

# **The Revolutionist**

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## Chapter I

Gabriel Andersen, the teacher, walked to the edge of the school garden, where he paused, undecided what to do. Off in the distance, two miles away, the woods hung like bluish lace over a field of pure snow. It was a brilliant day. A hundred tints glistened on the white ground and the iron bars of the garden railing. There was a lightness and transparency in the air that only the days of early spring possess. Gabriel Andersen turned his steps toward the fringe of blue lace for a tramp in the woods.

„Another spring in my life,“ he said, breathing deep and peering up at the heavens through his spectacles. Andersen was rather given to sentimental poetising. He walked with his hands folded behind him, dangling his cane.

He had gone but a few paces when he noticed a group of soldiers and horses on the road beyond the garden rail. Their drab uniforms stood out dully against the white of the snow, but their swords and horses' coats tossed back the light. Their bowed cavalry legs moved awkwardly on the snow. Andersen wondered what they were doing there Suddenly the nature of their business flashed upon him. It was an ugly errand they were upon, an instinct rather than his reason told him. Something unusual and terrible was to happen. And the same instinct told him he must conceal himself from the soldiers. He turned to the left quickly, dropped on his knees, and crawled on the soft, thawing, crackling snow to a low haystack, from behind which, by craning his neck, he could watch what the soldiers were doing.

There were twelve of them, one a stocky young officer in a grey cloak caught in prettily at the waist by a silver belt. His face was so red that even at that distance Andersen caught the odd, whitish gleam of his light protruding moustache and eyebrows against the vivid colour of his skin. The broken tones of his raucous voice reached distinctly to where the teacher, listening intently, lay hidden.

„I know what I am about. I don't need anybody's advice,“ the officer cried. He clapped his arms akimbo and looked down at some one among the group of bustling soldiers. „I'll show you how to be a rebel, you damned skunk.“

Andersen's heart beat fast. „Good heavens!“ he thought. „Is it possible?“ His head grew chill as if struck by a cold wave.

„Officer,“ a quiet, restrained, yet distinct voice came from among the soldiers, „you have no right—It's for the court to decide—you aren't a judge—it's plain murder, not—“ „Silence!“ thundered the officer, his voice choking with rage. „I'll give you a court. Ivanov, go ahead.“

He put the spurs to his horse and rode away. Gabriel Andersen mechanically observed how carefully the horse picked its way, placing its feet daintily as if for the steps of a minuet. Its ears were pricked to catch every sound. There was momentary bustle and excitement among the soldiers. Then they dispersed in different directions, leaving three persons in black behind, two tall men and one very short and frail. Andersen could see the hair of the short one's head. It was very light. And he saw his rosy ears sticking out on each side.

Now he fully understood what was to happen. But it was a thing so out of the ordinary, so horrible, that he fancied he was dreaming.

„It's so bright, so beautiful—the snow, the field, the woods, the sky. The breath of spring is upon everything. Yet people are going to be killed. How can it be? Impossible!“ So his thoughts ran in confusion. He had the sensation of a man suddenly gone insane, who finds he sees, hears and feels what he is not accustomed to, and ought not hear, see and feel.

The three men in black stood next to one another hard by the railing, two quite close together, the short one some distance away.

„Officer!“ one of them cried in a desperate voice—Andersen could not see which it was—„God sees us! Officer!“

Eight soldiers dismounted quickly, their spurs and sabres catching awkwardly. Evidently they were in a hurry, as if doing a thief's job.

Several seconds passed in silence until the soldiers placed themselves in a row a few feet from the black figures and levelled their guns. In doing so one soldier knocked his cap from his head. He picked it up and put it on again without brushing off the wet snow.

The officer's mount still kept dancing on one spot with his ears pricked, while the other horses, also with sharp ears erect to catch every sound, stood motionless looking at the men in black, their long wise heads inclined to one side.

„Spare the boy at least!“ another voice suddenly pierced the air. „Why kill a child, damn you! What has the child done?“

„Ivanov, do what I told you to do,“ thundered the officer, drowning the other voice. His face turned as scarlet as a piece of red flannel.

