

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

A FIGHT FOR GRAIN

THAT same morning twenty-three collective farm carts arrived at Gremyachy Log from the village of Yarsky. As they were passing the windmill Bannik fell in with them. With a bridle hanging across his shoulder, he was going to the steppe to look for his mare. As the first cart drew alongside he greeted the driver, and the black-bearded cossack replied.

"Where are you from?" Bannik inquired.

"Yarsky."

"Why haven't your horses got any tails? Why have you put them to shame like that?"

"Whoa! The devil! We've cut off her tail, but she's still frisky. Why haven't they got any tails, did you ask? We've cut them off to sell at a good profit! The town women will use the tails to drive away the flies with. You haven't got anything to smoke, have you? Treat us, we're short of tobacco." The cossack jumped down from his britzka.

The line of carts halted. Bannik felt sorry he had opened the conversation. He reluctantly drew out his pouch, watching as some five or six more men left their carts, tearing up newspaper into cigarette papers as they came.

"You'll use all my tobacco!" the niggardly Bannik croaked.

"It's the collective farm's now, don't you know? Everything's got to be communal," the bearded cossack said sternly. And he took as big a pinch of the home-grown tobacco as if the pouch were his own.

They lit cigarettes. Bannik hurriedly thrust his pouch into his trouser pocket, and smiled. He looked with fastidious pity at the horses' tails, which were docked almost to the cruppers. A bloodthirsty horsefly was plaguing the horses, settling on their sweaty haunches and collar-chafed necks. In the attempt to drive off the flies the horses swung their tails automatically, but the shameful, hairless stumps were ineffective.

"Where is she pointing to with her tail?" Bannik venomously asked.

"Always into the collective farm. Haven't they cut off your horses' tails yet?"

"Yes, but only for four inches or so."

"It was our Soviet chairman gave orders for this to be done. He got a prize for it, but when the heat sets in the horses will be lost. Well, we must be getting on. Thanks for the tobacco. We've had a smoke and it's softened our hearts, for all along the road we were wild because we hadn't got any."

"Where are you driving to?"

"Gremyachy."

"So you're going to our village. And what for?"

"For seed grain."

"What . . . what do you mean?"

"The District has sent an order for us to get our seed grain fund from you: four hundred and thirty poods of it. Well, gee up!"

"I knew it would happen!" Bannik shouted. Waving the bridle, he ran back to the village.

Before the Yarsky carts reached the collective farm

office half the village knew that they had come to take away seed grain. Bannik did not spare his legs, and he poked his nose into hut after hut.

First the women began to gather in the by-lanes, fussing and fluttering like coveys of startled partridges.

"They're carrying off our grain, my dears."

"We shan't have anything to sow with."

"The good folk told us it would be better not to put our grain into the communal granary."

"If only the cossacks had listened to us."

"We must go and tell them not to hand over the grain."

"But we'll see to that ourselves! Come on, women, to the granaries. We'll take stakes, and we won't let them get near the padlocks."

Then the cossacks began to show themselves. Among them the same kind of talk was to be heard. Passing from by-lane to by-lane, from street to street, they gathered into a crowd and moved towards the granaries.

Meantime, Davidov had read the official note brought by the Yarsky men from the chairman of the District Agricultural Union. "Dear comrade Davidov," he wrote. "You've got 73 centners of wheat which were not handed in to the District after the last grain collection. I propose you give this quantity of wheat to the Yarsky collective farm as they haven't sufficient seed grain. I have got the agreement of the Grain Co-operative to this."

Davidov read the note, and gave orders for the grain to be handed over. The Yarsky men drove from the yard of the collective farm office to the granaries. But around the granaries the street was dammed by the crowd. A couple of hundred women and cossacks surrounded the carts.

"Where are you going?" they demanded.

"Have you come for our grain? The devil's sent you here!"

"Turn back!"

"We won't give it to you!"

Diemka Ushakov hurried to fetch Davidov, who went to the granaries at a run.

"What's the matter, citizens?" he demanded.

"What have you gathered here for?"

"Why are you giving our grain to the Yarsky people? Did we collect it for them?"

"Who gave you such rights, Davidov?"

"What are we going to sow with?"

Davidov scrambled on to the steps of the nearest granary, and calmly explained that, on the instruction of the Agricultural Union, he was giving out not seed grain, but the remainder of the grain tax.

"Don't get alarmed, citizens," he said. "Your grain won't be touched. And instead of hanging around idle and chewing sunflower seeds, you ought to be in the fields. Don't forget the brigade leaders keep records of those who don't go out to work. We shall fine those who don't turn up."

