



**ALEXANDER GONCHAR**

# **STANDARD-BEARERS**

**A NOVEL**



**FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE**  
**Moscow 1948**

III. VI. 52

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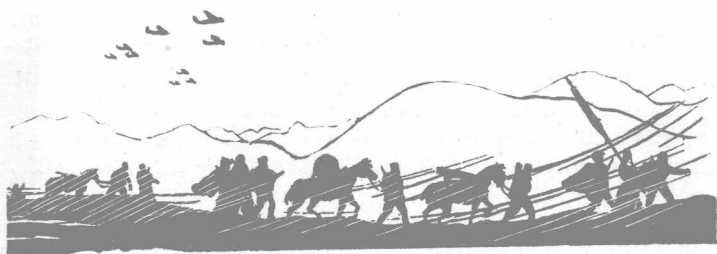
TRANSLATED BY N. J O C H E L



PART ONE  
**THE ALPS**

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# I

**I**T WAS several days since the forward troops had pushed across the frontier and disappeared behind the hills of that alien land. At the river crossing, frontier-guards were examining the papers of squads and individual men on their way to catch up with their units. They had put up the striped frontier-post again and were now erecting the sentry box. The frontier! We had come back to it, and the sentry had taken up his station at the very spot where he had stood on June 22, 1941. We had forgotten nothing; there was much that we had learnt. We were alive, maturer now, and the wiser for what we had been through. Were you alive, though, enemy airman with the Iron Cross on your chest—you who on that black Sunday long before dropped the first bomb on this sentry box? Did you think then that the hour of your doom would be striking soon, that men of the new, battle-born Second Ukrainian Front would be back in their deathless khaki beside this river—nay, that they would be crossing it? “It’s destiny!” you would have said. Ay! the destiny of just armies is ever glorious.

When Junior Lieutenant Chernysh was nearing the post, his attention was caught by a big-boned, broad-shouldered sergeant talking to one of the frontier-guards. The sergeant's close-cropped tawny head kept thrusting forward, and his arms were crooked in the elbow, as if he were creeping stealthily to pounce on a quail in the grass. As far as Chernysh could make out, this redheaded sergeant had been stationed in 1941 right here, at the frontier. Now he was giving a humorous exhibition of how they had first been bombed, how he had sought cover in the willow bushes, how no hole had seemed deep enough and he had burrowed into the ground, while the plane had kept after him like a hawk after a field mouse. He arched his broad greasy back tiger-fashion, remembering how the chills had run down it then. Some days those had been!...

Studying Chernysh's papers, the frontier-guard repeated the number of his unit. The sergeant broke off his story and turned to the lieutenant:

"You're bound for the Nth, Comrade Lieutenant?"

"I am."

"Then we'll be travelling together. *Bună ziua.*" \*

You couldn't tell by the sergeant's face if he was fooling or serious. He wore the kind of mock-ingenuous expression from which you can expect all manner of surprises. The men grinned in advance as they looked at him.

"Only if you don't mind my saying so, Comrade Lieutenant, I don't seem to remember you."

"This... is the first time I'm going up."

"Oh!" The sergeant pushed out his lips, as if much surprised by the fact. "First time! Then maybe you'll fall back five paces so I can salute you in proper style!"

Chernysh reddened with annoyance.

\* The Rumanian for "Good day."

"Comrade Sergeant!" (The sergeant clicked his heels with exaggerated precision.) "What are you playing the good soldier Schweik for? Why are you so unkempt?"

The sergeant hadn't tucked in his undershirt properly, and it stuck out beneath his short blouse. It was grimy, and that seemed to disconcert him for a moment. But he wasn't dismayed and showed no signs of blushing. For that matter, it was hard to imagine that he could blush at all. His face remained an earthy grey even after he had wiped off the dust.

"Don't get a down on my shirt for not being as clean as it might be," he said, tucking it in, and his eyelids twitched nervously. "It wasn't my mother that washed it, you see, it was the girls in the front-line laundries, and their hands have long been raw from the soap.... Poor old shirt! Never mind, I'll be washing you myself soon, and in the Danube too!... Now the lieutenant's rig-out is another matter. All nice and new and spick-and-span.... You're from across the Volga, I take it.... Come to the Ukraine by rail?"

"All right, I did. What about it?"

"Well... I made the trip crawling on my belly," the sergeant said, his voice down to nearly a whisper, and so simply that Chernysh was sorry he'd lost his temper.

"So you're really from the Nth?" he queried, anxious to make amends.

"You bet I am!"

"Well... suppose we push off together?"

"Sure thing. My name's Kazakov."

With a final salute to the frontier-guards, they set off across the makeshift bridge that thousands of feet had tramped over in the past few days.

"Here's hoping you'll get to Berlin!" the guards called after them.

"We'll send you a wire when we arrive," Kazakov returned with a straight face.

The pine boards creaked under their feet, the sun paled, as though it were going to rain. The river murmured, covered with beads of silvery foam—its muddy waves were rolling down from the mountains to the distant, unknown sea. Ahead, a purple cloud was floating towards them across the mountaintops; the road beyond the river climbed up and up, and it seemed as if this weren't a cloud before them, but another mountain, and they could reach it too.

