

STARVATION

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THE warm red sun sinks to the horizon. It does not see the wretchedness it has created upon earth. It plays with all the colors in a magnificent rainbow, while beneath it stretches a dry cloud, sombre and dull. On a road which passes among fields and meadows baked by the sun and changed to a great desert of dust, on a road where the wagons from the neighboring fields rattle along, one sees a cart about which are assembled a whole household of peasants, and close to them a brown horse, which has just collapsed. On the carriage lies an old woman, motionless; beside her, a child of thirteen or fourteen years, little Tanka, with her dry leathery face and sunken eyes, and then little Vanka, who is on his knees, with his eyes fixed on the distance.

'Vanka, Vanka!' groans little Tanka in her feeble voice.

'What?'

'Don't you see anything?'

'I see nothing.'

Silence.

'Vanka, I am terribly hungry.'

'Do you think that I am not hungry? Wait a little. Papa and mamma will come.'

Tanka falls silent. She turns her head uneasily and licks her dry, cracked lips. Then, as if an idea had come to her, and fixing upon her her great terrified eyes, she cries out, 'Grandmother! Grandmother!'

'Let Grandmother alone,' says Vanka. 'Perhaps she is asleep.'

'All of a sudden I am afraid that because of hunger, she has —'

'Well, what?'

'— That she has died, as grandfather did.'

'What, that she is dead? Why should she be dead?' replies Vanka looking at his grandmother. 'She is breathing —'

'Vanka,' begins Tanka anew, in tearful voice, 'suppose papa and mamma do not come back?'

The two children, wrapped in their feverish dreams, grow still. Silence falls anew. The grandmother, who had been motionless, opens her eyes and turns her head. She murmurs through her dry lips: 'A drink! Give me a little water.'

'Grandmother! Are you coming back to yourself? I thought that you were dead. You know that our *gniedko* [brown horse] is dead.'

'He is dead? Then there is nothing for it but for us to die too. A little water, or else something to stick between my teeth!'

'Patience, grandmother. Papa, or else mamma, will come soon,' says Vanka; and he scans the horizon again. 'There they are! There is mamma, and there is someone with her, but it is n't papa.'

'Who is it?'

'How should I know? They have a bag.'

Toward the carriage comes, on feet which drag painfully, an emaciated woman, bloodless and bowed by exhaustion, and a tall monk, clad in a patched cassock and carrying a bag on his back.

'All this has come to pass because you have forgotten God,' murmurs the monk, as he walks. 'You have turned against the Tsar, and because of your impiety, God —'

'True, it is true,' sighs the woman in a sad voice, giving her children a little water to drink. 'I would have drawn

up a whole bucket, but I had not strength.'

'You have angered the good God,' grumbles the monk, as he sinks to a seat on the earth, 'and the Tsar has left you and has gone to rule in India. He has gone away with the best among us, and now he is traveling to Egypt, to the promised land.'

The woman, Vanka, and then little Tanka, listened with a sort of black despair. As the monk uttered these terrible words, their faces grew more desperate. Nobody saw the silhouette of a peasant as it appeared close to the carriage.

'What is all this?' cried the peasant interrupting the monk.

'Papa, are you bringing something to eat?' cried Vanka.

'Papa, are you bringing something to eat?' said little Tanka, struggling to rise.

'Go and bring it yourself. There is nobody around here. It is a desert. Who is there to give bread when they have not even spinach? Nothing, not even a dirty chicken! I have followed along the road. I have dug up the earth. There are a few roots, but even they are dried out.'

'All this is because the people have forgotten God,' began the monk again. 'They have revolted against the Tsar —'

'Have you finished, you raving idiot?' interrupted the peasant brutally. 'God? The good God? But who is the first to intercede with God? It is you, you priests, and then it is you whom God does n't even see. Who do you think replies for the herd, the sheep or the shepherd? If it is the shepherd, that shows that you are good for nothing. It is you whom the good God has chastised, and we that are punished because we have supported you too long, you spiders with big bellies! Ho! You fat snout! 'And I suppose if one fum-

bled around a little in that bag of yours —'

The monk sprang back.

'But you are n't, you are n't very —'

'Don't be afraid! I'm not a thief. Fill up that paunch of yours.'

At this moment, the old woman, who lay motionless, lifted herself on her elbow, looked around everywhere with vacant eyes and cried out, shaking her head: 'Look, look! Cakes in hats are coming! They are bowing, they are bowing. Good morning, cakes in boots! Good morning!'

'Grandmother, grandmother!' murmured Tanka.

The peasant remained silent a long time. The woman raised herself into the carriage and fell to chewing something quickly.

'What are you chewing?' said the peasant to her, finally.

'An old dishcloth with a little grease in it. I found it. Do you want some?'

'No! It is only worse afterward. That does n't do anything but stir you up. When one's hungry, it is better to sleep, it seems.'

