Cain

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Translated from Russian by Rosa Savary Graham and Stephen Graham

The company of soldiers commanded by Captain Markof had come to take part in a punitive expedition. Tired, irritable, weary from their long journey in an uncomfortable train, the men were sullen and morose. On their arrival at a station with a strange-sounding foreign name, beer and vodka were served out to them by men who seemed to be peasants. The soldiers cried "Hurrah!" sang songs and danced, but their faces wore a look of stony indifference.

Then the work began. The company could not be burdened with prisoners, and so all suspected persons whom they came across on the road, and all those who had no passports, were shot without delay. Captain Markof was not mistaken in his psychological analysis; he knew that the steadily increasing irritation of his soldiers would find a certain satisfaction in such bloody chastisement.

On the evening of December 31st the company stopped for the night at a half-ruined baronial farm. They were fifteen versts from the town, and the captain reckoned to get there by three o'clock the next afternoon. He felt certain that his men would have serious and prolonged work there, and he wanted them to get whatever rest was possible, to quiet and strengthen them for it. He therefore gave orders that they be lodged in the various barns and outhouses of the estate. He himself occupied a large hollow-sounding, empty room, with a Gothic fireplace, in which a bed, taken from the local clergyman, had been placed.

A dark, starless night, windy and sleety, came down upon the farm, swiftly and almost unnoticeably. Alone in his immense empty chamber, Markof sat in front of the fireplace, in which some palings from the plundered estate were burning brightly. He put his feet on the grate and spread out a military map upon his bony knees, attentively studying the neighbourhood between the farm and the town. In the red firelight his face, with its high forehead, turned-up moustaches and firm, obstinate chin, seemed more severe than ever.

The sergeant-major came into the room. The water trickled down on to the floor from his waterproof cloak. He stood still for a moment or two, and then, convinced that the captain had not noticed his entrance, coughed discreetly.

"Is it you?" said the captain, bending his head back. "What is it?"

"Everything is in order, your honour. The third platoon is on guard, the first division at the church wall, the second. ..."

“All right! What else? Is the password given?”

“Yes, your honour. …” The sergeant was silent, as if waiting to hear more, but as the captain said nothing, he began in a lower tone,

“What’s to be done, your honour, with the three who. …”

“Shoot them at dawn,” interrupted the captain sharply, not allowing the sergeant to finish his sentence, “And afterwards”—he frowned and looked meaningly at the soldier—“don’t ask me any more questions about them. Do you understand?”

“Certainly, your honour,” answered the soldier emphatically. … And they were both silent again. The captain lay down on the bed without undressing, and the sergeant remained at the door in the shadow. For some reason or other he delayed his departure.

“Is that all?” asked the captain impatiently, without turning his head.

“Yes, that’s all, your honour.” The soldier fidgeted from one foot to another, and then said suddenly, with a determined resolution,

“Your honour … the soldiers want to know … what’s to be done with … the *old* man?”

“Get out!” shouted the captain with sudden anger, jumping up from the bed and making as if to strike him.

The sergeant-major turned dexterously in double-quick time, and opened the door. But on the threshold he stopped for a moment and said in an official voice,

“Ah, your honour, permit me to congratulate your honour on the New Year, and to wish. …”

“Thanks, brother,” answered the captain dryly. “Don’t forget to have the rifles examined more carefully tomorrow.”

Left alone in the room, Markof, neither undressing nor taking off his sword, flung himself down upon the bed and lay with his face toward the fire. His countenance changed suddenly, taking on an appearance of age, and his closely-cropped head drooped on his shoulders; his half-closed eyes wore an expression of pain and weariness. For a whole week he had suffered tortures of fever and had only overcome his illness by force of will. No one in the company knew that at nights he tossed about in fierce paroxysms, shivering in ague, delirious, only losing consciousness for moments, and then in fantastic hideous nightmares.

He lay on his back and watched the blue flames of the dying fire, feeling every moment the stealthy approaches of dizziness and weakness, the accompaniments of his usual attack of malaria. His thoughts were connected in a strange fashion with the old man who had been taken prisoner that morning, about whom the sergeant-major had just been speaking. Markof's better judgment divined that the sergeant-major had been right: there was, indeed, something extraordinary about the old man, a certain magnificent indifference to life, mingled with gentleness and a deep melancholy. People of his type, people resembling this old man, though only in a very slight degree, the captain had seen at Lao-Yan and Mukden, among the unmurmuring soldiers dying on the fields of battle. When the three men had been brought before Markof that morning and he had explained to them by the help of cynically-eloquent gestures that they would be dealt with as spies, the faces of the two others had at once turned pale and been distorted by a deadly terror; but the old man had only laughed with a certain strange expression of weariness, indifference, and even … even as it were of gentle condescending compassion towards the captain himself, the head of the punitive expedition.

