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ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ
Москва



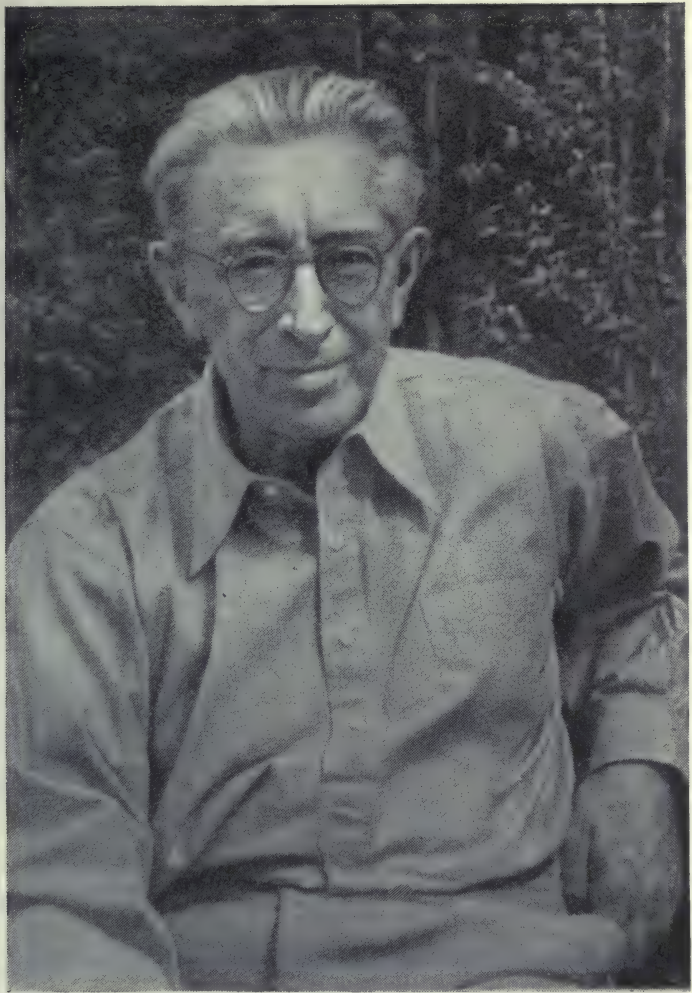
SUCH
A SIMPLE THING,
AND OTHER SOVIET STORIES

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
Moscow

DESIGNED BY G. DAUMAN

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BORIS LAVRENYOV
(1891-1959)

Boris Lavrenyov was born in 1891 in the family of a schoolmaster. In his school-days he became interested in the sea and made a voyage across the Mediterranean as a ship's boy. After graduating in law at Moscow University he was called up for the army and served as an artilleryman. To use his own expression he was "born in the literary sense after the Revolution." Lavrenyov's early stories "Wind," "The Forty-First," and "Such a Simple Thing," are inspired with the heroic romanticism of those years.

The poetry of Lavrenyov's early work is excellently conveyed in the film "The Forty-First," produced by Mosfilm Studios in 1956. His plays "The Break-Up" (1927) and "For Those at Sea" (1945) are running successfully at theatres in the Soviet Union and abroad.

SUCH A SIMPLE THING

CINEMATOGRAPHIC

A street. . . . Dawn. . . .

A notice slapped crookedly on a wall. . . .

URGENT!

REDS ARE LEAVING TOWN

THE VOLUNTEER ARMY IS IN THE SUBURBS

THE PUBLIC ARE REQUESTED TO KEEP CALM

A dusty Red soldier limps past dragging his rifle.
Sees the notice. . . and tears it down in a sudden frenzy
of hatred.

His lips move. A long choking fit of cursing.

THE FOREIGNER

The mirror in its battered frame with green spots of mildew round the inside edge had been broken and unskilful gluing had joined the two fragments unevenly. Pulled apart by this jagged crack, the face it reflected was distorted, so that the mouth extended to the left ear in an idiotic grimace.

On the back of a chair hung a jacket, and in front of the mirror stood a man in smart grey flannels and brown square-toed American shoes. He was shaving.

The barber's shop in this suburban district, wedged among the ruins of ammunition dumps, was unbelievably dirty and fly-blown and stank of home-distilled vodka, dirty linen and rotten potatoes.

The equally dirty and unkempt, and not quite sober proprietor, who for some unknown reason had opened his establishment in a place where only the dogs came to cock up their legs, was sitting sulkily by the window, casting sidelong glances at his strange customer who had arrived at such an unearthly hour, almost knocked the door down, refused his services and in broken Russian demanded hot water and a razor.

The dusty panes of the little window quivered with the moaning roar of approaching artillery fire, and at every heavy explosion the man who was shaving glanced towards the window with calmly attentive grey eyes.

The curls of his shaven moustache and beard gleamed a golden orange among the snowy soap-suds in the aluminium mug.

He put the razor aside and dipped a flimsy handkerchief in the hot water. Then he took a silver powder-box from his pocket and wiped and powdered his face.

And as he fingered his smooth cheeks and the round dimple on his chin, his mouth, which had been tight and harsh, suddenly blossomed like a carefree pink flower.

But again the window whimpered with the shock of an explosion. The proprietor gave a start, and as if waking from a doze, said hoarsely, in Ukrainian: "They're getting close!"

"Comment? What have you said?"

The foreigner swung round and heard the proprietor mutter sullenly: "What do I say? That's good! Been speaking Ukrainian for fifty years and everyone understood me, and he asks what I said. Christians understand but not the infidels!"

"Ahl" drawled the foreigner.

And to the proprietor's even greater surprise, he took a small brown medicine bottle out of his pocket, dug out the deep-set cork with his finger-nail and poured a few drops of pungent liquid into a saucer. He then dabbed a hairbrush in it and began brushing his hair back from the forehead.

Open-mouthed, the proprietor watched his customer's golden locks grow tarnished and turn slowly black.

Then the foreigner stood up, wiped his head with his handkerchief and carefully parted his hair.

He had fastened his collar, tied his tie and was putting on his jacket, when he again heard the proprietor's sulky mutter:

"That's funny! What have you done to your hair? Are you a clown or a comedian or something?"

The foreigner smiled faintly.

"No! . . . I am not a clown, I am a merchant! My name is Léon! . . . Léon Couturier."

"Aye, I thought you were no Christian! . . . And your name's not human either, more like a dog's. . . . Coot. . . Coot. . . What a lot of riff-raff there is in the world!"

And the proprietor spat contemptuously on the floor.

Léon Couturier took his light overcoat from the peg, stuck his top hat on the back of his head and pushed a large bank-note into the proprietor's hand.

The proprietor blinked in astonishment, but before he could recover, the foreigner was out in the street and striding along past garden fences towards the town, where beyond distant chimneys a zealous red-faced sun had already begun his daily round.

The proprietor crumpled the note in his fist, and the fine wrinkles in his cheeks puckered into a net of slyness. He squinted at the window, shook his unkempt head and said clearly and emphatically: "Must be mad!"

“AU REVOIR, MY BRAVE YOUNG MAN”

It was a warm and pleasant day on the verge of autumn.

Léon Couturier was strolling jauntily down the pavement in the same direction as ant-like streams of people.

The broad sweep of the warily deserted street led to an old park on the top of a cliff, below which a greenish shoaly river licked lazily at sand and rusty clay.

Along the very edge of the cliff ran the whitish ribbon of a path, fenced off with decorative cast-iron railings and shaded by spreading centenarian linden-trees.

The railings groaned under the load of human bodies that pressed and clung upon them.

On the other side of the river, along a narrow log road across a marsh, covered with yellowed rushes and criss-crossed with snaking streams, moved clumps of tiny, metallicly glittering reddish insects.

When Léon Couturier by dint of constant apologizing and raising of his top hat had squeezed his way to the railings, from the station far away on the left came four loud crashes. The air above screeched and rang as if it was torn apart, and over the distant log road and the blue haze of young pine-woods four white puffs of smoke billowed in the sky.

The infested railings gasped in one voice: “A-a-a-ah!”

“Overshot,” said a firm confident voice.

But the words were scarcely spoken before the air screeched again and the white puffs burst close over the road, swathing it completely.

“That’s the way! Good shooting!”

A gingerish thickset individual with gold pince-nez standing beside Léon Couturier licked his lips carnivorously.

The red insects on the road could be seen scattering in confusion.

"Aha, they don't like it! Now they're for it, the swine!"

"I fear they'll get away after all!"

"Not all of them! Not all of them, by God!"

"Good for Kornilov's men!..."

"I wish they'd smash them all. The bandits, the dirty scum!"

The shrapnel barrage grew heavier and more accurate. An elderly gentleman in a loose overcoat with a pretty young blonde on his arm, turned to Léon Couturier.

"What's it called... this stuff they're firing?"

"It is the shrapnel, monsieur! A kind of pipe with many small bullets. *Très désagréable!*"

The old gentleman peered again at the horizon. The blonde smiled at Léon Couturier with parted lips and a promising flutter of eyelashes.

"It's called buck-shot, isn't it?"

She was very pleased with herself for knowing the technical term.

"*Oui, madame!* Buck-shot."

Léon Couturier touched his hat and turned away from the railings. Looking back, he noticed her disappointed glance, blew a kiss gaily in return and strolled away down the path, flicking the pebbles with his stick.

He walked down the sandy path to the gates, where an imperial eagle with outspread wings gleamed a tarnished gold. Both its heads had been knocked off by little boys playing in the street.

When he reached the street, he turned towards the slope leading to the harbour. But behind him rose a clamour of shouts: "Look! Here they come!..." then the ringing thunder of flying hooves.

Léon Couturier halted on the edge of the pavement and looked up the street.

A golden, almost orange English charger, its white fetlocks flying high, foam spattering from its tight-held bit, swept down the street, lightly bearing its rider at the head of a thirty-horse detachment of cavalry.

A slim young officer, flushed with the gallop, the excitement and the intoxication of success, held his bared sabre at shoulder level, and the long scarves of his white *bashlyk* were flapping wildly behind him.

He reined in his horse fiercely by the lamppost against which Léon Couturier was leaning and glanced round, as though confident of finding the man he was looking for on the pavement.

Evidently impressed by the foreigner's calm demeanour and well-cut suit, he leaned out of his saddle and asked:

"What is the shortest way to the pier, sir?"

"*O, mon lieutenant!* You see this street? Go up to the first turning on this hand . . . *à droit*. There shall be a steep hill down and there you will find the pier!"

The officer saluted with his sabre.

"Are you a foreigner?" he asked.

"*Oui, monsieur!* I am a Frenchman!"

"Ah, an ally! . . . Long live France! Write home to Paris, monsieur, and tell them that today we have smashed the red-bellied swine to pulp. Moscow will soon be ours!"

Léon Couturier clasped his breast delightedly.

"*O, mon lieutenant!* The Russian officer, he is . . . he is . . . *le plus brave!* Le Maréchal Foch has said that the Russian army, it has smashed the guns of the Boche with the bare fist," he concluded with scarcely detectable irony.

The officer laughed.

"*Merci, monsieur!*" He turned to his detachment: "Follow me! At the trot . . . forward!" And the clatter of hooves on granite moved away down the slope.

Léon Couturier waved a farewell with his stick and walked on. At the corner he paused outside the broken window of an abandoned shop, leaned on the rusty rail and began attentively examining the scattered remains of goods lying about on the dusty shelves.

When he lifted his arm, he noticed with displeasure that the cuff of his coat was stained with rust.

"*Sacrebleu!*" he exclaimed in annoyance and, taking a handkerchief from his pocket, began carefully wiping off the rust.

Till evening he wandered aimlessly about the streets. Whenever he met cavalry and infantry units of the Volunteer Army that were entering the town, he would wave to them with his stick and top hat, and smiling politely, mingle in the ranks of the infantry, talk to soldiers and officers, and with much bowing and scraping congratulate them on their victories.

He had the pleasant, vacantly happy face of a Parisian *flâneur*; officers and soldiers rocked with laughter at his impossible accent. But far from taking offence the Frenchman shared their amusement. Occasionally, however, he appeared to be troubled by the stain on his cuff, and would take out his handkerchief and rub furiously at the unfortunate stain, and curse violently in French.

The day slipped away behind the forests on the far side of the river. And with the dank freshness of evening the townspeople withdrew as usual to their houses, afraid that they might be the victims of a bullet from the rifle of some nervous sentry, or a bandit's knife.

Léon Couturier's well-shod heels rang loudly in an empty side-street.

In the distance the Frenchman made out the windows of a mansion, honeycombed with light, which had once belonged to a rich horse-dealing landowner, and in the time of the Reds had been used as a district Party headquarters. In front of the porch a huge Mercedes Benz loomed grimly, its weary chauffeur asleep on the cushioned seat.

On the steps a cadet sentry stood rigidly to attention, the embodiment of complete and unreasoning devotion to duty. In the twilight a red and black stripe could be seen on the sleeve of his greatcoat.

As Léon Couturier walked by the windows he noticed two officers pass through one of the rooms, gesturing

animatedly to each other. As he stopped to take a better look, he heard the slap of a rifle brought to the ready and a harsh shout: "Move along there!"

"It is nothing, *monsieur le soldat!* . . . I am a peaceful citizen, foreigner, if you please! . . . Léon Couturier! I have the pleasure to congratulate the Orthodox army on its victory."

The Frenchman's voice was so full of a disarming simplicity, both foolish and affectionate, that the cadet lowered his rifle.

The Frenchman stood in the creamy shaft of light from the window, his hat on the back of his head, his feet apart, an amiable smile on his face, and to the cadet he looked like the gay hero of one of Max Linder's screen comedies which used to amuse him so much in the days when his hand preferred to squeeze not the heavy butt of a rifle but the soft hand of a girl-friend in the dark seclusion of the cinema.

Nevertheless he said sternly: "All right, monsieur! But move on! You aren't allowed to talk to sentries!"

"*Mille pardons!* I knew it not. I am not a soldier! Without doubt it is the big gun that you are guarding?"

The cadet chuckled. "Not quite! This is General Headquarters! . . . But pass along, monsieur!"

Léon Couturier walked on. When he had passed the house, he looked back. The motionless figure of the cadet towered like a bronze statuette on the steps. A cool silvery gleam played on the thin taper of his bayonet.

The Frenchman raised his top hat and cried: "*Au revoir, monsieur le soldat!* . . . I like very much the brave Russian *jeune homme!*"

THE CUFF

The small houses in Vasilyevskaya Street peered drowsily from the depths of old gardens.

Two weeks before the arrival of the Whites the actress Marguerite-Anna Couturier had taken over two rooms of

Doctor Sokovnin's flat on a warrant from the housing department.

At first the doctor's wife was furious.

"Saddling us with this riff-raff! She'll strip the place bare, then take herself off. And you can't even complain!"

So great was her annoyance that she would have nothing to do with their tenant, not even deigning to say good morning.

But far from taking things away, the actress brought with her a grand piano and several leather suitcases stuffed with dresses, underwear and music. She turned out to be a wonderfully pure dramatic soprano, with chiselled biblical features, beautifully kept hands and an excellent French accent.

And one evening, when she had sung several operatic arias with effortless power and precision, the wall of human enmity was broken.

The doctor's wife came to her room, enthused over her voice, began to talk volubly, and invited her to take her meals with them and not spoil her health in the horrible Soviet eating dens. And very soon Marguerite Couturier was accepted as one of the Sokovnin family.

Madame Margot charmed her hosts with her tact, her wonderful manners and her tender love for her husband, who had been stranded in Odessa ever since spring, and whom she expected to see when the Whites arrived.

On that anxious day, after the firing and the galloping and the street-stirring rumours had subsided, Madame Margot came home to tea full of gaiety and excitement.

"Oh, Anna Andreyevna! I've just met an officer I know in the street! He said Léon was on the Commander-in-Chief's train and would be here by eight this evening, as soon as they repair the railway into town."

"Congratulations, my dear, I'm so glad!" said the doctor's wife.

And so, when they were all assembled at table for supper—the doctor, Anna Andreyevna, their daughter

Lolya, and Margot—and the front-door bell suddenly buzzed furiously, everybody followed Margot as she ran to answer the door with a cry of, “*Ah, c’est mon mari!*”

It was Léon Couturier. Laughing joyfully, his wife kissed him on both cheeks. He patted her shoulder and smiled in embarrassment at the family.

“*O, mon Léon! O, mon petit, je vous attendais depuis longtemps.*”

The Frenchman said something quietly to his wife. She clung to his arm and turned round.

“O, I am so happy, I forgot. . . . Permit me to introduce my husband!”

Léon Couturier made a low bow, kissed the hand of his hostess and shook hands with the doctor.

“Why are we standing in the hall? Come in, come in! But I expect you want to wash after your journey?”

The Frenchman bowed.

“Thank you. . . . *Parlez-vous français, madame?*”

“*Un peu . . . trop peu!*” Mrs. Sokovnina answered shyly.

“It is a pity! . . . I speak the very bad Russian. *Non*, I do not wish to wash. I have the habitude of taking after a journey the bath. At the station I have asked to be taken to the bath. . . . *le bain*. The owner, he has been afraid. ‘How can you have the bath,’ he said, ‘one is shooting!’ But I give him the two hundred rubles. And he has bathed me, and on the street it was all the time ‘boom-boom!’ . . .”

He related the story of his bath so merrily that the whole family laughed. Margot laughed too, but her eyes flashed occasional wary glances at her husband.

The guest ate his supper with a good appetite, his teeth gleaming in a smile as he talked in broken Russian of the events in Odessa, of the landing of native troops and the rout of the Bolsheviks.

“Soon we shall have the complete order. . . . I shall engage myself again in the commerce, the factory, *les conserves*. . . . Marguerite will sing in the opera.”

He smiled and glanced inquiringly at his wife. She understood.

"Tu es fatigué, Léon. N'est-ce pas?"

"Oui, ma petite! Je veux dormir!"

"Yes, indeed. You must be longing for a rest after such a journey. Where is your luggage, Monsieur Couturier?"

"Ah, I have only the one little sac! I have left it with the owner of the bath until tomorrow!"

"Then you must take a pair of my husband's pyjamas."

"Don't worry, Anna Andreyevna! I have Léon's pyjamas with me," said the Frenchwoman and blushed charmingly.

"Merci, madame!"

Léon Couturier kissed the hand of his hostess again and withdrew with his wife.

As soon as he entered his wife's room, which was half taken up by a grand piano, the Frenchman crossed quickly to the window and looked down at the dim paving of the yard.

Then he turned sharply and asked in a whisper in perfect Russian: "Comrade Bela! . . . Do you know the whole flat well? Where is the back entrance?"

"By the woodshed in the yard. There's a gate on the left. It's kept locked at night. The wall is about twelve feet high, but there's a step-ladder by the shed!"

"Good work, Bela!"

She gave a soft laugh.

"It's amazing, you know! If I hadn't been expecting you at half past eight I shouldn't have recognized you. What a magical transformation!"

"Sh! . . . Quiet. The walls may have ears! Don't speak Russian. It might sound strange coming from a French couple like us."

Bela opened the piano and struck a resounding chord. Then she asked in French: "Where did you get this comic talent of yours, Comrade Orlov? I'd never have believed you had it in you!"

"The six years I spent as an émigré in Paris wasn't altogether wasted."

"I don't mean your French. I mean the way you imitate the accent. That's terribly difficult."

"There's nothing to it, Bela. All you need is a little will-power and self-control."

He sat down on the table and unbuttoned his cuff.

"Have you paper and pen?"

He took a piece of paper, laid the cuff out flat on the table and, peering closely at the faint pencil marks on its starched surface, began to copy them carefully in ink. Clearly written, the first line read: "Mai-Mayevsky Corps. Alexander Hussars Regiment. 600 sabres approx."

When he had copied everything, he carefully cleaned the cuff with india-rubber and held out the paper to Bela.

"Take this to Semenukhin tomorrow, Bela. He'll send it to Red Army Intelligence. Well, that's that. Where am I going to sleep?"

Bela pointed to the open door of the bedroom where an old-fashioned double bed of Karelian birch displayed its fresh white sheets.

"A very nice bed and a nice room. But where do you sleep?"

"In the same bed of course!"

Orlov knitted his brows.

"This is ridiculous! Couldn't you have thought of that earlier? Ask our hosts for a couch for me."

Bela flushed deeply and looked him straight in the eyes.

"Orlov! I didn't think you capable of such a petty-bourgeois attitude. You think it dangerous to talk Russian, but it certainly isn't French for a husband returning to his wife after a long absence to demand a separate bed. It's absurd and suspicious! We have two eider-downs and it'll be quite comfortable. I hope you can control yourself?"

He waved his hand impatiently.

"I don't mean that. . . . It's simply that I didn't want to bother you. I'm a very restless sleeper."

"Nonsense! . . . Go outside while I get into bed."

Orlov went into the other room and stood angrily flicking over the pages of the family album. The frivolous expression had long since vanished from his face, which was now pale and set hard. The corners of his lips were twisted downwards in an angry and aging fold.

The light-switch clicked in the bedroom, and from the darkness Bela's voice called softly:

"Léon! Je vous attends! Venez dormir!"

Orlov entered the dark bedroom, groped for the edge of the bed, sat down on it and quickly undressed.

He slipped under the rustling silk of the eider-down, stretched himself luxuriously and with a dry laugh commented: "A fine situation, I must say! Good night, Margot!"

"Good night, Léon!"

He turned his face to the wall. As always when he dozed, green, red, and violet spirals floated before his eyes, but after one or two deep sighs, Orlov went to sleep.

A MERE TRIFLE

The Couturier couple lived happily together. On the third morning after her husband's arrival, a Sunday, Bela was sitting on the edge of the bed in her dressing-gown drinking ersatz coffee from a large children's mug and nibbling boyishly at puffy yellow bread rings.

Orlov slowly opened his eyes and turned over.

"Good morning, Léon! How did you sleep?"

"Splendidly," Orlov replied, raising himself on his elbow.

Bela put the mug on the dressing-table and turned to him. Her eyes were glittering darkly.

"Well, I didn't sleep a wink. And I've been thinking that it's all very stupid, careless and disgusting!"

"What's wrong?"

"Everything! It's wrong to leave underground workers in a place where they are so well known. We're not so well off for good Party people that we can afford to lose them like trouser-buttons. It's idiotic of the Revolutionary Committee to use you like this."

"Bela! Kindly find some more suitable words for expressing your opinion about the actions of the Revolutionary Committee."

"I'm not used to diplomatic politeness!"

"You must get used to it then! The Revcom is no more stupid than you are!"

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it. . . . What do you know about Party work anyway?" Orlov said with sudden irritation. "You're nothing but a little girl who's run away from the most bourgeois of families and been carried away by the romance, the adventure of it all. It's a very good thing that you work so devotedly, but you're too young to hold an opinion."

"Everyone has a right to an opinion. . . ."

"I agree. But state it quietly. Do you want to know why I've been left here? Because I know every inch of the ground for fifty miles around, and I know how and who to watch when the White temper gets violent. And when our people return, I shall have the whole town in my hands in one minute. Like this!"

He unclenched his fist, then clenched it again tightly.

"Snap! And there'll be no plots, no espionage, and no counter-revolution!"

"And if you get caught?"

"It's a risk, of course. That's war. But if you didn't recognize me, it's fairly certain that no one will. 'The red-bearded hangman,' 'Nero,' 'the torturer' . . . Orlov of the Cheka* and Léon Couturier."

* Cheka—Russian abbreviation of Extraordinary Commission—*Tr.*

"But all the same...."

"Let's leave it at that, Bela. Now go away, I'm going to get dressed."

At breakfast Léon Couturier entertained his hosts with French stories and positively delighted their thirteen-year-old daughter by showing her how to swallow knives like a juggler at a fair.

But on returning to his room, Orlov took his hat and told Bela with dry authority:

"I'm going out, Bela. I shall be back at six. You will go to Semenukhin at once and give him my notes."

There had been a brief thunderstorm during the night and the freshly washed trees and buildings glistened in the glassy air.

The streets were full of loungers, tricolour flags and ribbons, roses, fashionable hats and the warm raspberry red of painted lips.

Everyone was hurrying to the cathedral square for the church parade and thanksgiving that were to be held to celebrate the happy salvation of the town from the Bolsheviks.

Léon Couturier pushed his way to the front of the crowd, reverently removed his hat and listened with dignified submission to the prayers and an ominous speech by a long-legged general, tapered like a wedge with the thin end downwards.

In his moments of emphasis the general hopped about, and his wiry body jerked like a cardboard clown, as if trying to jump out of his baggy tunic.

When the silver trumpets blared forth the *Marseillaise*, the Frenchman Léon Couturier straightened his chest proudly and stood watching the troops as they marched past in a glitter of bayonets, buttons, shoulder-straps and medals.

The crowd swarmed after the column.

Léon Couturier put on his hat and walked away unhur-

riedly in the other direction, down the main street. As he threaded his way along the crowded pavement he noticed a barefooted news-boy dashing wildly down the street, jumping and squealing and pushing everyone aside.

"*Nasha Rodina*, late edition! Capture of leading Bolshevik! Full story!"

Léon Couturier stopped the boy, who thrust a paper into his hands at lightning speed, pocketed the money and dashed on.

Léon Couturier's hand trembled slightly as he unfolded the paper. His eyes scanned the poorly printed lines that reeked of paraffin and stopped in amazement on a thick headline:

CAPTURE OF CHEKA EXECUTIONER ORLOV

Yesterday evening an unknown man was arrested by an officers' patrol while trying to board one of the trucks of a train that was leaving the station. Witnesses at the station identified the arrested man as the chairman of the Province Cheka, the notorious sadist, torturer and hangman, Orlov. In spite of the numerous testimonies to his identity, Orlov denies this fact and claims to be a peasant returning to his home in Yuzovka. No papers have been found on him, but a large sum of money was discovered sewn into his coat. Orlov claims that he received the money for the Yuzovka co-operative. This blatant and cowardly falsehood roused such indignation among the crowd that they wanted to tear him to pieces on the spot. The patrol had some difficulty in taking Orlov to counter-intelligence, where he will receive the punishment he so richly deserves.

.....

Fists clenched.... Newspaper crushed.... Feet rooted to the asphalt.

A woman's voice: "What's the matter. Are you ill?"

A second passed.

Léon Couturier lifted his hat. "*Merci!*... No.... It is nothing. I have the very bad heart ... *le coeur*.... Just a small attack.... A mere trifle. Thank you!... Cab! Nikolayevskaya Street!"

He jumped into the cab, pushing the crumpled newspaper into his pocket.

DIALOGUE

"Orlov? . . . Is . . . is it you? B-bela's j-just been here. . . . You. . . . But what's up with you? You look t-terrible!"

Orlov pulled the newspaper out of his pocket.

"Read this."

Semenukhin glanced at the page. His close-cropped head with its protruding red ears bent forward and he looked like a greyhound taking its final bound to catch a hare.

His eyes galloped along the lines.

Then his head came up again and his thick-lipped mouth was laughing with satisfaction.

"W-well, that's f-fine!" he stuttered. "That's sp-plendid!"

"What's so splendid about it?" Orlov asked, frowning as he seated himself on the edge of the table.

"It's a ch-chance in a h-h-hundred. N-now you've g-got n-nothing to worry about. They'll f-finish off this k-kulak, and you'll b-be d-dead. And no one will think of l-looking for you any more. Who c-could f-foresee anything s-so l-lucky!"

Orlov propped his chin on his hand and surveyed Semenukhin keenly.

"Have you never had any doubts, Semenukhin? Have you always done your job unquestioningly?"

"W-why d-do you ask?"

"What would you say if I were to tell you now that, having read this announcement, I was going to give myself up to White counter-intelligence?"

Semenukhin closed his smiling mouth with a snap, leaned back so that his chair creaked under the pressure of his iron body, then burst into a roar of laughter.

"W-well, I'll b-be d'damned! I nearly t-took you s-seriously! L-look h-here, everyone m-must b-be told about this. . . . The l-local c-committees must r-raise a h-howl of regret for C-comrade Orlov. That'll be j-just f-fine!"

Orlov bent across the table.

"You fool! I am absolutely serious. What would you say if I gave myself up?"

There was a harsh throb in Orlov's voice. The smile vanished from Semenukhin's face and he fixed his eyes attentively on Orlov's left cheek, where a triangular muscle was twitching nervously below the eye.

"W-what sh-should I say?" he began slowly and huskily, then he broke off, pushed back his chair and rising to his full height, calmly drew a revolver from his hip pocket. "I sh-should say one of t-two things. Either you'd g-gone m-mad, or else you were a sw-swine and a t-traitor! In either c-case it w-would be my d-duty to prevent such a-action."

"Put your toy away. You can't frighten me with that."

"I d-don't intend f-frightening you. But I can kill you!"

"Look here, Semenukhin! But aside all secondary considerations. This matter is acutely important to me. I am doing a very difficult job that demands perfect mental and physical balance. Your job is simple! You stay underground like moles and only come out at night to go round the local districts and agitate. But I'm dancing on a razor's edge all day long. One false step and I'm finished!"

"Well?"

"Just a minute! A terrible thing has happened. Because of an idiotic mistake, because of this fatal resemblance, a man is to be put to death. Not an enemy—not an officer, a priest or a landowner, but an ordinary peasant. One of the people I am working for. Can the Party let me be saved from danger by his death? Can I sit here calmly and let the scales tip in my favour?"

Semenukhin's mouth twisted sarcastically.

"The int-tellectual's attitude to the p-problem? Moral right and the demands of conscience? D-d-dostoyevsky stuff! You l-live for the Party's cause and you've g-got no r-right to be-betray that cause."

A deep flush spread over Orlov's face from brow to chin. He leapt up from his chair.

"Why speak of the cause?" I shan't betray it and I don't intend to. Even if I gave myself up, they could never torture anything out of me."

Semenukhin shrugged irritably.

"Then w-why stick your n-neck in the n-noose of your own f-free will? You say it's an o-ordinary p-peasant they've arrested. One of the p-people we're w-working for? . . . I d-don't know. . . . There're all k-kinds of p-peasants. H-had a large s-sum of money on h-him. . . . Where d-did he get it? T-taking it to the c-co-operative? P-possibly. . . . More l-likely done a b-bit of p-profeteering on g-grain or b-bacon. . . . A kulak! In that c-case, he's either an open or p-potential enemy. So there's n-no n-need to s-slobber!"

"But counter-intelligence will torture him to death!"

"L-listen!" Semenukhin said. "G-go home, d-drink a glass of v-vodka and s-sleep it off! . . . Philosopher!"

"Go to hell!" Orlov snapped, losing his temper. "And keep your advice to yourself. I don't need it."

Semenukhin shook his big head thoughtfully.

"You're v-very nervy! That's b-bad! That's why you're t-talking all this rubbish. W-what you s-said just now w-would be enough in itself to g-get any c-comrade expelled from the P-party. The action you w-wanted to take is t-treachery. I s-say that in the name of the Revolutionary Committee! C-come to your senses, man!"

Orlov turned pale and the skin tightened nervously over his cheek-bones. He lowered his eyes and his voice choked convulsively in his throat:

"Yes, it's my nerves. I'm not a machine, damn it all! In view of the circumstances, which you know very well, I ask the Revcom to release me from my work and send me across the front. I may simply break down under this continual strain and do even more harm to the cause. Take that into account too. Even a rock can split."

“Nonsense! Go home and have a rest!”

Semenukhin's voice had grown gentle and affectionate. He sounded like a father talking to his youngest and best-loved son.

“Dmitry! I understand what a h-hard time you're having. Your outburst was quite natural. You're our best agent. Have a rest for a c-couple of days. And you'll l-laugh over it yourself afterwards! . . . Just think w-what a lucky c-coincidence! The Whites feel s-safe b-because they've k-killed Orlov. But all the t-time Orlov's right here, under your n-noses, my beauties!”

“All right. Good-bye. I really am feeling dizzy.”

“I understand! But you w-won't do anything s-silly?”

“No!”

“Word of honour?”

“Yes!”

“G-good-bye then! This is j-just mad! After all the i-information you've collected in three d-days, and suddenly. . . .”

He gripped Orlov's hand in both his own and crushed it fiercely:

“M-mind you have a good r-rest!” And ended affectionately: “You're a w-wonderful ch-chap!”

ICE-CREAM

Léon Couturier tossed money to the flower-girl, pushed two asters into his buttonhole and, swinging his stick, strolled down Nikolayevskaya Street, smiling cat-like into the eyes of the women, whose glances bore the languor of the autumn air.

It was hot and he felt a desire for something cool and refreshing.

He pushed open the glass door of a confectioner's, placed his hat on a table, poured himself a glass of water and ordered an ice-cream.

A glance round. At the next table two officers were drinking grenadine. One had his right arm in a black sling and a red spot of blood had seeped through the bandage on his wrist.

The waitress brought him his ice-cream and he began swallowing the cool strawberry-flavoured mixture with pleasure.

“...Yes, that’s right—Orlov.”

Léon Couturier’s fingers slowly put down his spoon, and his whole body leaned imperceptibly in the direction of the voice.

“... It was a wonderful stroke of luck! Our patrol was making its round of the station across the rails. There were a lot of trains and trucks standing about. Should have been taking the infantry up north. And then we saw this devil crawling out from under one of the trucks. And the next minute he was trying to climb into it. “Halt!” I shouted. He stopped and we came up to him. A great hulking peasant in a homespun coat, with a big red beard. And his eyes were like glowing lumps of coal. ‘Who are you?’ ‘God bless you, Your Honours. I’m from Yuzovka. I want to get home but the trains have been held up all the week. Let me go.’ ‘Going to Yuzovka, are you? Then why are you getting in this train, when it’s going to Kruty?’ ‘How should I know, when all the trains are messed up?’ ‘Messed up? Your papers!’ ‘Haven’t got any, Your Honour, they were stolen!’ ‘Arrest him!’ said Shcheglov. And then he started shouting: ‘What for? What have I done?’ We took him along to the station, and as soon as we got there, someone shouted: ‘Orlov!’ ‘Who’s Orlov?’ we said. ‘The chairman of the Cheka!’ That made us stare. What a catch! And three more people came running up and identified him. One of them had been under arrest at the Cheka, so he gave him a punch in the face straight away. But though the blood was trickling down his beard, he stuck to his guns. ‘My name’s Yemelchuk,’ he said. ‘I’m in the co-op-

erative.' We wanted to finish him off on the spot, but the commandant made us take him to intelligence."

"Why?"

"Why?! Obviously he had stayed behind as an agent. He knows their organization backwards."

"You'll get damn all out of him. We twisted one of those Cheka men's tendons out of him on a ramrod, and even then the swine didn't blab."

"He'll talk!... They'll mangle him for three days and he'll tell them everything. Then, up against the wall. Well, are you going to Tanya's?"

"Why?"

"She promised to take us somewhere today—we'll have a game."

"I suppose so," the officer with the bandaged arm replied idly, and was about to rise.

Léon Couturier left his table and bowed to the officers with extreme politeness.

"Forgive me. I have not the honour . . . *l'honneur* . . . to know you. I am Léon Couturier, a businessman. I heard you have captured Orlov of the Cheka?"

The officer smiled complacently.

"I have wish to know. . . . One hears much of Orlov. . . . I have come from Odessa and learned that my old mother, *ma pauvre mère*, she has been shot by the Cheka. I have much hatred against the Cheka and wish to drink *la santé* of the valiant Russian lieutenant. Tell me what is he like, this Orlov. I shall him myself assassinate . . . kill him, you say."

Sparks of anger had sprung into Léon Couturier's eyes. Finding the foreigner amusing, the officer leaned over to his companion.

"Mishka! . . . We can get a lot of drink out of this French booby. I'll get to work on him."

He turned to Léon.

"Monsieur! . . . We are very glad. You are a representative of beautiful France. We are shedding our blood for the

common cause. We are very glad to respond to your toast—your health, monsieur!... Let us introduce ourselves. Count Shuvalov, lieutenant! His Highness, Prince Vorontsov, second lieutenant!"

The second officer nudged his companion from behind, but the latter hissed at him: "Keep quiet, stupid! Everyone this Frenchman knows in Russia is a count!"

Léon Couturier shook hands with the officers.

"I am very glad. *Je suis enchanté* ... delighted to know this noble Russian family."

"But I'm afraid we shall have to go somewhere else, monsieur. There's nothing but grenadine in this hole. And in Russia no one drinks to a friend in fruit juice."

"*Mais oui!* I know the Russian custom. We shall drink vodka!"

"Fine! A true Russian soul!" and "His Highness Prince Vorontsov" slapped the Frenchman tenderly on the shoulder.

"We shall drink vodka! Then you will tell me of Orlov. I wish to know where is he. I will go to the commander-in-chief and offer to shoot Orlov with my own hand—for the revenge! *La vengeance!*"

"As a matter of fact, monsieur," "His Highness" replied airily, "I couldn't say where this oaf happens to be at the moment. It's too small a matter for me, a Russian aristocrat, to worry about. But fortunately, I see someone in the doorway who can help us. Excuse me for a minute."

He clicked his spurs elegantly and went to the door, where a tall, slim-waisted officer stood surveying the interior of the café.

"I say, Sobolevsky, be a friend! Mishka and I have picked up a clot of a Frenchman. He's some sort of profiteer from Odessa. He's come here to find his mamma, and she's been bumped off by the Cheka. He happened to hear me telling how I arrested Orlov yesterday and he's getting terribly fond of me. You can be sure of all the drink you want. Come with us. You can tell him about his darling

and he won't get away till his pockets are empty. But remember, I'm Prince Vorontsov, and Mishka is Count Shuvalov."

The tall officer frowned.

"Playing the fool as usual. I'm up to my neck in work."

"Sobolevsky! My dear chap! Don't let us down. Don't be a swine. You've got all the latest news from your department. And this Frenchy is terribly interested in Orlov. Even said he would shoot him himself to revenge his '*pauvre mère*'!"

Sobolevsky looked bored as he toyed with the cord of his aiguillette.

"Well?"

"Oh, very well. I agree, damn you."

"I knew you were a real friend. Come on!"

Sobolevsky was introduced to Léon Couturier.

"Where shall we go?"

"To the Olympos. It's the only place open so far."

They hailed a cab and got in.

MY FRIEND

The crumpled velvet curtains that hung in dusty folds over the window made it almost dark in the cool private room of the restaurant. Twilight rays filtering through the thick haze of tobacco smoke gleamed coldly on the battery of empty bottles assembled on the edge of the table.

On a divan at the back of the room "Count Shuvalov" and "Prince Vorontsov," both of them dead drunk, were rolling about and squeezing some chorus-girls. The girls were squealing and laughing and swearing like troopers.

One had her silk blouse torn, her slip had come off her shoulder and a firm sharp-pointed breast protruded through the rent.

"Count Shuvalov" was kicking and screaming like a babe-in-arms and trying to suck the nipple. The girl was resisting and slapping him on the lips.

Only Léon Couturier and Sobolevsky had remained at the table.

The Frenchman was leaning back in his chair, his arm embracing the waist of a quiet little woman, who had perched herself on his knee like a sleek white kitten.

She was gazing dreamily out of the window.

Lieutenant Sobolevsky was sitting perfectly straight in his chair, as if in the saddle during a ceremonial parade, and smoking.

Against the light his face was invisible, except for an occasional glitter of the eyes.

The lieutenant had terrible eyes. They were huge and deep-set, languid and yet ferocious. A wolf's eyes glow green in the steppe at night, during a snow-storm. Sobolevsky's eyes glittered from time to time with the same green fire.

They conversed all the time in French.

At first Couturier had addressed the lieutenant in the broken Russian that had kept the other two officers convulsed with laughter, then Sobolevsky had said with a frown: "*Monsieur, laissez votre ésperanto! Je parle français tout couramment!*"

The Frenchman was delighted. It turned out that Sobolevsky had lived and studied in Paris, at the Sorbonne.

He sat opposite Léon, upright, eyes glittering, and spoke quietly of Paris, recalling the smoky gardens of Bougival, where Turgenev had died, and the noisy corridors of the *belles-lettres* faculty, where he, Sobolevsky, had passed three wonderful years.

Léon Couturier nodded and shared his own reminiscences of the gay spots in Paris, persistently plying the lieutenant with wine. But the lieutenant was slow to get drunk. At each glass his back merely grew straighter and his face paler.

"Yes, that was a wonderful time for France," Léon said with a sigh. "But the lights of Paris are dimmed. The ac-

cursed boches have killed off so many Parisians and now Paris is a city of mourning women."

"Is it long since you were there?" the lieutenant asked.

"Not very. Last year, when the boches were having their revolution. It made me very sad. The gaiety of Paris is in mourning, her heart wears widow's weeds."

"Yes, very sad," the lieutenant grated thoughtfully, and suddenly he asked: "My dissolute friends here told me you had come here in search of your mother."

Léon Couturier sighed.

"Yes, indeed. It is a terrible thing, monsieur lieutenant, I don't even know where her grave is. Such bestiality! And what do these people want? To set up socialism in a barbarous Asiatic country like this? Madness! We have the example of our great revolution. That revolution was made by the greatest minds in a country that had always been a torch for humanity. And what was their answer? They rejected socialism as a senseless utopia. But here? My God! Socialism for the Kalmyk hordes? And these brutes have no mercy on women! My mother! I can hear her calling upon me to revenge her!"

"She was shot by the Cheka?"

Couturier nodded.

"You can understand how glad I am that this devil has been arrested!"

"Give me a fag, Frenchy," the white kitten miowed suddenly, twisting round on Léon's knees. She was tired of listening to a foreign tongue.

"I think of Paris with great affection," Sobolevsky said through his teeth. "They were the best years of my life. Youth, enthusiasm, a clean heart! I loved literature, I loved those mad arguments on the future of the world that went on all night in the cafés. Words in tobacco smoke, in a haze of absinth, with violins wailing. And the poetry read by unknown young men, whose names would resound all over the world the next day..."

The lieutenant closed his eyes.

"Do you remember this:

*"Hier encore l'assaut des titans
Ruait les colonnes guerrieres,
Dont les larges flances palpitants
Craquaient sous l'essieux des tonnerres..."*

"Oh, I don't understand that kind of thing. . . . I'm no good at literature. My field is commerce!"

It had grown quite dark. Muffled kissing and squealing rose from the darkness of the divan. The lieutenant drained his glass and grew even paler.

"It's time I went. I have a lot of work to do."

"You are very tired, I expect? Your whole army must be. But it is the last weariness of heroes. The whole civilized world is watching your exploits. Now your victory is assured!"

The lieutenant rested his elbows on the table and stared drunkenly and ominously into the face of his companion.

"Yes, we'll finish soon. Enough trifling! After victory we shall begin the refashioning of Russia on a grand scale!"

"And how do you imagine your state of the future?"

"How do I imagine it?..." The lieutenant planted his elbows even firmer on the table. Léon Couturier saw Sobolevsky's strange eyes dilate in frenzy and glow with that furious wolfish glitter.

"Ah, monsieur! I have my own theory. Raze it to the ground! You understand! Turn this blasted country into a desert. We have a population of a hundred and forty millions. Only two or three have any right to live. The flower of the race. Literature, art, science! I am a materialist! One hundred and thirty-seven millions for fertilizer! You understand! No superphosphates, no nitrates or saltpetre! Dung the fields with the millions! The peasant swine who've revolted. All into the machine! A great big coffee-grinder! Grind them to pulp! Then dry the pulp and scat-

ter it on the fields! Anywhere that the soil's bad! And from that dung shall grow a new culture of the élite."

"But who will work for those that are left?"

"Nonsense, man! Machines! Machines! The unbelievable growth of engineering. The machine will do everything. You say machines have to be minded. That is where you can help. Since the war you have received huge territories in Africa, in Australia. You won't be able to feed all your savages, you won't be able to provide work for them all. We shall buy them off you. We shall train them as machine-minders. Just a few of them. About three hundred thousand! We'll give them a life of luxury, wine, brothels for every kind of vice. They shall wallow in gold and never want to revolt. And then there's medicine! The tremendous progress of physiology! Scientists will discover the centre of protest in the brain. And they'll remove it surgically, like the cerebellum of a rabbit. And there'll be no more revolutions! Enough! To hell with it! What do you say to that?"

Léon Couturier answered hastily:

"That is going to extremes, monsieur lieutenant! Such unnecessary cruelty. The world, Western Europe would never forgive you the destruction of so many lives."

The lieutenant leaned towards him. Stark madness gleamed in his eyes. His voice had grown sharp and hard, it sounded like a nail under the hammer.

"Scared, are you? You pleasure-seeker, you lily-livered slug! You're all milksops! A nation of mongrels, lap-dogs! You need stringing up, damn the lot of you!..." He wiped the foam from his lips. "To hell with you! I'm going! I must get some sleep. Tomorrow I've got some comrades to work on!"

"What comrades?" Couturier asked.

"Red-bellies . . . oafs! Just a quiet little chat. . . . Needles under their finger-nails, lead up their noses. . . . I'm the commandant at counter-intelligence! Don't you understand, you French flea!"

The lieutenant breathed hot vodka fumes into Léon Couturier's face. The woman on the Frenchman's knee came out of her dream.

"Why's your leg trembling, darling!... Feeling chilly?"

"No!... You have made it numb, the leg... Get off, please!" the Frenchman said crossly.

Sobolevsky glanced at the woman, shuddered violently and with a swing of his arm swept the bottles off the table. Fragments of glass tinkled over the floor.

"You're drunk, you swine!" said the woman.

The lieutenant stared thoughtfully at the scattered fragments. He leaned towards the Frenchman again.

"Forgive me, Léon... Léon, old fellow! You're a good chap, and I'm a swine, a hangman! Come round to my place for half an hour, man. I'll show you the lowest depths of degradation, the bottomless pit. Ever read Dostoyevsky? No! Well, you don't need to! You can see it with your own eyes and tell them about it in France. Tell them, the sons of bitches, what Russian officers, true to their honour and the fraternal alliance, have to bear."

"Very well, mon lieutenant! But be calm! Your nerves are out of order... I will tell them everything. Our people in France value your heroism."

"They value it, do they? They send us rotten chocolate, old uniforms taken from corpses! They're all scoundrels! You're the only good fellow among them, Léon! Come on!"

"Perhaps it's not worth it, monsieur lieutenant? You are tired and unwell. You need a good rest."

"You're funking again, are you? Don't be scared! I won't torture anyone! I was joking. Do come, Léon, old chap!... I'm feeling rotten!... A Russian officer... used to write poetry, and now I'm a hangman. I'll give you some liqueur. Wonderful Benedictine!"

"Very well! But I must pay the bill."

"Don't worry!"

Sobolevsky rang the bell.

"Bill tomorrow, at counter-intelligence! 17, Skobelevskaya Street. Now get out!"

Sobolevsky went over to the divan.

"Well, Your Highnesses! Enough leching for one night. Up you get!"

"You go, we'll stay here."

"And who will pay?"

"We've got money!"

Léon Couturier said good-bye to the officers. In the vestibule Sobolevsky went to the telephone.

"Car, at once! The Olympus! I'm waiting."

They went out into the porch. The lieutenant sat down on a step. Léon Couturier leaned on the balustrade.

Sobolevsky stared for a long time at the street lights. Then he turned his head and said huskily:

"Léon! When I was a little boy, I used to go with my mother to church. . . ."

Léon Couturier did not reply. A car, frighteningly black and long, swept up to the porch. The lieutenant rose and opened the door for the Frenchman.

The car hummed, then glided away noiselessly through the deserted streets. It pulled up sharply outside a two-storey house in a side-street. A sentry shouted a challenge from the steps.

"Have you lost your eyes, you devil!" Sobolevsky shouted and motioned Léon inside. They walked across the hall and went upstairs. Sobolevsky knocked at a door in the corridor to the left. A voice replied and he flung the door open.

A square, broad-shouldered man with colonel's shoulderstraps rose from behind a desk at the back of the dimly lighted room.

"Sobolevsky . . . is it you? What nonsense is . . ." he broke off at the sight of the stranger.

Sobolevsky drew back a pace and snapped:

"Colonel. Allow me to introduce my friend . . . Comrade Orlov!"

"A GREAT PITY!"

"You and your idiotic tricks. . . . Think you're a Japanese! . . . Ju-jitsu! You've knocked him cold."

"How was I to know he'd jump like a kangaroo? He landed right on my fist. That solar plexus punch is a killer."

"Pour some water over him. He seems to be moving."

Slowly and with difficulty Orlov opened his eyes. Every time he breathed, a pain bored into the pit of his stomach like red-hot knitting-needles. He groaned.

"He's coming round. It's all right, he'll recover!"

"Let's put him on the couch. You call up a strong guard."

They lifted Orlov to his feet. He fainted again with pain and came to himself on the couch. The electric bulb in the ceiling was shining straight in his eyes.

He turned his head and saw the room, the desk. He tried to remember.

The door opened. Sobolevsky came in gaily.

"Well, Colonel. Ten thousand off you, please. You've lost the bet. I have made the first catch."

"Go to the devil!"

"Admit that you've lost."

"All right, I have. Fools are lucky."

"That saying's out of date, Colonel. You're not really suitable for counter-intelligence, you know. I wouldn't keep you on. Your methods are obsolete! Pseudo-classicism. You have no knowledge of psychology."

"Leave me alone."

"I shan't. It annoys me to think that I, a man of talent, should be stuck away in this poky job, while a clot like you takes all the plums."

"Lieutenant!"

"I know I'm not a captain. But you ought to be made a corporal. The way you boasted when they brought in that

stinking ragamuffin! 'We've arrested Orlov!' You blind crow."

"Are you mad! You were rejoicing yourself. . . ."

"I was rejoicing over your stupidity. Now, I thought, old Rosenbach will be kicked out and I shall get promotion."

Sobolevsky's voice throbbed with arrogance. The colonel was silent.

"Well, we shan't quarrel about it," he said appeasingly. "Tell me how you managed it."

"How I managed it? Want to learn something, eh? To be quite honest, it was sheer chance. I hadn't the faintest suspicion at first. A Frenchman if ever there was one. He acted superbly! And I played up to him, even told him my theory about the negroes. But then something happened. The woman gave him away when he lost control for a second. And it suddenly dawned on me. What if? . . . Suppose we had really made a mistake and grabbed the wrong man? I got so worked up I had to smash the bottles to distract attention. And even then I couldn't believe it. So I decided to bring him round here on a friendly visit, and give him a little test. . . . And then he gave himself away a second time. If he hadn't tried to make a bolt for it just now, the whole thing would have ended in a joke."

Orlov gritted his teeth. "Swine!"

"Ah, Monsieur Léon! So you are awake? Did you sleep well?"

Orlov made no reply.

"I understand, of course! You prefer to speak French. A pure-blooded Parisian? And your mother's a Parisian too, isn't she? Do you remember Verlaine? A good poet, eh? I imitated him when I started writing poetry. I'll recite you some more and, by God, you'll appreciate it, you swine!"

Orlov closed his eyes. A green-spotted orange band was spinning round and round in his head at tremendous

speed. He shuddered and jerked himself upright on the couch.

"Kindly sit still, Monsieur Orlov," the colonel shouted, lifting his pistol. "We are obliged to restrict your freedom of movement."

Orlov did not hear. He sat staring dully in front of him. Then he remembered. Semenukhin! Their conversation! I gave my word of honour! He may think I... He pressed his knuckles to his forehead and rocked his head back and forth.

"What's the matter, Monsieur Orlov? Don't you like it here? I don't understand! It's quite warm, clean, comfortable, the treatment's almost polite, although I must apologize for the lieutenant's lack of tact. But you showed such an ability for making dizzy pirouettes that he had to stop you as best he could."

Orlov removed his hands from his face.

"You, scum! I refuse to talk to you," he shouted at the colonel.

The colonel shrugged.

"Thank you for the compliment. But you will have to talk to us. Even if you don't want to. We have our own methods here."

"Going to stick needles under my finger-nails, you swine?"

"I shan't! I'm no good at it. My hands are too unsteady. But the lieutenant is a virtuoso at it. The whole needle in one thrust, without breaking it! The comrades themselves are surprised. Which do you prefer, Monsieur Orlov? A cold needle or a hot one? Many prefer the hot kind. They say it's painful at first, but the finger goes dead quicker."

Orlov was silent. Lieutenant Sobolevsky paced across the room.

"Well, Monsieur Léon? Into the machine, eh? Yes, into the machine!" He strode swiftly up to Orlov and glowered at him with his wolf-like eyes. "We'll mangle them into pulp, dry it and use it for fertilizer! And the cultured West won't

say a thing. The wheat will grow, and they will bring bread to my table. A fresh loaf, warm and soft and tasty! And why? Because it grew not on some rotten German superphosphate, but on good human blood!"

The lieutenant twisted and hissed like a snake.

Orlov drew himself up and spat furiously.

Sobolevsky jumped back and lifted his fist with a curse, but the colonel stayed the blow.

"Now then! Stop that! You have such a sledge-hammer fist that you may kill Monsieur Orlov, and that is not what we want at all. The most amusing part is to come."

"You son of a bitch!" said the lieutenant, tearing his hand away. "I'm going to wash."

"Yes, by the way! Tell them to release that dolt Yemelchuk, the one from the co-operative. We needn't have damaged the fellow."

"So you even release people? What progress!" Orlov said.

"Don't worry. We shan't release you."

Orlov rummaged in his pockets. He had no cigarettes.

"Give me a cigarette!"

"I'm so sorry."

The colonel held out his case. Orlov took it and emptied its contents into his hand.

"How unkind of you! Aren't you going to leave me any?"

"You can commandeer some more! I've got to smoke!"

"You know, I rather like you! I like cold-blooded people."

"Well, shut up then! There's nothing to jaw about!"

"Oh, how unlike Paris! You're giving yourself away! But you must admit I have my intelligence service quite well organized. No worse than your Cheka."

Orlov glanced into the colonel's affectionately puckered eyes.

Then he leaned back on the couch and ground out between his teeth: "Unfortunately, I must agree with Lieu-

tenant Sobolevsky that you are an old idiot, whom they evidently keep on out of pity."

The colonel's face turned a violent purple to the very tip of his nose.

"So you intend to be impudent, you dog! That's enough! I'll show you! I shall ring up H. Q. at once and we'll get to work."

He picked up the telephone. Sobolevsky reappeared.

"Hullo! Headquarters! This is the chief of intelligence. Very well. . . . Escort ready?" he snapped at Sobolevsky, while waiting to be connected.

"Yes, Colonel."

"Yes. Speaking. Is that you, Your Excellency? I have to report that Orlov has been arrested. Yes. Today. No. . . . It was a mistake. . . . An amazing resemblance. . . . Very good. . . . Arrested by Lieutenant Sobolevsky. I understand. . . . Yes. . . . Yes. Why, Your Excellency. . . . It was we. . . . I understand, very good! It shall be done, Your Excellency! Good-bye, Your Excellency!"

He threw the receiver down angrily.

"Damn!"

"What's the matter?" Sobolevsky asked.

"They're taking him away from us."

"Where?"

"To Captain Tumanovich. At the special commission."

"But why? That's a swinish trick!"

"Don't you know! Tumanovich is out to make a name for himself. The smooth swine."

The colonel blew his nose loudly and at great length.

"It's a pity, Monsieur Orlov! You are very lucky. We shall have to send you to Captain Tumanovich. A great pity! The Captain is too much of a European and too particular in keeping to the rules of procedure. He won't get anything out of you, he'll just stick you up against a wall without finding out a damn thing. But we should have got it all out of you—by degrees, gently, lovingly. We'd have sucked you dry. Still it can't be helped. Orders have to be

obeyed. But you'll stay with us till morning, it would be dangerous to move you at night. You're a desperate character. I'm sorry I shan't be able to get my own back for that 'old idiot' . . . Lieutenant, take Monsieur Orlov along."

LIZA'S ARIA

Madame Margot came down to dinner a little upset.

"Anna Andreyevna, I just can't understand what has happened to Léon."

"Never mind, Margot! There's nothing to worry about. Either he's busy or he's called in to see some of his friends."

"I don't think so. Besides, he always tells me if he's going to be late."

Doctor Sokovnin stroked his beard over his plate of soup.

"Ah, my dear, you're making a mountain out of a mole-hill! It's all nonsense and nerves. Léon is too good a husband and he's spoiled you. You have to give us, menfolk, a little freedom sometimes. When I married Anna, I couldn't escape from love for a minute. If I was half an hour late, it was all tears and grief when I got home. And just try to be punctual in the medical profession! Well, one day I played a fine old trick. I went out in the morning. 'Just going to buy a paper,' I said. And that was the last they saw of me for three days. And here they were in hysterics, everything was upside down, the police had been called, the river was being dragged, all the mortuaries had been searched. And I'd only been doing a bit of fishing with a friend of mine fifteen versts away. It was a magical cure. Now I can be away all day and night without any worrying at all. That's what he ought to do to you."

Anna Andreyevna laughed.

"A fine sight he was when he came back! His nose was red and he reeked of vodka. I took one look at him and

thought: 'Is this the treasure I've been worrying myself to death over? Why, if he disappeared altogether I shan't bat an eye.'

But her hosts' efforts to cheer Margot were a failure. She was a bundle of nerves and anxiety.

"Well, if you're as worried as all that, my dear, I'll go to the police. I have an old friend there. He's been getting surgical spirit from me under all the regimes and he'll always do me a favour or two in return."

Margot started out of her nervous trance.