Kazakov's boots weren't the regulation kind—they were spoils of war, and with their wide, low uppers they made him look like some bow-legged cavalryman. He walked in a queer, padding way, his whole body leaning forward. As they went, he told Chernysh how he had cut loose from hospital. They'd been giving him electric treatments there for his nerves, to stop his eyelids twitching and his hands shaking when he got excited. But when he discovered that his outfit was already over the frontier, it was too much, and he lit out.

"It just draws you, like liquor does a drinker," he said. "I suppose I'm no use for 'civvy street' any more. Stay a soldier the rest of my life, most likely."

"The soldier for life!" Chernysh grinned. "There used to be students for life once upon a time... And how did you know about me?..."

"That you're just out of training school, you mean?" "Yes."

"Oh, I've just got the scout's eye."

On the hilltop above the road, a white pillar loomed. Climbing higher, they saw it wasn't a pillar really, but a tall, whitewashed stone cross, under a little wooden shelter that time had blackened and warped. The figure on the cross had turned dark too, and cracked from the sun and wind.

"There's our 'L'," Kazakov said. A big letter "L," with an arrow pointing westward, had been drawn in

charcoal just under the crucifix. "That means we're on the right track."

Westward! As though struck by the same idea, both turned their heads and looked down—at the crossing, at the river that had once again become the boundary. Beyond it lay their native land, wrapped in the hazy mist of spring. Surely, if not for that trembling bluish haze the whole country would unfold before their eyes: drying fields disfigured with trenches, scorched villages, blasted towns, roads littered with the twisted metal of charred tanks.... Ravaged homeland, bloody cockpit, field of battle—dearer still out here to your sons! Kazakov's face grew solemn, the flippant expression disappeared.

"You should have seen us a year ago... when we first entered the Ukraine.... Spring it was, just around dawn.... Hungry, fagged out, up to our knees in mud.... Think of it: for two years we hadn't set foot in the Ukraine, for two years we'd only heard it groaning, seen from a long way off how it burned. And here was the Kursk country coming to an end, and once past that state farm, the Ukraine started, we knew. We hadn't slept for several nights before that, but here there was no holding us! How we rushed that farmhouse and swept across the field beyond! Our Komsomol organizer, Yaroslavtsev, he takes a look at the map, and 'This,' he calls out, 'this is already the Ukraine!' And the whole lot of us—Siberians and Tajiks and Byelorussians and Ukrainians—we went down on the ground and kissed it. Couldn't help crying, would you believe it!... Stood there on our knees in that unploughed field, coats all covered with mud, with our caps off...."

They hadn't noticed a shadow settling; the rough ground looked darker now and seemed to be rocking gently, like a ship's deck. For the first time they sensed and were consciously aware that this was alien soil.

Rain pattered down, and the falling drops sent up puffs of brown dust, as if they were dum-dum bullets.

"Where's your coat, Sergeant?" Chernysh asked, pulling off his own.

"Oh, I'll get me one," Kazakov replied vaguely. "Let's stop under this mushroom till it blows over," he said, moving up to the crucifix. "The saint won't mind, will he?"

"That's the Saviour. . . . Get in under my coat."

Both of them got in under it.

The rain beat down harder and harder—and on the plain below, that last bit of their home country, the sun was shining still. The white nimbus hadn't got there yet, and their native green steppes were smiling a last sunny smile at them where they stood on this alien hill. And both Chernysh, the youthful subaltern in his smart new accoutrements, and the tough sergeant stooping beside him so as not to pull off the lieutenant's coat—both of them devoured that sunlit distance with their eyes, as if they wanted to drink it into their hearts and take it away with them.

## II

"What part of the country d'you come from?" Chernysh asked.

"Donbas."

"Your people been writing?"

"Got no people. Never had any."

"An orphan, are you?"

"Some orphan! Kids are orphans. And I'm—well, let's see, how old am I? Age-class of 1920. . . . Yes. . . . 1920."

The rain ceased as suddenly as it had begun. The last drops were rolling down the naked body on the crucifix; the rain had washed it clean of the dust.

They came out from their shelter and Kazakov started rolling a cigarette.

"Well, their gods are just the same as ours," he remarked, with a sidelong glance at the white cross. "What did they crucify him for?"

"Oh, it's a whole story," Chernysh replied, but he didn't stop to tell it. "So . . . it's on to the West, is it?"

"Absolutely."

They started off. The sodden clay stuck to their boots; walking was a hard job now.

"It's heavy ground," Kazakov said, scowling. "It was easier over there."

"Yes, it was easier."

And they looked round once more. Chernysh's eyes lit up and seemed deeper, and his face looked as if he were standing on parade while the colours were carried past.

"Dear motherland!" The words broke from him involuntarily, youthfully clear and solemn. And even to Kazakov, who couldn't stand any sort of high-sounding talk, they rang genuine and sincere.

"Expect us home," he said. "We'll come back when we've won the war . . . or we won't come back at all!"

They started descending, and the hill blocked out that last view of home. Strange fields stretched by the roadside, broken up into long narrow strips.

