DAYS AND NIGHTS

A NOVEL BY

Konstantine Simonov

TRANSLATED BY JOSEPH BARNES

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TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY *JOSEPH BARNES*

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DAYS AND NIGHTS

...there were those troubled times
When Russia, young,
Straining its strength,
Was growing under Peter.
More than one sudden, bloody lesson
Came at the hands of a foreign foe.
But in the long ordeal,
Surviving all the blows of fate,
Russia grew strong.
Thus a heavy sledge, which smashes glass,
Can also forge a sword.

–from *Poltava* by
Alexander Pushkin

ONE

AN exhausted woman sat leaning against the clay wall of the shed and in a quiet, tired voice told how Stalingrad had burned.

It was dry and dusty. A little breeze blew yellow puffs of dust along the ground. The woman's legs were bare and burned, and while she spoke she raked the dust with one hand onto her inflamed foot, as if trying to dull the pain. Captain Saburov looked at his own heavy, dusty boots, and automatically moved away from the woman. He was a very big man and seemed, in spite of his broad shoulders, almost too tall; his enormous, hunched figure and his plain, dour face made him look, in some subtle way, like Gorki when he was young.

He stood listening quietly to the woman, looking over her head at his troops unloading from their train directly onto the steppe beyond the last houses at the edge of the town.

At the far end of the steppe, the white band of a salt-water lake shone in the sun. The entire scene looked to him like the very edge of the world. Here, in September, they had reached the last railroad station east of the Volga, the nearest to Stalingrad. From here to the bank of the Volga they would have to go on foot. The little town was called Eltonskaya, after the name

of the salt lake. Saburov remembered from his school days the words Eltonskaya and Baskunchak. Once upon a time they had been only names in a school geography. Now here he was; this was Eltonskaya: small, low houses, dust, a provincial railroad town.*

The woman talked on and on about her misfortunes. Although her words were the same old words, they suddenly gave Saburov a sinking of the heart. Formerly they had retreated from town to town, from Kharkov to Valuiki, from Valuiki to Rossosh, from Rossosh to Boguchar, and in just this same way the women had cried, and he had listened to them with a mixed feeling of shame and weariness. But here was the naked steppe east of the Volga, the edge of the world. And in the words of this woman there was not a tone of reproach, but one of despair. There was no longer anywhere to retreat to in this steppe. For many versts behind them there were no towns, no rivers, nothing.

"Where have they driven us?" he whispered to himself. And all the limitless grief of the days gone by, when he had looked out over this steppe from the platform of a freight car, was compressed into these words.

At this moment his feelings were bitter, but he remembered the frightening distance between where he was now, and the frontier where the war had started—and he thought not about how he had come here, but about how he could go back. And in this unhappy thought there was that special, Russian stub-

* The German summer offensive in 1942 began on June 10 and drove back the Red Army slowly but steadily eastward from Kharkov. General Field Marshal Von Bock was then commanding the German forces in the south of Russia, and by the middle of August they had passed Voronezh and reached the Don River. Marshal Timoshenko fought delaying actions, but pulled out the bulk of his armies for re-equipment and regrouping east of the Volga. Many officers, like Captain Saburov in this story, then returned to the front with units made up partly of veterans and partly of new troops from Siberia. This unit was thus moving west towards the Volga and Stalingrad, where the Russians hoped to check the great German drive through the south of Russia.

bornness which since the beginning of the war had kept him and his comrades from ever admitting the possibility that there might be no going back.

But they could not go on like this. Here, in Eltonskaya, he suddenly felt that they had reached the line beyond which there could be no more retreating.

He looked at the soldiers hurriedly climbing down from the railroad cars, and he wanted somehow to push as quickly as he could through this dust to the Volga. He wanted to cross the river and to feel, suddenly and finally, that there would be no recrossing of it, and that his personal fate would be decided on the other bank, together with the fate of the city. If the Germans took the city, then that would mean he would certainly die. If he could keep them from taking it, then maybe he would live.

The woman, sitting at his feet, kept on talking about Stalingrad. One by one she named the streets that had been destroyed and burned. Their names, strange to Saburov, were filled for her with some special meaning. She knew where and when the houses had been built which were now burned, where and when the trees had been planted which were now cut for barricades in the streets. She mourned them all, as if she were talking not about a great city, but about her own home, where all the things belonging to her personally had come to utter ruin.

