

V. GARSHIN

The
SCARLET FLOWER





В. ГАРШИН

**КРАСНЫЙ
ЦВЕТOK**

ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ

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V. GARSHIN

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FLOWER**

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FOUR DAYS

I remember running through the woods, forcing our way through the hawthorn bushes, while the bullets whizzed around us, snapping off branches. The shooting became heavier. Red flashes spurted here and there on the edge of the wood. Sidorov, a young soldier of Company One ("What is he doing in our skirmish line?"

I found myself wondering), suddenly slumped down on the ground and looked back at me in silence with great frightened eyes. Blood trickled from his mouth. Yes, I remember that clearly. I also remember how, in the dense undergrowth, within almost a stone's throw from the edge of the wood, I first saw him. . . . He was a huge fat Turk, but I went straight for him, weak and thin though I was. There was a report, and something flew past me, something enormous, it seemed to me; there was a ringing in my ears. "He is shooting at me," came the thought. With a scream of terror he recoiled against a thick hawthorn bush. He could have gone round it, but in his fear he did not know what he was doing and flung himself upon the prickly branches. I struck out, and knocked the rifle out of his hands, then struck again and felt my bayonet sinking into something soft. There was a queer sound, something between a snarl and a groan. Then I ran on. Our men were shouting "hurrah!", dropping, shooting. I remember firing several shots after I had come out of the woods into a clearing. Suddenly the cheers sounded louder and we all moved forward again. I should have said "our men" instead of "we," because I was left behind. I thought it rather odd. Still more odd was it when all of a sudden everything disappeared, and all the shouting and the shooting were silenced. I heard nothing, and saw only a patch of blue; it must have been the sky. Then that went too.

I have never been in such a queer position before. I am lying, I believe, on my stomach, and see nothing in front of me but a small patch of earth. A few blades of grass, an ant, its head lowered, crawling along with one of them, bits of rubbish from last year's grass—that is my whole world. And I see it with only one eye, as the other one is pressed hard up against something—no doubt the branch on which my head is resting. I am terribly

uncomfortable, and want to shift my position, and simply can't understand why I am not able to do so. Time passes. I hear the chirr of grasshoppers, the hum of bees. Not a sound more. At last, with an effort, I disengage my right arm from under my body, and pushing away from the ground with both hands, I make an effort to get up on my knees.

A pain, intense and swift as lightning, shoots through my whole body from knees to chest and head, and I fall back. Again darkness, a void.

I wake up. Why do I see the stars shining so brightly in the blue-black Bulgarian sky? Am I not in my tent? What made me crawl out of it? I make a movement and feel an excruciating pain in the legs.

Yes, I have been wounded. Is it dangerous or not? Both my right and left legs are clotted with blood. When I touch them the pain gets worse. It's like a toothache—a continuous gnawing pain. There is a ringing in my ears, and my head is weighted with lead. Dimly I realize that I have been hit in both legs. What's the matter? Why didn't they pick me up? Have the Turks beaten us? I begin to recollect what happened to me, at first vaguely, then ever more clearly, and come to the conclusion that we have not been beaten at all. Because I dropped (I do not actually remember that, but I do remember everyone running forward while I wasn't able to, and being left behind with something blue before my eyes)—I dropped in the clearing, just on top of the mound. Our little battalion commander had pointed out that clearing to us. "Make for that, boys!" he had cried in his ringing voice. And we had made it, so we could not have been defeated. Then why hadn't they picked me up? It was an open spot here, they could not have missed me. Besides, I probably wasn't the only one lying there. They had been shooting so rapidly. I must turn my head and have a look. I can do that

more comfortably now, because when I had come to myself that time and seen the ant with the blade of grass crawling along head downwards, I had tried to get up and had dropped again not in my former position but on my back. That's why I can see the stars.

I raise myself and sit up. It's a hard thing to do with both my legs crippled. I had almost given it up in despair, but managed it at last with tears of pain springing to my eyes.

Overhead is a bit of blue-black sky with a big star and several small ones shining in it surrounded by something dark and tall. It's the bushes. I'm in the undergrowth—they have overlooked me!

I can feel the roots of my hair crawling on my head.

But what could I be doing in the undergrowth when I was wounded in the clearing? I must have crawled over here dazed with pain. The odd part about it is I cannot stir a limb now, while before I had been able to drag myself over to these bushes. Perhaps I had been hit only once then, and the second bullet had got me here.

Faint pink circles began to swim before my eyes. The big star faded and some of the smaller ones vanished. It was the moon rising. How good it was at home now!

Strange sounds reach my ears. It's like someone moaning. Yes, it's a moan. Is it someone else lying next to me overlooked, someone with crippled legs or a bullet in his stomach? No, the moans sound so near, but there doesn't seem to be anyone near me. . . . My God, why it's me myself! Low piteous moans; is the pain really as bad as that? It must be. Only I do not realize it, my head is so leaden and clouded. I had better lie down again and go to sleep—to sleep, sleep. . . . Would I ever wake up, though? Who cares.

Just as I am preparing to lie down a broad pale strip of moonlight clearly illumines the place where I am lying, and I see something dark and big lying within five paces

of me. The moon picks out bright spots on it here and there. These are buttons or accoutrement. It's a dead body or a wounded man.

I don't care what it is—I'm going to lie down. . . .

No, it cannot be! Our men could not have retreated. They are here, they have driven back the Turks and are holding these positions. Then why is there no murmur of talk, no crackle of camp-fires? It must be that I am too weak to hear anything. They must be here, I am sure.

"Help! Help!"

