O-oh, my mother dear,
My own mother dear—*

A deep sympathy for the poor, forgotten soldier, Luka Merkulov, filled Merkulov's heart. They kept him on a starvation diet and assigned him to extra duty, the platoon commander rated him, and so did the section leader — sometimes he even punched Merkulov in the mouth— and the drill was so heavy and hard. He might easily be taken ill, break an arm or a leg, or go blind from some eye disease; half the company had sore eyes as it was. Or he might even die far from home. Merkulov felt a bitter lump rise in his throat; there was a pricking sensation in his eyelids, and a drowsy sweet melody surged in his breast. Now the sad words of the improvised song moved him still more, and the tune he was making up seemed to him more and more tender and beautiful.

*Oh, my mother, mother dear,
Lay me in a coffin,
A pinewood, aspen coffin.
Lay me in the cold, cold ground!*

The air in the barracks had thickened and become unbearably heavy. The soot-blackened night-lamps shone dimly through a steamy haze as in a bath-house. Merkulov sat hunched, his feet twisted round the cross-piece of the stool, his hands deep in the sleeves of his coat. He felt hot and cramped in the coat; the collar chafed his neck, the hooks dug into his throat, and he longed for sleep. His eyelids felt swollen and were itching, there was a continuous dull noise in his ears, and a hollow sticky feeling persisted inside him, somewhere in his chest or stomach. He tried not to give way to sleep, but at times something soft and yet irresistibly strong gave his head a gentle squeeze; then his eyelids would flutter and shut, the hollow feeling would disappear at once, and there would be no more barracks or long night, and for a few seconds he would feel blissfully light and comfortable. He would not notice his head drooping in short jerks, lower and lower down, until suddenly, lurching forward, he would open his eyes in fright, straighten his back and jerk up his head, and again the hollow feeling of sleeplessness would rise in his chest.

In those brief seconds of unexpected half-doze, his memory had clung to his village, and he had been happy and amused because no matter what he thought of, he at once saw it before him, better and clearer than he could ever have seen it in reality. There was his old white gelding, spotty all over, as if it had been strewn with buckwheat. It was standing on the green common, its forelegs crooked, the bones sticking out on its crupper, the ribs showing. Its head hung down, dejectedly motionless, its lower lip with the scant long hair drooped flabbily, and its eyes, a light faded blue, with white eyelashes, gazed at him in vacant surprise.

And just beyond the common there was a broad cart-road. And it seemed to Merkulov that it was now a warm evening in early spring and that the road was black with mud and pitted with hoof marks, and the water in the ruts was pink and amber in the afterglow. The small, narrow river crossed the road, winding its way from under the little log bridge; it lay there as smooth as a mirror, hazy in the distance, looking as if it had been cast between its low but steep emerald-green banks. It reflected in neat, clear-cut outline the rounded tops of the fluffy yellow-green willows on the banks, and the banks themselves that looked even fresher and more intensely emerald in the water. Far off the bell-tower of the church stood out, tall and slender, against the limpid sky, a white wooden tower with pink stripes running down it and a steep green roof. The Merkulovs' kitchen garden was next to the church; you could even see the scarecrow, leaning so that it looked about to fall over, with Father's old cap on its head and its arms in tattered sleeves spread out in a permanent attitude of concentrated determination.

And Merkulov saw himself riding along the black, muddy road on his way home from the field. He sat sideways on his white gelding, dangling his feet and slipping back and forth on the horse's back at each step. The hooves plopped loudly as they came out of the mud. A light wind brushed Merkulov's face, bringing with it the strong, fresh scent of the earth, still moist after the thaw; and Merkulov felt fine and happy. He was tired and worn out after the day's toil, having ripped up nearly three acres of land; his body ached, his arms hurt, he could hardly bend or unbend his back, and yet he sang with all his might, carelessly dangling his feet:

Oh, my orchards, orchards mi-ine!

How wonderful he was going to feel when he lay down in the cool barn, on a heap of straw, throwing out his weary arms and legs!

