Meeting a Moscow Acquaintance in the Detachment

Leo Tolstoy

1856

We were out with a detachment. The work in hand was almost done, the cutting through the forest was nearly finished, and we were expecting every day to receive orders from headquarters to retire to the fort.

Our division of the battery guns was placed on the slope of a steep mountain range which stretched down to the rapid little mountain river Mechik, and we had to command the plain in front. Occasionally, especially towards evening, on this picturesque plain, beyond the range of our guns, groups of peaceable mountaineers on horseback appeared here and there, curious to see the Russian camp. The evening was clear, quiet, and fresh, as December evenings usually are in the Caucasus. The sun was setting behind the steep spur of the mountain range to the left, and threw rosy beams on the tents scattered over the mountain side, on the moving groups of soldiers, and on our two guns, standing as if with outstretched necks, heavy and motionless, on the earthwork battery close by. The infantry picket, stationed on a knoll to our left, was sharply outlined against the clear light of the sunset, with its piles of arms, the figure of its sentry, its group of soldiers, and the smoke of its watch-fires. To the right and to the left, halfway down the hill, white tents gleamed on the trodden black earth, and beyond the tents loomed the bare black trunks of the plane forest, where axes continually rang, fires crackled, and trees fell crashing down. On all sides the pale bluish smoke rose in columns towards the blue frosty sky. Beyond the tents, and on the low ground by the stream, Cossacks, dragoons, and artillery drivers trailed, with stampings and snortings, returning from watering their horses. It was beginning to freeze; all sounds were heard with unusual distinctness, and one could see far into the plain through the clear rarefied air. The groups of natives, no longer exciting the curiosity of our men, rode quietly over the light-yellow stubble of the maize-fields. Here and there through the trees could be seen the tall posts of Tartar cemeteries, and the smoke of their *aouls*.

Our tent was pitched near the guns, on a dry and elevated spot whence the view was specially extensive. By the tent, close to the battery, we had cleared a space for the games of Gorodki,79 or Choushki. Here the attentive soldiers had erected for us rustic seats and a small table. Because of all these conveniences, our comrades the artillery officers, and some of the infantry, liked to assemble at our battery, and called this place “The Club.”

It was a beautiful evening, the best players had come, and we were playing Gorodki. I, Ensign O□, and Lieutenant O□, lost two games running, and to the general amusement and laughter of the onlooking officers, and of soldiers and orderlies who were watching us from their tents, we twice carried the winners piggyback from one end of the ground to the other. Specially amusing was the position of the enormous, fat Lieutenant-Captain S□, who, puffing and smiling goodhumoredly, with his feet trailing on the ground, rode on the back of the small and puny Lieutenant O□. But it was growing late. The orderlies brought three tumblers of tea without any saucers, for the whole six of us, and having finished our game we came to the rustic seats. Near them stood a short, bandy-legged man whom I did not know, dressed in a sheepskin coat, and with a large, white, long-woolled sheepskin cap on his head. As soon as we approached him he hesitatingly took off and put on his cap several times, and repeatedly seemed on the point of coming up to us but then stopped again. Having, I suppose, decided that he could no longer remain unnoticed, this stranger again raised his cap, and passing round us approached Lieutenant-Captain S□.

"Ah, Guskantini! Well, what is it, old chap?" said S□, still continuing to smile goodhumoredly after his ride.

Guskantini, as S□ called him, put on his cap at once, and pretended to put his hands in the pockets of his sheepskin coat; but on the side turned to me, I could see it had no pocket, so that his little red hand remained in an awkward position. I tried to make up my mind what this man could be (a cadet or an officer reduced to the ranks?), and without noticing that my attention (the attention of an unknown officer) confused him, I looked intently at his clothing and general appearance. He seemed to be about thirty. His small round gray eyes seemed to look sleepily and yet anxiously from under the dirty white wool which hung over his face from his shaggy cap. The thick irregular nose between the sunken cheeks accentuated his sickly unnatural emaciation. His lips, but slightly covered with thin light-colored mustaches, were continually in motion, as if trying to put on now one, now another expression. But all these expressions seemed unfinished; his face still kept its one predominant expression of mingled fear and hurry. His thin scraggy neck was enveloped in a green woolen scarf partly hidden under his sheepskin coat. The coat was worn bare and was short; it was trimmed with dog's fur round the collar and at the false pockets. He had checked grayish trousers on, and soldier's boots with short unblacked tops.

"Please don't trouble," said I, when he again raised his cap, looking timidly at me.

He bowed with a grateful look, put on his cap, and taking from his trousers-pocket a dirty calico tobacco-pouch tied with a cord, began to make a cigarette.

It was not long since I myself had been a cadet; an old cadet, who could no longer act the good-humored attentive younger comrade to the officers, and a cadet without means. Understanding, therefore, all the wretchedness of such a position for a proud man no longer young, I felt for all who were in that state, and tried to discern their characters and the degree and direction of their mental capacities, in order to be able to judge the extent of their moral suffering. This cadet, or reduced officer, judging by his restless look and the purposely varying expression of his face, seemed to be far from stupid, but full of self-love, and therefore very pitiable.

Lieutenant-Captain S□ proposed another game of Gorodki, the losers, besides carrying the winners piggyback, to stand a couple of bottles of claret, with rum, sugar, cinnamon, and cloves, to make mulled wine, which was very popular in our detachment that winter because of the cold weather. Guskantini, as S□ again called him, was also asked to join, but before beginning, evidently wavering between the pleasure this invitation gave him and fear of some kind, he led Lieutenant-Captain S□ aside and whispered something into his ear. The good-natured Lieutenant-

Captain slapped him on the stomach with the palm of his big fat hand, and answered aloud, "Never mind, old chap, I'll give you credit!"