"Oh no, doctor. Not the police, please. I hate the Russian police. They're such extortioners! They'll go snooping about. I don't want that. If he doesn't arrive by tomorrow morning, we'll do something. But now we must be gay. Shall I sing you something?"

"It would be a great pleasure, my dear! I love to hear you trilling like a nightingale."

Marguerite sat down at the piano.

"What shall I sing? What would you like, doctor?"

"Well, if you're feeling so kind today, sing us Liza's aria from the *Queen of Spades*. I'm terribly fond of it. I remember I used to clap my hands sore in the gallery as a student."

Margot opened her music. Glassy waves of sound flowed from the piano.

The doctor settled back in his chair. Anna Andreyevna quietly washed the glasses.

All day and night

He was my light,

For him I suffered and grieved.

The crystal voice darkened and wavered.

Then the storm broke.

Its thunderous stroke

Dashed all my hopes and happiness.

The crystal waves suddenly ceased to flow.

Margot closed the keyboard and wrung her fingers. The doctor leapt to his feet.

"Margot, my dear girl!... What is the matter? Calm yourself! Anna, bring the valerian."

But Margot recovered herself. She rose pale and tight-lipped.

"No! I don't need anything, thank you! These are such dreadful times. I imagine all sorts of terrible things. Excuse me, I must go and lie down."

The doctor took her to her room, then returned to the dining-room.

"Young and green," he said in answer to his wife's glance of inquiry. "It's touching to see such love! Dear me!"

He picked up his newspaper, opened it at his favourite page—local events—and looked at it narrowly.

"You know what? They've arrested Orlov, Anna."

"What Orlov?"

"That famous Cheka chief of ours!"

"Have they, really?"

"Yes, indeed! They caught him yesterday, at the station. I'll give Margot the paper. That will take her out of herself."

The doctor padded quietly over to Margot's door in his felt slippers and knocked.

"Here's the newspaper for you, my dear. Enjoy the news for a bit."

Margot's hand appeared round the door and took the newspaper.

The doctor withdrew. Bela dropped the paper carelessly on the table. The grubby sheet fell open and two words jumped out of the closely printed page:

"ORLOV ARRESTED"

Bela stood still, except that her hands seized the edge of the table. The letters crawled before her eyes like worms. She sat down and closed her eyes. Then she jumped to her feet and snatched up the paper.

But why "yesterday"? Yesterday was the 14th. Orlov was still at home, and he was at home this morning. What is this nonsense! And now he has vanished. I mustn't waste time. I must go to Semenukhin at once.

Her fingers tore at the buttons of her fluffy coat. She couldn't put her hat on straight; the broad fashionable brim kept tilting to one side.

As she ran out into the hall Bela met the doctor.

"Where are you going, Margot?"

"Ach, I cannot sit at home," Bela almost groaned. "I am going to a friend of ours, I'm sure Léon is there. Even if I don't find him, I shall feel better in company."

"Well, God bless you, then. But don't upset yourself so much. Nothing will happen to him. They won't arrest him and kill him like Orlov."

Bela found strength to answer with a laugh:

"Good heavens, what a comparison! Léon is no Bolshevik."

She jumped into a cab. The driver drove at an unbearably slow pace and kept trying to start a conversation.

"What I think about the government, miss, is that all governments are nothing but a lot of swine. Because, it's impossible, as you might say, to make a minister out of everyone, and so there's bound to be discontent somewhere, and that means the governments are bound to get their throats cut...."

"Will you drive and not talk!" Bela shouted.

CAPTAIN TUMANOVICH

The people in the streets that morning were surprised to see ten soldiers, with rifles at the ready, roughly pushing aside anyone they happened to meet as they escorted a well-dressed gentleman, who walked along between them calmly and with dignity.

The man was not the kind the Whites usually arrested. People had got used to the idea that under the Bolsheviks

respectable citizens were marched off to the Cheka, while under the Volunteers the prisoners were usually greasy, unkempt workers or curly-headed boys and short-haired girls.

And so the idle onlookers tried to inquire of the soldiers about the mysterious criminal, but the soldiers silently poked them with their bayonets or swore violently in their faces.

The escort turned down a side-street. Orlov, refreshed by a night's sleep, surveyed the house keenly. He was taken into the hall, marched up a flight of stairs, and in a small room with tattered wallpaper handed over on receipt to a dark-eyed youthfully handsome ensign.

They sat him down on the bench with a guard on either side. The ensign, evidently new to the army, regarded him with excitement and sympathy.

"How did you manage to get yourself in this mess?" he said, clicking his tongue regretfully.

Orlov returned his glance and was touched by the boyish sympathy.

"Just one of those things! I shan't be here long."

The ensign showed surprise.

"What, you plan to get away? Not from here. We've got this place well organized!" he said with similarly boyish pride. "You shouldn't have got caught. Now I'll report your arrival to Captain Tumanovich."

Orlov glanced round him. The room contained a desk, two broken cupboards, several chairs and the bench on which he was sitting. The window gave on to a blank wall. He wanted to get up and take a look at it, but one of the guards pressed on his shoulder.

"Sit still, scum!"

Orlov bit his lip and sat down. In a few minutes the ensign returned.

"Take him to Captain Tumanovich's office."

The soldiers led him down a long dusty corridor and Orlov took good care to count the doors and turnings.

Finally the guards opened a door in front of him, on which was written crookedly in brownish-red ink:

INVESTIGATOR OF MAJOR CASES CAPTAIN TUMANOVICH

Captain Tumanovich was pacing unhurriedly from one corner of the room to the other and stopped half way across when they entered.

He went to his desk, sat down, placed a sheet of paper before him and said to the guards: "Go and stand outside the door." And to Orlov: "Are you Orlov, the former Chairman of the Province Cheka?"

Orlov drew up a chair in silence and sat down. The captain's eyebrow quivered.

"I don't think I invited you to sit down?"

"I don't care a damn for your invitation!" Orlov said sharply. "I'm tired."

He placed his elbows on the table and stared deliberately at the captain.

Tumanovich had a long lean face, a high, yellowishly transparent forehead and needle-sharp, icy blue eyes. His left eyebrow had a frequent and unpleasant nervous twitch.

"I could force you to respect my demands," he said coldly. "But it makes no difference. Kindly answer my question. Are you Orlov?"

"To avoid unnecessary discussion I must inform you that I shall not answer any of your questions! You are wasting your time."

Tumanovich wrote a few lines in his record of the interrogation and glanced up indifferently at Orlov with the dark-blue bits of ice that were his eyes.

"I foresaw that. As a matter of fact, I was not expecting to interrogate you in the ordinary sense of the word. It would be rather foolish to suppose that you would talk. But this is a necessary formality. We base our actions on strict adherence to the rules of procedure."

He paused as if waiting for a retort. Orlov remembered the colonel's words and smiled faintly.

The captain blushed slightly.

"All that the judicial power which in the present case I represent expects from you is a certain degree of help. Besides you, we have arrested several other members of the Cheka. Some of them were seized on the train that left here on the morning when the town was captured. They will all be put on trial. For purposes of clarification we think it useful to show you some of the material concerning the indictment. You, I hope, will not refuse to tell us what is true and what is false."

"Don't bother, Captain. I have not the least desire to see this material."

"But think for a moment, Mr. Orlov! There may be mistakes, some of the accusations may be based on personal enmity. These are troubled times. There is no opportunity for factual verification. By pointing out what is true and what is false, you may be able to alleviate the fate of those of your colleagues who are threatened by false accusation."

Orlov shrugged.

"I am very sorry to disappoint you, Captain. But did you really think you could catch me with that bait. Any accusation that I denied would, of course, be considered true. I thought you had more logic."

The captain flushed again and twisted the pen in his thin fingers.

"You don't wish to understand me, Mr. Orlov. You still consider yourself in the hands of counter-intelligence. But you are mistaken. We could force you to speak. For that there are means. True, they are a little outside the framework of legality, but then our whole epoch is a little outside that framework. But I am a man of law, I think on a judicial basis, I am bound to adhere to the ethic concepts of law and I categorically condemn the methods of Colonel Rosenbach."

"Especially since it was Colonel Rosenbach who handed me over to you? How low must one sink to be able to say such a thing calmly!"

Tumanovich squeezed the pen so hard that it cracked.

"Very well! So you have nothing to say! Then I shall pass on to a question that interests me personally. Till now I have had to deal with only two categories of your supporters: the first are the petty criminal elements, who see a convenient source of profit in supporting your regime; the second are people formerly engaged in physical labour, most of them decent sort of chaps, but intoxicated to the point of insanity by your promises, in other words, completely tricked. Neither category interests me much. You are the first person I have met who is both an important theoretician and practical organizer of your regime, and I am at a loss to know what category you, the organizers and leaders, belong to."

"I also wonder what category of your regime you belong to, Captain. Are you one of the large-scale criminals or one of the tricked?" Orlov replied harshly.

"Why are you trying to insult me, Mr. Orlov? You can see, I hope, the difference in the treatment which you experienced at counter-intelligence and that which you are receiving here. I am no longer questioning you as an investigator. I am simply interested in you as a phenomenon, whose psychological basis is still a mystery to me. Can't we discuss the subject calmly, simply to clarify the problem?"

"I thought you were more intelligent, Captain. I am not a toy for you to play with, and even less do I exist to solve your problems, particularly in my present position. You will go home from here to have your dinner, and as an act of gratitude for the lecture I have given you you will send me to be shot. We have nothing to discuss. Please consider the matter closed!"

"Just a minute," said Tumanovich. "I should like to know—really, this is most important to me—do you really

believe in the aims that you proclaim or—is it pure adventurism?”

“You will know that very soon, Captain, by your own experience—here, in this very town, when two or three months from now the very cobble-stones will be shooting at you.”

“So your organization is still working here?” the captain asked with a frown.

Orlov laughed.

“Trying to catch me out? Yes, Captain, it is working and will continue to work. Do you want to know where? Everywhere. In the houses, in the streets, in the air, in these walls, in the cloth on your desk. Don’t look so frightened! It’s invisible. These stones, the whitewash, the very cloth are soaked in the sweat of those who made them, and they have a deadly hatred—yes, these lifeless objects are capable of living and mortal hatred—for those they are forced to serve. And they will destroy you, they will return to their true owners and creators! And that will be your last day.”

Tumanovich regarded Orlov with interest.

“You speak well, Mr. Orlov. You probably know how to stir the masses. Your speech is captivating and vivid. No . . . no, I am not joking. And you are a very resolute person. I sense that you have real fire and enormous inner strength. From the standpoint of my convictions you deserve death. I think you would tell me the same were I in your hands. Eye for eye and tooth for tooth! Out of respect for the scale of your personality I shall make every effort to see that your death is an easy one, and free of the sufferings which unfortunately befall those who refuse to give us evidence. In view of your words I could immediately send you to Colonel Rosenbach’s torture chamber. But you are Orlov, and before me I have an extract from our intelligence reports: ‘Orlov, Dmitry. Member of the Party since 1906. Fanatic. Enormous self-con-

trol, recklessly daring. An extremely dangerous agitator. Exceptional honesty.' Very full, isn't it!"

The captain called in the guards.

"Good-bye, Mr. Orlov."

"Good-bye, Captain. I hope we shall not see much more of each other."

TWO PAGES

Indelible pencil. Squared paper torn from a pad:

"What a lot of rats here!... Tails like string, mangy, and so extraordinarily pompous.

"Sometimes about ten of them gather in a circle, stand up proudly on their hind legs and squeak....

"Then ... (a few words illegible) and it looks like a business meeting of high officials, a department of the state council of rats.

"I am writing by the light of matches.... No other light at all....

"Most likely these pages will be used for a practical purpose and never get outside these walls....

"But just in case....

"Konstantin.... You remember our talk today ... (illegible).

"...I have discovered that there is a limit even to my strength. Why the hell have we got nerves?... Lieutenant Sobolevsky, who arrested me, says: 'Surgeons will remove the part of the brain that gives birth to protest, to revolution.'

"It's the nerves they should remove, nerves that... (illegible) fatigue and demoralization. Yes, after the external shock induced by that false arrest I lost control of my will.

"One can always control one's face, but the body may betray....

"I know you think ... I broke my word and surrendered voluntarily....

"Nonsense... Never. I forgot my foolish outburst instantly. I got caught purely by chance. It was idiotic..."

"... (illegible) ice-cream, I heard an officer telling how he had arrested my double... Had to know the rest ... might have been able to arrange his escape. I wanted to know where this fellow..."

"... (illegible) they didn't know. 'He will help you...'"

"Do you know who I recognized?... Remember Sevastopol, the retreat... Remember the officer we saw shoot Oleg down in the street?... Yes... His name used to be Kornev... In counter-intelligence they have pseudonyms too.

"...I couldn't restrain myself... I sat opposite him thinking, now I've found you and you won't get away... I was attracted to him like a mosquito to a flame. If I'd been in a normal state I'd have left him... But this time I couldn't, my mind was poisoned by the feeling that he was in my hands. And when he got drunk and invited me to go with him to counter-intelligence, I went... Now I remember. He noticed my agitation and knocked the bottles off the table. But I missed it at the time ... weakening of the mind and will..."

"...Now he's really drunk, I thought, I'll get everything out of him... I even wondered how he would meet his end.

"... (illegible) that it didn't matter a damn whether a counter-intelligence man lost his rotten life or kept it, it wouldn't change anything... All because of nerves ... grabbed me like a chicken.

"...They won't get me for nothing... Not beaten yet. I've escaped from tighter corners than this. I am almost certain we'll see each other soon and am writing just in case.

"But you should remember that name: Sobolevsky... When the end comes, mind he doesn't get away... Remember Oleg's head on the pavement, the blood, the grey and pink splashes?... Remember!

"A splendid actor... Outacted me... I know I was nery, but that's no excuse.

"... (illegible) fate of B—. She's a good girl, but too expansive, will never make a real Party woman... If she's been caught, do all you can ... (illegible) to help....

"... (illegible) tomorrow ... (illegible) ... see that this prison's cleaned out when we take over ... this place is vile....

"No more matches... Egyptian darkness, you won't be able to read it anyway...."

RENUNCIATION

Bela dismissed the cab at the corner and ran down the lonely street on the outskirts.

The rising wind snatched at her hat and seeped icily under her coat.

A man who was passing bent forward to glance under her hat.

"Nice little thing," he said aloud, and turned to follow her.

Bela stopped. The man came up and saw her eyes, full of anguish and contempt.

"I demand that you leave me alone!"

He was taken aback.

"Very sorry, madam! I had no idea!..."

He lifted his hat and turned away. Bela slipped, trembling, through the gate and ran up the garden path.

She gave the agreed knock and Semenukhin opened the door to her with a candle. His other hand was behind his back, evidently holding a revolver. His eyes widened and flickered back the startled flame of the candle.

"Bela?... What b-brings you here? H-has anything happened?"

"Orlov...."

"Sh-sh! Go into the room. Quick!... Well, wh-what is it?"

"Orlov... he's been arrested!"

Semenukhin seized her hands. Bela cried out.

"Oh! . . . You're hurting me!"

He released her and asked fiercely, "Where, how?"

"I don't know anything. . . . There's a mistake somewhere. . . . The paper says yesterday. But he was at home this morning. I don't understand. He said he would be home at seven this evening. He hadn't arrived by ten. I couldn't stand it, so I came here."

Semenukhin threw down the paper she had offered him.

For a moment he said nothing.

"I've r-read that! But h-he was h-here today, after that. Surely he—"

Noticing that Bela had fallen back against the wall and was breathing heavily, he sprang forward and was only just in time to support her and help her to a chair.

Calmly he poured out a glass of water, took a mouthful and blew it in her face. The colour slowly returned to her cheeks.

"W-wake up! This w-won't d-do! S-stay the night h-here! You m-mustn't g-go back to the f-flat on any account. I'm g-going n-now. G-got to s-sort this out. S-surely he! . . ." Semenukhin clenched his fists and stood still.

Then he threw on his coat and left.

.
In the morning Bela was awakened by his voice, terrible and hard, like a stick.

"Get up! I've found out! He was arrested y-yesterday evening. I th-thought so. R-remember this," he paused and looked deep into Bela's eyes, "that Orlov n-no longer exists for y-you, for me, or f-for the P-party. He's a traitor."

Bela stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"Yes, a t-traitor! . . . He c-came here y-yesterday and s-said he was g-going to g-give himself up to s-save the p-peasant they'd a-arrested. I f-forbade h-him to do so in the name of the Party and the Revolutionary Committee. He g-gave me his w-word of h-honour and he's b-broken it. . . . He is a t-traitor and we shall cross him off!"

Bela rose.

"Orlov gave himself up?... Of his own accord? I can't believe it! It's impossible!"

"I w-wouldn't lie about it. It's w-worse for me than for you."

Bela flushed.

"Semenukhin, you're a lump of wood, a machine!... I can't!... Try to understand. I love him! It was for his sake I agreed to this ... to the possibility of failure ... to certain death."

"S-so m-much the worse," Semenukhin answered calmly. "It's a g-great pity you ch-chose such an individual. I'm g-going to c-call a s-special meeting of the Revcom to t-try Orlov.... S-such chicken-hearted Manilovs* aren't n-needed in the Party. So that's that!"

Bela asked chokingly:

"Is it true? You're not joking, Semenukhin?"

"This is h-hardly the t-time for jokes!"

Bela went away to the window. The quivering of her back told Semenukhin that she was crying.

But he maintained a stony silence.

At length Bela turned round. Her eyes were flowing with tears.

"Well?" Semenukhin asked.

Even he shuddered at the taut resilience of her voice:

"If this is true... I disown him! I despise my love."

"GOD-HELP-US"

Captain Tumanovich came back to the commission in the evening and, taking up his pen, opened the file containing the investigations of the "Special Commission Authorized by the Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of South Russia for the Investigation of Bolshevik Atrocities."

* Manilov—a sentimental character in Gogol's *Dead Souls*.—Tr.

He wrote several lines in a firm round hand, put aside his pen, gazed absently at the blue depths of the window, then, having drawn up his chair more comfortably, began to write his conclusion.

The captain's thin nose drooped over the paper and he began to look like a cunning ant-bear burrowing into an ant-hill.

As the last lines were being diligently penned, there was a cautious knock. The captain did not hear it. The knock was repeated.

Tumanovich laid his pen aside reluctantly and for a moment the cold blue icicles were dull and uncomprehending.

The ensign came in, saluted and said in a romantically villainous tone:

"The prisoner Orlov has been brought in accordance with your orders."

"Bring him in. . . . And bring him in yourself, please. Yesterday the soldiers made the whole office stink of tobacco. I can't stand that stench. I hope you don't mind."

Orlov was sitting on a bench in the ante-room. The soldiers stepped forward to escort him but the ensign took the rifle from one of them.

"I'll take him in myself! This way, Mr. Orlov."

They walked down the corridor.

"See what a guard of honour we're giving you," the ensign said shyly. "Captain's orders." Then he added mischievously: "Well, still thinking of running away?"

"I'll try not to delay your pleasure."

"I'd like to see you try it! . . . In fact, just between you and me, I'd like you to pull it off. I love that kind of thing."

Orlov laughed.

"All right. I won't disappoint you. You'll be satisfied."

In the office, Tumanovich handed Orlov a sheet of paper and a pen.

"I have only called you in for a minute. Sign this to say you have read the summing-up."

"What summing-up?"

"Of this investigation."

"Is that all? . . . Suppose I don't wish to?"

Tumanovich shrugged.

"Just as you like. It's only a formality."

Orlov silently scribbled his name at the bottom of the page.

"Anything else?"

"No. Ensign! Take the prisoner away."

The ensign's remark on the way to the office had stirred Orlov.

As he walked out of the captain's office, he steadied himself, tensing his will like a steel spring.

In the long corridor there were three turns between the ensign's room and Tumanovich's office. A fly-blown electric bulb burned dimly in the middle.

Orlov walked unhurriedly down the corridor. They passed under the light.

He turned in a flash. The rifle flew out of the ensign's hands, swung round and the ensign fell back with a gasp against the wall, the bayonet pricking at his throat.

"Not a sound! . . . Show me the way out or you're finished!"

"There are sentries in the street," the ensign whispered.

"Take me out the back way. You wanted to see me escape—well, this is it!"

The ensign detached himself from the wall. His lips were trembling but still smiling. On tiptoe he walked down the corridor, feeling the sharp tip of the bayonet under his shoulder-blade.

One turn, another. Almost complete darkness. The white shape of a door.

Orlov drew a deep breath.

"Here," said the ensign, gripping the handle.

The door was flung open. In the bright light Orlov caught a glimpse of a lavatory seat and a wash-basin.

Before he could recover, the door slammed behind the officer and a bolt clicked.

He was left in the darkness of the corridor, tricked and at a loss where to go.

Not a sound came from the lavatory.

Orlov swore quietly and dashed back along the corridor, hugging the wall. A door slammed somewhere and he froze to the spot.

At the same instant there was a deafening crash and, turning round, he saw a small round hole shining in the door.

A second shot.

Doors flew open, footsteps echoed down the corridor.

Then Orlov flung the rifle to his shoulder and shouted furiously: "All right . . . die in your piss-house, you swine!"

And, aiming calmly, he fired all four cartridges at the lavatory door, deafened by the tremendous vibration of the shots in the confined space of the corridor.

Someone jumped on him from behind and grabbed his arms. He jerked himself free, but something heavy struck him on the head and he fell on the dirty floor, hitting his jaw.

A heavy boot descended on the nape of his neck, another dug into his stomach.

Someone shouted, "Rope. . . . Bring a rope!"

Three men held him down while a rope was twisted round him, cutting into his arms and legs.

He was propped up in a sitting position against the wall.

"Where's Tereshchenko?" a tall officer asked.

"The devil knows! You can't see anything in this darkness! I expect he got him. Has anyone any matches?"

"Here's a lighter."

"I can't see him anywhere."

"He's in the w.c.! The door's been shot through!"

"Blast it! . . . He's killed the boy!"

The tall officer jumped over Orlov and tugged at the lavatory door. It cracked and began to give.

"Pull harder!"

The tall officer gave another pull, the bolt broke and the door flew open, banging against the wall.

Right up under the ceiling, crouching on the cistern and holding a pistol in one hand sat the dark-eyed ensign, his face deathly pale, his jaw trembling, his eyes goggling with fright.

His lips were moving rapidly and his ceaseless muttering was clearly audible to the silent group in the corridor.

"God-help-us ... God-help-us ... God-help-us ... God-help-us."

"The kid's gone crazy!" said one of the officers. "Tere-shchenko! Get down off there, damn you!"

But the ensign went on muttering and the officers were suddenly startled by barking sounds in the corridor.

Orlov was sitting where they had left him, letting out great barking yells of laughter.

"That's fine! Now this one's caught it!"

"What's going on here? What are you doing? Take the ensign down from his fortress! Good for him to think of climbing on the cistern. And bring Mr. Orlov to me."

Captain Tumanovich went back to his office. Two officers lifted Orlov and carried him along the corridor.

"Put him on the chair! That's right. Now you can go. Drink some water, Mr. Orlov."

The captain poured out a glass of water and held it to Orlov's lips.

He drank greedily, still shaking with laughter.

"I must say you are an exceptionally daring and resolute person. If that nice young man had not showed such presence of mind, you would have provided a job for Colonel Rosenbach. I don't suppose I should have seen you again. You planned it well, Mr. Orlov."

"Go to hell," Orlov snapped.

"No, I mean it quite seriously. And besides..."

There was a snarl from the field telephone on the desk. The captain lifted the receiver.

"Hullo."

The receiver crackled and Tumanovich recognized the amiable fruity baritone of Cornet Khrushchov, the Corps Commander's adjutant.

"Tumanovich, old dog's body! Is that you?"

"Yes. . . . What do you want at this hour?"

"All in good time. Mai's had a fit. He's like a Spanish bull in the arena, kicking up the dust. No one dares get near him. They're even afraid to give him a glass of brandy, think he'll kill them."

"But why?"

"Two misfortunes at once, my dear chap. First, his passion, that Lolka girl, you know, has snaffled all his diamonds and money and run off, so they think, with Snyatkovsky. That put him in a fine rage. And now we've just had a call to say that Chernetsov's division shit their pants at Mikhailovsky village, and Chernetsov. . . ."

"Killed?"

"No! We're informed he was taken prisoner. The Bolsheviks have offered an exchange. The chief of staff suggested exchanging him for your pigeon. Mai agreed. So you can take the official message."

The captain glanced round at Orlov. The prisoner was sitting with his eyes closed, exhausted and shaken.

Tumanovich shrugged his shoulders and said distinctly into the receiver: "Inform His Excellency that in view of recent developments the suggestion cannot be acted upon. Only a few minutes ago," the captain again glanced round at Orlov, "the prisoner Orlov attempted to escape, and to kill Ensign Tereshchenko."

Orlov stirred.

"Phew!" from the receiver. "And what shall we do about Chernetsov?"

"We'll find someone else to exchange. And if the 'comrades' do away with Chernetsov, it won't be any very

great loss. A few thousand uniforms saved from theft, that's all."

"You're probably right. I'll report that to Mai," said the cornet. "I'll ring you back."

The captain put down the receiver.

"You have no mercy towards your associates," said Orlov.

The captain's blue bits of ice gleamed cold anger at Orlov.

"I have no mercy on any criminal, no matter what side he's on. It is on your side that the man who steals most climbs highest."

"You have been misinformed, Captain," Orlov retorted with a dry laugh.

"Perhaps. Anyhow you've done yourself a bad turn."

"How?"

"If you hadn't tried this trick of escaping, you might have got away with an exchange. Now I shall insist that you be liquidated immediately."

"I'm extremely grateful to you!"

The telephone again played its nasal tune.

"Yes. . . . Speaking. Very good. . . . I thought so. Yes, that will be done. Yes. . . . Good-bye. No, I shan't be going to the theatre. I'm too busy."

The captain turned to Orlov.

"The general has confirmed our suggestion that you be tried by court martial. You will now be sent to your cell. My part is over. Good-bye, Mr. Orlov!"

A SIMPLE THING

The court martial lasted half an hour.

The presiding colonel whispered for a few minutes with the other members of the court, then coughed and read out lazily:

"By order of the Supreme Commander-in-Chief, the court martial of N— Corps, having heard the case of

Dmitry Orlov, a member of the Bolshevik Party, formerly Chairman of the Province Extraordinary Commission (Cheka), 32 years of age, decrees:—

The accused Orlov shall be executed by hanging. This sentence shall be carried out within 24 hours. It is final and carries no right of appeal."

Orlov listened indifferently to the sentence, merely commenting briefly at the end: "A pleasure to listen to."

He was taken back to his cell. Till nightfall he sat apparently calm and without emotion. But thoughts were racing through his brain as he considered the possibility of trying to make an escape on his way to the execution.

"I did it once in Kazan. . . . Cheated the noose. . . . And I'm not going to die like a sheep now either."

He cursed fiercely.

He paced up and down his cell. Suddenly he heard footsteps in the corridor. The door gave a wearisome creak and a golden shaft of light from a lantern poured into the cell.

"Stay here. I shall be out in a minute," said a familiar voice as a man entered. The man's face was in shadow and only when he said, "Mr. Orlov!" did Orlov recognize Captain Tumanovich.

Dark fury spurted up inside him. He strode up to the captain.

"What the hell do you want? Poking your Jesuit snout in here? Get out! . . ."

The captain calmly placed the lantern on the floor.

"Only a few minutes, Mr. Orlov. There is an official reason for my coming here, I have one small thing to see to. But that is not the real reason. I am able to inform you that the general has confirmed your sentence, except that he has substituted shooting for hanging, because the Commander-in-Chief has reprimanded him for gallows-mongering. But that makes no difference."

"Well, what is it then? Have you come to carry out the sentence in person?"

"Enough of this arrogance, Mr. Orlov. That is not what I have come for. As I have already said, from my own legal standpoint you deserve death. I should have been very sorry if we had had to exchange you for that old embezzler Chernetsov. To have spared the life of such an enemy as you would have been a flagrant political mistake. Now your fate is irrevocably decided. But remember, I promised you an easy death. I disliked the idea of your becoming a target for a squad of wet-legged infantry. . . . Take this!"

The captain held out his hand. A phial gleamed dully in the half-light.

Suddenly moved, Orlov seized the phial.

Neither spoke. The captain inclined his head.

"Good-bye, Mr. Orlov!"

But Orlov stepped up to him and pushed the phial back into his hand.

"I don't need it!" he said with a full and steady resonance in his voice.

"Why not?"

"Captain! I am very much indebted to you for your kindness, but I shall not take advantage of it. I overplayed my hand, I walked blindly into the arms of your curs, I failed to carry out the task the Party had set me, but I have no right to do further harm to the cause."

"I don't understand."

"You will never understand. But really it's such a simple thing. I have failed in the task I was entrusted with—now I must, if only by my death, make up for my mistake. You offer me the chance of quietly committing suicide. Of cheating your executioners of their last pleasure? I don't know why you do it! . . ."

"Don't think it's from pity," the captain interrupted.

"Perhaps not. For me personally that would be a fine way out. But we have our own peculiar psychology, Captain. At this moment I am interested not in my own personality but in our cause. My execution, when it becomes

known, will act as one more blow against your decaying world. It will kindle one more spark of vengeance in those who are behind me. But if I quietly take my own life here, that will make people say that Orlov, who failed to do his job, was frightened to pay the penalty and poisoned himself like a pregnant high-school girl. . . . But I have lived for the Party and I will die for it. You see how simple it is!"

"I understand," Tumanovich said calmly.

Orlov paced across the cell and again halted in front of the captain.

"Captain! You are a formalist, a pedant, you are soaked in legal formulas. You live in a shell, you have a soul of cardboard, you are a folder for filing papers in. But in your own way you have firmness. There is one thing that tortures me. . . . I talked to someone. . . . In short, I'm afraid my comrades think I gave myself up voluntarily. And I am afraid they despise me. I am afraid of that! Do you understand? I am afraid!"

The captain said nothing and dug at the floor with the toe of his boot.

"I refused to give evidence. But . . . I have here two written pages. They explain everything. Put them in the file. When the town is in our hands again. . . . You understand?"

"Very well," Tumanovich said. "Give them to me. I don't share your confidence about the town, but. . . ."

He took the sheets, folded them neatly and put them in his side pocket.

Orlov stepped forward.

"No. . . . No! I don't. . . ."

The captain smiled deprecatingly.

"Don't worry, Mr. Orlov. We are very different from each other, but I have my own, absolutely clear conception of judicial secrecy and personal honour."

Orlov turned away sharply. His emotion was near the surface, it had to be concealed.

"I shall not thank you! . . . Go away! Go, Captain . . . before I strike you! I never want to see you again!"

"You know," Tumanovich answered quietly, "I hope that I, too, when the day comes for me to die for my cause, may be granted such firmness!"

He picked up the lantern.

"Good-bye, Mr. Orlov." Tumanovich checked himself, as though suddenly frightened, and in the wavering yellow light Orlov saw the thin hand that the captain was holding out to him.

He placed his hands behind his back.

"No. That is impossible."

The hand quivered.

"Why?" the captain asked. "Or are you afraid it will harm your cause? Your comrades will never know about it."

Orlov smiled wryly and closed his hand firmly on the thin, bony fingers.

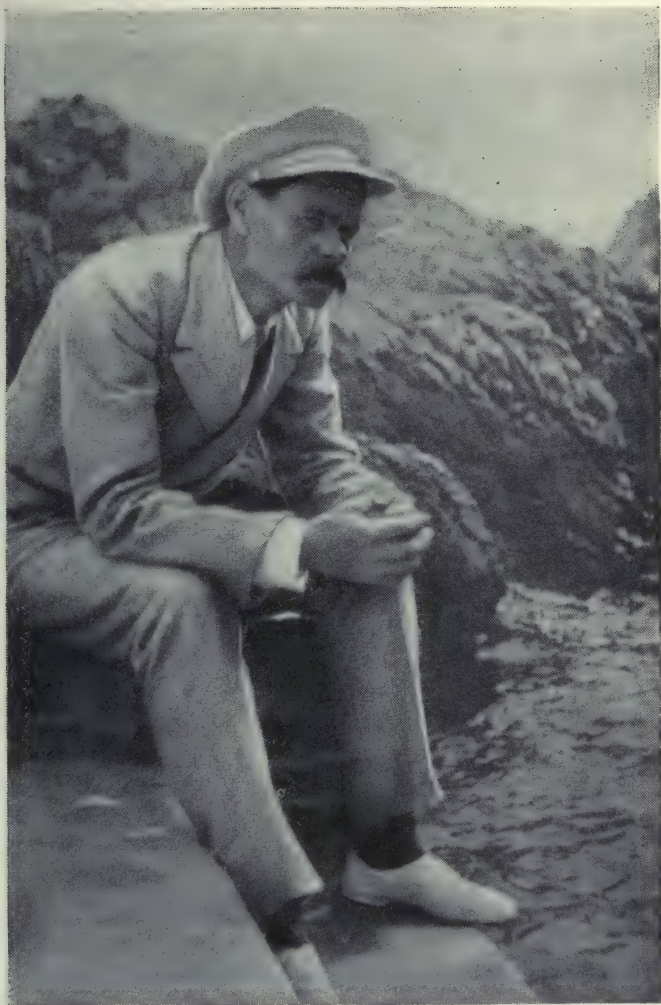
"I have no fear! Good-bye, Captain. I wish you a good death, too."

The captain went out into the corridor.

Darkness splashed into the cell, a soundless waterfall. The key turned in the lock, firm and sharp as the cocking of a gun.

July 1924

Translated by Robert Daglish



MAXIM GORKY
(1868-1936)

"...And the wisest of all the things he has learned to do is to love a woman and worship her beauty. All that is loveliest in the world has been born of his love of woman."

Such is the theme of the autobiographical story "First Love." It covers a period from 1889 to 1891 and is, as it were, a prolongation of the autobiographical trilogy "Childhood," "My Apprenticeship," and "My Universities." Again we see Gorky as the great humanist whose life and work was a hymn to man and man's creative powers.

FIRST LOVE

... It was then that fate, with the sole purpose of giving me a proper education, made me undergo a tragedy of first love.

Some friends of mine had arranged to go boating on the Oka River and had delegated me to invite X. and his wife, a couple who had recently returned from France and whom I had not yet met. I visited them in the evening.

They lived in the basement of an old house. In front of it, stretching from one side of the street to the other, was a puddle that remained there all spring and most of the summer. The crows and dogs used it as a looking-glass, the pigs as a bath.

So engrossed was I in my thoughts that I slipped and crashed into the door like a landslide, causing them no end of surprise. I was received coolly by a fattish man of middle height with a bushy brown beard and kindly blue eyes, who stood screening the doorway into the room behind him.

Pulling his clothes into place, he said curtly: "What can I do for you?" adding in rebuke: "Before entering a house one usually knocks at the door."

In the shadows of the room behind him I could see something like a big white bird fluttering about, and a clear bright voice said:

"Especially if it's a married couple you've come to see."

I asked with annoyance if they were the people I was looking for, and when the man, who looked like a prosperous tradesman, assured me they were, I explained why I had come.

"You say Clark has sent you?" repeated the man, stroking his beard solemnly. Suddenly he cried out, "Ouch! Olga!" and whirled round, clutching that part of the anatomy which, being located below the small of the back, is not mentioned in polite society.

His place in the doorway was taken by a slim girl who gazed at me with smiling blue eyes.

"Who are you? A policeman?"

"Oh, no. It's just my trousers," I replied politely.

She laughed, but I did not take offence because the gleam in her eyes was just what I had long been waiting for. Evidently it was my clothes that had made her laugh. I was wearing the full trousers of a policeman and the white jacket of a cook. This latter is a most convenient article of attire, substituting as it does for a suit coat and buttoning up to the throat so that no shirt is required underneath. Borrowed hunting-boots and the wide-brimmed hat worn by Italian banditti were effective finishing touches.

She pulled me by the sleeve into the room and pushed me towards the table.

"Why are you wearing such freakish clothes?" she asked.

"Why do you call them freakish?"

"Come, don't be angry," she said appeasingly.

What an odd girl! How could anyone be angry with her?

The man with the beard was sitting on the bed rolling a cigarette.

Indicating him with my eyes I asked:

"Is he your father or your brother?"

"My husband," she said deliberately; then, laughing: "Why?"

"Forgive me," I said after a moment's scrutiny of her face.

We went on making disconnected remarks for another five minutes or so, but I felt at ease and would willingly have sat in that basement room for five hours, or days, or years, for the pleasure of gazing at her fair oval face and gentle eyes. The lower lip of her small mouth was fuller than the upper one, giving the impression of being swollen a little. Her thick brown hair was clipped short and formed a fluffy cap upon her head, curling about her shell-like ears and pink cheeks. Her hands and arms were lovely; I had seen them bared to the elbow as she had stood in the doorway holding on to the jamb. She was dressed very simply, in a white shirtwaist, with full sleeves and lace trimmings, and a well-fitting white skirt. But the most remarkable feature about her was her eyes. What joy, sympathy, and friendly curiosity they radiated! And what is more, they were lighted by just the sort of smile (there could be no doubt about it!) a young man of twenty craves for, especially if his heart has been bruised by rough handling.

"It's about to rain," announced her husband, exhaling a cloud of smoke into his beard.

I glanced out of the window. The sky was clear and studded with stars. I took the hint and went away, but I was filled with the quiet joy of one who has found what he has long sought for.

All night long I wandered through the fields, ruminating upon the tender shine of those blue eyes. By morning I had convinced myself that that burly creature with the beard and the contented look of a well-fed cat was no husband for her. Indeed, I was filled with pity for her, poor dear! To think of having to live with a man who wore bread crumbs in his beard!

On the next day we went boating on the murky Oka under a high embankment streaked by layers of varicol-

oured marl. The day was the finest since the creation of the world. The sun blazed in a festive sky, the fragrance of ripe strawberries was wafted over the river, people were aware of their own goodness and this filled me with joy and love for them. Even the husband of my adored turned out to be a fine chap—he did not get into the boat in which his wife sat and which I rowed. He behaved admirably all day. First he told us interesting stories about Gladstone, then he drank a jug of excellent milk, stretched himself out under a tree, and slept like a child until night-fall.

Naturally our boat arrived first at the picnic site, and when I carried my lady out she said:

“How strong you are!”

I felt capable of overturning the highest steeple and told her it would cost me no effort to carry her all the way back to town (which was a good seven versts). She laughed softly and caressed me with her eyes. All day long I was conscious of the shine of her eyes, and, of course, I was certain they shone only for me.

Matters developed with a rapidity that was not strange when you consider that the young woman had never before seen an animal so extraordinary, and that the animal was pining for a woman's tenderness.

Soon I learned that, despite her youthful appearance, she was ten years my elder, had graduated from a School for Young Women of the Nobility in Belostok, had been engaged to the Commandant of the Winter Palace in Petersburg, had lived in Paris, and had studied both painting and obstetrics. Later it turned out that her mother, too, had been an obstetrician and had been responsible for bringing me into the world. I took this fact as a good omen and rejoiced in it.

Her association with Bohemians and political émigrés, the liaison she had formed with one of the latter, the half-starved, half-vagrant life they had led in the basements and attics of Paris, Petersburg, and Vienna, had given her

an amusingly inconsistent but exceptionally interesting personality. She was as pert as a tomtit, observed life and people with the curiosity of a clever schoolgirl, sang French songs with spirit, smoked cigarettes gracefully, drew skilfully, showed some talent as an actress, and was expert in making clothes and hats. The one thing she did not practise was obstetrics.

"I have had only four patients in my life and seventy-five per cent of them died," she said.

This was enough to make her lose all taste for aiding, though indirectly, the population increase. As for direct aid, a pretty and charming four-year-old daughter testified to her high qualifications in this field. She spoke about herself as of someone she knew intimately and had grown a bit bored with. But at times it was as if she caused herself astonishment: her eyes would grow beautifully dark and a faint smile of embarrassment would glimmer in their depths. Shy children smile in the same way.

I was aware of her quick keen mind, I realized she was vastly superior to me in education, and was struck by the amiable condescension with which she regarded her fellows. She was infinitely more interesting than any other girl or woman I had ever met. The casual way in which she told a story impressed me and led me to believe that in addition to knowing all that my revolutionary-minded friends knew, she was in possession of other knowledge, higher and more precious, that caused her to watch everything from a distance, as a bystander, wearing the smile a grown-up wears when watching the amusing, if risky, play of children.

The basement quarters in which she lived consisted of two rooms: a small kitchen which served as an entrance-hall as well, and a big room with three windows facing the street and two looking out on a dirty refuse-strewn yard. Doubtless they would have made convenient quarters for a cobbler, but not for an elegant lady who had lived in

Paris, the sacred city of the Great Revolution, of Molière, Beaumarchais, Hugo, and others of their kind. There were many other incongruities between the picture and the frame, all of which irritated me and evoked, among other sentiments, a feeling of compassion for this woman. Yet she herself seemed to be oblivious of things which I felt she should have found deeply offensive.

She was busy from morning to night. In the morning she worked as cook and chamber-maid, then she sat down at the big table under the windows and made pencil portraits from photographs of prosperous townsmen, or drew maps and coloured them, or helped her husband compile books of rural statistics. The dust of the street drifted down through the open window upon her head and the table, and the legs of passers-by threw thick shadows across her papers. She sang as she worked and when she grew tired of sitting would get up and waltz with a chair or play with her child. Despite all the dirty work she did, she was always as neat and clean as a kitten.

Her husband was lazy and good-natured. He was given to reading French novels in bed, especially the novels of Dumas *père*. "They sweep the dust out of your brain-cells," he would say. He viewed life "from a purely scientific point of view," called dining "the absorbing of nourishment," and, having dined, would say:

"In order to transfer food from the stomach to the body cells the organism must be in a state of absolute repose."

And so he would climb into bed without so much as shaking the crumbs out of his beard, read Dumas or de Montépin for a few minutes, and for the next two hours snore blissfully, causing his soft moustache to stir as if invisible insects were crawling in it. On waking up he would stare ponderously at the cracks in the ceiling for a while and at last come out with:

"Kuzma gave a wrong interpretation of Parnell's ideas last night."

And soon thereafter he would set out for Kuzma's with

the purpose of putting him right, saying to his wife in parting:

“Finish calculating the data from the Maidan Volost for me, that’s a dear. I’ll be back soon.”

At midnight or later he would come home in high spirits.

“Didn’t I give it to Kuzma, just! He’s got a good memory for facts, drat him, but so have I. By the way, he doesn’t understand the first thing about Gladstone’s eastern policy.”

He was always talking about Binet, Richet, and mental hygiene, and when he was kept indoors by rain he would undertake the education of his wife’s little girl, who had been born by chance somewhere along the road between two love affairs.

“You must chew your food thoroughly, Lolya; that aids digestion by accelerating the transformation of food into a conglomerate of chemical elements easily absorbed.”

After dinner, when he had reduced his organism to a state of “absolute repose,” he would take the child to bed with him and say, by way of telling her a story:

“And so when the vain and blood-thirsty Napoleon usurped power. . . .”

His lectures sent his wife into convulsions of laughter but he did not mind—he was asleep before he had time to mind. After playing with his silky beard awhile, the little girl would curl up and fall asleep too. I became great friends with her. She enjoyed the stories I told her more than Boleslav’s lectures on the blood-thirsty usurper and his unfortunate Josephine. My success made Boleslav amusingly jealous.

“I object, Peshkov! Before a child is brought into contact with life itself it must be taught the basic principles underlying it. Too bad you don’t know English so that you could read *Mental Hygiene for Children*. . . .”

He himself, it seems, knew only one word of English: “Good-bye.”

He was twice my age but as inquisitive as a young poodle. He liked to gossip and create the impression of knowing all the secrets of foreign as well as Russian revolutionary circles. Perhaps he really did know them, for he was always being visited by mysterious strangers who behaved as if they were great tragedians forced for the moment to play the part of simpletons. It was at his house I met the revolutionary Sabunayev who, being in hiding from the police, wore an ill-fitting red wig and a gaudy suit that was comically tight for him.

One day when I arrived I caught sight of a perky little man with a small head who looked like a hairdresser. He was wearing checked trousers, a grey jacket, and squeaky shoes. Boleslav pushed me into the kitchen and whispered:

"He's just come from Paris with important information. He's got to see Korolenko; be so kind as to arrange it."

I tried to, but it turned out that Korolenko had had the man pointed out to him in the street and so he said to me in no uncertain terms:

"No, thank you, I will have nothing to do with that fop!"

Boleslav took this as an insult both to the Parisian and the "cause." He spent the next two days composing a letter to Korolenko, couching his protest now in terms of wrathful denunciation, now in a tone of gentle rebuke, and at last consigning all his epistolary efforts to the stove. Soon after this a series of arrests were made in Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod, and Vladimir, and it turned out that the man in the checked trousers was none other than the famous Landezen-Garting, the first police agent I had ever set eyes upon.

But taken all in all the husband of my beloved was a good sort, a little sentimental and with a comic streak supplied by the "scientific baggage" he was burdened with. He himself used to say:

"An intellectual's only excuse for living is to accumulate scientific knowledge which he can then distribute among the masses with no thought of personal gain."

My attachment deepened and caused me acute suffering. As I sat in the basement watching my beloved bending over her work-table I became possessed of a dark longing to pick her up in my arms and carry her away from that accursed room stuffed with furniture—the big double bed, the heavy old-fashioned divan on which the child slept, the tables piled high with dusty books and papers. The legs of passers-by flashed past the windows, from time to time a homeless dog thrust its muzzle in; gusts of wind brought the stench of refuse rotting in the sun. Inside the room—stuffy air, the girlish figure at the table, her quiet singing, the scrape of her pen or pencil, the smile of her cornflower-blue eyes lifted for a moment to mine. . . . I loved her to distraction and pitied her to despair.

“Tell me some more about yourself,” she once said.

I began to tell her, but in a few moments she interrupted me:

“It’s not about yourself you’re talking.”

I realized only too well that what I was saying was not about myself, but about someone I have confused myself with.

I had yet to find my real self in the chaos of my impressions and adventures. So far I had been unable, even afraid, to do so. Who and what was I? The question baffled me. I was bitter against life; it had already driven me to a humiliating attempt at suicide. I did not understand people and found the lives they led to be stupid, low, and meaningless. A cultivated curiosity made me peer into all the dark corners of existence, into all the mysteries of life, and at times I felt myself capable of committing crime out of sheer curiosity—capable of committing murder just to see how I would feel afterwards.

I feared that if I found my true self my beloved would see me as a revolting creature caught in a fine mesh of preposterous thoughts and feelings; a ghoulish creature who would frighten and repel her. It was expedient that I do something about myself. I was certain that she would

be able to help me and even to weave a magic spell which would liberate me from the dark impressions of the life around me. Then my soul would burst into a flame of surpassing strength and joy.

The casual tone in which she spoke of herself and the condescending attitude she showed to others led me to believe that she was in possession of some extraordinary truth, that she held in her hand the key to all of life's mysteries, and that was why she was always so gay and sure of herself. Perhaps I loved her most for what I least comprehended, but the fact was that I loved her with all the strength and passion of youth. It was anguish for me to suppress a passion that consumed and exhausted me physically. A simpler, cruder acceptance of it would have eased my sufferings, but I believed that the relationship between a man and woman was something greater than the mere physical union which I knew in its bestial form; in that form it inspired me almost with loathing, even though I was a strong and fairly sensual youth with an imagination that was easily fired.

How I should have become possessed of this romantic dream is more than I can say, but unwavering was my faith in something beyond all that I knew, something that contained within it the lofty and mysterious meaning of a man's relations with a woman, something great, joyful, even terrible, to be revealed in the first embrace; and I believed that he who experienced this great joy would be transformed for ever.

It seems to me that I did not get these fancies from the books I read; I cultivated them just to be perverse for, as I said in an early poem of mine, "I've come to this world to disagree."

Furthermore, I had a strange and haunting memory: somewhere beyond the bounds of reality, some time in my earliest existence, I had experienced a great spiritual perturbation, a sweet agitation, or rather—a foretaste of harmony, a joy more bright than the sun in its rising.

Perhaps it was while I was still in my mother's womb that the nervous energy of some great joy she experienced was communicated to me in a fiery flash that gave my soul birth, ignited it to life; and perhaps that stunning moment of my mother's rapture launched me in life with a latent and quivering expectation of something extraordinary to be had of woman.

What a man does not know, he imagines. And the wisest of all the things he has learned to do is to love a woman and worship her beauty. All that is loveliest in the world has been born of his love of woman.

One day while bathing in the river I dived off the stern of a barge, struck my chest against the anchor-chain and caught my foot in it. There I hung, head-down in the water, until a carter pulled me out. They pumped the water out of me, scraping my skin badly. I was sick and spat blood and was made to go to bed and suck ice.

My beloved came to see me. She sat down beside my bed and asked how it had happened, smoothing my forehead with her dear hand and gazing at me with dark unquiet eyes.

I asked her if she couldn't see that I loved her.

"Yes," she said with a wary smile. "I see, and that is too bad, though I love you too."

At her words the earth leaped up and the trees in the garden reeled with joy. I was struck dumb with rapture and astonishment; I buried my head in her lap, and if I had not held on to her tightly I must surely have gone sailing through the window like a soap bubble.

"Don't move, it is bad for you," she said sternly, trying to put my head back on the pillow. "And if you don't calm yourself I will go home. What a mad fellow you are! I never knew anyone like you! As to us and our feelings—we'll talk about them when you get better."

She spoke with complete composure and the smile in her glowing eyes was inexpressibly tender. Soon she went away, leaving me radiant with hope and filled with the

confidence that with her help I would soar into a realm of new thoughts and feelings.

A few days later we were sitting in a field at the edge of a gully outside of town. The wind rustled the bushes down below. A grey sky threatened rain. In drab, practical words she pointed out to me the difference in our ages, saying I had to begin studying and that it was too soon for me to burden myself with a wife and child. These dismal truths, spoken in the tone of a mother to her child, succeeded only in making me love and respect her the more. It was both sad and sweet to listen to her voice and her tender words. Never before had anyone spoken to me in such a way.

I glanced down into the yawning gully where the bushes, swept by the wind, were like a swift-moving green river, and in my heart of hearts I vowed to repay her for the affection she showed me by giving her my whole soul.

"We must think well before making any decision," I heard her say softly. She was slapping her knees with a hickory wand as she sat gazing in the direction of the town, which was buried in the green of its orchards.

"And naturally I must speak to Boleslav; he already suspects something and is fidgety. I don't like scenes."

It was all very sad and beautiful, but, as it turned out, there had to be a comic and vulgar touch.

My trousers were too wide for me at the waist and I had pinned them together with a brass pin some three inches long (such pins are not made any more, fortunately for impecunious lovers). The pin kept scratching me, and once when I made a careless movement it plunged into my side. I managed to extract it, but to my horror I felt the blood come spurting out of the wound, wetting my trousers. I had on no underwear and the cook's jacket came only to my waist. How was I to get up and walk away in wet trousers that clung to my legs?

Aware of the absurdity of the accident and angry that it should have taken such a burlesque form, I began to

talk excitedly in the unnatural voice of an actor who has forgotten his lines.

She listened to me for a while, at first attentively, then with obvious perplexity.

"What high-sounding phrases!" she said. "It doesn't sound like you at all."

That was the last straw; I shut up like a clam.

"Time to go home, it's going to rain."

"I'm staying here."

"Why?"

What could I say?

"Are you angry with me?" she asked, peering tenderly into my eyes.

"Oh, no! With myself."

"You mustn't be angry with yourself either," she said, getting up.

I could not move. As I sat there in that warm puddle I fancied the blood was pouring out of my side with a noise she could not fail to detect, and that presently she would ask:

"What's that?"

"Go away," I mentally beseeched her.

She generously bestowed on me a few more tender words, then turned and walked away along the edge of the gully, swaying gently on her lovely legs. I watched her slim form diminish until she was out of sight; then I threw myself down on the ground, crushed by the certainty that this, my first love, would turn out unhappily.

And so it did. Her husband shed tears and mumbled a lot of sentimental drivel and she could not make up her mind to swim to my side across that treacherous stream.

"He's so helpless and you're so strong!" she said to me with tears in her eyes. "He says if I leave him he'll wither like a flower without the sun..."

I guffawed at the recollection of the stumpy legs, womanish hips, and melon-shaped belly of the "flower."

He had flies in his beard—they always found something to feed on there.

She smiled.

“It *was* a ridiculous thing to say,” she admitted, “but it really is hard for him.”

“And for me, too.”

“Oh, but you’re young and strong!”

For the first time in my life I felt that I was an enemy of the weak. Later on I was often to observe, in more serious circumstances, how tragically helpless the strong are when hemmed in by the weak, and how much precious energy of heart and mind is wasted on preserving the barren existence of those intended by Nature to perish.

Soon after that, half-ill and on the verge of insanity, I left the town and for nearly two years tramped the roads of Russia. I traversed the valleys of the Volga and the Don; wandered through the Ukraine, the Crimea, and the Caucasus, absorbed countless impressions, had all sorts of adventures, and became coarser and more resentful than ever, yet deep in my heart I preserved the image of this woman, though I met others who were better and more clever than she.

And when one autumn day in Tiflis more than two years later I was told she had again come back from Paris and was delighted to hear that I was in the same town, I fainted for the first time in my life, strong, twenty-three-year-old youth that I was.

Perhaps I would never have found the courage to go and see her if she had not sent me an invitation through one of her friends.

I found her more lovely and charming than ever. She had the same girlish figure, the same delicate colouring, the same tender shine in her blue eyes. Her husband had remained in France; she had come alone with her daughter, a child as lively and graceful as a doe.

A thunderstorm was raging when I went to see her; the air was noisy with the downpour, rivers of rain streamed off

Mount St. David, rushing through the streets with a force that tore up the cobblestones. The house was shaken by the roar of the wind, the angry splash of the water, and the bang and crash of destruction. The window-panes rattled, the room was continually lighted up by livid flashes, and everything seemed to be plunging down into a bottomless pit.

The frightened child buried her head in the bed-clothes; we stood at the window blinded by the lightning and speaking for some reason in a whisper.

"I've never before seen such a storm," came the words of my beloved.

Suddenly she asked, "Well, have you got over your feeling for me?"

"No."

She showed surprise and said in the same whisper:

"Goodness, how you've changed! You're an entirely different person!"

Slowly she sank into an armchair beside the window, started and frowned as a particularly vivid sheet of lightning flashed, and said:

"There's a lot of talk about you. What brought you here? Tell me about yourself."

God! How tiny and wonderful she was!

I talked until midnight, as if making confession to her. Nature in its grimmer aspects always excites me and makes me wildly jubilant. I must have spoken well, judging by the strained attention with which she listened and the fixed glance of her wide-open eyes. She only whispered from time to time:

"How really awful!"

On taking leave I noticed she said good-bye without the patronizing smile of an elder to a younger that in former days had always vexed me. I walked down the wet streets watching the sharp sickle of the moon mow down the clouds, my head spinning with happiness. The next day I sent her the following poem by post (she recited it so often afterwards that it stuck in my memory):

My lady!

*A tender word, a gentle glance,
suffice to make an humble slave
of this magician,
fine-skilled in the art of transforming
trifles, nothing,
into little joys.*

*Accept unto yourself this slave!
Perhaps he will transform little joys
into a great happiness.*

*Was not the great world created
of tiny particles of matter?*

*A none too jolly world I do confess,
a world of rare and meagre joys;
and yet it has its comic side:
your humble slave, for instance,
and a lovely side as well:
who lovelier than you?*

But stay!

*Can the blunt nails of words
fix the ethereal loveliness of you—
fairest of earth's few flowers?*

This, of course, can hardly be called a poem, but it was written with jocular sincerity.

And so here I am, once more sitting opposite the most wonderful person in the world, one I cannot live without. She is wearing a blue gown which falls about her in soft folds without hiding the graceful outlines of her form. She speaks in words that are new to me as she sits playing with the tassels of her belt, and I watch the movement of her slender fingers tipped by pink nails and fancy I am like a violin being tuned by a skilful and loving musician. I long to die, I long to breathe this woman into my soul so that she will remain with me for ever. My body is taut and aching with strain and it seems as if my heart must burst.

I read my first story to her (it had just been published) but I don't remember what she thought of it. I seem to remember her saying in surprise:

"So you've turned to writing prose!" and then, as in a dream: "I've thought of you a lot during these last two years. Can it really be that you have undergone all these hardships for my sake?"

I murmured something about there being no hardships in a world in which she lived.

"How nice you are...."

I longed desperately to embrace her, but I had such idiotically long arms and big hands that I dared not touch her for fear of hurting her. And so there I stood, swaying to the throbbing of my heart and murmuring:

"Come and live with me; I implore you to live with me!"

She laughed softly and with some embarrassment, and her dear eyes were blindingly bright. She withdrew into a corner of the room and said from there:

"This is what we'll do: you go back to Nizhny Novgorod and I'll stay here and think it over; then I'll write to you."

Bowing respectfully, like a hero out of one of the novels I had read, I walked away—on air.

That winter she and her daughter joined me in Nizhny.

"Even the nights are short when a poor man marries," is the sad wisdom of a Russian folk saying. My own experience taught me the truth of it.

For two rubles a month we rented a whole house—the bath-house in a priest's back yard. I occupied the entry and my wife moved into the bath itself, which served us as drawing-room too. The building was hardly suited to family life—ice formed in the corners and along the seams. I worked mostly at night, wrapped up in all the clothes I owned with a carpet on top, and even so I caught a bad case of rheumatism—most unexpected considering the hardness. I took such pride in it at that time.

