

Mikhail Sholokhov

THE COLT

(Translated by Assya Humecky and David H. Stewart)

ONE BRILLIANT DAY beside a manure heap thickly covered with emerald flies he emerged from his mother's womb, head first and with outstretched little legs. Directly above he saw the dispersing, soft, bluish puff of a shellburst, and the howling roar threw his small wet body beneath his mother's hooves. Terror was his first emotion on earth. A powder-smelling hail of fragments thumped the tiled stable roof. It sprinkled the ground lightly, forcing the colt's mother (Trofim's red mare) to jump up and then fall back again with a short whinny, her sweating flank against the protecting heap.

Afterward, in the hot silence, the flies began buzzing more distinctly and a rooster, afraid to climb upon the fence because of the artillery fire, flapped his wings a little somewhere in the shade of the burdock and crowed nonchalantly though quietly. From the hut one could hear the tearful groaning of a wounded machine-gunner. At times he would cry out in a shrill, hoarse voice, interspersing his cries with ferocious curses. In the front garden bees sang in the silky scarlet of poppies. Behind the village in the meadow a machine gun was finishing its belt. To the tune of its stitching and in the interval between artillery salvos, the red mare licked her first-born lovingly; and he, pressing against the swollen udder, for the first time felt the fullness of life and the ineffable sweetness of a mother's caress.

When the second shell crashed somewhere behind the barnyard, Trofim came out of the hut, slammed the door, and walked toward the stable. Rounding the manure heap and shading his eyes from the sun, he saw the colt trembling with the strain of nursing his (Trofim's) red mare. Trofim searched his pockets. With shaking fingers he found his tobacco pouch, rolled a cigarette, and found his voice: "So! You had it, did you? You really picked a time!" His last words were filled with bitter injury.

Pieces of weed and dry manure stuck to the mare's sweat-roughened sides. She looked unbecomingly thin and scrawny, but her eyes beamed with proud joy seasoned with fatigue, and her satiny upper lip wrinkled into a smile. So, at least, it seemed to Trofim. After putting the mare in the stable where she snorted and shook the feed bag, Trofim leaned in the doorway. He threw hostile glances at the colt and asked drily: "So here's the result of all the playing around?"

He waited in vain for an answer and then spoke again. "At least you could've chosen Ignat's stallion. But the devil only knows who this colt's from. What am I to do with him?"

In the dim silence of the stable the grain rustled. Between the door-planks a curved sunbeam poured its golden vein. The light fell on Trofim's left cheek. His red moustache and bristly beard shone ruddily while the wrinkles round his mouth were dark like crooked furrows. The colt stood on his thin downy legs like a wooden toy.

"Should I kill him?" His large, tobacco-stained finger pointed at the colt. The mare turned her bloodshot eye, blinked and looked skeptical.

That night there was a conversation in the squadron commander's room. Trofim was saying: "I noticed that my mare's been awful careful; wouldn't canter, and as for galloping, she wouldn't even try. She'd choke. So I took a look and sure enough she was carrying a foal. She sure was careful!—The colt's brownish, and that's the whole story."

The squadron commander squeezed the copper cup of tea in his fist. He pressed it like a sword hilt before an attack and gazed sleepily at the lamp. Above the yellow firefly of light, moths fluttered like flakes. Coming in through the window wave upon wave they burned themselves against the glass shade.

" . . . Makes no difference. Bay or black—so what? Shoot him. With a colt we'll be like gypsies. . . .That's right, just like gypsies! And what if the commander-in-chief comes? Then what? Suppose he comes to inspect the regiment? The colt'll frisk around and throw up his tail right in front of us. Right? And that'd shame the whole Red Army. I just can't understand, Trofim, how you let it happen. In the very heat of the civil war, and such carryings on! It's a disgrace! There's a strict order to you stable-tenders: keep the stallions away!"

In the morning Trofim came out of the hut with a rifle. The sun had not yet risen. On the grass lay pink dew. The meadow, trampled down by infantrymen's boots and dug up into trenches, reminded one of a tear-stained girl's face twisted by grief. Near the field kitchen the cooks bustled about. On the porch sat

the squadron commander in his undershirt half rotted with old sweat. His fingers, accustomed now to the bracing cold revolver butt, awkwardly recalled a forgotten but familiar task—they were weaving a fancy dumpling basket. Passing by, Trofim asked curiously: "You weaving a basket?"

The squadron commander tied the handle with willow withes and mumbled through his teeth: "The woman . . . my wife . . . she asked me to. Once I was a master at it, but now I just can't. See, it didn't come out right."

