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NIKOLAI TIKHONOV

Tales
of
Leningrad



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NIKOLAI TIKHONOV

TALES OF LENINGRAD

1942



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THE DUEL

THE German pilot could distinctly see his prey. Through the forest, that from above looked like a green pie, cut a narrow yellow strip. It was a railway embankment, and along it crawled a military freight train. There was no sense in swooping down on it while it was in the forest. He had only to wait until it reached the clearing between this forest and the next, and he could bomb it unerringly and at leisure.

The plane swung round. Its wings glistened in the sun. It made another turn, climbed, and then dived down towards the clearing. Two fountains of mud and earth spouted up on either side of the embankment where the train should have been. But when the pilot glanced around he saw that on reaching the clearing the train had suddenly backed into the forest again. The bombs had been wasted.

The German made another turn, deciding that this time he would not miss his mark. The train was speeding across the clearing. How could its

driver know that the reception was now awaiting him in the forest and that the heavy pines, uprooted and blown sky-high by the thunderous explosion, would come crashing down on to the freight cars? The pines fell, but without doing any damage. The train had slipped past them. Again the bombs had been wasted.

The pilot cursed savagely. Was this long, clumsy goods train going to get away scot free? Did its driver, unarmed as he was, expect to vie with him, a veteran pilot of the German army? He would teach this madman a lesson. The German swooped down on the forest, aiming at the very middle of the train.

Perhaps he had miscalculated, perhaps it was a mere chance, but the bombs fell wide of their mark. The elusive train was continuing to speed forward on its course, puffing indomitably.

"Now, keep calm," the pilot said to himself. "We are serious this time." He studied the ground carefully and made his calculations with calm deliberation. This unusual hunt was beginning to fascinate him.

Once more he swooped down to that spot on the ground where the transparent ribbon of smoke wavered in the vibrating air. It seemed to him that he was diving right into the locomotive. But at the last moment it seemed as if somebody had pulled the train from under his wings. The roar of the

explosion was still ringing in his ears when the conviction overcame him that he had missed once again. He glanced down. So it was! The train was gliding forward absolutely intact.

The German realized that he was up against a will no less stubborn than his own, that the engine-driver had the eyes of a hawk and an astonishing faculty for exact calculation, and that it would not be easy to catch him.

The duel continued. Bombs fell in front of the train, behind it, and on either side, but the monster, as the pilot called it, continued on its way towards the station, as though protected by invisible spirits.

The train hopped and leaped fantastically. Its couplings shrieked frantically. It dashed down inclines like a horse with the bit between its teeth, and put on the brakes just when the next shower of bombs was awaiting it. It backed, it stopped, it flew forward like an arrow. There seemed to be no end to the tricks which this exasperating monster could be up to in obedience to its driver. The bombs burst like Christmas crackers.

The German was sweating profusely. He spat in disgust. He flung himself into the attack again and again. The last time he calculated perfectly. There was no escape for the train this time. But an oath burst from the pilot's lips. He had used up all his bombs. There was nothing to strike at the train with!

He returned to the attack, this time flying low over the train and peppering it from his machine-gun. But as luck would have it, another forest appeared. The train plunged into its green seclusion and it seemed that it was invulnerable. The pilot was frantic. He aimed at the locomotive, at the enemy lurking behind that thin wall, at that Russian working man who was scoffing at him, the brave German ace, and was driving his train across fields and through forests like a madman. . . .

Bullets hailed down on to the train. Some fell under its wheels, others struck the rails, but the train moved steadily forward. . . .

The German leaned back exhausted. The sky glistened overhead. It was a serene, crystal-clear autumn day, reminding him of the autumns of his far-off Westphalia.

His cartridges had come to an end. The duel was over. That Russian down below had won.

What should he do? Hurl his plane into the locomotive? Answer madness with madness? A shiver ran down the pilot's back. He lowered his plane and sailed over the train in a spasm of curiosity and hatred. He could not see that the keen eye of the driver was following him. All the driver said was:

"Fooled you this time, you viper!"

And the locomotive, in contempt, ran over and crushed the shadow sprawling across the track—the shadow of the enemy plane.

THE RAFT

THE steamer was foundering. Its stern protruded high out of the water, and above it hovered a cloud of black coal-dust. The bomb had hit the steamer amidships and had sent up this cloud from its bunkers, and the coal-dust was now slowly settling on the heads of the people in the water, on the floating wreckage and on the stern, which was disappearing into the depths of the sea.

Among the peaceful non-combatants who had leaped into the cold autumnal waters of the Gulf of Finland was a photographer. His heavy camera in its case slung by a strap across his shoulder was dragging him down. And anyhow, he was unable to swim. The opaque green water seethed in his ears, while in the sky roared the engines of the German bomber which had nefariously attacked the little steamer, on which there was not a single gun, not a single rifle. Its passengers consisted solely of women and children, of old men and invalids. There was not one military man among them.

The photographer decided that it was all up with him and that there was no point in torturing himself by going through all those superfluous motions habitual to drowning men. He tried to persuade himself that it was all a tedious nightmare. But, alas! his mouth and eyes were filled with water, his body was strangely numb and he felt no sensation of cold. No, he really was drowning. . . . Perhaps there were cries and shrieks all around, but he did not hear them.

He folded his arms on his breast, closed his eyes and tried to picture his wife and children for the last time.

They arose vaguely in his mind's eye and then dissolved, as if washed away by the waves. He was dragged down head foremost to the bottom. But he did not reach the bottom. The water, after a few moments, lifted him up again, and half-strangled, half-crushed by a wave, he found himself on the surface again. Opening his eyes, he saw the sea strewn with human heads, the low sun, and the leaden clouds, and he heard the rattling of a machine gun: it was the German pirate flying low over the sea and shooting at the drowning men and women.

He felt such an intolerable spasm of disgust that he decided to sink beneath the water again. Once more he folded his arms over his breast, and once more the heavy camera, which he treasured as one

might a precious weapon, dragged him down into the green depths. A sense of weakness overcame him. His legs grew limp and his mind muddled and confused.

But once again the wave lifted him to the surface. However, he did not open his eyes, fearing to behold some new and repulsive spectacle. Swaying with closed eyes among the breakers, he seemed to be caught up and cast down by two waves that were fighting for his body, dragging it from side to side. Thus they played with him for some time, and, strange thing! his mind began slightly to clear.

"This must be the last upflaring of thought," he said to himself. "It is what they call dying in full possession of one's senses."

At this moment he was again lifted swiftly to the surface, and although hitherto he had not experienced any sensation of pain, he now felt a smart blow on the shoulder, and, opening his eyes, perceived that he had been brought alongside of a raft. He scrutinized the fragile and wretched contraption that had evidently been slung together hurriedly and clumsily in the hour of peril, and then turned his gaze on the passengers. He made no attempt to climb on to the raft, but only clung to the edges of the planks, lifting his head out of the water and drawing the air deep into his lungs.

Refreshed, he shook the wet hair from his brow

and now began to examine the raft with other eyes. On it sat three men and one young woman. The men were wet to the skin and they were silent and gloomy. They clung firmly to the planks and kept their eyes away from the woman. The woman was shrieking terribly in one continuous cry; it rang out, now loud and shrill, now plaintive and heart-rending, over the empty sea. The scratches on her cheeks, her dishevelled hair, her widely staring eyes, were all evidence of that last stage of despair when the mind no longer reasons.

The men in their tattered clothes, with their frowning faces and tightly compressed lips, were so close to the photographer that he involuntarily turned his gaze from their silent immobility to the convulsive spasms of the woman, who was now shrieking so loudly that even his ears, half deafened by his long stay under water, were overpowered by the piercing quality of the cry.

Leaning on the planks and raising himself out of the water, the photographer spat the bitter brine out of his mouth and, turning to the motionless men, shouted:

"Eh, citizens! What's all this confusion on the raft? Can't you calm that woman?"

The men gazed at him with sombre indifference. The raft rocked heavily on the waves and the photographer had to exert all his strength to prevent

himself from being swept beneath the planks. A wave swept over his head and completely restored his tranquillity. And how gratifying it was to be clinging to those solid planks. . . .

In a voice which seemed to him loud enough to drown out the shrieking of the woman, who was tearing her clothes and staring into the distance towards the oncoming dusk of evening, he demanded:

"Is there a communist on this raft?"

At first there was no reply. Then the man nearest to him stared at him fixedly for a moment, and said:

"I am a communist."

"Then what are you thinking of, comrade?" said the photographer slowly. "Can't you establish order on this raft? Listen to that woman . . . she has to be calmed down. You know, comrade—"

But at this moment a huge wave swept over the raft. The people on it disappeared in its opaque gloom, while the photographer was sucked down to the bottom, right down to the bottom of the sea, where he had not yet been before.

When he was again lifted to the surface the raft was no longer in sight. All he saw was three wonderful planks floating towards him, and he decided to appropriate them. But it was no easy matter to straddle them. They slipped from his grasp and heeled over; and at last he realized that if he did not disburden himself of his camera, his faithful

companion in all his wanderings, the planks would elude him and be borne away by the waves, and with them his last chance of salvation, for night was already falling.