The bath itself was warmer, but whenever I made a fire in the stove the rooms reeked of soap, steamed birch leaves, and rotting wood. This made the little girl (a porcelain doll with beautiful eyes) grow nervous and get a headache.

In the spring spiders and wood-lice made their home in the bath-house. Mother and daughter nearly fainted at the sight of them and I had to swat them with a galosh. Our tiny windows were overgrown with wild elder-berry and raspberry bushes, which kept the rooms in a state of twilight, but the drunken and capricious priest would not allow me to uproot or even clip them.

We could, of course, have found more convenient quarters, but we owed the priest money and he was so fond of me he would not let me go.

"You'll get used to it," he would say. "And if not, pay me my money and go wherever you like—you can live with the English for all I care."

He hated the English.

"They're a lazy lot, never invented anything but 'Solitaire' and don't know how to fight," he asserted.

He was an enormous creature with a round red face and a big red beard, and he drank so much that he could no longer conduct services in the church. He suffered unspeakably for love of a little, sharp-nosed, black-haired seamstress who looked like a jack-daw.

He would slap the tears out of his beard with the palm of his hand as he told me about the tricks she played on him:

"I know she's a harpy but she reminds me of Phimiama the Martyr and that's why I love her."

I looked for that particular martyr in the *Lives of the Saints* but could not find her.

Indignant that I should be so unbelieving, he tried to stir my soul by exhorting me in the following way:

"Take a practical view of it, son: there's millions of believers and only a dozen or so non-believers. Why's

that? Because a soul without the church is like a fish without water. See? Let's have a drink on it."

"I don't drink—bad for my rheumatism."

Spearing a piece of herring with his fork, he brandished it over his head and said threateningly:

"And that, too, is because you've got no faith."

I could not sleep nights for the shame of having my beloved live in that bath-house, of often having no money to buy meat for dinner or a toy for the child, of all my accursed poverty. I myself was not embarrassed by poverty, but it was humiliating and calamitous that this well-bred young woman, and especially her little girl, should have to endure it.

At night as I sat at my table in the corner copying legal documents or writing stories I would grit my teeth and curse myself, my love, my fate, and people in general.

My beloved was magnanimous; she was like a mother who does not want her son to see how hard life is for her. Not once did a complaint escape her lips; the harder our conditions, the brighter her voice, the gayer her laugh. From morning to night she drew portraits of priests and their dead wives and made maps of the district. For these maps the local administration was once awarded a gold medal at an exhibition. When orders for portraits were not forthcoming she made fashionable Parisian hats for the women in our street out of bits of silk, straw, and wire. I was no judge of ladies' hats, but her fantastic creations must have been highly amusing, for she choked with laughter whenever she tried them on in front of the looking-glass. And they had a strange effect on their wearers, who stuck out their bellies with a particularly proud air as they walked down the street with her birds' nests perched on their heads.

I worked as a lawyer's clerk and wrote stories for the local newspaper, receiving two kopeks a line for my creative efforts. If we had no guests for tea in the evening my wife would amuse me by telling me stories of her

school days. Alexander II, it seems, had paid frequent visits to the boarding-school in Belostok. He had treated the young ladies to sweets which in some miraculous way made some of them pregnant, and from time to time one or another of the prettiest of the girls accompanied him on hunting trips to the Belovezhskaya Reservation and then went straight to Petersburg to be married.

She told me lots of interesting things about Paris; I had already learned something about it through my reading, especially of the weighty volume written by Maxime Du Camp. She had learned to know Paris in the cafés of Montmartre and by living the wild life of the Latin Quarter. I found her stories more stimulating than wine and I wrote paeans to women, convinced that all the beauty in the world was inspired by love of them.

Most of all I enjoyed hearing about her own love affairs—she told about them in a fascinating way and with a candour that sometimes caused me embarrassment. Laughingly, her words like light pencil strokes, she sketched for me a picture of the general to whom she had been engaged. Once during a royal hunting party he had shot an aurochs without giving the Tsar the opportunity to do so first, then had cried to the wounded beast: "Forgive me, Your Majesty!"

She told me about Russian political émigrés, and as she spoke I always fancied there was a smile of condescension on her lips. At times her sincerity led her to become naïvely cynical; she would run the pink tip of her tongue over her lips like a kitten and a peculiar light would shine in her eyes; sometimes she showed disgust. But mostly she was like a little girl absorbed in playing dolls.

One day she said to me:

"When a Russian is in love he becomes talkative and boring—sometimes even objectionably eloquent. The French are the only ones who know how to make love. For them love is almost a religion."

After that I involuntarily became more restrained with her.

She said about French women:

"Their hearts are not always passionately tender, but in place of this they offer a carefully cultivated sensuality. Love for them is an art."

Her tone was grave and instructive as she told me this. It was not the knowledge I was most in need of, but it was knowledge none the less, and I drank it in eagerly.

"The difference between the Russians and the French is probably the same as the difference between fruit and fruit-flavoured sweetmeats," she said one moonlit night.

She herself was a sweetmeat. I greatly astonished her during the first days of our life together by ardently expounding my romantic views on the relations between men and women.

"Are you serious? Do you really think that?" she had asked as she lay in my arms bathed in blue moonlight. Her pale flesh was transparent and gave off the heady fragrance of almonds. Her slender fingers played absent-mindedly with my hair and there was an incredulous smile on her lips as she gazed at me with wide and unquiet eyes.

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed, leaping down on to the floor and pacing backwards and forwards, from light into shadow, her fair skin gleaming like satin when the moonbeams fell on it, her bare feet noiselessly touching the floor boards. She came back to me and put her hands on my cheeks as she said in a maternal tone:

"Your first experience should have been with an innocent girl—yes it should! Not with me."

When I picked her up in my arms she began to weep.

"You do realize how much I love you, don't you?" she asked softly. "I have never been so happy with anybody as I am with you—that is the truth and you must believe me. I never loved anybody else so tenderly and with such a light heart. You can't even imagine how good it is to be

with you! And yet I say we have made a mistake—I am not the person for you—not for you. I have made a mistake.”

I did not understand her. Her words frightened me and I hastened to smother her mood in joyous endearments. But her odd words stuck in my memory. A few days later she again said, with ecstatic tears:

“Ah, if only you were my first love!”

I remember its being a stormy night; the elder-berry branches beat against the window-panes, the wind howled in the chimney, the room was dark and cold and filled with the rustle of torn wallpaper.

Whenever we had a few extra rubles we would invite our friends to a fine supper: meat, vodka and beer, pastries, and all sorts of good things. My Parisian had an excellent appetite and a weakness for Russian food: *sychug* (cow's maw stuffed with buckwheat and goose fat); pies with sheat-fish filling; mutton-and-potato soup.

She founded the “Order of Bursting Bellies” with a membership of a dozen or so friends who enjoyed hearty meals and good drink, had a fine knowledge of the culinary art, and could discourse on it eloquently and indefatigably. I was interested in art of another sort; I ate little and paid no attention to the process of feeding—it was not included in my aesthetic requirements.

“Empty sacks,” was what I once called the Brothers of the Bursting Bellies.

“Anybody's empty if you give him a good shaking,” she retorted. “Heine once said: ‘We're all naked underneath our clothes.’”

She knew a lot of cynical quotations, but it seemed to me she did not always apply them aptly.

She was fond of “giving a good shaking” to members of the male sex and was very skilful at it. Her wit and gaiety enabled her to make things lively wherever she was and

she roused emotions that were not of the highest order. After talking to her for but a few moments a man's ears would turn red, then purple, his eyes would grow hazy, and he would gaze at her like a goat at a cabbage patch.

"A magnetic woman," observed the notary's assistant, a seedy nobleman with warts on his face and a belly the size of a church dome.

A fair-haired student from Yaroslavl wrote poetry to her—always in dactyls. I found the poetry loathsome but it made her laugh till the tears came.

"Why do you stir them up?" I once asked her.

"It's just as good sport as fishing," she said. "It's called flirting, and there's not a self-respecting woman in the world who doesn't enjoy it."

Sometimes she would peer slyly into my eyes and ask: "Jealous?"

No, I was not jealous, but I was annoyed. I could not bear vulgarity. Jovial by nature, I realized that the ability to laugh was one of man's highest gifts. I despised circus clowns and stage comedians, sure that I could easily outdo them. Often I made our guests laugh till their sides ached.

"You'd make a marvellous comedian!" she once said. "You ought to go on the stage, really you ought."

She herself acted successfully in amateur performances and had had offers from professional producers.

"I love the stage, but I'm afraid of the backstage," she said.

She was truthful in thought, word, and desire.

"You philosophize too much," she would say to me. "Life in its essence is crude and simple. There's no sense in complicating it by searching for hidden meanings—the only thing one can do is try to make it less crude. No one can do more."

I felt there was too much gynaecology in her philosophy, and *A Course in Obstetrics* was her Bible. She herself told me what a shock she had got when, on leaving the girls' school, she had read her first scientific book.

"I had been so very innocent that it was like being hit over the head with a bat. I came plunging down out of the clouds into the mud, and I wept for the faith I had lost. But soon I felt that the ground under my feet was firm, if rough. The thing I wept for most was God—I had felt so very close to Him, and all of a sudden He dissolved in thin air, like cigarette smoke, and with Him went my exalted dreams of love. How much we had thought, how beautifully we had talked about love at school!"

I was repelled by her nihilism—a mixture of a school-girl's naivete and Parisian worldliness. Sometimes I would get up from my desk at night and go to look at her. She looked even smaller, more dainty, and beautiful in bed, and as I stood gazing down at her I would bitterly regret the vicissitudes of life that had warped her soul. My pity for her only strengthened my love.

Our literary tastes were quite different: I was an admirer of Balzac and Flaubert, she preferred Paul Féval, Octave Feuillet, and Paul de Kock. She was especially fond of the novel *Young Giraud, My Wife*, which she considered one of the wittiest she had ever read; I found it as boring as the criminal code. Despite this we got on well, did not become bored with each other or stop loving each other. But in the third year of our life together I became aware of something ominous stirring within me—and stirring with growing insistence. I was reading and studying intensively at the time and had begun to take my writing seriously. Our numerous guests interfered with my work. Most of them were uninteresting people, and their numbers had increased as an increase in our earnings made it possible for us to give dinners and suppers more frequently.

Life for her was a sort of panopticon, and since the men wore no sign reading "Please, do not touch," she would sometimes go too close to them and they would interpret this to their own advantage. Misunderstandings resulted which I was obliged to clear up. I was sometimes too

impulsive, I was always inept; I remember a gentleman, whose ears I tweaked, complaining:

“Very well, I admit being at fault, but what right had he to tweak my ears? I’m not a schoolboy! I’m almost twice his age, and he goes tweaking my ears! A punch in the jaw would have been more dignified.”

Apparently I was not versed in the art of dealing punishment appropriate to the offender’s sense of dignity.

My wife did not take my stories very seriously, but at first I did not mind this. I myself did not believe that I would ever become a writer. True, I did experience moments of inspiration, but on the whole I looked upon my newspaper work as merely a means of gaining a livelihood. One morning I read “Old Izergil,” the fruit of my night’s labours, to her. She fell fast asleep. I was not offended at first. I stopped reading and gazed at her thoughtfully. The head I loved so dearly had dropped against the back of the rickety sofa, her lips were parted, and she was breathing as softly and evenly as an infant. The morning sun came peering through the elder-berry boughs at the window, scattering golden patches like transparent flowers over her breast and knees.

I got up and went out into the garden, now deeply hurt and filled with doubts as to my own powers.

Never in my life had I seen a woman who was not either steeped in dirt, lechery, poverty, and slavish labour, or in stuffy, vulgar, overfed self-complacency. Childhood had given to me only one lovely vision—that of Queen Margot, but a whole mountain range of other impressions separated me from her. I had supposed that women would rejoice in the story of Izergil’s life, that it would rouse in them a longing for freedom and beauty. And here was the woman I loved best—sleeping!

Why? Perhaps the instrument life had put into my hands was inadequate?

This woman occupied the place of a mother in my heart. I had hoped and believed that she would be able to

stimulate my creative powers, and that under her influence the edges would be taken off the roughness life had developed in me.

That was thirty years ago, and the remembrance draws a smile to my lips today. But at that time her indisputable right to sleep when she felt the necessity of it caused me untold pain.

I believed that sadness could be dispelled by talking about it in tones of levity. And I also suspected that someone who enjoyed human suffering was interfering in human affairs: an evil spirit that concocted family dramas and ruined people's lives. I looked upon this invisible demon as my personal enemy and did everything in my power to avoid his traps.

I remember that on reading (in Oldenburg's *Buddha, His Teachings and Followers*) the phrase "All existence is suffering," I deeply resented it. I had not seen much joy in life, but I felt that its suffering was fortuitous, not inevitable. And after a careful perusal of Bishop Chrisanth's *Religion of the Orient* I was even more deeply convinced that nothing could be more alien to my nature than a teaching that made sorrow, fear, and suffering the foundations of all life. After living through an intense period of religious ecstasy, I came to realize the humiliating futility of such emotion. Suffering became so repellent to me that I hated any sort of drama and learned to skilfully convert drama into comedy.

Perhaps it is unnecessary to go into all this merely for the purpose of saying that a "family drama" was developing in our house, and that both of us were doing our best to prevent it. I have allowed myself this philosophical digression in order to retrace the tortuous path I traversed in the search for my true self.

My wife's innate cheerfulness made it impossible for her to play at drama—a game so many of your "psychologizing" Russians of both sexes thoroughly enjoy.

And yet the dreary dactyls of the fair-haired student

wielded an influence over her like that of autumn rain. He covered sheet after sheet of note-paper with poems inscribed in a beautiful round hand, and thrust them between the leaves of books, inside of hats, and even in the sugar-bowl. Whenever I found such a neatly folded sheet I would hand it to my wife and say:

“Accept this latest attempt to melt your heart!”

At first Cupid’s paper arrows made no impression on her; she would read the poems to me and together we would laugh over such lines as:

*Ever, for ever, I live but for you,
All other pleasures I gladly eschew.
Live but to bask in the warmth that you shed,
Watch every movement, each turn of your head,
Hover, a falcon, above your sweet bed...*

But one day after such a declaration on the part of the student she said pensively:

“I do feel sorry for him.”

To which I replied that it was not for *him* I felt sorry. After that she stopped reading his poems to me.

The poet, a stocky young man four years older than me, was taciturn, persistent, and given to drink. On Sundays he would come to dinner at two o’clock in the afternoon and sit, silent and motionless, until two o’clock in the morning. He, like myself, was a lawyer’s clerk. The extent of his absent-mindedness caused his good-natured employer great astonishment. He was, in addition, careless in the fulfilment of his duties and often remarked in a hoarse voice:

“It’s all a lot of nonsense.”

“And what is not nonsense?”

“Hm . . . how shall I put it?” he would reply ruminatively, raising his languid grey eyes to the ceiling. He never discovered how to put it.

He affected a boredom that irritated me more than anything else. He sipped his drinks slowly and kept giving

contemptuous little snorts when he was drunk. Apart from these negative traits I could see nothing remarkable in him, for there is a law by which a man is bound to see only the bad in one who pays court to his wife.

A rich relative in the Ukraine sent him fifty rubles a month—a lot of money in those days. On Sundays and holidays he always brought my wife chocolates and on her birthday presented her with a bronze alarm-clock representing a stump on which an owl was killing a grass-snake. This odious mechanism always woke me up an hour and seven minutes ahead of time.

My wife stopped flirting with the student and began treating him with the tenderness of a woman who feels responsible for having upset a man's emotional equilibrium. I asked her how she supposed this sad affair would end.

"I don't know," she said. "I have no definite feeling for him but I want to give him a shaking up. Something seems to slumber in him and I may be able to awaken it."

She was undoubtedly telling the truth. She was always wanting to wake up somebody, and succeeded admirably in doing so. But the thing she usually woke up was the beast in men. I told her the story of Circe, but this did no good, and little by little I found myself surrounded by bulls, bucks, and pigs.

My acquaintances told me hair-raising tales about her doings, but I repaid them for their trouble by being savagely rude.

"I'll give you a thrashing for such talk!" I would say.

Some of them retracted ignominiously, others took offence.

"You'll never accomplish anything by being rude," my wife said to me. "They'll only spread worse tales. Surely you aren't jealous, are you?"

No, I was too young and self-confident to be jealous. But there are certain thoughts, feelings, and problems that a man talks about to no one but the woman he loves. There

are moments of sweet communion when he bares his very soul to her, as a believer to his god. And when I thought that in a moment of intimacy she might reveal these things—solely and utterly my own—to somebody else, I grew desperate; I sensed something very like betrayal. Perhaps it is this fear that lies at the basis of all jealousy.

I realized that the life I was leading might take me off my chosen path. By this time I knew that I must give myself up wholly to literature. But it was impossible for me to work in such circumstances.

Life had taught me to accept people with their foibles and vices without losing respect for or interest in them. This happily prevented me from making domestic scenes. By then I could see that all people are more or less guilty before the unknown god of absolute truth, and that no one is as guilty before mankind as the self-righteous. The self-righteous are monstrosities born of a union between vice and virtue brought about not through violence, but through legitimate marriage, with ironical necessity playing the role of priest. Marriage is a mystery by which the union of two opposites almost always brings forth drab mediocrity. In those days I was as fond of paradoxes as a child of ices. The vividness of a paradox stimulated me like fine wine, and the paradoxicality of words served to smooth over the crude and hurtful paradoxes of facts.

“I think I had better go away,” I said to my wife.

She considered a moment before answering.

“Yes,” she said, “you are right. This is no life for you. I understand.”

Both of us were sad and silent for a little, then we tenderly embraced and I left town. Soon after that she did too. She went on the stage.

And that is the end of the story of my first love—a happy story, though it had a sad ending.

Not long ago she died.

To her credit let it be said that she was a real woman. She knew how to take life as it came, yet every day for her was the eve of a holiday. She was always expecting that on the morrow the earth would bring forth new and ravishing flowers, that marvellous people would put in an appearance, and extraordinary events would take place.

She was mocking and contemptuous of life's hardships and waved them away like mosquitoes, always ready to be joyfully astonished by some good thing. But here was not the ingenuous rapture of a schoolgirl; it was the wholesome joy of a person in love with the kaleidoscopic changes of life, the tragicomic entanglements of human relations, the flow of daily events flashing by like dust motes in a ray of sunlight.

I cannot say that she loved people, but she loved to observe them. Often she hastened or retarded the development of a drama between husband and wife or between lovers by fanning the jealousy of one or heightening the infatuation of another. This dangerous game held fascination for her.

"'Hunger and love govern the world' and philosophy spoils it," she used to say. "People live for love—it is all-important."

Among our acquaintances was a bank clerk—a tall gaunt man with the slow and pompous stride of a crane. He was very fastidious about his clothes, and as he studied himself in the looking-glass he would flick his coat with bony fingers to remove dust which he alone could see. He was an enemy of all original ideas or expressive words; his heavy precise tongue would have none of them. He spoke slowly and impressively, invariably smoothing out his thin red moustache with cold fingers before he voiced any of the truisms he was so fond of.

"With the passing of time the science of chemistry will assume greater and greater importance in processing raw materials for use in industry. It has been justly said that

women are capricious. There is no physiological difference between a wife and a mistress—only a legal one.”

Once I said to my wife with a serious mien:

“Do you still maintain that all notaries have wings?”

She replied in a grave and guilty tone:

“Oh, no, not that, but I *do* maintain that it is absurd to feed elephants soft-boiled eggs.”

After listening to us go on in this way for a minute or two our friend observed profoundly:

“I am under the impression that you are not speaking seriously.”

Another time he said with the conviction born of having just given his knee a painful bang against the leg of the table:

“Density is unquestionably an attribute of matter.”

After seeing him to the door one evening my wife, half-reclining on my knee, said brightly and gaily:

“What a complete and absolute fool he is! A fool in everything—walk . . . gestures . . . every single thing! He fascinates me as a perfect type. Here, stroke my cheek.”

She loved to have me run the tips of my fingers lightly over the faint traces of lines appearing under her sweet eyes. Nestling against me like a kitten, she purred:

“How marvellously interesting people are! Even a man whom others find a perfect bore can rouse my interest. I want to peer into him as into a box—perhaps I shall find something hidden away that nobody has ever discovered, something I shall be the first to see.”

Her search for “discoveries” was not an affectation; she searched with the pleasure and inquisitiveness of a child entering a strange room for the first time. Sometimes she succeeded in kindling a spark of thought in listless eyes, but more often what she roused was a desire to possess her.

She admired her body and would exclaim while standing naked in front of a looking-glass:

“How beautifully a woman is made! How harmonious the lines of her body are!”

And again:

"I feel stronger, healthier, and more clever when I'm well dressed."

That was true: a pretty frock added to her wit and gaiety and brought a triumphant sparkle to her eyes. She had the knack of making herself pretty frocks out of mere calico and of wearing them as if they were silk or velvet. Simple as they always were, they created the impression of elegance. Other women went into raptures over them—not always sincerely, but always vociferously. They envied her and I remember one of them saying peevishly:

"My gown cost three times as much as yours and isn't one-tenth as pretty. It makes me green just to look at you."

Naturally women disliked her and spread gossip about her. A woman doctor, who was as foolish as she was pretty, once said to me:

"That woman will suck all the blood out of you!"

I learned much from my first love, yet the irreconcilable differences that separated us caused me much pain.

I took life too seriously, saw too much, thought too much, and lived in a constant state of worry. A chorus of raucous voices were always hurling questions at me that she had no use for.

One day at the market I saw a policeman cudgel a handsome one-eyed old Jew, accusing him of having stolen radishes from a peddler. I saw the old man, his clothes covered with dust, go down the road slowly and with dignity, like a figure in a painting, his one dark eye fixed on the hot and cloudless sky, a thin red stream of blood trickling out of the corner of his mouth down on to his long white beard.

Thirty years have passed since that day, yet I can still see the trembling of his white eyebrows and the mute protest in the eye raised to heaven. It is hard to forget insults dealt to human beings—and may they never be forgotten!

I came home despondent, my soul torn by anger and despair. Such experiences made me hate the world and feel like an outsider subjected to the torture of being shown all that was low, filthy, stupid and horrifying, all that was an offence to the soul. It was at such moments that I became most acutely aware of the great gulf separating me from the woman I loved.

She was greatly astonished when I told her what was on my mind.

"Is *that* what has thrown you into such a state? What delicate nerves you have!" Then: "You said he was handsome? How could he have been handsome if he had only one eye?"

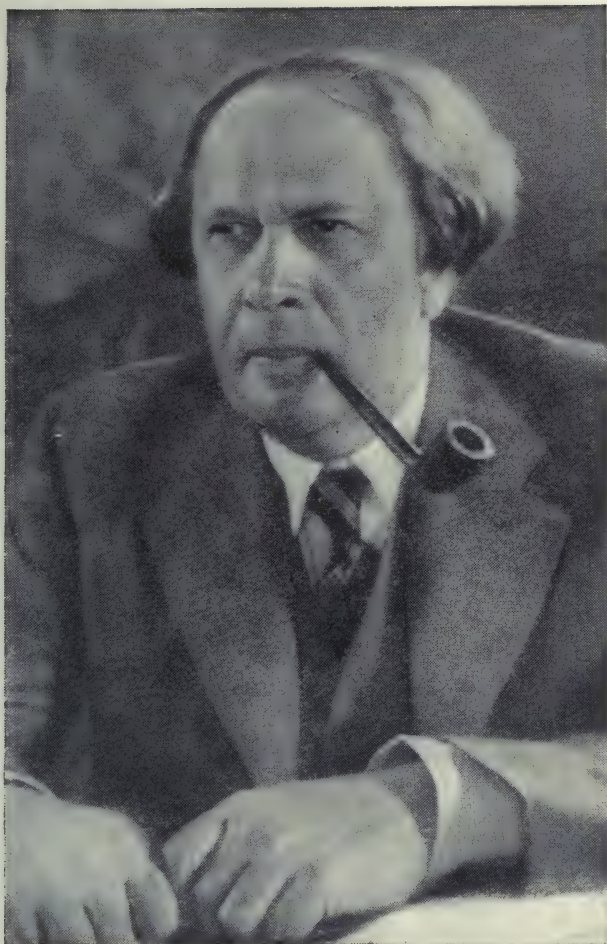
All suffering was repulsive to her; she could not bear to have people talk about misfortune, was never touched by lyric poetry, and rarely showed deep human sympathy. Her favourite poets were Heine, who laughed at his sufferings, and Béranger.

Her attitude to life was something like that of a child to a magician: all of his tricks are interesting, but the best is always to come. He may not show it until tomorrow or even the day after, but show it he surely will.

I believe but that in the moment of death she still hoped to see that last, most amazing and remarkable trick.

1923

*Translated by Margaret
Wettlin*



ALEXEI TOLSTOI
(1883-1945)

For all ages, Alexei Tolstoi has his appeal. For children there is the romance of "The Golden Key"; for youth, entrancing flights of imagination that carry you off to Mars or away down into the depths of the earth; for mature readers, the famed "Road to Calvary" and "Peter I."

Gorky wrote to him, in a friendly letter, "You know how I love and admire your intelligent, cheery talent . . . your sparkle, your keen irony—though that, to me, is only secondary; first and foremost is your talent, the bigness of it, truly Russian and imbued with true Russian understanding."

"The Marie Antoinette Tapestry," first published in 1929, is one of those fragments of history that Alexei Tolstoi painted with such consummate skill.

THE MARIE ANTOINETTE TAPESTRY

Sheepskins, padded jackets, long-skirted peasant coats—the last of the sightseers file out of the palace, now a museum. Off in the west the sun is sinking, crimson, into the winter murk. The day is short, here in the north. But I can still see the leaf designs that the frost has traced on the lofty windows, as though in memory of the leafy forests that once covered the earth.

Now the tracery begins to fade, and blue-grey dusk gathers over all. A door bangs in the distance. The watchman's felt boots crunch down the path. A wintry hush spreads through the palace and the snow-blanketed park.

Sometimes, from her fearful height, the moon shines palely in at an uncurtained window. But that is not often. Most of the time it is fog, fog, fog over the park, and a storm-wind whistling through the bare branches of the trees. Cold and desolate. I try to amuse myself by looking back over the years of my life. They are many, those years—some of them bright with fêtes and pageantry; others, grim and tragic.

Time does not touch me, does not age me as it did the women who pass through my memories; as it did those two queens to whom I belonged. I am beautiful still as I was a hundred and fifty years ago, in my powdered wig and my rich, blood-red gown. I hang in a spacious drawing-room, by a window to the left of the door. Over the

mantelpiece, opposite the windows, hangs a portrait of my mistress, painted at full length—young, and proud, and rather too erect, almost like a soldier—as she looked in the first years after her marriage.

Often, when the moon shines in, and the gilded chairs gleam in its light, I try to look into my mistress's face. But her eyes are turned stubbornly, angrily away from me. She always thought me the cause of all her troubles, for she was darkly superstitious as a woman of the Middle Ages.

It was not a very tactful gift, in any case, for President Loubet to have brought the Tsaritsa, Empress of the Russians, on his battleship a tapestry portrait of the guillotined French Queen. They took me out of my zinc-lined box and brought me here to this drawing-room, unrolled me, and laid me down on the rug.

"What is that?" the Tsaritsa asked, for she was no great connoisseur of the arts. (She stood looking down at me, stiff and straight as a governess, her clean, cold hands clasped before her.)

Fat little Loubet bowed low, and his starched shirt rustled. He answered glibly:

"It is a Gobelin, Your Majesty, and a very rare one. A portrait of Marie Antoinette, preserved by pure chance through the Revolution. France lays at your feet one of her national treasures."

At these words red spots came out on the Tsaritsa's faded cheeks, and she pressed her thin lips together to hide her fear. But I saw it—the look of insane horror that flashed in that instant in her round, blue German eyes.

"Why is her gown so red?" she asked.

To this Loubet could find no answer. He only bowed again, with a creaking of his bourgeois boots.

They hung me on the wall, by one of the windows. The Tsaritsa never, that I can recall, looked long at me. The red of my gown annoyed her. Vague, misty, watery tones

were the only ones that did not offend her taste. Marie Antoinette, too, detested vivid colours—all but the softest, the most soothing pastel tints. The bright red of my gown? Ah, but there is a story behind that. Here it is.

A hundred and fifty years ago there lived in Paris a beautiful girl named Elisabeth Roche. Elisabeth's father was a weaver at the royal tapestry manufactory, and the finest master of his trade in all of France. Old Roche might weave no more than a quarter of an inch a day; but such was his taste, his feeling for line and colour, that the tapestries that came off his loom rivalled and even excelled the living hues of Nature.

Elisabeth, too, had worked at the manufactory from the age of eight; and she had inherited her father's taste and feeling for colour. When she was nineteen she was put to work in the model room, where, with bits of wool and silk, it was her task to prepare for the weavers working models of the paintings they were to copy on their looms.

For all her hot young blood, Elisabeth lived very strictly. Her only hope for a better lot in life lay in her maiden beauty. And, too, fourteen hours of exhausting labour every day were enough to suppress all youthful longings. Yes—so it was, everywhere in France. The whole land was condemned to back-breaking toil, to insufferable poverty, that the King, the Queen, the princes and the court might spend their days in unceasing festivity: balls and ballets and fireworks and royal hunts that trampled out many a field of grain, and fantastic battles by night at the card tables, by the light of hundreds of wax candles. Futile revelry—it could not altogether still their dread of the fate that was already nearing. The Treasury was bare. The country was sinking deeper and deeper into destitution. The nobility could not pay their debts. The people of Paris growled ever louder after the gilded carriages, and the bourgeois circulated insolent lampoons against the Queen and the debauchery at Court. Usurers, crafty entrepreneurs, man-

ufacturers of luxuries—only for such were the times profitable.

From the offices of the Court came an urgent order to the royal manufactory for a tapestry portrait of the Queen, after an original by the great Boucher.

The Queen, at that time, was very occupied with her toy farm in the Versailles park. There was the gilt-horned, patchouli-scented cow that she must milk with her own hands; and the mushroom omelettes to be prepared for luncheon; and the Chinese fish in the pond to be caught for dinner; yes, and, in between, she must join her ladies in pastoral dances beside the brook. What with all these cares, Boucher could only catch the Queen long enough to sketch her face, and that but hastily. The gown he designed himself—cream-coloured, in the taste of the period. He was not too satisfied with the result.

When the portrait was brought to the manufactory, Elisabeth Roche was ordered to make a working model of it for the weavers. Her frame lay on the floor, and she worked on her knees, only now and again getting up to view the result from the top of a ladder. As the weather was hot, she wore but a short, thin frock, that exposed her neck and her shapely legs.

Thus was she found by the head of the manufactory—a ruined nobleman, fat and slovenly and, though far from young, only too sensible to feminine charms. Planting his ill-gartered legs wide apart, he stood goggling at her, and the sweat came trickling from under his little wig and down his shaven cheeks. The day was blazing hot; flies were buzzing against the grimy windows; and that girl—she was tempting as a luscious apple. He sat down beside the easel and got out his snuff-box. The snuff sprinkled over his lace jabot. His eyes were almost starting from their sockets. Elisabeth, preoccupied with her work, crawled about at his feet—now stretching out a hand for the scissors, now bending low to snip a thread with her teeth. Watching, he experienced almost a gourmand's greedy

pleasure. His nostrils quivered in anticipation. Her hair got into her eyes, and she straightened up in annoyance and lifted her bare arms to pin it back. At this, he was seized by something in the order of a stroke. His veins were on the point of bursting. Relief must be had quickly. He let himself fall heavily from his chair upon the girl, seized her in his arms, and covered her face, her neck, her breast with kisses.

Elisabeth screamed. Never before had any man dared touch her. She struggled desperately. Getting her right arm free, she struck him in the face. After that the only sounds were a few thuds of the man's fist, and a faint moan from the girl.

When the door slammed shut, and his shuffling steps died away down the hall, the women of the manufactory came in. They found Elisabeth unconscious, her frock all torn, lying across the model she had been making; and the cream-coloured gown in the model was stained with blood. Elisabeth's face was beaten black and blue. They carried her away. She was discharged from the manufactory immediately.

The incident would hardly have been noticed—but there lay the ruined model, and when Boucher saw it he was furious. The tip of his turned-up nose flushed scarlet under its coat of powder, and he stormed and raged at the manufactory administration. Then he looked again at the model, screwed up his eyes, and snapped his fingers. An idea had struck him. He had been dissatisfied with his portrait from the first, as I have said; and it now occurred to him that these spots of blood were of a very striking colour. He had the ruined gown in the model replaced with blood-red silk, declared the result charming, and sent it on to old Roche in the weaving-room.

And that was how I came to be. Old Roche worked on me day and night. Often, bitter tears ran down his wrinkled cheeks; but what had become of Elisabeth, I did not know. He began weaving me from the head, so that for

many months I hung head downward in his loom. They kept hurrying him, and he worked on in gloomy silence.

At length I was ready. Boucher was accorded the honour of presenting me to the Queen. My story had become known at Court, so that he easily justified the unusual colour of my gown. The blush of virginity, he called it. That was a jest entirely in the spirit of the times, and the Queen rewarded him with an airy smile.

I was hung in the royal bedchamber in the Trianon—a little palace that the royal family used for its amours. There was some truth, unquestionably, in the lampoons. The Queen was frivolous. Her beauty had begun to fade, and the King did not often visit her bedchamber. And when he did come—fat and soft and double-chinned, in his Chinese dressing-gown and slippers—his talk was rather of his exploits in the hunt, or his achievements at the lathe, than of the subtleties of love. After such platonic visits the Queen would call for her Venetian mirror and—lying back among her frills and laces, alluring still by candlelight—would look awhile in wondering unbelief at her reflection in the glass. At length her lower lip—for she was a Hapsburg!—would begin to pout. And at this point the merry ladies who circled her broad bed would begin some new nocturnal revel, after which the Queen would go peacefully to sleep.

From very morning, every day at Versailles was a holiday, ushered in with a rumbling of carriage wheels and a clamour of merry voices. Ladies in spreading skirts, fragrant with perfume, clustered like living flowers in the Queen's bedchamber, twittering and chirping like so many song-birds. Other ladies flitted seductively to and fro among the trees of the park. Fountains murmured and tinkled; swans beat their wings; gilded boats rocked on the artificial lake. Here picturesque ruins in the Greek style, there a group of marble statues gleaming in the sun, carried empty minds away to Arcady. The effeminate cavaliers, drenched in perfume to kill their natural odour,

seemed more like creatures from some imagined world than earthly noblemen with debt-ridden castles, their hands outstretched for the King's bounty.

Nature was kind to this artificial life. The lawns were odorous with sun-warmed hay, and bright with butterflies; fleecy cloudlets, floating over the lake, were reflected in its waters; even the breezes seemed to ask pardon as they rustled through the trees. And so the days flew by—brilliant, dew-decked gossamer. The Queen shut her mind to all sad thoughts. The King, hard at work on a new set of tortoise-shell snuff-boxes, would think to himself that, in the end, things would all come to rights: the lampooners would be locked up in the Bastille; the Treasury would find money—somewhere, somehow; the honest bourgeois would learn once more to love their King; the honest peasantry would give up worrying over the taxes; and, God willing, a war might turn up to bring back his wasted wealth. . . .

We all know how it ended, this thoughtless merriment at Versailles. They came down the road from Paris, crying, "Bread! Bread! Bread!"—some thirty thousand women from the city outskirts; and at their head, a sabre in her hand, rode that fierce beauty, the courtesan Théroigne de Méricourt, in a scarlet gown and a scarlet hat adorned with scarlet plumes.

The King smiled down at them from his balcony, and the Queen, too, with the little Prince in her arms, tried hard to smile. King, Queen and Prince were put into a carriage and taken off to Paris. No one was in the mood for smiles any longer.

Now there was no sound in the park but the autumn rain, tapping at the lofty windows of the Trianon. The trees lost their summer finery, and the dead leaves lay rotting on the paths, for there was no one to clear them away. Through the bare branches the marble gods and goddesses gleamed nude and shameless. Soon the winter fogs began. Only the watchman's footsteps broke the

hush of the abandoned palace. A spot came out on the ceiling of the bedchamber, and soon it was drip-dripping on to the parquet floor.

The first days of spring brought pleasure-seekers staring curiously at the whimsies of the royal park: men in dark, ugly clothing of thick cloth, wearing no wigs; and women in plain wollen gowns, with modest kerchiefs on their heads, leading their children by the hand. They carried baskets of food, and ate their lunches right there on the grass, leaving behind them greasy bits of lampoons that they had used to wrap the food in. These decent bourgeois women would turn their eyes quickly away from the nude statues. Looking in at the palace windows, they would cry out in wonder at the sight of the Queen's great bed. At me, they would glare angrily, shielding their eyes from the sun with their hands, their noses pressed flat against the glass; and some of them would shake their parasols in my face.

Summer ended. A winter storm smashed several windows in the palace. But at last April came again. Once more the blackbirds ran about among the bushes. Burdock sprang up, unchecked, on the park paths; the fountains were dead, and their pools overgrown with duckweed. Cows wandered freely over the grass, leaving droppings at the feet of the statues. More and more people came, of a holiday. But it was not the decorous bourgeois, now. These were a different sort: strange young men, their chests bared, their sleeves rolled up, their trousers all the way down to their ankles; and with them red-cheeked, laughing girls in scant cotton frocks. They romped like children, and when they grew tired went to sleep on the haystacks. They laughed and kissed, quarrelled and made peace again. They dived into the lake, scattering rainbow spray, and their tanned bodies did not yield in beauty to the chipped marble gods. When evening began to gather they would heap up blazing bonfires of the remnants of the

gilded boats, and in the fire-light, like untamed savages, dance the fiery Carmagnole.

But this summer, too, passed and was gone. Faces grew grimmer, sterner; and in men's darkened eyes I saw the pangs of hunger, and a mad determination. Many trees in the park were felled, that winter, for fuel. Both cows disappeared. The watchman must have eaten them. Then the watchman, too, disappeared. One day two people stopped to look in at my window—a broad-shouldered youth, with the dark down just showing on his cheeks, and a young woman. Both were barefoot. He had his arm flung lovingly over her shoulders, which her ragged clothing barely covered. She was beautiful, straight and strong, with flowing hair. She whispered something, and the youth jerked at the window. The rotting frame splintered, sending the glass panes crashing to the floor. The two young people came into the room. Now I recognized the ragged beauty: Elisabeth Roche. She stood there awhile, looking up at me, then rose on tiptoes and spat in my face. And then the youth tore me down from the wall and threw me on to the bed.

There I lay, in the desolated chamber, until one day I was picked up as a useful bit of property by a respectable bourgeois from Paris—a sausage dealer who had made the trip to Versailles in the hope of finding some broken-kneed old nag fit for nothing but slaughter. I was folded up neatly and thrust under the wagon box, and my new master sat on top. Behind us, under a length of sacking, lay a flayed horse. That was the manner of my journey to Paris, where my master hung me up in the bullet-riddled window of his shop, to keep the wind out. And it was there, on the Place de la Révolution, that I saw the Queen for the last time—but in how pitiful a plight!

Since that day, a hundred and fifty years have passed. It would be a weary task to recount all the twists and turns of fate that I experienced. When, one misty, windy

day, the black banner of the Commune was raised over the *Hôtel de Ville*, my sausage dealer was hanged in the doorway of his shop, with the slogan, "We demand fixed prices," fastened to his breast. A gunpowder-blackened hand tore me down from my window, and I became a cloak on the bare shoulders of a big, husky young fellow who brandished a lance with a red cap on its point. All that day, through the whine of bullets, my blood-red gown blazed on his shoulders. When evening came he made his way to the *Hôtel de Ville*—torchlit below, but its pointed turrets wrapped in fog. In the midst of a great crowd bristling with sabres and pistols, we burst into a vast hall, hazy with the smoke of wicks burning in oil. Here, on boards and boxes, sat the members of the Paris Commune, in endless session, their faces sallow with lack of sleep. Workers and craftsmen from the sections were demanding the heads of aristocrats and bourgeoisie, roaring, "Break up the Convention! Death to the traitors! All power to the Commune! Bread and fixed prices!"

My master curled up by one of the windows and tried to go to sleep, using me as a blanket. But—woven to please the eye alone—I must have proved poor comfort, that windy night, for he got up and hurled me on to a heap of rubbish in a corner of the hall. And there I lay until someone picked me up, shook me out, and laid me on the pine table at which the leaders sat, in place of a cloth. From that time on I was littered with papers, and goose-quill pens, and stale hunks of bread. Trembling with fury, a man sat at the table, his ragged-sleeved elbows pressing down on my breast. Black curls, limp with perspiration, hung over his long face and pale, bulging forehead. His name, if I remember correctly, was Hébert; and he personified the will of those half-naked people who crowded to the *Hôtel de Ville* every evening, after work, to shout of Justice, and their demands, and their hatred, and Liberty.

Like all the "madmen," he was beheaded. That day the sullen folk from the sections were addressed by a little man with a sharp, bony nose, neatly dressed and wearing a white wig. He stood with his head thrown slightly back and pressed down between his shoulders, his cold fingertips resting lightly on my gown, and spoke in a grating voice of moderation and of virtue. He swore that he would strike off the heads of all who led immoral lives, of all who plotted counter-revolution, yes, and of all who might think him, Robespierre, insufficiently revolutionary and patriotic. The shopkeepers, in their Liberty caps, applauded. But, alas, the bourgeois were weary, sick unto death of revolutions, of the madness of the mob, of rags and paper money.

And an hour came when a group of five, wearing tricoloured sashes, gathered hastily at the table which I still covered. One of the five was Robespierre. He laid on the table before him a pistol, ready cocked. They sat in silence, staring unblinkingly at the dark windows. Outside, in the square, the mob was roaring. There was only one candle on the table, and its flickering light could not dispel the shadows that filled the huge, empty hall.

That night the Revolution ended. The roar of the mob on the square subsided. There was a thunder of cannon wheels—shouted commands—and then the feet of the National Guard marching implacably up the steps of the *Hôtel de Ville*. They entered. The eyes of the five terrorists, still motionless at the table, flashed menace. But an ominous shout rose from the ranks of the National Guard. Saint-Just, youthful, effeminate, rose calmly to yield himself prisoner. Palsied Couthon buried his face in his hands. Lebas, always afire, seized the pistol and thrust it into Robespierre's hand. The little man raised it reluctantly to his temple—but a Guardsman sprang forward and jerked his elbow. A shot rang out, and Robespierre, his lower jaw smashed, dropped his head on my breast. His hand closed on some sheets of paper that were lying on the

table. He tried to stop the blood with them, but only smeared it over his face.

Further, my recollections drag through dreary years among the dusty rubbish in an antiquary's shop. No one would give so much as a hundred francs for me, while Napoleon was scattering the landowners' armies all over Europe. But he bled the honest bourgeois too hard, and—when it became more profitable to abandon the sword for the ledger—they betrayed him. The Revolution swung round at breakneck speed, and for a moment paused—back at its starting point. Louis XVIII ascended the French throne; and I was given a thorough cleaning and hung, as a sacred relic, in the Tuileries. The halls of the palace were freshly gilded. And in those halls, with oh! what returned ardour, danced the ladies I had known at Versailles—only faded, now, with twenty years of exile. As they danced, the powder sifted in white clouds from their rouged and wrinkled cheeks. A melancholy sight!

The revolutions and restorations that followed did not affect me. I hung quietly through them all in the Louvre museum. And that is the story of my life, up to the day when I was brought to the Alexandrovsky Palace, in Tsarskoye Selo, and hung in the drawing-room of Tsaritsa Alexandra Fyodorovna, ruler over countless millions of men and women.

After all I had been through, I found my new home dreadfully dull. The Tsar and the Tsaritsa had no liking for large gatherings. They were company enough for themselves. Except on affairs of state, they had few visitors. A favoured maid of honour might drop in, to kiss her mistress's hand. Or there might be a telephone call from that tramp and horse-thief, their spiritual muzhik, when he wanted to come and see them. And he would come, in his peasant coat and patent-leather boots, kiss them on the cheeks, and then sit down, screw up his crafty eyes, and lie away as fast as he could invent, while the Tsar and the Tsaritsa

stared reverently at his greasy beard, afraid to miss a word.

When the urge for drink came on the Tsar, he would go to the officers' club. The regimental trumpeters would be sent for, and to their blaring the drink would flow. Next day the Tsar would groan and clutch his aching head—but not when the Tsaritsa was in the room. True, he did not make snuff-boxes, like the French Louis, but he killed time quite successfully at amateur photography. The hours passed pleasantly, too, when he played his right hand against his left at billiards, humming contentedly to himself; and another pastime was reading—Averchenko, say, whose stories made him laugh aloud. When evening was gathering he liked to stand at the window, smoking, and watch the autumn rain drizzle down over the trees and bushes. Behind the bushes crouched freckled secret-service agents, their hard hats pulled down over their ears, afraid to move lest they be noticed.

The Tsaritsa, in her rooms, would work at endless embroidery, thinking, thinking all the time, with knitted brows, of her innumerable enemies—of the hidden intrigues against her family—of the ungrateful, undisciplined, unruly people it had fallen to her lot to rule—of her weak-willed husband, who could not make his people respect and fear him. At times, dropping her embroidery, she would tap angrily with her thimble on the arm of her chair, and her unseeing eyes would darken. On a little table behind a screen stood a wonder-working icon, with a bell attached to it. Often, kneeling before this icon, the Tsaritsa would pray long and earnestly, in hope of the miracle that would set the bell to ringing.

And so the years slipped by—none too gaily, you will agree. But things became worse than ever when the Tsar and the Crown Prince went away to the war, and the Tsaritsa began to wear a grey dress and linen kerchief, and a blood-red cross on her breast. In Versailles, at least, they enjoyed themselves before they died. There was

something to look back to, when the executioner tied their arms behind them and clipped the hair at the napes of their necks. But here—why, had I flesh-and-blood jaws, I'd have dislocated them with yawning! Coronation, anointment—what good had they brought these people, if they spent their lives so cheerlessly, surrounded by such universal hate!

Well, and then I noticed that the Tsaritsa had begun to scowl at me in the wildest way. She would stop in front of me, her hands clasped before her, and her low forehead would crease in wrathful lines—as though there were something she was trying her utmost to understand and overcome. Outside the windows, the December snow was sifting down. It collected in white heaps on the hard hats of the secret-service agents, who kept breathing on their hands to warm them as they crouched beneath the bushes. And the Tsaritsa paced up and down, up and down, her nostrils dilating in helpless rage. Alas, she had not the power to hang her foes—no, not so much as the chairman of the State Duma. Enemies everywhere. Everyone against her.

During one such moment, tidings came that seemed to break her. The spiritual muzhik, her only friend and guide, had been discovered dead—bound hand and foot, his head smashed in—in a hole chopped in the ice under a bridge. The news was brought by the Tsaritsa's favourite maid of honour, who dropped sobbing to the floor as she told it. The Tsaritsa turned deathly pale. She staggered, and leaned against my blood-red gown for support.

"We are lost," she said. "There is no one now to intercede for us with God."

That evening, dressed all in black, with a black shawl over her head, she stole furtively past the secret-service agents; and for a long time I could make out her dark figure moving away across the snow. She had gone to weep over her spiritual muzhik, brought out secretly from

the city to a little wooden chapel in a lonely part of the park.

The last time I saw the Tsaritsa was one dark night when a distant crimson glow hung over the trees and shone in at the frosted windows. Something, somewhere, was on fire.

The drawing-room was dark and warm. The palace lay sunk in sleep. Suddenly the door squeaked, and the Tsaritsa came in, wrapped in a white dressing-gown.

"What's burning? What's burning?" she asked of the empty room, in German.

She went to the window. The frosted leaves on the glass, now blue-black, now lit up with that crimson glow, made a fantastic design.

Her face was distorted, her eyes wide with superstitious fear. She and I were haunted, at that moment, with one and the same recollection.

... Tens of thousands of heads, a roaring, surging sea, all along the railing and the terraces of the Tuileries and flooding the broad Place de la Révolution, where, behind a picket of bayonets, loomed the scaffold—and over the scaffold the triangular blade, poised high between its two supports. From my sausage-shop window I could see the pointed turrets of the Conciergerie, and the two-wheeled cart that was moving past them. Now the cart turned off to the bridge, and crossed to my side of the river. The heads turned to watch, rolling like waves in a storm. And now the cart, with its guard of soldiers and drummers, entered the sea of heads. The roar of the mob drowned out the rattle of the drums. The cart passed by my window, and in it I saw the Queen. She sat with her back to the horse. Her arms were tied behind her, and that made her seem very stiff and straight. She had no corset on, and her withered breasts were outlined through the rumpled black wool of her gown. Court poets had once written madrigals in praise of those breasts, and an amber goblet had been made in their shape for the King to drink from. Her swallow

neck was bare. Her head was bowed, and her lower lip pursed in proud loathing and contempt. A lock of hair hung from under her high cap. "Death to the cursed Austrian!" chanted the bare-headed old women who followed, in rows of four, behind the cart, working incessantly on woollen socks for the Army—Robespierre's famed knitters. The cart stopped. A hush fell over the crowd. There was a swift bustling on the scaffold, and the gleam of a white cap. The drums beat louder, louder, in desperate, ear-rending clamour. And the blade slid down between its supports, a triangular flash of light. Someone lifted the Queen's severed head and held it up over the crowd. . . .

"Accursed maniacs! Devils, devils!" the Tsaritsa whispered hoarsely, in Russian, still peering out through the frosted, flame-lit window. And she began to cross herself, quickly, quickly, stiffly bowing her head. Her lower lip stretched, and slightly sagged.

That night her children came down with the measles. Never again did she enter the drawing room where I hang to this day, by a window to the left of the door. Sightseers, in huge canvas slippers over their felt boots, pause a moment before me in their tour of the palace, now a museum, and the guide says:

"Here you see an example of serf production, dating to the earliest period of the struggle between agricultural capital and commercial and industrial capital."



ALEXANDER MALYSHKIN

(1892-1938)

"We were poor, we came from the snub-nosed, shy common folk, and I was the first of our line that Father dared to send to high school to sit at the same desk as the nobility," wrote Alexander Malyshkin about himself. He grew up to be an important writer, author of "The Fall of Dair" (1923), "Sevastopol" (1929-1930), the novel "People from the Backwoods" (1937-1938), and a series of short stories. He was a writer who possessed the "secret of joy," which evades many other artists. Malyshkin could write books about happiness that were poetically alive, perhaps because he was always working out his own personal problems in his books. The story "A Train to the South" was written in 1925. The action is set in the first years of Soviet power.

A TRAIN TO THE SOUTH

Do you know that special feeling you get before a holiday? It's like a breeze from some invisible sunny garden blowing round you and plucking at your heart-strings. You get your first taste of it in the spring, when the trade-union committee starts looking out for accommodation in the Crimea and the typists leave off their woolly jackets and bring sunshine and the breath of wide-open tram windows to the office of a morning on their summer frocks and blouses. You are reminded of it by the accountant in your department who has already moved out of town for the summer. Even over his desk, that hallowed shrine of concentration, and over its fat pile of figure-filled ledgers there's a gleam of the moonlight on the Klyazma and birches rustling late into the night, the truant night of a park, sequestered corners, rendezvous. You carry the timetables of south-bound trains about with you in your head, and office walls, even in the middle of Moscow, turn to glass, and past them rush—oh, how they rush!—the fresh and boundless expanses of the steppes.

And there was something else that made me want to go south.

There was a time when the steppes vibrated with destruction, and every little wayside station won in battle carried a promise of something better than the world had ever known before. You probably remember the war com-

muniqués about the tragic fate of the 6th Urals Regiment near the village of Bereznevatka. It was I who managed to discover that piece of treachery in time and, after twenty-four hours of continuous fighting, to break through to our division with the bleeding remnants of the regiment, having lost half my men, including my only brother.

How strange to see again that field with its smell of irretrievable youth and of death. I had quite forgotten that smell in three years.

I remember, just before I left Moscow, one evening in August I went into a cinema in the Arbat. Everything was just as it should be. Blank-faced couples strolling up and down the foyer, violins wailing in the throes of *The Bayadere*, the pianist bouncing up and down on his stool like a man possessed. From behind the huge, heavily curtained windows came the spinning bustle of the square, the subterranean rumble of tram-cars carrying their people-filled, light-filled windows down the boulevard. I remembered about my journey, about the south, and I don't know why, but then it seemed impossible that there had ever been a place called Bereznevatka, or any disaster to the 6th Regiment, or daybreak over the smoking Perekop line. To think of these things was like looking into a desecrated grave. And now those dark fields were being desecrated by trains racing southward to happiness.

I, too, might have been lying there among those nameless dead!

... But that was all because I was overtired. On the morning of my departure there was such a cheerful squash on the platform and the sky was so joyously blue that I almost forgot all about it. I knew only that I was free, I emptied my head of all those case files, reports and enquiries—I did a war-dance on the lot of them.

The Sevastopol train was due out at two. I sat in my compartment, wondering idly whom I should be travelling

with. The first to arrive were two young ladies, evidently secretaries from some office of solid reputation; their yellow suitcases, their travelling-bags with embroidered initials and, of course, the flowers for the table, all spoke of a life of cleanliness and comfort under Mummy's protecting wing. And there they were standing under the carriage window, two stiffly corseted, heavy-jowled mammas of the old world, with huge patent-leather handbags. "Don't forget to writel!" they fussed. "The evenings are cool, Zhenya dear, be sure to wear your cardigan! Sonya dear, mind you go and see Sofia Andreyevna in Yalta!"

And Zhenya dear, bare-armed, and glance-kissed by admirers, and with an attractive mole under one dark eye, shrilled back capriciously. "Tell Vladimir Andreyevich!... He promised to arrange it." And something else about a trade-union committee that had to be informed, and a postcard she would be sure to send from Kharkov.

The second, a meaty damsel in a silk skirt—oh, she'll make a very motherly fetch-and-carry one of these days, one of the kind who are always running, too late, for their tram, and panting with despair under the weight of abundant parcels—the second merely tilted her luxurious golden stack of hair and smiled coddled sweetness.

"Mummy, don't forget to feed Tuska," was all she had to say.

Both of them had an intoxicated gleam in their eyes. Ah yes, I could see the kind of rooms they lived in—furniture museums, with their chair covers, their little shelves, their nick-nacks, with all the atmosphere of the old official pomposity, rooms of 1910 to 1914, successfully nursed through the storm of the revolution to our relaxing peaceful days. And now, after those terrible years—off to the Crimea again for the first time, just as of old!

Then came an army man, with regiment commander's tabs on his collar, a big hulking chap of about thirty, with a womanish weather-beaten rustic face that was already smiling at everybody in advance with good-natured

awkwardness. Before half an hour was out I knew that he was called Grigory Ivanich, and that he had tried once for the Academy but had failed on general education, and was now going to have another try, and this time he would pass, definitely, just to spite all these posh suitcases and all the mammas in the world.

"You off for a rest-cure too?" he asked me in his polite tenor voice, folding a pair of great purple hands in his lap.

"Yes, to the South," I replied and thought to myself, glancing at him with admiring envy: "What the devil do you need a rest-cure for?"

And as if in answer to my unspoken question, he smiled back at me with the terrible smile of shell-shock, which suddenly crumpled his blooming cheeks, a lightning smile that has to be brushed aside like a tear. Through that smile came a night of battle, of twisted darkness and creeping death. . . .

"Aha," I thought, "so you know what it is too!"

And finally a gloomy married couple arrived whom, judging by their resentful, harassed appearance, fate had been chasing from pillar to post. Now they were stall-keepers in Voronezh, now cashiers at the Lebedyan Co-operative Stores, now railway workers in Moscow, and always pursued by financial trouble or reduction of staff. . . . The bells rang for the last time and the mammas waved their handkerchiefs dodging the wildly swerving porters' trolleys. And soon we were deep in a dense clanking forest of railway trucks, and after that it was just golden dusty emptiness. Good-bye, Moscow!

Grigory Ivanich and I got up to look over the heads of the girls at the swirling farewell haze of roofs below us. And suddenly I noticed that Grigory Ivanich had caught sight of the mole under Zhenya's eyelash and was all of a dither. He was stealing glances at her, furtively shy, boyish glances.

"It's not worth it, Grigory Ivanich," I wanted to say to him. "You wouldn't understand their posh kind of room and those refined scents, and the things they say would give you the wrong idea, when you're thinking seriously how to save fifteen rubles or so out of your expenses on this trip to send home to help the old lady pay for a bit of rethatching for the winter. She'll be bored by your rustic simplicity, Grigory Ivanich."

We rushed through the yawning stillness of suburban platforms and wayside stations out into the wilds, into the cool and darkness of the woods, and everywhere we sowed our rebellious dusty rumble.

The young ladies grew tired. They sat down opposite each other at the table and, straightening their wind-blown coiffures, looked us over with cursory indifference. Inspiration came to Grigory Ivanich and he dived under the seat for the kettle. Soon we should be in Serpukhov.

Grigory Ivanich took swift aim at the young ladies' enamelled kettle.

"Can I fill your little fellow for you?"

Taken by surprise, Zhenya stared at him inquiringly.

"Certainly. . . ."