About her own home she said nothing. Listening to her, Captain Saburov thought how seldom, all through the war, he had met people who mourned their own lost property. The longer the war lasted, the less people even remembered their abandoned homes, and the more often and obstinately they remembered the cities they had left. Wiping her tears with the end of her kerchief, the woman looked long and questioningly at all who were listening to her, then said thoughtfully and with conviction:

"How much money! How much work!"

"What work?" asked someone, not understanding immediately what she meant.

"Building it all up again," the woman said simply.

Saburov asked the woman about herself. She said her two sons had gone to the front long ago; one of them was already killed. Her husband and her daughter had probably stayed in Stalingrad. When the bombing and the fires started she had been alone, and since then she had heard nothing of them.

"Are you going to Stalingrad?" she asked.

"Yes," said Saburov. He saw no military secret in this. Why else, except to go to Stalingrad, would a Red Army battalion be getting off a train at this moment in this God-forgotten town of Eltonskaya?

"Our name is Klimenko. My husband is Ivan Vassilievich Klimenko, and my daughter is Anya. Maybe you will meet them somewhere," the woman said with a vague sort of hope in her voice.

"It could be." Saburov gave the answer he always gave. Then he thought that it might actually happen, that sometime he might really meet them, by one of those strange accidents which happen so improbably but so often during a war.

The battalion was finishing its unloading. Captain Saburov said good-by to the woman, and after drinking a dipper of water from a pail placed in the street for the soldiers, he walked over to the railroad tracks.

The soldiers sat on the rails. They had taken off their boots and the cloth wrapped around their feet.* Some of the men who had kept part of the ration given them in the morning were eating bread and dry sausage. Through the battalion there had spread a soldiers' rumor, as true as usual, that after unloading they would begin to march, so all of them were

* Strips of coarse linen cloth, called "portyanki," are worn by Russian soldiers around their feet instead of socks. They are given credit by many Russians for the relatively low incidence in the Red Army of both trench foot and frostbite.

hurrying to finish whatever they had not done. Some ate, others mended their torn tunics, still others smoked.

Saburov walked along the railroad line. The train in which the commander of the regiment, Babchenko, was traveling should arrive at any minute, and until then one question would have to remain unanswered: Should Saburov's battalion begin its march to Stalingrad without waiting for the other battalions, or should the entire regiment start together the next morning, after sleeping here?

Captain Saburov walked along the tracks and looked at the men with whom he would go up to the front line the day after tomorrow. Many of them he knew well by face and by name. These were "the men of Voronezh," as he called those who had been with him in the fighting near Voronezh. Each of them was a man to be cherished, because you could command them without explaining all the little details.

They knew, for example, when the black drops which were bombs falling from an airplane were dropping straight on them, so that they had to lie down, and when the bombs were falling farther away, so that you could quietly watch them fall. They knew that when you are under mortar fire it is no more dangerous to move forward than to stay where you are. They knew that tanks most often kill soldiers who are running away from them, and that German automatic rifle fire from two-hundred meters away is always intended more to frighten than to kill.

Soldiers like this made up one-third of his battalion. The rest were going to see war for the first time. By one of the railroad cars, standing guard over equipment which had not yet been unloaded, stood a private who caught Saburov's attention from a distance by his Guardsman's bearing and his thick red moustaches standing out like spears from his face. When Saburov walked up to him he stood smartly to attention, and with straight, unmoving eyes looked in the captain's face.

The way he stood, the way he was dressed, the way he held his rifle, all betrayed a soldier with many years of service. At the same time Saburov, who could place almost all those who had been with him near Voronezh before the reorganization of the division, did not remember this soldier.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Konyukov," the soldier answered, still looking straight into the captain's eyes.

"Have you been in action?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"At Przemsyl."

"Well, well. That means you retreated all the way from Przemsyl."

"Not at all. We went forward there."

Saburov looked at him in surprise. "When? Last year?"

"Not at all. In 1916."

"So."

Saburov looked at Konyukov attentively. He had a serious face, even solemn.

"In this war, have you been in the army long?" asked Saburov.

"No. This is my first month."

Saburov looked again with satisfaction at Konyukov's strong face, and walked on farther.

By the last car he met his chief of staff, Lieutenant Maslennikov, supervising the unloading. Maslennikov reported to him that in five minutes the unloading would be finished, and looking at his square wrist watch asked:

"Comrade Captain, may I check my watch with yours?"

Saburov silently took his watch out of his pocket. It was fastened to its strap with a safety pin. Maslennikov's watch was five minutes slow. Distrustfully he looked at Saburov's old, silver watch with its cracked crystal.

Saburov smiled. "Never mind," he said, "change yours. In the first place, it was my father's watch, made by Buré. In the second place, you'd better get used to the fact that in war the correct time is always that of your commanding officer."

