

Э. Казакевич
Spring
on the Oder

*A Novel
in Three Parts*

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE

Moscow 1953

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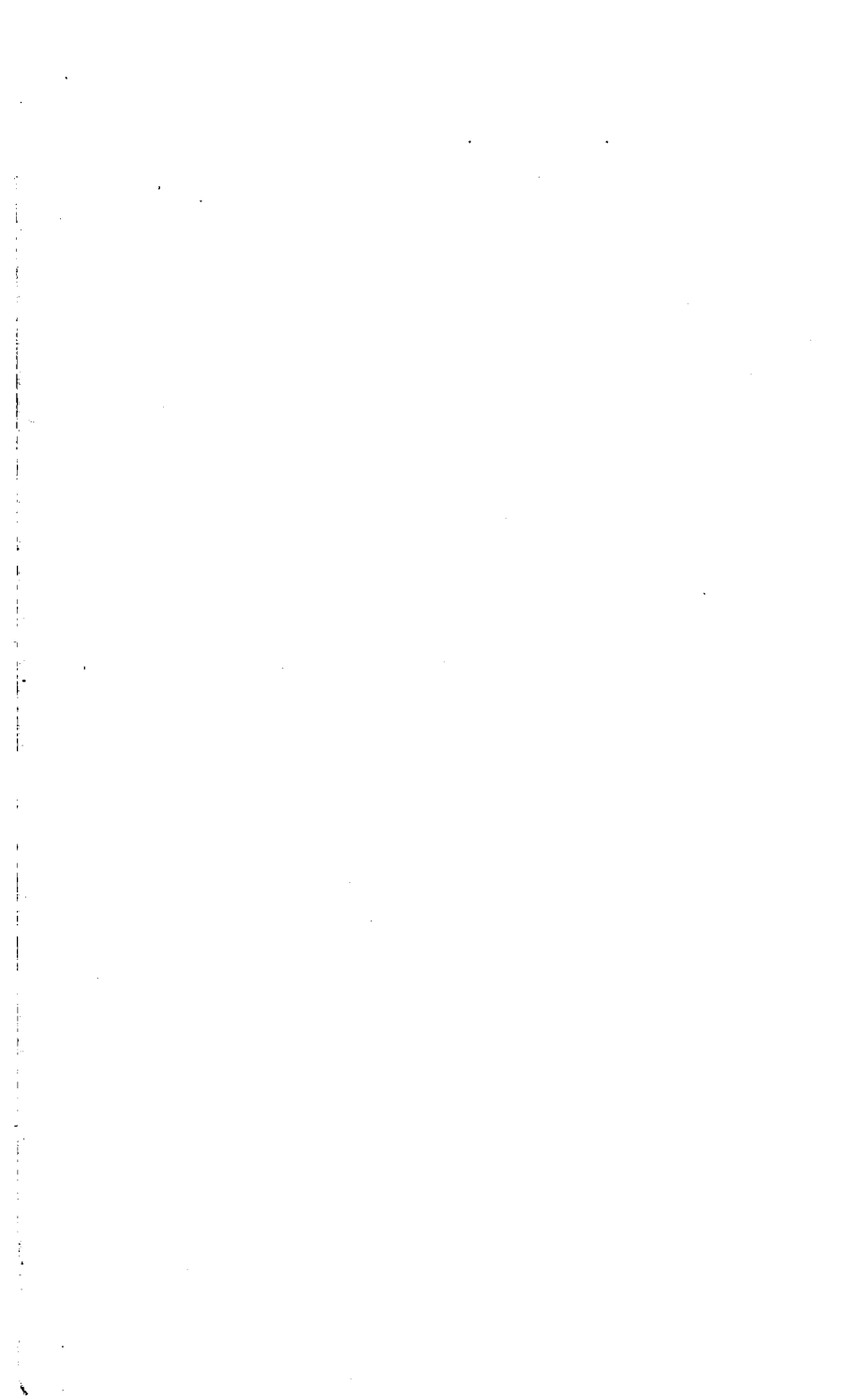
E. Kazakevich

SPRING
ON THE ODER

A Novel

STALIN PRIZE

1949



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Moscow 1953

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Part One
★
Major
of the Guards







I

ONE MISTY winter morning when the crows were cawing as insistently and hoarsely as their kin near Moscow, a neat little pine forest appeared round a bend in the road, exactly like the one through which the soldiers had just passed. But this was Germany.