When the game was finished, and when, the side of the lower-grade stranger having won, he should have ridden on one of our officers, Ensign D□, the latter blushed, turned aside to the seats, and offered the stranger some cigarettes by way of ransom. When the mulled wine had been ordered, and one could hear Nikita's bustling arrangements in the orderlies' tent, and how he sent a messenger for cinnamon and cloves, and could then see his back, first here and then there, bulging the dirty sides of the tent—we, the seven of us, sat down by the little table, drinking tea in turns out of the three tumblers, and looking out over the plain, which began to veil itself in evening twilight, while we talked and laughed over the different incidents of the game. The stranger in the sheepskin coat took no part in the conversation, persistently refused the tea I repeatedly offered him, and, sitting on the ground Tartar-fashion, made cigarettes one after the other out of tobacco-dust and smoked them, evidently not so much for his own pleasure as to give himself an appearance of being occupied. When it was mentioned that a retreat was expected next day, and that perhaps we should have a fight, he rose to his knees and, addressing only Lieutenant-Captain S□, said that he had just been at home with the Adjutant and had himself written out an order to move next day. We all were silent while he spoke, and, though he was evidently abashed, we made him repeat this communication—highly interesting to us. He repeated what he had said, adding, however, that at the time the order arrived, he was *with*, and *sat with*, the Adjutant, *with whom he lived*.

"Mind, if you are not telling us a lie, old chap, I must be off to my company to give some orders for tomorrow," said Lieutenant-Captain S□.

"No. ... Why should? ... Is it likely? ... It is certain ..." began the stranger, but stopped suddenly, having evidently determined to feel hurt, frowned unnaturally and, muttering something between his teeth, again began making cigarettes. But the dregs of tobacco-dust that he could extract from his pouch being insufficient, he asked S□ to *favor him with the loan of a cigarette*. We long continued among ourselves that monotonous military chatter familiar to all who have been on campaign. We complained, ever in the same terms, of the tediousness and duration of the expedition; discussed our commanders in the same old way; and, just as often before, we praised one comrade, pitied another, were astonished that So-and-so won so much, and that So-and-so lost so much at cards, and so on, and so on.

"Our Adjutant has got himself into a mess, and no mistake," said Lieutenant-Captain S□. "He always used to win when he was on the staff—whoever he sat down with he'd pluck clean—but now these last two months he does nothing but lose. He has not hit it off this campaign! I should think he's lost 2,000 rubles in money, and things for another 500: the carpet he won of Mukhin, Nikitin's pistols, the gold watch from Sada's that Vorontsov gave him—have all gone."

"Serves him right," said Lieutenant O□; "he gulled everybody; it was impossible to play with him."

"He gulled everybody, and now he himself is graveled," and Lieutenant-Captain S□ laughed good-naturedly. "Guskov, here, lives with him—the Adjutant nearly lost him one day at cards!—Really.—Am I not right, old chap?" he said, turning to Guskov.

Guskov laughed. It was a pitifully sickly laugh which completely changed the expression of his face. This change suggested to me the idea that I had seen and known the man before; besides, Guskov, his real name, was familiar to me. But how and when I had seen him I was quite unable to recollect.

"Yes," said Guskov, who kept raising his hand to his mustaches and letting it sink again without touching them, "Paul Dmitrich has been very unlucky this campaign: such a *veine de malheur*,"80 he added, in carefully spoken but good French, and I again thought I had met, and even often met, him somewhere. "I know Paul Dmitrich well; he has great confidence in me," continued he; "we are old acquaintances—I mean he is fond of me," he added, evidently alarmed at his own too bold assertion of being an old acquaintance of the Adjutant. "Paul Dmitrich plays remarkably well, but now it is incomprehensible what has happened to him; he seems quite lost—*la chance a tourné*,"81 he said, addressing himself chiefly to me.

At first we had listened to Guskov with condescending attention; but as soon as he uttered this second French phrase we all involuntarily turned away from him.

"I have played hundreds of times with him," said Lieutenant O⊠, "and you won't deny that it is *strange*" (he put a special emphasis on the word "strange"), "remarkably strange, that I never once won even a twenty-kopeck piece of him. How is it I win when playing with others?"

"Paul Dmitrich plays admirably: I have long known him," said I. I had really known the Adjutant for some years; had more than once seen him playing for stakes high in proportion to the officers' means; and had admired his handsome, rather stern, and ever imperturbably calm face, his slow, Little-Russian pronunciation, his beautiful things, his horses, his leisurely, Little-Russian disposition, and especially his ability to play with self-control—systematically and pleasantly. I confess that more than once, when looking at his plump white hands, with a diamond ring on the first finger, as he beat my cards one after the other, I was enraged with this ring, with the white hands, with the whole person of the Adjutant, and evil thoughts concerning him rose in my mind. But on thinking matters over in cool blood I became convinced that he was simply a more sagacious player than all those with whom he happened to play. I was confirmed in this by the fact that when listening to his general reflections on gaming—how, having been lucky starting with a small stake, one should follow up one's luck; how in certain cases one ought to stop playing; that the first rule was to play for *ready-money*, etc., etc.—it was clear that he always won simply because he was cleverer and more self-possessed than the rest of us. And it now appeared that this self-possessed, strong player had, in the detachment, lost completely: not only money, but other belongings as well—which among officers indicates the lowest depth of loss.

"He was always devilish lucky when playing against me," continued Lieutenant O⊠; "I have sworn never to play with him again."

"What a queer fellow you are, old man!" said S⊠, winking at me so that his whole head moved, while he addressed O⊠; "you have lost some 300 rubles to him—lost it, haven't you?"

"More!" said the Lieutenant crossly.

"And now you've suddenly come to your senses; but it's too late, old chap! Everyone else has long known him to be the sharper of our regiment." said S⊠, hardly able to refrain from laughter, and highly delighted at his invention.