Maslennikov looked again at both watches, carefully changed his own and, saluting, asked if he might go. He had been in charge of the trip on the train, and now this unloading was the closest he had come to a front line assignment. Here, in Eltonskaya, it seemed to him he could almost smell the nearness of the front. He was excited with his first taste of war. Everything assigned to him today by Saburov he had carried out with special accuracy and exactness.

"Yes, yes, go right ahead," said Saburov after a moment's silence.

Looking at this red-cheeked, boyish face, so full of life, Saburov wondered anxiously what it would look like after a week, when the dirty, exhausting, merciless life in trenches would have stamped itself for the first time on Maslennikov.

A small engine, puffing, pulled up on a siding with the long awaited second train.

The commander of the regiment, Lieutenant Colonel Babchenko, jumped down from the step of the car while it was still moving. He was always in a hurry. He twisted his leg as he jumped, swore, and turned toward Saburov, who was hurrying toward him.

"How is the unloading going?" he asked in a surly voice, looking away from Saburov.

"It is finished."

Babchenko looked around him. The unloading obviously was finished. But his sullen look and severe tone, which Babchenko considered necessary in all conversation with subordinates, demanded that he make some kind of observation in order to support his own prestige.

"What are you doing now?" he asked abruptly.

"I am waiting for your orders."

"It would be better to feed the men than just to let them wait."

"If we are going to move forward at once, I had decided to feed the men at the first stop for rest. But if we are going to spend the night here, I had decided to give them a hot meal here, in an hour," Saburov answered slowly, dragging his words a little, as was his custom, and with the quiet logic which particularly irritated the eternally hurrying Babchenko.

The lieutenant colonel was silent.

"Do you want them to eat now?" asked Saburov.

"No, let them eat at the first break. Get started, without waiting for the others. Order your battalion to form ranks."

Saburov called Maslennikov and ordered him to line the men up. Babchenko kept a sullen silence. He was used to doing everything himself, and just because of this he was always up to his neck in detail, always hurrying, and often not accomplishing what he set out to do. As a matter of fact the commander of a battalion is not himself required to form his men in ranks for a march. But the fact that Saburov had turned the task over to another, and stood quietly beside him, the commander of the regiment doing nothing, irritated Babchenko.

He liked to have his subordinates sweat and run. But he never achieved this with the quiet Saburov. Turning around, he began to watch the column forming ranks. Saburov stayed by his side. He knew that the commander of the regiment did not like him, but he had become accustomed to this and he paid no attention to it.

For a minute they both stood silent. Suddenly Babchenko said, still without turning towards Saburov, but in quite a different tone, with unexpected anger and venom in his voice:

"Just look what they are doing to our people, the swine."

Beside them, marching with difficulty along the tracks, filed

a long line of refugees from Stalingrad, tattered, exhausted, many of them wearing bandages which were gray with dust.

Both men automatically looked in the direction in which the regiment was about to march. There lay the same low steppe as here, except that the dust, hanging over the little hills, looked like faraway puffs of battle smoke.

"The assembly point will be in Rybachi," said Babchenko. "Proceed by forced march and send messengers back to me." He was speaking again with his former sullen expression on his face. He turned away and went back to his railroad car.

Saburov went out on the road. The regiment had already formed, but it was standing at ease waiting for the order to march. In the ranks the men talked quietly to each other. Walking past Company Two Saburov again saw the red-moustached Konyukov, who was saying something in a lively manner, gesturing vigorously with his hands. Saburov walked closer.

"You want to know why it's better for us to attack than to go backwards?" Konyukov was saying. "Why, it's better because when we attack, with the east behind us, in the daytime, when it's hot, the sun is nice and warm on our backs, and in the evening, when it gets cold, we have it in our faces. Everything works by schedule."

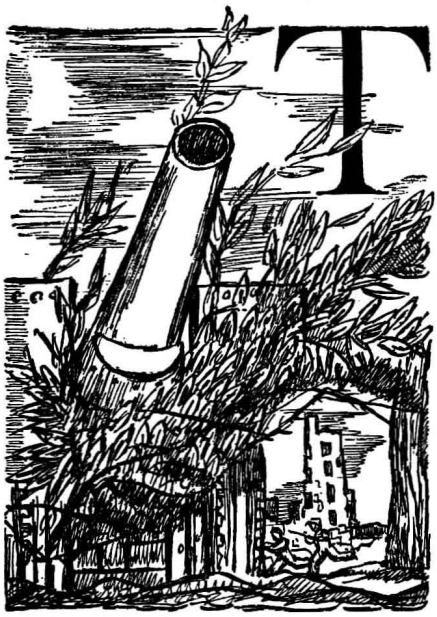
"And do the bullets go by schedule, too?" someone asked with a smile.

