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a sublime book'

SUNDAY TIMES



The Tartar
DINO STEPPES
BUZZATI

C
THE CANONS •

Chapter

One September morning, Giovanni, commissioned, set out from the city for Florence.

He had himself called while in the city. At that time put on his lieutenant's uniform. He looked at himself in the mirror and failed to find there the expected reflection in the house but from a neighborly voice to be heard; his mother was rising.

This was the day he had looked forward to the beginning of his real life. He thought of the Military Academy, remembered the books when he would hear people who were free and proud. He recalled the winter reveilles in the icy barracks and the punishment. He recalled the days to which there seemed

er One

anni Drogo, being newly commis-
ort Bastiani; it was his first posting.
it was still dark and for the first
uniform. When he had done, he
by the light of an oil lamp but
d joy. There was a great silence
pouring room low noises could
g to bid him farewell.
ked forward to for years – the
hought of the drab days at the
the bitter evenings spent at his
eople passing in the streets –
presumably happy, remembered
ck rooms heavy with the threat
torture of counting one by one
d to be no end.

Now he was an officer at last. He threw himself out over his books no longer a sergeant; for all that was past. All the hardships that had seemed so unpleasant were now behind him. Months and years which would have passed as an officer and would have money in his pocket. He looked at him, but then – or so he thought – his first youth, were probably looking at him in a mirror and saw a forced smile. He had sought in vain to love.

How stupid! Why could he not have been in a carefree manner while he said goodnight to her? He pay no attention to her last words. He was catching the tone of her voice, and he did he roam about the room not knowing where to find his watch, his crop or his hat. Why did he not proper places? It wasn't as if he had not seen this very moment scores of lieutenants and their companions, were leaving home. They were going to a fiesta. Why did he say nothing but vague, meaningless words? Soothing words? It was true that he felt the bitterness of leaving the old home, the old house where he had been born. He was full of hope – full with the fears which he had with emotion at saying goodbye. In the middle of all this there came an insistent

last and need no longer wear
or tremble at the voice of the
All those days which at the time
gone for ever – gone to form
never return. Yes, now he was
y, pretty women would perhaps
it struck him – the best years,
over. So Drogo gazed at the
e on his face, the face he had

ot manage to smile in the proper
goodbye to his mother? Why did
injunctions and succeed only in
so familiar and so human? Why
nervously, inconclusively, unable
cap although they were in their
were going off to the wars. At
tenants like himself, his former
e amid gay laughter as if they
d he bring out for his mother
phrases instead of affectionate,
at his heart was full with the
use for the first time – the old
and being born had learned to
ch every change brings with it,
e to his mother; but on top of
thought to which he could not

quite give a name but which was
he were about to set out on a j

His friend Francesco Vescovi accom
the first stage of his road. The h
deserted streets. Dawn was bre
sleep; here and there on a top flo
appeared and listless eyes look
lous birth of the sun.

The two friends did not talk
Fort Bastiani would be like but
not even know exactly where it
to reach it. Some people had s
one whom he had asked had ev

At the gates of the city Vescovi
things as if Drogo were going
suddenly he said:

‘Do you see that grassy hill
building on top of it?’ he went
outwork. I passed it two years a
when we were going hunting.’

They had left the city now. Th
pastures, the red autumnal wood
along the white, sun-beaten roa
old friends, having lived together
enthusiasms, the same friendship
day, then Vescovi had got fat bu

as like a vague foreboding as if
journey of no return.

accompanied him on horseback on
horses' hooves rang through the
aking, the city was still sunk in
oor a shutter opened, tired faces
d for a moment on the miracu-

k. Drogo was wondering what
t could not imagine it. He did
t was, nor how far he had to go
aid a day's ride, others less; no
er really been there.

vi began to chat about the usual
for a ride in the country. Then

? Yes, that one. Do you see a
on. 'That's a bit of the Fort, an
go, I remember, with my uncle,

the fields of maize had begun, the
ls. The pair rode on, side by side,
d. Giovanni and Francesco were
r for years on end, with the same
s; they had seen each other every
t Drogo had become an officer

and now he saw how far apart
life was his no longer; what lay
unknown. It seemed to him that
already a different gait, that the
light, less lively, with a suggesti
even the animal felt that life wa

They had reached the brow
the city against the light; the
roofs. He picked out the windo
open. The women were tidying
bed, shut everything up in a cu
ters. For months and months n
patient dust and, on sunny days
was, shut up in the dark, the lit
mother would keep it like that
find himself again there, still be
his long absence – but of course
she could keep intact a state of
ever or hold back the flight of
when her son came back and
reopened everything would be

At this point his friend Vesco
and Drogo went on alone, dra
The sun stood overhead when
valley leading to the Fort. On th
tain top the redoubt Vescovi had
much further.

they were. All that easy elegant
in wait for him was serious and
at his horse and Francesco's had
hoof-beats of his own were less
ion of anxiety and fatigue, as if
is going to change.

of a hill. Drogo turned to see
morning smoke rose from the
ow of his room. Probably it was
g up. They would unmake the
upboard and then bar the shut-
no one would enter except the
s, thin streaks of light. There it
ttle world of his childhood. His
so that on his return he could
a boy within its walls even after
e she was wrong in thinking that
f happiness which was gone for
time, wrong in imagining that
the doors and windows were
as before.

ovi took an affectionate farewell
wing nearer to the mountains.
he reached the mouth of the
e right he could see on a moun-
pointed out. It couldn't be very

In his anxiety to come to the fort he does not stop to eat, but pushed his horse up the road, which was becoming steeper and precipitous banks. Fewer and fewer houses were seen the way. Giovanni asked a cart driver where the Fort was.

