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**Prose**

*Artyom Vesoly, trans. from the Russian by Kevin Windle*

**Bitter Hangover**  
**Excerpts from *Russia Bathed in Blood***

Artyom Vesoly  
Translated from the Russian  
by Kevin Windle

***Introduction***

Artyom Vesoly (1899-1938, real name Nikolai Ivanovich Kochkurov) was born in Samara on the Volga. His father was a carter and loader, and the son, who started work at fourteen, would later describe his own working career as follows: “factory – tramp – newspaper seller – cabman – clerk – agitator – Red Guard – newspaper – party work – Red Army soldier – student – sailor – writer.”<sup>1</sup> He joined the Bolshevik Party in March 1917, aged seventeen, and was soon involved in the Civil War of 1918-1921, though not primarily in a combat role: having enough schooling to read and write – the first of his family to acquire literacy – he was assigned to propagandist duties, travelling the front-line areas in an “agit-train” and producing propaganda material, and editing a newspaper with the title *Krasny kazak* (The Red Cossack).

When the Civil War ended, Vesoly was able to attend the Institute of Literature at Moscow State University and study the craft of writing.

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<sup>1</sup> Artem Vesely, “Avtobiografiia,” in E. F. Nikitina, *V masterskoi sovremennoi khudozhestvennoi prozy*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Nikitinskie subbotniki, 1931), p. 173.

He did not complete the course, but soon began to publish fiction and drama, most of it based on his experience of the social upheaval brought by war and revolution. Recognized as a young writer of great promise, he was a founding member of the Pereval group of writers and briefly a member of RAPP (the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers).

The novel *Russia Bathed in Blood* (*Rossii, krov'iu umytaia*), first published in full in 1932 but further developed in subsequent editions, is the best-known of his works. In it he relied heavily on his own experience of the Civil War and on letters received from newly-literate soldiers and veterans. In the 1920s he published the novellas *Rivers of Fire* (*Reki ognennye*, 1924) and *Native Land* (*Strana rodnaia*, 1925). These were later incorporated, with some revisions, into *Russia Bathed in Blood*: *Rivers of Fire* became the chapter "Bitter Hangover" (*Gor'koe pokhmel'e*), and "Native Land," in three chapters, became the last part of the novel.

With the Russian novelists prominently in mind, Henry James spoke of the novels of the 19th century as "large, loose, baggy monsters." Had he lived long enough to read *Russia Bathed in Blood*, which has little else in common with the classics of that period, he might have found that it outstripped in bagginess anything he had previously read. It lacks a unifying plot, and a definite beginning, middle and end. Most of its parts can be read independently of the others as a series of extended episodes rather than a connected narrative. Nor is unity provided by the characters, though some appear in more than one chapter. It is free of heroes in the traditional sense; its focus is less on individuals than on the crowd, and the voices we hear, often of unidentified speakers, are mostly those of ordinary people with little education. The novel is unfinished: it continued to evolve throughout the author's life, and we know that he had plans for further chapters. Under the title page he placed the word "Fragment," a term which might be applied to most of its constituent parts.

The American critic Sophie Court, who read the Russian original at an early date, found much merit in its unusual structure, observing that its "fragmentary nature makes each episode, each scene stand out more independently and gives the narrative an unforgettable vividness." In her view, "the sparkling Russian humor, the depth of Russian sadness,

and the sincerity and naiveté of Russian pathos combine to make this novel of the Civil War a brilliant, powerful work of art.”<sup>2</sup>

While its form marks a clear break with established tradition, the work’s thematic unity is plain to see: the author’s experience of revolution and civil conflict had brought home to him that the barbaric atrocities which accompanied anarchic elemental freedom would in the end destroy that freedom, and that the adherents of such freedom were laying the ground for dictatorship. Jekaterina Lebedewa observes that this novel, like no other of its time, captured the contradiction between peasant Russia with its dreams of freedom on the one hand, and the ideas, aims and methods of the Bolsheviks, on the other. Vesoly warned, she writes, that the violent revolution would devour everything, including its own children.<sup>3</sup> All Vesoly’s works, and *Russia Bathed in Blood* in particular, belong to the literature of moral resistance to the falsification of history that took root early in the Soviet period.

