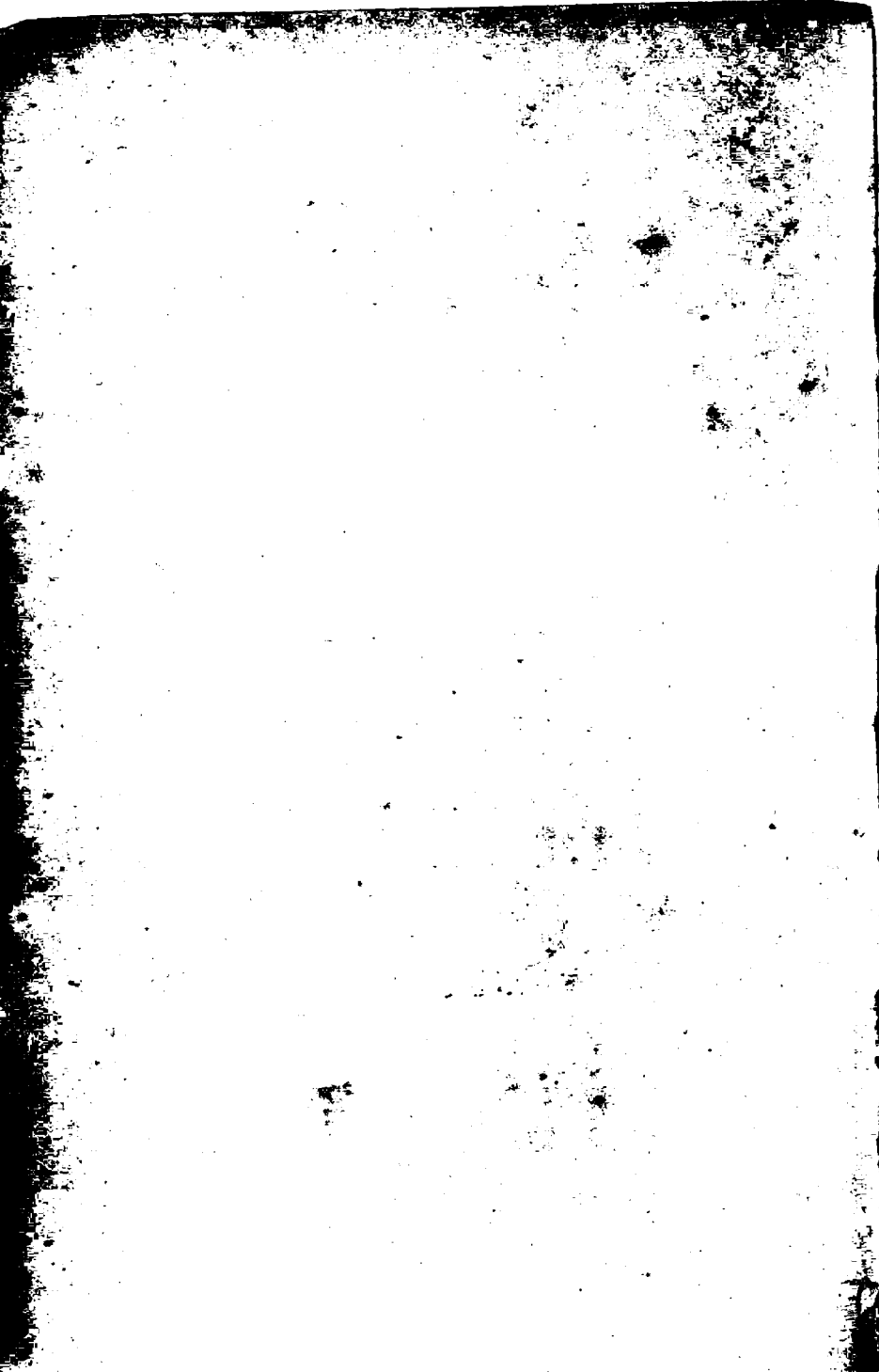


V. OVECHKIN

*Greetings
from
the Front*



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VALENTIN OVECHKIN

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Translated from the Russian

by

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HE PASSENGER TRAIN was travelling West from Kiev, but the front was still a good way off. At the rate we were moving, cautiously creeping over makeshift bridges and rough-laid embankments, making long waits at semaphore points and giving the road to military supply trains almost at every siding, it would take another day or even two before we reached the front. The passengers could still see stretches of ploughed fields, tractor-drawn waggons loaded with seed trundling along the roads, and people harrowing or sowing with teams of cows. It was the month of May and the height of the sowing season on the collective farms.