With a groan, he unbuckled the strap and let it slip from his shoulder. The camera sank into the depths alone. A moment later the photographer was lying on the planks, pressing his cheek against their wet surface, and his tears mingled with the water. They were tears of genuine grief for his lost camera. . . .

* * *

One day, a tall man with a sombre countenance and a scar on his forehead came to the office where the photographer was employed and asked for the manager. He had come to tell of the death of the photographer, of how he himself, together with two other men and a woman, had taken to a raft after their steamer had been sunk by a German bomber, and how the photographer had swum up to their raft. He had not recognized him at first. And as the photographer began to speak, a wave struck him and carried him off into the sea far away from the raft. Then he recalled that he had met that photographer in the town where they had taken the steamer. He was a fine man and a splendid worker at

his job, and in that last fatal moment he behaved splendidly. . . .

At this juncture the speaker was interrupted:

"Why not tell that to the photographer himself? He is sitting in the next room. Only please don't say a word about his camera; to this day he cannot get over the loss of it. . . ."

"In the next room! You don't say he was saved?"

"He was. See for yourself."

The photographer was summoned. He at once recognized the man on the raft who had said in answer to his question: "I am a communist."

"And what about the woman?" he asked with a smile. "Did you calm her in the end?"

The man with the scar looked embarrassed, but he replied:

"We did. We pulled ourselves together and then calmed her. Your cry restored us to our senses. You appeared so unexpectedly out of the sea and so unexpectedly disappeared, that afterwards, when we were picked up, we kept talking about you all the time. And I have come here with the express purpose of telling about your splendid behaviour. . . ."

"Oh, there was nothing splendid about it," rejoined the photographer. "But I lost my camera. It went to the bottom. If you only knew what a splendid. . . ."

The photographer sighed and his lips quivered.

A CHILD IS BORN

THE man stood panting heavily. He was irate and confused.

"I had the devil of a job finding you. A man would walk past his own house in this blackness," he said, shaking the snow from his cap. "Is this the lying-in hospital?"

"It is," he was told. "What's the matter?"

"What's the matter? Why, a woman is giving birth to a child in a backstreet. That's what's the matter."

"And who are you?"

"I am just a chance passer-by. I was on my way home from the night shift. Let's make haste. I will show you the way. What a business! . . . I was walking along, and there she was, and not a soul about except myself What could I do? I am not a midwife."

A minute later Irina, a hospital attendant and the stranger were stumbling through the snow-drifts. It was very dark. The houses stood like

stark cliffs. Not a light to be seen. Along the street swept a blizzard and snow-dust whirled through the air. And it seemed as if the shadows of scouts were stealing through the street, transparent, frigid and swift-moving.

Suddenly, they squatted down in the snow, their noses buried in each other's backs. A thin, evenly rising sound was heard, drawing closer and closer. They drew their heads into their shoulders. Somewhere from around the corner red flames shot upwards and a thunderous explosion reverberated through the street. Icicles dropped from the house eaves and shattered on the pavement with a splintering sound.

"I hope it hasn't struck her," exclaimed Irina.

"No, she is on the other side. Look for her there," said the stranger. "You will find her beyond the lamp-post. I'm off. The shooting is fierce tonight, I don't want to get hit before I get home."

Irina was not an accoucheuse by training. She was a nurse in the reception room of the lying-in hospital. But now she had to go forth into the night to seek out this woman and help her to give birth to her child. There was no time to lose. Nobody else would come to her aid. It was the dead of night. Frost and blizzard. With a hiss and a clang, shell after shell passed overhead. Irina and the attend-

ant ran from snowpile to snowpile, stopped and listened.

A groan was heard from the right. They dashed to the spot and, sure enough, beyond the lamp-post, as the stranger had said, leaning her back against the wall of a house near the tightly locked gate, sat a woman in the snow. Irina dropped on her knees before her, and the woman seized her hand in her own. It was hot and trembling.

Yes, it was too late to bring this woman to the lying-in hospital. She was already in the throes of childbirth. She was giving birth to a child in the snow, in that black winter's night, illuminated by the fitful glare of bursting shells. Irina glanced around. It all looked like a gloomy nightmare. The snow sifted under the collar of her coat, fierce gusts of wind struck her in the face, her hands began to freeze, and her heart pulsed so violently that she could hear its beat. It seemed as if there were no Leningrad, but only a wild, black wilderness, swept by a winter storm, to the howl of enemy guns. It would be vain to hammer at those tightly-locked gates, it would be vain to call—the street was deserted, and until the morning came no human being would pass this way.

Yet here, in this murk, in this open spot, swept by all the winds of heaven, a new life was being born. It had to be saved, it had to be torn from the

cold and the murk and the guns. Her ear was already deaf to the exploding shells. She helped the woman as if she were lying in a snug ward, in the way women are always helped in childbirth. . . .

. . . She raised the infant high in the air, as if to display it to the great city lying lost in the gloom. She carried it tightly clutched to her bosom, this warm, whimpering mite, nestling beneath her coat. She strode through the snow, which was fresh and still unmarked by human feet.

Behind her, supported by the attendant, like some large ruffled bird, the mother dragged her weary feet. She stumbled in the snowdrifts. She whispered through her parched lips: "I can walk myself. . . ." The attendant, himself wearied and harassed, merely kept reiterating: "We shall soon be there; it's not very far now. . . ."

The blizzard drove handfuls of dry snow into their faces. A rain of shattered glass followed on each reverberating explosion. But they strode forward like conquerors, conquerors of the night, the cold, and the cannonade. If need be, this procession would have marched through the whole city, carrying this new tiny life, this new tiny being, which had appeared in our city in this amazing hour.

The mother already knew that she had given birth to a girl. Now and again she would stretch forth

her hands towards Irina, who was carrying the infant, as though she wanted to detain her, and would then let them fall again.

They arrived at the lying-in hospital. And when the woman had already been put to bed, and everything was being done to make her comfortable, she called for Irina and said to her in a curt, almost stern whisper:

"What is your name?"

"Why do you want to know?" asked Irina.

"I must know."

"My name is Irina. But why do you ask?"

"I shall call my daughter after you. Let her remember you. You saved her life. I thank you from the bottom of my heart. . . ."

And she kissed her three times. Irina turned away and burst into tears. Why, she could not say.

THE OLD SOLDIER

HE was very old, and his eyes could scarcely see. They were all standing at the open windows. He went up to them, but he could see nothing. So he asked:

"Tell me, what is happening over yonder?"

"Somewhere, far away, thick clouds of smoke are rising above the city. Enormous mountains of white smoke. Their edge is rosy in the light of the sunset. And now the smoke is turning blue. It has reached the very zenith. . . ."

"What is it—fires?" he inquired. "Have the Germans done it?"

"Yes," he was told.

The anti-aircraft guns were still firing, but lazily. . . . He used to pore over his maps far into the night. He was an old military teacher of geography, and an inventor. He had piles of maps. The variety of the contours, the richness of the terrestrial features and the quaint intricacy of the reliefs were a source of consolation to him. Beyond these blue

patterns and brown patches, beyond the green and yellow strips, he saw the life of a mighty country—vast, ardent, free and growing. He knew how its map was changing from year to year. But now, as he gazed at the maps of Leningrad and its environs, his brow was furrowed and his glance was veiled and sombre.

The Germans were promenading along the avenues of the Pushkin Park, their shells were battering the palace at Gatchina, Peterhof was being sacked, and the rattling of machine guns could be heard not far from Kolpino.

"No, it's impossible," he said to himself; "it cannot be. It cannot be that the Germans will enter Leningrad, this city which has never surrendered to an enemy. I cannot believe it—my mind refuses to conceive it. Never has this city been yielded, never, never. Can it be that our times are to be covered in shame?"

He flung down his magnifying lens in agitation and strode up and down the room.

"And yield it to whom? To the Germans! To those doltish, brutish, bloodthirsty assassins of women and children. To the fascists! . . .

"No, no!" he muttered to himself. "The German generals are smug marionettes. They are not bad administrators, and they know how to fight. . . .

"But do they know how to fight?" he cried the

next minute. "They are adventurous gamblers, and all their plans are the ruses of bandits, designed to hypnotize, to disarm, to discourage . . . No, but it will not work this time! We are not to be fooled . . . The Russian people are not so easily duped. You will never get Leningrad!"

He retired to his bed, but sleep would not come. His whole being shuddered at the thought of the battle going on around the city. He closed his eyes and the picture rose in his mind of those peaceable environs where over half a century ago, as a young officer, he had taken part in the manoeuvres. Those quiet nooks were now one by one disappearing in the smoke of conflagrations, and—horrible thought!—perhaps enemy tanks had already penetrated to the outskirts of the city. If that was so . . . well, he still had the strength to throw a hand-grenade. He would not ask: "How many are there?" True, his eyesight was feeble, but he would ask: "Where are they?" But no, it was impossible; the Germans would never tread these sacred streets and squares. Never!

When the air-raid alarm sounded he did not go to the bombshelter. The house shook with the force of the concussions, shell fragments rained down on the roof, the windows rattled, and the house swayed as if it were a thing of matchboard, but all he said was:

"Fly, you vultures, but you will soon break your necks! . . ."