As Communist Party control over literature tightened in the late 1920s, Vesoly found it increasingly difficult to conform to its stringent ideological requirements. His short story “The Barefoot Truth” (*Bosaia pravda*), dealing with the difficulties faced by Civil War veterans in finding a place in society, published in 1929 in the journal *Molodaia gvardiia*, brought the journal a strict reprimand from the Central Committee for printing a “caricature of Soviet reality,” “of value only to our class enemies.”<sup>4</sup> As Nina Malygina has pointed out, the story offended by its assertion that power in the Soviet state did not lie in the hands of those who had fought to establish it.<sup>5</sup> Later his major works would be found wanting for their failure to recognize the “leading organizational role” of the Party in the revolution, the Civil War and the new society. The Party

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<sup>2</sup> Sophie R. A. Court, review of Artem Vesely’s *Rossiya Krov’u Umytaya*, *Books Abroad* 8/3 (July 1934), p. 351.

<sup>3</sup> Jekaterina Lebedewa, afterword to Artjom Wesjoly, *Blut und Feuer*, trans. Thomas Reschke (Berlin: Aufbau, 2017), pp. 624-625.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Zaiara Veselaia, “*Rossiiia krov’iu umytaia* Artema Veselogo. Po materialam lichnogo arkhiva pisatel’ia,” *Novy mir* 5 (1988), p. 160.

<sup>5</sup> Nina Malygina, *Andrei Platonov i literaturnaia Moskva* (St Petersburg: Nestor-Istoriia, 2018), p. 355.



demanded that history and literature record the Civil War as a clean-cut struggle between Reds and Whites, progress and reaction, right and wrong. Vesoly paints a more complicated picture, in which Reds, Whites, Greens, Cossacks, anarchists and partisans all contend for dominance, “normal” life for civilians is impossible, and neutrality is forbidden. *Russia Bathed in Blood* describes a world of anarchic chaos, social dislocation and frenzied mob violence, devoid of organization of any kind. The structure – or deliberate formlessness – of his novels reflects this.

Vesoly’s life came to an early end in Stalin’s Great Purge of 1937-1938. By that time, literature was under strict ideological supervision and Socialist Realism had been enshrined as doctrine. Free spirits such as Vesoly, who pulled no punches in his accounts of the revolutionary period, were accused of placing their talents at the service of the counter-revolution. In May 1937, the critic R. Shpunt wrote of *Russia Bathed in Blood* that “the whole book slanders our heroic struggle with our enemies, it lampoons the fighters and builders of the young Republic of Soviets,” and that it had enjoyed praise and promotion by “Trotskyites.”<sup>6</sup> In June, Nikolai Ezhov, then head of the NKVD, wrote to Stalin seeking permission to arrest Vesoly “in connection with his counter-revolutionary Trotskyite activity.” “Evidence” had been assembled that he “detested the Party leadership,” had stated his “terrorist intentions,” and was planning to write a poem in praise of members of the “Trotskyite-Zinoviev center” who had been executed.<sup>7</sup> He was duly arrested on 28 October 1937, the same day as Boris Pilniak, with whom he had been linked, and shot on 8 April 1938. Posthumous rehabilitation came in Khrushchev’s “thaw” of 1956, and the publication of some of his writings was again permitted.

To this extent, Vesoly has features in common with Pilniak and some others who wrote on the theme of the Civil War, for example Isaac Babel and Mikhail Sholokhov, whose *Quiet Don*, like much of *Russia Bathed in Blood*, is set in the Cossack lands. Of these, only Sholokhov,

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Zaiara Veselaia, p. 141.

<sup>7</sup> See Stiv Levin, “Volzhskaia doroga Artema Veselogo,” in *Voprosy literatury* 5 (2017), p. 197.

“Stalin’s scribe,” survived the purges.<sup>8</sup> In other respects, however, Vesoly’s work is very different. Indeed, it is a unique and striking contribution to Russian literature.