For the time being, however, that was known only at Headquarters. The soldiers, the ordinary men without maps, missed the great moment and it was only in the evening that they found out where they were.

And then they looked upon the soil of Germany, this well-tilled soil defended since ancient times by Slav strongholds and Russian swords against the barbarian invasions from the east. They saw the neat woods and orderly fields, studded with cottages and barns, planted with flowers and hedges. It was difficult to believe that from this land, so ordinary in appearance, there had risen a plague which threatened the whole world.

"So that's what you are like!" said one stocky Russian soldier thoughtfully, for the first time calling Germany to her face "you" instead of the abstract and hostile "she" he had called her for the past four years. And the soldiers thought too of the great Stalin who had led them here. At the thought of him they looked at each other and their eyes widened with the proud feeling of their own invincible strength.

“So that’s the kind of men we are!”

Troops were moving along the road in an unceasing stream. Infantry, lorries, long-barrelled guns and snub-nosed howitzers were heading westwards. From time to time the stream halted because of some clumsy driver and indignant shouts rose from all sides. True, in these shouts, usual enough on a jammed front-line road, that former note of irritation and anger was now missing. Everybody had become kinder to each other.

The columns started again and the infantry command: “Right wheel!” resounded; the traffic regulators waved their flags, and it would all have been very ordinary and rather boring if it were not for the words: “We are in Germany,” rushing like wine to everybody’s head and gleaming like fire in everybody’s eyes.

Had there been a poet among this mass of people his eyes would have been dazzled by the great multitude of impressions.

Indeed every man on this road could easily become the hero of a poem or story. Why not describe this picturesque group of soldiers with a huge sergeant standing out among them, whose face is either so sunburnt that his hair seems white or whose hair is so fair that his face seems dark?

Or these cheerful artillerymen clinging to their huge cannon like birds on a tree?

Or this thin young signaller who has been dragging his wire coil with him almost from the villages round Moscow and has now carried it right on to German soil?

Or these good-looking, clear-eyed nurses perching so importantly on a lorry loaded with tents and medical supplies? At the sight of them a soldier’s shoulders somehow straighten up, his chest sticks out, his eyes shine. . . .

And over there a car has appeared on the road, carrying a famous general. Behind it an armoured troop carrier follows with a heavy calibre machine gun pointed

threateningly upward. Why not write about this general, about his sleepless nights and famous battles?

Behind each one of these people lie two thousand kilometres of fabulous exploits.

An unusual spectacle has caught the attention of the soldiers and set them all laughing.

Along the road, wet with melting snow, a carriage was speeding. Yes, it was an elegant, old-fashioned carriage, tinted with purple varnish. At the back protruded the steps for the liveried grooms. On the doors gleamed a blue and gold coat of arms: a stag's head with branching antlers, on the right, the jagged battlements of a castle, on the left, a helmet with a vizor, above and below—a Latin motto: "Pro Deo et Patria." However, on the high coachman's box sat not a count's lackey but a young soldier in a wadded jacket, clicking his tongue and urging on his horses like a real old Russian coachman.

"Gee-up, my beauties!"

The soldiers cheered on the carriage with shouts, whistles and jokes:

"Heh! Where's the funeral!"

"Look! They've got a corpse on board!"

"Fellows! The museum's coming! . . ."

The "coachman" tried to preserve an unruffled mien but his beardless, flushed face quivered with barely restrained laughter.