There followed a scene savage and repulsive in its gruesomeness. The short figure in black, with the light hair and the rosy ears, uttered a wild shriek in a shrill child's tones and reeled to one side. Instantly it was caught up by two or three soldiers. But the boy began to struggle, and two more soldiers ran up.

„Ow-ow-ow-ow!“ the boy cried. „Let me go, let me go! Ow-ow!“

His shrill voice cut the air like the yell of a stuck porkling not quite done to death. Suddenly he grew quiet. Some one must have struck him. An unexpected, oppressive silence ensued. The boy was being pushed forward. Then there came a deafening report. Andersen started back all in a tremble. He saw distinctly, yet vaguely as in a dream, the dropping of two dark bodies, the flash of pale sparks, and a light smoke rising in the clean, bright atmosphere. He saw the soldiers hastily mounting their horses without even glancing at the bodies. He saw them galloping along the muddy road, their arms clanking, their horses' hoofs clattering.

He saw all this, himself now standing in the middle of the road, not knowing when and why he had jumped from behind the haystack. He was deathly pale. His face was covered with dank sweat, his body was aquiver. A physical sadness smote and tortured him. He could not make out the nature of the feeling. It was akin to extreme sickness, though far more nauseating and terrible.

After the soldiers had disappeared beyond the bend toward the woods, people came hurrying to the spot of the shooting, though till then not a soul had been in sight.

The bodies lay at the roadside on the other side of the railing, where the snow was clean, brittle and untrampled and glistened cheerfully in the bright atmosphere. There were three dead bodies, two men and a boy. The boy lay with his long soft neck stretched on the snow. The face of the man next to the boy was invisible. He had fallen face downward in a pool of blood. The third was a big man with a black beard and huge, muscular arms. He lay stretched out to the full length of his big body, his arms extended over a large area of blood-stained snow.

The three men who had been shot lay black against the white snow, motionless. From afar no one could have told the terror that was in their immobility as they lay there at the edge of the narrow road crowded with people.

That night Gabriel Andersen in his little room in the schoolhouse did not write poems as usual. He stood at the window and looked at the distant pale disk of the moon in the misty blue sky, and thought. And his thoughts were confused, gloomy, and heavy as if a cloud had descended upon his brain.

Indistinctly outlined in the dull moonlight he saw the dark railing, the trees, the empty garden. It seemed to him that he beheld them—the three men who had been shot, two grown up, one a child. They were lying there now at the roadside, in the empty, silent field, looking at the far-off cold moon with their dead, white eyes as he with his living eyes.

„The time will come some day,“ he thought, „when the killing of people by others will be an utter impossibility. The time will come when even the soldiers and officers who killed these three men will realise what they have done and will understand that what they killed them for is just as necessary, important, and dear to them—to the officers and soldiers—as to those whom they killed.

„Yes,“ he said aloud and solemnly, his eyes moistening, „that time will come. They will understand.“ And the pale disk of the moon was blotted out by the moisture in his eyes.

A large pity pierced his heart for the three victims whose eyes looked at the moon, sad and unseeing. A feeling of rage cut him as with a sharp knife and took possession of him.

But Gabriel Andersen quieted his heart, whispering softly, „They know not what they do.“ And this old and ready phrase gave him the strength to stifle his rage and indignation.

## Chapter II

The day was as bright and white, but the spring was already advanced. The wet soil smelt of spring. Clear cold water ran everywhere from under the loose, thawing snow. The branches of the trees were springy and elastic. For miles and miles around, the country opened up in clear azure stretches.

Yet the clearness and the joy of the spring day were not in the village. They were somewhere outside the village, where there were no people—in the fields, the woods and the mountains. In the village the air was stifling, heavy and terrible as in a nightmare.

Gabriel Andersen stood in the road near a crowd of dark, sad, absent-minded people and craned his neck to see the preparations for the flogging of seven peasants.

They stood in the thawing snow, and Gabriel Andersen could not persuade himself that they were people whom he had long known and understood. By that which was about to happen to them, the shameful, terrible, ineradicable thing that was to happen to them, they were separated from all the rest of the world, and so were unable to feel what he, Gabriel Andersen, felt, just as he was unable to feel what they felt. Round them were the soldiers, confidently and beautifully mounted on high upon their large steeds, who tossed their wise heads and turned their dappled wooden faces slowly from side to side, looking contemptuously at him, Gabriel Andersen, who was soon to behold this horror, this disgrace, and would do nothing, would not dare to do anything. So it seemed to Gabriel Andersen; and a sense of cold, intolerable shame gripped him as between two clamps of ice through which he could see everything without being able to move, cry out or utter a groan.