The battle dragged on. The enemy entrenched outside the very walls of Leningrad. Winter came. It was cold and dark in the house. A few damp shavings in the small iron stove emitted but a feeble warmth. It became harder for the old man every day. He lay beneath his rug and his whole life passed before his eyes. It had been a long, industrious and interesting life, and had it not been for the present privations he could have carried on for a long time yet. But weakness had now fettered his arms and legs, and even the firewood for the little stove he had to have cut for him, for he himself, he was ashamed to say, was rapidly fatigued by this child's labour.

He thought of the wonderful, inimitable, majestic city beyond his windows that was living its life of labour and battle. Shells were often bursting now in the neighbouring street, and the thunder of their explosions drove him into a state of acute irritation.

In sentimental moments, when the thought of his ebbing life was particularly oppressive, he would take a gold watch out of his table drawer and fondle it in his hand. This watch had been presented to him in recognition of his work at the Higher Militia Courses, where he had taught for many years and had helped in the training of many a young,

intelligent and dashing commander He thought of their smiling faces, their youthful spirits, their noisy discussions. And then he suddenly saw himself, young, riding on horseback by foaming mountain streams or ranging the Caucasian heights, an inquisitive cartographer, traveller and historian of mountain warfare But that was all so long ago.

He had grown very feeble. He even found it an effort to raise his soup spoon to his mouth at table, and his daughter had to feed him. And as she did so she recounted the news from the fronts.

"Retreating, always retreating!" he would murmur with a heavy sigh, and his shortsighted, almost blind eyes would peer in agony at his daughter.

"The old fellow won't last long," the neighbours said.

. . . One fine morning, the old soldier's daughter heard strange noises emanating from her father's room. First there was the sound of a saw, then of a hammer, then the sound of singing. . . . Yes, somebody was singing in the room. The words were indistinct; in fact, the song could scarcely be said to have any words at all. It was a sort of contented, self-engrossed rumbling.

As far as she knew, the old man should be lying, covered with his ancient rug, subdued, debilitated and discouraged.

She went to the door, but it was some time before she made up her mind to open it. When she did, she saw that her sick and senile parent was sawing away at a plank and singing to himself. Yes, it was he that was singing. And as he sang, his eyes gleamed. And although an old overcoat hung from his frail shoulders, he looked as majestic as a patriarch.

"Father, what is the matter with you?" she cried in alarm. "Why have you got up? And why are you sawing? You are not strong enough for that!"

He glanced at her, and then in a clear and sonorous voice, said: "Didn't you hear the radio this morning?"

"No," she replied. "What did it say?"

The old man almost hopped, with the saw in one hand and the plank in the other.

"You didn't hear it? The whole world has heard and you know nothing. The Germans have been smashed at Moscow! Smashed to atoms, to powder . . . the wretched adventurers! I always said that the only way they can fight is like bandits. Their tactics are the tactics of footpads and highwaymen. They have been routed, do you understand? And if they got a beating like that at Moscow, they will never get Leningrad. When I heard that I could not stay lying down any more. I jumped up. I jumped up to cry: 'Long live victory!' You can't cry that lying down, daughter, can you?"

THE WATCHER IN THE DARK

A CLUMSY woman in a bulky flannel dress almost stumbled over her in her haste as she sat on the doorstep in the darkness, and screamed in her fright: "Who's that?"

"It's me," answered the girl; "Polya."

"Why don't you run to the shelter. . . . Didn't you hear the alarm? The bombs will be dropping on your head any minute."

"I am waiting for them. That is what I am here for," said Polya calmly.

"What do you mean, waiting for them? You had better hurry to the shelter!"

"It is my duty to stand here. You run along, auntie, or you will get hit yourself. . . ."

"Well, I'm going. . . . Just fancy, sitting here on the step! Are you so fearless?"

"I am not fearless. I am on watch duty."

Polya remained seated on the step, staring intently at the sky, where searchlight beams crossed and diverged, rockets flared and hung in fiery balls,

and golden lines of tracer bullets pierced the blue vault. The whole sky was filled with the spasmodic thudding of enemy planes flying over the city. Poly-a sat tense and taut, waiting for that frightful hiss, the thud and the fiery blast which must come any minute. She would be the first to run to the spot in order to signal to the local air-defence headquarters where the bomb had struck.

Hunching her head into her frail shoulders and closing her eyes, she listened to the rising din. An explosion that seemed to shatter her head reverberated through the street. A warm blast struck her eardrums and compressed her chest. Poly-a leaped to her feet, staggering, and ran along the street to the spot where the walls had just collapsed and a cloud of smoke still hovered undispersed. The fresh ruins rose starkly in the darkness of the night. The blackened, mangled walls towered above the girl, the street was littered with rubble, broken glass and heaps of inconceivable garbage. A moment later she was 'phoning from a neighbouring house reporting the extent of the damage. That done, she dashed back through the murk to the ruins, from which came shrieks, groans and cries. And this was now a daily occurrence. Nobody was faster than she in discovering the site of disaster, nobody toiled as self-sacrificingly, tending the injured and spending whole nights among tottering walls, collapsing

beams and faces distorted with pain and horror. She excelled in excavating children from the ruins.

Sometimes, wiping the perspiration from her brow with the back of her hand, she would sit down and watch the rescue gangs as though she were an onlooker. The gutted houses, the dark city, the flashing torchlights, all seemed to her imponderable, unreal, fantastic.

Where were those nights, serene and merry, with lighted tram-cars, with song and dance and youth? Had there been such nights? Yes, there had. . . . And there would be again. . . . But now. . . . "But why am I sitting here," she would scold herself. And, leaping to her feet, she would hurry to help drag away the beams and turn over the rubble with pick and spade.

She became amazingly calm, firm of decision and strong of nerve. Nothing could astonish her now.

One night, running to the scene of an explosion, she saw by the light of the moon, high above a pile of collapsed house stories, a woman in her night-shirt, standing as though suspended in the air, clinging to the remains of a wall in a corner that by some chance happened to remain intact on the fifth floor. The woman stood like a statue, like the shape of the dead, her hands clinging to pieces of the wall to the right and left. Poly-a stared fixedly at the white patch of her nightshirt, thinking frantically that

the woman must be saved as quickly as possible, and how to get at her.

On another occasion, a young woman with dishevelled hair came running towards her, pressing an infant to her breast. Terrified by the explosion, and in agonies for the safety of her child, she might run like this through the whole city. Polya seized her in her arms, stroked her hair, and said: "It's all over now."

"What is all over? What is all over?" the woman muttered dully.

"Everything," said Polya. "Nothing terrible will happen now. Sit down and rest for a bit. . . . Let me cover you up."

And she led the woman, who had calmed down at once, to the first-aid station.

Many were the injured and crippled whom this slender girl, with the large, slightly astonished eyes, carried to safety; many were the terrified people whom she calmed, encouraged and even moved to laughter by a witty remark appropriately uttered.

The air bombing gave place to artillery bombardment. It was not so noisy; nevertheless, it was no easy matter to gather up the wounded in the street, in the blackness of the night, amid the whistling of shell splinters and the whine of shells hurtling overhead. But she went on with her job, gathering up dozens of wounded and hauling them away on her back.

One cold, nasty, windy evening the bombardment was unusually fierce. Polya crouched against a house wall, her back to a box of sand, while shell splinters struck the house over her head. Brick dust, lumps of plaster and broken glass rained down on to the pavement. Then she heard a groan. It came from quite nearby. The street was deserted. The rare pedestrians dropped to the ground, then sprang to their feet and dashed into the houses, or again dropped prone on the pavement.

Polya listened. The groans were indeed coming from close by. She cautiously ran in their direction. The glare of a new explosion lit up the street. The shell had struck the pavement, and the sound of the blow lingered long in her ears. Her heart was beating painfully. Near the wall of a house lay a young man. Where had she seen him before? . . . Why, of course, the football match last spring. The emerald-green field. The laughter all around. The gay jerseys of the players. Youth. Sunshine. Gay music. A warm, bright day and curly clouds, and this lad, to whom his comrades every now and again shouted: "Stick it, halfback!"

Now he was lying unconscious. But when Polya probed for his wound—he was injured by a shell splinter in the hip—he opened his eyes and groaned loudly. And as she bound up the wound, she said: "Stick it, halfback! Do you hear!"

The lad said nothing. She helped him to his feet, but he could not walk. He almost collapsed on to her, and she dragged him through the blackness, which every now and again was pierced by long, red-flashing sword thrusts.

But the next blast must have split the street and all the houses and all around in two, for Polya lost consciousness. She was lying on the soft green field, and an unknown voice was calling to her: "Stick it, halfback!" But she was unable to smile, she was unable even to stir. For some reason, the thought occurred to her, "This is my ninety-eighth patient," and she again swooned. But her hand still held the hand of the lad lying silently by her side.

When people came and bent over them she said in a clear, pure voice: "Take him, he is badly wounded in the hip." But before she could finish she had lost consciousness again.

"It's the legs, she is wounded in the legs," said a voice in the darkness.

She did not hear it. She was lying in the soft green field and saying to someone: "I am cold; how cold the green grass is. . . ."

She knew nothing more that night. . . .

. . . She did not die. When she recovered consciousness it was a mild, sunny day and through the window tall green pines were peeping.

THE MOTHER

"LET us go and visit him," the mother said, and although she did not mention his name, Olga, the daughter, knew whom she meant at once.