"No, it looks all right." Trofim praised him.

The squadron commander brushed the bits of withe from his lap and asked: "You going to liquidate the colt?"

Trofim silently shrugged and went on to the stable.

With his head bent the squadron commander waited for the shot. A minute passed—another—no shot. Trofim emerged from behind the corner of the stable, plainly embarrassed.

"Well?"

"Must be the firing pin is busted. It didn't fire the shell."

"Here, let's see."

Trofim handed it over unwillingly. Opening the action, the squadron commander screwed up his eyes. "But there's no shells in here at all!"

"Impossible!" Trofim exclaimed heatedly.

"I tell you there's none!"

"Well . . . I threw them behind the stable."

The squadron commander placed the rifle beside him and turned the new basket over and over. The fresh withes were sticky and fragrant like honey and willow blossoms. They smelled of earth and toil forgotten amid the everlasting fire of war.

"Listen. What the hell. . . . Let him live with his mother—just for the time being of course. When the war's over he can plow. And if there's any difficulty with the commander-in-chief, he'll just have to consider the position, on account of he really does have to nurse. The commander himself nursed at some breast or other, and we too. It's just the way things are and there's nothing more to say.—By the way, your firing pin works."

About a month later Trofim's squadron took part in a battle near Ust-Khopersk with a White Cossack detachment. Firing began just before dusk. When, at dark, they attacked, Trofim lagged hopelessly behind by the time his squad was

halfway to the enemy line. Neither the crop nor the bit, tearing his mare's lips until they bled, could force her to gallop. Lifting her head high, she whinnied shrilly and leaped about in one place until her colt, his tail flying, caught up with her. Trofim, his face distorted with anger, jumped from the saddle, stuck his sabre into the scabbard, and tore his rifle from his shoulder. The right flank was already engaged with the White troops. Near the ravine a mass of men swayed back and forth as if blown by the wind. They slashed in silence. The earth beneath the hooves rumbled. Trofim threw a momentary glance in that direction and then got the colt's sculptured head in the sights.—Was it his hand that shook in haste, or was there some other reason for missing? After the shot the colt kicked up his heels as if in jest, squealed, and throwing up grey clods of dirt with his hooves, made a circle and halted at a distance.—Not just a clipful of ordinary rounds but the red-nosed armour-piercing kind—these Trofim fired at the little red devil. Seeing that the armour-piercing bullets (which he grabbed accidentally) brought neither death nor injury to the red mare's offspring, Trofim mounted, swearing outrageously, and loped across to where the bearded, red-faced defenders of the old ways were pressing the squadron commander and three other Red Army men back to the ravine.

That night the squadron quartered on the steppe near a small depression. They smoked little. The horses remained saddled. A patrol returning from the Don reported that the Cossacks were gathering large forces.

Trofim lay wrapped in a raincoat and remembered the day's events as he dozed. Before his eyes swam the squadron commander jumping into the ravine. The pock-marked face of a defender of the old ways making a cross with his sabre on the commissar, a young lad chopped to bits, somebody's saddle blackened with blood, and the colt.

Toward dawn the squadron commander came up to Trofim and sat down nearby in the darkness. "Sleeping, Trofim?"

"Dozing."

Looking up at the fading stars, the squadron commander said: "Annihilate that colt of yours! He causes panic in battle. Whenever I see him my hand shakes and I can't use my sabre. It's all because he looks so homey—but in war things like that aren't allowed. Your heart just turns from stone to a sponge. . . . By the way, it's amazing the little rascal wasn't trampled during the attack; he got right under-foot." After a short silence he smiled dreamily, but Trofim did not see him. "You know, Trofim, his tail . . . well . . . that is . . . when he tosses it over his back and kicks, it looks like a fox's. Remarkable tail!"

Trofim did not answer. He covered his head with his coat, shivering from the dampness, and fell asleep with incredible speed.

Across from an old monastery the Don presses again a hill and dashes along recklessly. At the bend the water curls past, and green-maned waves leap upon chalky boulders which have been scattered along the river-edge by the spring avalanche.

Had the Cossacks not taken the bend where the current is weaker and the Don broader and more calm, and had they not begun firing toward the foot of the hill, the squadron commander would never have risked swimming the squadron across the river to the monastery.

At noon the crossing began. A small raft ferried a cart with a machine gun, the gunners, and three horses. One horse, harnessed on the left side, had never seen water and panicked when, in the middle of the Don, the raft turned sharply against the current and tilted slightly. You could distinctly hear the horse whinnying and stamping his shoes on the raft's wooden flooring, even at the foot of the hill where the dismounted squadron was unsaddling the horses.

