SOVIET SHORT STORIES

Moscow
1947

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The present collection is composed of stories written by Soviet authors during the past decade, with the exception of the three pre-revolutionary stories by Maxim Gorky with which the volume opens.

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MAXIM GORKY

A MAN IS BORN

IT WAS in '92, the famine year, between Sukhum and Ochemchiry, on the river Kodor, not far from the coast—hollow-sounding above the merry ripple of the glittering mountain stream I heard the rolling sea.

Autumn. Small, yellowed bay leaves were darting hither and thither in the white surf of the Kodor like nimble salmon trout. I was sitting on the high stony bank overlooking the river and thinking that the gulls and cormorants were also, probably, taking the leaves for fish and being fooled—and that was why they were screaming so plaintively over there, on the right, beyond the trees, where the waves were lapping the shore.

The chestnut trees spreading above me were decorated with gold—at my feet lay numerous leaves that looked like hands severed from human wrists. The branches of the hornbeam on the opposite bank were already bare and hung in the air like a torn net. Inside the net, as if caught in it, hopped a yellow and red mountain woodpecker, tapping at the bark of the trunk with its black beak, driving out the insects, which were at once gobbled up by those guests from the north—the agile titmice and grey nuthatches.

On my left, smoky clouds hung low over the mountain tops threatening rain, and causing shadows to glide across the green slopes on which the boxwood trees grew, and where, in the hollows of the ancient beeches and lindens, one can find the "grog honey" which in the days of old nearly sealed the fate of the troops of Pompey the Great. It knocked a whole legion of the Roman ironsides off their feet with its inebriating sweetness. The wild bees make this honey from the pollen of

bay and azalea blossoms, and "wayfarers" scoop it from the hollows and eat it, spreading it on their lavash—flat cakes made from wheat flour.

This is what I was doing, sitting on the stones under a chestnut tree, frightfully stung by an angry bee—I dipped my bread into my tea can, filled with honey, and ate, meanwhile admiring the idle play of the tired autumn sun.

The Caucasus in the autumn is like the interior of a magnificent cathedral which the great sages—being also great sinners—built to hide their shame for their past from prying eyes. They built a vast temple of gold, turquoise and emerald, and hung the mountain sides with the finest carpets embroidered in silk by the Turkmen in Samarkand and Shemaha, they plundered the whole world and brought all their loot here as a gift to the sun, as much as to say:

"Thine—from Thine—to Thee!"

...I saw a vision of long-bearded, hoary giants, large-eyed like merry children, descending from the mountains, beautifying the earth, scattering their multi-coloured treasures with a lavish hand, covering the mountain tops with thick layers of silver and the terraces with the living fabric of a vast variety of trees—and under their hands this patch of heaven-blessed earth was endowed with enchanting beauty.

It's a fine job—being a man in this world! What wonderful things one sees! How the heart is stirred by pleasure almost akin to pain in one's calm contemplation of beauty!

Yes, it's true, sometimes you find it hard. Your breast is filled with burning hatred, and grief greedily sucks the blood from your heart—but this cannot last for ever. Even the sun often looks down on men in infinite sadness: it has laboured so hard

for them, and what wretched manikins they have turned out to be!...

Of course, there's a lot of good ones—but they need repair, or better still, to be made all over again.

...Above the bushes on my left I saw dark heads bobbing; barely perceptible above the murmur of the waves and the rippling sounds of the river I heard human voices—those were the "starving" on their way from Sukhum, where they had been building a road, to Ochemchiry, in the hope of getting another job.

I knew them—they were from Orel. I had worked with them in Sukhum and we had been paid off together the day before. I had left before them, at night, so as to reach the seashore in time to see the sun rise.

They were four muzhiks and a young peasant woman with high cheekbones: she was pregnant; her huge abdomen protruded upward, she had bluish-grey eyes, seemingly bulging with fright. I could see her head above the bushes too, covered with a yellow kerchief, nodding like a sunflower in full bloom away in the wind. Her husband had died in Sukhum from overeating himself with fruit. I had lived in the same hutment with these people. From the good old Russian habit they had complained about their misfortunes so much, and so loudly, that their lamentations must have been heard a good five verste away.

They were dull people, crushed by sorrow, which had torn them from their native, worn out, barren soil and swept them like autumn leaves to this place, where the strange, luxurious clime amazed and dazzled them, and where the hard conditions of labour had finally broken them. They gazed at everything about them, blinking their sad, faded eyes in perplexity, smiling pitifully to each other and saying in low voices:

“Dee ... what a soil!”

“The stuff just shoots up!”

“Ye e es . but still .. it's very stony.”

“It's not so good, you have to admit.”

And then they recalled Kobily Lozhok, Sukhon Gon, Mokrenki —their native villages, where every handful of earth contained the ashes of their forefathers; they remembered it, it was familiar and dear to them, they had watered it with the sweat of their brows.

There had been another woman with them—tall, upright, with a chest as flat as a board, a heavy jaw and dull, squinting eyes as black as coal.

In the evening she, together with the woman in the yellow kerchief, would go a little distance behind the hutment, squat down on a heap of stones, and resting her chin in the palm of her hand and inclining her head to the side, would sing in a high-pitched angry voice:

Beyond the village churchyard,
Among the bushes green,
On the yellow sand I'll spread
My shawl so white and clean
And there I'll wait. . .
Until my darling comes. . .
And when he comes. . .
I'll greet him heartily. . .

Usually the one in the yellow kerchief would sit silently looking down at her abdomen; but sometimes she would suddenly join in, and in a deep, drawling, masculine voice would sing the words of the sad refrain:

Oh my darling. . .
My dear darling. . .
I am not fated. . .
To see thee more. . .

In the black, suffocating darkness of the southern night, these wailing voices had awakened in me the memory of the snowy wilderness of the north, of the shrieking blizzard, and the howling of the wolves. . .

Later the cross-eyed woman was struck down by fever and she was carried to the town on a canvas stretcher—on the way she shivered and moaned, and the moaning sounded as if she was continuing her song about the churchyard and the sand.

...The head in the yellow kerchief dived below the bush and vanished.

I finished my breakfast, covered the honey in my can with leaves, tied up my knapsack and leisurely followed in the track of the other people, tapping the firm ground with my cornel-wood walking stick.

And so, there I was on the narrow, grey strip of road. On my right heaved the deep blue sea. It looked as though thousands of invisible carpenters were planing it with their planes, and the white shavings rusted on the beach, blown there by the wind, which was moist, warm and fragrant, like the breath of a robust woman. A Turkish felucca, listing heavily to port, was gliding towards Sukhura, its sails puffed out like the fat cheeks of the pompous road engineer in Sukhura—a most important fellow. For some reason he always said "shoot oop" for "shut up," and "mebbe" for "may be".

“Shoot oop! Mebbe you think you can fight, but in two ticks I'll have you hauled off to the police station!”

He used to take a delight in having people dragged off to the police station, and it is good to think that by now the worms in his grave must have eaten his body right down to the bones.

How easy it was to walk! Like treading on air. Pleasant thoughts, brightly-clad reminiscences, sang in soft chorus in my memory. These voices in my soul were like the white-crested waves of the sea—on the surface, deep down, however, my soul was calm. The bright and joyous hopes of youth swam leisurely, like silvery fish in the depths of the sea.

The road led to the seashore, winding its way nearer and nearer to the sandy strip that was lapped by the waves—the bushes too seemed to be striving to get a glimpse of the sea and swayed over the ribbon of road as if nodding greetings to the blue expanse.

The wind was blowing from the mountains—threatening rain.

A low moan in the bushes—a human moan, which always goes to the heart.

Pushing the bushes apart I saw the woman in the yellow kerchief sitting with her back against the trunk of a walnut tree; her head was dropped on one shoulder, her mouth was contorted, her eyes bulged with a look of insanity. She was supporting her huge abdomen with her hands and breathing with such unnatural effort that her abdomen positively leapt convulsively. The woman moaned faintly, exposing her yellow wolfish teeth.

“What's the matter? Did somebody hit you?” I asked, bending over her. She rubbed one bare foot against the other in the grey dust like a fly cleaning itself and, rolling her heavy head, she gasped:

“Go away! . . . Ain't you got no shame? . . . Go away! . . .”

I realized what was the matter—I had seen something like this before—of course I was scared and skipped back into the road, but the woman uttered a loud prolonged shriek, her bulging eyes seemed to burst and tears rolled down her flushed and swollen cheeks.

This compelled me to go back to her. I threw my knapsack, kettle and tea can to the ground, lay the woman flat on her back and was about to bend her legs at the knees when she pushed me away, punched me in the face and chest and, turning over, she crept off on all fours deeper into the bushes, grunting and growling like a she-bear:

“Devil! . . . Beast!”

Her arms gave way and she dropped, striking her face on the ground. She shrieked again, convulsively stretching her legs.

In the heat of the excitement I suddenly remembered all I had known about this business. I turned the woman over on her back and bent up her legs—the chorion was already visible.

“Lie still, it's coming!” I said to her.

I ran to the beach, rolled up my sleeves, washed my hands and returned, ready to act as midwife.

The woman writhed like birch bark in the flames. She tapped the ground around her with the palms of her hands, and tearing up handfuls of faded grass she wanted to stuff it into her mouth, and in doing so she dropped earth onto her frightful inhumanly contorted face and into her wild, bloodshot eyes—and now the chorion burst and the child's head appeared. I had to restrain the convulsive jerking of her legs, help the child emerge and see that she did not stuff grass into her distorted mouth.

We swore at each other a bit—she through her clenched teeth, and I in a low voice; she from pain and, perhaps, from shame, I from embarrassment and heart-rending pity for her. . .

“Oh Lord! Oh Lord!” she cried hoarsely. Her livid lips were bitten through, there was foam at the corners of her mouth, and from her eyes, which seemed suddenly to have faded in the sun, flowed those abundant tears of a mother's unbearable pain. Her whole body was taut, as if at were being torn in two.

“Go . . away . . you . . devil!”

She kept pushing me away with her feeble, seemingly dislocated arms. I said to her appealingly:

“Don't be a fool! Try, try hard. It'll be over soon.”

My heart was torn with pity for her, it seemed to me that her tears had splashed into my eyes. I felt as if my heart would burst. I wanted to shout, and I did shout:

“Come on! Hurry up!”

And lo—a tiny human being lay in my arms—as red as a beetroot. Tears streamed from my eyes, but through the tears I saw that this tiny red creature was already discontented with the world, kicking, struggling and yelling, although it was still

chest and back he screwed up his eyes, and he struggled and shrieked as wave after wave washed his body.

“Go on, yell! Yell at the top of your lungs! Show 'em you come from Orel!” I shouted encouragingly.

When I brought him back to his mother she was lying on the ground with her eyes closed again, biting her lips from the fits of after pain, but amidst her groaning and moaning I heard her whisper:

“Give . . give him . . to me.”

“He can wait!”

“No! Give . . him . . to . . me!”

She unbuttoned her blouse with trembling uncertain hands. I helped her to uncover her breast, which nature had made fit to feed twenty children, and put the struggling Orelian to her warm body. The Orelian understood at once what was coming and stopped yelling.

“Holy Virgin, Mother of God,” the mother muttered with a sigh, rolling her dishevelled head from side to side on the knapsack.

Suddenly, she uttered a low shriek, fell silent again, and then opened her inexpressively beautiful eyes—the sacred eyes of a mother who has just given birth to a child. They were blue, and they gazed into the blue sky. A grateful, joyful smile gleamed and melted in them. Raising her weary arm the mother slowly crossed herself and her child. . .

“Bless you, Holy Virgin, Mother of God . . Oh . . bless you. . .”

The light in her eyes died out again. Her face again assumed that haggard hue. She remained silent for a long time, scarcely breathing. But suddenly she said in a firm, matter-of-fact tone:

“Laddie, untie my bag.”

I untied the bag. She looked hard at me, smiled faintly, and I thought I saw a blush, ever so faint, pass over her hollow cheeks and perspiring brow.

“Go off a little way,” she said.

“Take care, don't disturb yourself too much,” I warned her.

“All right. . . All right. . . Go away!”

I retired into the bushes nearby. I felt very tired, and it seemed as though beautiful birds were singing softly in my heart—and

together with the unceasing murmur of the sea this singing sounded so good that I thought I could listen to it for a whole year. . .

Somewhere, not far away, a brook was bubbling—it sounded like the voice of a girl telling her friend about her lover. . .

A head rose above the bushes, covered with a yellow kerchief already tied in the regular way.

“Hey! What's this? You've got up rather soon, haven't you?” I cried in amazement.

The woman sat down on the ground, holding on to the branches for support; she looked as if all the strength had been drained from her. There was not a hint of colour in her ashen-grey face, except for her eyes, which looked like large, blue pools. She smiled a tender smile and whispered:

“Look—he's asleep.”

Yes, he was sleeping all right, but no different from any other kid as far as I could see; if there was any difference it was only in the surroundings. He was lying on a heap of bright autumn leaves, under a bush, of the kind that don't grow in the Orel Gubernia.

“You ought to lie down for a bit, mother,” I said.

“No-o-o,” she answered, shaking her head weakly. “I've got to collect my things and go on to that place . . what do they call it?”

“Ochemchiry?”

“Yes, that's right! I suppose my folks are a good few versts from here now.”

“But will you be able to walk?”

“What about the Virgin Mary? Won't she help me?”

Well, since she was going with the Virgin Mary—I had nothing more to say [1]

She gazed down at the tiny, puckered, discontented face, warm rays of kindly light radiating from her eyes. She licked her lips and slowly stroked her breast.

I lit a fire and heaped some stones near it on which to place the kettle.

“I'll give you some tea in a minute, mother,” I said.

“Oh! That will be fine . . My breasts feel dried up,” she answered.

“Have your folks deserted you?”

“No! Why should they? I dropped behind. They had had a drink or two . . And a good thing, too. I don't know what I'd have done if they were around.”

She glanced at me, covered her face with her arm, spat out with blood and then smiled shamefacedly.

“Is he your first?” I asked.

“Yes, my first . . Who are you?”

“It looks like I'm a man. . .”

“You're a man all right! Are you married?”

“I haven't had the honour.”

“You are fibbing, aren't you?”

“No, why should I?”

She cast her eyes down in reflection. Then she asked:

“How is it you know about this women's business?”

---

[1] Well, since she was going with the Virgin Mary—I had nothing more to say.

Now I did tell a fib. I said

Once she halted and said

“Lord! Dear, good God! How good it is. How good! Oh, if I could go on like this, like this, all the time, to the very end of the world and he, my little one, would grow, would keep on growing in freedom, near his mother's breast, my darling little boy.”

. . The sea murmured and murmured. . .

MALYA

Stirred by the light sultry breeze it quivered, and covered with tiny ripples which reflected the sun—rays with dazzling brilliance it smiled at the blue sky with a thousand silvery smiles. The vast space between the sea and the sky rang with the merry sounds of splashing waves as they raced, one behind the other, towards the sloping beach of the spur. The splashing waves and the glint of the sun reflected by the thousands of ripples on the sea merged harmoniously in continuous movement, full of animation and joy. The sun was happy because it was shining, and the sea—because it reflected the sun's jubilant light.

The wind fondly stroked the silky breast of the sea, the sun warmed it with its burning rays, and the sea, sighing drowsily under these tender caresses, filled the hot air with a salty fragrance. The greenish waves breaking on the yellow beach bespattered it with white foam, which melted on the hot sand with a soft sigh and kept it moist.

The long narrow spur looked like an enormously tall tower which had fallen from the shore into the sea. Its slender spire cut into the limitless expanse of sparkling water, its base was

“Who's that with you?” he shouted when he discerned a queer, unfamiliar smile on Malva's handsome face.

“Wait and see!” she shouted back with a laugh.

The oarsman turned his face to the beach and glancing at Vasili also laughed.

The watchman frowned, trying to think who the stranger could be. His face seemed familiar.

“Pull hard!” Malva commanded.

The waves carried the boat almost half length up the beach. It heeled over on its side and stuck fast while the waves slipped back into the sea. The oarsman jumped out of the boat and said:

“Hello, father!”

“Yakov!” exclaimed Vasili in a choking voice, more amazed than pleased.

The two embraced and kissed each other, three times, on the lips and cheeks. The expression of Vasili's face was a mixture of pleasure and embarrassment.

. . I looked and looked . . and felt a tickling in my heart. I wondered what it was. . . So it was you? Who would have thought it? At first I thought it was Seryozhka, but then I saw it wasn't. And it turns out to be you!”

As he spoke, Vasili stroked his beard with one hand and gesticulated with the other. He was dying to look at Malva, but the smiling eyes of his son were turned on his face and their brightness confused him. The satisfaction he felt at having such a fine, strapping lad for a son was marred by the embarrassment he felt at the presence of his mistress. He stood in front of Yakov, stepping from one foot to the other, and fired question after question at him without waiting for an answer.

Everything was mixed up in his head and he almost got a shock when he heard Malva say mockingly:

And she had wept silently, hiding her face in her apron.

Yakov had not felt sorry for her then, but he felt so now. He glanced at Malva and frowned.

“Well, here I am!” exclaimed Vasili, appearing in the shack with a fish in one hand and a knife in the other.

He had got rid of his embarrassment, concealing it deep down in his bosom, and now looked at the two quite calmly, except that his movements betrayed a fussiness that was unusual for him.

“I'll go and light the fire and then I'll come in and we'll have a long talk, eh Yakov?” he said.

With that he left the shack again.

Malva continued to crack melon seeds, quite unceremoniously staring at Yakor, but he, although dying to look at her, studiously kept his eyes off her.

After a time the silence became oppressive to him and he said:

“Oh, I've left my knapsack in the boat. I'll go and get it.”

He got up leisurely and left the shack. Soon after Vasili returned. Leaning over towards Malva he demanded in a hurried and angry tone:

“Why did you come with him? What shall I tell him about you? What are you to me?”

“I came, and that's all there is to it!” Malva answered curtly.

“Oh, you . . silly woman! What shall I do now? Tell him right in his face? Spit it right out? I have a wife at home! His mother . . You ought to have understood that!”

“What's it got to do with me? Do you think I'm afraid of him? Or of you?” Malva asked contemptuously, screwing up her greenish eyes. “How funny you looked skipping in front

“It may seem funny to you! But what am I going to do?”

“You should have thought of that before!”

“How was I to know that the sea would throw him up on to this shore like this?”

The crunching of sand underfoot told them of Yakov's approach and they cut the conversation short. Yakov brought in a light knapsack, threw it into a corner and glanced angrily at the woman out of the corner of his eye.

She went on zestfully cracking melon seeds. Vasili sat down on the tree stump and rubbing his knees with the palms of his hands he said with a smile:

“Well, so you're here. . . What made you think of coming?”

“Oh, just like that. . . We wrote to you. . .”

“When? I never got the letter!”

“Is that so? But we wrote. . .”

“The letter must have gone astray,” said Vasili in a disappointed tone. “Devil take it! What do you think of it, eh? Just when you want it, it goes astray!”

“So you don't know what's happened at home?” Yakov inquired, glancing at his father distrustfully.

“How should I know? I didn't get your letter.”

Yakov then told him that their horse had died, that their stock of grain was all gone by the beginning of February, that he hadn't been able to get any work, that the hay had run out and the cow had nearly died. They had dragged on somehow until April and then decided that he, Yakov, should go to his father,

after the ploughing, for about three months, to earn some money. They wrote to the father telling him of their decision and then they sold three sheep, bought some grain and hay and . . well . . here he was!

“So that's how it is, is it?” exclaimed Vasili. “Humph. . . But . . how's that? I sent you some money, didn't I?”

“Perhaps I have,” answered Yakov reluctantly.

“Is she pretty?” Malva asked in a careless tone.

Yakov made no reply.

“Why don't you answer? . . Is she better looking than me?”

Involuntarily he raised his eyes and looked the woman in the face. He saw her dark, round cheeks and full, moist, trembling lips, parted in a mocking smile. Her pink cotton blouse fitted her exceptionally well and outlined her well-rounded shoulders and high, supple breasts. But he took a dislike to her sly, half-closed, greenish, laughing eyes. He heaved a sigh.

“Why do you talk like that?” he said in a pleading voice, although he wanted to talk to her sternly.

“What other way should I talk?” she answered with a laugh.

“And you laugh. . . Why?”

“I'm laughing at you!”

“Why? What have I done to you?” he asked angrily and cast his eyes down again.

She did not answer.

Yakov guessed what her relations with his father were, and this prevented him from speaking to her freely. His surmise did not surprise him. He had heard that men who go away from home have a good time, and he understood that a hale and hearty man like his father would find it hard to live without a woman for

long. But for all that, he felt awkward in this woman's presence, and in his father's, too. Then he thought of his mother —a weary, complaining woman, slaving out there, in their village, knowing no rest. . .

“Supper's ready!” announced Vasili appearing in the shack.

“Get the spoons, Malva!”

Yakov glanced at his father and thought to himself:

“She must come here often since she knows where the spoons are kept.”

Malva got the spoons and said she must go and wash them. There was also a bottle of vodka in the boat that she said she would go and fetch.

Father and son watched her leave the shack and when she was gone they sat together in silence. After a while Vasili asked Yakov:

“How did you come to meet her?”

“I went to the office to ask about you and she was there. . . She says to me, she says ‘Why walk all that way along the sand? Let's go by boat. I'm going across to him too.’ So we came.”

“Aa a-ah! . . I often used to think to myself: ‘I wonder what Yakov is like now?’ ”

The son looked into his father's face with a good-natured smile, and this smile lent Vasili courage.

“A nice little woman, isn't she . . eh?” he asked.

“Not so bad,” Yakov answered indefinitely, blinking his eyes.

“What the hell can a man do, little brother?” Vasili exclaimed, waving his arms. “I bore it patiently at first, but I couldn't stand it any longer! It's a habit . . I'm a married man! And besides, she mends my clothes, and one thing and another dear, oh dear!

You can't escape from a woman any more than you can escape from death!" he concluded fervently.

"What's it got to do with me?" said Yakov. "It's your business. It's not for me to judge you."

But to himself he said

"You can't tell me a woman like that would sit around and mend pants."

"Besides," said Vasili, "I'm only forty-five. . . I don't spend much on her. She's not my wife."

"Of course not," Yakov agreed, and thought to himself: "But she empties your pockets all the same, I bet!"

Malva came back with a bottle of vodka and a string of pretzels. They sat down to eat the chowder. They ate in silence, sucking the fishbones with a loud noise and spitting them out on the sand near the door. Yakov ate a lot, and ate greedily. Evidently this pleased Malva, for her face lit up with a kindly smile as she watched him blow out his tanned cheeks and rapidly work his thick, moist lips. Vasili ate little, although he tried to appear as if his mind was concentrated on his food. He was obliged to do this so as to be able without interruption, and unperceived by his son and Malva, to think out a plan of action.

The soft music of the waves was interrupted by the rapacious screeching of the seagulls. The heat had become less oppressive and now and again a stream of cool air, impregnated with the smell of the sea, blew into the shack.

After the savoury chowder and the vodka Yakov's eyes became heavy. A vacuous smile mounted his lips, he began to hiccough and yawn, and he looked at Malva in a way that compelled Vasili to say to him:

“Go and lie down a bit, Yakov, my boy. Take a nap until the tea is ready. We'll wake you when it is.”

“Yes. . . I think I will,” said Yakov, readily dropping down on a heap of sacks. “But . . where are you two going? Ha-ha-ha!”

Embarrassed by that laugh, Vasili hastily left the shack; but Malva pursed her lips, raised her brows and said in answer to Yakov's query:

“Where we are going is no business of yours! What are you? You're only a boy! You don't understand these things yet!”

“What am I? All right! You wait . . I'll show you! You think you're smart. . .” said Yakov in a loud voice as Malva left the shack.

She tossed her head contemptuously and fell silent. Her cold contemptuous words quenched Vasili's anger. He had never seen her so beautiful before.

“There you go, off the deep end . . .” he growled. He was angry with her, but he could not help admiring her.

“And I'll tell you another thing!” Malva burst out. “You boasted to Seryozhka that you were like bread to me, that I couldn't live without you! You're wrong! . . Perhaps it's not you that I love, and not you that I come to see, but this spot!” and with that she made a wide sweep with her hand. “Perhaps I like this place because it is deserted—nothing but sea and sky, and no disgusting people around. The fact that you are here makes no difference. It's what I have to pay to come here. . . If Seryozhka were here I'd come to him. If your son's here I shall go to him. It would be better if nobody were here. . . I'm sick of you all! . . With my beauty I can always get a man when I want one, and I can choose the one I want.”

“Is that so?” hissed Vasili, suddenly clutching Malva by the throat. “Is that the idea?”

He shook her, but she did not struggle, although her face was almost livid and her eyes were bloodshot. She merely placed her hands on Vasili's that were squeezing her throat, and stared into his face.

“So that's the sort you are?” said Vasili hoarsely, his rage gaining mastery over him. “You kept quiet about it up till now, you slut . . Cuddled me . . Petted me . . I'll show you!”

He forced her head down and with the utmost zest punched her in the neck—two heavy, swinging blows with his tightly clenched fist; it gave him the greatest pleasure to feel his fist come down upon her soft neck.

“Take that . . you snake!” he said triumphantly, flinging her away from him.

She sank to the ground without even a gasp, and lay there on her back, silent and calm, dishevelled, flushed, but beautiful. Her greenish eyes flashed cold hatred at him from under their lashes, but he, panting from excitement, and conscious of a pleasant feeling of satisfaction at having given vent to his anger, failed to catch her glance, and when he looked at her triumphantly she smiled—her full lips twitched, her eyes flashed, dimples appeared on her cheeks. Vasili looked at her in amazement.

“What is it, you she-devil?” he shouted, roughly pulling her arm.

“Vaska!” said Malva almost in a whisper. “Was it you who beat me?”

“Of course, who else?” answered Vasili, looking at Malva in perplexity, and not knowing what to do. Hit her again? But his anger had subsided, and he could not bear the thought of raising his hand against her again.

“That means you love me, doesn't it?” Malva whispered again, and that whisper sent a hot wave surging through his body.

“All right,” he growled. “You didn't get half you deserved!”

“I thought you didn't love me any more . . I thought to myself: ‘Now his son's come, he'll drive me away.’ ”

She burst into a queer laugh; it was much too loud.

“You little fool!” said Vasili, also laughing in spite of himself. “What's my son? He can't tell me what to do!”

He felt ashamed of himself and sorry for her, but remembering what she had said he added in a stern voice:

“My son has nothing to do with it. If I hit you, it's your own fault. You shouldn't have teased me.”

“But I did it on purpose—to try you,” she said, rubbing against his shoulder.

“To try me! What for? Well, now you know!”

“Never mind!” said Malva confidently, half closing her eyes.

“I'm not angry with you. You beat me for love, didn't you? Well, I'll repay you for it. . .”

She lowered her voice, and staring him straight in the face she repeated:

“Oh, how I'll repay you!”

To Vasili these words sounded like a promise, a pledge, and it stirred him sweetly. Smiling, he asked:

“How? How will you repay?”

“Wait and see,” said Malva very calmly, her lips twitched.

“Oh, you sweet darling!” exclaimed Vasili, grasping her in the tight embrace of a lover. “Do you know,” he added, “you've

become dearer to me since I beat you! I mean it! I are now of the same flesh and blood!”

The seagulls soared over their heads. The wind from the sea caressed them and carried the surf from the waves almost to their feet, and the irrepressible laughter of the sea rolled on and on . .

“Yes, that's how things are,” said Vasili, sighing with relief and pennively caressing the woman pressing against him. “How funny everything in this world is arranged—what is sinful is sweet? You don't understand anything. . . But sometimes I think about life and it scares me! Especially at night . . when I can't sleep . . You look and you see the sea in front of you, the sky over your head and all around darkness, such black darkness that it gives you the creeps. . . And you are all alone! You feel so small, ever so small. The earth is trembling under your feet and there's nobody on it except yourself. I often wish you were with me then . . At least, there'd be two of us.”

Malva lay silent across his knee, her eyes were closed. Vasili's coarse but kind face, tanned by sun and bent over

her, his large, bleached beard tickled her neck. The woman did not move, only her breast rose and fell evenly. Vasili's eyes now wandered out to sea and now tarried on this breast, that was so close to him. He kissed her on the lips, slowly, without haste, smacking his own lips loudly, as if he were eating hot and thickly buttered porridge.

About three hours passed in this way. When the sun began to sink into the sea Vasili said in a dull voice:

“I'll go and put the kettle on for tea. Our guest will wake up soon.”

Malva moved away from him, lazily, like a pampered cat. He rose reluctantly and went into the shack. The woman watched

him go through her slightly raised eyelashes and sighed, as one sighs when throwing off a heavy burden.

Later on the three sat around the fire drinking tea.

The setting sun tinted the sea with animated colours, the greenish waves were shot with purple and pearl.

Vasili, sipping his tea from a white mug, questioned his son about what was going on in their village, and he in his turn gave his recollections of it. Malva listened to their drawling conversation without intervening.

“So the old muzhiks at home are still carrying on, you say?” Vasili enquired.

“Yes, one way or another,” answered Yakov.

“We muzhiks don't want much, do we? A roof over our heads, enough bread to eat, and a glass of vodka on holidays. . . But we don't even get that. D'you think I'd have left home if we had been able to make a living? At home I'm my own master, the equal to everybody else in the village. But what am I here? . . A servant!.”

“But you get more to eat here, and the work's easier. . .”

“Well, I wouldn't say that! Sometimes you work so hard that all the bones in your body ache. The main thing, though, is that you work for a master. At home, you work for yourself.”

“But you earn more,” retorted Yakov.

In his heart of hearts Vasili agreed with his son. At home, in the village, life and work were harder than here, but for some reason he didn't want Yakov to know that. So he answered sternly:

“Have you counted the money we earn here? Now at home, in the village, my boy . . .

“It's like in a pit, dark and crowded,” Malva interrupted with a smile. “Especially for us women . . Nothing but tears!”

“It's the same for women everywhere . . and the light is the same . . the same sun shines everywhere!” answered Vasili, looking at Malva with a frown.

“You're wrong there!” exclaimed Malva animatedly. “In the village I've got to marry whether I like it or not, and a married woman is an eternal slave—reap, spin, tend the cattle and bear children . . What's she got left for herself? Nothing but her husband's curses and blows. . .

“It's not all blows,” interrupted Vasili.

“But here I don't belong to anybody,” said Malva, ignoring the interruption. “I'm as free as the seagull and can fly wherever I want to. Nobody can har my way. . . Nobody can touch me!”

“And if they do touch you?” asked Vasili with a smile, recalling what happened earlier in the day.

“If they do . . I will repay,” Malva answered in a low voice. The light in her eyes died out.

Vasili laughed indulgently.

“Eh!... You're a game cat, but weak! You're a woman, and you talk like a woman. At home, in the village, a man needs a woman as part of his life . . but here she exists only to play with.” After a slight pause he added “To sin with.”

They stopped talking. . . Yakov said with a pensive sigh:

“The sea looks as if there's no end to it!”

All three gazed at the vast expanse of water stretching before them.

“If only it were all land!” exclaimed Yakov, spreading his arms out wide. “And black earth! And if we could plough it all!”

“Oh, that's what you'd like, is it?” said Vasili laughing good-naturedly and looking approvingly at his son, whose face was flushed with the desire he had expressed. It pleased him to hear the lad express this love for the land. Perhaps it would soon call him back to the village, away from the temptations that would beset him here. And he, Vasili, would then be left alone with Malva, and everything would go on as before.

“Yes, you are right, Yakov! That's what the peasant wants. The peasant is strong on the land. As long as he is on the land he's alive; once he gets off it—he's done for! A peasant without land is like a tree without roots. It may be useful in some ways, but it can't live long—it must rot! It has even lost its forest beauty—all bare and stripped, a miserable looking thing! . . What you said was right, Yakov.”

The sea, taking the sun in its embrace, greeted it with the welcoming music of its waves, which the parting rays of the sun had tinted with the most gorgeous colours. The divine source of light, the creator of life, bid the sea farewell in an eloquent harmony of colour in order to waken the slumbering land, far away from the three who were watching it set, with the joyous rays of the radiant dawn.

“By God, my heart seems to melt when I see the sun go down!” said Vasili to Malva.

Malva made no reply. Yakov's blue eyes smiled as they swept the sea to the distant horizon; and all three sat for ..

“Hark at her singing!” said Yakov with a smile.

To them she was only a grey patch in the gloom. Her voice rang over the sea again:

Do not spare my breasts,
These two white swans!

“D'ye hear that!” exclaimed Yakov, starting in the direction from which the tempting words had come.

“So you couldn't manage the farm?” he heard Vasili's stern voice ask.

Yakov looked at his father with bewildered eyes and remained at his side.

Drowned by the sound of the waves only fragments of this tantalizing song now reached their ears:

. . . Oh, I cannot close my eyes
. . . alone . . . this . . . night!

“It's hot!” said Vasili in a dull voice, lolling on the sand. “It's night, but it's hot all the same! What an accursed country!”

“It's the sand. . . It got hot during the day. . .” said Yakov in a faltering voice, turning over on the other side.

“Here, you! What are you laughing at?” his father demanded sternly.

“I? What is there to laugh at?” Yakov asked innocently.

“I should say there wasn't!...

Both fell silent.

Above the noise of the waves sounds reached their ears that were either sighs or tenderly calling cries.

Two weeks passed. Sunday came again, and again Vasili Logostyev was lying on the sand next to his shack, looking across the sea and waiting for Malva. The deserted sea was laughing, playing with the reflection of the sun, and legions of waves were born to race up the sand, sprinkle it with their spray and slip back into the sea and merge with it. Everything was the same as it had been fourteen days ago, except that on the previous occasion Vasili had waited for his mistress with

calm confidence, now he was waiting with impatience. She had not come on the preceding Sunday—she must come today! He had no doubt about it, but he was already dying to see her. Yakov would not intrude today. Two days ago he had come for the net with some other fishermen and had said that he was going into town on Sunday to buy himself some shirts. He had got a job as a fisherman at fifteen rubles a month, had been out fishing several times, and now looked lively and cheerful. Like all the fishermen, he smelt of salt fish, and, like the rest, he was dirty and in rags. Vasili sighed as he thought of his son.

“I hope he comes to no harm,” he said to himself. “He'll get spoiled, and then, perhaps, he won't want to go home. . . In that case I'll have to go . .”)

The sea was deserted except for the seagulls. Now and again several tiny black specks moved along the narrow strip of sandy shore that separated the sea from the sky and disappeared, but not a boat came in sight, although the sun's rays were already striking the sea almost perpendicularly. As a rule Malva arrived long before this.

Two seagulls were fighting in the air so furiously that their feathers flew, and their fierce screeching introduced a discordant note in the merry song of the waves which merged so harmoniously with the solemn silence of the radiant sky that it sounded like the joyous playing of the sunbeams on the vast expanse of sea. The seagulls swooped down into the water, still pecking at each other and screeching from pain and anger, and again rose into the air in pursuit of one another . . And their friends —a whole flock—voraciously hunted the fish, tumbling in the greenish translucent restless waters, as if oblivious to the struggle.

The sea remained deserted. The familiar dark speck failed to appear on the distant shore. . .

“You're not coming?” said Vasili aloud. “Well, don't! What did you think? . .”

And he spat contemptuously in the direction of the shore. The sea laughed.

Vasili got up and went into the shack with the intention of cooking some dinner, but he felt no desire for food, so he returned to the old spot and lay down again.

“If Seryozhka would come at least!” he mentally exclaimed, and forced himself to think of Seryozhka. “He's a real terror, that fellow! Laughs at everybody. Always ready for a fight. He's as strong as a bull. Got some learning too. Has been to lots of places . . but he's a drunkard. He's good company, though. . . All the women have lost their hearts to him, and although he hasn't been here long, they're all running after him. Only Malva keeps away from him. . . She hasn't turned up here! What a stubborn wench she is! Perhaps she's angry with me because I beat her? But was that new for her? Others must have beaten her. . . And how! And won't I give it to her

And so, thinking of his son one moment and of Seryozhka another, but most of the time of Malva, Vasili lay on the sand and waited. His anxiety gradually grew into a dark, suspicious thought, but he kept driving it away. And so, concealing this suspicion from himself, he waited until evening, now getting up and pacing up and down the sand, and now lying down again. Darkness had already spread over the sea, but he still gazed into the distance, waiting for the arrival of the boat.

Malva did not come that day.

On turning in Vasili gloomily cursed his fate, which forbade him to go to the mainland. Over and over again, just as he was dozing off, he thought he heard the distant splash of oars. He jumped up and dashed out of the shack. Shading his eyes with

his hand he stared out into the dark troubled sea. On shore, at the fisheries, two fires were burning, but the sea was deserted.

“All right, you watch!” he muttered threateningly, and then turned in and fell fast asleep.

But here is what happened at the fisheries that day.

Yakov rose early in the morning, when the sun was not yet so hot and a fresh breeze was blowing from the sea. He went down to the sea to bathe and on the beach he saw Malva. She was sitting in the stern of a fishing boat that was moored to the beach and combing her wet hair, her bare feet were dangling over the boat's side.

Yakov stopped short and gazed at her curiously.

Malva's cotton blouse, unbuttoned at the breast, had slipped down one shoulder, and that shoulder looked so white and tempting.

The waves beat against the stern of the boat causing it to pitch, so that Malva now rose high above the sea and now dropped so low that her bare feet almost touched the water.

“Did you bathe?” Yakov shouted to her.

She turned her face to him, gave him a quick glance and answered, continuing to comb her hair:

“Yes . . Why are you up so early?”

“You were up before me.”

“Do you have to follow my example?”

Yakov made no reply.

“If you follow my example,” she said, “you may lose your head!”

“Oh! Isn't she terrible!” retorted Yakov with a laugh, and squatting down he began to wash.

He scooped up the water in his hands and splashed his face, grunting with pleasure at its freshness. After drying his face and hands with the hem of his blouse he asked Malva:

“Why do you keep trying to frighten me?”

“And why do you keep staring at me?” Malva retorted.

Yakov couldn't recollect having eyed Malva more than he had the other women around the fisheries, but suddenly he blurted out:

“You look so tempting, I can't help staring at you!”

“If your father hears about your goings on, he'll wring your neck for you!” said Malva, shooting a sly and challenging glance at him.

Yakov laughed and climbed into the boat. He did not know what Malva meant by his “goings-on,” but since she had said it, he must have been staring at her pretty hard. He began to feel quite cocky.

“What about my father?” he said, sitting down beside her on the gunwale. “Has he bought you, or what?”

Sitting beside Malva he ran his eyes over her bare shoulder, her half-exposed breast, her whole body—so fresh and strong, and fragrant of the sea.

“My, aren't you a beauty!” he exclaimed in admiration.

“But not for you!” she answered curtly without looking at him, nor did she trouble to adjust her clothing.

Yakov heaved a deep sigh.

Before them stretched the sea, inexpressibly beautiful in the rays of the morning sun. Small, playful waves, brought into

being by the tender breath of the breeze, softly beat against the hull. Far out at sea loomed the spur, like a scar on its silky breast, and against the soft background of the blue sky the mast stood like a thinly drawn line, and the red rag at its head could be seen fluttering in the wind.

“Yes, my lad!” said Malva without looking at Yakov. “I may be tempting, but I'm not for you . . Nobody has bought me, and I'm not beholden to your father either. I live in my own way. But don't you try to make up to me, because I don't want to stand between you and Vasili. . . I don't want any squabbling and quarrelling. . . Do you understand me?”

“Why do you say that to me?” Yakov asked in amazement.

“I haven't touched you, have I?”

“You wouldn't dare!” retorted Malva.

There was such a note of contempt in her voice that Yakov felt humiliated both as a male and a human being. A mischievous, almost vicious feeling overcame him and his eyes flashed.

“Oh, I wouldn't dare, eh?” he exclaimed, shifting closer to her.

“No, you wouldn't!”

“But suppose I do?”

“Try!”

“What will happen?”

“I'll give you one in the neck that will send you flying into the water!”

“Go on, do it!”

“Dare to touch me!”

He fixed his burning eyes upon her and suddenly flung his powerful arms around her, crushing her breast and back. The

touch of her strong, hot body set his own on fire, and he felt a choking in the throat as if he were being strangled.

“There you are! . . Go on! Hit me!... You said you would!” he gasped.

“Let me go, Yoshka!” said Malva, calmly trying to release herself from his trembling arms.

“But you said you'd give it me in the neck, didn't you?”

“Let go! You'll be sorry for it!”

“Don't try to frighten me! . . Oh!... Aren't you sweet!”

He held her still tighter and pressed his thick lips against her ruddy cheek.

Malva laughed mischievously, took Yakov's arms in a powerful grip and jerked her whole body forward. The two, held tightly in each other's embrace, shot overboard, plunged into the water with a heavy splash and soon were lost to view amidst a whirlpool of foam and spray. A little later Yakov's head appeared above the surging water with dripping hair and frightened face, and then Malva dived up beside him. Waving his arms desperately and splashing the water around him, Yakov roared and howled, while Malva, laughing heartily, swam round him, splashing the salty water in his face and diving to get out of the way of the broad sweep of his arms.

“You she-devil!” roared Yakov, blowing the water from his nose and mouth. “I'll drown! . . That's enough of it. . . By God... I'll drown! Ah!... The water's bitter.... I'm dr-o-w-n-ing!”

But Malva had already left him and was swimming to the shore, striking out like a man. On reaching the shore she climbed into the barge with remarkable agility, stood in the stern and laughed as she watched Yakov plunging and gasping in the water, trying to reach her. Her wet clothing clung to her

body and outlined its form from her shoulders to her knees, and Yakov, reaching the boat at last and clinging to its side, stared hungrily at this almost naked woman who was laughing merrily at him.

“Come on! Get out of the water, you porpoise!” she said between her chuckles, and going down on her knees she extended one hand to Yakov and grasped the gunwale of the boat with the other. Yakov caught her hand and exclaimed excitedly:

“Now look out! I'll give you a ducking!”

With that, standing up to his shoulders in the water, he pulled Malva down towards him. The waves dashed over his head, broke against the hull and splashed into Malva's face. Malva frowned and then laughed. Suddenly she shrieked and jumped into the water, knocking Yakov off his feet with the impact of her body.

And again they began to play in the greenish water like two porpoises, splashing each other, shrieking, spluttering and snorting.

The sun laughed as it watched them playing, and the glass in the windows of the fishery buildings also laughed as it reflected the sun. The water surged and gurgled as it was beaten up by their powerful arms, and the seagulls, alarmed by the two people struggling in the water, circled with piercing shrieks over their heads which vanished now and again under the incoming waves.

At last, weary and puffed up with the sea water they had swallowed they crawled on to the beach and sat in the sun to rest.

“Phew!” ejaculated Yakov, spitting out with a grimace. “This water is awful stuff! . . I wonder there's a lot of it!”

“There's plenty of awful stuff of all kinds in the world. Young fellows, for example. Good lord, how many of them there are!” said Malva with a laugh, wringing the water out of her hair.

Her hair was dark and, though not very long, was thick and wavy.

“No wonder the old man fell in love with you,” said Yakov with a sly smile, nudging Malva with his elbow.

“Sometimes an old man is better than a young one.”

“If the father is good the son must be better.”

“Is that so? Where did you learn to boast like that?”

“The girls in our village often told them that I am not at all bad-looking.”

“What do girls know? You ask me.”

“But aren't you a girl?”

Malva stared at him, laughed mischievously, and then, becoming grave, she said in an earnest tone:

“I had a child once.”

“Soiled goods—eh?” said Yakov bursting into a loud laugh.

“Don't be silly!” snapped Malva, turning away from him.

Yakov was cowed. He pursed his lips and said no more. Both remained silent for about half an hour, basking in the sun to dry their clothes.

The fishermen in the long, filthy sheds which served as their living quarters, awoke from their slumber. From a distance they all looked alike—ragged, unkempt and barefooted. . .

Their hoarse voices were wafted to the beach. Somebody was hammering on the bottom of an empty barrel and the hollow

sounds came over like the beating of a big drum. Two women were quarrelling in shrill voices. A dog barked.

“They're waking up,” said Yakov. “I wanted to go to town early today . . but here I am, larking about with you.”

“I told you you'd be sorry if you made up to me,” answered Malva, half in jest and half seriously.

“Why do you keep frightening me?” Yakov asked with a perplexed smile.

“Mark my words. As soon as your father gets to hear of this. . .”

Yakov flared up on hearing his father mentioned again.

“What about my father?” he demanded angrily. “Suppose he does hear? I'm not a kid. He thinks he's the boss, but he can't boss me here. We're not at home in the village. . . I'm not blind. I can see he's no saint. He does as he likes here. Let him not interfere with me!”

Malva looked into his face mockingly and asked in a tone of curiosity

“Not interfere with you? Why, what do you intend to do?”

“I?” answered Yakov, puffing out his cheeks and sticking out his chest as if he were lifting a heavy weight. “What I intend to do? I can do a lot! The fresh air has blown all the village dust off me, I can tell you!”

“Quick work!” said Malva ironically.

“I'll tell you what! I bet I'll win you from my father!”

“Well! You don't say?”

“Do you think I'm afraid?”

“No o?”

“Look here!” Yakov blurted out impulsively. “Don't tease me . Or else . . I'll . .

“What?” Malva asked coolly.

“Nothing!”

He turned away from her and said no more, but he looked brave and self-confident.

“Aren't you cocky!” said Malva. “The agent here has a black pup. Have you seen it? It's like you. It barks and threatens to bite when you're at a distance. But when you go near it runs away with its tail between its legs!”

“All right!” exclaimed Yakov angrily. “You wait! I'll show you the stuff I'm made of!”

Malva laughed in his face.

A tall wiry man with a tanned face and a thick thatch of unkempt, fiery red hair slowly approached them with a swaggering step. His red cotton blouse, which he wore without a belt, was torn at the back almost up to the collar, and to prevent the sleeves from slipping down he had them rolled up to his shoulders. His pants were nothing but a collection of rents of the most diverse shapes and sizes. His feet were bare. His face was densely freckled, his large blue eyes flashed insolently, and his broad upturned nose gave him an appearance of reckless impudence. On reaching them he halted. The patches of his bare body visible through the innumerable rents in his clothing gleamed in the sun. He sniffed loudly, stared enquiringly at them and pulled a funny face.

“Seryozhka had a drink or two yesterday and today his pocket is like a bottomless basket,” he said. “Lend me twenty kopecks! You can be sure I'll not repay you. . .

Yakov laughed heartily at this insolent speech. Malva gazed at the ragged figure with a smile.

“I'll tell you what, you devils! I'll marry you two for twenty kopecks! Do you want to?”

“Oh you clown! Are you a priest?” enquired Yakov with

“Idiot! I worked as a janitor for a priest in Uglich. . . Give me twenty kopecks!”

“I don't want to get married!” said Yakov.

“Never mind—give me the money. I won't tell your father that you're larking about with his tart,” persisted Seryozhka, licking his dry, cracked lips.

“He wouldn't believe you if you did tell him!”

“He will if I tell him! . . And won't he wallop you!”

“I'm not afraid!” said Yakov.

“In that case I'll wallop you myself!” said Seryozhka, calmly screwing up his eyes.

Yakov begrudged the twenty kopecks, but he had already been warned to avoid quarrelling with Seryozhka and to yield to his demands. He never asked for much, but if it was not given him he would get up to some mischief at work, or give his victim a thrashing for no reason at all. Yakov remembered this warning and put his hand to his pocket with a sigh.

“That's right!” said Seryozhka encouragingly, dropping down on the sand beside him. “Always listen to what I tell you and you'll become a wise man. And you,” he continued, turning to Malva. “Are you going to marry me soon? Make up your mind quickly. I don't intend to wait long!”

“You're nothing but a bundle of rags . . Sew the holes up in your clothing first and then we'll talk about it,” answered Malva.

Seryozhka gazed at the rents in his pants critically, shook his head and said:

“It would be better if you gave me one of your skirts.”

“What!” exclaimed Malva.

“Yes, I mean it! You surely have an old one you don't want.”

“Buy yourself a pair of pants,” Malva advised him.

“No I'd rather buy drink with the money.”

“You'd rather do that!” said Yakov laughing, holding four five-kopeck pieces in his hand.

“Yes, why not? A priest told me that a man must take care of his soul and not of his body, and my soul demands vodka, not pants. Give me the money! . . Now I'll go and have a drink . . I'll tell your father about you all the same!”

“Tell him!” said Yakov with a wave of the hand, and winking impudently at Malva he nudged her shoulder.

Seryozhka noticed this. Spitting out, he said threateningly:

“And I'll not forget that thrashing I promised you . . I'll give you such a thick ear as soon as I get some spare time!”

“What for?” Yakov asked, somewhat alarmed.

“I know what for!... Well, are you going to marry me soon?” Seryozhka asked Malva again.

“Tell me what we shall do when we're married, how we're going to live, and then I'll think about it,” she answered gravely.

Seryozhka stared out at sea, screwed up his eyes and licking his lips he said:

“We won't do nothing. We'll have a good time.”

“But where shall we get the money from?”

“Ekh!” ejaculated Seryozhka, waving his arm in disgust. “You argue like my old mother—what? and where? and how? How do I know? . . I'll go and get myself a drink.”

He got up and left them. Malva watched him go with a queer smile playing on her lips; Yakov sent hostile glances after him.

“A regular bully, isn't he!” said Yakov when Seryozhka had got out of earshot. “If he lived in our village they'd soon put a curb on him. . . They'd give him a good licking and that would put a stop to his tricks. But they're afraid of him here!”

Malva looked at him and muttered between her clenched teeth:

“You puppy! You don't understand his worth!”

“What's there to understand? He's worth five kopecks a bunch, and then only if there's a hundred to the bunch!”

“You ought to talk!” exclaimed Malva. “That's no more than you are worth. . . But he . . he's been everywhere, all over the country, and he's afraid of nobody!”

“Am I afraid of anybody?” demanded Yakov boastfully.

Malva did not answer him but pensively watched the play of the waves that were racing up the beach and rocking the hut, strumming a balalaika and singing, pulling funny faces the while:

Oh Mr. Policeman,
Be very kind to me.
Take me to the station
I've been on the spree. . .

He was surrounded by a score or so of people as ragged as himself, all smelling of salt fish, like everything else in the place. Four women, ugly and dirty, were sitting on the sand drinking tea, pouring it out of a large tin kettle. A fisherman, already drunk, although it was still early morning, was rolling on the sand, trying to rise to his feet and falling down again. Somewhere a woman was shrieking and wailing. The strains of an outof tune accordion were heard, and everywhere fish scales glistened.

At noon Yakov found a shady spot among a number of empty barrels. He lay down here and slept until the evening. When he awoke he wandered around the fisheries again vaguely conscious that something was drawing him somewhere.

After wandering about for a couple of hours he found Malva lying in the shade of a young willow a long way from the fisheries. She was lying on her side, holding a tattered book of some kind. On seeing him approach she smiled.

“So this is where you got to!” he said, sitting down beside her.

“Have you been searching for me long?” she asked in a tone that suggested that she was confident that he had been searching for her.

“I haven't been searching for you at all!” exclaimed Yakov, suddenly realizing what the vague feeling had been, that he had been longing for her, and he shook his head in perplexity.

“Can you read?” Malva asked him.

“Yes. . . but not very well.—I have forgotten. . .

“I don't read well either . . Did you go to school?”

“Yes, to the village school.”

“I taught myself.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. I served as a cook for a lawyer in Astrakhan. His son taught me to read.”

“You didn't teach yourself then!” said Yakov.

She looked hard at him and then asked

“Do you want some books to read?”

“Me? No. What for?”

“I love reading. Look! I asked the agent's wife to lend me this book and I am reading it.”

“What's it about?”

“It's about St. Alexei.”

And she went on to tell him in a pensive voice how a young lad, the son of wealthy and distinguished parents, left home, abandoning all the comforts of life, and later returned, poor and in rags, and lived with the dogs in the courtyard of his parents' house without revealing his identity until the day of his death. When she finished the story, Malva asked Yakov in a low voice:

“Why did he do that?”

“Who knows?” answered Yakov in a tone of complete indifference.

The sand dunes swept up by the wind and waves surrounded them. Vague, muffled noises were wafted to them from the distance—the sounds of revelry in the fisheries. The sun was setting, tinting the sand a rosy hue with its rays. The sparse leaves on the stunted branches of the willow trees fluttered feebly in the light breeze that was blowing from the sea. Malva was silent, she appeared to be listening intently for something.

“Why didn't you go over there, to the spur, today?” Yakov suddenly asked her.

“What's that to you?”

Yakov looked hungrily at the woman out of the corner of his eye, trying to think how to say what he was yearning to say.

“When I am alone, and it's quiet,” said Malva pensively. “I want to cry . . or sing. Only I don't know any good songs, and I'm ashamed to cry. . .”

Yakov heard her voice, it was low and tender, but what she said touched no string in his heart, it merely sharpened his desire for her.

“Now listen to me,” he said in a low voice, drawing closer, but keeping his eyes away from her. “Listen to what I'll tell you. . . I am young. . .”

“And foolish, very foolish!” said Malva interrupting him, speaking very earnestly, and shaking her head.

“Well, suppose I am foolish!” retorted Yakov in a tone of vexation. “Does one have to be clever for this sort of thing? All right—say I'm foolish! But this is what I've got to say. Would you like. . .”

“No, I wouldn't!”

“What?”

“Nothing!”

“Here, don't be a fool!” said Yakov, gently taking Malva by the shoulders. “Try and understand. . .”

“Go away, Yashka!” she said sternly, pushing his hands away. “Go away!”

He rose to his feet and looked around.

“All right. . . If that's the case, I don't give a damn! There's lots like you around here. . . D'you think you're better than the others?”

“You're a pup,” she said coolly, rising to her feet and shaking the sand from her skirt.

They walked side by side to the fisheries. They walked slowly, because their feet sank in the sand.

Yakov cruelly tried to persuade her to yield to his desires, but she coolly laughed at him and parried his pleadings with cruel jests.

Just before they reached the hutments Yakov suddenly stopped, grasped Malva by the shoulders and said between his clenched teeth:

“You are only teasing me . . working me up . . aren't you? Why are you doing this? Take care or I'll make you sorry for it!”

“Leave me alone, I tell you!” said Malva, releasing herself from his grasp and walking away.

Seryozhka appeared round the corner of a hutment. On catching sight of them he strode towards them and said with a sinister smile, shaking his unkempt, fiery head:

“Been for a walk, eh? All right!”

“Go to hell, all of you!” Malva screamed angrily.

Yakov halted in front of Seryozhka and gazed at him sullenly. They were about ten paces away from each other.

Seryozhka returned Yakov's stare. They stood for about a minute like two rams ready to charge one another and then silently parted, each going in a different direction.

The sea was calm but was lit up with a lurid glare from the sunset. Muffled sounds came from the fisheries, and above

those sounds was distinctly heard the drunken voice of a woman hysterically screeching the nonsensical words:

Ta-agarga, matagarga,
My matamchkha, ka!
Drunk, and knocked about am I.
Tousled, ruffled and rumpled—oh!

And these words, as disgusting as lice, overran the fisheries that were reeking of saltpeter and decaying fish, an offence to the music of the waves.

***

The distant sea dozed calmly in the tender light of dawn, reflecting the pearly clouds. On the spur, sleepy fishermen were busy loading tackle into a fishing boat.

A grey mass of netting crept along the sand to the boat and lay in folds in its bottom.

Seryozhka, bareheaded and half-naked as usual, stood in the stern hurrying up the fisherman in his hoarse, drunken voice. The wind played among the rents in his blouse and ruffled his red, unkempt hair.

"Vasili! Where's the green oars?" somebody shouted.

Vasili, frowning like an October day, was piling the net in the boat, while Seryozhka stared at his bent back licking his lips—a sign that he wanted a drink to drive away his hangover.

"Have you any vodka?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Vasili sullenly.

"In that case I won't go out... I'll stay here at the dry end."

"Ready?" somebody shouted from the beach.

"Cast off! Lively now!" commanded Seryozhka and then climbed out of the boat. "You go along," he said to the men.

"I'll stay here. See that you spread the net out wide, and don't get it tangled! And fold it evenly. Don't fasten the loop."

The boat was pushed into the water, the fishermen climbed into it and picking up their oars held them raised, waiting for the order to start.

"One!"

The oars struck the water with a single stroke and the boat shot out into the broad expanse of the sea now lit up by the dawn

"Two!" commanded the man at the tiller and the oars rose and stuck out on each side of the boat like the paws of a gigantic turtle "One! . Two"

Five men remained at the dry end of the net on the beach: Seryozhka, Vasili, and three others. One of them dropped down on the sand and said

"I'll have a little more sleep!"

Two others followed his example, and three bodies clothed in filthy rags curled up on the sand

"Why didn't you come on Sunday?" Vasili asked Seryozhka as they walked to the shack

"I couldn't."

"Why, were you drunk?"

"No I was keeping an eye on your son, and also on his stepmother," Seryozhka answered coolly

"A nice job you've found for yourself!" said Vasili with a wry smile "What! Are they little children?"

"Worse . One's a fool and the other . . a saint ."

"What! Malva a saint?" Vasili asked, his eyes flashing anger "Has she been like that long?"

"Her soul doesn't fit her body, brother!"

"She has a wicked soul!"

Seryozhka glanced at Vasili out of the corner of his eye and snorted contemptuously.

"Wicked! Ekh! You . . . dull clodhoppers! You don't understand anything ... All you want a woman to have is fat hips . You don't give a damn for her character . . . But all the spice in a woman is her character ... A woman without character is like bread without salt. Can you get any pleasure out of a balalaika which has no strings?... Dolt!"

"Gee! What fine talk you drank yourself into yesterday!" sneered Vasili.

He was dying to ask Seryozhka where he had seen Yakov and Malva, and what they were doing, but he was too ashamed.

On entering the shack he poured out a tumblerful of vodka for Seryozhka, hoping that this dose would loosen his tongue and that he would tell him about the two of his own accord.

But Seryozhka drained the glass, grunted and, quite sobered up, sat down at the door of the shack, stretched himself and yawned.

"A drink like that is like swallowing fire," he said.

"And can't you drink?" exclaimed Vasili, amazed at the speed with which Seryozhka had gulped down the tumblerful of vodka.

"Yes, I can!" said the hobo, nodding his red head and wiping his moist whiskers with the palm of his hand. "Yes, I can, brother! I do everything quickly, and straight off the bat, without any higgledy-piggledy. Go straight on, is my motto! What does it matter where you get to? We've all got to go the

same road—from dust unto dust. . . . And you can't get away from it!"

"You wanted to go to the Caucasus, didn't you?" Vasili asked, cautiously leading up to his subject.

"I'll go when I feel like it. And when I do feel like it I'll go straight off—one, two, three, and off! I either get my way or get a big bump on my head. . . . It's all very simple!"

"Nothing could be simpler! You seem to be living without using your head."

Seryozhka looked at Vasili with mocking eyes and said:

"You think you're clever, don't you? How many times have you been flogged at the volost police station?"

Vasili returned Seryozhka's stare, but said nothing.

"Is it good to have the police knock sense into your head through your backside? Ekh, you! What can you do with your head! Where do you think it will take you? What can you think up with it? Am n I right? But I push right on without using my head, and I don't give a damn! And I bet I'll get further than you," said the hobo boastfully.

"Yes, I believe you will!" answered Vasili with a laugh. "You'll get as far as Siberia!"

Seryozhka burst into a hearty chuckle.

Contrary to Vasili's expectations the vodka had no effect upon Seryozhka, and this made him angry He could have offered him another glassful, but he grudged the vodka On the other hand, as long as Seryozhka was sober he would get nothing out of him . . . But the hobo opened the subject without further prompting

"How is it you're not asking about Malva?" he enquired.

"Why should I?" Vasili answered in a tone of indifference, but trembling from a sort of premonition nevertheless

"She wasn't here last Sunday, was she? Why don't you ask what she's been doing these past few days?... You're jealous about her, aren't you, you old devil!"

"There's lots like her!" said Vasili with a contemptuous wave of his hand.

"Lots like her!" retorted Seryozhka "Ekh, you country bumpkin! You can't tell the difference between honey and tar!"

"What are you boosting her up like that for? Have you come here as a matchmaker? You're too late! The match came off a long time ago!" Vasili jeered

Seryozhka looked at him in silence for a while and then, placing his hand on his shoulder, he said very earnestly:

"I know she's living with you I didn't interfere—there was no need . . . But now Yashka, that son of yours, is hanging round her. Give it to him red-hot! Do you hear what I say? If you don't—I will. . . . You're a good sort. . . . Only you're as dense as a block of wood . . . I didn't interfere with you . . . I want you to remember that."

"So that's how the land lies! You are after her too, is that it?" said Vasili in a hollow voice.

"Too!... If I had wanted to, I'd have gone straight for her, and would have shoved you all out of my way!... But what good am I to her?"

"Then why are you sticking your nose into it?" Vasili asked suspiciously.

This simple question must have astonished Seryozhka, for he looked at Vasili with wide-open eyes, laughed heartily and said:

"Why am I sticking my nose in? The devil only knows! . . . But what a woman she is! Plenty of spice in her! . . . I like her. . . . Perhaps I'm sorry for her..."

Vasili looked at him distrustfully, but something in his heart told him that Seryozhka was speaking sincerely.

"If she'd have been an untouched virgin I could understand you being sorry for her. As it is . . . it seems funny to me!" he said.

Seryozhka remained silent, watching the fishing boat far out at sea describing a wide circle as it turned its nose to the shore. His eyes were frank and wide open. his face was simple and kind.

Vasili softened towards him as he gazed at him.

"Yes, what you say is true. She's a fine woman . . . only she's a bit loose!... As for Yashka, I'll give him hell... the pup!"

"I don't like him," said Seryozhka.

"And you say he's making up to her?" hissed Vasili through his clenched teeth, stroking his beard.

"He'll come between you and her, take my word for it!" Seryozhka said emphatically

The rays of the rising sun burst over the horizon like an open fan Above the sound of the waves a faint hail reached their ears from the boat far out at sea

"A-h oo y! Pull her in!"