The passengers in this strange conveyance were travelling together by chance. Either they were trying to catch up with their own units or were going on to new assignments. Young Captain Chokhov, a man of few words, had found the carriage at the gates of a country manor. An old Pole, serving on the estate, explained that for lack of petrol the baron, his master, had intended to flee westwards in it but did not have time to do so: Russian tanks had gone past—and so the baron changed his clothes and went off on foot.

Promising to pick up the runaway baron and teach him a lesson if he ran across him, Captain Chokhov set off to catch up with the unit to which he had been assigned. There were many cars going in the same direction but Captain Chokhov liked independence. On the way he picked up two soldiers and the number grew as they travelled. On the very next kilometre they were joined by a young, well-built woman-doctor with captain's shoulder tabs and, half an hour later, by a lieutenant with a bandaged hand who was returning from a hospital.

A conversation began which was shortly interrupted by a newcomer, a broad-shouldered, blue-eyed Major who jumped lightly on to the carriage step. He threw a humorous glance at the satin upholstery and said mockingly:

"Red Army's compliments to the honoured count's family."

Nobody noticed how the woman gasped softly and fixed her huge, grey eyes, which had suddenly become radiant, on the Major. Nor did the Major notice this. He went on:

"I've travelled on anything you like: boats, rafts, in air sledges and reindeer sleds—but never in a carriage! Now I'll see what it's like!"

His lively talk, filled with a merry humour, immediately broke through the reserve which usually grips such chance gatherings. Everyone started laughing and taking notice of each other in a friendly way, like children caught at some forbidden prank. In the blue eyes of the Major glowed that friendly, joyous spark which usually expresses something like this: "I love all of you sitting here, without distinction of sex, age or nationality because you are my friends although strangers to me; kinsmen although distant, because we are all from the Soviet Union and all share in one and the same task." People with such a spark in their eyes are loved by children and soldiers.

The "feudal" horses, whipped on by a young collective farmer, galloped along even more merrily. The Major almost fell down on the seat, then glanced at the woman, and exclaimed:

"Wait a moment! Is it you, Tanya?" and he grasped her hand firmly, suddenly becoming serious.

Everybody felt glad about the chance meeting of the two people, acquainted, perhaps, since the almost forgotten times before the war. But suspecting something romantic in this, everyone, after the usual remarks befitting such occasions ("What? Met a friend of yours?" "What a coincidence!" etc.), tactfully turned aside, giving the Major and the woman-doctor a chance to talk and perhaps even to kiss.

There were no kisses, however. Although the acquaintance of Major of the Guards, Sergei Platonovich Lubentsov with Captain of the Medical Service, Tatyana Vladimirovna Koltsova was a very old one, it had been fortuitous and short: for six days they had been together in the same group escaping from encirclement between Vyazma and Moscow during the memorable year 1941.

Lubentsov was a lieutenant then. Still very young, not more than twenty-two years old, even in those days he appeared gay, although this outward gaiety cost him no little effort of will. But he had considered it almost his Komsomol duty to appear gay in those difficult days.

He was marching with the remnants of his platoon and all the time, fighting men, singly and in small groups, who had lost their own units were joining him. Some of those men were depressed, many were unaccustomed to the jobs of war. He had to cheer them, reassure them and finally, simply to prepare them for battle in the face of many dangers.

Once, when bivouacking, in a marsh overgrown with thickets, someone, groaning softly with exhaustion, asked:

"But perhaps we shan't be able to get through?"

Lubentsov, just then, was cutting a thick stick with a Finnish knife. He was making a stretcher for a tankman who had been wounded in both legs. Hearing the question, he answered:

"Well, perhaps we shan't." And after a pause he added unexpectedly: "But that's not the point."

Bewildered grumbling was heard. Lubentsov explained with deliberate carelessness:

"We'll stay in the German rear as partisans. Aren't we a unit ourselves? We've even got our own doctor," he nodded towards Tanya, "and we'll have enough arms."

