

“DEAR COMRADE EDITOR. I want to describe a thing or two about thoughtless
5 women, who do us harm. The boys trust that when you were making your rounds on
the Civil Front, which you took note of, you didn’t pass over the hopeless station of
Fastov, which sits at the end of the earth, in a land far, far away, address unknown
— sure enough I was there, drank home-brewed beer, got my whiskers all wet, but
my mouth’s still dry. Now, I could write plenty about this above-mentioned station,
10 but as they say in our simple way — you won’t clear the master’s shit pile. So I’ll
describe to you only what my own eyes have seen first-hand.

“It was a nice, quiet little night seven days ago, when our esteemed Red Cavalry train
stopped there, loaded up with fighting boys. We were all fired up to contribute to the
common cause and had Berdichev as our destination. Only we notice our train’s not
15 moving, our little rascal’s not turning, and the fighters get to doubting, talking —
what’s this stop all about? And sure enough this turned out to be one hell of a stop for
the common cause, all on account of the profiteers, those evil enemies with untold
numbers of the female sex among them, who were getting impudent with the railroad
authorities. Without a hint of fear, they latched onto the handrails, yes, these evil
20 enemies darted across the iron roofs, running riot and stirring up trouble, and each
hand featured the notorious salt, up to five poods a sack. But the capitalist profiteers’
triumph didn’t last long. The initiative of the fighting boys, who came climbing out of
the carriages, gave the outraged railroad authorities a chance to breathe. Only the
female sex stuck around, with its sacks. The fighters took pity — they put some
25 women in the goods vans, some they didn’t. That’s how two girls ended up with us, in
the Second Platoon’s carriage. And as soon as we hear the first bell, up comes a
respectable-looking woman with a child, saying:

“‘Let me on, kind Cossack boys. This whole war I’ve suffered at railroad stations,
with a nursing child in my arms, and now I want to see my husband, but you can’t get
30 anywhere on account of the railroad. Don’t I deserve better, Cossack boys?’

“‘Let me tell you, woman,’ I say, ‘whatever the platoon agrees to, that’ll be your
fate.’ And, turning to the platoon, I argue that a respectable-looking woman is asking
to see her husband at our destination, and that she really has a child with her, and
what will you agree to — let her on or no?

35 “‘Let her on,’ the lads yell. ‘After we’re through, she won’t be wanting her
husband!...’

“No,’ I tell the lads quite politely. ‘I bow to you, platoon, but I’m surprised to hear that kind of horseplay out of you. Remember your lives, platoon, and how you too were children in your mothers’ arms, and talk like this — well, it just won’t do...’

5 “And the Cossacks — after talking it over some, saying what a persuasive fellow that Balmashov is — start letting the woman into the carriage, and she clambers up gratefully. And they’re all worked up by my truth, trying to help her up, vying with one another:

10 “Please sit, woman, in the corner there, and tend to your child the way mothers do, no one will touch you in the corner, and you’ll get to your husband untouched, just like you wanted, and we’re depending on your conscience to bring up some new blood for us, ’cause the old are getting older and the young, you see, are hard to come by. We’ve seen plenty of grief, woman, when we were drafted and when we re-enlisted, pressed by hunger, blistered by the cold. But you sit here, woman, and don’t you worry...’

15 “And when the third bell sounded, the train moved. And the nice little night pitched its tent. And in that tent hung star-lanterns. And the boys remembered the Kuban night and the green Kuban star. And a song flew by, like a bird. And the wheels went on rumbling, rumbling...

20 “After some time, when the night was relieved from its post and the red drummers were tapping out reveille on their red drums, the Cossacks came up to me, because they saw I was sitting there, sleepless and sad as can be.

“Balmashov,’ the Cossacks say, ‘what’s got you so sad, sitting there sleepless?’

“I bow low to you, fighters, and ask a little forgiveness, but let me have a few words with that nursing citizen there...’

25 “And I get up from my resting place, from which sleep ran like a wolf from a pack of villainous dogs, and I walk up to her, trembling from head to toe, and I take her child from her hands and tear the swaddling clothes off it, and I see it’s a good pood of salt.

“Now here’s a curious child, comrades, that don’t ask for the teat, don’t pee on the skirt and don’t trouble your sleep...’

30 “Forgive me, kind Cossack boys,’ the woman butts into our conversation, all cool-headed. ‘I didn’t lie to you; it’s my grief that lied to you...’

“Balmashov, he’ll forgive your grief,’ I answer the woman. ‘It doesn’t cost him much. Balmashov sells it for what he bought it. But take a look at the Cossacks,

woman, who raised you up as a toiling mother of the republic. Take a look at these two girls, who're crying now, on account of how they suffered from us in the night. Take a look at our wives, wasting their womanly strength out in the Kuban wheat fields, with their husbands gone, and those husbands, just as lonely, forced by evil
5 need to rape girls that cross their path... But you — they didn't touch you, though you're just the one they should've touched, you wretch. Take a look at Russia, crushed by pain...'

"And she says to me:

10 "I've lost my salt, and truth don't scare me. You don't care a thing about Russia, you're saving those Yids, Lenin and Trotsky...'

"We aren't talking Yids, vile citizen. Yids have nothing to do with it. By the way, I don't know about Lenin, but Trotsky's the daredevil son of a Tambov governor, and he went over to the working class, though he comes from another. They drag us out — Lenin and Trotsky — like condemned convicts onto the free path of life, but you,
15 foul citizen, are more counter-revolutionary than that White general who threatens us with his sharp sabre on his thousand-rouble horse... That general, you can see him on every road, and the worker dreams of cutting him down, but you, deceitful citizen, with your curious children who don't ask for bread and don't do their business — you're hard for the eye to see, like a flea, and you bite, and bite, and
20 bite...'

"And I admit it, I do — I tossed that citizen off the moving train, right on the embankment, but being a rough one, she just sat there a while, flapped her skirts and went on her crooked little way. And seeing this unharmed woman, with unspeakable Russia all around her, and peasant fields without an ear of wheat, and the outraged
25 girls, and my comrades who ride off to the front all the time but don't come back much, I had a mind to jump from the carriage and either finish myself off or finish her off. But the Cossacks had pity on me and said:

"Hit her with the rifle.'

30 "And taking my trusty rifle off the wall, I washed that shame from the face of the workers' land and of the republic.

"And we, the fighters of the Second Platoon, swear to you, dear Comrade Editor, and to you, dear comrades of the editorial board, to deal mercilessly with all the traitors who drag us into the pit, who want to turn back the river and pave Russia with corpses and dead grass.

“For all the fighters of the Second Platoon — Nikita Balmashov, soldier of the revolution.”