The novel is characterized by a distinctive use of language in both dialogue and narrative. The author’s preferred medium is far from the literary language of pre-revolutionary times: it is the colorful, earthy Russian of uneducated people, with a strong admixture of southern dialects. Many chapters include stanzas of poetry and song, and occasional *chastushki* – a traditional genre of popular song of which Vesoly was particularly fond. Proverbial sayings are frequent, many of them not well known today. The narrative features folksy locutions, poetic inversions, grammatical forms which are not part of standard Russian, oaths and abusive terms in profusion, arresting images and turns of phrase and much unconventional use of words. In addition, the author deploys a vocabulary of extraordinary range and richness, much of it not recorded in standard dictionaries, but often traceable in the famous dictionary compiled by Vladimir Dal at the turn of the 20th century, which covers a broad range of dialects. Like a writer of a later period, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Vesoly was known to have spent much time exploring the lexical treasures to be found in it. His wife Liudmila Borisevich remembered that he filled the margins of his copy with copious notes, adding words he had heard in the course of his travels. In his prose he often formed neologisms by adding new affixes to familiar roots, after the manner of the Futurist poets Vladimir Mayakovsky, Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh, whose bold linguistic experiments he admired.<sup>9</sup> His own unique style attracted wide interest, but not universal approval: one critic observed that it was difficult to penetrate the variegated textual fabric without a dictionary.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Brian J. Boeck, *Stalin’s Scribe: Literature, Ambition, and Survival: The Life of Mikhail Sholokhov*, (New York: Pegasus Books, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> See Ignacy Szenfeld, translator’s foreword to Artiom Wiesioły, *Rosja we krwi skapana* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej, 1964), p. 13, and Lebedewa, p. 627.

<sup>10</sup> Viacheslav Polonsky, “Artem Vesely,” in V. V. Eidinova, ed., *O literature* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1988), p. 79.

In her afterword to the German edition, Jekaterina Lebedewa writes: the novel seems “wegen seiner eigenwilligen Sprache, des bildreichen Jargons und der umgangssprachlichen Redewendungen aus dem Bauern-, Matrosen- und Soldatenmilieu so gut wie unübersetzbar. Literatursprachliche Worte bilden bei Vesjoly beinahe die Ausnahme” (the novel seems virtually untranslatable on account of its unconventional language, its colorful slang and colloquial idioms from the speech of peasants, sailors and soldiers. Literary vocabulary is almost the exception).<sup>11</sup> And Viktor Shklovsky, in conversation with Ignacy Szenfeld, the Polish translator, opined that before translating the novel into any other language, one first needed to translate it into Russian.<sup>12</sup>

It seems therefore legitimate to wonder whether an attempt to produce a translation is a fool’s errand. The same might, of course, be said of many works of literature, especially of poetry, and there is much poetry in Vesjoly’s prose.

As in the translation of poetry, some degree of loss must be accepted, since a translation can only aspire to resemble its original – it can never be “the same.” Among the losses is the use of regional forms of language and sub-standard Russian, and with them some local color. Here the decision has been made to avoid any particular dialect of the Anglosphere, instead resorting where possible to a synthetic sub-standard, exploiting those common features that mark uneducated speech in most of the better-known varieties of English. However, where a choice has to be made, preference here has gone to the translator’s native idiom, which is British rather than North American. The interpolated fragments of song and verse, some of them *blatnye* (of the criminal classes), cannot be closely matched in translation, and the same is true of some earthy adages.

The translation has been made with a close eye to two masterly versions in other languages, mentioned above: Ignacy Szenfeld’s Polish

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<sup>11</sup> Lebedewa, p. 632.

<sup>12</sup> Gaira Veselaia, Zaiara Veselaia, *Sud’ba i knigi Artema Veselogo* (Moscow: Agraf, 2005), p. 258.

translation (Artiom Wiesioły, *Rosja we krwi skapana*, Warsaw, 1964), and Thomas Reschke's German translation (*Blut und Feuer*, Berlin, 2017), which includes some material not available to Szenfeld. While they may at times differ in their understanding of some passages, these versions often prompt reflection on nuances of interpretation and overt and concealed meanings, and sometimes suggest a solution which can be applied in English.

In addition to vetting this English version closely, Elena Govor, a grand-daughter of the author, has brought to bear her intimate knowledge of the texts, their variants and the background to them. With other members of her family, in particular her aunts Gaira and Zayara Vesolaya, she has done much to preserve Artyom Vesoly's legacy and ensure his place in Russian literary history. For further information in Russian on Vesoly's life and works, the reader is referred to Elena Govor's website: <https://artemvesely.com>

The excerpts published here are taken from the long chapter entitled "Bitter Hangover" (Gor'koe pokhmel'e), describing a retreat by elements of the Red Army eastward across the southern steppes in 1918.