The car was crowded with passengers, both military and civilians. People lay on the floor under the seats and on the luggage racks beneath the very roof. It was almost impossible to squeeze through the passages which were encumbered with bundles and suitcases. The girl porter took up a position on the car steps outside the locked door at every stop, resisting the attempts of new passengers to gain admission to the car and shouting:

"Full up! Try further down!"

"We don't mind standing, anywhere'll do."

"There isn't any room, I tell you! The regular passengers inside have been standing on one leg, like geese, all the way from Kiev. How long d'you think people can stand on one leg?"

"I say, let me in. I'm from this car. Just went out to buy something."

"From this car, you say?" The girl shot a suspicious look at a young Red Army soldier with a sparse reddish moustache that sprouted all over the place like cat's whiskers and was obviously a recent acquisition, and turned to the passengers seeking confirmation.

"Is he from this car?"

"Yes, he is! Tell by his moustache. He's been travelling all the way from Fastov."

Two or three women with sacks contrived to rush the platform of the car in the wake of the soldier. At every stop the car became more crowded.

What with the crush and the stuffiness, conversation in the car was conducted on a somewhat heightened note.

"Hey, there, young fella!" some one shouted from overhead to the soldier as he scrambled through to his place over passengers' backs and knees. "Sell me your mousetail, I'll use it instead of a bath sponge when I get to the front."

Somebody tugged the boot of a passenger berthed on the luggage rack.

"It's a darned shame I call it! Here's a fellow been sleeping three days, snoring his head off, while your legs are swollen with standing. I don't remember seeing him going once to the lavatory! Hi, friend, wake up! Here, let's change places. Get up, stretch your legs a bit."

Two soldiers, perched precariously on one shelf, could not fall asleep and kept jostling each other.

"What the hell are you twisting about for? Can't you lay quiet?" Twisting and turning, you'd think he'd swallowed a bradawl. Whatsermatter—too hard? Want me to give you a feather bed?"

"The mess-tin keeps slipping down."

"Oh, the mess-tin! That was a brainwave of yours—shoving it under your head. To be sure, two empty pots won't lie on top o' one another. Here, hang it up, and roll your coat under your head."

The only quiet railway conversation was conducted in the compartments where the passengers were more or less comfortably accommodated. The talk turned on the second front, market prices in the Donbas and Dniepropetrovsk district, good and bad food bases, and mingled with it were the clicking of dominoes played on suitcase lids, laughter and snatches of song. From the far end of the car a gay voice chanted a popular ditty to the accompaniment of a balalaika.

Captain Spivak was returning to his unit at the front after having had his wound patched up. He had improvised a bed on the middle shelf with the aid of his tent-cape, great-coat, map-case and kit, and lay with his long legs resting on the railprop of the luggage rack, gazing for hours out of the window, or sleeping, or perusing for the tenth time an old newspaper he had bought in Kiev. The Captain had a headache from the tumult in the crowded car. It was the Captain's third year of fighting, but ever since the outbreak of the war this was his first experience of railway travel in a passenger train. He had made the journey from the Ukraine on foot by a route that brought him via Perekop to the Crimea, thence to the Caucasus, from the Caucasus to the Volga, then back again to the Ukraine, fighting mostly in the steppes and forests, keeping clear of the big towns, which, if he did have to pass through them, were still burning, and where wrecked railway stations greeted him with the noise of rifle fire instead of engine whistles. He remembered the railways for what they were before the war—spick-and-span railway cars smelling of fresh paint, electric light in every compartment, closet conveniences at both ends of

the car, civil porters and a punctual timetable. He had even asked the porter by force of habit when boarding the train: "Is this a smoker?" to which she had gruffly replied with a look of astonishment: "Smoker! Fancy asking! All cars are smokers now.... Where are you travelling from, Captain? Not from the Far East?" Spivak, who had got used to a good deal at the front, was not accustomed to frontline railways simply because he had not had occasion to use them. He lay fretting because the train stood for hours amid the deserted steppe waiting for the semaphore to go up and because at stops where one could do some shopping, nobody could say how soon the train would be starting again, and just when you reached the vendors' stalls the departure whistle would blow; he lost his temper over the window which had probably not been opened for three years and couldn't be opened because it was stuck fast and the straps were missing anyway; he made a wry face as he felt the stubble on his chin, for there was nowhere to shave, there was no water in the closet, and you couldn't get to the little compartment table by the window.

