

WHEN A YANK GETS FIGHTING MAD

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He slashed out viciously at the Nazi, fighting furiously at the side of his valiant Russian Allies!

Not bullets and bayonets but medicine and food awaited Nazi prisoners taken by the Allies, but for those Heinie fiends who chose to destroy and murder and maim whoever and whatever fell under their merciless, goose-stepping, hobnailed boots, this fighting Yank in a Russian uniform and his fearless United Nations battlemates had a hell-spawned welcome ready—the world's deadliest, fastest, toughest tanks and guns and planes!

I

DOCTOR Mikhail Tchekov, American military surgeon attached to the Russian Army and stationed in Amavir in the Caucasus, waited in front of the camp where the Soviets kept their German prisoners on the outside of the town.

As he stood before the gates of the barbed wire entanglements waiting to be admitted, he remembered to keep well back from the gate. One touch of the wire before the electric switches were pulled which charged them, and he—or anyone—would need a doctor. That is, if he survived the terrific electric shock.

A guard strode to the gate. He swung it wide and saluted.

"Thank you, Pavrovitch," said Mickey nodding at the Russian. "I hear we have a new batch of prisoners today."

"Da," replied the guard Pavrovitch. "General Timoshenko has added another five hundred to his collection of Nazi dogs for his great kennel."

Mickey laughed. He entered the enclosure.

The gang at the hospital called him Mickey. Mickey Checkoff and even the nurses dared call him that—though they did it quietly, respectfully, and even affectionately, for everyone in the hospital situated on the left bank of the Kuban River liked the tall, handsome, dark-eyed

BRING ON THOSE MURDERING NAZI FIENDS—THIS FIGHTING YANK AND HIS FEARLESS ALLIES WERE READY FOR THEM!—SMASH NOVEL!

American. They liked his jokes, his broad smile, and the noise he made with his tongue—a sort of clucking noise—twice. When he said anything that tickled his hearer, a broad wink always accompanied it from one of his laughing eyes.

“Do I have to examine the whole five hundred, Pavrovitch?” he asked smilingly.

“Only fifty, doctor,” replied Pavrovitch. “The others have been examined.”

Mickey strode on to a low, rambling pinewood building, at one end of the camp.

He walked past dozens of small groups of half-starved, weary Nazis in ragged grey-green uniforms. He saw the toes of many of them sticking through rotten, worn-out boots. Their coats and britches were torn, badly patched, or pinned together.

As he passed one man separated from the rest, the German stopped him.

“Herr doktor.”

Mickey stopped.

“Oh! Hello Heinsel,” he greeted in perfect German.

Heinsel was a small man, of the type which might have been obese if he had been well fed enough.

“*Wie gehts?*” asked Mickey.

“*Sehr gut!*” smiled Heinsel. The man never complained; at least, not to the American. It was odd seeing an American uniform among the German and Russians in camp.

MICKEY and Heinsel were old friends. They had known each other when Mickey was taking a postgraduate course in medicine at the Breslau University. Heinsel gave up surgery when he lost an arm in the attack on Moscow.

“I just wanted to let you know that one of your new prisoners is Von Starheim,” Heinsel warned him. “You’ll meet him in the examining hut.”

Mickey’s face was not a poker face. He showed his surprise plainly. Then he smiled.

“Really,” he grinned. “We meet even here.”

“Hitler may yearn to rule the world,” Heinsel added. “But one thing is certain; if he wins, he won’t be able to make it any larger—or any smaller.”

“So my old sword-swinging Von Starheim is a guest of ours,” mused Mickey.

“I shall always remember how you used to beat him to a pulp with your fists in the good old

American fashion while he would insist on using broadswords in your duels,” recalled Heinsel as if it were something pleasant to remember.

“So will he, I’ll bet,” smiled Mickey. “He swore to kill me for it someday. Said I was responsible for disgracing him at the University; making a laughing stock of him for refusing to fight in the prescribed German fashion; making him resign from the College of Medicine, he said.” Mickey looked away from Heinsel as he reminisced. He turned back to the smaller, bespectacled man. “Do you think he meant what he said,” he grinned. “Do you really think he’ll try to kill me?”

Heinsel was not smiling. His undernourished face was serious. “I’d be careful if I were you, Mickey,” he urged. “I’ve seen Von Starheim in action. He is capable of anything.”

Mickey smiled at the German.

“Thank you for the tip, Heinsel,” he said reassuringly. “I’ll be careful.”

As Mickey entered the low building, a Russian orderly who could speak German cried: “All right you men, line up for examination.”

The Nazi prisoners complied.

“I’ll take the officers first,” ordered Mickey.

“Officers fall in up front,” shouted the orderly again.

Mickey placed his kitbag in one of the pine compartments on the long examining table of bare pine. He removed his blouse and hung it up on a hook and put on the long, white coat that it replaced.

The first ten men Mickey examined were officers; the eleventh was Von Starheim.

“Well,” said Mickey by way of greeting. “Fancy meeting you here, Von Starheim.”

The German’s eyes glowed with the hate that was born in a University classroom in Germany, and the kind of hate Mickey knew would be carried into eternity.

“I won’t stay here very long, Tchekov,” replied the man bitterly. “I don’t like the place; and I don’t like the people.”

“Oh, you’ll get used to us,” encouraged Mickey. “We’re not like the Nazis at all. We treat our prisoners with kindness and medicine. Not with bullets and bayonets.”

“I’ll stake my life that I’m not in this prison camp twenty-four hours,” boasted the German.

“Come now,” said Mickey. “You should be a good guest if you want your host to treat you with

affability. If you have any information that would be helpful to him, as long as you accept his hospitality and his food, you should reciprocate in kind."

MICKEY looked at Von Starheim. He could see fires of intense passion burning in the man's soul; the passion to kill. Mickey became serious as he applied the stethoscope to the Nazi's broad chest. Why couldn't Americans be like that? This man represented the most hateful thing on earth; the domination of races and peoples so far superior to the Nazi stupidmen that it was a pleasure to kill for the ambition. Yet great nations went down in the mad onrush of Heinie brutality only because they were not trained as the Nazis were; to destroy everything opposing them in their insane path; to kill everything that lived whether it was a simple flower, or an innocent child that chanced to be under its stiff, unrelenting, goose-stepping, hobnailed boots.

Mickey examined Von Starheim from head to feet.

"Your luck seems to be with you, Von Starheim," he said. "You're in pretty good shape."

"I intend to continue to be," replied the man, his chest expanding with arrogant Nazi pride.

"You look a lot better fed than most of the officers I've just examined," remarked the American.

"And why not?" asked Von Starheim. "I am a Staff officer."

"Well," Mickey observed, "you always did take good care of that body of yours. Even at Breslau."

Von Starheim's face darkened.

"I haven't forgotten Breslau," said Von Starheim bitterly. "I swore to kill you then for disgracing me at the University, and now that we are at war, my job will be a lot easier."

"You disgraced yourself, my friend," reminded Mickey. "Your arrogance got you into trouble not only with me, but with the faculty as well. If you were asked to resign, the fault lay with you, not with me."

"I would not have suffered the ridicule from the other students if you had fought honorably," replied Von Starheim.

"Fighting honorably, as you put it," said Mickey, "is not in the Nazi category. It is also a matter of geography. In my country we fight with our fists; not with broadswords. If I were a

German—which, thank God, I am not—I might have fought you that way—and killed you."

The Nazi stiffened.

"You would never have killed me," he snapped.

Mickey looked down and smiled.

"You forget my strength," he grinned.

Von Starheim had not forgotten. He remembered the terrific pummeling from Mickey's big fists. He remembered the unconcealed amusement on the faces of the other medical students when he appeared with his eyes blackened; a gaping hole in the middle of an otherwise perfect row of teeth where Mickey had knocked a tooth or two off its foundation. But the American had taken the German's taunts at the University, his bragging arrogance of his Aryan superiority over the American Indian as he had called him, until even a patient Yankee must defend his good name. So Mickey slapped Von Starheim's face.

VON STARHEIM'S seconds called on the American. He had the choice of weapons. He chose to use his fists. Von Starheim had no alternative. He had to fight with his fists. The count reached almost a thousand—or it could have—before he could mutter: "Where am I?" Even his seconds laughed at that. And so did the whole medical studentry. It made the proud Von Starheim forget his medical career; but not the students who laughed; nor Mickey Tchekov. When the Nazi Party came into power, six of the students died in concentration camps for their laughter. Von Starheim became a respected member of the Nazi party, gained power, and began seeking typical Nazi revenge. He had one more to go; that was Doctor Mikhail Tchekov, the American "Indian."

But there was nothing Indian about Mickey, except his fine body; his enduring strength. Though these were not inherited from any Indian ancestry but from a father and mother of Kuban Cossack descendancy. Mickey's father was a Caucasian who, with his wife, had migrated to New York City where, in the lower East Side, Mickey was born to them.

Mickey's father prospered and his son enjoyed all the fruits of a free American education even to the scholarship which sent him to Breslau University for postgraduate medical work.

When the war broke out, Mickey enlisted in the United States Army and because he spoke Russian

and German fluently, was sent to Iran with the first American contingent to await further orders.

The Soviet Union declined the use of American soldiers to protect Russian soil, but they did accept many American medical officers when the German 1942 summer offensive started and medical men were at a premium in the Soviet.

With a number of other Americans who could speak Russian and German, Mickey was shipped up the Caspian Sea to Mackhack in the Caucasus. There he entrained on the Transcaucasian Railway and later disentrained at Amavir where one of the largest of the Caucasian Hospital units was based. It was there many of Russia's captured Germans were imprisoned in a camp on the outskirts of the town.

No. Von Starheim had not forgotten Mickey's strength. Nor the disgrace that strength had caused.

"How can I forget your strength," the Nazi replied, "when it caused me the loss of my career? Do you think I shall ever forget that?"

"Probably not," agreed Mickey. "You're not the type. You lost your career not through any beating I might have given you, but through your foolish Nazi pride." He looked down at Von Starheim significantly. "I'd advise you to forget that around here."

"I won't have time to forget it here," smirked the Nazi. "I won't be here long enough. My army is driving South. They've smashed Krasnodar. They are not far from the Maikop oil fields. Once in Maikop, this place will crumble like an egg crate." The man could not help licking his chops at the prospect. "Then, my friend, you will not be too far away for me to get satisfaction."

THE news was bad from the direction of Maikop. The German Army was pushing down on it and driving the dauntless Russians back deeper into the Caucasus. Amavir was less than seventy-five miles from Maikop to the southwest of it.

Back at the hospital, Mickey sat with his superior officer.

"I'm not an alarmist, sir," he said, "but in the face of the information we are getting from Maikop—and that from our bragging Nazi friend, it would seem to me that evacuating our wounded up the Kuban River to Batalpashinsk where they will be a lot safer—at least for a while—is the pressing thing to do."

"That will be difficult, Captain Tchekov," replied the Chief Surgeon. "You must remember that the Kuban flows down from the Elbrus Mountain. To embark for Batalpashinsk will be driving against the strong current. Our boats are small and too few."

"I think we still have time to get more boats, sir," replied Mickey. "I know where there are at least a dozen of them; motorized."