‘The Fort?’ answered the man.
‘Fort Bastiani,’ said Drogo.

‘There aren’t any forts in these mountains,’ he heard speak of one.’

Evidently he was ill-informed. As the afternoon advanced became darker. He searched the topmost rims of the hills for the Fort. He imagined a sort of ancient citadel. As the hours passed he became more and more convinced Francesco had misinformed him. His horse must already be far behind.

Look how small they are – how small against the side of the mountains higher and wilder. He goes on climbing for an hour before the end of the day, but the road is so steep where the torrent rushes are so noisy that at the moment they are level with Drogo’s horse. The ravine, seem to slacken pace for a moment, then glide up the hillside and the horseman is left behind.

All the valley was already broken by the

At the end of his journey Drogo did not find his already tired horse on up the steep slope. He was walled in between high mountains. Fewer people were to be met on the road. How long it took to reach the fort was not known.

He asked, 'What fort?'

'In these parts,' said the carter. 'I never heard of it.'

Drogo set off again and as he went he became aware of a subtle uneasiness. He rode up the side of the valley to discover the ruins of an ancient castle with giddy ramparts. He was becoming more and more convinced that there was something in the air; the redoubt he had pointed out was not there. And evening was coming on. Giovanni Drogo and his horse – the horse – the mountains which are growing steeper as he is climbing so as to reach the Fort. The shadows rising from the depths of the valley are quicker than he is. At a certain point he turned on the opposite side of the mountain. A minute as if not to discourage him. He went on and over the boulders and the

mountain was rimful of violet shadows – only

the bare grassy crests, incredibly
when suddenly Drogo found his
– it was black and gigantic against
evening sky – a military building
look. Giovanni felt his heart beat
but everything, the ramparts, the
inhospitable and sinister air.

He circled it without finding
already dark there was no light
any watch-lights on the line of
bat swinging to and fro against
tried a shout.

‘Hallo,’ he cried, ‘is anyone there?’

Then a man rose from the shadows
the foot of the walls, a poor bearded
beard and a little bag in his hand
cult to make him out; only the walls
looked at him with gratitude.

‘Who are you looking for, sir?’

‘I’m looking for the Fort. Is it there?’

‘There isn’t a fort here any more,’
natured voice. ‘It’s all shut up,
for ten years.’

‘Where is the Fort then?’ asked
with the man.

‘What Fort? Is that it?’ And he
out his arm and pointed.

ly high up, were lit by the sun
himself in front of what seemed
ainst the intense purity of the
g with an ancient and deserted
eat, for that must be the Fort;
he very landscape, breathed an

g the entrance. Although it was
in any window nor were there
the ramparts. There was only a
the white cloud. At last Drogo

there?’

shadows which had gathered at
egggar of some sort with a grey
ad. In the half-light it was diffi-
white of his eyes glinted. Drogo

r?’ the man asked.

this it?’

ore,’ said the stranger in a good-
there hasn’t been anyone here

asked Drogo, suddenly annoyed

so saying the stranger stretched

In a gap in the nearby crags (a
ness), behind a disorderly range
Giovanni Drogo saw a bare hill
red light of the sunset – a hill
from an enchanted land; on
geometric band of a peculiar ye
of the Fort.

But how far off it was still! He
and his horse was spent. Dro
wondered what attraction there
almost inaccessible keep, so cut
did it hide? But time was runn
of the sun were slowly leaving t
bastions swarmed the dark hor

ar Steppe

they were already deep in dark-
of crests and incredibly far off,
l which was still bathed in the
which seemed to have sprung
its crest there was a regular,
yellowish colour – the silhouette

Hours and hours yet on the road
go gazed with fascination and
e could be in that solitary and
off from the world. What secrets
ing short. Already the last rays
he distant hill and up its yellow
des of encroaching night.

Chapter

Darkness overtook him on the way, and the Fort had disappeared behind him. There were no lights, not even a fire, and from time to time the noise of

He tried to call, but the echo was a hostile note. He tied his horse to a tree where it might find some grass, and sat on the bank, waiting for sleep to come. He thought of the journey ahead, of the people he would meet, of his future life; but he could see nothing. At last the horse pawed the ground in a disturbing manner.

When at dawn he set off again, he went to the side of the valley, at the same height as before, and shortly after made out some lights. He had not yet reached so far down

er Two

ay. The valley had narrowed and
nd the overhanging mountains.
the voices of night birds – only
distant water.

oes threw back his voice with a
to a tree trunk on the roadside
. Here he sat down, his back to
ome, and thought meanwhile of
le he would find at the Fort, of
no cause for joy. From time to
nd with its hooves in a strange,

in he noticed that on the other
neight, there was another road,
something moving on it. The sun
n and the shadows lay heavily in

the angles of the road, making it
quicken his pace Drogo concluded
that it was a man – an officer of

A man like himself at last –
he could laugh and joke, talk
share, of hunting expeditions,
city which to Drogo now seemed
distant world.