Reassured by Davidov's declaration, some of the cossacks went away, many of them going out to the fields. The storekeeper began to weigh out the grain for the Yarsky men, and Davidov returned to the office. But in less than half an hour a complete change occurred in the attitude of the women who had remained to watch by the granaries. Yakov Lukich was responsible for this, for he whispered to several cossacks: "Davidov's lying! They're taking seed grain. The collective farm is already sowing, but the grain handed in by the individual peasants is being given to the Yarsky collective farm."

The women grew more and more agitated. Bannik, Diemid the Silent, old Donietzkov, and some thirty other cossacks stood discussing matters for a few minutes, then went across to the scales.

"We're not giving up the grain to Yarsky!" Donietzkov announced on behalf of them all.

"You haven't been asked!" Diemka Ushakov snapped back.

A skirmish began between them. The Yarsky men took Diemka's part. The same black-bearded cossack whom Bannik had treated to tobacco drew himself up to his full height on his britzka, cursed furiously for a good five minutes, then shouted:

"What are you disobeying the government for? What are you making us suffer torments for? We've had to drive thirty miles on a hot day, and you're holding back the State grain. The G.P.U. is crying bitter tears for you! You ought to be sent to Solovka concentration camp, you sons of bitches! You're like dogs in a manger; you lie and don't eat anything yourself, but you won't let others eat either. Why aren't you out in your fields? Is it a holiday to-day?"

"And what do you want?" the younger Akim Beskhlebnov roared. "Is your beard itching? We'll comb it for you! In one minute!" He rolled up his sleeves and pushed his way to the britzka.

The bearded Yarsky cossack jumped down. He did not roll up the sleeves of his faded brown shirt, but met Akim with such a well-placed, furious blow on the jaw that Akim flew backward some five yards, waving his arms like windmill sails and sending the crowd scattering.

Then a fight began such as Gremyachy had not seen for many a day. The Yarsky men received severe

punishment, and, streaming with blood, they dropped the sacks of grain and clambered into their britzkas. Whipping up their horses, they broke through the crowd of screaming women and galloped off.

From that moment Gremyachy Log became a seething whirlpool of excitement. The crowd wanted to relieve Diemka of the keys to the granaries containing the seed grain, but during the fight the intelligent Diemka had slipped out of the crowd and hurried off to the office.

"What shall we do with the keys, comrade Davidov?" he asked. "Our people are beating up the Yarsky men, and it's certain they'll be coming along to us next."

"Give them to me," Davidov calmly said.

He took the keys, put them in his pocket, and went to the granaries. Meantime the women had dragged Andrei Razmiotnov out of the village Soviet, and were persistently shouting:

"Open the meeting!"

"Women! Aunties! Mothers! My darlings! There aren't any meetings being held at present. We've got to sow now, and not hold meetings. What d'you want meetings for? 'Meetings' is a soldier's word. Before you can say it you have to sit three years in the trenches! You have to go to war and feed lice, then you can talk about meetings," Razmiotnov tried to reason with the women.

But they would not listen to him, and, clinging to his trousers, to his sleeves and the end of his shirt below his belt, they dragged the frowning Andrei into the school, and bawled:

"We don't want to sit in the trenches!"

"We don't want to go to war!"

"Open the meeting, or we'll open it ourselves."

"You son of a bitch, you're lying when you say you can't. You're the chairman, so you can."

Andrei pushed away the women, stopped his ears with his fingers, and roared in the attempt to out-shout them:

"Shut up, you devils! Stand back a bit! What d'you want a meeting for?"

"About the grain. We want to talk to you about the grain."

Finally he was compelled to announce:

"I declare the meeting open."

"Let me speak!" demanded the widow Yekaterina Gulyashchaya.

"Speak up then, and let the devil smell you!"

"None of your devilling, chairman! Or I'll mark you. . . . By whose permission did you allow our grain to be dragged off? Who gave orders for it to be given to the Yarsky men, and what need was there for the order?" With arms akimbo, she bent forward waiting for his answer.

Andrei waved her off as though she were a persistent fly.

"You were authoritatively informed by comrade Davidov. And I didn't open the meeting for you to talk such nonsense, but in order. . . ." He sighed. "Because, dear citizenesses, we ought to go after the marmots with all our strength. . . ."

But Andrei's manoeuvre was not successful.

"What marmots?" they demanded.

"The marmots are nothing to do with us."

"Give us grain."

"A fine speaker you are, may a hedgehog prick you! Go off after the marmots! But what are you going to say about the grain?"

"There's nothing to be said about it."

"What, nothing? Give us back our grain!"