His head drooped again, almost touching his knees, and again he awoke with that cloying, agonizing sensation in his chest. "Must have dozed off," he murmured in surprise. "Well, well!" He was terribly sorry that he could no longer see the black springtime road, the lovely reflections of the willows in the smooth mirror of the river, that he could no longer smell the good fresh earth. But he was afraid he might fall asleep, and to brace himself he started oil a fresh found of the barracks. His feet were numb with the long sitting, and at first he could not feel them at all.

Passing the clock, Merkulov looked at the dial. The big hand stood upright, and the small one had moved slightly to the right of it. "It's past midnight," he guessed. He yawned vigorously, made several times the sign of the cross over his mouth in a hurried manner, and muttered something like a prayer, "O Lord—Holy Mother—two hours and a half to go yet, I reckon—O ye saints—Pyotr, Alexei, Yona, Filipp—our righteous fathers and brethren—"

The paraffin was running out in the lamps, and the barracks were plunging into darkness. The sleepers lay in strained unnatural attitudes; their arms and heads must have grown numb from the hard mattresses. Plaintive groans, deep sighs, unhealthy, choking snores could be heard everywhere. There was something ominous, something depressing and mysterious about those inhuman sounds coming from under the grey, monotonous heaps in the melancholy darkness.

"Shall I go outside for a bit?" Merkulov said aloud to himself, and walked slowly to the door.

It was pitch black outside and a fine drizzle was falling steadily. A row of dimly lighted windows glimmered feebly across the courtyard; those were the barracks occupied by the Sixth and Seventh companies. The rain drummed dully on the roof and pattered on the panes and on Merkulov's cap. Somewhere nearby rain-water was gushing out of a drain-pipe with a hurried gurgling sound and splashing down on some stones. Above the noise of the rain, Merkulov thought he heard strange sounds. It was as if someone were coming towards him along the barracks wall, splashing fast and heavily through the puddles. Merkulov would turn to peer in that direction. The splashing would stop at once. But no sooner did he turn away than he would hear the heavy, hurried splashing again. "I'm just imagining things," Merkulov told himself, and lifted his face to the pattering raindrops. There was not a star in the sky.

Suddenly, close by, the entrance door of the Fifth Company's barracks flew open and the pulley on the door gave a piercing screech. The form of a soldier in coat and cap showed for a second in the faint light of the doorway. But the door was pulled shut again by the screeching pulley, and you could not even tell in the dark where it was. The soldier who had come out stood on the steps—Merkulov could hear him noisily taking in the fresh air and vigorously rubbing his hands.

"Must be on duty, too," thought Merkulov, feeling an irresistible urge to walk over to this one man who was awake and alive and look at his face, or at least hear his voice.

"I say, friend!" Merkulov called to the soldier, invisible in the dark. "Could you lend me a match?"

"Mebbe I could," came a low, husky voice from the steps. "Wait a bit."

Merkulov heard the soldier slap his pockets, and then caught the rattle of the match-box found at last.

The two soldiers came together midway between the two barracks, near the well, finding each other by the sound of their boots squelching in the wet, slippery clay. "Here you are," said the soldier and, since Merkulov could not at once find his outstretched hand, slightly shook the box.

But Merkulov had no need for matches, for he did not smoke; he merely wanted to stay for a moment near a man who was awake and not in the clutches of that strange supernatural force, sleep.

"Thanks," he said, "a couple will do. I've got a box over in the barracks, but no more matches."

They took shelter under the high roof built over the well. Merkulov idly fingered the huge wooden wheel that worked the shaft. The wheel creaked plaintively and swung softly round. The two soldiers leaned on the edge of the well and stared down into the darkness.

"Lord, I'm sleepy" said Merkulov, and yawned aloud.

The other soldier followed suit at once. Their voices, and yawns resounded with a pealing echo in the void of the deep well.

"Must be just past midnight," said the soldier from Five Company, in a flat indifferent voice. "How long have you been in the army?"