'Get up, lads! Hey! To the net!" commanded Seryozhka

The men jumped to their feet and soon all five had chosen the part of the net each was to take A long cable, taut and as flexible as steel, stretched from the water to the shore, and the fishermen, twisting it into loops round their bodies, grunted and gasped as they hauled it onto the beach

Meanwhile, the fishing boat, gliding over the waves, was hauling in the other end of the net

The sun, bright and magnificent, rose over the sea

"If you see Yakov, tell him to come and see me tomorrow" Vasili requested Seryozhka.

"All right!"

The boat slipped onto the beach and the fishermen, jumping out of her, grabbed hold of their respective parts of the net and hauled it in The two groups gradually drew closer to each other and the cork floats of the net, bobbing up and down in the water, formed a perfect semicircle

Late that evening, when the men at the fisheries, were having their supper, Malva, tired and pensive, was sitting on a damaged upturned boat and gazing out at sea, now enveloped in gloom Far away a light glimmered Malva knew that it was the fire that Vasili had lit. Like a lone spirit lost in the dark expanse of the sea, the light now flared up brightly and now subsided as it in agony It made Malva feel sad to watch this red speck lost in the wilderness, flickering feebly amidst the ceaseless booming of the waves. Suddenly she heard Seryozhka's voice behind her:

"What are you sitting here for?"

"What's it to do with you?" she retorted without turning round.

"I'm just interested!"

He said no more, but looked her up and down, rolled a cigarette, lit it, and sat astride the upturned boat. After a little while he said in a friendly tone:

"You're a funny woman! You hide from everybody one minute and hang on nearly everybody's neck the next!"

"I don't hang on your neck, do I?" she said in a dispassionate tone.

"No, not on mine, but on Yashka's."

"And are you jealous?"

"Hruph!... Let's talk straight, from the bottom of the heart, eh?" suggested Seryozhka, patting Malva on the shoulder. She was sitting sideways to him, so he could not see the expression on her face when she said curtly:

"All right!"

"Tell me, have you dropped Vasili?"

"I don't know." answered Malva. After a brief pause she added: "Why do you ask?"

"Just like that."

"I'm angry with him."

"Why?"

"He beat me."

"You don't say! ... What, he? And you let him! Oh! Oh!"

Seryozhka was amazed. He glanced sideways at her and clicked his tongue ironically.

"I wouldn't have let him if I had not wanted to" she said fervidly

'Why didn't you stop him then?"

"I didn't want to"

"That shows you are head over heels in love with the old tomcat," said Seryozhka mockingly, blowing his cigarette smoke at her 'I'm surprised! I didn't think you were one of that sort!"

"I don't love any of you," she answered in a dispassionate voice waving the smoke away

'That's a lie!"

"Why should I lie?" she asked, and by the tone of her voice Seryozhka realized that she really was not lying

"If you don't love him, why did you allow him to beat you?" he asked her in an earnest tone

"Do I know? . What are you pestering me for?"

"Funny!" said Seryozhka, shaking his head.

Both remained silent for a long time

Night drew in The clouds, moving slowly across the sky, cast shadows on the sea The waves murmured

The light from Vasili's fire on the spur had gone out, but Malva was still gazing in that direction And Seryozhka gazed at her

"Tell me," he said "Do you know what you want?"

"If only I knew!" Malva answered in a very low voice, heaving a deep sigh

"So you don't know? That's bad!" Seryozhka said emphatically I always know what I want!" And he added with a touch of sadness in his voice "The trouble is I rarely want anything"

"I am always wanting something," said Malva pensively, "but what it is I don't know Sometimes I feel I'd like to get into a boat and go out to sea . . . far, far out, and never see anybody again. And sometimes I feel I'd like to turn every man's head and make him spin like a top round me. And I would look at him and laugh. Sometimes I feel so sorry for them all, and most of all for myself; and sometimes I want to kill them all, and then die a frightful death myself. . . . Sometimes I feel sad and

sometimes happy. . . . But all the people around me seem so dull, like blocks of wood."

"You are right, the people are no good," Seryozhka agreed.

"More than once I've looked at you and thought to myself: 'You're neither fish, flesh nor fowl . . . but for all that there's something about you . . . you're not like other women.'"

"And thank God for that!" said Malva with a laugh.

The moon rose up from the dunes on their left and shed its silvery light upon the sea. Large and mild, it floated slowly across the blue vault of heaven, and the bright light of the stars paled and vanished in its even dreamy light.

Malva smiled and said:

"Do you know what? . . . Sometimes I think what fun it would be to set fire to one of the huts. What a hullabaloo there'd be!"

"I should say so!" Seryozhka exclaimed with admiration, and suddenly slapping Malva on the shoulder he said: "Do you know what? I'll teach you an amusing game, and we'll play it. Would you like to?"

"Rather!" said Malva burning with curiosity.

"You've set Yashka's heart on fire, haven't you?"

"It's burning like a furnace," answered Malva with a chuckle.

"Set him against his father! By God it'll be funny!... They'll go for each other like a couple of bears. ... You tease the old man up a bit, and the young one too . . . and then we'll set them against each other What do you think of it, eh?"

Malva turned and gazed intently at Seryozhka's red, joll, smiling face. Lit up by the moon, it looked less blotched than in the bright light of the sun in the daytime It bore no trace of

anger, it bore nothing but a good-natured and somewhat mischievous smile

"What makes you dislike them?" Malva asked him suspiciously.

"I? Oh, Vasili is all right. He's a good chap. But Yashka . . . he's no good. You see, I dislike all muzhiks. . . . They're rotters! They pretend to be poor and destitute ... and get bread, and everything, given them They have the Zemstvo, you see, and the Zemstvo does everything for them ... They have their farms, their land and cattle. . . . I once served as a coachman to a Zemstvo doctor and I saw quite enough of them . And later I was on the road for a long time. Sometimes you'd go into a village and beg for a piece of bread and they'd nab you in a jiffy! . . . Who are you? What are you? Where's your passport? . . . That's happened to me lots of times . . . Sometimes they take you for a horse thief, and sometimes they put in the stone jug just for nothing . . .They're always snivelling and pretending they're poor, but they know how to live! They have something to hold on to—land What am I compared to them?"

"Aren't you a muzhik?" Malva asked interrupting him

"No!" answered Seryozhka with a touch of pride "I'm townbred I'm a citizen of the town of Uglich"

"And I come from Pavlish" Malva told him in a pensive

"I have nobody to stand up for me!" continued Seryozhka. But the muzhiks . . . they can live, the devils! Th h the Zemstvo, and all that sort of thing!"

"What's the Zemstvo?" Malva enquired.

"What's the Zemstvo? The devil knows! It was set up for the muzhiks. It's their administration.... But to hell with it.... Let's get down to business—shall we arrange this little joke, eh? It

won't do any harm. They'll just have a fight, that's all! ... Vasili beat you, didn't he? Well, let his own son pay him out for it."

"It's not a bad idea," said Malva smiling.

"Just think . . . isn't it a pretty sight to see other people busting each other's ribs for your sake? And only at a word from you! You wag your tongue once or twice . . . and they go for each other hammer and tongs."

Speaking half in jest and half in earnest Seryozhka explained to Malva at great length, and with equally great zeal, the attractions of the role she was to play.

"Oh, if only I were a good-looking woman! Wouldn't I cause some trouble in the world!" he exclaimed in conclusion, putting his hands to his head and closing his eyes tight as if in ecstasy.

The moon was already high in the sky when they parted, and with their departure the beauty of the night increased. Now only the limitless solemn sea, the silvery moon, and the blue star-spangled sky remained. There were also the sand dunes, the willow bushes among them, and the two long, dilapidated buildings in the sand. looking like two, huge, roughly made coffins. But all this seemed petty and insignificant compared with the sea: and the stars which looked down upon this shined with a cold light.

Father and son sat opposite each other in the shack drinking vodka. The son had brought the vodka so that the visit to his father should not be dull, and also to soften his father's heart towards him Seryozhka had told him that his father was angry with him over Malva, that he had threatened to beat Malva almost to death, that Malva knew about this, and that was why she was not yielding herself to him. Seryozhka had said to him mockingly:

"He'll pay you out for your tricks. He'll pull your ears until they are over a yard long. You had better not let him set eyes on you!"

The jeering of this red-haired, repulsive fellow had roused in Yakov's heart a feeling of burning rage against his father, and on top of this was Malva's behaviour, the way she looked at him tantalizingly at one moment and longingly another inflamed his desire to possess her until it was too painful to bear

And so on visiting his father, he regarded him as an obstacle in his path, an obstacle which you could neither climb over nor go round. But he felt not the slightest trace of fear of his father He sat opposite him and looked at him confidently with a sullen angry stare as much as to say

"Dare to touch me!"

They had already had two drinks but had not yet said a word to each other, except for an insignificant remark or two about things concerning the fisheries Facing each other alone in the midst of the sea they sat there accumulating anger in their hearts against each other Both were aware that soon this anger would boil over and scald them

The bast matting which covered the shack rustled in the wind, the reeds knocked against each other, the red rag at the masthead fluttered, making a chattering noise, but all these sounds were subdued and resembled distant whispering voices, incoherently and timidly begging for something "Is Seryozhka still on the booze?" Vasili asked in a glum voice.

"Yes, he gets drunk every night," said Yakov, pouring out some more vodka.

"It'll be the death of him. ... So that's what it is, this free life... without fear! And you'll be like that too..."

Yakov answered curtly:

"No, I won't!"

"You won't?" said Vasili frowning. "I know what I'm talking about. ... How long have you been here? This is the third month. It'll be time for you to go home soon. Will you have much money to take with you?" He picked up his cup angrily, shot the vodka into his mouth, gathered his beard into the palm of his hand and tugged it so vigorously that his head went down with it.

"I couldn't have saved much in the short time I've been here," said Yakov.

"If that's the case, it's no use you gallivanting here. Go back home to the village!"

Yakov smiled but said nothing.

"What are you pulling a face for?" Vasili exclaimed angrily, irritated by his son's coolness. "How dare you laugh when your father is talking to you! Take care! You've started taking liberties far too early! I shall have to put a curb on you!"

Yakov poured out some more vodka and drank it. His father's reproaches provoked him to anger, but he restrained himself, trying not to say what he was thinking in order to avoid exciting his father still more. To tell the truth, he was somewhat frightened by the stern and even cruel light in his father's eyes.

Seeing that his son had taken another drink without offering him one, Vasili flared up still more.

"Your father tells you to go home, but you laugh at him, eh?" he demanded "Take your discharge on Saturday and . . . quick march home! Do you hear what I tell you?"

"I won't go" said Yakov firmly, obstinately shaking his head

"You won't, eh?" roared Vasili, and resting his hands on the barrel he rose from his seat. "Who do you think you are talking to? Are you a dog to bark at your father? Have you forgotten what I can do to you? Have you forgotten?"

His lips trembled, his face twitched convulsively, the veins stood out on his temples.

"I haven't forgotten anything," answered Yakov in a low voice without looking at his father "But do you remember everything? You'd better look out!"

"Don't dare teach me! I'll smash you to a pulp! ."

Yakov dodged his father's arm as it rose over his head and muttered through his clenched teeth

"Don't dare touch me . . You're not at home in the village"

"Silence! I'm your father no matter where we are!"

"You can't get me flogged at the volost police station here! There ain't no volost here!" said Yakov laughing in his father's face and also rising from his seat

Vasili stood with bloodshot eyes, head thrust forward and fists clenched, breathing hot breath mixed with vodka fumes into his son's face Yakov stepped back and, with lowering brow, watched every movement his father made, ready to parry a blow. Outwardly he was calm, but hot perspiration broke out over whole body Between them stood the barrel which served them as a table

"I can't flog you, you say?" Vasili asked hoarsely, arching his back like a cat ready to spring

"Everybody's equal here . You are a labourer and so am I."

"Is that what it is?"

"What do you think? Why are you mad with me? Do you think I don't know? You started it . . ."

Vasili emitted a roar and swung his arm with such swiftness that Yakov was unable to avoid it. The blow came down on his head. He staggered and snarled into the angry face of his father.

"Take care!" he warned him, clenching his fists, as Vasili raised his arm again.

"I'll show you take care!"

"Stop, I tell you!"

"Aha! ... You're threatening your father! ... Your father! ... Your father! ..."

The small shack hemmed them in and hampered their movements. They stumbled over the salt bags, the overturned barrel and the tree stump.

Parrying the blows with his fists, Yakov, pale and perspiring, teeth clenched and eyes blazing like a wolf's, slowly retreated before his father, while the latter followed him up, waving his fists in his blind fury, and suddenly becoming strangely dishevelled, like a bristling wild boar.

"Leave off! That's enough! Stop it!" said Yakov in a calm and sinister voice, passing through the door of the shack into the open.

His father roared still louder and followed him, but his blows only encountered his son's fists.

"Aren't you mad. . . . Aren't you mad," said Yakov teasingly, realizing that he was far more agile than his father.

"You wait, ... You only wait...."

But Yakov skipped aside and ran towards the sea.

Vasili went after him with lowered head and outspread arms, but he stumbled over something and fell flat on the ground.

He quickly rose to his knees and then sat down on the sand, propping his body up with his arms. He was exhausted by the scuffle, and he positively howled from a burning sense of unavenged wrong and the bitter consciousness of his weakness

"May you be accursed!" he shouted hoarsely, stretching his neck in the direction Yakov had gone and spitting the foam of madness from his trembling lips

Yakov leaned against a boat and closely watched his father while rubbing his injured head One of the sleeves of his blouse had been torn out and was hanging by a single thread The collar was also torn, and his white perspiring chest glistened in the sun as if it had been smeared with grease He now felt contempt for his father He had always thought of him as being stronger than himself, and seeing him now sitting on the sand, dishevelled and pitiful, threatening him with his fists, he smiled the condescending, offensive smile of the strong contemplating the weak.

'Curse you! May you be accursed forever!"

Vasili shouted his curses so loudly that Yakov involuntarily glanced out at sea, towards the fisheries, as if afraid that somebody out there might hear these cries of impotency. But out there there was nothing but the waves and the sun He then spat out and said:

Go on, shout! . . . Whom do you think you are hurting? Only yourself.. And since this has happened between us I'll tell you what I think . . "

"Shut up! Get out of my sight! . . Go away!" roared Vasili

I won't go back to the village," said Yakov, keeping his eyes on his father and watching every movement he made "I shall stay

here for the winter It's better for me here I'm no fool. I understand that. Life's easier here.... At home you'd do as you like with me, but here...look!"

With that he doubled up his fist, showed his father a fico and laughed, not loudly. but loud enough to make Vasili jump to his feet again mad with rage. He picked up an oar and made a dash for Yakov shouting hoarsely:

"Your father? Do that to your father? I'll kill you!"

By the time he reached the boat, blind with fury, Yakov was already far away, running with his torn-out sleeve flapping behind him.

Vasili hurled the oar after him. but it dropped short, and. again exhausted, the old man leaned his chest against the side of the boat and madly scratched at the wood as he gazed after his son.

The latter shouted at him from a distance:

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself! You've got grey hairs already. and yet you go mad like that over a woman! Ekh, you! But I'm not going back to the village.... Go back yourself.... You've no business to be here!"

"Yashka! Shut up!" roared Vasili, drowning Yashka's voice. "Yashka! I'll kill you! ... Get out of here!"

Yakov strolled off at a leisurely pace.

His father watched him go with dull, insane eyes. He already looked shorter, his feet seemed to have sunk into the sand... He had sunk up to the waist ... up to the shoulder ... to the neck ... he was gone! A moment later, however, somewhat further from the spot where he had vanished, his head reappeared, then his shoulders, and then his whole body ... but he was smaller now. He turned round, looked in Vasili's direction and shouted something.

"Curse you! Curse you! Curse you!" shouted Vasili in reply.

His son made a gesture of disgust, turned round and went off, and again vanished behind the sand dunes

Vasili gazed for a long time in the direction his son had gone until his back ached from the awkward posture of his body as he lay leaning against the boat He rose to his feet and staggered from the pain he felt in every limb His belt had slipped up to his armpits He unfastened it with his numbed fingers brought it close to his eyes and threw it on the sand. Then he went into the shack and halted in front of a hollow in the sand and remembered that that was where he had stumbled, and that had he not fallen he would have caught his son The shack was in utter disorder Vasili looked round for the vodka bottle He saw it lying among the sacks and picked it up The bottle was tightly corked and the vodka had not been spilt Vasili slowly prized the cork out and putting the mouth of the bottle to his lips he wanted to drink, but the bottle rattled against his teeth and the vodka flowed out of his mouth onto his beard and chest

Vasili heard a ringing in his ears, his heart throbbed violently, his back ached unbearably

After all I am old!" he said aloud and sank down on the sand at the entrance to the shack

The sea stretched out before him The waves laughed, noisily and playfully as always Vasili gazed for a long time at the water and remembered the yearning words his son had uttered

"If only it were all land! And black earth! And if we could plough it all!"

A bitter feeling overcame this muzhik He vigorously rubbed his chest, looked around and heaved a deep sigh His head drooped low and his back bent as if under the weight of a heavy burden His throat worked convulsively as if he were

choking. He coughed hard to clear his throat and crossed himself, looking up into the sky. Gloomy thoughts descended upon him.

. . . For the sake of a loose woman he had abandoned his wife, with whom he had lived in honest toil for over fifteen years ... and for this the Lord had punished him by the rebellion of his son. That was so, oh Lord!

His son had mocked at him, had torn his heart. ... Death would be too good for him for having vexed his father's soul in this way! And what for? For a loose woman who was living in sin.... It had been a sin for him, an old man, to forget his wife and son and to associate with this woman....

And so the Lord in His holy wrath had reminded him of his duty and through his son had struck at his heart in just punishment.... That was so, oh Lord!

Sitting huddled up on the sand Vasili crossed himself and blinked his eyes, brushing away with his eyelashes the tears that were blinding him.

The sun sank into the sea. The lurid glare of the sunset slowly faded away. A warm wind from the silent distance fanned the muzhik's face that was wet with tears. Absorbed in his thoughts of repentance, he sat there until he fell asleep.

Two days after his quarrel with his father, Yakov, with a number of other fishermen, went off in a large boat towed by a steam tug to a spot thirty versts from the fisheries to catch sturgeon. Five days later he returned to the fisheries alone in a sailing boat—he had been sent back for provisions. He arrived at midday, when the fishermen were resting after dinner. It was unhearably hot, the scorching sand burnt one's feet, and the fish scales and fish bones pricked them. Yakov cautiously made his way to the hutments cursing himself for not having put his

boots on He felt too lazy to go back to the boat to get them and, besides, she was hurrying to get a bite and also to see Malva He had often thought of her during the dull time he had spent at sea, and now he wanted to know whether she had seen his father and what he had told her. . Perhaps he had beaten her That wouldn't be a bad thing—it would knock the starch out of her a bit! As it was, she was far too perky and impudent!

The fisheries were quiet and deserted The windows of the hutments were wide open and these large wooden boxes also seemed to be gasping from the heat In the agent's office, which was hidden among the huts, an infant was bawling with all its might Low voices were heard behind a pile of barrels

Yakov boldly stepped up to the barrels, he thought he heard Malva's voice On reaching them, however, and looking behind them, he started back, frowned and halted

Behind the barrels, in their shade, red haired Seryozhka was lying on his back, his hands under his head. On one side of him sat his father, on the other side was Malva

"What's he doing here?" said Yakov to himself, thinking of his father. "Has he given up his quiet job to come here so as to be nearer to Malva and to keep him away from her? Oh hell!' What if mother heard about all his goings-on?. . . Shall I go to him or not?"

"Well" he heard Seryozhka say "So it's good bye, eh? All right! Go and grub the soil!"

Yakov blinked his eyes with joy

"Yes, I'll go!" his father said

Yakov then boldly stepped forward and exclaimed merrily.

'Greetings to an honest company!"

His father shot a rapid glance at him and turned away.

Malva did not turn an eyelash, but Seryozhka jerked his leg and said in a deep bass voice:

"Lo! Our beloved son Yashka hath returned from distant lands!" And then he continued in his usual voice: "He deserves to be flayed and his skin used for a drum like a sheepskin!"

Malva laughed softly.

"It's hot!" said Yakov sitting down.

Vasili glanced at him again and said:

"I've been waiting for you, Yakov."

Yakov thought his voice was softer than usual and his face looked younger.

"I've come back for provisions," he announced, and then he asked Seryozhka to give him some tobacco for a cigarette.

"You'll get no tobacco from me, you young fool!" said Seryozhka without moving a muscle.

"I'm going home, Yakov," said Vasili impressively, making marks on the sand with his finger.

"Is that so?" answered Yakov, looking innocently at his father.

"What about you ... are you remaining here?"

"Yes. I'll remain . ... There's not enough work for both of us at home."

"Well. ... I won't say anything. Do as you please. ... You're no longer a child. ... Only remember this—I won't last much longer. Perhaps I shall live ... but as for being able to work—I'm not sure about that... I've got unused to the land... So don't forget—you've got a mother back home."

He must have found it hard to talk; his words seemed to stick in his teeth. He stroked his beard and his hand trembled.

Malva stared at him. Seryozhka screwed up one eye and with the other, large and round, looked hard into Yakov's face.

Yakov was bubbling over with joy, but fearing to betray it he sat silently staring at his feet

'So don't forget your mother . remember you're her only son' said Vasili

"You needn't tell that, I know!" said Yakov shrinking

"All right, since you know!" said his father, eyeing him distrustfully "All I say is—don't forget"

Vasili heaved a deep sigh For several moments all four remained silent Then Malva said:

"The bell will go soon!"

"Well, I'll go along" said Vasili, rising to his feet The other three did the same

'Good bye, Sergei! If ever you are on the Volga, perhaps you'll look me up? Simbirsk Uyezd, Village of Mazlo, Nikolo Lykovskaya Volost"

"All right!" said Seryozhka, shaking Vasili's hand, holding it tight in his sinewy paw that was overgrown with red hair and smiling into his sad, grave face.

"Lykovo Nikolskoye is a fairly large place. . . It's known all over the countryside, and we live about four versts from it," Vasili explained

"All right, all right I'll look in if ever I'm that way!"

"Good bye!"

"Good bye, old man!"

Good bye, Malva," said Vasili in a choking voice without looking at her

Malva unhurriedly wiped her lips on her sleeve and placing her white hands on Vasili's shoulders silently and gravely kissed him three times on his cheeks and lips.

Vasili was confused and muttered something incoherently Yakov dropped his head to conceal an ironic smile, while Seryozhka looked up into the sky and yawned softly.

"You'll find it hot work walking," he said.

"Oh, that's nothing.... Well, good-bye, Yakov!"

"Good-bye!"

They stood opposite each other not knowing what to do. The sad phrase "good-bye," which had rung out so often and monotonously during these few seconds, awakened a tender feeling for his father in Yakov's heart, but he did not know how to express it: to embrace him as Malva had done, or to shake hands with him as Seryozhka had done. Vasili was vexed by the irresolution expressed in his son's posture and face, and he still felt something that was akin to shame in Yakov's presence. This feeling had been roused by his recollection of the scene on the spur and by Malva's kisses.

"And so—don't forget your mother!" he said at last.

"All right, all right!" exclaimed Yakov with a cordial smile.

"Don't worry ... I'll do the right thing!"

He nodded his head.

"Well ... that's all! Farewell. May the Lord send you all the best. ... Think of me kindly. ... Oh Seryozhka! I buried the tea can in the sand under the stern of the green boat!"

"What's he want the tea can for?" Yakov enquired hastily.

"He's taken over my job ... out there on the spur," explained Vasili.

Yakov looked at Seryozhka, glanced at Malva and dropped his head to conceal the joyous sparkle in his eyes.

"Well, good-bye. friends. ... I'm going!"

Vasili bowed all round and went off. Malva went with him.

"I'll see you off a little way," she said.

Seryozhka dropped down on the sand and caught hold of Yakov's foot just as Yakov was about to step out after Malva.

"Whoa! Where you off to?"

"Wait! Let me go!" cried Yakov, trying to tear his foot free. But Seryozhka caught him by the other foot and said: "Sit down next to me for a while!"

"Hey! Stop playing the fool"

"I'm not playing the fool But you sit down!"

Yakov sat down

"What do you want?" he demanded through his clenched teeth.

"Wait! Shut up for a minute! Let me think and then I'll tell you"

Seryozhka looked threateningly at Yakov with his insolent eyes and Yakov yielded to him

Malva and Vasili walked on in silence for a little while. She cast sidelong glances at his face and her eyes glistened strangely Vasili frowned and said nothing Their feet sank in the loose sand and they walked very slowly

"Vasya"

"What?"

He glanced at her and at once turned his eyes away

"I made you quarrel with Yashka on purpose . You could have lived here together without quarrelling," she said in a calm and even voice

'Why did you do that?" Vasili asked after a brief pause.

"I don't know Just like that!"

She shrugged her shoulders and laughed

"A nice thing to do! Ekh you!" he said reproachfully in an angry voice

She remained silent

"You'll spoil that boy of mine, spoil him completely! Ekh! You are a witch, a witch! You don't know the fear of God! You have no shame! What are you doing?"

"What ought I to do?" she asked, and there was a note either of anxiety or of vexation in her voice. it was difficult to say which.

"What you ought to do? Ekh, you!" exclaimed Vasili, feeling anger welling up in his heart against her.

He passionately wanted to strike her, to knock her down at his feet and trample upon her on the sand, to kick her in the breast and face with his heavy boots. He clenched his fist and looked round.

Near the barrels he could see the figures of Yakov and Seryozhka, their faces were turned towards him.

"Go away, go away! I could smash you, you. ..."

He hissed the abusive word almost in her face, His eyes were bloodshot, his beard quivered and his hands involuntarily stretched towards her hair, which had slipped from under her kerchief.

She, however, gazed at him calmly with her greenish eyes.

"I ought to kill you, you slut! Wait ... you'll get what's coming to you! Somebody'll wring your neck yet!"

She smiled, said nothing. and then, heaving a deep sigh, she said curtly:

. "Well. that's enough! Good-bye!"

And turning on her heel she went back.

Vasili roared after her and ground his teeth. But Malva walked on, trying to step into the distinct and deep traces of Vasili's footsteps in the sand, and each time she succeeded she carefully obliterated them with her foot. And so she proceeded, slowly, until she reached the barrels, where Seryozhka greeted her with the question:

"Well, so you saw him off?"

Malva nodded in the affirmative and sat down beside him. Yakov looked at her and smiled tenderly, moving his lips as if he were whispering something which he alone heard.

'Now that you've said good bye you feel sorry he's gone, eh?" Seryozhka asked again, quoting the words of the song

'When are you going out there, to the spur?" asked Malva by way of reply nodding in the direction of the sea

'This evening"

'I'll go with you"

"You will! Now that's what I like!"

"And I'll go" said Yakov emphatically

"Who's inviting you?" Seryozhka asked, screwing up his eyes

The sound of a cracked bell was heard calling the men back to work, the strokes hastily following one another and dying away in the merry surge of the waves

"She is!" said Yakov, looking at Malva challengingly.

"I?" she exclaimed in surprise "What do I want you for?"

"Let's talk straight, Yashka!" said Sergei sternly, rising to his feet "If you start pestering her . , I'll smash you to a pulp! And if you put a finger on her . . . I'll kill you as I would a fly! One crack on the head—and you'll be a goner! It's very simple with me!"

His face, his whole figure and knotty hands stretching towards Yakov's throat, all very convincingly testified that it was very simple with him

Yakov stepped back a pace and said in a choking voice.

"Wait a but! Why, she herself . .
"

"Now then—that's enough! Who do you think you are? Mutton's not for you to eat, you dog! Be grateful if you get a bone to gnaw . Well what are you glaring at?"

Yakov glanced at Malva Her green eyes were laughing in his face, an offensive, humiliating, mocking laugh, and she pressed against Seryozhka's side so lovingly that the sweat broke out all over Yakov's body.

They walked away from him, side by side and when they had gone a little distance they both laughed out loudly. Yakov dug his right foot deeply into the sand and stood as if petrified, breathing heavily.

In the distance, over the yellow, deserted, undulating sand, a small dark human figure was moving. On its right the merry, mighty sea glistened in the sun. and on its left, right up to the horizon, stretched the sand—a dreary, monotonous desert. Yakov looked at the lonely figure and blinked his eyes, which

were full of vexation and perplexity, and vigorously rubbed his chest with both his hands.

The fisheries were humming with activity.

Yakov heard Malva shouting in a resonant throaty voice:

"Who took my knife?"

The waves were splashing noisily, the sun was shining, the sea was laughing....

HOW A SONG WAS COMPOSED

THIS IS HOW two women composed a song to the accompaniment of the mournful ringing of church bells, one summer's day. It was in a quiet street in Arzamas, just before sundown. On a seat outside the house in which I lived. The town was dozing in the sultry silence of a June day. Sitting at the window with a book, I was listening to my cook, plump, pock-marked Ustinya, talking quietly to the housemaid of my neighbour, the rural prefect.

"And what else do they write?" she asked in his masculine, but very flexible voice.

"Oh, nothing else," answered the housemaid in a low, pensive drawl. She was a dark, thin girl, with small, fixed, frightened eyes.

Remaining silent for a as if listening to the mournful croaking of the frogs and the lazy ringing of the church bell- she once again deftly picked up words and music.

Neither fierce winter storms

Nor rippling springs in the spring ...

The house-maid shifted close up to Ustinya, and resting her white kerchiefed head on Ustinya's plump shoulder, she closed her eyes and, now more boldly, continued the verse in her thin and tremulous voice

A word of tidings from home

To console me doth bring ...

"There you are!" said Ustinya triumphantly, slapping her knee 'When I was younger I could make up even better songs than this! The girls used to say 'Go on, Ustyusha, start a song!' Ekh, didn't I let myself go! Well, how is it to go now?"

"I don't know," said the housemaid, opening her eyes and smiling

I looked at them through the flowers on the windowsill The singers could not see me, but I could very well see Ustinya s rough, deeply pitted cheek, her small ear, which her yellow kerchief failed to cover, her grey, animated eye, her straight nose like the beak of a jay, and her square, masculine chin She was a sly, talkative wench, a confirmed tippler and fond of hearing the lives of the saints read She was the biggest gossip in the street and, moreover, she seemed to be the repository of all the secrets of the town Beside her, plump and well-fed, the lean, angular housemaid looked like a child And the housemaid's mouth was like that of a child, she pouted her small full lips as if she had just been scolded, was afraid she would be scolded again, and was ready to burst into tears.

Swallows were darting back and forth in the street, their curved wings almost touching the ground. It was evident that the gnats were flying low—a sure sign that it would rain at night. A crow was sitting on the fence opposite my window, motionless, as if carved out of wood, watching the flitting swallows with its black eyes. The church bells had stopped ringing, but the frogs

were croaking more sonorously than before; the silence seemed denser, hotter.

The lark is singing in the sky,

The cornflowers bloom in the corn

sang Ustinya plaintively, looking up at the sky, her arms crossed over her breast. The housemaid followed her up boldly and tunefully.

Oh for a glimpse of my native fields,

and Ustinya, skilfully supporting the girl's high-pitched tremulous voice, added in a velvety tone the moving words:

And with my laddie in the woods to roam! ...

They stopped singing and sat silently for a long time, pressing close against each other. At last Ustinya said in a low pensive voice:

"It's not a bad song we made up, is it? Quite good, I think..."

"Look!" said the housemaid softly, interrupting Ustinya.

They looked across the street to the right. There, bathed in sunshine, a tall priest in a purple cassock was striding down the street with an important air, tapping the pavement with his long staff in a measured beat. The silver crook of the staff and the golden cross on his broad breast glistened in the sun.

The crow glanced sideways at the priest with its black beady eye lazily flapped its heavy wings and flew to a branch of an a-htree from which it dropped like a grey clot into the garden

The women rose to their feet and bowed low to the priest. He did not even notice them They remained standing, following him with their eyes until he turned the corner.

"Yes little girl, said Ustinya, adjusting the kerchief on her head "If only I were younger, and had a prettier face ..."

Somebody called angrily in a sleepy voice

"Maria! Mashka!..."

"Oh, they're calling me . ."

The housemaid ran off like a frightened rabbit, and Ustiuwa sitting down again, smoothed her gaudy cotton frock over her knee lost in thought

The frogs croaked The stifling air was as still as the water in a forest lake The day was passing away in a riot of colour An angry rumble came across the fields from beyond the river Teba—it was the distant thunder growling like a bear.

Alexei Tolstoy

THE RUSSIAN CHARACTER

THE RUSSIAN character! For a short story the title is rather pretentious. Still, it cannot be helped—it is precisely the Russian character I want to talk to you about.

The Russian character! It is not an easy thing to describe. . . . Shall I tell you a story of valour and heroism? But so many could be told, that one is simply at a loss to make a choice. A friend of mine has helped me out of my difficulty with an episode from his personal experience. How this man fought the Germans I shall not stop to tell you, though he does wear the gold star of Hero and half his chest is covered with decorations He was a simple, quiet, ordinary man—a collective farmer from a Volga village in the Saratov Region

Among his fellows, however, he was conspicuous for a stalwart well-knu figure and handsome features To see him climb out of the tank turret was a thing to incite admiration A veritable god of war! He would jump to the ground, pull the helmet from his sweating brow, and wipe a blackened face with an oil rag, invariably smiling with sheer good humour .

At the war fronts where life is a constant play with death, men become better, they shed all frippery like an unhealthy skin after a severe sunburn, leaving only the kernel of the man

To be sure, in some men it is harder, in others softer, but even those whose kernel has a flaw in it try to make good, to be good and faithful comrades. But my friend Yegor Dremov even before the war was a man of moral excellence and he nourished a deep respect and love for his mother, Marya Polikarpovna, and his father, Yegor Yegorovich "My father's a respectable

man, with him self-esteem stands above all else You, my son, he says, will see a lot in life and will visit foreign parts but remember always to be proud that you're a Russian ..

He had a sweetheart in his native Volga village We speak a good deal about sweethearts and wives, especially during a lull in the fighting, when there is a frost outside and the men have gathered after mess round a cheerful little stove in the dugout dimly lit by a smoky oil wick, Here yarns will be spun and many a tale embroidered One will start the ball by propounding "What is love?" One man will say "Love's founded on mutual respect Another. "Nothing of the sort, love's a habit, a man doesn't only love his wife, he loves his father and mother and even animals" " "Pshaw! Silly ass" a third will say "Love's a thing when you're all sizzling inside and a fellow goes about as if he was drunk. . . . And so they torture the question for a good hour or two until the sergeant brings the argument to an end with a peremptory but conclusive word of his own. . . . Yegor Dremov, obviously shy of joining these conversations, merely made a passing remark to me about his sweetheart, from which I could gather that she was a nice girl, and that once she had given her word to wait for him, wait she would though he'd come home on one leg.

Neither was he inclined to dwell on feats of war. "One doesn't care to remember such things!" he would say with a frown and begin smoking a cigarette. About the battle exploits of his tank we usually learned from his crew. Especially thrilling were the accounts of tank-driver Chuvilev.

"... We'd only just deployed, you know, when suddenly I sees him coming up over the hill. . . . I yelled: Comrade Lieutenant, a Tiger! Straight ahead, he shouts, step on the gas! I started zigzagging in and out of the fir trees. . . . The Tiger began nosing around with his gun muzzle, groping like a blind man and sent a washout at us. . . . Our Lieutenant let him have the

fireworks, straight in the side—the sparks went flying! Then he got one smack into the turret—the Fritz's tail went all skewy. . . . He sent a third shell, and that Tiger started belching smoke all over—the flames shut out of him at least three hundred feet high.... The crew came tumbling out the emergency hatch. Then Vanya Lapshin started squirting 'em with his machine gun—and they went down, collecting the lead.... Well, now the way was clear. Five minutes later we dashed into the village. Here's where I nearly burst me sides.... You ought to see the Nazis scuttling about... It was muddy, you know, and some of the fellows had jumped out without their boots on, hopping about in their socks. They all made a dash for the barn. Our Comrade Lieutenant, he raps out the command. 'Now then, wade into that barn!' We swivelled the gun round and rode full tilt into that barn .. Crikey! The rafters came raining down on the armour, with boards and bricks and fascists that had been sitting inside. ... I ironed that barn out again—the rest of 'em stuck up their hands, 'Hitler kaput'. "

And so Lieutenant Yegor Dremov fought until he came to grief During the fierce fighting in the great battle of Kursk, when the Germans were on their last legs and wavering, his tank was hit by a shell on a rise of ground amid a field of wheat. Two of the crew were killed on the spot The second shell set the tank on fire Driver Chuvilev who had jumped out through the forward hatch climbed on the armour and managed to pull the Lieutenant out of the blazing tank. He was unconscious and his overalls were on fire Scarcely had Chuvilev dragged the Lieutenant away when the tank exploded with such terrific force that the turret was hurled a distance of fifty yards Chuvilev threw handfuls of earth over the Lieutenant's face and head and over his clothes to extinguish the flames Then he hauled him on his back, and crawling from shell-hole to shell hole brought him to the first aid station ... "The reason I pulled

him out," Chuvilev eventually related, "was because I felt his heart beating "

Yegor Dremov survived and even retained his eyesight, although his face was charred to the bone in some places He lay in hospital for eight months, undergoing one plastic operation after another, and his nose, his lips, his eyelids and ears were restored When the bandages were finally removed he looked at his face, if his it could be called The nurse who handed him the little mirror turned away with a sob He gave her back the mirror at once

"Could have been he said "One can live like this."

But he never asked the nurse for the mirror again. He frequently explored his face with his fingers, as if trying to get used to it. The medical commission found him unfit for active service, He then betook himself to the commanding General and said: "Please let me return to my regiment." "But you're disabled," said the General. "Certainly not. I'm a scarecrow, but that won't interfere with my getting back to fighting form." (It was not lost on Yegor Dremov that the General had tried to keep his eyes averted from his face during the interview, and Dremov's livid, slit-like lips twisted in a wry smile.) He was given twenty days' furlough to recuperate, and went home to his father and mother. That was in March.

He had expected to take a cart from the railway station but was obliged to walk the distance of eighteen versts. The snow still lay around, it was damp and desolate, and a chill wind blew out the skirts of his greatcoat. howling dismally in his cars. Dusk had fallen when he arrived in the village. There stood the familiar well with the tall crane swaying and creaking in the wind. His parents' cottage was the sixth from here. Suddenly he stopped, his hands thrust into his pockets. He shook his head and turned towards the house. Knee deep in the snow he peered

through the window and saw his mother—she was laying out supper in the dim light of a low-burning oil lamp, which hung over the table. Still in the same dark shawl, quiet, patient, gentle. She looked older, her thin shoulders were sharply outlined under the shawl.... "Ah, had I known it, I should have written her at least a couple of words every day about myself...." She placed the frugal meal on the table—a jug of milk, a chunk of rye bread, two spoons and a salt-cellar, and stood before the table with thin hands crossed on her bosom, lost in thought.... Looking at his mother through the window Yegor Dremov realized that she must not be frightened, that the dear old face must not be made to quiver with despair.

Ah, well! He lifted the latch of the wicket-gate, passed through the little courtyard onto the porch and knocked His mother answered from behind the door- "Who's there?" He replied "Hero of the Soviet Union Lieutenant Gromov "

His heart throbbed violently, and he leaned his shoulder against the lintel No, his mother had not recognized his voice. He seemed to be hearing it himself for the first time, changed after all those operations—a husky, gruff, muffled voice it was

'What do you want, my dear?" she enquired

"I've brought regards to Marya Polikarpovna from her son, Senior Lieutenant Dremov "

She opened the door and ran to him, seizing him by the hand

"Oh, he is alive, my Yegor? Is he all right? Goodness, come in, come in, my dear"

Yegor Dremov sat down on a bench by the table. This was where he used to sit when his feet did not reach the floor, and his mother, stroking his curly head, used to say "Eat, my darling He began to talk about her son, about himself, in detail —what he ate and drank, that he lacked for nothing, was

always in good health and cheer, and briefly about battles he had taken part in with his tank

"Tell me, is it very awful at the war?" she broke in, peering into his face with dark unseeing eyes

"Yes, it is pretty awful, mother, but you get used to it"

Yegor Yegorovich, his father, came in These years had told on him too, his beard looked as though it had been sprinkled with flour Glancing at the visitor he stamped his worn felt boots in the doorway, slowly unwound his scarf, took off his sheepskin coat, drew up to the table and shook hands—ah, how familiar was this broad, just parental hand!

Without asking any questions, for the presence of a guest decorated with military honours did not need explaining, he sat down to listen with eyes half-closed.

The longer Lieutenant Dremov sat thus, unrecognized, talking about himself, ostensibly about another, the more impossible it became for him to disclose his identity, to get up and say: don't you recognize me, mother, father, the scarecrow that I am!... He felt happy sitting at his parents' table. happy yet pained.

"Well, let's have supper, mother. get something for the guest." Yegor Yegorovich opened a little old cabinet, where in the left-hand corner had always lain a collection of fishing hooks in a matchbox—they were still there—and a teapot with a chipped spout—it still stood there too, and whence came the familiar odour of bread crumbs and onion peelings. Yegor Yegorovich brought out a flask of vodka, just enough to fill two glasses, and sighed over the fact that no more was obtainable. They sat down to supper as they did in the old days. During the supper, Senior Lieutenant Dremov suddenly became aware that his mother was intently watching the way he held his spoon. He

smiled wryly. His mother raised her eyes, her face quivered painfully.

They talked of this, that and the other. what the spring would be like. whether folk would cope with the sowing and that the war would probably be over this summer.

"What makes you think the war will be over this summer, Yegor Yegorovich?"

"The people's blood's up," replied Yegor Yegorovich. "they've passed through death and nothing'll stop 'em now—it's kaput for the Germans."

Marya Polikarpovna asked-

"You didn't say when he'll get leave to come home for a visit We haven't seen him for three years Must have grown up, I guess, goes about with a moustache . . . Facing death, like that, every day, I should imagine his voice too has become rough"

"Well, you'll be seeing him—maybe you won't recognize him," said the Lieutenant.

They fixed up a bed for him on the Russian stove, where every brick was familiar, every crevice in the timbered wall, every knot of the wooden ceiling. There was a smell of sheepskin and bread, the cozy smell of home that a man never forgets even in the face of death, The March wind howled above the roof. His father snored behind the partition. His mother turned and sighed and could not fall asleep ... The Lieutenant lay on his stomach with his face buried in his hands "Can it be that you didn't recognize me," he thought, "can it be? Mama, mama. . .

He was awakened in the morning by the crackling of the wood in the stove, by which his mother was quietly busying herself. His washed foot wrappings were strung on the clothes line and his cleaned boots stood by the door.

"Do you like wheat pancakes?" she asked him

He turned with his reply as he climbed off the stove, slipped on his shirt, and drawing his belt sat down barefooted on the bench.

"Does Katya Malysheva, Andrei Malyshev's daughter, live in your village?" he asked

"She finished her studies last year. She's a schoolteacher now in the village. Do you want to see her?"

"Your boy told me to be sure to give her his regards"

His mother sent the neighbour's little girl for her. Scarcely had the Lieutenant got his boots on than Katya Malysheva came running in. Her wide grey eyes were shining, her eyebrows twitched with excitement and her face was flushed with joy. When she slipped the knitted shawl from her head onto her broad shoulders the Lieutenant groaned inwardly. "Oh, to kiss that warm, fair hair!" Thus had he always pictured to himself his dear friend—so fresh, sweet, merry, and kind, and so beautiful that the little cottage seemed filled with her golden radiance....

"You've brought regards from Yegor?" (He stood with his back to the light and merely nodded his head, for speak he could not.) "I miss him terribly, tell him that."

Coming up closer to him she glanced at his face and suddenly recoiled with a look of horror in her eyes. At that moment he definitely made up his mind to go away—that very day.

His mother served wheat pancakes with baked milk. Again he talked about Lieutenant Dremov, this time about his military feats, concealing none of the cruel details, and keeping his eyes averted from Katya's in order not to see on that sweet face the reflection of his own hideousness. Yegor Yegorovich wanted to make arrangements for a collective farm cart to take him

down to the station, but he set out on foot. the way he had come. He felt very depressed over the way things had turned out. He stopped now and again, clutching his head in his hands. and asking himself hoarsely: "What's to be done now?"

He rejoined his regiment which had been withdrawn deep into the rear for replacements. His comrades met him with unfeigned joy. It was like balm to the agonizing heartache which had deprived him of sleep, made it impossible for him to eat or breathe. He decided to let his mother remain a little while longer in ignorance of his misfortune. As for Katya—he would tear that image out of his heart.

A STRANGE STORY

HERE THEY CAME! They crawled along in single file—one, another, a third—marked with a white circle like a cat's eye. and with a black cross. Standing behind Pyotr Filippovich, Praskovya Savishna crossed herself. He had jumped onto the bench at the window and pressed his face against the pane. as soon as the tanks rumbled up. When Praskovya Savishna crossed herself he wheeled about and gave an almost toothless sneer into his wiry little beard. Huge trucks filled with soldiers sitting in even rows followed the tanks down the muddy village street! From under their deep helmets the Germans stared vacantly into the grey drizzle, their faces grey, lifeless and morose

The noise of the passing column died away Then the faint peals of thunder could be heard once again Pyotr Filippovich turned away from the window. His eyes were puckered with laughter, and, barely visible through narrowed lids, had a strange gleam Praskovya Savishna said.

"Lord, what a fright! Well, Pyotr Filippovich, perhaps we'll be somebody now?"

He did not reply. He sat tapping with his fingernails on the table—a small man with broad nostrils and sparse red hair. Praskovya Savishna would have liked to say something about their house, but timidity sealed her lips She had always been afraid of her husband, ever since the day in 1914 when she had been taken from her poor family into his rich Old Believer household With the years she seemed to have become used to it But that spring, when Pyotr Filippovich returned after having served a ten-year sentence, she again began to fear him, though she herself could not say why. He did not beat her or swear at her—but he sneered at everything she did, and he always spoke in riddles Nobody in the house had ever read books before; but now he borrowed newspapers from the village library and used up kerosene reading books He had brought eyeglasses from the North for that purpose.

Praskovya Savishna began to prepare dinner without having spoken her mind, she chopped up some cabbage and onions, poured out watery kvass[2] and angrily summoned the children.

They had mouldy toast with their dinner: the grain, flour and smoked goose and pork had all been hidden away from German eyes, just to make sure. Before picking up his spoon Pyotr Filippovich stretched his arms out of his sleeves, bent them at the elbow and stroked his hair—a habit of his father's. When he thrust his arms out Praskovya Savishna suddenly said, with feminine inconsistency:

"They've torn down the sign on the village soviet: they should give us back our house now."

[2] A sour drink made from fermented rye

Putting down her spoon and wiping her tears with her apron, she burst forth in a long complaint heard for the hundredth time. Pyotr Filippovich and the children—a boy with his father's red hair, and a twelve-year-old daughter with a milky-white, moody face—continued to eat in silence. Finally Praskovya Savishna blurted out the piece of news that was giving her no rest:

"In Blagoveshchenskoye village a convict—everybody says he is—was made burgomaster. They gave him a house with a first floor made of brick, and a horse. . . And goodness knows, you've suffered enough to deserve something. . ."

"And you're the world's biggest fool," was all that Pyotr Filippovich replied to this, but with such conviction that she immediately broke short and fell silent.

On the following day trucks arrived with Germans—this time in trench caps instead of helmets. The officers occupied the house that had belonged to Pyotr Filippovich's father, a good house with a tin roof; it stood diagonally across the street from the little house in which he now lived. The soldiers were billeted in the various houses. Several days earlier almost all the young folk—teen-age boys and girls—had disappeared from the village: someone had lured them away. The Germans were very displeased about this. On the doors of the commandant's office and at the well they posted an announcement in two languages, on good paper the rules of conduct for the Russians, with one penalty—death Then a general search began The frightened Praskovya Savishna related that they had a soldier who was an expert in finding hidden suckling pigs: he would quietly enter a farmyard and begin grunting—and you couldn't tell the difference—grunting and listening. In several farmyards sucklings squealed in reply —and they had been so well hidden up in the attic And those women cried later on' ...

The Germans took everything, they picked the houses clean Praskovya Savishna was completely exhausted by her nightly occupation of dragging articles from the trunk to the cellar and from there to the ash heap, under the stove or some other place Finally Pyotr Filippovich shouted at her and stamped his foot: "Esther sit still or go away, lay down and die some place, or get out of here!" Their house was passed by, as though it were under a ban, Finally two soldiers armed with rifles appeared Pyotr Filippovich pulled his father's caracul cap over his forehead and calmly walked off between the soldiers. On the porch of the commandant's office he stopped to watch a tall, respectable looking German on eyeglasses pull a round-faced girl of about fourteen up to him and start pawing and squeezing her. She shielded herself with her elbows in fright and whispered, "Don't, uncle, don'" He pressed her between his knees and squeezed her breasts with his large red hands She started to cry He hit her in the back of the head, and she stumbled and went off He straightened his eyeglasses and looked at Pyotr Filippovich—not in the face or the eye, but higher

"Is this Pyotr Gorshkov?" he asked, breathing hard.

Pyotr Filippovich followed the tall German into the house where he had been born and bred, had married, and had buried his father, mother and three of his children; this house had had a hold on him all his life, like the one-eyed Evil One astraddle a peasant. The walls were freshly whitewashed and the floors washed; the smell of cigars hung in the room with the three windows: it was here that the Gorshkov family had gathered around the table on big holidays in the old days. A second German carefully put down his pen, looked up at Pyotr Filippovich—in the same way, over his head—and said in Russian:

"Take off your hat and sit down in the chair near the door."

This German was good-looking, with a dark moustache and a glistening part in his hair; on his black collar tabs there were silver streaks of lightning (in the ancient Runic alphabet they stand for the letters "s" and "s", and are also the chief attributes of Thor, the Teutonic god of war).

"Your biography is known to us," he began after a lengthy silence. "You were an enemy of Soviet power—which, I hope, you continue to remain." His hat on his knee and his beard jutting forward, Pyotr Filippovich looked at the officer with shining pin-points of eyes behind wrinkled slits. "What do we want of you? We want: complete information about the population, and especially about contacts with the partisans; we want you to force the population to work; the Russians do not know how to work; we Germans do not like that—a man should work from morning to night, all his life, otherwise death awaits him; where I was born, at my father's place, there is a small mill worked by a dog—day and night she runs in a treadmill; the dog is a wise animal, she wants to live—which I cannot say about the Russians. . . . And so, you will be appointed burgomaster of the village of Medvedovka. You will attend the execution of two partisans on Monday. Then you will enter upon your duties."

Pyotr Filippovich returned home. His wife rushed up to him.

"Well, what did they tell you? Will they give us back the house?"

"Of course, of course," answered Pyotr Filippovich, wearily, sitting down on a bench and unwinding his scarf

"What else did they tell you?"

"They ordered you to heat the bathhouse for me."

Praskovya Savishna stopped short and stared at her husband, her lips pressed tight But she was afraid to ask him again

"That's right—today is Saturday, and the Germans love order " She pulled on her boots and went out to heat the bathhouse on the bank of the brook.

Pyotr Filippovich steamed himself thoroughly, drank his fill of tea and lay down to sleep Before daybreak he was already out of the house.

The partisans about whom the good-looking German with the streaks of lightning on his collar was so concerned had their headquarters not far from the village of Medvedovka, if you figure it as the crow flies, but it was very hard to get there little lanes and barely noticeable paths led to a swamp through thick growths of fir, alder and other thickets, the headquarters was located on an island in the middle of the swamp, all the approaches to it were guarded by sentries; the Germans did not even dare to poke their noses into this forest If a stranger entered it he would suddenly hear the hammering of a woodpecker somewhere close by, then a cuckoo calling in answer from afar, and then strange sounds all through the forest

knocks and whistles, the cawing of crows, the whining of dogs . A stranger would have been terrified The day was windless and drizzly No substantial operations were foreseen at partisan headquarters. Small groups of three or four went off as usual. some on reconnaissance, others to plant mines on the highway Since dark a special group had been lying in wait for a troop train. German sentries walked their two-kilometre beats along the sides of the embankment, which had been covered with lime to show up the footprints of partisans; the sentries cast gloomy, wary glances all around as they walked. Ten paces away from them, a girl observer covered with broken branches lay in the sedge of a little marsh; she was armed with a carbine and two black grenades the size of goose eggs: farther off, behind a huge uprooted stump, sat a boy: this boy

had seen soldiers in helmets and grey-green uniforms push his whole family—mother, grandmother and little sisters—into a barn with a hayloft and set a torch to it in the night, and among the cries he had heard the voice of his mother. The boy's face was sallow and prematurely wrinkled; he also did not take his eyes off the German marching along the embankment with helmet pulled down over his ears.

When one of the sentries had passed the spot designated by the partisans, a nimble lad in a tightly-belleted quilted jacket crossed the roadbed in one bound. holding his tomgun in front of him; instantly another lad dashed out of the bushes and with rapid movements began to place a complicated and ominous shell under the rail.

The entire train was visible as it roared around the bend: the white clouds of smoke hugged the earth, wandering among the tall stumps and the scattered slender birches. The huge, puffing engine approached, looming up over its drive-wheels. and the sentries stepped off the roadbed in sign that the way was clear. A sharp explosion resounded in front of the locomotive. a column of sand rose skyward, and a piece of rail flew to the side, accompanied by whistling fragments: the locomotive cut into the ties with all its driving momentum; with a crash the coaches piled up. toppled over, and rolled heavily down the slope. Out of them scrambled screaming little grey-green figures. . .

The partisans had a great deal of other work that morning besides this sort of thing. Chief of Staff Yevtyukhov was having a quiet conversation with a guest—Ivan Sudarev, chief of the mounted scouts. Sitting in the drizzle on a felled pine near the camouflaged dugout, they were drinking from empty tin cans a French champagne whose praises had been sung by Pushkin. The old wounds of both ached in that dampness. Yevtyukhov was telling about the various difficulties and

complications owing to lack of information about the enemy's plans and about what was going on in the German rear troops.

"We need an inside scout, but where to find him?! That's my worry."

"You have every right to worry," Ivan Sudarev said judiciously, and he threw out the remains of the weak beverage. "Without inside information you're like a brave man fighting blindfolded, and that's absurd."

In the midst of this conversation the rain-laden fir branches began to quiver and send down a shower of drops, and two girls in soaked tunics, short skirts and large boots appeared. Holding rifles with bayonets attached, they led Pyotr Filippovich. His eyes were bound with a cotton kerchief, and he walked with outstretched arms. Interrupting each other and justifying themselves, the girls related how they had captured this man three kilometres away; they couldn't understand how he had slipped past the sentries.

"He's a plump carp," Ivan Sudarev said to the Chief of Staff. "I once stayed overnight at his house in Medvedovka. He's clever and shrewd. Wonder what he's going to say."

Pyotr Filippovich's eyes were unbound, and the girls, shouldering their rifles, stepped aside, reluctantly. Pyotr Filippovich raised his head, looked up at the fog-enveloped crowns of the trees, sighed, and said:

"This is just where I was headed for. I have some business with you."

"I'd like to know what kind of business you could have with me," replied the Chief of Staff, giving him a cold, piercing glance. "The Germans troubling you?"

"On the contrary, the Germans are not troubling me. You see, I served a ten-year sentence for wrecking."

"Do you know, Gorshkov, that you managed to reach this place, uninvited, but that getting back will be difficult?"

"Of course I know it. I counted on death."

The Chief of Staff exchanged glances with Ivan Sudarev and moved over on the log.

"Take a seat, Gorshkov, it'll be easier to talk. Now why did you choose such a complicated means of suicide?"

Pyotr Filippovich sat down and folded his hands on his stomach.

"Yes, I thought you might not believe me. But there was no way out. Yesterday they summoned me, you see, and offered me the position of burgomaster. The Germans go in for mutual responsibility, and so they decided to pin me down with a crime: on Monday I'm to be present at the execution of two of your partisans. . . ."

Yevtyukhov leapt up from the log.

"Ugh, you devil!"

His eyebrows twisted as he stood in front of Pyotr Filippovich and tried to pierce the impenetrable eyeslits.

"Sit down, there's always time for that," Ivan Sudarev told him.

"Continue, Gorshkov, we're listening."

"First of all, this is what I want to tell you: I actually was a wrecker and was justly sentenced. I didn't belong to any organization—I was framed on that. But I was angry, that's all. I didn't believe that my children would live well, in plenty, in happiness. That when I grew old I would die with an easy heart having forgiven people, the way it should be. That I would be buried with honour on Russian soil. . . . There was no forgiveness in my heart. Well, I got connected with a certain

agronomist. He gave me some powders . . . I thought and thought—the cows that fed us, and the horses—why were they to blame? I threw out those powders, that sin isn't against me. But the agronomist was caught, and during the questioning he mentioned me. But I kept quiet out of anger: all right, exile me. . ."

"A strange story," said the Chief of Staff, who still had not calmed down.

"Why strange? A Russian isn't an ordinary person, a Russian is a cleverly contrived person. I worked in the camps ten years—didn't I think it over a bit? So, Pyotr Gorshkov, you're suffering. Oh, excuse me, I'll only add about our house, my father's, with the tin roof—Praskovya Savishna worries about it, but not me, that died away long ago. For what truth are you suffering? In the town of Pustozersk, not far from our camp, Archpriest Avvakum sat in a pit in the reign of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich. They had cut off his tongue because he wouldn't keep silent; with his tongue cut off, he sat in a pit and wrote appeals to the Russian people, begging them to live by the truth and to stand up for the truth, even unto death. I read Avvakum's writings. Then there was one truth, and today it's another—but it's truth. And the truth is the Russian soil.

"He speaks convincingly," Ivan Sudarev said to the Chief of Staff. "Continue, Gorshkov, and get down to business."

"Let's not hurry—we'll get around to business, too. Yesterday a German—an officer he was—was telling me that his dog was a clever and useful animal, which, he said, he could not say about the Russians. The Germans are making fun of us—eh?" Pyotr Filippovich suddenly relaxed his wrinkles and looked at his listeners with round, colourless, heavy eyes. "They're making fun of the Russian people: there it goes, unwashed and uncombed, a total fool—beat it to death! Yesterday another

officer—right out on the street in front of everybody—began to paw little Anyutka Kiseleva, such a nice girl she is, and he lifted up her dress and got all out of breath. What's it all about? Is it the coming of the Antichrist? Is it the end of the Russian land? The Soviet power has armed the people and led it into battle to stop the damned Germans from making fun of us. You're doing important work, comrades, I thank you. The Soviet power belongs to us, Russians, peasants. I wrote off and forgot my personal score long ago."

Pyotr Filippovich leaned his elbows on his knees and covered his forehead under the peak of his caracul cap with his palm.

"Now—decide. Lead me into the forest and shoot me. I'm ready—only, by God, it'll hurt. . . . Or else take my word. Here's what I propose: to give you all the information about them; I'll know everything, I'll get into their army headquarters—I've plenty of cunning. I'll work boldly. I'm not afraid of death, and tortures don't frighten me."

Ivan Sudarev and Chief of Staff Yevtyukhov went into the dugout, where they had a little argument. On the one hand, it was difficult to trust such a person; on the other, it would be foolish not to take advantage of his proposal. They climbed out of the dugout, and Yevtyukhov said sternly to Pyotr Filippovich, who continued to sit on the log:

"We've decided to trust you. If you deceive us—we'll find you even in hell!"

Pyotr Filippovich's face brightened. He rose, took off his hat, and bowed.

"I am happy," he said. "Very happy. I'll supply the information wherever you say, through my little girl. My son is weak—takes after his mother, but the daughter, Anna, is like me—she's a sullen, secretive child."

Pyotr Filippovich was blindfolded, and the same girls led him away.

Early in the morning on Monday, the same sort of wet and dismal day, German soldiers began to drive the inhabitants out into the street, shouting strange words at them and pointing in the direction of the village soviet. On a small square where until recently there had been a little garden with a statue of Lenin, torn down and smashed by the Germans, a horizontal bar now stood. Two thin ropes with nooses hung from it.

Everybody already knew that they were going to hang Alexei Sviridov, a Young Communist League member whom the Germans had wounded in a hazel grove not far from the village, and Klavdia Ushakova, a schoolteacher at the Medvedovka elementary school who was captured while trying to carry Alexei Sviridov off to safety.

Pointing with their chins and shouting as though at cattle being driven along a dusty road to the slaughterhouse in town, the soldiers pressed the people up closer to the horizontal bar. The rain streamed down their steel helmets, down the wrinkled faces of women, down the cheeks of children. The mud gurgled underfoot. Nothing was heard but the faint outcries of villagers pricked by bayonets.

A truck drove up. The schoolteacher, bareheaded and as white as a corpse, her black coat unbuttoned and her hands tied behind her back, was standing on it. The half-dead Sviridov sat at her feet. He was a fiery, convincing fellow, well liked in the village. There was hardly anything left of him after the tortures, he slumped like a sack of flour. Two officers followed the truck: the tall German in glasses, carrying a camera, and the good-looking one. They were both smiling smugly as they looked about at the Russians.

The truck drove up, turned around and backed up under the horizontal bar. Two soldiers jumped onto the truck. Then Klavdia Ushakova, opening her eyes wide as though with incomprehending astonishment, shouted in a low-pitched voice:

"Comrades, I'm dying, wipe out the Germans, swear you will. . ."

A soldier swung his palm over her mouth and at once began hastily and clumsily pulling the noose over her thin, childish neck from the back.

Still seated, Alexei Sviridov gave a hoarse, heart-rending shout:

"Comrades, kill the Germans! . ."

The other soldier struck him over the head and also began to pull on the noose.

The people in the crowd were crying louder and louder. The truck jerked forward sharply. Klavdia Ushakova's legs dragged forward, her body pitched back as though she were falling, and then she swung free. She was the first to hang on the thin rope, her bare head bent toward her shoulder, her eyes closed. . . .

Pyotr Filippovich, the burgomaster, stood on the spot where the truck had been. The crowd watched with horror as he removed his hat and crossed himself.

At dusk several days after the execution the Chief of Staff stood in the designated place, in a thicket of scrub oak in a gully, waiting for the Gorshkov girl. Gorshkov himself came. The Chief of Staff trembled from head to foot as he looked at him. But Gorshkov merely squatted on his haunches and in a quiet voice began to give a detailed account of the execution.