"Here's Guskov himself—he prepares the cards for him. That is why they are friends, old chap! …" And Lieutenant-Captain S⊠ laughed goodhumoredly so that he shook all over and spilled some of the mulled wine he held in his hand. A faint tinge of color seemed to rise on Guskov's thin, yellow face; he opened his mouth repeatedly, lifted his hands to his mustaches and let them drop again to the places where his pockets should have been, several times began to rise but sat down again, and at last said in an unnatural voice, turning to S⊠:

"This is not a joke, Nicholas Ivanich, you are saying *such things*! And in the presence of people who don't know me and who see me in a common sheepskin coat … because …" His voice

failed him, and again the little red hands with their dirty nails moved from his coat to his face; now smoothing his mustaches or hair, now touching his nose, rubbing his eye, or unnecessarily scratching his cheek.

"What's the good of talking; everyone knows it, old chap!" continued S□, really enjoying his joke and not in the least noticing Guskov's excitement. Guskov again muttered something, and leaning his right elbow on his left knee in a most unnatural position, looked at S□ and tried to smile contemptuously.

"Yes," thought I, watching that smile, "I have not only seen him before, but have spoken with him somewhere."

"We must have met somewhere before," I said to him when, under the influence of the general silence, S□'s laughter began to subside.

Guskov's mobile face suddenly brightened, and his eyes, taking for the first time a sincerely pleased expression, turned to me.

"Certainly; I knew you at once!" he began in French. "In '48 I had the pleasure of meeting you rather often in Moscow, at my sister's—the Ivashins."

I apologized for not having recognized him in his present costume. He rose, approached me, and with his moist hand irresolutely and feebly pressed mine. Instead of looking at me, whom he professed to be so glad to see, he looked round in an unpleasantly boastful kind of way at the other officers. Either because he had been recognized by me who had seen him some years before in a drawing-room in a dress-coat, or because that recollection suddenly raised him in his own esteem, his face and even his movements, as it seemed to me, changed completely. They now expressed a lively intellect, childish self-satisfaction at the consciousness of that intellect, and a kind of contemptuous indifference. So that, I admit, notwithstanding the pitiful position he was in, my old acquaintance no longer inspired me with sympathy but with an almost inimical feeling.

I vividly recalled our first meeting. In '48, during my stay in Moscow, I often visited Ivashin. We had grown up together and were old friends. His wife was a pleasant hostess and what is considered an amiable woman, but I never liked her. The winter I visited them, she often spoke with ill-concealed pride of her brother, who had lately finished his studies, and was, it seemed, among the best-educated and most popular young men in the best Petersburg society. Knowing by reputation Guskov's father, who was very rich and held an important position, and knowing his sister's leanings, I was prejudiced before I met Guskov. One evening, having come to see Ivashin, I found there a very pleasant-looking young man, not tall, in a black swallowtail coat and white waistcoat and tie; but the host omitted to introduce us to one another. The young man, evidently prepared to go to a ball, stood hat in hand in front of Ivashin, hotly but politely arguing about a common acquaintance of ours who had recently distinguished himself in the Hungarian campaign. He was maintaining that this acquaintance of ours was not at all a hero, or a man born for war, as was said of him, but merely a clever and well-educated man. I remember that I took part against Guskov in the dispute, and went to an extreme, even undertaking to show that intelligence and education were always in inverse ratio to bravery; and I remember how Guskov pleasantly and cleverly argued that bravery is an inevitable result of intelligence and of a certain degree of development; with which view (considering myself to be intelligent and well-educated) I could not help secretly agreeing. I remember also how, at the end of our conversation, Ivashin's wife introduced us to one another, and how her brother, with a condescending smile, gave me his little hand, on which he had not quite finished drawing a kid-glove, and pressed mine in the

same feeble and irresolute manner as he did now. Though prejudiced against Guskov, I could not then help doing him the justice of agreeing with his sister that he really was an intelligent and pleasant young man, who ought to succeed in society. He was exceedingly neat, elegantly dressed, fresh-looking, and had self-confidently modest manners and a very youthful, almost childlike, appearance, which made one unconsciously forgive the expression of self-satisfaction and of a desire to mitigate the degree of his superiority over you, which his intelligent face, and especially his smile, always showed. It was reported that he had great success among the Moscow ladies that winter. Meeting him at his sister's, I could only infer the amount of truth in these reports from the expression of pleasure and satisfaction he always wore, and from the indiscreet stories he sometimes told. We met some half-dozen times and talked a good deal, or, rather, he talked a good deal and I listened. He usually spoke French, in a very correct, fluent, and ornamental style, and knew how, politely and gently, to interrupt others in conversation. In general he treated me, and everyone, rather condescendingly; and, as always happens to me with people who are firmly convinced that I ought to be treated with condescension, and whom I do not know well, I felt that he was quite right in so doing.

Now, when he sat down beside me and gave me his hand of his own accord, I vividly recalled his former supercilious expression, and thought that he, as one of inferior rank, was not making quite a fair use of the advantages of his position in questioning me, an officer, in an offhand manner, as to what I had been doing all this time and how I came to be here. Though I answered in Russian every time, he always began again in French, in which it was noticeable that he no longer expressed himself as easily as formerly. About himself he only told me in passing that after that unfortunate and stupid affair of his (I did not know what this affair was, and he did not tell me) he had been three months under arrest, and was afterwards sent to the Caucasus to the N□ Regiment, and had now served three years as a private.

"You would not believe," said he, in French, "what I have suffered at the hands of the officer sets! It was lucky I formerly knew this Adjutant we have just been talking about: he is really a good fellow," he remarked condescendingly.

"I am living with him, and it is, after all, some mitigation. *Oui, mon cher, les jors se suivent, mats ne se ressemblent pas*,"82 he added, but suddenly became confused, blushed, and rose from his seat, having noticed that the Adjutant we had been talking about was approaching us.