Merkulov guessed by the changed sound of the voice that the soldier had turned to face him. He turned too, but could not see so much as a shape in the darkness.

"Since eighteen-ninety. What about you?"

"Same here. You come from Orel Province, too?"

"No, I be from the Kromi region," replied Merkulov. "My village is called Mokriye Verkhi. Ever heard of it?"

"No, I come from far away—close to Yelets. I must say it's dull here!" These words he uttered in the midst of a yawn, swallowing them, and they sounded like "Ahmu-hay issdullyere."

They fell silent for a while. The soldier from Yelets spat into the well through his teeth. Ten seconds or so passed. Merkulov listened with curiosity, his head on one side. Suddenly there came from the darkness an unusually neat, clear ping, like two pebbles striking together.

"It's deep down there!" said the man from Yelets, and spat again.

"It's a sin to spit into the water. You mustn't do that," Merkulov remarked censoriously, and at once spat himself.

The long interval between the spitting and the ping which came from the well greatly amused both soldiers.

"Suppose a man jumped down there?" the soldier from Yelets asked suddenly. "I reckon he'd give his head a good banging against the walls before he reached the water?"

"That he would," Merkulov responded confidently. "Make a proper mess of himself too."

"Tur'ble!" said the other, and Merkulov guessed that he was shaking his head.

There was another long pause, and again the two men spat into the well. Suddenly Merkulov spoke up again.

"You know what a funny thing happened? I was sitting in the barracks and—I must have dozed off a bit—I saw such a—such a queer dream."

He was eager to tell his dream with all its charming poetical detail, the wonderful scent of his native soil, of that sweet old life that was so far away. But what he brought out was too plain and colourless and uninteresting.

"I dreamed I was in my own home village. It looked like evening. And I could see everything—I could see it so well it didn't seem like a dream at all."

"Ye-es, things like that do happen," the other put in indifferently, scratching his cheek.

"And I was riding on my horse—my old gelding. We've got a white gelding, about twenty years old it is, I'll bet. It may be dead by now."

"Seeing a horse means a falsehood. Somebody's going to cheat you," remarked the soldier.

"I was riding on my gelding and could see everything. Just like it used to be. It was such a queer dream I saw—"

"Ye-es, a man sees many a dream," the soldier put in lazily. "I'm sorry, though," he added, straightening up. "Our sergeant—damn him—sneaks about at night. Good night to you."

"Good night, friend. What a night, eh! My goodness-it's dark as a pit."

After the fresh air the atmosphere in the barracks seemed unbearable at first. The air was soaked with heavy emanations of the human body, the acrid smoke of coarse tobacco, the sour mustiness of coat cloth and the powerful smell of ill-baked bread. The men were still sleeping restlessly, tossing and groaning and snoring as though every breath cost them a tremendous effort. As Merkulov paced through the quarters of Three Platoon one of the men sat up suddenly in bed. He stared wildly about him for a few seconds, as if in utter bewilderment, making

noises with his lips. Then he began to scratch himself furiously—first his head, then his chest; then sleep took him again and he toppled over on his side. Another man hurriedly muttered a long sentence in a stiff, hoarse voice. Merkulov listened with superstitious fear and was able to make out some of the words: "Don't break it off—tie it in a knot. A knot, I tell you!" To Merkulov there always seemed to be something dreadful in these ravings he heard in the dead of night. He imagined that those broken words were not uttered by the man himself but by some invisible being who had descended on his soul and taken possession of it.

The clock kept on ticking unevenly, as if delaying the second stroke, but its hands seemed not to have moved at all. The wild, fantastic idea crossed Merkulov's mind that perhaps Time had stopped altogether and that this night would last months, years, an eternity; the sleepers would breathe as heavily and rave in the same way, the dying night-lamps would flicker as dimly, the pendulum would tick as sluggishly and indifferently. This vague, swift sensation, which Merkulov himself could not account for, filled him with helpless anger. And he shook his fist threateningly in the darkness, and whispered through clenched teeth, "You devils! Wait till I get at you!"