The people realized that great martyrs, saints, had departed from this world. Their last challenging words are still ringing in everybody's ears. As for information, here it is . . .

He then began to report more important information than the Chief of Staff had ever dreamed of. For a long time he gazed wide-eyed at Gorshkov.

"Well, if you're lying . . ."

In reply Pyotr Filippovich only spread out his palms and grinned; out of his hat he took a map on which the German petrol and munitions stores were marked with crosses.

"Don't you draw any more maps," Yevtyukhov told him, pocketing the sheet of paper. "I forbid it most firmly. Keep everything in your memory—and no papers! And don't come here any more yourself. Send the girl."

Gorshkov's information proved exact. German dumps were blasted skyward one after the other. The pale, taciturn Anna stole up to the gully almost every evening with information both important and unimportant. One day she said in her usual grumbling, indifferent tone:

"Papa told me to tell you they've received new tommy guns and that he's got the key to the warehouse now. You'll be the first ones to get them. Come tomorrow night, but he said you shouldn't dare fire at the sentries but only use knives."

Pyotr Filippovich operated boldly and audaciously. He seemed to be mocking the Germans, to be demonstrating to them that the Russian is truly a cleverly contrived person, and that it was not for the shallow, limited German mind to grapple with the sober, inspired, sharp Russian mind which often does not even know the limits of its own potentialities.

Both officers were confident that they had found a quick-witted person as loyal to them as a dog to its master. They lived in

constant terror: under their very noses army stores burned down and trains were wrecked—and just those trains which were carrying troops or especially important freight; it never would have occurred to them, for instance, that a good half of the rifles, tommy guns and revolvers received in crates from Warsaw were already gone, and that carefully sealed crates loaded with sand had been shipped from Medvedovka to the front. The officer with Thor's streaks of lightning on his collar never dreamed that the object of the attack on his house one murky night had been to steal for several hours his dispatch case, containing a map with extremely important notations. He himself escaped with nothing more serious than a scare when in the middle of the night the windowpane crashed and something landed on the floor with such a blast that if he had not been lying on a low cot at the time the irreparable would have occurred. He sprang out into the street in his drawers. Pandemonium spread through the village. Soldiers ran out of the huts shouting "Partisanen!" and firing into the darkness. Two sentries with slashed throats lay near the officer's porch. It was morning before he realized that his dispatch case was missing. Later on Pyotr Filippovich brought it together with a little suitcase and a muddied uniform—he had found these articles in a vegetable patch nearby; the partisans had evidently dropped them as they fled.

Pyotr Filippovich's burgomastership cost the Germans dearly. But finally he was caught—because of a petty thing, or rather, because of his overbearing wrath against the Germans. He stole a rubber stamp and a letterhead, took a German typewriter from the warehouse, and drove over to the village of Staraya Buda, where the partisan detachment of Vasili Vasilyevich Kozubsky operated. The director of the school wrote him out a pass in German to enter the town and army headquarters. Although Vasili Vasilyevich knew German well, he made a mistake in a case ending. This was Gorshkov's undoing. He

was detained and sent back to Medvedovka together with the forged pass. Neither the tall officer, nor the good-looking one could grasp such unfathomable Russian insidiousness, but later they became enraged: now everything was clear. . .

This happened at a time when the Red Army had broken through one of the sectors of the German front and was driving the Germans out of villages and hamlets. The partisans were the first to enter and occupy Medvedovka. On the street Yevtyukhov was accosted by Anna; the girl's hair was matted with earth and twisted as though by plica; her face was drawn, dusty, aged, her dress was torn at the knees.

"Are you looking for my papa?"

"Yes, yes, what's the matter with him?"

"The Germans burned down our hut and killed mama and brother. They tortured my papa four days; he's still hanging alive, come on."

Walking as though in a trance, Anna led Yevtyukhov to the former Gorshkov house with the tin roof. She turned and with difficulty parted her lips to say:

"Don't you think anything—my papa didn't tell them a word."

Gorshkov, clad only in his underpants, hung from a cross beam in the cow shed, his feet were blue and slack; his sagging body was covered with welts, his arms had been twisted behind his back, and his ribs protruded—a hook had been fixed into his right chest, and he hung from the cross beam on a rib.

When Yevtyukhov called some men and tried to lift him to lighten his sufferings, Pyotr Filippovich, evidently delirious, muttered:

"Nichevo. We're Russians."

Mikhail Sholokhov

HATE

". . . You cannot defeat an enemy without having learnt to hate him from the bottom of your heart."

(Order of the Day of the People's Commissar of Defence of the U.S.S.R. J. Stalin, May 1, 1942.)

LIKE MEN, trees also fulfill their individual destinies in wartime. I have seen a huge tract of woodland cut down by our artillery fire. Here, quite recently, the Germans, driven out of the village of X. . had entrenched themselves, thinking to make a prolonged stay; but death mowed them down together with the trees. Under the felled pine trunks lay German dead, their mangled bodies rotting among the living green of the ferns, and all the resinous fragrance of shell-splintered pine was powerless to drown that stiflingly-sickly, pungent stench of decaying bodies. Even the earth itself with its dun-coloured scorched and brittle-edged shell holes gave off, it seemed, the odour of the grave . . .

Silently, majestically, death held sway in that clearing made and ploughed up by our shells, but in the very middle of the clearing stood a solitary silver birch that had survived by some miracle and the breeze swayed its splinter-scratched boughs and whispered in the shiny and gluey young leaves.

We were walking through the clearing. The young orderly just ahead of me touched the birch trunk lightly and asked with sincere and affectionate astonishment:

"How did you manage to come through it, my sweet?"

But while a pine that is hit by a shell falls as though mowed down by the wind, leaving only a bristly stump oozing pine tar, the oak meets death otherwise.

A German shell hit the trunk of an ancient oak growing on the bank of a nameless stream. The yawning, jagged wound sapped the life from half the tree, but the other half, bowed by the explosion towards the water, revived marvellously in the springtime and burst into luxuriant leaf. And to this day, no doubt, the lower boughs of that mutilated oak bathe in the running water while the upper still stretch out eagerly to the sunlight their firm, chiselled leaves.

Tall, rather stooped, with something of the kite in his high, broad shoulders, Lieutenant Gerasimov was sitting at the entrance of the dugout, giving us a circumstantial account of today's action, the enemy tank attack repulsed by his battalion.

His lean face was calm, almost indifferent; his inflamed eyes screwed up wearily. He spoke in a cracked bass and from time to time interlaced his big knotty fingers: it was curiously out of keeping with his powerful frame, his manly, strong face—this gesture so eloquent of mute grief or profound and painful reverie.

Suddenly he ceased speaking and a change came over his face: his swarthy cheeks paled, the muscles twitched in the hollows beneath the cheekbones, and his eyes, gazing steadily before him, lit up with such fierce, unquenchable hatred that I involuntarily turned to follow his gaze. Three German prisoners were crossing the woods from the forward fringe of our defences, escorted by a Red Army man in a summer tunic bleached by the sun, his trench cap pushed to the back of his head.

The Red Army man trudged on at a leisurely pace, rhythmically swinging his rifle, the bayonet flashing menacingly in the sunlight. And the Germans too plodded on leisurely, unwillingly dragging their feet shod in low boots caked with yellow mud.

As he reached the dugout, the German prisoner, who walked in front—an elderly man with hollow cheeks overgrown with thick brown stubble—cast a glowering, wolfish glance at us, then turned sharply away and adjusted the helmet attached to his belt. Lieutenant Gerasimov sprang to his feet and barked at the Red Army man:

"What are you up to? Taking 'em for a stroll?! Now then, get a move on and more sprightly!"

He evidently wanted to add something else but lost his breath with indignation. Turning sharply, he ran down into the dugout. A senior lieutenant who was present volunteered a reply to my inquiring, astonished glance.

"Can't be helped," he said in an undertone. "It's his nerves. He was taken prisoner by the Germans—didn't you know? You ought to talk to him sometime. Went through an awful lot there, and naturally he can't bear the sight of a live German after that—yes, a live German. He doesn't mind looking at dead ones, I'd say, he even gets a certain satisfaction out of it, but let him only catch sight of prisoners and he either shuts his eyes and sits there pale as death, or turns away and clears out."

The lieutenant moved nearer to me and dropped his voice to a whisper: "I went into action with him twice. He's as strong as a horse, and you ought to see what he does. . . . I've seen a lot in my time, but the way he lays about him with butt and bayonet —I tell you there's something terrifying about it!"

That night the German heavy artillery kept up a disturbing fire. At regular intervals a dull rumble was heard in the distance, followed a few seconds later by the metallic whine of a shell in the starry sky overhead; the whine would rise to a pitch and gradually die away till somewhere behind us, in the direction of the highway, crowded in the daytime with trucks bringing

up ammunition to the firing line, there would be a spurt of yellow flame and an explosion like a thunder-clap.

In the intervals between the shells, when silence fell on the woods, we could hear the thin whine of the gnats and the diffident croaking of startled frogs from the neighbouring swamp.

We were lying under a hazel bush and Lieutenant Gerasimov was leisurely giving us his story, beating off the gnats with a twig. I give the story here as far as I can remember it:

"Before the war I was a mechanic at a factory in Western Siberia. I was called up last year—the ninth of July, 1941, to be exact. I've got a family, a wife and two children, and then there's my father, he's disabled. Well, my wife, naturally, cried a bit when she saw me off, and told me, 'Defend your country and your folks to the last. Lay down your life if need be but we've got to win through!' I remember I laughed then and said to her, 'Who do you think you are, my wife or the family agitator? I guess I'm big enough to know myself what I'm about, and as for winning through—we'll wring it out of the fascists by the throat, don't you worry.'

"My dad's made of tougher stuff, of course, but I didn't get off without a bit of parting advice from him either. 'Remember, Victor,' he said, 'the Gerasimovs are no ordinary family. You come of a line of workingmen: your great-grandfather worked for Stroganov; our family's been turning out the country's iron for hundreds of years, and you've got to be like iron in this war. The government we have is of our own making, it kept you a commander of the reserves before the war broke out, and you've got to let the enemy have it good and hard.'

"'We will, Dad,' I said.

"On the way to the station I dropped in at the District Party Committee headquarters. Our Secretary was a dry, matter-of-fact chap given to reasoning and I thought to myself—well, if my wife and my old man simply couldn't resist giving me some parting advice, this fellow will surely never let me go without a half-hour speech at least. It turned out just the very opposite. 'Sit down, Gerasimov,' he says. 'It used to be the custom in the old days to sit down for a minute or two before taking a journey.'

"We sat quietly for a bit, and then he got up and I saw that his glasses looked sort of blurred. . . . Well, I thought to myself, wonders are happening today. And then he said, 'There's nothing much to say, Comrade Gerasimov. I remember you when you were just so high, a lop-eared youngster wearing a Pioneer's red tie. And I remember you afterwards as a Young Communist League member, and I've known you as a member of the Party for ten years now. Show no mercy to those German swine! The Party organization has confidence in you!' For the first time we kissed each other—and somehow that Secretary didn't seem such a dry old stick as before.

"And I came out of the District Committee building cheered and moved by the affectionate way he treated me.

"My wife, too, put me in a more cheerful frame of mind. You can well understand it's not a particularly cheerful business for any man's wife—having to see her husband off to the front. Well, and mine also got a bit upset, she wanted to say something really important but everything had gone clean out of her head. The train was just pulling out and she ran alongside, wouldn't let go of my hand and kept on repeating:

"'See you look after yourself, Vitya, and don't catch cold out there at the front.' 'Good heavens, Nadya,' I said, 'what do you take me for? I shouldn't think of catching cold. It's a very

healthy and even temperate climate out there.' And I felt sad at parting with her and at the same time cheered by the silly but sweet things she said. And then a quiet anger at the Germans took hold of me. 'Since you were the first to start, our treacherous neighbours—you'd better look out,' I thought. 'We'll give you the drubbing of your life!'"

He was silent for a few minutes, listening to the spasmodic exchange of machine-gun fire on the forward fringe. It ceased as suddenly as it had begun.

"Before the war we used to get machinery from Germany. When I was assembling it, I remember, I used to examine every part five or six times, turning it over and looking at it from every side. There was no doubt about it, skilful hands had made those machines. I used to read books by German writers, and somehow I'd got into the way of respecting the German people. True, I used to think at times what a shame it was that a people so gifted and industrious should stand that abominable Hitlerite regime. . . . But that, after all, was their own affair. . . . Then the war broke out in Western Europe. . . .

"And so I was on my way to the front and I couldn't help thinking: their army's not a weak one and they're pretty strong on the technical side. Why, when you come to think of it, it's really interesting to cross swords with an enemy like that and break his ribs. We weren't so simple either, in 1941. I must admit I never looked for too much honesty in this adversary of ours—you can't expect anything of that sort when you're dealing with fascism—but I never thought we'd have to fight such a downright unprincipled gang as the Germans actually turned out to be. But we'll come to that later on. . . .

"Our unit reached the front at the end of July. Early on the morning of the twenty-seventh we went into action. At first, being new to it, it was a bit terrifying. They made us a bit

uncomfortable with their trench mortars but towards evening we'd got the hang of things, knocked them about a bit, and dislodged them from one of the villages. We rounded up a bunch of them, about fifteen men, in that engagement. I remember it clearly as if it had only just happened. They were brought in looking frightened and pale. My men had cooled down by then and each brought the prisoners what he could spare: a pot of soup, some tobacco or a fag, others treated them to some tea. And they clapped them on the back and called them 'camarade.' 'What are you fighting for, camarade,' and all that sort of thing.

"One of our fellows, a man with years of service behind him, watched this touching scene and said, 'Chuck slobbering over these friends of yours. Here they're all "camarades." Wait till you see what they're doing behind their own lines, how they treat our wounded men and civilians.' Well, his words were like a bucket of cold water on our heads. And then he walked off.

"Soon after that our troops launched an offensive and then we did see what they were doing: villages razed to the ground; hundreds of women, children and old folks shot; mutilated corpses of Red Army prisoners; women and girls, some only children, raped and then brutally murdered.

"One case in particular stuck in my mind: it was a girl of about eleven. She must have been on her way to school when the Germans caught her, dragged her into a potato patch, raped and then killed her. There she lay among the crushed potato-tops, a chit of a girl, a mere child, with her school-books lying all around spattered with blood. Her face was frightful, gashed with a sabre. She was still clutching her open school-satchel. We covered the body with a cape and stood about silently for a bit. Then the men went away just as silently. But I lingered on, whispering over and over again, in a sort of daze: 'Barkov and Polovinkin. Physical Geography Reader for Junior Secondary

and Secondary Schools.' It was the title of one of the books lying there in the grass. A book I knew. . . Because my own little girl was in the fifth form. . . .

"This was near Ruzhin. At Skvira we came across a gully where the Germans had tortured captured Red Army men to death. You've been in a butcher shop, haven't you? Well, that'll give you an idea of what the place looked like. . . .

"The bodies hung from the boughs of the trees growing in the gully. The arms and legs had been hacked off, and half the skin flayed off. . . . The bodies of eight more men lay in a heap at the bottom of the gully. And there you couldn't make anything out. It was just a pile of slaughtered flesh. And stacked on top of it, like dishes one fitting into the other, were eight Red Army trench caps. . . .

"You see, I couldn't even tell you all that I've seen. There are no words to describe it. You have to see yourself. Anyhow it's about time we changed the subject," and Lieutenant Gerasimov said nothing for a long time.

"Is smoking allowed here?" I asked.

"Yes, of course, but don't show a light," he replied in a hoarse voice. Then, lighting up himself, he went on:

"You can easily understand that after seeing all the Germans have done we've become pretty savage ourselves. It was only to be expected. Every one of us realized that we weren't dealing with human beings but with foul beasts drunk with blood. It was apparent that the Germans killed, raped and murdered our people with the same thoroughness and precision they had once applied in making their machines. After a while we had to fall back again, but we kept on fighting like devils all the time.

"Nearly all the men in my company were Siberians. But we put up a stubborn fight for every inch of Ukrainian soil. Many a

man from my parts was killed in the Ukraine, but the Germans had to pay a heavier price still. Yes, we were losing ground but we let them have it hot just the same."

He took a few puffs at his cigarette, then went on, and now there was tenderness in his voice.

"Fine soil in the Ukraine, and the nature is lovely too. Every village, every hamlet, seemed near and dear to us. Maybe it's because we weren't stinting our blood to defend them, and blood, they say, is thicker than water. . . . And whenever we had to withdraw from any of those villages our hearts ached, ached like the very dickens. It hurt, hurt devilishly. Here we were abandoning a place, and we simply could not look each other in the eye.

"Little did I think at the time that I'd ever be a prisoner of the Germans. But that's what happened. I was wounded in September for the first time, but I stayed on with my company. And on the twenty-first I was wounded for the second time in the fighting around Denisovka, Poltava Region, and taken prisoner.

"German tanks had broken through on our left flank and their infantry came pouring into the breach. We were surrounded but we fought our way through. That day my company suffered particularly heavy losses. We repulsed two tank attacks, set fire to and crippled of the enemy's tanks and an armoured car and laid down about a hundred and twenty Hitlerites in a maize field. But at this point they brought up their mortar batteries and we were obliged to abandon the height which we'd held from midday till four o'clock. It had been hot since morning. Not a cloud in the sky and the sun blazing down till you felt you couldn't breathe. Shells were coming over thick and fast and, I remember, we were so thirsty our lips were swollen black and I was issuing orders in a hoarse croak that I didn't

recognize as my own voice. We were crossing a ravine when a shell burst right in front of me. I saw a pillar of black earth and dust—and—that was all. One shell splinter went through my helmet and a second got me in the right shoulder.

"I don't remember how long I lay there unconscious, but the tramping of feet brought me to myself. Raising my head, I saw that I wasn't lying where I had fallen. My tunic was gone and my shoulder had been roughly bandaged. I had lost my helmet, too. There was a bandage round my head but it hadn't been properly fastened and the end hung down on my chest. It flashed through my mind that my men had carried me off the field and bandaged me on the way; and it was them I hoped to see when, after much difficulty, I raised my head. But running towards me were not my men—but Germans! It was the tramp of their feet that had brought me back to consciousness. I could see them perfectly clearly now, just as though on a cinema screen. I groped about me: neither revolver nor rifle nor even a hand grenade were within reach. Someone—probably one of my own men—had relieved me of my arms and map case.

"'So this is the end,' I thought to myself. What else was I thinking at the moment? If you want to use my story for a future novel, you'd better fill in the gaps yourself. To tell the truth, I hadn't time to think of anything just then. The Germans were close at hand and I didn't want to die lying down. I simply didn't want to. I just couldn't meet the end lying down, you understand? So I made a terrific effort and got up on my knees, touching the ground with my hands to steady myself.

"By the time they reached me I was on my feet. Yes, I stood there, rather groggy, and terribly afraid that my knees would give way any moment and they'd finish me off with their bayonets while I'd be down. I can't recall a single face now. They clustered around me talking and laughing. 'Kill me, you blackguards!' I said, 'Kill me and be done with it, before I fall.'

One of them hit me with his rifle butt. I fell but managed to get up again. They burst out laughing and one of them waved his hand as much as to say: get a move on. I did.

"My face was caked with blood from the wound in my head, and blood was still flowing from it, warm and sticky; my shoulder ached, and I couldn't raise my right hand. I remember now that all I wanted was to lie down and not go anywhere, but still—I went on. . . .

"No, I certainly didn't want to die, and even less did I want to stay a prisoner. With much effort, fighting down dizziness and nausea, I plodded on; so there was life in me yet, and I could still move. But oh, how thirst tormented me! My mouth was parched and all the time I kept putting one foot in front of the other a sort of black mist seemed to be billowing before my eyes. I was on the verge of unconsciousness but I went on, thinking to myself: 'As soon as I get a drink and a bit of a rest, I'll make a dash for it!'

"All of us who had been taken prisoner were assembled on the fringe of a grove and lined up. They were men from a neighbour unit of ours. From my own regiment I recognized only two Red Army men—from the 3rd Company. Most of the prisoners were wounded.

"A German lieutenant demanded in broken Russian if there were any commissars and commanders among us. Nobody answered. Then he snapped out: 'Commissars and officers—two paces forward march!' Nobody budged.

"The lieutenant paced slowly in front of the line and picked out about fifteen men who looked more or less like Jews. He asked each of them, 'Jude?' and, without waiting for an answer, ordered the man to fall out. The men he picked out included not only Jews but Armenians and Russians who happened to be swarthy and have black hair. They were led off a little distance

away and shot down before our eyes with tommy guns. Then we were submitted to a rather perfunctory search, and deprived of our wallets and other personal belongings. I was never in the habit of carrying my Party card in my wallet: it was in an inside pocket of my breeches, that's why they overlooked it. Men are queer creatures, when you come to think of it. I knew for certain that my life hung on a thread, that even if I wasn't killed when I attempted to escape, I'd be sure to be killed on the road because I'd lost so much blood that I wouldn't be able to keep up with the rest. And yet, when the search was over and I knew I still had my Party card on me, I was so glad that I actually forgot all about my thirst.

"We were lined up and driven off westward. A pretty strong guard kept the roadsides, in addition to a dozen German motorcyclists. We were kept going at a quick pace and my strength was ebbing fast. I fell twice, but each time I scrambled to my feet and went on because I knew that if I stayed down a minute longer the column would pass on, and I would be shot then and there in the roadway. That was what happened to a sergeant just ahead of me. He'd been wounded in the leg and could hardly drag himself along. He groaned terribly and sometimes even shrieked with pain. We'd gone about a kilometre when he cried out:

"'No, I can't stick it any longer! Good-bye, comrades!' and sat down in the middle of the road.

"The others tried to give him a hand but he slumped down again on the ground. I remember him like someone in a dream —his drawn, pale, youthful face, the knitted brows, and eyes wet with tears. The column passed on. He was left behind. I glanced round, and saw a man on a motorcycle ride up close to him and, without getting off, pull out his revolver, shove it against the sergeant's ear and fire. Before we reached the river

the Germans shot several more Red Army men who fell behind.

"And then we came in sight of the river, a wrecked bridge and a truck that'd got stuck at the side of the crossing. And right there I fell face downwards. Did I faint? No. I didn't. I just measured my length in the road. My mouth was full of dust. I ground my teeth in fury. I could feel the sand gritting between my teeth, but I couldn't get up. My comrades were marching past me. 'Get up quick!' one of them said in a low voice as he passed, 'or they'll do you in!' I started to tear my mouth apart with my fingers and to press hard on my eyeballs so that the pain would rouse me and help me to get to my feet again.

"The column had passed on and my ear caught the swish of the motorcycle wheels coming towards me. Somehow I did manage to struggle to my feet! Without glancing at the motorcyclist, and staggering like a drunkard, I forced myself to reach the column and fell into line somewhere at the back. Crossing the river, the tanks and trucks stirred up the mud in the water, but we drank of it greedily—that warm, brown slush—and it seemed sweeter to us than the purest spring water. I splashed my head and shoulder with it. That refreshed me and my strength came back. Now I could trudge on in the hope that I would not drop and be left lying in the roadway.

"Hardly had we left the river behind than we met a column of German medium tanks. The driver of the leading tank, seeing that we were prisoners, stepped on the gas and drove full tilt into our column. The front ranks were mangled and crushed under the treads. The motorcyclists and the rest of the escort roared with laughter at the sight, bawled something to the tank crews, who had popped their heads out of the hatches, and waved their hands. Then they lined us up again and drove us along by the side of the road. Oh yes, they've a queer sense of humour, the Germans, there's no doubt about it. . .

"That evening and night I made no attempt to escape, as I realized that I wouldn't be able to do it—I was too weak from loss of blood. Besides, a strict watch was kept over us, and any attempt at escape would have failed. But how I cursed myself afterwards for not having made the attempt! Next morning we were driven through a village where a German unit was stationed. The German infantrymen trooped out into the street to look at us, and our guards made us go through that village at the double. They wanted to humiliate us before the German soldiers who were just coming up to the front. And we did it at the double. Whoever lagged behind or fell was shot on the spot. By evening we had reached the war prisoners' camp.

"This was the yard of a former machine-and-tractor station well fenced off with barbed wire. Prisoners were huddled inside shoulder to shoulder. We were handed over to the camp guard and they drove us inside with their rifle butts. To call that camp hell would be saying nothing at all. For one thing, there was no latrine. Men had to relieve themselves where they stood and then sit or lie in filth and stinking pools. The weaker men never got up at all. We were given food and water once a day—that is to say, we got a mug of water and a handful of raw millet or mildewed sunflower seed. Nothing else. Some days they forgot to give us anything at all. . . .

"After a day or two heavy rains set in. The slush and mud was up to our knees by now. In the morning the men, drenched to the skin, steamed like horses; and the rain never ceased. . . . Several dozen prisoners died every night. We were getting weaker and weaker for want of food. And my wounds troubled me a lot.

"By the sixth day I felt that my head and shoulder were much worse. The wounds began to fester and smell. Next to the camp there were collective farm stables, where seriously wounded Red Army men were lying. In the morning I went over to the

corporal of the guard and told him I wanted to see the doctor, as I had been told there was one with the wounded. The German NCO spoke Russian quite well. 'Go to your doctor, Russian,' he replied. 'He's sure to help you right away.'

"At that time I didn't understand the sneer, and made my way to the stables.

"The army doctor met me at the door. He was a finished man. I could see at once. Thin to the point of emaciation, he was already half out of his mind with all he had gone through. The wounded lay about on manure litters, suffocating with the abominable stench. Their wounds were crawling with maggots and those of the men who were still able to do so, dug them out with their fingernails and sticks. . . Beside them lay a pile of dead prisoners that no one had time to clear away.

"'See that,' the doctor said. 'So how can I help you? I haven't a bandage or anything. Clear out, for God's sake. Take your dirty bandages off and sprinkle ashes on the wounds. There's some fresh ashes at the door.'

"I did as he advised. The German NCO met me at the door. He was grinning broadly. 'Well, how was it? Oh, your soldiers have a splendid doctor. Did he give you any help!' I wanted to pass him without speaking but he punched me in the face and shouted: 'So you won't answer me, you swine!' I fell, and he kicked me in the chest and head until he got tired. I'll never forget that German as long as I live, never. He beat me up several times after that too. As soon as he'd catch sight of me through the barbed wire, he'd order me out and start beating me silently and methodically.

You wonder how I stood it all? Before the war, and before I became a mechanic, I worked as longshoreman on the Kama, and I could carry two sacks of salt, a hundredweight each, at one time. Yes, I was pretty strong, nothing to complain of, and

in general I have a sound constitution. But the chief thing was —I didn't want to die, my will to resist was strong. I had to get back to the army to fight for our country—and I did get back eventually, to avenge myself on the enemy to the full!

From that camp, which was a sort of evacuation centre, I was transferred to another about a hundred kilometres away. It didn't differ at all from the first one: the same tall posts with barbed wire around them, and not a bit of roofing over the prisoners' heads—nothing. And the food was just the same, except that occasionally instead of raw millet we got a mug of cooked mouldy grain, or they would drag in the carcasses of some dead horses and let the prisoners divide the meat up among themselves. We ate so as not to die of starvation and hundreds of our men died of it. . . . Then, to make matters worse, the cold weather set in; in October it rained without end, and there were frosts in the morning. We suffered cruelly from the cold. I managed to get a tunic and a greatcoat off a dead Red Army man, but even these didn't protect me from the cold. We were used to hunger by then.

"The soldiers who guarded us were well-fed—fattened on what they were stealing. They were all tarred with the same brush. A choicer selection of scoundrels would be hard to find. Their idea of entertainment ran on the following lines. In the morning a corporal would come up to the barbed wire and announce through the interpreter: 'Rations will be given out now. They'll be issued on the left side.'

"The corporal would leave. Every man able to stand on his feet would line up on the left side. And then we'd wait—an hour, two hours, even three. Hundreds of shivering, living skeletons standing in the piercing wind. Standing and waiting.

"Suddenly Germans would appear on the opposite side. They'd throw pieces of horse flesh over the barbed wire. The whole

famished crowd would stampede across to the other side. There would be a regular scrimmage over the muddied bits of horse meat.

"The Germans would roar with laughter. Then there'd be a prolonged burst of machine-gun fire followed by shrieks and groans. The prisoners would rush to the left side again. The ground would be strewn with killed and wounded. . . . The lanky first lieutenant—the superintendent of the camp—would then approach the barbed wire accompanied by the interpreter. Scarcely able to control his laughter, he would say:

"'It's been reported to me that a disgraceful scene took place during the distribution of rations. Should this occur again I'll have all of you Russian swine shot down without mercy. Clear away the killed and wounded!' The German soldiers crowding behind the officer would be splitting their sides laughing. This was the sort of 'wit' they were fond of.

"In silence we dragged the dead away from the camp yard and buried them in a gully nearby. . . .

"In that camp too they beat us regularly with their fists, sticks and rifle butts. Sometimes they beat us out of sheer boredom, sometimes for amusement. My wounds were beginning to heal, then they opened again either from the constant dampness or the beating, and the pain was unbearable. But I stood it, I lived through it all, still clinging to my hope of delivery. . . . We slept on the muddy ground, they wouldn't give us even a bit of straw. We would huddle close together and lie like that. And all night the fidgeting would go on: those who were at the very bottom, in the mud, would freeze and those who were on the top would be just as cold. There was neither sleep nor rest, only bitter torment.

"So the days went by as in an evil dream and with every day I grew weaker. A child could have knocked me down.

Sometimes I looked with horror at my skinny, withered arms and wondered: 'How shall I ever get out of here?' And how I cursed myself for not having attempted to escape at the beginning! If they'd have killed me, I would have been spared all this ghastly torture.

Winter came. We cleared away the snow and slept on the frozen ground. Our numbers were dwindling steadily. . . At last it was announced that in a few days we were to be sent to work. We all brightened up. Hope stirred in everybody's breast, faint enough, but still a hope that somehow we might get a chance to escape.

That night it was very still and frosty. Just before daybreak we heard the booming of artillery. The people around me woke to life. When the rumble of guns came again someone cried:

"'Comrades, it's our troops—attacking!'

"What followed is well-nigh inconceivable. The whole camp was on its feet, even those who hadn't been able to get up for days. All around you could hear feverish whispering and stifled sobbing. . . . Someone near me was crying, just like a woman. . . . And me too. . . . Me too. . . ."

Lieutenant Gerasimov's voice broke as he said this. After a short pause he pulled himself together and went on in a quieter voice: "The tears rolled down my cheeks too, and froze in the chill wind. . . . Someone started to sing the 'International' in a feeble voice: it was taken up by our cracked, piping voices. The sentries opened fire on us with rifles and tommy guns. An order was snapped out: 'Lie down!' I lay flat, pressing my body into the snow, and cried like a child. But they were tears of pride as well as joy, pride in our people. The Germans could kill us, unarmed and enfeebled as we were with hunger, they could torture us to death, but they hadn't been able to break our

spirit and never would! They'd got hold of the wrong kind for that, I'm telling you straight!"

I didn't hear the end of Lieutenant Gerasimov's story that night. He received an urgent summons from headquarters. We met again a few days later. The dugout smelled of mildew and pine-tar. He was sitting on a bench, leaning forward, his huge, bony wrists resting on his knees, his fingers interlocked. As I looked at him it occurred to me that it was probably in the prison camp that he had got into the habit of sitting like that for hours, with his fingers interlocked, sitting silently, lost in gloomy, oppressive, fruitless meditation. . .

"You want to know how I managed to escape? This is how it happened. Soon after the night when we'd heard the guns, we were put to work building fortifications. The frosts had been followed by a thaw. It was raining. We were marched off in a northerly direction from the camp. On the road we had a repetition of our previous march: men dropped with exhaustion, were shot and were left there.

"One of the men, by the way, was shot by a German NCO for picking up a frozen potato. We were crossing a potato field. The man in question, a sergeant, a Ukrainian named Gonchar, picked up the blasted potato and wanted to hide it. The NCO saw him. Without a word he went up to Gonchar and shot him in the back of the head. The column was ordered to halt and line up again. 'All this is German property!' the NCO explained, indicating everything with a sweep of his arm. 'Anybody who touches anything without permission will be shot!'

"On the way we had to pass through a village. The women, directly they saw us, came out and threw us pieces of bread and baked potatoes. Some of us managed to pick them up, others didn't: the guards opened fire on the windows of the houses and

we were ordered to quicken our step. But the children—there's no frightening them! They ran out into the road a good way ahead of us, and left the bread there so we could pick it up as we went along. I got a great big boiled potato, I remember. I shared it with the man next to me. We ate it, skin and all, and I'm sure I've never tasted anything so delicious in my life!

"The fortifications we were put to work on were in a woods. The guard was strengthened and we were given spades. But it wasn't of building their fortifications that I was thinking; I wanted to destroy them!

"That same evening I made up my mind: I scrambled out of the pit we were digging, grasped the spade in my left hand, and went up to the guard. . . . I had noticed that the rest of the Germans were some distance away, near a gully, and except for the man who was keeping watch over our group there wasn't another guard anywhere near us.

"'Look, my spade's broken,' I muttered, going up to the soldier. For an instant it crossed my mind that if I couldn't muster enough strength to knock him down at the first blow I was done for. The German must have noticed something in my face for he dropped his shoulder to unsling his tommy gun. Then I hit out with the spade and caught him full in the face. I couldn't get at his head because he was wearing a helmet. Still, I had enough strength left to hit him hard, and he dropped on his back without a sound. . . .

"Now I had a tommy gun and three clips. I tried to run, but saw that I couldn't. I hadn't the strength and that was all there was to it. I stopped, got my breath and started off again at a slow trot. The woods on the other side of the gully was thicker so I made for that. I can't recollect now how many times I fell, got up, fell again. . . . But I was getting farther away every minute. Sobbing, breathless with weariness, I was making my way

through a thicket on the other side of the hill when far behind me I heard tommy-gun bursts and shouts. It wouldn't be so easy to catch me now.

"Dusk would be falling soon. But if the Germans did come upon my tracks and get near me—well, I would keep only my last cartridge for myself. That thought buoyed me up, and I slowed down and began to move more cautiously.

"That night I spent in the woods. There was a village about half a kilometre away but I was afraid to go near it for fear of bumping into the Germans again.

"Next day I was picked up by some partisans. I stayed in their dugout for a couple of weeks till I got stronger. At first they were rather suspicious of me, in spite of the fact that I showed them my Party card I'd managed to sew into the lining of my coat while in the camp. But afterwards, when I began to take part in their operations, their attitude toward me changed. It was there that I opened my account of the Germans I've killed, and I continue keeping that account very carefully; the figures are gradually mounting, nearing a hundred.

"In January the partisans led me across the lines. I was about a month in the hospital. They got the splinter out of my shoulder there, and as for the rest of my ailments, the rheumatism I'd got in the camp and so on—well, that will just have to wait until the war is over. Then I was sent home from the hospital to convalesce. I was a week at home. I couldn't stay there any longer. I just got a yearning to be back; after all, my place is here, to the very end."

We said good-bye at the entrance to the dugout. Gazing out thoughtfully over the sunlit forest clearing, Lieutenant Gerasimov said:

". . . And we've learnt to fight the real proper way, and to hate and to love. War is a whetstone that sharpens all emotions. You'd think that love and hate couldn't be placed side by side. You know the old saying: 'The stallion and the timid hind—never in one harness bind.' And here you can see them harnessed and pulling well together! Bitter hatred is what I feel for the Germans for all they've done to my country and to me, and at the same time I love my people with all my heart and I want them never to suffer under the German yoke. That's what makes me, and all of us for that matter, fight so savagely: it's just these two emotions, embodied in action, that will lead us to victory. And while love of country is cherished in our hearts, and will be cherished until those hearts cease to beat, we carry our hatred on the points of our bayonets. Forgive me if it's rather an elaborate way of expressing it, but that is what I think," concluded Lieutenant Gerasimov. And for the first time since we met he smiled the candid smile of a child.

And now for the first time I noticed that this Lieutenant of thirty-two, whose grim face bore traces of the harrowing experience he had been through but who was still sturdy as an oak, had dazzlingly white hair at the temples. And so pure was that hoary whiteness won through great suffering, that the white thread of a spider's web clinging to his trench cap was lost against the temple, where I could not distinguish it, try as I might.

Alexander Fadeyev

EARTHQUAKE

* 1 *

IT WAS IN 1920, when, in accordance with the armistice concluded with the Japanese command, the units of the Maritime army group withdrew beyond the neutral zone, thirty kilometres from the railway. The Second Separate Vangou Battalion found itself in the village of Olkhovka deep in the taiga backwoods, where it was to set up winter quarters and supply dumps in the event of a renewed outbreak of partisan warfare.

August came. The winter quarters and storehouses had long been finished but the battalion had received neither food nor other supplies. It appeared to have been utterly forgotten. For a month the men had been issued no more than a handful of millet a day.

It was then that it was decided to send two section commanders, Fyodor Maigula and Trofim Shutka, to the nearest valley where there was food to ask for aid.

Maigula and Shutka were Southern Ussuri men, born in the same village and of the same age to boot, stalwart and tall as ashtrees. They were friends, besides. Maigula was given to dreaming, and when not on duty, he would lie for hours in the grass watching the clouds sail across the sky, the sunlight play on the tree trunks, the shadows fall and the colours change in the morning, at noon and at eventide. Shutka, on the other hand, had an inquisitive mind; he liked doing things and

whatever he put his hand to he did well. He was as nimble and jolly as his name.[3]

To start them properly on their way, a local tiger hunter and partisan named Kondrat Frolovich Serdyuk undertook to lead them to the creek that was to guide them through the surrounding bogs. Serdyuk was an old man as tall as Peter the Great but far broader in the shoulder, with a red beard so thick and so incredibly long that it became a standing joke that he had to brush it aside before he could answer a simple call of nature.

For tigers the old man had a soft spot in his heart, but no respect, calling them simply "cats." In his lifetime he had trapped no less than thirty of them alive; there was "no counting," as he put it himself, the number he had killed. The live tigers he sold to a firm called Kunst for delivery to German menageries, and the dead, to Chinese merchants for use in making medicaments.

Kondrat Frolovich's body and face were covered with scars and his right forearm bore the deep marks of a tiger's teeth. Once with his two sons he had trailed a tigress with three adolescent cubs. For three weeks they had pursued the beasts, preventing the tigress from stalking her prey. In the end the cubs dropped from exhaustion. Fighting off the dogs, the tigress hovered around in the vicinity, but the hunters could not get a bead on her. By twilight two of the cubs were securely bound, but the third was still at large. In the excitement of the chase, Kondrat Frolovich blundered on the adult animal in the dark and taking her for the cub, sprang at her flank with a rope in his hands with such force that the old tigress was thrown off her four feet; he realized his mistake only when the tigress' bared teeth flashed on top of him and a savage roar all but burst his

[3] Shutka is Russian for "jest."

eardrums. There was nothing to do but thrust his arm as deep as he could into the tigress' mouth; snarling and choking, the beast sank its teeth in the arm while Kondrat Frolovich's sons, unable to shoot for fear of hitting their father, took turns at beating the animal on the head with their Winchesters until the rifles were in splinters. The old man himself finally managed to sink his hunting knife, with his left hand into the tigress' heart.

Kondrat Frolovich, who had no one to talk for on end when he was out on the trail, liked to talk when he had company, and all the way he kept up a steady flow of conversation in his slow, deliberate manner.

It began with Maigula asking:

"How come you're not afraid of tigers, Grandpa? Pretty fierce animals, aren't they?"

"Why should I fear them when I know they're more afraid of me?" replied the old man. "Of course, our hunters like to tell you how they were attacked by a cat, or maybe a bear, but most of them are tall stories, you know. The most savage beast doesn't want to get mixed up with man. He goes after you only when there's no other way out. I tell you, man's the most savage beast in the taiga."

Kondrat Frolovich now went on to discuss men, of whom he turned out to be of the worst possible opinion.

"People aren't savage only toward the beast, but toward each other, and themselves, too," the old man said. "About twenty years ago I was a guide to an expedition; some educated colonel was mapping these parts. Once he told me: 'Now, Kondrat Frolovich, you are as simple as a child, even your eyes are the eyes of a child.' 'The eyes haven't got anything to do with it, when there's a vulture in my heart!' says I. 'No,' says he, 'you're a good man, and all because you live close to nature.'

Says I, 'Nature doesn't make us good. Maybe it would if we simple folks were its masters; but as it is we're its slaves. On weekdays we pull up stumps until we sweat blood, and to relax on Sundays we swill vodka and by evening we're cutting each other up. No, it's misery and hatred we get from nature, not goodness.' 'Now look at the Golds,'[4] he says, 'they're as wild as they come, but they live as naturally as children; don't you agree there's something fine and noble about them?' 'Sure there is,' says I, 'but that's because they observe the laws of brotherhood; nature for them is a cruel stepmother and they fear her.' We left it at that. True enough, we live poorly, very poorly. And no matter how hard we try to better things, they keep on going the old way. Maybe it's an earthquake folks need to shake them up a bit, to turn the whole world upside down. Perhaps those who were left would start living in a new way. Out of fear, you know," the old man added, and fixing the two young men with his grey eyes, he smiled.

They reached the creek and sat down in the shade of a cedar to have a bite before parting. After the meal, Kondrat Frolovich broke the silence suddenly:

"I don't envy you fellows. You've a terrible road ahead of you. You know what this taiga is? It's dead. Neither bird nor beast dwells here, and the wind never reaches this far. Only silence, and what silence!"

He removed his cap and listened, and his eyes grew animal-like. Maigula and Shutka also raised their heads and listened. The forest rose in front of them like an impenetrable wall. Not a leaf stirred, there was not a rustle, not a breath of wind, only the faint babble of the creek. The young men looked at the old man, then at one another, and being young, burst out laughing.

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[4] The Golds, or Nanai, are a tribe of the Tungusic-Manchurian group inhabiting the Nanai District, Maritime Region.

* 2 *

True enough, the forest was so dense that the sun rarely penetrated its depths. For thousands of years it had stood there unchallenged. Ferns the height of a man stood all around in sculptured immobility. The air was damp and oppressive. The ground was covered with rotten, moss-grown trees that had crashed with age. Now and then Maigula and Shutka sank into the debris to their waists.

They pushed on, talking of one thing and another. At first they talked because they were happy to be away from the boredom of Olkhovka. Then they talked because it was frightening to be silent; so incomprehensible was the stillness that enveloped them.

That night they sat long at the campfire staring into the flames.

In the morning Maigula went to fetch water for tea. He walked down to the creek and was bending over to dip his canteen into its surface when he stopped short with a shudder. A rotting, mouldy tree stretched across the creek, and in the tree, staring straight at Maigula, an enormous boa constrictor lay coiled, its flat, round head resting on the convolutions of its body. Its coils were studded with emeralds and in its eyes, now fixed on Maigula, were two pinpoints of gold. Everything was silent, only the creek babbled faintly.

With trembling hands Maigula dipped the canteen into the water and returned to the camp barely able to restrain himself from breaking into a run. At first he wanted to get his rifle and go back to kill the snake, but he could not bring himself to do it: the thought of returning to the creek filled him with horror.

That night, to their own surprise, the young men quarrelled. Shutka began to build a fire, and Maigula told him not to. He did not want a campfire for fear that the leaping flames would

expose them and all the weight of the gloom and silence would come down and crush them. But Shutka knew that it was always safer in the taiga with a campfire.

They began arguing, unaware that they were speaking in whispers.

"It's warm enough as it is," Maigula hissed. "Let's wrap ourselves in our coats and go to sleep."

"It'll be safer with a fire," Shutka hissed in reply. "What are you afraid of?"

Maigula resented this accusation of cowardice.

"You're the one who's afraid to be without a fire," he countered. "It's quite warm enough as it is."

"I wouldn't have believed it of you!" Shutka grew angry. "It'll be safer with a fire."

They did build the fire after all, but they ate their supper without looking at one another, and when they lay down to sleep, it was not side by side as the night before, but on opposite sides of the campfire. In the morning they got up with swollen eyes and tempers on edge.

All day they avoided meeting each other's eyes and were silent for fear of a quarrel. That day they left two high hills behind. In the evening even Shutka made no effort to start a fire.

"So we're quits," Maigula wanted to tell him. "Maybe you'll admit you're scared now?"

But he did not want to confess to his own fears; besides, he was afraid Shutka might build a campfire out of sheer stubbornness, and then it would be even more terrifying for both of them.

Wrapping themselves in their greatcoats, they lay down apart, and spent a restless, sleepless night straining their ears like wild animals for the slightest sound.

In the morning it appeared that Maigula had left the hatchet at the spot where they had camped the day before, and the quarrel was on again.

"I didn't know you were as big a fool as that!" Shutka sputtered.

Maigula looked at him with eyes black with hatred and said:

"You're the one who strapped up the packs. . . . You strapped them up!"

Now they were utterly repulsive to one another. Shutka thought that Maigula ate too much (surely the food would not last to the end of the trek), and that his lips were thick and ugly, and that he was lazy and left everything for him, Shutka, to do: building campfires, and cooking, and washing the mess-tin, and tying up the packs. As for Maigula, he was now certain that Shutka merely put up a jolly front while actually he was a crafty, base creature. And he kept recalling that at home the Shutka family had had a reputation for thievery.

They no longer spoke to one another. Their hatred grew from day to day, but they both feared a showdown. They were afraid that if they came to grips and one of them was killed, the survivor would perish in this terrible forest from fear and solitude. At night they lay apart wide awake, somehow managing to snatch some sleep in the daytime. It seemed that they had been on their way for an age. And when one evening, exhausted to the point of dropping in their tracks, they climbed to the top of Velvet Pass, notorious for its steepness and wildness, they could hardly believe their eyes: the open starry

sky spread overhead, they felt the wind in their faces and the taiga lay far below, dimly visible in the starlight.

Barely able to wait for the morning, they began the descent. Just as they reached another brook, a loud whirring in an alder grove made both leap aside, frightened by the sudden noise after so many days of silence. With unbelieving eyes Shutka and Maigula watched a covey of partridges emerge from the bushes.

The forest gradually thinned out and by noon they had reached the sun-bathed valley. A merry rivulet barred their way. Beyond it lay wheat fields under a deep-blue sky. In the distance women were reaping the grain.

The young men stripped and plunged into the water. For a long time they splashed in the cold stream, snorting and smiling to themselves. Finally Shutka spoke up:

"We made it after all, eh?" And he laughed.

For the first time in days they looked each other in the face, and each noticed the other had lost weight and grown yellow. Maigula felt sorry for Shutka, and he blinked and turned away.

* 3 *

The Suchan Regiment was stationed in the valley, and by a roundabout route it sent food to the Vangou Battalion.

Then partisan war broke out again and lasted until 1922, when the last armed Japanese was expelled from our country. Shutka and Maigula as well as Kondrat Frolovich Serdyuk fought to the end of this war.

When the war was over, Kondrat Frolovich returned to Olkhovka and resumed his tiger hunting, only the beasts he caught went to Soviet instead of German menageries. Shutka and Maigula went to school.

Another twelve years passed.

Now Kondrat Frolovich and Shutka and Maigula, all of whom had started out in life from obscurity, were eminent people known all over the country.

Kondrat Frolovich's tigers could be seen in the menageries and zoological gardens of Moscow, Leningrad, Kharkov and Tbilisi. And the children who came to see them knew they had been caught by the famous Ussuri hunter Kondrat Frolovich Serdyuk, collective farmer of Olkhovka village.

Shutka had become a builder of railways. He laid track in the Urals, in Kazakhstan, in Khibiny and in the Caucasus. Many of the people who travelled along his roads had never seen a railway before: Voguls, Kazakhs, Karelians, Lezghins. And at the rail terminals the travellers could see plaques of honour on which among other names was that of Trofim Shutka.

In the meantime Maigula had learned to paint pictures on canvas. His paintings were exhibited in Moscow, Baku, Gorlovka and Magnitogorsk. Everywhere people said his canvases helped bring up men and women in the spirit of the new life.

In the autumn of 1934 Maigula left on a trip to his birthplace.

He did not recognize these parts he had known so well. For hundreds and thousands of kilometres along the old Ussuri railway a second track was being laid, and crews of workers were busy at intervals all along the line. Night after night Maigula could not tear himself away from the coach window as he watched the headlights of tractors moving in the fields and listened to the roar of engines rise above the noise of the speeding train: it was the autumn ploughing season.

There were a great many troops at the stations. The men were well clothed and shod. During one long stop Maigula watched some troops drilling. The drill went very well.

Over the vast expanses of the taiga airplanes coursed their way. Now and then their powerful roar mingled with the noise of the train and the shadows of aircraft crept over the yellow collective farm fields and the blue waters of rivers and lakes. The airplane had become as much a part of the familiar landscape as meadow larks and pigeons.

Maigula looked at all this with moist eyes and thought: "That is the land my father, my brothers and I worked so hard to clear, the land we drenched with our sweat, tears and blood. Now people have begun to live well on this land."

His emotion reached the peak when the train pulled in at the station whence the Vangou Battalion had once withdrawn to Olkhovka. Maigula sprang out of the coach on the platform only to run into Trofim Shutka; he was wearing blue breeches, the Order of Lenin shone on his chest, and his bare feet were thrust into a pair of slippers, a sure sign he lived right there at the station.

"Hello, Fedya," Shutka said, just as if it had been only a few hours and not twelve years since they had last met. "Where're you bound for?"

"What are you doing here?" exclaimed Maigula.

They showered each other with questions without waiting for an answer, they kissed and shook each other by the shoulders. They were still strong and husky, though Shutka had gone completely bald, with only bushy ginger eyebrows standing out on his face, and Maigula's hair was as grey as a beaver's pelt.

At last Maigula managed to explain that he was on his way to visit the old folks, and Shutka that he was building a new

railway here. It occurred to Maigula that his folks, who had waited for him twelve whole years, could very well wait for a few more days, and he took his luggage off the train.

* 4 *

The railway Shutka was building ran through the very same lifeless forest where fourteen years before he and Maigula might have killed each other had they not been afraid to do so. It had been laid almost as far as Velvet Pass, whence it was to be continued to the very sea.

Could either one of them have thought when they stood under the starry sky on the crest of Velvet Pass that one of them would some day do away with it once and for all? Yet that was what had happened. Shutka was preparing to blast the pass wide open. He had planted into it twenty-six carloads of ammonal—a blasting job bigger than any since men first appeared on earth. The mountain ridge famous as a landmark throughout all these parts had been stuffed with high explosive and now it stood there ready like a pie waiting to be eaten. A chap had come along with two cameras—a big one and a small one—to photograph the explosion, so that everybody should be able to see it later on.

In the evening Shutka, Maigula and the cameraman set out in a closed rail car along the road Shutka had built, and by morning they were in Olkhovka. There they intended to pick up Kondrat Frolovich.

In Olkhovka the annual income was just being distributed among the collective farmers. A string of wagons laden with grain was moving down the dusty village street—fifteen of them, with six or seven sacks to each. This was the grain collective farmer Ivan Prutikov and his family had earned that year.

Behind the string of carts and followed by a group of collective farmers came a five-piece band. No two of the instruments kept time so that it was impossible to march in step, but for all that the sun glistened gloriously on the brass, the bunting on the carts waved merrily in the wind and everybody was in high spirits.

When the carts reached Prutikov's cottage, the chairman of the collective farm board hurried ahead to open the gate and the band blew harder, each horn still keeping its own time. The Prutikov family, sixteen people in all with the children, poured out of the cottage. The head of the family, a short, slight man with a pockmarked face that looked like a thimble, ran out to the gate, stopped in his tracks and pressed his fists against his chest.

The collective farm chairman produced a paper and read out the number of workday units the Prutikovs had to their credit and how much grain was coming to them. But Ivan Prutikov did not hear what the chairman was saying; he only stood there with his small gnarled hands pressed to his chest and muttering:

"For me? All that for me?"

He was so dazed by this sudden wealth that everybody, his own children included, laughed at him. The cameraman pulled out his smaller camera from its case and aimed it at the string of carts, the band and Ivan Prutikov himself. As for Maigula, he stood aside wiping the tears from his eyes and thinking how hard it would be to convey all this on canvas; in life everything was forever changing and moving ahead but the result on canvas was invariably static.

They found Kondrat Frolovich at home. The old man was sitting at the table peering at a school globe through his spectacles; he was holding it with both hands and turning it

from side to side the way a doctor turns the head of his patient while examining an ailing throat or eye.

"Well, well! Look who's here!" he said, removing his glasses, as the newcomers greeted him from the door.

Kondrat Frolovich still had his powerful frame. Only his beard had grown grey and he had trimmed it down to a third of what it had been so as not to frighten children in the dark.

"See how distinguished-looking he's become," Shutka said, winking at Maigula.

"I can afford to be distinguished, you know," the old man responded gravely. Then, poking a huge finger at the globe, he continued: "I was just thinking how much water there is on our planet. A great deal indeed. Got to build submarines." And he spun the globe around so that the great seas and the continents merged into one hazy whole.

It was evening when they set out for Velvet Pass. They did not make much speed for the rails here had only just been laid and were not properly fastened.

Maigula could not find a single familiar landmark all along the route. Where the railway ran the dead forest had been felled and razed with explosives until only jagged stumps were left jutting out like decayed teeth. The rail car now plunged into a gloomy gorge, now crawled along a railway embankment so high that no matter on which side you looked it seemed to be running on the brink of an abyss. The creek was still there but its banks too were bare. Wooden bridges spanned it where the railway crossed. It would have been useless to look for the spot where Maigula had seen the boa constrictor.

It was quite dark when they stepped down from the car and set out along the dirt road running parallel to the unfinished track. Campfires built around the barracks and tents ahead cast their

glow through the gathering darkness; the railway builders were having their supper. Up the road a truck stuck in the mud roared, its headlights cutting sharply into the night.

"I'm afraid they've scared your tigers away, Grandpa," said Maigula.

"That's all right. I guess my day is just about over," Kondrat Frolovich replied in a level voice.

* 5 *

Velvet Pass ceased to exist the next morning. Maigula and the old tiger hunter watched the explosion two kilometres away, behind a shelter on top of a low hill affording a view of the pass and the yellow-and-blue taiga all around. The chap with the big camera mounted on a tripod also installed himself on the same hill.

First they saw people running back and forth on the bare hills nearby, and heard Shutka swearing at someone for all he was worth. Then the hustle and bustle ceased, the people took cover and everything grew very quiet.

Suddenly the vast mass of Velvet Pass rose slowly into the air and where the ridge had been a heavy black cloud swiftly mounted skyward. At first it went up like a pillar and then slowly mushroomed out. At last the sound of the explosion came, the air blast struck the observers, and boulders were seen flying in the cloud of dust and smoke.

The explosion was nothing like a gunshot or a clap of thunder, it was rather a dull subterranean rumble that filled all space and passed through the earth in waves so that Maigula and Kondrat Frolovich not only heard it but felt it with their whole being. Rocks hurtling from the cloud like cannon balls smashed trees at the very foot of the hill where Maigula and Kondrat Frolovich stood. The air was filled with a crashing and

whistling in which the beat of horses' hoofs, the rat-tat-tat of air hammers and the swish and whine of some gigantic whip seemed to mingle. Some of the rocks actually fell on the hill, and one buried itself deep in the ground a metre or two from the cameraman. But with sweat streaming down his face he went on turning the crank of his camera.

When it was all over, a greyish-yellow fog, thickest at the site of the explosion, hovered for a long time over the locality. Then the fog dispersed and the sides of the pass were seen to have spread out and in the centre there yawned a deep gash, through which the blue sky showed above the chaos of boulders and rock massed at the bottom.

Around what had been Velvet Pass the forest was reduced to matchwood, and the vicinity lay bare but for a layer of grey dust, rocks and splintered tree trunks. Even on the slopes of the hill where Maigula and Kondrat Frolovich had taken cover many trees had had their crowns sheared off.

The most interesting thing of all happened on the third day after the explosion. A sedate, grey-haired old man who turned out to be a professor arrived at the construction site. He was the director of a seismic station that had registered an earthquake in this area, and had come to investigate the causes of the tremors. For a long time he would not believe that it was Trofim Shutka who had made the earthquake, but when he did he was as happy as a child.

The professor was given a sack of cedar cones as a present and sent home in the rail car together with Kondrat Frolovich. The two hit it off very well, and as they peered out of the car windows on the way back, the two greybeards looked so much alike that you could not tell which was the peasant and which the professor.

Sergei Sergeyev-Tsensky

THE OLD DOCTOR

* 1 *

WHEN THE OLD SURGEON, well on toward his seventies, entered the hospital in his usual unhurried manner that morning of June 22, they said to him:

"Ivan Petrovich! Have you heard? War has broken out!"

He had not heard, because he did not keep a radio. He saw the consternation on the faces about him; he saw that everyone was greatly upset.

At first he could not guess even with whom we could be fighting. His heart began to palpitate and he poured himself a glass of water.

Then his wife came in. She was also a doctor, a therapeutist, also old, with much grey among her thinning dark hair. She glanced at him anxiously through her glasses and said:

"Do you know what I heard on my way to the hospital, Ivan Petrovich?"

"Yes, I do, Nadezhda Gavrilovna," he answered.

The solemnity of this form of address was not dictated by the unusualness of the moment. They simply were used to calling each other by their first names and patronymics.

"I think it is very, very bad," she said, looking at him searchingly through her glasses.

He nodded and echoed:

"Very!"

After that strange things happened, and happened with a speed they could not have imagined.

The town in which they lived was situated several hundred kilometres from the western borders, but every day as they looked at the map they observed how noticeably the distance dwindled between their town and the line of the front.

"If they continue at this rate, Ivan Petrovich. . ." she said, and somehow could not finish the sentence.

He tried to be perfectly calm as he smoothed his long, silver, professorial hair, combed with such meticulous care from right to left, and he answered confidently:

"We'll stop them, Nadezhda Gavrilovna. We'll stop them."

Since the town stood on the sea, German landing troops were expected from the very first day of the war. For that reason, posts were hastily brought from the vineyards and driven into the loose blue gravel of the beach to support barbed wire entanglements.

The weather was utterly calm when they did this. The sea lay like a mirror. But two days later a north-easter arose, lashing the surf against the beach and quickly tearing down the barbed-wire entanglements, so that the crests of the heaving waves were decorated with lacy convolutions of wire and bobbing posts. Then, when the sea had played enough with them, it hurled them back upon the shore, where they lay, a heap of posts and wire as prickly as a porcupine. Bathers hauled them off the beach so that they would not interfere with undressing and entering the sea. After that, the posts were driven into the ground beyond the beaches, out of reach of the waves.

Everyone began to dig a slit trench beside his house as a shelter from shrapnel. German bombers were also expected to appear from the sea, from the shores of Rumania.

The professorial appearance of Ivan Petrovich was due not only to his halo of white hair, but to his stately carriage and his manner of looking at people and speaking with them. Although he lived in a town surrounded by vineyards, filled with wine cellars, and having a wine shop on every corner, he never developed a weakness for wine, though such a weakness was somehow common to surgeons.

Once his wife said to him, "You never have headaches, Ivan Petrovich, and your memory is as good as ever. In general, you show no symptoms of sclerosis of the brain."

To which Ivan Petrovich replied,

"Speaking of sclerosis of the brain—today I asked our dental technician Prilutsky if he was thinking of going away, and where, in view of the fact that the Germans are getting pretty close. What do you think he said? 'I'm not going anywhere.' 'But if the Germans get here after all?' I asked. 'What of it?' he said.

'Germans indeed! Do you think I don't know what the Germans are like? I guess they have teeth too. What difference does it make to me whose teeth I fix?' 'You mean to say you really intend to stay here?' I asked. 'I sure do,' he said. 'Right here! I'm even anxious to get a look at the Germans!' What do you think about that, Nadezhda Gavrilovna? Wouldn't you call that sclerosis of the brain, eh?"

"No, Ivan Petrovich," she answered with conviction. "That's not sclerosis. That's pure villainy."

* 2 *

The more apparent it becomes to a person that he is departing this life, the more attractive appear all his surroundings. Every day throws some new light on that which has long been familiar. As he observes the things to which he has grown

accustomed, they suddenly shine with so bright a light that he closes his eyes with the pain of his happiness.

This is true of healthy old age. This was true of Ivan Petrovich, for he was a healthy old man.

Whenever Nadezhda Gavrilovna wanted to assure herself that the muscles of his heart were not giving way, she would place her stethoscope to his breast, listen carefully, and invariably say:

"Your heart's all right. Keeping up with your birth certificate. I might say it's even a bit younger."

In these evidences of solicitude for him and for others which Ivan Petrovich observed in the wife with whom he had lived for thirty-six years, he also found something new, and something deeply moving. He was even amazed that he had not fully appreciated it before.

The house in which they lived—and had been living for a long time—some twenty years, in fact—stood on a hill. It was necessary to climb a flight of stone steps in order to reach it from the street. But neither of them found any discomfort in this as yet.

"And once you get there—up on the hill—the air comes to you first hand—as delicious as a pineapple!" Ivan Petrovich often said.

That was because in the summertime light breezes were drawn across their hill, from sea to mountain, and from mountain to sea. Naturally the air here was much fresher than in the streets below.

It seemed to Ivan Petrovich that even the tea roses which he grafted onto the wild rose bushes in front of their house were particularly fine. He loved to "perform operations" on them, cutting the bushes down into the desired form in the spring and

fall. They were of a variety that could be made to bloom right up until January.

Once he performed an operation on a stray police dog which had been run over by a machine. The dog had been only bruised and lacerated by the impact and by sliding over the rough ground, which left gravel and bits of cinders imbedded in its flesh. The dog recovered and remained with the doctor. They called it Ralfs—"Ralfishka" for endearment, "Fishka" and "Fisha" for short.

A year later, Nadezhda Gavrilovna brought in a puppy from the yard. The puppy was Fisha's son—round as a ball, and so fluffy that they immediately named him Fluffy—"Fluff" for short. Thereafter they lived together at the house—Fisha, the pure-blooded police dog, and Fluff, her hybrid offspring—and their life together was most felicitous.

Ivan Petrovich used to say, when speaking about Fisha,

"Just look at her eyes, Nadezhda Gavrilovna. Just like human eyes. It even makes you feel queer to look at them."

"She's so smart!" answered Nadezhda Gavrilovna. "And what a nose! I've tried to hide that stone from her in ten different places, but she always finds it. Fluff is not so smart, of course, but then he's simply adorable."