She meant her son, Olga's brother, Boris, the volunteer. He had said that he was going into the army, together with all the men of his year at the institute. The mother stood facing him—small, erect and worried.

"But you are short-sighted, and weak in health," she objected. "Aren't you afraid?"

"Don't worry, mother," Boris replied.

"You have never fought before, you will find it very hard. . . ."

"Don't worry, mother," he repeated, and went on packing his kit-bag.

. . . Many a time had the mother and Olga gone to visit him at the village where he was undergoing military training. He would return from exercises, elated, tired, dusty, and tanned, and they would sit and talk about the city and about their friends and

acquaintances. They never talked about the war, for everything around them was filled with its breath and action.

Olga was still quite a young girl, and to her these visits to her brother seemed like the customary summer outings of yore, the familiar country excursions to the villages around the city. They would return, their arms full of field flowers, to the electric train, and would arrive home in the dusk of evening, when the city was full of the bustle and preoccupation of war.

Only, of late, everything had changed. The front was already quite near, and Olga was worried. How would they find their brother today, when everything was so unlike those quiet Sunday outings which their visits to Boris had been?

They walked across the fields, which already lay in their autumn bareness. The summer residences were boarded up. They met carts and motor trucks going in the opposite direction. The roads swarmed with refugees, with their children, carrying bundles and knapsacks on their backs. From a ditch a dead horse raised its rigid legs to the sky. Red Armymen marched past, their billycans rattling. Somewhere, not far off, the sound of continuous firing could be heard.

They had already left the noisy highroad far behind them.

They proceeded along familiar bridle-paths, but everything around was strange and unfamiliar: broken fences, an absence of people, and a sense of alarm, of tense expectation, of something sinister. In the field, concealed beneath bushes, lay Red Armymen with machine-guns. And when they entered the first village it was deserted, completely deserted. Not even a sparrow was to be seen pecking in the dust, not a single hen, not a single dog. No smoke issued from the chimneys, and the tumble-down benches in front of the houses were lonely and solitary. Villages looked like this only in the white nights, just before dawn, when everybody was asleep. But nobody was asleep now; this was a wilderness.

Through the silence of this wilderness Olga bravely followed after her mother, who strode steadily forward with a noiseless but confident step.

The second village was in flames. When they had climbed the hillock they involuntarily came to a halt. The flames waved like red manes over the roofs, and there was nobody to extinguish them. Several of the huts had been reduced to matchwood, and this was a pitiful and astonishing sight. Olga pulled her mother timidly by the sleeve. But her mother said quietly: "We must go as far as that copse." And so they proceeded along the village street between the burning houses. Olga glanced in at the

windows where the flames were seething. She saw a curtain catch fire and an inner wall collapse, and a shower of sparks poured from the blackened windows. She pinched herself softly in the arm like a schoolgirl. Could she be awake? It was so amazing, these familiar places that had become so novel, so alien and incomprehensible. Round about, the hills were crowned with woods, and from behind them poured clouds of black and blue smoke. The thunder of guns was borne on the wind from somewhere on the left. The air was filled with flying pieces of wallpaper, straw and tow. Haybarns were burning. An uncanny light-blue smoke rose from them. Embers fell with a hiss into the pond from the roof of a shed standing on its very brink.

When they reached the village and had descended into a shallow ravine, their road was barred by a dead cow. It lay on its side, its tawny back plastered with a swarm of black flies. Parts of its entrails lay in the road. Farther off stood a cart, with pitchforks and a spade protruding from it. Near its hind wheels, his arms outstretched as though in astonishment, a man lay prone. He was dead. His face was lined with black weals, as if it had been lashed by the terrible blows of a whip. One of the eyes was covered over with some dark mass; the other was open and there was such a look of amazement in it that Olga was thunderstruck.

Scarcely had they left this gloomy sight behind them, when they became aware of a shrill whistling sound, rising in volume and intensity; it approached so persistently and inexorably that it pained the ears to listen to it. The mother stopped and bent her head. Olga did the same. She knew that this was the wrong thing to do, that they ought to cast themselves down in the road and bury their faces in the ground. But they had to move on, they had to find Boris, and if they were to drop down every time a shell passed, they would never reach their destination and never see him.

The shell burst behind a mound. The fountain of earth it raised slowly subsided. It had hardly settled, when another shell burst near the cart and the dead man; but they had already left them far behind. Then they broke into a run, stumbling over the bushes, for the bursts of black cloud shot with red lightning were now continuous. Olga was trembling violently, her lips were parched, but the mother kept pressing implacably forward, and Olga followed after her, consoling herself with the absurd thought: "They won't hit us. They can't hit us. They mustn't. . . ."

The village where Boris had lived and taken his military training had simply disappeared. In its place, black pillars protruded from the ground and here and there charred boards lay about in fantas-

tic heaps. Even the trees had been burned down or torn up by the roots and were sprawling by the side of enormous holes filled with greenish opaque water.

"Mother," said Olga, "where are we to go now?"

The mother stood in silence. Olga was seized with pity for this little, tired, pertinacious woman.

"Mama," she said again, "let us go home. You see yourself, it is no use going on."

"Let us go forward a bit," the mother replied.

"We will ask there. . . ."

They turned once more into the fields, and passed through gloomy copses and wrecked villages. Everywhere now, lying in the grass and in ditches, they saw Red Armymen, looking towards the left. Suddenly three of them came out of a small bathhouse. The mother ran towards them and in a voice of happiness said to one of them, a tall, slender, freckled fellow: "If I am not mistaken, you are Paul?"

The Red Armyman opened his eyes in astonishment; for a moment he carefully examined the little woman standing before him, and then said: "You are Boris' mother, aren't you?"

"Yes . . . I want to see him. Where can I find him?"

"Find him?" echoed Paul, taken aback. "Continue straight on, towards that hill. But you had better not go. . . . It will be hard to find him, and

then . . ." He suddenly smiled: "Why, there is fighting going on all round, we are almost surrounded. How do you come to be strolling about here? . . ."

"We are not strolling," the mother replied. "I must see Boris . . . I must. . . ."

She said this so warmly and in such a deep voice that Paul, who had come from the same institute and belonged to the same battalion as Boris, could only say: "Well, go along. . . ."

. . . The mother sat in the high grass, her back propped against the log wall of the bathhouse. Olga sat by her side, with bated breath. A Red Armyman pointed down towards a long marshy field overgrown with scrub, where here and there the bends of winding streamlets glistened. The field merged into a wood, and beyond the wood, on a hill, a village could be seen. The whole landscape was dominated, if one might say so, by a blinding thunder. Somewhere from behind, one of our batteries was bombarding the village on the wooded height, while the German guns held under their fire the marshy field and the approaches to the eminence on which Olga and her mother were sitting.

"The only just went off into attack," said the Red Armyman. "You can wait if you like, or not, that's up to you. They went off in that direction. . . . They are attacking. . . ."

"Do you know Boris? the mother asked.

"Of course, I do. He is with them. . . ."

"How does he shoot?"

"He is not a bad shot. . . ."

"Is he a coward?"

The lad, a former student, shrugged his shoulders and looked offended. "Why, if he were a coward we would never have allowed him into our company. . . ."

They both fell silent. Without a word they stood staring at the village burning on the hill. The roar of voices could be heard from the wood crying, "Hurrah!" or something else—the words could not be distinguished. The wood, illuminated by the flames of the fire, seemed stained in blood. Olga wanted to say: "How terrible!" But instead she said: "How strange!"

The mother rose and walked to the edge of the hill. It was as if she wanted to see her son, to find him in the midst of that wood that was being torn by battle, to see him running with a rifle in his hand towards that burning village. Thus she stood for a long time. If Olga had not known that her mother was not a believer, she would have thought that she was lost in prayer.

Then she said to Olga: "Let us go!" And without glancing around she took the path leading to the road.

"Won't you wait for them?" cried the Red Armyman.

"No," answered the mother. "Thank you for your kindness. Let us go; Olga. . . ."

They reached the road.

"Olga," the mother said, "you are tired, my darling. . . ."

"No, mother. But I am afraid we will never get out of this alive. I have become such a coward. . . ."

The mother's thin bloodless lips curled in a smile.

"Nothing will happen to us, Olga," she said.

And then, after a moment's silence:

"I am easy in my mind now. I thought that he was not fit to fight, that he was too weak, too short-sighted. So I decided to find out for myself. And I have. Now I know that my son is fighting as well as the best of them. That is all I wanted to know. Let us go home now. You must be back in time for your night duty, and it will be dark before we get there."

And she set out with her short, rapid stride, small, erect and light-footed. . . .

AN ENCOUNTER

HE walked quickly along the ice-covered pavement, sunk deep in thought. From time to time he cast a glance at the houses, those dark, evening, winter houses of wartime. Now and again he passed by ruins, but did not slacken his pace. Only in front of one building, with a wide entrance, did he involuntarily halt for a moment. This building once housed the Children's Theatre. How familiar these walls were with noise, merriment, bustle and delight! How many thrilled and gleaming eyes had stared at the stage, what ovations had burst from the hearts of the young spectators, and how this childish enthusiasm had been treasured by the gifted adult actors of this splendid theatre!