Gulyashchaya at their head, the women began to advance towards the stage. Andrei stood by the prompter's sheet-iron box. He gazed at the women with a smile, but inwardly he felt a little anxious: the cossacks crowding behind the white daisy-field of the women's kerchiefs looked rather too grim.

"You go about in leg-boots winter and summer, but we haven't got anything to buy shoes with," one woman shouted.

"You've become a commissar!"

"How long is it since you wore out Marina's husband's trousers?"

"Your muzzle's had its fill!"

"Undress him, women!"

The shouts rattled out like irregular rifle-fire. Several dozen women crowded right against the platform. Andrei vainly tried to restore silence: his voice was inaudible in the hubbub.

"Pull his boots off him! Come on, women, all together!"

In a moment innumerable hands were stretched towards the stage. Andrei was seized by his left leg. He clung to the prompter's box, and went pale with anger. But the boot was already torn from his foot and thrown back across the crowd. Hand after hand caught the boot and threw it farther, accompanying it with unfriendly, unpleasant laughter. From the back rows came approving male voices:

"Undress him!"

"Let him go without his trousers."

"Take the other boot off!"

"Get on with it, women! Throw him down. . . ."

They tore off Andrei's other boot. He shook his leg-rags and shouted:

"Take the puttees, too! Someone may find them useful for nose-rags!"

Several young men pushed their way swiftly up to the stage. One of them, Yefim Trubachov, a thick-lipped lad whose father had been in the Ataman's regiment, and who was himself over six feet, shoved the women aside and stepped on to the platform.

"We don't need your leg-rags," he said, smiling and breathing heavily, "but we'll take off your trousers. . . ."

"We badly need trousers! The poor peasants are going about without trousers, and there weren't enough of the kulaks' to go round," another lad, younger and shorter, but looking more mischievous and like a ring-leader, slowly explained.

This youngster, who had been nicknamed "Smoky," was unusually curly-headed. His smokily fair hair was like Astrakhan fur, and looked as though it had never been touched by a comb, in such disorderly ringlets did it burst from under the rim of his old cossack cap. "Smoky's" father had been killed during the German war, his mother had died of typhus, and young "Smoky" had been brought up in the care of his aunt. From his earliest childhood he had stolen cucumbers and radishes from other people's gardens, cherries and apples from the orchards, and had carried off water-melons in sackfuls from the melon plots. When he grew up he developed such a passion for ruining the village girls, and in this career he acquired such unpleasant notoriety, that not one of the Gremyachy mothers with a grown-up daughter could look with equanimity at his figure, which was small, but as well-proportioned

as a hawk's. Whenever they caught sight of him they invariably spat away and hissed:

"There he goes, the white-eyed devil! There he is, the lecherous hound, wandering about the village!"

Turning to their daughters, they would add: "Well, what are you staring your eyes out for? What are you doing at the window? You bring me a baby home in your skirt, you only dare bring it, and I'll choke it with my own hands! Go and get some dung-fuel for the fire, you daughter of a bitch; go and see to the cow."

But "Smoky," stepping in his worn shoes as gently as a wild animal, would quietly whistle through his teeth, and would walk past the fences and walls, gazing at the yards and windows from under his curly eyelashes. A girl's kerchief had only to make a momentary appearance anywhere for the lazy-looking, unhurrying "Smoky" to be transformed: with a short, sharp movement he would turn his head as swiftly as a hawk and straighten up. Yet his pallid eyes had no predatory look, but were gentle and profoundly tender. At such a moment even his eyes seemed to change colour and to become as deeply blue as a July sky. "Fektina, my dear, my little azure flower! As soon as dusk is falling I'll come along to the back of the yard. Where will you be sleeping to-night?" "Oh, don't be silly!" the girl would reply in an inaccessibly stern tone as she ran past.

"Smoky" would watch her with an understanding smile, and turn away. At sunset he would be by the communal granary, playing the accordeon which had formerly belonged to his exiled friend Timofei. But as soon as the blue shadows lay over the gardens and groves, and human voices and the lowing of

cattle had died away, he would walk unhurryingly by back ways to Fektina's yard, while over the mournfully whispering crowns of the poplars, over the silent village the moon would pass, as lonely and round-faced as "Smoky" himself.

Girls were not the only solace in "Smoky's" life; he was fond of vodka, too, and even more of a fight. Wherever there was a fight, there he was sure to be found. At first he would stand looking on. Then his legs would begin to tremble at the knees, the trembling would become uncontrollable, and, unable to master the passion rending him, he would join in the fight. He had managed to lose half a dozen teeth by the time he was twenty or so. More than once he had been beaten until the blood poured from his throat. He had been beaten for girls' follies, and for interfering in other people's fights. He would cough and spit up blood, and would lie a month on the stove at the side of his everlastingly weeping aunt. Then he would turn up again at the evening sing-songs, and his blue eyes would glitter even more insatiably, his fingers run still more nimbly over the keys of the accordeon. But after his illness his voice would sound more hollow and hoarse, like the sigh of the worn, ancient accordeon bellows.