Ivan Petrovich was also very fond of Fluff, but he pretended to be appalled by all his shaggy dark fur, and sometimes he would say to him, trying to be most severe:

"No sir, you've first got to prove to me that you're a dog! That's what I want! I have a fairly decent knowledge of zoology, but I swear I can't figure out just what kind of animal you are!"

Fluff would glance up inquiringly from where he lay at the feet of Ivan Petrovich and growl guiltily.

Now, in the summer, the mountainsides were curly, like lamb's wool; the sea was blindingly blue, though it was no longer calm; the red-tiled roofs added gaiety to the morning scene, as did the full-blown pink blossoms of the Lenkoran acacias which were here called mimosa, and the winding beach, so soft to the eye. And it was this, all of this, which old Ivan Petrovich realized was withdrawing from him, passing away, but passing away little by little, with a smile, like a loving mother leaving the nursery where her children, worn out by the day's romping, are falling asleep.

Now, all of a sudden these things seemed to be rushing away from him. Everything became sombre and unfamiliar, and this strangeness was unpleasant and alarming, like a close flash of lightning to be followed any minute by a clap of thunder loud enough to knock you down.

The lightning of gunfire and the thunder of cannonades grew constantly nearer: the line of the front was approaching this quiet town on the shore of the sea. The inhabitants kept filling bags with sand and gravel from the beach and hauling them away in green trucks to protect the buildings from bombs. Companies of storm detachments were drilled in the squares and marched through the streets. The paper strips pasted on the window panes at the beginning of the war were substituted by strips of cloth, but people in the know said that even cloth would not help, they said that all the glass would fly, at the first bombing.

As soon as twilight deepened into darkness, this darkness reigned until dawn. Somehow the usual faint roar of the sea became more audible in this darkness, and all the more inescapable seemed that which was bearing down from the west like a flood.

When they began raising funds for the defence of the country, Ivan Petrovich made an impassioned speech at a meeting and contributed his old gold watch, some silver spoons, all his government bonds, and a roll of bills. Then he and Nadezhda Gavrilovna gathered all the brass utensils to be found in their house—the samovar, a basin for making jam, a bell, a mortar and pestle—and turned them in at the receiving station.

Every morning he asked his neighbours for the latest radio reports from the front and checked them on his map. Every day he read the newspaper accounts of how the Germans shot and hanged and tortured Soviet people, how they buried them alive in bomb craters and burned them alive in houses and sheds.

"What is happening? What is this, I ask you?" said Ivan Petrovich to his wife. "Has a whole generation of Germans gone atavistic? Do you call this a war? No, this isn't a war. We've had wars before, we've even had the misfortune to live through some. But to think up a war like this you'd have to be either a madman or a gorilla—probably the former."

Nadezhda Gavrilovna nodded her head thoughtfully in agreement.

"Yes, of course, this is psychosis on a mass scale. You know what it reminds me of? Of the witch trials in the Middle Ages, when millions of "witches" were burned at the stake. Just imagine it!"

"But the men who burned them were gorillas!"

"No, they weren't. They were madmen too, only they were dressed up in the robes of holy judges."

"The inquisitors? Of course the inquisitors were gorillas and not human beings. But—but—what is the conclusion to be drawn? The only conclusion to be drawn is that a certain part of mankind falls victim to a psychosis making them dangerous

to humanity as a whole. A world war must inevitably follow. That's natural enough. If we don't defend ourselves from the insane, they'll be sure to wipe out everybody else. They say quite openly that it's only our territory they need, and not our people. That's the way they think—and the way they act! But you just wait a bit, my fine fellows! Chickens are counted in the autumn! It's already taken you longer to get here than you expected. We'll see what our autumn has in store for you!"

* 3 *

And autumn was approaching. Incidentally, in these parts autumn was distinguished from summer mostly by an abundance of fruit, and this year brought an exceptional harvest.

Farmers, and gardeners, and fruit growers with good memories recalled that during the first year of World War I there had also been an exceptional harvest, and they tried to make mystic deductions therefrom. People did not know what to do with all the tomatoes, watermelons, and musk-melons. They did not bother to chase the crows from the ripening pears in the orchards since they saw no possibility of selling or storing them.

Formerly, when the grapes were ripening, people would walk through the vineyards with rattles to scare away the thrushes—beautiful song birds in the early spring, but vicious marauders in the autumn. Now the black and grey thrushes were allowed to mercilessly steal and spoil the ripening clusters.

No one knew what to do with the wine which stood in the cellars in thousands of huge barrels, and now the time had come to press out new Muscat, Alicante, Don Pedro, Murved, Saperavi. In any case, heavy axes were placed alongside of the barrels in order to quickly knock out the bottoms and let the wine run out on the ground if this became necessary.

Large schools of grey mullets appeared near the shore, followed by schools of preying dolphins, but no one put out to catch the dolphins, for the fishermen had all been called up.

One day Ivan Petrovich chanced to meet a certain Wald in the street, a man ten years younger than Ivan Petrovich, but already retired on pension. Wald's nerves always seemed unstrung, and he was never quite sober. He was tall, bearded, very modestly dressed, and sharp-tongued in expressing his opinions. Since he was ruptured, he always walked slowly and with a cane, but he glanced with contempt on everyone.

He called himself an artist, trying to justify the title by accepting orders for portraits. But his portraits were always rejected. It was known that he had once been a notary public in Makhach-Kala, but for some misdemeanour had been tried and sentenced to a term of one and a half years. It was even said that during the civil war he had been an agent of the White Guards, and that his brother had been executed as a spy by the tsarist government.

He would send complaints about everyone to Moscow, where his nephew was a lawyer. More than once complaints resulted in investigations, so that people were afraid of Wald, and even paid him for portraits which they never hung.

By blackmailing his landlady, Wald not only lived in her house free of charge, but even managed to be fed at her expense. He often came for treatments to the hospital, for he had a passion for discovering all kinds of things the matter with him. That was how Ivan Petrovich happened to know that he was called Fyodor Vasilievich.

When the doctor met him this day in September, he addressed him by that name, but Wald suddenly screwed up his eyes contemptuously, jerked up his beard and stuck out his lower lip:

"With your permission, I must make a slight correction: not Fyodor Vasilievich, but Theodor Wilhelmovich!" he said very loudly and distinctly, even glancing triumphantly from right to left to see whether anyone beside this "quack" had heard.

He had not used the word "quack," but Ivan Petrovich felt in the very pit of his contracting stomach that this was exactly the opinion held of him by the new-found Theodor, who for so long a time had been Fyodor.

Wald's head in his old straw hat shook like that of an inveterate drunkard, but he looked about him scornfully, even witheringly.

This was insulting to Ivan Petrovich. It made him say in some amazement:

"How is it that they haven't shipped you out of here, I'd like to know?"

"Ship me out?... Me?.."

Wald broke into a shrill laugh, suddenly went hoarse, coughed, spat on the ground, and rasped:

"Ship me out? It's me who'll do the shipping if I please!"

Ivan Petrovich turned away in shocked surprise and continued on his way, repeating to himself: "Is he crazy, or simply a rascal? Maybe he's both."

But Theodor Wald stood leaning with both hands on his tall stick, his beard up-tilted, his eyes following Ivan Petrovich triumphantly, his worn yellow hat and dirty white shirt standing out vividly against the blue background of the sea.

* 4 *

At last the first German bombs were thrown upon this town which boasted no factories. The planes came from inland,

rather than from the sea as had been expected at the beginning of the war. The line of the front was now quite close, heavy war machines kept thundering through the streets, shaking not only the panes of the windows, but the very walls of the houses.

Just at this time the sea suddenly rose with unprecedented force. The pier was old. The heavy rails by which it was supported had long since rusted away at their foundations, but this had been unnoticed. Instead of the usual sand and gravel, the surf hurled whole rocks up on the shore, and the waves beat against the pier so violently that it collapsed. Along with the pier, collapsed the hopes of many who had been waiting for a ship to dock and take them away to some shore of the Caucasus. The sea roared, the earth roared.

Now the people were leaving the town on foot if they had no means of riding. They went directly east along the shore, carrying as many of their most essential possessions as they had the strength to carry. They hurried along—crying, carrying babies, dragging children by the hand, driving cows before them or trying to harness these frightened beasts to clumsy hand-made carts. . . .

Had the sea engulfed the shore and flooded the vineyards and orchards of this valley, the population would have fled just as precipitately, but not so far—only to the hills. Now they did not know where to go, or where to call a halt.

At every bomb-burst, even though it was far away from the hill on which they lived, Fisha and Fluff would run for shelter, just like the people, but not in the slit-trench in the yard with its make-shift roof and its floor made muddy by rain, but under the porch of the house, where they would remain for the entire night. No one taught them to do this—they thought of it themselves.

The wine barrels in the cellars were uncorked, but the wine flowed out so slowly that it was necessary to resort to the axes. The cellars became flooded with wine; people waded knee-deep in wine, going from barrel to barrel. All the drunkards were drawn to the cellars, about which the very air had become intoxicating. They came with pails and jugs and bottles and cried:

"How is it possible to throw away such riches?... Let us have at least a pailful. How can you let it all run out on the ground? Despots! Spoilers! Just one little pailful!"

But armed guards stood at the cellar entrances, from which issued only the dull thud of barrels being broken and the pungent odour of wine to tickle the nostrils.

Every day brought new patients to the hospital, and all of them were surgical cases: people who had been seriously injured by bomb-bursts, by falling buildings, by fire. Already there was no more room in the hospital, but it was impossible to turn them away. It became necessary to send home almost all those who had been in hospital before the bombing began, and those who were able to walk, left of themselves.

Many of the doctors also left: not all at once—one after another they disappeared unnoticed. Finally the entire hospital staff consisted of only Ivan Petrovich, Nadezhda Gavrilovna and three or four old nurses.

The wounded groaned and pleaded for aid with mute, feverish eyes. It was difficult to help them, but they could not be left without any care at all. They could not be abandoned.

Before the wounded began coming in, Nadezhda Gavrilovna had tried to prepare for a journey by packing a few things in two old suitcases. But the more things she stuffed into these suitcases, the more things she discovered which were

absolutely essential and required packing in other suitcases or baskets or bundles. When people live in one place for a long time, they accumulate a great many possessions.

Nadezhda Gavrilovna had decided that she must somehow restrict herself to only those two suitcases, but when she tried to lift the smaller of the two, she found it was impossible. And when she thought of Fisha and Fluff who would have to be abandoned to their fate, she said to herself resolutely:

"You can't act like a pig even in regard to dogs!" and she set about unpacking the bags.

As she helped her husband perform operations and change the dressings on the wounded, Nadezhda Gavrilovna forgot about her plans to set out for some indefinite destination. People were suffering, and every effort had to be made to save their lives. This was the first consideration, the Germans came second.

And when, one evening, the streets of the town were filled with troops retreating to the east and the radio announced to all remaining inhabitants that the Soviets were withdrawing and the town would be occupied by the Germans in the morning, Ivan Petrovich and Nadezhda Gavrilovna stayed right on in the hospital for the night.

They did not go to bed, though they were tired from the day's work. They could not have slept for a second, too great were the changes taking place in their lives. At the same time, they were possessed by a great calm, as though the death sentence had finally been pronounced and no remission could be expected.

Only once Nadezhda Gavrilovna asked:

"What is going to happen to us, Ivan Petrovich?"

Ivan Petrovich replied with a sigh and a shrug of his shoulders:

"Well, after all, we've lived our life, . . . I can only wish everyone as long a life as we have had."

After a brief silence, she asked him again:

"But if they should torture us before killing us?"

"Torture us? I'm sure I don't know why they should torture us," replied Ivan Petrovich thoughtfully. "At any rate, our troops may be coming back in a day or two."

* 5 *

The first thing they noticed about the Germans was the possessive manner in which the latter entered the hospital. For more than twenty years, no one had entered with such a possessive air as was displayed by these long-legged foreign-looking people.

Their translator proved to be Theodor Wald, who had become intolerably important since being appointed assistant burgomaster. He had changed his worn straw hat for a black felt one, and his dirty white shirt for a grey checked coat.

The three officers whom he accompanied had scarcely glanced around the ward which they entered when Wald turned to Ivan Petrovich, and nodding to the patients in bed, rasped through clenched teeth:

"Throw that rabble out of here. German soldiers are to occupy the wards now."

"What am I to do with people who can't even get out of bed?" asked Ivan Petrovich with more surprise than indignation.

"It's no concern of mine what you do with them," replied Wald superciliously. "Those are my orders, and there's nothing further to say! Poison them if you want to. We have no need of cripples."

Ivan Petrovich exchanged glances with Nadezhda Gavrilovna. The dark rims of her glasses stood out sharply against the pallor of her face.

The senior officer requested that they show him the operating room. When they entered, he asked in what condition the instruments were and even had the cabinet opened so that he might inspect them.

The glass in most of the windows was broken, and had been replaced by cheesecloth to keep out the flies, which were particularly numerous now, in the autumn. All this was noted by the senior officer, before whom Wald bowed ingratiatingly.

When this officer ordered Wald to see that glass was restored to all the windows by the following day, Ivan Petrovich realized that the decision to turn their clinic into a German army hospital was irrevocable.

The officers did not remain long, and as they left, Wald repeated his order to clear the wards. The surgeon, his wife, and the old nurses spent the rest of the day trying to distribute the patients. Some of them were taken home by their families, others by neighbours, but there were a few, and those the most seriously injured, for whom no place could be found. Even if they had been removed to a shed in the yard, as Ivan Petrovich had thought of doing, there would have been nothing to feed them, and so they were left in their beds.

Toward evening Wald returned with two workmen and two large wooden boxes filled with glass taken from the windows of houses. Ivan Petrovich imagined that when he was alone with Wald, without the German officers, he could somehow talk him into finding a place for the remaining patients. But Wald said haughtily:

"We have no use for them, or you either! Get out of here! The quicker the better!"

Ivan Petrovich took a last look at the injured, shook his head, and left the ward.

He took Nadezhda Gavrilovna by the arm and went home. Nadezhda Gavrilovna felt very weak, complained of her heart, and had difficulty in climbing the stone steps—up their hill.

* 6 *

That night was a nightmare for the old doctor and his wife, even though they spent it in their own home. Late in the evening one of the old nurses came and told them that the Germans had "thrown the remaining patients into a truck like a pile of logs" and hauled them off to "the dumps" outside the town.

"The brutes! . . . The gorillas!" said Nadezhda Gavrilovna in horror.

"What else did you expect of them?" asked Ivan Petrovich.

Outwardly he appeared to be perfectly calm, but as soon as the old woman left, he began going through his medicines. Either because he was nervous, or because the stub of candle he held gave very little light, he had difficulty in finding what he was looking for, and kept muttering, "Hm-m! . . . That's strange. . . . Where could it be? . . ." At last he found it and placed the bottle to one side, then, after some hesitation, in his side pocket.

In the morning a German corporal came for Ivan Petrovich, escorted not by Wald this time, but by the dental technician Prilutsky, a dark, fidgety person, with an unnatural smile constantly pasted on his thin, effeminate face.

"Well, Ivan Petrovich, you were very wise to remain behind," he began with animation. "They are asking you to come to

work at the hospital. I'll do the teeth, you the rest. They've invited me too, can you believe it?"

"To work? To do what sort of work?" asked Ivan Petrovich uncomprehendingly.

"Well, for goodness sakes! Your own work naturally—surgery—not to scrub floors!"

"I heard that they had already taken the patients away," began Ivan Petrovich, but Prilutsky interrupted him eagerly:

"On the contrary, they've just brought them—several officers, about thirty soldiers. I'm telling you those Germans sure know how to do things! Come on, let's go!"

"All right, Nadezhda Gavrilovna and I will come in a minute," said Ivan Petrovich firmly. "You go ahead, and we'll follow."

"But I promised to bring you along."

"I'll just have a glass of tea and we'll come."

"'Promised to bring us!' How strange!" said Nadezhda Gavrilovna indignantly. "If we want to go we'll go by ourselves, but if we don't want to go, how can you 'bring us'? On a rope, perhaps?"

"I give you my word that we shall come immediately," said Ivan Petrovich, looking intently at Prilutsky.

And Prilutsky went off with the corporal who understood not a word of Russian, and therefore had been standing by silently, even sleepily, struggling to keep his white lashes from covering his dull eyes.

"I don't understand," said Nadezhda Gavrilovna. "Yesterday that rascal Wald literally threw you out of the hospital, and today you give your word to that Prilutsky who is also a rascal that you'll come back. Do you really mean to. . ."

"Wald!" snorted Ivan Petrovich. "He was only trying to show his authority. But every army has need of surgeons. There are never enough surgeons during a war."

His wife looked at him incredulously.

"Do you really. . ." she began again.

Without giving her an opportunity to finish, he took her in his arms, kissed her, and whispered in her ear:

"We'll have to go because we have no hypodermic syringe."

Then he took the bottle from his pocket and showed it to her.

She understood. Her eyelids, reddened by two sleepless nights, fluttered and became moist, but she nodded her head. They left the house quietly, so that the dogs should not think they were going far. They walked down the street solemnly, arm in arm, looking intently at all that they passed: at the sea, blue and bright and wide; at the dark blue ribbon of the beach, now unpleasantly spotted by the figures of a few German soldiers working over some kind of machine; at the distant, mountainous shore with its white houses surrounded by Lombardy poplars; at the ruins of houses they passed and at the shattered glass glittering at their feet. . . .

They had not delayed long at home, but Prilutsky and the corporal were coming down the street again, apparently to fetch them, for on seeing them, they turned back.

"Notice how anxiously they are waiting for us," said Ivan Petrovich cheerfully.

"Waiting for us. Well, what of it?" replied Nadezhda Gavrilovna under her breath. Then she added in a stronger voice, "Well, what of it? Let them wait."

They were met in the yard of the hospital by one of the officers who had visited the hospital the day before. Beside him stood Prilutsky, beaming obsequiously.

The officer removed the cigarette from his mouth and said:

"Morgen!"

Ivan Petrovich pretended not to understand this brief salutation, but nevertheless he raised his cap slightly.

The husband and wife passed through the doors they had entered thousands of times, and as usual donned white smocks. Ivan Petrovich immediately went to the cabinet containing surgical instruments which was open, although no one was in the operating room. He considered this a stroke of good luck, and in spite of his nervousness, he quickly found the little nickel box containing the syringe and slipped it into his pocket, glancing significantly at his wife. She lifted her brows comprehendingly.

When the officer, now without Prilutsky, appeared in the door leading from the operating room to the ward, Ivan Petrovich had the appearance of a man eager to work in the field which was his speciality.

* 7 *

Latin is a language common to medical people, and for that reason, in spite of the fact that he knew little German, Ivan Petrovich could speak quite freely with the young German surgeon with whom he examined the six seriously wounded patients in the officers' ward.

This German surgeon with the long, horsey, ordinary face, for some reason showed respect for Ivan Petrovich, even going so far as to call him "Herr Professor." Perhaps this was because of Ivan Petrovich's imposing appearance, or because Prilutsky had sung his praises, or simply because the German lacked self-

confidence, having had very little practice in his profession. However it was, he willingly accepted all the prognoses of his Russian colleague.

All the wounded officers had to be operated immediately. This was confirmed by Nadezhda Gavrilovna, whose glasses and grey hair won her, too, a certain amount of respect from the Germans as the "professor's" assistant.

According to Ivan Petrovich, two of the six officers were practically beyond hope. His opinion about them was expressed in the single word "malum," and the grievous expression in the eyes of the German surgeon indicated that he agreed. The order of operating on the remaining four had to be decided upon, and when this was done, Ivan Petrovich took the unlabeled bottle of medicine and the syringe out of his pocket in a calm, businesslike manner.

Nadezhda Gavrilovna followed his every movement, and when she caught his slight nod, she went over to the window with him and held out her right arm, bared to the elbow.

Ivan Petrovich filled the syringe and made an injection in the arm of the woman with whom he had lived all his mature life, the woman who was dearer to him than anyone or anything else on earth.

His hands trembled, but he made a supreme effort to overcome this trembling. Then he handed her the bottle and the full syringe. Seeing that she hesitated, he made the injection in his arm himself.

All this took no more than two minutes, yet he felt that his strength was failing, that he wanted to sit down, even to lie down. He saw that Nadezhda Gavrilovna had already sunk down on one of the white hospital stools, that her face had

paled, that her hand was pressing her heart and that she was looking at him with wide, motionless eyes.

Then he gathered all the energy that still remained in him, drew up a second stool, sat down beside her, placing his head on her shoulder and letting the bottle and syringe slip from his fingers.

At this moment, the German surgeon who had left a few minutes before returned with an officer and some orderlies to carry the first of their patients to the operating room. They stopped in astonishment. Then the surgeon rushed for the bottle lying at Ivan Petrovich's feet, smelled it, and said fearfully:

"Venenum!"

The strong and quick-acting poison, which gave off a faint but characteristic odour, had already stricken the old doctor and his wife to the floor.

In the dead man's pocket they found a piece of paper containing the few words: "Better death than a life of infamy!"

Boris Gorbatov

FRIENDSHIP

WHEN ALL the ships had sailed, all the planes taken off, and the year's first snow, still soft and fluffy, had fallen on the ice-locked bay, the Arctic ether grew quiet and peaceful, the wireless operators heaved a sigh of relief, and, for the first time in three months, Stepan Timofeich took a look in the mirror. He took one look—and stood there aghast.

"It's red. . ." he muttered, dazed, and shoved the little glass right under his nose.

No doubt about it: the beard was red.

In the bustling days of the Arctic navigation season, Stepan Timofeich had had no time either to shave or to look in the mirror. Like the rest of the operators at the wireless centre, he had been at the station day and night, sleeping between watches doubled up on the narrow bench in the battery room, with his uniform jacket for a pillow. After a few hours they would be coming to wake him again; he would dip his head in the fire brigade's barrel of icy tundra water, snort like a walrus, wipe his whiskers, and take over his watch; sit down comfortably by his desk, put on the earphones and lay his thumb on the key.

He had a "nasty" job, Post No. 3—Communication with Vessels.

A multitude of ships scudded over the Northern Sea Route that summer: icebreakers, steamers, Diesel-driven vessels, lumberships, the hydrographer's "egg-shells," tugs with convoys of barges and lighters, whaleboats, schooners, expedition.

To Stepan Timofeich's dismay, all of them had wireless stations, all had accumulated a big collection of mail, business and private, all needed weather forecasts, all demanded immediate contact with the mainland, all were nervous and in a hurry, all got annoyed and vented their annoyance on Stepan Timofeich, the sole representative of the world they were anxious to contact.

The vessels each had their own communication times, but these were far too short in the opinion of their wireless operators, bored with inaction in their shacks, and the fellows were forever trying to smuggle through more than their quota to Stepan Timofeich.

"Marusya, Marusya," a hydrographical boat's operator banged out insistently, bent on transmitting the second mate's ardent message: "Arctic regards and red-hot kisses, which not even the ice all round can . . ."

"Go to hell, you and your Marusya!" Stepan Timofeich exploded. "Got any business messages? You haven't? Then I'm closing down."

But there was no quelling the operators afloat. They were a stubborn, wilful lot, and Stepan Timofeich had no end of trouble with them. The foreign lumber ships were the greatest nuisance of all. A mere scrap of ice somewhere way off on the horizon would set their captains in an indescribable panic; they would demand an icebreaker right away, urgently, immediately, without a moment's delay, and bombard him with radiogram after radiogram.

You had to be meticulously polite with these foreigners—diplomacy, foreign exchange, the honour of the station, and all the rest of it—and, gritting his teeth, Stepan Timofeich would dutifully take down the panicky messages, and only shrug his shoulders in his rage.

Nothing to be done about it—these weren't Russians, not the breed that's used to taking risks, and not accustomed to dealing with pack-ice.

And here more of that nonsense would come crowding out of the ether—dot, dot, dash, dot, dash—"Marusya, I think about you, love you just the same on the seventieth parallel."

But a really extraordinary racket, one you couldn't compare with anything on earth, was raised by the ships crowded nearby in the roadstead. Their call-signals were ear-splitting, they all wanted Stepan Timofeich at once, all banged out something they meant him to hear, all jammed one another—and this whole cacophony, this hysteria of sound, the squeaks and squeals and whistling, the mad hullabaloo without rhyme or reason burst upon Stepan Timofeich's poor ears.

He would fling the earphones on the desk in a fury and shout to the dispatcher:

"Can't stand any more of it, Yemelyanich, do what you like . . . A regular madhouse! They must have gone potty, the whole blooming lot. Let them have the traffic cop."

The imperturbable Yemelyanich would switch on the "radiomilitiaman," which promptly and politely drowned out all stations with its greater power, and announced suavely in the dispatcher's sarcastic voice:

"Hul-lo. Kindly observe traffic regulations in the ether. Not all at once, if you please. Icebreaker Sadko will call now. We are listening on so-and-so many metres. You through? Chronometre next, the wavelength will be . . ."

But now all this was over, all the ships had sailed, all the planes taken off, and Stepan Timofeich was staring in the glass at the surprise of a ginger beard.

"A regular villain! A bandit from the Bryansk forests, large as life! And ginger too. Why on earth ginger? Where's the logic of it, tell me that?"

He spent quite a while stroking and smoothing this unexpected decoration on his face, and decided finally that his appearance was not villainous at all, but rather heroic, if anything. An old salt. A veteran of the Arctic. Or even, if you like, Stenka Razin. His full name had been Stepan Timofeich too.

Reassured, he shaved the stubble on his cheeks, combed out the beard, gave his whiskers a twirl, winked in the mirror and headed for the messroom.

Next day already found him on a new job. He was detailed to the old station—the "rest-cure," the dispatcher said with a grin.

This venerable station, one of the oldest on the whole Arctic coast, and with a fine record of service, was getting to the end of its days. All the equipment had long been replaced; actually, the only old thing left about it was the time-blackened walls and the smell of garlic and petrol clinging to them.

Yet there the old lady was, still going strong, blithely sending out her call-signal and servicing a whole area as she lived out the remainder of her days—all the little wintering posts close in that were off the beaten track. Like an old nurse looking after the little tots.

Stepan Timofeich sat down at the desk, pulled out his pipe, got it puffing and took a look around. He was all on his own now in this empty old shack. It was quiet here, a bit melancholy and unwontedly lonely after the new station. Over there, you had a crowd all the time—fellows bending over their sheets of paper at the desks under the green lampshades, keys rattling, tape-machine rattling, typewriter rattling, the announcer roaring into the mike and the phone ringing incessantly.

In this old place, on the other hand, silence reigned unbroken, just as it had done ten years ago, he supposed. He couldn't help feeling that if he looked out of the window, he might very well see a bear, still unafraid and drawn here by the smell of a solitary dwelling.

He actually did glance out, but all he saw through the lightly frosted panes was the slender radio masts and the grey outlines of the houses. He laughed, put down the pipe, took a look at the time-table, then anxiously at his watch, and reached for the key.

And at once the silence and solitude were gone. The world came to life, spoke up, made noises in the earphones. The dots and dashes formed quickly into letters, the letters into words. It happened quite automatically, without any conscious effort on Timofeich's part, the process had so long been familiar. It was not dots and dashes he heard, but complete words; he guessed the endings when the words were long, and knew what the next word would be, just as if he heard a man's voice and intonation.

The ether was peopled with welcome familiar voices. Timofeich recognized the operator at the other end by his way with the key, as you know a man by his writing, a painter by his brushwork, a craftsman by his workmanship. No need for him to ask who it was. He called them by their names at once —they were all old pals. Some he knew personally, from having been in the same wintering crews or had drinks together ashore, others only by radio, from past encounters in the ether.

Now he hailed them again, passed the time of the day, sparred with one or the other as friends will. He had noisy confabulations with them, took down their weather reports and mail—and the room was quiet as ever, with only the timid chirruping of the key and the scraping of the pencil on paper.

But what you could not hear or make out in the mysterious chirruping, you could read in Timofeich's face. It frowned and smiled by turns, changing all the time: concern and laughter and sympathy, knowing expectancy and alarm chased one another across his kindly, mobile features. News of joy and striving, of a wintering crew's successes and of love—of sickness, death and recovery—news of a good trapping expedition or of the birth of a son—all passed through Stepan Timofeich's hands. The world lived in his earphones. The world loved, suffered, ailed, gave birth, built stations, fought and conquered—and it took Stepan Timofeich into all these secrets, sharing with him its joys and sorrows.

"Marusya, Marusya, how's the little one and how's yourself?" he would take down, and smile fondly. "Station meteorologist ill requires urgent attention." And he would frown anxiously. "Inform methods preserving Polar bear's meat." And he would shake with soundless laughter, the smoking pipe bobbing in his hand.

That day all the stations showed up on schedule, he exchanged mail with all of them and got through in time with the lot—all except one.

Nadezhda Bay was not to be raised. This was a new and minor outpost. It had been set up to fill some gap in the meteorological network. Somewhere between two important places there remained a blank which drove the weather experts to despair. They claimed that it was here of all places, at Nadezhda Bay, that the cyclones broke and weather was made. As a matter of fact, they used to say that about any place where there was no meteorological post. Anyway, the post was established. And now it had failed to show up at the appointed hour.

Timofeich called and called, but all in vain. "UKL, UKL," he keyed, aggrieved, but UKL was silent. He lost his temper finally, and entered in the log: "UKL not to be raised."

In the evening he reported to the dispatcher:

"No UKL today. Operator NG, I guess."

"There you are," the dispatcher took him up. "Sending these NGs to the Arctic! Is this where they belong? How many times have I said. . . ." This was the dispatcher's hobby-horse: he could go on about it for hours.

The next day UKL didn't turn up either, nor the three days after that. Timofeich raged, fumed and brandished his pipe.

On the fifth day, UKL "trotted out" into the ether and himself called the centre. Timofeich replied with a shower of abuse.

"Where have you been these five days? Where's the meteo, you so-and-so?" That, translated from the language of dots and dashes, was roughly what Timofeich fired at the Nadezhda operator. The fellow sought to excuse himself:

"Alone. . . . I'm all alone. . . . Things out of gear . . . had to get them fixed myself. Sorry, Comrade."

He was humble and contrite, as was proper for the operator at a tiny post when addressing the all-powerful centre, and Timofeich's wrath was appeased.

"GA. Let's have it," he keyed, and grinned at the idea that flashed through his mind: I'll make him sweat as a punishment.

"GA, faster. Step on it. You're not dead, are you?" he messaged, and burst out laughing. "Come on, my lad, come on!"

The tapping that came in reply was a knock-out—clear and fast, the fastest he'd ever heard.

Timofeich was flabbergasted. "Oho! Must be doing 30," and he started taking it down hastily, afraid he mightn't keep up.

All the meteos that had piled up in the five days were disposed of in half the apportioned time. "He's a first-rater," Timofeich admitted; as a matter of fact, he felt mighty pleased with himself for managing to get it all down.

He had nothing for Nadezhda, so he thought he'd use the remaining time to get acquainted with the fellow.

"You new?" he queried. "Don't seem to know your fist."

"Yes. My first winter."

"What's your name?"

"Kolyvanov."

"Mine's Timofeich—at least, that's what they call me."

"Pleased to meet you, Timofeich."

"Afraid they'll call me Stenka Razin now . . . Developed a beard, you see. A ginger one."

"Razin's was black."

"Well, mine's ginger."

"Dye it."

"I might."

Pleased with the acquaintance, Timofeich decided that courtesy required, and the time still allowed him, to treat his new friend to some music, to display his art, as is the way among "sparks" up in the Arctic. So he tapped out "Toreador"—his regular act, his countersign, as it were, his "trade-mark" in the ether. When he was through, he waited—would the Nadezhda fellow be able to make return? It isn't everyone that can make music on a telegraph key. But now came the sounds of a rhythm being

keyed from Nadezhda. It was Mozart's "Turkish March." The fellow had good taste. And a good hand with the key. Timofeich seemed to have heard that hand before somewhere. He tried to recollect, but gave it up finally. "Kolyvanov? No. Don't know anybody by that name."

That was how their friendship began. UKL now showed up punctually, and the two men would hail each other and change pally banter in between business. Of course, these confabs, which had now become a daily feature, were very different from the talks friends have over their beer on a night out, or perhaps at home, puffing away at their pipes with their legs stretched out under the table. They were fragmentary, brief, condensed. Five hundred kilometres lay between the two men. The duration of their talks was limited rigidly by the schedule. They would have perhaps a minute at their disposal, or two or three at the outside; but even that was quite a lot for operators who could do 30 words a minute. Sometimes the conversation would have to break off in the middle of a word; the time would be up (the job came first, of course); and Timofeich wouldn't get a chance to reply to some joke the other had made. He would go about smiling the rest of the evening, pondering the next day's joke, polishing it up. For men have no use for a lot of gushing and sentimental declarations. There's more real warmth and feeling in a good salty joke. And they could really feel it warming their hearts.

Every day the Nadezhda fellow would ask:

"How's the beard?"

To which Timofeich invariably replied:

"OK. Thriving on your prayers. Getting long—and black."

"Tried putting shoe polish on it?"

The mail for Nadezhda was never more than scanty. Timofeich already knew that there were only two of them there: his pal Kolyvanov, and Savintsev, the meteorologist. For Savintsev there were messages fairly often—from his mother, from Lida, whom Timofeich gathered to be his girl, from fellows he knew. The messages were cheerful and bantering. Savintsev replied promptly, also in a tone that was perhaps exaggeratedly cheerful, even a trifle pompous. And as the whole correspondence passed through Timofeich's hands, he could picture distinctly what Kolyvanov's mate was like. He could just see him: one of those young, very young boys, a good, healthy lad, with an open face not unlike a girl's, eager, impulsive, adoring his uniform and the braid on his sleeve—one of those nice romantic YCL boys that are so wild nowadays to get up North, the kind that imagine a bear behind every pile of ice, dream of adventures and heroic deeds and are mortified to find there are no adventures. Out of his long experience and knowledge of men, Timofeich gleaned all this between the meagre lines of the radiograms to and from Savintsev, and he had no doubt of the portrait's accuracy.

But never once was there in the post-box labelled UKL any mail for Kolyvanov, nor did Kolyvanov ever send messages of his own. The thing surprised Timofeich, it troubled him. He knew only too well how important, how vital it was out here to get word from home at the right moment.

Timofeich was a good-hearted, fussy chap. He pictured at once how his pal must be fretting without news, pacing with long strides up and down the cabin, glancing impatiently at his watch as he waited for his schedule-time, and bitterly disappointed when nothing came, though pride kept him from asking.

If there'd be just one message for him, didn't matter if it was only skimpy. It really would be nice. You could pull his leg a

bit first, keep him guessing. Couldn't make him cut capers, of course, as mess-mates do to the lucky fellow that gets a radiogram. But he would have to bang out his "Turkish March"—absolutely. As a ransom. And then you could let him have his precious message, something like "Vasya, darling, I love you."

But no messages ever came for Kolyvanov. One day Timofeich actually went over to the new station himself, hunted through the log, and rifled the mail-packet on the desk to make sure nothing had been mislaid. But there was nothing. And, worried and depressed, Timofeich that day keyed in place of his usual greeting:

"Nothing for you today, old man. But tomorrow. . ."

"I'm not expecting anything," the Nadezhda operator replied.

"How's that?"

"Haven't got anybody."

"Your mother?"

"She's dead."

"And the wife?"

Timofeich waited a long while for an answer, but the time was up and finally, after sending out "QRX—till tomorrow," he set to calling another station.

At any rate, he realized that it was no use asking Kolyvanov about his wife or home. And he felt sorry for the friend whose face he had never seen, but now for some reason visualized as pale, drawn, suffering.

He knew that Kolyvanov often remained alone, quite alone in the place. Savintsev would go off trapping, scouring the locality, seeking adventures and deeds of derring-do, hoping to

discover a new bay or at least some bit of a cape or promontory that hitherto had remained unknown. Kolyvanov would be left by himself in the log cabin, handling both the radio and the meteorological work, cooking the meals, feeding the dogs. And still there would be a lot of time on his hands and nothing to do with it. Timofeich could imagine him brooding by his lonesome, looking out of the window that was half banked up with snow, yawning, drinking the tea he had just boiled on the primus stove, and sucking thoughtfully at a sugar-coated anti-scurvy lemon. And the dog would be rubbing against his knees, licking his hands. "Has he got a dog, come to that? Not a team dog, but a little creature of his own, an indoors dog . . . a pal?"

The question bothered him, and the first thing he asked the next time he called UKL was:

"You at least got a dog?"

Kolyvanov didn't understand.

"BK. Repeat. I don't get you," he keyed, and Timofeich felt rather a fool; he suddenly realized it was a queer sort of question to ask.

"Doesn't matter. Let's have the meteo. I just wanted to know for myself if you've got a dog over at your place."

"Sure. Name of Druzhok. Affectionate little cuss. Great pal of mine."

And Timofeich felt unspeakably relieved. His customary joviality returned. He even sent a little message to Druzhok, inquiring deferentially after his health. After that he would often ask about the dog and send it his regards—all in the two or three minutes they would have left between business, for the private remarks that don't go down in the log.

Once in a while Kolyvanov would ask:

"How's the weather over your way?"

"Blizzard, I believe," Timofeich would reply, glancing towards the window, though he had no need to think about the weather.

"Same here. Blowing hard. All of eight points, I'd say."

"Feeling blue?" Timofeich would inquire sympathetically.

"No, I'm OK."

But Timofeich knew better. Blizzard, did he say? A bad business. He would look out of the window and listen; the wind howled in the wires, rattled the roofing, banged the doors. But Timofeich would, once his watch was up, be going over to the warm messroom, where there was electricity, company, music, the clicking of dominoes on the table; and the fat cook, so spick-and-span in his white cap, would be serving him supper with a flourish and as like as not topping off the porridge with a joke. While the other man, over at Nadezhda, would be sitting alone, listening to the blizzard wailing outside, and wondering—should he risk going out to the shed for another lot of coal, or climb into the sleeping-bag, head and all, and snooze off that way? Timofeich had spent winters in places like that himself—he knew all about it. And he felt more strongly drawn than ever to the man at Nadezhda Bay, a man he knew so well, yet didn't know at all, a man so utterly alone in the world.

"Kolyvanov, Kolyvanov," he would mutter. "Seems I did hear the name some time." But where and when, he could not recollect.

The November 7th anniversary came round, and a storm, a veritable storm of congratulatory messages broke over the Arctic coast. They showered onto the desks in such profusion that you might think the whole country had no thought that day except for the men up North.

Timofeich received a lot of congratulations too. From home, from relations, from his friends. One message—totally unexpected—was from Sukhum, from old cronies whom he had long forgotten, but who had now recollected him. "Met on vacation thought of you old man comma of the old army days stop holiday greetings will be drinking your health,"

Touched, Timofeich twisted the bit of paper uncertainly in his hands.

"Imagine," he muttered. "From Sukhum. I daresay the magnolias are in blossom down there now. Or maybe the peach-trees. And yet they thought of me, believe it or not."

It was with the message still in his hands that he went to take over his watch. It was nearly time for UKL. Timofeich reached into the locker and got out the little packet of radiograms.

"Savintsev." "Savintsev, Nadezhda." Another one for Savintsev. Savintsev again.

"Hey! What about Kolyvanov?" Timofeich wondered, alarmed. "Isn't there anything for Kolyvanov?"

He went through the packet again. No, there was nothing.

"Nothing on a day like this? Poor old boy! You certainly are alone in the world."

On a sudden impulse, he dashed over to the desk and scribbled down a radiogram in one go: "Nadezhda operator Kolyvanov dear comrade heartfelt greetings congratulations on day of Great October Revolution wish you health and strength." And he signed it, "Radiocentre operators."

Then he thought for a moment and added "88" which in the language of "sparks" the world over means "best wishes."

He keyed the radiogram eagerly, and at once came the reply: "Many thanks dear comrades your friendly message and

support give me strength am doing my job confidently and shall do operator Kolyvanov 88 to all."

That festive evening Timofeich was unusually gay. He told the boys about Kolyvanov and about the message he had sent to him. They all nodded approval, and even the ordinarily imperturbable dispatcher said, impressed:

"That was a good thing to do, Timofeich. After all, everything passes through us radio men—and how much mail do we get?"

All evening Timofeich carried these two radiograms around with him—this one from Nadezhda, and the other, from Sukhum. The one reminded him of the present, of the blizzard outside, of the lonely man by the distant bay; and the other . . . the other, of bygone times . . . of the old army days . . . of machine guns on madly racing gigs . . . of campaigns and marches. . . .

"Kariakin, Samoilov, Chubenko." He read the names under the message over and over again, whispering to himself: Kariakin, Samoilov, Chubenko. The southern front's wireless men . . . the boys. . . . Field headquarters. . . . Night. . . . Fields of rye around . . . Kariakin . . . Samoilov . . . Chubenko . . . Kolyvanov. . . .

He felt suddenly that he had remembered, had found a clue. He wrinkled his forehead and pressed his fingers to his temples.

"Kariakin . . . Samoilov. . . ."

The first thing he recalled was, for some reason, the smell of cherry-trees . . . of cherry-orchards in blossom. And the steppe, and the honey-smell of the grasses. . . . Moonlight . . . silvery . . . and the hamlets a misty blue . . . girls singing in the village . . . and guns thundering somewhere. . . . And he remembered a laddie in a brand-new Red Army uniform, snub-nosed, blue-eyed, and so young. . . . The laddie had no ginger

beard in those days. . . . And people didn't call him Stepan Timofeich, but Styopa, just plain Styopa. Just through with the training course, the laddie was, and taking a watch on his own for the first time. . . . He put on the earphones timidly. Kariakin—yes, it was Kariakin—smiled encouragement, lent him a hand. Swallowing his fears, young Styopa sat expectant, pencil in hand, with the blank before him. There came the call-signal. It was Skadovsk—headquarters—calling him. He replied tremulously, and without further warning, a rapid tattoo, like a machine-gun rattling, poured into his ears. A whole cascade of sounds, letters, words overwhelmed him. All he could catch was snatches, something like "pr," "cl," "bi." He felt like crying out, "Wait a moment! I can't keep up—have a heart—I'm new." The pencil hopped convulsively over the paper, registering his helplessness: "pr," "cl," "bi." Kariakin—yes, it was Kariakin—saw and took pity on him.

"Here, I'll take it down."

Crestfallen, Styopa crawled rather than walked away from the desk. He sat with his head down on his knees, feeling absolutely crushed. And through the window came the scent of cherry-trees, of cherry-trees in blossom.

"That's Kolyvanov," Kariakin told him. "Kolyvanov at the key. A real devil, he is. No keeping up with him. It's all I can do, and you're new to the job."

After that, Kolyvanov in Skadovsk would ask every time before he started transmitting:

"Who's at the key?"

And Styopa, recognizing the relentless hand, would resign his place humbly to Kariakin or Chubenko, himself taking over another key instead. How could he hope to take down Kolyvanov?

And it became his dearest, fondest wish to outdo Kolyvanov. Yes, outdo him. Nothing less.

All his spare time he spent practising: 16, 18, 20, 24 words a minute. But that did not satisfy him: 26, 28, 30.

And at last one day, when Kolyvanov was calling, he did not abandon his place as usual, but, gritting his teeth and flushing with the strain, started taking down the message himself. After a few minutes, emboldened by his success, he demanded:

"GA, faster."

And after another minute had passed:

"GA, faster still."

What he heard now was an unbroken machine-gun rat-tat. His pencil did not even race over the paper—it flew. And still he demanded, "Faster, faster." The others bent over him, looking on silently at the contest. And he sat there triumphant. At last he had made Kolyvanov sweat. Yes, Kolyvanov . . . Skadovsk. . . . The southern front. . . . Silvery moonlight nights. And cherry-trees in blossom.

But was it the same Kolyvanov? How, by what miracle had he turned up here? He of all men? Come to think of it, Stepan Timofeich had never set eyes on him. Kolyvanov had soon disappeared from the headquarters station. Styopa had been moved along with the Red Army troops, on and on, past the hamlets in the steppe, on to the sea, on the heels of the retreating White armies. He had never come across Kolyvanov again, either in person or in the air.

Suppose it really was he? Talk about coincidences!

The next day, when it was time at last to call UKL, Timofeich asked:

"You ever served in Skadovsk?"

"Yes. Why?"

"What year?"

It was really the same Kolyvanov. Timofeich was pleased and thrilled past telling.

"Wonderful," he muttered, puffing at his pipe. "Simply wonderful! To think of meeting like that."

And indeed, they are wonderful, these meetings in the Far North. It's a wonderful thing when pilots meet in the air, and a wonderful custom to salute by dipping their wings; the chance encounters of friends at the crossroads of air routes are wonderful too when they run into each other at some tiny unexpected aerodrome, over a tin mug of black coffee by a blazing hot stove in a little shack of creaking boards; and so are the conversations of travellers by a bonfire in the tundra when all the news has been retailed, the pipes smoked, yet the talk smoulders on and on, like the fire, warm and intimate—and over the fire, the broiling meat hisses, the snow crunches around, and the dogs go nosing at one another. But most wonderful of all are the encounters of wireless men in the ether, when, above the wailing and whistling of snowstorms, the voices of two buddies find each other.

"And so we've met again, Vasya Kolyvanov," Timofeich thought, smiling fondly. "And where, of all places? In the ether of the Arctic. The south last time—now it's up north. Some country! Some people it's got! Look where you and I have got ourselves, Vasya Kolyvanov—where we have managed to meet. And I don't even know what you look like. Fair or dark, tall or short? Talk to you every day, and the queer thing is, I don't even know your voice. Is it a baritone, or maybe an alto, or a bass? Why, if I met you in the street, or in a tram let's say, I'd pass by without knowing it was you. And in the ether I

recognized you. Well, hullo to you, old boy. How are things, anyway? How's life?"

Now army reminiscences became the main topic of the daily talks they sandwiched in between business. The time allowed by the schedule was far too short, and they devised symbols and abbreviations, inventing a whole code of their own as they went along, eager to get more said. They told each other of the ways they had gone after leaving the army. These were quite ordinary, prosaic ways—yet they had led both to the Arctic land of romance, for Kolyvanov still new and mysterious, while for Timofeich it had been the ordinary thing for a long time now. After Skadovsk, Kolyvanov had served in a submarine. Then he'd been demobbed and had stayed on in the merchant fleet. Voyages abroad. The Baltic, the White Sea. Then, last autumn, he had suddenly decided to go out to a Polar station.

What had made him do it? He did not say, and Timofeich didn't ask. As it was, that "suddenly decided" told him volumes, and he did not pry any further. In his own mind, that "suddenly decided" was linked with Kolyvanov's total absence of mail; he sensed, without being told, a drama in the other man's private life. He would never touch on it—but it made him feel more than ever for his distant and solitary pal.

Their conversations now invariably began with: "Remember? . ."

"Remember Baryba, the headquarters clerk?" one of them would query—and both would roar with laughter over their sets, with 500 kilometres between them, as they recalled the tow-headed clerk with his foppish airs, and all the anecdotes about him. They didn't go into any detailed reminiscences—just outlined the framework, awakened forgotten memories by a single sentence, and then each, alone with himself, would go

over all the associations it called up, turning them over and over delightedly.

They would recall fellows they had both known in the army, episodes that both knew about—those that had been talked of at headquarters, at the radio stations, in the commandant's squads. It did happen sometimes that some incident was known only to one of the two—they had served in different places, after all, had never even met! The other would reply regretfully that he didn't remember that, and they would count the day lost. But there were so many acquaintances in common that this happened but seldom. They now lived in surroundings of their own creating: under grey canvas amid the sun-scorched steppes of the Ukraine, they lay on the fragrant clover by their field transmitters, billy-cans rattling, they raced over to the field kitchen for their share of butterless porridge, and seasoned it with a laugh instead. They laughed and sang as only carefree youth can laugh and sing to the accompaniment of the artillery cannonade. And over the ice-pack of the Arctic, over the white stillness of the frozen tundra, the hot winds of the steppes would blow for them, and their soldiering youth, resurrected and transmuted, scorched them with its hot breath. They would look forward impatiently to their next meeting in the ether to say again, "Remember?"

If for Timofeich, with all the good friends he had in the ether, a bustling, close-knit bunch of jolly, congenial companions around him, and regular news from home, these talks with Kolyvanov were a real joy, for the lonely man at Nadezhda they were everything.

Timofeich guessed as much, and the relationship was the more precious to him because of it. He was the kind that give more than they take, the kind that do not look for gain in friendship, and when they spill out their last crumbs of tobacco for a pal, do not expect his last shirt in return. It was the fact that he gave

more than he took that made this friendship with Kolyvanov so dear to him. And when he managed to remind his pal of a few funny stories of the Skadovsk days, it made himself feel good. He seemed to see the smile parting the other's pale lips, seemed to hear him laughing with delight. He knew that now Kolyvanov would be smiling for the rest of the day, that his black thoughts would be banished, and the night, the Polar night outside, would seem a bit brighter and more friendly.

And so, between watches, talks and jokes, the long Polar night melted away at last. Kolyvanov was the first to report:

"The sun came out over here today. How about your place?"

"Expecting it tomorrow," Timofeich replied, and congratulated him.

The following day Kolyvanov inquired first of all whether the sun had made its appearance, as if he feared that it might take to dawdling or that the celestial mechanism might get out of gear and Timofeich be left sunless. Now Timofeich, whether because of his long years in the Arctic, or because he lived in company, in a house lit by bright electric lights, cared but little if the narrow rim of the sun had appeared beyond the hills or not. He replied that he believed it had. But by the intonation he guessed in Kolyvanov's question, even without hearing his voice, he could tell what the sun must mean to the man at Nadezhda Bay. And he congratulated him again upon its coming.

Everybody at the centre knew about Timofeich and his buddy. They twitted him a bit, as people like to do in such wintering crews, but on the whole they were rather nice and touching about it and would often give him regards for Kolyvanov and ask how he was getting on.

And when one day in March Timofeich came off duty looking glum and upset, it did not take them long to guess that something must have happened to Kolyvanov.

"UKL didn't turn up," Timofeich said.

"How d'you mean, he didn't?" the dispatcher queried.

"Called him for twenty minutes," Timofeich said, shrugging his shoulders. "Called him in the second watch, too, and the third. And nothing, not a sound. Dead silence."

"Maybe it's just a dead spot?" somebody suggested.

"No. All the western section stations showed up. Reception was fine. I can't understand it. Can't make out what's happened to him."

All that evening Timofeich worried. And when UKL failed to reply in the night-time communication period, and in the morning too, he no longer doubted that something had happened to Kolyvanov. But what? What?

"Maybe the batteries are just run down," the others comforted him. "Or something's gone out of commission."

"No. He would have warned me. We were just talking about it day before yesterday. Only a bit back he gave his outfit a general overhauling."

"Well, then, maybe he's ill. . . , flu or something."

"That couldn't keep him away from the key," Timofeich returned despondently. "He's a wireless man, through and through. He'd have got to the key if he had to crawl. Wouldn't you? Wouldn't I? No, no, this smacks of something serious. This—" but he would not admit even to himself that this meant some disaster, as before, he called UKL when the schedule told him to and when it didn't; and as before, he got no reply.

He felt then as if he had for ever lost a friend, the best friend he had ever had. And he didn't even know his face, his voice. What could he remember about him? Only the dots and dashes they had keyed. As to what he was like—his friend Kolyvanov—whether he was good-looking or plain, clean-shaven or bearded, what kind of eyes he had, how he laughed, smoked, brooded—he did not know any of these things. He did not know the vital details that keep the picture of a departed friend in your memory, creating the illusion that he is still alive, is here, by your side. Timofeich lacked even that illusion. Dots and dashes—that was all he could recall about his pal.

He puffed mournfully at his pipe, took his watches, did his job, but he was thinking about Kolyvanov. Whenever communication time came, hope awakened again. He would fish out the radiograms for Nadezhda Bay—quite a packet of them had accumulated by now—and set to work doggedly calling UKL. The allotted time would pass, and no sign from UKL. Disconsolate, he would go through the messages before putting them back in the drawer.

And suddenly he noticed among them one that astounded him. "Nadezhda Bay Kolyvanov," it said. Perhaps he had misread the address? No, there it was: Kolyvanov. The first message in all that time. He flashed a glance at the signature, and read "Galya."

"Galya," he said out loud. "Galya!"

"Vasya forgive me I was a fool come back can't live without you Galya."

He rushed over to the key. Again he started calling UKL.

"Vasya, come back! Come back! Make some sign! Vasya!" he whispered, banging away frantically. "There's a radiogram for

you. Galya loves you. Come back, Vasya! UKL! UKL! Vasya!"

But Nadezhda Bay was silent. He stopped, waited for an answer, called anew. He changed the wave-length. He pressed the earphones to his head, then flung them down and listened intently at the loudspeaker—but all he heard in reply was the whistling in the ether. He did not give up, did not lose hope; he put his ear closer to the loudspeaker—he wanted so badly to hear the reassuring dots and dashes, no matter how faint and unintelligible—but all he heard was that whistling, and it seemed to freeze his soul. He began to think he could make out in that whistling distant, muffled groans and cries: "Help! Help!"—and a whispered, "Old pal! Old pal!" He was prepared to believe that he did hear it, that he heard anything under the sun—anything but dots and dashes. No, that he did not hear. His trained ear would not allow him to deceive himself on that score.

He returned home a racked, worn-out man after his watch.

Flopped on his cot. Smoked in silence. The tobacco smoke enveloped the room. Blue smoke. . .

That radiogram. It would have made Vasya happy. Maybe he had been waiting for it all through the long Polar night. And now it was here, and Timofeich couldn't pass it on to him.

Some of the others looked in, took a seat beside him.

"Nothing, eh?" they asked sympathetically.

Timofeich shook his head furiously.

"No news is good news, the sages say," the fellows comforted him. "After all, Kolyvanov isn't alone in the place. His mate would have sent word long ago."

"How? How would he have sent it?" Timofeich burst out. "Through pigeon mail? Or the Holy Ghost? He's not a wireless man."

So five more weary days passed—seven altogether that UKL had kept silent. A plane came to the station, the first plane that year, a swallow heralding the distant spring.

The bright-blue bird raced over the ice in the bay, raising clouds of snow in its trail. Out of the cockpit climbed a burly, ungainly, fur-clad figure. It took off the woollen mask that had protected its face against the frost, and Timofeich saw that the pilot was young, blond and handsome. In the rest room, he got out of his furs, unwound the scarves that went round and round his throat and were tied crosswise behind his back, pulled off his frozen deerskin boots, his shaggy stockings of dog's fur, his flying suit, sweater and padded trousers, and Timofeich discovered that actually the pilot was slim and wiry. He looked hopefully at this keen young fellow with his weather-beaten face, a fellow that smelt of frost and petrol and great open spaces, a regular pilot of the line, one of the gallant lads that fly in any weather on the northern lines, undertake to deliver anything anywhere, and crack a joke into the bargain.

The pilot was having breakfast in the messroom while the wintering party had dispersed to their rooms to read the letters he had brought. Timofeich approached him apologetically.

"Comrade," he ventured. "You feeling . . . very cold after the trip?"

"No, I'm not so bad," the pilot grinned. "Good coffee you have here."

"And you're in a great hurry? Or not?"

"That'll depend on the weather."

"Do you think . . . you could go to save a fellow, comrade?"

The pilot gave him a wondering look, but made no reply. Then Timofeich told him the whole story—about UKL, which wasn't reporting when it was supposed to, about Kolyvanov, the lonely wireless operator of Nadezhda Bay, about their friendship, about Galya, who had sent a message at last, about. . . .

"But what makes you think something's happened to your friend?" the pilot asked sympathetically. "Maybe it's simply that his transmitter is out of joint?"

Timofeich shook his head unhappily.

"No, something's happened. I feel it in my bones. If a fellow-pilot of yours, a real crackerjack pilot, took off from Dickson for Dudinka, let's say, and if a day, two days, three days passed and he wasn't either at Dickson or at Dudinka or at any of the stations in between, what would you say? That he'd taken ill? You know quite well, there's no such thing as a pilot taking ill in mid-air. . . . You would say something had happened to your pal. And you'd go off to look for him. Right?"

"Well, naturally."

"Well, and I'm a wireless operator. A first-class operator, I may say. And when a pal of mine doesn't show up on schedule for seven solid days, I tell you something has happened to him. And I beg you—I implore you, comrade—save my pal."

The pilot got up and paced the room in silence.

"All right," he said finally, coming to a stop in front of Timofeich. "Nadezhda Bay, did you say? That's two or three hours' flying, heading straight over the tundra. We'll fuel up here—full tanks. Take a doctor along. We'll find your pal. Absolutely. I'll have to get the sanction from Moscow, though."

"Moscow'll sanction it," Timofeich cried. "It can't help sanctioning it. Why, a man's life is at stake. We'll ask Moscow

right now if you like." He glanced anxiously at his watch. "In fifteen minutes it'll be time for direct contact with Moscow. In an hour's time we get Moscow on the telephone. I'll make out the request myself if you like. We'll say 'Man in danger. Urgent aid needed.'"

Moscow gave its sanction during the night (Timofeich had been waiting in suspense at the radio station, smoking pipe after pipe, and when the radiogram finally came through, he rushed in search of the pilot, flourishing it triumphantly.) At dawn the plane with the doctor on board was already on its way westwards to Nadezhda. In a pocket of the pilot's flying togs was Galya's radiogram, sealed up in an envelope.

"That'll be medicine for him," Timofeich had said as he handed it over. "Finest medicine in the world."

He himself was staying put at the station to keep in touch with the plane. "Passed Kamennaya," he scrawled feverishly in the log. "Flying over tundra." "Snowstorms." "Visibility poor." "Plodding through fog."

"They'll turn back," he thought in despair. "Will they really turn back?"

". . . Pushing through fog . . ."

"Visibility nil. . ."

"4.10. Caught in blizzard."

". . . 5.10. Got clear. Now over Cape Chortov Kamen."

"Got clear! Got clear!" Timofeich carolled. "Those are men for you—the real kind!"

His thoughts, feelings, hopes, fears were all out there now, on the ribbed blue wings of the plane, with the two fur-clad men aboard. With them he battled forward through the whirling snow, floundered in the fog, climbed, dropped again, hoped,

despaired, yet continued to push on. Faster, faster! To the rescue. Hold on, Vasya. We're coming. We're over Chortov Kamen already. . . . "5.40. . . . Over Krest Bay. . . 6.10. . . over Tixie Bay . . . 6.40 . . . Nadezhda Bay in sight. . . . 6.45 . . . about to land. Will call you through UKL."

About to land. Contact broke off. Ten weary minutes passed. Had they landed or not? Was everything all right? Another ten minutes of uncertainty. What were they doing now? Climbing out of the cockpit. Tramping over the snow to the cabin. . . . Maybe they'd landed a long way off. . . . Another ten minutes, that seemed like eternity. What had happened? Why no sign? UKL! UKL! Another ten minutes. The minutes dropped like raindrops off a roof, splashing and vanishing, evaporating. UKL! UKL! What's happened to you?

And suddenly—dots and dashes, clear, distinct: "UKL calling. UKL calling. Centre! Centre! UKL calling. Audibility?"

"OK. OK," Timofeich replied happily. And he felt as if it were Vasya calling him, just like a week ago. Nothing had happened, he'd imagined it all. . . . But he listened to the tapping of the distant key. No, it wasn't Vasya. That wasn't his hand—not his voice, so to speak, not his characteristic manner.

"Communicate weather immediately starting return trip."

"What about the operator . . . Vasya?" Timofeich keyed, breathless.

"Very bad. Bringing him back."

"He's alive!" So he is.

And now the plane was in the air. Kolyvanov was on board of it now. They were coming back here.

". . . 9.10 . . . nearing Tixie Bay . . . 9.40 . . . passed Krest Bay . . ."

"What's the matter with Kolyvanov?" Timofeich asked.

"In a bad way . . . out trapping . . . alone . . . blizzard. Must have lost his way . . . a ridge . . . he fell over . . . knocked his head . . . concussion of the brain . . . Wait a minute, I'll see where we are . . . You listening? Passed Chortov Kamen. . . . Savintsev found him . . . Splendid fellow . . . didn't lose his head . . . hauled him back to the cabin . . . pushed on to the nearest settlement . . . sent a Nenets with a note for the doctor at Belaya . . . We got there first, though. . . . Unconscious now. . . . Doc says . . ."

"What? What does he say?"

"Says he's bad, but still there's hope . . . Main trouble, unconscious all the time . . . Nearing the island. See your fire. About to land . . . closing down . . ."

Timofeich dashed out bareheaded onto the porch and saw the machine circling over the bay; its sunlit wings seemed to be made of molten metal, it hurt your eyes to look at them.

When he had got into his things and reached the plane, an excited crowd was already gathered around it, the fire was burning itself out, youngsters carrying off the smouldering bits. Timofeich elbowed his way through to the machine and saw a fur-wrapped figure being lifted gingerly out of the cockpit. He rushed to help, they made room for him, as was only right, and, with two of the other operators, he carried Kolyvanov carefully to the hospital.

When the sick man was divested of his furs, Timofeich saw his old friend's face for the first time.

"So that's what you're like . . . that's what you're like," he whispered, gazing at the pale, sharply-chiselled features. He saw temples touched with grey, deep, strong furrows on the cheeks, compressed lips. The eyes were closed. He would have

liked to see them—for some reason he decided they must be blue. Kolyvanov had no beard or moustache, but his cheeks and firm chin were blue with the stubble that had grown in the past week. And then Timofeich saw what escaped the eyes of the others. He divined the strength and will-power of this man, lying unconscious before him. He understood everything.

It was all there, in those blue cheeks. He had shaved every day, doggedly, meticulously, afraid of letting himself go, of getting slack, unnerved. He had probably washed his shirts ever so often, changed his collar every day, made a point of seeing he never had a button missing. Had no doubt established a cast-iron routine for himself and stuck to it rigidly. He had wrestled with himself, with his gloomy thoughts, with his solitude—and had emerged victor from the contest.

"So that's what you're like . . . that's what you're like. . ." Timofeich whispered, and scratched his beard.