But now all was gloomy and deserted. Only tattered posters, ice-covered, multi-coloured strips of paper flapped in the wind that swept the dark street. The producer shivered and hastened his step. A vivid picture rose in his mind of the actors who so recent-

ly had joked so gaily, sat before the large mirrors in the green room, or rehearsed their parts with as much enthusiasm as the tiny folk of the great city had watched their acting on the stage.

Some of these actors had now departed, others . . . He recalled with a cruel clarity two of them who had worked in his troupe at the front. How simplified life had become. They had succeeded in remaining actors in the crowded dugouts, where the army men, with stern weather-beaten faces, had shown such high appreciation of their art? They had performed from motor-trucks amidst vast, snow-covered fields, they had acted on stages a few yards square in dugouts. They had been jovial, sterling men, with simple hearts, and their names were also simple: Semyonov and Emelyanov. . . . They had made their way to the whizzing of mortar bombs and the deafening roar of shells along the communication trenches, they had crossed fields at the run to the front lines, and had never retreated in the face of danger.

They were both killed on the same quiet winter morning; and the other actors, with the iron discipline of men of art, gave their performance without them.

The producer had seen with his own eyes how the two black whirlwinds had swallowed them up and the snow at that spot was stained a dark red. Yes,

everything had become simple, like this dark city which had once gleamed and glistened with light. This, truly, was the modern classical element, about which they had argued so much, and of which they had been unable to form a distinct idea. The majestic simplicity of the evening, of the dark buildings and the deserted streets—and the equal simplicity of life and death.

The producer suddenly accelerated his pace, for a pedestrian ahead of him had begun to sway and wave his arms with the feeble movements of a drowning man. He ran up to him and seized him by the arm. The head of the pedestrian sank on to the producer's shoulder, and thus they stood, clinging to each other, for several moments. The pedestrian the producer saw, was an old man with a haggard face and large feverish eyes, and he was greedily swallowing the air through his wide open mouth.

At last, the old man, having swayed once more, seemed somewhat to have recovered. He glanced at the man who had come to his aid and said in a low hoarse voice:

"I thank you with all my heart. . . . I had an attack of faintness. . . ."

"Do you live far from here?" the producer asked.

"No," replied the old man, leaning on him as though on a giant. And, indeed, the producer did

seem a giant by the side of this frail, slender, almost ghost-like old man.

"No," repeated the old man, "I live in that house over there, at the end of the street."

"I will escort you there," the producer said; "it is on my way."

He took the old man by the arm and they set forth.

The old man sighed and whispered as he walked. The producer supported him tenderly, as though he were his sick father. Thus, in silence, stumbling on the icy pavement, they reached the house, with its entrance as black as a cave.

"Here it is," the old man said, and he leaned against the doorpost. The producer stood facing him. The old man slowly raised his head, stared up and down the street, glanced at the dark, cold sky, and then intently gazed at his companion.

"Young man," he said, and the faint shadow of a smile flickered around his thin, almost black lips, "do you know in what city you are living?"

The producer did not answer. The old man brought his gaunt face close to his.

"You are living in Ilium," he pronounced loudly.

"In Ilium?" repeated the producer. "Why do you compare our city to ancient Troy?"

"Excuse me," said the old man, "I am a former teacher of ancient history. . . . I know of no city the

legend of which is as majestic as that of Troy. And only our city today, don't you think, has not only equalled it"—here his voice sank very low—"but has even surpassed it in heroism. . . ."

The producer did not answer at once. They stood facing one another in unbroken silence, at the entrance dark as a cave, while the surrounding houses towered above them like castle walls.

"Yes, perhaps you are right," said the producer at length. "But in our Troy there will be no Trojan horse! Never!"

Their hands met in a warm clasp, they bade each other goodnight and parted.

THE LION'S PAW

YURA was not one of those annoying little fellows who was always getting in the way of adults. He was still quite young, only seven, but he would disappear for the whole day, playing in the park or in the streets, or in the zoological gardens. The zoo was just across the way from the house where he lived. He was very fond of the animals.

But, although he would be terribly ashamed to admit it, what he liked most was the huge plaster of Paris lion on the column near the ticket-office at the entrance to the zoo.

The first time he set eyes on it he was fascinated, and he could never remain indifferent to it again.

"He is there to protect the zoo, so that bandits shouldn't do anything bad to the animals, isn't that so, mamma?" he asked her one day.

"Yes, yes, dear," his mother answered absently. And Yura was very content that his mother had agreed with him on such an important point.

The large peaster of Paris lion reared proudly over the entrance, and every time Yura passed it he greeted it with a glow of friendship and respect.

. . . The sirens howled over the city, and the mothers, in anxious alarm, gathered their children and hastened with them to the bomb shelters. Yura sat on a stool in the cellar and every now and again his little heart leaped to his mouth. In the large, low cellar, the terrible thundering outside rumbled distinctly and uncannily. Sometimes the house shook as though in terror, something poured down the outer wall, and the sound of shattered glass could be heard.

"The bandits, the air pirates!" the women exclaimed in indignation; and when the bangs were particularly loud the old women crossed themselves hastily.

Suddenly the house trembled violently, as if somebody had tried to pluck it out of the ground together with its foundation, like an oak with its roots, but then changed his mind and only gave it a thorough shaking.

"That one fell very close," said Yura's mother; "perhaps across the way."

She was not mistaken. When the all-clear signal was given they all ran out to see where the bomb had fallen. Yura kept pace with his mother. It had fallen into the zoo, bystanders said, killing an elephant and wounding a monkey, while a sable had broken loose and was running about the street.

But Yura, his eyes filled with tears, saw only one thing. "Mamma, the lion!" he cried.

There was such deep despair in Yura's voice, that his mother involuntarily glanced towards where he was pointing. His wonderful idol, the plaster of Paris lion, was lying on its side, its great white head reclining on one paw. Its hind legs had disappeared. One of the front paws had been shattered, but its mane was just as majestic, and its eye as stern and immovable as ever.

"Mamma, mamma, the bandits have killed him!" cried Yura. "Mamma, he fought with them. . . ."

He ran forward and began to search for something at the foot of the column, which had been smashed by bomb splinters. The tears coursed freely from his blue eyes as he rummaged among the fragments. At last he found something and with a spasmodic movement slipped it into his pocket.

"Yura, what are you doing there?" his mother cried. "What are you looking for among that rubble? You will only dirty yourself all over. What do you want to collect that rubbish for? . . ."

Yura could not drag himself away. He kept walking around the column and gazing at the lion reclining on its side, as if he wanted to fix forever in his memory the sight of the poor dumb beast that had stood for so many decades at the entrance to the zoo and had watched over the security of the animals. He was not attracted by the bomb craters, by the broken fence, by the overturned hut, or by

the ticket-office, of which only a few posts remained standing, or even by the polar fox which was scurrying about among the bushes of the park. He only had eyes for the lion.

One evening a Red Armyman, covered with the dust of battle, came to visit Yura's mother. He sat at the table drinking tea, and Yura gazed at him with drowsy eyes which grew heavier and heavier every minute. He had been running about all day and was so tired that he could scarcely understand what the visitor was saying. He was telling about the front, about the kind of men we had there, the way they were fighting the Germans and the heroism they were displaying; and he also told about Yura's uncle, his mother's brother, who had received the Order of the Red Banner. Perceiving that Yura was almost ready to fall from his chair his mother ordered him to bed. It was only when he was already undressed and sitting on the edge of the bed that he said:

"Is it true that Uncle Michael has got the Order of the Red Banner?"

"Yes; he fought like a lion. I hope you will be as brave as he when you grow up. When he comes back he will teach you to fight like a soldier. . . ."

"Mamma, did he fight like our lion?" Yura asked.

"What lion? That's only a way of talking. When a Red Armyman fights bravely they say he fought like a lion. . . ."

"Yes, he fought like our lion," answered Yura, not listening to what his mother said. "That means he fought well . . . I will also fight like that. . . ."

"Well, go to sleep now," his mother bade him. "There may be an air-raid tonight, and you must get a good sleep before the alarm sounds. . . ."

The air-raids had now become quite common. It was not always possible to get Yura into the shelter. Sometimes he would be out in the street and could not be found, sometimes he would creep unperceived on to the roof of the house, or else stand on duty at the first-aid station. He was already accustomed to the anti-aircraft guns, to the vibration of the house, and to the dull thud of the bombs.

"Where do you disappear to?" his mother asked. "I run my legs off looking for you. Never go far away from the house, do you hear? You have got entirely out of hand ever since your father went away. There is no managing you. Wait until your father comes back from the navy, he will give you a good talking to. I don't know what to do with you."

"I am helping to build the barricade behind our house," rejoined Yura seriously.

"What barricade?"

"They are building them already on Bolshoy Avenue. I saw how they are doing it, and I got the boys together and we are building one too."

Three days later, after a heavy air-raid, he was

brought home stunned by a bomb explosion. His mother, pale, her hair dishevelled, undressed him with trembling fingers. He lay quietly, but he had already recovered consciousness. He had only been struck by the blast of air and flung to the ground.

"I was watching the barricade behind the house, mamma," he said in a low penitent voice. "I am alive, mamma, don't worry."

