CAPTAIN OF THE STEPPE

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Translated by Ian Appleby

Introduced by Marcel Theroux
They used to deliver newspapers like potatoes to the company stationed out in the steppe: a month’s worth at a time, or two, or even enough to see them through to spring, so as not to waste fuel and not to pamper the unit. They were last year’s papers, sent from the chaotic regimental reading room where they took whatever was left in the binders of back issues. But even though the papers were tattered, when they reported something big that had taken place long ago, unknown to the soldiers, they found tears could be squeezed from their eyes. To find out so late and yet so suddenly about all the world’s events drove the soldiers to squander what remained of their lives; lives that were in any case wasting away. Even amidst this dereliction of duty, you could hear them drearily going over and over what they had read, reluctant to forget. Word by word, the discussions among the servicemen grew more heated, each man developing
his particular opinion and, if suddenly some bigger and more significant event came to light, yet without any clear political line, it would end in fisticuffs.

Captain Khabarov expected nothing from life. If he ever planted himself in a group of these textual analysts, he would furtively mix his long-standing personal anguish into the general unease arising – or so they maintained – from the international situation.

Ivan Yakovlevich Khabarov had wound up in government service neither through calculation nor through coercion; mind you, his own free will hadn’t played much part either. So they had shaved his head and taken him as a soldier, as they did everyone. He served out his time. But when his term as a conscript was up, they persuaded him to stay on as a sergeant major. ‘Stay put, Ivan, carry on serving. This is the right place for you. You’re not one of them civvy bastards, are you?’

The military man in Khabarov could be detected in his mean, crude features. The sergeant major was a thickset, stocky man who resembled a great sack of potatoes. This made him unremarkable, comparable to maybe another million servicemen just like him. However, this million formed a mass of people within which each individual disappeared without trace. He was fated – here’s the truth – to be suspended in it like some sort of clot. Anyway, he stayed in the service for the rations and the pay packet, which wouldn’t buy much in the way of treats. No matter what happened, Khabarov would think, ‘There’s no way around it; just have to put up with it.’
And he also thought, no matter what happened, ‘This isn’t over yet.’

Now in dusty captain’s epaulettes, Khabarov was serving out the rest of his natural life in one of the camp companies in the Karaganda region. He’d been shunted around the prison camps from Pechora to Zeravshan for longer than any hardened criminal, yet he hadn’t been promoted any higher.

The place in the steppe where Captain Ivan Yakovlevich Khabarov was now serving was called Karabas. This is what the Kazakhs had dubbed it. In their language, the name meant something like ‘The Black Head’. However, there were by now no Kazakhs to be seen anywhere near Karabas. They had settled on far-off collective farms, raising sheep. From time to time the steppe-dwellers would come into the settlement for a quick look at the camp, and in the hope of maybe getting their hands on a bit of ironmongery. And when they were asked how the place had come to inherit such a dour name, the Kazakhs looked round shiftily and confessed that they didn’t know where their forefathers had got this notion of blackness or how they had contrived to see a head in the midst of this desolate expanse of steppe. The hills that surrounded the place like grey smoke did not look remotely like heads, while their stony ridges darkened in the dank weather to look more like tree stumps. Mind you, there was space and to spare. No plant life, nor agriculture, nor rivers troubled the good steppe earth. There was no crowding. It wasn’t because of the space,
though, that people had settled there. They were to build a prison camp; the site was chosen as if someone had spat there, purely out of malice, and there they had set about living.

Karabas was divided into two parts, of which the more unassuming was the sentry company quarters, while the other, all too visible – like some great barge on the steppe – was the camp itself. Both the company quarters and the camp had been built at the same time, but they had suffered many batterings over the years, while temporary structures had been put up and pulled down with equal abandon. In all its time, the settlement had never seen shops, public amenities, houses or churches. There were only cheerless barracks, exactly like kennels, right down to the idiot howl of the guard dogs that echoed around them. Boots had trodden out pathways stretching towards the barracks. The paths were so narrow, it was as though people had been walking along a rim, afraid to fall. These paths led away to dead ends, breaking off where the sealed zones and other strictures began. Access to Karabas was by a narrow-gauge railway that parted company from the main line far beyond the hills. Another route away from the camp led to a barely visible graveyard, where the sickbay buried unclaimed zeks. At this site, from time to time, freshly dug soil would appear. These were all the connections, as it were, all the ways in and out. If truth be told, in Karabas only the barrack lice circulated freely, two-timing the soldiers with the zeks at will, and vice-versa.
The lice paid each other visits, eating and drinking, and multiplying a hundredfold. Meanwhile the men suffered from itchiness and squashed the little monsters in the midst of their festivities, which created a bond between them stronger than a mother’s love.

Not counting the livestock, Karabas was inhabited by soldiers, zeks, volunteer workmen and prison warders. The zeks and the soldiers lived here for years, seeing out their terms, which meant military service for some and imprisonment for others. A small factory had been built in the camp where they knocked together boots, always to the same pattern, boots that weighed a ton, for just such camps as this. The working days exhaled sour cabbage soup; long and oppressive, they welled up as though from ancient depths.