He spent all day in the hospital, only stepping out occasionally for a smoke and a breath of the cold air, and hurrying back. Bulky and ridiculous in the white hospital coat over his padded jacket, he sat by the sick man's bed, afraid to stir. The hospital smells of carbolic acid and chloroform bothered him, he wanted to cough and sneeze, but he controlled the desire, afraid of disturbing the patient, of breaking the mysterious and evidently necessary quiet of the hospital. He sat there, glancing nervously around him. The doctor and nurse were doing something noiselessly by the bedside. They came and went, soundless as shadows, while he kept sitting there, huddled on his chair, and looking, looking. . . .

When consciousness returned slowly, ever so slowly to Kolyvanov, he saw that he was lying in a strange room which he finally made out to be a hospital. He could not recollect

either what was the matter with him or how he had come to be there.

An unfamiliar but very kindly face bent over him. He saw a beard. A ginger beard. And he remembered.

"Timofeich," he whispered, and smiled wanly.

THE RETURN OF SATANAU

THE STORY of Satanau's return was told me by Rebrovsky, who is a Party official in Chukotka. The two of us spent a solid month at the Maina Pylgina Supply Depot on the Behring Sea coast. We were waiting for a steamer, and no steamer came.

In the daytime we would wander about the shore, looking on listlessly at the brown droves of cachalots at play in the sea. (It had been amusing at first, then boring, then we had got sick to death of it. Never have I seen animals more stupid than these wet, blunt-nosed monsters!) The evenings we spent sprawled on deerskins spread out on the floor, smoking, yawning, playing dice.

By this time I knew all about Rebrovsky's first love affairs and the story of his marriage, and what dishes he favoured. I have an idea that by now we were devilishly sick of each other too. The last few evenings we just lay there silent, each in his own corner.

"Want me to tell you the story of Satanau?" he asked all of a sudden one night.

"Go ahead."

"But first you'll have to hear about Nam-Bok."

"And what may that be?"

He fished out a tattered, well-thumbed book from under his pillow and read me Jack London's story, Nam-Bok the Unveracious.

Here is the story of Nam-Bok.

After ten years of roaming distant seas, he came back to the fires of his tribe. The Eskimoes shrank from him: he had come from the Kingdom of Shadows, they were sure. Nam-Bok told them of the things he had seen in the white man's land, of the house made of iron that moved without paddles over the water, of the monster which was fed with stone and in return towed men about. . . . He told them of many such wonders. But the Eskimoes laughed at him and called him a liar: iron goes to the bottom, monsters do not feed on stone. And they cast out Nam-Bok and drove him away in disgrace. There is the story of Nam-Bok, as told by Jack London, the writer.

And here is the story of Satanau, as told me by Rebrovsky at Maina Pylgina on the Behring Sea coast in those weary days of our "forced landing."

The steamer came from the east. She anchored in the roadstead, past the cliff, for the bay was still packed with ice: the north wind had been blowing the day before. Today a strong westerly breeze was clearing the ice out of the bay, and the captain hoped to come closer in by nightfall and start unloading. He stood on the bridge, puffing at his pipe and staring out indifferently at the long-familiar shore.

An impatient tugboat darted towards the steamer from the shoreline. Dodging adroitly among the floating blue and green ice-floes, it nosed its way to the ship, and the man aboard clambered up the ladder, eager to get the papers and the mail, to hear the latest news, and even more eager to see some fresh faces and have a talk with somebody different.

It was the first ship that year, and everybody in the place swarmed out to meet it: the wintering party at the Polar station, the Chukchi trappers, their wives and children and dogs. They crowded on the shore, bustling and babbling excitedly.

At last the tug came back. She dug her nose into the wet sand, and the occupants jumped out—men of the ship's crew and passengers, some of the wintering party.

The last to come ashore was a man in blue overalls, the pockets stitched on with a double line of white thread. You see overalls like that in Alaska, at the Japanese fishing stations, and in this country—out in Kamchatka. A knapsack dangled on the man's back—all the baggage he had. Without looking at anybody or speaking to anybody, he strode confidently up the bank, like a man who knew his way about these parts, picked the driest stone he could find, sat down, and proceeded solemnly to pull off his boots. From the knapsack he brought out a pair of shoes, a bright red tie with a blue polka-dot design, and a bandanna to match, all this he laid out lovingly on the stone, stuffed the boots into the knapsack, put on the shoes and tie, tucked the bandanna into his breast pocket and smiled, well-pleased with himself. Then he headed for the people standing about on the shore.

He walked straight up to a little knot of Chukchi and planted himself in front of them, a grin on his face and legs importantly wide apart.

"Here I am back again," he said in Chukchi. "Here I have come back at last."

Dozens of eyes stared in surprise. They did not recognize him, he realized, and it pleased him well. He laughed again, thrust his chest out proudly, drew forth the bandanna and waved it about his face.

"Who art thou, that thou speakest like real men?" an ancient bespectacled man asked in a quavering voice.

"Oh, is it thou, Pelyaugyn?" the newcomer laughed. "Who gave thee spectacles? And that . . . is that Tygrenkau?" he went on, peering into the faces. "Is that . . . Ulkutyn?" He shifted his eyes from one to the other, while they looked on in bewilderment. "That is Ichel. . . . That is Kau-Kau. Thou art grown old, Kau-Kau, like ill-baked dough. Are these the children?"

He recognized only the old. The young ones were unknown to him. He eyed with disfavour two young lads in European suits. To his annoyance, one of them was wearing a tie; but his own tie was brighter and more handsome, and he felt better. He scanned the crowd, but did not find the person he sought. His face darkened.

"Who art thou, who art thou, man that knoweth us?" Ukutagyn asked in wonder.

The stranger laughed uproariously.

But Pelyaugyn, who wore the glasses, and so could see more keenly than the rest, ventured, after peering into the newcomer's face:

"Eheh! Is it thou, Satanau? Thou hast come back?"

"Yes," the stranger replied proudly. "I am Satanau. And I have come back."

"O, Satanau!"

"Satanau has come back!"

"It is Satanau!" voices called, and they all crowded eagerly about the man in the blue overalls.

"But where hast thou been then, Satanau?" Pelyaugyn asked.

"There. Beyond the sea," Satanau motioned. "I have been where none of you has ever been. For I am a great man." And he thumped his lusty breast.

They followed him in a flock to the village, and told the women who came running out, those that had not been down by the shore:

"It is Satanau. He has come back."

And women, children, dogs—all joined the procession headed by the man in the blue overalls, who had returned at last to the fires of his people.

They gave Satanau the place of honour by the fire, and the entire population of the settlement squatted around. A savoury smell of meat and seal oil rose from the cooking pots, and Satanau did not wait for an invitation, but plunged his hand into the pot, fished out a huge chunk of meat, and gorged. They all waited patiently, for Satanau was doing as was proper: a man does not tell his tidings until he has filled his belly.

And he, for his part, plucked the fattest chunks out of the pots, smacked his lips loudly as he ate, and cried boastfully, flushed with the food:

"Yes, indeed. Give me the choicest pieces. Give me liquor. Give me tobacco. Now shall I eat the seal's liver. Where is Umkugyn, that old hound? Drive him away, I shall be shaman[5] now, I have seen mighty sorceries out there, beyond the sea."

And all the Chukchi laughed, like men who can appreciate a joke.

When Satanau had finished—and he fed long and heartily—they asked him to tell about the places where he had been and the things he had seen. He lit his pipe and opened impressively:

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[5] Medicine man.

"You who are seated around this fire, my fellows and neighbours. Thou, Pelyaugyn, thou, Tygrenkau, thou, Ukutagyn, and all of you. Hear Satanau speak, he will tell you of what you will never hear nor see." He wanted to continue in the same solemn, impressive strain, as he had been planning for ten years; but he could not sustain it, and the rest of his tale came in disconnected, boastful snatches.

"Eheh! You! Chukchi men! Satanau is a great man indeed. He has been beyond the sea. Ho! Like the wind he went. . . . To Alaska with the whalers, ho! Then America . . . , Frisco. I have seen wonders." He made great eyes and said in a whisper: "I have seen a bird on which men flew, and the bird was made of iron, it was all iron, like this pot."

"O!" Tygrenkau let out in astonishment.

"That is a plane," Pelyaugyn whispered under his breath. "We too have seen such a bird. We thought that it had been fledged like a bird, in a nest, but they told us that men had fashioned it."

Satanau flashed an irate look in his direction.

"Oho!" he cried. "Where hast thou seen such a bird, old man with four eyes? Hast thou dreamed it?"

"Here," Pelyaugyn replied, and pointed towards the bay. "They come here often."

"But you have not flown on such a bird!" Satanau thundered. "No Chukcha has ever flown on one. But I, oho, I! I wanted to fly on it, I did not fear, only it costs much money—and why throw money away?"

"We have not flown," said Ukutagyn, "but Tyvlyanto has flown. He says it is good. He said nothing about money."

The good-natured Tygrenkau felt it was poor courtesy to bandy words in such wise with a guest. So he said pacifically:

"Let Satanau speak, do not interrupt Satanau. He has seen more than we, he has roamed the earth for ten years, while we have been sitting here by the sea."

"Yes," Satanau cried. "I have roamed the earth for ten years. And I have seen mighty sorceries. I have come back to show you great wonders. Send Umkugyn away, I shall be shaman now."

They all laughed anew and said nothing, only the irrepressible Pelyaugyn burst out:

"But we have no shaman."

"Then shall I be shaman." Satanau rose to his feet and scanned them all haughtily. "Who of you has been beyond the sea? But I! Ho! You have seen the bird which flies, and you think that you have seen everything? Ho! I have seen things more wonderful."

"Tell us, then," Tygrenkau asked, and they all nodded friendly agreement.

"Eheh, eheh, tell us . . ."

"I have seen," Satanau declared, resuming his seat by the fire, "an iron sleigh, drawn by an iron beast, and riding upon that sleigh were more men than there are on all this coast."

"Oho!" Tygrenkau exclaimed in surprise, but the younger Chukchi whispered among themselves, and one of them said diffidently:

"That is called a lo-co-mo-tive. . . ."

"Yes, yes, we have seen a picture of it," Pelyaugyn recalled. "It is a plane, only without wings. It is a ship that sails on land

instead of on the sea. We have seen a picture of it, Satanau. So it is true? Some would not believe."

"A lo-co-mo-tive," the young Chukcha in European clothes repeated, plucking up courage. "It goes by steam. It has an engine."

"Boys should be silent when their elders are speaking," Satanau muttered. "Have the Chukchi no more men wise with age that whelps should set up a bark?"

"Speak, Satanau," Tygrenkau soothed him, "the boys will be silent."

"I have seen," Satanau said, looking angrily about him, "what no man has seen. Those who saw it died and those who will see it will die. I! I alone am alive. I saw linen stretched, white as snow and pure as snow. And the great shaman struck his gong, and shadows appeared on the linen. And all who were there to see it died of fright. Only Satanau did not die. He saw the shadows moving about on the linen, threatening men with knives and hissing like evil spirits. . . Oh! It was fearful. But I did not die." And he cast a proud look around him.

The young Chukchi whispered together again; but Ukutagyn, after an angry look at them, himself said:

"We too have seen the linen and the shadows, Satanau. Over there," he pointed towards the Polar station, "they have shown us that wonder at holiday-times. And we too feared that we would die, but. . ."

"I have seen," Satanau cried, interrupting, "men speaking together when one was in a house on the shore and the other on a ship in the sea. And they hear the voices, and I myself have spoken and heard. It is a wonder, men, a wonder, I say to you."

Everyone laughed, but none ventured to break in when Satanau was speaking, while he rushed on, afraid he would be interrupted:

"I have seen a lamp that burns without oil, and without kerosene, and without wood. And I saw a box in which glad spirits dwelt and sang. . . . It was beautiful music, none of you has ever heard the like."

But here the good-natured Tygrenkau rose and made for his yaranga. The people looked in surprise after him, and even Satanau stopped and waited, puzzled, to see what would happen next. Soon Tygrenkau returned, and in his hands was an oblong box. He stood it on the ground near the fire and said hospitably:

"It will give thee pleasure, Satanau, to hear the music that thou heardst beyond the sea." And he opened the gramophone. "I gave two foxes for this box. And Ukutagyn got one for nothing," he added regretfully.

"They gave it to me because I am the best trapper," Ukutagyn explained apologetically. He wanted to say something more, but at this moment the gramophone started playing.

The soft strains of an Argentinian tango rose over the tundra and floated out to sea. Men and women listened spellbound to the music, they nodded their heads in time, their whole bodies swayed and they whispered:

"Eheh! Eheh! It is good."

Sweet music! It was born under torrid skies, but now it had leapt into life on the shores of the icy sea by a smoky fire. Proudly, Tygrenkau turned the gramophone handle. Satanau sat disconsolate in his place of honour. He had dropped his head, and was staring down at the ground. His eyes were dull, his arms were limp, his whole figure expressed weariness and

dejection. The music died away, they all turned to Satanau again, waiting for him to tell more, but he sat silent as before, eyes fixed on the ground. For some reason everyone felt unhappy and ill at ease. Ukutagyn flung a bone savagely at the dogs fighting by his yaranga. Tygrenkau turned the gramophone handle helplessly. It was quiet by the fireside, only the idle seagulls soared shrilling over the coast.

Then the crafty Pelyaugyn came up closer to the fire, took off his spectacles, wiped them, planted them on the very tip of his nose and said to Satanau:

"Thou hast roamed foreign lands for ten years, Satanau, while we have stayed here by the sea and have hunted the walrus and trapped. Thou hast become a man who idly roams the earth, while we have remained what we were before. And what hast thou seen that we have not seen? Thou dost not know the way to live, Satanau, no, indeed."[6]

And Satanau stooped still lower under the weight of this terrible insult; he made no reply, but merely drew his head still further down to his shoulders.

The good-natured Tygrenkau felt sorry for him. He shook his head and said to Pelyaugyn:

"Thou must not scoff at him, Pelyaugyn. He is a guest by our fireside."

And Ukutagyn too said:

"Satanau has done nothing to be scoffed at. Do not our young men go out to travel inland, and do not they then return as men of wisdom to their settlements?"

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[6] This is considered an expression of great opprobrium by the Chukchi, among whom terms of abuse are practically non-existent.

"But they learn when they go inland," Pelyaugyn called shrilly, spitting saliva.

"Perhaps Satanau has learnt something too," fat Tygrenkau said pacifically. All fat people like friendly converse.

"What hast thou learnt, then, Satanau?" they all cried encouragingly.

But Satanau did not reply.

"Mayhap thou hast learnt to cure sickness?" Ukutagyn asked. "The son of Rykkon of Wankarem has returned from inland and now he cures sickness in the tundra. Mayhap thou canst cure sickness too?"

"No, I cannot," Satanau replied in a low voice.

"Or thou hast become a sailor like Ranau? He sails the seas and knows the engine as we know our dogs."

Satanau shook his head sorrowfully. "No."

"Tygrenkau knows!" Tygrenkau called of a sudden. "He will teach our children, like the teacher that hails from Chaun."

"That is woman's work," muttered Ukutagyn, "and he is a man."

"No, I do not know how to teach children."

The Chukchi whispered disapprovingly among themselves. But Tygrenkau had not yet abandoned hope of protecting the guest from affront.

"There is Tyvlyanto," he cried. "He does not teach children and does not cure sickness in the tundra. But he is a big man in Chukotka, and he has sat with Stalin in a great house, and spoken with him about Chukotka business. Mayhap thou hast become a Bolshevik, Satanau?"

The guest shook his head. "No."

"But then thou canst carve bone, like Vukvol? They pay good money for that. Or drive a motor-car? Then there are people who can speak across the air; Ancheno, the son of Tayuge, works at the station, they say."

"No, I cannot," Satanau whispered.

Tygrenkau raised his hands in dismay and said:

"Well, then, thou wilt hunt the beasts on the sea, as thou didst before and as we do. But thou art not a great man, Satanau. And thou must not put on big looks before us."

"I wanted to be your shaman," Satanau muttered. "I have seen many wonders beyond the sea. . . ."

They all laughed mockingly, Tygrenkau even louder than the rest: fat people are fond of laughing.

And, laughing, the crafty Pelyaugyn spoke to him:

"What land is it that thou hast roamed for ten years, Satanau? Our young men too leave to travel in the world. They go to big settlements and learn there for many, for a great many years. Then they come back to us, and they know many wonders, but none of them wants to be shaman. What land is it thou hast roamed, Satanau, that thou hast learnt nothing? There is no such land, indeed."

And they all cried up:

"Tell, tell us about that land, Satanau."

And he began to tell them about the land beyond the sea. He said that he had been in places where they caught fish; and there was a vast deal of fish there, he said. But Satanau had forever been hungry.

"Why wast thou hungry, then, Satanau, if there was much fish?"

"The fish there was not mine."

"Fish is his that catches it," said the young Chukcha with suit and tie. "Whoever kills a walrus eats it. Is it not so?"

"No," Satanau replied with a wry smile.

But the young Chukcha decided that he was lying.

He told them how he had roamed the land and had sought work and had not been able to find it. He had come to fisheries and farms and factories, had held out his strong hands, but they had driven him away, saying, "Not wanted."

"Thou wast sick, Satanau?" Tygrenkau asked.

"No, I was strong."

"Why should there be no work for a strong man?"

He hesitated, not knowing how to explain it. And at that all of them decided that he was lying, and blushed with shame for him: a man should not lie—it is shameful.

He went on telling about the strange land which he had roamed for ten years; there was no note of bragging in his voice any more, nothing but weariness and pain. But the people gathered by the fireside could not understand his tales. The younger Chukchi decided that he was lying about the land beyond the sea—there was no such land. The older ones shook their heads and said, "Yes, there were such things, there were such things once. . . . But now they are no longer. You are telling us about what used to be. Why will you not tell about what there is today?"

And they all decided that Satanau was a liar, and turned their backs upon him. The women took the children away from the fire, that they might not see and hear a man telling lies; the men dispersed little by little. Satanau was left alone.

When the people awoke in the morning, they looked for Satanau that they might feed him again; but Satanau was nowhere to be found. He had disappeared.

And to this day no one knows what became of Satanau.

Konstantin Simonov

MATURITY

IT WAS the first really warm day. The snow had held on late, but now it was melting fast, and quick black rivulets ran down the steep slope of the village street. The last thing Colonel Protsenko noticed as he entered his billet was some of his men floundering across the street, their valenki[7] soaked and squelching.

Protsenko went in and sank wearily onto a seat, while Vasya, the medical orderly, got his bed ready. He felt hot and cold by turns—the flu that had dogged him for weeks today seemed about to bring him down finally. He put his hand to his forehead, it was flaming. He staggered over to the bed. Vasya pulled off his boots and rummaged in his kit for medicine.

"Wait a minute," said Protsenko. "I'll take it right away. Get Gvozdev, will you?"

Vasya, who could always tell by the inflection in the colonel's voice where his medical authority began and ended, obediently closed the kit and went in search of a Red Army man to call Gvozdev.

When Major Gvozdev, the divisional quartermaster, came in, Protsenko already seemed fast asleep, his eyes shut tight. But he opened them instantly on hearing the major click his heels, and stared down fixedly at his boots. Gvozdev, after reporting arrival, looked down at the boots too, puzzled to know what could have attracted the colonel's notice. There seemed nothing wrong with the boots. Still looking down at them, Protsenko proceeded to ask questions. He did not raise his voice, and used

[7] Felt boots.

the formal second person plural—both of which, as far as Gvozdev knew, boded no good.

"Boots arrived?" he inquired.

"Not yet, Comrade Colonel," said Gvozdev. "The trucks are bogged down over by Kurmoyarskaya. They'll be here the day after tomorrow."

"Are you aware what the men are wearing in the meantime?" Protsenko asked.

"Yes, Comrade Colonel. Valenki," Gvozdev said. "We'll get the boots here by the day after tomorrow."

"If they're not here by tomorrow," said Protsenko, "I'll have you and your whole outfit wearing valenki yourselves the day after. And if they're not here by the day after tomorrow. . ."

For the first time, Protsenko looked up at the major, and Gvozdev dropped his eyes involuntarily before that look. "Those are new soles you've got, eh?"

"Yes," Gvozdev said, reddening.

"Good soles," the Colonel remarked. "That'll be all."

Gvozdev went out. Protsenko closed his eyes again, swallowed down listlessly some tablets Vasya gave him, and continued to lie there motionless, his jerky breath alone betraying that he was not asleep. Teeth clenched, he thought with mortification that his men, who in these two months had covered 600 versts, were now tramping in wet valenki, with no place to get warm or even dry. That was one of the incidental expenses of the drive, one of the things which nobody was to blame for, when you came to analyse it, but which were intolerable all the same. They were driving ahead so fast that the supply columns couldn't keep up, nor the kitchens; they would eat next to nothing for two and three days on end, and had long forgotten

all about a warm-up with vodka. And now this thaw. . . . He could picture perfectly the trucks stalling on the upgrade by Kurmoyarskaya, and no power of man capable of hauling them out; and at the same time, he knew it was Gvozdev's duty to devise some superhuman way of getting it done, because done it had to be, and also because this whole drive was a superhuman effort, and if the men were capable of it, then Gvozdev had to be capable of it too. Here he thought of himself, and tried to blame himself for having slumped into bed now, instead of going out to his regiments. But no, he really couldn't have gone; half an hour ago, talking to Colonel Shepovalov, his second-in-command, he had all but collapsed, and had kept upright only by clutching at the windscreen of his jeep. He must stay in bed this one day, otherwise he would simply peg out. Besides, it occurred to him, his would be a sorry division, and himself a sorry commander, if he couldn't take his eye off things for one day. A year ago, he reckoned, he couldn't have afforded to even for a day; but now he could. He had given all the orders, and after all, Shepovalov knew his job, and the regimental commanders too were capable officers, and he had mapped out, down to the last detail, what they had to do in these 24 hours in order to take the town tomorrow.

Vasya the orderly, gently raising his head, put a compress round his sore throat and propped him up against the pillows.

"Higher," Protsenko asked.

Vasya raised him higher.

"Let's have the map," said Protsenko.

Vasya opened out the map and held it vertical before Protsenko's eyes. The red and blue arrows and semi-circles danced upon it, and Protsenko, thinking that the map shook in Vasya's hands, commanded:

"Hold it up properly."

But the arrows and semi-circles kept on dancing, and finally Protsenko realized that it was the fever and sickness making him see double. He opened and closed his eyes several times, shifted his head about on the pillow, and finally hit on a position in which the map didn't dance any more. Yes, everything was the way it should be: he was moving his division onto the byroads left of the town, outflanking the Germans as usual, he meant to dislodge them from the heights and push through by moving to the western end of the town, giving the eastern end the go-by. As far as he could tell, his regiments should be starting the push on the heights by now, and the frequent mortar-bomb bursts seemed to bear it out.

It was getting on towards evening.

"What's the time?" Protsenko asked. He would often ask Vasya the time, just to give him the pleasure of looking at his large handsome watch—a recent acquisition. But this time he was asking simply because he hadn't the energy to lift his eyes to the watch on his wrist.

"Five," Vasya said, standing motionless at the foot of the bed, his eyes fixed unhappily on the colonel.

"Shepovalov's first despatch should be here by seven," Protsenko estimated, and in his impatience felt like counting off the two hours in minutes, as he used to do when he was a boy: one, two, three, four, five, and so up to sixty—one minute; and then start all over: one, two, three, four, five, and up to sixty again. He did start counting, but right away the figures got muddled and seemed to caper about before him.

It was half an hour before he opened his eyes again, not sure whether he had been asleep or unconscious. Vasya was standing as before at the foot of the bed, gazing down at him.

In his eyes was an eager anxiety to do whatever the colonel might require. He stood there, long and lanky, his great hands lying helpless on the bedrail. He had done all he could—fed Protsenko all the pills he could, put on a compress—and now he was tormented by the knowledge that he could do nothing more, that he was powerless before the sickness that held his colonel in its grip. But then he was the colonel's aide too. That dated back to the time he had swum the Don last summer, with Protsenko, badly wounded, on his back. The colonel had brought him and many, many others out of the enemy ring and when, on the very threshold of liberty, with the Don already before them, Protsenko was hit, Vasya had risked his life to save the colonel. He had stayed on with him ever since, had never parted from him, following him around with a tommy gun, shielding him from danger, real and imaginary, and at the same time believing implicitly, deep down in his heart, that next to Protsenko he would be all right too, and that, no matter what happened, Protsenko would pull through both the division and Vasya himself. From men like Vasya, who had known him a long time, ever since last year, and who believed in him utterly, Protsenko derived confidence when things were blackest. Their faith in him was well merited, but at the same time it was just this faith that, many a time, had led him to take bold risks, in the conviction that he, in whom these men had such complete faith, in his turn would not err in judgment and would be right in running the risk.

Now Vasya was standing by his bed, and there was something solid and reassuring about his familiar figure. "We've been through plenty together, sure enough," Protsenko found himself thinking. And this bad day would go by too, tomorrow would come, and then the day after—and so until the end of the war. And whatever else might happen, both of them would come through—both he and this boy Vasya, who was standing before him now.

"Maybe you'd like a drink, Comrade Colonel?" Vasya asked.

"No," Protsenko said, and closed his eyes again. "Wake me up when the despatch comes."

Instead of the despatch, however, it was Captain Markushev, commander of the training battalion, that awakened him a quarter of an hour later by bursting into the room. His cap was awry and his sheepskin coat open, with hand-grenades bulging out of the pockets.

"Comrade Colonel," Markushev began, panting. "Comrade Colonel, the car's ready, get out while there's time. The Jerry panzers have broken through. They're getting near the village now, near headquarters."

"Same as in Kalinnikovo?" the colonel asked contemptuously, looking hard at Markushev.

Kalinnikovo was the one village during the whole drive that Protsenko's division had allowed the Germans to recover, after a surprise panzer attack a month ago. It had been recaptured only the following day, with heavy casualties, and its name had become a byword in the division—a reminder of a nasty reverse. Markushev too had fallen short of the mark that time and retired from the village; and so the colonel's present remark about Kalinnikovo got him on the raw.

"No, Comrade Colonel," he declared. "It won't be the same as in Kalinnikovo. We won't go this time. Even if they get all the way to this street, we'll burn them out, every last one. Only you please get into the car and move at least as far as that homestead. They're liable to break in here, you know."

"You just keep them out," said Protsenko, "and there'll be no need for me to move anywhere. I'm sick and I'm not doing any moving. And now do what you like: let them come or keep them out, whichever you please." And he turned over on his

side, face to the wall, giving the captain to understand both that he wasn't going to budge and that the interview was over.

Markushev knew by past experience that once the colonel was through talking, it was no use trying to continue the conversation. He stood about for another moment or two, then stalked out with the long stride of a man whose mind is made up.

As soon as he was gone, Protsenko turned over on his back again. He felt better lying that way, and had turned on his side solely to impress the captain that nothing very much had happened, and that panzers nearing the village weren't reason enough for him to leave it, or for the captain to come bursting in with his sheepskin just anyhow and his pockets crammed full of hand-grenades. If Protsenko had tried at that moment to analyse his feelings and had harked back a year or a year and a half, he would have told himself that a year before, and still more so eighteen months ago, he could not have turned over calmly and gone on lying there at such a piece of news: he either would have moved to the homestead, as suggested, or, more likely, would have gone forward with Markushev to fight off the panzer attack himself. In any case, at that time such a panzer attack, even if already a familiar thing, would still have been something terrifying, and he could not have stayed quietly where he was to await the outcome. Now he could. In fact, he was convinced that there would be no fighting in the street beneath his windows, that the panzers would be stopped and set alight before they got any further than the edge of the village, and that it would be the doing of this same Captain Markushev, who had come running to him in such a state not because of the tanks, but because Protsenko was sick, and as such appeared to Markushev as something easily hurt and fragile, which should at once be taken out of harm's way.

Now the sounds of fighting close at hand were making their way into the house. Protsenko turned again to face the wall; opening his eyes from time to time, he listened, trying to tell by ear what was happening. The firing would die down, then flare up with new force. He could tell by the reports that both guns and anti-tank rifles were firing, and at both ends of the village. A full year ago, at the end of last winter, Protsenko had managed to conquer that excitement of the attack which made him fling in right away everything he had. The Germans had taught him some sound lessons in those days on the western front; they would go for his denuded rear-lines and, on one occasion, had pretty nearly wiped him out complete with his whole staff. He had proved an apt pupil, and now it always gave him satisfaction to think that at the crucial moment of an action, faced with all sorts of surprises and counterattacks, he always had something in hand that could be flung at the last moment onto the scales of military fortune.

True, this year his division had more both of guns and of anti-tank rifles—but it wasn't that. In the old days, no matter how many he had, he still could not restrain himself, and always sent them into action a little earlier than absolutely necessary. Now he had developed a keen instinct for that. Now he could tell, by a sort of sixth sense, between real and seeming necessity. That was why, at this moment, he was calmly certain that the village was protected with everything needed to fight off the panzer attack, and that Markushev must fight it off, and that he had been right, a quarter of an hour ago, in turning his face to the wall instead of interfering, by giving orders of his own, in the details of the action—in the work of his subordinate, who ought to do the job himself, without his assistance.

In an hour it grew dark. The sounds of nearby fighting had died away, there remained only dull, distant shell-bursts over on the

elevations, where the regiments were engaged. Captain Markushev came in, less hastily than the first time. He had run as far as the porch, but had paused for breath in the passage and used the time to remove the Sam Browne from his tunic and adjust it over his sheepskin. He found Protsenko lying just as he had left him.

"Well?" Protsenko asked, without turning his head.

"Beaten them off," Markushev reported. "Knocked out four of the panzers, the rest turned tail. One gun's been squashed."

"Beaten them off," Protsenko repeated. Only now did he turn to look at Markushev.

The captain was standing at attention, with his sheepskin drawn in under the belt and the cap set more than commonly straight and precise on his head.

"That's the sort of report for a Guardsman to make," said Protsenko. "And the way for a Guardsman to look too." Then, noticing the great precision with which Markushev had put on his cap—evidently out in the passage, just now—he smiled and added: "Only tell me, Captain, what made you put on your cap that way? A Guardsman should have his cap a bit on the side, so he'll look dashing."

Markushev smiled back, pushed the cap to one side with a practised gesture, and said:

"Yes, Comrade Colonel."

"Well, you've done fine. Get along now," said Protsenko. "And here you were trying to rout me out of bed. I can't get up, you know. Vasya won't let me."

The despatch from Shepovalov was overdue. It didn't arrive until nine, because, so the colonel was told, the first despatch-rider sent was killed by a mortar bomb on the way. Shepovalov

reported that he'd been able to make hardly any headway so far on account of the vicious fire, but that he hoped, by bringing all his forces into play, to clinch the issue during the night.

Protsenko summoned his chief of operations and gave him some additional orders; he was to take them to Shepovalov and bring back a report in the morning. Actually, these orders amounted to the usual command—not to strike frontally and not to use up the reserves ahead of time; but the fact that Protsenko was sending a special messenger with them was to convey that in the present case this was especially important, and that he anticipated stiff opposition.

When the Ops chief had gone, Protsenko found himself thinking that, in effect, all the experience he had gained in the war boiled down in the main to a few very simple truths, like those of which he had just sent Shepovalov a reminder; but all these truths—very simple when considered in the abstract—became a matter of military skill in each concrete instance, when they had to be applied now in one set of circumstances, now in another. Not to strike frontally involved knowing for sure in each particular case, in each new position, where that "front" was; while not bringing in the reserves prematurely meant dividing in each instance the split second that separated the premature from the timely. It was the same with all the other simple truths, and that was what was so hard.

Around midnight the colonel felt a little better and dozed off at last. When he woke in the night, it was light in the room. Vasya had lit a lamp of Stalingrad invention—a shell-case with the edges squeezed together to hold the wick, and paraffin inside. In the light of this improvised lamp, Protsenko saw Vasya's long legs in their heavy boots stretched across the doorway leading to the kitchen. Vasya had planted himself in front of the door as was his wont, lest the colonel—God forbid!—should go out without waking him. Protsenko suddenly

wondered for the first time: what was it going to be like if he and Vasya had to part when the war was over? "Don't suppose he'd stay on as an aide—he'll want to study and be a doctor," he thought. "Or he might. We've certainly got used to each other." It seemed incredible not only that he mightn't have Vasya with him at all after the war, but even that they would be living in separate quarters and Vasya wouldn't follow him around with a tommy gun any more, and wouldn't have his meals with him, and sleep that way, at the entrance to the next room. The coming peacetime life struck the colonel at that moment as queer and even uncongenial.

Closing his eyes, he listened. In the silence of the night he could make out distinctly not only the distant mortar-bomb explosions, but machine-gun bursts too—a night action was in progress on the elevations.

The operations chief returned at ten in the morning. Protsenko was lying propped up in bed, frowning with pain as he swallowed small gulps of hot milk. He handed the glass to Vasya and listened silently to the report. The position hadn't changed. The 37th regiment did manage to gain the heights, but in the morning the Germans pushed it down again. The 81st had tried, at Shepovalov's orders, to outflank the enemy still further to the left, but had landed under heavy flanking fire and made no headway either.

"What's happening now?" Protsenko asked abruptly.

"Now we've brought up artillery and are to launch a general attack."

Protsenko dismissed him and asked Vasya for the map with the latest development marked on it. Things stood practically the same as yesterday afternoon, when he was setting out from the forward lines. In the evening and during the night, he had been keyed up because he could not watch the operations himself,

and because of the usual impatience to see his plan executed. Now, for the first time, it struck him that perhaps not everything in this plan was as new as he had believed. Both Shepovalov and the regimental commanders seemed to be carrying out his instructions—yet the advance was stalled.

He tried sitting up and putting his feet on the floor, but swayed and all but toppled over, so he fell back on the pillows again.

Vasya, watching for his chance, took advantage of his patient's momentary weakness to thrust a thermometer under his armpit.

"39.9," he announced triumphantly ten minutes later, "and here you were wanting to get up."

"And what are you so pleased about?" Protsenko demanded.

"Because you'll have to go to the hospital, that's what," Vasya replied, summoning up all his courage.

Protsenko said nothing. He was thinking that either he must get over his illness today or he would indeed have to go to the hospital. This could go on yesterday, today—but by tomorrow he must either command the division or get out of it. He put himself for a moment in the position of Shepovalov, whom he valued and respected, and felt that if he, Protsenko, remained on the scene, while not commanding the division, Shepovalov would be handicapped against fighting as well as he might: he would be conscious all the time of his sick chief, would not feel that the full burden and responsibility of the command rested upon himself, and so would not be able to use his initiative and independent judgment to the full. If he were in Shepovalov's shoes, he would feel rotten too. After a few minutes' hesitation, he made up his mind that if he didn't pull together by tomorrow, he would hand over the command to Shepovalov and go to the hospital.

"Didn't sleep well, did you, Comrade Colonel?" Vasya asked.

"Not too well."

"I'll give you some bromides, maybe they'll send you to sleep."

"All right."

He wouldn't mind dropping off for a couple of hours, until the next despatch came along. Like other people who can't spare the time to be ill, he had settled ideas of his own about illness; one of which was that the more you sleep, the better, and that it's in their sleep that sick people get well. In that hope he dozed off, after taking his bromides.

The despatch arrived at three. Shepovalov reported that the morning's attacks had been beaten back, but that he meant to bring in the reserves and try again.

"What orders will there be?" asked the liaison officer, laying his map-case on his knees to take down what the colonel said.

Instead of replying, however, Protsenko said to Vasya:

"Let's have some milk."

Vasya handed him a glass of milk. He took a few gulps, and though it still hurt to swallow, he thought it was a bit easier than before.

"Hand me my boots," he ordered, "and let them bring the bus round."

Vasya knew it was useless to object, and only pleaded for the colonel to remove the compress.

"You mustn't go out with it."

"Why not?" queried Protsenko, whose notions of medicine were vague. "It's warmer that way, isn't it?"

"No, you mustn't. I'll put on a plain bandage instead."

Protsenko waited patiently while Vasya removed the compress, put on the bandage, and helped him into his boots and sheepskin; then, leaning on the boy's shoulder, he went out onto the porch. The fresh air made him reel, and he made haste to get into the jeep, next to the driver. Vasya, the liaison officer and a tommy gunner got in behind. The jeep set off. Two kilometres down the road they turned left and headed along a wet, broken, bumpy track.

Shepovalov's observation post was behind the crest of a little snow-covered mound. There was a good view of the whole of the long valley ahead, and the German-held hills stretching right and left of it.

Protsenko found his second-in-command about to give orders for the 35th regiment to go in on the left wing. Shepovalov reported developments and stood there, waiting for instructions. He had shaved, for which Protsenko mentally commended him, but looked dead tired and was obviously relieved that the colonel had come and could see for himself that if things weren't working out, it was not because he, Shepovalov, had bungled, but because they had not foreseen the enemy's course of action, and the Germans, in defending this town, were not fighting in the usual way or the usual places.

"Shall I send in the 35th?" he asked.

"No," Protsenko returned, and spent a few moments examining the scene of action silently through his binoculars.

"What are the casualties?" he asked, lowering the glasses.

In a low voice, Shepovalov told him. The casualties were heavy, very heavy, indeed, even if you made allowance for these confounded hills and the awkward situation. Protsenko took another look through the glasses. The Germans were

disposed on the rear slopes of the hills, and it was hard to tell what forces they had in the area. But everything—the casualties, the stubborn resistance, the frequent bursts of mortar-bombs, which dropped in regular rows ahead—went to indicate that the enemy was here in strength. He should not have been, by all expectations. It was the German 117th infantry division that had been falling back before Protsenko of late: the division was badly battered; and if, as usual, its main forces were covering the highway to the town, there could be no more than two depleted battalions here, on these hills, by rushing which he meant to skirt the town. And yet. . . .

Suddenly, with the uncanny insight that would come to him at critical moments, Protsenko reversed the whole thing in his mind and put himself in the place of the German general who had been retreating before him for close on a month now and had given up three towns in as many weeks. Protsenko had captured all three towns by one and the same manoeuvre, putting out a mere screen of patrols on the highway, and detouring his main forces right or left of the town, over difficult terrain in which the Germans, thinking themselves safe, themselves left nothing more than a scanty screen of troops. Three times the enemy had fallen into this trap, three times Protsenko had entered his town from the western end, three times the German 117th had gone reeling back, leaving prisoners and wounded behind it and barely eluding encirclement. And here was this fourth town, and again the highway leading to it, and again hard-to-negotiate heights. After all, the German general had probably been a captain or major in the last war, and had been fighting for a year and a half in this one, he had got over the first shock and discomfiture, and it was no great feat, after losing three towns in the same way, to foretell the Russian commander's course of action the fourth time. It came home to Protsenko with an impact that was almost physical, that this time the German had

outwitted him and, like himself, had left only a screen on the highway; while behind these hills he was firing at, the enemy had, not two battalions, but a regiment and a half, if not all of two regiments.

He sat down with Shepovalov on a ground-sheet laid out over the snow, and together they spread the billowing map on their knees.

"What's the time?" he asked.

"Five," Shepovalov told him.

"It'll be getting dark in an hour. Let the 35th shift from the left wing to the right, onto the highway, as soon as darkness begins to close in, and once it's quite dark, draw off the 81st as well. We'll put it on the highway too."

Protsenko looked down at the map and marked out the routes for the two regiments—first rearwards and then along the front, until the highway was reached.

"Let's see, what's the distance?" he asked. "Twelve kilometres or thereabouts, eh?"

"Yes."

"Well, over that sort of road they'll be massed by the highway in four hours, and the 34th we'll spread out. You stay on here. I'll leave you all the artillery except the AT-guns, and act so that the Germans shouldn't get wind of anything. Give it to them mostly with fire, don't spare the ammunition."

"What about attacks?" Shepovalov asked. "Keep them up?"

"Not general ones. Harass them all evening in small parties. Let artillery boss your part of the show tonight. We've lost enough men today as it is."

He waited while Shepovalov gave orders to his aide. Then he said:

"I'll take charge myself on the highway." And, dropping the official tone, he went on to explain the orders he had just given: "You see, Anatoly Dmitrievich, I have a feeling they've put one over on me today. Their main forces are here—and over on the highway there's nothing worth mentioning. If we can shift the two regiments without their knowing, the town's ours. Look me up in town in the morning. You'll find me somewhere around the cathedral."

Night was falling and the air getting colder and colder. Shepovalov unscrewed his field-flask and held it out:

"Have a drink, Alexander Ivanovich; else you'll catch a worse cold still."

Protsenko accepted the flask, took a big gulp and broke into a long, painful fit of coughing.

"That damned flu," he said, clutching at his throat. "Like a sentry: won't even allow a bit of liquor in. . . . Well, I'm off. Go to it."

It was already quite dark as he drove back. Along the dirt road on the outskirts of the village where he had his headquarters, forward units of the 35th were marching towards the highway. Nightfall had brought a frost, and the men tramped with rifles rattling, hunching their shoulders against the cold and stamping with their wet *valenki*.

When the jeep drove up to the colonel's billet, Vasya tried to talk him into lying down for an hour and then catching up with the troops—those foot regiments would be trudging for a long time yet. But Protsenko felt that if he left the jeep and lay down, he wouldn't get up again tonight. Whereas now he could

feel the excitement of the impending action surging over him and driving the flu down, down, down inside him.

Vasya jumped out, trotted into the house and brought pills and gargling solution. Without shifting from his seat, Protsenko gargled meekly, swallowed the pills, and told the driver:

"Get going."

All the first half of the night he spent around the highway, giving orders and telling his subordinate commanders what they had to do. The town had to be carried that night. No time to trundle up artillery, and he decided to make the most of the surprise element, the cover of dark, and concentrated tommy-gun fire. For the initial blow, he massed all the tommy-gunners he had, added in the divisional reconnaissance company, and gave orders that all mortars going—company, battalion and regimental—should be moved as close to the enemy as possible. They must overwhelm him with mortars, tommy-guns, anything they had. And if Shepovalov, over on the left, could keep the Germans from noticing any change, they would think that here, on the highway, fresh units had joined in, and even if they had the forces for a counter-thrust, they would cave in and abandon the town, for fear of being trapped in a pocket, the very fear that they had tried, so systematically and persistently, to put into us.

The fighting started at three in the morning—and by six, in the grey light of a winter's dawn, the first parties of tommy-gunners had broken through to the edge of town. The liaison officer from army headquarters urged Protsenko to report the town captured.

"No," said Protsenko, "I haven't captured it yet."

"But surely, Comrade Colonel," the liaison officer pressed, "we're on the outskirts already."

“The outskirts and the town are two different things,” Protsenko returned. “I’ve been fighting this war for close on two years, Major. It wouldn’t do for me to have to blush now. I’ve had to blush once already, a year ago: reported prematurely, so the bulletin said we’d taken the place, and then we spent another three days taking it.”

“But this time you’ll take it, all right. It’s a sure thing.”

“Oh, I’ll take it, right enough,” Protsenko said confidently. “And that’s when I’ll report, too. Let them wait a bit up at army HQ; nothing will happen if they report it to the front HQ in tomorrow’s despatch and not today’s. Main thing, Major, is to get the town. And if the report stands over until tomorrow, that doesn’t matter so much.”

At 7 a.m. Protsenko drove up to the cathedral and pulled up his jeep by the broad, shell-pocked cathedral steps. A horseback messenger came galloping from the western end of the town to inform him that the Germans were being cleared out of the last few houses.

“Now this is where we do report,” Protsenko told the major. “We’ll report that the town is ours.”

Down the streets past him marched the companies of the second line. Many of the men were unshaven. There were veterans who had fought in the last war—you could spot them right off in most cases by their whiskers and soldierly bearing.

Many others were young lads—ever so young. But both sorts tramped through the town with the customary assurance of real soldiers. All had something dauntless about them, something born in the bitter experiences of war. Protsenko recalled the regular division in which he was chief of staff just before the war. Yes, it had looked very spick and span, had had a higher polish, and the men had all been the same age, the pick of their

class. But they didn't have this practised seasoned air, this nonchalance in the face of danger that he saw in the men passing before him now. He supposed it was the law of war. Many had had to die before those who survived and were fighting now came to be like that—seasoned, regular soldiers, in fact and not only in name.

Shepovalov, driving up, broke into the colonel's train of thought. He reported on the progress of the fighting on the left wing—or rather, by now, the progress of the pursuit. Then, catching Protsenko's look, he too spent a few seconds examining the marching troops.

"So we've got the town after all," he said. "Jerry's on the run. Just think how we'd have them running if we had the regular, full-strength division that we started the war with."

"The one we started with?" Protsenko echoed. "No, Anatoly Dmitrievich, you're wrong. If we had the division that we started the war with, we wouldn't be pushing them back as fast as we are. It was a good division, all right, but the one we've got now is better. And you and I are better soldiers too, and so are our officers."

"But those were regulars!" Shepovalov objected.

"These are regulars too," Protsenko retorted. "More so, if anything." He pointed to the street, with the troops tramping past. "You and I and those men over there—all of us have a university education now, whereas when we started out, we had been only through school; for peacetime training is only school; war—and nothing but war—is the university. You talk that way, Anatoly Dmitrievich, because you were called up from the reserve when the war broke out, and underrate yourself on account of it; you still feel you're a bit of a civilian. Whereas actually you're a dyed-in-the-wool regular by now—more of a regular than I was myself when the war began, even

though I'd done fifteen years in the army. Well," he added in a different, more official tone of voice, "look out a place for headquarters. Take care of the pursuit. Vasya'll be finding a billet for me now, and I'll lie down until tonight."

From a truck that had just driven up, Major Gvozdev jumped down and stepped over to the colonel. Protsenko, lifting a weary hand to his cap, glanced down at the major's boots. Gvozdev nodded his head gaily in the direction of the truck.

"Brought the first batch," he said. "Hauled the truck out on our own backs."

"What about the rest?" asked Protsenko.

"They'll be along by tonight."

"Good. Well," he turned as Vasya came up, "found a billet?"

"I have, Comrade Colonel. And the bed's waiting for you."

"Look me up in the evening, Anatoly Dmitrievich," Protsenko asked Shepovalov, settling more comfortably in the jeep and wrapping up in his felt cape.

He looked up at a little tattered white cloud, and at the sky just starting to turn blue; then shifted his glance to the ground, with the sunbeams dancing upon it, and added:

"I'll be getting up in the evening—be feeling better by then, I expect. It's such marvellous weather today."

THE CANDLE

THE EPISODE I want to tell you about took place on the nineteenth of September, 1944.

Actually Belgrade had already been captured. Only the bridge over the Sava River and a tiny bridgehead still remained in German hands.

At dawn on that day five Red Army men decided to steal up to the bridge. They had to cross a small square on which stood several burnt-out tanks and armoured cars, both ours and the enemy's. Not a single tree was left intact: only splintered stumps levelled to a man's height as if by some monstrous hand.

In the middle of the square our men were overtaken by a mortar barrage from the other bank. For half an hour they lay there under fire and finally, when it grew a bit quieter, two men who were lightly wounded crawled back, dragging along the two who were seriously wounded. The fifth lay dead on the square.

I know nothing about him except that on the company roll he was listed as Chekulayev and that he was killed on the morning of the nineteenth in Belgrade, on the bank of the Sava River.

The Germans must have been alarmed by the attempt of the Red Army men to steal up to the bridge, for after that their mortars shelled the square and the adjoining street all day long with only brief lulls.

The company commander, who had orders to try to reach the bridge again before dawn on the next day, said that meanwhile there was no need to go for Chekulayev's body and that he would be buried after the bridge was taken.

The Germans continued their fire all through the day, at sunset and at nightfall.

At the edge of the square, some distance from the other houses, towered a heap of rubble that gave hardly any clue to

what it once might have been. It would not have occurred to anybody that someone might be living there.

Yet in the cellar, under the ruins, lived an old woman by the name of Maria Jokich. A gaping black hole half-covered by bricks led down into the cellar.

She used to live on the second floor in a room left to her after the death of her husband, the bridge watchman. When the second floor was destroyed she moved to a room on the first. Everybody else left the house. And when the first floor was destroyed she moved into the cellar.

The nineteenth was the fourth day she had been living in the cellar. That morning she had plainly seen five Russian soldiers crawl onto the square, which was separated from her only by a twisted iron railing. She saw the Germans open fire at them and the mines exploding all around. She even crawled halfway out of her cellar to invite the Russians in—she was sure it was less dangerous where she was living—when a mine exploded near the ruins and the old woman, deafened by the blast, fell back, struck her head against the wall and lost consciousness.

When she recovered and looked out again she saw that only one of the five Russians remained on the square. He lay on his side, one hand thrust out and the other under his head, as if he had sought a comfortable sleeping position. She called to him several times but he did not answer, and she realized that he had been killed.

The Germans again opened fire and mines continued to burst all over the little square, raising black pillars of earth; the splinters severed the last branches of the trees. The Russian lay alone on the naked square, his arm under his head, surrounded by twisted iron and dead wood.

Old Maria Jokich looked at the dead soldier for a long time. She would have liked to tell someone about him but there was not a single living creature about. Even the cat which had lived four days with her in the cellar now lay dead, killed by a brick splinter during the last explosion. The old woman thought for a long time, and then, rummaging in her only bundle, she took something out, hid it quickly under her black widow's shawl, and slowly climbed out of the cellar.

She could not crawl, neither could she run. She simply walked slowly and unsteadily to the square. When a section of the railing that had remained intact obstructed her progress, she did not try to climb over it. She was too old for that. She slowly walked around it, and entered the square.

The Germans continued to shell the square, but not a single mine fell near the old woman.

She crossed the square and reached the dead Russian soldier. With an effort she turned him on his back and saw that his face was young and very pale. She smoothed his hair and with difficulty folded his already rigid hands on his breast. Then she sat down beside him.

The Germans continued shelling, but as before the mines fell far away from her.

Thus she sat beside him, perhaps an hour, perhaps two, silent.

It was cold and quiet, quiet, except for when the mines exploded.

At last the old woman rose rest, but at last there was no more water in the hole. Then the old woman returned to the dead soldier. She took him under the arms and dragged him along.

She had no more than ten paces to go, but she was very old, and three times she had to sit down and rest. Finally she managed to drag him to the hole and let him down into it. This exhausted her completely. For a long time, probably an hour, she sat and rested.

The Germans were firing all the time, but their mines continued to fall far away from her.

After she had rested she knelt beside him, made the sign of the cross over him and kissed him on the lips and on the forehead.

Then she began to cover him slowly with the loose earth which lay so plentiful around the shell hole. Soon she had covered him completely. But that did not satisfy her. She wanted to make a real grave. After another rest she began to scoop up more earth. In a few hours she managed to cover the grave with a little mound by adding handful after handful of earth to it.

The Germans kept up the shelling, but their mines, as before, fell far away from her.

After making the mound she took out from under her black widow's shawl the thing she had taken along from the cellar. It was a large wax candle, one of the two bridal candles she had saved from her wedding day, forty-five years before.

Rummaging in the pocket of her dress, she found some matches. She set the candle on top of the grave and lit it. The flame caught easily. The night was calm and the flame rose straight up, without flickering. After lighting the candle she remained beside the grave, motionless, with her arms crossed on her knees under her shawl.

When mines exploded far off, the candle only flickered, but several times when they fell somewhat closer it went out, and

once it even toppled over. Each time the old woman took out her matches and patiently relit the candle.

Dawn was approaching. The candle was half burnt down. Searching about her on the ground, the old woman found a seared rusty bit of tin and with effort bent it in her old, feeble hands. She then planted it in the earth near the candle, to make a shield against the wind and air waves. Thus done, she rose, recrossed the square as slowly as she had come, again skirted the section of railing which had been left intact, and returned to her cellar.

Just before dawn the company in which Red Army man Chekulayev had served crossed the square under heavy mortar fire and captured the bridge.

An hour or two later it was already quite light. Our tanks were following the infantry to the other bank. The battle continued on that side, and mines no longer fell on the square.

Then the company commander remembered Chekulayev and sent some soldiers to find him and bury him in a common grave with the men who had lost their lives in battle that morning.

They searched everywhere for Chekulayev's body—but in vain. Suddenly one of the soldiers stopped short at the edge of the square and cried out in amazement, calling the others. A few more men came up.

"Look," said the Red Army man.

Everybody looked at where he was pointing.

Near the broken railing a little mound rose over an old shell hole covered with earth. A candle sheltered by a rusty bit of tin was sputtering softly on the mound. It was almost burnt out and the end was gutted with wax, but the tiny flame continued to burn.

The men beside the grave immediately bared their heads. They stood around the mound silently and watched the dying candle. They were too overcome to speak.

Just then a tall, aged woman in a black widow's shawl whom they had not noticed on the square before, came up. Silently she bent her feeble steps past the Red Army men, knelt beside the grave and took out another wax candle from under her shawl. It was exactly like the one which was sputtering its last on the mound. Picking up the candle end, she lit the new candle with it and set it in the earth in place of the old one. She had difficulty in rising to her feet, and the Red Army man standing nearest gently helped her up.

Even then she said nothing. She only looked at the men standing there with uncovered heads and bowed low to them with great dignity. Then, straightening the ends of her black shawl, she retraced her steps without turning to look either at the candle or the men.

The Red Army men followed her with their eyes, and talking softly as though loath to disturb the silence, went in the opposite direction, toward the bridge across the Sava River, to join their company and the fighting.

On the mound, amidst the powder-blackened earth, amidst the twisted iron and dead wood, the last possession of a Yugoslav mother—her bridal candle—continued to burn on the grave of a Russian lad.

And its flame did not die but seemed eternal, as eternal as a mother's tears and a son's bravery.

Ilya Ehrenburg

THE ACTRESS

WHEN LISA BELOGORSKAYA, the little actress, was told that she was to go to the front she was ready to weep from sheer joy. Then doubts assailed her. Who could possibly be interested in the monologues of some imaginary heroine, when every evening the loudspeaker spoke hoarsely of blown-up cities and murdered children? "I am making my debut in life," Lisa wrote in her diary, "at the very moment when life is plunged in gloom."

She played in a small town which had once been quiet but was now crowded with refugees who lived a sort of transitory existence, fearing to get rid of their baggage and forget the past.

They all had some near relative at the front. The footsteps of the postman, weary and cold-benumbed, sounded like the footsteps of fate. The army was retreating. People crowded outside the building of the city committee of the Party listening to the news from the front, avoiding one another's eyes. Housewives, majors' wives, girl students of the conservatory of music worked with a desperate frenzy digging the ground and making shells.

The theatre staged old-fashioned tragedies and war melodramas. "Why?" Lisa asked herself. The bright glare of the footlights, the make-up, the heroine's lines: "If you love, the whole world is within you and there is no death. . . ." All seemed so futile to her and made her feel somehow ashamed. Whenever Lisa had a night off she would mingle with the theatre crowds listening to their conversation. They talked about bread, about wounded husbands or brothers, about the Germans being in Krasnodar. And Lisa would go home to her

dark little room in a house filled with old women and children and write: “I cannot pretend any longer.”

What was it that bound her to the stage? She searched her soul for an answer to this question with the severity peculiar to very young and honest natures. It was not ambition, but a blind, and what she sometimes felt to be, a stupid worship of art. “Show off,” her mother had sometimes called her. But Lisa did not show off, she actually felt that she was Anna Karenina, or Turgenev’s Asya, or else the blind flowergirl from the movie. She was considered cold and aloof, and the thought kept her awake nights. This dark-complexioned, blue-eyed little actress was a lonely soul; her mother had died long ago and her friends avoided her. There was something about her that made them uncomfortable. Before the war an engineer named Pronin had proposed to her. It happened one evening in the city park. Lisa suddenly she felt that these sullen, unshaven men were drinking in every word she uttered. They applauded wildly; in reply she smiled weakly and helplessly, after all, she had given them her heart as a donor gives his blood. Then she returned to the room where the other actors were sitting. “I don’t know. I think it was all right,” she said in answer to Belsky’s question and she leaned against the door-jamb for support.

After that she performed at aerodromes, in hospitals and in the forest. Sometimes the concert was interrupted by air-raid alarms. Lisa discovered how demolition bombs exploded. She knew what it felt like to lie in the sticky clayey mud. She spent the nights in dugouts and she grew as accustomed to the booming of the guns as to the noises at home. She drank Madeira with a fat general who kept saying: “I am an old theatre fan, you know. I never missed a single premiere in Sverdlovsk. . . .” A young pilot with the gold star of a Hero of the Soviet Union on his tunic, a queer mixture of self-assurance and bashfulness, confided to her: “You remind me of my first

love. . . .” May came with its sudden heavy rainfalls, its cuckoo calls in the woods, its wistful longing to peer into the future, its foolish jokes and its intoxicating sensation.

In one of her last nights at the front Lisa was going back to her quarters with Major Doronin. Before the war he had been a student of chemistry. They talked about spring, about Tolstoi, about the fact that everyone has a childhood; they talked because they were afraid to fall silent. Nevertheless there came a moment when conversation lapsed.

They had met only four days ago. Doronin had helped the actors to find quarters in the village. Lisa had liked him at once, although he was not at all handsome. Taking stock of her feelings she had asked herself: “Why? After all, I have seen many like him. . . .” But she corrected herself at once: “It’s not true. I have never met anyone like him before. Of course, he looks quite ordinary. He is no actor. Yet there is something unusual about him. Those stern eyes, and what he said about Lermontov and how he looked when he said: ‘You won’t be angry with me if I call you Lisa, will you?’”

“And so you’re going away tomorrow?” said Doronin and stood still. Whereupon Lisa laid her hands on his shoulders and kissed him. A green flare swept across the black sky like a lost star.

When Lisa returned home everything seemed strange and unfamiliar. She could not bear to hear people talking about shopping or about squabbles at work. When one of the actors said: “There’s nothing in the communique today, no towns taken,” Lisa flared up: “How dare you say that! Men are fighting and dying out there. . . .” The theatre seemed dull and commonplace: the audience appeared bored, the applause was mechanical and the spectators rushed off for their coats as usual before the curtain fell on the last act. How she yearned

for her frontline audiences! She wore a talisman on her breast: an army P.O. number. She did not want to write first, she wanted to see what he would write. But after a while she reconciled herself to the thought that he was probably too busy to write. “They are advancing,” she told herself. And so she wrote a brief letter endeavouring to conceal her passion, her jealousy and her concern for his safety. The answer was warm but bitter. Lisa crushed the letter in anger. Doronin wrote that life was queer and that he had attracted her merely because they had met at the front but that when the war was over she would find him dull and ordinary, for after all she was an actress with a stormy life ahead of her (“a hundred lives” was how he put it) while he, Doronin, would be an ordinary chemist if no mine or bullet interfered.

She was so deeply hurt that she wanted to tear her feeling for him out of her aching heart. “He is right,” she told herself. “I was acting and allowed myself to be carried away, I cannot distinguish the truth from fiction.” But the next minute she yielded: “He says that because he does not love me. And now I know that it is one thing to act death and another thing to die.” She suffered thus for a week and then she wrote him a passionate, rambling letter, a regular “weak woman’s” letter as she told herself. She confessed her love for him: “I shall give up the stage if you wish,” she wrote. “I can live without art, but not without you. . . .” When she dropped the envelope into the letterbox she was filled with horror: “That’s the end of play-acting for you!” she told herself.

She waited a long time for an answer. At last the postman, inured to cries of joy and dread, came and calmly handed her the letter she had mailed with such fear and trepidation. On the envelope was an inscription to the effect that the addressee was no longer in that unit. She lay inert all day. That evening she played badly, very badly, repeating mechanically lines learned

by heart. She knew that Doronin was dead. Life ceased to have any meaning for her; she rose, dressed, rehearsed and dined overcome by a feeling of unreality.

Then the postman came again bringing her a letter. “Dear Comrade!” she read. “I have sad news for you. Your fiance Major Doronin died in our hospital. We did everything we could to save him, but his injuries were too grave. He was brave to the end, and he asked me to write to you and send you his wrist watch. I am an old woman and I feel for you like a mother. I wish I were near you to press you to my heart.”

Lisa did not leave the house for two days. She said she was ill. On the third day she came to the theatre and played a role she had never liked. But Lisa had changed. When she came to the lines: “If you love, the whole world is within you, and there is no death,” the audience held its breath. Then they applauded her wildly. The director, a bald-headed, sad-faced man said: “Lisa, my dear, you have grown up, you are a real actress. . . .” And she could only whisper: “Don’t.” She went home and reread for the hundredth time the letter from the unknown woman. “He told her that he was my fiance.” She looked at Doronin’s watch. The hand slowly moved around the dial. And suddenly the thought struck Lisa: “Perhaps play-acting is my destiny, after all.”

Vasili Grossman

LIFE

FOR TWO WEEKS the small detachment of Red Army men had been fighting their way through war-devastated mining villages in the Donetz steppe. Twice they had been surrounded by the Germans, twice they had broken through and moved farther east. But this time there was no chance of getting out. The Germans had drawn a close ring of infantry, artillery, and mortar batteries around the detachment.

Contrary to all logic and common sense, as it appeared to the German colonel, they were refusing to surrender. The front was already a hundred kilometres away, and here was this handful of Soviet infantrymen entrenched in the ruins of the pit-head building, still firing away. The Germans pounded them with guns and mortars day and night. It was impossible to close in on them—the Red Army men had machine guns and anti-tank rifles, and were evidently well supplied with ammunition, for they were not sparing of it.

The whole business was becoming a scandal. Army headquarters sent an irritated, sarcastic radiogram enquiring whether the colonel needed the support of heavy artillery and tanks. Insulted and chagrined, the colonel sent for his chief-of-staff and battalion commanders.

“You realize,” he said, “that defeating this miserable detachment won’t bring us any glory, but every hour of its continued existence is a disgrace for me, for each one of you, for the whole regiment.” And his face became livid with rage.

At dawn the heavy mortars set to work on the ruins. Heavy yellow-bellied mortar shells sped straight to their objective. It seemed as though every metre of earth had been ploughed up

by the explosions. One and a half regular issues of ammunition had been used up, but the colonel gave orders to continue firing. More than that—he brought in the artillery. Great clouds of dust and smoke rose into the air, and the high walls of the building housing the pit-head gear collapsed with a terrific crash.

"Continue firing!" ordered the colonel.

Stones flew in all directions. Iron girders snapped like rotten thread. Concrete crumbled. The colonel watched this terrible work through his field glasses.

"Don't stop firing!" he repeated.

"We must have sent over fifty heavy mortar bombs and thirty artillery shells for every Russian there," remarked the chief-of-staff.