In that compartment, under his berth, sat the young soldier with the reddish moustache; an old woman with a little girl of four on her knees, returning from evacuation to some place near the frontier; two elderly women, one of whom, judging by her talk about schools and pupils, was a school-teacher appointed by the educational authorities to some new post, the other a major's wife returning from a visit to her husband in hospital; an old man of seventy or so in an army greatcoat, and two invalids, one without an arm, the other a blind man on crutches, with a face disfigured by livid scars and burns. The invalids occupied the corner seats by the window, and held themselves aloof, discussing their own private affairs in quiet tones without joining the

general conversation. The man without the arm was, apparently, not yet accustomed to his disablement. His blind companion rolled cigarettes for him and opened tins of food with a Finnish knife which he manipulated more effectively by his sense of touch than his comrade did with his one hand. The latter, however, went out at stops for hot water and milk, read the newspaper to his blind companion and helped him around the car.

Only snatches of conversation reached Captain Spivak from below through the rumble of the wheels, and they did not arrest his attention.

Screening himself with a newspaper against the sun which shone straight into the window, and letting his eyes wander absently over the faces of his fellow-passengers, Spivak speculated how long he would still have to travel in that car, how many more miles he would have to cover by jeep and truck until he reached the front, and where he would find his army. He called to mind his wife and children whom he had managed to see at home after his discharge from the hospital, thought of the people he had met and the talks he had had in his native village in the Poltava region whence he was now travelling, and took out of his kit-bag some home-made cakes which he began idly munching, washing them down with tepid soured milk from his flask.

Many people went out of the car at some unforeseen stop and the compartment suddenly became deserted and quiet. The train was standing in a forest. Spivak too went out, sauntered down the track, descended to a stream that flowed under a viaduct, stripped himself to the waist, took a wash, and returning to his compartment refreshed and clear-headed, he gave a more attentive ear to the talk that was going on below. The train being at a standstill there was no noise of wheels or hubbub to prevent him following the conversation.

The school-teacher was speaking. The talk was about life before the war, the war itself, the losses and suffering caused by the war. The woman was talking about her own family.

"We were three married sisters, four brothers and father and mother. My brothers, younger sister and I lived with the old folks. We lived in the same house, but in different apartments. On holidays we always used to gather at my elder brother Dmitri's place for dinner. A company of eighteen used to sit down to the table. All our acquaintances envied us the way we lived—we were such a happy, loving family. Our father was a workingman, engine driver, yet he managed to give all his children a university education. Dmitri was director of a factory, two of the other boys were engineers and the girls were school-teachers. We lived nicely. While we were studying we used to help each other out—the elder ones helped the younger; then, when each started to make his own living we got along independently. What's left of our family now? One of my sisters, and all her children and husband, were killed in the very first days of the war at Kovel. Dmitri joined the partisans; we know nothing about his fate, and he left behind three children and a crippled wife—the Germans maimed her in the Gestapo. My father was killed on the railway during a bombing raid. We have no news about another brother—he last wrote us from Smolensk when the army was retreating and we haven't heard from him since. I haven't had any letters from my husband for more than six months. Varya, my younger sister, who was living with me, received a false notice about her husband's death. She lived for a year by herself, then married another man. And recently her husband turned up, an invalid without a leg—he got encircled during the fighting at Minsk in '41 and stayed on in the forest as a

partisan until he rejoined the Red Army. Lost his leg in the last battle. Now he's come back. Varya's already got a baby from her second husband, and two from the first one. When I left she had not yet made up her mind what to do, whom she was going to live with. There, you see how many wounds there are in one family...."