The telephone jangled on the Chief Surgeon's desk. He answered it. Mickey watched him. The man's face grew serious, as he listened to the squeaking voice which came through to the American. The conversation was short and snappy. When the Hospital Commandant turned to Mickey, his eyes were aglow with an anxious light.

"You were right, Captain," he said. "Orders have just come in. We must evacuate at once. Do you think you can get those boats?"

Less than one hour later, with the help of a dozen Russian guards, Mickey had the motorboats tied to the hospital dock. The whole place had suddenly come alive. Stretcher bearers, nurses, doctors, assistants, orderlies and hospital attendants were bringing out the wounded and laying them on the ground to wait their turn to be put aboard the boats.

Von Starheim had not lied. Maikop had fallen to the Germans. Gunfire, light and heavy, could be heard not more than twenty miles away. The vanguard of the retreating Russians appeared less than five miles to the West across the Kuban Steppes. Motorboats of all sizes lined the docks and part of the shoreline. Soon one of the motors roared over the noise of distant gunfire and the boat moved out with the wounded and nurses packed as tightly as they dared.

Mickey Tchekov, his kitbag in hand, rushed from one stretcher to another, and helped the wounded men where he was needed. One by one the boats were filled. But the job was a slow one. The gunfire drew closer to the little town at the river's edge; and the hospital that nestled at the base of the foothills of the Caucasus Range.

As Mickey looked toward the South, he saw Mount Elbrus towering toward the sky, over eighteen thousand feet above them. Not much higher than the mountain, he caught a glimpse of smaller objects. Their noses were pointed in his direction. Suddenly the noses dipped. The objects started a mad dive earthward. The sound of Jumo

engines ripped the atmosphere over the hills. Mickey shouted:

“Hurry! Hurry! Stuka dive bombers are tearing at the hospital!”

It was true. Those Nazi messengers of death were aiming their beaks for the Amavir Hospital roof and as they roared down in screaming fury, they unloosed their cargo of burning destruction upon the red cross that marked the roof of the building using it as a guide to place their bombs.

ONE by one they roared over. One by one they sent their black missiles of oblivion into the unprotected building. Blast after blast rocked the earth about it; geysers of white cots, hospital equipment, men and women, were blown through the roof to fall back to earth, lifeless, useless, twisted things. Fire rose through the roof and the flames licked at the side walls. Men were still bringing the wounded out in spite of the roaring inferno that soon made it impossible to return for more. Most of the wounded men and women were brought out. In the face of devastating fire from the Nazi machine guns, the boats were being loaded rapidly now, and moved up the river with their cargo of pain as rapidly as they could get away.

The five miles that separated the motorized Russian columns that were marching and riding in the direction of Amavir were soon obliterated and the light gun carriers blasted into action. They poured their anti-aircraft shells at the roaring, diving Huns and caught two of them in their engines driving them into the earth where they burned as they had caused the hospital to burn.

Men shouted orders across the open fields. Only one boat remained to be filled. The Chief Surgeon, the remaining nurses, and a small number of men who did not require stretchers boarded it. Several of the younger men gave up their places to the older doctors, and the nurses. Among them was Mickey Tchekov. He remained on the beach, to whatever fate destiny had in store for him.

Guns blasted all around him as the Russian anti-aircraft gun carriers rolled up to the field where a few minutes before the wounded men waited to embark. One of the boats seemed to be having motor trouble. It was filled with men and women attendants, nurses and doctors who attempted to protect the wounded men from the devastating machine gunfire. The motor on the boat finally coughed and gave up.

One of the Nazi pilots must have seen the boat in trouble. It made an excellent target for his front machine guns. He dived down on the boat from a height of five hundred feet firing all the way down, and racked and rocked it with burning tracer fire, felling the men and women who were still standing up. The small boat floundered a moment, and with the loss of buoyancy of live men and women and wounded soldiers, the small craft turned on its side flinging its stricken cargo into the Kuban River as it started to burn.

Three of the ack-ack guns concentrated their fire on the Nazi dive bomber and the pilot had not time to pull out of the dive. As he attempted to pull the nose of the heavy ship up, his tail section struck the water and the impact twisted it beyond further use. With full engine on, throttle wide-open and Jumo screaming, the plane pancaked as the pilot's cubicle was ripped apart with the exploding ack-ack. The Stuka dived into the Kuban and sank, submersing the already dead pilot, leaving the battered, twisted tail sticking up out of the water like a camouflaged cross.

Mickey turned to one of the other doctors who had stayed behind with him: “That couldn't have happened before that rat sank the hospital boat.”

“Now we see why we must not lose this war,” remarked the man. “That is only a sample of what the Nazis will do to us if we do.”

II

THE fires in the hospital building continued to rage. Walls collapsed and sent great geysers of burning embers showering over the guns still active on the grounds.

Mickey called his colleagues together under the protective shadow of a huge Soviet tank which stood by near the main road.

“I told Commandant Kousoff that we would try to join the unit at Batalpashinsk. If we stick to our forces, I think we'll have no difficulty making it. What do you gentlemen think?”

“I think if we're to try joining our hospital unit,” suggested one of the doctors, “we'd best start now. I see the infantry is moving off.”

Stormovik fighters took up where the ack-acks left off and were smashing at the remaining Stukas high overhead. The Russian Infantry unit continued on in its retreat recognizing now how little they could do to save the hospital. With pressure being

brought upon them by advancing Nazi tanks and men, they started to gather their forces and move out of Amavir in orderly fashion, putting the torch to anything that still stood intact and maintaining their policy of leaving nothing but scorched earth behind them.

With Amavir in flames, the only thing the Russians left standing was the prison camp. So fast was the onrush of the Nazis that the men of the Soviet had no time to put the torch to the buildings, or take the prisoners with them.

As Mickey drove on with his other officers in a small, light truck, he saw Von Starheim on a box in the middle of the prison yard haranguing the Nazi prisoners to take possession of the camp. He saw them break for the switches, cut off the current as they ran screaming about the yards at their liberation, and threw the unelectrified gates wide-open.

That was the last thing he saw of Heinsel too. For the little German stood off from the mob; he let them run amok and stood calmly by watching them.

As the little car which carried Mickey and his medical colleagues drove into the green of the Caucasus hills, tanks clashed with tanks on the outskirts of Amavir. Shells dropped around them and blew dirt up on both sides of them. It fell back and smeared their uniforms. Some of the dirt blew into the driver's eyes and blinded him. The car veered off the road and drove up a small mound. An 88-millimeter shell from a Nazi tank dropped just behind the veering truck and drove its nose into the ground just beneath it. It blew up and carried the rear of the small car with it. The occupants were blown over the greenery of the Caucasian countryside. The driver was killed instantly. Two of the other doctors lay quite still where they fell. Three of them came through; one of the three was Mickey Tchekov.

When he regained consciousness, and opened his eyes, he was still in the hills. A familiar face looked down upon him. Gradually it fell into focus. A familiar voice spoke as if it were relieved.

"I'm glad you're alive," it said. "I hated the thought of anything or anyone else killing you. I wanted that distinctive pleasure for myself."

IT WAS Von Starheim. And he held a Luger in his hand. The man had spoken truthfully. He did not stay a prisoner in the Russian camp twenty-four

hours. In fact, he had not been a prisoner half that time.

"Hello, Von Starheim," muttered the still-dazed Mickey. "I'm surprised you didn't put a bullet into me while I couldn't fight back. That is typically Nazi, isn't it?"

The Nazi's eyes narrowed venomously.

"I wanted you to know that it was I who did the job," replied Von Starheim. "Now that you are conscious, I would do it but I have too many of my men around me to see it. It might shock their sensitive souls to see me put a bullet through you here."

"I'm sure it would," replied Mickey. "They're so unused to it."

Von Starheim ordered the men to cover Mickey and take him back to the prison camp which had temporarily held him a prisoner.

As Mickey rose to his feet, he found his kitbag lay a mass of debris not far away.

"That's no good anymore," he remarked dully.

He looked about him at the other unconscious and dead men.

"What are you going to do with these men?" he asked.

"Oh, they'll be taken care of," said Von Starheim.

"Why don't you let me see if they're alive?"

"No need for that," replied the Nazi. "They're all dead. All but you." He smiled, as if in gratitude to a good Nazi Rosenberg-created God.

One of the other doctors stirred. Mickey dropped to his knees and turned him over.

"Get up!" ordered Von Starheim threateningly.

Mickey looked up and saw the man aiming a Luger at him. "But you can't let this man lie here and die," he remonstrated.

"I said he'll be taken care of!" shouted Von Starheim furiously. "Now get on with you."

As Mickey entered the gates of the prison camp he could hardly help smiling woefully. The uniforms of the men now walking the yard were changed from German grey-green to Russian mud-brown. The Heinies were out; the Vodkas were in.

It was a strange metamorphosis; but that was the fortune of war.

Mickey wondered how the boats with the wounded men, the doctors and nurses who escaped with them fared; and if they succeeded in reaching Batalpashinsk and safety. He hoped so, though he doubted it because of the rapidity of the German

onslaught.

His uniform was a bit battered with the recent explosive experience; but he himself was none the worse for it though he was a bit shaken up. The Nazi Commandant of the prison camp sent for him.

"I understand you are a good doctor," he began.

"I have a fair reputation," replied Mickey. "I finished my studies in Breslau."

"Oh," said the man perking up. "Breslau. Then you must be good."

"Not necessarily," explained Mickey with meaning. "Not everything that comes out of Germany is good." Then he added significantly. "Lately, in fact, not anything."

THE Commandant eyed Mickey a few minutes with eyes that were not unkindly. In fact, he half-smiled good-naturedly at the American's attitude. He might have taken offense but he did not. He dropped the German language and to Mickey's amazement spoke a perfect American English.

"I can understand how you feel, Captain," he smiled. "There are still a few of us left with some human instincts."

Mickey eyed the man with surprise.

"I see you've been to the States," he said quietly.

"I had a large family in Berlin," explained the Nazi Colonel. "I had a lot of money; large business interests in Philadelphia and in Berlin and Hamburg. It was suggested I cooperate with the Party. I saw Dachau for my relatives if I didn't. So here we are."

Mickey didn't know why but he liked the man and his frankness. He apologized for his seeming brusqueness.

"Oh, that's all right," replied the Commandant. He seemed a little weary. He looked at Mickey's uniform. "It seems strange seeing that uniform here in Russia." Then he added quietly, quoting a famous American patriot: "If this be treason, they can make the most of it; but I like seeing it over here."

Mickey smiled.

"I think we understand each other, sir," he said. "Now how can I serve you?"

The man took his tunic off.

"First you can relieve me of this boil under my arm," he said. He pointed to a table. "That medical kit will be yours."

While Mickey operated the man talked.

"There is a shortage of medical officers with my unit," he said. "I'll have to ask you to take care of the Russian prisoners. My own men will take care of our soldiers. However; if we need your services there, you will be called upon."

Mickey concentrated on the wound and nodded his head in understanding. A low clucking sound dropped from his mouth. The Nazi looked at him in wonder as he winced with a momentary shock of pain.

"What was that?" asked the German.

"I always do that when I've done a job satisfactory to myself," Mickey replied. "I've just removed the core. You'll be all right now."