His mother was turning a pile of miscellaneous objects out of his pockets, looking for a handkerchief.

"What a lot of rubbish you carry about in your pockets," she said as she pulled out a large piece of plaster of Paris which had already turned grey.

"Mamma!" cried Yura, "Don't touch that! It's the lion's paw. I need it. It is a reminder."

The mother stared in surprise at the lump of plaster of Paris. And sure enough the mark of a big round claw could be distinctly seen on it.

"What do you need it for? Is this what you found among the rubbish outside the zoo?"

"It's a reminder," he said, his little forehead wrinkled in a frown.

"But what is it to remind you of, Yurik? I don't understand, my dear," she said tenderly.

He blushed as he answered.

"I will avenge him . . . I will take revenge on those bandits. Let me only come across them . . . I will give them such a reminder, they will never forget it . . ."

THE FAMILY

"MOTHER, come here for a minute, I want to tell you something," said Semyon Ivanovich.

Dasha stared at her husband as if she was seeing for the first time this broad-shouldered, serious-looking man with the unhurried movements and the stern eyes, who for so long now had not smiled at her or jested with her. She wiped her hands on her apron, sat down on a chair, and with averted eyes, said:

"I know what you are going to say, Semyon."

"You do, do you? How do you know? . . ."

"I feel it in my heart . . . Well, go on, what do you want to say? . . ."

"Shut the door, I don't want Olya to hear. . . ."

"Olya has gone for water. I will tell you myself what you want to say; you just correct me if I am wrong. . . . I have seen, of course, what you have been going through ever since Kostya was killed. Well, Kostya died a good death, defending Lenin-grad. And we have got to take revenge on the fascists; we have got to take revenge on them every day,

every hour. . . . Oh, the villains, the scoundrels, what they are only doing! It is terrible, it is horrible. I hate them, I despise them. . . . You want to take revenge for your brother Kostya. You want to join the army, you want to go to the front. That is so, isn't it? Am I right?"

Semyon Ivanovich slapped his knee, rose, went up to his wife, embraced and kissed her, and said:

"You are a regular mind-reader, Dasha. You are right, I couldn't have put it better myself. Well, to clinch the matter I have already filled in the applications. So that's how it is, mother. There will be one soldier more in the Red Army. I can't go on working at the bench; my heart is just boiling over. And I am an old soldier, I have been through the last world war, and I haven't forgotten how to shoot. . . . But I have little time to spare, mother. Help me to get my things packed. . . ."

"I will see to it," said Dasha softly. She went to the window and looked into the street to see whether Olya was coming. The street was crowded with people, as though it were a holiday. They were all walking on foot, because the street cars were not running. Many were dragging sleds loaded with firewood or sacks. On some of the sleds sat old men or women, wrapped up in shawls and scarves.

Water was also being carried on steds—in children's baths, in churns, in buckets and in kegs. People slipped on the frozen road, the water would splash out of its receptacles and freeze in tongues of ice. The frost was fierce. Gusts of wind came blowing from the gulf, hurling prickly snow and biting ice-dust into the peoples eyes. Everybody had his face bound up to the mouth in a black scarf, and seemed to be wearing a semi-mask, like a masquerader. Dasha stood for some time staring at the endlessly moving throng. Beneath the masks, the breath froze into an icy lacework and a white vapour rose from the pedestrians' mouths. It would be hard to spot Olya with her bucket in the thick of this human torrent. She should be coming any minute.

"I also have something to say," said Dasha, turning away from the window. "I have made up my mind too: since you are going to the front, I will take your place. Don't interrupt me, listen to what I have to say. Our city is besieged. The sufferings of the people are unmentionable. The city has now become the front—that is what the papers are saying. And it is true. And that being so, and since you are going off to take revenge on the Germans for your brother, I will take your place. I am still hale and hearty, and I can stand it. You don't have to worry. I have got some sense, and I like work. I will not let you down. You won't have any cause to be

ashamed of your wife. . . . I am used to the life. After all, I left the factory only because of the children. . . .”

“But it is just the same now,” exclaimed Semyon Ivanovich.

“What is just the same?”

“Petya is still a little fellow. And even Olya is only twelve; and she is such a weak girl. What will become of the children; if both of us go away? The home will go to wrack and ruin, mother. Have you thought of that?”

“I have, Semyon, I have thought it over very carefully. I will send the children to Porokhoviye. I have an old friend there and she has children just about the same ages as ours. I will ask her to take care of them. And then our hands will be free. This is not the time to think of family life. We may see one another again, or we may not. Yes, and the enemy is even wrecking and destroying our homes. We’ve got to fight, we can’t sit with folded arms. Nobody will fight for us if we don’t fight ourselves . . . Am I right, Semyon?”

“You are right, mother,” Semyon Ivanovich said approvingly. “You put it well.”

Olya came in. Leaving her bucket of water in the kitchen, she went straight into the room to warm herself. She walked up to the tiny stove and spread her tiny hands, blue with cold, before it. She

was struck by something unusual in her parents, manner.

“Mamma”, she exclaimed, „what is the matter with you today? Something has happened. Has somebody else been killed? No, tell me the truth, don’t hide anything.”

“We have nothing to hide from you, my dear,” said Dasha. “Take off your things and listen carefully to what we have decided.” She took a deep breath and said rapidly, with scarcely a pause between the words: “Your father is going to the front, and I am going to the factory to take his place, and we have decided to send you children to Auntie Lolya at Porokhoviye to be taken care of. . . . That’s how it is, Olya. . . .”

Olya opened the stove door, threw in a couple of billets and sat staring at the low reluctant flames. Then, without raising her head, she asked:

“But why send Petya and me to Porokhoviye?”

“But there will be nobody to look after the house, my dear. Who is going to stand in the line for bread, and get firewood, and fetch water, and feed Petya? Somebody will have to look after him when he comes back from playing with the neighbours’ children; he can’t be left to himself . . . Who is going to do all this when I am away? . . .”

“Mamma, I won’t go to Porokhoviye, and don’t send Petya. I don’t like Auntie Lolya. She is always

complaining. She keeps grumbling all day. . . .
And as to the house, I will manage all right myself."

She stood up, with an abrupt movement threw her coat from her thin, almost boyish shoulders, shook her head and began to speak in a distinct confident voice:

"Do I manage badly now? Don't I fetch the water? What of it? I know where to get firewood; Valya from No. 17 will help me. And as to lighting the stove, what of it? And I can make the dinner too. Valya and I will stand in the line in turns for bread. And I feed Petya every day anyhow: Don't think I am just a tiny helpless child. There are no children now, we are all grown up. Go, both of you, since you have to. Don't worry about us. You will be coming home every day, won't you? . . . Well, all right. If it's hard for me, what of it? It's hard for everybody nowadays. Nothing will make me go to Porokhoviye. So there you are, mother darling. Don't worry, everything will be all right. . . . There, let me kiss you. That's all. . . ."

THE APPLE TREE

IN the bomb shelter the lights went out. It was at once filled with cries and the grating of shifting chairs and benches, and then a voice loudly cried: "Quiet, comrades, keep calm and sit where you are. There is nothing wrong."

And so they continued to sit in the pitch darkness. The raid had already lasted for several hours. The artist sat on the folding stool which he used to take with him on his sketching expeditions. This light, three-legged stool of his own construction came in very handy nowadays. The artist lived in a small, one-storied house, one of those many veterans which still stand on the broad streets of the Petrograd District, spared by all the wars and revolutions. The little house had a front garden, and in the garden there was even an old, neglected fountain, with its rusty pipe and moss-covered granite. Now it lay beneath the deep snow, and the last thing the artist thought of at this moment was the house, the garden, and the fountain.

His mind vaguely registered the conversation of his neighbours, the exclamations of horror and astonishment, the weeping of children, the creaking of the door. The black, solid murk enveloped him from head to foot like a cloak. . . .

"I ought to have gone away from Leningrad long ago," a voice said in irritation. "Yes," the artist thought to himself, "how silly it was of me not to have gone away too." There would have been nothing cowardly about it. He was now designing posters, posters that were very popular; they were displayed in the streets, in clubs and in dugouts at the front. That was all true. But it was not at all essential that he should do them in Leningrad. What was more, conditions had become such that it was almost impossible to work. It was cold in his studio, his frozen fingers could scarcely hold a pencil, the tiny stove hardly emitted any heat and there was no way of warming himself. Naturally, there was no bomb shelter in his little house, and each time he had to run to the large neighbouring building and sit for long hours in its cellar. He had caught cold, he was weary and was coughing badly, and he had not had a square meal for ever so long. He felt twinges of rheumatism, or something like it. He found it difficult to walk the long distance from his home to the Artists' Club; the street cars were not running. And now the lights had gone out. Yet he had been

told that he had only to travel to the Volga, and there he would find lighted towns, warm rooms and abundant food. There his colleagues were living who had left in time. . . . Yes, how silly it was to be sitting here in the dark, cold and hungry, and to wait for the bombs to fall on one's head.