Where did he find his confidence and firmness in those difficult days? He was born and bred in the Amur Taiga, he was tough, an excellent pathfinder, and he knew a host of useful things about life in the forest. But that was not the root of the matter. There burned within the Lieutenant an absolute certainty of final victory over any enemy. This certainty at times even surprised Tanya who was almost collapsing from the long march, the unusual hardships and the sadness of her thoughts.

She had joined the army in the field straight from the Medical Institute and had barely had time to begin carrying out her duties in a regimental aid station when German tanks broke through and advanced towards Moscow.

The young Lieutenant soon began to treat Tanya, the only woman in his party, with special attention, behind which there was more than ordinary sympathy.

He was so sorry for her that it hurt him. She was so pale, so large-eyed and so sad that he was ready to carry her on his shoulders along these autumn-rutted tracks, thick with clinging mud and hedged in with wet, red bushes. She walked on silent and uncomplaining without looking aside, and this silence of hers and her presence itself had a beneficial influence on the others. She, of course, did not know this but Lubentsov knew it and sometimes he reproached the laggards:

"You would do well to learn something from this girl...."

Thin ice would cover the puddles in the morning and the sky frowned threateningly. The Germans were near. Tanya was suffering; her hands were so frozen that she could not do her hair or wash her face. And all her thoughts seemed frozen too, except for one, "Oh, how bad I feel!" But this Lieutenant shaved himself every day with a safety razor, complained with a smile in his eye of the absence of boot polish and once even washed himself down to the waist beside a stream. At the mere sight of this bathing Tanya's teeth began to chatter.

She was grateful to him for everything: for the tiny campfire he built especially for her in bivouac—he had forbidden all campfires because of the danger; for the way he taught her to take care of her feet and for the way he looked at her sympathetically, saying from time to time:

"You are doing fine. You'll make a good soldier."

Active, tireless, with a good understanding of people, he had a word of encouragement not only for Tanya, but for everyone. Thanks to his determination and coolheadedness they all began to feel calmer and more confident.

Before dawn he usually went off with two men to reconnoitre. Once he came back gloomy and distracted. In the neighbouring village, he told the others, there were captured Russian soldiers, most of them slightly wounded. The badly wounded, he had discovered, had been shot on the road by the Germans.

"They are guarding the prisoners," he said after a pause, "but the guard is only fifteen men strong. There are no sentries posted."

Glancing questioningly at the men gathered round him, he went on:

"And their means of communication is just a single wire ... cut it and it's all over."

There was silence. Suddenly a man in a peasant's sheepskin coat with an astrakhan collar stepped out in front. So far this man had trudged on silently, staring at his feet and taking no notice of anybody.

"There's no need to get mixed up in a fool's game," he said slowly and authoritatively. "It's a job beyond our strength. You say—there's fifteen of them and about fifty of us. All right. But them—they are regular troops. . . . Germans!"

The Lieutenant frowned and said:

"This is not a trade union meeting. It's a military unit, even if it is a mixture."

"You can't teach me army regulations, I know more about them than you do."

"All the better," retorted Lubentsov quietly. "Then you ought to know that I am in command of this unit and my orders must be obeyed."

"Who appointed you?" the man flared up. "Don't you know who I am? I'm a captain."

Lubentsov suddenly burst out laughing.

"Now, just what kind of a captain are you?" he said. "It's a sheepskin you are, not a captain!"

Crestfallen but still defiant, the man in the sheepskin asked:

"I suppose it was you that demoted me?"

"Why?" answered Lubentsov and, turning away, he added, "You have demoted yourself."

They freed the prisoners more easily than even Lubentsov had expected. The guards, taken by surprise, put up no resistance. They had been feeling too sure of themselves. Their arms were stacked neatly in the entrance of the village Soviet, and Lubentsov distributed the captured rifles among the liberated wounded, to whom Tanya gave what medical attention she could.

The group moved on at a quicker pace, for Lubentsov feared pursuit. They marched on in good heart as if the