He seemed to have as many lives as a cat. He had been expelled from the Young Communist League, had been tried for hooliganism and arson. More than once Andrei Razmiotnov had arrested him for brawling, and had locked him up for the night in the Soviet shed. "Smoky" had long nourished a great anger against Razmiotnov, and now he climbed on to the stage in order to settle accounts.

He drew nearer and nearer to Andrei. His knees shook, and it made him look as though he were dancing.

"We'll have those trousers," he said with a noisy intake of breath. "Come on, off with them!"

The stage was flooded with women, the many-handed crowd again surrounded Andrei, breathing fierily against his face and the back of his head, enclosing him in an impenetrable ring.

"I'm the Soviet chairman," he shouted, "and you're making a mock of me, you're making a mock of the Soviet government. Clear off! I won't allow you to take the grain! I declare the meeting closed."

"We'll take it ourselves."

"Ho-ho! He's closed the meeting!"

"We'll open it then!"

"We'll go to Davidov and shake him up, too!"

"Come on, along to the office!"

"We must lock up Razmiotnov first!"

"Beat him up, boys!"

"What are you looking at him for?"

"He's against Stalin!"

"Lock him up!"

One of the women dragged the crimson satin cloth off the chairman's table and threw it over Razmiotnov's head from behind. While he was struggling to tear away the dusty and inky cloth, "Smoky" gave him a short-arm jab in the pit of his stomach. Freeing his hand, panting with pain and reckless fury, Andrei pulled his pistol from his pocket. The women fled back screaming; but "Smoky" and three other cossacks on the platform seized his arms and took away the weapon.

"So you were going to shoot at the people! You son of a bitch!" one of them joyfully shouted, raising Razmiotnov's pistol with its completely empty chambers above his head. . . .

Davidov involuntarily slowed his steps when he heard a single, threatening roar coming from the neighbourhood of the granaries. A woman's piercing scream flew high above the men's deep voices. It was sharply distinguished from the solid mass of voices, just as, in the forest touched by the first frost, the sobbing, passionate, furiously weeping howl of a hunting bitch following the hot scent of an animal is distinguished from the general tumult of the pack.

"Better send for the second brigade, or they'll share out the grain," Davidov thought. He decided to return to the office, to hide the granary keys somewhere. He found Diemka Ushakov standing distractedly at the gate.

"I'm going to hide, comrade Davidov," he said. "They'll be coming after me for the keys."

"That's your business. Is Naidionov here?"

"No, he's with the second brigade."

"Isn't anybody of the second brigade around?"

"Kondrat Maidannikov's here."

"Where is he? What's he doing here?"

"He's come to get seed grain. There he is!"

Maidannikov hurried up to them. He waved his whip as he approached, and shouted:

"The community's arrested Andrei Razmiotnov. They've put him in a cellar and they're going to the granaries now. You hide somewhere, comrade Davidov, or there may be wrong done. . . . The people have gone mad."

"I'm not going to hide! Are you mad? Here are the keys. Gallop back to the brigade, and tell Liubishkin to put some fifteen men on horses and gallop here at once. You can see there's going to be trouble. What did you come in on?"

"On a britzka."

"Unharness one of the horses and ride it back as fast as it'll go."

"I'll be there in two ticks." Maidannikov thrust the keys into his pocket and ran down the by-lane.

Davidov slowly went to the granaries. The crowd quietened down as it waited for him. "Here comes the enemy!" some woman shouted hysterically, pointing at him. But he did not hurry, and in full view of them all he stopped to light a cigarette, turning his back to the wind and striking a match.

"Come on! Come on! You'll have plenty of time to smoke!"

"You can smoke in the next world!"

"Are you bringing the keys, or aren't you?"

"He's bringing them, I expect. The dog knows the hand that feeds him!"

Puffing out billows of smoke, thrusting his hands into his pocket, Davidov walked up to the front rows of people. His calm, assured bearing had a dual effect on the crowd. Some of them felt that it indicated his consciousness of strength and superiority, others were enraged by it. The shouts rattled out like hail on an iron roof:

"Give us the keys!"

"Break up the collective farm!"

"Clear out of here altogether! Who the devil asked you to come?"

"Give us our seed grain!"

"Why won't you let us sow?"