"It is such a consolation to meet a man like you," whispered Guskov as he was leaving my side; "there is very very much I should like to talk over with you."

I told him I should be very glad, though I confess that, in reality, Guskov inspired me with an unsympathetic painful kind of pity.

I foresaw that I should feel uncomfortable when alone with him, but I wanted to hear a good many things from him, especially how it was that, while his father was so wealthy, he was poor, as his clothes and habits showed.

The Adjutant greeted us all except Guskov, and sat down beside me where the latter had been.

Paul Dmitrich, whom I had always known as a calm, deliberate, strong gambler and a moneyed man, was now very different from what he had been in the flourishing days of his card-playing. He seemed to be in a hurry, kept looking round at everybody, and before five minutes were over he, who always used to be reluctant to play, now proposed to Lieutenant O□ that the latter should start a "bank."

Lieutenant O⊠ declined, under pretext of having his duties to attend to; his real reason being that, knowing how little money and how few things Paul Dmitrich still possessed, he considered it unwise to risk his three hundred rubles against the hundred or less he might win.

"Is it true, Paul Dmitrich," said the Lieutenant, evidently wishing to avoid a repetition of the request, "that we are to leave here tomorrow?"

"I don't know," replied Paul Dmitrich, "but the orders are, to be ready! But really we'd better have a game: I would stake my Kabarda83 horse."

"No, today ..."

"The gray one. Come what may! Or else, if you like, we'll play for money. Well?"

"Oh, but I—I would readily—you must not think—" began Lieutenant O⊠, answering his own doubts, "but, you know, we may have an attack or a march before us tomorrow, and I want to have a good sleep."

The Adjutant rose, and putting his hands in his pockets began pacing up and down. His face assumed the usual cold and somewhat proud expression which I liked in him.

"Won't you have a glass of mulled wine?" I asked.

"I don't mind if I do," he said, coming towards me.

But Guskov hurriedly took the tumbler out of my hand and carried it to the Adjutant, trying at the same time not to look at him. But he did not notice one of the cords with which the tent was fastened, stumbled over it, and letting the tumbler drop, fell on his hands.

"What a muff!" said the Adjutant, who had already stretched out his hand for the tumbler. Everyone burst out laughing, including Guskov, who was rubbing his bony knee, which he could not have hurt in falling.

"That's the way the bear served the hermit," continued the Adjutant. "It's the way he serves me every day! He has wrenched out all the tent-pegs stumbling over them." Guskov, paying no heed to him, apologized, looking at me with a scarcely perceptible, sad smile, which seemed to say that I alone could understand him. He was very pitiable, but the Adjutant, his protector, seemed for some reason to be angry with his lodger, and would not let him alone.

"Oh yes, he is a sharp boy, turn him which way you will."

"But who does not stumble over those pegs, Paul Dmitrich?" said Guskov; "you yourself stumbled the day before yesterday."

"I, old fellow, am not in the ranks; smartness is not expected of me."

"He may drag his feet," added Lieutenant-Captain S⊠, "but a private must skip ..."

"What curious jokes! ..." said Guskov, almost in a whisper, with eyes cast down. The Adjutant evidently did not feel indifferent to his lodger; he watched greedily every word he uttered.

"He'll have to be sent to the ambuscades again," he said, addressing S⊠, and winking towards the disgraced one.

"Well, then, tears will flow again," said S⊠, laughing.

Guskov no longer looked at me, but pretended to be getting tobacco from the pouch which had long been empty.

"Get ready to go to the outposts, old chap," said S⊠, laughing, "the scouts have reported that the camp will be attacked tonight, so reliable lads will have to be told off."

Guskov smiled undecidedly, as if preparing to say something, and cast several imploring looks at S⊠.

"Well, you know I have been before, and I shall go again if I am sent," muttered he.

"Yes, and you will be sent!"

"Well, and I'll go. What of that?"

"Yes, just as you did at Argun—ran away from the ambuscade and threw away your gun," said the Adjutant, and, turning away from him, began telling us about the order for the next day.

It was true that the enemy was expected to fire at the camp in the night, and a movement of some sort was to take place next day. After talking on various subjects of general interest for a while, the Adjutant, as if he had chanced suddenly to recollect it, proposed to Lieutenant O□ to have a little game. The Lieutenant quite unexpectedly accepted, and they went with S□ and the Ensign to the Adjutant's tent, where a green folding-table and cards were to be found. The Captain, who was commander of our division, went to his tent to sleep, the other gentlemen also went away, and Guskov and I were left alone.

I had not been mistaken; I really felt uncomfortable alone with him, and I could not help rising and pacing up and down the battery. Guskov walked silently by my side, turning round hurriedly and nervously so as neither to lag behind nor pass before me.

"I am not in your way?" he said, in a meek, sad voice. As far as I could judge in the darkness his face seemed deeply thoughtful and melancholy.

"Not at all," I answered, but as he did not begin to speak, and I did not know what to say to him, we walked a good while in silence.

The twilight was now quite replaced by the darkness of night, but over the black outlines of the mountains the sheet-lightnings so common there in the evening flashed brightly. Above our heads tiny stars twinkled in the pale-blue frosty sky, and the red flames of smoking watch-fires glared all around: the tents near us seemed gray, and the embankment of our battery a gloomy black. From the fire nearest to us, round which our orderlies sat warming themselves and talking low, now and then a gleam fell on the brass of our heavy guns, and made visible the figure of the sentry, as, with his cloak thrown over his shoulders, he walked with measured steps along the embankment.

"You can't think what a relief it is to me to talk to a man like you!" said Guskov, though he had not yet spoken to me about anything. "Only a man who has been in my position can understand it."

I did not know what to answer, and again we were silent, though it was evident that he wished to speak out and I wished to hear him.

"For what were you. … What was the cause of your misfortune?" I asked at last, unable to think of any better way to start the conversation.