Meanwhile the valley grew nearer
closer, so that Giovanni Drogo saw
At first he did not dare to shout
and disrespectful. Instead he saluted
right hand to his cap, but the officer
he had not noticed Drogo.

‘Captain,’ Giovanni cried at once
and he saluted again.

‘What is it?’ a voice replied from
had halted and saluted correctly
his cry. There was no severity in
that the officer was surprised.

‘What is it?’ the captain’s voice
irritated.

Giovanni stopped, used his hands
with all his breath:

‘Nothing, I wanted to say “G

It was a stupid explanation – a
it might be taken for a joke. Dr

it difficult to see clearly. But by
trived to draw abreast and saw
on horseback.

– a friendly being with whom
of the life they were going to
of women, of the city; of the
med to have become part of a

narrower and the two roads drew
aw that the other was a captain.
ut – it would have seemed silly
aluted several times, raising his
ther did not respond. Evidently

last, overcome by impatience,

from the other side. The captain
and now asked Drogo to explain
the question, but it was evident

e echoed again, this time slightly

nds as a megaphone and replied

“good day” to you.’

almost an offensive one, because
drogo repented of it at once. He

had got himself into a ridiculous position and was bored with himself.

‘Who are you?’ the captain said.

It was the question Drogo had expected. The conversation across the valley was beginning to take the form of an interrogation. It was an unpleasant surprise, if not certain, that the captain would ask him to reply.

‘Lieutenant Drogo,’ Giovanni said.

The captain did not know him. He could not catch the name at that distance; he was a little less ruffled, for he moved forward. He made a gesture as if to say that they were waiting. An hour later a bridge appeared. The road had narrowed. The two roads became one.

At the bridge the two men dismounted, came up to Drogo. He was a man getting on for forty or perhaps fifty. He had a stern, bureaucratic face. His uniform was cluttered with medals. He introduced himself: ‘Captain.’

As he shook his hand it seemed to Drogo as if he were entering the world of the Fort. He was followed by all sorts of others.

Without more ado the captain turned back. Drogo followed at his side, keeping a respectful distance for his rank and awaiting some

ous situation simply because he

shouted back.

ad feared. This strange conver-
gning to sound like an official
ant beginning, since it was prob-
ain was from the Fort. However,

i shouted, introducing himself.
m – in all probability could not
however, he seemed to become
ard again making an affirmative
ould meet shortly. In fact, half
ed at a point where the ravine
ne one.

a met. The captain, without
o and held out his hand. He was
erhaps older with a thin, aristo-
msily cut but perfectly correct.
n Ortiz.'

ed to Drogo that he was at last
. This was the first link, to be
which would shut him in.

tain set off again and Drogo
a little behind out of respect
e unpleasant reference to the

embarrassing conversation of the captain kept silence – perhaps he was shy and did not speak. The road was steep and the sun on slowly.

At last Captain Ortiz said: ‘I distance a little while ago. Drogo’

‘Drogo, with a “g” Giovanni really, sir, you must excuse me if he added with confusion, ‘I didn’t’

‘No, you couldn’t see,’ Ortiz contradict him, and he laughed.

They rode on thus a while, Ortiz said: ‘And where are you’

‘For Fort Bastiani. Isn’t this’

‘Yes, it is.’

They fell silent. It was hot; on tains, huge wild grass-covered

‘So you are coming to the dispatch?’

‘No, sir, I am going on duty.’

‘Posted to the strength?’

‘I believe so, to the strength’

‘I see, to the strength, quite regulate you?’

‘Thank you, sir.’

They fell silent again and ro

a few minutes before. Instead
perhaps he did not want to speak,
not know how to begin. Since
it was hot, the two horses walked

“I didn’t catch your name at that
point, wasn’t it?”

“I answered, ‘Giovanni Drogo. But
if I shouted back there. You see,’
‘I can’t see your rank across the valley.’
Ortiz admitted, not bothering to

“I was both a little embarrassed. Then
‘I was bound for like this?’
‘I was on the road?’

“On all sides there were still moun-
tainous mountains.

‘Fort?’ said Ortiz. ‘Is it with a

‘I have been posted there.’

‘... my first posting.’

‘... right. Good, good. May I congrat-

‘... ride on a little further. Giovanni

had a tremendous thirst; there hanging by the captain's saddle a jug of the water in it.

'For two years?' asked Ortiz.

'I beg your pardon, sir – did

'Yes, for two years – you will tour of duty, won't you?'

'Two years? I don't know. The

'But of course it's two years. lieutenants do two years, then

'Two years is the usual for e

'Of course it's two years – f That's the important thing. Other the post. Well, if it means a qu used to the Fort, what d'you sa

Drogo had never heard of t stupid figure, he tried a vague p

'Of course, a lot of them . .

Ortiz did not press the poin interest him. But now that the ice a question:

'So at the Fort everyone has

'Who is everyone?'

'I mean the other officers.'

Ortiz chuckled.

'The whole lot of them! Tha of course, otherwise who woul

Buzzati

There was a wooden water-bottle
and you could hear the glug-

...
'... you say for two years?'
'... will be doing the usual two years'

'... they didn't tell me for how long.'
'... – all you newly commissioned
'... you leave.'

'... everyone?'
'... for seniority they count as four.
'... otherwise no one would apply for
'... quick rise I suppose you can get
'... ay?'

'... this, but, not wishing to cut a
'... phrase:
'... .'

