

Hadji Murat

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Leo Tolstoy

Translated by Kyril Zinovieff
and Jenny Hughes



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Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910)

Hadji Murat

I WAS COMING HOME THROUGH the fields. It was the height of summer. All the meadows had been mown and they were just about to harvest the rye.

There is a lovely choice of flowers at this time of year: red, white and pink clover, fragrant and fluffy; impudent daisies; milk-white, ox-eyed “love-me-love-me-nots” with their bright-yellow centres and their fusty intoxicating stench; yellow charlock with its smell of honey; tall mauve and white campanulas with their tulip-shaped bells; the creeping vetch; the tidy scabious – yellow, red, pink and purple; plantains, with the faintest of pink down and a hardly discernible smell; cornflowers, bright blue in the sun and when young, paler blue and reddish in the evening and as they grow old; and the tender, almond-scented flowers of the convolvulus that fade as soon as they open.

I picked a large bunch of different flowers and was going home when I noticed in a ditch a wonderful raspberry-coloured thistle in full bloom, of the kind which here we call a “tartar” and which the reapers are careful to scythe around; if they do cut it by accident, they chuck it out of the hay so as not to prick their hands on it. It occurred to me to pluck this thistle and put it in the middle of my bunch. I scrambled down into the ditch and, chasing away a furry bumblebee which had burrowed its way into the very centre of the flower and fallen sweetly and limply asleep there, started to pluck the flower. But it was very difficult: not only was the stalk prickly on every side, even through the handkerchief I had wrapped round my hand, but it was so awfully tough that I wrestled with it for a good five minutes, tearing the fibres one by one. When at last I had torn off the flower, the stalk was all in shreds and the flower itself no longer seemed so fresh and beautiful. Besides, its coarseness and toughness did not fit in with the delicate flowers in my bunch. I was sorry to have needlessly destroyed a flower, which had been so attractive in its proper place, and I threw it away. “But

what energy and passion for life," I thought, remembering the effort I had put into plucking the flower. "With what intensity it defended its life and what a high price it sold it for."

The road back to the house went through a fallow field of black earth which had just been ploughed. I walked gradually up the hill, along the dusty, black-earth road. The ploughed field belonged to a landowner and was very large, so that on either side of the road, and up the hill in front of me, nothing could be seen except the black, even furrows which had not yet been harrowed. The ploughing had been well done and nowhere in the field was a single plant to be seen, or a single blade of grass – everything was black. "What a destructive, cruel creature man is, how many different living creatures and plants he destroys to sustain his own life," I thought, involuntarily trying to find something alive in the midst of this dead black field. In front of me, to the right of the road, could be seen a little bush. When I came up closer to it, I recognized in that little bush just the same old "tartar" whose flower I had needlessly plucked and thrown away.

The "tartar" had three offshoots. One was torn off and what remained of the shoot stuck out like a severed arm. The other two each had a flower. These had once been red but were now black. One shoot was broken and half of it, with a dirty flower on the end, was hanging down; the other, though smeared with black-earth mud, was still erect. One could see that the whole little bush had been run over by a wheel, later to spring up again so that it stood crookedly but all the same erect, as if part of its body had been wrenched away, its innards gutted, an arm torn off, an eye pierced. But still it stood erect and had not surrendered to man, who had destroyed all its brethren around it.

"What energy!" I thought. "Man has triumphed over everything, has destroyed millions of grasses but still this bush has not surrendered."

And suddenly I recalled an old Caucasian story, which I had partly seen myself, partly heard about from witnesses and partly imagined. The story, as reconstructed in my memory and imagination, was the following.

IT ALL HAPPENED at the end of 1851.

On a cold November evening, Hadji Murat was riding into Makhket, a rebellious Chechen *aoul* wreathed in the fragrant smoke of dried-dung fires.