"Of course," went on the Nazi Commandant, "you'll still be a prisoner and have the status of prisoner in spite of the freedom you will have in making the rounds of the camp."

He looked at Mickey thoughtfully as the young American applied a compress to the wound and placed a roll of bandage to it clamping it in place. He watched Mickey as he rolled the bandage about his arm, and added: "With all that freedom, you will naturally think of escaping. . . ."

"Naturally," agreed Mickey.

The Nazi smiled.

"You will be pursued," he warned.

"Those are the chances I'll have to take, sir," Mickey grinned. He finished his job. The medical kit the Commandant had given him was complete. It was assembled with typical German precision for every field emergency.

"There you are, sir," Mickey said. "What next?"

"Report to my Chief Surgeon," he said. "He will assign you to your job."

The Chief Surgeon was unlike the Colonel. He was brusque, almost to offensiveness. But Mickey did not mind the man. He was used to Nazi arrogance. When the man learned that Mickey had studied in Breslau, he softened a little. But not much.

THE American was assigned to the Russian prisoners. The men liked that. They had heard of the American doctors who had come up from Iran and were doing a fine job. They had heard of Mikhail Tchekov, the American born of Russian parents, and heard that he was an excellent man.

He looked about him for Von Starheim, but the man was nowhere to be seen. He asked the German

Sergeant of the Guard about him. The man knew Mickey and liked him. He had treated him for a swollen gland and reduced the pain and size so quickly, that the man asked him if he could do anything for him.

"Yes," replied the American. "I haven't seen Captain Von Starheim all day. Has he been transferred?"

"Oh, yes," the Nazi Sergeant replied. "He was given a company of two hundred men with machine guns to go out and find the guerrilla Koslovitch. They say he and his band have been picking off our men like flies. I suppose he's somewhere up in the mountains looking for him."

Mickey had examined all the Russian prisoners; had talked to them of Koslovitch, and one by one they stuck their tongue in their cheeks and smiled knowingly.

No. They had not seen Koslovitch. But they had heard of the exploits he and his little band of fifty had perpetrated. They had sniped at Nazis for months and sent more than their quota back to Germany in pine boxes, when their bodies were found or, with transportation from the Caucasus difficult, saw them laid to rest under Russian soil. They believed that all good Germans were those laid to rest under any soil.

The Russians told him of many things Koslovitch had done; destroyed an airdrome; smashed a hundred Stuka dive bombers on the ground; blew up an ammunition dump; and many other equally dangerous and courageous pieces of destruction.

In making the rounds two days later, he found a new man—or rather, a boy—in one of the prison tents. No one knew how he got in—not even his tent mates, and they didn't ask questions. He was there—and he was wounded.

Mickey examined the boy.

"Where did you get this?" he asked in Russian.

The boy did not answer. He merely scrutinized Mickey's face in an effort to discover what he wanted to find there.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" asked the American.

"You are Mikhail Tchekov," asked the youngster. His dark Caucasian eyes continued to gaze piercingly at the American.

"Yes," replied Mickey quietly. The other prisoners had stepped out of the tent. He saw their shadows plastered against the canvas, as if standing

guard over it. "Yes, I am Mikhail Tchekov. Why do you ask?"

"You will come with me tonight," the boy replied. It was the tone of authority. It was not a request but an order.

MICKEY looked at the youth. He was ragged. Not in uniform; slightly dirty with the mud of the Caucasus caked on his leather boots split at the vamp. As Mickey dressed the flesh wound on the boy's arm, he said:

"That sounds like an order."

"It is an order, Comrade," said the boy. He could not have been more than fifteen; in years, that is, but in attitude, experience, the boy seemed a hundred. Mickey had never met anyone quite like him before and he studied the bronzed, serious face that bore the marks of great responsibility.

"If I should refuse to go with you?" asked Mickey.

"You cannot refuse," the boy told him firmly. "We are comrades with one aim; to destroy the Nazi lice and everything they stand for if we are ever to have peace in this world again." His eyes narrowed a little as if he was determined to have his way no matter what it cost. "You will not refuse."

Mickey smiled at the boy's confidence; his self-assurance.

"How do you know we can get out of here?" he asked.

A wise smile crept over the small face; his lips became compressed with a tinge of contempt. "I got in," he boasted. "We'll get out. You leave that to me."

"Who sent you to me?" asked Mickey.

"Koslovitch, the guerrilla," replied the boy suddenly. "His band needs a doctor. You are the only one we know of here we can trust. Besides," he added, "you are an American. You represent everything all free men admire, and respect and love and die for." The boy's eyes shone with an almost holy light. "Koslovitch loves his country and is ready to give his life for it. Just as your countrymen did in 1776. You can't refuse to help him or his wounded men."

Mickey knew right then and there that he couldn't.

"What time shall I meet you and where?" he asked putting the finishing touches to the job of patching up the boy.

"Here, at this tent," he said. The tent stood on the end of the line near the barbed wire enclosure.

"What time?"

"At twelve o'clock," replied the boy. "They change the guard then and for five minutes there is no one near this tent."

"The barbed wire is electrified," warned Mickey.

"I know. I have a pair of insulated wire cutters. We'll cut our way through."

"I don't need to do that," explained Mickey. "I have the freedom of the camp. I'll meet you on the other side."

"That won't do," replied the boy. "You will be followed. Do it my way and we'll have no trouble."

Mickey had never met so positive a person before. The kid certainly had what it takes to lead men, he thought. Someday this youngster would be a figure in Russian politics, he expected. Mickey agreed. He would meet the boy at the appointed place and hour.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"You can call me Feodor," the boy replied. "And—oh, yes. Fill your bag with plenty of bandages and other medical supplies we'll need for our men."

"That's the simplest part of the job," replied Mickey.

AT FIVE minutes to twelve that night, Mickey approached the tent at the end of the line. As he reached the middle of the tent street, he was halted by a sentry. He moved closer to the man so that he could be recognized in the dark. His bag hung heavy in his hand.

"I've a patient with a high fever in the last tent," he explained. "I'm just going to look in on him."

"Very well, Herr doktor," replied the sentry. "I'm sorry I stopped you. Pass."

"Thank you," said Mickey. "Can't be too careful these dark nights."

"Quite right, sir," agreed the man.

As Mickey entered the tent, the four men lay on their straw-filled mattresses on the tent floor.

"Feodor," whispered Mickey.

"Ready," replied the boy in a whisper. "Is the coast clear?"

"I'll see," answered the American. He pushed the tent flap cautiously aside and peered out. He turned around and whispered, "All clear."

Feodor dropped to his knees; looked out and

crawled to the barbed wire fence. He hesitated in some tall grass near one of the fence posts as the guards changed places. He waited a few breathless moments and with thickly rubber-gloved hands he grasped the electrically charged wire near the ground and lifted it high enough to allow his body to pass silently through. Mickey followed after passing his bag through the large opening Feodor made for him. Carefully, the young Russian replaced the wire against the post. So skillfully did he do the job that even in broad daylight, it would not be discovered.

"So that's how you got in," whispered Mickey.

"Come," whispered Feodor, "and keep well down to the ground." The noise of boots on gravel reached them. "Down!" commanded the boy and automatically, as though he were accustomed to complying with the other's orders, Mickey dropped to his knees and hid in some underbrush.

The black shadow of the sentry retracing his path outside the enclosure passed not more than five feet away. They waited with bated breath until the man was out of earshot.

"Come!" whispered Feodor, and grabbing Mickey by the arm led him on the double to a clump of maple trees about a hundred yards away and to a small thicket of willows that lined the Kuban River about a half-mile from the camp.

They reached one large tree set back from the river. Its foliage was denser than the others. Like a monkey, agile, strong, Feodor disappeared into the branches above and soon descended with a large bundle.

"Help me with this," he commanded.

Mickey smiled at the boy's tone, but took his orders good-naturedly. He helped him open up what proved to be a rubber boat. In the dark the youngster found the valve. A second later, there was a sharp hissing noise as the boat took shape. This boy had evidently prepared for all emergencies.

"So this is how you got down here from the hills," said Mickey.

"I came down with the current from the Elbrus," explained Feodor. "I brought a gas bottle with me and hid it with the boat after I had deflated it." He finished the job of inflation. He looked toward the river. "It will be harder going back," he said. "We will have to row against the current."

"Where are your oars?" asked Mickey.

"I hid them in that farthest tree," he

indicated, pointing to a willow on the edge of the river whose branches and leaves were kept wet as they dripped into the Kuban.

THEY carried the rubber boat and set it down under the deep shadow of this willow. Feodor climbed into the tree and returned with two small paddles and another object.

"What else have you got there?" asked Mickey curiously.

"A submachine gun," explained Feodor.

"You thought to bring everything, didn't you?"

"I have to get you back to the men," explained Feodor.

"And to Koslovitch," added Mickey.

"And to Koslovitch," agreed Feodor.

It was more difficult to paddle up the fast-running current of the restless Kuban that even Feodor had anticipated. Both men paddled desperately against the rapidly-moving waters that roared down from the great mountain. They kept inshore for the resistance was lessened there by its close proximity to the banks. The paddling was less difficult.

Dawn broke over them as they continued to paddle up the stream that was less than a half-mile wide. It was broad daylight when they rounded the bend in the river and came upon the railroad bridge that crossed it while they were still several miles from Batalpashinsk.

Mickey remembered that his hospital unit had escaped to there. At least, he thought they were still there but Feodor told him:

"They were driven out again and have gone on to Pyatigorsk where our Kuban Cossacks are holding the Germans back," he told Mickey. "Just how long they can hold out there, I don't know. But they are determined not to let the Nazi rats infest more of the valley than they can help."

As the boat reached the trestle that held the railroad tracks above the Kuban, Feodor ordered: "Stop paddling," and grabbed for one of the piles on the south bank of the river.

"This is as far as we dare go now on the river in broad daylight," he said. "We'll hide the boat under the bridge and go to one of the collective farms nearby where many of the farmers are getting ready to evacuate their farms for places out of the battle areas. We may be able to get a lift from there to the foothills around Elbrus."

He drew the boat up the bank under the trestle

and deflated it. Feodor rolled it up and hid it under a depression that was hardly observable even when one stood near it.

"You seem to know this country pretty well, Feodor," remarked Mickey.

Feodor was not a braggart. He spoke as one having authority; but there was no arrogance in his replies. He was a strange youth, Mickey observed. All the boy said was:

"Pretty well."

They walked up to a woman collectivist farmer who was loading a wagon with her furniture, bedding, and what food she had left. With her was her son of ten. Her head was wrapped in her shawl of wool; the youngster's close cropped head was covered with a homemade cap.

Feodor strode officiously over to the woman. He was not much more than a child himself in years. Mickey saw him whisper something in the woman's ear. She clapped her hand to her mouth as if to suppress a scream of delight and prevent her shouting the thing he had whispered to her. She looked toward the young American doctor in a now water-stained, mud-spattered American uniform and grinned happily. He heard her say in her native Russian:

"Of course, I'll help. With all my heart—with all my life if necessary."

THAT was the Soviet man or woman's cry. It rose in every corner, light or dark, in the nation. It was the cry that would one day send the Nazi hordes reeling back to the rat holes in Germany from whence they had come.