'... at; apparently the topic did not
'... e was broken, Giovanni hazarded

'... double seniority?'

'... at's good. Only the subalterns,
'... d ask to be posted to it?'

‘I didn’t,’ said Drogo.

‘You didn’t?’

‘No, sir, I learned only two o
to the Fort.’

‘Well, that’s certainly odd.’

Once more they were sil
different thoughts.

‘Of course,’ said Ortiz, ‘it m

Giovanni shook himself.

‘You were saying, sir?’

‘I was saying – it might mean
posting and so they assigned yo

‘Perhaps that’s it, sir.’

‘Yes, that must be it, right e

Drogo watched the clear-cur
the dust of the road, their heads
only the fourfold beat of their h
of the road was still not in sig
the valley curved one could see
cut into precipitous hillsides, c
reach that spot, look up and the
them, still climbing higher.

‘Excuse me, sir,’ asked Drogo

‘Yes, what is it?’

‘Is it still far?’

‘Not very – about two and a
pace. Perhaps we will be there

days ago that I had been posted

ent, each apparently thinking

ight mean . . .'

n that no one else asked for the
ou officially.'

nough.'

t shadow of the two horses on
nodding at every step; he heard
oooves, the hum of a fly. The end
ht. Every now and again when
e the road ahead, very high up,
limbing in zigzags. They would
ere the road was still in front of

o.

half hours, perhaps three at this
by midday.'

They were silent for a while
the captain's was tired and drag

'You are from the Royal Militar

'Yes, sir, from the Academy.'

'I see – and tell me, is Colon

'Colonel Magnus? I don't thi

The valley was narrowing now
the pass. Every now and again
down them there came icy wi
one caught sight of steep, steep
that you would have said two or t
to reach the summit.

'And tell me,' said Ortiz, 'is
he still run the musketry cours

'No, sir, I don't think so. T
Zimmermann.'

'Yes, Zimmermann, that's r
point is that it is a good many
all be different now.'

Both now had their own tho
into the sun again, mountain fo
now with rock faces here and t

'I saw it in the distance yeste

'What – the Fort?'

'Yes, the Fort.' He paused, th
how to behave: 'It must be very l
to me.'

Buzzati

; the horses were in a lather –
gged its hooves.

y Academy, I suppose?’ said Ortiz.

nel Magnus still there?’

nk so. I don’t know him.’

w, shutting out the sunlight from
dark ravines opened off it and
nds; at the head of the ravines
o peaks. So high did they seem,
three days were not time enough

Major Bosco still there? Does
e?’

There’s Zimmermann – Major

ight, I’ve heard his name. The
years since my time. They will

oughts. The road had come out
ollowed mountain, even steeper
here.

erday evening,’ said Drogo.

en added to show that he knew
arge, isn’t it? It seemed immense

‘The Fort – very large? No, very old building. It is only a little impressive.’

He was silent for a moment,

‘Very, very old and complete.’

‘But isn’t it one of the principal?’

‘No, no, it’s a second class fort to enjoy belittling it but with the same way as one amuses oneself of a son, certain that they will against his unlimited virtues.’

‘It is a dead stretch of frontier never changed it. It has always ago.’

‘What do you mean – a dead?’

‘A frontier which gives no desert.’

‘A desert?’

‘That’s right – a desert. Stone it the Tartar steppe.’

‘Why Tartar?’ asked Drogo.

‘Long, long ago, I believe anything else. No one can have the last wars.’

‘So the Fort has never been?’

‘None at all,’ said the captain.

As the road rose more and more

no, it is one of the smallest – a
from the distance that it looks a

, then added:

ely out of date.’

ipal ones?’

ort,’ Ortiz replied. He seemed
a special tone of voice – in the
elf by remarking on the defects
always seem trifling when set

ier,’ Ortiz added, ‘and so they
s remained as it was a century

d frontier?’

worry. Beyond there is a great

es and parched earth – they call

Were there ever Tartars there?’

But it is a legend more than
e come across it – not even in

any use?’

n.

more the trees came to an end;

only a scattered bush remained
parched grass, rocks, falls of re

‘Excuse me, sir, are there an

‘No, not near. There’s San Ro
away.’

‘So I don’t suppose there’s m

‘Not much, that’s right, not

The air had become cooler, th
becoming more rounded, anno

‘And don’t people get bored,
mately, laughing at the same tir
all the same to him.

‘You get used to it,’ answered
rebuke: ‘I have been there for a
wrong, I’ve completed my eigh

‘Eighteen years?’ said Giovan

‘Eighteen,’ answered the cap

A flight of ravens passed, sl
plunging into the funnel of the

‘Ravens,’ said the captain.

Giovanni did not reply – he
awaited him; he felt that he wa
solitude, of those mountains.

‘But,’ he asked, ‘do any of th
on their first posting?’

‘Not many now,’ answered O
the Fort and noticing that the c

here and there. For the rest –
d earth.

y villages near at hand?’
occo, but it will be twenty miles

uch in the way of amusement?’
much.’

he flanks of the mountains were
uncing the final crests.

, sir?’ asked Giovanni more inti-
ne, as if to say that it would be

Ortiz and added with an implied
almost eighteen years. No, that’s
teenth.’

ani greatly impressed.
tain.

skimming the two officers, and
valley.

e was thinking of the life that
s no part of that world, of that

e officers stay on who go there

rtiz, half sorry at having decried
ther was now going too far, ‘in

fact almost no one. Now they all
Once it was an honour, Fort B
be a punishment.'