Many of Vesoly's gifted contemporaries – Babel, Pilniak, Mikhail Bulgakov, Mikhail Zoshchenko, Iury Olesha, Konstantin Paustovsky, Mayakovsky, Sholokhov and Boris Pasternak – have been widely translated into other languages, including English. Vesoly too has received the attention of German, French, Polish, Czech, Bulgarian and Swedish translators. In English, however, only a nine-page excerpt from *Russia Bathed in Blood* has appeared, in an anthology edited by Serge Konovalov in 1932.<sup>13</sup> It is to be hoped that, over eighty years after his premature death, some of the recognition he continues to enjoy in Russia may yet accrue to him in the English-speaking world, and that Russia's brutal civil war, now largely forgotten in the West, may be returned to memory.

A full English translation of the novel, benefiting from Elena Govor's and Zayara Vesolaya's careful study of the numerous Russian

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<sup>13</sup> Serge Konovalov, ed., *Bonfire: Stories out of Soviet Russia* (London: Ernest Benn, 1932), pp. 74-82.

editions, textual variants and the censor's cuts, will be published by Anthem Press in 2020.

Kevin Windle and Elena Govor

May 2019  
Canberra

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*Revolution in Russia –  
Fevered villages, delirious towns*

The army was assailed by lice,  
the army was dying.

Autumn brought lashing rains, lead and blood.

Unharvested crops, infested with weeds, were laid as flat as felt. The orphaned grain-fields were trampled by cavalry, devastated by swarms of mice, and pecked clean by passing birds. The crimson banners of fires fluttered over the lands of the Kuban, the Terek and Stavropol. The Reds were setting fire to the homesteads and villages of rebellious Cossacks; the Whites were laying waste peasant villages and workers' settlements.

Winter was drawing in.

From the north, cold winds were more and more frequent, stripping the orchards bare and rustling the dead grass in the steppes. Morning frosts set in, covering puddles with the first fragile ice.

The troops were short of clothes and footwear.

Along the same routes, the same roads as the army, the typhus-bearing louse came crawling. The fit could manage to fight it off, the sick could not. [...]

A motor-car bounced jauntily along the steppe road. A man in military uniform dozed in his seat and was shaken awake every minute.

His tired face was grey and his gold-rimmed glasses jumped up and down on his nose.

The brigade and regimental wagons made their slow way along the road.

The car sounded its hoarse klaxon.

“Let us through, you bloody horse-eaters!” yelled the driver angrily. “Tell the front ones to stop.”

The wagon-drivers snarled back: “Go screw a cow!”

Car-driver: “Pull over!”

Wagon-drivers: “Pull over yourself! There’s one of you and lots of us.”

The timid steppe horses shied away in panic... A field kitchen tipped over, spilling hot borshch; an ambulance wagon tipped over and the patients shrieked as they tumbled into the mud.

The car swerved and began speeding along the roadside verge, pursued by a torrent of abuse, curses and cries of “Stop! Stop!” The car ran on, picking up speed, throwing up muddy clods from its wheels. Ivan Chernoyarov overtook it at a gallop and stood his horse athwart its path: “Go on, run me over.”

The driver braked. Horsemen closed in round the car.

“Who are you?” Chernoyarov asked the man in the gold-rimmed glasses. “What the hell are you doing running my men down?”

“Arslanov, authorized representative of the army’s revolutionary council. What is it you comrades want? My warrant? Here it is. I...”

“Do you know Ivan Chernoyarov?” the brigade commander interrupted him.

“I’ve heard the name, but haven’t had the honor.”

“Where are you going?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“He’s in a hurry to get to Astrakhan with a report,” smirked the soldiers. “Let him go. He’s no time to waste.”

“I don’t have to answer to everybody I meet. What’s your unit? Who’s in command? I’ll lodge a complaint... Drive on!” he ordered his driver.

The engine revved. Nobody moved.

“Out of my way or I’ll shoot!” A nickel-plated Browning glinted in his hand.

“I’m Chernoyarov!” Ivan leaned down in the saddle and with a stroke of his saber sliced off the authorized representative’s head. “Load the car up with forage, lads!”

The horsemen whooped with delight.

The army fell back in disarray. Units became intermingled and lost touch with their supply columns, their headquarters and their victuallers. Attempts by individual level-headed commanders to impose order proved futile – nobody took any notice of orders. Only the two cavalry regiments and Ivan Chernoyarov’s brigade covered the retreat.

General Pokrovsky’s cavalry dogged their heels.

Chernoyarov’s brigade arrived in Kizlyar by night. [...]

Supplies of forage, bread and water were low.