"I, Madam, had three sons," said the old man in the army greatcoat. The younger one's still fighting, but the other two are dead. The eldest got killed at Stalingrad, the other one died in hospital in our town, in my arms. I've got something to remember him by, this coat of his I'm wearing.... Just before the war, you know, I had intended retiring. The boys were grown up, and making a decent living. They told me: 'Dad! We don't want people to think ill of us, letting you work at your age. Retire on your pension, we'll buy you and Ma a little house with a garden outside town (we lived in Nezhin) and we'll help you all together—you'll get along all right. It isn't as if you need so much!' That's what I thought too—we old folk didn't need much. Well, it was just the spring of '41, and we started to look for a little cottage with a nice garden where we'd be able to spend our old age quietly and peacefully, make a holiday of it. And here I am now, no house, no sons.... It's all ended in smoke. And I'm left with three little grandchildren on my hands. A rest now is out of the question. One must live. Roll up your sleeves and put your shoulder to the wheel. If not for yourself, for the sake of the grandchildren. My own flesh and blood after all. Who'll set them up in the world? Don't expect them to go into a children's home when they have grandparents living! Our only hope now's the third boy—maybe Sasha'll come back. I'm getting on in years too, turned seventy-one. I'm a cutter, a tailor's cutter, by profession. The work's not hard and I can't complain about my health.

Never had anything more serious than mumps ever since I was a child, but I get attacks of weakness. Doesn't seem to be anything wrong with me, yet I feel shaky. I notice it about the house how feeble I've become lately. A bucket of coal, say, weighs something round a pood, but it seems to me now to weigh three. Then when it comes to walking a big distance I'm a washout. And I've got to hang on for at least another ten years to bring up the grandchildren. The eldest is getting on for eight. Now, it'll be some time before he grows to manhood! Yes, and as likely as not I'll bring back some more kiddies. . . . I'm going now in search of my daughter. We had a daughter, too, in Izyaslavl, a widow with two children. When the Germans took the town she disappeared without a trace. We keep on writing, but neither before nor now, when the place has been liberated, have we heard from her. What's happened to her, God knows. I'm going to make enquiries about her. Maybe they've left the town, or maybe they were killed—my daughter was a member of the Communist Party. Or maybe she's dead and the children are living in some children's home. . . . There, that's the way my life has turned out. I thought—you've lived and worked and brought up the children, now you can die in peace. But things work out so you've got to go on living. I've already given up smoking. Smoked a pipe for over forty years—chucked it now. Not for economy's sake—just on account of my health. Even started doing physical jerks—on Müller's system. Do it on the sly, though, so's not to let the old woman catch me at it. She'd probably think—'look at the old fogey, wants to get young.' There's nothing for it but to pull your strength together some way or another to make life last a bit longer. Mechnikov, the famous scientist, they say, prolonged his life with sour milk; he used to drink a glass of sour milk first thing in the morning—to destroy some sort

of harmful microbes in the stomach which are supposed to cause premature ageing. But we haven't got a cow and soured milk's expensive on the market, so I thought perhaps a cold dousing would improve the circulation. . . . I'm not saying anything against the microbes, maybe it's right about them affecting the organism, but if you ask me, old age is the result of stagnation of the blood. Now why is it that when a man drinks vodka—in moderate quantities, of course, not so as to make him tipsy—it braces him up for a time and even sort of makes him stronger: he can walk uphill without losing his breath and carry a weight he would never be able to lift onto his back when he's in a sober state? Because his blood circulates faster under pressure of alcoholic vapours. Now, physical exercises, I've noticed, also have a good effect in whipping up the blood."

Nobody in the compartment laughed at the venerable sportsman, and he himself spoke about his innocent researches in the field of human longevity with utter gravity and without the shadow of a smile.

"You've got to live, Dad, not only for the sake of your grandchildren," said the major's wife. "Don't you think it's interesting to live to see how everything that our sons sacrificed their lives for is restored?"

"It's interesting, of course," agreed the old man. "It's nothing new to us, we know what life was before the war; still it wouldn't be bad to see it again. . . . But it strikes me, Madam, that the Dnieper Power Plant will be rebuilt sooner than my little granddaughter Katya will forget the bombings. She still cries out in her sleep: 'Mamma, they're coming! Mamma, they're coming!'"

Spivak lay listening and made a mental note of the fact that with the end of the war in sight people seemed to be increasingly engrossed in thoughts of their private fates, of

ruined homes, of the heavy burden the nation would have to bear in rebuilding its life from the debris of yesterday's scenes of battle, and of the repairable and irreparable effects of the war. A good deal similar to this railway talk he had heard at home, in his village, from people whom he knew.