"It's queer even to see these little patches," said Kazakov. "Hard to believe that our land used to look like that."

Chernysh gazed silently at the tiny plots, as though reading a book of abysmal penury.

"This wasn't the way I pictured Europe," Kazakov confessed. "I thought it was all cities and gardens, one on top of another—that you couldn't walk a step without running into somebody, it was so overcrowded. They're forever wanting more living space, aren't they? And here it turns out their villages are even farther apart than ours are in the Donbas."

The rain-washed crops were a vivid green. Myriads of pliant stalks flanked the roadside ditch. The sky cleared again; but all the way to the first village they didn't meet a soul. There were only the stone crosses gleaming white above the road; and the markers charcoaled upon them pointed westward.

The walls in the village main street were covered with inscriptions testifying that a big and lively army had lately passed that way. They still echoed its laugh. "Vasya and Kolya, catch up!" "Be seeing you in Bucharest—Balabukha and the Bull"—though hundreds of miles of enemy territory still lay between here and Bucharest. "Vladimirov, step on it!" And so on.

And over it all the "L"... the "L"—and a big arrow pointing to the West.

A tambourine spoke up suddenly in the middle of the village, a fiddle squeaked. A group of soldiers stood in a semicircle in front of a brown peasant house. An old Gypsy sat on the doorstep, the fiddle pressed against his beard, and with him was a big-eyed lad with a tambourine. Before them, some boys and girls were dancing, kicking up the mud. Their curly pates tousled and homespun shirts hitched up high, they turned frequent cartwheels, at which everyone roared with laughter. The old man cried out encouragement. At the sight of Chernysh, with his officer's insignia, he jumped to his feet, bent over double and started playing "Katyusha." Chernysh felt ashamed for the old man's cringing and the children's pitiful capers.

"Come on," he said.

But Kazakov was keen to stay.

"This must be some of their West-European culture," he said. "Let's have a look at it."

"You'll have plenty of chances yet," Chernysh insisted.

Beyond the village they met Rumanians and Bes-

sarabians transporting our wounded in their ox-drawn carts. The oxen had worn their feet sore on the stony road and were limping, but the Rumanians in their grey jackets and tall black caps walked stolidly beside the carts, like the salt-carriers of old. Some fed the beasts out of their hands as they went. Gaunt, haggard and swarthy from constant exposure, with prominent melancholy eyes, these men made one think of the crucifixes—they might have stepped down from the white roadside crosses.

Once in a while, on one of the carts, a head would be raised heavily under a bloodstained coat.

"Brother! . . . Say, brother. . . . Give us a smoke."

Kazakov doled out the remains of his tobacco. For the first time Chernysh regretted that he didn't smoke.

"How far's the front?" Kazakov tried to find out.

"Oh . . . a long way. . . ."

"Well, what's the distance?"

"We've been moving . . . two days now. . . ."

The carts creaked, muffled groans came from the wounded, and Chernysh gazed at them with a kind of awe. They had been where he hadn't and seemed to him a different race of men. It made him feel guilty to be walking past them, hale and hearty, with the hot young blood glowing in his face. He pictured how, before long, he too might be lying on a cart with his coat flung over him, wincing every time the wooden wheels bumped against a stone.

They stopped overnight with a taciturn Rumanian, in a house full of children and chickens. The woman of the house served some goat's cheese for supper, dumped a hot round of *mamaliga*\* on the table and sliced it with a thread. Her husband, in rawhide sandals and narrow woollen trousers, sat silent on the bed, sucking at his

\* Rumanian maize-pudding.

empty pipe. In the corners, the swarthy, grimy children goggled at the visitors. Apparently, they were surprised that these strange men, of whom the schoolbooks said that they would kill everybody, weren't doing any killing, but laughing and eating *mamaliga*. The woman threw the children a round of *mamaliga* too, and they fell upon it like so many sparrows on a sunflower. Kazakov looked and looked at the youngsters gulping down the hot lumps, then gave a sudden sigh.

"We've got kiddies like that too.... In the Ukraine last winter—you'd enter a village, and there wouldn't be a soul in it. Everything a wreck. Only some kiddies squatting on the embers, trying to warm up. 'Where's your Pa?' 'Haven't got one.' 'And your Ma?' 'Got no Ma.' Well, you'd pull off your coat, start shovelling. Make a dugout for them, leave 'em some hardtack—and on again to the West."

"After this war," said Chernysh, "this won't happen again. Children won't squat on the cinders of their homes.... People won't cringe like that fiddler did today.... After this war, everybody must have a decent human life...."

Kazakov walked over to a scraggy little girl with a cross around her neck. "See what we want, curly?"

"Nu știu...."\*

He put his heavy, calloused hand upon her head.

"Don't want you to spend your life slicing *mamaliga* with a thread. See?"

"Nu știu!" she repeated stubbornly.

"Want you to be free...."

"Nu știu.... *Trăiască România mare!*"\*\* the child brought out suddenly, and her black eyes gleamed with defiance.

\* I don't understand.

\*\* Long live the Greater Rumania!