He lifted himself, climbed under the wagon, and stretched out. An hour passed. Suddenly the peasant distinctly heard Vanka's joyous voice.

'Papa, mamma, grandmother, Tanka! Up, quick! Here are messengers from the Tsar of India!' The *moujik* sprang out from beneath the carriage. They were all awake and all joyous and merry, full of hope. They looked far about them. Far away on the horizon was a light coming straight toward them, and in this light they could see two sharp silhouettes. The *moujik* rubbed his eyes, for he recognized men of his district. His uncle Prokhor and his cousin, Mitri Sergeievitch.

'Uncle Prokhor! Mitri Sergeievitch! How does it happen that you have come as ambassadors from the Tsar of India? You look exactly like the Bolsheviki.'

'We have come to help you,' said they together. 'The Tsar of India has n't anything to do with it. You're flying because you don't know how to struggle reasonably.'

Then the *moujik* heard the sound of a trumpet echoing in his ears, and provisions were spread out about him. He fell upon the bread and broke it. It was a *pâté* with mushrooms. He tried to give some to Vanka, but he already had a cake with icing. He looked at the grandmother, but she had a pot full of soup; and his wife, she had already two pails, one full of milk, the other of syrup.

'Am I dreaming?' said the peasant to himself. Unable to contain himself, he said: 'I see you good people and I say to myself, "Is it you or is n't it you?" Who are you?'

And they never stopped throwing all sorts of things at him: a sewing machine, a threshing machine, a binder.

'Well,' exclaimed the peasant, 'I have n't rubles and here is money. How am I going to gather up and take care of all this?'

Scarcely had the thought crossed his mind, when suddenly everything vanished.

'What is this!' cried the peasant in a loud voice, as he looked around. Above the desert the sun was rising slowly.

The peasant climbed out beneath the carriage. He lifted himself, his head was whirling, he could scarcely stand up on his legs.

'Can one dream like that? Oh, the devil! Hé? Wife, my wife! Name of Christ! What, is she dead? Grandmother, grandmother! She too? Tanka! Vanka!'

Vanka lifted his head.. 'What is it, papa?'

'They don't move any more,' screamed the peasant, trying in vain to aid the grandmother, Tanka, and the dead wife. 'But what has happened? How? Why did n't they last even until morning? How's that' — He cast a glance around him without seeing anything. — 'Good people, how is this possible? Gniedko, and Tanka, and the grandmother? Good people, if they had only had a bite yesterday, just one little bite!'

Then, taking by the waist little Vanka, who could hardly stand on his feet, he set out staggering along the dusty way in the direction of the city, without even remembering that on his wagon were stretched out the bodies of those who had been dear to him.

The pitiless sun was already high in the heavens, when some people, passing in a carriage for the city, gathered up the peasant and little Vanka, stretched out exhausted on the ground.

A PAGE OF VERSE

'THE TWELVE'

BY GEORGE SLOCOMBE

[*The Daily Herald*]

[*This poem, celebrating, in one of the most radical of English labor newspapers, the death of Alexander Block, chief among the poets of the Russian Revolution, takes its name from his most famous poem, 'The Twelve'*]

TWELVE soldiers of the Red Army
Marching
Like the black shadows of gaunt birds
Over the snow;
Twelve soldiers of the Red Army
Staggering over the snow,
With hunger in their bellies
And ice in their bones,
But in their hearts
Fire, and a tempestuous indignation,
And resolution like a burning sword,
And Death welcoming them
Like a bride.

This was the dream that you dreamed,
Alexander Block,
This was the vision that filled your
eyes,
Looking out over the frozen Neva,
Over the pinnacles and towers of Petro-
grad,
The lost city,
Over the echoing and desolate palaces
of the Tsar's mistresses.
This, in hunger and despair of life,
Abandoned by happiness and the illu-
sory phantom
Of the world-wide brotherhood of the
sons of man,
This you saw:
Twelve soldiers in the snowy desolation,
And, stumbling before them,

In pride of their pride
And pity of their pity,
Jesus
The Son of God.
First of the revolutionary poets
Of the first Revolution!
Your dust lies now in the lost city
Of the corruption of the Romanoffs,
In the corrupted city purified and
made clean
By the blood of the Red Army
And the poems of Alexander Block.
And singers of the Revolution as yet
unborn,
Singing their songs of unrest by the
forge and the loom,
Expelling the fetid air of serfdom with
a great breath,
Singers who never knew you,
To whom you were nothing, not even a
name,
Will yet see in your Twelve Soldiers
The twelve disciples of the Lord,
And will remember,
Long after the Red Army is as dust
On the endless Russian plains,
The twelve black shapes on the snow,
And the phantom figure moving in
pity and anguish
(Risen again after his countless cruci-
fixions)
To lead the army of the sons of slaves
Out of bondage.
They, everywhere,
In all continents and cities,
In the dark factory and the peasant's
hovel,
Who are about to die,
Salute you,
Alexander Block,
Dead poet of the Revolution.