"He'll sink the ferry!" muttered Trofim frowning, and he did not have time even to lay his hand on his mare's sweaty back when the horse on the raft cried wildly, backed against the cross-tree, and reared.

"Shoot!" yelled the squadron commander squeezing his crop.

Trofim saw the gunner grab the horse's neck and put a revolver in its ear. The shot resounded like a child's pop-gun. The two other horses pressed closer against each other. The gunners, fearing to capsize the raft, pushed the dead horse against the cart. His forelegs bent slowly and his head drooped.

In about ten minutes the squadron commander rode out onto a spit of land. He was the first to put his horse into the water, and the whole squadron—one hundred and eight half-naked riders and as many horses of all colours—followed him with a thunderous splash. The saddles were carried ahead on three boats, one rowed by Trofim who had entrusted his mare to the squad leader, Nechepurenko. From the middle of the Don Trofim saw the first horses drinking, knee-deep in the water. The riders hastened them with low voices. In a moment the horses' heads densely covered a stretch of water over a hundred feet wide. All were snorting. Close to the horses, holding onto their manes swam the Red Army men with their clothing and packs tied to their rifles.

Throwing the oar to the bottom of the boat, Trofim rose to full height. He

squirmed from the sun's heat and eagerly scanned the mass of swimming horses for the red head of his mare. The squadron looked like a flock of wild geese scattered across the sky by hunters' shots. In front, raising high its shiny back, swam the squadron commander's horse; just back of his tail were two white spots shining like silver—the ears of the horse which had belonged to the commissar. Behind these two was a black mass of other horses, and farthest back, lagging more and more each second, was Nechepurenko with his brushy hair, and at his left were the pointed ears of Trofim's mare. Straining his eyes, Trofim also saw the colt. He was swimming in surges, first leaping high out of the water, then sinking until his nostrils were barely visible.

It was then that a gust of wind, bursting over the Don, brought Trofim the colt's call, thin like a strand of cobweb.

The cry across the water rang sharply like a sabre's stinging edge. It cut Trofim to the heart, and a strange thing then happened to him: He had gone through five years of war. Many times death had wooed him, looking straight into his eyes, and it meant nothing to him; but now he turned white beneath his bristly red beard. He paled to an ashy blue. Grabbing the oar, he pointed the boat against the current heading toward the whirlpool that had caught his exhausted colt. About seventy feet away Nechepurenko tried vainly to turn the mother who was swimming toward the pool whinnying hoarsely. Trofim's friend, Steshka Efremov, who sat in the boat on a heap of saddles, shouted sternly: "Don't be a fool! Head ashore! Look, there're the Cossacks!"

"I'll kill him!" panted Trofim yanking at the rifle sling.

The current carried the colt far from the squadron's crossing place. The small pool whirled him steadily, licking him with green choppy waves. Trofim tensely swept the oar, and the boat leaped forward. On the right bank the Cossacks jumped out of a ravine. Their Maxim hammered deeply. Bullets hissed and plunked into the water. An officer in a torn canvas shirt shouted something, waving his revolver.

The colt whinnied less often, and his short, keen cry was softer and thinner. It was a coldly terrifying cry like a baby's. Nechepurenko, having left the mare, swam easily to the left shore. Trembling, Trofim snatched up the rifle and shot, aiming below the small head as the whirlpool tugged it downward. He pulled off his boots, groaned deeply, and flopped into the water with outstretched arms.

On the right shore, the officer in the canvas shirt bellowed: "Cease fire!"

Within five minutes Trofim was near the colt. With his left arm he grasped

beneath its cold belly. Choking and hiccuping he headed for the left shore. Not one shot sounded from the right bank.

Sky, forest, sand—all was bright green and translucent. A last powerful effort and Trofim's feet grated on the bottom. He dragged the slick little body onto the sand. Gasping and vomiting green water, he fumbled about in the sand with his hands. In the forest sounded the voices of the men who had reached shore. Somewhere beyond the point artillery fire grumbled. The red mare stood by Trofim, shaking off the water and licking her colt. From her drooping tail a brilliant stream of water trickled on the sand.

Swaying, Trofim stood up, took two steps across the sand, then jerked upward and fell to the side. Like a hot sting something pierced his breast. As he fell, he heard the shot—a single shot behind him from the right bank. On the right shore the officer in the torn shirt opened the carbine and ejected a smoking shell. On the sand, two paces from the colt Trofim writhed; and his hard bluing lips, which had not kissed a child for five years, smiled and foamed blood.