A gentle breeze played with the ends of the women's kerchiefs, rustled the bunches of reeds on the granary roofs, and brought from the steppe the vapid smell of drying earth and the scent of the young grasses, like

unfermented wine. The honey perfume of the buds bursting on the poplars was so cloyingly sweet, that when Davidov began to speak he felt that his lips were sticking together, and even thought he could taste the honey.

"What's all this, citizens?" he demanded. "What have you refused to obey the instructions of the Soviet government for? Why didn't you let the Yarsky collective farm have the grain? Don't you realise that you'll have to answer in court for this, and for interrupting the spring sowing campaign? It's a fact you will! The Soviet government will not forgive you that!"

"At the moment your Soviet government is under arrest! It's shut up, like a lover, in a cellar!" a short, lame, individual farmer replied.

Someone laughed; but Bannik stepped forward, and angrily shouted:

"The Soviet government doesn't dictate the things you're making up. We won't submit to such a Soviet government as you and Makar Nagulnov have started. Is it right to stop the farmers from sowing? What d'you call that? That's a distortion of the Party!"

"Do you mean to say we're stopping you from sowing?" Davidov asked.

"Well, aren't you?"

"Did you put your seed grain into the communal granary?"

"Yes, I did."

"And have you got it back again?"

"Yes, I have; but what of it?"

"Then who's stopping you from sowing? What are you hanging around the granaries for?"

Bannik was a little disconcerted by this unexpected

turn in the conversation; but he tried to recover his ground:

"I'm not worrying about myself, but about the people, those who've left the collective farm and haven't had their grain back or their property. That's what! And besides, what sort of land have you let me have? Why is it so far off?"

"Clear out of here!" Davidov could not control himself any longer. "We'll talk with you later! Fact! And don't you shove your nose into the collective farm affairs, or you'll lose it quick! You're working up the people! Clear out, I tell you!"

Muttering threats, Bannik fell back. But the women quickly rushed forward in his place. They all shouted at once and in one voice, not allowing Davidov to say a word. He tried to play for time, in order to give Liubishkin and his men the chance to arrive. But, screaming deafeningly, the women surrounded him, supported by a sympathetic silence among the cossacks.

As he looked around, Davidov noticed Marina Poyarkova. She was standing a little way off, her mighty arms bare to the elbows and crossed on her breast. She was talking animatedly to a group of women, her bluish-black eyebrows frowning until they almost met above her nose. Davidov caught her hostile glance, and almost at the same moment he noticed that close to her was Yakov Lukich. Yakov was agitatedly, expectantly smiling, and whispering something to Diemid the Silent.

"Give us the keys! Give us them for your own good, d'you hear?" One of the women seized Davidov by the shoulder, and thrust her hand into his trouser pocket.

Davidov forcibly shoved her off. The woman stepped

away, fell on her back, and hypocritically howled: "Oh, he's killed me, killed me! My dears, don't let me perish!"

"What's all this?" someone at the back of the crowd said in a quivering tenor voice. "So he's beginning to fight? Well then, give it to him so that the juice spurts from his nose!"

Davidov stepped across to pick up the fallen woman, but his cap was sent flying from his head, and he was struck several times on his face and back. They seized his arms. Swinging his shoulders, he threw off the women attacking him. But with a shout they again clung to him, tore the collar of his shirt, and in a few seconds had rummaged through and turned out his pockets.

"He hasn't got the keys!"

"Where are they?"

"Hand them over! Otherwise we'll smash the padlocks."

Panting, and swearing violently, a majestic old lady, the mother of Mishka Ignationok, pushed her way to Davidov and spat in his face.

"That's for you, you Satan! You atheist!"

Davidov turned pale, and exerted all his strength in the attempt to free his arms. But he could not. Evidently some of the cossacks had hurried to the women's aid, for strong, horny fingers had seized and were pressing back his elbows, pressing them back as though with pincers. Then he ceased to struggle. He realised that the matter had gone too far, that none of those around him would come to his help. So he decided to take a different course of action.

"I haven't got the keys to the granaries, citizens. They're kept. . . ." He stopped short: he was about to say that he did not keep the keys, but he at once

realised that if he said that, the crowd would rush to look for Diemka Ushakov and would certainly find him. Then Diemka would have a bad time, and he might be killed. "I'll say I've got them at home, and I'll go along there and search. Then I'll say I've lost them. They won't dare to kill me, and meantime Liubishkin will have arrived. The devil take the lot of them!" he thought. He was silent while with his shoulder he wiped the blood from his scratched cheek, then he said: "The keys are kept at my place, but I won't give them to you. And if you smash the padlocks you'll answer for it with all the severity of the law. So now you know. Fact!"