Giovanni said nothing but th

'All the same, it is a frontier
there are some first class fellow
a frontier post after all.'

Drogo kept silent; he felt a s
had widened; in the extreme
silhouettes of rocky mountains,
into the sky.

'Even in the army things are l
Ortiz went on. 'Once upon a
honour. Now they say the fronti
frontier is always the frontier a

A little stream crossed the ro
horses and, having dismounted,
stretch themselves.

'Do you know what is really fi
heartily.

'What, sir?'

'The messing – you'll see ho
explains the number of inspecti

Drogo laughed out of polite
whether Ortiz was a fool, whet
whether he simply talked like t

'Excellent,' said Giovanni, 'I'

I want to go to a crack garrison.
astiani, now it almost seems to

the other went on:

garrison. Speaking by and large
ws there. A frontier post is still

sudden oppression. The horizon
distance appeared the strange
sharp peaks rising in confusion

looked at differently these days,'
time Fort Bastiani was a great
er is dead – they forget that the
nd one never knows.'

ad. They stopped to water their
walked up and down a little to

first rate?' said Ortiz and laughed

ow we eat at the Fort. And that
ons. A general every fortnight.'
eness. He could not make out
her he was hiding something or
hat without meaning it.
m hungry!'

‘We’re nearly there now. Do you see that patch of gravel? Well, it is just

They set off again; just beyond the patch of gravel the two officers emerged onto the sloping plateau and the Fort appeared.

It did indeed seem small compared to the one of the previous evening. From the centre of the plateau, so much as a barrack with a few rooms, a few walls ran out to connect it with the plateau on each side. Thus the walls formed a narrow strip the width of the gap – some five hundred metres – in on the flanks by high precipitous cliffs.

To the right, at the very foot of the cliffs, the ground fell away into a sort of saddle; the road crossed the pass and came to an end again.

The Fort was silent, sunk in a deep shadow, almost lifeless. Its walls – the front could be seen clearly – stretched out yellow and bare. All along the ramparts of the fort, the sentries on the walls and of the redoubts, dozens of sentries with rifles at the slope, walking slowly on his own little beat. Like the sentries, the sentries marked off the passage of time in the vastness of the immense silence.

To right and left the mountains rose steeply, the eye could see in precipitous and

do you see that hillock with the
behind it.'

l the hillock with the patch of
ed on to the edge of a slightly
eared a few hundred yards away.
mpared with the vision of the
ral fort, which was like nothing
ew windows, two low turreted
ch the lateral redoubts, two on
a weak barrier across the whole
undred yards – which was shut
tous cliffs.

ot of the mountain, the plateau
there the old road ran through
ainst the ramparts.

the full noonday sun, shadow-
not be seen since it faced north
A chimney gave out pale smoke.
central building, of the curtain
ens of sentries could be seen,
up and down methodically, each
e motion of a pendulum they
without breaking the enchant-

ains stretched out as far as the
l apparently inaccessible ranges.

They too – at least at that time –
colour.

Instinctively Giovanni Drogo
slowly round, he fixed his gaze
able to read their true meaning
thought of an abandoned palace
a flag, which before had hung limp
billow out over the Fort. There
trumpet. The sentries walked slow
before the gate of the Fort three
it was impossible to make out
not – were loading sacks on to a
lay a mysterious torpor.

Captain Ortiz, too, had halted

‘There it is,’ he said, although

Drogo thought: now he is going
it, and was embarrassed at the time
said nothing.

It was not imposing, Fort B
was it in any sense beautiful, no
bastions – there was not one s
bareness, to bring to mind the
previous evening at the foot of
if hypnotised and an inexplicable
his heart.

And beyond it, on the other side
opened up beyond that inho

of day – had a parched, yellow

o stopped his horse. Looking
on the dark walls without being
g. He thought of a prison, he
e. A slight breath of wind made
mply entangled with the flagstaff,
e was the indistinct echo of a
owly to and fro. On the square
e or four men – at that distance
whether they were soldiers or
a cart. But over everything there

ed to look at the building.
gh there was no need to say so.
oing to ask me what I think of
thought. But instead the captain

astiani, with its low walls, nor
or picturesque with towers and
single thing to make up for its
e sweets of life. Yet as on the
the defile Drogo looked at it as
e feeling of excitement entered

ide, what was there? What world
spitable building, beyond the

ramparts, casemates and magazines. What did the northern kingdom one had ever crossed? The map, beyond the frontier a vast zone the eminence of the Fort one was a house; or was there only the waste?

He felt himself suddenly alone which had come so easily till now. In garrison life lasted, the comfort of company of gay friends, at night in the gardens – all his self-assurance seemed to him one of those unexamined certainties he never seriously thought he might lose. It was unpleasant, but rather because it was not from his own life. A world which demanded of him, a world with its own laws that of its rigid laws.