"If he is really one of the rebels," Markof reflected, closing his inflamed eyes, and feeling as if a soft and bottomless abyss of darkness yawned before him, "then there is no doubt that he occupies an important position among them, and I've acted very wisely in ordering him to be shot. But suppose the old man is quite innocent? So much the worse for him. I can't spare two men to guard him, especially considering what we've got to do tomorrow. In any case, why should he escape the destiny of those fifteen whom we shot yesterday? No, it wouldn't be fair to spare him after what we have done to others."

The captain's eyes opened slowly, and he started up suddenly in mortal terror.

Seated on a low stool by the bedside, with bent head, and the palms of his hands resting upon his knees, in a quiet and sadly thoughtful attitude, was the old man who had been sentenced to death.

Markof, though he believed in the supernatural and wore on his breast a little bag containing certain holy bones, was no coward in the general sense of the word. To retire in terror, even in the face of the most mysterious and immaterial phenomenon, the captain would have reckoned as much a disgrace as if he had fled before an enemy or uttered a humiliating appeal for mercy. With a quick, accustomed movement he drew his revolver from its leathern case and pointed it at the head of his unknown visitant, and he shouted like a madman,

"If you move, you'll go to the devil!"

The old man slowly turned his head. Across his lips there passed that same smile which had

engraved itself upon the captain's memory in the morning.

"Don't be alarmed, Captain. I have come to you without evil intention," said he. "Try to abstain from murder till the morning."

The voice of the strange visitant was as enigmatical as his smile, even monotonous, and as it were without timbre. Long, long ago, in his earliest childhood, Markof had occasionally heard voices like this when he had been left alone in a room, he had heard such voices behind him, voices without colour or expression, calling him by his own name. Obedient to the incomprehensible influence of this smile and this voice, the captain put his revolver under his pillow and lay down again, leaning his head on his elbow, and never taking his eyes from the dark figure of the unknown person. For some minutes the room was filled with a deep and painful silence; there was only heard the ticking of Markof's watch, hurriedly beating out the seconds, and the burnt-out fuel in the grate falling with a weak, yet resounding and metallic, crackle.

"Tell me, Markof," began the old man at length, "what would you answer, not to a judge or to the authorities, or even to the emperor, but to your own conscience, should it ask you, 'Why did you enter upon this terrible, unjust slaughter?' "

Markof shrugged his shoulders as if in mockery.

"You speak rather freely, old man," said he, "for one who is going to be shot in four hours' time. However, we'll have a little conversation, if you like. It's a better occupation for me than to toss about sleeplessly in fever. How shall I answer my conscience? I shall say first that I am a soldier, and that it is my duty to obey orders implicitly; and secondly, I am a Russian by birth, and I would make it clear to the whole world that he who dares to rise up against the might of the great power of Russia shall be crushed as a worm under the heel, and his very tomb shall be made level with the dust. ..."

"O Markof, Markof, what a wild and bloodthirsty pride speaks in your words!" replied the old man. "And what untruth! If you look at an object and put your eyes quite close to it you see only the smallest of its details, but go further away, and you see it in its true form. Do you really think that your great country is immortal? Did not the Persians think so once, and the Macedonians, and proud Rome, who seized the whole world in her iron claws, and the wild hordes of Huns who overran Europe, and mighty Spain, lord over three-fourths of the globe? Yet ask history what has become of their immeasurable power. And I can tell you that thousands of centuries before these there were great kingdoms, stronger, prouder, and more cultured than yours. But life, which is stronger than nations and more ancient than memorials, has swept them aside in her mysterious path, leaving neither trace nor memory of them."

“That’s foolishness,” objected the captain, in a feeble voice, lying down again upon his back. “History follows out its own course, and we can neither guide it nor show it the way.”

The old man laughed noiselessly.

“You’re like that African bird which hides its head in the sand when it is pursued by the hunter. Believe me, a hundred years hence your children’s children will be ashamed of their ancestor, Alexander Vassilitch Markof, murderer and executioner.”

“You speak strongly, old man! Yes, I’ve heard of the ravings of those enthusiastic dreamers who want to change swords into ploughshares. … Ha-ha-ha! I picture to myself the sort of state these scrofulous neurasthenists and rickety idiots of pacifists would make. No, it is only wax that can forge out an athletic body and an iron character. However …”—Markof pressed his hand to his forehead, striving to remember something—“however, this is all unimportant. … But what was it I wanted to ask you? … Ah, yes! Somehow I don’t think you will tell me untruths. Do you belong to these parts?”

“No.” The old man shook his head.

“But surely you were born in the district?”

“No.”

“But you are a—European? What are you, French? English? Russian? German?”

“No, no. …”

Markof, in exasperation, struck the side of the bed with his fist.

“Well, who are you, then? And why the devil do I know your face so well? Have we ever met anywhere?”