"She will take us right to our destination," Feodor told him. "Isn't that nice?"

They helped the woman load her wagon, leaving a space in the center of the cart for themselves to step into. She put the finishing touches to the job by throwing her bedding in over them as they crouched, completely hidden even from possible searchers.

The woman gave them a whole loaf of black bread and some milk, and as the wagon dragged along the stretch of road winding through the foothills of the Caucasus, the mountain undulated for miles ahead of them, their tips snow-crested and white; their bases green-carpeted, and brown.

Across the Kuban Steppes they rode; the two chestnut-colored horses drawing the cart behind them; and behind the cart two cows and several

sheep and pigs followed in their wake.

"Her husband is a member of Koslovitch's guerrillas," explained Feodor. "He is lying wounded in the cave and she was going to him to help nurse him. When I told her who you were, Comrade, it made her very happy."

"I'm glad of that," said Mickey.

Through a very tiny crack in the piled up goods over his head and on all sides of him, Mickey could see the winding mountain pass over which the cart was plodding several hours later stretch far to the west. Beyond that, he caught a glimpse of the glacial peak of Mount Elbrus.

"You came a long way to get a doctor," remarked Mickey to his young companion.

"I tried two other places first," explained Feodor. "One was Pyatigorsk, the other Batalpashinsk. I was told they could spare none, but that you and four other doctors were taken prisoner and would probably be available if I could get you out." He smiled a boyish smile; the first Mickey had seen on the youngster's serious face. "Well," he added, "here you are."

Mickey laughed.

But the laugh was cut short. Automobile engines suddenly snorted in upon them. The sound of them drove down from the hills. With a roar they were upon the little wagon and seemed to be coming upon them from all sides. A man shouted in Russian at the woman.

"Stop!" he cried. "Stop your wagon!"

The cart was pulled up short. The furniture and bedding and other of the woman's belongings shifted but not sufficiently to expose the hidden men. Feodor reached for the machine gun at his feet. His grip fastened upon the stock. Mickey could see a peculiar light creep into the boy's eyes; his bronzed face darkened; his jaw tightened with grim determination. The Russian had a tinge of German as it drifted through to them.

"Where are you going?" the voice said.

"I am going to join my husband who is wounded," replied the woman truthfully.

"What have you got there on your cart?" demanded the voice.

"Just my furniture, my bedding, a few pots and pans," she said calmly. "Nothing else."

MICKKEY admired the woman's courage. She knew that if he and Feodor were uncovered by the Nazis, not only would they be shot on the

spot, but the woman and her son would die with them. Yet her voice was steady, calm, emotionless.

"Search the wagon," cried the voice.

Mickey went hot and cold all over. They were sunk now, he thought. He and Feodor sank to the floor of the cart as pieces of furniture were yanked off the wagon and thrown to the ground.

Feodor raised the muzzle of his machine gun, readying it into position for attack. He might die, but he would not die alone.

"We are looking for guerrillas," went on the voice. "Have you seen any on your way up here?"

"Oh, no," replied the woman.

"If you had you would tell us, wouldn't you, my good woman?" went on the man.

"Of course," she replied, "if you insisted on it."

"You're a filthy Russian liar," cried the man.

The unloading continued. Mickey and Feodor were perspiring in their anxiety. They did not want to be caught. They did not fear for themselves, but for the brave woman and the child with her. The Germans ripped off a bundle of bedding that roofed in the hidden men. They were getting closer to the men. For some unknown reason they stopped with the first bundle of bedding. Had they lifted the second, they would have uncovered the two men.

The Heinie above stopped searching. The furniture and bedding were scattered about the road surrounding the wagon. Some of the lighter pieces were broken.

"Herr Oberst," he called down, "there is nothing but this filthy peasant stuff on this cart. The woman spoke the truth."

"Very well," cried the man. "Come down and let's get on."

"Yes, sir," replied the man. He jumped to the ground. "Shall we put the stuff back?"

"Put the stuff back!" shouted the man. "What do you mean, you swine! Let the filthy peasant put it back herself!" He turned about and gave the command: "*Forvarts!*"

The motors in the German truck snarled into life; shifting gears ground raucously. One by one the trucks roared by and the noise of their guttural steely throats dimmed with the distance.

Mickey wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. He was too weak to reach for his kerchief behind him. He had recognized the man's voice.

It was Von Starheim.

III

“THAT was a narrow squeak,” said Mickey rising from his cramped position on the floor of the cart.

Young Feodor too rose and stretched himself when the Nazis were out of sight. “You’ll get used to them,” he remarked philosophically.

“We’d better get down and help the woman re-pile her wagon,” suggested Mickey.

“Not while the Nazis have powerful field glasses to pick us up with,” said the masterful youth. “She will have to do the job herself—to save us from a firing squad. We’re not yet out of danger, you know,” he reminded Mickey, “even if those Nazi roaches are out of sight.”

Mickey eyed the boy with unconcealed admiration. This youngster thought of everything.

The woman started putting back her furniture and other belongings. Thirty minutes later, the strange caravan was on its way. Mickey and Feodor were not as cramped this time for they had placed two small wooden chairs in the middle of the pile and they sat on them.

“How far is the camp from here?” asked Mickey.

“We should reach the place sometime tonight at the speed we are going,” said Feodor. “In about an hour or two she will turn off the road and take a route into the hills.”

“She knows where the place is, I suppose,” said Mickey anxiously.

“As well as I do,” replied Feodor. “She could find it in the dark.”

“I’d like to get out of this and stretch my long legs,” said the American.

“When the woman turns into the hills,” assured Feodor, “you will be able to.”

But it took the slowed-up horses two hours to cross that part of the Steppes which lay south of the Kuban River and stretched like an endless green carpet to the base of the towering ranges. Off the mountain pass and in between two high precipitous hills the little caravan halted. They were well out of possible enemy territory now, and in deep enough for them to be sufficiently safe to start a small fire on which to cook a meal.

The woman removed the bedding and some of the other pieces of furniture and let Feodor and the American Army doctor whose legs were so cramped he could hardly stand on them drop to the

ground.

As Mickey looked off toward the undulating range of mountains, he drew in a deep breath of the crystal clear air. He pounded himself on the chest Tarzan fashion.

“It’s good to get out of the hemmed in position we were in,” he said stretching himself to his full height and yawning widely. The altitude, and the thinner, colder air made him feel a little drowsy.

Even the little youngster, who had been riding outside all the time, yawned as he watched Mickey. Feodor and the woman took some of the broken furniture and started a small fire. The cattle were released and permitted to graze. Mickey took the youngster’s hand and they walked a short distance from the wagon. As the American gazed off at the gentle mist that hung over the mauve, green, gold, and white of the distant hills, he turned to the child beside him and said: “Now I know why the Don and Kuban Cossacks fight the way they do to save these mountains from the Nazi swine.”

HIS eyes fairly glowed with the beauty of the scene. For a moment he thought he was home; back in the States where other and equally beautiful mountains rose in great golden-white peaks that looked out upon a blue Pacific.

They ate the heavy black bread and pot cheese the woman had made herself the day before, with a gusto that amazed even Mickey. He didn’t realize he was that hungry. Water was boiled on the small fire and the cold chill was tempered in their bodies with hot Russian tea.

Late that night, the groaning vehicle with Mickey and Feodor riding on the tail board now, reached a cave in the hills near the village of Kislovodsk, to the West of Pyatigorsk where the Kuban Cossacks held the Nazi lines whose eyes were turned toward the golden flow of the Grozny oil fields.

As the wagon approached it from a trackless field, it was stopped by a guerrilla guard of three men. When they saw who the woman was and whom she had with her, the men were elated. One of the men took the horses’ heads and led them to a narrow pass cut in two thousands of years before by descending glacial currents. In the dark, the narrow pass was completely obscured and would not possibly have been found even by the woman who had been there before. If the guard had not taken them in, Feodor would have led them. But

the guard simplified the job. Feodor could remain with Mickey to identify him.

A few more winding turns in the dark and the wagon was halted. Mickey and Feodor dropped off the tail and Feodor preceded the American into the great, natural cavern that was recessed almost a hundred yards into the base of the hill. It was large and high-vaulted; wide and rambling.

The place was fitted out like a dormitory, but not with modern fixtures. Not even the farms themselves could boast much of modern improvements; but there were beds of straw on both sides of the forward part of the cave; two or three roughhewn tables, and a dozen or more chairs brought up from the abandoned farms.

As Mickey entered with Feodor, a loud shout of welcome greeted them. Several wounded men lay in the beds on the floor of the cave; others were seated on them or on chairs cleaning their "little rifles"—as they called them, by flickering candlelight. Although the cave was well set back in the hill, Koslovitch did not permit much light to be used in the hideout.

The woman and the small boy hurried to the side of one of the wounded men. She dropped down beside him and threw her arms about his neck. So did the youngster. The man was glad to see them.

"We have a doctor now," the woman said. "You'll be made well again, my husband."

"That is good," replied the man. "Then I can take up the work of killing more Nazis."

Mickey came over to the man and brought his kitbag with him. Feodor joined him.

"So this is the place?" said Mickey.

"This is the place," replied Feodor, "and these are the men." He made a sweep with his hand that took in all the wounded men on the floor.

FEODOR introduced Mickey to the men. There were about twenty-five of them. The others were out on a mission.

"I suppose Koslovitch, your leader, is with the others," Mickey said turning to one of the men.

"Koslovitch?" said the man puzzled.

"Yes," replied Mickey. "I understand he is quite a great guerrilla. One of the men at the prisoner's camp mentioned the fact that he had killed no less than two hundred and fifty Nazis alone by his magnificent sniping." Then he added quickly, "Of course, that doesn't include a few hundred others

who died in train wrecks or explosions."

"You do not know Koslovitch?" asked the still puzzled Russian.

Mickey shook his head.

The man on the straw bed laid down the rifle he was cleaning, put his head back and laughed uproariously. The other men, hearing the conversation, also joined in the fun much to the chagrin which showed plainly on the American's face.

"Well," asked Mickey, "what's so funny about that?"

"He doesn't know Koslovitch," shouted the man in a deep basso profundo that echoed to the ceiling above. A roar of laughter rose again.

Mickey turned appealingly to Feodor.

"They do not know," said the boy smilingly. "I must apologize for not telling you before, but—I am Koslovitch."

Mickey's eyes almost popped.

"You!" he almost yelled.

"Yes," said the fifteen-year-old leader of the most hated and feared guerrilla band in that part of the Caucasus. "I am Feodor Koslovitch." He said it quietly; modestly.

Mickey eyed the boy a moment. Then he shook his head. "Now I've seen everything," he muttered.

He understood now what he couldn't understand before; the tone of authority in the boy's voice; never requesting a thing to be done, but ordering it; and getting it done without question or protest.

His reputation as a guerrilla fighter had given him a national reputation. He was known wherever a Russian defended a foot of his native soil against the Nazi invaders.

It was odd that a boy should lead men. But this was no ordinary boy. He was a born general; a splendid, natural strategist. There were geniuses or prodigies in other fields; why not in the art of war?

"Well," thought Mickey, "why not?"