The intense singing of the muezzin had only just died away. In the clear mountain air, permeated with the smell of dried-dung smoke, through the lowing of cows and bleating of sheep dispersed among the flat-roofed *saklas* which were fitted together like a honeycomb in the *aoul*, one could distinctly hear the guttural sounds of male voices arguing with each other and, from below the fountain, the voices of women and children.

This Hadji Murat, a *naib* of Shamil famous for his daring exploits, invariably rode out wearing his own badge* and surrounded by dozens of his own *murids* showing off on their horses. Now, wearing a hood and wrapped in his *burka* with a rifle protruding from beneath it, he was riding with a single *murid* and trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, peering cautiously with his quick, black eyes at the faces of the villagers he happened to meet on the way.

Having reached the centre of the *aoul*, Hadji Murat rode on, not along the street that led to the square but turning left into a little narrow alley. When he came to the second *sakla* in the alley, which was dug into the mountainside, he stopped and looked round. There was nobody under the balcony in front of the *sakla*. But on the roof, behind the freshly painted clay chimney, lay a man covered by a coat. Hadji Murat lightly touched the man lying on the roof with the handle of his whip and clicked his tongue. From under the coat, an old man got up in a nightcap and *beshmet*, torn and shiny with wear. The old

man's eyes had no lashes and were red and moist; he blinked in order to unstick them. Hadji Murat said the customary *salaam alaykum** – and uncovered his face.

“*Alaykum salaam,*” said the old man with a toothless smile as he recognized Hadji Murat and, getting up on his thin legs, tried to feel his way with his feet into the wooden-heeled mules that stood by the chimney. This achieved, unhurriedly he slipped his arms into the sleeves of a wrinkled sheepskin coat, put it on and started to climb backwards down the ladder which was propped against the roof. While he was dressing and climbing down the ladder, the old man nodded his head on his thin, wrinkled, suntanned neck, ceaselessly chomping with his toothless mouth. Once on the ground, he went to take the reins and right stirrup of Hadji Murat's horse as a gesture of hospitality. But Hadji Murat's *murid*, strong and agile, quickly dismounted, pushed the old man aside and took his place.

Hadji Murat dismounted and, limping slightly, went under the balcony. A boy of about fifteen quickly came out of the door to meet them and stared with astonishment at the new arrivals, his eyes sparkling and black as ripe currants.

“Run to the mosque and call your father,” the old man told him and, preceding Hadji Murat, opened for him the light creaking door into the *sakla*. As Hadji Murat was going into the *sakla*, out of an inner door came a woman carrying cushions – a slender woman, thin and no longer young, wearing a red *besbmet* over a yellow shirt and wide, blue trousers.

“Your arrival brings us luck,” she said and, bending double, began to put the cushions against the wall for the guest to sit on.

“May your sons live long,” Hadji Murat replied, taking off his *burka*, rifle and sword and giving them to the old man.

The old man carefully hung the rifle and the sword on nails next to the weapons belonging to the owner of the *sakla*, between two large basins which shone on the smoothly plastered, freshly whitewashed wall.

Hadji Murat, having adjusted the pistol at his back, sat down on the cushions laid out by the woman, wrapping his *cherkeska* around him. The old man sat down opposite him

on his bare heels and, closing his eyes, lifted his hands with the palms upwards. Hadji Murat did the same. Then both of them said a prayer, ran their hands down the sides of their faces and brought them together at the end of their beards.

“*Ne khabar?*” Hadji Murat asked the old man; that is to say: “what’s new?”

“*Khabar yok,*” – “there’s nothing new” – replied the old man, looking with his red, lifeless eyes not at the face of Hadji Murat but at his chest. “I live at the apiary. I only came just now to see my son. He knows.”

Hadji Murat understood that the old man did not want to tell him what he knew and what Hadji Murat needed to know; he nodded his head and did not ask any more questions.