They took the first peasant. Gabriel Andersen saw his strange, imploring, hopeless look. His lips moved, but no sound was heard, and his eyes wandered. There was a bright gleam in them as in the eyes of a madman. His mind, it was evident, was no longer able to comprehend what was happening.

And so terrible was that face, at once full of reason and of madness, that Andersen felt relieved when they put him face downward on the snow and, instead of the fiery eyes, he saw his bare back glistening—a senseless, shameful, horrible sight.

The large, red-faced soldier in a red cap pushed toward him, looked down at his body with seeming delight, and then cried in a clear voice:

„Well, let her go, with God’s blessing!“

Andersen seemed not to see the soldiers, the sky, the horses or the crowd. He did not feel the cold, the terror or the shame. He did not hear the swish of the knout in the air or the savage howl of pain and despair. He only saw the bare back of a man’s body swelling up and covered over evenly with white and purple stripes. Gradually the bare back lost the semblance of human flesh. The blood oozed and squirted, forming patches, drops and rivulets, which ran down on the white, thawing snow.

Terror gripped the soul of Gabriel Andersen as he thought of the moment when the man would rise and face all the people who had seen his body bared out in the open and reduced to a bloody pulp. He closed his eyes. When he opened them, he saw four soldiers in uniform and red hats forcing another man down on the snow, his back bared just as shamefully, terribly and absurdly—a ludicrously tragic sight.

Then came the third, the fourth, and so on, to the end.

And Gabriel Andersen stood on the wet, thawing snow, craning his neck, trembling and stuttering, though he did not say a word. Dank sweat poured from his body. A sense of shame permeated his whole being. It was a humiliating feeling, having to escape being noticed so that they should not catch him and lay him there on the snow and strip him bare—him, Gabriel Andersen.

The soldiers pressed and crowded, the horses tossed their heads, the knout swished in the air, and the bare, shamed human flesh swelled up, tore, ran over with blood, and curled like a snake. Oaths, wild shrieks rained upon the village through the clean white air of that spring day.

Andersen now saw five men's faces at the steps of the town hall, the faces of those men who had already undergone their shame. He quickly turned his eyes away. After seeing this a man must die, he thought.

## Chapter III

There were seventeen of them, fifteen soldiers, a subaltern and a young beardless officer. The officer lay in front of the fire looking intently into the flames. The soldiers were tinkering with the firearms in the wagon.

Their grey figures moved about quietly on the black thawing ground, and occasionally stumbled across the logs sticking out from the blazing fire.

Gabriel Andersen, wearing an overcoat and carrying his cane behind his back, approached them. The subaltern, a stout fellow with a moustache, jumped up, turned from the fire, and looked at him.

„Who are you? What do you want?“ he asked excitedly. From his tone it was evident that the soldiers feared everybody in that district, through which they went scattering death, destruction and torture.

„Officer,“ he said, „there is a man here I don't know.“

The officer looked at Andersen without speaking.

„Officer,“ said Andersen in a thin, strained voice, „my name is Michelson. I am a business man here, and I am going to the village on business. I was afraid I might be mistaken for some one else—you know.“

„Then what are you nosing about here for?“ the officer said angrily, and turned away.

„A business man,“ sneered a soldier. „He ought to be searched, this business man ought, so as not to be knocking about at night. A good one in the jaw is what he needs.“

„He's a suspicious character, officer,“ said the subaltern. „Don't you think we'd better arrest him, what?“

„Don't,“ answered the officer lazily. „I'm sick of them, damn 'em.“

Gabriel Andersen stood there without saying anything. His eyes flashed strangely in the dark by the firelight. And it was strange to see his short, substantial, clean, neat figure in the field at night among the soldiers, with his overcoat and cane and glasses glistening in the firelight.

The soldiers left him and walked away. Gabriel Andersen remained standing for a while. Then he turned and left, rapidly disappearing in the darkness.