He glanced back toward the rear of the cave. In the dim candlelight he made out over a hundred small wooden boxes. They contained dynamite and ammunition.

"That's dynamite, isn't it?" he asked.

Feodor nodded.

"If that stuff should suddenly decide to go up, some night," Mickey said, "there would be no further need here for a doctor." Then he added smilingly: "In fact, there would be no doctor. No. And no guerrillas and no Koslovitch."

"You'll get used to sleeping with it," grinned the boy.

Mickey removed his coat.

"Well," he said in a most professional and doctor-like manner, "if we're going to put these men back on their feet, I think we'd better start now."

HE ROLLED up the sleeves of his shirt and went to work on the husband of the woman who drove them to the hideout. He had one of the tables cleared and the man placed on it. The woman provided clean sheets from her furnishings. Hot water was given him by one of the men young Koslovitch ordered to put on a fire. The man would need an operation. The right leg had received a nasty bullet wound; had turned gangrenous and would have to be removed.

The man screamed he'd die first; Mickey told him he would die if he didn't permit the operation. Koslovitch ordered it. The man quietly obeyed the young guerrilla. His eyes filled with tears; he agreed. He did not weep for the loss of the limb. He wept because he knew his days of defending his homeland were over.

Koslovitch was right. There would be a need for brave men who survived the holocaust to revivify Russia. Even if they had only one leg, they would still prove of inestimable value in the process of reconstruction that would follow.

The woman proved a good and able nurse. Although Mickey worked under a handicap; bad light; inadequate tools and supplies, the job was skillfully done.

The other men were not so seriously hurt. But they needed attention and lots of it. Mickey taught the woman how to care for them. She was a most apt pupil; and an efficient worker.

Koslovitch's guerrillas now had a guerrilla nurse—and a guerrilla doctor.

IV

MICKEY worked through the night on the wounded men. Dawn crept into the cave as it slipped down the pass from the opening in the hills above. As he stepped out for a brief smoke, through the gap he could see the peak of Mount Elbrus, eighteen thousand feet above him, and about five or six miles to the south.

The other twenty-five of Koslovitch's men

trailed in during the night and dropped onto their beds of straw, tired, slightly disgruntled, for they could not find any Nazis to maraud. But their boy leader encouraged them. He would find something to do. Something important; vitally important.

It happened sooner than he dreamed. As Mickey stood in the pass and admired Mount Elbrus, one of the men who acted as lookout brushed past him and dashed breathlessly into the cave shouting for Koslovitch.

Mickey, sensing some exciting event impending, followed on the man's heels. Out of breath from his mad dash down the mountain from his lookout post, he gasped:

"Fifteen Nazi tanks. Stalled. They're fifteen miles north of Kislovodsk. They're headed south for Pyatigorsk and the German lines." He paused for breath. In his hand he held a pair of fifty-seven power German binoculars taken from a dead Nazi. These binoculars could make plain almost anything within fifty miles or more.

The man continued: "They seem to be out of fuel. They were draining the fuel tanks of those Mark III's which had more gas than the others, and filling the empty tanks of those which had not enough."

"Let's see them," said Koslovitch.

He grabbed the binoculars from the hand of the watch, and together they started for the entrance to the cave.

"Do you mind if I go along, Feodor?" asked Mickey.

"Not at all," the boy said. "But keep low as we climb the hill. I don't want you to be seen."

The three men crouched low as they climbed the side of the mountain through the brush and tall grass that grew upon it. They climbed for about two hundred feet and stopped by a tall pine whose branches were thick with needles and hid a small platform large enough for a man to sit on.

Because they were three, they did not climb to the seat but observed the distant steppes from where they crouched. The guerrilla watch located the tanks and turned the binoculars over to the boy. He watched the spot a few minutes before he spoke.

"They're still dividing their fuel," he said as he pressed the glasses closer to his eyes.

He was much older than his years, Mickey observed. He did not look like a boy at all but a little man. A sort of Napoleon without inhibitions

or complexes.

Feodor swung the glasses over the panorama that unfolded in the lenses.

"They are the only Nazis for miles," he said. "The way they are dividing their fuel I don't think they will go far." He turned the glasses over to Mickey. "Take a look."

Mickey glanced through the binoculars.

FIFTEEN Mark III's, several on the road, others in the field at the side of the highway, were stalled and men in dirty, oily coveralls were handing each other small cans of gasoline drained from the tanks.

The American medical officer turned the binoculars back to the guerrilla leader.

"They look vulnerable to me," he ventured.

"They are vulnerable," said Feodor.

Back in the cave, the young fighter called his men together.

"Pavlovnik! Stavan! Volkov! Pushkin! Shostakovitch! Kudashkin!"

One by one the men fell into line and waited. They might have been guerrillas, but they were disciplined. The boy had insisted on military precision—and got it.

Feodor ordered the men to get shovels, picks, and other digging tools. He ordered others to take dynamite; others detonators; still others hand grenades. He turned to Mickey.

"You will join us, doctor," he said.

Mickey found he had another surprise in store for himself. Feodor led the men to another hill a short distance up the pass. He had walked so fast that he was about twenty yards in advance of the men when he suddenly disappeared. As the men approached the spot, the American saw another hole in the side of the hill.

Mickey waited outside as the men entered. Their guns were slung over their shoulders; their cargo held carefully in their hands. He stepped inside as the last of almost thirty men disappeared within. About fifty yards back, he heard stomping of heavy feet on the soft dirt floor. As his eyes grew accustomed to the dim light within, he saw two long lines of horses. These horses were the individual property—or had been before the war—of the Cossacks who made up Koslovitch's band.

Mickey stepped out into daylight again as Feodor Koslovitch walked two horses out into the pass. The horses blinked as they emerged into the

sunshine.

"Can you ride?" he asked Mickey.

"Not like a Cossack," said Mickey. "But I did play polo back in the States and I stayed in the seat."

Feodor smiled. "That is recommendation enough." He turned the reins of one of the saddled horses over to the American. "Here." Feodor was a boy of few words.

Mickey examined the girth; mounted the horse and adjusted the stirrups to fit his long legs and walked the horse a little way down the pass to make room for the others to emerge from, and line up in front of, the cave for their orders.

"We will go to the outskirts of Kislodovsk," Feodor began. "Proceed five miles to the north of the village to the mountain pass those tanks will have to ride over if they ever hope to join their units." He turned to the men with the picks and shovels. "We'll dig traps for the tanks." He turned to the men with the dynamite and the grenades. "You will plant your dynamite and grenades carefully." He swung his horse in the direction opposite to that of the main cave and started a winding course in and out of depressions which hid the descending group from any possible observer.

FEODOR knew that country with the same expertise that Mickey knew the tracing of a nerve in the human body. He knew every knoll; every depression; every plain; every hill and mountain. He knew every cave; every farmhouse; every pass and road, open or closed. This knowledge helped more than once to save the lives of his men. They knew this and trusted him implicitly; and carried out his every order with an undeviating faithfulness that Mickey no longer marveled at. Because he now knew, understood and admired the young guerrilla leader.

The Kuban Cossacks rode their horses as though they were a part of the animals. They rode out slowly at first. When they reached a stretch of open plain, they rode across the green with a speed that warmed the cheeks of Mickey Tchekov as the friction of the wind that flowed swiftly past rubbed the warmth back into the capillaries.

One hour later they reached their objective. It lay at the foot of a hill—in fact, the narrow pass lay between two hills. They tied their horses to the south side of the first of the hills, hiding them among a cluster of trees and about a half mile back.

Feodor sent a lookout to the top of the hill from which they worked to keep an eye for the approach of the German tanks. The spot cut them off ten miles in advance of the place where they had stopped to divide their gas. The guerrillas went feverishly to work. First with the picks, then with the shovels.

Thirty sincere men can dig a lot of holes in thirty minutes and when the dirt was cleared, the place in the middle of the road looked as though a two-ton bomb had dug the crater. The huge Mark III would fit into the gap nicely—and would have a lot of difficulty getting out.

Mickey watched the men plant their dynamite and set the detonators. When that job was done, others brought long, thin branches they had cut from the trees and placed them across the holes. This they covered with leaves and other foliage and made it look as though the wind had strewn the brown dirt pass. It was a magnificent job of earthy camouflage. A light layer of brown earth was thrown over the whole.

The holes dug in the side of the roadway were similarly treated. Only an expert in camouflage might suspect anything wrong. Mickey could see that the tank drivers would not.

“That’s a magnificent job, Feodor,” he said admiring the handiwork of the men.

“It is if it does the work it is intended to do,” replied the boy.

With the job finished, Feodor ordered his men up to the top of the hill where they could observe without being seen themselves. As they were up the halfway mark, they saw the lookout coming down. He signaled to Feodor that the tanks were on the way.

It was about two hundred feet to the top and when they arrived there, the men flung themselves on the grass for a much needed rest—and waited. They saw the line of tanks lumbering slowly along, digging their steel caterpillar tracks in the soft Caucasian earth. They rode slowly on to conserve what little fuel they had.

MICKEY watched them from his place on the ground. Young Feodor seemed unconcerned. Soon the noise of the roaring diesels reached them on the west wind. They lowered their heads deeper into the grass. From where the tanks rolled unsuspectingly along the pass, the guerrillas could not be seen.

Slowly, slowly on came the rumbling juggernauts. In Mickey’s mind they seemed a lot of juggler that would soon be naughts. Mickey looked below to see if the wind had disturbed the camouflaging. From where he and the others lay hidden in the ground on the elevation, they could see up and down the road for miles. So perfectly had the job of laying the tank traps been done, that even he could not locate them. He smiled at the knowledge.

He turned to Feodor. “It looks as though they are right on top of the traps,” he whispered. The tension that he felt all around him made him lower his voice. He actually thrilled at the experience. He had some difficulty controlling his emotions. This being a guerrilla, he thought, was stimulatingly exciting.

All eyes were upon the steel caravan below. They watched the slow moving lead vehicle rumble and grumble on; its diesel engine objecting strenuously to insufficient and inadequate nutrition.

Eagerly, anxiously, hidden eyes watched the scene hungrily. The heavy vehicle approached the main trap. The smell of burning oil rose to the men strewn about the grass. As their eyes followed the movement of the tank, there was a crashing sound that reached their ears; the tail of the tank rose suddenly into the air as the nose dived into the tank trap. The caterpillar tracks churned the edge of the hole and blew the dirt into the air like a dog kicking up the dust behind him.

A terrific grating sound followed as the driver reversed the direction of the tracks in an effort to get out of the hole, but the more he ground, the deeper he buried himself and his tank.

Mickey and the others laughed silently as they watched the tank dig in.

It was only a matter of seconds for this to happen. So close rode the others behind the ill-fated Nazi landcraft, that the tank that followed it directly behind had not sufficient time to turn out and piled up on the tank in the hole with a crash that rang through the hills for miles. Its caterpillar track ground desperately on the roof of its fallen brother. The driver here too reversed his gear. The tracks in reverse rasped and screamed like a dull file on an iron casting. As the tank drew back off the other, it backed into another and oncoming rumbler behind it; the tracks of both tanks locked and the teeth were stripped from them like the teeth from an old comb. And just as the second tank

rolled from the one in the trap, the stripping teeth robbed of power of grip and locomotion, the huge craft hung poised for a brief moment off balance, then toppled completely over on its side.