Saburov walked past Konyukov to the head of the column.

"Battalion, march!"

The column moved. Saburov strode ahead. The dust in the distance hanging over the steppe still looked to him like smoke but then, he thought, maybe the steppe in front of him was really burning.

TWO



TWENTY days before, on a stifling August day, bombers of the Richthofen squadron had hung from early morning suspended in the sky over Stalingrad. It was hard to say how many there actually were and how many times they bombed, flew away, and came back again, but observers counted 2,000 airplanes over the city during the day.

The city was burning. It burned that night, all the following day, and all the following night. And although on the first day of the fire the fighting was still sixty kilometers from the city, at the crossings of the Don River, it was with that fire that the great battle of Stalingrad began, because both Germans and Russians—they in front, we behind—from that moment watched the glow of Stalingrad. All the fighting thoughts of both the warring sides, from that day on, were pulled toward the burning city as if by a magnet.

On the third day, when the fire started to die down, you began to smell in Stalingrad that special heavy odor of ashes which from then on never left the city through all the months of siege. The smells of hot iron, charcoal, and burned brick mixed themselves into a single, heavy, caustic stench. Cinders and ash settled quickly on the ground, but as soon as even the

lightest breeze came off the Volga, this black dust began to roll in puffs along the burned-out streets, and then it seemed that the town was smoking again.

The Germans continued their bombardment of Stalingrad, now here, now there, starting new fires which no one bothered about any longer. Usually they burned themselves out relatively quickly because after consuming a few new houses, the flames soon came to a street already gutted and, finding nothing more to feed on, went out. But the city was so enormous that somewhere, just the same, something was always burning, and after a few days everyone became used to this unending fire as if it were an essential part of the night landscape.

Ten days after the start of the fire, the Germans came so close that their artillery and mortar shells began to explode not only on the edges, but in the center of the city. On the twenty-first day there came that minute when it might have seemed, to a man believing only in military theory, that to defend the city further was useless and even impossible. To the north of Stalingrad the Germans had already reached the Volga, to the south they were approaching it. The city, spread out over a length of sixty-five kilometers, was nowhere more than five kilometers wide, and along almost its entire length the Germans had already occupied the city's western districts.

Cannon fire, which began at seven every morning, did not stop until dusk. An uninitiated man happening into army headquarters might have thought that everything was in fine shape, and that in any case the defenders still had great strength. Looking at the staff map of the city, where the disposition of the regiments was shown, he would have seen a relatively small sector on the map thickly written over with the numbers of the divisions and brigades defending the city. He would have heard the orders given by telephone to the commanders of these divisions and brigades, and he might have assumed that it was necessary only to carry out these orders

accurately for success to be assured beyond any doubt. In order really to understand what was going on, this uninitiated observer would have had to go to the divisions themselves, which were marked on the map in such precise little red semicircles.

Having retreated from far beyond the Don, tired out after two months of heavy fighting, any one of these divisions, in its number of men, was at best no better than a regiment. At staff headquarters, in the artillery regiments, and in the medical corps there were still enough people, but in the rifle regiments and battalions men were counted one by one. In recent days everyone who was not absolutely essential had been taken from headquarters and rear units. Ambulance men, orderlies, telephone operators, cooks, and chemical warfare specialists were all transferred to the regiment commanders and, because there was no other choice, became infantrymen. Although the chief of staff of the army, looking at his map, knew very well that not one of his divisions was any longer a division, nor even a regiment, still the size of the sectors which they occupied demanded that each should carry out the military tasks which fall on the shoulders of a division. Although they knew that this burden was almost beyond human strength, still every officer from the highest to the lowest assigned these tasks to his subordinates because there was nothing else to do.

Before the war the commander of the army would probably have laughed if someone had told him the day would come when the entire mobile reserve which he could move around would consist of three hundred men. But today was that day. Three hundred machine gunners loaded in twenty trucks—this was all he could throw quickly from one end of the city to the other in the critical moment of any break-through.

On the large, flat top of Mamai Kurgan,* about one kilo-

* The Mamai Kurgan is a bluff on the west side of the Volga at Stalingrad, next to the business center of the city. It was once used by Tartar chieftains as a burial ground; later it became the city's principal park. On September 14 the Germans seized it, but were driven back by Major General Alexander