"Take us to your room. We'll find the keys ourselves," Ignationok's mother persisted. Her flabby cheeks and the great wart on her nose trembled with her agitation, the sweat poured incessantly down her wrinkled face. She was the first to push Davidov, and he readily but slowly walked in the direction of his hut.

"But are the keys there? Maybe you've forgotten," Bannik's wife Avdotia questioned him.

"Yes, they're there all right, auntie!" Davidov assured her, bending his head to hide a smile.

Four women held him by the arms, a fifth followed behind him with a healthy-looking stake in her hands, on his right hand, shaking continually, old Ignationok walked with a long, masculine stride, and on his left the women hurried in little groups. The cossacks remained at the granaries to wait for the keys.

"Let go of my arms, aunties! I shan't run away!" Davidov asked.

"But who knows, maybe you will after all!"

"No, I shan't!"

"You come with us, it'll be quieter for you!"

They reached his hut, threw down the wattle-gate and fence, and poured into the yard.

"Go and fetch the keys. And if you don't bring them we'll call the cossacks and they'll twist your neck lopsided for you!"

"Ah, aunties, you've soon forgotten the Soviet government! But it won't forget you for this business!"

"Seven crimes, only one punishment! It's all the same to us whether we swell with hunger in the autumn because we haven't sown anything, or whether we answer for it now. You go in and get them, go on!"

Davidov went into his room, and, knowing that they were watching him, pretended to make a diligent search. He turned over everything in his suitcase and on the table, shook out all the papers, crawled under the bed and the crooked-legged table.

Going on to the porch, he announced: "I can't find the keys."

"Then where are they?"

"I expect Nagulnov's got them" he replied.

"But he's gone off for the day."

"What's that got to do with it? He's gone himself, but he may have left the keys behind. In fact I'm quite sure he's left them behind, for we were to give out grain for the second brigade to-day."

They led him to Nagulnov's quarters. On the way they began to beat him. At first they only cursed and gently jostled him, but, growing enraged because he continually laughed and joked, they began to beat him in earnest.

"Citizenesses! My dear nannies! At any rate don't

hit me with sticks!" he pleaded, pinching the nearest women, while he bent his head and forced a smile. But they thrashed him unmercifully on his broad, bowed back. He only grunted, shrugged his shoulders, and, despite the pain, still tried to joke:

"Women! You're near to your graves, and you're laying it on like that! Let me give you a whack or two, eh?"

"You unfeeling idol! You cold stone!" The youthful Nastia Donietskova howled almost tearfully, as she zealously drubbed Davidov's back with her small but strong fists. "I've broken all my hands open against him, and it seems nothing to him. . . ."

They split open his ear, his lips and his nose. But he went on smiling with swollen lips, revealing the loss of a single upper tooth, and unhurriedly and gently pushed away the most violent of the women. He was terribly plagued by old Ignationok, the woman with the angrily quivering wart on her nose. She hit him hard in order to hurt, trying to reach the bridge of his nose, or his temple. Unlike the others, she struck him with the knuckles of her clenched fist. Davidov vainly tried to turn his back towards her as he walked along. Panting, she pushed aside the women, ran in front of him and hoarsely screamed:

"I'll hit him on the snout! I'll hit him on the snout!"

"You wait, you she-devil!" Davidov thought in a cold fury, turning away from her blows. "As soon as Liubishkin arrives I'll give you such a whack that you'll go spinning away from me!"

But there was still no sign of Liubishkin and the other horsemen. Meantime the women dragged him to Nagulnov's quarters. This time the women went

with Davidov into the room. They rummaged everywhere, threw aside books, papers, linen, and even searched for the keys in the rooms occupied by the mistress of the hut. Naturally, they did not find them, and they pushed Davidov on to the porch.

"Where are the keys? We'll kill you!" they stormed.

"Ostrovnov's got them," Davidov replied as he recalled the evilly smiling face of the collective farm manager among the crowd at the granaries.

"You're lying! We've already asked him. He said you ought to have the keys!"

"Citizenesses!" He touched his monstrously swollen nose with his fingers, and quietly smiled. "Citizenesses! You've beaten me absolutely for nothing! The keys are in the office, in my table. Fact! I remember perfectly now."

"You're laughing at us!" shrieked Yekaterina Gulyashchaya.

"Take me there; how can there be any question of my laughing? Only without any whacks, please!" Davidov stepped down from the porch. He was tormented with thirst, mastered by an impotent frenzy. It was not the first time he had been beaten, but he had never been beaten by women before, and he was beside himself because of it. "But I mustn't drop, or they'll go mad and peck me to death, of all things! That would be a silly way of dying! Fact!" he thought, hopefully straining his eyes in the direction of the hills. But there was no sign of dust whirled from the road by horses' hoofs, no sign of a stream of riders. The hill was completely deserted as far as the distant mound on the horizon. And the streets were equally deserted.