THE other tanks came on. The fourth tank, unable to pull up, crashed into the third tank which had just stripped its track teeth, and as the driver in the third tank again reversed his gear this time for forward motion, the impact of the fourth tank at his rear, and the propelling action of the track, drove him completely across the first and second tanks into another trap that lay buried just in front of the trap into which the lead tank had fallen.

General confusion, trapped Nazis shouting and screaming inside their tanks; steel crashing against steel, with the ringing noise mingling with the roar of racing diesels; all this reached the eyes and ears of the men above and they laughed uproariously at the mad scene below. Laughed again and again as others, turning out and away from the piled up wreck, themselves dropped into other holes in the sides of the road and sank up to the tops of their bogie wheels.

Feodor raised his hand to one man with a detonator. He dropped it again quickly. There was a terrific explosion below; a blast of yellow flame lit up the first of the stricken tanks, and its seam opened wide as the steel rivets blew off the tank like the buttons on the vest of an overfed fat man.

Feodor repeated the maneuver. One of the other guerrillas pressed the plunger on the detonator and another tank was blown apart.

The tanks in the sides of the roads, in holes that were not as deep as the first, reversed their tracks and drew out of the holes. But they did not go far. As they rode over hidden grenades that blasted the tracks off the bogie wheels and left the huge death-dealing steel elephants without a means of propulsion, the gas lines to the engines were also blown apart and the diesels coughed, gasped and, like many of the Nazi rats driving the craft, died a permanent death.

Of the fifteen tanks that rode casually on, only six managed to get into the fields and safety. But even they did not move beyond the stricken tanks. Their engines gasped for want of fuel, and the tanks stalled where they were.

Two more detonator plungers were driven home; two more deafening blasts followed; two more tanks were blown apart and fire began

burning all around them. Men in the tanks who could escape ran to cover. Some ran up the hill toward the place where the Russian guerrillas were concealed.

Feodor Koslovitch swung his arm again and called unto himself the submachine gunners. They fell on their faces as they watched the men coming up. Their guns were poised and waiting for the Nazis to get within range.

Mickey followed them down; his kitbag in his hand. As he looked off in the direction of Pyatigorsk, toward the position in the Caucasus where the German lines were blasting at the Cossacks in an effort to bypass them to Grozny, Mickey saw two crawling objects about ten miles away. They were headed in the direction of the German tanks.

"Look, Feodor," Mickey said.

THE young guerrilla leader put his binoculars to his eyes. "Tankers," he said. "Nazi tanker cars with fuel for those crawling insects we've just blown apart."

Feodor signaled the gunners to retire. They scurried back to the top of the hill, and down the other side.

"Come!" he cried. And ran down the hill followed by the men who had quickly gathered their detonators and other equipment and ran to where their horses were tethered.

Mickey and Feodor were the first to reach their horses. They mounted and waited for the others, and together they drove off at a gallop to a place about three miles below the shattered tanks.

Feverishly they went to work to fell a huge pine tree which stood by the side of the road. In fact, they felled two huge trees and cut them so that when they toppled to the ground, they lay across the road and completely cut off the passage of the gas tankers.

When the trees lay comfortably across the only road in the vicinity, Mickey, Koslovitch, and the rest of the band of Cossack guerrillas darted for cover about twenty yards off the side of the road and waited.

They had not long to wait. Up the winding dirt highway rode the two tank cars carrying their load of gasoline through the Caucasian hills to the stricken tanks. Their dull green, circular, elongated steel bodies appeared and disappeared. The Russians in ambush waited until the fallen trees

would halt the Nazi tankers.

As the cars reached the spot, their brakes squealed, their tires skidded along the highway and the trucks came to a full stop just in front of the obstructions.

Arming themselves with rifles, the men dropped to the ground and tried to run for cover. They knew this was an ambush and were taking no chances. Previous experience with Russian guerrillas had taught them to get under cover and get cover fast.

But these men were not fast enough. Hand grenades came hurtling at them from the pines; two struck one of the gas tanks. They blew up tearing a rent in the tank out of whose big, oval belly gasoline poured over the ground. A second later an explosion rocked the world about the ears of the Nazis as well as the Russians. Mickey thought his eardrums had split. His head sang with the concussion.

Of the escaping tanker, the drivers were blown out of their cab; the tank rolled side over side down a small gully and finished up on its top. A half-dozen well-directed hand grenades spread the tankers' seams and blasted the tank apart and left it a raging mass of flames in the depression.

"That places those Mark III's just where they were when they were born," said the grinning Koslovitch, "empty and at the mercy of our dive bombers. We'll leave it to them to finish them off."

The men left the trucks blazing where they blew apart and returned to their horses which they had hidden in a depression in the side of the mountain. Five minutes later their horses beat a muffled tattoo in the grass as they tore up the pathless heights to their cave.

V

WHEN the horses were put up, young Koslovitch and Mickey returned to the main cave to find an oxcart heavily loaded with ammunition and other munitions expertly hidden under a false load of hay.

Kopelnikov, the driver of the cart, called Feodor aside. Mickey joined them at the boy's request.

"You can speak in front of the doctor," the boy said. "What is it?"

"Three things that you should know," began the driver. "One: A Captain Von Starheim with a party of two hundred Nazi dogs are scouring these mountains in search of you and your men. Two:

They are also looking for an escaped American doctor who was their prisoner. Three: Tomorrow night—or rather, about two o'clock tomorrow in the morning, an ammunition train will pass your allotment on the Rostov-Baku Railway from the direction of Rostov. It will be headed for the German lines near Pyatigorsk."

"It will be headed for the lines, my friend," replied the boy, "but I promise you it will never reach them."

The other guerrillas in the meantime were unloading the cart.

"Is this the doctor the Nazis are looking for?" asked the oxcart driver.

"I'm the doctor," replied Mickey.

"Be careful, my friend," warned the man. "That man Von Starheim takes no prisoners. He's dangerous—and what is more, he is elusive."

"Have you tried to capture him?" asked Mickey.

"We have," replied the driver, "but he seems to know these mountains as well as we do. And he always gets away. He spent several years in the Caucasus during his younger years on various missions for industrial firms during his college vacations, I am told," explained the oxcart driver further. "That is why he is so successful in evading us."

"I know the man well," said Mickey. "We were at the Breslau University together when I was a medical student there."

"He is said to have sworn to kill you with his own hands," added the driver.

"He will have to catch me first," smiled Mickey.

"In the meantime," injected Feodor, "we'll see what we can do to dispose of him."

"I'm joining you on your job of train blasting, am I not?" asked Mickey.

"I insist on it," smiled Feodor. "One never knows when our own men may need medical attention in the field."

"That satisfies me," replied Mickey. "If you hadn't insisted on it, I should have. If I'm going to doctor guerrillas, I may as well be one."

THIS was not the first time the oxcart driver had brought the Koslovitch gang information of Nazi troop and supply movements. A member of the Soviet counterespionage system, it was his business to know many things and to convey what he learned to the men most closely involved in their execution. That is, if any particular job of

destruction is to be performed as a result of what he has learned. And usually some job of Nazi baiting and blasting followed.

The woman who had brought Koslovitch and Mickey to the cave proved to be better than even Mickey had hoped. The men under her care were doing splendidly. Three of them had been put on their feet and were back in service. Her own husband was still confined. Their little son kept him entertained when she was attending the others, or assisting Mickey with his work of making repairs on the men.

It was midnight the next night when twenty of the men headed by young Feodor Koslovitch and with him in the lead, one Mikhail Tchekov—Mickey, for short—a guerrilla doctor—rode out of the pass down the side of the mountain in the direction of the Rostov-Baku Railway to a point midway between Pyatigorsk and Batalpashinsk. The ride took them almost an hour and a half. They would not need much time to set their time bombs. About fifteen minutes would be adequate.

A dense overcast obscured the light that might otherwise have come from the Caucasian moon. As the twenty rode on, those who did speak seemed affected by the stillness that hovered about them, above them and all around them.

Even the hoof beats of their horses were muffled on the soft, grass-covered earth.

There was no need for Feodor to ride back and warn his men carrying the bombs and dynamite they would lay waste the railway; with that they should be doubly careful with their horses. There was always the danger of their tripping on a stone concealed underfoot. But a single misstep might send the twenty of them where the Nazis would like to see them; and they had a job to do first. He warned them to keep a tight rein on the horses.

They had been out an hour when Mickey asked young Feodor: "How much farther?"

"Not much," replied the young Russian. "About another half hour when we will come to a bend in the railway. This bend cuts through a natural pass in the hills." He turned and smiled at the impatient American. "Be patient, my friend. Are all you Americans so eager to get at the enemy?"

"We are," Mickey assured him. "A hundred and thirty million of us. And we're eager to get it over with and go home."

Feodor was careful to keep to the lower hills and passes so that his approach to the railway

might not be seen. He avoided the peaks. One hour and a half later, the guerrillas dismounted and tethered their horses to a cluster of maples about a half-mile from the tracks. The young guerrilla leader sent one of his men on ahead to see if the road was clear. He returned and reported in the affirmative.

CAREFUL not to drop one of their bombs, they hurried on to the railway tracks, separated into small groups and began working feverishly among the ties. They did not—dared not, use lights. They worked as best they could. It was not more than a matter of ten minutes when they had buried their bombs after setting them to go off in twelve minutes.

For a distance of three hundred feet, bombs were laid alternately from one side of the tracks to the other. No train could escape destruction on a distribution of solid death such as that.

Feodor gave the signal for the men to beat a hasty retreat. They scrambled up the sides of the depression and together they ran rather than walked that half-mile that separated them from their horses and impending death.

They jumped into their saddles and whipping up the animals rode off without Feodor's checking their number to see if they were all there. This was unusual. But with the bombs to go off in so short a time, they decided to count off in the cave.

They stampeded in the direction of the cave and were not gone out more than three or four miles when the sound of a locomotive reached them on the wind that drove across from the north.

They slowed their horses to a walk; turned about in their saddles and watched. The distant, darkened train's black silhouette crawled through the night. The long shaft of steam which flowed behind it and trailed the long line of flat cars with its exposed cargo was the only thing visible when the fire door was thrown open and the fireman recoiled. That was on only for a moment and was blotted out when the man had reclosed his fire door.

From where the little band stood now, they watched the slow train lumber into the pass and gradually disappear completely from view.

"Quick," called Feodor to the others. "Dismount. Make your mounts lie down and flatten out near them yourself. When that train blows up, there won't be a thing left standing within a radius

of miles." He looked at the luminous dial on his watch. "Hurry!" he ordered. "There is only two minutes left."

As the men hurriedly dismounted and dropped to the ground with their mounts, Mickey counted nineteen men and nineteen horses. He turned and shouted over his horse's flank to Feodor: "One of your men is missing."

"Who is it?" called the boy. "Who's missing?" His voice sounded anxious.

"I'd suggest the men here name themselves," urged Mickey.

The men repeated their names one by one. The missing man was Pavlovitch.