"Don't stop firing!" said the colonel stubbornly.

The soldiers were tired and hungry but they were not given time out for either breakfast or dinner. Not until five o'clock in the afternoon did the colonel give the word for the attack. The battalions charged the ruins from four sides. Everything had been prepared—the Germans carried tommy guns, light machine guns, powerful flame-throwers, explosives, hand grenades, anti-tank grenades, knives, and spades. They drew nearer and nearer the ruins, shouting, brandishing their arms and roaring to drown their fear of the men in the colliery building.

Dead silence met the attackers; not a shot, not a stir. The reconnaissance platoon were the first to break in.

"Hey you, Russ!" shouted the soldiers. "Where are you, Russ?"

But the stone and iron remained silent. Naturally the first thought that entered their heads was that all the Russians had been killed. The officers ordered their men to make a strict search, dig out and count the bodies, and ascertain from the identification cards to which unit the men belonged.

The search was long and thorough, but not one body was found. In a number of places there were pools of blood or bloodstained bandages and tattered, bloodstained shirts. Four light machine guns that had been wrecked by German shells also came to light, but there was no sign of empty tins or wrappers from food concentrates, or bits of rusk. One of the scouts found a half-eaten mangel-wurzel in a hollow.

The soldiers examined the head workings and found traces of blood leading to the shaft. A rope was hanging from an iron rung of the emergency ladder fastened to the wooden facing of the shaft. Evidently the Russians had descended by the emergency ladder, taking their wounded with them.

Three scouts fastened ropes round their waists and let themselves down, grenades ready in their hands. The seam was at no great depth from the surface, for the shaft did not go down more than seventy metres. The scouts hardly reached the shaft bottom than they began jerking desperately at the ropes. They were drawn up, unconscious and bleeding profusely: the bullet wounds showed that the Russians were there. It was obvious that they could not hold out long—the half-eaten mangel-wurzel was proof that their food supplies had run out.

The colonel reported all this to his superiors and received another particularly biting telegram from army headquarters; the general tendered his congratulations on the unusually brilliant victory and expressed the hope that within the next few days they would finally succeed in breaking the resistance

of the Russians. The colonel was desperate. He realized that the situation was ridiculous.

Thereupon he adopted the following measures. Twice in succession a paper proposing surrender, written in Russian, was let down the shaft. The colonel promised that the lives of those who surrendered would be spared and that the wounded would be cared for. Both times the paper returned bearing the one pencilled word: "No!" Then smoke bombs were tossed down, but evidently the absence of a draught prevented the smoke from spreading through the galleries. Beside himself with rage, the colonel gave orders to round up the women of the mining village and inform them that if the men in the pit refused to surrender, all the women and children would be shot. Then the women were told to pick three of their number to go down and persuade the Red Army men to surrender in order to save the children. If the Red Army men refused, the pit-shaft would be blown up.

The women chosen were Nyusha Kramarenko, a timberer's wife; Varvara Zotova, who had worked on the coal-washer before the war, and Marya Ignatyevna Moiseyeva, a woman of thirty-seven and the mother of five children, the eldest of whom was a girl of thirteen. Her husband, a blaster who lost his eyesight while laying a charge, had not been working since 1938. The women asked the Germans to allow Kozlov, an elderly miner, to go down with them, they were afraid of losing their way, since the men had probably withdrawn to the interior of the mine to avoid the smoke bombs. The old man had offered to act as their guide.

The Germans rigged up a block over the pit-shaft and ran the cable from the wrecked cage through it; to the cable they fastened an ordinary tub such as is used for transporting coal along the tunnels.

The delegation was led to the pit-head, followed by a crowd of weeping women and children. They themselves were also in tears as they took leave of their children, their relatives, their village and the blessed daylight.

Old Kozlov led the way, limping to the pit-head—his left foot had been crushed in 1906 when the roof had fallen in the western gallery. He stumped along, calmly swinging his miner's lamp as he tried to keep ahead of the weeping and wailing women who spoiled the solemn mood that always overcame him when he went down into the mine. Now, too, he gave free reign to his fancy; he imagined the cage slipping down the pit-shaft, the damp air caressing his face, he remembered how he had walked along the quiet tunnel to the coalface with his lamp throwing its light on the trickles of dark water running down the slopes, and the beams covered with greasy, soft coal dust. At the coalface he would take off his jacket and shirt, fold them up, measure the cut and dig into the soft coking coal. An hour later his pal, the safety man, would come to him and ask: "How are you getting on, still digging it out?" And he would wipe off the sweat, smile and answer: "What else would I be doing? As long as I'm alive, I'll be digging it out. Let's sit down and rest for a while." They would sit near the ventilation shaft and set down their lamps, while the stream of air would play softly on his blackened, sweating body, and they would have a leisurely chat about the gas pockets, about the new gallery, about the roof of the main gallery, and joke about the fire boss. Then his pal would say: "Well, Kozlov, I can't be sitting here with you all day," turn up his lamp and get up to go. And he would say: "Get along then, old chap," and himself take up his pick and feel it bite deeply into the soft black coal of the seam. Forty years at the game was no joke!

But no matter how the lame old man hurried, he could not outstrip the women. The air was filled with their cries and weeping.

Soon the group reached the dreary ruins of the pit-head building. Not once had Kozlov been near the place since the day the roly-poly engineer Tatarinov, pale as a ghost, had with his own trembling hands dynamited the pit-head installations. That had been two days before the Germans came.

Kozlov looked around him and involuntarily removed his cap. The women were wailing. The fine cold drizzle pricked the skin of the old man's bald head. It seemed to him that the women were bewailing the dead pit, while he himself had the strange feeling that he was again at the cemetery, as on that autumn day when he had walked up to his wife's open coffin to take his last farewell.

The Germans were standing around in their capes and greatcoats, talking among themselves and smoking cigarettes as though all this death and desolation was quite natural.

The old man was the first to climb into the tub. Nyusha Kramarenko cried out at the top of her voice:

"Olechka, my little darling, my baby!"

A little girl of about three, her stomach distended from her diet of beets and raw maize, scowled at her mother, as though reproving her for her noisy behaviour.

"I can't do it! My hands are shaking and my legs are giving way under me!" cried Nyusha. She was afraid of the dark abyss in which the soldiers were hiding. "They'll shoot us all! They won't be able to make anything out in the darkness! We'll all be killed down there, and you'll be killed up here! . . ."

The Germans pushed her into the tub but she braced her feet against the sides. The old man wanted to help her, but lost

his balance and struck his head painfully against the metal. The soldiers burst out laughing, and Kozlov, stung to the quick and furious, shouted:

"Get in, you idiot! You're going down the pit, not to Germany. What're you wailing about?"

Varvara Zotova jumped lightly into the tub. Looking around at the weeping women and children who were stretching out their hands to her, she said:

"Don't be scared, you women!"

Her tear-filled eyes suddenly sparkled gaily and mischievously. She liked the idea of this perilous trip. As a girl she had been known for her daring. Just before the war, when she was already a married woman with two children, she used to go to the pub with her husband on paydays, where she would play the accordion, and, tapping with her heavy iron-shod boots, dance with the young loaders, her workmates on the coal-washer. And today, too, in this terrible and difficult moment, she waved her hand with a reckless, cheery gesture as she called out:

"While there's life there's hope. What is to be will be, eh, Grandad?"

Marya Ignatyevna heaved a fat heavy leg over the edge of the tub, gasping and groaning.

"Varka, lend me a hand," she said. "I don't want that German to touch me, I'll manage without him," and she flopped over into the tub.

To her eldest daughter, who was carrying an eighteen-month-old boy, she said:

"Lidka, don't forget to feed the goat, the leaves are chopped up already. There's no bread, but you take the half

pumpkin left from yesterday and boil it in the iron pot, it's under the bed. Borrow some salt from Dmitrievna. And remember, see that the goat doesn't stray or it'll be snapped up in a minute."

The tub swung free and Marya Ignatyevna, losing her balance, grabbed for the side, while Varka Zotova flung an arm round her ample waist.

"What have you got there under your blouse?" she asked in surprise.

Marya made no reply, but snapped *angrily* at the German corporal:

"Well, what are you waiting for? We're all in, why don't you let us down?"

As though he had understood her words, the corporal gave the signal and the tub descended. Two or three times it bumped against the dark, moss-covered boards of the pit-shaft so violently that all of them were thrown off their feet; then it continued downwards smoothly and they were engulfed in a dank darkness, broken only by the dim light of the lamp, which barely picked out the rotting boards with the thin trickles of water silently running down their sides. Chill, dank air rose from the mine, and the deeper the tub descended, the colder and more terrifying.

The women were silent. They had suddenly been cut off from all that was near and dear to them; the sound of weeping and wailing was still in their ears, yet the sombre silence of the underground was stealing over them, subduing mind and heart. Their thoughts turned to the men who had been sitting in the gloomy depths for three long days. . . . What were they thinking? What were they feeling? What were they waiting for, what hopes had they? Who were they, young or old? Whom

were they dreaming of, whom were they sorry for? Whence came their strength to live?

The old man turned the light of his lamp on a flat white stone wedged in between two beams.

"It's thirty-six metres from this stone to the shaft bottom," he said. "This is the first gallery. One of you women had better call out or the lads may start shooting."

The women obeyed.

"Don't be afraid, boys, it's us!" shouted Zotova.

"It's your own folks, Russians, your own people!" called Nyusha at the top of her voice.

And Marya Ignatyevna trumpeted down:

"Listen, bo-o-oys, don't sho-o-ot! Bo-o-oys, don't sho-o-ot!"

At the shaft bottom they were met by two sentries with tommy guns. Each of them had hand grenades slung from his belt. They stared at the old man and the women, screwing up their eyes painfully at the feeble light of the lamp, shading them with their hands, and finally turning away. This tiny yellow flame no bigger than a baby's little finger, surrounded by a thick metal gauze, dazzled them like bright summer sunlight.

One of them offered his shoulder to help Ignatyevna out, but he had overrated his strength, for when she leaned her weight on him he lost his balance and fell. The other sentry laughed and said:

"Fine one you are, Vanya!"

It was impossible to make out whether they were old or young; thick beards covered their faces, they spoke slowly and moved cautiously like blind men.

"You haven't got a bite of anything with you by any chance, have you?" asked the one who had tried to help Marya Ignatyevna.

The other immediately broke in:

"And even if they have, they'll give it to Comrade Kostitsyn; he'll share it out."

The women kept their eyes fixed on the Red Army men, while the old man, raising his lamp, lighted up the high vault at the shaft bottom.

"Not bad," he growled. "Holding out all right. Those timberers certainly did a good job."

One of the sentries remained at the pit-shaft while the other led the women and the old miner to the commander.

"Where have you settled down here?" asked the old man.

"Right here, through the gate, to the right, and down the corridor, that's where we are."

"That's not a gate," exclaimed Kozlov. "That's the ventilation shutter. On the first slope. . . ."

The sentry walked beside the old man with the women following.

A few steps from the shutter stood two machine guns pointing towards the shaft bottom. A few yards further on the old man raised his lamp.

"Are they asleep, or what?" he asked.

"No, they're dead," the sentry replied slowly.

The old man turned the light on the bodies in Red Army greatcoats and tunics. Heads, chests, shoulders and arms were wrapped in bandages and rags, rusty with dried blood. They lay there side by side, pressed close to one another as though for warmth. Some of them wore shoes, with the ends of footcloths sticking out, two were in felt boots, two in jackboots and one barefoot. Their eyes were sunken, their faces covered with stubble.

"Good Lord!" whispered the women looking at the dead. They crossed themselves.

"Come on along. No use standing around here!" said the sentry.

But the women and the old man seemed rooted to the spot. They stared at the bodies, sensing with horror the stench emanating from them. At last they moved on. A faint groan sounded from beyond a turn in the gallery.

"Are we there?" asked the old man.

"No, this is our hospital," replied the sentry.

Three wounded men were lying on boards. A Red Army man was standing beside one of them, holding a billycan of water to his lips, the other two were absolutely motionless. The old man turned his lamp on them.

The Red Army man with the billycan turned round.

"Who're these people and where are they from?" he asked; then, catching the women's horrified eyes fixed on the two men lying there so utterly still, he added soothingly: "Their troubles will be over in an hour or two."

The wounded man who was drinking said in a weak voice: "Oh, for some sauerkraut juice, mother!"

“We’re a deputation,” said Varvara Zotova, with a bitter laugh.

“What sort of a deputation? From the Germans, are you?” asked the orderly.

“Never mind about that now,” the sentry interrupted. “You can tell it to the commander.”

“Show us a light, Grandad,” the wounded man begged. With a groan that seemed to come from way down inside he raised himself and threw off his greatcoat, exposing a leg that was shattered above the knee.

Nyusha Kramarenko gasped.

In the same quiet voice the wounded man asked Kozlov:

“Turn the light this way, please.”

He raised himself higher to get a better look. Calmly and intently he examined his leg as though it had nothing to do with him, as though it were something apart from himself, unable to realize that this dead, rotting flesh, this black, gangrenous skin, could be a part of his own familiar, living body.

“Now, there you see for yourself,” he said reproachfully. “There are maggots in it, you can see ’em crawling. I told the commander it was no good worrying about me, better to have left me up there. I could have thrown a few grenades and then put a bullet through my head.”

“But why should you suffer down here?” asked Nyusha Kramarenko. “If you came up at least they’d clean and bandage your wounds in a hospital.”

“Who? The Germans?” retorted the wounded man. “I’d rather let the worms eat me up alive here.”

“Come on, now, come on!” the sentry urged. “None of that talk around here, citizens.”

“Just a minute,” said Marya Ignatyevna, pulling out a piece of bread from under her blouse. She held it out to the wounded man. The sentry raised his tommy gun.

“That’s forbidden,” he said sternly and authoritatively. “Every crumb of bread in the pit goes to the commander to be distributed. Come along, come along! You’re doing no good here.”

And they went on past the hospital, which was permeated with the same smell of decaying flesh as the mortuary they had passed a few minutes before.

The detachment had taken up its position in an abandoned working in the first western gallery of the eastern slope of the mine. Machine guns stood in the gallery and there were even two light mortars there.

When the deputation turned into the gallery, they suddenly heard a sound so unexpected that they involuntarily stopped short. It was the sound of singing coming down the gallery—some song they did not know, a mournful air sung in a muffled, weary voice.

“That’s to keep our spirits up, instead of dinner,” their guide told them seriously. “This is the second day the commander’s been teaching it to us. He says that’s the song his father used to sing when he was in prison in tsarist times.”

A single voice rose again in long-drawn-out notes:

No foe could mock your passing,
For we were all your own.
We came to close your eagle eyes,
You did not die alone.

“Listen, you women,” said Nyusha Kramarenko firmly, “let me go first.”

Marya Ignatyevna pushed past Nyusha.

“Get out of my way!” she said. “It’s time I had my say.”

From the darkness a calm voice sounded:

“What’s the matter there?”

The lamp lit up a group of Red Army men lying on the ground around a tall, broad-shouldered man with a fair, round beard, heavily sprinkled with coal dust. The hands and faces of the men around him were just as black as his, their teeth and eyeballs dazzlingly white by contrast.

Old Kozlov looked at them with a thrill of emotion: these were the soldiers whose fame had rung throughout the length and breadth of the Donetz Basin. Somehow he had expected to see them in red breeches, with silver-mounted sabres, a-lock of hair showing jauntily from under tall Cossack hats, or caps with shining lacquered peaks. Instead he was looking at the faces of workers, blackened with coal dust, faces just like those of his pals, hewers, timberers, blasters and pony drivers. And looking at them, the old miner realized in his heart of hearts that the bitter fate they had chosen in preference to being taken prisoner was also his own.

He threw an irate glance at Marya Ignatyevna when she began to speak:

“Comrade Commander,” she said, “we’ve come to you as a kind of deputation.”

The commander rose, tall, broad-shouldered and very thin, and the Red Army men immediately rose to their feet. They were wearing quilted jackets and dirty caps with earflaps, and their faces were overgrown with a thick stubble. The women

stared at them. These were their brothers, the brothers of their husbands; they used to come home looking like that after the day and night shifts, grimy with coal dust, calm, weary, blinking painfully at the light.

"And what have you deputies come for?" asked the commander with a smile.

"It's very simple," replied Marya Ignatyevna. "The Germans rounded up all the women and children and told us to send some women down to persuade the men in the mine to surrender, and that if we didn't get them to come up they'd shoot all of us and the children too."

"So that's it," said the commander, shaking his head. "And what do you want to tell us?"

Marya Ignatyevna looked the commander straight in the eye. Then she turned to the other women and asked softly and sadly:

"What'll we say, girls?" From under her blouse she pulled out some pieces of bread, boiled beets, potatoes boiled in their jackets, and some dry crusts.

The Red Army men turned away, their eyes lowered, ashamed to stare at the food, so beautiful and impossible was the sight of it, so tempting. They were afraid to look at it, for it was life. The commander alone looked at the cold potatoes and bread without flinching.

"This isn't only my answer," said Marya Ignatyevna. "Our women gave me the things to bring you. It's a good thing I managed to get it here. I was scared the Germans would search me."

She placed the modest gift on a kerchief, bowed low, and brought it over to the commander, saying:

“Excuse us. . . .”

He bowed to her in silence.

“Ignatyevna,” said Nyusha Kramarenko softly, “when I saw that wounded man with the maggots eating him up alive, when I heard what he said I forgot everything!”

Varvara Zotova turned smiling eyes on the Red Army men.

“It looks as though the deputation came for nothing, comrades!” she said.

The men looked at her young face.

“Stay here with us,” said one of them, “and marry me.”

“That’s an idea,” said Varvara. “But can you support a wife?”

Everyone laughed.

Over two hours had passed since the women had come down. The commander and the old miner were talking quietly apart from the rest.

Varvara Zotova was sitting on the ground. One of the men was leaning on his elbow beside her. In the semi-darkness she could see the pallor of his brow through the grime of the coal dust, the bony structure of his face and the veins at his temples showing through the skin. With his mouth half-open like a child’s he gazed intently at her face and the whiteness of her neck. Tenderness welled up in her heart. She stroked his hand softly and moved closer to him. His face lit up with a smile and he whispered hoarsely:

“Ekh, why did you come down here to upset us? Women, bread—everything to remind us of the sunshine.”

With a swift, sudden movement she threw her arms around him, kissed him, and burst into tears.

The others watched them mutely, seriously, without a thought of laughter or jokes. Not a word broke the silence.

"Well, time for us to go," said Ignatyevna, getting up. "Let's go, Kozlov, shall we?"

"I'll see you as far as the shaft," said the old miner. "But I'm not going up with you. There's nothing for me to do up there."

"What's that?" said Nyusha. "Why, you'll starve to death down here."

"And what if I do?" he replied. "I'll die here with my own people, in the pit where I've worked all my life."

He said this in such a calm determined tone that they realized it was no use arguing with him.

The commander stepped over to the women.

"Well, friends," he said, "don't think harshly of us. It's my opinion that the Germans only wanted to scare you and take us in. Tell your children about us. Let them tell their children that our people know how to die."

"What do you say if we send a letter with them?" said one of the men. "Our last greetings to send our families after the war."

"No letters," replied the commander. "The Germans will probably search them when they come out."

The women left them, weeping as though it were their own husbands or brothers they were leaving there to die.

Twice that night the Germans threw smoke bombs down the shaft. Kostitsyn gave orders to close all the ventilation shutters and pile up chunks of coal against them. The sentries

got to the shaft through the air vents and stood guard in gas masks.

The orderly made his way to Kostitsyn through the darkness to report that the wounded men had died.

“It wasn’t the smoke bombs, they died their own death,” he said, and feeling for Kostitsyn’s hand, he pressed a bit of bread into it.

“Minayev wouldn’t eat it. ‘Give it back to the commander,’ he said. ‘It won’t do me any good now anyhow.’”

Silently the commander put the bread in his haversack, the detachment’s food store.

Hour after hour passed. The lamp flickered and went out. The darkness was complete. For a few seconds Kostitsyn turned on his flashlight, the battery had almost run down, the dark red filaments of the bulb scarcely glowed, too weak to overcome the immensity of the darkness.

Kostitsyn divided the food which Ignatyevna had brought into ten portions. There was one potato and a small piece of bread for each.

“Well, Grandad,” he said to the old miner. “Are you sorry you decided to stay with us?”

“No,” the old man replied. “Why should I be sorry? Here my heart is at peace and my conscience clear.”

“Talk to us, Grandad, tell us something interesting,” asked a voice out of the darkness.

“That’s right, Grandad,” another voice chimed in. “Don’t be shy, we’re all working folk here.”

“What kind of work did you do?” asked the old man.

“All kinds. Captain Kostitsyn here used to be a teacher before the war.”

“I taught botany in a teachers’ training college,” said the captain, and burst out laughing.

“There you are. And four of us were fitters, me and three of my buddies.”

“And all four of us are named Ivan. The four Ivans.”

“Sergeant Ladyin was a compositor, worked in a printshop, and Gavrilov, our medical orderly . . . he’s here, isn’t he?”

“I’m here,” replied another voice. “My doctoring is over.”

“Gavrilov used to be in charge of a tool room.”

“And then there’s Mukhin, he was a barber, and Kuzin comes from a chemical works.”

“And that’s the lot.”

“Who said that? The orderly?” asked the old man.

“That’s right. You see, you’re getting to know us already.”

“So there’s not one miner here among you, no one who worked underground?”

“We’re all underground men now,” said a voice from a distant corner. “All miners.”

“Who was that?” asked the old man. “The fitter, wasn’t it?”

“Himself in person.”

A quiet, rather lazy laugh went up.

“And so we have to rest.”

“We’re still in action,” said Kostitsyn. “We’re in a besieged fortress. We’re holding up enemy forces. And remember,

comrades, that as long as one of us remains alive, he is a soldier in our army, he is fighting a great battle."

I left to go they caught me again and clapped me into jail. I ran away from there for the third time. Made my way to the Baltic provinces, and came down with typhus. There I lay and thought: 'Will I really never get back to the mines after all; am I going to die here?' But I'd been one too many for the Germans, and I was one too many for the typhus too, I got well again. Till '21 I fought in the Civil War, volunteered. You see, I hated the old way of things. When I was still a young fellow, I used to distribute 'notices,' as we used to call our leaflets."

"Yes, there's no getting you down, old man," said the soldier sitting next to Kozlov.

"Oh, I'm a rare 'un, I am," said the old man, with childlike boastfulness. "I'm a working man, a revolutionary; I've never begrudged anything for the sake of truth. Well, I came back when they demobilized me, in April. It was evening I came." He was silent for a moment, reliving the past in his mind. "I came back, yes, came back again. And I'll tell you the truth, I didn't go to the village, but came straight here. I wanted to take a look at the pit-head. I just stood there and couldn't help crying. I wasn't drunk, but the tears rolled down my face. It's the truth by God! I looked at the pit and at the slag heap, and just bawled. But some of the folks around recognized me and ran to tell my old woman: 'Your old man's come to life again!' they said. 'He's gone to the pit-head! He's standing there and crying!' And believe me or not, to the last day of her life my old woman could never forgive me for going to the mine first before I went home to her. 'You're a miner,' she'd say, 'you've got a lump of coal where your heart should be.'"

He was silent a moment, then continued:

“But believe me, comrade soldier, you’re a working lad too, and I tell you straight. I’ve always dreamed of working all my life in this mine, and then dying here.”

He addressed his invisible listeners as though they were one man. And he felt that this man was somebody he knew well, that after the hideous times he had lived through fate had brought him an old friend, a worker, who was now sitting beside him in the old abandoned workings, listening to him with understanding and affection.

He reveled in the calm spiritual beauty of the young commander and his men. It felt good to be with them after the days spent among the Germans, who defiled men’s souls with petty meanness and cowardly lies.

“Well, comrades,” said the commander, “come and get your rations.”

“What about a light,” said someone jokingly, “to make sure nobody comes twice?”

Everyone laughed at the very idea of such an underhand act.

“Well, come on, come on; why isn’t anyone coming?” said Kostitsyn.

Voices sounded from the darkness:

“Go on, you go. . . . Give our miner his ration first, give it to Grandad. . . . Go on, Grandad, what’s the matter with you? Reach out for your ration.”

The old man was deeply moved by the unselfishness of these hungry men. He had seen much in his life, had more than once seen starving people pounce on a bit of bread.

After the food had been distributed, the old man stayed beside Kostitsyn.

“There you are, Comrade Kozlov,” said the commander. “There are nine of us left. The men are very weak and there’s no more bread. I was afraid they’d start bickering and quarrelling when they realized what our position was. And actually there was a time when there was wrangling over every trifle. But then there was a turning point, and I give myself a good deal of credit for it: we had a very serious talk before you came. And now the harder things are, the closer we are to one another; the darker it is, the better friends we all are. Under the tsar my father was sentenced to hard labour when he was still a student, and I often remember the stories he told me when I was a child. ‘There was very little hope,’ he said, ‘but I had faith.’ And he taught me: ‘There’s no such thing as a hopeless situation; fight to the end, as long as there’s breath in your body.’ And after all, your hair stands on end when you think how we fought last month, what forces the enemy sent against us—and yet we didn’t surrender to those forces, we kept them off. There are nine of us left. We’ve gone down deep into the earth. Maybe there’s a German division standing up there, over our heads. But we’re not licked. We’ll go on fighting, and we’ll get out of here. They’ll not be able to rob us of the sky, and the wind, and the grass—we’ll get out of here!”

And in the same quiet voice the old man answered:

“Why leave the mine altogether? It’s home here. Sometimes you get sick and don’t go to the hospital—you lie here in the mine and it cures you.”

“We’ll get out, we’ll get out all right,” said Kostitsyn loudly, so that everyone could hear him. “We’ll get out of this pit, we’re not the kind to take a licking, and we’ve proved it, comrades!”

He had hardly finished speaking when a heavy, slow, dull shock made the roof and ground tremble. The props creaked

and cracked, and chunks of coal rattled to the ground. It seemed as though everything around surged and heaved, and then suddenly clamped together, pressing down on the men who had been thrown to the ground, crushing them, driving the breath from their lungs. There was a moment when it seemed impossible to breathe, the thick fine dust which had settled on the props and walls over the course of so many years had been shaken off and now filled the air.

Coughing and choking, somebody said hoarsely:

"The Germans have blown up the shaft! This is the end. . . ."

Kostitsyn sent two men to examine the shaft. The old miner led the way. It was hard going as in many places the explosion had caused falls or even brought down the roof.

"Follow me, hang on to me," said Kozlov, as he made his way easily and confidently over the piles of coal and the fallen props.

They found the sentries at the shaft bottom—both of them lying in pools of still warm, but already cooling blood. They buried the two men, covering them with chunks of coal.

"And now there are three Ivans left," said one of the men.

For a long time the old man felt his way about, went to the shaft and bustled around noisily, examined the props and roof and exclaimed at the force of the explosion.

"There's villains for you!" he growled. "To blow up the shaft! Whoever heard of such a thing! It's like hitting a baby over the head with a club."

He crawled away somewhere far off, until nothing more could be heard of him. The men called out to him a few times:

“Grandad, hey, Grandad! Come back, mate, the captain’s waiting!”

But there was neither sight nor sound of the old man.

“Hope he’s all right,” said one of the men, and called again: “Hey, there, Grandad! Miner, where are you? Can you hear me?”

“Hey, where are you?” came Kostitsyn’s voice from the main gallery.

He crept along till he found the men and they told him of the sentries’ death.

“Ivan Korenkov, who wanted to send a letter with the women,” said Kostitsyn, and they were all silent. Then Kostitsyn asked:

“And where’s our old man?”

“He went off a long time ago. We’ll shout out for him,” said one of the men, “or maybe we’d better fire a burst from a tommy gun. He’d hear that all right.”

“No,” said Kostitsyn, “let’s wait.”

They sat there silently, peering in the direction of the shaft in the vain hope of discerning a ray of light. But the darkness was thick and impenetrable.

“The Germans have buried us, Comrade Commander,” said one of the men.

“Come, now,” answered Kostitsyn, “don’t you know there’s no burying us? Look at how many of them we’ve buried, and we’ll bury as many more yet.”

“Wouldn’t mind doing it, I must say,” said the other man.

“I should say,” said the first slowly.

But Kostitsyn could hear by their voices that they did not share his confidence.

The rattle of falling coal was heard in the distance, then again silence.

“Rats,” remarked one of the men. “What tough luck we’ve had! Ever since I was a kid I worked hard. At the front I had a heavy rifle to drag—an anti-tank rifle—and now it’s a hard death I’ve found.”

“And I was a botanist,” said Kostitsyn, and laughed. It always made him laugh to remember that he had once been a botanist. His former life now seemed to him so radiant, so beautiful, that he had completely forgotten the interminable differences he had had with the head of the chair, had forgotten that his master’s dissertation had been a failure and that he had been obliged to swallow his pride and do it over again. Here, in the depths of the ruined mine, he remembered the past as a laboratory with big, wide-open windows, or a woodland glade with the morning sun shining on the dewy grass where he had supervised the collection of specimens for the college herbarium.

“No, that wasn’t a rat. It’s Grandad fussing about,” said the other man.

“Where are you all?” Kozlov’s voice sounded from the distance.

They could tell by his heavy, excited breathing, which carried to them from the distance, that something extraordinary had happened, something that caused their hearts to beat in joyful anticipation.

“Where are you? Are you there?” asked Kozlov impatiently. “Good thing I stayed down here with you, lads.

Hurry up and let's get back to the commander. I've found a way out."

"I'm here," said Kostitsyn.

"Here's how it is, Comrade Commander. As soon as I got to the shaft I felt a draught; I followed it up and this is what I found. The fall jammed up above and choked the shaft, leaving it clear as far as the first gallery. There's a crevice in the gallery caused by the explosion, and that's where the draught's coming from. There's a cross-cut there for about fifty metres; it leads out into an adit. I used to use it in 1910. I tried to climb up the emergency ladder, and got up about twenty metres, but the rungs had been knocked out further up. So I decided to use up my last matches to investigate, and found things as I've told you. We'll have to put in about ten rungs and clear away some of the rocks blocking the shaft, hack away about two metres, and we'll come out in the old gallery."

No one said a word.

At last Kostitsyn broke the silence.

"Well, what did I tell you?" he said calmly and slowly, although his heart was pounding. "I said it wouldn't be here we'd be buried."

One of the men suddenly burst into tears.

"Is it really true, shall we really see daylight again?" he said.

"How could you have known all this, Comrade Captain?" whispered the other. "You know, I thought you were just talking to keep our spirits up when you said there was hope for us."

"I told the commander about the first gallery when the women were still down here," said the old man confidently. "It

was I who gave him that hope. Only he told me to keep mum until it was certain."

"Nobody wants to die, after all," said the man who had broken down, ashamed of his tears now.

Kostitsyn got up.

"I must examine it myself," he said. "Then we'll call the others here. Come and show me. Wait here, comrades, and if any of the others come, not a word until I return. You understand?"

Once again the men were left alone.

"Shall we really see daylight again?" said one of them. "It actually gives you the creeps to think of it."

"It's all very well to be a hero, but nobody wants to die," growled the other, still unable to forgive himself for betraying his emotion.

Nowhere in the world, perhaps, has a job been done at the cost of such superhuman effort than that which Kostitsyn and his detachment performed. The merciless darkness numbed their brains and preyed on their hearts, while hunger racked them both when they were working and during their brief periods of rest.

Only now, when they saw a way out of their seemingly hopeless plight, did they feel the full weight of the horror that was threatening to crush them; only now did they drink to the dregs the bitterness of their position. The simplest task that would mean an hour's work in the light of day for a strong, healthy man meant long days of exhausting labour for them. There were moments when they literally dropped to the ground, feeling that no power on earth could raise them again. But after a while they got up and, leaning against the wall, set to work again. Some of the men worked in silence, slowly,

methodically, lest they waste an extra ounce of strength, others worked with feverish energy for a few minutes, fuming and raging, then collapsed, gasping for breath, and sat there, hands hanging limply, waiting for their strength to return. In the same way thirsty men wait patiently and doggedly for a few drops of murky, tepid moisture to ooze up out of a dried-up spring. Those who had rejoiced the most in the beginning, and who thought they would be out of the pit in next to no time, were the first to lose heart. Those who had not expected immediate release were calmer and worked more evenly. Sometimes desperate, furious cries would ring out in the darkness:

"Give us light . . . we can't go on without light! . . . How can a man work without grub? . . . If only I could sleep, just sleep! . . . Better to die than work like this! . . ."

The men chewed their leather straps, locked the grease off their rifles, tried to catch rats. But in the darkness the swift, elusive vermin slipped out of their very hands. And with bursting heads and ringing ears, reeling with weakness, they returned to their work.

Kostitsyn was like a man of iron. He seemed to be everywhere at once: with the three fitters who were cutting and bending new rungs out of thick iron bars, with the men clearing away the rubble, with those hammering the new rungs into the wall of the shaft. One would have thought he could see the expression on the men's faces despite the darkness; for he was always on the spot when needed, beside the man who felt his strength ebbing away. Sometimes he would help to raise a man who had fallen, and speak a few words of encouragement; sometimes he would say slowly, quietly: "I order you to get up, only the dead have the right to lie down here." He was merciless, pitiless, but he knew that if he permitted himself the slightest weakness or pity for those who collapsed, they would all perish.

Once one of the men, Kuzin by name, fell to the ground and said:

"Do what you like with me, Comrade Captain, I haven't the strength to get up."

"I'll make you get up," said Kostitsyn.

"And how will you do it?" said Kuzin in anguished mockery, breathing heavily. "Shoot me? There's nothing I'd like better. I can't stand this torture any longer."

"No, I won't shoot you," said Kostitsyn. "Lie there if you want to. We'll carry you up to the surface. But when we get up there into the sunlight, I won't give you my hand. I'll spit, and send you packing."

And with a curse Kuzin dragged himself to his feet and staggered off to help clear away the rocks.

Only once did Kostitsyn lose his self-control. One of the men came up to him and said in a low voice:

"Sergeant Ladyin's down. I don't know if he's dead or if he's just collapsed, but he doesn't answer when I speak to him."

Kostitsyn knew the sergeant well, a simple, upright man. He knew that if he, the commander, were to be killed or wounded, Ladyin would take his place and lead the men just as he would have done. And when he silently approached the sergeant in the darkness, it was with the knowledge that the latter had worked without a murmur, and had given out sooner than the others simply because he was weak from a recent wound and considerable loss of blood.

"Ladyin!" he called. "Sergeant Ladyin!" and passed his hand over the cold, damp face of the man lying on the ground.

The sergeant made no reply.

Kostitsyn bent over him and dashed the water from his flask over the man's head and chest.

Ladyin stirred.

"Who's that?" he muttered.

"It's me, the captain," replied the commander, bending lower over him.

Ladyin put his arm around Kostitsyn's neck. He pulled himself up till his wet face touched the captain's cheek, and said in a whisper:

"Comrade Kostitsyn! I can't get up. Shoot me." And he kissed the commander with his cold lips.

"Silence!" shouted Kostitsyn. "Silence!"

He left Ladyin and quickly walked off toward where the men were working.

And Ladyin crawled after him, dragging a heavy iron bar: he stopped every few metres to summon his strength, and then crawled on again.

"Here's another rung," he said. "Give it to the men working up above."

Whenever anything went wrong with the work, the men would ask:

"Where's the boss? Grandad, come here! Grandad, where've you got to? Hey, Grandad!"

All of them, including Kostitsyn himself, knew well enough that had it not been for the old man, they would never have been able to cope with the tremendous task they had undertaken, and which they finally carried through. He moved with a sure, light step in the darkness of the mine, groped around and found the material they needed. It was he who

found a hammer and chisel, who brought three rusty picks from a far-off working, and advised the men who were driving in new rungs to make themselves fast with straps and ropes. He was the first to make his way to the upper gallery and there groped around until he found the stones blocking the entrance to the cross-cut. He climbed up and down the shaft as if he felt neither hunger nor fatigue.

The work was nearing completion. Even the weakest suddenly felt a new influx of strength. Even Kuzin and Ladyin felt stronger, getting to their feet and standing firmly when a voice shouted down from above:

"The last rung's in!"

The men were drunk with joy. For the last time Kostitsyn led them back to the old workings. There he distributed tommy guns and ordered each man to fasten hand grenades to his belt.

"Comrades," he said, "the time has come to return to the surface. Remember, the war is going on up there. Twenty-seven of us came down here, eight are returning. May the names of those who rest here be remembered forever!"

He led the detachment to the shaft. They walked in silence. Their emotion was too strong for speech.

It was only their nervous elation that gave the men the strength to clamber up the shaky rungs, to draw themselves up metre by metre through the wet, slippery shaft. It took more than two hours for six of them to make their way up to the gallery, but finally they were there, sitting in the low cross-cut, waiting for Kostitsyn and Kozlov, the last two.

No one saw in the darkness how it happened . . . It seemed to be a cruel, senseless accident that caused the old miner suddenly to lose his grip within a few metres of the cross-cut and sent him hurtling downwards.

“Grandad, Grandad!” several anguished voices cried out simultaneously. But the only reply was a dull thud from below as the old man’s body struck the pile of rubble at the shaft bottom.

“How terrible, how senseless,” muttered Kostitsyn, shaking the motionless body.

And only the old man himself had felt some minutes before his death that something strange and terrible was happening to him. “Can it be death?” he thought.

At the very moment when the men had yelled down joyfully that the last rung was in, when the weakest of them felt he could move again, the old man had felt his life’s strength ebbing away from him. Never before had he experienced anything like it. His head was spinning, crimson spots flashed and circled before his eyes. Slowly he pulled himself up the shaft leading from the pit where he had worked all his life, and with every movement, with each effort, his grasp weakened, his heart grew colder. Far-off, long-forgotten scenes flashed through his memory—his black-bearded father stepping softly in his bast shoes, leading him to the pit-head . . . the English mine inspector shaking his head and smiling as he looked at the small, eleven-year-old boy who had come to work in the mine. And again a wave of crimson seemed to film his eyes. What was it—sunset in the Donetz Basin, the red sun shining through the smoke and dust; or was it blood, or that bold flaming piece of red cloth which he had pulled out from under his jacket and carried at the head of the huge crowd of ragged miners, his heavy boots clattering as he made straight for the Cossacks and mounted police dashing out from behind the office building? . . . He mustered all his strength to call out, to shout for help. But there was no more strength in him; his lips moved soundlessly.

He pressed up against the cold slippery stone, his fingers clutching the rung. The soft damp mould touched his cheek, water trickled over his forehead, and it seemed to him that his mother's tears were trickling down his face.

Again he tried to shout, to call Kostitsyn, and then his fingers lost their grip and he fell.

It was night when they came out into the open. A fine warm rain was falling. Silently the men took off their caps and sat down on the ground. The warm raindrops fell on their bare heads. Not a word was said. The nocturnal darkness seemed bright to eyes accustomed to the heavy blackness of the pit. They drew in deep breaths, looked up at the dark clouds, ran their fingers through the wet blades of spring grass which had pushed their way through last year's dead stubble. They gazed into the misty night, listened to the rain pattering on the ground. Sometimes a gust of wind came from the east, and they would turn their faces towards it. They gazed and gazed around them, at the wide open spaces, and peering into the darkness, each man saw what his heart desired.

"Don't let your rifles get wet," said Kostitsyn.

The scout who had been sent out returned. Loudly, boldly, he shouted to them:

"There are no Germans in the village!" he called. "They left three days ago. Come on, hurry up. Two old women are boiling potatoes for us and they've spread out some straw. We'll be able to lie down and have a good sleep. Today is the twenty-sixth. We've been in the pit twelve days. They say that the whole village was saying Masses for us in secret. They thought we were dead."

It was very warm in the house. Their faces must have been terrible, for the two women who brought them hot water and potatoes could not hold back their tears.

The men soon fell asleep, huddled together on the warm damp straw. Kostitsyn sat on a stool with his tommy gun, on guard. He sat there upright, head high, and stared into the darkness that precedes the dawn. He decided to spend a day, a night and another day there, and the following night they could leave. A queer scratching sound caught his ear—something like a mouse gnawing under the floor. He listened intently. No, that was no mouse. The sound seemed at once far off and near, as though someone were timidly, gently and yet stubbornly tapping away with a tiny hammer. Maybe it was the noise of that work underground still in his ears? Sleep was far from him. He sat there and thought of Kozlov.

An old woman came noiselessly down the passage on bare feet. Dawn was breaking. The rim of the sun appeared through the clouds, lighting up a corner of the white stove; drops of water glistened on the windowpanes. A hen cackled excitedly. The old woman murmured something to it as she bent over the wicker basket. Again that strange sound.

“What’s that?” asked Kostitsyn. “Can you hear, Grandma? As if a tiny hammer were tapping somewhere; or is it only my imagination?”

The old woman’s reply came quietly from the passage.

“It’s here, in the passage. The chicks are hatching; they’re breaking through the shells with their beaks.”

Kostitsyn looked at the men lying there. They were sleeping soundly, without stirring; breathing slowly and evenly. The sun was shining in on a fragment of broken mirror lying on the table, and the reflection played in a narrow bright

strip on the hollow in Kuzin's temple. A wave of tenderness for these men who had borne so much surged through Kostitsyn. It seemed to him that never in his life had he experienced such affection and warmth of feeling.

He gazed at the black, bearded faces, at the heavy, bruised hands of the Red Army men. Tears coursed down his cheeks, but he did not wipe them away, for nobody was there to see Captain Kostitsyn crying.

The dead Donetz steppe stretches away, majestic and sad. The ruined pit buildings rise out of the mist, the high slagheaps loom darkly, and a bluish smoke from the burning pyrites steals along their dark slopes and then, caught by the wind, is whipped away, leaving only an acrid smell of sulphur behind. The steppe wind runs to and fro between the miners' wrecked cottages and whistles through the gutted office buildings. Doors and shutters hanging on a single hinge creak as they swing back and forth; the rails of the narrow-gauge railway are coated a rusty red. Locomotives stand lifeless under the remains of a blown-up bridge. The powerful elevator mechanism has been blasted away by the force of the explosion, and the five hundred metre steel cable has slipped from its drum and lies in coils on the ground. The tapering concrete mouths of the inlet ventilators have been laid bare. The red copper of the torn windings gleams among the wreckage of the mighty dynamos, and the heavy coal-cutting machines lie and rust on the stone floor of the workshops.

It is terrible here at night, in the moonlight. There is no silence in this kingdom of death. The wind whistles through moaning wires; loose sheets of metal roofing clang like bells; a piece of sheet iron that has crumpled up in the fire of the burning building suddenly cracks as it straightens out; a brick comes crashing down, and the door of the tipple creaks as it swings. Patches of moonlight and shadow creep slowly over

the earth, climb up the walls, move over the heaps of scrap iron and the charred beams.

Red and green fireflies soar everywhere over the steppe, fade and disappear in the grey *mist of clouds bathed in moonlight*. The German sentries, terrified in this land of coal and iron which they have slaughtered, fire shots into the air, trying to drive away the shadows. But the huge expanses swallow up the weak crackling of the tommy guns, the chill skies extinguish the glowing tracer bullets, and again the dead, conquered Donetz coal-field strikes terror into the conqueror, and again tommy-gun bursts rattle, and red and green sparks streak across the sky. Everything here bespeaks a frightful obduracy: boilers have burst their iron sides, unwilling to serve the Germans; iron from the open-hearth furnaces has poured out onto the ground; coal has buried itself under great layers of rock, drowned itself in torrents of brackish water, and the mighty power of electricity has burnt out the machines that generated it.

The sight of the dead Donetz Basin evokes not only grief but a great pride. This appalling scene of desolation is not death. It is a testimony to the triumph of life, which scorns death and conquers it.

Valentin Katayev

OUR FATHER

I WANT TO SLEEP. I'm cold."

"Goodness! I'm sleepy too. Get dressed. And no more fussing. That'll do. Put on your scarf. Put on your hat. Put on your *valenki*. Where are your mittens? Stand still. Don't wriggle."

When the boy was dressed she took him by the hand and they left the house. The boy was still half-asleep. He was four years old. He hunched his shoulders and stumbled after. Dawn was just breaking. A blue, frosty mist hung in the air. The mother tightened the scarf around her son's neck, straightened his collar and kissed his sleepy, sulky face.

The dry stalks of wild grape clinging to the wooden galleries with their shattered windowpanes were sugary with rime. It was twenty-five degrees below. Their breath steamed in the frosty air. The yard was covered with frozen slops.

"Mummy, where are we going?"

"I told you—for a walk."

"Then why did you take the valise?"

"Because I need it. And keep quiet. Don't talk. Close your mouth. You'll catch cold. See how cold it is. You'd better look where you're going or you'll slip."

At the gate stood the janitor in a sheepskin coat and white apron, his janitor's badge pinned on his chest. She walked past him without looking up. He silently closed the gate after them and barred it with a long iron latch. They walked along the street. There was no snow, only ice and rime everywhere. Where there was no ice or rime there was smooth stone or earth

hard and smooth as stone. They walked under naked, black acacias crackling from the frost.

The mother and son were dressed almost alike. They both wore fairly good coats of artificial monkey fur, tan *valenki* and bright woollen mittens. But the mother had a checkered kerchief on her head, while the boy wore a round hat of monkey fur with earflaps. The street was deserted. When they reached the crossing the street loudspeaker gave such a loud click that the woman started. But then she remembered that it was the morning radio broadcast. It began, as usual, with the crowing of a rooster. The rooster's over-loud call rang melodiously down the street, heralding the beginning of a new day. The boy looked up at the loudspeaker.

"Mummy, is that a rooster?"

"Yes, sonny."

"Isn't he cold up there?"

"No, he isn't cold up there. And don't fidget. Look where you're going."

Then the loudspeaker clicked again, rustled, and a gentle childish voice uttered three times with an angelic intonation:

"Good morning! Good morning! Good morning!"

Then the same voice, unhurriedly and with much feeling, said the Lord's Prayer in Rumanian:

"Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done... "

At the corner the woman turned away from the wind and, dragging the child behind her, practically ran down the sidestreet as though that over-loud and over-gentle voice were pursuing her. Soon the voice fell silent. The prayer was over. A sea wind swept down the icy corridors of the streets. Ahead

was the blood-red halo of a bonfire around which the men of a German patrol were warming themselves. The woman turned about and went in the other direction. The boy pattered along by her side in his tan *valenki*. His cheeks were flushed cranberry red. A tiny icicle hung from his nose.

"Mummy, are we taking a walk now?" the boy asked.

"Yes, we're taking our walk now."

"I don't like to walk so fast."

"Be patient."

They crossed a courtyard and came out into another street. It was quite light now. A brittle, roseate dawn filtered through the bluish clouds of vapour and rime. The chill clamped one's jaws. Several pedestrians appeared on the street. They were going in one direction. Almost all of them carried bundles. Some were pushing carts laden with belongings or pulling loaded sleds whose runners scraped along the naked pavement.

That morning people moved slowly in one direction, like ants, from all parts of the city, carrying bundles. They were Jews going to the ghetto. The ghetto had been laid out in the Peresyp, the bleak, low-lying part of the city where charred oil tanks stood at sea level, like the tents of travelling circuses. Several dirty blocks had been fenced in with two rows of rusty barbed wire; a single entrance had been left, like in a mousetrap. The Jews moved along the streets leading down to the Peresyp. They passed under the railway bridges. They slipped on the icy sidewalks. Among them were old men and women who could not walk, and typhus patients who were carried on stretchers. Some fell in their tracks and remained where they had fallen, leaning against a lamp-post or with their arms around a hydrant. Nobody accompanied the Jews. They went by themselves, with no guard. They knew that those who

remained at home would be shot. That is why they went of their own accord. The penalty for sheltering a Jew was also death. For hiding one Jew every single dweller in an apartment was liable to be executed on the spot. Walking down the steep hills and under the railway bridges, the Jews converged on the ghetto from all parts of the city, pushing carts in front of them, leading bundled-up children by the hand. Like ants they walked in single file between the houses and the rimy trees. They walked past locked doors and gates, past smoky bonfires around which German and Rumanian soldiers were warming themselves. The soldiers paid no attention to the Jews; they just stamped their feet and rubbed their ears with their mittened hands.

The cold was frightful. It would have been a heavy frost even in a northern town. In Odessa it was simply astounding. Odessa has frosts like that once in thirty years. The small disc of the sun shone feebly through the dense blue and green vapour. Sparrows killed in flight by the frost lay stiff on the pavement.

The sea was frozen white to the very horizon. The wind was blowing from the sea.

The woman looked Russian. The boy also looked Russian. The boy's father was Russian. But that did not mean anything. The woman was a Jewess. They had to go into the ghetto. The boy's father was a Red Army officer. The woman had torn up her passport and thrown it into the ice-covered toilet that morning. She had left the house with her son, intending to roam the streets until things quietened down. She believed they would be able to hold out somehow or other. It would be madness to enter the ghetto. It would mean certain death. So she had decided to walk around town with the boy, trying to avoid the more crowded streets. At first the boy was silent, thinking they were out for a walk. But soon he began to fret.

"Mummy, why do we walk all the time?"

"We're taking a walk."

"Nobody ever takes a walk so fast. I'm tired."

"Be patient, little one. I'm also tired. But I'm not fussing, am I?"

She realized that she was indeed walking too fast, almost at a run, as though pursued. She forced herself to walk slower. The boy looked up and did not recognize his mother. Her swollen, bitten lips, the frosted strand of hair that straggled from under her kerchief, and her glassy, fixed eyes with their dilated pupils frightened him. He had seen such eyes on toy animals. She stared at her son with unseeing eyes. Squeezing his little hand, she dragged the boy along. The boy was frightened. He started to cry.

"I want to go home. I have to do number one."

She hastily took him behind a billboard covered with German orders. While she unbuttoned and buttoned his trousers, shielding him from the wind, the boy continued to cry, shivering with cold. When they set out again, he said he was hungry. She took him into a little restaurant, but two Rumanian policemen in heavy winter coats with dogfur collars were having their breakfast there and she was afraid that without identification papers she would be arrested and sent to the ghetto, so she pretended she had entered the place by mistake. She begged pardon and hurriedly shut the door with the little bell. The boy ran after her, wondering what it was all about. He began to cry again. The next restaurant was empty. With relief she crossed the threshold, which had a horseshoe nailed on it. She ordered a bottle of buttermilk and a roll for the boy. While the bundled-up youngster sat on a high stool drinking the buttermilk, of which he was very fond, and

chewing on his roll, she continued to think feverishly of what to do next. She could think of nothing. An iron stove was going in the restaurant and they were able to warm up. It seemed to the woman that the proprietress was looking at her inquisitively. She hastily asked for the bill. The proprietress gazed anxiously out of the window and suggested that the woman sit near the stove a while longer. The stove was red-hot. It was almost cherry red, slightly darker. Sparks flashed across its surface. The boy grew drowsy with warmth. His eyelids drooped. But the woman was in a hurry. She thanked the proprietress and said that she was in a hurry. After all, they had sat there almost an hour. Groggy with warmth and food, the boy had difficulty in keeping his feet. She shook him by the shoulder, straightened his collar and gave him a slight push toward the door. He tripped on the horseshoe nailed to the threshold. Then he gave her his hand, and once more she led him down the street. Old plane trees grew along this street. They walked past the spotted trees with the tender, rimy bark.

"I'm sleepy," the boy said, screwing up his eyes against the icy wind.

She pretended not to hear him. She realized their position was desperate. They had practically no friends in the city. She had come there two months before the war and had been stranded. She was all alone.

"My knees are frozen," the boy whimpered.

She took him down a side street and rubbed his knees. He calmed down. Suddenly she remembered that she did know one family in town, the Pavlovskys. They had become acquainted on the *Gruzia* while sailing from Novorossiisk to Odessa and had met several times subsequently. The Pavlovskys were a newly-married couple. He taught at the university, and his wife —Vera—had just graduated from a civil engineering college.

The two women had taken a liking to each other and became friends while the ship was sailing from Novorossiisk to Odessa. They had visited each other once or twice. Their husbands had also become friends. Once they had even got drunk together. Once the two couples had gone together to see a soccer game between Kharkov and Odessa. The Pavlovskys were Odessa fans. She and her husband had rooted for Kharkov. Odessa had won. My goodness, what had gone on in that tremendous new stadium by the sea! Shouts, cries, fights, clouds of dust! Why, they had almost quarrelled that time. But it was pleasant to recall it now. Pavlovsky was not in town. He was in the Red Army. But Vera was stranded; she had not managed to leave the city. She had seen Vera recently at Alexandrovsky Market, and they had even chatted for a while. But it had not been safe to dawdle at the market. The Germans raided it almost every day. The two women had not even talked five minutes. Since then they had not met. But Vera was probably in town. Where could she have gone to, anyway? The Pavlovskys were Russian. She could try to stay at Vera's place until things blew over. If the worst came to the worst she could leave the boy there. The Pavlovskys lived quite a distance away, at the corner of Pirogovskaya Street and French Boulevard. The woman turned back.

"Mummy, where are we going? Home?"

"No, sonny, we're going visiting."

"Where to?"

"Remember Auntie Vera? We're going to visit Auntie Vera."

"All right," said the boy, calming down. He liked to go visiting. His spirits rose.

They crossed over Stroganovsky Bridge. The street down below led to the port. It was called Quarantine Hill. It was lined with dull rectangular sandstone buildings. Some of them had been turned into heaps of rubble. Some had been burned out. At the bottom of the hill the round spans of another bridge were visible. Beyond the spans were the angular ruins of the port. Still farther, above the charred, demolished roofs, lay the white sea, frozen to the very horizon. Along the horizon ran a thick blue strip of open water. Several leaden-grey Rumanian transports were locked in the ice around the white ruins of the famous Odessa lighthouse. On the hill, far to the left, the shell-like cupola of the city theatre shone blue through pink and azure clouds of vapour. The railing on Stroganovsky Bridge consisted of a long row of tall iron spikes. The spikes were a distinct black. Down below people with pails were climbing up Quarantine Hill. Water splashed from their pails and froze on the pavement, glittering like glass in the roseate glow of the sun. Taken all together, it was very beautiful. After all, they could stay in the Pavlovsky apartment, and then she would see.

They walked a long time. The boy was tired, but he did not fuss. He pattered along in his little tan *valenki*, barely keeping up with his mother. He was in a hurry to get to the place. He liked visiting. On the way his mother rubbed his frost-bitten cheeks several times. On the sidewalk near the house in which the Pavlovskys lived a bonfire was burning and soldiers were warming themselves. It was a large building with several wings. The gate was chained. The house was being raided. Sentries were inspecting the papers of all those who passed in and out. Pretending she was in a hurry, the woman walked past the gate. Nobody paid any attention to her. Once again the boy began to whimper. She took him in her arms and ran, her feet thumping on the blue clinker slabs of the sidewalk. The boy calmed down. She began to roam the streets again. It seemed to her that she was appearing in the same places too often and that

people were beginning to pay attention to her. Then she got the idea of going to the movies for a few hours. The showings began early, for it was forbidden, under pain of death, to be out in the streets after eight o'clock.

She felt nauseated and dizzy in the stuffy, smelly hall jammed with soldiers and prostitutes who, like herself, had been driven there by the cold. But at least it was warm, and they could sit down. She unloosened the boy's scarf and he immediately fell asleep, hugging her arm above the elbow. She sat through two showings, hardly able to make out what was taking place on the screen. Most likely it was a war newsreel followed by a comedy or something of that sort; she could not grasp the thread of it. Everything was confused. Now the whole screen was taken up by the head of a pretty girl with blonde curls, who pressed her cheek against the flat chest of a tall, headless man, and then they sang a duet to the accompaniment of an orchestra; now the same girl was climbing into a low sports roadster; then the black fountains of explosions flew skyward, one, two, three, four in succession, with a tinny roar, as though tin roofing were being ripped apart into long strips, one, two, three, four strips, and black clods of earth fell like hail pounding on a tin drum; over the shell-ploughed earth crawled tanks marked with funereal crosses, scrunching and plunging, and spitting from their long guns still longer tongues of fire and curly wisps of white smoke.

A German soldier in worn *valenki* and a Russian fur hat with earflaps leaned heavily on the woman's shoulder and tickled the boy's neck with a large, dirty finger, trying to wake him up. He reeked of garlic and raw alcohol. He kept chuckling amicably and babbling:

"Don't sleep, baby. Don't sleep, baby."

But the boy went on sleeping; he merely turned his head and whimpered in his sleep. Then the German laid his heavy head on the woman's shoulder, embraced her with one arm and with his other hand began to play with the boy's face. The woman said nothing, afraid to offend the soldier. She was afraid he would ask to see her papers. The German also smelled of smoked fish. She felt nauseated. She forced herself not to flare up and make a scene. She told herself to keep calm. After all, the German was not doing anything particularly obnoxious. He was simply a boor. Quite a decent German. She could stand it. Anyway, the German soon fell asleep on her shoulder. She sat without moving. The German was very heavy. It was a good thing he slept.

Once again the girl with the blonde curls was moving about on the screen, and a long cluster of black and white rays the length of the hall moved with her. Black fountains flew up with an iron roar; tanks crawled forward; German battalions marched across desert sands; a huge fascist flag was raised on the Eiffel Tower; Hitler with his pointed nose and feminine chin barked from the screen, sticking out his feminine behind, rolling his eyes and opening and closing his mouth very rapidly. He opened and closed his mouth so fast that the sound lagged behind a bit: "Bow-wow, bow-wow."

In the dark the soldiers squeezed the girls, and the girls squealed. It was terribly hot and stuffy, it smelled of garlic, smoked mackerel, raw alcohol, and Rumanian Chat Noir perfume. Still, it was better here than being outside in the bitter cold. The woman rested up a bit. The boy had a good sleep. But the last showing ended, and they had to go out into the street again. She took the boy by the hand and they started to walk. The city was completely dark. Thick, frosty vapour curled up among the darkened buildings. The vapour glued one's eyelashes together. Smoky bonfires burned fitfully in the

icy streets. Every now and then a rifle shot rang out. Patrols marched along the streets. It was after eight. She took the sleep-heavy child in her arms and began to run, almost fainting at the very thought of being stopped by a patrol. She chose the most out-of-the-way back streets. The rime-covered plane trees and acacias lined the streets like ghosts. The city was dark and deserted. Sometimes a door would open, and, together with the bright strip of light that suddenly illuminated the cars frozen at the entrance, came the shrill, passionate wail of a violin from a cabaret. The woman reached the Shevchenko Park of Culture and Rest without incident. The vast park stretched parallel to the shore. Here it was lonely and quiet. It was especially quiet down below, under the cliff, overlooking the frozen sea. A ponderous quiet hung over the sea. Several large stars glittered above the white boughs of the trees. The blue ray of a searchlight fingered the stars.

She walked down a broad asphalted parkway. To the left was the stadium where they had seen the Odessa–Kharkov game together. Beyond the ruins of the stadium lay the sea. The sea was not visible in the darkness, but its presence could be sensed at once by the stillness. To the right lay the park. The broad asphalted parkway glittered in the starlight like emery paper. As the woman walked along she picked out the different kinds of trees. There were catalpas with long pods hanging down almost to the ground like strands of rope. There were acacias, plane trees, thuyas. Thickly covered with rime, they merged and hovered over the ground like clouds. She caught her breath and began to walk slower now past the endlessly long row of empty benches. Then she noticed that one of the benches was occupied. Her heart pounded as she walked past it. The black figure with head resting on the back of the bench did not move. The woman saw that the man was half-covered with rime, like a tree. The faceted stars of the Big Dipper twinkled above the black cupola of the observatory looming up

out of the white clouds in the garden. Here it was very quiet and not at all frightening. Perhaps it was not frightening because the woman was so tired.

At dawn the following morning trucks cruised the city picking up the bodies of people who had frozen to death during the night. One of the trucks rolled slowly down the broad asphalted drive in the Shevchenko Park of Culture and Rest.

The truck stopped twice. First it stopped at a bench on which sat a frozen old man. The next time it stopped near a bench on which sat a woman and a little boy. She was holding him by the hand. They sat side by side. They were dressed almost alike. They both wore fairly good coats of artificial monkey fur, tan *valenki* and bright mittens. They looked as though they were alive, but their faces, which had become covered with rime during the night, were all white and fuzzy, and an icy fringe hung from their eyelashes. When the soldiers lifted the bodies they did not straighten out. The soldiers swung the woman with the bent knees and threw her into the truck. She struck woodenly against the old man. Then the soldiers swung the boy with the bent knees and lightly tossed him in. He struck woodenly against the woman and even bounced a bit.

As the truck drove off a rooster crowed in the street loudspeaker, heralding the beginning of a new day. Then a gentle childish voice uttered three times with an angelic intonation:

"Good morning! Good morning! Good morning!"

Then the same voice, unhurriedly and with much feeling, said the Lord's Prayer in Rumanian:

"Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy Kingdom come... "

Vadim Kozhevnikov

MARCH–APRIL

CAPTAIN PYOTR ZHAVORONKOV used to weigh all of eighty-seven kilograms.

At the present moment, however, he weighed no more than seventy (minus his equipment). His flying togs torn to tatters, with holes in them burned through in places while he dozed off a night by a campfire, hung loosely on his emaciated body. His red unkempt beard and the deep lines of his face ingrained with dirt, made him look much older than he was.

He had baled out behind the enemy's lines in March on a special mission and now, what with the thaw setting in and rivulets and streams swelling up everywhere, it was no easy matter trying to make his way back through the woods in his squelching felt boots. At first he had travelled only by night. During the day he had hidden away in some hole or other. But now, afraid that hunger would completely undermine his strength, he was pushing on in the daytime too.

The captain had carried out his mission. The only thing that remained to be done was to locate the radio operator who had been dropped somewhere in the vicinity some two months ago.

"Carried out his mission!" How simple it sounded now. He had lost seventeen kilograms on this job—seventeen kilograms of flesh from a body that had never carried a superfluous ounce.

During the last four days he had had next to nothing to eat. Pressing on through the sodden forest his famished eyes lingered longingly on the white trunks of the birch trees, the bark of which—he knew—could be pounded to powder and

cooked in the tin in which he had carried his supply of T.N.T., and eaten—a bitterish sort of gruel, true, with a woody flavour.