Thatched roofs of straw and reeds were stripped for forage. Emaciated horses gnawed at the carts, the posts and fences to which they were tethered. The first troops to pass through drank all the water from the wells. Those who came later scooped only mud from the bottom. For the rearguard, nothing was left.

In the district of Kizlyar, wine flowed in rivers and spread into an ocean of wine. Barrels were rolled out from cellars and basements: the troops drank wine, poured more, and filled the horses’ troughs with it. The hungry horses, soon drunk, blundered frantically into fences and pushed their way into the flames. Bellowing men and prancing horses splashed in puddles of wine. Wine foamed and lapped, reflecting a drunken glow. [...]

Chernoyarov’s brigade dismounted in the market square, handed over their mounts to the horse-holders, and started raising their voices.

“They’ve sold us out!” yelled Chaganov, the machine-gunner with one shoulder higher than the other, who’d already found time for a drink. “Where are we going? To the slaughter? They’ve sold us out and drunk the money!”

“Cut it out, Chaganov,” said Butsoi, his pal, trying to calm him down. “Who’s sold us, and who to? Nobody would pay a penny for you and me.”

“Treachery!” cried another voice from a different group. “At the front we had to fight barefoot and naked, and here there’s whole trainloads of uniforms on fire! We were short of shells and bullets, and here there’s mountains of ’em!”

Rumblings of discontent.

“We’ve had it.”

“All our commissars and commanders are running away with full suitcases and abandoning us.”

“Their watchword is ‘Save Your Skin!’”

Chernoyarov pushed his way into the very middle of the crowd and jumped up onto a cart.

“Brothers...”

The voices abated a little, but for some time the discontented grumbled here and there and hurled oaths, like logs.

Chernoyarov spoke: “Brothers! There’s treachery all around us. We have only ourselves and our spirit! But the time for vengeance will come, and my iron hand will punish all cowards and traitors severely! Away with panic and faint hearts! We will fight on to the end! If anyone doesn’t want to stay with us he can hand in his mount, his rifle and his partisan conscience and get out of my sight! Brothers, we’re withdrawing towards Astrakhan. The way will be hard. Four hundred versts of wild Kalmyk steppe. With no water and no forage. We halt here for one day. Stock up with whatever you can. Throw out any junk. On the march you’ll need every little bunch of hay and every handful of oats. I’ll be checking your bags and holsters myself. If I find as much as one piece of surplus rag, expect no mercy. I’m ordering the horses to be shod with studs. Check all saddles, shafts, harnesses, welds, tires, and rivets; we don’t want even one loose nail. The supply train will carry five hundred pails of wine. One cup a day for the fit, three for the sick. Go easy on your horses. We move out at first light. Meeting over. Disperse to your billets, quietly.”

The forges worked through the night.



At dawn the brigade made ready, sent the supply column forward and set out on its last march. All three regiments withdrew in good order. [...]

At the limit of the Kalmyk lands, at one of the last homesteads, the brigade halted for the night.

Chernoyarov sat in a house, sucking on his pipe by an open window. The troops were asleep or playing cards for piles of Kerensky roubles, cartridges, and silver and gold.

By-passing the homestead on a road below it, a mixed detachment was on the move. Tethered to a phaeton a handsome bay horse danced along, as pretty as a picture. Chernoyarov raised his field-glasses to his eyes and called Shalim, who was sitting nearby on his outspread greatcoat, filing some notches out of the blade of his saber.

“See that, friend? Look at that bay there!” He winked. “Off you go.”

Accustomed to the unbridled caprices of his friend and master, the adjutant silently untied his Kabardinian horse from the gatepost, sprang into the saddle and galloped down to the lower road. He soon returned to report:

“Derbent Regiment... Bay mare belong Beletsky, regiment commander.”

Spoiled by war and no longer able to control the fire in him, the partisan leader whipped his Mauser out of its holster and laid it on the windowsill in front of him.

“Off you go, brother, and don’t come back without that mare, or I’ll shoot you. You know I always keep my word.”

The card-players left their game, chuckling to each other as they tried to guess the outcome of their commander’s fancy.

Shalim turned his head sharply, grunted, whipped up his horse and raced to catch up with the Derbents, who by now had passed the homestead and were riding down into a dip.

All watched until he disappeared from view.

Before Chernoyarov could finish his pipe, dust could be seen rising from the road. Shalim was riding hell for leather, leading a

second horse by the reins. Some horsemen were galloping after him, whooping and twirling their sabers.