From time to time the house shook from top to bottom: everybody fell silent, and then for several minutes wild pandemonium reigned. Then, gradually, calm was restored. The blackness seemed to be growing thicker. The artist lost all sense of time. He had come to the bomb shelter in the evening; now it must already be very late. The raid was dragging out abominably. Again the thud of an explosion, and again, and again. . . . "They are dropping bombs," he thought drearily. How the city he loved so dearly had changed! It was painful to think of, it almost brought tears to one's eyes. How sad and miserable it all was. Soon the alarm would be over, the all-clear signal would be given—he would emerge into the street and perhaps he would see the fresh ruins of houses, fires, and piles of shattered fragments. . . . Oh, those apartments, with beds and clothes cupboards hanging in the air, caught in the beams, and portraits on the stark exposed walls—pitiful relics of this unstable, casual human life! . . .

An unseen child whimpered in the corner. Through the murk, the artist tried to picture that childish

head with the wide-open eyes full of tears. Perhaps it had been sleeping and had awakened, and had begun to cry from terror in the darkness. Should he paint a picture of a bomb shelter, one like this say, only illuminated by candles? The trembling flames flickering on the faces, the black shadows on the walls, the taut anxious figures, the old women wrapped in worn winter coats, the young people whispering in the corner, the infants clasped to the breasts of young mothers. . . .

A hard task had fallen to the lot of art in these astounding times. The great masters of the past would have fearlessly depicted all the gloom and grandeur of the epoch. Goya would have drawn Leningrad with a bold and firm hand, and would have signed his sketches as he did over a hundred years ago: "This I saw. . . ."

A light flared on the staircase, and through the open doors came the sound of the all-clear signal. The raid was at last over.

The artist did not hasten to leave. He waited until the dark, solid crowd had been absorbed by the narrow exit and was one of the last to leave, groping his way along the cold walls.

He was afraid that ruins would greet his eye as soon as he emerged into the street. He thought of how he would make his way, stumbling, to his little house which was only a few paces away.

As he came out into the street he stopped in amazement and confusion.

Everything was bathed in the mighty, dazzling light of the moon, which hung, almost violet in colour, in the frosty haze, above the house walls, high in the greenish-blue sky, which was studded with white fleecy clouds that looked like a flock of sheep. The sky seemed to be ringing with cold and light. The blank walls of the high houses looking on to a piece of waste ground seemed built of bronze. The snow crunched softly underfoot. Blue velvety shadows lay on the snowdrifts piled high along the street, which, always so commonplace, now gleamed with an unknown splendour.

He strode towards his house, and could scarcely recognize it. He found himself in a garden which was as fantastic as a dream. The trees were covered with hoarfrost three fingers thick. Every twig seemed to have been picked out by a master hand, and sparkled, radiating a soft iridescence. Strange lights flickered in the summits of the trees, where the snow lay like caps of ermine. It was as if the trees were clad for some solemn dance and would soon break into a stately measure around the artist, joining hands and scattering emeralds all around.

In the middle of this miraculous garden stood a tree of enchanting beauty. On it, all that adorned the other trees—the tinsel, the radiance, the

spangles and the emeralds—was multiplied. And on it, everything attained a perfection which it was beyond the power of human skill to create. The tree burned in a cold and wonderful light; like a white bonfire, it threw off snowy flames, and never for a moment did these flames cease their iridescent play.

The artist stood amazed, lost in dumb contemplation. He did not recognize the spot and could not understand how he had arrived in this garden, or where he was at all.

He glanced around him. People were walking along the street. Young laughter and the gay crunching of the snow could be heard. He took off his fur cap and stood for a moment with closed eyes. Then his senses returned to him. As he opened his eyes he seemed to have come back to earth. He was in his own garden and walking straight to the fountain covered with snow. How had he passed the fence surrounding the garden? The fence had disappeared. The powreful blast of an explosion had carried it away and dropped it far down the street, stripping off its old and rotting boards. The tree of dazzling beauty was his old familiar apple tree, which always stood modestly near the fountain. Here, too, stood his house, dark and quiet in the midnight.

He looked around and saw the city bathed in the bewitching light of the violet moon. The splendid

city rose up around him in unspeakable and inimitable beauty.

The artist gazed at it as if he had been born anew. All the gloomy thoughts that had irritated him there in the bomb shelter disappeared. What, quit this amazing world of beauty, heroism, labour and splendour? Never!

This city must be defended to the last breath, to the last ounce of blood; the enemy must be hurled back from its walls; he must be exterminated, utterly. But leave it? Never! And the artist stood and stared, and there was no end to his pleasure and wonderment, to his delight and pride.

THERE GO THE PIGMIES

YOUNG Vitya did not understand a thing about the affairs of the grownups but it was clear, even to him that morning, that something strange and alarming was happening. Sheep and cows were being hurriedly driven through the village, carts passed by loaded with belongings, children were crying, women weeping, while somewhere quite near guns were going off.

His mother was busy tying up some bundles, a look of bewilderment on her face. Every now and then she would tell him to sit still, not to bother her, that she had enough to see to without his getting in the way. Having finished with packing she kept on running to the window or onto the porch, looking up and down the street. "Why doesn't Uncle Kostya come?" she kept on muttering to herself at a loss. "What's keeping him! We may get left behind. No, that's impossible. . . ."

Vitya stole out quietly onto the porch, his cane in his hand, and looked curiously down the village

street. There never used to be so many people around at that time of day. And what a din, what a commotion! But the guns drowned everything else. At times the rumble seemed to come from somewhere beyond the hills, at others it rent the air somewhere quite near.

One word, more than any other, was on everybody's lips: Germans. Vitya couldn't make out where they had turned up from or who they were. To ask somebody at such a time when everything was topsy-turvy, was useless, of course. The grownups had their hands full as it was without having to answer his questions as to what was happening. His mother's wrought-up state began to affect him too. He simply could not sit still in the room, which was all in disorder, with things strewn all over the place and the dirty dishes from breakfast piled up on the table. He saw the neighbour's cat lapping up the milk in the crock on the windowsill, and yet his mother, who saw what the cat was up to as well, let it alone as though everything was as it should be.

He stood on the porch swinging his cane, lost in thought. Borka came up to him silently and touched his arm. Vitya glanced at him expecting to find some change in Borka too, but the latter looked as much as usual, only his tuft of hair was somewhat more dishevelled than usual and there was a glint in his eye which always appeared when he was up

to one of his most reckless pranks. And he was always up to something or other. His favourite pastime was to slip off to the woods without leave, or to the swamp, or to the railway station.

And now, too, taking Vitya by the arm he said to him:

"Come on, I've got something to show you. . . . Hurry up!"

Vitya followed him as one bewitched. Borka's bare feet seemed to glide over the dust as, clutching Vitya's arm, he led him down the familiar street towards the outskirts of the village. There on a hill stood an old church with a high belfry where children were never admitted. The old watchman from the collective farm usually kept the door locked and the children could do nothing but gaze longingly at the roof where whole flocks of grey pigeons nested or paraded along the eaves out of reach even of their catapults.

But today was a crazy sort of day and the door to the belfry stood ajar with no watchman in sight. Borka was the first to slip through the door and Vitya followed closely on his heels, stumbling over the broken step. They crept up the stairs, mounting higher and higher, for what seemed to be an eternity. From time to time Borka would look over his shoulder at Vitya and make the most terrible grimaces, his hand raised in warning. Vitya, with uneasy

curiosity, looked at the grey walls covered with inscriptions and drawings but he had no time to make out what they were. At last they reached the very top and came out into the glaring sunlight. A vast expanse of blue sky stretched far beyond the hills. The distant woods and meadows and a stretch of river seemed like a painted picture. Vitya poked out his head between the railings and caught his breath at the unaccustomed height.

For a minute he could not understand a thing, he had a new sensation, a feeling of space.

Borka pointed in the direction of the gully to where, from time to time, small clouds of smoke appeared followed by a heavy thud and a flash.

"What's that?" he asked in alarm.

"What a chump you are," Borka replied with dignity. "That's guns shooting and look over there, you silly ass—there's our machine-guns."

Borka was older, he was captain of the gang and he knew everything. Suddenly they heard a sort of undefined but rather loud click right over the belfry, and then something came pattering down onto the roofs and trees nearby tearing off the leaves, rattling the windowpanes and followed by cries somewhere down below amongst the houses.

Vitya was so scared that he stood there rooted to the spot but all of a sudden Borka jerked him

painfully by the arm. "Look," he shouted, "there go the pigmies, there go the pigmies. . . ."

Vitya crawled nearer to the railing, his eyes glued to the spot indicated by his chum. Figures which from a distance resembled dwarfs dressed in black were flitting from bush to bush down there in the meadow, right near the river. They seemed to Vitya like wicked, ugly pigmies who were marching on the village in order to kill Borka and him and mamma and everybody they could find there. Every now and then they would stop, and what queer antics they were up to?—first they would fall flat to the ground, then jump to their feet, or take cover behind the bushes, or pop up from holes in the ground. And what a lot of them there were, these pigmies who had turned up from nowhere just as in some terrible fairy tale.

It looked so unreal that Vitya looked and looked, forgetting all about his fear. But when a column of black smoke suddenly grew up midway between him and the pigmies and the latter began to go down like ninepins Borka caught hold of Vitya's arm and started shouting out of sheer excitement. Shells now, with a metallic and strident screech and whistle, were beginning to whiz over the belfry. Somewhere to the left a machine-gun began to bark and the pigmies fell flat to the ground taking cover.