"What wouldn't people give for a quiet, peaceful life!" said the major's wife with a heavy sigh. "It's not just a matter of wishing the war over, it's the old times we want to see back again."

"They won't be the same any more," answered the school-teacher.

"Why not?"

"They won't be exactly the same. You and I are not the same we were. I, for example, have a feeling that I'll never be as happy and carefree as I remember I used to be before the war."

"I mean the simple things. I'd like to see the markets teeming again with produce coming up daily from the country, the twenty different kinds of loaves and buns in the bakeries, the shop assistants in starched aprons, the ice cream vendors at every street corner selling portions at twenty kopeks, the militia men in white gloves, the lit-up houses."

"That'll come back...."

Taking advantage of the stop the two invalids were having their meal in the corner by the little table, talking in undertones about front life, about a Lieutenant Kudrya who had lost his taste for meat after having received shell-shock while sitting in a dugout eating American canned sausage fried on lard; about the fighting at Kanev, a river crossing, of things and documents lost and mislaid.

"Where are you boys bound for?" the old man in the

greatcoat asked them. "By the look of you your fighting days are over, yet you're travelling West."

"We've been visiting his place," the one-armed young man said motioning to his blind comrade, "in Darnitsa, not far from Kiev, and now we're heading for my village."

The one-armed man put the remains of the meal back into his kit-bag and swept the bread crumbs off the table with the sleeve of his shirt. The blind man rolled two cigarettes, for himself and his comrade.

"When we came to Darnitsa," began the one-armed man, "we went to the street he used to live in—he couldn't see anything, of course, but I could see there wasn't a whole house left standing on that street. He says to me: 'It's the third house from the corner.' But who could make out which was the third house, when there was no first nor second—just a pile of rubble. We walked round and round the spot until at last we ran into a man of his acquaintance. 'No, Petro,' he says, 'your family ain't here any more.' He had a mother and little sister there—they got killed during an air attack. The Germans bombed Darnitsa pretty hot—it was a juicy spot for them, a railway junction, a bridge nearby and a ferry—the place was all ploughed up, one crater on top o' another. Well, I says, if that's the case, Petro, you'd better come with me and live in my home. I had letters from my people when I was at the front, they were all right. I've got a mother, a widowed sister and a young brother. Come on, brother sergeant, let's go. . . . We'd served together in the same machine-gun outfit; he was crew leader and I second gunner. Fought together for two years. We hiked all the way from Ordjonikidze town to Kanev. He saved me from death, you might say. I'd have lost my head, leave alone my arm, in that last battle, if it wasn't for him. He carried me out when I got wounded—our machine gun was smashed by a tank shell. He had a splinter wound

in the leg himself, but he didn't leave me in the lurch—dragged me out on his back about three hundred metres to a ravine. Tied up my arm with a bandage out of his first-aid packet, stopped the bleeding, and then went back for the platoon commander and got himself mixed up in another tank assault. This was when he got properly damaged. He was scorched by a flame thrower and hit in the leg by another splinter. We lost track of each other for a time, then met again at the medical battalion. He recognized me first, by my voice. He was lying with his face all bandaged up, you couldn't very well recognize a fellow with his face muffled up like that. I'd lost my temper over something and started bawling out the nurse when he heard me and called out: 'Is that you, Sidorenko?' We were treated in the same hospital and discharged at the same time. Naturally, we've stuck together ever since. We were in a hospital all the way down by the Black Sea, in Sochi. On our way back we dropped in on his hometown first. Well, when a fellow's got such rotten luck as to lose his home and his family, it's only natural he should come to my home. My mother's a good woman. She'll welcome him like a son when she knows he didn't leave me in the lurch and saved my life in battle. We'll live like two brothers. We'll manage to get along all right. I've had a schooling—finished six classes; I'll learn to write with my left hand and get a job as clerk on a collective farm. We'll find something for him to do too. He was a motor repairs mechanic in civil life, a locksmith, a turner, a blacksmith, a Jack-of-all-trades—maybe he'll be able to fix up with a job as instructor. We haven't got any good specialists down at our place who understand machines, only a home-bred smithy who at best can bend an oven fork for the housewives or tinker with a ploughshare, but can't handle a big repair job, like patching up a harvester, and if he does put a new rim on a wheel