“To arms!” shouted the brigade commander.

The men snatched up their rifles.

“At their hats, on the command ... fire!”

Shalim came flying into the homestead.

His pursuers halted on a rise, paused for a moment as the bullets whistled low over their heads, brandished their sabers and turned back.

Chernoyarov leapt out of the window.

“That’s what I like about you, friend: your guile,” he laughed, taking the reins of the golden-bay mare with dappling in the groin. “That’s the way to do it: if you lack the strength, use a bit of dash... And this is a good buy, I can see.” He stroked the frightened, snorting horse.

“I cut him up,” muttered Shalim gloomily.

“Cut who up?”

“Beletsky.”

“Are you kidding?” The brigade commander looked intently at him. “Well, are you?”

Shalim silently produced his saber, stained red with fresh blood, from under his burka.

“Bloody hell!” Ivan frowned and stepped close to his adjutant. “Idiot. If we sent you to pray to God you’d plunder the church!”

“Wouldn’t give! He shout!” explained Shalim. “I cut him: left, right!”

“Soft-headed idiot!” said Chernoyarov, but added at once as he looked at the prize, “but I do need a mare, and this is a good one, I can see.”

Graceful, long-legged, of medium weight and supple as a pike, the mare gave her new owner a tender glance, twitched her little fox-like ears and shook her sleek head, as if asking to be ridden.

“What’s her name?”

“In hurry. Forgot to ask,” grinned Shalim, wiping down his blade with some sand and a cloth.

“I’ll call her Arrow... Arrow.” Chernoyarov tightened the saddle-girth, swung himself into the saddle without touching the stirrups, and galloped into the steppe to break in his mare. [...]

[One of the retreating detachments] came unexpectedly upon a lonely tent standing protected from the winds between two long barrows. The horses’ nostrils flared at the scent of burning dung; they neighed hungrily and lengthened their stride.

Before they’d gone a hundred paces,  
a hatless and beltless man sprang out of the tent into a  
gully, thrust out the muzzle of a rifle and opened fire.

“Hey! Hey!” they shouted. “Are you mad? We’re friends!”

The leading horse, a palomino, toppled over. A bullet nicked one of the Temryuk men in the shoulder.

Galagan jumped down from the cart.

“What the hell’s going on? Why the shooting?”

Maxim pulled the sleeping Grigorov down from the cart by his feet.

The others took cover too.

Rat-tat-tat...

“Won’t stop firing, the son of a bitch.”

“Maybe it’s the cadets.”

“Couldn’t be. How could they have got here? Looks like he’s alone.”

“Maybe he is, but he’s in that hollow where we can’t get a shot at him.”

“Let’s crawl up, surround him on all sides and rush him,” suggested one of the Temryuk men.

“No need for any of this shilly-shallying. I’ll nail that worm in two ticks, I’ll...” Galagan sprang up and moved forward in leaps, crouching low.

By the time the others reached him, Galagan was already sitting astride the sniper, throttling him with his left hand while lashing his face with his right and calling him every name he could think of: “You snake... whore... wrecker... shoot at your own side, would you?... Reptile... monster... viper... spawn of Judas!”

They rushed to the tent. Inside it an elderly Kalmyk woman lay on some sheepskins, delirious with typhus. There was nobody else to be seen. They turned their attention to the sniper. Galagan picked him up from the ground by the scruff of his neck and fixed him with a furious glare: "So who are you? Tell us!"

"Don't torture me, brother," said the man, bursting into tears and wiping away some blood from his chin. "Just shoot me. For God's sake, shoot me and don't torture me!"

"Sit down and tell us your story." Galagan snatched his Colt from his belt and cocked it. "Give us the whole truth. One false word and you swallow a bullet."

All sat down by the flap of the tent.

With bruised and blackened eyes he looked at his former comrades-in-arms like a ferret caught in a trap and told his tale in a low voice, hardly moving his split lips.