Then, one at a time they began to crawl on.

Just then Vitya remembered that his mother would be looking for him high and low all over the village, that she most probably was weeping and wailing, and that Borka had been "playing one of his pranks again," as people usually said of him, and that it was high time to make tracks. True, the black figures mesmerized him, it was difficult to tear his eyes away from them and their queer antics as they hopped and fell, but Borka and he had to be off because a shell landed somewhere quite close and the belfry rocked just like a horse in a merry-go-round. Vitya dashed down the steps with Borka close at his heels holding on to the walls.

Vitya lost sight of Borka in the street which was crowded with carts and people. But he had no time to think of Borka now. Here, on the ground, the racket and the din from the firing was much more terrifying, and people were yelling more than ever. Vitya dashed off for home and just in time. His mother's eyes were reddened with weeping.

"Where have you been all this time?" she shouted, directly she caught sight of him. "Uncle Kostya has come. Here take that bag quickly. Be smart about it, it's time to be off. The Germans are coming. . . ."

"Mamma," he said, "mamma, I saw them. Don't be afraid, mamma, they're only pigmies. . . ."

But his mother was not paying any attention. She ran out onto the porch loaded with bundles

and with a satchel on her back. The truck was waiting for them in the street.

Uncle Kostya helped the women and the children up onto the truck. He was covered with dust from head to foot, even to his moustaches. "Take your time," he said, "there's room for everybody, we won't leave anybody behind, so don't be afraid. . . ." The chauffeur started the engine. And when his mother was already seated on her bundles and he was also up holding on to the side he saw big, heavy trucks suddenly turning into the village street in a cloud of dust, from which Red Armymen began to jump off one after the other. They had rifles in their hands and formed up right there in the street.

With sparkling eyes Vitya looked at the tall sturdy figures, at the tanned youthful faces, at their muscular arms handing down the machine-guns, and they appeared to him unusually tall. The smallest of them was much bigger than those pigmies who were hopping around in the meadow coming towards the village. He said to his mother:

"And won't those pigmies get it now. . . ."

His mother wanted to say something to him but the driver who was already at the wheel started the car which, throbbing in every fibre, sped off quickly zigzagging in between the trucks of the Red Armymen.

Vitya could not make out anything more owing to the dust. A jolt sent him toppling over onto his mother's bundles and she held him tight to her. He stayed where he was. He could not forget, however, what he had seen from the belfry and what he had experienced when he was running with Borka. His small heart was going pit-a-pat. And after that he was so tired that he fell asleep then; there was a lot of noise; it began to rain; people began to scream; then houses suddenly appeared, the road became much smoother, the truck went more evenly and he would wake up now and then only to fall asleep again. He was still half asleep when his mother put a piece of bread and butter into his hand. He munched it sleepily. But one thing was stamped on his mind—a thing which he would never forget: the broad meadow under a blue sky and the black figures of the wicked, ugly pigmies and the sturdy handsome, tall Red Armymen who jumped from the trucks to pit themselves against the strangers who had appeared from nowhere. . . .

RAW HANDS

IT was so bitterly cold that even the thick warm gloves could not keep it out. The woods all around seemed to be encroaching on the narrow strip of uneven road, full of ruts and holes, along both sides of which were deep ditches filled with treacherous snow. Every now and then a branch of some tree would just graze the truck and bring down a shower of snowflakes onto the roof of the driver's cabin and leave their mark on the sides of the tank.

Yes, many were the roads he had seen since he became a chauffeur but never such a one. And this was the road he had to do all the time now, working like a horse. He would hardly reach his dugout which was crowded and dark and damp, and rest his head in a corner amongst his tired comrades, when somebody would call him and he would be ordered out again onto the road. Sleep—he would sleep later on, now it was time to work, the road was calling. And you could not tell them to put it off for a bit, that there was no hurry—it was in

a hurry, and what's more you had to keep your eyes skinned otherwise the car would be in a ditch in next to no time and you'd have to get your pals to help you lug it out, because to do it yourself was absolutely impossible. And the frost? It seemed as though the North Pole itself had come to this road in the forest to regulate traffic.

Or else you'd be treated to fogs, or from the direction of Lake Ladoga you'd get blasts of wind the like of which he had never experienced before—raging furies which penetrated to the very marrow, or else a blizzard when it would be impossible to see a thing two yards in front of your nose. The tires too were not made of iron, they were showing signs of wear and tear and, then again, if you bring up the rear it's up to you to give a helping hand to your pals who have landed in a ditch, but what was most important was to deliver the stuff in time. And, by the way, how was it faring? . . .

Bolshakov stopped the car, clambered out of the cabin and wading through the deep snow went up to the tank. He climbed up and in the pale light of the wintry day he saw that a thin stream was trickling down the frost coated side. A shiver went down his spine. The tank car was leaking. The tank had sprung at the joint. The seam had opened. Petrol was leaking out.

He stood there and looked at the thin stream which

it seemed nothing could stop. To go through all the miseries of the road only to deliver an empty tank car? He tried to recall all the cases of accidents he had ever had but he could not recall a similar instance. The biting frost seared his face. To stand there for long and just look at it would not help matters.

Up to his waist in snow he made his way back to the cabin. The political instructor was sitting there, his frozen nose buried in the collar of his sheepskin jacket.

"Comrade Political Instructor," Bolshakov called to him. "I'm afraid I'll have to trouble you."

"What is it, have we arrived already?" the political instructor asked waking up with a start.

"It looks like it," Bolshakov said. "The tank's sprung a leak. What are we going to do about it?"

The political instructor scrambled out of the cabin. He rubbed his eyes, almost slipped, but when he saw what had happened he began to chafe his frozen hands, thoughtfully searching for a solution.

"Drive to the nearest station. There we'll pump the stuff out of the tank and get her patched up. What do you say?"

"That's all very well," Bolshakov said. "It would be a way out if the petrol were going somewhere else and not to Leningrad, if it wasn't urgent for

the front. Simply pump it out? No, you can't pump it out."

"What can you do?" the political instructor asked, looking at the petrol trickling out from the open seam.

"If you don't object I'll try and make it tight," Bolshakov replied.

He opened his tool box and at that moment the tools looked more like instruments of torture than anything else—they felt more like molten iron. Gritting his teeth he took a caulking-iron, a hammer and a piece of soap which resembled a stone and climbed up. The petrol trickled down onto his hands. What queer petrol. It scorched like fire. It saturated his mittens and the sleeves of his tunic. Spitting in mute desperation he plugged up the seam and smeared it with soap. The petrol stopped leaking.

Heaving a sigh of relief he went back to his place at the wheel. After a stretch of about ten kilometres or so Bolshakov stopped the car and went to have a look at the tank. The seam had opened again. A stream of petrol was trickling down the cylindrical surface of the tank. He had to begin all over again. Again the caulking-iron was brought into play, again the petrol scorched his hands and again he smeared the cut surface of the joint with soap. The petrol stopped leaking. It seemed as if the road would never end.

He stopped counting how many times he got down from his seat and clambered up onto the tank. He ceased to feel the pain from his scorched hands. It seemed to him that it was all some terrible nightmare: the dense forest, the endless snowdrifts, the petrol trickling onto his hands.

He tried to calculate in his mind how much of the precious liquid had leaked out. According to his calculation it could not be more than forty or fifty litres. But if he would stop caulking every ten or twenty kilometres then all his work would be in vain. And so he began all over again with the persistency of a man who had lost all conception of time and space.

He was so tired that he began to think that he wasn't moving at all but standing in one place and every forty minutes or so he would snatch up the caulking-iron while the crack would be getting wider and wider, jeering at him and all his efforts.

Suddenly, at a bend in the road, empty spaces which looked so strange to the eye came into sight—vast, unbounded expanses shrouded in white. The road now led over the ice. The enormous lake breathed at him with the ferocity of a monster, but he was no longer terrified. He sped along confidently, glad that the forest had come to an end. Now and again his head would bang against the wheel but he immediately pulled himself together. Sleep weighed

down his shoulders as though some giant were standing behind his back and trying to crush his head and shoulders in his enormous soft, thickly gloved hands. The truck went on and on. Frozen and dead tired he was kept going by one thought which gave him inexplicable joy. He knew for sure that he would be able to stick it out, and he did. The load was delivered to its destination.

. . . In the dugout the doctor examined with surprise his raw hands and mutilated fingers and looked at him questioningly.

"How did this happen?" he asked.

"I had to caulk a joint, comrade doctor," he replied clenching his teeth with pain.

"Why couldn't you stop on the way?" the doctor asked. "You're not a baby and you know yourself that you can't go soaking your hands with petrol in such a bitter frost. . . ."

"It was impossible to stop," he replied.

"Why? What was the hurry? Where were you taking the petrol to?"

"To Leningrad, to the front," he said in a voice that resounded all over the dugout.

The doctor looked at him searchingly.

"I s-e-e," he drawled, "to Leningrad! Everything's clear! No further questions are required. Let me bandage up your hands. You've got to get treatment."

"No harm in getting treatment. I'll do that until morning, and then again on the road. . . . It'll be warmer with the bandages on to drive the car and as for the pain I'll manage to hold it in between my clenched teeth. . . ."