“There’s nothing good in the latest news,” said the old man. “The only news is that the hares are all in council to decide how to chase away the eagles and the eagles tear them to pieces one by one. Last week,” the old man croaked venomously, “the Russian dogs, may their faces be torn, burnt the hay of the Michitskys too.”

Hadji Murat’s *murid* came in, striding softly across the earthen floor on his strong legs; like Hadji Murat, he took off his *burka*, rifle and sword, keeping only a dagger and a pistol, and hung them up himself on the same nails as the weapons of Hadji Murat.

“Who’s he?” asked the old man, pointing at the man who had just come in.

“He’s my *murid*. Eldar is his name,” said Hadji Murat.

“Good,” said the old man, and showed Eldar to a place next to Hadji Murat on the strip of felt.

Eldar sat down, crossing his legs, and peered silently with his beautiful sheep’s eyes at the face of the old man who had by now become talkative. The old man was telling the story of how last week some of their lads had caught two soldiers. They had killed one and sent the other to Shamil at Vedeno.* Hadji Murat listened absent-mindedly, glancing occasionally at the door and listening to the sounds outside. Steps could

be heard from under the balcony at the front of the *sakla*; the door creaked and the owner came in.

Sado, the owner of the *sakla*, was a man of about forty with a small beard, a long nose and eyes as black, though not as sparkling, as those of the fifteen-year-old boy, his son, who was running behind him and who, coming into the *sakla* with his father, sat down at the door. He took off his wooden shoes at the door, pushed his worn old *papakha* to the back of his head – unshaven for a long time and now growing a crop of black hair – and squatted immediately in front of Hadji Murat.

Like the old man, he closed his eyes, lifted his hands, palms upwards, said a prayer, stroked his face with his hands and only then began to speak. He said that there was an order from Shamil to take Hadji Murat alive or dead, that the men sent by Shamil went away only yesterday, that the people were afraid to disobey Shamil and that therefore one must be careful.

“In my house,” Sado said, “while I am alive, nobody will do anything to my *kunak*. But outside, who knows? We must think.”

Hadji Murat listened attentively and nodded his head in approval. When Sado had finished, he said: “Right. Now we must send a man to the Russians with a letter. My *murid* will go, but we need somebody to take him there.”

“I’ll send my brother Bata,” said Sado. “Go and fetch Bata,” he said, turning to his son.

The nimble-footed boy leapt up as if on springs and left the *sakla*, waving his arms. Some ten minutes later he came back with a deeply sunburnt, wiry, short-legged Chechen in a yellow *cherkeska*, with the seams coming apart and the sleeves torn to shreds and black leggings coming undone. Hadji Murat greeted the new arrival and, without wasting words, said shortly: “Is it possible for you to take my *murid* to the Russians?”

“It is possible,” said Bata, promptly and cheerfully. “Everything is possible. There isn’t a Chechen who could do it better. Someone else might come and promise everything and wouldn’t do it. But I would.”

“Right,” said Hadji Murat. “You’ll get three for your pains,” he said, putting up three fingers.

Bata nodded to show that he understood but added that what mattered to him was not the money; he was ready to serve Hadji Murat for the honour of it. Everyone in the mountains knew Hadji Murat and how he used to beat the Russian swine...

“Good,” said Hadji Murat. “A rope should be long – a speech, short.”

“Well, I’ll keep quiet,” said Bata.

“At the bend in the Argun, opposite the cliff, there is a meadow in a wood with two stacks of hay. Do you know it?”

“I do.”

“That’s where my three horsemen are waiting for me,” said Hadji Murat.

“Aye,” said Bata, nodding his head.

“There ask for Khan Mahoma. Khan Mahoma knows what to do and what to say. You must take him to the Russian commander, Prince Vorontsov. Will you do that?”

“I will.”

“Can you take him there and bring him back?”

“I can.”

“When you’ve taken him there, come back to the wood. I’ll be there.”

“I’ll do all that,” said Bata. He got up and, bringing his hands to his chest, went out.