If only he could turn back, not to the Fort but ride back down to the old habits. Such was Drogo's shameful such weakness in a soldier to it, if necessary, provided the north the invisible north a thick cloud of imperturbably the sentries watched the high sun. Drogo's horse whinnied once more.

zines which shut off the view?
n look like, the stony desert no
Drogo recalled vaguely, showed
with scanty names – but from
ould see some village, pastures,
e desolation of an uninhabited

ne, and his soldier's high spirits,
ow – as long as the uneventful
forts of home, the constant
ght the little adventures in the
were suddenly gone. The Fort
known worlds to which he had
t belong – not that they seemed
they appeared infinitely remote
hich would make much greater
hout splendour unless it were

not even cross the threshold of
o the plain, to his own city, to
o's first thought; and, however
oldier, he was ready to confess
ey let him go at once. But from
d was rising over the glacis and
alked up and down under the
ied. Then the great silence fell

Giovanni at last looked away from the side, at the captain, hoping he had remained quite still and watching the walls. He, too, who had lived there, looked at them as if bewitched, as if once again. It seemed he could not tire of looking at them and a vague smile, half joyful, half

ar Steppe

from the Fort and glanced to
for a friendly word. Ortiz too
as gazing intently at the yellow
here for eighteen years, looked
ce more he witnessed a miracle.
looking upon them once again,
half sad, slowly lit his face.

Chapter

The first thing Drogo did was to go to the kitchen to see Matti. The orderly officer, an elderly man called Carlo Morel, accompanied them to the entrance of the fortress. Leaving the entrance they had a glimpse of a great empty courtyard, a long corridor whose end was lost to the light, in shadow; at intervals a little balcony with a narrow window.

It was not until they had climbed the stairs that they met a soldier carrying a bundle of clothes. The naked walls, the silence, the dim light, the inmates had forgotten that some of them had brought flowers, laughing women, gay and carefree. Nothing spoke of renunciation, but of a new beginning. Now they were traversing the same courtyard, exactly similar to the first. From

Chapter Three

to report to the adjutant, Major
easy-going, friendly young man
led him through the heart of the
hall, from which one caught a
ward, the two went down a long
to sight. The ceiling was hidden
beam of light came in through a

climbed to the next floor that they
of papers. From the damp and
dim lighting, it seemed as if the
where in the world there existed
and hospitable houses. Here every-
t for whom, to what mysterious
the second floor along a corridor
m somewhere behind the walls

there came the distant echo of
unreal.

Major Matti was plump and
nature. His office was huge, the
covered with orderly heaps of papers
of the king, and the major's sword
in for the purpose.

Drogo came to attention and re-
documents and began to explain
to be posted to the fortress – he
transferred as soon as possible – he

‘I knew your father years ago
sure you will wish to live up to
High Court, if I remember right

‘No, sir,’ said Drogo, ‘he was

‘Ah, yes, of course, I was for
course.’ For a moment Matti saw
Drogo noted how he kept raising
if trying to hide a round, greasy
the breast of his uniform.

The major recovered himself

‘I am very pleased to see you
Majesty Peter III said? “Fort Bast
I may add that it is an honour to

He said these things automati-
learned years before which he
occasions.

f a laugh; to Drogo it seemed

smiled with an excess of good
he desk big in proportion and
paper. There was a coloured print
rd hung on a wooden peg driven

ported. He produced his personal
that he had not made any request
was determined to have himself
out Major Matti interrupted him.
o. A very fine gentleman. I am
his memory. A President of the
ntly?’

s a doctor, my father.’

rgetting, a doctor, of course, of
seemed to be embarrassed, and
ng his left hand to his collar as
y stain, evidently a fresh one, on

E quickly.

u,’ he said. ‘You know what His
tiani the guardian of my crown.”
o belong to it. Don’t you agree?’
ically, as if they were a formula
e must produce on certain set

‘Yes, sir,’ said Giovanni, ‘you are right, it was a surprise to me. I have never before prefer if possible to stay . . .’

‘So you want to leave us before we say I’m sorry, very sorry.’

‘It isn’t that I wish to. I would like that I . . .’

‘I understand,’ said the major, ‘it’s an old story and he could sympathise. I had thought the Fort would be surprised and frightened. But tell me honestly how you feel of it if you have only arrived a few days.’

‘I haven’t the slightest objection,’ said Giovanni. ‘Only I should prefer to stay in the Fort. Do you understand? I am talking to you because you understand these things. I prefer to stay.’

‘Of course, of course,’ exclaimed the major. ‘That’s what we are here for. We are here to do his will – not even the least impossible thing. You seem a good lad to me.’

The major fell silent a moment. It was at this point, as he turned to look at Drogo’s glance fell on the wall of the courtyard. He could see the narrow faces of the others and sun-beaten like them. There was a rectangle of a window. There was a clock, and on the topmost terrace

are quite right, but I must confess
my family in the city and should

before you arrive, do you? I must

and not dream of arguing. I mean

or and sighed as if this were an
hise with it. 'I understand. You
different and now you are a bit
— how can you form an opinion
few minutes ago?'

ion to the Fort, sir,' said Drogo.
the city or at least near it. You
ou in confidence, because I see
put myself in your hands.'

imed Matti with a short laugh.
e don't want anyone here against
portant sentry. Still, I'm sorry.

nt as if to consider the best solu-
urned his head a little to the left,
window opening on to the inner
orthern wall, yellowish like the
a, with here and there the black
s a clock as well, pointing to two
race a sentry walking to and fro

with his rifle at the slope. But in the glare of noon, there rose a tip could be seen and in itself it Yet for Giovanni Drogo that first visible lure of the northern whose existence hung heavily on like? he wondered. From it the through slow-moving smoky wis to speak again.