When the train stopped, spurs and kettles went clanking posthaste up the corridor. Zhenya leaned out of the window.

"Don't get left behind!" she shouted after him.

I was afraid to look, in case Grigory Ivanich had tripped over in an excess of bliss.

We floated out into the rolling lands beyond Serpukhov; the moon was a red bonfire and shadowy depths were swallowing up churches and villages and the fields beyond wrapped in mist. Over tea Grigory Ivanich grew bolder in talking to the young ladies. But I didn't trust Zhenya's exaggerated attentiveness, I didn't trust her kind, round-eyed smile. Was it not generated by the same feelings that made her wear a red kerchief at political demonstrations in Moscow or make laughing eyes at

the Communist chairman of the trade-union committee? Yes, she was a sly one, she knew how to hit it off with the bosses. And soon we had learned that Sonya and she were going to Alupka, and then along the south coast of the Crimea; and that they had been there when they were only schoolgirls, in 1914, and then war had been declared and there had been such a panic, such a panic.

"But don't you remember the Gates of Baidary, Sonya!"

"Ah, the Gates of Baidary!..." Sonya's face was an ecstatic pucker.

"Are you going to Sevastopol too?" Zhenya asked and her eyes had a playful point-blank challenge in them. To how many had that challenge been issued before, across the piano, under the drooping tulip petals of the lamp-shade? How many, I wondered.

"No, I go through Simferopol. Those, er ... Baidary Gates, I've seen them already. Our brigade went all over that part..."

Grigory Ivanich was trying to think of something special.

"Here, I've got it all written down—what's where. It's very interesting! After Kharkov we'll be in the chicken country, you'll be able to eat as much as you like, ha-ha-ha!" Grigory Ivanich's hoarse little laugh was womanishly polite. "And then after Melitopol there'll be fried bullheads. Bullheads are the thing, ha-ha-ha!"

He couldn't sit still, he was bubbling with joy, he kept worrying the surly married couple with offers of tea.

At first they refused, but then they opened their bag and produced enormous army mugs, which they self-consciously held out to Grigory Ivanich. Grigory Ivanich started pouring, he went on pouring long and patiently until his arm ached with the strain. But the mug seemed to be bottomless. Grigory Ivanich felt awkward, but it would have been even more awkward to stop, and the woman shamefacedly holding out her mug felt awkward too; her black teeth smiled pitifully. After that effort of hospitality Grigo-

ry Ivanich sat in silence, as if he had been spat upon; he would have preferred the earth to open and swallow him up.

In the twilight we burst into Tula, into a jaunty provincial evening of twinkling lights; the young ladies got out to take a walk in the lamp-lit cool and strolled slowly up and down, utterly aloof from us. After the experience of the mugs Grigory Ivanich dared not approach them and skulked at a distance, in wretched solitude. But I was glad. The walls that had enclosed me had fallen apart. In this fresh darkness I could at last imagine beyond every station a boundless city, with thousands of lives, any of which might cross with mine. And Bereznevatka was still somewhere beyond the dark curving bulk of the earth, still living in a smoky haze of sadness.

Zhenya put on a warm knitted jacket and went out into the corridor, to the open window. Out there lay the cold night, and the wonderful forests went rushing past endlessly, and it was all a song without a beginning or an end. Now would be the time to look into her real face, full of virgin sedition! But Grigory Ivanich was not there, he was roaming about miserably in another part of the train. And at the next stop a close-shaven young man from a first-class carriage went past under the window. He was well dressed, and to Zhenya he lifted eyes that seemed fathomless in the twilight and sang very wonderfully; you know what it's like, that singing under windows, when the trees are rustling and someone carries past you into the night a joy that is surprised at itself. Poor Grigory Ivanich, what a moment you missed! But here he was, our Grigory Ivanich, thundering triumphantly down the corridor, all out of breath—nearly got left behind probably—and under each arm a huge water-melon.

"Fine pair of water-melons!" he shouted to us in Ukrainian and couldn't help giving one of his hoarse little laughs as, without letting go of his prize, he plumped his massive frame down on the seat

"I don't know your proper name, miss! You'll get something in your eye out there. Just come and look what a couple of monsters I've bought for twenty kopeks!"

Zhenya came in lackadaisically, her eyes misty in the light and still dreamy, and shook her head. No, she didn't want any, it was cold enough as it was. And she frowned with a shiver.

"Sonya, are you going to bed now?"

But some dark rebellious force sprang up in Grigory Ivanich and he was not going to give in for anything.

"But look what a beauty she is," he protested wildly and suddenly brought the water-melon down with a thump on his knee.

And it cracked apart into two luxuriously ripe and juicy halves brimming with ragged, scarlet, sugar-oozing pulp, which a knife sliced swiftly for Zhenya.

"Here you are, miss!" and Grigory Ivanich dealt us all out with a piece, as if he were sharing out happiness.

And Zhenya could not refuse, going into fits of the silliest laughter, neither could the stuck-up fat one. And the sulky married couple and I, too, accepted slices and ate of a coolness that smelled of thawing spring snow. Grigory Ivanich, who had had his fill of silence, chattered and laughed enough for the five of us.

The train stopped in the midst of nocturnal orchards.

I went out on to the platform and by the glow of bluish lamplight found the name of the station. At one time Denikin and Mamontov had been through here and our Red Army trains had rumbled after them. I turned my back to the light and half-closed my eyes, trying to picture the scene. Smashed windows, the quivering light of kerosene wicks in the station hall where the ragged, desperate, lice-ridden troops, sent against Moscow, huddled with their rifles on the floor and the benches, while locomotives roared like mortally wounded animals. But I could not picture it—the cold took me in its embrace like a river, and in the dim orchards the leaves rustled bravely, thick and young.

Oh, to drop down in the grass and go to sleep with the breeze from the steppe murmuring over me.

In the distance I spotted Grigory Ivanich. He was skipping along joyfully towards the carriage with another monster water-melon pressed to his stomach. At the steps we nearly bumped into each other but he carefully avoided me and turned aside waiting till his nervous tick had passed.

In the dark compartment, where everyone was asleep, he touched me on the shoulder.

"Too late. And it's a grand water-melon. Do you want some?" And then in a whisper he asked confusedly: "What shall I do with my boots for the night? My feet smell."

"What nonsense," I said.

Nevertheless he went to bed like a martyr, with his heavily booted feet dangling over the edge of the bunk.

I was left to myself, and the train rushed wailing on in the tracks of Mamontov. And the dark fields closed in on the roads, the towns, and my dreams like a great cloud.

Yellowed stubble for endless hundreds of versts where the harvest had just passed like the busy waters of spring. Bandit stations waist-deep in bushes and poplar; barefooted women on the platforms with food, with their pots, their water-melons, all the abundance of village and orchard, and with cheeks like ripe plums. And over the station was the sun, and beyond it wound those bandit roads, where not so long ago Makhno, Shchus and Khmara used to give the Red mopping-up detachments the slip. Along one of those roads, over its grey-blue dusty softness, oxen were dragging a cart, and a young demobilized soldier in a faded tunic, who was lying on his belly on the load, looked up to meet the train with drowsy overfed eyes. And in the ditches beyond the village, with their age-old posts and rusty barbed wire, the burdock and the goose-foot and the stinging nettles grew thick, and in the darkness of spider's webs and grasses the chickens clucked.

Everything was overgrown and fat and heaped over with plenty and ignorance.

Again we ate water-melons in our compartment and near Kharkov we ate cheap chicken, although by now we didn't even want to look at them, let alone eat them; and drank—who knows how many times—tea from Grigory Ivanich's kettle. And Grigory Ivanich never let the two young ladies out of his sight, clanking after them protectively in his spurs and even volunteering to take them to the station letter-box at Kharkov. As she walked along beside him, Zhenya could only laugh and laugh and cast playful glances at the windows of the first-class carriage.

And I gloated. There you are, you wouldn't listen to me, Grigory Ivanich! But he had ceased to exist—that hoarse titter and those spurs, were they the real Grigory Ivanich?

And it was from this hive of plenty and ignorance that a new family came into our compartment to take the place of the gloomy couple, who had slipped away inconspicuously in Kharkov. The robust angry-faced woman had a baby in her arms; her husband, a fiery-eyed young fellow like a gypsy, followed her, leading a little girl of about four. Then came their sacks, their baskets and their blankets—all piled in a heap with the squealing baby on the blonde young lady's bed; the mother, quite unconcerned, pulled out her big breast and immediately began to feed the baby. At every stop the young man ran off busily for food and hot water. It seemed to me that I had seen him somewhere before, this docile young man uncomplainingly looking after everyone with a quiet, apologetic air.

The young ladies cast sidelong glances, shrugged their shoulders and harboured venom on their lips. The young ladies were displeased.

And, indeed, water-melon peel and pulp and other unchewed fragments were soon scattered all over the floor, making a squelching slippery mess, on which the elder

girl with a large chunk of water-melon in her hands skipped and jumped to her heart's content. And she also contrived to upset a kettle full of boiling water and splash the blonde young lady's skirt.

Then she had a real wail.

"It's disgusting, I can't understand it. Making such a mess, such chaos, spoiling a person's dress. . . . I'm going to complain."

The woman rocked her baby unconcernedly, without even looking round.

"You will be fined for spoiling the carriage," I said, feeling it was time for me to intervene. "Look, what a state it's in."

Her exasperated silence burst.

"Well, let them!" she shouted. "I've got children. Can't you see—children! Why don't you travel first-class if there's not enough comfort for you here? Just a lot of. . . ."

The young man stood leaning back with his elbows on the bunk and merely chuckled. You couldn't tell whether it was cheek or simplicity. I eyed him firmly and deliberately. He continued to smile back at me with that smile I thought I had seen in the old anxious days but could not remember. I answered the woman severely:

"We are not just anybody, we are workers in Soviet organizations. Bear that in mind."

"And you're taking up a whole seat to yourselves!" the fairhead burst out again through tears, rustling her wet skirt.

I was not a bit attracted by the prospect of a quarrel. I went out, and for I don't know how many hours stood at the end of the corridor by the noisy open window.

The fields flowed past infinitely remote. The lilac lines of hill-tops rose behind them on the horizon, against the warming light of dawn. I imagined a legendary army marching along that ridge into the dawn; the soldiers' faces were pink from the sun that was as yet invisible. Yes, this was the first song-breath of Bereznevatka, of the land

that had taken three hundred of my comrades, every one of whom I had known by his first name. In the night the train would rush over them with its muffled sleeping-cars.

And at night there was an alarm.

On the Serebryanoye-Bereznevatka part of the line the night before a band had held up the express. And so at the junction an armed guard boarded our train. A breath of half-forgotten storms, of 1919, floated through the carriage. The passengers huddled in groups in their dim compartments, the young people laughed, a bearded citizen on one of the upper bunks got very worried: "The devil knows what they're up to, perhaps they're in ambush somewhere already!" "You must have a lot of money in your pocket if it makes you feel that scared!" a cheerful bandy-legged lad in bulbous breeches laughed at him.

A glimmering candle had been lighted in our compartment and the woman, once again taking no notice of anyone, was nursing her baby. How many more such grim evenings would she know in life. The young man, silently helpful as ever, fed them all for the night, made up the beds and went for water. They had a stifling effect on me.

It was a sullen night, fit indeed for bandits. The passengers made haste to get to sleep, so that they could forget their alarm and wake up in the sunshine. The blonde, alone now, heaved her bulk irritably on to an upper bunk, spanning the compartment with her capacious maternal thighs. I was left to myself.

I decided to look for Grigory Ivanich. The train was going downhill and I was thrown about the corridor. The door at the end of the carriage flew open at my touch—clanking, screeching, cold. He was there, but not alone—they were both leaning out of the window, squeezed happily together.

At first I didn't understand. Of course, it was merely because Zhenya was really afraid of bandits; now she needed someone's broad and reassuring strength. What

else could suddenly have thrust her under the wing of a muzhik.

"The station's a bit further on, I'll show it to you..." Grigory Ivanich was saying, and this was the voice of another Grigory Ivanich, the one I had been waiting for. "But I'm still alive, you see, and going to the seaside. And in two or three years' time, maybe I shall pass this way again and it'll all be different, and I'll be speaking two languages..."

"Tell me some more..." I heard Zhenya ask quietly, or say something else, subdued and appealing. They did not see me, I stepped back and quietly closed the door.

I don't know why I was suddenly assailed by a vague feeling of grief. Perhaps because I had guessed wrong and life had easily trampled on my feeble thoughts; perhaps because I, too, wanted to march through life victorious.

And I returned to my corner in the compartment and dozed off. And everyone was asleep; even the meek young man was sleeping with his head resting against the iron post.

It was not much further now to Bereznevatka. To Bereznevatka? So there was such a place on earth after all?

At midnight an armed patrol came round to check our papers.

The dimly swaying corners of the world were half buried in sleep. The young man also opened his eyes drowsily, asked me for a light and rummaged carefully in his pockets.

"Here's my Party card to go on with," he said. "Wait a minute and I'll find my passport."

Two foreheads came together over a lamp to examine the document.

"This'll do," they said with gruff respect. We were left alone in the sleeping, monotonous, rushing stillness. I felt the eyes of the man opposite appealing to me.

"Comrade," he said suddenly in a low voice, leaning

forward, "I wanted to apologize for what happened, for the wife. She's a bit," he laughed good-naturedly, "she's a bit nervy, you know; it took it out of her working in the underground."

I was a little surprised, but hastened to reassure him politely, and said that I had forgotten all about it. He seemed anxious to talk. He mentioned the bandits. I said I knew this locality well—there would be a gradient before Bereznevatka, then a cutting. It was the best place for an ambush. I had been here with the Sixth Army, when it broke through Perekop.

He was delighted.

"Yes, I know. Then you came on into the Crimea. That's where I'm from."

The young man named several people at army headquarters and in the special department, and several division commanders. No, he didn't recall my name.

"Perhaps you heard about me? Yakovlev, a partisan. We joined up with the Sixth Army at Simferopol."

A shiver of excitement seared through me. Was this Yakovlev? Of course, I remembered him. In the division reconnaissance company we had once curiously examined the photograph of this unimpressive young fellow who played catch-as-catch-can with the hangman's noose, the commander of an army that was quietly taking control of Wrangel's rear. Yakovlev! Who of us did not know about Yakovlev, about the legendary crossing of the Yaila ridge in winter, by icy paths known only to wild beasts? His brother had been hung at Sevastopol.

"The worst time was the winter, but we managed to get away. We used to hide in a cave near Baidary. My wife used to be our go-between with the Sevastopol Committee."

I listened to him with wild excitement. Now we were no longer wrapped in the darkness of the compartment, we were out there among the lands and phantoms of Bereznevatka. He went on to tell me that he had been a militia

chief somewhere in Kupyansk District and was now being transferred nearer home, nearer Yalta, and that he and his wife were purposely making the journey through Sevastopol to see the Baidary Gates again. The rumble of the train began to sound like sad and powerful music. Through my sleep I heard Grigory Ivanich creep in, find his greatcoat and go out again—presumably to put it round submissive shoulders at that blustering window.

A low barrack aglare with lights came up through my sleep and I recognized Bereznevatka.

I ran out into the squalid station hall with its dilapidated varnished wooden sofa; Red Army men were at the telephones, all of them with rifles. In the next room, soldiers were tramping about with the kind of ominous muttering one hears before a riot. I went into the telegraph office: the same big-nosed, rook-like Armenian was tapping his keyboard, and went on doing so purposely to show me that all the life had gone out of those ivory keys.

“Can’t get through,” he said.

“You needn’t,” I said, “we’re withdrawing.”

I galloped after the battalion retreating from death over the ridge of the hill; the lads’ faces were grim, and ruddy in the sun, a frosty sun that looked down on death.

“Where’s the H.Q. platoon?” I asked. My brother was in command of it. No one knew. Behind the fences at the bottom of the hill several battalions were covering the rear, doomed battalions. I rode past Red Army men lying flat on the ground; they looked like heaps of rags; but they were still alive, still resolute, still ignorant of what had happened. My brother jumped up, ran to the fence and gripped it to climb over.

“Alexei!” I shouted, trying to stop him. “Not that way, Alexei!”

He was transfixed before he could even look round. I jumped off my horse and removed his cap. The hair on the back of his head was matted into a red pulp, and under

it there was a deep hole. And now we were thundering over graves that I had never seen. The gentle rocking had lulled everyone to sleep; and I slept too.

Dawn came beyond Perekop and the Sivash marshes. Warm grey grasses without banks, and birds in the sky—those birds must be able to see the mountains and the blue paradise beyond. At Jankoi the sun suddenly burst upon us and the station walls at once began to glare as if it were midday; black velvet shadows lay on the asphalt platforms. They looked as if they had been hosed, and there were roses for sale in the cool. Yes, we were at the gates of the blue paradise. And again we were wrapped in the grey warmth of the steppes, where the breeze, even the morning breeze, comes always from some sun-scorched spot and makes you hang your arms blissfully out of the window, rest your cheek on the hot frame, and dream, and sing scraps of melody. . . . I groped warily within myself for traces of the past night, but it was gone; as yet there was nothing but the lulling rush of the train.

No, I couldn't believe it. It might yet spring on me from some dark corner, an unforgiving shadow that would fall across my world.

The children were awake and chirruping under our bunks. The Yakovlevs' cooing bustle was beginning again.

"That's Chatyr-Dag," the young ladies gasped behind me and flew to my window, forgetting themselves in their rapturous delight and pressing up to me with their careless soft-breasted warmth. Behind them Grigory Ivanich's ruddy smiling visage wore a morning pucker.

"Is it much further to Simferopol?" he asked me quietly.

"About an hour to go."

The poor chap would soon have to say good-bye to us.

At the next stop Comrade Yakovlev, commander of an army of partisans, went round the fruit stalls and bought a capful of huge lilac-coloured plums and a big bag of

grapes. The fruit was poured into his wife's hospitable lap, from which the whole family took its fill in unhurried silence. Beyond the blankets flapping out of the window rose a lime-blue mountain, a dazzling land—the Crimea. The bandits and the night had long since been forgotten, the carriage was sunny, and stuffy enough to make you choke; the men flapped their shirt fronts exhaustedly: if only they could rip them off altogether.

At Simferopol, Grigory Ivanich mysteriously disappeared. His neatly strapped bedding stood together with his suitcase on the edge of the bunk. From the corridor I could see Zhenya's bare neck and slender back in an airy cotton frock, and her bare arms thrust back behind her rebellious curls; she was quarrelling resentfully with the fair-haired Sonya.

"Sonya, my dear, I know perfectly well what I am doing. For heaven's sake don't lecture me!"

Grigory Ivanich reappeared just before the last bell, looking very sheepish.

"I've booked through to Sevastopol," he said, smiling guiltily. "I must see those Baidary Gates if they're such a wonderful sight."

"I thought you had seen them before?" the blonde snapped at him jealously.

"That was something different," Grigory Ivanich faltered. "Same kind of name, I've forgotten it now, but not the same place."

The train was enclosed in rocky cliffs towering to the very sky. The gay hot noon was somewhere on their distant grassy truncated heights. Tunnels thundered past like brief nights of merry-making, and with every onrush of darkness came a titivatingly familiar peal of girlish laughter. Already the bells must be ringing at the station to announce the arrival of the Moscow-Sevastopol train. Here it was, our sunny, yearned-for journey's end! We whistled with all the strength of our iron lungs and with a joyful rumble plunged into the last jungle of platforms.

There were spangles of sunlight playing on the polished doors and on the asphalt floor of the empty curtained station hall, with its glaring exit on to the square. Out there everything was red-hot and it made you think of huge, luxuriously breaking waves.

We waited for the twelve-seater Crimea Resort bus, sitting on our luggage like refugees. The Crimea streamed down on us from advertisement hoardings on all sides—white-walled fairy-tales flung into the blue, palaces in sunset shadow with sultry flower-gardens and the sea in the background. And straight out of the hoardings came cars and buses driving up to catch the evening train and discharging their loads of sunburned passengers with the rock-dust of the beaches still on their cheeks. What poignant, irreconcilable regrets for those who must go away and leave the sea behind!

While his wife was changing the children's clothes, Comrade Yakovlev talked to me like an old acquaintance. He had long been dreaming of a post in the Crimea. Here he was in his native element, it would be good for the children, his militia service wouldn't give him much trouble—not many incidents around here! And now he and his wife would be able to catch up with their education, as they had always wanted to.

"We'll see your cave today," I said with feigned indifference.

Something agonizingly important to me depended on his glance, on how he would answer. The young man smiled over my head at the sky.

And said nothing.

In the bus the blonde and I got the front seats. I should have liked to have had everyone in front of me. Never mind, now I should see them, just at the right moment, full in the face.

The blonde crumpled into kindness at once and took a delight even in the hillocks on the outskirts.

"Wonderful, wonderful!" she exclaimed, her flesh wobbling vigorously with the vibration of the bus.

We rolled down the damp Balaclava valley. There were clouds above and the villages on the right were waist-deep in the green fertile gloom of the dales. The blue paradise was further on. We climbed in spirals higher and higher. The driver changed gear and the engine groaned mournfully, as if the height had gripped its heart, too. The mountains closed in on us, their slopes chalky and curly. We could not go any higher—below was the air, and the stunted scrub and the breath-taking drops of the valleys. Now we should plunge down.

"Ooooh!" Grigory Ivanich squealed behind in mock panic.

We dropped into emptiness, bushes screeched past raggedly, our lungs emptied and would not fill. I glanced round. Zhenya was clinging to Grigory Ivanich, clutching his arm. She was helpless, she had lost rooms and mamma, everything. Grigory Ivanich's eyes met mine, they saw nothing in their bliss.

We rested in Baidary. The air smelled of approaching evening, there had been some rain and now there would be sun and wind in the pines higher up. The cool had spread a green dew over the grapes on the stalls. We seemed to drive on endlessly. Perhaps it was a dream.

Yes, it was a dream. Here was the gorge through which the partisans had once passed. One more turn and someone's eyes would see what they were searching for and stare at the dark gap under the pines on that sheer green precipice. Now the rounded shoulder of the mountain was withdrawing, a blue line of bushes, a hint of emptiness on the other side of the road. Yes, this was what I was waiting for—I could feel the other man's yearning behind me, sudden and sharp as a knife thrust; I felt a triumphant and terrible shaft of light fall from the past and show up the life there differently with a new glow. But perhaps it was just my imagination. I turned my head to look into the blurred

faces of the two sitting behind me. I searched for them, but instead I saw Grigory Ivanich, a ghastly apparition with his blinking smile, and a dozen other eyes madly dilated, then suddenly turning a light blue.

We dropped down to the Baidary Gates! The walls of the mountains were flung wide open. And now the driver stopped the bus light-heartedly on the very edge of the abyss, over the blue, heart-gripping emptiness. In front of us and beneath us there was nothing, nothing except the sky and the trembling triumphant blue rising over the world.

The sea.

A burst of squealing, whispering, ecstasy in the bus, and the blonde was first to jump to the ground and rush wildly to the edge of the precipice.

"How beautiful! Oh, how beautiful! . . ."

Grigory Ivanich dashed about with frenzied eyes, pulled a revolver out of his pocket and pretended that he had caught sight of a fox in the gorge below.

"Don't you dare!" Zhenya screamed and ran after him down the road.

Now I must see my comrades, the Yakovlevs. I heard the woman asking the driver if she had time to feed the baby. He said she would. But I could not tear my eyes from the fathomlessly beautiful world that had risen before me. The sea stretched away over the boundless horizon. It had done so yesterday, before we came, and it had done so a thousand years ago in its wild, turbulent stillness. In the green abyss at my feet I imagined towns, a monastery. A lighthouse perched perilously on a needle of rock. The flash of a swallow in mad flight. . . . But still I must see those people.

And I turned and saw the tenderly bowed head of the woman and the confusion of soft curls on her neck. It had grown cool in the mountains; a coat, remade from a great-coat, was thrown over her shoulders, a coat whose folds still held the breath of those stormy immortal years. The

young man was standing by her with his hands in his pockets, gazing attentively at her breast. His lashes formed a blissful curve. There was the light and the stillness of the sea on them.

I turned away and looked at the infinite wonder created by life out of water and the rocks of eternity. The fat girl in the silk skirt was getting worried and asking everyone what had happened to Zhenya. But who was bothered about Zhenya? Only I could see Grigory Ivanich running down through the bushes on the edge of the fatal blue, laughing and carrying the girl in his arms.

1925

Translated by Robert Darglish



VERA INBER
(b. 1890)

"Yesterday bombs fell on Novaya village. Fifty people were brought from there. A wounded girl of about seven kept complaining that the tourniquet was hurting her leg. They comforted her, saying that she would soon feel better, and then put her to sleep and amputated her leg. On coming to she said, 'How nice, it doesn't hurt any more.'

"The girl didn't know she had lost her leg."

This is the artless beginning of a tragic story about the besieged Leningrad, told by Vera Inber in her diary, "Almost Three Years" (1945). Throughout the siege she stayed in the city, where she wrote her famous poem, "The Pulkovo Meridian" (1942), a number of short stories about Leningrad children, etc.

It was in Leningrad that Vera Inber, whose path in literature was a tortuous one, came closest to life and people.

"Maya" is one of Vera Inber's early realistic stories.

MAYA

I

On the south coast, hard by the Black Sea, there is a town. A small town. It has an old Genoese fortress boasting of debris, wormwood and lizards. It has a Greek coffee-house where an old wistaria creeping up the awning sheds its petals into your coffee. And it has a market-place which in summer is piled with flounder and peaches. The sweet corn-cobs on sale have silvery grey hair and little white teeth; the rest is sheathed in a green hood. The town has a cinema and two or three offices, but there is the sea at the end of every street and in comparison with it all else is just trivial. Fish-nets are spread out on the sand and boats lie resting, some on their bellies, some on their backs. An occasional wave rolls on to the sand, and vanishes hissing into nothingness.

At night the town, drenched with moonlight, is like a sleeping fish. On its house-tops the tiles glisten like scales, its vineyards run into the distance in a narrowing tail, and the wind plays with them. And on the shore, where the fish's head should be, the museum curator's lamp shines like a solitary eye.

For the town has a museum.

Fishermen's wives, spare Greek women, come out of doors for a gossip at sundown. Their faces are dark with sunburn, their aprons are bright red, and from afar the

whole makes you think of a slice of tomato on a crust of brown bread.

While cooking supper as they wait for their husbands, the women discuss, among other things, the fact that old Stavrakis, now curator of the museum and formerly just a wealthy man, is the grandson of a smuggler. Nikolaos, his grandfather, had gone in for smuggling and had trafficked in duty-free tobacco—there is no doubt about that. True, he had also had the good fortune of coming into an inheritance after his partner, a Russian merchant, was knocked overboard by the sail boom. But heaven alone knows what that boom actually was like, whether it did not wear black whiskers and wide trousers and whether its name was not Nikolaos Stavrakis.

Nothing was known for certain, but from then on Nikolaos Stavrakis had been a rich man. He built himself a splendid, comfortable house, and draped his sofas with silks and set his tables with curios brought from foreign lands. There was also a Persian shawl, white and pink like a patch of snow strewn with roses.

Unlike his father, Nikolaos' son, Adrianos, did not engage in any objectionable practices. He lived in Odessa, a big city, where he kept a shop dealing in canaries and corals. He had made an enormous fortune on the business, for it was peace-time when people could afford to listen to canaries and wear coral brooches as much as they pleased. But his son, likewise called Adrianos, did not so much as look at the shop; he sold it and set up a greengrocery, which, however, he did not stoop to running in person but entrusted to a manager. He went abroad and lived there, a bachelor, for a long time. Then he came back to his home town, remodelled his grandfather's house and settled in it for good. Besides reconstructing it, he decorated the interior with unheard-of luxury. His grandfather's Persian shawl no longer languished in solitude, for it had quite a collection of companions, shawls like itself and just as Persian. There were also paintings, statues, period furni-

ture, lace and precious stones—in short, all that a wealthy man could afford to have.

That was how young Stavrakis lived until he grew old in his turn.

And then came the Revolution.

A decree was issued saying that beautiful things should belong to all but that no one might take them to his home. They must be kept in a special house called a museum, and on Sundays and even on week-days, except Mondays, anyone could come and look at them, but no touching. Adrianos Stavrakis' house was therefore transformed into a museum, while its former owner became curator. He was assigned a corner room, once the dwelling of a big white statue representing a nude maiden with a mirror.

The daughter of Diamantos, an old shopkeeper, was installed at the foot of the main staircase to issue tickets to whoever insisted on them, though admission was free. And on Sundays, as well as on week-days except Mondays, anyone, including Diamantos the shopkeeper, could satisfy himself that old Stavrakis was taking good care of national property, for none of the Persian shawls were moth-eaten, the daggers had not darkened and the nude maiden, apparently rubbed down with a sponge, gleamed as brightly as ever.

II

It was a Sunday and the museum was more crowded than usual. Diamantos' daughter was run off her feet issuing tickets and taking from the visitors umbrellas, canes, and even pipes. Regulations with regard to pipes had been enforced with particular rigour ever since Christos, a fisherman, had stopped in front of an Italian painting and cried:

“What a lousy boat! I'll be damned if you can row her against the wind off the cape. With a low stern like that.”

And he had rapped the old canvas with his pipe so hard

that it had pierced a hole in the delicate surface of the sea. Then Pavel Zuyev, a Russian Young Communist, had said to him reproachfully:

"We thought you were a cultured man, Comrade Christos, but you've done something to the contrary. How can you so much as put a finger on an object of art! That's absolutely out." He had paused, scratched his neck, and added musingly: "But of course that stern's no good."

And so, considering the experience of past days, pipes were rigorously taken away at the entrance.

Old Stavrakis, alarmed by the overwhelming flow of lovers of the beautiful, broke a habit of his by coming out into the large square room opening on the sea. Once it had been the dining-room, but now it was the finest treasure-chamber of the museum, with Pompeian frescos running along the walls and a Renaissance bronze lamp hung from the ceiling.

Stavrakis' heavy figure, tussore coat, greying beard, and sullen look coming through a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles had a vaguely disconcerting effect on the visitors. Dorochka, a tanned and impulsive young textile worker and a fine sportswoman who had beaten all the national swimming records, had come with a group of sightseers. She stood in front of a canvas portraying a woman with an infant, clad in a stiff dress and wearing tresses entwined with strings of pearls.

"Just look at her dress," she said to her girl-friends. "What a job—embroidering all that. They probably didn't care for swimming. And, of course, they led a sponger's life. But—" she peered into the woman's face, and catching the shadow of a smile in it, said almost in a whisper, "but she's very beautiful just the same."

"Yes, she's a beautiful woman, and above all a kind-hearted one," Christos the fisherman, who this time had no pipe with him, corroborated. "You can tell that by the way she's holding her baby."

Seeing Stavrakis passing by, Dorochka fell silent.

At the other wall, a Young Pioneer stood in front of a copy of Michelangelo's *David*. He stood with his legs wide apart, his hat tilted, his hands behind his back.

"He was a capable old man, all right!" he exclaimed at last, gleefully.

"Who?" Stavrakis asked, not trusting his ears.

But the boy was not to be embarrassed as easily as Dorochka.

"Why, Michelangelo, of course," he replied. "See the biceps his boy's got. And his legs! Do you know that he could beat any runner to any distance, even if he gave him a head start!"

III

Sunday was over. The last and most persistent of the visitors, who came to the museum every afternoon to gaze spellbound at the dark-eyed usher, had left too. Stavrakis sat in his corner room, relaxing. Stillness, sea and moonlight flowed in through the wide-open window. The backs of the volumes in the glass bookcase were touched with gold. On the desk stood a Venetian vase with a blossoming rose.

One-eyed Afanasy, the museum watchman, who was also Stavrakis' cook and laundress and maid, brought supper on a small tray: cream in a shallow crock, a flat cake, butter, and comb-honey on a vine leaf. An excellent supper that even an ancient Greek could hardly have resisted. Afanasy also brought a few letters—the stamped catch of the day, washed by life's sea on to old Stavrakis' desk.

Stavrakis went slowly through the mail as he ate. The light of the moon and the lamp fell on his hair and broad shoulders.

The letters were of little interest. Two or three messages from colleagues, museum people like himself. One of them offered an ancient Novgorod icon—he had several of them—in exchange for an antique funeral urn dating from

400 B.C. at the latest. Another asked him for the best way to protect parchment scrolls from drying. And other things of that sort. One letter came from the capital. To be exact, it was not a letter but a formal order from the People's Commissariat of Education to the effect that visitors should fill in a special form, according to enclosure. But here at last was a real letter. The writer was an old friend, a poet living a miserable exile's life in Paris. It ran:

"You know that, despite my forbidding appearance, I have always been chivalrous to ladies. There are two—only two—ladies whom I cannot bear. One is Death, the old hag, and the other, Revolution. But the former I only know by hearsay, fortunately. As for the other lady—"

Stavrakis nodded in assent. The moon was floating serenely over the sea, splashing with silver and niello a small yacht riding at anchor off the schoolhouse.

And here was another letter. The address was scrawled feebly on a cheap, drab envelope. Stavrakis opened the envelope and read: "Dearest Uncle."

He paused to think whose uncle he was. Of course. He did have a niece by the name of Aglaia. But something had happened to her. Of course. She had married a Communist. Well, what did she want, this Aglaia who had the delicate profile of the Byzantine queen Theodora? She had given no sign of life for so long, and now here was this letter. It appeared that she was ill. (That was understandable, though.) Her husband had been sent to Siberia to implant co-operatives, and as for her and her children, the doctor said they needed the sea. She had recalled her dearest uncle, and she believed he would not refuse her his hospitality. She was asking him to wire his reply.

Stavrakis reflected for a long time. On the one hand, his summer would be ruined, of course. But on the other hand, little Aglaia had been a sweet and amusing child. She had loved fruit and fairy-tales. One day she had said on seeing a coco-nut:

"If this is a ball why doesn't it bounce, and if it's a monkey where's its tail?"

Stavrakis roused Afanasy in the cubby-hole under the staircase, into which the moonlight stabbed its way through the narrow window. He handed him a note and some money, and said:

"Send this wire in the morning." As he turned to go he added: "And tidy that spare room where we keep old frames."

IV

Kostas Kontakis the cabbie, whose cab was the only one in the town to boast springs, drew up at the front door and helped his fares to alight. First he extracted, from the depths of his vehicle, a pallid strange woman, who was not Aglaia, with an infant in her arms, then a big trunk and a small suitcase. And lastly Aglaia herself jumped down from the high footboard, looking exactly as she had on the coco-nut day. She had the same chestnut head of hair and her eyes were like the Byzantine queen's.

"Good morning, Uncle," said the pallid woman who was not Aglaia. "Don't you recognize me? I'm Aglaia. And this is my daughter, she's six years old, and this is my son, he's turned eleven months. He's already cut three teeth."

With help from Afanasy, Stavrakis led his guests into the house, installed them, and finally treated them, washed and refreshed, to a late dinner in his corner room. The infant with the three teeth, exhausted by the journey, was sleeping in the armchair. As he talked with the real Aglaia, Stavrakis kept looking at her daughter who was like the juvenile Theodora. "Theodora" did not say anything, she sat eating her mutton chop heartily.

Children will always be children. They will always love fruit and fairy-tales. Aglaia, for one, had liked oranges best. So Stavrakis picked up a big golden globe from the bowl and held it out to Aglaia's daughter.

"I like apples better," the girl said in a ringing voice. Stavrakis was amazed.

"But why? Aren't oranges more delicious?"

"Yes, but apples are hard and you can bite into them. And oranges chew so easy," Aglaia's daughter replied with perfect composure, and scorning the orange, she took a hard, ruddy apple.

The table was cleared. Afanasy swept the floor, using the broom with difficulty. Aglaia outlined to Stavrakis her life during the past years, as well as the condition of co-operatives in Siberia, and then retired to her room to feed her son with semolina. Stavrakis found himself alone with his grand-niece.

It was a grim sunset, as it so often is in early spring. A strong wind ruffled the sea, which gathered frowning into short, angry waves. The wind banged doors, tousled the jessamine shrubs in the garden, and biding its time till the sun set, finally threw the first bunch of raindrops against the window-pane. Curtains were drawn, and it was decided to light the fire-place.

Some wood was brought in. The fire-place was lighted, and the flames raged as terribly as they must have done on Nikolaos Stavrakis' smuggling nights, and as they must have done earlier in all the hearths of the earth. Stavrakis told himself that the hour had come for him to know his new relative better. She was squatting in front of the fire-place. He could see by her face that she was well rested from the journey, had had her fill of food, and was content with life and inclined to a friendly chat.

"Well, my child," Stavrakis began, taking the poker and sitting down on the rug beside her, "let's talk a bit. Why, I don't even know your name."

"It's Maya. I know *yours*—it's Adrianos, and Adrianovich, too. But I'll call you Grandad."

"All right, child. Maya is a wonderful name. It means 'dream,' or 'illusion,' in Hindi. Use my handkerchief, dear, if you haven't got one."

"No, it isn't 'dream,' it's 'May Day,' and it's Russian and not Hindi."

"'May Day,' is it? And how old are you, Maya, my girl? Your mummy told me but I forgot."

"I'm six years old. I'm three years younger than the Revolution, but I'm growing with it. And how old are *you*, Grandad?"

"I'm sixty-one," he replied meekly, and asked irritably: "But who told you that thing about yourself and the Revolution?"

"Daddy did. He knows everything. And do you know what our boy's name is? It's Rem."

"That's fine, short for Remus." Stavrakis drew a sigh of relief as he hit a smouldering brand with the poker. "Now all we need is Romulus. But I hope he wasn't nursed by a she-wolf?"

"No, we had a goat because we lived in the country. And what's Romulus, Grandad?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what words is it made up of? Rem is short for Revolution, Elect—rification and Metarul—Metallurgy. And what does Romulus stand for?"

"Tell me, Maya," said Stavrakis, in utter despair, "do you like fairy-tales?"

"Yes," she replied. "I know the one about the boy who went to Tashkent for bread."

"That's a story, my girl, not a fairy-tale."

A strong gust of wind swept over the house. It was dismal outside, and the sea was roaring. But inside there was a fire burning. A magnificent setting for a fairy-tale—a pearl born in the shell of folk wisdom.

"Listen, Maya," Stavrakis said, "I'm going to tell you a fairy-tale, or a myth, to be exact."

"And what's a myth?" Maya asked instantly.

"A myth is a fairy-tale too, only it's very, very old and therefore still more beautiful than a fairy-tale. Move up closer to me, and do take my handkerchief."

Maya fixed on Stavrakis a pair of rounded eyes, and the fairy-tale began.

"Long, long ago there lived a girl named Proserpina," Stavrakis began. "She was lovely. If you and I ever go to Paris, I'll show you Proserpina as the painter Moreau saw her: dark, with black curls, a pomegranate in her hand, and with lips that are like a half-open pomegranate. One day Proserpina and her girl-friends happened to be picking white flowers in a meadow."

"Daisies?"

"No, not daisies. It must have been narcissuses, only they were bigger and more fragrant than those you see nowadays. As she walked on she saw more and more flowers. She left her friends behind. Suddenly—" Stavrakis rose, pushed back his chair, and ran the poker over the floor. "Imagine that this footstool is Proserpina. And that the flowers on this rug are real ones. . . . Suddenly the earth yawned where the bookcase is standing, and in a chariot drawn by fire-breathing horses out came Pluto, who had a kingdom down there." Stavrakis tapped the floor with the poker. "He snatched up Proserpina like a flower, and the earth closed over them."

"Did Pluto live in the basement?" Maya asked in a thrilled whisper.

"Not in the basement but underground. He had a domain of his own down there. Everything there was just like it was on earth, only the sun never shone and it never rained the way it is raining now."

"And then? What happened then?" Maya urged him.

Ha, Stavrakis said to himself, gloating, and put the arm-chair back in its place. So you want me to go on, do you? I see that Tashkent boy has faded considerably in your imagination.

He resumed his tale.

"Proserpina's mother was called Ceres. That wise and infinitely kind-hearted woman was in charge of all the

plants on earth. When she learnt of Proserpina's plight, she flew in search of her."

"By plane?" Maya asked.

"No, on foot. But she couldn't find out anything. Then she took off her rich mantle embroidered with wheat-ears, put on rags and set out for distant parts. And because no earthly creature had revealed to her the secret of Proserpina's disappearance, she punished the earth by stripping it of flowers and fruit. The earth yielded nothing that year."

"Not even apples?"

"Of course not."

"But what did people eat?"

"Humph. . . . Probably tinned food bought in co-operative shops. But let me continue. Ceres walked and walked until she reached a strange kingdom. Everything was very simple in those days and she was at once ushered to the Court. There was rejoicing there: a long-awaited son had been born to the king and queen, and the queen mother wanted a—"

"A goat?"

"No, a nurse for him. When Ceres entered the royal chamber, everyone was struck by her bearing and her face. Her knotted hair lay as heavy as a sheaf, and the folds of her garment were like furrows left by the plough. Her eyes were as deep as pools. The queen at once sensed that all life must flourish under the gaze of those eyes, and she proposed that Ceres should care for her son. Ceres agreed on one condition—"

"Maya dear, it's time you went to bed!" came Aglaia's voice. "I'm all done in as it is. Rem is naughty, he must be cutting his fourth tooth, or perhaps he's caught cold, I don't know which."

"But I've got to know that condition!" Maya protested. "I can't go before I do."

"Give her five minutes more!" Stavrakis shouted into the other room. "I'll bring her myself in exactly five min-

ites. . . . As I was saying, Ceres agreed—on the condition that neither the father nor the mother, nor any relative, should watch her or try to give her any advice. She wanted to have complete freedom. And that's what they agreed on. . . . Some time passed. The boy could already stand up, and he was more robust and handsome and happy than any other child in all the kingdom. He never fell ill and never caught cold. He kept smiling even when he was cutting a new tooth."

"Couldn't be," Maya said.

"O yes, he did. And then the queen mother thought she'd take a peep and see by what means such wonderful health was achieved."

"Sports," Maya prompted. "Daddy says—"

"Quiet. One night when everybody had gone to bed, the queen took off her shoes and stole to the nursery door. And what do you think she saw there?"

"What? What was it?"

"There was a fire blazing in the hearth. A heap of embers glowed like burnished gold, the way it is doing here. Ceres undressed the child and carefully examined his little body. The naked baby, white as foam, was staring at the fire, and the flames were reflected in his dark pupils. Ceres stepped up to the hearth, raked the embers apart, and sat the boy on them as if it had been so much sand."

"Oh!" Maya whispered, terrified.

"Yes. And the boy laughed. He was happy. As she saw her son in the fire, the queen gave a loud scream. And as if in reply to her scream, the boy cried out with pain."

"Why? I don't understand."

"It was magic. You mustn't forget that Ceres was a goddess. She wanted to make the child an invulnerable hero, and had already got to the point where he no longer felt a burn. But no mortal eye might see anything of it. The mother spoiled it all."

"An invulnerable hero," Maya echoed dreamily, "but the mother spoiled it all. And what's a goddess?"

"Your five minutes are up," said Aglaia from the doorway. "I want you to go to bed right away. It's late. Rem has fallen asleep at last. The trouble he gave me!"

"Come along, Maya," Stavrakis said, rising. "We promised."

"What about Pro-persina? What became of her?"

"I'll finish the tale tomorrow if you liked it."

"I liked it very much."

Slowly Maya went to the door. Her movements were faltering, her eyes open and staring. She must be seeing in her mind's eye the far-away hearth, the royal infant, the mantle adorned with wheat-ears, a whirlpool of unusual images in which she foundered. On reaching the door she halted.

"Will you finish the tale tomorrow?"

"By all means."

"But tell me just one thing: is all that true or not?"

And the man, old and clever, gave a sly answer, valiantly upholding his own childhood illusions.

"It's a myth, Maya," he said. "A myth. It happened so very long ago that nobody knows for sure if it actually happened or not. Sleep well, my girl."

V

The spell of bad weather was over. Quivering with flashes, the rain cloud drifted away beyond the horizon, and the narrow crescent of the waning moon hovered above the sea. The wet jessamine shrubs were strewn with heavy, fragrant diamonds.

Stavrakis went to sleep on the old ottoman that served him as a bed. The fire crackled slightly as the embers died out one by one. A flimsy haze of moonlight showed through the uncurtained window. Sleep was setting in on the old ottoman. It grazed the tassels and cushions and touched

the old man's grey hair, and already he was asleep. He saw a rye field that was also a sea. Above it was a winged cloud, spread out like a mantle. And suddenly lightning flashed out of the cloud. There was a dreadful thunderclap and a dreadful shriek.

Stavrakis opened his eyes. Maya in a long white night-dress, her face bathed in tears, was standing in front of the fire-place. Behind her was Aglaia, more pallid than during the day. Little Rem was crying piercingly in his mother's arms. Afanasy in his underwear stood shaking in the doorway.

"What—what's happened?" Stavrakis asked, trying to shout Rem. "Why are you all here? Afanasy, give me my sedative. Do say something!"

They all began talking at once.

"Good Lord," Afanasy wailed, fumbling on the mantelpiece for the drops. "I was walking down the passage to see if the front door was fastened, and suddenly along comes the young lady, beside herself with excitement, carrying her baby brother. Her eyes were flashing, and she walked right into the study. I felt like a jolt. I ran after her and saw her shoving the poor baby into the fire-place, just like a chip!"

"I was sleeping when I heard a rustle," Aglaia sobbed. "I opened my eyes—no children. Out I rushed, just in time to catch a glimpse of Maya's night-dress. I rushed in just as she was pushing Rem—into the—into the fire. Fortunately it was already dead. Hardly anything left but ashes. And now my boy's poor little arm hurts, it hurts! Ah, my poor baby, my lamb! You nasty, wicked girl!"

"Wait a moment, Aglaia," Stavrakis interrupted, "that won't do. See how she's trembling."

"I—I just wanted to make him—an invulnerable hero," Maya sobbed, "but Mother spoiled it like when—"

They went back to bed. Rem, his pain assuaged with soda, was already asleep. Dawn had touched the sea, the

stars were fading with every moment. But old Stavrakis could not sleep.

He sat at his desk, writing by the uncertain lamplight to his poet friend in Paris.

"Everything is changing," he wrote, "even children. What was good for us is disastrous for them, and vice versa...."

1926

Translated by S. Apresyan



BORIS GORBATOV
(1908-1954)

Born and brought up in Donbas, Boris Gorbатов began his literary career with his story "Komsomol Group" about the Y.C.L. members of Donbas in the 1920's. His books "Ordinary Arctic," "My Generation," "Unconquered" and "Donbas" show us that the writer's entire life was linked up inseparably with all that was most significant and momentous in the life of his people and country. This is what Konstantin Simonov said of Boris Gorbатов: "He wrote good books, he had the large, generous heart of a Soviet man, responsive to human grief and human joy."

DELIVERY ON CUCUMBER LAND

There was trouble on Cucumber Land, a lonely little island in the Arctic Ocean that you wouldn't find by that name on the map. On maps, that tiny speck of land bears a perfectly decent and even romantic name. But polar wireless operators insist on calling it Cucumber Land, and that's that. You know the sort of chaps wireless operators are. Anything for a laugh. Perhaps it's because they're bored in their cubby-holes.

However, this queer name has a history. The island was only discovered recently, quite recently, in fact. The leader of the expedition, taking a sweeping and hasty survey of the newly discovered land (he was urged on by pack ice setting inexorably on the ship) sent in a report saying: "The newly discovered island is shaped like a cucumber." And the wireless operators, who in those parts act as go-betweens in absolutely everything, were quick to dub the new member of the family of Arctic islands Cucumber Land.

The little island soon assumed considerable importance because it lay so far north. Research workers rubbed their hands complacently, for they could now probe into many a secret of the Arctic Ocean. Weather forecasters sighed in relief: a station in that area was just what they needed. Young polar explorers longed to go there. They dreamed of Cucumber Land and its untold charms, they were prepared to brave any obstacles if only they had a chance to

go and conquer it. They would say with a note of condescension: "What's Dickson, Tiksi, Chelyuskin? They've all been explored. They're just like home. But this—" they would add in an excited whisper—"this is no joke, you know, seventy-eighth parallel..."

The island shaped like a cucumber became inhabited. Men's footprints, pointed and resolute, appeared on the virgin snow beside the large, cup-shaped prints of bears. Houses were put up. Life came to the ice-fields. People already had their routine, their joys, worries and excitements, their nightly sessions of chess, and their coffee bubbling in brightly polished percolators... And already they were having trouble. Or rather, it was a blessing. Yes, of course, it was a blessing. However, there was no telling yet how it would all turn out. The woman's screams were inhuman and bloodcurdling, while the hands of the pale fat man standing over her shook helplessly and heavy drops of sweat rolled down his forehead.

You are wrong if you imagine that people in Soviet Arctic regions live isolated lives on their remote islands, knowing nothing about their neighbours. It's true that the closest neighbours are as much as a thousand kilometres apart—and what kilometres. But you mustn't forget the wireless operators. It was they who spread the news throughout the Arctic that on far-away Cucumber Land a woman was in travail. And the whole Arctic world waited for the outcome of this delivery with bated breath, as though all those grim, fearless men—Nordvik miners, Chelyuskin scientists, Dickson wireless operators, Tiksi port builders, and winterers on the Bely Island—stood beside the woman's bed, afraid to cough or stir, waiting for the child to come, waiting to hear its first masterful cry so that they could greet it with a fond, fatherly smile.

"How is she?" they inquired morning, noon and night.

But the woman kept screaming, and her screams seemed to reach across the Arctic. Her husband, helpless like all men under similar circumstances, stood weeping over her,

and the local doctor could do nothing but bustle about nervously. The poor chap was not an obstetrician, and besides it happened to be an exceptional case—the infant was in a crosswise position.

That day a message of despair was radioed from Cucumber Land.

“Help! Help!” begged the woman’s husband. “Do something, anything to save mother and child.”

What was to be done? The wireless operator who received the message grimaced in pain, took off his ear-phones and went to his chief. Couldn’t something be done? That poor woman, and the child too. . . .

The chief and the Secretary of the Party organization put their heads together, and wondered what could be done to help the woman. There was no means of flying the doctor there. There was not a single plane available at the station. Also, it was the dead of polar winter. What chance did they stand of getting to Cucumber Land? The Party Secretary went to the hospital to see the doctor about it.

Sergei Matveich was the doctor’s name. He was an ordinary physician, one of those whom nothing could surprise, hurt or frighten any longer. In appearance, too, Sergei Matveich was the most ordinary sort of man: a moderate paunch, large red hands, typical of a surgeon; a booming, good-natured voice; a bald pate with thin hair brushed across it; black horn-rimmed spectacles; clothes, hands and everything else about him steeped in the smell of carbolic acid, medicine and hospital generally—in short, he looked a typical doctor. And so whenever anyone saw him in the mess wearing a naval coat with gold braid anchors one naturally wondered what had happened to his doctor’s coat.

The only extraordinary thing about the man was that he was too ordinary for a polar doctor. After all, a polar doctor is something of a romantic character. Take a look at the map. That eloquent memorial to polar explorers bears such names as Doctor Starokadomsky Island or the Cape of Doctor Isachenko. On arrival at Port Dickson you’ll

have the grave of assistant doctor Vladimirov, a modest hero of the North, pointed out to you at once, and you'll bow your head in respect. On Wrangel Island your first impulse will be to look for the grave of the courageous Doctor Wulfson who lost his life fighting a *saboteur* active in the Arctic.

But Sergei Matveich was hopelessly lacking in anything romantic. He was just an ordinary, matter-of-fact doctor. He was not even like those plucky ship's doctors who take pack ice, gales, swaying decks, tin rations and the briny smell of the ocean in their stride.

The Arctic regions have lately been attracting medical men with a leaning for research in biology, botany and, in some cases, zoology. Some collect sea crayfish, rare amphibia and lizards, bottle them in alcohol, and take them back home with them; others dissect and dry dwarf willow-trees, root, crown and all, no bigger than a man's palm; still others make a study of disease in Arctic conditions, of the inhabitants' morale, hazards of infection, and the influence of polar night and day on man.

Sergei Matveich preserved no crayfish in alcohol, dried no lichens, and apparently did not even jot down any "curious little facts of medical practice" in his diary. Once he did attempt to do something, but then gave it up for lack of time. He had his worries, his patients and his hospital. It was evident that science would be no richer in new discoveries for his wintering in the Arctic.

On board ship, on his way out, he was once approached by Modorov, a young magnetologist, one of those enthusiasts who love science for science's sake and for whom there is no better environment than a polar station to show what they can really achieve. The young man said to the doctor with a cheerful smile:

"I for one understand you. I also understand your outlook on all of us winterers. We are just so many guinea-pigs to you. You're going to make a study of us, aren't you? You're going to take our pulse before and after an emerg-

ency job, count our heartbeats during and after a polar night, and then, of course, you'll publish a treatise. Am I right? Tell me! I'm quite willing to be a guinea-pig to you, doctor."

Sergei Matveich gave him a frightened look and stammered that his plans did include something of the sort, but his words trailed off so vaguely that neither Modorov nor the other "guinea-pigs" ever asked him about his research work again. It looked as though he had come North for the sole purpose of treating people when they fell ill, delivering children, extracting teeth and removing appendices.

To do all this he needed a hospital, for a doctor without a hospital was "just another Columbus without a ship," as he put it. And he did not want a slapdash affair either, he wanted a decently equipped hospital because a person needed proper treatment if he fell ill, Arctic or no Arctic. When they were unloading the lighter he hauled up the cases of equipment on his own back, shouting angrily at anyone who tried to lend him a hand: "Careful! Mind you don't drop it!"

He watched the carpenters with a restlessly distrustful eye, worked with plane and saw, coated the walls with white oil paint, and even laid down the linoleum. Hands were few and jobs were plenty. A wireless station was going up, and explosions thundered in the harbour where a coal dump was under construction. It was 1934—an eventful year for the Arctic when buildings, quays, machine shops and mines appeared as if by magic on the desolate diabase rock shores of the Arctic Ocean.

A hospital was built too. It was small, five beds in all, but it was good enough. And what was more, it had the atmosphere of a regular hospital, one of those in which Sergei Matveich had grown grey and bald and become permeated with a lasting smell of iodine and carbolic acid. The spotless walls shone, and the sun glittered brightly on the instruments and jars in the glass cabinets. It was

immaculate. It was quiet. He had his patients—mostly women. Wives of trappers or fishermen came from hundreds of kilometres away in dog sleighs, a month or two before their time. Men came too, with ruptures, acute appendicitis, frost-bitten fingers, fractures or toothache. Sergei Matveich had to treat toothache as well, and even fill teeth. Quite a number of people who had neglected their teeth at home had them fixed by Sergei Matveich. But what he usually said to his patients was:

“It’s a bad business, old chap. What d’you want that rotten tooth for, anyway? Let’s give it a jerk, shall we?”

Before extracting a tooth he would give his patient thirty grammes of alcohol for courage. It was a tradition with him. But he often caught them cheating him. They would toss down the alcohol and then refuse to have the tooth pulled out. “D’you know, doctor, the pain’s quite gone. Let’s do it next time.” He finished by not letting them have any alcohol until after the tooth was out.

Surgery being both specialty and second nature with him, he invariably preferred to operate rather than treat. Indeed, he cheered up when he saw an opportunity to “cut someone up,” as his friends said.

“Well, old chap, we’ll give you a tiny snip here, and you’ll be all right. There you are! We’ve snipped it off. There goes your illness!” he would say.

As for internal diseases, he regarded them with mistrust.

“All those therapeutics and things are pastimes for the idle rich. What good is it to you, old chap? It’s sheer rubbish!” And then he would comfort his patient saying: “Leave it to nature. There’s nothing wiser than nature. It will all go down. . . . The climate’s wonderful here, it’s certainly a healthy climate!”

It became a standing joke for someone to call to him across the dinner table:

“I say, doctor, I’ve got a headache. D’you think it’ll go down?”

"It will, my dear chap, it will," he would reply with conviction.

Such was that most ordinary of doctors, Sergei Matveich. The only thing about him that baffled understanding was why he had come to the Arctic.

The Arctic as such he never saw, however. He moved in a closed circle: hospital, mess, winterers' homes, hospital. Once he planned to go hunting, but he never got around to it. He also planned to make a round of the distant trappers' huts, but there was no one to entrust the hospital to—there were all those deliveries to be handled (the birth rate in the Arctic was growing amazingly), and so his assistant made the rounds instead.

Only once in autumn, when the white whale was on the move, did the doctor tag after the young chaps, but he just got in everyone's way, was soaked through, all but lost the net for them, and finally came ashore, dripping but highly satisfied. And when the whales were hauled on land, he cut one of them up with his knife, with almost the entire population looking on. ("He's examining the whale for appendicitis," the young people joked.) With a master's hand he cut open a whale's insides and pointed out its lungs and stomach to the crowd. "It all has a rather close resemblance to human organs, you know."

After coffee one evening, when the mess seemed particularly warm and cosy, young Modorov took a chair next to the doctor and said:

"I hope you won't mind my asking, Sergei Matveich, but tell me, what brought you to the Arctic?"

Sergei Matveich shrugged in embarrassment.