When things went hard with him the captain had a way of arguing with himself as though he had a worthy and staunch companion at his side.

"Now bearing in mind the extraordinary circumstances," the captain ruminated, "you can make your way to the nearest highway. In that case, by the way, you'll have a chance of getting a change of footwear. But, generally speaking, to make a raid on solitary German transports is a sign that you're almost at the end of your tether. And, as the saying goes, the clamouring of your stomach is drowning the voice of reason."

Accustomed to being alone for long periods at a stretch, the captain could go on arguing with himself until he either grew weary or, as he admitted to himself, he began to talk nonsense.

But whenever he thought like this, the captain felt as though he had a companion. And this other, second fellow with whom he argued—of course, it was rather embarrassing to admit it—was not at all a bad sort of chap, one you could talk to, whose heart was in the right place and sympathetic.... Only on rare occasions did the captain cut him short roughly: "Hey, you, you can gas as much as you like but don't forget to keep your eyes peeled." He would pull himself up this way at the slightest rustle made by a lump of snow falling off a branch, at the crackling of a twig, or when he caught sight of ski tracks in the melting

The captain's opinion about this companion of his being a fellow after one's heart, one who understood things, differed somewhat from the opinions of his comrades.

Laconic, reserved, he did not imbue others with a desire for friendly confidences.

He never found a friendly cheering word for newcomers who were going out on a job for the first time; on the contrary, he would scare them with the dangers in store for them; then he would really wax eloquent.

Sometimes he would turn a man out of the plane just before it took off.

"You whippersnapper!" he would shout. "I don't need the likes of you!" And he would slam the trapdoor.

Returning after some successful job the captain would do his utmost to evade the congratulations of the men and their pompous welcomes. Eluding their open arms impatiently, he would mutter:

"Pardon me, fellows, I simply must have a shave, I rather too much like a hedgehog just now," and off he would go to his own quarters.

Resting after a job he would loll about on his bed and turn up for dinner with a drowsy and sullen look on his face.

"Not a very interesting chap," was the general opinion. "Rather a bore."

At one time a rumour went round which served to justify his conduct. It was said that his family had been killed off by the Germans at the very beginning of the war. Hearing the rumour, the captain turned up to dinner one day holding a letter in his hand. He kept it in front of him while he gulped down his hot soup.

"My wife writes that my mother-in-law has come from Ryazan to live with us," he announced, and then added, with gruff boastfulness, "I managed to lay my hands on a good apartment, with gas."

The men exchanged glances. Many of them with a look of chagrin—for they wanted to believe that the captain was such a recluse because of some great sorrow. But it turned out there had not been any sorrow.

Then again, the captain simply detested the violin. The sound of a violin had the same effect on him as the scraping of a knife against glass on others...

The forest was bare and dripping. The ground was soggy, full of holes filled with dirty water, marshy slush. It was a miserable job to tramp through such a wilderness, alone, dead beat.

The captain, however, had deliberately chosen this bleak route. There would be less probability of meeting Germans on the way. And the more wild and forsaken the place looked the more confidently did he press forward.

The only drawback was the pangs of hunger which were making themselves felt so. At times a mist rose before his eyes. He stopped and rubbed his eyes and when that did not help he punched his face with his woollen-gloved fist in order to send the blood to his head.

The pain in his stomach had long since passed away. Weakness made his movements exact and calculated. Fearing the appearance of some insidious and unexpected signs of hunger the captain kept a close watch on himself.

Making his way down a gully he turned towards a tiny waterfall trickling over an ice-rimmed declivity and began to drink. The taste of the snow water produced a feeling of nausea. But he went on drinking nevertheless in order to stop the gnawing at the pit of his stomach.

Evening came. Faint shadows lay on the thin, slushy snow. It grew cold. The puddles froze over and the ice crunched

underfoot. The wet branches became coated with ice; when he pushed them aside with his hand they tinkled like glass. However much the captain tried to make his way noiselessly, every step of his was accompanied by this tinkling and crunching.

The moon came up. The forest was aglow. Innumerable icicles and icy puddles reflecting the light of the moon sparkled like Bengal lights.

The radio operator must be somewhere in the vicinity. But how could he expect to find him at once if the spot in question covered an area of about four kilometres? The man, probably, had found himself a retreat hidden away no less snugly than the lair of a wild beast.

After all, he couldn't go shouting through the woods: "Hey, Comrade! Where are you?"

The captain made his way through a grove flooded with moonlight. His felt boots frozen by the night frost became heavy and stiff, like clogs.

He was vexed at the radio operator because he was so difficult to find. But he would have been angrier still had he found him at once.

Stumbling over the trunk of a tree buried under an old snowdrift, the captain went sprawling on the ground. And when with difficulty he got onto his knees, steadying himself with his hands in the snow, he heard the metallic click of a revolver being cocked behind his back.

"Halt!" came a whispered order. "Halt!"

The captain behaved rather queerly. Without turning round he began to rub his injured knee. But when, in the same whisper, he was ordered in German to put his hands up, the captain turned round and said:

"First of all, when a chap's down already, what's the use of crying 'Halt!'? Secondly, you should have gone for me at once and plugged me with that revolver of yours, wrapping it up at least in your cap—then the shot would be muffled and almost inaudible. And thirdly, when a German challenges anybody he usually yells out 'Halt' at the top of his voice so that his neighbour should also hear him and, in case of necessity, come to his aid. Here we are teaching you and teaching you, and all to no purpose..." The captain scrambled to his feet.

He gave the password in a whisper that could barely be heard. When he was given the countersign he nodded his head and, adjusting the safety cap, slipped his blue *Sauer* back into a pocket above his knee.

"Yet you kept your gun ready!"

The captain glared angrily at the radio operator.

"You didn't expect me to depend only on your being an ass, did you? Look here," he demanded impatiently, "better show me where that den of yours is!"

"After me," the radio operator said, remaining on his knees in an unnatural posture, "I'll crawl along."

"What do you want to crawl for, there's nobody about in these woods."

"My foot's frozen," the radio operator explained in a whisper. "It hurts awfully."

The captain snorted and followed the man who was crawling along on all fours.

The captain felt deep resentment welling up in him against the unfortunate radio operator rather than sympathy. He had a strong desire to curse him. How could he have let himself get

to a point where he'd freeze like that! Without stopping to think how he would get the man out, he said roughly:

"What have you been *doing*—running around barefoot, eh?"

"The plane was pitching like the dickens when I baled out. One of my felt boots slipped off when I was still in the air."

"You're a nice one! How is it you didn't lose your pants?" And flaring up, he added: "Lubber! How the devil will I get you out of here now?"

The radio operator sat down, supporting himself on his hands in the snow.

"Now look here, Comrade Captain," he said, a tone of righteous indignation in his voice, "I don't intend to leave. You can leave me some food and clear off. When my foot's better, I'll manage to get away somehow."

"Oh, yes? I can just see them rigging up a sanatorium for you! The Germans have got your bearings, understand?" Bending down suddenly, the captain asked in alarm: "Wait a minute! What's your name? Your face seems familiar to me...."

"Mikhailova."

"Well I'll be..." the captain muttered. It was impossible to make out which predominated in his voice—embarrassment or resentment. And, as if to encourage himself, he said: "Oh, well, never mind. We'll manage somehow." Then he enquired politely: "Anything to help you?"

The girl made no reply. She crawled on up to her elbows in the snow.

The captain's feeling of exasperation gave way to something else, something less defined but more disturbing. He remembered this very same Mikhailova at his camp base where

she had gone through a course of training. He simply could not make out why she was there—tall, beautiful, yes, very beautiful, with a proud tilt to her head and a rich, large, finely moulded mouth which seemed to hypnotize one when she spoke.

She had an unpleasant way of looking a person straight in the eye. Her large, intelligent and steady eyes, with a glint of gold around the large pupils, were very fine. The captain could not stand the steadiness of her gaze, and was forced to shift his eyes. And the girl had noticed this.

And then again that manner of hers of doing her hair—fluffy, shiny and also golden, like the glint in her eyes—letting them fall onto the collar of her greatcoat.

How many times had he told her:

"Tuck that mat of yours out of sight. A military uniform is not a fancy dress."

Mikhailova, it is true, was very persevering at her lessons. Remaining behind after class she often asked the captain questions which revealed a good grasp of the subject. Convinced, however, that her knowledge would be of no use to her, he replied briefly and tersely, looking impatiently at his watch all the time.

The superintendent of the courses was compelled at last to admonish the captain for giving such little attention to Mikhailova.

"She's a good girl, you know."

"She's good enough for family life," and the captain suddenly burst out passionately, heatedly: "Please understand, Comrade Superintendent, people in our particular line aren't allowed to have any extra ties."

After that he tried to get rid of Mikhailova: at the very first opportunity he transferred her to the radio operators group.

The courses for paratroopers were located in one of the rest homes near Moscow. The wide, closed-in verandas, the red-carpeted floors, the brightly-polished furniture—the whole atmosphere in general so reminiscent of the days of peace—inclined one to take things easy of an evening. Somebody would sit down at the piano and then they would have dances. And had it not been for the fact that everybody present was in military uniform, one might almost have believed that this was a usual week-end gathering in one of the excellent rest homes outside Moscow.

Anti-aircraft guns barked out, the white beams of the searchlights scoured the skies with their long tentacles—but one need not think of that.

Classes over, Mikhailova would often be seen sitting on a settee in the drawing room with a book in her hand. She read by the light of a lamp with an enormous shade attached to a massive mahogany stand. This girl with the beautiful, tranquil face, restful pose, hair loose down her back, and fingers so slender and white, somehow did not fit in with things such as the work of a sapper, or with stabbing a wet clay dummy with a knife with a rubber grip.

Whenever Mikhailova caught sight of Captain Zhavoronkov she would jump up and stand at attention, as the regulations required when an officer appeared.

Zhavoronkov would walk past giving her a careless nod, and again that feeling of exasperation would well up in him.

However, this strong man with the tanned, gaunt face of a sportsman, somewhat tired and sad, was hard and exacting even to himself.

German sappers had mined the country lanes which fed the trunk road. At night he shot the man on point duty with a small-calibre pistol which fired almost soundlessly, and, armed with the man's lantern, took his place on the road.

He regulated the traffic, giving the required signals—green or red. When a tank column appeared, he switched on the red light barring its way along the main road and gave the green light directing it to one of the mined country lanes.

Stumbling across a German headquarters telephone line, the captain cut the wire and lay in wait. A signaller showed up. He was accompanied by several tommy gunners. After repairing the line, the signaller went off with his tommy gunners. The captain then ripped the insulating tape from the wire and placed the latter on the ground. His ruse worked just as he had planned. Ascertaining that the line was not working properly and that there was a break somewhere, the signaller returned, but alone this time. The captain stabbed him. Coiling up the line, he threw it into a hayrick and set fire to it.

On another occasion he crawled onto the roof of a German dugout. He had no hand grenades to blow it up with. So he dropped the contents of his cartridge case down the chimney. He shot down the Germans who came tumbling out from under cover with his tommy gun.

The captain's heart had become chilled with an icy pain ever since the death of his wife and child. They had been mangled to death on June 22, the very first day of the war, under the tracks of a column of tanks that had swept through the frontier settlement where they lived. The captain was ashamed of his grief. He suffered. He did not want his sorrow to be the cause of his daring. That was why he tried to deceive his comrades. He told himself: "My wife and my child have not been killed, they're alive. I must keep cool when I fight."

But he felt no contempt for death. On the contrary, he respected it, as he dealt it out in battle; and when death stared him in the face, he did not flinch.

They, the Germans, had made him the soldier he was—cunning, clever, cool, calculating. All his life's blood now went to quench the thirst for revenge.

And now, walking behind the radio operator who crawled on in front, the captain tried not to think of anything that would hinder him from drawing up a plan of action. He was hungry, weak and exhausted by his long journey. And she was as good as wounded, with her frozen foot. She, of course, was reckoning on his help. But, then, she did not know that he wasn't fit for anything either.

Tell her how things were? No, nothing doing! Better make her buck up somehow, and in the meantime he'd husband his strength and then, maybe, he'd be able to manage somehow. . . .

On the steep slope of a hill the turbulent spring and autumn waters had washed away something in the nature of a cave. The hard tree roots hung overhead, some thin like cord, others twisted and wiry, resembling more a bundle of rusty hawsers. A roof of ice hid the cave from sight. In the daytime the light penetrated into the cave as through a glassed-in veranda. Inside it was clean and dry, the floor covered with a layer of fir branches. The only fittings were a square box containing the radio apparatus, a sleeping bag and a pair of skis leaning against the wall.

"Quite a snug little lair," the captain remarked. And touching the matting on the floor, he said "Here, sit down and take your boots off."

"What!" the girl exclaimed indignantly, in surprise.

"Take your boots off. I've got to know what you're good for with that game leg of yours."

"You're not a doctor. And then . . ."

"Look here," the captain said, "we'd better come to an understanding from the very start—less back talk."

"Oh, that hurts!"

Stop squealing," the captain said, running his hand over her foot which was all black and blue and swollen.

"Oh, I can't stand it any longer!"

"Well, you've got to stick it," the captain said. He took off the woollen scarf he had around his neck.

"I don't want your scarf."

"You prefer that stinking stocking of yours?"

"It doesn't stink, it's clean."

"Look here," the captain repeated, "don't try to kid me. Have you a bit of string?"

"No."

The captain tore off a length of thin root and bound the foot wrapped up in his scarf.

"Now it'll hold," he declared.

After that he took the skis outside and got busy with a knife, the shaft of which was made of rubber. He came back, picked up the radio apparatus and said:

"Come on, let's get going."

"You want to lug me along?"

"As a matter of fact, I don't, but it's a case of having to."

"Just as you like—I have no choice in the matter."

“Now, that’s the right spirit,” the captain agreed. “By the way, you haven’t anything to chew, have you?” he asked.

“Here,” she said, taking a bit of broken toast out of her pocket.

“Doesn’t look much.”

“It’s all I have left. For several days already. . . .”

“Everything’s clear,” the captain said. “Others usually eat their toast first and leave the chocolate for a rainy day.”

“You can keep your chocolate to yourself.”

“I don’t in the least intend to treat you,”—and the captain left the cave bending double under the weight of the heavy radio apparatus.

After plodding on for an hour the captain realized that he was on his last legs. And although the girl lying on the skis, or rather the sled made out of the skis, helped him as best as she could by trundling the thing along with her arms, he felt his strength giving out. His legs were shaky and his heart was pounding in such a way that it seemed to stick in

“If I tell her I’m absolutely done in, she’ll get panicky. But if I go on braving it out things will end pretty rotten,” he thought to himself.

The captain looked at his watch.

“It wouldn’t be a bad thing,” he said, “to drink something hot.”

“Have you any vodka?”

“That’s all right!” the captain said. “You needn’t budge: all the same I won’t give you any vodka.”

Digging a hole in the snow he made a flueway with a stick and covered the exit with some green branches and snow. The

branches and the snow would serve as a filter for the smoke and then it would not be noticeable. Gathering some dry twigs, the captain put them into the hole and then, taking from his pocket a small silk bag in which he kept some gunpowder, he sprinkled a handful on the twigs and put a match to it.

The flames began to rise, licking the branches. He placed his TNT tin on the fire and filled it up with bits of ice. After that he took the rusk, wrapped it up in his handkerchief and, putting it on the stump of a tree, pounded it into a powder with the handle of his knife. This he put into the boiling water and began to stir it. Taking the tin off the fire he set it down on the snow to cool off.

"Is it nice?" the girl asked.

"Almost like coffee," the captain replied, handing her the tin with the brown concoction.

"No, thanks, I can go without it," the girl said.

"You'll have to go without a lot before I've finished with you," the captain said. "But in the meantime stop playing the fool. Here, drink this."

Towards evening he managed to kill an old rook.

"Are you really going to eat that crow?" she asked.

"It's not a crow but a rook," the captain replied.

He grilled the bird over a campfire like the one over which he had boiled his tin of water and rye rusks.

"D'you want any?"—he offered her half.

"Not for anything!" she replied, turning away in disgust.

The captain hesitated for a moment and then he said thoughtfully:

“Yes, it will only be fair,”—and he ate the whole bird himself.

Lighting a cigarette, he felt more cheerful and asked:

“How’s your foot?”

“I think I could manage to walk a bit,” the girl replied.

“Forget about it!”

All night long the captain dragged the makeshift sled while the girl dozed fitfully.

Towards daybreak he stopped in a gully.

An enormous pine—torn up by the roots during a storm—lay on the ground. Under the mighty roots was a hollow. The captain cleared away the snow, strewed the bottom of the hole with some branches and spread a ground-sheet over them.

“You want to sleep?” the girl asked, waking up.

“For an hour, not more,” the captain said. “I’ve almost forgotten how to sleep by now.”

The girl began to scramble out of her sleeping bag.

“Hey, what are you up to?” the captain asked, raising himself on his elbow.

The girl went up to him and said:

“I’m going to turn in with you. I’ll be warmer that way. We’ll cover ourselves with the bag.”

“Look here . . .” the captain began.

“Move over,” the girl said. “After all you don’t want me to lie in the snow, do you? . . . Are you uncomfortable?”

“Take your hair away, its tickling my nose. I feel like sneezing, and in general. . . .”

“I thought you wanted to sleep! Well, go ahead. My hair won’t interfere with you.”

“But it does,” the captain mumbled drowsily and fell asleep.

The only noise was the dripping of the melting snow. Scurrying clouds, like wisps of smoke, throw fleeting shadows on the snow.

The captain slept, his fist to his lips, a tired and exhausted look on his face. The girl bent over him and cautiously slipped her arm under his head.

Heavy drops of water dripped from the canopy of branches over the hollow. The girl shielded the face of the sleeping man with her palm. When it became filled with water she carefully poured it out.

The captain opened his eyes, sat up and began to rub his face with the palms of his hands.

“Your hair’s grey at the temples,” the girl remarked. “Is it the result of that incident?”

“Which one?” the captain asked, stretching himself.

“The time when you were lined up to be shot.”

“I don’t remember,” the captain said with a yawn. His yawn was forced—he did not feel inclined to remember that incident.

In August the captain had blown up a large German ammunition dump. He was shellshocked as a result of the air blast and scorched by the flames. When the Germans picked him up he was lying on the ground in his charred and still smouldering clothes. The captain, together with a group of other prisoners, was lined up to be shot. They were reprieved at the very last minute. Instead of being shot they were bundled

onto a transport plane and sent somewhere in the vicinity of Yelna. Here they were forced to launch a "psychological" attack against the Russians, a company of tommy gunners behind them to spur them on. The captain was wounded by a bullet from our own men. He was picked up and the next two weeks he spent in one of our hospitals.

He did not feel inclined to remember that incident. So he asked her roughly and insistently:

"Does your foot still hurt?"

"I've told you already that I can walk," she replied irritably.

"Good. Now get on the sled. When the time comes you'll hop along yet."

The captain harnessed himself to the sled and again he plodded on through the slush.

It was raining and snowing at the same time. The ground was slippery. Every now and then he would stumble into a pothole filled with slush. It was a grey and dreary day. And just as drearily the captain wondered whether they would manage to cross the ice of the river which, most probably, was already covered with water.

A dead horse lay across their path. The captain squatted down over it and took out his knife with the rubber shaft.

"You know," the girl said getting up from the sled, "you do everything so efficiently that I don't mind watching you at all."

"You're simply hungry, that's all," the captain replied melancholically.

He roasted several thin slices of meat, using the antenna in place of a spit.

"It tastes good!" the girl said in surprise.

“Of course,” the captain replied, “roast horsemeat is always better than beef.”

After his meal he got up and said:

“I’ll go along and do a little reconnoitring. You stay here.”

“Very well,” she agreed. “You may think me silly but I’m beginning to find it very hard to be left alone now. I’ve somehow got used to us being together.”

“Now look here! None of that nonsense!” the captain replied.

But this really applied more to himself because he felt embarrassed.

He came back in the evening.

The girl was sitting on the sled, her revolver in her lap. When she caught sight of him she smiled and got up.

“Sit down, sit down,” the captain said in the tone he had been accustomed to use in class. He rolled himself a cigarette and looking at the girl with distrust, he said:

“I’ve spotted something interesting. The Germans have rigged up an aerodrome not far from here.”

“So what?” the girl asked.

“Oh, nothing,” the captain replied. “They’ve done a cute job.” Then he asked her seriously: “Is your apparatus in working order?”

“You want to get in touch?” the girl asked, brightening up.

“Exactly,” the captain said.

Mikhailova took off her cap and adjusted the headphones. Several minutes later she asked the captain what he would like

to transmit. The captain sat down beside her. Bringing his fist down on the palm of his hand he said:

"In short it's like this: my map's spoilt from being in the water. I can't indicate the exact location of the aerodrome. I'm giving the coordinates according to the compass. Owing to the low ceiling all ground bearings will be covered from sight. Our radio on wave length—give your wave length—will serve as their guide to the spot."

The girl took off her headphones. Her face beamed happily. She turned towards the captain.

The captain, however, rolling a new cigarette, did not even glance at her.

"Now look here," he said dully. "I'm going to take that radio apparatus of yours and go over there," he indicated the direction with his hand, and explained: "In order to be nearer to the target. You'll have to make your way back as best you can. As soon as it gets dark slip down to the river. The ice is very thin so take a pole or something suitable with you. If the ice gives way under you it'll come in handy. Once you're across make for Malinovka. It's about three kilometres away. Somebody'll meet you there."

"That's all very well," Mikhailova said, "only I'm afraid I can't give you the apparatus."

"Here, none of that," the captain said.

"I'm responsible for the apparatus and I'm going to stick to it."

"As a sort of free supplement," the captain blurted out. Flaring up he said loudly: "I order you."

“You know, Captain, that every one of your orders will be carried out. But you have no right to take the apparatus away from me.”

“Then what do you want?”

“To get orders,” she said quietly.

“But can’t you understand . . .” the captain said in a furious temper.

“I do understand,” Mikhailova replied calmly. “And that is why I suggest you make your way back as best you can. I’m going to remain.”

“And what else have you to say?”

“Now don’t fly off the handle. This job concerns only me and me alone.” And looking the captain angrily in the eye she said: “Here you go boiling over and want to tackle a job that’s actually none of your business.”

The captain swung round abruptly. He wanted to say something, something harsh, rude, but he checked himself and said with an effort:

“All right, go ahead, you do it.” And as though to get his own back he said: “Of course, you couldn’t think of it yourself and now . . .”

Mikhailova looked at him scoffingly.

“I thank you very much, Captain, for the idea,” she said.

The captain looked at his watch.

“What are you sitting here for? Time is short.”

Mikhailova picked up the apparatus by the shoulder straps, took several steps and then glanced round towards the captain.

“Good-bye, Captain,” she said.

‘Go on, go on,” he blurted out and walked away in the direction of the river.

A dense mist covered the ground, the air reeked of dampness and everywhere could be heard the murmuring of running water which did not freeze even at night.

Had Mikhailova, say, some three months ago read a novel in which the heroine had gone through adventures that had fallen to her lot, a dreamy look would have undoubtedly come into her beautiful eyes, drawing herself up cosily under her soft blanket she would have pictured herself in place of the heroine; at the end, only, in revenge for all she had suffered, she would have saved the life of the haughty hero. And then he would fall in love with her but she would not pay the slightest attention to him.

That evening when Mikhailova had decided war she did not know that the work at the front would demand such superhuman effort, that she would have to learn to sleep the mud go hungry, freeze in the open, he and miserable. But had anybody what was in store for her, how hard it would be, she would have asked simply:

“But other people can do it?”

“Suppose you’re killed?”

“Not everybody’s killed.”

“And if they torture you?”

She would have pondered for a while and then said quietly, ever so quietly:

“I don’t know. I can’t say how I’d behave. What I do know is that I won’t say anything. And you know that too.”

And when her father heard that her mind was made up, his head suddenly drooped onto his chest and he said in a hoarse voice she could hardly recognize:

"It'll be hard, very hard now for your mother and me."

"Papa," she said appealingly. "Papa, but do try and understand. I simply can't stay at home."

Her father lifted his face and she was aghast—how old and weary he looked.

"I do understand," her father said. "Well, it would have been worse had my daughter been different."

"Papa!" she exclaimed. "Papa, you're so good to me that I'm almost ready to cry!"

They had told her mother the next morning that she was joining some military courses as a telephone operator.

Her mother had turned pale but trying not to show her emotion she had said:

"Only take care of yourself, darling."

At the courses Mikhailova had studied diligently, and during the exams had been as excited as when she had taken her exams at school; and how happy she had been when she learned that she had received excellent marks. The captain, however, was right. Alone in the woods during those terrible, cold, black nights, she had given way at first to tears and consoled herself by eating up all the chocolate. She had transmitted at regular intervals, and although at times she had terribly wanted to add something of her own so as to dispel that feeling of loneliness, she had refrained from doing so, so as not to use up the battery.

And now, making her way to the aerodrome, she was surprised at how simple it had been. Here she was crawling

through the slush, wet to the skin, her foot frozen. When in the old days she was laid up with a light case of the grippe her father would sit at her bedside and read aloud to her so that she should not strain her eyes. And her mother, with a look of concern on her face, would warm the thermometer in her hands because her daughter did not like to take her temperature with a cold thermometer. And when somebody rang up, her mother would whisper in distress 'Yes, she's sick.' And her father woul'd muffle the telephone so that when it rang the bell would not disturb his daughter. And now, if the Germans were quick in detecting the hearings of her radio, she would be killed for sure.

Yes, they would kill her, she who was so nice, so beautiful and good and, perhaps, gifted. And they would leave her lying in that hateful, wet snow. She was in fur-lined flying togs. The Germans, most likely, would strip her. And she shuddered, picturing herself lying naked in the mud. And the soldiers, with abominable looks in their eyes, would stare at her, at her naked body.

This forest so resembled that grove at Kratovo where she had lived in the summer. There were the same kind of trees there. And when she was in the Pioneers' camp there were the same kind of trees there too. And there was a hammock there, tied to two twin pines just those over there.

And that time when Dimka had carved her name on the bark of a birch tree—just like like that one over there—she had been angry because he had injured the tree, and she would not speak to him. And he had followed her and looked at her with sad and beautiful eyes. And later on, when they had made it up, he had told her pathetically that he wanted to kiss her. She had closed her eyes and said:

"Only not on the lips."

And he was so excited that he kissed her on the chin.

She was very fond of beautiful clothes. On one occasion, when she was sent to make a report somewhere, she had put on a lovely dress. Her friends had asked: “Why the glad rags?”

“And why not?” she said. “Why shouldn’t I look beautiful when I deliver a report?”

Each time, as she looked at herself in the mirror, she had thought to herself: “I’m happy. It’s so nice to be beautiful.”

That had been long, long ago. And now she was crawling over the ground, dirty, wet, glancing about warily, listening intently, dragging her frozen swollen blue foot after her.

“So they’ll kill me. Well, what of it? After all, Dimka was killed and others too—such splendid chaps. Well, and I’ll be killed. Am I any better than they?”

It was snowing. The puddles squelched under her. Half-thawed snow lay in patches in the hollows. She crawled on and on. Stopping to rest she would lie flat on the wet ground, her head on the hollow of her arm. It was all the same, because she had no strength to crawl to a dry spot, because she only rested when her strength was spent.

And again she crawled on with the doggedness of a wounded man who crawls to a first-aid station where his wound will be dressed, where he will get a drink of water, where he at last will find a haven of blissful rest. But ahead of her lay fearful, terrible misfortune, impossible to avert now.

The mist grew black because the night, too, was black. And somewhere in the sky, enormous ships were winging on their way.

The navigator of the flagship sitting in his chair, his eyes half closed, listened intently to the rustling and wheezing in the

megaphones—but he could not catch any signals of the radio operator.

The pilots also listened intently to the wheezing and screeching in the megaphones—but they could not catch any signals.

The radio operators and gunners, pressing their helmets to their heads, also listened intently—but still there was no signal.

The propellers cleaved a way through the murky sky. The planes flew ever forward and forward through the murky night sky—but still there was no signal.

And suddenly, hardly audible, came the first cautious signal. The enormous ships turned, steering their course by this flimsy thread of sound; ominous and heavy they ploughed through the cloud banks. And the sound became so clear, so dear. The shy little signal, as dear as the song of a cricket, the sound of dry wheat in the breeze of the steppes, the rustling of dry autumn leaves against a windowpane—this little signal served to guide the enormous steel ships.

Death is more terrible, more hateful, than anything else. There is nothing so vile as death. But we know its price.

Mine are people of the happiest faith there is on earth; they are industrious and they are dreamers, they are in love with the splendid man of the future and for his sake they accomplish all that they do, fearing to rest lest it mean a postponement of the day of happiness. Why, we haven't even realized how we have become the men of our dreams!

And here he walks, the great son of a great people, in a rusty-coloured greatcoat, its hem caked with mud, a rifle on his shoulder. He goes to fight and to die for his faith and for the land on which that man of matchless purity is to live.

At night, after battle, you can hear the wounded German soldiers crying out loud and long. They howl like animals being slaughtered. The sound is unbearable.

Our people die silently. They accept death with dignity.

He is unassuming, very unassuming, this man. It is he who wrote on the shop doors in besieged cities: “Bottles accepted in unlimited quantities.” And with a fire bottle, he crawls to meet the enemy tank.

He will not yield that twisted birch on the peat bogs of Polesye to you, you plunderers! Because he believes in that birch too. He, the toiler, drains the marsh, burns the peat in the furnaces of the electric stations, and nurtures the birch as he nurtured the rye in the land beyond the Arctic circle, the orchards in Siberia, the cucumbers in the tundra.

He will not yield even this plain birch to you, you plunderers.

The murderers wanted to batten on our land. Now, take that, and that! . . .

The commander of the flight, the pilots, the radio operators and gunners, the flight mechanics—and Mikhailova too—knew: the bombs would go hurtling down to the spot where the radio transmitting the signal—a signal so dear—was located. Because, that was where the enemy planes were.

Mikhailova, on her knees in a pit filled with black, slimy water, bent over her apparatus, her hand working the key.

The sombre sky hung low over her head. But it was empty and silent. Her frozen foot became numb lying in the soft mud, her back ached and her temples too, as though somebody had clamped her head with a hot iron band. She was feverish. When she put her hand to her lips, they felt hot and dry. “I’ve

evidently caught a cold," she thought to herself moodily. "What does it matter now, anyway."

At times she felt that she was losing consciousness. She opened her eyes and listened fearfully. Her hand was numb, but in the headphones she could hear the signal loudly and distinctly. Her hand, evidently, was automatically pressing the key transmitting the signal!

'See how disciplined I am! It's a good thing I went, and not the captain. Could his hand work the signal automatically? But if I hadn't come I would have been in Malinovka by now and, maybe, somebody would lent me a sheepskin jacket . . . and maybe there's a fire in the stove out there . . . and everything would have been different. And now nothing more will ever happen.

"How strange things are. Here I am lying on the ground and thinking. And somewhere there's Moscow. And there are people there, lots of people. And nobody knows I'm here. After all, I'm okay. Maybe I'm really brave? It's not so terrible, come to think of it. No, that's not so, it's because I'm in such pain that I'm not afraid . . . If only it would soon be all over. Really, now, what are they up to? Can't they realize that I simply can't stick it any longer?"

Sobbing, she lay down on her side on the slope of the pit and went on transmitting the signal, holding her palm on the key. Now she could see the vast expanse of sombre sky. Suddenly, searchlights began to play on it and she could hear the distant heavy throbbing of the engines. And Mikhailova, swallowing her tears, whispered to herself:

"Oh, you dears, you darlings! At last you've come for me. I'm feeling so bad here." Suddenly she grew scared: "What if that's what I've been transmitting instead of the signal? What will they think of me then?"

She sat up and began to transmit the signal distinctly, clearly, repeating aloud to herself the code so as not to get muddled up. The roar of the planes' engines could be heard coming nearer and nearer. It seemed as though the black sky was roaring and slipping down to one side like a rocky avalanche.

Anti-aircraft guns opened fire.

"Aha, you don't like it!"

She stood up. She felt no pain, nothing. She pressed the key with all her strength as though it was not a signal she was transmitting but a command—"Wipe them out, wipe them out!"

Cleaving the inky darkness the first bomb came hurtling down with a crash. The air blast threw Mikhailova on her back. Orange splashes of flame were reflected in the puddles. The ground trembled from the dull thuds. The radio apparatus teppled down into the water. Mikhailova made an attempt to lift it up. Bombs, one after the other, seemed to be coming straight at her, at her pit.

She hunched up her shoulders and squatted down, closing her eyes tight. The glare from the flames penetrated through her eyelids, and when the bombs exploded, she felt as if something great within her, was exploding too. The blast of air following one explosion sent a pole entwined with barbed wire flying into her pit. Between the explosions she could hear the muffled sounds of things bursting and crashing at the aerodrome, staining the night with a yellow glow. The black mist reeked of gasoline, smoke, and something acrid as well, something irrecoverable.

And then came silence; the anti-aircraft guns ceased their fire.

“It’s all over,” she thought sadly to herself. “Now I’m alone again.”

She tried to get up, but her feet . . . she could not feel them at all. What had happened? Then it came back to her—these things happen sometimes. Temporary paralysis—the result of shell shock—that’s all. She lay down with her cheek to the wet clay to rest a little before that other would begin.

If only one bomb had come her way! How simple everything would have been. And then she would have been saved from that other, from the worst. No luck.

“No” she said suddenly to herself “I still have time to rest. Others have been through worse and yet they’ve managed to get away. That other must not happen to me. I don’t want it to.”

Somewhere not far off she could hear the chugging of a motorcar, and cold white beams of light flitted several times over the black shrubs, then came an explosion, something much weaker than that caused by a bomb, and then—quite near —several shots.

She made an attempt to turn over on her back but the pain in her foot rushed in a hot black torrent to her heart. She screamed, tried to scramble up and fell.

Cold, firm fingers unbuttoned her collar. She opened her eyes.

“That you? You’ve come for me?”—Mikhailova said, and burst into tears.

The captain brushed away her tears with his hand and she again closed her eyes. She could not walk. The captain gripped her by the belt of her flying suit and pulled her out of the pit. His other hand hung limply at his side.

She could hear the runners of the sled plash over the slush. Then she saw the captain. He was sitting on a tree stump holding one end of a strap between his teeth and binding his bare, white arm; blood trickled down from under the strap. Looking at Mikhailova the captain asked:

"Well, how are you?"

"Pretty seedy," she whispered.

"It's all the same," the captain said between his teeth, "I'm no good any more. Done in. Try and make the distance yourself. It's not far from here."

"And how about you?"

"I'll stay here and have a bit of a rest."

The captain tried to get up but with a queer sort of smile he slipped off the stump onto the ground.

He was very heavy and it took her a long time to drag his limp body onto the sled. He lay uncomfortably, face down, but to turn him onto his back was beyond her strength.

For a long time she tugged at the traces to make the sled move. Every step caused her unbearable pain. The pain swept through her body like an electric current and struck her at the nape of her neck. It seemed to her that she would go mad with the pain. But she kept on tugging at the traces and dragged the sled over the slushy, soggy ground.

She could not understand it. How could this still go on? Why was she still standing and not lying exhausted on the ground?

Leaning against a tree she stood there, her eyes closed, afraid that her knees might give way, because then, she knew, she would never have the strength to rise again.

She saw the captain slip onto the ground; then he lay with his chest on the sled, and held on to the crossbar with his sound hand.

“It’ll be much easier for you that way,” he whispered.

He crawled along on his knees, half suspended over the sled. Sometimes he lost his grip and his face would strike the ground.

When that happened she slid the sled under his chest, powerless to turn away as not to look at his bruised and battered face.

Then she fell down and again she could hear the swish of the mud under the runners. Then she heard ice crackling. She felt as if she were choking, drowning; water closed over her. It seemed to her that all this was a dream.

She opened her eyes because she felt somebody’s eyes fixed intently on her. The captain was sitting on a bunk, emaciated, yellow, his beard unkempt, his hand in a sling between two dirty bits of board.

“Awake,” he asked her in a voice she did not recognize.

“I wasn’t sleeping.”

“It makes no difference,” he said “It’s the same as sleeping.”

She raised her arm and noticed that her arm was bare.

“Did I undress myself?” she asked plaintively.

“I undressed you,” the captain said, and examining the fingers of his wounded arm he explained: “You and I had a bit of a dip in the river, and then I thought you were wounded.”

“It makes no difference,” she said quietly and looked straight at him.

“That’s true,” he agreed.

She smiled and said:

“I knew you’d come back for me.”

“How did you know?” the captain asked with a smile.

“I simply knew.”

“Nonsense,” the captain said, “you couldn’t have known a thing. During the bombing you acted as an orientating point and, well, you might have been popped off, so I looked around and found a hayrick so as to be able to continue giving the signal by fire. And then an armoured car fitted up with a radio apparatus detected your apparatus. It combed the whole place until I got it with a hand grenade. And thirdly. . . . ”

“And thirdly?” Mikhailova asked in a ringing voice.

“And thirdly,” the captain went on in a serious tone of voice, “you’re a good kid.” And then he added sternly: “And generally speaking, whoever heard of anybody acting otherwise in such circumstances?”

Mikhailova sat up and, holding a pile of clothes to her chest, said loudly and distinctly:

“You know, I believe I’m awfully fond of you.”

The captain turned away. His ears went red.

“Now, none of that.”

“No, not that way . . . I just simply like you a lot,” Mikhailova said proudly.

The captain raised his eyes to hers, scowled, and said thoughtfully:

“If that’s what you mean, then, of course, it’s different.”

As he rose, he asked:

"Ever ride a horse before?"

"No," said Mikhailova.

"Well, you will now," said the captain.

". . . Partisan Gavryusha," said a short man with a face long unshaven and a twinkle in his squinting eyes, as he introduced himself. He was holding two lean, bob-tailed German Gunters by the reins. Catching Mikhailova's eyes on his face, he explained: "You'll excuse me; I know I look like a mangy stray dog. After we drive the Germans out of the district I'll get a shave. We had a fine barber shop before, with a full-length mirror."

Then, fussily helping Mikhailova up into the saddle, she muttered in embarrassment "Don't mind the horse's tail. It's a real horse. That's the breed. And I'll go on foot. It's pride, can't ride a horse without a tail. Our people like to joke. After the war I'd never hear the end of it."

It was a quiet, rosy morning. The trees and the earth exuded a warm delicate scent. Mikhailova, leaning over to the captain, said tremulously:

"I feel so good now!" And as she met the captain's eyes her own dropped and she whispered, smiling "I'm so happy now."

"Naturally," said the captain. "You'll be happier still."

The partisan, with his hand at the stirrup, was walking beside the captain's horse. Suddenly he raised his head and said:

"Before this I couldn't even kill a chicken. I used to sing tenor in the chorus. Was a beekeeper—an occupation for the dreaming kind. And how many of these Germans I've already killed!" He clapped his hands together, and then said pensively:

“Perhaps later on I’ll be seeing them in my dreams. But now I’m mad; I’ve been wronged.”

The sun rose higher. In the russet brush a delicate green was already gleaming joyously. The German horses pricked up their ears and trembled in fright as they shied away from the gigantic trees which shed their lacy shadows on the earth.

When the captain returned to his unit from hospital his comrades did not recognize him. He was so jolly, so lively, so talkative. He laughed heartily, joked, and had a cheery word for everybody. But all the time his eyes kept searching for

somebody. His comrades, noticing it, guessed whom it was, and they told him offhand:

“By the way, you know Mikhailova is out again on a new job.”

Bitter lines appeared on the captain’s face for an instant and disappeared. Without looking at anybody he said aloud so that everybody could hear:

“She’s a good kid, there’s no doubt about that,” and adjusting his tunic he went off to report to his superior officer that he was back for duty.

Leonid Sobolev

HIS SWEETHEART

WHENEVER LYUBA was on duty in the ward we were in excellent spirits. Affectionate and glowing with life, she would flit noiselessly into the ward in the morning in her soft little slippers, like a ray of sunshine. Her cheeks still tingled with the bright cold flame of frost, her laughing, guileless eyes sparkled and danced, and the legless major in the last bed invariably exclaimed:

"A maiden's cheeks are brighter than roses," Lyuba, never say die, is it?"

"Absolutely!" she would answer in a clear, ringing voice as she blew on her frost-nipped fingers.

Placing her hands behind her back, she would snuggle up against the big black stove—a slim white creature whose expression of businesslike gravity was as delightful and touching as a child's. While she was warming her hands she would chatter away a mile a minute about everything: about the morning war bulletin, about what happened with the damp firewood, about what was cooking in the kitchen for dinner, about yesterday's movie. And little by little the moaning in the ward would quieten down, faces, contorted with pain, would brighten, the pallingly dreary hospital air of the war freshened, sorrow grew lighter, and thoughts looked up and smiled.

Then she would place her slender fingers on her neck to see whether they were warm enough, wrinkle her nose in a preoccupied way, sweep the ward with an experienced eye deciding where to start, and then begin her rounds.

She did everything swiftly and gently—she would wash a man's hair without spilling a drop of water on the pillow,

straighten a dressing that had slipped, write letters for those who were unable to do so, immediately notice if a patient took a turn for the worse and send for the doctor, fight tooth and claw for the life of a wounded man in his hour of crisis, comfort those who seemed to have lost all rest, and lull them into tranquil and healing sleep.

We were all fond of her, and perhaps, we were all in love with her. But jealousy was not allowed into our ward. And if in a free moment Lyuba sat down at a man's side to play a game of "Old Maid," we all knew that on that day he must be feeling worse than the rest of us.

On this day I was by right the first to play cards. I had not slept the night before, upset about things that have nothing to do with this story, and in the morning I could only manage to grimace in the semblance of a smile in reply to her greeting.

It was amazing how this young woman, little more than a girl, immediately sensed something wrong in another's soul. She had just glanced at me, and yet, when she had finished her rounds, she unerringly walked over to my bed with a pack of cards in her hand.

But we did not have a game. Her childlike mouth drooped bitterly, her merry eyes were sad, and suddenly it seemed to me that she was very, very old. The cards lay untouched on the white blanket, the ten of spades—symbol of sorrow—staring blackly up at us, and we began to talk, softly and unreservedly.

Her husband, a captain in the tank forces and a man of great courage which already won him a decoration, had been reported missing. For a whole month she had been unable to trace him. For a long month this young woman had brought sunshine into our ward, and all the time her soul was heavy within her and her heart ached; at night she would cry softly in her room at the dormitory, trying not to wake her friends.

The previous day she had found an old friend of her husband's, a high-ranking tank officer. He had taken her hand and said

I shan't try to fool you, Lyuba, Pavel has remained in enemy-occupied territory. The others broke through, but he did not return." He had squeezed her hand to keep her from crying and said "Courage, Lyuba! He may return. You understand—you must wait. Of course, waiting is a great art. I promise to tell you when there'll be no need to wait any longer."

I looked at her and tried to find in myself the strength of character this woman possessed. In face of her sorrow I forgot my own, but I could not find in my clumsy, awkward and selfish male soul the words of comfort and hope which she so lavishly bestowed on us all.

The major in the last bed groaned.

Lyuba jumped up and rushed over to him. Once again her eyes were as they had been before. The hurt, her own hurt made way before that of another. And no one in the ward saw how great a burden of sorrow lay on her slim girlish shoulders.

Soon after, I was transferred temporarily to another hospital, but two weeks later I was back in the familiar ward. Many of the old patients were no longer there, and new wounded had arrived. In the bed next to mine I saw a big motionless dummy made of bandages.

It was a tankman who had been severely burned on the face and chest. Everything that could possibly burn on a human face had been burned on his: hair, eyebrows, eyelashes, and the skin itself. From the white gauze the bulging dark lenses of huge goggles leered ominously. The glasses kept out light, protecting the miraculously spared eyeballs from contact with the bandages.

Beneath them a slit for the mouth had been skillfully and cunningly made. From this slit came human speech—the only conveyer of his thoughts and sensations.

The tankman was fighting against harrowing and protracted pain. He suffered tortures when his dressings were changed, but he wanted to live. He wanted to live, and once more fling himself into the fray. This will to live seethed in the tongue-tied indistinct speech that came from his scared lips.

He loved to talk. In his dark and solitary world he thirsted for companionship. The words that issued from the motionless roll of bandages were muffled and strange, but after I had learned to distinguish these wounded. Broken words. I could make out stories of valour. hatred and victory, the din of battle and contact with death, heard hopes and dreams. confessions and beliefs—everything that a man of twenty-two who was fleeing from the spectre of solitude could possibly tell a friend. A friend, for by night we had become fast friends, the way men suddenly do during battle or illness.

I woke up before dawn, when it was still quite dark. The ward was breathing heavily, and from time to time a groan cut through this alarming breathing of strong male bodies that had been broken in battle. And because no noiseless white shadow glided rapidly towards that groan I knew that Lyuba was not on duty. Fenya, the other nurse, a plain woman no longer young, who tired quickly and often dozed during the night in her chair by the stove, was probably on duty. I got up to go out into the hallway for a smoke, and the tankman, hearing me move, asked me for a drink (it sounded strangely like "gink"). Afraid that I might hurt him, I wanted to wake the nurse.

“Don’t,” he said “It’ll be all right.”

I carefully poured a few mouthfuls of water through a funnel into the opening in the bandages, and, of course, wet the gauze. Very much embarrassed, I apologized.

"It's all right," he repeated, and laughed, if series of soft gasps could be called laughing "She's the only one who knows how. . Makes you feel you're drinking with your own lips. . ."

"Who is she?"

"My sweetheart."

And I heard an unusual tale of love.

He spoke of a woman whom he had never seen and could not see. He called her by the old Russian affectionate name of dushenka[8]. He had called her that on the very first day, divining her great tenderness and warmth of heart, and he continued to call her that because his burned lips could not pronounce her name. "It's Lyuba, of course," I thought. Her name would indeed sound strange coming from his mutilated lips: "Luba, Lyu-shab. . ."

He spoke of her with the greatest tenderness and pride, and, strange to say, passion. Dreaming aloud, he pictured her to himself, describing her face, her eyes, her smile, and I was amazed at this prevision of love. Lowering his voice, he confessed that he knew her hair, the fine, silky hair that tumbled from under her cap; once he had touched it when he had tried with his groping fingers to help her find the thermometer case which had fallen behind the night table. He spoke of her hands—so soft, strong and tender, which he had held in his for hours, telling her about himself, about his childhood, about the action he had seen, about the tank explosion, about his solitude and the horrible life of a cripple that awaited him.

[8] Little darling

He retold me all her words of comfort, all her tender words of hope, and her faith that he would be able to see, live and fight again. And it seemed to me that I could hear the voice of Lyuba herself. Lowering his voice to a bare whisper, he told me that tomorrow was the decisive day: the professor had promised to remove his goggles and had said that he might be able to see. He had not told this to dushenka—what if he should remain blind? He did not want her to suffer. Didn't he know her face well enough as it was, so lovely and soft? Couldn't he see her eyes and the love that shone in them? Then there was something else: she had talked him into a delicate operation which would restore his eyebrows, eyelashes, and fresh pink skin. He knew the price of pain he would have to pay for that new face, but he was willing to undergo anything for the sake of his sweetheart.

Yes, his sweetheart. He repeated the word with pride. Her husband had fallen at the front; she was alone just as he was, and even more unfortunate than he—he had only lost his face whereas she had lost her beloved. During the long nights they had come to know each other well, and love had come to this ward where death stalked, life, brought by love, had helped him to take a grip on himself. For there had been a time when he had wanted to shoot himself. Was it worth while living, with a face like his? . . .

"She told me 'I don't care what happens to your face. I love you and not your face, do you understand?' "

And he wept. I gathered this from the way his breast, now filled with happiness, heaved and his breathing became laboured.

Trying not to disturb him, I lay down quietly on my bed and thought of Lyuba. I wondered at her strange fate. Was this real love—the inexplicable love of a noble woman's soul or

deep compassion, which is so often like love? Or was it perhaps common sorrow, her great bereavement, or recaptured vision of her lost one—a tankman, a hero, a fighter?. . . I waited impatiently for morning and the change of nurses so as to read the answer in Lyuba's glance—eyes like hers were not hard to read. With these thoughts I dozed off.

I woke up late. By the familiar ward routine I could tell that the nurses had already changed, but Lyuba was not there. I walked over to the tankman and asked him how he felt.

"Wonderful," he replied "She's gone to find out about my dressing. Only listen here, not a word about the professor. Will I really be able to see today?"

I could tell from his voice that he was smiling.

"You know her, don't you? She's lovely, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is indeed," I answered

Again he spoke of how he would see her that day. Then he suddenly fell silent and subdued, listening to the patter of soft slippers, it was remarkable how he could distinguish them through the bandages that muffled his head. Or was it the sensitive ear of love that heard?

"It's her," he said with infinite tenderness. "My dushenka."

I turned around. But it was Fenya who came up; she had evidently been detained after hours. I wanted to put him right.

"Hello, Fenya," I said. "Lyuba coming in soon?"

"Oh, hello there!" she said. "So you're back with us again? Lyuba's away—she found her husband. He's wounded."

She sat down beside the tankman.

"Darling Kolya," she said tenderly. "Bear up now—it's time to change your dressings. . . ."

He stretched out his hand convulsively, and that hand of a soldier who had come to close grips with death and was shuddering in anticipation of pain, at once found its way into Fenya's hand: obviously the change of dressing was agonizing. She covered it with her other hand, and there was a long, eloquent silence. She stroked his hand gently, played with his fingers, and in the eyes that gazed steadily at the dark goggles there glowed the warm, slow fire of love.

I looked at Fenya's face, an ordinary face, which we had glanced at indifferently every day. The change in it astonished me. Elderly, tired, inspired by the force of love, it was beautiful, the simple face of a Russian woman and mother, filled with faith and sad tenderness. Then the tears welled up in her eyes and she softly turned her head aside to keep them from dropping on his hand. But sensing this light movement, he became alarmed.

"Dushenka, dear, what is it?"

And—amazing thing—Fenya began to talk vivaciously and merrily, cheering him up with tender words, while the tears streamed down her face and bitter grief twisted the mouth which uttered the light-hearted words. Then her eyes turned to the door, and hopeless, silent misery filled them. I followed her gaze: a wheelcot was being rolled in. I understood her tears. She was anticipating the approaching pain.

The tankman was placed in the wheelcot and Fenya walked by his side, holding his hand. I saw them out into the hall. She stopped at the door of the surgery. Her strength deserted her, and leaning her head against the door jamb she let her tears flow freely. I touched her on the shoulder. She raised her eyes to mine.

"The professor told me this morning . . . The professor—" She could not speak.

“I know,” I replied. “But why do you upset yourself beforehand? I’m sure he will see.”

She shook her head as though in great pain.

“That’s just it—he will see me. . . What does he want with a woman like me? . . Why did he have to make it all up? Why did he have to let his imagination run wild?. . . ‘Lovely, lovely’ . . Oh, leave me alone!” she suddenly gasped and pressed her ear to the door of the surgery.

I could hear the professor’s cheerful voice:

“That’ll do for the first time. Just another week in darkness for you!”

Fenya turned deathly pale with the terrible pallor of despair, and walked rapidly down the hall. Nobody has ever seen her in the hospital since. Later we learned that she had gone back to her home town.

Vasili Ilyenkov

FETIS ZYABLIKOV

HERE WERE twelve of them. And they were sitting around in the cold collective-farm granary, locked in by a huge padlock. To their ears came the crunch of the snow under the heavy boots of the sentry.

"We're in for a mighty cold spell now, all right," Fetis said, breaking the silence which weighed down on all of them.

They were silent because they were all thinking of one and the same thing. That morning they had been asked:

"Who of you are Communists?"

They had remained silent.

"Well, all right, think it over," the officer had said, expressively clapping his hand to the holster of his parabellum gun.

There were two Communists in the village: Zabotkin, the head of the collective farm, and Vavilich, the Party organizer. Zabotkin was executed by the Germans in the morning on the common, in plain sight of the collective farmers.

Zabotkin had been a stalwart giant and as strong as an ox. He could lift a horse. He would stoop under the animal's belly, slowly straighten out, and with a grunt would raise the horse clear off the ground on his massive shoulders—the animal frantically kicking its legs about. . The day before, Zabotkin had thrown his foot out of joint while dragging a truck out of the mire, and so he had not been able to take to the woods. He had been bound by the legs to one tank, and by the arms to another, and at a signal the tanks had hurtled forward in opposite directions. Zabotkin had had time only to roar out:

“Farewell, brothers!”

And for the rest of their lives everybody would remember his eyes—great black bottomless pools, and so stern that Fetis thought. “Dead or alive, that man will hold you to account!”

Every single person there felt that Zabotkin had riveted his eyes on him—in the same way as when you look at a portrait; the eyes seem to be fixed straight on you wherever you move if you take a few steps to the left, the eyes follow you inexorably to the left. And Fetis felt convinced that Zabotkin had stared straight at him, sternly, reproachfully, as if to say:

‘Eh, Fetis, Fetis! If you had only been quicker about fetching me that board to shove under the wheel of the truck, instead of scratching the back of your head, I wouldn’t have thrown my foot out of joint and been taken prisoner by the Germans and had to suffer such horrible torture . . .’

And when he recalled all this, Fetis said out loud:

“A board. . . If I’d only. . . A board. . . ”

Some of the eleven men eyed Fetis in perplexity. As for Vavilich, the Party organizer, he shifted his crutches and raised his head. Meeting Vavilich’s lowering glance, Fetis thought:

“And he’s ready to chew my head off for me, too.”

In point of fact Vavilich was regarding him with an unfriendly stare, knitting his black brows. Fetis dropped his eyes, thinking:

“Where does the cripple get his magic power from? Look at him: just a bag of bones. But if he sets his eyes on you, you’re a goner.”

Vavilich lost the use of his legs about two years before. They were carting seed grain from the elevator one spring. The road was a mess, the hollows were flooded. The horses fell

through the ice, and the sacks of precious wheat—they were full of some sort of rare seed—began to sink. It was then that Vavilich jumped into the icy water and started hauling out the sacks. The others sprang in after him, and only Fetis remained on the bank. . .

From that time on Vavilich had to use crutches. but in his eyes there appeared that unquenchable powerful light, and Fetis was ashamed and afraid to meet those eyes. . .

Vavilich sat there stooped over, thinking intensely. He had no doubt but that the Germans would execute him too, and it was now important to settle one thing: what good had he done on earth?—he, a member of the Communist Party? With what unuttered thoughts and feelings would those eleven men bid him farewell? And was there such a one among them who would point him out to the enemy?

In his mind Vavilich went over them all, one by one. He had gotten to know them well in the last fifteen years, and he could tell exactly what lay closest to the heart of each one of them—just as the pebbles are visible as they lie on the bottom of a clear lake.

There was Grandad Danila, a puny withered old fellow, rubbing his bare chilled feet with his hands—the Germans had taken his felt boots from him. The old man's skinny legs were hairy and knotted with blue veins. His son Timosha was a battery commander at the front. The Germans would not be able to force one word out of a man whose son was fighting in defence of his country.

And Maxim Savelyevich, the field brigade leader—he would hold up stoically under any tortures, and die if need be. When Vavilich had spoken to him about joining the Party, Maxim had said

“I’m not worthy of that. What kind of a soul does a Communist have to have? It has to be big enough with room for everything that is fine and grand in human life’ . . . I’d best mind my onions and see to the crops.”

And Maxim had been enormously pleased to learn that there was such a thing as non-Party Bolsheviks, Bolsheviks outside of the Bolshevik Party.

“That means me!” he had said

.. Next to him sat Ivan Turlichkin—a colourless personality, you might say, but he was a friend of Maxim’s, and he would follow Maxim through fire and water.

And so, one after another, Vavilich went over ten of them in his mind, and not one of them could he suspect of doing the treacherous deed that the Germans were counting on.

Remained only the last man—Fetis Zyablikov.

Fetis was a sullen fellow, always dissatisfied with everybody and everything. No matter what project was afoot at the collective farm, he would always grumble crustily

“Asking us to turn our pockets inside out again, huh?”

When Vavilich came to his house, dragging his legs after him with difficulty, Fetis gave him an ungracious welcome:

“What’s it for this time: aircraft, or for the Negroes?”

In his speeches, one of Vavilich’s favourite expressions was:

“That’s how we live. But now you take the Negroes. . .”

And once it happened that Fetis yelled out:

“What do we want to take them for?”—and then he got up and headed for the exit. It was after this particular scene that Vavilich made the trip to his house and read him a lecture on

the State and the duties of a citizen. And after all was said and done Fetis subscribed for the loan. And what's more, he fished out his grimy leather wallet right then and there and paid in full, taking a long time to count and recount the money, spitting on his thumb to separate the paper notes.

"You know what, Fetis, you're just a gnarled and knobby birch." Vavilich once said, losing patience with him.

Gnarls and knobs—those were the growths covering a birch tree, with every fibre of wood intertwined and crossed like the threads in a tangled mass of twine, tough and unyielding so that neither axe nor saw could faze it.

"In all these years I haven't been able to put any polish on him," Vavilich thought bitterly, gazing at Fetis.

As for Fetis, he was going around, squatting first beside one and then beside another, whispering something in each man's ear, his sheepskin cap pulled down low over his eyes. There he was whispering into Maxim's ear, but Maxim shook his head, and waved him off with his hand.

"Get away!" he said sternly. "So that's what you thought up! . . "

Everybody heard his words.

"Talking them into giving me away," Vavilich thought, and, preparing for the inevitable, he said to himself:

"Well, Vavilich, give an account of yourself, what have you done in this here village for the last fifteen years?"

Vavilich looked around again at the men sitting in the granary, and suddenly it occurred to him that before he had come here these men had not been the same people he saw today. Fifteen years ago Maxim had walloped Grandad Danila for picking up some apples that the wind had blown off one of

Maxim's apple trees and tossed over the fence into the old man's garden. And the following year Grandad Danila had wrung the neck of one of Maxim's chickens when he caught it in his garden. Yet these two men had worked shoulder to shoulder putting up the humped bridge, and had told each other off for not watering the collective farm's horses on time. Now they were all members of one rich, closely knit family. And Vavilich felt a great gladness spread over him at the knowledge that this was the work of his hand, his heart, that all this was implanted in the souls of men at the cost of his own health, that he had done his duty as a Communist with honour . . .

And, supporting himself on his crutches, he creaked his way over to the door in order to peer through a narrow crack and for the last time look at the world that was so dear to him.

Fetis was sitting near the door. Seeing Vavilich heading in his direction, he shrank away and pressed into the corner. It was dark here, from his vantage point he watched Vavilich—and on his face there appeared that same wonderment that had been there when Vavilich had sprung into the icy water, while he, Fetis, had stood on shore, not understanding how anybody could plunge into the icy river, stand there up to his chest and haul out sacks of grain which did not belong to him personally.

Vavilich peered through the crack, his face was illuminated by a sort of inner light, and he smiled as a man smiles down at his own offspring.

And when Vavilich hobbled away, Fetis felt a burning curiosity to know what it was the Party organizer had seen through the narrow crack. He got up, glued one eye to the opening, and stood stock-still.

There was his house, its roof piled high with snow, and above it rose the top of a birch tree. And the roof, and the birch tree covered with hoar-frost, and the tip of the arm-like lever of

the well—everything was aglow with a rosy-golden flush shed by the setting sun. All this Fetis had seen every day, it was all as unchanged and still as ever, but at the same time it was all new and unrecognizable. The snow on the roof scintillated and glittered with a myriad of coloured sparks, twinkling brighter, growing dim, and then assuming a lilac hue; and the crow tracks were dark, like embroidery on a linen cloth. The long branches of the birch tree hung low, like a fringe of white gold, and the tree looked like some lissome beauty with a fluffy white scarf thrown over her shoulders. . . And that was exactly what Tanya used to look like when she went out into the street on holidays, and all the young blades pressed about her, sighing and trying to guess which of them would be the lucky dog to win old man Fetis' daughter. . . But Tanya was no more, nothing was left—the Germans had taken her away, nobody knew where. . .

And only now, while peering through the narrow crack, did Fetis understand that he had possessed everything necessary for a man to be happy on earth. And he peered and peered, unable to tear his eyes from the crack, panting heavily the way a man does when he is carrying a weighty burden.

Suddenly he felt someone's eyes on him. He turned around and met Vavilich's stare—the same large black stern eyes that Zabotkin had fixed on him in that last instant of his life.

But in these eyes shone something else, something piercing and cold, which made Fetis shiver.

"Is he really afraid I'm going to give him away?" Fetis experienced a horrible sensation. Overcome with confusion, he turned back again to the crack.

There was the street he had trodden his whole life long, never noticing its beauty. On the pond in the distance glistened the newly formed ice, its surface a bare glittering expanse,

gone was the ringing laughter of children, and the resonant clink of ice skates. The school building stood dark and forbidding, turned into a torture-chamber by the Germans. Some soldiers were hacking down the willows planted around the pond—as though there was not enough wood for them in the forest. . . On the hill stood the windmill, motionless, its broken arms spread helplessly apart—the source of the bright and clean light that had burned in every house and even in the barns was dead now. The cheerful throb of the electric threshing machine was gone, and, like a slug gripped fast in the ice, the combine stood black and rusting in the field.

Fetis recalled the difficulties they had had to overcome in order to get all this started and growing, and how they had grumbled, many of them, and loudest of all he himself—not because he was set against it, not at all, but because that was his nature, he could not help "throwing his weight around" and crabbing, although everybody was fully aware that he would pitch in with the best of them: he helped dig the pond, plant the willows, and build the humped bridge. And never had this world, built by the sweat of his brow, seemed so dear to him, as in that bitter moment of captivity, when he looked out through the tiny crack in the door of the granary. And still more bitter was it to see in Vavilich's eyes those piercing knives of suspicion.

"Everybody is a Communist in our village!"—that was how they had to answer the Germans! But when Fetis told that to Maxim, he brushed the suggestion aside: in that case the Germans would kill them all! You had to think up some way to stay alive, and not give Vavilich away, and also not to go back on Communism, and at the same time to keep your pride before the Germans, not crawl! Maybe the best thing was to stand firm and let them think there were no Communists in the village at all.

Grandad Danila said it was all one to him if he died or not; he was ready to accept the tortures in store for Vavilich and tell the Germans he was a Communist. But nobody would listen to that, because what sort of Communist could Grandad Danila make himself out to be?—he was barely able to stand up.