The soldiers stayed alive on their pay and rations. There hadn’t been a pay rise in decades, but there hadn’t been a pay cut either. On the quiet, it’s true, there were mutterings that they were long overdue a raise for this sort of service. On the basis that a substantial portion of their wages was being embezzled, they would serve still more slackly, so as not to lose out. Meanwhile their commanders were glad to take every opportunity to declare that they were carrying out their duties poorly and being paid for nothing. And that’s where things were left. In the summer, rations would be cut to try and save at least a little something for the winter, while in the autumn, similarly, they wouldn’t get quite enough, as rations were kept aside, in reserve. But when January stole up
unannounced, these reserves would barely feed a sparrow, and no one knew why they had gone hungry for so long. Your zek, now, he’ll demand what’s his even if he has to slit his own throat. Your warder, he’ll steal it on the sly, so where’s a serviceman to find his cut? You can’t exactly weigh what comes in from the regiment. They say that the supplies meet regulations, but which regulations? Who knows? They ration by gross weight, as though they don’t understand that grain settles out, or shrinks when cooked, or generally just vanishes away. Instead of proper nourishment, just that dreadful army margarine. And the fat is like water: you’ll never feel full, and your very soul is repulsed by it. Instead of apples: dried fruit. They substitute this hot, tarry, tea-like concoction for actual tea. No matter where you look, they’re scrimping and saving. Put plainly, the men weren’t serving so much as surviving the best they could; and if you did manage to stuff yourself full, then for some reason you’d lose all your will to live.

The captain never let slip a word of complaint about his fate. Complaining meant picking someone to blame or evading responsibility, and these were things he did not know how to do. When he’d ended up in the sentry company, Khabarov had soon understood that there was no real military service here. There was just the same misery for everyone, the same toil: hauling this barge of a camp and all who sailed upon her, all struggling to keep down a rising seasickness. This was why he didn’t like the camp commanders and had no respect for the
peripatetic courts, when gawpers would crowd into the club building and sentences would be passed, even when for once the guilty copped it. This was a misfortune, and as at funerals, only those nearest and dearest should be present. A solitary individual shouldn’t be held up for display and abuse. Khabarov plodded along under the camp’s yoke, making life easier neither for himself, nor for the zeks, nor for the soldiers. Each man served out his time in the camp, but there, where they would only have died alone, they lived en masse, kept on their feet by being crammed together so tightly that not even a dead man could fall.

Only in winter did a sleepy silence hang heavy over the settlement, and a grimy off-white calm seep through, sending Karabas into hibernation. Throughout this long period, you could remember how life had abated, and the remembered warmth would heat you like a stove. The captain liked to drift away in this heat, which also soothed the sting of his many snubs and setbacks.

If it were possible, now that we have painted this picture of the camp settlement’s expanse, to turn from the height we have already attained to its depths, then we’d have to fall like a stone into the barracks square, striking the eternally drunk Ilya Peregud, a man so huge that even without taking aim you would always hit.

Ilya Peregud served in the company in all the unfilled posts – those insignificant, transient jobs that won’t make a man a commanding officer, but burden him with the mundane chores: counting the sheets in the stores,
making sure the dogs have been fed. Karabas suffered from a permanent shortage of personnel, so all these duties fell to Peregud. He had first caught the captain’s eye as a prison warder, being quite lost in that position. The captain had led him by the hand, like a little orphan child, across into his company. Ilya’s heart and soul ran on vodka. Mind you, he wasn’t keen on moving; he was usually to be found, like a bear in his den, at one of his posts, more often than not in the stores. Peregud would be located in a dark box room, which space he filled completely: a veritable coffin. Going in, a person would take Ilya for a dead man: he’d be sat there, his huge head with the topknot apparently ready at any moment to tumble off his great mound of a torso. One arm of this mighty warrior would rise into the air like a mountainside, and in the gloom a glugging noise would be heard, and then Ilya, sighing with relief after quenching his thirst. ‘Just who are you? Are you a Cossack?’ Peregud would ask pointedly, failing to recognise who had walked in. And then he’d answer himself, ‘Well, I am a Cossack!’

It scarcely needs saying that Peregud didn’t do a bloody thing about any of his duties. There was nothing he was able to do, in fact, apart from inspire respect. The dogs were not fed, the sheets not counted. But the disorder that reigned on his account throughout the company made life the merrier for everyone; they used to love taking the piss out of him. He was, in fact, an unrivalled source of entertainment. Peregud had never once in his life hit anyone, for fear of killing them. If they wound him up too
much, he would just bellow in warning, ‘You dare take the piss out of me? Out of a Cossack?’ Or he would glower and get angry. He might punch a hole in something – one of the walls, maybe – in front of them and instantly regain their respect. From time to time, though, he would be seized by fear, as other people sometimes get aches in their bones before it rains. Once it happened that during one of these episodes someone whispered to Peregud that a patrol wagon was after him. So Ilya went and climbed under the cots in the barracks, and the soldiers deliberately kept him scared: ‘You lay there, maybe they won’t find you.’ And there he lay, not moving, thinking it was all true. Then he was dragged out from under the bunks by the deputy political officer, Vasil Velichko, a man who always spoke the truth and stood up for the unfortunate.

As regards Vasil Velichko, the men themselves would tell you he was the sort of man who held nothing back and kept no secrets. This is the man we should have started with, in fact, if only Peregud hadn’t turned up. Peregud could have waited, he wouldn’t have gone anywhere, and he’d put up with anything so long as you poured vodka into his heart. But just you try and move past him!

If they had said to Captain Khabarov that Peregud had hidden himself under the cots, a stunt the soldiers had scared him into trying, he wouldn’t even have stood up, let alone drop the matters that he was busy with. But Velichko, now, Velichko rushed off, all aflutter. That was the kind of man he was; he wanted to save everyone and change everything on earth!