"Now, how shall I put it, old chap," he mumbled. "Everyone was talking about the Arctic. And I thought, why shouldn't I go too? After all, I'm not so very old. What do you say: Am I too old or not?" He gave his moustache a dashing twirl. "And then we had a new doctor at our hospital. He'd just come back from the North. He was all enthusiasm. A vast field of activity, he said. Plenty of curious

cases. So why not volunteer? I was in the war, too. I've been through everything. And then. . . ." He raised his honest blue eyes to his listener and added simply: "And then there is good money in it. Two winters here will bring in a round little sum, old chap. I'm saving up to buy a cottage near Moscow. You know the sort of place I mean: a bit of a garden, a hammock swinging in the shade, flowerbeds. . . . I'm very fond of nasturtiums. I'd also love a bed of wild orchids under the window."

After this conversation, everyone thought the doctor even more of a bore than ever.

Humdrum and matter-of-fact though he was, this man with the large red hands, the paunch and the reek of disinfectant and iodine was still the only person at the polar station who could help the woman on Cucumber Land in her difficult delivery, although no one could quite tell just what was expected of him.

The Secretary of the Party organization arrived at the hospital, and remained closeted for a long time with the doctor.

"We've got to help her," he said, his tired eyes on Sergei Matveich.

"That's all very well saying we've got to help," replied the doctor. "Bring the patient here. She's welcome. But you can't expect me to deliver a child somewhere away in space, so to say."

"But we've got to help, doctor," the Party Secretary insisted.

"Why, that's just wonderful!" The doctor flung up his arms and laughed. "Provide me with a pair of arms a thousand kilometres long so that I can reach the sick-bed with them. Provide me with a pair of eyes that will enable me to see a thousand kilometres away. I'm at your service. I'll be ready to help."

"We shall provide you with the arms and eyes you want, doctor," said the Party Secretary, "and then. . . ."

"I don't understand. What arms? What eyes?"

"Wireless. The condition of the patient and the, what d'you call it, position of the infant will be reported to you, and you'll radio your instructions."

Sergei Matveich stared speechlessly at the man.

"Do you really mean it?" he brought out at last in a whisper.

"Absolutely. There's no other way out."

Sergei Matveich got up, put on his white robe and strode resolutely to the door.

"Let's go and see the patient," he said. He stopped short. "Why the coat, though? Oh well, never mind. Strange things do happen in this world of ours. It's my first case, you know, this delivery by remote control, so to say. I can imagine my colleagues' surprise. . . . Oh well, never mind. Let's go."

Cucumber Land was contacted. The operator signalled to all the other polar stations: "Cucumber Land is on the line. All other stations will be temporarily disconnected until the outcome of the delivery."

Tense silence fell in the room and in the air. With bated breath the Arctic waited for the birth of a child on Cucumber Land.

"Well then," Sergei Matveich said, coming close to the wireless set, his hands tucked inside the belt of his robe. He did not know what to say next. From force of habit he almost asked: "And how is our patient feeling this morning?" but checked himself, remembering that he was not really facing a patient. There was nothing. Nothing but emptiness. A void.

He was ill at ease, anyone could see it. He missed the atmosphere he was used to working in, the atmosphere which gave him the necessary poise and confidence. He had to see his patient, hear her groans and pleas, he had to speak the usual words of comfort to her in her pain, to see her blood in a basin, to feel the infant with his own hands—that tiny, slippery, helpless little body.

There was none of that now. He felt like an old soldier

who remains unruffled under a shower of bullets but dreads the ominous silence of an ambush; he felt like a miller who sleeps in peace to the grinding of his millstones and starts awake when they grow silent.

Here, with nothing but a wireless set before him, he was like a white whale flung ashore. The lamps burnt with a steady light. A faint crackling came from the loud-speaker. Silence. No patient, no groans, no suffering.

No suffering, did he say? But she *was* suffering—somewhere in space. Suffering badly, waiting for help. Everyone was watching him tensely and waiting. Well then, doctor, how about it?

He bent over the wireless operator and said:

“Look here, ask the doctor: What is the present position of the infant?”

Curiously he watched his words scatter into dots and dashes like a bagful of peas, and fly away into space. The answer came a minute or two later.

Sergei Matveich read it and wrinkled his forehead in thought. And then he began the extraordinary, remote-controlled delivery.

“Ahem . . . the infant’s position is crosswise,” he mused aloud. “Yes . . . quite a case. Ask my colleague, will you,” he addressed the operator, “does he know, or has he at least heard of the Braxton-Hicks method of turning the infant?”

“But how could he? He’s so young. And a therapist at that,” he said to himself.

Like all surgeons, he was rather mistrustful of all therapists.

The answer was just what Sergei Matveich had expected: “I’ve heard of it, but please tell me what to do exactly.”

“Wash your hands in alcohol and iodine. Paint all your fingers with iodine. Keep washing them for about ten minutes, old chap,” the doctor said, and the wireless operator, assisting at some sacred rite as it were, transmitted

everything, "old chap" and all. How was he to know there was no hidden medical meaning to this "old chap" as well?

The Cucumber Land doctor radioed, with a hint of deference, that he had washed his hands as instructed.

"Good," Sergei Matveich nodded. "Now for the asepsis of the patient." He wrote out detailed instructions on a piece of paper and handed it to the wireless operator. And once again, with curiosity and amazement, he watched his words, his very thoughts which only a minute before were secreted in his brain alone, being miraculously transmitted across a thousand kilometres. For the first time in his life he was inspired with respect for a wireless operator.

The operator, excited by the urgency of the moment, was all red and tense with the strain. He clicked the sounder carefully and sharply, anxious not to make a slip. When he wrote out the answer, he did it slowly and thoughtfully, with none of his usual boastful dash.

"Slow up," he would say. "A single letter gone wrong, and the baby and the woman might come to harm."

"To proceed," said the doctor. "Make an internal examination now. Insert your left hand. . . ."

The decisive moment was close, here it was now.

"Supposing the cervix of the uterus has not opened enough, what then?" ran his anxious thought. "Oh, if only I were there myself! After all, I can't be held responsible for something I can't even see, can I?"

He had never felt so nervous as he did then, waiting for the answer, and to pull himself together he walked away to the window and stared out at the street. It wasn't really a street. Just a drift of snow under the window. And beyond that, there was the warehouse and the bay, and beyond that there was snow, nothing but snow. It lay on the roof of the warehouse, and in the bay, and in the tundra. Greenish snow, and moonlight.

"You've come pretty far north, haven't you, Sergei Matveich?" he suddenly said to himself, and the realization that he had come so far north actually dismayed him. He

was as struck by the thought as if nothing of the sort had ever occurred to him before, as if it were his first day there and not his second year.

"Sergei Matveich," someone called to him in a whisper.

He turned abruptly to face two women. One was the wife of the wireless operator, and the other, of the geophysicist.

"Doctor dear, how is she?" asked the operator's wife, being the braver of the two.

"What d'you mean, how is she?" the doctor flared up. "You'd better ask your husband. There he is, twirling the knobs. He knows more than I do. I can't see a thing, nothing at all, nothing but snow."

"We only wanted to say . . ." the geophysicist's wife put in shyly. "You see, I had a friend, and hers was a case just like this. I know all the details . . . perhaps it would help if I told you?"

The doctor dismissed her with a grimace.

"What's it to you? After all, she's not a friend of yours. What business is it of yours, anyway?"

"Why, Sergei Matveich, how can you say that?" said the woman.

Just then the operator had finished writing out the answer from Cucumber Land. He had no idea whether it was good or bad news. Medical terms meant nothing to him, but he was as worried as if he knew beforehand that the news would be bad.

"I see," the doctor said and smiled. "The opening is two and a half fingers, is it? There's nothing for it. We'll use the Braxton-Hicks method."

He came close to the set. Someone hastily pushed forward a chair for him. Somehow everyone instantly knew that the decisive moment had come at last. The operator turned pale. The Party Secretary hissed "Quiet!" although the room, for all those people crowded there, was quiet, amazingly quiet, as it was. Everyone watched the doctor with hope, fear and anxiety in their eyes.

A thought flashed through his mind: "Where did I get this courage, this power from? Here I'll speak the word, and there he'll do everything I tell him to do. And maybe everything will be all right. And it's me . . . me!"

Aloud he said:

"Insert two fingers of your right hand and try to grip the infant's foot."

The sounder clicked, dots and dashes scattered, and all stray thoughts fled the doctor's mind. He saw nothing but his patient before him. It was he who was inserting the two fingers. He heard her groans. He felt the softness of the baby foot, so helpless, so . . .

"Careful now," he shouted, and the operator clicked out the words. "Mind you don't mistake the hand for the foot. Locate the heel. The heel, you hear me? And make sure what it is, or you might pull it by the hand. It does happen, you know. . . ."

On Cucumber Land, too, people pressed anxiously round their wireless operator. The woman's husband, sweating and dishevelled, kept running from the wireless set to his wife's bed and back. He gave the doctor the radioed instructions, got his answer, and rushed back to the set, muttering the words for fear he might leave something out or make a slip.

The doctor was worried, but Sergei Matveich's support gave him heart. He saw the woman's eyes, eloquent with tears and suffering, fastened on him.

"Don't worry, don't worry," he muttered as he worked. "Sergei Matveich and I will see you through. Don't worry. . . . Here's the heel now. . . . What a soft little heel!"

"I have the foot," Sergei Matveich read.

"Aha!" he said. "He's gripped the foot. Good chap."

A muffled, happy murmur rippled through the room: "He's got the foot, he's got the foot!" Everyone stirred back to life, smiling and all but congratulating one another. But the expression on Sergei Matveich's face remained grim, and all fell silent again.

"Good," he said. "Now turn it by the foot, and with your other hand. . . ."

Distance was forgotten. He might have been standing by the operating-table, giving curt orders to his assistant. "He's a good chap, he certainly is good," he was thinking. "He's one of the best, even if he is a therapist. Good chap." He was feeling more and more confident that everything would be all right. And now it seemed to him that he had always known that everything would be perfectly all right. In other words, he had at last recovered his self-possession. He was back on familiar ground.

Moments passed which seemed like eternity. It was already an hour since Sergei Matveich had sent his first message.

"Have I thought of everything? Can anything unforeseen happen now? Will the man manage? Oh, why can't I be there! Is there anything I've forgotten to ask him?"

He stared at the loud-speaker as if it could answer his anxious thoughts. And he heard it: dots, dashes, dots, dashes . . . it was all Greek to him.

"Managed the turn safely," he read over the operator's shoulder, eagerly following the pencil point.

"Safely!" the wireless operator shouted in spite of himself.

"Safely, safely!" the room was astir. "Oh, doctor! Sergei Matveich! Oh, dear, dear doctor!"

"Watch the child's heart," he snapped angrily.

He was angry with himself for getting so excited about the radioed reply, for acting like a first-year student, like an orderly at his first operation.

"Shame on you! You're a disgrace, doctor!"

"Watch the child's heart," he shouted once more, and the operator hastily clicked out the order.

"There is no baby yet," he addressed the room at large in a tone of reproach. Once again there was perfect silence. "It's too early, too early," his voice died down to a whisper, and he turned his stare on the loud-speaker again.

And all at once he felt a longing, a desperate longing for the child to be born alive. He must be born alive, alive, and he must be a boy! A curly-haired little chap. . . . He longed for the child as if it were his very own. The woman was out of danger now, but the child, the child. . . .

"Watch the child's heart! Don't take your ear off the child's heart!"

"The heart is beating clearly and distinctly," the operator read the answer.

But it was not the operator's words he heard. No, it was the heart of the child beating in its mother's womb that he heard. It was the heart of someone not yet born. But he would be soon, and his cry would be triumphant, it would be a cry asserting his rights. What sort of a heart would it be, the heart of this man whose very life he owed to his country, to all those wireless operators, to this Party Secretary pulling at his pipe, to the therapist (a good chap, a good chap indeed), and . . . and to himself, too, to Sergei Matveich. He burst out laughing. He laughed as he had never laughed before. And there was no triumph, pride or satisfaction in his laughter either. There was something else in it, something he did not yet quite understand himself.

Birth pangs set in. Messages from Cucumber Land began to come in rapid succession. The doctor there reported briefly on the patient's condition and the intervals between the pangs, while the husband added on his own initiative: "She's suffering terribly, it's awful. She's screaming at the top of her voice. . . . It's not human. What's to be done? What's to be done, doctor? She's suffering so, the poor soul. Do something, doctor. I can't bear those screams any longer."

They seemed to hear those inhuman groans of a woman in labour coming from the loud-speaker. Sergei Matveich turned and saw the Party Secretary biting hard on his pipe, his face ashen.

"What's wrong with you? What's it to you, old chap? What's the matter? It's not *your* wife, is it?"

"Of course not," the man answered with a shadow of a smile. "But then both the woman and the child are, how shall I put it . . . ours."

Sergei Matveich flushed, hating himself for those stupid questions of his and for failing to appreciate the man's feelings, hurting him perhaps. But there was no time to brood on it now.

"Watch the child's heart!"

Three hours went by. He had been sitting in that chair for three solid hours, and now he felt incredibly tired and utterly spent, as if he had gone through a thrashing. Would it be soon, would it all be over soon, this extraordinary delivery by radio?

Suddenly he heard the operator's jubilant cry:

"It's a boy! A boy! Here, look!" He handed the doctor the message.

"Dear doctor, comrades and friends," it said. "It's a boy, a son, my son! Thank you, thank you for everything. Sergei Matveich, thank you, you were wonderful. Thank you!"

Everyone wanted to shake the doctor's hand. Those were warm, friendly, emotional handshakes. People congratulated him, marvelled at him and thanked him. The Party Secretary shook his hand long and heartily, saying over and over again:

"Sergei Matveich, my dear. . . . You're a real man! You really are. It was wonderful. Congratulations. You acted like a true Bolshevik, Sergei Matveich."

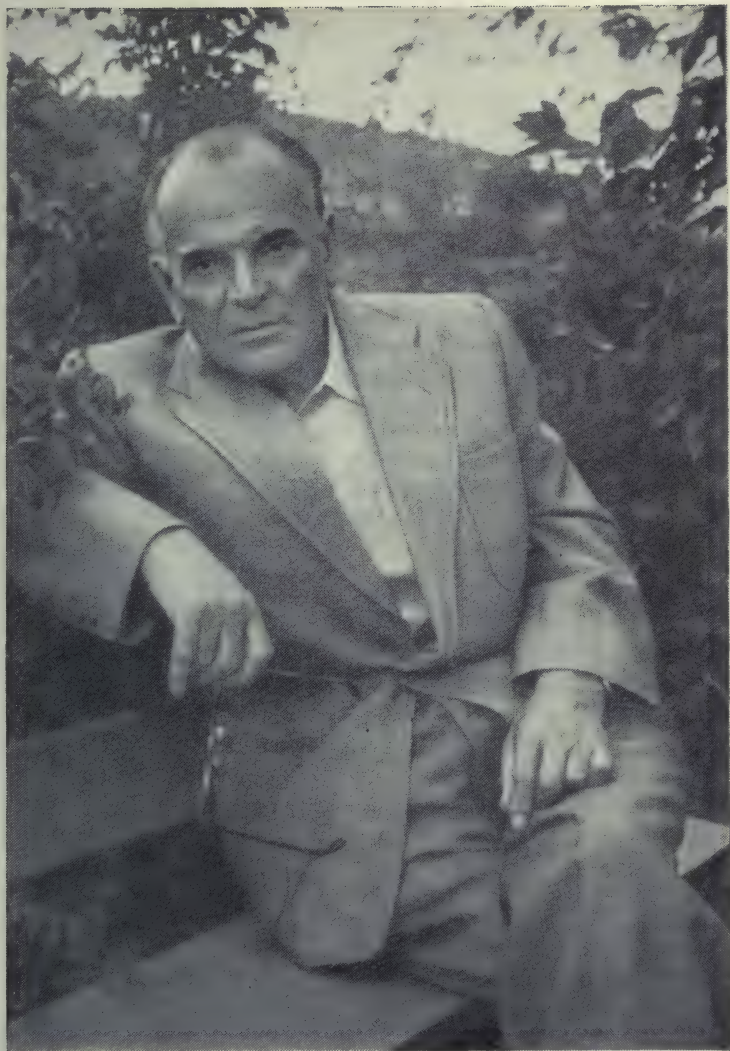
And he sat there, confused and instantly gone limp. He looked at them and understood nothing; he read the message and could not understand the words; he heard them congratulating him but did not understand what they were saying. He was confused. A surgeon who had lost his self-possession.

His whole life suddenly passed in review before him. He saw himself, his profession, his student dreams and everything he had ever done, or was capable of doing, in a new, unusual light.

Surely it was someone else who had only the day before voiced aloud his ideal of a peaceful old age. What was it he had said? Nasturtiums and a bed of wild orchids under his window?

1937

Translated by Olga Shartse



KONSTANTIN PAUSTOVSKY
(b. 1892)

"In our imagination colours never fade, summer does not end and love does not die.... In imagination we can laugh with Pushkin, shake Dickens's thin hand, and find Ophelia's blue flowers in a frozen stream. Imagination accompanies life just like a shimmering gleam accompanies a swiftly flowing river."

Such is the creed of Konstantin Paustovsky, an artist of profound thought, a poet of reflection and imagination.

For him there are no boring people or dull days. Each day holds hidden stores of unexpected encounters, fresh discoveries, worthwhile thoughts and observations. The romance of learning the new—this is the substance of Konstantin Paustovsky's books, his "Colchis," "Karabugaz," his autobiographical "Story of My Life," the "Golden Rose," a book about the work of writers, and his exquisite, graceful stories of ordinary good people, of Russia's beautiful forests, fields, rivers and seas.

THE GOLDEN TENCH

It's best not to go fishing in meadow lakes at haymaking time. We knew it but set out for the Prorva just the same.

Unpleasantness began as soon as we crossed Devil's Bridge.

A motley group of women were stacking hay. We tried to give them a wide berth, but they caught sight of us.

"Where to, brave lads?" the women shouted, and laughed. "He who fishes gets no wishes!"

"They're off to the Prorva, believe me, loves," said a tall, lean widow called Grusha the Prophetess. "They've nowhere else to go, poor chaps."

The women had teased us all summer. No matter how good our catch, they invariably said with a sympathetic air:

"Oh well, you're lucky you've caught enough for a pot of soup anyway. Petka, you know, brought home ten carp this morning. And such hefty ones too, fat was just dripping from their tails!"

We knew that Petka had only brought home two lean carp, but we said nothing. We had a private score to settle with the lad: he had cut off Ruvim's hook and had spied out the spot where we were feeding the fish. According to the fishermen's code of honour, Petka ought to have been thrashed for the deed, but we let him off.

When we had got to the unmowed meadows, the women's voices died away.

Sweet sorrel whipped us across our chests. The smell of lungwort was so strong that it made the sunlight flooding the distance seem like thin honey. We breathed the fragrance of the sun-warmed grasses, and heard the chirping of grasshoppers and the loud buzzing of bumble-bees all about us.

The dull silvery leaves of old willows rustled overhead. A smell of water-lilies and clear cold water came from the Prorva. We chose a spot and cast our lines, but suddenly "Ten Per Cent," an old man who had come trailing after us from the meadows, turned up.

"Hellow, fishermen," he said, squinting at the dazzling sunlit water. "How's the catch?"

Anyone knows that once the lines have been cast talking is forbidden.

The old man sat down, rolled and lit a cigarette, and then began to remove his torn bast shoes. He examined the holes in them thoughtfully, and heaved a noisy sigh.

"That mowing sure finished my shoes for me. Oh no, it won't bite today, the fish is finicky about food nowadays, the devil knows what sort of bait it wants."

He fell silent for a minute. A frog croaked sleepily near the shore.

"Just listen to it," he muttered, and looked up at the sky.

Pinkish smoke hung over the meadow. A pale blue showed through the pink, and a yellow sun hung over the silvery willows.

"It's too still," the old man said with a sigh. "I expect there'll be a good rain before nightfall."

We said nothing.

"That frog there must know why it's croaking," the old man offered, slightly put out by our morose silence. "The frog, you know, always frets before a storm and goes hopping all over the place. I stayed the night with the ferryman, we had a fire going and were cooking some fish soup over it, when suddenly a frog—must have weighed a kilo at least—leapt right into the pot and got

good and cooked there. I said, 'Vasily, it's done us out of our soup,' and he said: 'What the hell's a frog to me? I was in France during the German war, and I saw them eating frogs there just like that. Come on, eat, don't be scared,' he said. We didn't leave any soup in the pot either."

"Did it taste all right?" I asked.

"Good food it was," the old man said. He screwed up his eyes and thought a moment. "Look, would you like me to weave you a coat of bast? You know, I made a regular three-piece suit of bast for the All-Union Exhibition. Coat, trousers and waistcoat. There's no bast weaver to beat me in the whole kolkhoz."

He did not leave us until two hours later. We caught no fish, of course.

No one in the world has such a host of various enemies as an angler. Boys are the worst. At best they stand for hours behind you, staring blankly at the float. At worst, they start swimming near by, snorting, blowing and frolicking like so many colts. It's time to pack up then and go elsewhere.

In addition to boys, women and chatty old men, we had enemies of a more deadly kind: submerged old roots, mosquitoes, duckweed, thunderstorms, bad weather, and the rise of water in lakes and rivers.

Large lazy fish were known to hide in old roots, and we could not resist the temptation of trying those spots. The fish bit slowly and surely, sinking the float deep, but then it would get the line tangled in the roots and snap it off, float and all.

The thin, persistent buzzing of mosquitoes reduced us to panic. During the first half of the summer we went covered with blood and swollen with mosquito bites.

On hot windless days, when the same puffy clouds that looked like cotton wool hung motionless in the sky for days on end, mouldy duckweed appeared on the surface of lakes and creeks. The green, sticky film covered the water so thickly that even a sinker could not pierce it.

Fish stopped biting before a thunderstorm. It was frightened by the calm before a storm, when the earth echoed the rumble of distant thunder.

In bad weather or at high water there was no bite at all.

But then how good were the misty and fresh mornings when the trees cast their shadows far across the water and shoals of unhurried goggle-eyed chubs passed close to the shore. On mornings such as those, dragon-flies alighted on the feather floats, and with bated breath we watched the float suddenly sinking sideways into the water and the dragon-fly, having wetted its feet, flying up and away, while a strong and jolly fish strained and tugged at the line.

How wonderful were the perches falling like quicksilver into the thick grass and leaping about among the dandelions and clover! How wonderful were the sunsets flaming across half the sky over the forest lakes, how wonderful were the flimsy, smoking clouds, the cool stalks of water-lilies, the crackling of the fire and the quacking of wild ducks!

The old man proved right: a storm did gather. It grumbled for a long time in the woods, then rose to the zenith in a sinister wall, and the first flash of lightning stabbed at the distant haystacks.

We stayed in our tent until late. By midnight the rain stopped. We built a large fire and dried our clothes.

Night birds called sadly in the meadows, and a white star glimmered above the Prorva in the greying sky.

I fell into a doze. A quail crying somewhere close in the sweetbriar and buckthorn thicket awoke me.

Clutching at roots and grasses, we made our way down the steep bank to the water. It gleamed like black glass. The sandy bottom showed slim tracks cut by snails.

Ruvim cast his line a little way from me. A few minutes later I heard him whistling softly, calling me. It was our

own anglers' language. Three short whistles meant: "Drop everything and come here."

Treading softly, I walked over. He pointed silently to his float. It was a strange sort of fish. The float rocked, twitched slightly this way and that, quivered, but did not sink. It turned sideways, dipped for a moment, and came up again.

Ruvim froze to the spot—only a very large fish bites like that.

Now the float swerved with a jerk, stopped, straightened up, and began to go slowly down.

"It's sinking," I said. "Pull."

Ruvim pulled. The rod made an arc, the line cut whistling through the air. The invisible fish tugged hard, circling slowly about. A sunray fell on the water through the growth of white willows, and I saw a dazzling streak of bronze under the water: it was the fish, writhing and backing into the depths. It took us several minutes to pull it out. A huge, lazy tench with dark golden scales and black fins lay in the wet grass, slowly moving its fat tail.

Ruvim wiped the sweat off his brow and lit a cigarette.

We fished no more. We packed up and started back for the village.

Ruvim carried the tench. It hung heavily down his shoulder. The fish dripped water, and its scales flashed as brilliantly as the golden dome of the old monastery which, in clear weather, could be seen thirty kilometres away.

We struck out purposely across the meadow, past the women. When they saw us they stopped working and stared at the tench, shielding their eyes as if they were looking at the blinding sun.

They stared in silence. And then a soft whisper of admiration ran through the motley crowd.

We strode through the lines of women with a calm and

independent air. Only one of them spoke. Picking up her pitchfork, she said as we passed:

"My, what a beauty—hurts your eyes to look at it!"

We solemnly bore the tench across the whole village. Old women thrust their heads out of their windows to stare after us. Boys trotting close on our heels whined:

"Uncle, I say, Uncle, where did you catch it? Uncle, I say, Uncle, what did it bite on?"

Old "Ten Per Cent" gave the tench's hard, golden gills a flip.

"That'll make the women tuck in their tongues," he said laughing. "All they know is tease and giggle. This is different, they couldn't laugh *this* away."

From then on we no longer avoided the women. We walked straight at them, and they called to us sweetly:

"Wish you a good catch! You might bring us a bit of fish too!"

Justice had triumphed.

Translated by Olga Shartse

GOOD LUCK FLOWER

One day last summer I was walking back to the village from Borovoye Lake through a clearing in the pine wood. There was a lush growth of grass all about me, fragrant with summer dryness.

Flowers and eared grass were especially thick near old tree-stumps. The rotten stumps fell apart at the slightest kick, and instantly came to life. Brown dust, like finely ground coffee, went up in a dark cloud, and an intricate maze of secret passages and caves, made by bark beetles, was revealed with its awakening bustle of winged ants and flat black beetles with red shoulder straps, which made them look like a military band. No wonder these beetles are popularly called "tin soldiers."

A sleepy bumble-bee of black and gold crawled out of a hole under the stump and, droning like an aeroplane,

soared up, aiming a blow at the forehead of the man who had destroyed the stump.

Cumulus clouds were piled up in the sky. They looked so resilient that I was positive one could stretch out on their dazzling white mass and gaze at the smiling earth below with its forests, clearings, glades, flowering rye, shimmering still waters and motley herds. Cows always graze against the wind, and one can always tell by the slow movement of the herd which way the wind is blowing. That day the wind was blowing from beyond the Oka River in the south.

In a glade, close to the forest I saw some blue flowers. They clung together in patches that looked like tiny lakes filled with deep blue water.

I picked a large bouquet. When I shook it, ripe seeds rattled softly inside the flowers.

They were unfamiliar to me. They seemed like bluebells, but their cups, instead of drooping limply downward, were brittle and stood upright.

The road left the wood and entered the fields. And instantly I heard invisible skylarks singing high above the rye. A glass thread flung from one to the other—such was the impression of their song. They seemed to drop the thread one moment, only to catch it up the next, and its quivering note did not break off for a second.

Out on the country road I saw two young village girls walking towards me. They must have come a long way. Dusty shoes, with the laces knotted, were slung over their shoulders. They were talking and laughing, but on seeing me they fell silent at once, hastily tucked strands of fair hair into their kerchiefs, and primly shut their lips tight.

Somehow it always hurts when girls as sunburnt, grey-eyed and jolly as those put on a forbidding expression on seeing you. But it hurts even more to hear a suppressed giggle behind your back when you have passed them.

I was prepared to feel hurt when suddenly the girls stopped, and both of them together smiled at me so shyly and nicely that I was quite taken aback. Could anything be nicer than a girl smiling spontaneously, the blue of her eyes alight with a tender, limpid glow and you standing there in the middle of a deserted country road as amazed as if a shrub of hawthorn or jasmine had suddenly blossomed out before you in all its radiant colours, in all its fragrant loveliness splashed with sunlight.

"Thank you," the girls said to me.

"What for?"

"For coming our way with those flowers."

Abruptly they broke into a run, but even as they hurried away they looked back again and again and, laughing, shouted gratefully:

"Thank you! Thank you!"

The girls, I thought, were simply making fun of me in their happy mood. Still, there was something mysterious and intriguing in the trifling incident, something that baffled me.

On the outskirts of the village I met a neat little old woman hurrying along, dragging a smoke-grey goat by a rope. When she saw me she stopped, threw up her hands, letting go of the rope, and said:

"Ah, my dear! It's like a miracle coming across you like this in the road. I really don't know how to thank you."

"Thank me for what?" I asked.

"Oh, you," the old woman said, shaking her head with a cunning twinkle in her eye. "As if you didn't know. I can't tell you, it's a secret. Go on your way and don't hurry, let more people meet you."

The riddle was only solved for me in the village. The person who explained it to me was Ivan Karpovich, the Chairman of the Village Soviet. Though strictly a man of business, he enjoyed delving into local lore and doing historical research "on a district scale," as he put it.

"You've found a rare flower, you see," he told me. "It's called Good Luck flower. There's a popular belief—but then I don't know if I ought to let you in on the secret—that this flower brings young girls luck in love, and elderly people peace in their old age. I mean happiness generally."

Ivan Karpovich laughed.

"There," he said, "I too have chanced to meet you with your Good Luck flowers. I expect I'll have luck in my work now. It probably means that this year we'll complete the highway that's to link us to the district centre, and reap our first harvest of millet. Millet's never been sown here before, you know."

He paused, smiling at some thought of his, and added:

"I'm glad for the girls' sake anyway. They're good girls, our best gardeners. Happiness, you know, is founded on work. On the prosperity of our land too."

Translated by Olga Shartse



PYOTR PAVLENKO
(1899-1952)

"When the war ends it will probably be difficult to realize that our everlasting wanderings are over, that we may return home, sleep in our own beds every night, under our own roof, get up at six or seven by the alarm-clock, use a bridge to cross a river rather than wade, no longer dig foxholes. . . . Atlases will deal with our country's geography once again, and we shall no longer have to measure distances with our own legs but shall look them up instead in reference books. How much scope there will be for life then! How much freedom and energy!" Thus wrote Colonel Pavlenko, a regimental commissar, in his notebook in 1942-1943, while marching mile after mile of war-time roads together with thousands of Soviet fighters like him. Pavlenko's war-time stories, as well as his later works—"Happiness," "Steppe Sunlight" and "Workers of the World" (he died before it was finished)—are all mature works of a master who had found his road in art and was following it faithfully. To use his own words in the story "A Voice on the Road": "Let your voice be weak, let it quiver from weariness and strain, but go, go dauntlessly forward and call others after you."

THE LOST SON

... We entered the stanitsa on the run, and I didn't recognize the place. I'd been to that stanitsa before. I had friends there too, but now I didn't know the place. Houses on fire, German tanks blazing, something blowing up somewhere. And not a living soul anywhere. I looked about me and saw our fellows turning a corner. I followed. I saw some smouldering ruins and beside them a little chap of three, or four at most, raking the ashes with a stick. Our fellows just stood there riveted to the spot, staring at him and saying nothing.

"What are you doing?" I asked, and there was a catch in my throat.

He was so black and grubby, you could see he hadn't eaten for days, he was all eyes and cheek-bones.

"It's our home," he said to me. "I'm looking for potatoes." He pointed to the ashes.

"Where's your daddy?" I said.

"Don't know," he said.

"And your mummy?"

"Don't know. I was hiding in the corn."

He stood looking at us, as broken as a broken flower. And then we all felt as if our hearts were slashed with knives—we grabbed for our bags and started pulling out bread, rusks, sugar and everything, laying it all before the little chap, and all of us weeping, damn it. And me too. Why, we just couldn't check the tears, not then,

I, too, gave him a lump of sugar.

"Here," I said, "suck it and wait for me. I know where your mother is. I'll take you to her. You just sit here, don't go anywhere—you hear me?—and don't let anything scare you."

He rushed to me, dropped the sugar, hugged my legs with his thin little arms, and tears came rolling out of his eyes—you know, fellows, those tears were as big as if he'd spilled his very eyeballs. God, was I scared I'd let go! I clenched my teeth so hard they grated.

"Stay here like I told you," I said, and made a sign to our fellows to start going.

"Uncle, my name's Vovka!" he shouted.

It was a busy day for us—we went into attack again and again, and all on the move. And just think of it: that evening my platoon was sent in another direction. And there I was, thinking of him all the time. You know, none of my own kids lived, tough luck, and then what with the war and this and that. . . . There, I thought, I've found myself a sonny boy. He was such a nice little chap, you know: a bit too skinny, it's true, but then Mother, my woman that is, would feed him out in no time. There, I thought, I've found myself a sonny boy, and in the battle-field too, not just anywhere. He'd grow up into a jolly good Cossack. Oh, Vovka, Vovka dear! And that evening they up and sent my platoon in another direction. Bad business, couldn't be worse, I thought. But I'd get off later on. Vovka'd wait for me all night. But then the night was over, and by morning we were some thirty versts away from the stanitsa. I got down from my horse, friends, squatted beside a ditch and just howled—I could've filled my cap with tears. I remembered him raking those ashes with a stick, and my heart just turned over. But time was getting on. Marching orders. I happened to look down at my boots, and broke into a cold sweat: there was a print of his baby hand on my boot, just like a maple leaf. It was as if he'd put his stamp on me: don't forget Vovka; if you do, you'll be cursed for ever. . . .

The man's blue eyes turned dim and leaden as it he had suddenly gone blind.

The listeners sighed.

"Oh well, your son will be all right now," said one of the Red Army men confidently.

"And then it was no fault of yours," another tried to comfort him. "Look, don't try to shoulder it all alone. You're not to blame."

Turning away his face to take the hardness out of his eyes, the man said softly:

"But is *he* to blame?"

Translated by Olga Shartse



VADIM KOZHEVNIKOV
(b. 1909)

In the life of every nation there are unforgettable events that seem to stand out more vividly as they recede into the past. Such events in the life of the Russian people were the Revolution of 1917 and the Patriotic War of 1941-1945, to which Vadim Kozhevnikov has devoted his best pages.

The most widely read of Kozhevnikov's stories is "Towards Dawn." It describes revolutionary Siberia, where the author spent his childhood, his parents having been exiled to that region for their revolutionary activity.

As a war correspondent during the Patriotic War, Kozhevnikov covered developments on various battle fronts.

"The Captain," one of a collection of short stories, was written in 1942.

THE CAPTAIN

Captain Zhavoronkov's tattered flying suit, with holes burned during nights spent by campfires, hung loosely on his gaunt figure. His matted red beard and grimy wrinkles gave him an aged look.

In March he had parachuted on a special mission behind the enemy lines, and now, with the snow gone and rivulets gurgling fussily everywhere, he found it very hard to make his way back through the forest in his sodden felt boots.

At first he had walked only by night and in day-time had rested lying in some hole. But now, fearing that hunger would get the better of him, he plodded on by day as well.

With the mission completed, all he had to do was to find the WT operator who had been dropped thereabouts two months ago.

He had scarcely had anything to eat for the last four days. As he trudged across the slushy forest, he kept squinting a hungry eye at the white birch-trunks. He knew that you can pound birchbark, boil it in a tin, and then eat the bitter mess that smelled and tasted of wood.

In the more trying moments Zhavoronkov talked to himself as he might have done to a courageous and worthy companion.

In view of the extraordinary circumstances, he was saying to himself, you may get out on to the highway. Then you'll also have a chance to change your boots. But,

of course, you must be in a sore plight to be thinking of attacks on solitary German supply trains. The voice of your belly drowns the voice of reason.

Once he had got used to his prolonged solitude, he could reason with himself until he felt tired or, as he confessed to himself, began to talk nonsense.

He had an idea that the other man, the one he talked to, was a good chap, kind and sincere, who understood everything. Only occasionally did Zhavoronkov pull him up short. This happened each time he heard the slightest rustle, or saw a ski-track.

But Zhavoronkov's opinion of his double, the sincere chap who understood everything, was somewhat at variance with that of his comrades. No one in the unit considered him very likable. Taciturn and reserved, he didn't dispose the others to friendly intimacy. He never had anything sympathetic or encouraging to say to the tyros starting on their first raid.

On returning from a mission, he carefully avoided an effusive welcome.

"I need a shave. I'm as bristly as a hedgehog," he would mutter, dodging hugs, and hurry off to his room.

He did not like to tell about his activity behind the German lines, and confined himself to formal reports to his superior. He would lie on his cot, resting after the mission, and there would be a sleepy, sullen look on his face when he walked into the messroom.

He was reputed to be poor company, and indeed, a bore.

Once rumour spread that seemed to justify his behaviour. It was whispered that the Germans had wiped out his family in the early days of the war. When the rumour reached him, he stepped into the messroom with a letter in his hand.

"From my wife," he said, holding the letter in front of him, as he ate his soup.

Those around him glanced at each other. Many of them looked disappointed—they would have liked to imagine

that Zhavoronkov was so unsociable because of a great misfortune that had befallen him. But apparently there was no misfortune.

And then Zhavoronkov disliked the violin. The sound of a bow gliding over the strings affected him in the same way as a knife grating on glass affects some people.

A bare and wet forest. Marshy ground, holes full of muddy water. Flabby, boggy snow. Tramping through such desolate countryside is most disheartening for a lone, exhausted man.

But Zhavoronkov deliberately chose that way the better to avoid an encounter with the Germans. And the more forsaken and forgotten a region looked, the firmer was his tread.

He was suffering terribly from hunger, however. Sometimes his sight was blurred. He would stop and rub his eyes, and when it didn't help he would belabour his cheekbones with his mittened fists to restore circulation.

On his way down into a gully, he bent over a tiny waterfall dropping from the icy fringe of the slope and began to drink. He felt the nauseating sweetness of melted snow but kept drinking, even though he wasn't thirsty. He drank just to fill an empty stomach craving for food.

Night was falling. Thin shadows settled on the moist snow. It grew cold. The pools froze, and the ice cracked loudly underfoot. The wet boughs were crusted with ice and gave a ringing sound when turned aside. And much as Zhavoronkov tried to walk softly, his every step was attended by cracking or ringing.

The moon rose, and set the forest glittering. Countless icicles and ice-covered pools reflected the moonlight, burning with a cold fire, like the columns at the Palace of Soviets Station in the Moscow underground.

The WT operator must be somewhere in the sector Zhavoronkov had reached, but he wasn't easy to find because

the sector was four kilometres in area. He had probably dug himself a hole no less secluded than a beast's lair. And Zhavoronkov could certainly not start booming, "Halloo! Where are you?"

He walked on through a thicket flooded with a stark light. His damp boots had become as heavy and hard as stone blocks from the night cold.

He was angry with the WT operator who was so hard to find, but he would have been angrier still if he had come across him at once.

Tripping over a windfallen tree buried under the hardened snow, he fell down. And as he began to struggle to his feet, propping himself up on the snow, he heard the metallic click of a pistol behind his back.

"*Halt!*" someone said to him under his breath. "*Halt!*"

But Zhavoronkov did a strange thing. He began to massage his bruised knee without turning. He didn't turn until he was told, in the same low voice and in German, to stick up his hands.

"What's the idea of saying *Halt!* to a man who's lying down?" he sneered. "You should have rushed at me and used your pistol, wrapping it in your cap to muffle the crack of the shot. Besides, a German shouts *Halt!* loudly, so that his neighbour will hear him, and lend him a hand if necessary. You people have been told those things time and again, but a fat lot of good it's done you!"

He stood up.

He gave the password with only his lips. Hearing the reply, he nodded, put his Sauer on safety, and thrust it into his pocket.

"So you had your pistol ready, eh?"

Zhavoronkov glared at the WT operator.

"Did you think I'd rely on your wisdom alone?" And he commanded impatiently, "Now come on, take me to your lodgings!"

"Follow me," said the WT operator, kneeling in an unnatural posture, "I'm going to crawl."

"Why should you crawl? It's quiet here in the forest."

"My foot is frost-bitten," the WT operator explained softly, "it hurts badly."

Zhavoronkov snorted, and followed his guide, who had started to crawl on all fours.

"How did it happen? Were you barefoot or what?"

"The air was very rough when we jumped. I lost my boot . . . even before I landed."

"A fine jump! It's surprising your trousers didn't come off too. . . . Now how are we to get out of here with you the way you are?"

The WT operator sat down, propping his hands on the snow.

"I'm not going to get out of here, Comrade Captain," he said in an offended tone. "You may leave some grub and move on. I'll get back by myself when my foot's better."

"So you want me to set up a hotel for you here, do you? Don't you know the Germans have pin-pointed your set?" Suddenly Zhavoronkov bent forward and said anxiously, "I say, what's your name? Your face seems familiar to me."

"My name's Mikhailova."

"Splendid!" Zhavoronkov murmured, in a voice that sounded both embarrassed and offended. "Well, all right, I'll see what's to be done. . . . Can I help you?" he inquired politely.

The girl made no answer. She had resumed her crawl, sinking shoulder-deep in the snow.

Zhavoronkov's annoyance had given way to a less specific but more disquieting sentiment. He remembered having seen this Mikhailova among the trainees at the base. She had from the outset incurred his dislike and, in fact, his indignation. He could not for the life of him understand what business she had at the base, a tall and beautiful—indeed, very beautiful—girl with a proudly upraised head and a large clear-cut and fresh mouth that held your gaze while she spoke.

She had a disagreeable way of looking you straight in the eyes. It wasn't that her eyes were repellent. On the contrary, they were wonderful—big and calmly attentive, with a sprinkling of golden specks round the large pupils. But the trouble was that Zhavoronkov could not sustain their fixed gaze. And the girl knew it.

Besides, she wore her hair, which was rich and glossy, and golden too, in a mass overflowing the collar of her greatcoat.

"Put away your hair," he had told her more than once. "You're in uniform, not in fancy dress."

True, Mikhailova was very diligent. After the lecture she often stayed to ask Zhavoronkov quite sensible questions. Nevertheless, he answered them curtly, glancing frequently at his watch, for he was sure she would never have any use for the knowledge she acquired.

Once the commander of the training school reproved him for giving Mikhailova too little of his attention.

"She isn't a bad girl, is she?" he said.

"Oh, she's all right for family life," Zhavoronkov replied, and then added with unexpected vehemence: "But don't you see that people like us mustn't have any ties? The situation may require anyone of us to blow his brains out. What about her? How could she do such a thing? Why, she'd be sorry for herself! How could a—a girl so—" He broke off helplessly.

He transferred Mikhailova to the WT group to get rid of her.

The parachutist scout school was situated in a former holiday home, in the vicinity of Moscow. The surroundings—glazed semicircular verandas, walks strewn with red sand, furniture shining with varnish—had not yet quite lost their peace-time charm, and of an evening they invited to pleasant occupations. Someone would sit down at the piano, and there would be dancing. And had it not been for the tunics belted at the waist, you might have fan-

ced it was a Saturday evening at some first-class suburban resort.

There were bursts of anti-aircraft fire, and the white beams of searchlights groped in the sky with stiff feelers, but you could forget them.

After class Mikhailova often sat on a sofa in the drawing-room with a book in her hands, her feet tucked up under her. She read by the light of a lamp with a huge shade, set on a tall and stout mahogany support. Nothing about the girl—neither her calm, beautiful face, her serene posture, her hair flowing down her back, nor her fingers, which were so fine and white—squared with demolition technique, or with stabbing a dummy with a rubber-handled knife.

When Mikhailova caught sight of Zhavoronkov she would spring up to attention. He would pass her by with a careless nod, feeling an irritating indignation stir up in him. A strong man with a sportsman's dry, reddish face which, however, looked a little tired and sad, he was harsh and exacting to himself as well.

Zhavoronkov preferred to operate alone. He had a right to do so. His wife and child had been crushed to death by German tanks in a frontier village, and sorrow had held his heart in a cold, painful grip ever since.

But he didn't want anyone to attribute his fearlessness to his misfortune. He therefore had said to himself: *My wife and child weren't killed, they are alive. I'm not petty. I'm like anybody else. And I must fight as calmly as anybody else.*

He had concentrated all his vigour on settling accounts with the enemy. There are many men like him fighting in this war, men whose hearts are sorrow-stricken and bleeding, yet who are strong and proud.

Only a great calamity could have embittered my people—so good, so cheerful, so kind-hearted. . . .

As he walked after the crawling WT operator, Zhavoronkov was trying not to think of anything that would prevent him from doing the right thing. He was starved, and worn out by the long march. She obviously counted on his help but of course didn't know he was no good.

Should he tell her everything? Oh, no! He would do better to cheer her up somehow, then he would pull himself together, and perhaps they would succeed in—

Spring water had hollowed a sort of niche in the sheer wall of a gully. The tough roots of trees dangled overhead, some thin and frail, others twisted and sinewy like bunches of rusty cable. An ice roofing sheltered the niche, into which daylight flowed as into a greenhouse. It was dry and clean in the niche, and a matting of fir branches lay on the ground. There were the WT set in a cubic box, a sleeping-bag, and a pair of skis leaned against the wall.

"A cosy little cave," Zhavoronkov commented. He patted the matting with his hand. "Sit down and take those rags off your foot."

"What?" The girl was surprised.

"Take them off. I must find out how good you are with that foot of yours."

"You aren't a doctor. Besides—"

"Let's get this straight from the very first: you mustn't talk too much."

"Ouch, it hurts!"

"Don't squawk," he said, feeling her swollen foot. Its blue skin was shiny and taut.

"But I can't stand the pain."

"You'll have to." He started to pull off his woollen scarf.

"I don't want your scarf."

"Think a stinking sock's better?"

"It isn't stinking, it's clean."

"Look here, stop trying to fool me. Got a piece of string?"

"No."

Zhavoronkov reached up with his hand, broke off a thin root, and with it tied the scarf he had wrapped round the girl's foot.

"It'll hold all right," he declared.

He took the skis outside and set about making some contraption, using his knife. Then he came back and picked up the wireless.

"We can start now," he said.

"You want to sled me on the skis?"

"I don't exactly want to, but I must."

"Well, I have no choice."

"That's right," he agreed. "By the way, can you find me anything to eat?"

"Here." She took a broken biscuit out of her pocket.

"Not much of a meal, that."

"It's all I have. It's been several days since I—"

"I see. Other people begin by eating up their biscuits, and leave their chocolate for a rainy day."

"You can keep your chocolate."

"I didn't mean to offer you any."

He walked out, bending under the weight of the wireless.

After an hour's trudge Zhavoronkov saw that he was in bad shape. He was dead beat, although the girl on the sled made of the skis helped him by pushing herself along with her hands. His knees were shaking, and his heart was thumping as wildly as if it were stuck in his throat.

If I tell her I'm no damn good she'll be scared, he thought. But if I keep showing off, things will end up miserably.

He glanced at his watch.

"A hot drink wouldn't do any harm," he said.

He dug a hole in the snow, made a chimney with a stick, and covered its opening with green fir twigs and snow. The twigs and snow were to filter the smoke and thus make it invisible. Zhavoronkov broke off some dead branches and heaped them in the hole. He then took a

silk bag with half a charge of shell powder out of his pocket, strewed a handful of the large-grained powder on the branches and struck a match.

Flames licked the branches, hissing. Zhavoronkov put a tin on the fire, and threw icicles and bits of ice into it. Then he got out the biscuit, wrapped it up in his handkerchief and pounded it on a stump with the haft of his knife. He poured the crumbs into the boiling water and stirred it for a while. Then he lifted the tin from the fire and dug it into the snow to cool.

"What does it taste like?" the girl asked.

"It's almost like good coffee." He held out the tin with the brown wash.

"I don't want any, I still can do without it," the girl said.

"You'll do all the fasting you need later on. In the meantime, drink this."

Towards nightfall he contrived to kill an old rook.

"You aren't going to eat that crow?" the girl said.

"It isn't a crow, it's a rook."

He roasted the bird over the fire.

"Here," he said, offering the girl one half of the bird.

"Not on your life!" she replied, disgusted.

He had a moment's hesitation.

"I suppose it's only fair," he said pensively. And he ate up the whole bird.

He lighted a cigarette, and his spirits rose visibly.

"Well, how's your foot?" he asked.

"I could probably walk a little way," she replied.

"Not today!"

Zhavoronkov pulled the sled all through the night, with the girl apparently dozing.

At dawn he halted in a ravine. A huge pine-tree, torn up by a storm, lay on the ground. There was a hollow under the powerful roots. Zhavoronkov cleared it of snow, broke off some branches and spread out his cape on them.

"You'd like to get some sleep?" the girl asked, roused from her doze.

"An hour's nap, no more. I've almost forgotten what sleep is like."

She clambered out of her sleeping-bag.

"What are you up to?" Zhavoronkov asked, raising himself up on his elbow.

"I'll lie down with you to make it warmer. We'll use the bag as a blanket."

"Well, I must say!"

"Move over. You don't want me to lie in the snow, I hope? What is it, now—aren't you comfortable?"

"Take away your hair, it keeps getting into my nose, makes me want to sneeze, and—"

"You'd better sleep because you need it. And my hair isn't in your way at all."

"Yes, it is," he said lamely, and fell asleep.

She could hear the whisper of melting snow, and the tinkle of falling drops. The shadows of clouds trailed over the snow like wisps of smoke.

The sleeping Zhavoronkov held his fist pressed to his lips, and his face looked weary and emaciated. The girl bent forward, and gently slipped her arm under his head.

Heavy drops of water kept falling on the sleeper's face from a branch of the tree inclined over the hollow. The girl got her arm free and held up her hand to catch the drops. Whenever her hand filled with water, she threw it out carefully.

Zhavoronkov awoke and sat up, rubbing his face with his hands.

"You have a streak of grey hair here," the girl said. "Was it after that thing happened?"

"What thing?" he asked, stretching himself. It was something he didn't wish to recall.

This is what had happened. In August Zhavoronkov had blown up a big German ammunition dump. He had suffered concussion and burns. He had been lying on the ground in his smouldering, blackened clothes when German medical orderlies picked him up and took him to hospital along

with the wounded German soldiers. He had lain in hospital for three weeks, pretending to be deaf and dumb.

"Foot still hurt?" he asked with peremptory gruffness to change the topic.

"I told you I could walk by myself," the girl replied irritably.

"All right, and now get back on the sled. I'll give you all the walking you can take when the time comes."

He harnessed himself to the sled and resumed his trudge over the slush.

It was raining and snowing, and his feet kept slipping. He often stumbled into dips filled with slush. The day was grey and dim. He was wondering in anguish whether they would manage to cross the river, where there must be water on top the ice by now.

They came on the carcass of a horse. Zhavoronkov squatted beside it, and got out his knife.

"You know," the girl said, sitting up, "you do everything so skilfully that I don't feel disgusted watching you."

"That's because you're hungry," he replied calmly.

He roasted thin slices of horseflesh, using the aerial rod as a spit.

"My, it's delicious!" she said in amazement.

"Of course," he said. "Roast horseflesh tastes better than beef."

Awhile later he got up.

"I'll take a look round and see how things are," he said. "You stay here."

"All right," the girl agreed. "You might think it funny, but I now find it very hard to be left alone. I've somehow got used to being with you."

"Stop that nonsense."

But this was for himself rather than her because he felt embarrassed.

He came back after nightfall.

The girl sat on the sled, holding her pistol in her lap. She smiled when she saw him coming, and got up.

"As you were," he said, in the tone he used when his trainees rose to salute him.

He lighted a cigarette.

"Here's how it is," he said, looking at the girl distrustfully. "The Germans have built an airfield not far from here."

"What of it?"

"Nothing. They've done it very skilfully." He gazed at her, and asked earnestly, "Is your transmitter in working order?"

"You want to use it?" she said joyfully.

"Exactly."

The girl took off her cap and adjusted her earpieces. A few minutes later she asked him for the message. He sat down beside her, and struck his palm with his fist.

"This: 'Map soaked through and pulpy. Cannot determine co-ordinates of airfield. Am giving compass bearings. A low overcast will hide linear landmarks. Take your radio bearings on our transmitter.' What's our waveband?"

The girl took off her earpieces and turned a beaming face to Zhavoronkov. But he was busy rolling a fresh cigarette, and didn't even look up.

"Now listen," he said in a toneless voice. "I'm taking the set with me. I'm going there"—he indicated the direction by a wave of his hand—"because I want to be closer to the target. You will have to go on by yourself. You'll go down to the river as soon as it gets quite dark. The ice is thin, so take a pole with you. It'll help you if the ice gives way. You'll have to crawl your way to Malinovka—that's three kilometres or so—and there they'll take care of you."

"Very well. But I'm not giving you any set."

"Now stop that talk."

"I'm responsible for the set, and I stay with it."

"As an appendage," he grumbled. And losing his temper, he added in a loud voice: "It's an order!"

"You know, Captain, I'm ready to carry out any orders you give, but you have no authority to take away the set."

"But can't you understand?" he flared up.

"I do understand," she replied calmly. "It's a job that concerns nobody but me." She gave him an angry look. "Because you're all worked up you're sticking your nose into something that's none of your business."

He turned abruptly to face her. He was about to snub her but controlled himself.

"All right, do as you like," he said with an effort. Apparently feeling an urge to repay her somehow for the offence, he added: "Of course, the idea never occurred to you, so now—"

"I'm very obliged to you for the idea, Captain," she broke in ironically.

He drew back his sleeve to look at his watch.

"What are you waiting for? There's no time to be lost."

She laid hold of the straps, took a few steps, and turned.

"Good-bye, Captain!"

"All right, go on!" he muttered, and headed for the river.

A misty haze hugged the ground, the air smelled of dampness, and everywhere there was the murmur of water, which hadn't frozen even during the night. In weather like that it is particularly unpleasant to die. Not that any weather can make it pleasant.

A dreamy look would probably have come into Mikhailova's beautiful eyes if, a mere three months ago, she had read a story whose heroes went through this kind of adventure. Rolled up snugly under her blanket, she would have imagined herself the heroine, except that in the end she would have rescued that haughty hero by way of revenge. And then he would have fallen in love with her, but she would have ignored him.

The evening she had told her father about her decision, she hadn't known that the job would require superhuman exertion, that she would have to sleep in mud and starve and freeze, and eat out her heart in solitude. And if anyone had told her in great detail how very hard it all was, she would simply have replied, "But other people can do it, can't they?"

"What if you're killed?"

"They don't kill everybody."

"What if they torture you?"

She would have fallen to thinking, and would have answered softly, "I don't know how I'd behave. But I wouldn't tell them anything just the same. You know I wouldn't."

And when her father had heard that she was leaving for the front, he had bowed his head.

"It will be very hard for your mother and me—very hard," he had said, in a strangely husky voice.

"Dad," she had said cheerfully, "you *must* understand that I can't stay!"

Her father had raised his head, and she had been terrified by his face, for it had never looked so old and haggard.

"I understand," he had said. "It would have been worse if my daughter had been different."

"Dad!" she had exclaimed then. "You're so wonderful you'll make me cry!"

In the morning they had told her mother that she was going to join a telephony school.

Her mother had turned pale but had checked her emotion.

"Be careful, my child," was all that she had said.

Mikhailova had been very diligent at the school, and during the tests had been as excited as a schoolgirl. She had been very happy to see the speed of her transmission and her proficiency commended in the order of the day.

Finding herself all alone in the forest on those pitch-dark nights that were so cold and wild, she had cried a good deal at first, and had eaten up all her ration chocolate. But even so she had transmitted her messages regularly, and although occasionally she had longed to add something on her own behalf to feel less like a waif, she hadn't done so, because she knew she *must* save current.

And now, as she made her way to the airfield, she was surprised to realize how simple it all was. There she was,

soaked to the skin, crawling over the wet snow with a frost-bitten foot. Back at home, when she had had a cold, her father had kept her company, reading at her bedside so that she wouldn't have to weary her own eyes. Her mother, looking worried, had warmed the thermometer in her hands before handing it to her. When there had been a telephone call her mother had told the caller in a worried whisper that her daughter was ill. But now Mikhailova would be killed by the Germans if they succeeded in pin-pointing her set soon enough.

Yes, they would kill her even though she was so kind-hearted and beautiful, and perhaps gifted. And she would lie dead in that disgusting slush. She was wearing a fur-lined flying suit. The Germans would probably peel it off her. She was horrified to imagine herself lying naked in mud, with the soldiers staring at her body with horrid eyes.

Yet this forest was very like the pine grove in Kraskovo where she had lived in summer. The trees there were just like these. In the Young Pioneers' camp, too, where she had stayed, the trees were the same. And the hammock had been strung between the same kind of twin pines.

When Dimka had engraved her name in the bark of a birch that was very like this one here, she had reproached him angrily for crippling the tree, and afterwards had refused to talk to him. He had followed her and gazed at her with melancholy, and therefore beautiful, eyes. And when they had made it up, he had said he wanted to kiss her. She had shut her eyes and replied plaintively, "Not on the mouth, please." He had been so excited that he had kissed her on the chin.

She had been very fond of fine dresses. One day when she was asked to read a paper she had put on her smartest dress.

"What have you dolled yourself up like that for?" the boys had asked her.

“What’s wrong with it?” she had replied. “Can’t I be an elegant lecturer?”

And now here she was crawling over the ground plastered with mud, casting wary glances about her, straining her ear, dragging her frost-bitten, swollen foot.

What if they kill me! she thought. What if they do! Didn’t they kill Dimka and the others? Well, so they’ll kill me too. Am I any worse than the others or what?

It was snowing, the pools splashed and squelched. And she kept crawling. She rested lying on the wet ground, her head pillowed on her bent arm.

And then she would crawl on—with the doggedness of a wounded man crawling to the aid post where he knows they will dress his wound, quench his thirst, afford him blissful rest, and tend him.