Everybody had gathered around the granaries, whence arose a dull thunder of innumerable voices.

By the time they reached the office Davidov was beaten so severely that he could hardly keep his feet. He no longer jested, but stumbled again and again without cause, clutched his head more and more frequently, and asked in a hollow voice:

"Enough! Why, you'll kill me! I haven't got the keys! Don't hit me on the head. I'll go on till nightfall, but I haven't got the keys."

"Go till nightfall?" the infuriated women groaned, and again clung like leeches to the helpless Davidov, scratching, beating, and even biting.

Right outside the office yard he sat down in the road. His canvas shirt was soaked with blood, his short town trousers, fringed with wear at the bottoms, were torn at the knees, his swarthy, tattooed chest was visible through his ragged shirt. He breathed heavily and wheezily, and looked a pitiful sight.

"Get on, you son of a bitch!" old Ignationok thrust at him with her foot.

"And it's for you, you bitches," he said unexpectedly loud, running his strangely gleaming eyes around them, "it's for you we're working! And you're killing me! Ah, you bitches! I shan't give you the keys. Understand? I shan't, and that's a fact! Well?"

"Don't worry about him, girls!" shouted a woman who came running up. "The cossacks have smashed the padlocks and are giving out the grain."

The women abandoned Davidov by the office gates, and ran off to the granaries. With a tremendous effort he rose and went into the yard. He carried a bucket of water, lukewarm with the heat, on to the porch, and took a long drink. Then he poured the water

over his head. Groaning, he washed the blood from his face and neck, wiped himself on a horsecloth hanging over the balustrade, and sat down on the threshold.

There was not a soul in the yard. Somewhere a chicken was anxiously clucking. On the roof of the starling nest-box a black titlark was twittering with head thrown back. From the steppe came the whistle of marmots. A thin, graded ridge of lilac clouds curtained the sun, yet such an oppressive, exhausting heat hung in the air that even the sparrows which had been bathing on a heap of ashes in the middle of the yard were lying motionless, their little necks stretched out, occasionally fluttering the tiny fans of their open wings.

Hearing a dull, soft trample of hoofs, Davidov raised his head. A saddled, limber-flanked little dun horse came flying through the gate at full gallop. It swung sharply round, dug its hind hoofs into the ground, and circled the yard, snorting as it went and dropping white, fluffy flecks of foam from its haunches on to the hot earth. By the stable door it halted, and snuffed at the step. Its handsome, inlaid silver bridle was broken, the ends of the reins were hanging, the saddle had slipped forward on to its withers, and the broken breast-strap hung to the ground, touching the dark lilac horn of its hoofs. Its sides were heaving, its rosy nostrils were dilated, clumps of brown, last-year's burrs were clinging to its crupper and the tangled strands of its mane.

As Davidov was staring in amazement at the horse, the door to the hayloft creaked noisily, and old Shchukar's head was thrust out. After a moment or two he emerged, opening the door with the greatest caution, and timorously peering in all directions. His sweaty shirt was thickly covered with wisps of hay, and out of his tangled beard stuck the empty ears of quitch, dry blades

of grass and leaves, and the yellow pollen of clover. His face was a cherry red, and the impress of immeasurable terror lay on it, while the sweat poured down from his temples over his cheeks and beard.

"Comrade Davidov!" he said in an imploring whisper, tiptoeing to the porch, "hide yourself, for the love of God! Once they've started to smash us up they'll not stop at murder. How they've mauled you about; I wouldn't know your face. I saved myself in the hay. . . . It's stifling in there, I'm sweating all over, but you have more peace of mind, by God! Let's wait for this commotion to pass over, and hide together, ah? It's horrible for one to stay. . . . What's the point of getting killed for you don't know what? Listen how the women are howling like hornets, damn them! And they've done for Nagulnov, that's clear! That's his mare just galloped in. He rode off to the District on her this morning. She stumbled under him at the gate, and I said to him then: 'Turn back, Makar; that's a bad sign!' But did he ever listen to anyone who knew? Never in all his life. He's always liked to go his own way, and now they've killed him. But if he had turned back he might have hidden like me."

"Then he may be at home now," Davidov queried irresolutely.

"At home? But why has his mare come back riderless, snorting as though she had smelt a corpse? I know those signs only too well! It's quite clear; he returned from the District, saw them taking grain at the granaries, and told them to stop, his hot blood couldn't stand it. And so they killed him!"

