HERO?  Who is a hero?  Field Captain Puisin. . . . In his day he had been mentioned in the despatches from the theater of war as a hero.  Leading his company, he was the first to mount the hilltop.  With a dexterous blow of the sabre, he knocked, out of the hands of a Japanese, the enemy's standard.

The portraits of Field Captain Puisin appeared in his day, in many journals, with the inscription: "The hero of N—— Hill, Field Captain, etc."  In these portraits he appears handsome, young, with audaciously turned-up moustaches, and the daring glance, if not that of an eagle, at least that of a hawk.  His fur cap rests a little more on one ear than on the other; his head is turned a little sideways and lifted high. . . . More than one maiden in the provinces, upon looking at a new number of The Niva, would pause, with attention akin to rapture, to scrutinize this portrait; and sigh at the sudden trepidation in her heart.

"Look, Glashenka, what a handsome fellow!"
"The hero of N—— Hill." . . . Really, a hero!  One could see that at once. . . .

The Field Captain had had this picture taken just before his departure for the battlefields.

"I should like to take your photograph, with Rembrandt effect. Will you permit me?"
"How?" asked Puisin doubtfully.
"With Rembrandt effect!"
"Well, go ahead!  I don't mind.  I should like you, however, to catch the most prominent trait in my character. . . ."

The "Rembrandt effect" was successful.
"Hm. . . . Not at all bad!" observed the Field Captain afterward, examining the first proof; and, as he twisted with his fingers his left moustache, he passed a mental reflection upon himself: "A right smart-looking lad!" . . . Even his wife, accustomed as she was to daily contact with the future hero, flashed her eyes and whispered with tender pride:

"Volodka!  What a handsome husband I have!"
"Really?"
"See for yourself!"

And looking at the portrait together they both admired it.
"What a pity you did not take a full length!  Upon my word, you look a real hero here! . . ."

Liuba pressed close to her husband; they embraced each other, then gave way to tears. . . .
“And you too? . . . Don’t. . . . It doesn’t become you! . . . A captain!” . . . murmured Liuba through her laughter and tears.

“Fiddlesticks! I won’t. . . .”

“Heroes don’t weep, and here . . . there are tears in your eyes. . . .”

And they both laughed as they looked caressingly at each other.

“I will prove to you that I am no coward, that I am exactly as I am in the portrait!”

“Well, beware! I want to be proud of you. Do you hear?”

“Yes!” answered the Captain resolutely, then shook his head and wiped dry with his handkerchief his merry eyes.

“And what are you doing here?” he asked his servant, who had become an unintentional witness to this touching scene. “What are you crying about?”

“We might die, your honor, together. . . .”

“Not ‘your honor,’ but ‘your excellency’,” corrected Liuba.

“So, so! I, too, have a wife in the village. . . . And a little lad—Meetka, by name. . . .”

“Look here, Stepan, don’t you abandon your master there! Keep a good watch over him!”

“I’ll do my best, lady! Everyone in our company loves his excellency very much. They would do anything, . . . .”

“Good! Good! Now don’t stand there snivelling! We are not two women!”

“So, so, your excellency! I’ll stop. . . . No, not women. Heroes, your excellency!”

The somewhat perturbed Ameshka circled between and around their feet, and barked joyously at the heroes.

“And what is the matter with you, you little silly? As if you understood anything! Now whom are you trying to bark at? It is plain, Volodia, she does not want you to go to war! . . . You don’t want him to go? . . . Yes? . . .”

“It’s food she’s always begging!” explained the servant.

WHAT a short time has elapsed since all this had taken place! . . . It might have been yesterday. . . . But how everything has changed! . . . Field Captain Puisin had been made full Captain at the time of his discharge; and not alone was he a captain but a hero. . . . He had kept his promise, although he little resembles now his portrait, which he and Liuba had admired so much. The captain’s legs had been left behind in a strange and distant region.