"Did you not hear about that unfortunate affair with Metenin?"

"Oh yes; a duel, I think. I heard some reference to it," I answered. "You see, I have been some time in the Caucasus."

"No, not a duel, but that stupid and terrible affair! I will tell you all about it if you have not heard it. It was that same year when you and I used to meet at my sister's. I was then living in Petersburg. But first I must tell you that I then had what is called *une position dans le monde*.84 and a tolerably lucrative, if not brilliant one. *Mon père me donnait* 10,000 *par an*.85 In '49 I was promised a place in the embassy at Turin; an uncle on my mother's side had influence and was always ready to give me a lift. It's now a thing of the past. *J'étais reçu dans la meilleure société de Petersbourg; je pouvais prétendre*86 to make a good match. I had learned—as we all learn at school; so that I possessed no special education. It is true I read a good deal afterwards, *mais j'avais surtout*, you know, *ce jargon du monde*;87 and, whatever the cause, I was considered one of the leading young men in Petersburg. What raised me most in the general estimation, *c'est cette*

liaison avec Mme. D[illegible],88 which was much talked of in Petersburg. But I was awfully young at the time, and set little value on these advantages. I was simply young and foolish. What more did I need? At that time in Petersburg that fellow Metenin had a reputation …" And Guskov continued in this manner to tell me the story of his misfortune, which, being quite uninteresting, I shall here omit.

"Two months," continued he, "I was under arrest and quite alone. I don't know what did not pass through my mind in that time; but, do you know, when it was all over, when it seemed as if every link with the past was severed, it became easier for me. *Mon père, vous en avez entendu parler*89 surely: he is a man with an iron will and firm convictions; *il m'a déshérité,*90 and ceased all intercourse with me. According to his convictions it was the proper thing to do, and I do not blame him at all; *il a été conséquent.*91 And I also did not take a step to induce him to change his mind. My sister was abroad. Mme. D[illegible] was the only one who wrote to me when letters were allowed, and she offered me help; but you will understand that I could not accept it, so that I had none of those trifles which somewhat mitigate such a position, you know—no books, no linen, no private food, nothing. Many, very many thoughts passed through my brain at that time, and I began to look at everything with other eyes; for instance, all that noise and gossip about me in Petersburg society no longer interested or flattered me in the least; it all seemed ridiculous. I felt I was myself to blame; I had been careless and young and had spoiled my career, and my only thought was how to retrieve it. And I felt I had strength and energy enough to do it. After my arrest was over, I was, as I told you, sent to the Caucasus to the N[illegible] Regiment.

"I thought that here, in the Caucasus," he continued, growing more and more animated, "*la vie de camp,*92 the simple, honest men with whom I should be in contact, the war, the dangers—all this would just suit my frame of mind, and I thought I should begin life anew. *On me verra au feu*93—people would like me, would respect me not for my name only; then I should receive a cross, become a noncommissioned officer, and at last be pardoned, and should return, *et, vous savez, avec ce prestige du malheur!*94 But *quel désenchantement*!95 You can't think how I was mistaken! … You know the officer set of our regiment?" He paused for some time, probably expecting me to say that I knew how bad the society of officers here is; but I did not reply to him. I was disgusted that—on account, no doubt, of my knowing French—he should suppose that I ought to despise the officer set, which, on the contrary, I, having lived long in the Caucasus, had fully learned to appreciate, and which I esteemed a thousand times more than the society Mr. Guskov had left. I wished to tell him so, but his position restrained me.

"In the N[illegible] Regiment the officer set is a thousand times worse than here," he continued—"*J'espère que c'est beaucoup dire*96—so that you can't imagine what it is like! Not to mention the cadets and the soldiers—it is just awful! At first I was well received, that's perfectly true, but afterwards, when they saw I couldn't help despising them—when in those scarcely noticeable everyday relations, you know, they saw that I was a totally different sort of man, standing on a far higher level than they—they were exasperated with me, and began to retaliate by subjecting me to all kinds of petty indignities. *Ce que j'ai eu à souffrir, vous ne vous faites pas une idée.*97 Then, being obliged to associate with the cadets; and, above all, *avec les petits moyens que j'avais, je manquais de tout,*98 I had only what my sister sent me. A proof of what I have suffered is that I, with my character, *avec ma fierté, j'ai écris à mon père,*99 imploring him to send me something, however little. … I can understand how, after five years of such a life, one may become like our cashiered officer, Dromov, who drinks with the soldiers and writes notes to all the officers begging them to *lend* him three rubles, and signs himself, '*Tout à vous* Dromov.' One needs a char-

acter like mine in order not to sink quite into the mire in this terrible position." He then walked silently by my side for a long time. "*Avez-vous un papiros?*"100 he said at last. "Yes … where had I got to? Oh yes, I could not stand it. I don't mean physically, for although it was bad enough and I suffered from cold and hunger and lived like a soldier, yet the officers still had a sort of regard for me. I still had a kind of *prestige* in their eyes. They did not send me to do sentry duty or drill. I could not have borne that. But morally I suffered terribly, and, above all, I could see no escape from this position. I wrote to my uncle imploring him to transfer me to this regiment, which is at least on active duty, and I thought that here Paul Dmitrich, *qui est le fils de l'intendant de mon père*,101 would be of use to me. My uncle did this much for me, and I was transferred. After that other regiment, this seemed an assembly of courtiers. And Paul Dmitrich was here; he knew who I was, and I was capitally received—at my uncle's request … Guskov, *vous savez*. But I noticed that these people, without education or culture, cannot respect a man nor show him respect when he is not surrounded by an aureole of wealth and rank. I noticed how, little by little, when they saw that I was poor, their behavior to me became more and more careless, and at last almost contemptuous. It is dreadful, but it is perfectly true.