"My name's Tsaregorodtsev, from the Cossack township of Pashkovskaya. Our squadron reached the sea at Lagan. From there the road runs all the way to Astrakhan. We started trying to cross the estuary. A breeze blew up from the shore – just our luck: an ice-floe broke away and got swept out to sea with us on it. Some wept, some laughed with spite, and some of us jumped and swam, relying on our horses. Lots drowned, but my mate Bondarenko, a Cossack from the village of Goncharovskoye, and me made it to the shore. We left our frozen horses behind and started running into the steppe, to warm up. It was dark, we couldn't see any tracks. "The wind should be blowing from our left," I said. And my mate says, "No, from our right." We wandered around for several days, hungry, nothing to smoke, our matches were wet and wouldn't light. We came to a settlement: not so much as a crust of bread nor a living soul in it. Dead bodies in the houses and the street, and dogs roaming among them. My feet were frostbitten; the skin started peeling off and my toes started rotting. My mate carried my kitbag and rifle. We shot a badger and ate it raw. My belly revolted. I was rolling in the sand gasping, "I'm dying!" My mate turns me on my back and starts pummeling my belly with his fists and knees. I burst into a sweat and got a bit of strength back. I wasn't exactly well, but I could stand up and

wobble on my feet. So on we go. Taking it slowly. Then we come to this tent. They had three sheep and a bit of flour. "We're weak," I says. "They'll cut our throats in the night, and the food won't last long for all of us. Let's kill 'em." Bondarenko says, "I can't do that. They ain't done nothing to us. My father in the Kuban's just as old; maybe someone there's planning the same for him." "Well," I says, "if you're so soft-hearted, turn away for a minute." He goes off and turns his back, although he doesn't want to. I pull out my pistol and shoot the old Kalmyk, and a child, and another kid and a nimble dark-skinned lad: put two bullets into him, and he's still squealing, grabbing at my gun and kissing my feet. I finished him off, but let the old woman be: thought she might give us a bit of pleasure before she died. She was still fit and steaming with heat. So we live together for a day, a week, like gypsies, and life's good. We eat noodles with mutton, fall into bed, have a good sleep, I rape the woman, we boil up some more noodles and fall into bed again. My mate's completely recovered and keeps saying, "Come on, let's be going." My feet are all swollen, so I can't get my boots on, and you can't get far barefoot. The woman gets on my nerves at night, sitting by the grave where we buried 'em, and whining so loud your hair stands on end, the bitch. I chase her away and beat her, but as soon as night falls she's at it again ..."

He fell silent for a moment, then went on: "I can see we're running out of flour and there's only one sheep's carcass left, and I had this wicked thought: my mate might leave and make off with the mutton. I start watching him. Sometimes he goes up the top of the barrow and studies all the roads. Well, he and I argue... He goes to bed, not suspecting anything... And that night I... I did it. And I'm left by myself, living with the Kalmyk woman as man and wife ..."

"All clear," Galagan interrupts him. "So why, my good friend, did you start shooting at us?"

"I was scared, brother... I..."

"I see. Scared we'd eat your mutton? Well, my dear fellow, let's go. You're going to get the reward you deserve." Galagan gave him a kick to get him to his feet, led him off to one side and finished him off.

They waited for the blizzard to die down, then set out again.

They reached the main road.

The Temryuk men had the stronger horses, so they went ahead. Maxim, Galagan and Grigorov were left alone again, and their horse stopped more and more often.

“Come on, my brave steed, gee up.”

The brave steed shuffled a little further, then fell in a heap. They lifted her up. She took one more step, then another, and fell down again. A last shudder ran over her worn-out hide, like a ripple over still water.

“A beast dies, and man goes on living. Lord, thy miracles are beyond all understanding!” Galagan gave a bitter laugh and pulled his rifle and kitbag down from the cart.

Maxim took a hatchet and chopped up the shaft, hacked the cart into pieces and made a bonfire of the boards. They slept as best they could on the warm ash, and in the morning sucked on some snow and went on their way.

Along their route, on both sides of the road, lay filthy footcloths, broken wheels, smashed field kitchens and carts, abandoned saddles and crumpled human figures, all half-buried in sand.

Grigorov barely managed to put one foot in front of the other.

“We’ll soon be just like them...”

“Hold on, friend,” said Maxim, trying to lift his spirits. He himself could hardly walk, but refused to let it show. Nor would Galagan let anything get him down. To distract his companions from gloomy thoughts, he kept up an unending flow of funny stories. [...]

Word came of the death of Chernoyarov.

A group of soldiers sat in a circle on a bluff above the Volga, waiting for a ferry. They were finishing their last barrel of wine and recalling the Kuban villages and campaigns and battles past. Their daredevil leader Ivan Chernoyarov was fondly remembered too.

“Yes, those were the days!” sighed Maxim from the bottom of his heart. “A brave spirit is abroad no more... Brothers, let’s raise our glasses in memory of a true Cossack!”