The moist fog had become black because the night was black. Huge planes were sailing somewhere in the sky. The navigator of the leading plane sat in his chair with his eyes half shut, listening to the whispering and hissing in his earpieces, but he couldn’t catch any radio signals. The pilots and the gunner, too, were listening to the hissing and screeching in their earpieces, but they couldn’t hear any signals either. The screws were churning the black sky. The planes sailed on and on in the night sky, but still there were no signals.

Suddenly the first call sign sounded cautiously. The planes winged over, holding on to that gossamer-like sound; heavy and roaring, they sped on in the dense clouds. As familiar and cherished as the chirping of a cricket, the hum of a dry wheat-ear in the steppe wind, or the rustle of a leaf in autumn, the sound had become a guide for the huge, powerful machines.

The squadron leader, the pilots, gunners, flight engineers and Mikhailova herself knew that the bombs would be dropped over the spot from where the set was sending that familiar call. For there were enemy aircraft there.

Mikhailova was kneeling in a hollow filled with dark,

oozy water, tapping with the key as she bent over the set. A heavy sky hung overhead. It was empty and dumb. The girl's frost-bitten foot lay numb in the soft ooze, and the pain in her temples seemed to hold her head squeezed in a hot vice. She was shivering. Her lips felt hot and dry when she put her hand to them. I must have caught cold, she told herself in anguish. But what does it matter now?

Sometimes she had an impression that she was losing consciousness. She would open her eyes and listen in fright. The signals were humming in the earpieces with sonorous clarity. Her hand must have kept pressing the key quite independently of her will.

How disciplined I am, she thought. It's lucky I insisted on going in the captain's place. How could his hand have operated on its own? But if I hadn't come here I'd now be in Malinovka, and perhaps they'd have given me a warm coat. There must be a stove burning there now. . . . Everything would have been different then. But now there can't be anyone or anything any more. . . . How strange to be crouching here, thinking while there's Moscow somewhere. There are people in Moscow—lots of them. And not one of them knows I'm here. I'm not doing badly, though. Perhaps I'm brave. I don't think I'm afraid. But it's because my foot hurts so that I'm not scared too much. I wish it didn't take so long. Why can't they hurry up? Don't they realize that I can't stand it any longer?

With a sob she reclined on the slope of the hollow, and continued to tap, lying on her side. She could see the enormous, heavy sky. Now searchlights licked it, and she heard the heavy breathing of distant aircraft.

"My darlings!" she whispered, struggling with the tears. "So you're coming for me at last! I feel so unhappy here."

Suddenly she was frightened. What if she had tapped out those words of her own instead of the call sign? What would they think of her?

She sat up and tapped away, clearly, distinctly, repeating the cipher aloud so as not to make another slip.

The hum of the aircraft was drawing near. AA guns opened up.

"You don't like it, eh?"

She rose. There wasn't any pain or anything. She was tapping with all her might, as if it were not signals that she was striking from the key but one single shouted demand: "Hit 'em! Hit 'em!"

The first bomb crashed, ripping the black air. Mikhailova was thrown on her back by the blast. The orange spangles of reflected flames danced in the pools. Blows shook the earth. The wireless toppled into the water. Mikhailova tried to recover it. The screaming bombs seemed to be coming down straight at the hollow.

She sat with hunched shoulders and closed eyes. The glare of the flames forced its way through her eyelids. A gust of an explosion hurled stakes with barbed wire into the hollow. In the intervals between the blasts, the girl could hear something bursting and cracking on the airfield. The black fog reeked of burning petrol.

Then there was no more AA fire, and silence set in.

It's over, the girl thought in anguish. I'm all alone again.

She tried to get up, but her legs—she couldn't feel them at all. What had happened? Then she remembered. Nothing unusual. You just lost the use of your legs—concussion, that was all. She laid her head on the wet clay to rest a little. Why hadn't one of the bombs dropped where she was! Then everything would have been so simple. And she wouldn't have known the worst.

"No!" she said suddenly. "Others have been in worse trouble and got away. Nothing terrible can happen to me. I don't want it to."

A car was snorting somewhere. Cold white shafts of light glided over the dark shrubs again and again, there was an explosion—less loud than that of a bomb—and shots rang out near by.

They're looking for me, the girl said to herself. And I'm

so comfortable lying here. Won't there be any more even of this?

She tried to lie on her back, but the pain in her foot surged to her back in a burning wave. She gave a cry, tried to get up, and fell.

Cold, hard fingers pulled at the hooks of her collar. She opened her eyes.

"You? Have you come for me?" she said, and began to cry.

Zhavoronkov wiped her face with his hand, and she closed her eyes again. She couldn't walk. He got hold of the belt of her flying suit and pulled her out. His other arm was dangling like that of a rag doll.

She could hear sled runners wheezing as they slithered in the mud.

Then she saw Zhavoronkov. He sat on a stump, tightening his belt round his bare arm, while the blood trickled from under the belt.

"Well, how do you feel?" he asked, looking up.

"Poorly," she whispered.

"Anyway," he said through his teeth, "I'm no good any more. I've no strength left. Try to get there, it isn't far now."

"How about you?"

"I'll rest a bit here."

He tried to get up, but smiled somehow shyly and fell from the stump. He was very heavy and she had to struggle with him long and painfully till she succeeded in lifting his limp body on to the sled. He lay there awkwardly, face downwards. But it was more than she could do to turn him over.

She had to tug at the straps for quite some time before she managed to start the sled. Every step caused her unbearable pain. She pulled doggedly at the straps and backed up as she towed the sled over the sodden ground.

She couldn't understand how she managed it. Why was she still standing up and not lying exhausted on the ground? Leaning back against a tree, she stood with her

eyes half shut, afraid to fall, knowing that once she fell she wouldn't be able to get up any more.

She saw Zhavoronkov slide back from the sled and lay his chest and head on it.

"It'll be easier for you this way," he said, holding on to the cross-piece with his sound hand.

He crawled on his knees, half hanging from the sled. Sometimes he lost his grip and struck the ground with his face. Then she would shove the sled under him, but she hadn't strength enough to look away from his bruised and blackened face.

Later on she fell and again heard the mud wheezing under the runners. Then she heard ice cracking. She was panting and choking, the water closed over her, and she fancied she was dreaming.

She opened her eyes because she felt someone's gaze fixed on her. Zhavoronkov—thin, sallow-faced, with a dirty beard and with one arm held in a sling on his chest and squeezed between two dirty pieces of wood—sat on a plank bed, looking at her.

"So you're awake," he said in an unfamiliar voice.

"I wasn't sleeping."

"Anyway, it was like sleep."

She raised her arm and saw that it was bare.

"Did I undress by myself?" she asked plaintively.

"I did it for you." Feeling the fingers on his wounded arm one by one, he explained: "You and I kind of took a swim in the river, and then I thought you were wounded."

"It's all right," she said softly, and looked him in the eyes.

"Of course."

She smiled.

"I knew you would come for me."

"How did you know?" He gave a laugh.

"Oh, I just knew."

"Nonsense. You couldn't have known anything. You were a landmark during the bombing, and they could

have killed you. Against that emergency I found a haystack to be able to signal with burning hay. In the second place, you were located by an armoured car equipped with radio. It kept combing the terrain till I pitched a grenade in its way. In the third place—”

“Yes?” she queried in a ringing voice.

“In the third place,” he replied earnestly, “you’re the right sort of girl.” And he added sharply: “But, after all, what else could you expect me to do?”

She sat up, holding the pile of clothes to her breast and gazing with shining eyes into his.

“You know, I think I’m very fond of you,” she said loudly and distinctly.

He turned away. His ears had paled.

“Now don’t give me that.”

“I didn’t mean it that way, it’s simply that I like you,” she said proudly.

He looked at her from under his eyebrows.

“I’m not like you—very often I can’t bring myself to speak my mind, and that’s very bad,” he said pensively, searching her face with his eyes. He got up and asked, “Can you ride a horse?”

“No.”

“You will.”

“The name’s Gavryusha, a partisan,” said a shortish, shaggy man with gay, twinkling eyes, holding two short-tailed, bony German hunters by the bridle. He saw the girl looking at him, and explained: “I’m sorry, I know I look pretty shaggy. I’ll shave as soon as we’ve thrown the Germans out of here. We used to have a first-class barber’s. The looking-glass was this big. Man-high, it was.”

As he fussily helped the girl into the saddle, he murmured in embarrassment, “Please don’t mind its tail. It’s a real horse. It’s that sort of breed. And don’t worry about me, I’ll walk. I’m too proud to ride a dock-tailed horse. People here like a good laugh. They’d keep teasing me after the war, too.”

It was a rosy, quiet morning, with a delicate smell of mellowed trees and warm earth.

"I'm feeling so wonderful!" She looked into Zhavoronkov's face, dropped her eyes, and whispered with a smile, "I feel so happy."

"Of course," he said, "you will be happy yet."

The partisan walked beside Zhavoronkov's horse, holding on to the stirrup.

"Time was I couldn't kill a chicken," he said suddenly, raising his head. "I sang tenor in a choir. And my trade is a peaceful one—I'm a bee-keeper. But how many of those fascists I've killed! I'm a vicious man now, I'm bitter."

The sun climbed higher. Joyful, delicate green shoots were showing through the brown earth. The German horses laid their ears back and shied violently away from the giant trees casting branchy shadows on the ground.

When Zhavoronkov got back to his unit from hospital, his comrades found him changed beyond recognition. He had become so genial and talkative. He laughed boisterously and cracked jokes, and greeted everyone with a friendly word. And his eyes kept looking for someone.

"Mikhailova's on a mission again," they told him, affecting a casual tone.

A bitter line appeared on his forehead, and was gone the next moment.

"She's the right sort of girl—no doubt about that," he said loudly, looking at no one in particular. He pulled his tunic straight, and started for the commander's office to report.

1942

Translated by S. Apresyan



SERGEI ANTONOV

(b. 1915)

The story "Rain" is typical of the work of Sergei Antonov, one of the most popular of Soviet short-story writers of the post-war period. He does not go in for sensational themes and exceptional characters; he deals with simple people and everyday life. Nor does he hasten to draw conclusions, preferring to let the reader do this for himself. His people work in factories, build roads, till the soil, and it is while they are engaged in the daily tasks that their fate is decided, they fall in and out of love and experience joy and sorrow.

The stories "Rain," "Lena," "Spring," "Aunt Lusha," and others; short stories "The Poddubki Songs," "It Happened in Penkovo" composed several volumes of Sergei Antonov's works, which appeared in the 'fifties.

RAIN

1

Among the letters that Pasha had brought from the post office was a letter from the Central Management. The letter-head had been filled in as follows:

To: *Comrade Guryev, chief of construction of the bridge over the Valovaya River near the village of Otradnoye.*

In Reply to: *Yours of June 13, No. 147/06.*

And the message that followed was:

No additional motor lorries will be allotted to your construction job during the current quarter.

The most elementary arithmetic shows that you have more than enough lorries to fulfil (in pencil was added: to overfulfil if you wanted to) your plan.

Only irresponsibility (in pencil was added: and complete indifference to the job assigned) can account for the fact that you are always behind plan with the hauling of sand, crushed stone, and gravel, for the building of the bridge over the Valovaya, as a result of which the concrete foundations may not be ready by winter, and this means the whole construction job may not be finished in time.

You will be given exactly one week in which to catch up with the plan for hauling sand, crushed stone, and gravel, to the spot of the bridge over the Valovaya, and I suggest:

- a) *that all your lorries be used for this work only;*
- b) *that work at the quarries be carried on in two shifts;*
- c) *that the loading and unloading of the lorries be mechanized;*

d) *that you make full use of the orders for carts and horses that were issued to you. . . .*

And the list went on giving other instructions just as simple and easy to carry out.

Valentina Georgievna, secretary to the Superintendent of Construction, read the letter through, noted its receipt in the book kept for this purpose, and fell to thinking.

She thought of the rain that had been coming down day and night for two weeks; of the wet roads, slippery as soap; of the lorries loaded with crushed stone and gravel that strained over the ruts with heart-rending groans; of the faces of the drivers, blue with cold and lack of sleep; of Ivan Semyonovich, Superintendent of Construction, a small, asthmatic man, splattered with mud from head to foot; of the people from the District Executive Committee who refused to allow collective-farm horses to be taken off field work; of the feeble little pump called the "frog" that kept chugging away in the stone quarry.

The morning was dark and dreary. Rain pounded on the roof of the hastily built barracks in which the office was located. From the other side of the partition came the truculent voices of Ivan Semyonovich and the foreman of work on the left bank.

"He's had enough to upset him for one day," thought Valentina Georgievna. "I'll show him the letter later." And she opened a drawer and put the letter into a folder with "Reports" stamped on it in gold letters—a folder she had bought with her own money in Riga at the end of the war. Then she began to sharpen pencils. Ivan Semyonovich liked to have a lot of well-sharpened coloured pencils on his desk.

Somebody gave the plywood entrance-door such a kick that it flew open and stood quivering as if with the ague.

Into the ante-room came a girl about eighteen years old, wet through, with a whip pushed into the top of one boot.

"Is the chief in?" asked the girl.

"Who are you?" asked Valentina Georgievna in her turn without interrupting the sharpening of a green pencil.

"I'm brigade-leader of the carters from the New Way Collective Farm. Kurepova's the name. Olga Kurepova. The chief's got to write us out. We're going home tomorrow."

"That's too small a matter for the Superintendent of Construction," said Valentina Georgievna, half closing her eyes to give proper emphasis to the last words. "You must speak to your foreman about it."

"Our foreman's a fat-head--doesn't even know how to harness a horse. I keep telling him the chairman of our farm only gave us permission to work here five days and we've been here seven already. But all the same he won't write us out. We've got to cart manure out to the fields."

"I don't know anything about that. But the Superintendent of Construction can't be bothered with such things. He's too busy."

"If he's so busy I'll wait."

And the dripping brigade-leader sat down on a bench and began to wring the water out of her skirt.

"You're in an office, not a shed," said Valentina Georgievna scathingly.

"The floor's got to be scrubbed anyway," replied the girl, going right on with her wringing. "Just look at all the mud. A little water won't hurt it."

Valentina Georgievna tried to give her room the orderly look of an important office, so that visitors would be filled with respect for the chief and for the work he supervised. She herself always came to work looking very neat and forbidding in a starched blouse with a man's neck-tie at the collar and something pink showing underneath. Her black hair was faintly streaked with grey, and she wore it in a tight knot.

Pasha, the charwoman, was so intimidated by the secretary that she scrubbed the floor at least three times a day. But in spite of all Valentina Georgievna's efforts, the ante-room was obviously pinchbeck. There was nothing in it but the secretary's desk and a clumsy bench, and even the bench was carried into the chief's office every time a production meeting was held. The appearance of the room was further marred by the electric light bulb hanging from the ceiling which was pulled up by a piece of string so as to be over the desk—to make night work easier and to keep people from bumping their heads on it.

Valentina Georgievna was sharpening her fourth pencil when the foreman from the left bank came out of the office and went away muttering something under his breath.

"I'll have to give him the letter now," thought Valentina Georgievna, and she went into the chief's office. Ivan Semyonovich was upset on reading it. He sent for Timofeyev, the man in charge of the garage, and asked to see the latest report on how the lorries were working.

Timofeyev came in looking tired, unshaved, and indifferent.

"Look at this," said Ivan Semyonovich, poking at the report with his finger. "Only eight of sixteen lorries are working on the line. How do you account for that?"

"There are twelve on the line, Ivan Semyonovich," answered Timofeyev, staring out of the window at the grey sky and wondering when the chief would tire of making these useless calculations.

"What do you mean, twelve?" Ivan Semyonovich got up, took a red pencil out of the brass cup and threw it down hard on the report. He simply did not know how to make a scene and was only too aware of this weakness. "Only eight lorries are hauling gravel. How do you account for it, Comrade Timofeyev?"

"Kuzmichyov and Kuvayev are being overhauled and Stepanov drove the manager of the dining-room to town. You yourself gave him permission. . . ."

"Look at that. I gave him permission to go once, and he goes every day."

Timofeyev did not reply. He just went on staring out of the window as if he didn't care what his chief said.

"Well, that makes eleven," went on the chief. "Where are the other five?"

"Valov and Korkina have blow-outs. Alexeyev went for petrol. But what sense is there in counting the lorries? It's boats you need to haul gravel in weather like this, not lorries."

"Very well. Where are the other two?"

"One was handed over to the supervisor on the left bank—by your order."

"What's that?"

"By your order, I say," repeated Timofeyev testily.

"And the sixteenth?"

Valentina Georgievna was waiting anxiously for them to get to that sixteenth lorry. Two days ago the obstinate Timofeyev, despite the chief's orders to the contrary, had sent this lorry on a long trip to a friend of his who had promised to exchange the "frog" for a more powerful pump. Owing to the rain, the lorry had got stuck somewhere, and now there was neither pump nor lorry. Valentina Georgievna glanced at her chief—a stout, shortish man with a puffy, harassed face and kindly eyes as blue as a baby's. Then she looked at the unshaved, unconcerned Timofeyev. Looked at both of these men, who knew as well as she did that the trouble lay not in the lorries but in the weather, and who realized in the depths of their hearts the uselessness of such talk. And she felt sorry for them both.

"Well, where's the sixteenth?" insisted Ivan Semyonovich.

"Working. These figures aren't right."

"We'll check them. Valentina Georgievna, bring me the reports of all the foremen."

Valentina Georgievna went out, feeling as distressed as her chief. The brigade-leader in the wet skirt was still sitting on the bench.

"I'm not leaving till I get that write-out," she said. "Think we don't know the law? We've bumped into plenty of these 'busy' chiefs in our time. Once some fellow in charge of potatoes came to help himself to our farm horses. Didn't we let him down hard, just! Right on his sitting-down place...."

"Please be more careful with your language," interrupted Valentina Georgievna, more hurt than she could say that an experienced engineer in charge of a large construction job should be compared to a fellow in charge of potatoes.

"What's that?" asked Ivan Semyonovich, who had come to the door of his office.

"She won't let me see you," said the brigade-leader. "Our time's up, so's our food, and we've got to haul manure out to the fields and the foreman won't give us a write-out."

"Humph," said Ivan Semyonovich.

"Honest to goodness. Says we haven't fulfilled our plan. How can we fulfil our plan when we've got to go miles for that gravel? And when we've got to hitch a second horse to the cart every time we climb out of the gully? One horse can't make it alone!"

"Humph," said Ivan Semyonovich again.

"Honest to goodness. There's gravel on the river-bank, about a mile from here. If it was that gravel we hauled, we'd have fulfilled two plans for you by yesterday. Do you think we like to see those concrete-mixers standing there with nothing to do?"

"Not all gravel's worth hauling, my girl," said Ivan Semyonovich gently. "You have to be sure the gravel's sufficiently hard. Soft lime gravel won't do."

"You know best. Well, are you going to write that paper yourself or have it typed?"

"Don't be in such a hurry, my girl," said Ivan Semyonovich, clumsily patting her on the shoulder as if she were a hot stove. "Let's be friends and agree to help each other for another three days."

"Three days! Can't be done!"

"Come, come. You're a Komsomol member, aren't you? You can see for yourself how things stand. You mustn't quit the job before it's finished. Komsomol members don't do things like that. Aren't you ashamed!"

"That's all right, we won't be ashamed."

"I don't understand you girls. If I were in your place, I'd stick around here until the bridge was finished. Haven't you noticed what nice eligible young men we have on the job? Mechanics, surveyors, drivers—all young and handsome."

"What do I want with your drivers? I've got a man of my own," said the brigade-leader, unmoved. "And if you don't give us that write-out we'll leave without it."

Dozens of pressing matters were awaiting the attention of the Superintendent of Construction, yet he took the time to coax this girl to stay, never once mentioning the critical condition things were in, nor the sharp, unjust letter he had just received from the Central Management. Valentina Georgievna heard him trying to convince the girl, appealing to her conscience, joking with her, although he could no more joke than he could make a scene. As the secretary looked at his grey hair and his self-conscious smile, she felt herself growing more and more indignant with this stubborn girl.

At last Ivan Semyonovich gave a wave of his hand and said limply: "Type the write-out, Valentina Georgievna. I can't force them to stay," and he went into his office.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," said Valentina Georgievna furiously when the door was closed. "Can't you see for yourself what the weather's like, that the lorries skid

all over the place, that the chief's turned grey in the last few days, and still you demand a write-out? It's you who need the bridge, not us," and her lips trembled.

"Oh, all right," said the girl, surprised and frightened. "We'll go on working tomorrow, but give us the write-out anyway."

There was a knock on the wall. Valentina Georgievna went into the chief's office. He seemed to have forgotten all about the sixteenth lorry, for he was busy writing something and Timofeyev was gone.

"Here's a list—of the letters and documents—" said Ivan Semyonovich with long pauses as he went on writing—"that I want you—to get ready for me—by tonight. I'm going to Moscow," and he tossed away the pencil with a resolute gesture. "I want to show them it's boats we need to haul that stuff now, not lorries."

2

Soon after Ivan Semyonovich went to Moscow the weather changed. The sun came out and Valentina Georgievna could wear her favourite white shoes to work.

It was quiet and empty in Ivan Semyonovich's office. Some withered flowers kept dropping their petals on the window-sill.

On his desk stood the brass cup with beautifully sharpened pencils in it, points up.

Valentina Georgievna was always in low spirits when Ivan Semyonovich was away. At such times it became particularly clear that people were interested in her only as the chief's secretary. There was almost nothing to type, nobody tapped on the wall, the telephone rarely rang. And she couldn't help worrying about how Ivan Semyonovich was getting on in Moscow all by himself, and who was getting necessary documents for him.

By lunch-time she had dispatched the business of the day and reminded the foremen that their fortnightly re-

ports were almost due. Then she went out to pick some fresh flowers.

The bridge was being built about a mile from the office; from the steep river-bank the huge piers could be seen thrusting out of the still water. Nothing was being done to one of the piers, but workmen were busy on the other two, and Valentina Georgievna remembered a sentence Ivan Semyonovich had recently dictated to her: "Owing to lack of material, all concrete-work must be concentrated on the second and third piers."

A temporary bridge spanned the river on rough piles. Ivan Semyonovich had sketched the design for this bridge on the back of a cigarette-box in ten minutes, and Valentina Georgievna had been sure it would collapse. But there it stood, and little trucks were shuttling back and forth across it between the piers and the river-bank, carrying foundation-stones, concrete, lengths of frame-metal, staples, nails, and all the other things that had covered eighteen pages of the order-list. They also carried satiny-yellow newly-sawn one-inch boards—the same boards she had shouted herself hoarse about while sending a telegram by telephone a few days before: "Immediately deliver one-inch boards stop concrete-work at standstill without them."

The closer Valentina Georgievna came to the bridge, the easier it was to pick separate sounds out of the merged and cheerful roar of construction: the distinct sound of axe-blows, following some seconds after the flash of the blade out on the second pier—a whole gamut of sound, from the first trial blow on the nail to the resounding ring of the last triumphant blow, when the long nail was in up to the head; the wail of the saw, low and uncertain as long as the stubborn metal refused to bite straight into the wood and had to be righted with the thumb, loud and free as it obeyed and gained speed, spraying off a fine stream of sawdust; the dull plop of the piledriver working on the right bank; the blood-chilling scrape of crushed rock

against steel in the concrete-mixer; the hasty chug-chug of a stationary engine on the embankment, now louder, now softer, as if it ran away from time to time and then came back; the startling thunder of logs being unloaded on the right bank.

And all this business-like roar, hum, and hammering which had been instituted by the absent Ivan Semyonovich after many days of calculating, arguing, discussing and approving, bore a direct relation to Valentina Georgievna, and this made her glad. She walked across a springy bed of old shavings, across logs that kept rolling out from under her feet, across the ribbed ruts made by a five-ton tip-up lorry. From time to time people whose faces she did not remember nodded to her. She climbed the crumbling embankment of the left-bank approach, passed some barges being equipped to float down steel spans, came at last to her favourite little field bright with buttercups and daisies and some little red flowers whose name she did not know.

The field lay between a narrow inlet and a grove of young fir-trees whose branches ended in prickly little crosses. When the wind blew, the flowers bent and nodded as if playing hide-and-seek, and the fir-trees bowed to each other comically. The sound of building could scarcely be heard here; only an occasional log floating down the river with a number chalked on the head was a reminder of the work being carried on not far away.

Valentina Georgievna gave herself up to day-dreams as she gathered her flowers. She dreamed that Ivan Semyonovich would be made head of the Central Management and have an office with silk curtains and a bell to summon his secretary, and the ante-room would be lined with standard filing cabinets, and every cabinet would be filled with standard folders with automatic fasteners, and Valentina Georgievna would cut numbers out of last year's calendars and paste them on the backs of the folders, and there would be so many of them that Ivan Se-

myonovich would send the car for her after working-hours if he was urgently in need of a certain document. That was what Valentina Georgievna dreamed of as little white butterflies went fluttering past her like bits of paper caught up by the wind. Valentina Georgievna had been working with Ivan Semyonovich for more than eight years and could not imagine working with anyone else. Before this she had worked for ten years as a typist in the typing department of a technical publishing house. During the war this department was abolished, and then she had gone to army headquarters and asked to be taken on in any capacity whatsoever. As a volunteer she was made secretary to Captain Ivan Semyonovich Guryev of the Engineering Corps, and had been travelling from one construction site to another with him ever since. The severity of her appearance and her unsociability kept her from making friends among the people she worked with. Her one and only "affair" had had a strange ending. One day their front-line newspaper had carried a photograph of a sailor who bore striking resemblance to the famous flyer Valery Chkalov. Thrilled by the heroism of this sailor, Valentina Georgievna had typed him a letter in two copies. She kept one copy and sent the other to him through the newspaper. Thus began a correspondence. At that time Valentina Georgievna was working for the Management of Military Roads, near the town of Tikhvin, and the sailor was fighting near Leningrad. Their letters were frequent and regular. In one of them the sailor asked Valentina Georgievna to send him her picture. She cut out the photograph of herself that was posted on the Honour Board, sent it to him, and began to count the days until she should get an answer. It never came. Ivan Semyonovich, who knew all her simple secrets, tried to convince her that the sailor must have been killed, although he himself did not believe it.

When she had gathered enough flowers, Valentina Geor-

gievna went to the water's edge and sat down on a log, first making sure there were no lizards about.

The reflection of billowing clouds and delicate blue sky made the water of the inlet seem fathomless. From time to time slow circles would appear among the lacquered leaves of the lilies lying on the still surface, as if a drop of water had fallen, and the white blossoms would stir, touched by the fish. The wings of dragon-flies rustled as they chased one another low over the water. The warm air blurred the outlines of the opposite bank, and the woods beyond seemed to be seen through mist.

Valentina Georgievna paid no attention to all this. She set about making a bouquet, carefully selecting each flower, and was so engrossed in her task that she did not hear Timofeyev come up.

"For the chief?" he asked.

"To put in the chief's office," corrected Valentina Georgievna, casting Timofeyev a glance over her shoulder.

"Coming back soon?"

"Yes. Perhaps the day after tomorrow."

"You can tell him glad news. We've almost caught up with the plan for hauling gravel. That's what dry weather will do."

"According to weather reports, it ought to be a nice day tomorrow too."

"What makes you so clumsy with these flowers, Valentina Georgievna?"

"My fingers hurt. I don't know why. Nerves, I suppose. Or too much typing," said Valentina Georgievna, touched by the tone of his voice.

Timofeyev sat down on the grass, picked up the buttercups that had fallen out of her lap, and handed them to her.

"Why don't you ever shave?" she asked, blushing and fearing that he might look at her.

"Who for?"

"Yourself."

Timofeyev reflected a moment and gave a sigh.

"No sense in it, and no time. We don't seem to be getting anywhere with this work of ours. Can't get the building materials hauled in time, and now they've given the last petrol to the tractors. Tractors can work in any weather, but every minute is precious to the lorries. Tomorrow they won't be able to work."

"Really?" said Valentina Georgievna drily, sensing criticism of Ivan Semyonovich in Timofeyev's words.

"Yes, really. We're all good fellows, but we're not working together. Not like a fist. All five fingers separately. No head. That's what makes *our* fingers hurt."

"I don't need any more flowers, thanks," said Valentina Georgievna coldly.

"Very well," and Timofeyev got up and went off in the direction of the bridge.

Valentina Georgievna waited until he had disappeared behind a hill and then she, too, got up and went back to work. There was very little to do that evening, so she returned to the village early, ironed a blouse, read Chekhov, and went to bed.

As she was dozing off, it suddenly seemed to her that in the report the chief had asked her to draw up before he left she had written 3,000 instead of 4,700 cubic feet of concrete. She jumped out of her folding bed, dressed hastily, and, despite her fear of the dark, ran back to the office to look at her copy. No mistake made. There it was: 4,700 cubic feet of concrete.

It was very late when Valentina Georgievna, greatly relieved, returned home. Down at the bridge the pile-driver was thumping away monotonously.

Two days later Ivan Semyonovich came back, and he brought another man with him. Valentina Georgievna was immediately occupied by so many big and little tasks

that she had no time to take particular notice of the other man. She simply observed that he cocked his head on one side when he entered the room and that he wore a waistcoat under his suit coat. The next day he appeared with Ivan Semyonovich early in the morning, and this time she got a better look at him. He was a tall strong man of about thirty-five or thirty-eight, with thinning hair. He wore a faded black coat, waistcoat, and trousers stuffed into the tops of imitation leather boots. Out of the pocket of his waistcoat stuck a slide-rule. His face and hands were as tanned as if he had just returned from a summer resort, and his fingers were hairy.

The stranger went into the office with Ivan Semyonovich. As Ivan Semyonovich was closing the door behind him he told his secretary not to admit anyone.

"Very well," said Valentina Georgievna. People were often sent by the Central Management to check and inspect; she was used to them.

After lunch, when she was typing out some fire-prevention rules, Timofeyev came in.

"How do you like the new chief?" he asked under his breath, nodding towards the door.

"What do you mean?" asked the perplexed Valentina Georgievna.

"Haven't you guessed?" said Timofeyev in surprise. "Ivan Semyonovich is turning things over to him."

And suddenly Valentina Georgievna realized why Ivan Semyonovich had asked her to bring him all the blueprints, documents, and book-keeping reports, and why he had asked her not to allow anyone into the office. She tried to go on with her typing but she made mistakes in every line and had to give it up.

This was not the first time Ivan Semyonovich had been transferred to another construction site, but every other time Valentina Georgievna had been the first to know about it. Her chief had always called her into the office, told her that at a certain time they were to be sent to a

certain place, but that she was not to say anything to anyone else about it for the present, and was to do this and that in preparation for their departure.

Valentina Georgievna found it insulting that she should have learned this from Timofeyev. When the new chief left, she got up determinedly and went in to speak to Ivan Semyonovich without giving her usual knock.

Ivan Semyonovich was sitting at the desk writing. But instead of sitting in his usual place, he was perched on a stool off to one side. He glanced up when Valentina Georgievna entered, then went on writing without saying a word, dropping his grey head still lower.

"Ivan Semyonovich, are we leaving?" she asked.

Slowly the chief straightened up and looked at her in discomfiture.

"Looks as if we've got to," he said. "Can't be helped. I've been made Head of the Technical Bureau of Management. Seems I'm too old to work on construction. Can't be helped. Funny, isn't it, how old age creeps up on you without any warning?"

He gave a sad little smile.

"When are we to leave?"

"You see, Valentina Georgievna," he said, assiduously making corrections in what he had been writing, "this time I'm afraid I'll be leaving alone. The head of the Central Management said I wasn't to take a single person from the site with me. It can't be helped."

"What about me?" asked Valentina Georgievna in astonishment.

"That's all right." Ivan Semyonovich got up and patted her on the shoulder as clumsily as he had patted the brigade-leader. "You just go on working here a while longer and I'll send for you. I can't very well do it at present. But why in the world should you come traipsing after an old man like me . . . into the stuffy town? . . ."

"I see . . ." said the stunned Valentina Georgievna.

"It's quite another thing on a construction job," went

on Ivan Semyonovich sadly. "River, fields, forest, fresh air..."

On the next day Ivan Semyonovich stayed home to pack his things and the new chief, named Nepavoda, established himself in the office. He was there when Valentina Georgievna came to work. The office-door was wide open.

"Valentina Georgievna," called the new chief, pronouncing each syllable very precisely.

"Heavens, he already knows my first name and patronymic!" thought Valentina Georgievna with a start, trying not to hurry as she went into the office.

Nepavoda was sitting with his hairy hands spread open on the desk, which seemed to be much smaller than it had been under Ivan Semyonovich. The new chief cocked his head on one side to look at her, and she seemed to detect irony in his gaze.

"Well?" said Valentina Georgievna drily.

Nepavoda stared at the bridge of her nose—stared long and hard and with such penetration that the bridge of her nose began to itch.

"Please take away these coloured pencils," said Nepavoda. "I have no time to draw pictures. One pencil's enough for me."

"Very well," said Valentina Georgievna.

"And another thing: tell them to hang a hand-washer in that corner."

"A what?"

"A hand-washer. An apparatus for washing hands." The new chief rose to his full height and his shadow fell on Valentina Georgievna's feet. She stepped aside. "And a pail or a wash-tub. I'll bring soap and towels myself."

"Where am I to find a hand-washer?"

"What a problem! Are they so hard to find? In that case let them bring an empty oil tin and a six-inch nail and I'll make the hand-washer myself."

"Very well," said Valentina Georgievna.

"And now type this out in the form of an order." He

held out a scrap of paper with something written on it in a hasty hand. "Have it sent to all sections. Today."

His eyes said, "That's all." Valentina Georgievna went out.

She sat down at her desk, put rubber tips on her fingers, and typed:

ORDER NO. 69

Otradnoye, June 26, 19. .

Starting as from today by Order No. 3751/OK issued by Central Management, June 21, 19. . I am taking over the duties of the new Superintendent of Construction of the bridge over the Valovaya River.

Valentina Georgievna took off the rubber tips, wrote "checked with original" on all three copies, and began to weep.

4

After Ivan Semyonovich left, everything was turned upside down at the construction site. The lorry was taken away from the supervisor of work on the left bank, and he himself was made supervisor of concrete-work; digging was stopped on the approaches to the right bank; the supervisor of the right bank was put in charge of work at the quarries, and some sixty workmen were assigned to repair the road leading to the quarries.

Tractors and other machines stopped running because the new chief issued an order that five tons of fuel was to be put aside as an emergency supply and the rest was to be distributed by Timofeyev, who fuelled nothing but lorries. Somehow the new chief got wind of the abandoned gravel quarry down on the river-bank—the same quarry, it seems, that the brigade-leader had mentioned. He had a sackful of earth and pebbles brought from there, spread it out on the floor of his office and sent samples

to be analyzed. Early in the morning he began riding back and forth between quarry and construction site. When he came back to the office covered with mud and cement dust, he would strip to the waist and wash himself, splashing water all over the wall. In the few hours he was to be found there, the door of his office was always wide open, he saw everyone, and instead of knocking on the wall when he needed something as Ivan Semyonovich had done, he simply shouted "Valentina Georgievna!" at the top of his voice. People from the District Executive Committee and the District Party Committee began to come to the office, a thing they had never done before. Nepavoda was instantly on the best of terms with them; he often rang them up and roared with laughter over the phone.

The new chief was always ragging Timofeyev, although the latter had now become one of the most important men on the job. One day the chief saw a barrel of petrol standing in the sun. He sent for Timofeyev and had him put up the following sign in the fuel storehouse: "A three-ton lorry covers thirty-five miles on the amount of fuel that evaporates from a barrel of petrol standing in the sun for one day." Timofeyev did not believe this, but he had the sign made and he hung it up himself. The chief found out about the exchange of the "frog." He had the new pump taken back and deducted the cost of transportation from Timofeyev's wages. Timofeyev came to argue the matter with him, but the chief refused to talk to him until he shaved. Timofeyev shaved and the chief talked to him, but the decision remained unchanged.

Valentina Georgievna had a feeling that everyone was as dissatisfied with the new chief as she was and just as anxious to have Ivan Semyonovich back. She missed him dreadfully, and on the day when she saw his signature and his new title as head of the Technical Bureau on a blueprint just received from Moscow, she was as happy as if she had got a letter from him. For a long time she

wondered whom she could tell about her happiness, and at last she sent for Pasha.

"Do you recognize this signature?" she said cryptically.

Pasha did not.

"It's Ivan Semyonovich's. He's working in Moscow now and sends blueprints to construction sites all over the country."

"You don't say," observed Pasha non-committally; then, after a pause: "Shall I scrub the floors now or later?"

Valentina Georgievna was hurt and put the blueprint away, but when Timofeyev came in she couldn't help getting it out again.

"Do you recognize this signature?" she asked.

"Of course. The old man's in the right place now. Here, let's have it." He studied the blueprint. "Just look what they've planned for us: asphalt five inches thick. They must have gone off their chumps. As if we could ever haul that much!"

"Evidently that's what technological standards require," said Valentina Georgievna tersely. "Ivan Semyonovich knows what he's doing."

"Maybe. If that's what technological standards require, we'll have to haul it," said Timofeyev placatingly. "Things are going better now."

"They're going better because it has stopped raining," said Valentina Georgievna, flaring up.

"Because it has stopped raining and because we're working more sensibly. Everything's concentrated on the hauling, our weakest point at present."

"It's easy enough for you to criticize. You're getting all the attention. But you ought to hear what the supervisors say."

"They don't say anything. They used to say plenty, but they haven't time to any more—too busy."

Valentina Georgievna was shocked by Timofeyev's words. Who, if not Timofeyev, should cherish kindly mem-

ories of Ivan Semyonovich? Why, Timofeyev hadn't had a moment's rest since the coming of the new chief. But there he stood, shaved and smiling, confident he could haul whatever he was asked to in those sixteen lorries of his.

That day Valentina Georgievna found herself harbouring a dreadful wish: she wished it would start raining again. It was not fair to compare the two chiefs in such unequal circumstances. If it began to rain again and the lorries got stuck in the mud and the quarries filled up with water and the concrete-mixers stopped working, then everyone would see that Ivan Semyonovich was better than Nepavoda.

And Valentina Georgievna waited for the rain to begin again.

The collective farmers, in whose house she and two girls who were employed as draughtsmen were staying, said that if the geese stood on one leg it meant cold and rain.

Secretly despising herself, Valentina Georgievna began to take special notice of the geese as she passed through the yard on her way to work in the morning. The geese would cackle quietly as she drew near, as if they knew what she was thinking.

One morning she woke to find the collective farmers having breakfast by the light of the lamp. It was so dark in the room that in her sleepy state she supposed it was still evening. The first thing she saw on looking out of the window was a crow. It was perched under the eaves of the neighbouring house and shaking itself like a dog. A heavy rain was falling. The mistress of the house was angrily pulling boots and galoshes out of the trunk. Valentina Georgievna dressed quickly, opened her umbrella, and hummed a tune as she made her way to the office.

The chief's office was full of people.

Engineers were assigned to supervise road repairs. Tractors fuelled from the emergency supply were stationed

at the worst places to pull out lorries that got stuck. An order was given to build roofs over the piers and to keep on laying concrete no matter what happened. The chief tried to put a call through to Moscow, but the line was down. Everything was in such turmoil that Valentina Georgievna's head began to ache. At last the chief went away, the office was empty, and Valentina Georgievna could settle down to her usual business.

In an hour or two the soaked and mud-spattered chief rushed back and made another attempt to put a call through to Moscow, but without success. He washed himself and dictated a telegram at the same time.

“‘Urgent. To chief of production of Central Management.’ Got it? ‘Samples of gravel from quarry on bank Valovaya sent for analysis one week ago still no answer stop.’ Got it? ‘Gravel evidently suitable for concrete stop seems to answer all technological standards stop please wire results analysis immediately,’” went on the chief, splashing water in all directions, “‘otherwise will use gravel unanalyzed stop can’t put up with your delay any longer.’”

“Are we sending this to the Management?” said Valentina Georgievna, tactfully suggesting that the language was too downright. But the chief missed her point.

“Yes, why?” he asked, splashing her stockings.

“Nothing in particular,” she said, thinking to herself: “What do I care, after all?” Aloud she said: “I’ve written: ‘can’t put up with your delay any longer.’”

“Good. In future send quick help instead of official letters. Nepavoda.’ That’s all. And call in our technical expert.”

“I thought so,” said Valentina Georgievna to herself as she sat down at the typewriter. “As soon as there’s a little rain he sends a hundred-ruble wire to Moscow.” When it was typed, she went into his office for the signature. Nepavoda took up a pencil to sign it, but some

thought stopped his hand, and he said to the technical expert:

"If it's taken them so long with this analysis, there's not much sense sending wires. In a week's time we'll be wanting finished piers and not analyses. Do you know when they took gravel out of that quarry last?"

The technical expert said he didn't.

"Perhaps you know?"

Valentina Georgievna did not know either.

"Who could we send to the village to find out?" asked Nepavoda. "As quickly as possible."

They began to consider whom to send. But the bad weather had put everybody on the job. The only man in the office was a technician who was drawing up the new plan for July, long overdue. Everyone was busy. The chief looked at Valentina Georgievna.

"Do you ride horseback?" he asked suddenly.

"What?" she asked in astonishment.

"No, I don't suppose you do," he remarked in disappointed tones. "I thought you might have learned in the army."

"I travelled in a car in the army. Ivan Semyonovich always let me sit in front with the driver." And she narrowed her eyes significantly.

"But you can't ride in a car in weather like this," he said, looking out of the window. "Couldn't you walk to the village and find out about that quarry from the local people, or from the chairman of the collective farm?"

"I suppose so," said Valentina Georgievna with a shrug of her shoulders. After all, if engineers were sent out to mend roads, there was no reason why she shouldn't be turned into an errand-boy.

"But you'll have to go on foot."

"Naturally."

Out in the ante-room she listened to the sound of the rain, put on rubber boots and a light coat with padded

shoulders, turned up her collar, took her umbrella, and made for the door.

"Valentina Georgievna," said the chief.

She turned slightly, unwilling to meet his eyes.

"Surely you don't mean to go like that?"

"Like what?"

"You'll be soaked to the skin. Wait a minute."

He brought a big stiff mackintosh with army buttons on it and a large black number stamped inside. It smelt of tobacco.

"Put this on," he said holding it for her.

The mackintosh was big even for the tall Valentina Georgievna. The chief buttoned it up, turned back the cuffs and pulled the hood up over her hat.

"Now you'll be all right. Leave your umbrella here. If you don't find out anything in this village, go on to the next. Here's wishing you luck."

Valentina Georgievna slipped a sandwich wrapped in waxed paper into her pocket and went out.

The rain was coming down steadily, drearily, without thunder and lightning—a solid, impenetrable downpour. She could hardly see anything. The river was white with foam. Finding the road slippery, Valentina Georgievna jumped across the drainage-ditch on to the grass. The going was easier there. Little wet toads that looked like pickles leaped out from under her feet. The rain pattered on her hood as on a roof, but not a drop got through, and Valentina Georgievna found it pleasant to stride along over the wet fields in this voluminous mackintosh—"As if I were in a tent," she thought with a little shiver.

The owners of the house where she lived were surprised to see her in working-hours. They could not give her any information about the gravel quarry; did not, in fact, even know of its existence. Evidently it had been abandoned many years before. The man of the house advised her to go and speak to the road-builder who lived at the edge of the village.

The road-builder was a cheerful young man. He got out a map precisely scaled to millimetres and found the sign indicating the quarry with the amount of gravel it contained written under it (about 180,000 cubic feet). But he said this gravel was not used for road-building. He did not know when and for what purpose the quarry had last been worked and assured her there was no one in the village who did.

"At the Golden Corn, the next collective farm, there are still some old men who worked for contractors when the railway was built before the Revolution," he said. "They probably worked in that quarry."

So Valentina Georgievna set out for the Golden Corn.

This road was worse. It led her up hill and down dale. On both sides of the sloping slippery road stretched dark ploughed fields, and when she had gone half a mile she could hardly lift her boots, so plastered were they with heavy wet clay. The mackintosh billowed out and tugged at her shoulders. The further she went the more indignant she became at the senselessness of her mission, and she gravely suspected Nepavoda of having sent her out in the pouring rain just for spite, because he knew she did not approve of him.

Soon she felt hungry. She remembered her sandwich and looked about for a place to sit down, but saw nothing but ploughed fields, a few bushes, and the muddy road. And her sandwich had become a gluey mass of sodden bread with bits of tobacco pressed into it. She threw it away. "If Ivan Semyonovich could only see me now!" she thought as she continued on her way. It seemed to her that the road was longer than it should be. The road-builder had said that the Golden Corn was only three miles from their village, but she was sure she had gone at least five.

"Can I have lost my way?" she thought, unwilling to admit that whenever she came to a fork in the road she chose whichever way seemed easier. She stood a while

in the hope of meeting somebody, but nobody came, and so she decided to go on and take the left-hand road whenever she came to a fork. When she had gone on in this way for about an hour, she caught the faint outlines of a shed and found herself in the vegetable gardens at the edge of a village. She knocked at the door of the first house she came to. Someone called out "Come in," and, crossing a dark entry where chickens had taken refuge from the rain, she entered a large room. Three people were having dinner—an old woman, a young girl and a youth with eyes like those of the old woman. He got up and helped Valentina Georgievna off with her mackintosh, which was so stiff it could have stood up alone. The old woman brought her a pair of warm felt boots and told her to take off her rubber ones.

"Heavens, it's nearly five o'clock!" said Valentina Georgievna when she saw the time.

"Where are you from?" asked the girl, but before Valentina Georgievna could reply she had caught sight of her neck-tie and exclaimed: "Why, it's the lady from the bridge, Alexei!"

Valentina Georgievna glanced at the girl again and saw that she was the brigade-leader who had come to be written out.

"From the bridge, all right," went on the brigade-leader. "Have you come for our carts again?"

"No, not this time. What's your name? Olga, isn't it?"

"That's right," said Olga with a little laugh. "All the people you have there, and you remember my name! This is our granny. And that's my husband Alexei. Don't be scared of him; it's just his looks. He's really as quiet as a mouse."

Alexei was only twenty-two years old, but he had the impressive manners of the head of a family.

"Can't you see she's all in?" he said as he put a clean soup plate on the table. "Feed her, and then you can chatter away all you like."

"Oh, I'm not hungry," said Valentina Georgievna, secretly afraid they might take her at her word. But the old woman was cautiously removing an heirloom plate standing on end behind tea-cups and wine-glasses, and Olga was clutching a loaf of bread to her breast as she sliced off large fragrant chunks.

"What are you here for?" she asked.

"I got lost. I meant to go to the Golden Corn."

"And instead of going to the Golden Corn you came to the New Way. Just see how far off the track you went!" called the old woman from the kitchen.

"What did you want at the Golden Corn?" asked the irrepressible Olga.

"I wanted to find out about the quarry you spoke of that time."

"So that's it. I guess you'll be taking gravel from there now. There's nothing else to do."

"When was it last worked?" asked Valentina Georgievna as she dipped her spoon into the thick cabbage soup.

"It hasn't been worked for ages," said Olga. "It's all grown over."

"Seems to me they took gravel out of that quarry when the railway was built," called the old woman from the kitchen.

"When was that?"

"Before the war."

"What war?"

"The first war. Under the tsar."

"And later?"

"Seems to me they used that gravel for building the road later."

"If you don't know, don't mix things up, Granny," said Alexei, getting up and putting on his coat. "We hauled gravel from Crooked Gorge for the road. The quarry she's talking about is ten miles from here. Why should we haul it such a long way?"

"Who could tell me exactly?" asked Valentina Georgievna. "I've got to find out."

"I'm afraid there's nobody here who could tell you," said Alexei thoughtfully.

"Some prospectors told me about that quarry," interrupted Olga. "They're at the district centre now. There's an old man at the head of them, and he's the one who told me about it."

"Is he at the district centre too?"

"I suppose so."

"What's his name?"

"His name? I don't remember."

"The man with the withered arm? Isn't his name Mosquitov?" called the old woman from the kitchen. "Seems to me it was Mosquitov."

"Don't mix things up, Granny," said Alexei. "If you don't know, don't mix things up. You mean that man with the withered arm who stayed with the Yevgrafovs?" he asked, turning to his wife.

"He's the one."

"Wait a minute, I'll go and ask them."

Alexei went out. In ten minutes he came back, bringing with him a man with a beard who had a discarded army coat thrown over his shoulders.

"Gnatov's the name," announced Alexei. "Vasily Ignatyevich Gnatov."

"Wait a minute, I'll tell her myself," said the man with the beard. He threw off the coat, wiped his wet hands on it, and sat down at the table. "Are you from the bridge?" he asked respectfully. "Well, then, take a piece of paper and write this down so's you don't forget: Gnatov, Vasily Ignatyevich, road-engineer. A remarkable person. Knows these parts inside and out—knows all about the land and the roads and all the bridges, even the littlest of them. He can tell you anything you want to know. Now he's living in town, not far from Soviet Square. When you cross the square you'll pass the cinema; keep right

on going till you come to the second turning, and it'll be the fourth or fifth house on the left. You'll find it easy enough—has a porch with an iron roof."

The man with the beard spent so much time explaining how to find Gnatov that one might have thought it was he and not Valentina Georgievna who needed him.

"How far is it from here to town?" she asked.

"Twelve miles down the highway."

"Very well. I'll go back now and tell my chief."

"I'm going to the MTS," said Alexei. "If you like, I'll take you back. It's on my way."

When he finished harnessing the horse, Valentina Georgievna said good-bye and went outside. It was after eight o'clock. The rain was not coming down in sheets now, but in separate drops, cold and hard, and the sound of it was more noticeable in the darkness than it had been in the day-time. Valentina Georgievna felt her way to the cart and sat down in the straw. "Pull up your legs, there's a post here," said Alexei, and they drove off. The man with the beard walked beside them and kept on explaining how to find Gnatov, and Valentina Georgievna thanked him and said she quite understood. At last he left them. Valentina Georgievna rode more than half the way with the taciturn Alexei, but she found this ride as exhausting as walking, for the cart kept pitching from one side to the other, almost turning over more than once. She went the last four or five miles on foot, thinking to herself that the working-day was over, and that waiting for her at home were a crock of fresh warm milk and her folding bed and a volume of Chekhov.

In the distance appeared the lights of the office. The electricity cut through the foggy darkness like the solid rays of a searchlight. On entering the ante-room, which for the first time she found cosy and hospitable, she took off her rubber boots, put on a pair of shoes, and went into the chief's office.

"Well, did you find out?" he asked impatiently, interrupting his writing.

"No. Nobody knows."

"That's bad," snapped the chief, going on with his writing.

"In town there's a man named Gnatov, an engineer," went on Valentina Georgievna, staring at his hairy hands. "They say he was in charge of a group of prospectors for many years. . . ."

"And what does this Gnatov say?"

"I tell you he lives in town."

"In other words, you didn't see him?"

"Of course not. In the village they simply told me where he lives."

The chief thought for a moment.

"You'll have to look him up," he said at last.

"Very well."

"I'll call a car."

"Must I go at once?" asked the dismayed Valentina Georgievna. "I. . . ."

"Why not? There's a good road all the way to town. Hello. Give me the garage. . . . An hour there, an hour back. You'll ride in front, beside the driver. . . . Hello, who's speaking? Timofeyev? Have them fill up a one-and-a-half tonner. . . . That's right, to town. . . ." He put down the receiver. "If you bring us good news, Valentina Georgievna, you'll do more to help speed up work on the bridge than all our machines put together."

"I see," said Valentina Georgievna, going out to take off her shoes and put on her rubber boots.

The driver of the lorry turned out to be an intolerably talkative chap. He told her the story of one film after another—she thought he would never stop. At first Valentina Georgievna made an effort to listen to him, then she dozed off, then she woke up and listened again.

And the rain kept coming down. In the blaze of the head-

lights drops seemed to be flying like bullets against the radiator.

They drove fast. A spare wheel bounced about noisily in the back of the lorry whenever they hit a bump. It was after midnight when they reached town. The streets were almost deserted.

"Where do we go from here?" asked the driver.

"I don't know myself," said the sleepy Valentina Georgievna. "Somewhere in the direction of Soviet Square."

The driver opened the door and called out, "Hey, lad!" and began to question someone who was invisible in the dark. Then they rode on until they came to a square where the head-lights showed a closed barber-shop, a closed grocery-shop, a closed photographer's and a closed cinema. Near the entrance to the cinema was a bill-board with blue lettering on it that had run in the rain. Behind the drawn curtains of a third-floor window could be seen a cheery yellow lamp-shade, and for some reason Valentina Georgievna guessed that a game of lotto was in progress there.

"And where do we go from here?" asked the driver again.

"The second turning from the cinema; engineer Gnato's house is somewhere in that neighbourhood," answered Valentina Georgievna wearily. "But I can't imagine how we'll ever find it this time of night."

"We'll find it if it's there," said the driver confidently.

They turned into a dark by-street. The driver jumped out of the lorry and knocked unceremoniously at the first house. A light appeared, a window was opened, somebody said something. Then the window was slammed shut. The driver went from house to house. "He'll wake up the whole street," thought Valentina Georgievna impassively as she dozed off again. She woke up from being shaken.

"Where are we going?" she asked in fright.

"To Gnatov's," answered the driver. "See those two lighted windows? They're his. You go and talk to him while I clean my sparkplugs."

Valentina Georgievna was met on the porch by a small and sprightly old man in a dressing-gown and cap. She followed him through the hall, where her stiff mackintosh caught on to a bicycle, a basket, a clothes-tree; and together they entered a room in the centre of which was a table covered with a clean cloth. Against one wall stood a low sofa on which Gnatov slept, near another—a screen. From behind the screen came the sound of even breathing, indicating that someone was sleeping there. On the table was a plate with a wet beret stretched on it.

"So you were sent by the builders of the bridge over the Valovaya?" asked the old man in an animated whisper, blinking his eyes in the bright light. "Glad to see you. Sit down. Sorry I can't offer you tea; the landlady's asleep. I'm rather like you—a nomad."

In lowered tones Valentina Georgievna explained what she had come for.

"Of course I remember that quarry," said the old man with a smile. "I was the one who found it—when I was still a student and taking a bathe in the Valovaya with a chum of mine, now a professor at the Leningrad Engineering Institute. The contractor who was building a branch-line of the railway rewarded yours truly for the discovery by treating him to a bottle of vodka, and the ancestors of the present collective farmers rewarded him by giving him a beating. . . . Much later, in about 1926, that gravel was used on my recommendation in building foundations. . . ."

"Can it be used for making concrete?"

"Perfectly well so far as its technological requirements are concerned. The granulometric composition isn't quite up to mark, but that's not important. You can sieve it and then add some coarse material. Look, you don't have to go far to see for yourself—there's a concrete bridge at

the 194th picket along this very highway—not a beauty like the one you're building, of course, but a bridge with two twenty-foot spans, and it's all made of that gravel and as solid as a rock," whispered the old man.

"And that one at Beliye Kresty, too," came unexpectedly from behind the screen.

"True enough," said Gnatov in his natural voice now, nodding towards the screen. "That's at the 241st picket, Taisia Ivanovna, plus 40 or 50, I don't remember which."

"Thank you ever so much," said Valentina Georgievna, getting up. "I must go now. Forgive me for waking everybody up."

"Glad to have been of service. Come again if you need anything else," said the old man, unconsciously lowering his voice to a whisper again. "I'll be glad to see you."

Valentina Georgievna went outside and climbed up beside the driver again.

The lorry set out with a jerk, was soon out of town and tearing down the highway, splashing through puddles, its head-lights momentarily lighting up road signs, whitewashed posts and the glistening leaves of bushes. Valentina Georgievna fell asleep and dreamed of the puddles and the whitewashed posts and the road flowing like water under the wheels of the lorry, and when at last they came to a halt in front of the office she was sure she had never been asleep.

Every muscle of her body ached as she climbed down and took off her mackintosh in the ante-room. Too tired to take off her boots, she went straight into the chief's office.

He was gone. Pasha was sitting at his desk reading the newspaper.

"Where's Nepavoda?" asked Valentina Georgievna.

"He's gone to the quarry. Said you were to wait for him."

"What are you doing here?"

"If the telephone rings, he said I was to ask who it was."

"All right. You can go now. I'll wait for him. By the way, who gave you permission to read the chief's newspaper?"

"Nobody. It won't go up in smoke if I read it, will it?"

"So that's what things have come to," thought the weary Valentina Georgievna as she collapsed on a stool in the ante-room. "Even Pasha doesn't give a snap of her finger for me. Even Pasha!" A wave of self-pity rose within her; quickly she took out a piece of paper, slipped it into the typewriter, put rubber tips on her fingers, and typed:

Dear Ivan Semyonovich,

She wished to say that things had become unbearable, that nobody gave her any consideration, that she had neither friends nor relatives and lived in the hope that he would send for her, and that she was sure he would find life easier with her than with any other secretary. . . . But actually she wrote:

This is just to say that I am still willing to come and work for you if you have not found someone else more satisfactory. But I cannot come to Moscow if I am not given a room there. Please let me know as soon as possible what the chances are in this respect, since I do not intend to remain here in the autumn, but will go to work for a more stable organization.

Here is the latest news: concrete-work is finished on the second and third piers and almost finished on the first. Tomorrow we begin dressing the scaffold bridge. Soon we are going to take gravel out of the quarry on the river-bank. The lorries on the line have reached 90% of plan fulfilment.