"Here I have been in action, have fought, *on m'a vu au feu*,"102 he continued, "but when will it end? Never, I think! And my strength and energy are beginning to fail. And then, I had imagined *la guerre, la vie de camp*,103 but it turns out to be quite different from what I expected: dressed in a sheepskin, in soldier's boots, unwashed, you are sent to the outposts, and lie all night in a ditch with some Antonov or other who has been sent into the army for drunkenness, and at any moment you may be shot from behind a bush—you or Antonov, all the same. … That is not courage! It is horrible. *C'est affreux, ça tue.*'104

"Well, but you may be made a noncommissioned officer for this expedition, and next year may become an ensign," I said.

"Yes, possibly. I was promised it; but that would be another two years, and it is very doubtful. And does anyone realize what two such years mean? Just imagine the life with this Paul Dmitrich: gambling, rough jokes, dissipation. … You want to speak out about something that has risen in your soul, but you are not understood, or you are laughed at. They talk to you not to communicate their thoughts, but to make a fool of you if possible. And it's all so vulgar, coarse, horrid; and all the time you feel you are a private—they always make you feel that. That is why you can't imagine what a pleasure it is to talk *à cœur ouvert*105 to a man like you!"

I could not imagine what sort of a man I was supposed to be, and therefore did not know how to reply to him.

"Will you have supper?" at this moment asked Nikita, who had approached unseen in the darkness, and who, I noticed, was not pleased at the presence of my visitor: "there's nothing but dumplings and a little beef left."

"And has the captain had his supper?"

"He's asleep long ago," said Nikita, crossly.

On my telling him to bring us something to eat and some vodka, he muttered discontentedly, and went slowly to his tent. However, after grumbling there a bit, he brought us a traveling-case, on which he placed a candle (round which he first tied a piece of paper to keep the wind off), a saucepan, a pot of mustard, a tin cup with a handle, and a bottle of vodka bitters. Having arranged all this, Nikita stood some time near us and watched with evident disapproval while Guskov and I drank some of the spirit. By the dim light of the candle shining through the paper the only things one could see amid the surrounding darkness were the sealskin with which the traveling-case

was covered, the supper standing on it, and Guskov's face, his sheepskin coat, and the little red hands with which he took the dumplings out of the saucepan. All around was black, and only by looking intently could one discern the black battery, the equally black figure of the sentry visible over the breastwork, the watch-fires around, and the reddish stars above. Guskov smiled just perceptibly in a sad and bashful way, as if it were awkward for him to look me in the eyes after his confession. He drank another cup of vodka, and ate greedily, scraping out the saucepan.

"Yes, it must at any rate be some relief to you," I remarked, in order to say something, "to be acquainted with the adjutant; I have heard he is a very decent fellow."

"Yes," answered he, "he is a kindhearted man, but he can't help being what he is; he can't be a man: with his education one can't expect it," and he suddenly seemed to blush. "You noticed his coarse jokes today about the ambuscades." And Guskov, in spite of my repeated efforts to stop the conversation, began to justify himself to me, and to demonstrate that he did not run away from the ambuscades, and that he was not a coward, as the Adjutant and Captain S⍰ wished to imply.

"As I told you," he said, wiping his hands on his sheepskin, "people of that kind can't be considerate to a man who is a private and who has but little money: that is above their strength. And these last five months, during which it has somehow happened that I have received nothing from my sister, I have noticed how they have changed towards me. This sheepskin I bought of a soldier, and which is so worn that there is no warmth in it" (here he showed me the bare skirt of the coat), "does not inspire him with sympathy or respect for my misfortunes, but only contempt which he is unable to conceal. However great my need, as, for instance, at the present time, when I have nothing to eat except the soldiers' buckwheat, and nothing to wear," he continued, seemingly abashed, and pouring out for himself yet another cup of vodka, "he does not think of offering to lend me any money, although he knows that I should certainly repay him, but he waits that I, in my position, should ask him for it. You understand what it would mean for me to have to go to him. Now, to you, for instance, I could say quite straight: *Vous étes au-dessus de cela, mon cher, je n'ai pas le sou.*106 And do you know," said he, looking desperately into my eyes, "I tell you straight, I am now in terrible difficulties; *Pouvez-vous me préter dix rubles argent?*107 My sister must send me something by the next mail, *et mon père* ..."

"Oh, with pleasure," said I, though, on the contrary, it was painful and vexatious, especially because, having lost at cards the day before, I myself had only a little over five rubles, and they were in Nikita's possession. "Directly," I said, rising, "I will go and get them from the tent."

"No, it will do later, *ne vous dérangez pas.*"108

But without listening to him, I crept into the closed tent where my bed stood, and where the captain lay asleep.

"Alexey Ivanich, please lend me ten rubles till our allowances are paid," said I to the captain, shaking him.

"What! cleared out again? And it's only yesterday you resolved not to play anymore!" said the captain, still half-asleep.

"No, I have not been playing! But I want it—please lend it me."

"Makatyuk!" shouted the captain to his orderly, "get me the money-box and bring it here."

"Hush, not so loud," I said, listening to Guskov's measured footsteps outside the tent.

"What! ... Why not so loud?"

"Oh, that fellow in the ranks asked me for a loan. He's just outside."

"If I had known that, I would not have given it you," remarked the captain. "I have heard about him, he's the dirtiest young scamp."

Still the captain let me have the money all the same, ordered the money-box to be put away and the tent properly closed, and again repeating, "If I had known what it was for, I would not have given it you," he wrapped himself, head and all, in his blanket. "Remember you owe me thirty-two now!" he shouted after me.

When I came out of the tent Guskov was pacing up and down in front of the little seats, his short bandy-legged figure in the ugly cap with the long white wool, disappearing in the darkness and reappearing as he passed in and out of the candlelight. He pretended not to notice me. I gave him the paper-money. He said "*Merci!*" and crumpling it up he put it in his trousers-pocket.