‘Tell me,’ he asked Drogo, ‘w away or would it be the same t two? For us, I repeat, it is all th of view, that is,’ he added so as

‘Since I have to go back,’ said at the lack of difficulties, ‘since me I had better go at once.’

‘Quite right, quite right,’ said I must tell you something. If you thing is for you to go sick. You g vation for a day or two and the There are a lot of people in any altitude.’

‘Do I really have to go sick?’ this sort of fiction.

‘You don’t have to, but it mak you would have to make a wri has to be sent to the High Com

over the ramparts, far, far away,
a rocky crest. Only its extreme
was nothing out of the ordinary.
fragment of rock represented the
territory, the legendary kingdom
over the Fort. What was the rest
ere came a drowsy light shining
ps of mist. Then the major began

ould you like to go back straight
o you if you waited a month or
e same – from the official point
not to sound discourteous.

l Giovanni, pleasantly surprised
e I have to go back it seems to

l the major soothingly. ‘But now
u want to go right away the best
go into the sick bay under obser-
e doctor gives you a certificate.
r case who can’t stand up to the

asked Drogo, who did not like

akes everything easier. Otherwise
tten request for a posting. That
mand, the High Command has

to reply – that means at least a f
has to go into the matter, and
Because he does find these thing
that’s it, they hurt him just as
his Fort. Well then, if I were yo
I would try to avoid it.’

‘But excuse me, sir,’ said Dro
going away might cause me tro

‘Not at all, you have misunde
your career suffer. It is only a ca
Of course, and I told you this n
be pleased. But if you have real

‘No, no,’ said Drogo, ‘if thi
medical certificate is better.’

‘Unless . . .’ said Matti with a
sentence in mid-air.

‘Unless?’

‘Unless you were to put up w
which would be the best solutio

‘Four months?’ asked Drogo,
since he had thought to be leav

‘Four months,’ Matti confirme
regular that way. I’ll explain to
is a medical inspection – it is
four months’ time. That seems t
nity. I give you my word that,
adverse. You can set your mind

fortnight. Above all, the colonel
that I would prefer to avoid.
things unpleasant – they hurt him,
if you were doing an injury to
you, if you want me to be frank,

‘I didn’t know that. If my
trouble then it’s another matter.’
understood me. In neither case will
use of a – of a shade of meaning.
right away, the colonel will not
ly made up your mind . . .’
things are as you say perhaps the

a meaning smile and leaving his

with staying here four months –
on.’

already somewhat disappointed,
ing at once.

ed. ‘The procedure is much more
you direct. Twice a year there
laid down. The next will be in
to me to be your best opportu-
if you like, your report will be
absolutely at rest.’

‘Besides,’ continued the major, ‘four months are four months – long enough. You can be certain that the colonel knows you know how important that is, and we must get this quite, quite clear –’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Drogo, ‘I understand.’

‘Service here is not hard,’ said the major, ‘it is always guard duties. And the more of one, will certainly not be a hardship with. There will be no hard tasks, and you will never be bored.’

But Drogo was scarcely listening. His attention was strangely attracted by the view through the window with that tiny piece of sky. A vague feeling to which he did not give a name, but which was gradually penetrating into his inmost thoughts, a baseless fancy.

At the same time he felt some desire to go, but not so desperately as he had felt at the fears he had had on his arrival. He was not as good a man as he had been, he now thought, it might be his own inferiority. Thus his own consciousness was longing for the old familiar existence.

‘Sir,’ said Drogo, ‘thank you for your answer. I will wait it over till tomorrow.’

‘Very well,’ said Matti with a nod.

or after a pause, 'besides, four
g enough for a personal report.
lonel will do one on you. And
can be for your career. But let
you are perfectly free . . .'
erstand perfectly.'

the major emphasised, 'almost
New Redoubt, which demands
t be entrusted to you to begin
ks, don't be afraid – you won't

ning to Matti's explanations, for
acted by the picture framed in
of crag showing above the wall.
d not have the key was gradu-
t being – a stupid and absurd

what calmer. He was still anxious
before. He was almost ashamed
rival. He could not believe that
ll the others. If he left at once,
ooked upon as a confession of
eit of himself fought with his
stence.

or your advice, but let me think

evident satisfaction. 'And this

evening? Do you want to meet t
you prefer to leave things in th

‘I don’t know,’ answered Gi
no use my hiding myself, part
months?’

‘That’s better,’ said the maj
way. You will see what nice p
officers.’

Matti smiled and Drogo saw t
But first of all he asked:

‘Sir,’ his voice was apparently
to the north and see what there

‘Beyond the wall? I didn’t kno
answered the major.

‘Just a glance, sir, merely ou
is a desert and I’ve never seen

‘It isn’t worth it. A monoton
Take my advice – don’t think a

‘I won’t insist, sir,’ said Dro
anything against it.’

Major Matti put the tips of hi
as if in prayer.

‘You have asked me,’ he said,
Only personnel on duty may go
guard rooms; you need to know

‘But not even as a special exce

‘Not even for an officer. Oh,

Buzzati

the colonel in the mess or would
the air?’