Once again he sat down in the same place, between the stove and the rifle stack, and almost immediately drowsiness enclosed his temples in its soft, tender embrace. "What now? What?" he asked himself in a whisper, knowing that it was now in his power to summon something familiar and very pleasant. "Oh, yes. My village—the river—Come on, please, come on—"

And again the little river winds its way in the fresh green grass, now dropping out of sight beyond velvety hills, now showing forth its pure glistening breast, and again the black, rutted road stretches away in a broad ribbon, the thawing earth is fragrant, the water gleams pink in the fields, the smiling breeze fans his face with its warm, caressing breath, and again Merkulov rocks back and forth on the knobby back of the horse, while a plough, with the coulter turned up, trails along the road behind him.

Oh, my o-orchards, orchards mi-ine!

Merkulov sings at the top of his voice, thinking with pleasure how sweet it is going to be to sprawl his tired body on a heap of fresh straw. Ploughed fields run along the road on both sides, and glossy blue-black rooks stalk gravely about. The frogs in the marshes and puddles croak in a deafening chorus. There is a subtle fragrance of blossoming willows in the air.

Oh, my orchards, o-orchards mine!

The only thing that seems odd to Merkulov is that somehow the white gelding is walking at an uneven, rocking pace, swinging him from side to side. There it goes again. Merkulov all but falls headlong from his mount. He must settle properly in the saddle. He tries to sling his right foot to the other side, but his leg will not move, it feels heavy, as if someone had clamped a strange weight to it. And the horse rocks and sways under him. "Gee up, damn you! Gone to sleep?"

Merkulov topples down from the horse's back, hits his face on the ground, and opens his eyes.

"Sleeping, damn you!" a voice shouted above him.

Merkulov sprang up from the stool and fingered dazedly his cap. Sergeant-Major Taras Gavrilovich was standing in front of him in his underwear, with dishevelled hair. It was he who had roused Merkulov by jabbing his fist in the soldier's cheek.

"Sleeping, eh?" the sergeant-major repeated in a sinister tone. "You son of a—! Sleeping on duty, were you? I'll learn you how to sleep!"

A swift blow caught Merkulov on the cheek-bone and staggered him; he shook his head and muttered hoarsely, "I was all in, Sergeant."

"Ha! All in, were you? Well, you'll go on duty twice more out of turn so you won't be in again. When are you due for relief?"

"At two, Sergeant."

"You've missed relief time, damn you! Now look lively! Wake up the next one. Get going!"

The sergeant left. Merkulov rushed to the plank bed on which the next man to go on duty—the old soldier Ryaboshapka—was sleeping. "Sleep, sleep, sleep," a joyous, exultant voice cried inside him. "Two extra duties? I don't care a straw, that'll come later, but now I'm going to sleep!"

"Uncle Ryaboshapka, d'you hear, Uncle Ryaboshapka," said Merkulov in a fearsome whisper, tugging at the sleeper's leg.

"Mrmr—g'way—"

"Get up, Uncle Ryaboshapka, it's relief time."

"Oh, g'won—"

The watch had exhausted Merkulov to such an extent that he had no more patience to wake up Ryaboshapka. He ran to his place on the plank bed, undressed as fast as he could and squeezed himself in between two sleepers, who at once sank back upon him, heavily and lifelessly.

For a second Merkulov recalled the well, the pitch black night, the fine drizzle, the gurgling water running out of the drain-pipe, and someone's invisible feet squelching in the mud. Oh, how cold and grim and creepy it was out there now! A blissful animal joy engulfed him. He pressed his elbows hard to his sides, drew up his knees, dug his head deeper into the pillow, and whispered to himself, "And now—quick, the road—the road—"

Once again the black rutted road winds away neatly before his eyes, once again the delicate green of the willows looks down into the mirror of the stream... And all of a sudden Merkulov hurtled at a frightening but agreeable speed into a deep, soft darkness.