Yours truly,

Valentina Georgievna

At three o'clock in the morning Nepavoda took the various supervisors and drove out to the bridge Gnatov had mentioned at the 194th picket. In the light of pocket-torches he began pounding the pier on the embankment with a sledge-hammer, grunting like a born blacksmith. The concrete proved to be harder than iron. "There's your laboratory analysis for you," said Nepavoda, and they went back.

At six o'clock in the morning a tractor with scrapers attached was sent to the river-bank quarry. They began work on the quarry—clearing approaches and setting up machines for sifting the gravel. By noon the first lorries brought gravel from the new quarry to the construction site.

On the next day the daily plan of hauling was overfulfilled. The drivers, who so far had taken most of the blame for the delay in building the bridge, now cheered up, grew reckless, kept arguing with the loaders that their lorries could hold more, insisted on having them filled to the very top, explaining that a well-loaded lorry was less apt to skid.

Meanwhile the rain kept coming down. It had been raining almost without interruption for three days and people had somehow grown used to it. Timofeyev drew a clever cartoon for the wall-newspaper, showing the office at the construction site as a kingdom under the sea and all the employees, including Nepavoda, as fish. The only one who was not a fish was Valentina Georgievna; she was a mermaid.

That evening Nepavoda called her in and held out a paper.

"Please type this in three copies," he said. "One for the files, another for the notice-board, the third for the book-keeper. And accept my congratulations."

Without knowing what for, Valentina Georgievna let him

take her hand in his, which was pleasantly cool because he had just washed it. Then she left the room.

She got the paper ready for typing—the top sheet of good paper, to be signed by the chief; the other two of inferior paper for the book-keeper and the notice-board. But before she could begin typing Timofeyev came in, all dirty and blustering.

“Know how much my men hauled from that quarry of yours today?” he asked.

“It doesn’t interest me in the least,” snapped Valentina Georgievna, narrowing her eyes and giving him to understand that there was no good reason why he should have drawn her as a mermaid when all the others were fish.

“Just as you say,” said Timofeyev, nipped in the bud. “Can’t force you to be interested.” And he went in to speak to the chief.

Valentina Georgievna took up the paper and read what Nepavoda had written in his large bold hand. Each of the letters was written as distinctly as he enunciated sounds when he spoke.

ORDER

For excellent fulfilment of the assignment given her (viz., to find out the quality of the gravel in the quarry on the bank of the Valovaya River), thereby making it possible to overfulfil the plan of hauling despite unfavourable weather conditions, Valentina Georgievna Ostrovskaya, secretary to the Superintendent of Construction, is awarded a sum of money equal to her month’s salary.

She gave a bitter little smile, put rubber tips on her fingers, and shifted the stool to a more comfortable position. To show the chief her contempt for awards, she typed this notice in the middle of a long list of other notices, between a paragraph stating that garage mechanic Matveyev was to be considered back from holidays from such-

and-such a date, and a paragraph stating that technician Natalia Rummyantseva wished henceforth to go by the name of Smirnov, her husband's name.

The chief signed the paper and she posted it among all the others.

One day Valentina Georgievna stopped Timofeyev as he was coming out of the chief's office.

"Here's a telegram from the Central Management," she said. "The results of the analysis show that the gravel can be used in making concrete."

"We know that ourselves," replied Timofeyev. "But it looks as if we'll have to do an about-face. Back to the old quarry."

"Back to the old one?" said Valentina Georgievna testily. "Did I spend the whole night finding out about this quarry so that you could go on using the old one?"

"I know, but we can't haul the gravel along the embankment—it's washed out. It will cave in any minute. And there's no other road to your quarry."

"Make another road."

"Easy to type that on your typewriter, but quite another thing to do. It's no joke to build three miles of road."

"Then haul it down below, along the river-bank."

"Next you'll be advising us to drive our lorries through the water."

"I'm not trying to be funny."

But suddenly Timofeyev's face lighted up and he rushed back into the chief's office.

"Comrade Nepavoda!" Valentina Georgievna heard him cry excitedly. "A barge! That's what we need for hauling gravel from that quarry. We could haul 35,000 cubic feet all at once."

"Are you suggesting that we take the ironwork for the spans off the barge?" asked the chief quietly.

"To hell with the ironwork. We can put that back later."

"And where shall we get a tug?"

Valentina Georgievna stopped typing and listened. She realized that Timofeyev's proposal would immediately solve all transportation problems and solve them quickly and cheaply. Her heart pounded.

"That's true, we need a tug," said Timofeyev disappointedly.

"We can probably get a tug. I'll ring up the lumber-camp and they'll give me a tug. But what about the channel? Will a loaded barge get through everywhere?"

"It will. I can arrange to have the channel sounded now if you like."

"Good. Sound the channel and then we'll decide what's to be done about the quarry."

Timofeyev dashed out of the office and through the door.

"Why, in one trip we could haul more gravel than all our lorries can haul in ten days. That would be simply wonderful!" thought Valentina Georgievna, and in her mind's eye she saw a barge loaded with gravel from her quarry sailing up to the very bridge; saw the joyful faces of the workmen, the foremen, and Timofeyev. "Wouldn't they rejoice!"

Valentina Georgievna waited ten minutes. "He must have forgotten," she thought. "I must remind him."

She went into the office. The chief was having a glass of tea.

"You haven't forgotten to ring up the lumber-camp, have you?" she asked.

"What for?" asked the chief, pouring himself out a glass of tea as they do in a pub—simultaneously from two tea-pots, a large one and a small one.

"About the tug." Suddenly Valentina Georgievna realized that her words proved she had been eavesdropping, and she blushed.

"So that's it!" The chief looked at her and gave a little laugh. "We'll wait and see what the sounding shows. If everything's all right we'll ring everybody up at once. Concerned about that quarry of yours?"

"I'm concerned about the whole construction job," replied Valentina Georgievna with dignity. She gave an angry toss of her head and went out of the office, very much displeased with herself.

And the rain kept coming down. A fine, dreary rain. Drops made crazy paths down the glass of the only window in the ante-room. The sky was dark and gloomy. The day was drawing to a close, and still Timofeyev did not come back with the results of his soundings. "Heavens, will this rain go on for ever?" thought Valentina Georgievna.

"Pasha, you're from these parts, aren't you?" she asked.

"I am," said Pasha.

"Is the river deep here?"

"Uh-huh. Very deep. In some places especially."

"And are there shallow places too?"

"Shallow places too. Why? Thinking of taking a swim?"

Valentina Georgievna gave a sigh and went on waiting for Timofeyev. But he didn't bring the results of the soundings until next morning. They proved to be satisfactory, and Nepavoda asked Valentina Georgievna to telephone the lumber-camp. The camp did not give any definite reply to the request for a tug, but promised to ring back in half an hour. Valentina Georgievna began to wait for the call, glancing at the clock every minute or so.

To distract her attention she began looking through the mail. One of the envelopes was from the Central Management. She cut it open with a pair of scissors, took out a crisp sheet of paper, and read:

Valentina Georgievna Ostrovskaya, secretary to the Superintendent of construction, is to be sent to the personnel department for assignment to a new post.

There it was! Ivan Semyonovich had not forgotten her after all!

Valentina Georgievna knew that she ought to be overjoyed. But she wasn't.

"I'll show that letter to the chief later," she thought. "He has plenty on his mind as it is."

And he certainly did have. The lumber-camp refused to give the builders a tug, and so Nepavoda had to ring up the District Executive Committee. But they could do nothing for him this time.

Valentina Georgievna waited until evening to show him the letter.

"Well," he said, "you'd better get ready to leave. Hand over the business to Smirnova." And he took up the next letter.

For a minute or so Valentina Georgievna stood beside the desk without saying a word.

"I wonder whether he's glad or sorry I'm going," she thought, gazing at his clean hands.

"Smirnova won't be your secretary for good, will she?" she asked at last without guessing whether he was glad or sorry.

"Of course not."

"Who will you get?"

"Oh, we'll find somebody. I can't bother about that at present."

Valentina Georgievna remained there a minute longer, then went out.

The same driver who had helped her look up Gnatov took her to the station. He did not say a word on the way, and Valentina Georgievna felt that he disapproved of her going. She had had no chance to say good-bye to the chief because he was in town trying to get a tug. When they reached the little station, the driver said good-bye and immediately drove off for a load of gravel. There were very few people waiting for the Moscow train, but all of them had friends seeing them off. Valentina Georgievna was the only one who sat all alone with her bag and a bundle.

About fifteen minutes before the train was due, Nepavoda came into the waiting-room, looked about for Valentina Georgievna and went over to her.

"I have a favour to ask of you," he said. "Would you mind taking these apples to my kids?" And he held out a medium-sized package clumsily wrapped up. "I tried to send it by post, but they wouldn't take it. Said it wasn't packed properly."

"Of course I'll take it," said Valentina Georgievna, getting up.

"Don't get up. I'm not your chief any more," he said with a smile. "And here's a postcard. Write your address in the space I've left for it and drop it into a mail-box, and my wife will come for the package."

For some reason Valentina Georgievna was astonished to hear that this man had a wife and children, that he thought about making presents of apples, and that he had begun the postcard with: "My dearest dears."

"Are they going to give you a tug?" she asked.

"Yes. We've already sent conveyers to the quarry. Tomorrow we'll bring up a barge and begin loading."

The train came. Nepavoda carried her things into the carriage and put them up on the baggage-shelf. Then he went out and stood on the platform and lighted a cigarette in the rain.

"Go home now," said Valentina Georgievna. "Why should you stand here and get wet?"

"That's all right, I'm used to it."

She wanted to say a few heart-felt words in parting, as if in apology for the cold official attitude she had adopted towards him, but the words did not come, and so when the train whistle blew she merely said hurriedly:

"I left my folder with 'Reports' written on it in the left-hand drawer. You can give it to your new secretary."

"Thanks," said Nepavoda.

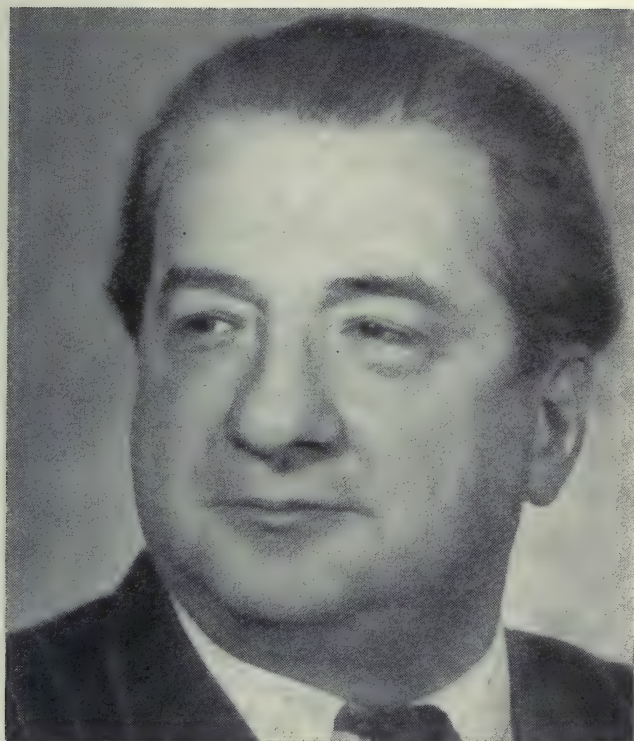
The train was moving before she knew it. And although it was she who was leaving and Nepavoda who was stay-

ing, it seemed to her that she was standing still and Nepavoda and the little station and the highway along which she had ridden into town and the glistening trees and the fragrant rain-drenched earth and the soft low sky—that all these things had begun to move and were slowly wheeling away from her. Suddenly she remembered Pasha, and clever ungainly Timofeyev, and the inquisitive brigade-leader Olga, and the bearded man wearing the discarded army coat, and Engineer Gnatov, and the disapproving driver; and she was bitterly sorry that all these people, who had just begun to respect her, were receding faster and faster into the distance, and perhaps she would never see a single one of them again.

She thought about the tug and the barge and her quarry, about all the things that had become so very dear and essential to her of late. But the train kept on going, taking her away from them all.

1951

Translated by Margaret Wettlin



IRAKLI ANDRONIKOV
(b. 1909)

Irakli Andronikov is one of the creators of what may be called the "literary research" type of story, in which the quest for facts and documents of literary history carries us away in much the same manner as Jack London's good old tales of the quest for gold.

Andronikov is equally known as writer and actor, as historian and student of literature, as a talented story-teller and as the author of sensitive and highly original studies of the great Russian poets Pushkin and Lermontov. He is a born mime—a gifted poet and musician—and at the same time a keen and scholarly researcher in the field of the Russian classics.

THE PORTRAIT

A FAMILIAR FACE

This is a story about an old, old painting, the portrait of a man you all know well, though he has long been dead. The story is not so old as the painting—in fact, it all came about quite recently; but it certainly is a story!

A trip to Leningrad, on business for one of our Moscow publishing houses, is no great event in itself. Nor would I start my story with it, had it not led to another event—no, not an event, a tiny incident, of the sort we generally forget almost before they are over—which proved the starting point for a long series of adventures.

And so, we begin with a business trip to Leningrad, a city that has a place all its own in the depths of my heart. I studied there, and took my University degree; made my first literary ventures, and gained my first friends—in a word, was happy.

It is wonderfully pleasant, such a brief return to a city in which you once lived ten happy years. And when that city is Leningrad—well, if you have ever been there, during the white nights particularly, you will understand me.

The straight lines of the embankments. The still ranks of the palaces—pale yellow, tarnished red, dull grey—and their reflections, upside down, in the mirror-black, granite-rimmed Neva. The arched tracery of the bridges against the yellow pink of the sky. The mauve outlines of towers, and columns, and bronze steeds, in the decep-

tive half-light. The avenues and embankments seem even straighter, the bridges lighter and closer together, the domes and spires nearer one to another, in the strange, limpid hush. Everything seems smaller, somehow, than by daylight; but that makes the city only the more beautiful, the more entrancing—if Leningrad *can* be more beautiful!

But I have wandered from my subject.

Once in Leningrad, of course, I could not fail to look in at the Pushkin Centre.

Lermontov, his life and works—that is my passion, the object of years of study and research. And the Academy of Sciences Pushkin Centre in Leningrad is the repository of almost all of Lermontov's manuscripts. It owns a large collection of portraits of Lermontov, too, and of paintings and drawings by Lermontov's hand; and in a special room, in row upon row of bookcases, stand all the known editions of Lermontov, and also the works that have been written about him. A visit to the Centre is one of the high spots of every trip I make to Leningrad, however brief.

I once worked at the Centre myself, and still have free access to work-rooms and documents.

This time too, presenting myself to Yelena Panfilovna Naselenko, in the Museum Department, I received full permission to dig in catalogues, leaf inventory journals, and take from the shelves at will my choice of the heavy files and albums.

And I at once proceeded to make myself at home in the Department work-room—crowded with desks, bookcases, cabinets.

Ah, what a clumsy bear! Hardly had Yelena Panfilovna turned back to her work when, squeezing past her desk, I caught my sleeve on the corner of a huge open file. The file crashed to the floor, and almost all its contents came flying out. I remember picking up something like fifteen prints of Ushinsky, the noted educator; an engraving of the Metropolitan Yevgeny, compiler of a dictionary of Russian writers; several representations of Lomonosov,

with his head held high and a sheet of paper in his hand; Bestuzhev-Marlinsky, in a shaggy Caucasian cloak; a photograph of Tolstoi telling his grandchildren a story; the Krylov monument; the poet partisan Denis Davydov, on a white horse; a view of the south coast of the Crimea.

"I'm so sorry, Yelena Panfilovna," I mumbled. I was down on my knees, hastily stuffing the pictures back into the file. "How could I be so clumsy? Do forgive me!"

"Oh, well, I suppose I shall have to," she returned, smiling. "Hand it over."

But I did not hand her the file.

"I beg your pardon," I said, "but might I look through this material just once more?"

"Of course. Only what could interest you in all that stuff?"

"One moment," I mumbled, digging among the pictures. "Just one moment."

Had my eyes been playing me tricks? No, no. I had seen it, and immediately lost it—such a familiar, such a very familiar face! It had flashed at me when the file was falling, and then disappeared.

"Just one moment. . . . One more moment. . . . Ah!"

Eagerly, I pulled it out: a small, yellowed photograph, the portrait of a young officer.

I had never before seen this portrait. Why, then, did it seem so familiar? The thoughtful eyes, dark and lustrous; the slightly upturned nose; the dark moustache, shading full, still childish lips; the stubborn chin; the eyebrows, raised high as though in wonder; the clear, smooth forehead—strictly speaking all these features might seem none too well assorted. Yet what a beautiful face it was! And what an unusual one!

For the rest—a heavy Army greatcoat, thrown carelessly over the shoulders, so that one of the epaulettes on the uniform beneath was visible.

I turned the photograph over. There was a pencilled note on the back:

"Epaulettes and trimmings—silver."

And that was all.

Who could it be?

It was he, of course. I had known him at once, as though we had long been acquainted, as though I had seen him thus in life. Lermontov! Was it really he? An unknown portrait?

Amazement—rapture—doubt. Lermontov? Lost in this heap of miscellaneous reproductions? Yet I was certain, I was positive that the face in the faded photograph was his—though, to tell the truth, it was not very like other portraits of him. In any case, I must find out.

"Yelena Panfilovna, is this by any chance Lermontov?"

"It's thought to be Lermontov," Yelena Panfilovna answered—and my breath came short. "But no one seems to know exactly."

I sat staring at the photograph. There could be no certainty, after all, who it might be—yet already the hundred years that part us from Lermontov seemed shorter, and he seemed to live, for me, on this yellowed bit of paper. How fascinating, the mystery of his face! How old had he been when the portrait was painted? What was the uniform he wore? How did it come to be here—this faded photograph, and where was the portrait it reproduced? And on what grounds, above all, was it thought to be Lermontov?

"Yelena Panfilovna, on what grounds is it thought to be Lermontov?"

"Well, you see," Yelena Panfilovna said, "the photograph came to us from the Lermontov Museum at the Cavalry School. That must have been in 1917. I suppose it was regarded there as a reproduction of a Lermontov portrait. If you believe it's really Lermontov, why don't you follow it up, and try to find the portrait? It's an interesting one."

Smiling, she pulled out a catalogue drawer and took up her pen.

The first thing to do, of course, was to find out exactly how the photograph had come to be in the Pushkin Centre, lying in that file of miscellanies on Yelena Panfilovna's desk.

In the MSS Department, I asked for the inventory books of the one-time Lermontov Museum at the St. Petersburg Cavalry School. As Yelena Panfilovna had said, this Museum's collection, and also its inventory books, had been transferred in 1917 to the Pushkin Centre.

After a little search I found the entry I was seeking. A photograph of a portrait of Lermontov had been donated to the Museum by one V. K. Vulfert, a judge of the Moscow Higher Court.

That told me who had owned the portrait. But *when* had he owned it, *when* given the Museum this photograph? Back in the eighties, perhaps, when the Museum was just being organized? How was I to trace him? Was he still alive? Still in Moscow? Still in possession of the portrait?

Yes, first and foremost, I must find out what I could about this Vulfert. For a beginning, I decided to look into Modzalevsky's card catalogue.

There is a miracle of bibliography for you!

Boris Lvovich Modzalevsky, well-known student of Pushkin's life and works, had the habit of noting down on a separate card or slip of paper every name that occurred in the materials he read—memoirs, works of history, old letters and albums, magazine articles, official reports. With the name, which he always wrote in full, he would set down the title of the book or magazine in which he had found it, noting volume and page. This habit he never gave up. And in the course of thirty years he accumulated over three hundred thousand cards. After his death, his catalogue was acquired by the Pushkin Centre. It is a little cabinet, with wide, shallow drawers. The

drawers are divided into compartments, and each compartment is crammed with cards, all written in Modzalevsky's hand.

With the aid of this catalogue I soon had a list of several books in which the name of V. K. Vulfert might be found. Then, in the library, looking out these books and opening them at the pages indicated, I learned that Vulfert's name was Vladimir Karlovich; that his literary collection had included the manuscript of Gogol's *Marriage* and several letters written by the poet Batyushkov; that he had ventured into literature himself, writing several stories that were published in the eighties; that his father had been called Karl Antonovich; that his mother had been a sister of Nikolai Stankevich—a young thinker who had been a fellow-student of Lermontov's at Moscow University. From a book entitled *List of Civilian Officials*, I learned that Vladimir Karlovich Vulfert had been "in the service since 1866."

So! He could hardly be alive, then. I tried *All Moscow, 1907*—a Moscow address book. No Vladimir Karlovich. But there was another Vulfert—Ivan Karlovich, living at Molchanovka, 10. A brother, evidently. Well, he might be useful too.

I skipped a few years, and tried *All Moscow, 1913*. So far, so good. Ivan Karlovich was still listed, and there was also another Vulfert—Anatoly Vladimirovich, evidently a son of Vladimir Karlovich. His address was given as Bolshoi Nikolo-Peskovsky, 13.

Now I reached for *All Moscow, 1928*. I hardly dared open it. So much had been turned upside down between 1913 and 1928! Were the Vulferts alive? In Moscow? Was the portrait still in existence, and still in their hands? After all, they might very well have sold it.

Va.... Vu.... Vul.... Vulfert! Anatoly Vladimirovich. Vakhtangov Street, 13, flat No. 23.

Alive!

Alive in 1928. And now?

"I beg your pardon," I said to the librarian, "but might I see the latest telephone directory?"

"It's over on that shelf."

"That's the Leningrad directory. I want the Moscow one."

"We haven't got a Moscow one."

"Oh!"

I dashed out of the library and down the street to the nearest long-distance telephone station. Breathlessly, I requested a Moscow directory.

Vulfert, A. V. Vakhtangov Street, 13. Telephone, Arbat 1-08-87.

Hurrah!

AN ADMIRER OF THE RUST'HVELI THEATRE

My business in Leningrad completed, I returned to Moscow. And that same evening I set out in search of Vulfert, carrying in my brief case a copy of the photograph I had found at the Pushkin Centre.

I had not far to go. The house was only a block away from mine, and I saw its roof every time I looked out of my window. But all these years, I had never suspected the existence of an unknown Lermontov portrait under that roof.

How strangely things work out, at times!

I turned off Arbat into Vakhtangov Street. There it was—No. 13. I started up the stairs, watching the numbers on the doors. Flat No. 23. I knocked. An old woman opened the door. She seemed half asleep.

"I beg your pardon," I said. "Might I see Anatoly Vladimirovich Vulfert?"

"Vulfert? Why, the Vulferts moved out of here years ago!"

I stared at her blankly.

"Moved out? And where do they live now?"

"That I can't say."

"Is there no one who could tell me?"

"You'd best ask Sasha. That's their son. He's an army engineer. Go see him. He'll tell you."

"And where does he live?"

"Novinsky Boulevard. Number 23, I think it is. Down towards Vosstaniye Square. Only I don't remember what flat. Ask for Alexander Anatolyevich."

Off I sped to Novinsky Boulevard.

No. 23. And the flat was No. 17. A letter-box on the door, with the corner of a newspaper sticking out of it, *Sovetskoye Iskusstvo* (*Soviet Art*). Well, if art was honoured here, the portrait must be safe. Its value could not but be realized.

I rang the bell. Footsteps inside, and a man's voice asking:

"Who's there?"

"Might I see Alexander Anatolyevich?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon! Look, I'll undo the door, but don't come in for a minute. I've just climbed out of the bath."

The lock clicked open. Footsteps again, retreating rapidly. Then the same voice, from a distance, calling:

"Come in."

I had hardly shut the door behind me before I knew, by the very look of the place, that the portrait must be here.

Under the coat rack in the entry stood an old, round-topped, wooden travelling-trunk.

Through the glass doors of a bookcase I glimpsed the bindings of old books.

Over another bookcase hung an old painting—trees and a pond.

I was still looking about me when my host appeared: tall, slender, handsome, his shoulders the least bit stooped. He had a net on his wet hair.

"Oh!" he cried, when he saw me. "I beg your pardon! I didn't realize it was a stranger. By your voice, I took you for one of my old friends. I do apologize!"

"Oh, but it's I who should apologize, really."

"Well, let's get acquainted, in any case. My name is Vulfert."

"And mine is Andronikov."

"Very glad to meet you. Incidentally, I know a man of that name in Tbilisi."

"In Tbilisi? Probably some relative of mine."

"Then you're from Tbilisi too? In that case, you must know the Rust'hveli Theatre."

"I should think so! I was brought up on it, I might almost say."

"And you've seen Akaki Khorava on the stage?"

"Of course. And admire him tremendously."

"To my mind, he's an absolute genius! And then there's Vasadze, too, in the same theatre—another stupendous actor. Have you seen them together in *The Robbers*? I'm simply in love with their acting, I must confess."

And so the talk sped on—hurried, enthused, skipping from the Georgian theatre to the Maly, and then to the Moscow Art Theatre.

Alexander Anatolyevich was not merely a theatre-goer. He was a devotee. He had worked several years at the Colchis construction project, and all that time, during his frequent visits to Tbilisi, had never—if he could help it—missed an evening at the theatre.

Still talking, he ushered me into the living-room. I glanced around the walls. Several old engravings and water-colours. No sign of "my" portrait. And the conversation was so absorbing that I almost forgot what I had come for. At length, however, I recalled my errand, and slipped the photograph out of my brief case.

"I beg your pardon, Alexander Anatolyevich, but have you ever seen this portrait?"

I handed him the photograph.

"Why, it's our Lermontov!" he exclaimed. "Where on earth did you get hold of it?"

"Then it's really Lermontov!" I cried, exultant. "And still in your hands? And might I see it?"

"I never even asked what brought you to me, I was so busy talking about the theatre! But tell me, do—where did you get that photograph?"

I explained.

"How fascinating!" he exclaimed. "Well, your search is over now. The portrait is here somewhere. My grandfather treasured it so, he couldn't part with it even when he gave his library and manuscripts away to the History Museum. Would you like to see him? Here's his photograph. And this is my great-grandfather, and with him my great-grandmother, Nadezhda Vladimirovna. She was a sister of Nikolai Stankevich. Another sister was married to a son of Mikhail Semyonovich Shchepkin. My grandfather had a photograph of Shchepkin, only I don't know where it's got to."

Stankevich, renowned thinker; Shchepkin, renowned actor—an interesting background, truly.

"And now we'll have a look at Lermontov," Vulfert went on.

He glanced behind a bookcase. Peered up at the top of the bookcase. Opened the bookcase and searched inside it. Knelt, and looked under it. Groped in the space between his desk and the wall. Shifted the sofa. Went out into the entry and shifted the wooden travelling-trunk.

"It's very strange," he said at last. "The portrait is quite large, in a very good oval frame. It's painted in oils, and by a good artist, too. I simply can't imagine where it's got to. Mother must have put it away somewhere. I'll tell you what we'll do. Tatyana Alexandrovna—that's my mother—is away in the Crimea just now, but I'm expecting her home in a few days. When she arrives we'll search the portrait out, and then I'll let you know."

I left him my telephone number and went home, well pleased with this new acquaintanceship.

"DON'T BE UPSET"

Two weeks passed. Finally, Vulfert telephoned.

"Don't be upset," he began, "but I must disappoint you about that portrait. I'm so sorry to have given you unfounded hopes. I really don't know how to tell you, but—well, unfortunately, the portrait has gone out of our hands, and I'm very much afraid it may have been destroyed."

I could not muster up the breath to say a word.

"When we were moving to these rooms from Nikolopeskovsky, five years ago," Vulfert went on, "my mother let the portrait slip away, and for a song. To some young fellow—Boris, everybody called him. At one time he worked for some old antiquarian who kept a shop on the Smolensky market-place. Mother saw him there several times; and then he came to the house, once or twice, to deliver some things she had bought. Well, and he took a fancy to the oval frame of the Lermontov portrait, and asked Mother to sell it to him, but she wouldn't. And when we were moving he came again, and he wouldn't take 'no.' He just had to have that frame. And Mother let him have it. But it was only afterwards she realized he'd taken the portrait too."

"What's this Boris's full name?" I asked.

"Mother doesn't know, unfortunately."

"Well, but what makes you think the portrait may have been destroyed?"

"Why, don't you see, this Boris evidently had no idea it was a portrait of Lermontov. Mother never said anything to him about it. And she hasn't seen him since. I'm terribly sorry things should have turned out so. If we get any new information, of course, I'll let you know."

Hanging up, I felt as though I had just learned of the death of a dear friend.

There were no traces, nothing to point the way for further search. The Smolensky market-place no longer existed.

The antique shop was gone. The old antiquarian who had run it—how was one to find him? This Boris who had bought the portrait—we did not even know his surname. And it was five whole years since the thing had happened. Five years ago, a person called Boris, in Moscow, had bought the portrait. That was all I knew. Far too little, alas, to justify any further effort.

But—if this Boris did not realize it was Lermontov he had bought, the portrait would never come to people's knowledge. All hope of that was vain. No, I must keep up the search, persistently, untiringly. No information? Then information must be obtained. And the first thing I must do was to find out every least detail the Vulferts could tell me about this anonymous Boris.

I went to visit them.

This time I found Tatyana Alexandrovna at home: elderly, but straight and tall, her hair still black, her clever grey-blue eyes alive.

"Yes, I know, I know," she cried, when I introduced myself. "My son told me all about it. 'Andronikov was here to see me,' he said, 'and such an interesting talk we had!' Well, and when he admitted that he'd started straight off on that theatre mania of his, I realized he'd probably talked you half-dead, and I was afraid you'd never come again. You must be disgusted with us, anyway, after the way we lost that portrait. I'm thoroughly upset about it. And in your place, I should simply go mad, I'm sure."

"Tell me," I said, "how did this Boris carry it off?"

"Easily enough," Tatyana Alexandrovna answered, smiling. "He simply took it under his arm and went off with it. It wasn't heavy. But how he came to be there, just at the critical moment, is more than I can understand. They'd unloaded the van, and the driver had to be paid, and Alexander had gone off somewhere with all our money in his pocket. I didn't know what to do. And just then this Boris came up. A tow-headed little fellow he is, restless and

fidgety. And he lisps. 'Thell me the frame,' he said. 'I'll give you fifty.' And I said, 'Here—take it, then, worse luck to you!' He paid me the money and took the frame. It was only afterwards I realized he'd taken the portrait too! Ah, well, don't be so glum. Have some coffee, and we'll try and think of some way out."

She was silent awhile, thinking back.

"Yes!" she recalled suddenly. "In 1935 this Boris worked in a Torgsin shop on Gorky Street. He was cashier in the sausage department. And generally, I saw him quite often, in one place or another. But since he took that portrait I've never had a sight of him. I suppose he's afraid of me. Well, but he can't be dead, after all! If I met him now, I'd send Alexander off for you at once, and we'd get that portrait back one way or another. Why don't you drink your coffee before it gets cold?"

As I listened I began to feel that, perhaps, all was not yet lost. Such was the soothing effect of Tatyana Alexandrovna's lilting Moscow speech, of her smiling apologies, of her cordial hospitality.

ENCOUNTER IN A COMMISSION SHOP

Through acquaintances of acquaintances, I traced the whereabouts of the one-time director of the Torgsin shop on Gorky Street. He was still a director, but away out in Vladivostok. I wrote to him, asking the name of the man who had worked as cashier in the sausage department. I suppose he thought my question rather queer. At any rate, he did not answer.

Then I traced the assistant director, who had moved to Odessa. I wrote to him, too. And he, too, did not answer.

They must have thought I was mad!

I began a tour of Moscow's commission shops, asking the salespeople everywhere whether they did not know a lisping fellow named Boris.

"What's the rest of his name?" they would ask.

"That's just what I'm trying to find out."

"Well, you see, there are lots of people in Moscow named Boris."

I tried showing my photograph of the Lermontov portrait.

"Has a portrait like this ever passed through your hands?"

"No, never."

"If it should be brought here for sale, would you be so kind as to let me know? Here's my telephone number."

I looked in at the Literary Museum, too—showed my photograph, and asked to be informed if the portrait should be brought there.

I plagued all my friends for advice as to ways and means of seeking out Boris.

One day I looked in at the Vulferts' again. I found Tatyana Alexandrovna alone at home.

"How's life treating you, Tatyana Alexandrovna?"

"Ah, don't ask!"

"Why, what's wrong?"

"I've ruined everything."

"Ruined? What?"

"Your portrait!"

"How can you have ruined it?"

"Listen, then. I went into a commission shop, one day—the one in Stoleshnikov Street. And the first thing I saw was Boris—that very same Boris! You should have heard me! 'Boris! Boris!'—and I ran straight to him. I made such a din, I was really ashamed. He turned around and stared at me. 'Don't you remember me?' I said. 'I'm Tatyana Alexandrovna Vulfert. I used to live on Nikolo-Peskovsky.' And he staring at me all the time, with those calf eyes of his. 'Yeth,' he said, 'I remember. I bought a nithe little frame from you.' 'Who cares about the frame!' I said. 'Bring me back that portrait! It's one of our ancestors. And it isn't mine. It belongs to my brother.' I said that

purposely. If I told him it was Lermontov, I thought, he'd never bring it back. 'My brother gives me no peace,' I said. 'He wants that portrait back.' Well, and then Boris said he'd sold the portrait to some artist or other, who stuck it away behind a bookcase. The frame went somewhere else. When I heard the portrait was unharmed, I started begging him to get it back for me. He laughed. 'If I bring you the portrait,' he said, 'will you tell me your miniatureth?' And I agreed. I was ready to make him a gift of the miniatures, if only he'd return the portrait. He promised to bring it the next day. I wrote down our new address for him, and—well, I've been waiting ever since. It's three weeks now, and not a sign of him."

"Did you find out his name?" I asked eagerly.

"That's just it—I didn't!"

"Oh! But why?"

"Well—I asked, of course, but he only said, 'Is it my name your brother wants, or the portrait? I'll bring you it tomorrow, never fear.' Ah, don't you be so glum! The main thing is, the portrait still exists. And if I ever catch that Boris again, I'll simply force his name out of him. I'll call a militiaman—that's what I'll do. There's one thing that worries me, though—I'm afraid that artist, whoever he is, might take it into his head to scrape the paint off. Because, you see, some people think they can see something else underneath. One artist friend of ours kept begging me to let him scrape it a bit, the tiniest bit, just to see what there was underneath."

"But I don't understand," I cried, alarmed. "What could there be but the canvas?"

"That's just what I told him. 'It must be the soul,' I said, 'that you spy through the paint.'" I don't know what he thought he might find, but in any case, I wouldn't let him touch it."

"Of course not," I said—as though I were an authority. "We'll look into that, if ever we find the portrait. The main thing is, to find it! The rest will be simple."

NIKOLAI PAVLOVICH

The days rolled by. No portrait. No Boris. No idea as to the address or identity of the artist who had thrust the portrait behind his bookcase.

"Found it yet?" my friends kept asking.

"No, not yet."

"You're certainly taking your time about it! The portrait's probably been sold again long since. As if anyone would keep Lermontov behind a bookcase!"

"Well, but the man doesn't know it's Lermontov," I would explain.

"Oh," my friends would say, disappointedly. "Well, in that case, you're hardly likely to find it."

Piqued, I would say to myself, "I'll show them yet!" But I had nothing to show.

One day I decided to talk the thing over with Pakhomov. With Nikolai Pavlovich, I mean.

Nikolai Pavlovich Pakhomov was known in the Moscow museum world as an authority on rare books, antiques, old paintings.

"Has Nikolai Pavlovich seen it?" "What does Nikolai Pavlovich think of it?"—those were questions often to be heard among researchers.

And as to Lermontov—there was no one who could tell you more than Nikolai Pavlovich about Lermontov's portraits, drawings by Lermontov, illustrations to Lermontov's works, museum materials of any type connected in any way with Lermontov. This was a field in which Nikolai Pavlovich knew no equal. Moreover, he was working at the time on a book to be called *Lermontov in the Fine Arts*.

Yes, I decided, I would have a talk with him: surprise him, first, with my new portrait, and then ask his advice.

I telephoned, and the next evening went to see him.

We sat long over our tea, fiddling with our spoons and discussing Lermontoviana.

At a favourable moment, I slipped a hand into my briefcase and got out my precious photograph.

"Nikolai Pavlovich," I asked, as indifferently as I could, "what would you say of this?"

And I held the photograph up so that Nikolai Pavlovich could see it. I could not help smiling. I sat waiting for his answer.

"Just one minute, my dear fellow," Nikolai Pavlovich said. "I can't seem to make it out without my glasses."

He reached over to his desk.

"Is it by any chance *this* portrait you have in mind?"

And he showed me a photograph, exactly the same as mine.

I stared at it, trying to detect some difference—any difference! There was no difference. Absolutely none. The silver epaulette, half concealed by the greatcoat collar; the eyebrows, raised as though in surprise; the eyes, absorbed and serious; the nose, the lips, the hair; even the size of the photograph—all exactly the same!

For an instant I was stunned, as by a sudden shot. And then, for a minute, the whole story—the portrait, and Boris, and my rounds of the commission shops, and my talks in the museums—all seemed to me so stale, so tame, so needless, like some half-forgotten dream.

There was a silence. Finally, I cleared my throat.

"Interesting!" I said. "They're exactly alike!"

Nikolai Pavlovich put away his photograph and smiled.

"M'm," was his only remark.

We applied ourselves to our tea.

"Where did you get it?" Nikolai Pavlovich asked, after a while.

"Pushkin Centre. And you?"

"History Museum."

"Is that where the original is?"

"No, only a photograph. The original belonged to the Vulferts."

He knew all about it! What a fool I had made of myself!

We returned to our tea in silence. At length, I mustered up the spirit to ask:

"Well, Nikolai Pavlovich, and what do you think of it? An interesting portrait, to my mind."

"Yes," he said. "It's interesting. But the question is—who is it?"

"Who? Why, Lermontov, obviously!"

"I beg your pardon, but where did you get that information?"

"I didn't get it anywhere," I said. "I simply draw conclusions from the facts at my disposal. For one thing, this young officer is remarkably like Lermontov's mother. You will remember, of course, his friend Krayevsky's remark to the effect that Lermontov resembled his mother's portrait more than he did any of his own. Viskovatov cites him, if you remember, in his biography of Lermontov: "He resembled his mother," Krayevsky declared, and turning to her portrait, added, "If you add a moustache to this face, and change the hairdress, and throw a dolman over the shoulders—you'll find yourself looking at Lermontov." Well, and, Nikolai Pavlovich, you may believe it or not, but I've done all that—added the moustache to Lermontov's mother's face, and thrown the dolman over her shoulders. And the resemblance to the Vulfert portrait is simply amazing. Too amazing for any explanation but one: that the person in the portrait is the poet Lermontov, her only son."

"Go on," Nikolai Pavlovich said.

"For another thing," I continued, "Vulfert clearly had grounds for considering it a portrait of Lermontov. Why should he have kept it, and given photographs of it to different museums, if he didn't think it genuine? Well, and finally, Lermontov seems to be wearing the uniform of the Grodno Hussars. The silver epaulette speaks for that. Gilt epaulettes were worn in all the other regiments Lermon-

to served in—the Guard Hussars, the Nizhny Novgorod Dragoons, the Tenginka Infantry.”

“Are you done?” Nikolai Pavlovich asked, as I paused. “Then, with your permission, there are a few things I should like to say. First of all, I see no resemblance in this officer to Lermontov’s mother. Forgive my bluntness, but that argument is rather weak. To you, he seems to resemble her. To me, he doesn’t. To some third person, he may seem to resemble you or me. Seeming is no argument. I prefer concrete proofs.”

He was right, too, I reflected. It was really no argument.

“And now as to Vulfert’s considering it Lermontov,” Nikolai Pavlovich continued. “Here—look at these! Their owners also claimed they were portraits of Lermontov.”

He handed me two photographs. One was a portrait of an obvious cretin—narrow shoulders, low forehead, apathetic look. The other portrayed a goggle-eyed person with a huge, bushy moustache. He had his head drawn down between his shoulders. With an expression of horrible distaste, he was smoking a long-stemmed Turkish pipe. How outrageous to admit even the slightest possibility that these might be Lermontov!

And again I had to confess to myself that Nikolai Pavlovich was right. Vulfert’s claim was no proof.

“Well, and as to the uniform,” Nikolai Pavlovich went on mercilessly, “that’s hard to tell by a photograph, of course; but surely you know that the Grodno Hussars were not the only regiment that wore silver epaulettes. There were several others. So that I, for one, would avoid drawing conclusions from such uncertain data. And anyway, my dear friend, to be very honest”—and he smiled at me—“can you tell me, with your hand on your heart, that you really think this portrait is Lermontov? Why, compare it with any of the authentic portraits. Can you find the slightest likeness?”

“Yes, I can and do.”

“But where? In what?” he insisted, clearly perplexed by my obstinacy. “Where are your proofs?”

I did not answer. I had no proofs.

WHEN YOU GET DOWN TO IT

I went home that night deeply depressed.

Could I really be mistaken? Was it really not Lermontov? Impossible! Ah, what a waste of time and effort, if it was not he! What an awful shame!

And I could see it all so clearly! Early spring, 1838. Lermontov—looking just as in this portrait—comes to spend a few days in St. Petersburg. His service in the Grodno Regiment, now quartered outside Novgorod, is almost over. His grandmother is interceding for him, through persons who have influence at Court. Any day now, the transfer may come through—back to Tsarskoye Selo, to the Guard Hussars. And, before discarding the Grodno uniform, he yields to his grandmother’s pleas and sits for his portrait.

So far as one might judge by a photograph, the portrait was a very good one. Grandmother must have asked an artist of some standing.

And so, for a few days, Lermontov finds himself once more in the city whence a year earlier, for his stanzas on the death of Pushkin, he was exiled to military service in the Caucasus. He has matured, in this year. His travels through the Caucasus, his encounters in Cossack villages, in seacoast towns, at the mineral springs, along the Caucasian roads, have filled his soul to overflowing with new impressions—have given birth to new and daring projects. He sees more clearly and more deeply, now, the vicious and empty vanity that reigns in “high society”—the fetters it hangs on human feeling, the waste of talents, strangled by lack of any worthy goal. The thought has come to him already of a novel in which he will set forth these impressions, a novel expressing the tragedy of an intel-

ligent and gifted man of his day—the hero of his times.

Surely, all this was clearly to be read in Lermontov's eyes, in the Vulfert portrait!

I could see Lermontov—as he is depicted in this portrait—walking home, as dawn approaches, through the streets of the city. There he goes along the Palace Embankment, past the sleeping palaces—pale yellow, tarnished red, dull grey. The waves are beating against the boat landings. The floating bridge by the Summer Gardens sways and creaks. A sentry, with his halberd, stands dozing beside his striped booth. The poet's footsteps echo up and down the deserted embankments. The city seems to have melted away in the grey murk that precedes the dawn; and there is a sense of something lurking somewhere in the chill dampness of this early hour.

Yes, and I could see Lermontov—just as in this faded photograph, with his greatcoat thrown carelessly over his shoulders—leaning back in an armchair in his grandmother's rooms on the Fontanka, looking out through the window at the iron grille that lines the embankment, and the trees—still black and bare—along the grim walls of the Mikhailovsky castle. I could see the whole scene: a low couch by the armchair, heaped with cushions, and Lermontov's sabre thrown across it; and a round table, piled with books and papers. The light from the window falls on Lermontov's face, on the beaver collar of his coat, on the silver epaulette. And there—with his back to me—stands the artist, in a coffee-coloured frock-coat. Before the artist stands an easel, and on the easel a portrait—this very portrait.

No, I could not, I could not possibly persuade myself that it was not Lermontov! I could never reconcile myself to such a thought!

Why was it that Nikolai Pavlovich and I differed so radically in our opinions of this portrait? Probably, because our ideas of Lermontov himself did not agree. Nor was there anything surprising in that. Even the people who

had known Lermontov in life had differed in their thoughts of him. Those who shared his wanderings, who fought by his side on the field of battle, had described him as a devoted comrade, youthfully ardent, tactful as a woman in his relations with his friends. But there had been others, many others, who found him arrogant, rude, malicious, mocking; who measured him by their own small standards—blind to the poet, discerning only the officer.

Why, then, must I agree with Nikolai Pavlovich? Had he proved to me that the man in the portrait was not Lermontov? That it was someone, anyone, else? Of course not! He had simply refuted my own arguments, and most logically, demonstrating their lack of substance. He simply considered, and quite justly, that in itself the photograph gave me no real grounds for proclaiming it Lermontov. But if I could find such grounds, he would be compelled to agree with me.

Yes, I must find that portrait, whatever happened. And then we would see!

A LERMONTOV DISPLAY AT THE LITERARY MUSEUM

I had a call, one day, from the Literary Museum—an invitation to attend the opening of a special Lermontov display. Vladimir Dmitriyevich Bonch-Bruyevich, the Museum director, was particularly anxious to have me come. There would be some writers I knew, and some people from the films, and several newspapermen.

Later, Nikolai Pavlovich phoned and also asked me to come. There was some interesting material he and Mikhail Dmitriyevich Belayev had dug up in various places: several unknown drawings and a book with an inscription in Lermontov's hand.

I was detained, and people were already beginning to leave when I reached the Museum. I met several acquaintances at the checkroom. Bonch-Bruyevich was on the stairs leading up from the entrance—greeting one visitor,

seeing off another, thanking a third, reminding a fourth of some promise, promising something to a fifth himself, asking everyone to come again.

"So you're here, after all," he rumbled at me. "Good! You must be sure and see everything!"

Then Nikolai Pavlovich came up, with a smiling "Latish, my friend!"—and led me off to show me the exhibits.

There were several late-comers in the first hall, looking at portraits, paintings, sculptures.

"You can see these later," Nikolai Pavlovich said. "I'd rather you started further on."

And he led me straight through to the second hall.

"We've got some rather decent stuff together," he said. "Look at this water-colour. Interesting, isn't it? Gau, of course. A portrait of Mongo Stolypin. We found it in the store-rooms at the Tretyakov Gallery."

I moved about the hall, from exhibit to exhibit. Soon Bonch-Bruyevich came up, with Belayev.

"Well?" he asked.

"Splendid!" I answered, looking up at him.

And then I noticed the wall behind him—and stood petrified.

"Oh!" was all that I could say.

I was looking straight at the Vulfert portrait, hung in a simple oval frame. The original. In oils. With the same silver epaulette as in the photograph, half concealed by the beaver collar of his greatcoat. Lermontov, with that look of melancholy contemplation in his eyes.

"Why don't you faint?" Nikolai Pavlovich cried, his eyes screwed up in friendly laughter; and he held out his arms, as if to support me.

I did not speak. I could feel the colour flooding my cheeks. Deeply moved, I looked into the face that had occupied my thoughts so long, so hopelessly. My mind was in a whirl. I was almost happy—but only almost. A secret vexation marred the joy of discovery. Of what good had

been all my efforts, my anxieties, my anticipations? What had anyone gained by them? Nothing! Others had found the portrait, not I!

"Well, man, won't you even say a word?" Belayev demanded.

"He's tongue-tied with joy," Nikolai Pavlovich said, smiling.

"Let him look his fill," Bonch-Bruyevich put in. "It was his doing we bought the portrait, after all."

"My doing?" I asked, my spirits rising.

But Nikolai Pavlovich waved my inquiries away.

"We'll talk of that later," he said impatiently. "I want to know what you think of the portrait."

"To my mind, it's excellent."

"Yes, it isn't bad," Nikolai Pavlovich agreed. "Only, you see, it isn't Lermontov. That's settled definitely now."

"Not Lermontov? Who is it, then?"

"Some unknown officer."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Why, his uniform."

"What about his uniform?"

"It proves he's an officer of the Engineers—that's what! Look for yourself: the edging on the collar of his coat is red. And the combination of red edging and silver epaulettes, for that period, means the Engineers. You can't go against that."

"In other words. . . ."

"In other words, it's clearly not Lermontov."

"Then why have you hung it here?"

"Why—for one thing, to show it to you, and get your opinion. Let it hang, for the time being. It's in nobody's way."

"Well, but still, Nikolai Pavlovich," I protested, "it can't be settled so simply as all that."

But Nikolai Pavlovich shook his head.

"I'm afraid that's that," he said.

THE SLOYEVS

The portrait had only been acquired a few days before the opening of the display.

An old woman came to the Museum offices to offer four old engravings and a rolled-up canvas. The canvas, when unrolled, proved to be a portrait of a young officer. She asked a hundred and fifty rubles for it.

The purchasing committee decided to take the engravings, but found nothing to interest it in a portrait of some unknown officer. When the old woman came for her answer the portrait was returned to her, with the explanation that it did not suit the Museum's needs.

But just as she was about to roll it up again Mikhail Dmitriyevich Belayev happened into the room. He noticed the portrait, and exclaimed that it was the very one Andronikov was searching for—the one he had asked the Museum to look out for. Andronikov, he added, considered it a portrait of Lermontov; but Nikolai Pavlovich Pakhomov was of quite a different mind on the matter. Nikolai Pavlovich, who had come in during this explanation, insisted that the portrait be bought. And Bonch-Bruyevich directed the committee to take it. It was entered in the Museum's inventory books as No. 13931.

"What was the old woman's name?" I asked.

"Yelizaveta Kharitonovna Sloyeva."

"And her address?"

"It's here in Moscow. Eleven, Tikhvinsky Street."

I went straight to Tikhvinsky Street.

"Might I speak to Yelizaveta Kharitonovna Sloyeva?"

"That's me."

"I believe you sold a portrait recently to the Literary Museum."

"Why, yes, I did."

"Might I ask where you got it?"

"My son gave it to me."

"And where is your son?"

"In the next room, shaving."

In the next room:

"I beg your pardon, Comrade Sloyev. Could you tell me where you got that portrait?"

"My brother brought it. He'll be here in a minute. Ah, there he is! Kolya, tell the comrade where you got that portrait."

And Kolya Sloyev, a young railway-school student, outlined for me the portrait's recent history.

"They were taking down a woodshed, out in our back yard. And among the junk there was a broken-down bookcase and this old portrait. I was coming through the yard, and I noticed a bunch of youngsters playing. They were tying a rope to the portrait, and they had a muddy cat they were going to ride on it. I told them they ought to be ashamed of themselves, treating a portrait that way—like so many savages! I took it away from them, and thought I'd leave it on one of the window-sills on our staircase. But my brother here came along just then, and he said that was no place. There's a radiator under the window, and the heat would crack the paint and wrinkle the canvas. So I took the thing home, and my brother mended the canvas where the youngsters had torn it, and gave it a rubbing with some oil. And we hung it on the wall. And then, one day, Mother said, 'It seems to be such a good piece of work. Suppose I took it to a museum?' And so she did."

"Who owned the bookcase that was in that woodshed?" I asked.

"An artist. Voronov, his name was."

"And where could one find him?"

"He's dead. Died two years ago, and his bookcase and that portrait were dumped in the shed."

Everything tallied. And so, all these years, the portrait had been lying here in Tikhvinsky street, behind the bookcase of an artist named Voronov.

WHAT THE TRETYAKOV GALLERY REPLIED

Nikolai Pavlovich Pakhomov's book came out. It included a reproduction of the Vulfert portrait, which it classified as doubtful.

"The officer in this portrait," Pakhomov wrote on page 69, "bears very little resemblance to Lermontov. Only in his nose and forehead can one trace the slightest likeness."

I put the book down and sank once more into thought.

At the beginning it had seemed to me that the main thing was to find the portrait. Well, now it was found, and safely stored at the Museum. Yet the basic problem had not been solved, and probably never would be solved. Though I was convinced, as before, that this officer was Lermontov, I had no way of proving it. Through the years, the decades, the portrait would remain hidden away in some dark store-room at the Museum, and the poet's charmed readers would never see him as he was here portrayed. Ah, that uniform! It seemed destined for ever to hide the poet from those who loved him. Yes, there was no getting rid of that uniform.

Ah, but was there not? Might it not be attempted? Had not Tatyana Alexandrovna Vulfert spoken of something that showed through from underneath? If the portrait had ever been retouched—who could tell whether the present coat had not been painted over another coat, with other edging on its collar?

I went to the Literary Museum, straight to the department of iconography.

"Might I see the Vulfert portrait of Lermontov?" I asked. "The one that was hung at the display."

"Which portrait did you say?"

"The Vulfert one. That used to belong to the Vulferts."

"We have no such portrait."

"Well, the Sloyev one, perhaps, you call it. It was bought from Sloyeva."

"Never heard of it."

At this point one of the girls in the department had an inspiration.

"He must mean the Andronikov portrait," she said. "The one that isn't genuine."

I actually blushed.

They got me out the portrait. Once more I saw that remarkable face—so open, so noble, so marked with intellect.

I took it to the window. Yes, there really did seem to be something underneath—under one of the silver buttons of the greatcoat, and under the collar.

I asked for a magnifying glass, and looked through that. Yes, there certainly seemed to be something underneath. You could glimpse it where the paint was cracked, in the green cloth of the greatcoat. As though both coat and greatcoat had been painted over something else.

And suppose—just suppose!—that something else was the uniform of one of the regiments in which Lermontov had served: the Nizhny Novgorod, the Tenginka, the Grodno!

That could be determined by X-rays. It had been X-rays, I knew, that had helped Korin in his discovery of the renowned Fornarina, a painting by Giulio Romano, pupil of Raphael. The rays had revealed the figure beneath a layer of clothing added at a later period; and, removing this surface layer, Korin had brought to light the long-lost painting.

"Could we have this portrait X-rayed?" I asked.

"Why not?" the Museum staff replied. "We can send it to the Tretyakov Gallery. They'll do it for us."

The portrait was sent to the Tretyakov Gallery. In my impatience, I inquired at the Museum daily for the result.

At length the portrait was returned, and with it a letter, stating, in brief: Nothing discovered beneath the surface. The letter was signed by Professor Toropov.

THE LABORATORY ON FRUNZE STREET

Besides X-rays, there are ultra-violet rays, which, falling on an object, make it emit light—the character of the light depending on the nature of the object. Luminescence, this phenomenon is called.

Suppose that some inscription on a document has been removed by chemicals. It cannot be seen by ordinary light. It will not show on a photograph. It cannot be detected by X-rays. Ultra-violet rays will find it, and make it legible.

Ultra-violet rays discover blood-spots that have been scrubbed or laundered out. They will discover oil, if it is there, in rock. They are unbiased judges of precious stones, and of sorts of wood. They can determine the composition of lubricants, of paints, of inks. If you dip your pen in different ink-wells while writing a letter, they will discover the difference—even if the ink is of one and the same colour. They are used at fish canneries to distinguish spoiled fish from fresh.

If the uniform in the Vulfert portrait had been painted over another uniform, at a different time, the paint then used might luminesce differently, when subjected to ultra-violet rays, than the original paints.

It was Tatyana Alexeyevna Turgeneva, a grand-niece of Turgenev and a member of the Literary Museum staff, who suggested these rays to me.

“Have you never thought of trying the Criminal Laboratory?” she asked me one day, when I looked in at the Museum. “It’s a wonderful place, run by the Law Institute of the Academy of Sciences. And it’s right in your district—10, Frunze Street. Of course, their regular job is to investigate clues and evidence. But they help us too. I took a book there only the other day, with a blacked-out inscription that was thought to be in Lomonosov’s hand. No one could make it out. X-rays did no good. But the Criminal Laboratory photographed the inscription in

ultra-violet rays, and the photograph was perfectly legible. It wasn't Lomonosov, either. I was there while they did it, and—well, it was simply miraculous! Everything showed so clearly!"

Tatyana Alexeyevna and I took the portrait to Frunze Street that very day.

When we unrolled the canvas at the Laboratory and explained our errand, everyone was tremendously interested. They bent over the portrait, looking eagerly into the face, and asked endless questions about it. That is easily understood. Loving the poet's works, people want to know what he himself was like, and every detail interests them deeply. A new portrait of Lermontov—who would not be glad to help in its identification?

They placed the portrait on a table, under an appliance that looked much like the quartz lamps I had seen in hospitals. But this was a lamp of a special type. Its light filters passed only ultra-violet rays.

Heavy hangings were drawn over the windows, and then the current was turned on. The portrait began to glow, emitting a sort of violet haze. Shades and colours vanished, and in place of a work of art I found myself staring at a crude smear. Every fault, every unevenness in the priming stood out sharply. Tiny cracks and scratches, unnoticeable ordinarily—the scar left by a nail—the tear that Sloyev had mended—everything became clearly visible.

"A little better than X-rays, this," Tatyana Alexeyevna whispered.

"Yes, I see," I answered.

"Do you notice those streaks under the greatcoat?"

"Yes."

"And—you know—something seems to show through under the coat!"

"I don't see anything."

"You're simply blind! Don't you really see it? Just below the collar. Definitely!"

"There's nothing there at all."

"How can you be so hateful! Don't you really see another coat underneath?"

"I'm very sorry, but I don't."

"Nor do I, any more," Tatyana Alexeyevna admitted, sighing.

The Laboratory staff examined every inch of the canvas, turning it at all angles to the rays.

"We're sorry," they told us finally, "but we can find no changes worth speaking of. No inscriptions of any kind on the canvas. No second uniform underneath. Nothing but a few slight brush corrections."