Giovanni, ‘it seems to me there’s
particularly if I have to stay four

or. ‘You’ll get confidence that
people they are, all first class

that the time had come to leave.

calm, ‘may I take a quick look
is beyond that wall?’

now you were interested in views,’

of curiosity. I’ve heard there
one.’

ous landscape – no beauty in it.
about it.’

ago. ‘I did not think there was

s plump fingers together almost

‘the one thing I can’t grant you.

o on to the ramparts or into the
v the password.’

ception – not even for an officer?’

, I know – for you people from

the city all these petty rules seem
the password is no great secret.

‘Excuse me, if I keep on about

‘Do please, do.’

‘I wanted to say – isn’t there one
which one can look?’

‘Only one. Only one in the
no one thought of a belvedere
worth it, I repeat, a landscape
You will have plenty of that view

‘Thank you, sir, will that be
he saluted.

Matti made a friendly gesture

‘Goodbye. Forget about it –
you, an extremely stupid landscaper

But that evening Lieutenant Morel
duty, secretly led Drogo on to the

An immensely long corridor,
the length of the walls from one
Every so often there was a door -
rooms. They walked for about a
entrance of the third redoubt.
the door. Morel asked to speak
commander of the guard.

Thus they were able to enter
Giovanni found himself in the en

in ridiculous. Besides down there
. But here it is different.'
out it.'

even a loophole, a window from

colonel's office. Unfortunately
for the inquisitive. But it isn't
with nothing to recommend it.
ew if you decide to stay.'

all?' And coming to attention,

e with his hand.

a worthless landscape, I assure
cape.'

orel, who had come off orderly
ne top of the wall to let him see.

lit by infrequent lamps, ran all
ne side of the pass to the other.

—storerooms, workshops, guard

a hundred and fifty yards to the

An armed sentry stood before

to Lieutenant Grotta, who was

r in defiance of the regulations.

entrance to a narrow passageway;

on one wall there was a board
on duty.

‘Come on, come this way,’
better hurry.’

Drogo followed him up a narrow
the open air on the ramparts of
paced to and fro Lieutenant Mo
was no need for formalities.

Giovanni suddenly found him
battlements; in front of him the
moonlight, and the secrets of the

A kind of pallor came over D
as rigid as stone. The nearby sen
silence seemed to have descen
light. Then without shifting his

‘And beyond – beyond that
on and on like this?’

‘I have never seen it,’ replied
New Redoubt – that one there
see all the plain beyond. They s

‘What do they say?’ asked I
with unusual anxiety.

‘They say it is all covered wit
white stones, they say – like sn

‘All stones – and nothing els

‘That’s what they say – and a

‘But right over – in the nort

with the names of the soldiers

said Morel to Drogo, 'we had

narrow stair which came out into

the redoubt. To the sentry who

Morel made a sign as if to say there

himself looking on to the outer

the valley fell away, flooded with

the north lay open before his eyes.

Drogo's face as he looked; he was

the sentry had halted and an unbroken

led through the diffused half-

gaze Drogo asked:

rock what is it like? Does it go

Morel. 'You have to go to the

on the peak. From there you

say . . .' And here he fell silent.

Drogo, and his voice trembled

h stones – a sort of desert, with

ow.'

ce?'

an occasional patch of marsh.'

h they must see something.'

‘Usually there are mists on the coast,’ said Drogo, who had lost his previous warm enthusiasm for the land. ‘The mists keep you from seeing.’

‘Mists,’ said Drogo incredulously. ‘The horizon must clear now and then.’

‘Hardly ever clear, not even when the sun is out. They say they have seen things.’

‘Seen? What sort of things?’

‘They mean they’ve dreamt things,’ said Drogo. ‘The soldiers have to say. One says one has seen a white tower, or a volcano and that is where the Captain Ortiz, maintains he saw the land. According to him there is a low pass, probably.’

They were both silent. When had they seen this world before? Had he ever created it as he read some ancient books? He had seen some things out – the low crumpled hills in which there were neither trees nor steep slopes and finally that triangular rock before him could not come from the very depth of his being.

At this moment Drogo was looking at the uninhabited land across which he had never come. No enemy had ever come; no battles; nothing had ever happened.

the horizon,' said Morel, who had
sm. 'There are mists which keep

usly. 'They can't always be there
and again.'

in winter. But some people say

things. You go and hear what the
ne thing, one another. Some say
else they say there is a smoking
mists come from. Even Ortiz,
v something five years ago now.
ng black patch – forests prob-

e, Drogo asked himself, had he
e lived there in his dreams or
cient tale. He seemed to make
bling rocks, the winding valley
ees nor verdure, those precipi-
ngle of desolate plain which the
ceal. Responses had been awak-
ng and he could not grasp them.
ooking at the northern world –
ch, or so they said, no man had
come out of it; there had been
ppened.

‘Well,’ asked Morel attempting
like it?’

‘I don’t know,’ was all Drogo
of confused desires and foolish

There was a bugle call, a lo
tell where.

‘You had better go now,’ ad
not seem to hear, intent as he
The evening light was failing and
shadows, slid along the geometr
order to keep warm the sentry
again, gazing every now and the
did not know.

‘You had better go now,’ repe
by the arm.

Buzzati

ng to assume a jovial tone, 'you

could say. Within he was a whirl
fears.

w bugle call, but he could not

vised Morel. But Giovanni did

was on searching his thoughts.

d the wind, re-awakened by the

rical architecture of the Fort. In

had begun to walk up and down

en at Giovanni Drogo, whom he

eated Morel, taking his comrade