“We must send yet another man to Gekhi,” Hadji Murat said to his host, when Bata had left. “What we want in Gekhi is this,” he began, taking hold of one of the cartridge cases on his *cherkeska*; but, seeing two women come into the *sakla*, he immediately dropped his hand and stopped talking.

One was Sado’s wife, the thin woman, no longer young, who had laid out the cushions. The other was a very young girl in wide red trousers and a green *beshmet* with a curtain of silver coins across her breast. A silver rouble hung at the end of the fairly short but thick, coarse black plait which lay between the shoulders of her thin back; the same black eyes as her father’s

and brother's shone merrily like currants in her young face, which tried to look stern. She did not look at the guests though she was clearly conscious of their presence.

Sado's wife was carrying a little round table on which there were tea, pasties, pancakes in butter, cheese, *churek* – unleavened bread – and honey. The girl carried a basin, a *kumgan* and a towel.

Sado and Hadji Murat both kept quiet all the time that the women, moving silently in their red soleless slippers, were laying out what they had brought in front of the guests. Eldar, for his part, with his sheep's eyes fixed on his crossed legs, was as still as a statue the whole time that the women were in the *sakla*. Only when the women had gone out and their soft steps could no longer be heard outside the door, did Eldar heave a sigh of relief; and Hadji Murat took one of the cartridge cases from his *cherkeska*, removed the bullet that was placed in it and, from under the bullet, a note rolled up into a little tube.

"For my son," he said, pointing to the note.

"And his reply?" Sado asked.

"To you. And you report to me."

"It will be done," said Sado, and put the note into a cartridge pocket on his own *cherkeska*. Then, taking the *kumgan* in his hands, he moved the basin nearer to Hadji Murat. Hadji Murat rolled up the sleeves of his *besmet* on his muscular arms, white above the elbow, and put them under the cold stream of clear water which Sado was pouring out of the *kumgan*. Hadji Murat dried his hands with a clean, rough towel and moved closer to the food. Eldar did the same. While his guests were eating, Sado sat opposite and thanked them several times for the visit. The boy sitting near the door, never taking his bright black eyes off Hadji Murat, smiled as if to confirm his father's words with his smile.

Although Hadji Murat had eaten nothing for over twenty-four hours, he ate only a little bread and some cheese; then, taking a small knife from under his dagger, he cut some honey and spread it on the bread.

“Our honey is good. This year’s honey is the best for years: there’s a lot of it and it’s good,” said the old man, obviously pleased that Hadji Murat was eating his honey.

“Thank you,” said Hadji Murat, and moved away from the food.

Eldar wanted to go on eating but, like his *murshid*, he moved away from the table and gave Hadji Murat the basin and the *kumgan*.

Sado knew, in receiving Hadji Murat, that he was putting his own life at risk because, after Shamil’s quarrel with him, it was officially forbidden to the whole of Chechnya to receive Hadji Murat, under threat of execution. He knew that the inhabitants of the *aoul* could at any moment learn of Hadji Murat’s presence in his house and demand his surrender. Not only was Sado not embarrassed by this, it gave him pleasure. Sado considered it to be his duty to defend his guest and *kunak*, even if it cost him his life, and it was a source of pleasure and pride that he was behaving in the way it was his duty to behave.

“So long as you are in my house, and my head is on my shoulders, no one will do anything to you,” he repeated to Hadji Murat.

Hadji Murat looked searchingly into his bright eyes and, realizing that this was the truth, said, a little solemnly, “gladness and life be yours.”

Sado silently pressed his hand to his breast as a sign of gratitude for the kind words.

After closing the shutters of the *sakla* and setting fire to the branches in the fireplace, Sado, in a particularly gay and excited mood, left the room where he had received his *kunak* and went into that part of the *sakla* where all his family lived. The women were not yet asleep and were talking about the dangerous guests who were spending the night in the room of the *kunaks*.