The night was drawing to a close. The air turned chilly, and the tops of the bushes defined themselves more clearly in the dark. Gabriel Andersen went again to the military post. But this time he hid, crouching low as he made his way under the cover of the bushes. Behind him people moved about quietly and carefully,

bending the bushes, silent as shadows. Next to Gabriel, on his right, walked a tall man with a revolver in his hand.

The figure of a soldier on the hill outlined itself strangely, unexpectedly, not where they had been looking for it. It was faintly illumined by the gleam from the dying fire. Gabriel Andersen recognised the soldier. It was the one who had proposed that he should be searched. Nothing stirred in Andersen's heart. His face was cold and motionless, as of a man who is asleep. Round the fire the soldiers lay stretched out sleeping, all except the subaltern, who sat with his head drooping over his knees.

The tall thin man on Andersen's right raised the revolver and pulled the trigger. A momentary blinding flash, a deafening report.

Andersen saw the guard lift his hands and then sit down on the ground clapping his bosom. From all directions short, crackling sparks flashed up which combined into one riving roar. The subaltern jumped up and dropped straight into the fire. Grey soldiers' figures moved about in all directions like apparitions, throwing up their hands and falling and writhing on the black earth. The young officer ran past Andersen, fluttering his hands like some strange, frightened bird. Andersen, as if he were thinking of something else, raised his cane. With all his strength he hit the officer on the head, each blow descending with a dull, ugly thud. The officer reeled in a circle, struck a bush, and sat down after the second blow, covering his head with both hands, as children do. Some one ran up and discharged a revolver as if from Andersen's own hand. The officer sank together in a heap and lunged with great force head foremost on the ground. His legs twitched for a while, then he curled up quietly.

The shots ceased. Black men with white faces, ghostly grey in the dark, moved about the dead bodies of the soldiers, taking away their arms and ammunition.

Andersen watched all this with a cold, attentive stare. When all was over, he went up, took hold of the burned subaltern's legs, and tried to remove the body from the fire. But it was too heavy for him, and he let it go.

## Chapter IV

Andersen sat motionless on the steps of the town hall, and thought. He thought of how he, Gabriel Andersen, with his spectacles, cane, overcoat and poems, had lied and betrayed fifteen men. He thought it was terrible, yet there was neither pity, shame nor regret in his heart. Were he to be set free, he knew that he, Gabriel Andersen, with the spectacles and poems, would go straightway and do it again. He tried to examine himself, to see what was going on inside his soul. But his thoughts were heavy and confused. For some reason it was more painful for him to think of the three men lying on the snow, looking at the pale disk of the far-off moon with their dead, unseeing eyes, than of the murdered officer whom he had struck two dry, ugly blows on the head. Of his own death he did not think. It seemed to him that he had done with everything long, long ago. Something had died, had gone out and left him empty, and he must not think about it.

And when they grabbed him by the shoulder and he rose, and they quickly led him through the garden where the cabbages raised their dry heads, he could not formulate a single thought.

He was conducted to the road and placed at the railing with his back to one of the iron bars. He fixed his spectacles, put his hands behind him, and stood there with his neat, stocky body, his head slightly inclined to one side.

At the last moment he looked in front of him and saw rifle barrels pointing at his head, chest and stomach, and pale faces with trembling lips. He distinctly saw how one barrel levelled at his forehead suddenly dropped.

Something strange and incomprehensible, as if no longer of this world, no longer earthly, passed through Andersen's mind. He straightened himself to the full height of his short body and threw back his head in simple pride. A strange indistinct sense of cleanness, strength and pride filled his soul, and everything—the sun and the sky and the people and the field and death—seemed to him insignificant, remote and useless.

The bullets hit him in the chest, in the left eye, in the stomach, went through his clean coat buttoned all the way up. His glasses shattered into bits. He uttered a shriek, circled round, and fell with his face against one of the iron bars, his one remaining eye wide open. He clawed the ground with his outstretched hands as if trying to support himself.

The officer, who had turned green, rushed toward him, and senselessly thrust the revolver against his neck, and fired twice. Andersen stretched out on the ground.

The soldiers left quickly. But Andersen remained pressed flat to the ground. The index finger of his left hand continued to quiver for about ten seconds.