The hero has been granted rank, the cross of St. George, a pension
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for life. . . . He could hardly expect to be granted another pair of legs. And since that time—it is already the third year—the Captain does not arise from his soft and comfortable chair on wheels. Now he can only sit in his chair by the window and look wearily out into the street. Like a beggar thrust out of doors, he confronts the brightly illuminated windows of the temple of life and timidly listens to the joy of existence. . . .

They had taken away from the Captain his legs. And the Captain’s legs had taken away from him everything, absolutely everything. The Captain has been forgotten by everyone, abandoned by everyone; he has become like a broken toy cast aside by the children. Only two have remained faithful to him: his servant Stepan, and his little dog Ameeshka. The servant diverts the Captain with stories of street occurrences, and reminiscences of the past, while Ameeshka, as before, stands up on her hind legs before the Captain, and begs a lump of sugar; and, as before, licks his hand and continues to romp about the rooms. Of the Captain’s former personal effects there remain only the clock, a double bed, and many, many portraits. . . .

And here is another day fading away. On the opposite side of the little gray house a small flame is seen to glimmer suddenly. In the room of the hero everything is impressively still. Only the clock on the wall continues its measured beat, to the accompaniment of string-like, metallic echoes. So ticked the same clock even in the old days, when the Captain was yet Field Captain.

“Tick-tack, tick-tack!” goes the clock. To the Captain it is no longer a clock, but Sergeant Mironov making his soldiers mark time, and crying exasperatingly:

“One-two! One-two!” . . .

As for the metallic echoes, they do not emanate from the clock at all; they are the sounds that come with the clank of his own scabbard.

Afterward he can hear the rattle of arms, the discharge of muskets;—he can hear cries, groans, the neighing of horses. . . . Then suddenly he feels something strike him, burn him sharply; he feels himself thrown to one side. . . . Then nothing more. . . . When at last he has opened his eyes he sees people throng around him, busying themselves with him; he hears them whisper among themselves. . . . And here from among these unfamiliar faces there emerges, as out of a mist, a fair woman’s head with retoussé nose and blue eyes.

“Well, if it isn’t Liuba’s little head!”

“Listen, Volodia, be in good health and return a hero!” says the fair little head, smiling through its tears, while two hands place on his neck a small gold medallion containing a portrait and a lock of light blonde hair.
THE HERO

The Captain trembles at this importunate recollection. His blood rises to his head; he feels a clutching at his throat.

The curly-furred Ameeshka still stands before the chair, looks at the hero and wags its tail. . . . Tears trickle slowly down the hero’s cheeks. . . .

"Your excellency! Your excellency!"

"Ah! What!" murmurs the hero, giving a sudden shudder and opening his eyes. "What is it, Stepan?"

"Let us forget! We are not women!"

"You, Stepan. . . . But, I’ve just dozed off and had a dream."

"What do you say to having tea? Just for a little cheer! I, too, am feeling a bit down-hearted . . . that is how it is, your excellency, the heart is sick! Since that day, when you lost your legs. . . ."

The hero turns his face toward the window. He does not wish Stepan to see his tears. . . . But Stepan had seen them.

"What’s the good of weeping? It is all the same—new ones won’t grow in their place no matter how much you cry!" mumbles the servant, wiping the steam off the windows with the palm of his hand.

"I saw our mistress in my dream."

"She’ll come back . . . see, if she don’t come back. I, too, had such a dream, expecting her return. . . . Simply because this lieutenant Temliakov, though he is in the artillery, is only showing off his boot-legs. . . . Against you, he is a good-for-nothing. . . . ‘Pon my word! You are a hero, your excellency, and he . . . ."

The hero is silent. He knows that Liuba will never return, just as well as he knows that he will never grow new legs.

Ameeshka continues to wag her tail. She whines.

"Hungry again . . . be quiet! One feels badly enough without you," grumbles Stepan.

The clock continues slowly:

"Tick-tack! Tick-tack!

"Your lady, your excellency, will come to her senses. And there’s my Avdotya. She’s about the worst! I no sooner returned home than I found her grown somewhat in girth . . . well, you know. Because of them, these women, there is much sin on earth. . . . Come on Ameeshka, we’ll prepare the samovar! . . . ."