The old man bent his head still lower and sat for a long time saying no word. At last he began to speak, as if hesitating:

“Yes, we have met, Markof, but you have never seen me. Probably you don’t remember, or you’ve forgotten, how once, during an epidemic of plague, your uncle hanged in one morning fifty-nine persons. I was within two paces of him that day, but he didn’t see me.”

“Yes … that’s true … fifty-nine …” muttered Markof, feeling himself overwhelmed by an intolerable heat. “But they … were … rioters. …”

“I saw your father’s cruel exploits at Sevastopol, and your work after the capture of Ismaila,” the old man went on in his hollow voice. “Before my eyes has been shed enough blood to drown the whole world. I was with Napoleon on the fields of Austerlitz, Friedland, Jena, and Borodina. I saw the mob applauding the executioner when he held up before them on the platform of the guillotine the bloody head of Louis XVI. I was present on the eve of St. Bartholomew, when the Catholics, with prayers on their lips, murdered the wives and children of the Huguenots. In the midst of a crowd of enraged fanatics I gazed whilst the holy fathers of the Inquisition burned heretics at the stake, flayed people alive for the glory of God, and poured white-hot lead into their mouths. I followed the hordes of Attila, Genghis Khan, and Solyman the Magnificent, whose paths were marked by mountains of human skulls. I was with the noisy Roman crowd in the circus when they sewed Christians up in the skins of wild animals and hunted them with dogs, when they fed the beasts with the bodies of captive slaves … I have seen the wild and bloody orgies of Nero, and heard the wailing of the Jews at the ruined walls of Jerusalem. …”

“You’re—only my dream … go away … you’re—only a figure in my delirium. Go away from me!” Markof’s parched lips uttered the words with difficulty.

The old man got up from the stool. His bent figure became in a moment immensely tall, so that his hair seemed to touch the ceiling. He began to speak again, slowly, monotonously, terribly:

“I saw how the blood of man was first shed upon the earth. There were two brothers. One was gentle, tender, industrious, compassionate; the other, the elder, was proud, cruel, and envious. One day they both brought offerings to the Lord according to the custom of their fathers: the younger brought of the fruits of the earth, the elder of the flesh of animals killed by him in the chase. But the elder cherished in his heart a feeling of ill-will towards his brother, and the smoke of his sacrifice spread itself out over the earth, while that of his brother ascended as an upright column to the heavens. Then the hate and envy which oppressed the soul of the elder overflowed, and there was committed the first murder on the earth. …”

“Go away, leave me … for God’s sake,” Markof muttered to himself, and tossed about in his crumpled sheets.

“Yes, I saw his eyes grow wide with the terror of death, and his clenched fingers clutch convulsively at the sand, wet with his blood. And when after his last shudder his pale cold body lay still upon the ground, then the murderer was overwhelmed by an unbearable terror. He hid his face in his hands and ran into the depths of the forest, and lay trembling there, until at eventide he heard the voice of his offended God—‘Cain, where is thy brother Abel?’ ”

“Go away; don’t torture me!” Markof’s lips could scarcely move. Yet he seemed to hear the voice continue,

“In fear and trembling I answered the Lord, ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ And then the Lord pronounced on me an eternal curse:

“ ‘Thou shalt remain among the number of the living as long as the earth shall endure. Thou shalt roam as a homeless wanderer through all centuries, among all nations and in all lands, and thine eyes shall behold nought but the blood shed by thee upon the earth, thine ears shall hear only the moans of the dying—eternal reminders of the brother thou hast slain.’ ”

There was silence for a moment, and when the old man spoke again each word fell into Markof’s soul with pain:

“O Lord, how just and inexorable is Thy judgment! Already many centuries and tens of centuries have I wandered upon the earth, vainly expecting to die. A mighty and merciless power ever calls me to appear where on the battlefields the soldiers lie dead in their blood, where mothers weep, and curses are heaped upon me, the first murderer. There is no end to my sufferings, for every time I see the blood of man flowing from his body I see again my brother, stretched out upon the ground clutching handfuls of sand with his dying fingers … And in vain do I desire to cry out, ‘Awake! Awake! Awake!’ ”

“Wake up, your honour, wake!” The insistent voice of the sergeant-major sounded in Markof’s ears. “A telegram! …”

The captain was awake and on his feet in a moment. His strong will asserted itself at once, as usual. The fire had long since died out, and the pale light of dawn gleamed through the window.

“What about … those …” asked Markof, in a trembling voice.

“As you ordered, your honour, just this moment.”

“But the old man? The old man?”

“As well.”

The captain sank down upon the bed as if his strength had suddenly left him. The sergeant-major stood at attention beside him, awaiting orders.

“That’s it, brother,” said the captain in a feeble voice. “You must take the command in my place. I will send in my papers today, for I … I … ’m absolutely tormented by this cursed

fever. … And perhaps”—he tried to smile, but only distorted his features by the effort —“perhaps I may soon be entirely at rest.”

The sergeant-major saluted and answered calmly, as if nothing could surprise him,

“Yes, your honour.”