Wild, hoarse, frantic cries burst from my throat, but remain unanswered. They resound loudly in the night air. All else is silence. Only the grasshoppers keep up their ceaseless chirp. The round face of the moon looks down on me sorrowfully.

If he were wounded he would have come to from such a cry. It is a corpse. One of ours or a Turk? Ah, my God! What difference does it make? And sleep descends upon my burning eyes.

I lie with closed eyes, although I have long been awake. I do not want to open them, as I can feel the sunlight through my closed eyelids; if I open them the glare of the sun will hurt. And I had better not move either. Yesterday (was it yesterday?) I was wounded; a day has passed; more days will pass, and I shall die. Who cares. I had better not stir. Let my body lie still. If only I could stop my brain working, too! But nothing can check it. Thoughts and memories throng in my head. That is not for long, though; soon the end will come. All that will remain will be a few lines in the newspapers saying that we had sustained few casualties—so many wounded, volunteer Private Ivanov killed. They will not even write the name; just—one killed. One private, like that wretched little dog.

A vivid scene leaps to my mind. It was long ago; but then my whole life, *that* life I had lived before I lay here with shot up legs, was so long ago. . . . I was walking down the street, and the sight of a crowd of people made me stop. They were standing in silence, looking at a bleeding ball of white that was whimpering piteously. It was a pretty little dog that had been run over by a horse tram. It was dying, as i am now. A janitor pushed through the crowd, picked the dog up by the scruff of its neck and carried it away. The crowd dispersed.

Would someone carry me away? No, I am to lie here and die. And how beautiful life is! That day (when the accident occurred to the dog) I was happy. I walked along drunk with joy, and had good reason to be. Ah, aching memories, leave me alone, do not torment me! The joy that was, the anguish that is . . . let the anguish alone remain; it is easier to bear than memories which compel comparisons. Ah, what agony! You are worse than wounds!

It is becoming hot, though. The sun is blazing. I open my eyes and see the same bushes, the same sky, only now in daylight. And there is my neighbour. It's a Turk, a corpse. What a huge man! I know him, it's that same man. . . .

Before me lies the man I have killed. What did I kill him for?

He lies there dead and gory. What fate had cast him here? Who is he? Perhaps he, too, like me, has an old mother. How long will she sit on the doorstep of her squalid little clay hut in the evenings, looking northward to see whether her beloved son, her breadwinner and worker, is coming home?

And I? And I too. . . . I would gladly change places with him. How happy he must be not to hear anything, not to feel the pain of his wounds, nor the deadly anguish, nor the thirst. . . . The bayonet had pierced him to the heart.

There was a big black hole in his uniform with blood round it. *I had done that.*

I had not meant to. I had had no grudge against any one when I went to fight. The thought that I would have to kill anybody had not occurred to me somehow. I had merely seen *myself* putting *my own* chest out to meet the bullets. And I had gone and done so.

And now what? Ah, fool, fool! And this poor fellow (he was wearing Egyptian uniform)—he was still less to blame. Until they were packed into a steamer like herrings in a barrel and shipped to Constantinople, he had never heard of Russia or of Bulgaria. He had been told to go, so he had gone. If he had not he would have been bastinadoed, or some pasha perhaps would have shot him down with a revolver. He had made the long and gruelling march from Stambul to Rustchuk. We had attacked, he had defended himself. But seeing what formidable men we were—men who had kept pushing on and on in face of his patented English Peabody-Martini rifle—terror had struck his heart. And when he had wanted to retreat, some little fellow, whom he could have killed with one blow of his dark fist, had rushed at him and plunged his bayonet into his heart.

Was it his fault?

Was it my fault, for that matter, although I did kill him? This thirst is terrible. Thirst! Who knows what that word means! Even when we were going through Rumania, marching fifty versts a day under a terrific heat of over a hundred degrees, I had never felt what I am feeling now. Ah, I wish somebody would come!

My God! Why, he must have some water in that huge flask of his! How can I get to it, though. At what cost? But get to it I must.

I begin to crawl. My legs drag, my weakened arms barely push my inert body forward. The corpse lies within fifteen feet of me, but for me this is more—not more, but

worse—than fifteen miles. But crawl up to it I must. My throat burns. Besides, you'll only die quicker without water. As it is, you stand some chance.

And I crawl forward. My legs drag over the ground, and every movement is agony. I scream, scream and weep with pain, but crawl on. At last I reach the body. There is the flask . . . it has water in it—a lot of water! It must be at least half full. Oh, that water will last me a long time—it will last me till I die!

You are saving my life, my poor victim! Leaning on one elbow, I begin to unstrap the flask, when suddenly I lose my balance and fall face downward on my saviour's chest. He is beginning to give off a strong smell of putrefaction.

I drink my fill. The water is tepid, but it is still drinkable and there is a lot of it. It will keep me alive a few more days. I remember reading in *The Physiology of Everyday Life* that a man could live without food for over a week so long as he had water. It gave the story of a suicide who had killed himself by starvation. It had taken him a long time to kill himself because he had had water to drink.

What of it? What if I do live another five or six days? Our men have retreated, the Bulgarians have run away. There is no road near by. All the same I'll die. Only instead of three days' agony I have given myself a week. Would it not be better to put an end to it? Next to my neighbour lies his rifle, an excellent English fire-arm. I need only stretch my hand out; then—in a flash—it will all be over. The cartridges lie there, too, all in a heap. He had not had time to use them up.

Well, should I get done with it, or wait? Wait for what? Rescue? Death? Wait until the Turks come and start flaying me, stripping the skin off my wounded legs? Better to put an end to it myself.