"I suppose play is in full swing at Paul Dmitrich's now!" he then began.

"Yes, I suppose so."

"He plays so queerly, always *à rebours*,109 and does not hedge. When you have luck it is all right, but then, when it goes against you, you may lose terribly. He is a proof of it. On this expedition he has lost more than fifteen hundred rubles, counting the things he has lost. And with what self-control he used to play formerly! So that that officer of yours seemed even to doubt his honor."

"Oh, he did not mean anything. … Nikita, have we any Caucasian wine left?" I asked, very much relieved by Guskov's loquacity. Nikita grumbled again, but brought us the wine all the same, and again crossly watched Guskov emptying his cup. In Guskov's manner the former nonchalance again became apparent. I wished him to go away, and thought he stopped only because he did not like to go immediately after receiving the money. I was silent.

"How could you, with means at your disposal and no necessity, *de gaieté de cœur*110 make up your mind to come and serve in the Caucasus? That is what I don't understand," he said.

I tried to justify myself for this step that seemed to him so strange.

"I can imagine how uncongenial to you also the society of these officers must be, men without an idea of education. It is impossible for you and them to understand one another. Why, you may live here for ten years, and except cards and wine, and talk about rewards and campaigns, you will see nothing and hear nothing."

I did not like his being so certain that I shared his opinion, and I assured him with perfect sincerity that I was very fond of cards and wine, and of talks about campaigns, and that I did not wish for better comrades than those I had. But he would not believe me.

"Oh, you do not really mean it," he continued; "and the absence of women—I mean *femmes comme il faut*111—is not that a terrible privation? I don't know what I wouldn't give to transport myself into a drawing-room now, and take a peep, though but through a crack, at a charming woman."

He was silent a moment and drank another cup of wine.

"Oh God, oh God! It is still possible we may some day meet again in Petersburg among men, live with human beings, with women."

He emptied the bottle and said: "Oh, pardon, perhaps you would have taken some more, I am so terribly absentminded. And I'm afraid I have drunk too much, *et je n'ai pas la tête forte*.112 There was a time when I lived on the Morskaya113 *au rez-de-chaussée*.114 I had a delightful little flat and furniture—you know I had a knack for arranging things elegantly and not too expensively. It is true *mon père* gave me the crockery, and plants, and excellent silver plate. *Le matin je sortais*,115

then calls, at five o'clock *regulièrement* I went to dine with her, and often found her alone. *Il faut avouer que c'était une femme ravissante!*116 Did you not know her? Not at all?"

"No."

"You know, there was so much of that womanliness about her, that tenderness, and then such love! … Oh God! I did not know how to value my happiness then. … Or when we returned from the theater and had supper together. It was never dull in her company, *toujours gaie, toujours aimante.*117 Yes, I did not then foresee how rare a joy it was. *Et j'ai beaucoup à me reprocher*118 in regard to her. *Je l'ai fait souffrir, et souvent*119—I was cruel. Oh, what a delightful time it was! But I am wearying you."

"No, not at all."

"Then I will tell you about our evenings. I used to enter—oh, that staircase, I knew every plant-pot on it—the very door-handle—all was so nice, so familiar to me—then the anteroom, and then her room. … No, it will never, never, return! She writes to me even now; I can, if you like, even show you her letters. But I am no longer what I was—I am ruined, I am no longer worthy of her. … Yes, I am completely ruined! *Je suis cassé.*120 I have neither energy nor pride; nothing, not even nobility … Yes, I am ruined! and no one will ever understand what I have suffered. Everyone is indifferent. I am a lost man! I can never rise again, because I have sunk morally … sunk into the mire … sunk. …" And a real, deep despair sounded in his voice at that moment; he did not look at me, but sat motionless.

"Why give way to such despair?" I said.

"Because I am vile; this life has destroyed me; all that was in me has perished. I no longer suffer proudly, but basely; I have no *dignité dans le malheur.*121 I am insulted every moment, and I bear it all, and go to meet insults halfway. The mud *a déteint sur moi.*122 I have become coarse myself, have forgotten what I knew, I can't even speak French now, and I feel that I am base and despicable. I can't fight in these surroundings; it is impossible! I might perhaps have been a hero: give me a regiment, gold epaulets, and trumpeters; but to march side by side with some uncivilized Antonov Bondarenko or other, and to think there is no difference between him and me, it is all the same whether I get killed or he does—that is the thought that is killing me. You understand how terrible it is that some ragamuffin may kill me—a man who thinks and feels, and that he might as well kill Antonov by my side, a creature indistinguishable from a brute; and it is quite likely to happen that it is I who will be killed and not Antonov—it is always so, *une fatalité* for all that is lofty or good. I know they call me a coward. Granted that I am a coward. It is true I am a coward and cannot help it; but it is not enough that I am a coward, according to them I am also a beggar and a contemptible fellow. There, I have just begged money from you, and you have a right to despise me. No, take back your money," and he held out to me the crumpled note; "I want you to respect me." He covered his face with his hands and began to cry, and I did not in the least know what to say or do.

"Don't go on like that," said I; "you are too sensitive; you should not take things so much to heart: don't analyze but look at things simply. You say yourself that you are a man of character; face your task, you have not much longer to suffer," I said to him very incoherently, for I was excited both by feelings of pity and by a feeling of repentance at having allowed myself to condemn a man who was truly and deeply suffering.

"Yes," he began; "had I but once, since I came into this hell, heard a single word of advice, sympathy, or friendship—a single human word such as I hear from you—I might have borne everything calmly, have faced my task, and even behaved as a soldier; but now it is terrible. …

When I reason sanely, I long for death. Why should I care for a life of dishonor, or for myself, who am dead to all that is good in life? But at the least sign of danger I can't help craving for this vile life, and guarding it as if it were something very precious, and I can't, *je ne puis pas*,123 master myself. … That is, I can," he continued, after a moment's pause; "but it costs me too great an effort, a tremendous effort, when I am alone. When others are present, and in ordinary circumstances when going into action, I am brave enough—*j'ai fait mes preuves*124—because I have self-love and am proud—that is my fault—and in the presence of others … I say, let me spend the night with you; they'll be playing all night in our tent. I can sleep anywhere—on the ground."