... Fetis peered through the cranny at the dying winter day, eagerly drinking in with his whole soul the life that was there beyond his reach and for that very reason so desirable to him. He drank it all in—with its bitterness and its joy, with its worries about the affairs of the State and about the distant Negroes, with its tireless labour on the collective field and its noisy meetings of an evening, with the aches and pains that wracked every joint and the merry drinking bouts at the autumn feasts. Everything was good in that fading world. . .

The snow crunched under the boots of the German sentinel, and Fetis peered through the crack and thought:

"I should have looked sooner. . . What a thick-skulled slow-witted lout. . . "

Then he came up to Vavilich, and, touching him with hands unaccustomed to caressing, blurted out:

"You're most likely chilled. . . Well, don't worry, it's all right. . . Here, take these." and he extended his gloves to him.

There was a clanking noise at the padlock. A German flung open the door and yelled, making a sign for them to come out.

They were lined up in front of the school. And all of them stared straight at the new school wing, and each one of them recognized the logs which he had hewn and shaped with his axe.

An officer came out on the porch and down the steps. He was an elderly man with cold grey eyes and lips that were curled contemptuously.

“Communists, step out!” he said, puffing a cigarette.

Twelve men stood motionless, silent, while Fetis searched with his eyes for the birch and examined the knobs and gnarls on its trunk, that from afar resembled a rook’s nest.

“Gnarled and knobby . . . Well, so what! A gnarled birch is stronger than an oak,” he thought quickly, his lips moving. At that instant in his ears again sounded that lazy drawl:

‘Communists, step out!’

Fetis strode forward and, staring straight into the cold grey eyes of the enemy, answered loudly:

“Here we are!”

The officer took a notebook out of his pocket.

“Name?”

Fetis opened his mouth wide, inhaled the frosty air, and, straining his throat, shouted in a hoarse voice:

“Fetis Zyablikov! That’s me!”

He was surrounded by soldiers and led off to the wall of the school building. He stood there, erect and as though grown taller and more burly shouldered and handsome. He stood there, and gazed at the birch where it was covered by the knobs and gnarls that resembled a rook’s nest.

The eleven men gazed at him, their faces at once radiant and shadowed with alarm. And Maxim said softly:

“He’s worthy!”

THE COMMANDANT OF BIRD ISLAND

* | *

HE WAS AN obstinate schooner. Before finally shutting off her engine and hanging out fenders, the Kobe-Maru played a game of hide-and-seek, taking cover behind a cliff. When this dodge failed, she began to thrash about the bay like a hooked cod. Then followed an idiotic race around two islets, and attempts to lead the Smyeli onto the reefs, to ram us with her prow, to jostle us with her stern. In a word, she resorted to all the petty ruses in her arsenal.

Protecting the Smyeli's hull from risky collisions, Koloskov steered us on a course parallel with the Kobe-Maru.

We were wet to the skin, raging mad and most sincerely wished the schooner at the bottom of the sea. Bosun Gutorov, who for the past half hour had been standing on the forecastle with a boat hook, voiced this reasonable desire, and got an immediate reprimand from the commander.

"And then call in deep-sea divers to question them?" grumbled Koloskov. "Aha, they're cornered! They see the game's up."

At last he was able to slide up to the Japanese boat and two of our men sprang onto her deck.

"Konnitsu-wa! Good day!" said the chastened skipper.

He stood on the forecastle near the winch, bowing low.

The nets were empty. The holds glistened with the scales of former catches. And the crew, to a man, was dressed in fresh coveralls still unrumpled by use. The high rubber boots

(without a single patch) fastened on top to their belts gave the fishermen a sturdy, even military, appearance.

We found the radioman, sullen and obstinate, in a lean-to next to the skipper's cabin. This little man in a striped jersey had locked himself in and was tapping off Morse messages so fast that one would think the Kobe-Maru was sinking.

Putting the radio room under lock and seal, we lined the Japanese along the rail. The military bearing of these "fishermen" was really amazing. Judging by their carriage and the military precision of their movements, they were as familiar with the Arisaka[9] as with the Kawasaki[10].

Under the linoleum on the floor of the skipper's cabin we found a Mauser, two Zeiss cameras, a theodolite, a box of photographic plates and other "fishing tackle."

The last to be found was tracing paper with some plans drawn on it in a free but skilful and firm hand.

The Japanese refused outright to proceed to headquarters under their own power, so we had to take them in tow. They had already managed to place some bits of cork and felt in different parts of the fuel mains.

Ordering the crew down into the orlop and making fast the towline, we dragged the schooner out of the bay with some effort.

. . . It grew noticeably cooler. The waves rose higher and the whitecaps scattered into spray. Now and again the Smyeli pitched into a wave, and the water flew noisily over the pilot's bridge, stinging our hands and faces.

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[9] Japanese army rifle

[10] Fishing motor boats

The blood-red sky promised a difficult voyage. There was a squally head wind, and the short, taut towline vibrated at our stern.

Halfway to headquarters the Smyeli began to pitch. Water frothed on deck all the time now. No longer a free agent because of the rigid towline, the schooner rolled and tripped up against the crests as she dragged after us. The Kobe-Maru probably had a worse time than we, for the rope prevented her from rising freely with the waves.

Soon we could only make out the breakers following in our wake.

The shore which had been looming up darkly on the right disappeared. The low rumble and hiss of the boundless waters muffled the throbbing of the engine. A squall struck the cutter with such force that it tore the bridge tarpaulin into shreds and ripped the cover off the dinghy.

Shaking and groaning under the heavy blows, the Smyeli progressed slowly through the darkness. There was not a star or a light to be seen. The commander ordered the searchlight turned on and went to the stern to inspect the towline.

I was at the wheel when Koloskov returned to the bridge, and I heard him mutter under his breath in an effort to convince himself

'The devil! He won't melt. Of course . . '

We were thinking the same thing. Behind us, on the deserted deck of the schooner, stood two of our men: bosun Gutorov and machinist's apprentice Kositsyn. Gutorov could be relied on. He was quick and as hard as nails, and had a good head on his shoulders. He came from the village of Kerba, known for its fishermen and hunters, and was more firmly rooted on a ship's deck than a bollard. But Kositsyn worried

us. Many a time we had dragged him on deck from the engine room, limp, green, with glazed eyes. On shore he lived up and displayed the common sense and tenacity of the peasant, but at sea he grew as soft as hardtack dipped in hot tea. What could be done about it if the plainsman could stand neither the roll of a ship nor the dampness?

To calm the commander I said:

"He'll be all right. Out in the fresh air it'll be easier."

'Yes? I think so too," said Koloskov, and then immediately changed his tone. "What's all this? What are you talking about? Are you at the compass or in a pub?"

We were already near Uglovoi Lighthouse when the sailor at the towline cried out:

I suddenly felt the cutter moving at a suspiciously high speed, turned, and saw the bow waves quickly vanishing behind us. Out of the darkness came Kositsyn's voice, muffled by a squall:

...rade Commander! . . . made . . . ander!"

It was impossible to make out what else he was shouting, and we didn't even try. Veering sharply, the Smyeli went to the aid of the schooner.

The searchlight quickly found the Kobe-Maru. Amidst the black waters she shone like a moth—then the ray circled round her and settled on the waves. Suddenly Koloskov, the signalman and I shouted all together: "Stand from under!"

Two men were floundering in the storm-crazed waters. They were fighting. The crests beat them mercilessly but they continued to struggle.

Grappling and gasping, each tried to pull the other under. The searchlight blinded them but still they did not let go. Now

and again the waves bore the swimmers high above us, over the rumbling, groaning sea, then dropped them, but they continued to fight.

The sea separated them but they rushed at each other again.

When we approached the scene of battle and threw out a line, only one of them grabbed it. . .

It was Gutorov.

Bleeding, exhausted, he lay face downward and muttered:

'Kositsyn's alone—on the schooner."

'Full speed ahead!" Koloskov ordered.

"Aye, aye, sir! Full speed ahead!" came the echo from the engine room.

The Smyeli trembled but did not budge.

"Engine room!"

Sachkov made an inaudible reply. The water behind the stern was churned white, the hull shook and creaked as it strained forward—yet we crawled at the rate of a floating crane.

Koloskov ordered us to inspect the screw. A rope was holding us back. A huge, swollen lump of it was trailing along behind our stern, cutting down our speed and manoeuvrability. Probably a whole coil of sturdy Manila cordage had been washed off the schooner's deck, and a hundred metres or so had wound itself around our screw when the cutter ran into it.

We stopped the engine and got into the water to hack off and untangle the knots. Meanwhile the bosun, his teeth chattering, reported what had happened on the schooner.

Kositsyn was at the wheel. I was examining the towline. Just then a wave smashed the glass in the deck-house. At the

sound the Japanese made an attempt to get on deck. I ran to the orlop and secured the door with an oar—the catch was rather weak. All of a sudden a 'fisherman' came crawling out of some opening, maybe the rope box. He managed to cut the towline with a knife and tried to trip me up. Just then the schooner heeled over . .

Gutorov did not know what had happened to Kositsyn. He gulped a glass of vodka, tied a rope around his waist and crawled into the water again, because no one else could remain underwater for more than half a minute.

We cleared the screw but continued to roll about in the same place, for the shaft had been torn off and the propeller-boss was loose. The engine panted like a baited beast, and the Smyeli could not even pull out against the wind . . .

The Smyeli became a plaything of the waters while the schooner moved farther and farther away. The searchlight reached as far as the trucks of the masts, which kept nodding in all directions at the sea—like small, light blades of grass amidst the angry waters. These too finally disappeared from sight.

It is hardly worth trying to recall how we spent that night. And in the hold a motor pump and four hand donkeys were kept going all the time.

The sea smashed all the washboards from the bridge to the capstan, swept the dinghy overboard, and to top it all, broke the glass of the searchlight, badly cutting signalman Sashin.

At daybreak we saw a mutilated cutter and malicious, dull-grey waters.

Her siren screaming, the icebreaker Truvor came up. Koloskov, glummer than the sea, turned away from the Truvor and ordered a towline prepared.

At dawn our whole detachment was on its feet. Without waiting for our return to port the commander of the brigade had sent out six cutters and a wing of aircraft. Foot and cavalry patrols went south, searching every cove for the schooner.

That same day, after replacing the propeller shaft and screw, we again took to sea. The storm had died down; the horizon was clear. But not a single fisherman for a stretch of a hundred miles to the south of Cape Sobol had seen the lights of the floundering schooner.

Only on the fourth day did we learn what had happened to the Kobe-Maru. Here's the story of Kositsyn's adventures.

* II *

"Comrade Commander!" cried Kositsyn.

There was no answer. The schooner's hull rumbled under the blows of the waves. The water on deck hissed as it met the sea.

He cupped his hands and cried out again into the darkness, towards the whitecaps gleaming in the wind:

'Comrade Command—er!"

Kositsyn was alone on the wet deck illumined only by silvery foam. He was seized with a fierce longing to hear his comrades'.

"What?" asked the skipper quickly. "What do you want?"

"That's my business. Now, raise the jib!"

They looked straight at each other, then the skipper turned and walked slowly to the mast. Kositsyn replaced his revolver.

A low fog stretched off the starboard down to the very horizon. From time to time they could hear the distant thunder of the surf. As always in shallow places, the rollers were huge.

“We’ll smash up,” thought Kositsyn. “Sure to smash up.”

But when the jib rose the wheel began to obey him. Kositsyn resolutely turned the schooner toward the fog.

He was so chilled and so homesick for terra firma that he would have gladly hit the rocks, run into a shoal or even landed on the devil’s back itself, just so long as that back were steady. Furthermore, with the coming of dawn the danger of meeting a Japanese schooner increased.

The skipper brought the sheet of the sail aft and sat down on the washboard opposite Kositsyn. He was very uneasy; he kept turning and twisting, listening to the roar of the surf. To hear better he even removed the kerchief he wore to protect his ears from the wind. Finally he blurted out

“This sure dangerous.”

Kositsyn did not answer. The fog was rising. He could see the high rollers, the shore and the dark green covering of the hills

“Common sense is the weapon of the brave,” said the skipper hurriedly. “If you like, we lower dinghy for you.”

‘I don’t understand. Never learned Japanese.”

“Seems I speak Russian!”

And to me it seems that the words are Russian but the idea is Japanese.”

The skipper looked at the young, set face of the helmsman and immediately eased off the sheet.

“Now there!” said Kositsyn menacingly, and the end of the jib was pulled up again.

Land was close by, but the seven-foot breakers were nearer still. Kositsyn stared over the skipper’s hat at the hill, lost in

thought. Too bad they were moving so slowly. She'd turn broadside to shore, most certainly. "Well now, hold on!" he said to himself, pulling down hard on the wheel.

"Don't, Ivan!" shouted the skipper.

"I know what I'm at! Leave me alone!"

The skipper ran to the door, pushed out the oar, and all the Japanese rushed up from the orlop to the deck, yelling.

The Kobe-Maru was being carried right into a hill, a dark-green hill covered with a growth as curly as lambswool.

They dropped the anchor but the schooner had already turned broadside to the shore and struck the rocks. Water mixed with gravel thundered over the side and swept off the men.

* III *

They had come to Bird Island, a low mound of sand and stone surrounded by sullen waters. Kositsyn realized it just as soon as the sun cleared the fog, and the mottled mountains of the continent loomed up beyond the strait.

Everything could be seen from the top of the hill: the shore fringed with noisy waves, the strip of pebbles and seaweed, the sticks on which wet linen hung, and even the barnacles on the bottom of the capsized Kobe-Maru.

The sea breathed deeply and freely as it slapped gently against the motionless schooner; patches of oil still gleamed on the sloping billows, and mats bobbed up and down.

A bonfire was smoking down below. Six half-naked Japanese were sitting around a pot, taking turns at the noodles and looking wryly at the hill.

Kositsyn took off everything but his shorts and his revolver. On land he felt far stronger than at sea, though the scratches on his shoulders still pained and he had a bitterish taste in his mouth from the salt water. This was land. Hot and steady! Standing in the breeze, he calmly turned now toward the prisoners, now to the sea.

This island was Soviet. He had been here on former cruises. They had come here sometimes for target drill, here they had gathered wild garlic and seagulls' eggs in their caps. Let them whisper among themselves at the pot: the schooner was wrecked and they couldn't get very far away in their dinghy.

The pungent odour of the grass and the warm air sweeping over the rocks made Kositsyn sleepy. Pulling on his trousers and damp monkey jacket, he decided to go around the island, following the shoreline.

A bad business! No sooner did his legs touch the sand than all his muscles began to ache, grow flabby and beg for mercy. Exhausted by the stormy sea, Kositsyn was all but ready to stretch out at the foot of the hill. What? Lie down? He pinched himself pitilessly, and, dragging his feet, continued his painful walk.

The island had no streams, no trees, no shade. It was overgrown with a tough, curling grass. Only birds inhabited it. Black fat puffins rose up from the water, with difficulty flew some one hundred metres and dived into holes in the slope. But the seagulls soared high on their strong wings. They boldly fought in the air and only occasionally came to rest on the very highest rocks.

The whole eastern side was cluttered with damp rubbish. Kositsyn examined it all with interest, and, practical peasant that he was, gazed longingly at the forlorn wealth of the sea. There were dented, rusty barrels, glass floats in corded nets,

bottles, bamboo sticks, bits of netting, mats, the scarlet claws of crabs, stinking seaweed with bulbs atop every stalk, scraps of oars, rope, the crumbling bones of whales, pumice stone, boards bearing the names of boats, life belts which had never saved anyone, starfish, jellyfish melting among the seaweed like lumps of ice in spring, rotting tarpaulin.

Everything was dead, damp, covered with salt crystals.

Higher up, beyond this graveyard, stretched heaps of dry white brushwood. This gave Kositsyn the idea of building a bonfire, a tall smoke signal-fire which would be visible from sea both by day and by night. But when he approached the Japanese and asked them to carry branches from the shore to the ridge, no one budged. The skipper didn't even want to share his matches with him.

Skosi mo vakarimasen," he laughed.

Seven fishermen were sucking down their noodles with evident relish. They had managed to remove from the schooner and conceal under the seaweed a case of noodles and some packages of hardtack, and now they watched the hungry sailor ironically.

"No understand," the skipper translated graciously.

Kositsyn's face darkened. He could get along without water and without bread. Since that concerned only himself. But matches... A bonfire must be lit. Narrowing his eyes, he said very quietly:

"Again back talk? Now then?!"

Only then did the smile fade, and the skipper threw him a box of matches.

What to do with the "fishermen" now was beyond Kositsyn's comprehension. He was only twenty-two, knew

how to handle engines and could find his way by a compass, but he had never been stranded on an island alone with Japanese.

He did not, however, worry overmuch. In his clean uniform and monkey jacket buttoned up to the top, he felt that he was the one and only master of the land on which some suspicious "fishermen" were sitting around, smacking their lips with gusto. The Japanese had to be put in their place right at the start. Particularly since the mainland lay only some two miles away from the island.

To put them in their place. . But how? He recalled Koloskov's unhurried speech and manner of speaking at meetings with one arm behind his back and the other in the lapel of his jacket. He straightened up and said grimly:

'Hey, there, mate! Make my stand clear to the crew. You are now on an island. That is No 1. There is not much land here, but all of it is our land, Soviet land. That is No 2. So the rules here will be our rules. No going away without leave. No tricks will be tolerated. Be sensible and keep order. If anything happens I will punish with all due severity as commandant. Any questions?"

"Yes," said the skipper quickly. "You commandant? Good? Then give orders us be fed. First, give rice, second—fish, third —dessert. Well?"

He looked exultantly at Kositsyn. Imitating him, the entire crew turned to the sailor, but they did not stop eating.

The commandant thought awhile, choosing his words.

"I can't promise you the rice," he said gravely. "Then, you'll have to wait a bit for the fish. But you'll get your desserts. Without fail. And a double dose too."

Kositsyn had to gather the brushwood himself. Nine times he went down to the shore and nine times he carried to the top of the hill armfuls of branches as bare as horns and washed white by the sea.

He lit a bonfire immediately, but the brushwood was thin and dry. The flames quickly consumed the branches, emitting practically no smoke. Then he brought several armfuls of seaweed from the shore. Soon brownish smoke pillars rose over the island.

In a stony depression on top of the hill Kositsyn found a puddle of warm rain water. First he drank his fill and then even washed the crown of his cap. Then he searched his pockets in the hope of finding something edible. What he dug out was a bit too hard to bite: a penknife, buttons, an empty rifle cartridge. All this was covered with bits of paper and a sticky reddish mess. Kositsyn remembered that the evening before he had put two slices of bread smeared with red caviar into his pocket (it is easier to stand the roll if the hold is well packed).

He drew out several blobs of this salty mess and began to chew slowly, washing it down with water from the puddle. Near the bonfire the commandant found some seagull nests. In each lay three warm, bluish eggs. He gulped down about ten. The seagulls circled overhead, trying to get their beaks into his cap.

After breakfasting he again felt drowsy. The sun shone so evenly, so gently, that his eyelids closed of themselves. The commandant turned to scan the horizon. But the sea, calm after the storm, was a shimmering blue that blinded the eyes. To evade temptation he decided to put his “command post” in order. He cleared the site of big stones, set them in a semicircle, built a sort of bench and then beat a path along the eastern slope to the supply of brushwood.

In the evening the commandant went to the Japanese. The "fishermen" were occupied with a curious game. Standing in a circle around the placid skipper, each in turn drew a straw from a bunch in his fist. The longest was drawn by the bosun. At the sight of Kositsyn the skipper moved aside and began to clean his nails with a bit of wood.

"We choose cook," he explained pleasantly. "This man cook for us today."

Kositsyn looked at the men who had been drawing lots. The huskies stood in a semicircle, hissing and bowing with studied friendliness. The puny radioman even saluted him. The bosun regained his self possession, looked sidewise and slowly opened his big mouth.

They were clearly up to some foul play. Just what, Kositsyn could not guess. Deep in thought, he made the rounds of the Japanese camp. The mats, the pot, the barrel, the rubber boots —everything was just as it had been in the morning. But the boat was considerably closer to the water. Was the tide the explanation? And why was the broken oar tied up with twine? The commandant knew some twenty Japanese words, but their quick jabber sounded like a nonsense-jingle. He could catch only the familiar sound, sadi-des. Were they planning to take off?

After a moment's thought he pulled both oars, on which clothes were drying, out of the sand and took them up the hill.

The cook ran ahead and asked anxiously:

"Hey, Ivan, why take?"

"They should be shorter. Much too big for spoons," retorted Kositsyn grimly.

* IV *

Night fell, spacious and starry. The bonfire on the hill was dying down, and the skipper gave the command to start.

As we discovered later, the "fishermen" kept two knives and a flat bayonet which the bosun had managed to secrete in a cod's belly during our search. At first they had decided not to resort to arms but to wait for the police schooner which had taken the message from the Kobe Maru the day before. Then two of the fishermen" (the dinghy wouldn't hold any more) undertook to make their way to the nearest island of the Kuril group and apply for help. But the oars were up on the hill at the commandant's post. Nothing remained for them but to wait until sleep came to the assistance of their knives. And sleep came. They could see the hungry fire pale and droop to the grass. Soon the commandant himself ceased stirring.

To avoid making any noise the Japanese left their sandals and their rubber boots down below. Faithful to their tactics of encirclement, they separated into two groups and cautiously ascended the hill. The bosun who had drawn the longest straw the evening before was to attack first.

The bonfire was out. The man was asleep. The commandant's rounded back was silhouetted against the starry sky. His cap had fallen down over his nose and his head was drooping to his knees.

The bosun rushed up to the sleeping man and quickly plunged his knife into his back. Once! Twice!

He pushed Kositsyn into the grass and the "fishermen" who had run up out of the dark began to maul the commandant with uncontrolled fury.

The skipper was the first to come to himself.

"Sa-a, that's how!" he cried.

The others also stopped. And then the "fishermen" heard Kositsyn's familiar, husky voice:

"Now, what all this, a-ah?" he drawled. "Killed a sleeping man? You happy?"

He stepped out from behind the bushes and threw the dummy onto the coals, first removing his monkey jacket from it. The roll of seaweed burst into flame and illumined the glum faces of the Japanese.

"Give me the knife." Kositsyn said to the murderer. "So that's what you call being a cook?"

He wanted to say something more biting about Samurai villainy, but couldn't find the right words immediately. By the time he found them, stones were clattering down the slope at the heels of the Japanese.

The rest of the night Kositsyn spent in the wet grass, only getting up occasionally to feed the fire.

By morning the commandant's arm was blue from pinches. He took a cold rub-down in the icy water and again set to work. He found the strength to lay in a supply of brushwood, wash his jersey and even to polish his buckle and tarnished buttons with a bit of pumice stone. He was the commandant, the master of Bird Island, and every time he passed the silent, hostile crowd of Japanese he forced himself to raise his weary eyelids and plant his heels firmly on the ground.

But the sand was temptingly warm. The dry, springy seaweed clutched at his feet, inviting him to lie down and rest. So insistent was the call that Kositsyn began to avoid this dangerous spot, choosing rather the large, uneven rocks.

At dinner time he again set out to look for eggs. Now all the nests were empty, but on the sand near the fishermen lay a whole pile of eggs.

Such impudence roused Kositsyn's ire. He went up to his neighbours resolved to make them divide the lot. But he had hardly come up to the mats when two "fishermen" jumped straight onto the heap of eggs. Filled with a lust for revenge, they started a ridiculous war dance among the shells.

"Drive them away? Scare them for form's sake? No matter how hungry the commandant was, he didn't want to start using his revolver.

Kositsyn simply didn't notice the two dancers. He straightened up and passed the Japanese with the leisurely gait of a man who has just dined.

The ruse of the famished man must have been obvious, for the skipper snorted. This angered Kositsyn. He slowed his pace and said firmly to the skipper:

"Your cook is much better at poking into other people's pots. I'm afraid he may choke on some lead peas."

Hunger again brought Kositsyn to the bird colony. Throwing off his monkey jacket, he began to rummage about in the holes hollowed out by the birds in the sandy slope. The puffins had beaks of iron and they defended themselves desperately. Kositsyn twisted the heads of two puffins and roasted them on the red hot coals. The dark meat was bitter and smelled of fish.

What followed is hazy in his memory. Kositsyn sat at his bonfire, his eyes wide open. He saw nothing but the fire and the Japanese stirring on the sand. The rocks swam before him and multiplied; the waves, for some reason, rushed up to the grass; the sun rumbled like a huge blowtorch. The seagulls screeched monotonously: a fi-as-co! A fi-as-co!

* V *

It was a quiet and lovely evening when Kositsyn descended the hill and sat down opposite the Japanese. Exhausted by the constant nervous tension, the commandant wanted to look the enemy in the face.

"Go to sleep, anata," he said in a tired voice. "Go to sleep, do you hear? . . "

It was strange that not a single "fisherman" raised any objections. It was as if the entire crew had tacitly admitted that opposition was useless. Sleep? Then sleep it is!

The sun dropped down into the quiet, shimmering sea. A duck hid its head under its wing. The smoke over the island rested on a thin, spindly leg, jutting its crown into a green sky.

Through the quiet came the murmur of the waves as they lapped against the pleated sands.

Seven "fishermen" lay on their mats, stretching and yawning deliciously. It was enough for one of them to open his mouth for the yawn to make the rounds of the entire crew and infect Kositsyn. They soon noticed this and began openly to mock the commandant. First one, then another distorted his mouth in a sign of extreme exhaustion. From all sides came deep, contented sighs, the sound of joints snapping into place, the smacking of lips, grunting, and sleepy murmurs—the dark music of drowsiness capable of felling even a man fresh from sleep.

To shake it off Kositsyn went down to the shore, kneeled, and plunged his head into the dark water.

This refreshed him a bit. He wet his cap and clapped it down on his head. If only he could last till morning, and then . . the Smyeli must, after all, notice his fire!

He returned to the Japanese. Now they seemed to be really asleep; the snores and sighs appeared genuine. Kositsyn once again counted the "fishermen." Seven Japanese lay in a semicircle, heads toward the hill, feet toward the fire. The fire, too, was dozing, its coals covering with a carpet of grey ashes.

Cold water dripped from the ribbons of his cap down his back. The commandant did not even stir. Let it drip—better so. His hand was numb from his pinches, and the drops did, after all, drive sleep away.

A bird screeched. A mosquito began to drone tediously near his ear. Lower, lower it droned and rang . . If only dawn came soon, then he'd go for birds' eggs. In the wind his lids were not so inclined to close. He brushed away the mosquito. It was hesitating, poised for a bite . . If only it would bite! Not a mosquito, but a telegraph wire in the steppes . . How did the steppes get there? Nonsense! The wind? No, it was a song—a strange song.

He gazed at the coals, trying to make out whether it was a man singing or simply the ringing in his tired head. And through the lazy lapping of the sea clearly came the song—sad and simple.

He jumped up and moved away. The song followed him, went alongside, enfolded him in a phantom embrace.

It was bending him, making him reel, putting him to sleep.... What the devil! The stars were dipping and the shore rolling just like the deck of a ship. Was he imagining it all?

The commandant grew chilly. He moved faster, almost running. The song died down, lagged behind . . .

Out of the darkness a cliff rushed up to meet him. He ran into its wet side. The blood was throbbing painfully in the scratch on his shoulder. Should he wash it with salt water?

Tomorrow the doctor would bandage it properly. What was that? Like a noose round his neck.

Again Kositsyn sensed the stealthy approach of the song. It had crawled up from somewhere in the dark, out of the damp seaweed, out of the stones, and, embracing him, was putting a gentle hand over his eyes.

Crouching, he muttered through his teeth, repeating over and over again:

"I don't want to sleep. I don't want to sleep. I don't . . ."

But the song was stronger than he. Gently it bent his feverish head to his knees. Sleep! Sleep! Nothing else mattered.

He straightened up, and looked despairingly into the gloom. The commandant seemed to see the skipper sitting on a stone opposite the cliff. The skipper had his elbows dropped on his knees and his chin cupped in his palms. His face was motionless but watchful eyes were smouldering under his lashes. So that's what it was! The song was coming from between his teeth.

And all at once the commandant understood he was weaving a spell of sleep. Another minute and the song would lead him, step by step, into oblivion. Like a bull! Damn them!

He jumped up, shouting as loud as he could

"You won't get me! Nothing doing! Shut up!"

The song stopped. He could hear the indolent splashing of the sea.

"Good," said the skipper. "I no sign." He linked his arms around his knees and added dreamily, narrowing his eyes: "Excuse. I thought to please you Siberians like beautiful—"

“I’m not a Siberian! Shut up!”

“Excuse me, but who? Most like from Volga? Volga songs also nice.”

Kositsyn reeled away from the danger spot. Now at least he could look the enemy in the face. The black fear born of the song gave way to the ordinary anger of a tired and hungry man.

“I’ll do the questioning,” said Kositsyn glumly. “You’re not quacking in your own bog.”

They were silent.

“Yes . . . Ah, so,” said the skipper breathlessly. “Well, you know rule: he laugh who strong?”

“That’s why I’m laughing.”

“Who you? Commander? No! Master? No! Simple sailor. We all Robinsons in same fix.”

“And I think there are no Robinsons here,” said Kositsyn reflectively, “nothing but rascals. And I am your commandant here. Is that clear?”

Making an effort he moved away from the skipper. Then he turned and added bitterly:

“Don’t sing Volga songs. I’m afraid—the fish’ll peg out.”

* VII *

The cry of the Japanese roused the commandant from his doze. The excited “fishermen” were crowded on the beach near the water’s edge, shouting greetings to a white schooner. The radioman, screeching above the rest, tore off his yellow jacket and waved it over his head, although the schooner had already caught sight of the group. The boat was no more than ten cable lengths away.

She was heading directly for the island, and the Japanese outdid one another in their attempt to make Kositsyn understand what a sad end awaited him. The bosun was most vivid in his explanations, for his vanity had been greatly piqued by the commandant. Standing on tiptoe he moved his hand around his short neck and stuck out his tongue as if to say. "Well, you've gotten as far as the hempen necktie."

The skipper hastened to explain most graciously:

"This our. This imperial boat. Soon you take complete rest, Mr. Commandant."

"I see," said Kositsyn morosely.

He silently took out his revolver and looked into the cylinder, counting anxiously:

"Seven for seven. Just right."

Then he looked again at the ship and turned away from..

The commandant had no need for field glasses. She was the well-known Kairi-Maru, a blue-white, elongated schooner with superstructures on the very stern, giving her the look of a refrigerator ship. Officially she belonged to the Ministry of Lands and Forests, but she was sent on various delicate commissions which could be described only by referring to the criminal code.

As soon as we detained a crab boat or a couple of pirate schooners in our waters the Kairi-Maru made her appearance, though keeping at a respectable distance, and entered into lengthy conversations full of hints and transparent threats. More than once we had met her near the seaplane base, the new wharfs or the sea otter rookery, and Sachkov, enraged, had promised to give up one eye if only he could see "that ox on a rope" with the other. He gained nothing by losing his temper. Both his eyes were in perfect condition, and the audacious

Kairi-Maru had now been cruising for almost three years along the Kamchatka coast, signalling by night to the concessionaires' canneries.

This was the end. Kositsyn turned and went along the shore, trying to determine just where the schooner would land her party.

It is hard to say what he was banking on. He himself did not know. The heavy holster slapped against his thigh in a friendly, if awkward, manner, as though desiring to cheer him up for the last time.

At Kositsyn's heels came the "fishermen." They were tired of waiting for the commandant to collapse. The nearness of the Kairi-Maru and the hissing of the skipper strengthened their resolution to put an end to Kositsyn before the schooner sent a party ashore.

Had Sachkov or Gutorov been in the commandant's position, the climax would have reached much sooner. It's difficult to keep your bullets—and your head—when your finger is just itching to pull the trigger. But Kositsyn was patient enough not to rush things.

He quickened his step, and so did the "fishermen." Persistent, light on their feet, they uttered not a word. All that could be heard was the crunch of the pebbles and the screech of the seagulls following the men.

Silently they crossed the brittle heap of brushwood, climbed over some rocks and following Kositsyn to the sea, went along the wet, firm strip of sand.

He turned and said in a tired voice:

"Hey, anata! I need no escort."

The skipper drew his breath in a whistle and answered respectfully:

"It is farewell stroll, Mr. Commandant!"

They moved on. It was a strange promenade. In front went the tall, slightly stooped sailor with a grim and sleepy face; behind him, seven high-handed, angry "fishermen" in coarse blue suits and gaudy jerseys. When the commandant moved, the "fishermen" moved; when the commandant stopped, the Japanese stopped.

They rounded a bend and came out on the northwestern shore, the only convenient landing place. The small cove, which the coast guards subsequently named Kositsyn Cove, bends here in the form of a horseshoe. Its steep slopes offer excellent protection against the wind.

Here Kositsyn noticed two long shadows ahead of him. The radioman and the bosun had run on ahead and now stood in the commandant's path. The others were closing in from the left, and all together formed a trap opening in the direction of the sea.

The skipper shouted some brief words in his own tongue. Kositsyn immediately understood: death would not come easy. The radioman held a monkey wrench. The bosun was waving a tiller, the rest held sticks and stones in readiness.

The Japanese moved along in a semicircle. Behind them, on the bare summit, the fire still flickered. The smoke stood like a tree with a thick trunk, and its bushy crown threw a shadow on the sand.

It was awkward shooting at close range. The commandant took a step back into the water and raised his revolver. Strangely enough, Kositsyn felt a sense of relief. The feeling of alarm and of being constantly on guard which had not left him the

past three days vanished completely. No longer even felt sleepy.

He planted his feet firmly and saw plainly that anger and fear were at war in the Japanese. The bosun was walking, his head lowered like a bull, looking into the water. The skipper had his eyes closed. The radioman moved sidewise. All of them were afraid, for the first choice belonged to the commandant. Until the first shot was fired he was stronger than everyone singly, and stronger than all of them together. Yet they continued to advance.

Seven for seven. Well, so be it!

"What are you cringing for?" he cried to the bosun. "Look straight! Look at me!"

He took a firmer footing on the slippery stones and fired at the end man. The boson fell. The rest rushed forward. Stones struck the commandant on the elbow and chest at the same time, spoiling his aim.

"Well now, who's next?"

Aiming at the skipper he waited for a blow, a leap. But the "fishermen" unexpectedly stopped dead. Only the skipper, grey with anger and fear, frowning, tense, still advanced, squinting.

A siren was wailing in the sea.

Craning their necks, the "fishermen" looked over the commandant's head at the schooner, and their faces grew blacker with every second. Someone dropped a stone into the water.

"Sa a," said the dumbfounded radioman. The skipper cautiously opened one eye, hissed, and clenched his fists.

Kositsyn could not turn around—the "fishermen" were two steps away. He looked at the Japanese, trying to guess what

had happened on the schooner, and understood only one thing: he had no time to lose.

He straightened his cap, lowered his revolver and walked out of the water toward the enemy.

The radioman was the first to draw back; after him went the others. The "fishermen" walked faster and faster away from the sea. Then they began to run.

Once on the beach, the commandant turned around. The Kairi-Maru was being convoyed by a coast guard cutter, until then concealed by her high sides. Now the schooner was slowly tacking, revealing a small grey cutter, its green flag, and sailors jumping into a boat.

. . . Leaping ashore, we rushed to Kositsyn.

We saw him raise his hand in an invitation to the Japanese to line up, saw him put the little skipper on the left flank. Then Kositsyn took three steps back, inspected his "fishermen" critically, and with the command: "Ten—shun!" started toward the boat.

His monkey jacket buttoned carefully, he walked staidly to meet us—gaunt and overgrown with a coppery brush.

The commandant's eyes were closed. He was asleep on his feet.

1939

Konstantin Paustovsky

NASTYA, THE LACEMAKER

HE MOUNTAINS of Ala-Tau were filled with the dull roll of thunder that night. A large green grasshopper, frightened by the storm, jumped through the window of the army hospital and settled on the lace curtains. Wounded Lieutenant Rudnyev raised himself on his elbow and lay contemplating the insect and the curtains. Blue flashes of lightning threw the lacy pattern of fullblown roses and little tufted roosters into sharp relief.

Morning came. The yellow heaven beyond the window was still hazy with storm. Twin rainbows spanned the mountain peaks. In the window-boxes, the wet petals of wild peonies flamed like live coals in a brazier. The air was humid. Clouds of vapour rose from the moist cliffs. At the foot of a precipice roared a swollen stream, bowling along the rocks which impeded its onrush.

"This is Asia for you," sighed Rudnyev. "But the lace of those curtains comes from our country, up North. And undoubtedly it was made by someone like the beautiful Nastya."

"What makes you say that?"

Rudnyev smiled.

"It reminds me of something that happened in our gun battery on the Leningrad front."

And he told me the story.

During the summer of 1940, the Leningrad painter Balashov took a trip to one of the sparsely populated regions of the North to do some hunting and sketching.

He got off the old river boat at the first village which struck his fancy and found lodgings in the home of the local schoolteacher.

A young girl, named Nastya, famous for her beauty and the laces she made, lived in that village with her father, a forester. Like all northern girls, Nastya was grey-eyed and quiet.

One day when they were out hunting, Nastya's father accidentally wounded Balashov in the chest. The injured man was brought to the home of the teacher, and Nastya's father, overwhelmed by the misfortune, sent his daughter to take care of him.

Nastya nursed Balashov back to health, and gradually her pity for the wounded man turned into love—her first maiden love. But this love was so reticent that Balashov never even noticed it.

Balashov had a wife in Leningrad of whom he never spoke to anyone, not even to Nastya. Everyone in the village was sure that Balashov was unmarried.

As soon as the wound healed, Balashov returned to Leningrad. But before going away, he went unannounced to the hut where Nastya lived to take her some presents and thank her for her care. Nastya accepted his gifts.

This was the first time Balashov had ever been to the North. He was unfamiliar with local customs. He did not know that a man who comes unannounced to visit a girl and brings her presents is considered this girl's betrothed if she accepts the presents. That is the manner in which love is declared up North.

Nastya timidly asked Balashov when he would return from Leningrad. In complete innocence he replied with a smile that he would return very soon.

Then he left.

Nastya waited for him. The bright summer passed, as did the bitter, wet autumn, but Balashov did not return. Nastya's happy, impatient expectancy turned into alarm, despair, shame. The whole village was whispering that Nastya had been deceived. But Nastya would not believe this. She was convinced that some misfortune had overtaken Balashov.

The coming of spring brought new suffering. Spring came late and stayed long. The rivers overflowed and seemed unwilling to return to their banks. Only at the beginning of June did the first steamboat pass the village—without stopping.

Nastya resolved that without telling her father, she would run away to Leningrad in search of Balashov. She left the village at night. It took her two days to reach the railway station, where she learned that war had broken out that very morning. Across the grim, vast, stern country, this peasant girl, who had never before seen a train, went to Leningrad, where she searched for Balashov's apartment until she found it.

Balashov's wife opened the door to Nastya. She was a thin, red-headed woman in pyjamas and with a cigarette dangling from her lips. She looked at Nastya with cold curiosity and said that Balashov was not at home. He was at the Leningrad front. The red-headed woman received Nastya with suspicion and derision. Perhaps it was this pretty simpleton from the village who was the cause of all the discord between herself and her husband.

Nastya learned the truth. Balashov was married. He had deceived her, he had laughed at her love. Nastya was afraid to talk with this shrill-voiced woman with the painted face. She was afraid to stay in that city apartment with its constant telephone calls, its dusty silk-covered divans, its powder-strewn floors.

Nastya walked despairingly through the imposing city, now turned into an armed camp. She did not notice the anti-aircraft guns on the squares, nor the monuments piled high with sand bags, nor the ancient, shady gardens, nor the handsome buildings.

She came to the Neva. The dark, clean waters of the river flowed level with the granite embankments. Surely these waters represented the only escape from her intolerable pain, and from her love. Nastya took off the old shawl which had been a present from her mother and hung it on the railing. Then she else her heavy braids and placed one foot on the railing. Somebody grabbed her arm. Nastya turned. Behind her stood a icon man with the brushes of a floor-polisher under his arm and ye stains on his working clothes.

The floor polisher shook his head and said

"What a time to do a thing like this, you little fool!"

This man, Trofimov by name, took Nastya to his house and handed her over to his wife, a noisy, downright woman who operated an elevator and had the greatest contempt for men.

They took Nastya in, and for a long time the girl lay ill in their room. It was from the elevator-operator that Nastya first learned that Balashov was in no way to blame, that no one was expected to know their Northern customs, and that only a little "dunce" like Nastya could lose her head over the first man she met.

The elevator-operator scolded Nastya, but Nastya was glad. She was glad that she had not been deceived, and she harboured the hope of once more seeing Balashov.

Soon the floor polisher was called to the army and Nastya remained alone with his wife.

When Nastya recovered, the elevator operator arranged for her to take a course in nursing. The doctors who taught Nastya were amazed at the dexterity with which her strong, thin fingers handled the bandages. “Oh, but I’m a lacemaker,” she said, as though in justification.

Finally the winter of the Leningrad siege with its bombardments and its cruel nights came to an end. Nastya finished her course and wanted to be sent to the front. At night she thought of Balashov and of her old father who probably would never understand why she had left home so secretly. He would not scold her. He would forgive her everything, but he would never understand.

In the spring Nastya was at last sent to the Leningrad front. Wherever she went—through the uprooted parks of palaces, among fires and ruins, to dugouts, and gun batteries, through woods or fields—she kept looking for Balashov, and asking everyone about him.

Nastya met the floor-polisher at the front, and in a talkative mood he told the fellows in his unit about the girl from the North who was searching everywhere for the man she loved. The story of Nastya began to spread and grow like a legend. It was passed from unit to unit, from battery to battery. It was carried by men on motorcycles, by truck drivers, by stretcher-bearers, by liaison officers. At last it reached the most remote corners of the front.

The soldiers envied the man whom the girl was seeking, and they were reminded of the sweethearts left behind, whose memories they cherished like their mothers’ letters. In telling the story of the girl from the North, the soldiers changed the details to suit their fancy.

Each of them swore that Nastya was a girl from his native region. The Ukrainians called her theirs, the Siberians—theirs.

Men from Ryazan were certain that Nastya was from Ryazan, and even Kazakhs from the distant steppes of Asia declared that this girl at the front had surely come from Kazakhstan.

The story of Nastya finally reached the shore battery in which Balashov served. Like all the other soldiers, he was moved by the story of this girl persistently searching for her sweetheart, and he was amazed by the strength of her love. He often thought of her and began to envy the man she loved. How was he to know that he was that very man?

Balashov was unhappy in his personal life. His marriage had turned out unsatisfactorily. Others were apparently more fortunate. All his life he had dreamed of a great love, but now it was too late. Already his temples were grey. . .

It happened that Nastya finally reached Balashov's battery, but she did not find Balashov. He had been killed two days before her arrival and was buried in a pine forest on the shore of the bay.

* * *

Rudnyev fell silent.

"What happened after that?"

"After that?" repeated Rudnyev. "After that the soldiers fought like men possessed, and we wiped out the entire German line of defence. We lifted it up in the air and hurled it down on the earth in a mass of dirt and dust. I have rarely seen such an outburst of wrath."

"And Nastya?"

"Nastya? Nastya keeps on devoting herself to the wounded. She's the best nurse along our sector of the front."

Ilya Ilf and Eugene Petrov

COLUMBUS REACHES PORT

TAND AHOY! Land ahoy!" joyfully shouted a sailor perched atop the mast.

Christopher Columbus's difficult trip, full of anxiety and suspense, was over. Land was in sight. With trembling hands Columbus picked up a spyglass.

"I see a vast mountain range," he said to his mates. "But how strange: windows are cut into it. This is the first time I've seen mountains with windows."

"A canoe with natives!" someone shouted.

Waving their plumed hats and trailing their long capes behind them, the explorers rushed to the weather-rail.

Two natives arrived in strange green costumes boarded the ship and silently handed Columbus a large slice of paper.

"I want to discover your land," said Columbus proudly. "In the name of Queen Isabella of Spain I declare these lands to belong __"

"What's the difference? First fill out this questionnaire," said a native wearily. "Print your name and surname, and state your nationality, whether you're married, have trachoma, are conspiring to overthrow the American Government and also whether you're an idiot."

Columbus reached for his sword. But since he was not an idiot, he cooled down immediately.

"We must not irritate the natives," he said to his mates. "The natives are like children. Sometimes they have the strongest customs I know from experience."

“Have you a return ticket and five hundred dollars?” continued the native.

“What’s a dollar?” asked the great navigator in perplexity.

“You just stated in the questionnaire that you’re not an idiot and yet you don’t know what a dollar is? What do you plan to do here?”

“I want to discover America.”

“Will you have any publicity?”

“Publicity? First time I hear of it.”

The native looked Columbus over from head to toe, very slowly, and finally said

“You don’t know what publicity is?”

“N no.”

“And you’re planning to discover America? I wouldn’t be in your shoes for anything, Mr. Columbus.”

What? You don’t think I’ll be able to discover this rich and fertile land?” questioned the great Genoese with a troubled frown.

But the native was already walking away, muttering to himself:

“No prosperity without publicity.”

By this time the caravels were pulling into harbour. Autumn in these latitudes is beautiful. The sun shone and seagulls circled over the stern. Columbus was profoundly moved as he set foot on the new land. In one hand he held a modest package of beads which he planned to exchange profitably for gold and ivory, and in the other a huge Spanish flag. But no matter where he looked he could not see the soil, grasses or trees he had been accustomed to in old, placid

Europe. There was nothing here but stone, asphalt, concrete and steel.

A huge crowd of natives with pencils, notebooks and cameras rushed past him. They surrounded a famous boxer who had just disembarked from a neighbouring ship; he was a gentleman with cauliflower ears and an immoderately fat neck. No one paid the slightest attention to Columbus. Only two female natives with painted faces came up to him.

"Who's the funny guy with the flag?" one of them asked.

"Probably an advertisement for some Spanish restaurant," the other said.

Then they too rushed past to gape at the famous gentleman with the cauliflower ears.

Columbus did not succeed in planting his flag in American soil. He would have had to use a pneumatic drill first! He pecked away at the pavement with his sword until it broke. So he had to walk through the streets carrying the heavy, gold-embroidered flag. Fortunately he did not have to drag the beads. They had been confiscated at customs for non-payment of duty.

Hundreds of thousands of natives were dashing about absorbed in their own affairs, diving underground, eating, drinking and doing business, without suspecting that they had been discovered.

Columbus thought bitterly: "Here I am, after scraping up money for the expedition, sailing across the stormy ocean, and risking my life, and nobody pays the slightest attention to me."

He went up to a native with a kind face and said proudly

"I am Christopher Columbus."

"What'd you say?"

“Christopher Columbus.”

“Spell it,” said the native impatiently.

Columbus spelled it.

“I seem to recall it vaguely,” answered the native. “Do business in portable machines?”

“I have discovered America,” said Columbus slowly.

“You don’t mean it? Since when?”

“Just now. About five minutes ago.”

“Now that’s interesting. And just exactly what do you want, Mr. Columbus?”

“I think,” said the great navigator modestly, “that entitles me to some measure of fame.”

“But did anyone meet you at the dock?”

“Not a soul. The natives had no idea I intended to discover them.”

“You should have cabled. Who does things that way? When you’re planning to discover a new land you first send a telegram, prepare a couple of funny stories to hand out to the reporters and get a hundred or so photographs ready. Otherwise nothing’ll come of it. What you need is publicity.”

Publicity! That’s the second time I’ve heard this strange word. Just what does it mean? Is it a religious ritual or some heathen sacrifice?”

The native looked at the newcomer pityingly.

“Don’t be a child,” he said. “Publicity is publicity, Mr. Columbus. I shall try to do something for you. I feel sorry for you.”

He took Columbus to a hotel and got him a room on the thirty-fifth floor. Then he left him alone in the room, declaring that he would see what he could do for him.

Half an hour later the door opened and the kind native walked in with two other natives. One of them kept chewing something all the time. The other got out a tripod, attached a camera to it, and said:

"Now smile! Laugh! You don't understand? Well then, do what I do—'ha-ha-ha!'" and the photographer unsmilingly bared his teeth and whinnied.

Christopher Columbus's nerves gave way and he laughed hysterically. There was a flash, the camera clicked, and the photographer said, "Thanks."

Now the other native took Columbus in hand. Still chewing, he took out a pencil and said:

"Your name?"

"Columbus."

"Spell it. C-o-l-u-m-b-u-s? Very good. It's most important not to mix up names. How long since you discovered America. Mr. Colman? Today? Very good, How do you like America?"

"You see, I haven't had time to get a complete picture of this fertile land."

The reporter sat deep in thought.

"That so? Well, then tell me, Mr. Colman, what four things do you like best about New York?"

"Well, you see, it's difficult. . ."

The reporter again fell into deep thought. He was accustomed to interviewing boxers and movie stars. Dealing with a chap so slow and dumb as Columbus was, was hard on

him. Finally he nerved himself for another encounter and squeezed out the following, strikingly original question:

"Mr. Columbus, can you tell me two things you did not like?"

Columbus gave a deep sigh. He had never been in such a fix. He wiped his brow and turned timidly to his native friend:

"Maybe we could get along without publicity."

"You're mad," said the kind native, paling. "The fact that you've discovered America doesn't mean anything. The important thing is for America to discover you."

The reporter made a tremendous mental effort and arrived at this inspired question:

"How do you like American women?"

Without waiting for an answer he began to write busily. From time to time he took his burning cigarette out of his mouth and stuck it behind his ear. At such times he put his pencil into his mouth and gazed at the ceiling for inspiration. Then he went on writing. When he finished he said, "Okay," slapped the embarrassed Columbus on his lace-trimmed, velvet back, shook his hand, and left.

"Well, now everything's fine," said the kind native. "Let's go for a walk in the city. Since you've discovered the country, you might as well have a look at it. Only you won't be allowed on Broadway with this flag. Better leave it behind."

The walk along Broadway ended in a visit to a thirty-five cent burlesque show from which the great and shy Christopher fled like a scalded cat. He rushed through the streets, bumping into people and praying aloud. When he got to his room he threw himself down on the bed and to the rumble of the elevated trains fell into a deep sleep.

Early the next morning Columbus' protector ran in, joyously waving a newspaper. On the eighty-fifth page the horrified navigator recognized his grinning countenance. The caption said he was simply mad about American women, whom he thought the most elegant creatures in the world, that he was the best friend of the Ethiopian Negus Selassie, and, incidentally, that he was to lecture on geography at Harvard University.

The worthy Genoese was on the point of swearing that he had never said a word of it, but at this moment some new visitors arrived.

Wasting no time on polite amenities, they got down to business at once. Publicity had begun working its magic: Columbus was being invited to Hollywood.

"You see, Mr. Columbus," the visitors tried to drive home to him. "We want you to take the leading role in the historical film Amerigo Vespucci. Just think of it, the real Christopher Columbus in the role of Amerigo Vespucci. The public will fall for it. The whole point is that the dialogue will be in Broadway slang. Get it? You don't? Then we'll tell you all about it from the beginning. We have a scenario. It's based on Alexandre Dumas' novel The Count of Monte Cristo—but that isn't important. We've rehashed it to include the discovery of America."

Columbus reeled and moved his lips wordlessly. He was evidently praying. But the natives from Hollywood continued animatedly:

"And so, Mr. Columbus, you'll play the role of Amerigo Vespucci, with whom the Spanish queen is madly in love. He is just as madly in love with the Russian princess, Grishka. But Cardinal Richelieu bribes Vasco da Gama and with the help of Lady Hamilton arranges to have you sent to America."

His fiendish plot is simple and clear. Pirates attack you at sea. You fight like a lion. The sequence is three hundred metres long. You probably can't act, but that isn't important."

"What is important?" groaned Columbus.

"Publicity! The public already knows you and it'll flock to see a worthy and scientific man like you fight pirates. It all ends in your discovering America. But that's not important! . . . The main thing is the battle with the pirates. Get it—halberds, pole-axes, catapults, Greek fire, yataghans—in a word Hollywood has enough mediaeval stage props. Of course, you'll have to shave. No beards or moustaches. The public has seen so many beards and moustaches in movies about Russia that it's fed up with them. So first of all you'll take a shave and then you'll sign a contract for six weeks. Agreed?"

"Okay," said Columbus, his body atremble.

Late that night he sat at his desk writing a letter to the Queen of Spain.

"I have travelled far and wide but have never met such original natives. They cannot tolerate silence, and so to enjoy as much noise as possible they have built special roads all over the city. These roads are high up on iron pillars, and iron carriages travel along them day and night. This makes the noise so beloved of the natives,

I have not yet been able to determine whether they are cannibals, but at any rate they eat hot dogs. With my own eyes I saw many stands where passers by are urged to eat hot dogs and told how tasty they are.

"Everybody here reeks of an odour which in the vernacular 15 ed gasoline. All the streets are steeped in this odour which is most unpleasant to the European nose. Even the native beauties smell of gasoline.

“I was able to establish that the natives are heathens. They have many gods, whose names are written in letters of fire over their huts. It seems that they worship most the Goddess Coca Cola, the God Druggist Soda, the Goddess Cafeteria and the great God of the Gasoline Smell, Ford. He seems to be their Zeus.

“The natives are terrible gluttons and are everlastingly chewing something.

“Unfortunately, civilization has not yet affected them. Compared to the mad pace of modern Spanish life, the Americans are extremely slow. Even walking on foot seems to them too rapid a means of locomotion. To drag this process out, they have introduced a vast number of things called automobiles. Now they move with the speed of snails, and this seems to please them exceedingly.

“A ceremony held every evening in the locality called Broadway astounded me. A large number of natives gather in a big hut called the burlesque. Some native women get up on a platform and to the barbaric thumping of tom-toms and the wail of saxophones gradually shed their clothes. All present clap their hands like children. When the women are almost naked and the natives in the hall have reached fever heat, the most incomprehensible part of this amazing ritual takes place. or for some reason the curtain drops and everyone retires to is

“I hope to continue my investigation of this remarkable country and penetrate farther inland. My in in danger. The natives are very considerate, cordial and c to strangers.”

THE WONDER GUESTS

THE OFFICES of the newspaper One Evening were all agog. At short intervals a member of the staff would rush out onto the

landing and look down the staircase. The charwomen were sweeping the corridor at an unusual hour and their brooms knocked the legs of the scurrying reporters, while from a room name-plated “Literary Department and Legal Advice Bureau” came the smell of sausage and a frantic clatter of knives. No less than five waiters and a maître d’hotel in frock tails were holding the fort in that room. All were busy cutting loaves of bread, or making symmetrical displays of green tailed radishes, discs of lemon and slices of Cracow sausage on china plates. The manuscripts of this department were covered with bottles and gravy-boats.

In expectation of the banquet, nobody had eaten a thing. From time to time the editorial staff peered into the room to draw inspiration from the bright array of oranges and table-napkins, and then back they tripped to their posts on the staircase.

The head of the Literary Department was nervously twisting his little moustache as he stood talking to the editor.

“They are now having dinner with the Honoured Artists and Peoples Artists, and after that they are driving to the State Planning Department for lunch. Ten minutes after lunch they are having dinner with prominent collective farmers. There our man stands ready with the cars, to get hold of them and bring them over for a snack.”

“And Captain Voronin, will he be there?” The editor seemed doubtful.

“He will, indeed! You may rest assured, I have provided our editorial office with a full supply of Chelyuskinites.”

“And the heroes? Look to it, Vasili Alexandrovich!”

“They are also in full supply. We’ll have Doronin, Molokov, Vodopyanov and Slepnev.”

"Listen, my friend, what if they are intercepted on their way? You know they are coming from the Maroseyka side—an institution in every building!"

"That's all right too—I have it all in hand. I arranged for our man to take them along the Sadovaya and from there through side-streets. We'll deliver them as fresh as if they came straight off the ice."

"I wish they'd hurry up and come!" said the editor.

"Everything all right about food? Look to it, they'll probably come starving hungry!"

The latest communique came over the telephone:

"They have left the State Planning Department. On their way to the prominent collective farmers."

The news spread in a flash. The knives clattered louder than ever. The maitre d'hotel threw out his chest, and adjusted his bow-tie. Children started gathering in the street outside the house.

The next hour brought such excruciating tension, that the Chelyuskinites scanning the horizon for a relief plane could not have felt worse. Vasili Alexandrovich was hanging on the phone taking the reports.

"What's that? They're at their second course. Very good."

"They've started the speeches? Excellent!"

"Who is standing by to pick them up? Not on your 1. Mind you, if you let them slip by we'll have you up before the Trade Union Committee. Perhaps you would like some e.p. We're sending out three men on motorcycles. Have them stationed along the route."

Finally, the last communique:

“They’ve left the house. We’ve grabbed them. Put them in our cars. They’re on their way.”

“They’re on their way, they’re on their way!”

At that point, the theatre critic burst into the editor’s office. In his excitement he tore off his tie and remained brandishing it in his hand.

“Catastrophe!” He could barely utter the word.

“What’s happened?”

“Down below,” said the critic in a sepulchral voice, “on the third floor, there are tables laid out for a banquet in the newspaper office Piscatorial Times.”

He had seen it with his own eyes, that very moment.

“Well, so what? What has that got to do with us?”

“They say they’re expecting the Chelyuskinites. What is more, the very same Chelyuskinites that we’re expecting.”

“But it is our people who are bringing them along.”

“They’ll grab them. My word of honour, they will! We are on the fourth floor, and they’re on the third.”

“We’ll put them on the lift.”

“And the lift is worked by their girl. They’ve planned it all out. I talked to her. She has strict orders to take them to the third floor, and that’s that.”

“We’re sunk!” exclaimed the editor in a strangled tone. “I told you, Vasili Alexandrovich, somebody would grab them!”

“And I told you six months ago not to let these Piscatorial people get onto our third floor. We should have rented it out to something unobtrusive like the Medical Encyclopedia, and everything would have been all right.”

“Who could have thought that the Chelyuskin would sink! Oh dear, oh dear! We have nourished a viper in bosom.”

“And what a table!” spluttered the critic. “What could you expect from a fishermen’s newspaper? Nothing but fish! Salmon, two kinds of sturgeon, beluga, herrings of all kinds, smoked fish, eel’s liver, crab. Eighteen varieties of herrings, comrades!”

The unfortunate editor of the paper One Evening threw up his hands, rushed out to the staircase and down to the third floor.

And there all serene was the editor of the Piscatorial Times strolling up and down, with small, neat steps. He was muttering something under his breath, apparently rehearsing a speech of welcome. Members of his staff were peering out from behind doors. They smelt of fish.

Controlling his indignation, the editor of One Evening said:

“Good day to you, Comrade Barsuk. What are you doing out here, on the staircase?”

“Taking a breath of fresh air,” said the Piscatorial editor innocently.

“That’s odd.”

“Nothing odd about it. Its my landing, I suppose I can breathe here, can’t I? But what are you doing here, Comrade Ikapidze?”

“Also taking a breath of fresh air.”

“You go and take your air in your own quarters. On the landing of the fourth floor.”

“Ah, Comrade Barsuk,” said One Evening in tones pregnant with meaning. “It looks as if we’ll have to meet at the Party Control Commission.”

“If you please, Comrade Ikapidze, at your service. Party card No.-1293562.”

“I know, I know,” moaned One Evening. “You’re waiting here for our Chelyuskinites.”

“The Chelyuskinites are not yours anyway, they are common property,” retorted the Piscatorial Times with composure.

“Oh, they’re common property, are they!”

The editors drew closer to each other.

At that moment the roar of motors was heard down below, and shouts came from the crowd. The illuminated lift stopped on the third floor. The heroes came out on the landing. The Piscatorial Times lift girl had done her black deed.

One Evening made a pounce, but that besafaced Barsuk struck a posture and started chanting at an incredible speed:

“Allow me, my dear comrades, at this memorable hour . . . The Fourth Floor’s case seemed lost. Barsuk spoke cunningly of the close links between fishing and the Arctic, and of the prominent part played by his paper in saving the Chelyuskinites.”

While Barsuk orated, One Evening stood impatiently, first on one foot, then on the other, like an impatient horse. Hardly had the enemy finished his oration, when Comrade Ikapidze drew his face into a most hospitable smile and adroitly took the initiative.

“And now, our dear guests,” he said, pushing his rival back with his shoulder, “welcome to the fourth floor, for a little snack. Go right through, if you please, this way. Don’t stand in

the way, Comrade Barsuk. Excuse me, you are blocking the way. This way, my dear guests, this way please! Don't scorn our modest hospitality."

The self-sacrificing editor of the Piscatorial people tried to stretch himself out in front of the steps, to bar the way with his own body. One Evening gave him a sharp nudge with his knee and conducted the Chelyuskinites upstairs.

The Wonder Guests gave a fatigued smile, and smelling the food with apprehension, they followed the lead to the offices of the evening paper.

However, in this lightning exchange of courtesies—which passed almost unnoticed—the smart Barsuk managed to grab hold of two heroes and eight members of the Chelyuskin crew with their families, and dragged them to his lair.

Their absence was not noticed until the banquet had started. However, it was compensated by the pleasant fact that gallant Vasili Alexandrovich had used the fire-escape to escort three more members of the Chelyuskin crew to the fourth floor: two seamen, first class, and one stoker with his wife and two small children. As they were climbing past the window of the third floor the Piscatorials tried to get hold of their legs, shouting: "Enter this way! You are welcome." and as for Vasili Alexandrovich—they attempted to push him down into the abyss—at least, that was his story.

After that, everything went well, nay, splendidly. They made speeches, they wept with joy, they feasted their eyes on the heroes, they entreated them to have a little more to eat, just a little bite of something. The good-natured heroes ate to please their hosts. And on the third floor things went well too. From there came a super-sized cheer as if a whole army corps were going into attack.

The speeches were followed by reminiscences; they laughed, they sang, they enjoyed themselves. All in all,—as the saying goes, the evening lasted till long past midnight.

And so, long after midnight, the two editors met on neutral ground between the third and fourth floors. Both had coloured bits of confetti in their dishevelled hair. Something that was once a pale-yellow rose, and now, for some reason smelt of Port No. 17, was dangling from Barsuk's button-hole, and Ikapidze was fanning his flustered face with the green tail of a radish.