Without a word, Mickey slapped his horse's rump and the beast struggled to his feet. Mickey grabbed up his kitbag and jumping into his saddle shouted to Feodor: "I'm going back. He may be in trouble and need me."

BEFORE he even realized his danger, and the certain death he was returning to to save a possibly stricken man, he kicked his horse below the girth-line and the animal darted off like a streak in the direction of the bomb planted railway to the shouts of "NO! NO! Stay here, don't go!" from the prostrate men.

But Mickey had not heard. And if he did, he completely disregarded his danger and drove his horse on toward the pass four miles ahead.

The sound of the locomotive exhaust seemed dimmer now. Not so much with distance as the muffled effect that comes as the train passes through a tunnel or a depression between high hills.

This served to accentuate the sound of the horses' hoofs beating echo-less on the padded grass under his feet.

The sound of the dull hoof beats; the muffled heartbeat of a laboring locomotive suddenly went out. The sky was ablaze with a blinding light; the earth fell about Mickey and his eardrums seemed to split in two as the world blasted apart.

His horse stopped with a suddenness that made him think the animal had blindly driven into a stone wall. It staggered back as though it had been struck by a giant hand. It rose on its hind legs a brief second, and tried desperately to maintain an equilibrium it no longer possessed. Its head wavered frantically from side to side. It was blown back on its two hind legs, throwing Mickey clear as both were blown up the hill they were descending a

moment ago, in defiance of all natural physical laws.

Over and over they rolled as the first explosion was followed by others; many others.

Dirt and grass and the shattered bodies of German trainmen mingled with the peaks of the hills near the blast as they were blown off their centuries-old Caucasian bases. But Mickey did not see that. He felt it. He felt the earth suddenly drop away. He seemed suspended in the atmosphere. He saw the stars. Millions of them. Then he saw the overcast that was aflame with the fire on earth and he knew there could be no stars. Then came—utter darkness.

But the attack of unconsciousness was brief. The rumblings of more and smaller explosions vibrated through him as he lay on the soft earth and these had the effect on him that an alarm clock bell might have on a sleeper.

As he came to, he saw his horse struggling to rise. Someone was standing near it. He saw a hand stretch out and touch the animal in the middle of its forehead. There was a flash of fire; and the animal lay perfectly still.

FEODOR came up after seeing to it that the stricken animal would no longer suffer.

"Are you hurt?" he asked anxiously.

"No," replied Mickey pressing himself all over. "Just dazed."

"You're a very lucky man, Comrade," said Feodor.

"I'd forgotten about the impending explosions," said Mickey.

"That was because you thought more of the safety of one of our men, than of your own," said the young guerrilla leader. "We shall remember that." He took Mickey by the arm. "I think you will have to get up behind me. I just had to shoot your horse. His forelegs—both of them—were broken."

Mickey lowered his head. "I'm sorry, Feodor," he said. "Guess we have to think before we act."

"We haven't always time," Feodor Koslovitch qualified for Mickey's impetuosity. "Come," he said with another one of his characteristic sweeps of the hand.

"Don't you want to see what happened to Pavlovitch?" asked Mickey anxiously.

"I don't think we need to," Feodor reminded him. "If you were knocked off your horse and your horse's legs broken four miles from the blast, you

can imagine what must have happened to poor Pavlovitch who was a lot closer to it.”

“Yes,” said Mickey thoughtfully.

One hour later the nineteen men halted on the crest of a high hill and looked back to where the sky was still alight with the flames still consuming the ammunition train the Nazis would have no further need for.

Less than a half-hour later, the small band of Russian guerrillas trailed into the stable cave, stalled and covered their horses, and returned to their quarters in the main cave, still wondering what had happened to Pavlovitch.

The night had gone well but for that one thing. The destruction of the ammunition train would delay the Nazi timetable in the insane drive toward the Grozny oil fields.

The men lay on the beds of straw and looked up at the dirt ceiling above them. They didn't know why but they could not sleep. Mickey had rested his daze off and was about to drop off when there was a slow, plodding noise outside the cave. This was followed by a shout from the sentry outside.

“*Doktarah!*” he cried in Russian, “*Doktarah Tchekov!* Pavlovitch comes! Pavlovitch comes!”

Mickey sat up on his bed on the floor. A candle was lit hurriedly. Other candles were lighted. Their yellow flickering lights cast weird shadow shapes on the walls of the cave as the still-awake men jumped to their feet. The light fell upon a strange pair. Pavlovitch, the guerrilla, hung to the mane of his horse which, though wounded seriously itself, had brought him safely back to the cave.

AS they stood in the doorway, a forlorn, desolate looking pair, they made a picture of utter despair and hopelessness. Mickey was the first to reach Pavlovitch's side. The man was unconscious from loss of blood.

“Start a fire,” shouted Mickey. “I'll need some hot water.”

Pavlovitch was removed to a long table in the rear of the cave. Mickey went to work on him. Examining him, he found the man's body was filled with shrapnel.

Mickey gave the wounded man an injection of adrenaline, for his heart beats had slowed from loss of blood. An immediate operation was necessary; he would need help, help in addition to that he would receive from the woman. Feodor would help. The lad had had first aid training.

Mickey went to work on Pavlovitch with Feodor's and the woman's help. He removed most of the shrapnel; all but one piece in the region of the man's heart. He did not dare touch that just then. The operation was performed by the light of many candles.

Pavlovitch regained consciousness two hours later. Dawn was breaking into the underground haven and gently lit up the front part of the cave.

He moved as the tired Mickey turned to him.

“Hello, Pavlovitch?” said Mickey.

Pavlovitch turned his dazed eyes toward the American.

“How do you feel?” asked Mickey.

A faint smile crept over the man's face as he recognized the guerrilla doctor. Slowly, painfully he spoke.

“*Kakvashhe Zdarovyeh?*” he asked weakly in Russian repeating Mickey's question a little dully. “How are you?”

FEODOR was standing by the man's bed. Neither he nor Mickey had slept that night.

“What happened?” asked Feodor of Pavlovitch.

“I wouldn't tax him too much, Feodor,” warned Mickey. “At least, not just yet.”

“We must know,” insisted Feodor seriously. “I feel extremely uncomfortable about the whole business. Pavlovitch may know something.”

“I—do,” said the man slowly. Painfully he turned his head to Feodor. “I'm—sorry—this—happened, Comrade Koslovitch,” he said. “I—ran—after you. I slipped and fell back down the hill to the tracks.” He paused for breath. After a moment's rest, he continued: “I—tried—to walk. My—ankle—was broken. When—I—managed to crawl—to the top—of the hill—you—were gone. My horse was at the foot of the hill—on—the other side. I was just about to crawl down when the explosion came.”

Pavlovitch had to pause again.

“Take your time Pavlovitch,” said Mickey gently.

The wounded man smiled gratefully at Mickey. “I have—not time,” he said prophetically.

“Nonsense,” encouraged the American. “You'll outlive us.”

“No,” said Pavlovitch. “No. I know.” He turned to Feodor. “I don't know how—I got—on my horse. Maybe—I think—my horse was blown down too. I—think—I—got on him while he was

still on—the ground. When it was all over—we headed for—home.” He smiled weakly at the thought of home. “Home,” he murmured, as though it were a sacred word. He went on: “We were getting—along—all right—until we met Nazi guerrillas. They shot at us—at me. I heard their leader—tell the men—not to kill the horses. He didn’t care what—they did—to me. They called him—Captain Von Starheim.”

“Von Starheim!” gasped Mickey. Turning to Feodor he shouted: “Do you know what this means? It means that Von Starheim had followed that horse here . . .”

But Feodor was not listening to Mickey. He was listening to machine gun fire outside the cave. Mickey realized what was happening. Von Starheim and his gang of Nazi killers had found the hideout of the Russian guerrillas and they were attacking it.

“To arms! To arms!” shouted Feodor. But he could have saved his breath. His men were already blasting at the Nazi invaders and machine gun fire raked the pass from both ends.

Hand grenades blasted at the mouth of the cave.

Mickey drew deeper inside. Then he saw the hundred boxes of dynamite. One little stray bullet, and the mountain in which the cave lay, would blow apart.

Outnumbered four to one, the Russians had little hope of destroying this band in open combat. There was a small passage in one side of the cave which led to the other underground hideout in which the horses were kept. There was just room enough for a man to stand up stoop-shouldered.

“Help me get the wounded into the other cave, Tanya,” he said.

THOSE wounded who could walk struggled through the passage. The others were carried on stretchers to the stables, tied to the back of some of the horses, and led out of another passage into the daylight at the rear of the mountain. He urged them to make their getaway.

“Come with us,” they insisted.

“No,” said Mickey. “My place is here with Feodor Koslovitch. You people cannot help us. Go down to the valley behind Pyatigorsk. Friendly hands will take care of you all there.”

“What about Pavlovitch?” the woman asked.

“He’s dead,” said Mickey. “Get going,” he ordered.

The woman mounted one of the horses and Mickey handed up her youngster. They whipped up the horses and disappeared into other passes which led them in a roundabout way toward the valley behind Pyatigorsk.

Mickey returned to the stable. About twenty of the guerrillas were mounting their horses for their getaway.

“Where are you going?” he asked of the mounted men.

“Koslovitch ordered us to evacuate while we still can,” one of the men replied. “We cannot win. We are outnumbered four to one. He is wounded: the others remaining with him are wounded and cannot escape. But you— Come with us, Comrade.”

“No, thank you,” replied Mickey. “My place is here. I have no orders yet to evacuate. But you go while you can. Take the back pass. Follow your wounded comrades and protect them.”

Mickey picked up two submachine guns lying on the stable floor. Those men were not running out, Mickey knew. If Feodor had insisted they save themselves while they could, the plight of the little guerrilla band must be hopeless. At least, he could get a shot or two in before they were all finished off; one good shot and that one in the rotten carcass that was Von Starheim.

The American doctor slouched through the passage that connected the stable cave to the cave used by the Russian guerrillas as quarters. As he neared the passage, he observed a sudden quiet. The deadly fire had ceased. The two machine guns he held in his hands were knocked out of his grasp as he emerged into the larger cave. A flashlight was thrown in his face and momentarily blinded him as he emerged from the dark of the subterranean passageway. When he could see clearly—he saw that he faced the grim, dark barrel of a Luger pistol. And it was held in the hand of the Nazi Oberst— Von Starheim.

VI

“HOW nice, Doctor Tchekov,” smirked Von Starheim. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“Not very original, are you, Von Starheim?” smiled Mickey. “I think I said that once before somewhere.”

“I don’t think I’ll have any occasion to use the phrase to you in the future, Doctor Tchekov,”

scowled the Oberst. "For you—like your band of Russian guerrillas—there is no future."

"What have you done with the boy, Feodor Koslovitch?" asked Mickey hurriedly fearing the worst.

"Shot him," replied Von Starheim. "As he deserved for blowing up that ammunition train—he and his band—last night and with it five hundred of Germany's finest infantrymen."

"I can see where the ammunition would be a loss," smiled Mickey with satisfaction at hearing that five hundred Nazi smudge pots went up in smoke with the ammunition. "But as for the men," he added, "they can mean nothing to your inferior Fuhrer judging by the number he keeps sending into the muzzles of the Russian guns to be slaughtered like diseased cattle."