Davidov was silent. From the granaries the groan of a myriad-voiced hubbub was still rising; he could

hear the creaking of carts and the clattering rattle of wheels. "They're carrying off the grain," he thought. "But what has happened to Makar? Surely they haven't killed him? I'm going to see."

He rose to his feet. Thinking Davidov had decided to hide with him in the hayloft, Shchukar fussed around him:

"Come on, hurry away from the sin! Or the devil will bring someone else along here, they'll see me and you and do for us! They'll do it in less than no time! And it's really very good in the hayloft. The smell of the hay is easy and pleasant, I'd lie there a month if they brought my food up to me. Only a goat stirred me up a bit. I could have killed the nuisance! I heard the women breaking up the collective farm and saucing you about the grain. 'Well,' I thought to myself, 'you're lost, Shchukar, for a pinch of tobacco!' For every one of these women knows that only me and you, comrade Davidov, have been on the platform from the very first day of the revolution, and that we set up the collective farm in Gremyachy and turned out Titok as a kulak. Who have they got to kill off the very first? That's clear enough: me and you! 'Our business is in a bad way,' I thought. 'I must hide, or they'll kill Davidov and get me, too. And then who will give evidence to the investigator after Davidov's death?' In a moment I plunged into the hay, covered myself with it right over my head, and lay there, breathing heavily and still afraid. Then I heard someone crawling over the hay above me. He crawled, and naturally he sneezed with the dust. 'Mother!' I thought, 'it must be them looking for me; they must be after my life!' And he crawled and crawled, then he trod on my stomach. I lay still! My soul and body were

parting in my fright, but I lay like the damned, because there was nowhere I could go to! And then he stepped right on to my face! I felt with my hand, and found a hoof, and all hairy! The hair of my head stood on end, and my skin all but began to come away from my body. I couldn't breathe for fright. What did I think when I felt that hairy hoof? 'It's a devil,' I thought. It was terribly dark in the hayloft, and the unclean spirits are fond of the dark. 'In a minute he'll begin to beat and worry me to death. I'd rather let the women execute me!' Yes, I was in a fright, there's no denying it! Let anyone else be in my place, a cowardly sort of lad, and he might easily have burst his heart and all his inside out of him. That always happens with sudden fright. But I only turned cold a little, and lay quiet. Then I thought it smelt too much like a goat; and I remembered that Titok's goat lived up in the hayloft, and I'd quite forgotten him, the devil! I peeped out, and it was him sure enough: Titok's goat crawling over the hay, looking for sage, and chewing wormwood. Well, of course, then I got up and gave him what he deserved. I mauled him about as though he was my darling, and pulled his beard and lord knows what else. 'Don't crawl over the hay, you bearded devil, when there's a rising in the village! Don't stamp around without reason, you stinking devil!' I shouted. I was so mad that I wanted to put him to death on the spot, just because, although he is an animal, he ought to understand how and when and where he can wander over the hay unnecessarily, and when he ought to hide quietly away and be still. . . . But where are you going, comrade Davidov?"

Without replying, Davidov went past the entrance to the hayloft and made for the gate.

"Where are you going?" Shchukar whispered fearfully.

Through the half-open wicket gate he saw Davidov walking as though blown along by a gusty wind, going towards the communal granaries with swift, though uncertain steps.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

THE ANCIENT MOUND

At the side of the road stands a burial mound. On its windswept summit the bare twigs of last year's wormwood and trefoil rustle mournfully, the brown tufts of cotton-thistles bow moodily to the earth. Over its slopes, from its foot to its summit clumps of yellow, fronded feather-grass are littered. Drearily colourless, faded with the sun and weather, they stretch their hempen stalks over the ancient, weather-beaten ground. Even in spring-time, amid the exuberant flowering of the myriad grasses, the mound looks agedly despondent, out-lived. Only towards autumn does it gleam, flooded with a proud, frosty white. And only in the autumn does it seem as though, clothed in a scaly silver chain-mail, the grandly dignified mound is on guard over the steppe.

In the sunset glow of summer evenings a steppe eagle flies from beneath the clouds of the summit. Its wings whistling, it drops to the mound, clumsily hops a couple of steps, and stops, using its hooked beak to clean the brown fan of its outstretched wing, its crop covered with rusty-hued feathers. Then it is drowsily still, its head hanging, its amber, black-encircled eye fixed on the everlastingly azure heaven. Looking like a native stone—the immobile, yellow-brown eagle rests before its evening hunt. Then it lightly breaks from the earth and flies away. Before sunset the grey shadow of its regal wings will be flung again and again over the steppe.