While Nikita was making up a bed we rose, and again, in the dark, began walking up and down the battery. Guskov must really have had a very weak head, for after only two cups of vodka and two glasses of wine he was unsteady on his feet. When we had walked away from the candle I noticed that he put the ten-ruble note, which he had held in his hand all through the foregoing conversation, back into his pocket, trying not to let me see it. He continued to say that he felt he might yet rise if he had a man like myself to take an interest in him.

We were about to enter the tent to go to bed when suddenly a cannonball whistled over us and struck into the ground not far off. It was very strange: the quiet, sleeping camp, our conversation—and suddenly the enemy's ball flying, God knows whence, right in among our tents: so strange that it was some time before I could realize what had happened. But one of our soldiers, Andreyev, who was pacing up and down the battery on guard, came towards me.

"He's sneaked within range. There's the place he fired from," remarked he.

"The captain must be roused," said I, and glanced at Guskov.

He had crouched nearly to the earth and stammered, trying to say something, "This … this … is unple … this is … most … absurd." He said no more, and I did not see how and where he suddenly vanished.

In the captain's tent a candle was lit, and we heard him coughing, as he always did on waking; but he soon appeared, demanding the linstock to light his little pipe with.

"What's the matter, old man?" said he, smiling. "It seems I am to have no sleep tonight; first you come with your 'fellow from the ranks,' and now it's Shamyl. What are we going to do? Shall we reply or not? Nothing was mentioned about it in the orders?"

"Nothing at all. There he is again," said I; "and this time with two guns."

And, in fact, before us, a little to the right, two fires were seen in the darkness like a pair of eyes, and then a ball flew past, as well as an empty shell—probably one of our own returned to us—which gave a loud and shrill whistle. The soldiers crept out of the neighboring tents, and could be heard clearing their throats, stretching themselves, and talking.

"Hear him a-whistlin through the fuze-hole just like a nightingale!" remarked an artilleryman.

"Call Nikita!" said the captain, with his usual kindly banter. "Nikita, don't go hiding yourself; come and listen to the mountain nightingales."

"Why not, y'r honor?" said Nikita, as he came up and stood by the captain. "I have seen them nightingales and am not afraid of 'em; but there's that guest who was here a moment ago drinking your wine, he cut his sticks soon enough when he heard 'em; went past our tent like a ball, doubled up like some animal."

"Well, someone must ride over to the Chief of Artillery," said the captain to me in a grave and authoritative tone, "to ask whether we are to reply to the shots or not. We can't hit anything, but we can shoot for all that. Be so good as to go and ask. Order a horse to be saddled, you'll get there quicker; take Polkan, if you like."

Five minutes later the horse was brought, and I started to find the Chief of Artillery.

"Mind, the watchword is *pole*," whispered the careful captain, "or you'll not be allowed to pass the cordon."

It was barely half a mile to where the Chief of Artillery was stationed. The whole way lay among tents. As soon as I had left the light of our own watch-fires behind, it was so dark that I could not even see my horse's ears—only the watch-fires, which now seemed very near, now very far away, flickered before my eyes. Having given the horse the rein and let him take his own course for a little, I began to distinguish the white, four-cornered tents and then the black ruts of the road. Half-an-hour later, after having asked my way some three or four times, twice stumbled over tent-pegs and been sworn at each time from within the tent, and after having been twice stopped by sentries, I reached the Chief of Artillery at last.

While on my way I heard two more shots fired at our camp, but they did not reach the place where the staff was stationed. The Chief of Artillery ordered not to fire, especially now that the enemy had ceased firing; so I returned, leading my horse and making my way on foot among the infantry tents. More than once, while passing a soldiers' tent in which I saw a light, I slackened my pace to listen to a tale told by some wag, or to a book read out by some "literate" person, to whom a whole division listened, tightly packed inside and crowding outside the tent, and now and then interrupting the reader with their remarks; or I caught merely some scrap of conversation about an expedition, about home, or about the officers.

Passing one of the tents of the 3rd Battalion, I heard Guskov's loud voice speaking very merrily and confidently. He was answered by young voices, not of privates but of gentlemen, as merry as his own. This was evidently a cadet's or sergeant-major's tent. I stopped.

"I have long known him," Guskov was saying. "When I was in Petersburg he often came to see me, and I visited him. He belonged to very good society."

"Whom are you talking about?" asked a tipsy voice.

"About the prince," answered Guskov. "We are related, you know; more than that, we are old friends. You know, gentlemen, it is a good thing to have such an acquaintance. He is awfully rich, you see. A hundred rubles is nothing to him; so I've taken a little of him till my sister sends me some."

"Well, then send …"

"All right! … Savelich, old boy!" came Guskov's voice from the tent as he drew near to the entrance; "here are ten rubles, go to the canteen and get two bottles of Kahetinsky. … What else, gentlemen? Speak up!" and Guskov, bareheaded and with hair disheveled, reeled out of the tent. Throwing open his sheepskin and thrusting his hands into the pockets of his grayish trousers, he stopped at the entrance. Though he was in the light and I in the dark, I trembled with fear lest he should see me, and moved on, trying not to make a noise.

"Who's there?" shouted Guskov at me in a perfectly tipsy voice. The cold air evidently had an effect on him. "What devil is prowling about there with a horse?"

I did not reply, and silently found my way out onto the road.

Leo Tolstoy
Meeting a Moscow Acquaintance in the Detachment
1856

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