"Silence!" shouted Von Starheim in a fury. "You will not long live to see much more of that Russian luck." With a wave of the Luger in the direction of the mouth of the cave he motioned Mickey to get outside. As he started for the entrance, two or three shots outside made him halt. He turned to Von Starheim, enquiringly.

The man smiled fiendishly. "The coup de grace," he explained, guessing what was on Mickey's mind. "We don't like to leave wounded Russians to suffer unnecessarily"—his eyes narrowed, his lips curled significantly as he added—"we don't take prisoners."

"Knowing you as well as I do, Von Starheim," said Mickey biting, "I can understand that."

"That applies to you too," added the Nazi, smiling.

"I didn't think I would be immune from your Nazi form of civilization," retorted the American. "I wasn't fooling myself for a single moment."

"I'm glad to hear that," said Von Starheim, "because I have saved you for myself. But first, I want you to witness a small ceremony."

They emerged into the light of the pass. As Mickey looked about him for the body of young Feodor, his eyes fell upon eight of his guerrilla comrades lined up in front of the wall of the pass. Their hands were tied behind their backs; their machine guns lay at their feet temptingly, but they could not reach for them even if they were not tied for they were faced with a row of Nazi submachine guns in the hands of Von Starheim's men.

Mickey's eyes widened. He was about to turn to Von Starheim when he heard the man cry in

German: "Take aim!"

"Von Starheim!" Mickey cried. "You can't do that! You can't kill men in cold blood like that! It's murder!"

Von Starheim merely laughed.

"*Blahadaryoo, Doktarah!*" cried the doomed Russians to Mickey. "*Praschaheeteh!*" They were thanking Mickey for all he had done for them and their stricken comrades; and they said goodbye.

MICKEY'S eyes filled as he smiled and waved a trembling hand at the brave men who waited for death. They smiled back at him, grateful that there was one friend to see them make the last great sacrifice.

"Fire!" cried the Nazi Captain Von Starheim. The German machine guns raked the bodies of the Russians until the weight of the lead, added to the loss of life that made it possible for them to stand so courageously up to the Germans, brought them down and they fell across the guns with which they had laid so many of the Huns so low.

When the smoke from the guns cleared in the draft of the pass, Mickey saw the inert body of young Feodor lying about twenty feet above the opening to the cave. He turned to Von Starheim: "These people were my friends," he began. "I don't expect you to do favors for me; but like your own men, they still were soldiers and deserve, if not a soldier's burial, then a spot where the carrion birds won't thrive on the men who gave their lives to defend their homes and their land. Will you let me put their bodies inside the cave?"

Von Starheim grinned: "The indomitable Tchekov asks me for a favor," he said. He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, why not? We were classmates in Breslau. And this is a last request. Make it snappy and don't keep me waiting too long."

Mickey did not stop to thank his enemy. He stepped across the still bodies of his friends to where young Feodor lay. He stooped down and picked the boy up in his arms; gently he carried him inside the cave.

With his handkerchief, Mickey wiped the blood from the boy's face. With a torn sheet taken from the bed on which he used to sleep, he covered the silent body as a tear fell from his cheek and baptized the little hero.

One by one Mickey brought the fallen Russians into the cave. Von Starheim accompanied him on several of his trips to see that he did nothing other

than that which he had requested permission to do. The other Nazis climbed up the side of the hill in which the cave lay and threw themselves down to wait for Mickey to finish.

Mickey took another man into the cave and, as with the others, laid him on the bed he occupied in life. This man he carefully carried to one of the beds near the piled-up boxes of dynamite. Von Starheim, satisfied that Mickey was resigned to his fate, and that he would not attempt to escape, did not follow him into the cave. This was what Mickey wanted. As he laid the dead man on his bed near a box of time bombs, the Yankee guerrilla doctor grabbed one, set the fuse for five minutes, placed it in a box of dynamite the cover of which had been ripped open before, and stepped hurriedly out of the cave.

THERE was one more man left to put in his bed. This took Mickey another minute for he laid the man on some straw near the cave opening.

Quite calmly Mickey stepped over to the waiting Von Starheim who smiled at him as he approached.

"I'm ready, Von Starheim," Mickey said. "Let's get it over with. Call your men."

Mickey waited for Von Starheim to call his men.

"Oh, please don't be silly, doctor," said the man sarcastically. "That is my privilege. That is an honor I have looked forward to for many years. I want the pleasure of killing you myself—and alone. Only I shall enjoy your great death scene. I have earned it with patient waiting. It can mean nothing to the others."

"Very well," said Mickey. "You have your Luger ready. Why don't you use it?"

"Not here," said the man. "But down there." He indicated a cluster of trees below in the valley about a thousand feet from the cave.

Mickey glanced slyly at his watch. There were still three minutes to go before hell would break loose under unsuspecting Heinies on the hill. Mickey smiled inwardly as he hurried down the hill toward the valley.

"You seem in a hurry," noted Von Starheim.

"I don't like prolonging anything good or bad," Mickey replied. He turned back to Von Starheim, who was following close on his heels. "Don't shoot me in the back, will you Von Starheim?"

"What!" replied the Nazi, "and lose the

satisfaction of seeing the expression on your face when my bullets tear through you? Of course not! That would be foolish."

Two minutes to go.

Mickey kept talking. "It's a beautiful day for a murder, isn't it rat?" he asked.

"What do you Americans say about sticks and stones?" asked Von Starheim sarcastically.

"You'd be surprised," said Mickey.

They reached the cluster of trees Von Starheim had ordered Mickey to.

"Where do you want me to stand, you Nazi bootlicking killer?" asked Mickey. He knew the man couldn't take much of that.

One minute to go before the blast.

THE taunt didn't seem to move Von Starheim. He seemed so intent on the sadistic enjoyment that awaited him when he would behold his Luger steel lay low the American he hated most in the world. He ordered Mickey farther into the cluster of trees.

Thirty seconds to go.

"I wonder what all your schoolmates at Breslau University would think if they could see the disgraced and yellow classmate of theirs, Captain Von Starheim of Hitler's Heinie Rats about to murder a man in cold blood," asked Mickey.

"*Donnerwetter!*" cried the man as Mickey touched off the spark that made the Nazi storm. "This is it!" he screamed. Being reminded of his expulsion was more than even he could take under the circumstances. He raised the Luger muzzle to the line of Mickey's heart. He could see the cold perspiration gather on the American's forehead as he waited to receive the hot steel.

"This is it!" screamed the Nazi again. And as he was about to press the trigger, it was as though he himself had given the signal. Fire flashed from the muzzle of the Luger. But the detonating sound did not seem to come from the pistol but from the hill above.

The whole earth seemed to rise under their feet; a huge rent in the soil opened up a few feet away, as the sky suddenly blackened above them. The blackness was streaked with an orange flame. As the explosion reverberated through the valley, both men were lifted clear off their feet and thrown about twenty yards by the concussion.

Von Starheim's bullet went wide. His gun flew out of his hand and drove for a cluster of brush

where it disappeared. There were only two great blasts, but the concussion left both Von Starheim and Mickey limp for almost fifteen minutes.

When they both came out of the daze, they glanced off to the mountain and saw most of it blown away. The dirt and laughing Heinies that were blown skyward together, now lay quietly in each other's bosoms.

Von Starheim and Mickey were not immune to the falling debris. They were covered with it and had to dig themselves out. The German looked for his gun but it was nowhere in sight.

Mickey was the first to speak.

"Looks like fists again, rat," he said.

Von Starheim was pale from the blast; the threat of a physical beating made him take on a jaundiced appearance; his face turned yellow. His eyes took on a frightened expression.

"No," he murmured. "No. You can't do that to me." He recalled other beatings administered by Mickey at Breslau. "You can't do that to me," he repeated.

Mickey rose to his feet. He painfully strode over to where Von Starheim was still sitting on the ground. The man tried to crawl back and away from the disaster he knew was about to befall him.

"Get up you filthy swine," he gritted. "You're a brave man facing an unarmed man with a gun in your hand. You're a brave man when you're with other dogs like you who you order to shoot men with their hands tied behind their backs. Get up! I'm going to polish you off and this time do a better job of it than I ever did at Breslau."

HE reached down and lifted the Nazi to his feet; then, in his best pile-driver fashion, sent his big fist crashing into the man's mouth, driving the Nazi's front teeth down the back of his throat.

Mickey followed this by a left to the man's nose. He felt the bone crush under the impact and the wine flowed as it had never flowed in any wine cellar in Germany. The murderous Nazi face was crimson; the mouth that gaped black with a huge toothless cavity, screamed for mercy.

"What mercy did you give those Russians?" asked Mickey now in a red fury himself.

"Help! Help!" cried Von Starheim as Mickey pounded on the man's chest and ribs until they cracked under the trip-hammer blows.

"Don't call for help," cried Mickey. "God himself wouldn't listen to you—and right now

there isn't anyone else who could hear you."

He continued to beat the man into insensibility. But before the Nazi passed out, Mickey, hysterical himself now, screamed at him in a frenzy: "I set off that explosion, you dog! I blew your Nazi band to pieces! I did it!"

He felt the German collapse under him as he shook the life out of the man to impress him with the fact that it was Mickey who destroyed his band of killers. He let him go and the man fell unconscious to the dirt-covered grass.

Mickey himself dropped to the ground, exhausted; weeping bitterly with anger, and at the loss of his young friend Feodor.

There was nothing weak in his tears. No stronger man could have helped cracking under the gigantic strain. Mickey Tchekov was an ordinary human, like any other ordinary human with an average human's courage.

Calmed, his strength recovered, three hours later he walking into the camp of the escaped guerrillas carrying the badly mashed Von Starheim over his strong young shoulder. He dumped the man to the ground and turned him over to his comrades.

"There he is," he said. "This is what is left of Von Starheim."

"Why didn't you kill him?" asked one of the men.

"No," replied Mickey. "I'm a doctor. I'm supposed to save lives; not destroy them. That's your job."

"But Feodor was your friend," reminded one of the men significantly.

"He was your leader," recalled Mickey.

"He is right," said another of the Russian guerrillas, a giant of a Cossack. "The doctor is right." He leaned down and lifted the now whimpering Von Starheim as though the one hundred and sixty pound German were just a child. He swung him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, and headed for the rear of the barn on the farm where the guerrillas had found haven. Other of the men followed him.

MICKEY walked off toward a small scrub pine that grew in front of a taller growth of pine trees. It was so symbolic of young Feodor and his guerrilla band of men, that Mickey felt it was a silent memorial to the boy and his faithful followers.

His hand caressed the pine needles and stopped

suddenly as a number of shots rang out on the otherwise quiet air about the farm. There was no expression of joy on his face at the sound. He knew it was all over with his old enemy; but he knew, too, that it was all over with his young friend.

“It won’t be—it isn’t over,” he murmured. “I’ll always remember that kid as I knew him—not as I left him. He was brave, unselfish, and fine. I’m

proud to have served under him—even if he was years younger than I. Boy though he was; he was every inch a man. I hope, when I go, my friends will be able to say as much for me.”

Mickey Tchekov gave the little pine a gentle, affectionate pat—and turned back to the farmhouse where the men had gathered.