"Yes, there's nothing there," Tatyana Alexeyevna agreed, and added, for my benefit: "I told you everything would show as clear as clear! These rays are wonderful!"

The Laboratory people laughed.

"We can try infra-red," they offered.

AN ARTIST'S EYE

By means of infra-red rays, a letter written in lead pencil can be read through a sealed envelope. That is because, to these rays, paper is a semi-transparent medium, and pencil lead an impassable barrier. A printed document blotted with blood or ink can be easily read in infra-red rays, for they penetrate blood and ordinary ink, but are stopped by printer's ink. Infra-red rays will detect every attempt at forgery, erasure, or correction, however skilful, on cheques, bonds, or other papers.

If there were constituents impenetrable to infra-red rays in the paints used for the portrait, the secret of the uniform would be revealed.

The portrait was photographed in infra-red rays, from front and back. But nothing invisible came to light.

Failure! Yet I could think of no other way of proving the portrait's identity than the discovery of another uniform beneath the present one.

No, I thought, rays might be all that was said of them, but after all it was art we were dealing with, and the best judge would be an artist. Why not ask Korin? He was an artist of wonderful taste and talent, and his eye was keen. Surely he might help!

I telephoned Korin and asked him to meet me at the Literary Museum.

He came. I led him straight to the portrait.

"I want your opinion, Pavel Dmitriyevich," I began. "Is there any indication of another uniform underneath this one? X-rays don't show any, nor do ultra-violet rays, or infra-red."

"Why does that interest you?" Korin asked, in his slow, quiet way.

"I'm trying to identify the portrait."

"Why, that's simple enough, I should say. It's Lermontov, clearly."

"How do you know?"

"By his face, of course. Who else do you think it could be?"

"No one but Lermontov."

"Well, then, why all the to-do?"

"The trouble is, I have no proofs."

"No proofs? The face is there for all to see. What better proof could anyone ask?"

"But that's not documentary proof."

"Well, you don't ask your acquaintances for their documents before you say 'Hullo, do you?'" Korin demanded, laughing. "You know them without documentary proof, I'm sure!"

"Yes, but, Pavel Dmitriyevich, looks are a debatable thing. There are people who don't agree with your opinion and mine. They say there's no resemblance here to Lermontov."

"How can anyone say that?" Korin cried, clearly astonished. "The outline, the features, the proportions—clearly, it's Lermontov. Painted from life. In excellent style. In

the eighteen thirties. By a skilled artist unquestionably. But what makes you ask about another uniform?"

"This one is wrong."

"Oh, so that's it! I see. But there's no sign of interference, unfortunately. Nothing but a few slight changes down below, by the original artist. It will do you no good to remove the paint. You'll only ruin the portrait."

"What do you advise, then?"

"Try to find some other way of proof. I'm sure there must be some way. Base yourself on the face, on the resemblance. To my mind, it's unquestionable."

AN UNUSUAL HOBBY

In my Leningrad days, working at the Pushkin Centre, I had made friends with a young professor of history, keen, gifted, erudite—Pavel Pavlovich Shchegolev.

Pavel Pavlovich was gone now, to my deep sorrow. He had died in 1936.

At his home, while he was still alive, I had often met his friend, Yakov Ivanovich Davidovich, professor of law at Leningrad University, a well-known authority on questions of labour legislation.

When Pavel Pavlovich and Yakov Ivanovich got together, they had invariably plunged into a rather unusual sort of contest, that they never seemed to weary of.

"Yakov Ivanovich," Pavel Pavlovich might call through the open door of his study, while his friend was still getting out of his overcoat in the hallway, "could you by any chance tell me the colour of the edging on the coat cuffs in Her Majesty's Regiment of the Guard Cuirassiers?"

"A simple question, Pavel Pavlovich," Yakov Ivanovich would answer, appearing in the doorway, with a friendly nod for me. "Light blue, of course, as everybody knows. But perhaps you might inform me, my dear Pavel Pavlo-

vich, what colour dolmans were worn in the Pavlograd Hussars, where Nikolai Rostov served."

"Green," Pavel Pavlovich would shoot back. "And what about the plumes in the Finland Regiment of the Guards?"

"Black."

"Well, then, my dear Yakov Ivanovich, and can you tell me in what year the Lithuanian Regiment of the Guards was formed?"

"1811, if my memory doesn't deceive me."

"And in what battles did it participate?"

"Borodino, Bautzen, Dresden, Kulm, Leipzig. I name only those battles in which the regiment distinguished itself. Yes, and, of course, it was one of the first to enter Paris."

"Yakov Ivanovich! There's not a living soul remembers all that but you! You're simply remarkable! Colossal!"

To be truthful, I could not share in Pavel Pavlovich's enthusiasm. I knew nothing of edgings, pouches, housings, and the like, nor was I particularly well informed on the details of army history. I would soon tire, and when I could no longer suppress my yawns, would take my leave.

Puzzling, now, over the problem of the portrait, I thought more and more often of Yakov Ivanovich and his unusual store of knowledge.

If Korin was right, I reflected—in other words,

1. If the thought of another uniform underneath must be dropped (in which he was right unquestionably); and

2. If it be assumed that, his uniform notwithstanding, the officer in the portrait was Lermontov—

Then it remained,

3. To investigate the uniform depicted in the portrait.

That was a question I was not competent to deal with. And so, to have a talk with Yakov Ivanovich, I made a special trip to Leningrad.

I explained my trouble to him by telephone, then hurried to his home.

"Yakov Ivanovich!" I cried, as I came in. "What regiment might an officer belong to in the nineteenth century if he wore red edging on his collar?"

"Red edging! How you laymen talk!" Yakov Ivanovich returned impatiently. "There was always a remarkable wealth of shades and colours in Russian military uniform. What shade of red have you in mind?"

"This," I said, producing a slip of paper on which I had had the colour copied for me.

"That was never red, and never will be," he said crisply. "It's crimson, of course—the shade that was used, if I remember correctly, in the Guard Sharp-Shooters, the 17th Novomirgorod Uhlans, the 16th Tver Dragoons, and the Grodno Hussars. I'll look them up, to make sure."

He went to a bookcase and got out piles of material: lists of uniforms, regimental histories, coloured prints.

"So far, so good," he declared, after a swift check. "Now for the other details. If the epaulette in your portrait is the cavalry type, that eliminates the Sharp-Shooters, leaving us the Tver Dragoons, the Novomirgorod Uhlans, and the Grodno Hussars. But the Tver Dragoons and the Novomirgorod Uhlans wore gilt buttons and epaulettes, whereas in your portrait the epaulette is silver. That leaves only the Grodno Hussars. What about the rest of the uniform?"

I showed him the photograph.

"What an innocent you are!" he exclaimed. "Why, this is a cavalry coat of the eighteen thirties. There were changes in the Grodno Regiment at that period—a shift to blue edgings on the dolman, for one thing. But the olive-green coat was retained until 1845, and until 1838 the edgings on the coat were crimson. You can see that for yourself, if you look through the drawings that were made in colour for Nicholas I. So that the evidence is all in favour of the Grodno Regiment."

He began putting his books in order.

"Yakov Ivanovich!" I cried. "You can't even imagine the importance of what you say! Why, all that being so, this is clearly Lermontov!"

"I'm sorry," Yakov Ivanovich returned, "but that I cannot tell. All we know so far is that it's an officer of the Grodno Hussars. Whether it's Lermontov or not, is not for me to say."

METHODS OF IDENTIFICATION

An officer of the Grodno Hussars! That narrowed the possibilities to some thirty or forty people—the number of officers in that regiment in the eighteen thirties.

The goal seemed very near. But—how to attain it, I could not imagine.

I returned to Moscow. And again I spent my evenings puzzling over the photograph—staring at it, at times, as though I thought it might tell me something, if only I looked hard enough. Yes, that would have been wonderful—for the portrait to say itself whom it represented.

And then I thought of something else: the identification, not of portraits, but of living people, in cases when they themselves could not, or would not, say who they were. What was done then? Clearly, other people must be asked to identify them.

But suppose there was no one who knew them, or at any rate who would admit he knew them?

They might, of course, be identified by photograph. But suppose there were no photographs? Could a portrait by a painter possibly serve this end?

Again I borrowed the portrait and took it to the Criminal Laboratory.

"Ah," the staff greeted me. "Here again?"

"Here again. What I want to know is—how can a person be identified, in criminal investigations, if there are no photographs of him available.

"In such cases we use the method of verbal portrait."

"And what is that?"

"Oh, that's simple enough."

In questions of identification, the science of criminal investigation discards such descriptions as: thin, stout, ruddy-complexioned, clean-shaven, grey-haired, and the like.

Today a man's cheeks may be ruddy, and tomorrow pale. He may be clean-shaven today, and bearded before a month has passed. His hair may be grey in the morning, but dyed any colour he chooses by the afternoon.

Investigators, therefore, take into account only stable, basic traits—those which cannot be changed either by time, or by circumstances, or by deliberate intent: such traits as height, body structure, and—of the face and profile—the shape and dimensions of forehead, nose, ears, lips, and chin, the shape and position of the eyes, the colour of the iris, etc. Descriptions, or verbal portraits, based on such data are always dependable, for, like fingerprints, no two persons' stable traits ever coincide completely.

"But why should all this interest you?" the Laboratory people asked.

"Well, you see," I explained, "I've cleared up the uniform problem. That's all straightened out. And now I wonder whether you couldn't help me to establish finally whether or not the officer in the portrait is Lermontov."

"Look here," they said, "why don't you have a talk with Sergei Mikhailovich? He might agree to try. And if he does, your problem will be settled once and for all."

"But who is Sergei Mikhailovich?"

"Professor Potapov, of course. Do you mean to say you've never heard of him? Why, he's known internationally for his work in criminology. One of the founders of the science in our country. An expert in forensic photography. Creator of the study of handwriting as a science. Our greatest authority in the field of identification. He

has a passion for difficult, muddled problems, and your portrait certainly ought to interest him."

They led me down the hall to Professor Potapov's office.

He was writing at his desk—an elderly man, with a tiny grey beard and grey hair combed straight back from his forehead. A tranquil, clever face, and swift, penetrating hazel eyes.

I was introduced, and explained my problem. He heard me out attentively, questioned me in some detail, and examined the portrait with great care.

"Very well," he said finally. "We'll see what we can do by the verbal portrait theory of identity. I shall have to ask you to trust us with this portrait, and to send us reproductions of all other Lermontov portraits known to be authentic. Yes, and to wait patiently for about a month."

I thanked him, and we left his office.

"What is he planning to do?" I asked my guides.

"He intends to apply the theory of identity based on the verbal portrait," they explained. "If you take two different photographs of the same person, and bring them to scale so that the distance between two chosen stable points on the face corresponds, then, when you lay one photograph on the other, all the stable points will coincide. If the photographs are not of the same person, the points will not all coincide, for, as research has proved, for different persons they do not and cannot all coincide. Photographs are often compared in this way, but for paintings this will be a first attempt."

We shook hands, and I prepared to leave.

"Your worries are over now," they said in parting. "Once Sergei Mikhailovich has taken it up, you'll get your answer next month, as he promised, and it will be definite: Lermontov, or no."

PROFESSOR POTAPOV'S CONCLUSION

A month passed.

The day came when a messenger brought a packet and an envelope, both addressed to me.

I tore open the envelope. It contained a typewritten document headed, "Conclusion by Professor S. M. Potapov."

I did not yet know my fate. But it was signed and sealed, and here it lay before me. With beating heart, I began to read.

"With the idea in mind of an attempt to solve the problem set before me by comparing the facial characteristics of the given portrait . . . with those of other Lermontov portraits, of unquestioned authenticity, I examined reproductions of several such portraits. . . ."

Of the reproductions I sent him, Professor Potapov selected that of a miniature done by Zabolotsky in 1840, in which Lermontov's head is poised at the same angle as in the Vulfert portrait. To compare the miniature and the portrait, he first had them brought to scale: in other words, so photographed as to equalize the distance between two definite stable points in both. As his stable points, he chose the bottom of the ear lobe and the corner of the right eye. Then he had these photographs transferred to lantern slides.

"Superimposing one slide on the other, and holding them up against the light. . . ."

The slides—they must be in the packet! Impatiently, I snapped the cord and opened the cardboard box. Inside lay two dark glass plates.

I took them out and held them up to the light. One was the Zabolotsky miniature, enlarged; the other, the Vulfert portrait, diminished. Slowly, methodically, I brought them together: united the ear lobes; united the corners of the eyes. And—a miracle took place! Both portraits disappeared, melted before my eyes—merged in a new, third

portrait. Everything coincided—eyes, eyebrows, nose, lips, chin! Only the hair was differently combed, and the cheek in the Vulfert portrait was a little fuller than in the miniature. But neither hairdress nor roundness of cheek, after all, can be considered a stable trait! And, turning back to Professor Potapov's statement, I knew now what I would find:

"...I must express the opinion that the portrait in oils submitted by Com. Andronikov is a portrait of M. Y. Lermontov."

What an amazing achievement! An authority in the study of crime, not of art or literature—and how splendidly his method had helped in the identification of a poet portrayed by an artist a century ago!

Professor Potapov had feared that the painters might have been inexact in rendering the proportions of the face. Were these distorted, his tests could not succeed. But his fears had been unfounded.

Thrilling with happy excitement, I turned again to that wonderful merging of two different portraits into the one living face. How the eyes had changed! The absent, musing gaze of the Vulfert portrait was now focussed and intent. It seemed to be turned straight on me. How fortunate that both painters had so truly grasped not only the appearance and expression of their great contemporary, but the relative proportions of his features!

Once more I read through Professor Potapov's conclusion. It was an exhaustive reply to the question I had set, refuting authoritatively all doubt as to the portrait's identity.

It had not been a matter of pure chance—this final success. People of many professions had joined, first in the search for the portrait, and then in the quest for proof of its identity: the staffs of two literary museums; an Army man—Lieutenant-Colonel of the Engineers Vulfert; a railway school student—Kolya Sloyev; an artist—Korin; Professor Potapov and his staff of crime researchers;

librarians, photographers, X-ray operators. Even if Yakov Ivanovich had been unable to help me with the problem of the uniform, Professor Potapov would have recognized the officer of the portrait as Lermontov, and presented incontrovertible proof of his identity.

Only now—the search completed, the proof attained—did I realize how deeply I had come to love this portrait, and how infinitely difficult it would have been for me to accustom myself to the idea that it was not Lermontov. Many and many a line of Lermontov's verse, many a fancy of my own creation concerning the poet and his life, are bound up inseparably, for me, with this inspiring portrait of him.

Let me describe it, then, in parting, in Lermontov's own words:

*Behold the likeness: with a careless line,
As if an echo of a thought divine
The artist has portrayed him. The face
Is not quite dead, nor really living.*

Translated by Helen Altschuler



YURI KAZAKOV
(b. 1927)

Books are like people. Some we pass by after having met them, others we like to keep near us, as we would a friend, adviser or companion.

Those who love the voices of Nature will enjoy this story "The Hound" by Yuri Kazakov. The author is a young student of the Gorky Literary Institute, and although this essay still lacks the skill of the experienced craftsman, it is written with an affection that cannot fail to please. This, together with an observant eye, promises well for his future mature career as a writer.

THE HOUND

1

His appearance in the town remains a mystery. He came from somewhere in the spring, and he stayed. He bothered no one, got in no one's way, and submitted to no one—he was free.

Some said that passing Gypsies had abandoned him in the spring.

Strange people, those Gypsies! They moved out in early spring.

Others said that he had come sailing down on an ice-floe during the spring freshet. He had stood alone amid the drifting ice, a still black shape in a white-blue medley. Overhead had flown the swans, crying "klink-klank!"

People always look forward with a thrill to the coming of the swans. And when they come over, rising from the flood meadows at dawn with their great spring call "klink-klank," people follow them with their eyes, and the blood begins to sing in their hearts—they know, then, that spring has come.

The ice was drifting downstream with a crackling, booming noise, the swans were crying, and he stood there on an ice-floe, his tail between his legs, wary, uncertain, nose and ears intent on what was going on around him. When the ice-floe touched the bank, he became excited, made an awkward leap, fell into the water, but scrambled ashore quickly, shook himself and hid among the log stacks.

Be that as it may, he came in the spring, when the days were filled with brilliant sunshine, the babble of

brooks and the smell of bark, and he stayed in the town.

As to his past, one can merely guess. He was probably born under some doorstep, on a litter of straw. His mother, a pure-bred Kostroma hound with a long low body, had disappeared under the porch when her time came to perform her great act in secrecy. They had called her, but she had not answered, had not ate anything. She was wrapped up in herself, waiting for something to happen, something that was more important than anything else in the world, more important even than the chase and men—her masters and gods.

He was born blind, as all puppies are, and was promptly licked over by his mother and laid next to her warm belly, which was still tensed with birth throes. And while he lay there, learning to breathe, he was joined by sisters and brothers. They wriggled, grunted, and tried to whimper—all dun-coloured puppies with naked bellies and short quivering tails. Presently it was all over, and each had found a teat. The only sounds were a sniffing of noses and a smacking of greedy lips, and the heavy breathing of the mother. And so their life began.

In due course all the puppies opened their eyes and were delighted to find a world so much roomier than the one they had been living in. He had opened his eyes, too, but he was not destined to see the light of day. He was blind. His eyes were covered with a thick grey film. He had a bitter time in store for him. Life was going to be a terrible thing, could he have but realized it. But he did not know that he was blind, he could not know it. He took life as he found it.

It so happened that he was not drowned or killed in puppyhood, which would have been only an act of mercy towards a helpless unwanted puppy. He lived to undergo painful experiences which hardened him both in body and soul while he was still at a tender age.

He had no master to provide a roof for him, to feed him and take care of him as of a friend. He became a home-

less dog, a vagrant—sullen, clumsy and suspicious. His mother, having reared him, quickly lost all interest in him, as she did in his brothers. He learned to howl like a wolf, with the same long-drawn dismal cry. He was dirty and often ill. He rummaged about in the rubbish heaps outside the eating-places, and together with similar homeless and hungry dogs like himself received kicks and the contents of slop pails over him.

He was not able to run fast, and his legs, his strong legs, were really of little use to him. He had a feeling all the time that he was heading for something sharp and cruel. When he fought with other dogs—and he had many a scrap in his time—he did not see his enemies. He snapped and rushed at the sound of breathing, at the growls and yelps, at the rustling sounds made by paws on the ground, and often snapped at the empty air.

No one knows what name his mother had given him at birth—every mother, even a dog, always knows her children by name. To people he was nameless. Who knows whether he would have stayed in the town, or have slunk away to die in some ravine, had not human intervention changed the whole pattern of his life.

2

I was living in the small northern town that summer. It stood on the bank of a river. White steamboats, dirty-brown barges, long rafts, and broad-nosed scows with pitch-blackened sides sailed down the river. The jetty smelt of bast matting, rope, damp rot and fish. Few people used the jetty except suburban farmers on market-day and official visitors to the sawmill from the regional centre.

Dense virgin forest covered the hillsides around the town. Drift timber was felled upstream. The forest contained large glades and solitary lakes with old pines towering along the banks. The pines murmured softly all

the time. But when a cool moist wind blew from the Arctic Ocean, driving up the clouds, the pines boomed threateningly and dropped cones, which hit the ground with a resounding noise.

I rented a room on the edge of the town, on the upper floor of an old house. My landlord, a doctor, was a silent man, who was forever busy. He once had a large family, but his two sons were killed in the war, his wife died, and his daughter moved to Moscow. He was now living by himself, treating children. The doctor had one peculiarity—he liked to sing. He sang all kinds of arias in the thinnest of falsettos, sustaining the high notes with an air of sheer bliss. There were three rooms downstairs, but he seldom used them. He ate his meals on the veranda and slept there. The rooms were gloomy, and smelt of dust, drugs and fusty wallpaper.

The window of my room gave on a neglected garden, overrun with currant and raspberry bushes, and burdock and nettles growing along the fence. In the morning the sparrows made a fuss outside the window, and blackbirds flocked together to peck the currants. The doctor did not drive them away, neither did he collect the berries. Sometimes the neighbour's hens and cock would fly up on the fence. The cock would crow lustily, with outstretched neck and quivering tail, the while he glanced round the garden with a curious eye. Finally, he would succumb to temptation, and flutter down, followed by the hens, and all of them would start rummaging around the currant bushes. Cats straggled in to the garden, too. They would crouch among the burdock, ambushing the sparrows.

I had been living in the town for a fortnight, and still could not get used to the quiet streets with their boardwalks and the grass growing between the planks, to the creaky stairs, and the occasional hoot of a steamboat at night.

It was an odd town. The white nights lasted nearly all through the summer. A brooding peace reigned over

its riverside and streets. At night the sound of footfalls could clearly be heard outside the houses—these were workers returning from the night shift. All night long the sleeping inhabitants could hear the steps and laughter of couples. It seemed as if the houses had keen-eared walls and the town itself lay hushed the better to be able to listen to the tread of its wakeful inhabitants.

At night the garden smelt of currants and dew, and the quiet snores of the doctor issued from the veranda. On the river a steam launch sang out in a snuffing voice: "Too-too...."

One day a new occupant appeared in the house. This is how it happened. On returning from duty, the doctor saw the blind dog cowering among the logs with a bit of string round his neck. The doctor had seen him before on several occasions. This time he stopped, took careful stock of him, clicked his tongue, whistled, then took hold of the string and dragged the blind dog off home.

There the doctor washed him with warm water and soap and fed him. The hound quivered and shrank while he ate. He ate greedily, bolting his food and choking. His forehead and ears were covered with whitened scars.

"Run along now!" the doctor said, when the dog had eaten his fill. He tried to push him off the veranda, but the dog hung back, trembling.

"H'm..." the doctor muttered and seated himself in his rocking-chair. Evening was drawing in. The sky darkened, but still glimmered. The bigger stars lit up in it. The hound lay dozing on the veranda. He was scraggy and raw-boned, and his ribs showed through his sides. Every once in a while he opened his dead eyes, pricked up his ears, and turned his head, sniffing. Then he laid his head on his paws again and shut his eyes.

The doctor looked at him in perplexity and fidgeted about in his chair, racking his brains what name to give him. How was he to call him? Or perhaps he had better

get rid of him while it wasn't too late? What did he want a dog for! The doctor gazed at the sky. Low down over the horizon a big star twinkled with a bright blue light.

"Arcturus," the doctor muttered.

The hound's ears twitched and he opened his eyes.

"Arcturus!" the doctor repeated, his heart beating faster.

The hound raised his head and wagged an uncertain tail.

"Arcturus! Come here, Arcturus!" the doctor called in a now masterful joyous tone. The hound got up, approached his master and cautiously poked his muzzle into his knees. The doctor laughed and laid his hand on his head. And so the unuttered name by which his mother had called him vanished for ever, and he received a new name instead, given him by Man.

There are as many kinds of dogs, as there are human characters. Some dogs are beggars and cadgers, some free and surly vagabonds, others mushy barkers. There are dogs who demean themselves, who come crawling to the first person who whistles to them. There are servile grovellers, tail-waggers and cringing toadies, those who scuttle away, squealing with panic, when you hit them or even just threaten them.

I have seen devoted dogs, dogs submissive and capricious, dogs swaggerers, stoics, and lickspittles, dogs apathetic, sly and stupid. Arcturus resembled none of them. His feelings towards his master were wonderful and exalted. He loved him passionately and poetically, perhaps more than life itself. Those feelings were too sacred to be paraded.

There were moments when the master was in a bad humour, sometimes he was indifferent, often he smelt irritatingly of eau-de-Cologne—an odour never met with in Nature. More often than not, however, he was kind, and then Arcturus would pant with love. His coat would become fluffy and his whole body would tingle. He felt

like jumping up and racing away madly with a joyous bark. But he checked himself. His ears would get soft, his tail drop down, his body grow limp, and only his heart would start hammering loud and fast. And when his master began jostling him about, tickling him, stroking him, and laughing with a low chortling laugh, what rapture it was! His master's voice was then a medley of sounds, short and prolonged, gurgling and whispering, at once resembling the tinkle of flowing water and the rustle of trees. It was like no other sound. It called forth gleams of memory, faint smells of something, like a drop that raises ripples on water, and it seemed to Arcturus that all this had happened to him before, a long time ago, so long ago that he could not remember where it was and when. Probably he had experienced the same sense of happiness when he had been a blind puppy sucking his mother.

3

After a while I got a chance of studying Arcturus closer, and learned many curious things.

Looking back now, I think that he was aware somehow of his inferiority. To look at he was a full-grown dog with strong legs, and black-and-tan colouring. He was powerful and husky for his age, but all his movements betrayed a strained hesitancy of manner. His muzzle and his whole body expressed a sort of abashed inquiry. He knew perfectly well that all the living creatures around him were freer and quicker than he was. They ran faster and more confidently, trod easily and firmly without stumbling or running into anything. The sound of their footfalls was different to his. He always moved warily and slowly, in a sidling manner—there were so many obstacles in his way. The fowls, pigeons, dogs, sparrows, cats and people and lots of other animals fearlessly ran upstairs, jumped ditches, turned corners, flew away and disappeared in

such baffling ways, whereas his lot was uncertainty and wariness. I never saw him walking or running freely and swiftly, except perhaps on a wide road, a meadow, or on the veranda of our house. But while animals and humans were something he could comprehend and possibly identify himself with, such things as motor-cars, tractors, motor cycles and bicycles were totally incomprehensible and frightening to him. Steamboats and launches excited his curiosity tremendously at first, but realizing that he would never be able to fathom that mystery, he took no further notice of them. He showed a similar lack of interest in airplanes.

Although he could not see anything, he had a scent which no other dog could match. (Little by little he studied all the smells of the town and could make his way about with ease. He never went astray and always found his way home. There were smells galore, and all of them loudly declared themselves. Every thing had a smell of its own—some unpleasant, some neutral, some sweet. Arcturus had but to raise his head and sniff to be able immediately to distinguish rubbish heaps and dust-holes, houses of wood and stone, fences and sheds, people, horses and birds, as clearly as if he could see them.

Half-sunk in the ground by the riverside, there was a large grey boulder which Arcturus was especially fond of sniffing. Its fissures and pores held the most fascinating and unexpected smells. They lingered there sometimes for weeks, and nothing but a strong wind could blow them out. Arcturus never ran past that boulder without stopping to investigate it. He spent a long time round it, snorting, sniffing and getting terribly excited, then running off and coming back again to ascertain additional details.

He also heard the finest of sounds, which no human ear could catch. He awoke at nights, opening his eyes and lifting his ears, listening. He heard the faintest murmurs for miles around. He heard the song of a gnat and the buzz of a wasp nest in the hayloft. He heard the rustle

of a mouse in the garden and the padded walk of a cat on the shed roof. The house was not a dead and silent thing to him as it was to us. It was alive, too: it creaked, and rustled, and crackled, and quivered ever so slightly from the cold. Dew dripped down the rain spout and fell on the stone slab below drop by drop. From below came the faint splash of the river. The heavy layer of logs stirred in the boom by the sawmill. Rowlocks creaked softly—someone was crossing the river in a boat. And far away in the village the cocks crowed faintly in the farmyards. It was a life of which we knew and heard nothing, but which, to him, was familiar and comprehensible.

Another thing about him was that he never yelped or whimpered, seeking sympathy and pity, although life treated him harshly.

One day I was walking down the road that ran out of town. Evening was drawing in. It was warm and still with that serene peace which only a summer evening gives. Dust rose in the distance along the road, and one could hear mooing, drawn-out shouts and the crackling of whips. The cows were being driven in from the meadows.

Suddenly I saw a dog making towards the herd with a business-like air. From the peculiar, strained, hesitant way in which he ran I immediately recognized Arcturus. He had never gone out of town before. "Where is he off to?" I wondered, then suddenly I noticed signs of unusual excitement among the approaching herd.

Cows do not like dogs. They have an inborn fear and hatred of that doglike breed—wolves. Seeing a dark dog running towards them, the front ranks halted. A squat-bodied dun-coloured bull with a ring in his nose pushed his way through to the front. With legs planted wide apart, and head lowered to the ground, he bellowed threateningly. His skin twitched and his bloodshot eyes rolled wildly.

"Grishka!" someone shouted from behind. "Run ahead, quick, the cows have stopped!"

Arcturus, suspecting nothing, was trotting down the road in his ungainly way, and had already approached quite close to the herd. Frightened, I called him. He stopped dead in his tracks and turned towards me. In a flash, the bull rushed at him, roaring, and tossed him on his horns. The black silhouette of the dog leapt out in the twilight and dropped plump into the middle of the herd. His fall had the effect of a bomb-shell. The cows stampeded, snorting and butting each other with a clash of horns, while the dust rose in a cloud. I strained my ears in an agony of suspense to catch the death scream, but there was not a sound.

Meanwhile the cowherds had come running up, cracking their whips and shouting. The road cleared and I saw Arcturus. He was lying in the dust, himself like a heap of dust or an old rag thrown into the roadway. Then, stirring, he staggered to his feet and hobbled towards the roadside. One of the cowherds noticed him.

"Ah, it's a dog!" he cried gleefully, then swore and lashed out at him deftly with his long whip. Arcturus did not yelp. He merely shrank, turned his blind eyes for a moment towards the cowherd, staggered to the edge of the ditch, slipped and fell.

The bull stood in the middle of the road, pawing the ground and bellowing. The cowherd treated him, too, to a stinging lash of the whip, upon which he immediately calmed down. The cows quietened down, too, and the herd moved on again at a leisurely pace, raising a dairy-smelling dust and leaving dung cakes in the road.

I went up to Arcturus. He was covered with mud, breathing heavily with lolling tongue. There were wet weals on his sides. His hind paw quivered—it was crushed. I laid my hand on his head and spoke to him, but he did not respond. His entire being expressed pain, perplexity and a sense of grievance. He could not understand why he had been whipped and trampled on. Dogs usually whimper in such cases, but Arcturus didn't.

Arcturus would have remained an ordinary house dog and perhaps grown fat and lazy but for a happy accident which gave exalted and heroic meaning to the rest of his life.

It came about in this way. I went to the woods one morning to admire the last riotous flashes of summer before it faded and died. Arcturus tagged along after me. I shooed him back several times. He squatted down at a distance, then ran after me again. I got tired of his odd persistence, and took no further notice of him.

The forest staggered Arcturus. Back there, in town, everything was familiar to him. There were boardwalks there, wide roads, planks on the river-bank, and smooth foot-paths. Here all kinds of unfamiliar objects assailed him from all sides: the tall, already stiff grass, the prickly bushes, the rotting stumps, the felled trees, the supple young pines and firs, the rustling leaves on the ground. All round him things touched, pricked and grazed him, as if all had conspired together to drive him out of the woods. And the smells—the smells! So many of them, all unfamiliar and frightening, strong and faint, the meaning of which he knew not! Arcturus ran into all these odorous, rustling, crackling and prickly objects. He shrank at every contact, snorted, and cowered at my feet. He was bewildered and scared.

“Ah, Arcturus!” I said to him softly. “Poor doggie! You don’t know that there is a bright sun in the world, you don’t know how green the trees and bushes are in the morning, and how brightly the dew sparkles in the grass; you don’t know how full of flowers the world is—white, yellow, blue and red, and how tenderly the clusters of ashberries and the sweetbriar glow amid the grey firs and yellowing leaves. If you saw the moon and stars at night, you might bark at them with pleasure. How can you know that the horses, dogs and cats are all different

colours, that fences can be brown, or green, or simply grey, and what a blaze the window-panes make at sundown, what a flaming sea the river then is. If you were a normal healthy dog, your master would be a sportsman. You would hear, then, in the morning, the rousing song of the horn and the wild shouts of the hunters—no ordinary men ever shout like that. You would pursue the game, frenzied with excitement, barking furiously, and in this would be your service to your lord and master. No service you could render him would be nobler than this. Ah, poor Arcturus, poor hound!”

I spoke to him softly, reassuringly, as I went deeper and deeper into the woods. Arcturus recovered himself little by little, and began to explore the bushes and tree-stumps. How new everything was, how fascinating! He was so busy now, investigating, that he no longer clung to me. Occasionally he would stop, peering in my direction with blind eyes, to make sure that he was going right and that I was following him, then he would go off on his rambles again.

Presently we came out into a clearing and walked through the underbrush. Arcturus was seized with wild excitement. He weaved through the bushes, biting the grass and stumbling over the tussocky ground. He breathed loudly as he forced his way ahead, taking no further notice either of me or of the prickly branches. At last he took the plunge and crashed headlong into the bushes, where he could be heard snorting and rummaging about. “He’s unearthed something!” I thought, and stopped.

A tentative bark came from out of the bushes.

“Arcturus!” I called him anxiously. At that moment something happened. Arcturus, with a loud yelp and a howl, dashed through the underbrush. The howl quickly changed to an excited bark, and I could follow his movements through the bushes by their quivering tops. I rushed forward to head him off, calling him loudly all the time, but my cries only seemed to goad him on. Stumbling

and panting, I ran through a glade, then another, descended a hollow, and raced through it as fast as I could to intercept him. I emerged into a glade and there I saw Arcturus. He bounded out of the bushes and was making straight for me. He was unrecognizable, and ran comically in a series of high leaps, not the way ordinary dogs do, but none the less confidently followed the scent, baying furiously all the time. Every now and then his voice rose to a puppy-like yelp.

"Arcturus!" I shouted. My cry put him off his stroke and gave me time to rush up to him and seize him by the collar. He struggled and snarled and all but bit me, and it was quite a time before I got him calmed down. He was badly bruised and scratched, and held his left ear to the ground. Apparently he had hurt himself, but was worked up to such a pitch of excitement and passion that he did not feel it.

5

From that day his life took a different turn. Every morning he ran off to the woods and did not return until the evening, sometimes the next day. He came home always utterly exhausted and bruised, with bloodshot eyes. He had grown considerably during that time—his chest had developed, his voice had grown stronger, and his paws had become dry and powerful, like steel springs.

How he managed to follow the trail there alone without killing himself was beyond me. He must have felt, though, that this lone hunting of his was not what it should be, that something was missing. Perhaps he missed the human approval and encouragement that are so necessary to every hunting hound.

I had never seen him come back from the forest sated. He ran with the slow awkward gait of the blind, and never ran down his quarry, never got his teeth into it. The forest to him was a silent enemy. It lashed his face

and eyes, it flung itself under his feet, it stopped him when he ran. All that it had for him was scent, wild, exciting, alluring scent, ineffably beautiful and hostile. One among thousands, it led him on, forever onward.

How did he find his way home after his mad race, when he came to himself out of his ecstatic dreams? What a sense of space and topography, what a powerful instinct he must have had to be able to find his way back after coming to himself, utterly worn out, hoarse-voiced, and panting, somewhere in the dense forest miles away from home with nothing all round him but rustling grasses and the smell of damp gullies.

Every hunting hound needs the encouragement of man. The hound will forget everything in the excitement of the chase, but he will never forget that somewhere near by is his master the hunter, seized with the same passion as himself, and that when the time comes his shot will decide the issue. At such moments the master's voice becomes wild with passion, and this communicates itself to the dog. He, too, helps the dog to follow the scent by running round the bushes, yelling hoarsely, egging him on. And when it is all over the master will toss his dog a hare foot, look at him with wild, happy, drunken eyes, shout with delight, "Well done, my boy!" and rumple his ears.

Arcturus was lonely and miserable in this respect. He was divided between love for his master and his passion for the chase. Several times I saw him crawl out from under the veranda in the morning—he liked to sleep there—and after a run about the garden, sit down under his master's window and wait for him to wake up. He had always done that, and if the doctor, waking up in a good humour, looked out of the window and called "Arcturus!" the dog used to go crazy with joy. He would go close up to the window, and throw his head back, his throat twitching and his body swaying as he shuffled from foot to foot. Then he would go inside, and they would start romping about in there

amid a medley of happy sounds, the doctor singing his arias, the dog scampering through the rooms.

He still waited there for the doctor to get up, but now betrayed signs of uneasiness. He had nervous twitches, scratched and shook himself, looked up, stood up and sat down again, and would start whimpering softly. Then he would begin running about round the veranda in widening circles, then sit down again under the window and even give short impatient barks, ears erect and head cocked now on one side, now on the other, listening. Finally he would get up, stretch himself nervously, yawn, and make for the gap in the fence with an air of decision. After a while I would see him far out in the field, trotting along in his strained, hesitant way. He was making for the forest.

6

I was walking once with my gun along the high bank of a narrow lake.

The ducks that year were extraordinarily plump and abundant. There were lots of snipe in the low-lying places, and the shooting was easy and pleasurable.

Choosing a convenient stump, I sat down to have a rest, and when the flurry of wind had died down, leaving a moment of brooding stillness, I suddenly caught an odd sound somewhere far away. It was as if someone was steadily striking a silver bell, and the mellow note stole through the fir grove, lingered among the pines and echoed through the whole forest, lending a touch of solemnity to everything around. Gradually the sound grew more distinct and concentrated, and I realized that a dog was barking somewhere. It was a clear, faint, distant bark, coming from the dense pine forest on the opposite bank of the lake. At moments it was lost altogether, but then it came again as persistent as ever, always a bit nearer and louder.

I was sitting on the stump, gazing around at the yellowed thinning foliage of the birches, and the greying moss with the crimson leaves of autumn on it showing at a distance, and it seemed to me, as I listened to the silvery bark, that the whole world was listening with me—the hidden squirrels and the grouse, the birch-trees, the close green firs and the lake below, and the quivering webs woven by the spiders. Presently, in that sweet musical bark, I caught a familiar note, and suddenly it struck me that this was Arcturus on the trail.

At last I had heard him! The pines threw back a faint silvery echo and this made it seem as if several dogs were barking at once. Arcturus was suddenly silent—apparently he had lost the trail. The silence lasted for several long minutes, and the forest immediately became empty and dead. I could almost see the hound circling, blinking his white eyes, trusting to his scent alone. Perhaps he had hit a tree? Perhaps he was lying at this moment with a broken chest, bleeding and agonized, unable to raise himself?

The pursuit was taken up again with redoubled vigour, this time much nearer to the lake. This lake was so situated that all trails and foot-paths ran down to it, and none passed it. I had seen many an interesting thing by that lake. Now, too, I waited to see what would happen. After a while a fox bounded out into a small glade, brown with horse sorrel, on the other side. He was dun grey, with a thin skimpy tail. For a moment he stopped with raised forepaw and ears erect, listening to the sounds of approaching pursuit. Then leisurely he trotted across the glade to the fringe of the wood, plunged into a gully and vanished in the underbrush. Arcturus dashed out into the glade in full cry. He ran a little wide of the trail, baying furiously all the time, and making high awkward leaps as he ran. He plunged into the gully after the fox, crashed through the underbrush, then yelped and howled there, struggled out of some difficult spot in silence, and began

baying again in deep measured tones, as if striking a silver bell.

Hound and beast, the ever-warring pair, flashed past me as if in some strange theatre and disappeared. I was left alone again with the silence and the distant bark of the dog.

7

The fame of this remarkable hound spread throughout the town and the countryside. He had been seen at the distant river Losva, in the fields across the wooded hills, and on the remote forest trails. People spoke about him in the villages, at the landing-stages and ferries, and the raftsmen and sawmill workers discussed him over a glass of beer.

Hunters started calling at our house. As a rule, they did not believe all these rumours—*they* were not to be taken in by hunters' yarns. They examined Arcturus, discussed his ears and paws, talked about his build and toughness and other points of the sporting dog. They found all kinds of faults and tried to persuade his master to sell him. They were dying to feel Arcturus's muscles, his chest and paws, but he sat at the doctor's feet with an air of such wary grimness that they dared not reach out a hand. The doctor, red and angry, told them again and again that the dog was not for sale, and it was time they all knew it. The hunters would go away disappointed, to be followed by others bound on the same errand.

One day Arcturus, badly bruised after one of his hunting forays, was lying under the veranda, when an old man came into the garden. He had an empty eye socket and a scraggy little Tatar's beard, and was wearing a battered old cap and run-down hunting-boots. Seeing me, the old man started blinking, pulled off his cap, scratched his head and gazed up at the sky.

"The weather these days, the weather..." he began vaguely, then grunted and fell silent. I guessed what he was after.

"You've come about the dog?" I said.

"Yes, yes!" he said quickly, putting on his cap. "Now look, is that right? What does doctor want with dog? He does not want dog, but I do, I need dog badly. Soon we go hunting. I have dog, but he's no good—he's a fool-dog, no nose, no voice, nothing. And this one is blind, mind you! It's wonderful, I tell you! A dog in a thousand, so help me God!"

I advised him to speak to the master. He sighed, blew his nose and went indoors. Five minutes later he reappeared looking very red and crest-fallen. He stopped next to me, grunted, and took a long time lighting a cigarette. Then he frowned.

"Did he refuse you?" I asked, knowing beforehand what his answer would be.

"Did he!" he exclaimed with annoyance. "It's a shame, I tell you. I been hunting from a child. See, I lose my eye—and I have sons as well. I tell you, we need this doggie badly! But he say—no! I give him five hundred—what a price, eh?—but he don't want to listen! Was he wild! It's me who should be wild, not him! Hunting time is coming and I have no dog!"

He looked round the garden and at the fence with an air of perplexity, then suddenly a crafty look flashed across his face. He calmed down at once.

"Where you keep him?" he asked in a casual sort of way, blinking his eye.

"You don't intend to steal him, do you?" I said.

The old man was taken aback. He took off his cap, wiped his face with the lining and looked at me closely.

"God forbid!" he said with a laugh. "What a thing to say, God bless you. Now tell me, what do he want a dog for? I ask you?"

He made for the door, then stopped and looked at me joyously.

"What a voice! What a voice, I tell you! A clear spring!"

Then he came back, went up to me and whispered, winking his one eye at the windows of the house.

"You wait, the dog will be mine. What he want a dog for? He's a man of brains, not a hunter. He will sell me that dog, I tell you, so help me God! We'll think up something. Ah, well, well!"

As soon as the old man had gone, the doctor walked briskly into the garden.

"What's he been telling you here?" he said anxiously. "What a nasty old fellow! Did you notice the ugly look in his eye? He's up to no good."

The doctor rubbed his hands nervously. His neck was red and a grey tuft of hair drooped over his forehead. Arcturus crawled out from under the veranda at the sound of his voice and limped towards us.

"Arcturus!" the doctor said. "You'll never leave me, will you?"

Arcturus shut his eyes and poked his muzzle into the doctor's knees. He sat down on his haunches, too weak to stand. His head drooped, and he almost slept. The doctor glanced at me gladly, laughed and patted him on the head. He did not know that the hound had already left him, had betrayed him from the moment he had gone into the forest with me.

What a good thing it would be if all beautiful stories had a happy ending! Doesn't the hero, even though he were only a hound, deserve to live happily ever after? No one is born into the world without a purpose, and a hound is born in order to pursue his enemy the quarry, pursue him because he had not come to man and become his

friend, as the dog had done, but had remained forever wild. A blind dog is not a blind man—no one will help him; he is all alone in the darkness, powerless and doomed by Nature herself, who is always cruel to the weak, and what can be more beautiful than the passion with which he fulfils his destiny by living in the face of such terrible odds. But even that life was all too short for Arcturus.

August was drawing to a close and the weather had changed for the worse. I was preparing to leave, when Arcturus disappeared. He had gone into the woods in the morning and had not returned in the evening, nor the next day, nor the day after.

When a friend you have been living with and seeing every day without giving much thought to suddenly goes away never to return, all that you are left with are memories.

I recalled all the days which I had spent with Arcturus, his lack of confidence, his perplexity, his ungainly sidling trot, his voice, endearing habits, his adoration of his master, even his odour, the odour of a clean healthy dog. I remembered all this and was sorry that he was not my dog, that it was not I who had given him his name, that it was not me he loved and not to my house that he returned in the dark, when he came to himself after the wild chase, miles away from home.

The doctor had a pinched look these last few days. He had immediately suspected the one-eyed old man, and we searched for him a long time before we found him. But the old man swore that he had not seen Arcturus. He was even filled with anger at our not having taken proper care of him, and offered to join us in the search.

The news of Arcturus's disappearance spread swiftly throughout the town. It turned out that many people knew him and loved him and everyone was eager to help the doctor in his search. Conjecture ran wild. Some had seen a dog who resembled Arcturus, others had heard his bark in the forest.

The children whom the doctor treated, together with others he did not even know, went about the woods, shouting and calling, shooting, exploring every forest trail, and called on the doctor ten times a day to find out whether the wonder hound had turned up.

I took no part in the search. Somehow I could not believe that Arcturus could lose himself. He had too good a scent for that. And he was too strongly attached to his master to have deserted him for some hunter. He had perished, of course. . . . But how, where—that I did not know. There are so many ways of dying!

This was borne in upon the doctor too after several days. He suddenly became a saddened man. He sang no more, and lay awake in the evenings for a long time. The house became empty and quiet without Arcturus. The cats had the freedom of the garden again, and no one sniffed at the boulder by the river any more. It stood there dark, dreary and useless, wasting its smells on the empty air.

On the day of my departure the doctor and I carefully avoided the subject of Arcturus. Only once did the doctor express his regret at not having become a hunter in his youth.

9

A couple of years later I visited those parts again and stayed with the doctor. He was still living alone. No one pattered across the floor, sniffed and snorted, or thumped his tail on the wicker furniture. The house was silent, and the rooms smelt of dust, drugs and old wallpaper.

It was spring, however, and the empty house was not depressing. The buds were bursting in the garden, the sparrows were uproarious, the rooks were fussily setting up housekeeping in the town park, and the doctor sang his arias in the thinnest of falsettos. A blue mist hung over the town in the mornings, the brimming river spread as far as the eye could reach, swans rested in the flooded

parts and rose in the mornings with their perpetual "klink-klank," the spry steam launches hooted gaily, and the plodding tugs blew their horns protractedly. They were cheering sights and sounds!

The day after my arrival I went out shooting. The forest was wrapped in a golden haze, and was full of dripping, tinkling, gurgling sounds. The thawed earth gave off a strong heady smell, in which all the other odours of the forest—those of asp bark, rotting wood, and wet leaves—were drowned.

It was a fine evening with the sky a flaming sea of sunset. The woodcocks were plentiful. I killed four and could barely find them among the dark litter of leaves. When the glow of sunset faded into green, and the first stars peeped out, I made my way slowly homeward along a familiar unused track, avoiding the wide pools, in which the sky, the bare birches and the stars were reflected.

Skirting one of these pools along the brow of a hillock I suddenly saw something gleaming in front of me, and thought at first that it was a patch of lingering snow. But on approaching closer I saw that it was the bones of a dog lying scattered on the ground. I examined them closely with a beating heart, and saw a familiar dog-collar with a brass buckle that had turned green. Yes, these were the remains of Arcturus.

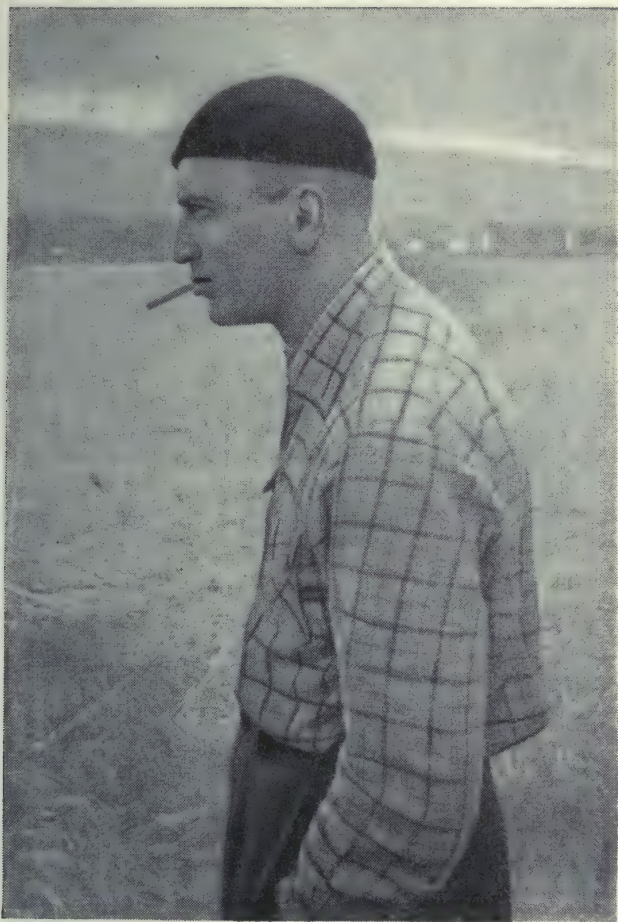
I carefully examined the spot in the gathering darkness and formed a clear idea of what had happened. A young but already dry fir-tree had a lower branch sticking out of it. The branch, like the tree, had dried, shed its leaves and worn itself down to a bare sharp stick. Arcturus had run headlong into that stick when he was following the hot smelly trail, hearing nothing, knowing nothing but that scent which lured him ever on and on. He had died in the chase without ever having seen the light of day. He had lived a glorious life.

I proceeded on my way in utter darkness and came out on the edge of the forest, where, squelching over the wet ground, I found the road homeward. But my thoughts kept returning to that hillock with the dry broken fir-tree.

Hunters have a weakness for loud-sounding names. What a variety of them one can find among hounds! We have Diana and Anteia, Phoebus and Nero, Venus and Romulus. But probably no dog had been worthier of such a noble name, the name of an unfading blue star.

1957

Translated by Bernard Isaacs



IGOR ZABELIN
(b. 1927)



Igor Zabelin was born in Leningrad in 1927. He entered the Geographical Faculty of Moscow University in 1944, and was graduated in 1948. Three years later he maintained his candidate's thesis.

Zabelin has been on various expeditions. He prospected for gold in the Tuva Region, took part in an expedition looking for large herring shoals in the Sea of Okhotsk, explored the physical geography of Buryat-Mongolia and Tien Shans, and spent some time in the Carpathians and the Arctic. He has written over forty scientific works and a series of short stories about Soviet people.

WITHOUT WITNESSES

Returning to Olkhovka after two months' absence, Svetlov learned that the girl who was to become his wife had married Vetrin, a young geologist. He was anything but sentimental, yet the news stunned him and made him sink on to a bench, staring blankly in front of him.

Naumenko, who shortly before had had a good time at the wedding, was the first to break the news, almost before Svetlov could take off his rucksack. He followed it up with a long reassuring speech to the effect that women were a bad lot and that he had always said so. But Svetlov heard nothing.

Sometimes a man has to go a long and hard way to reach happiness, seeing more sorrow than joy at first. But as soon as he comes to believe that he is loved and so has found a friend with whom he can share his every thought and every sentiment, the world seems to present to him an entirely new facet—bright and colourful.

For six months Svetlov had believed in Sonya and in their love. That faith had not come easily, for he was no longer young, he had loved before and knew what disappointment was like. With Sonya entering his life his previous existence had acquired a very specific meaning: he had lived and worked to win her love.

That was what he had told himself a mere half-hour ago. He couldn't understand what had come over Sonya and

why she had forgotten him so easily. Perhaps she hadn't loved him as he loved her, or hadn't loved him at all. Or perhaps Vetrin was the only one to blame. Most probably he was. He was young and handsome, and he had turned the girl's head. Indeed, why shouldn't he have his bit of fun between two expeditions? Svetlov all but choked with rage as he thought of Vetrin. With both hands he squeezed his head—big, bald, with a reddish fuzz—till it hurt. Damn it, if just then they had met somewhere in the forest, anything could have happened. . . .

Naumenko went on talking. Svetlov realized that at last, and grimaced as if he had a toothache.

"You'd better go now, friend," he said. "What do you think you're talking about?"

When Naumenko had left, Svetlov got up and stepped to the dim, fly-blown mirror. He ran his hand over his heavy chin covered with bristly red hair, and smiled bitterly. What a rival for young Vetrin!

Svetlov was in his thirty-sixth year, but at the moment he looked forty. No one could possibly care for a bald-headed, stout man like him—why, he was almost square. Sonya was right. Vetrin was so different.

Svetlov shaved, washed and changed, and then only left the house. He was determined not to call on Sonya: he might run into Vetrin for all he knew, which heaven forbid. He made straight for the house of the chief of the expedition to report his return.

Near the chief's house he saw Vetrin. Slender and trim, he was coming down the road, with an insolent, defiant smile which seemed to imply that he didn't mean to give way to Svetlov even in a village street. When they met, Svetlov's blood rushed to his head, and he dug his nails into his palms to subdue his anger.

That evening Naumenko dropped in with a bottle of alcohol.

"Shall we have a drink?" he said.

Svetlov nodded.

He drank and drank, and felt that his heart was empty and dark. Rather than dull his unabating pain, the alcohol made it worse. Once again Naumenko was talking, and again Svetlov ignored him, shaking off his torpor only when Naumenko mentioned Vetrin.

"What were you saying about Vetrin?"

"I was saying that he's no good. A bad man and a worse geologist. But see what happened!"

"Yes," Svetlov said.

He had not once abused Vetrin aloud, but he was pleased to hear someone else do so.

"Remember what he did to me that spring? I didn't want to have anything to do with him, or else I'd—"

"Yes," Svetlov said again, though he remembered very well that in that great argument, which had made a stir in the expedition party, the one who had proved right was that greenhorn Vetrin.

They kept drinking almost till the morning. When the stars began to dim, Svetlov told his visitor to go. Naumenko stumbled to the door, holding on to the wall, and slipped out. But Svetlov didn't go to bed. He threw the window open and stared out into the empty, dark street. Holding his head with his hands, he rocked gently, as if trying to alleviate the unbearable pain.

The next day Naumenko came again with a bottle of alcohol, but Svetlov refused to drink. For three days he lay on the hard wooden bench, doing nothing. He lost flesh, and the dark shadows under his eyes made them seem sunken and bigger. On the fifth day he was called in by the chief of the expedition.

The first snow had fallen during the night, and the taiga closing in on the cabins had turned slightly yellow. The crisp air braced Svetlov, who even squared his shoulders as he sauntered over the hardened ground.

Vetrin was in the chief's office. Svetlov passed him by as if he had been a wooden post, and sat down beside the desk.

"We got a radiogram from Irkutsk yesterday," the chief

said, leaving out all preliminaries. "We are to survey an extra area. It's a large one, so it'll have to be crossed by two routes. You will take one route and Vetrin the other. You can go together as far as the Upper Amga, then you'll part and meet again two weeks later on the Upper Biya. Mark the spot on your maps. Got it? You must meet there on the third of October—not sooner or later. From there you'll go down along the Biya to the mouth of the Uluk, make a raft and sail on to the village of Kirovskoye. Svetlov will be in charge of the expedition. That's all!"

Svetlov preferred to go to the Upper Amga alone, and the next day, at dawn, he started on the route. He had left the base for the taiga many times before, with the rucksack strapped to his back, the map-case slung over his shoulder and the geologist's hammer stuck under his belt. And each time, amid mountains and taiga forests, he had felt the same confidence and peace of heart and mind. Even now, despite the bitterness of what he had just gone through, he was pacified, and his pain dulled and shrunk to a small lump that had no acute angles, by the cold air, the yellow larches, the limpid river gliding almost silently over the boulders worn smooth by it, the round mountain tops bristling with trees, the sky that was a solid blue and the September sun that still gave some warmth.

Going wasn't easy, for Svetlov had had to take with him a large supply of provisions, an axe, a kettle, and a fowl-ing-piece in case he ran out of food. But he was walking along with unhurried, measured step, as if he were unaware of the heavy load. His rucksack also contained an unusual object—a flask of alcohol. He never drank on the route, but this time, feeling shaky, he had decided to provide himself with what he called "medicine."

He was crossing country already surveyed by others and so could have gone on without stopping. But he left

the trail every now and again to climb to an exposure of basic rock, break off bits of granite or basalt, crush them with his hammer and examine them carefully. Once he found, among fragments of black basalt shot with grey, a crystal of red pyrope. Thoroughly delighted, he took off his rucksack and sat for a long time, admiring his find. As he turned the crystal in his hand, the sunlight seemed to filter into it, and was reflected in its facets as in deep, dark water. He loved rocks, as if they were living things, and his memory associated some experience or impression with each one of his finds. In Irkutsk, where he lived, he kept a collection of samples of magnificent *belorechit*, of a colour suggesting soaked raw meat; dull-green, solid nephrite—the “stone of eternity”—found in the Eastern Sayans; varicoloured jade from the Urals; agate streaked red, and dozens of other rocks that he had picked up in various parts of the country. Each rock held a place all its own in his heart, and now the pyrope would for ever be linked in his memory with the experiences of the past five days, with thoughts of Sonya and hatred for Vetrin. Vetrin. . . . He must see that they didn't meet in the taiga, Svetlov told himself. Why should he meet Vetrin? To lead him back to Kirovskoye and Sonya? Let him get back by himself—he might go on foot or fly on the wings of love for all Svetlov cared. These thoughts upset Svetlov. He carefully put away the pyrope, shouldered his rucksack, and marched on.

It took him several days to reach the Upper Amga, where he began to work, calmly deliberate and methodical. He described the exposures in minute detail, and picked an occasional sample, so that the weight of the rucksack hardly diminished.

He arrived one day late for the appointment. Gathering some brushwood for a fire and making a shelter with his cape just in case, he explored the large glade but detected no trace of man. Vetrin must have gone down along the Biya without stopping at the appointed place, or was

being late. In either case Svetlov was free not to wait for him. He had documentary evidence—detailed entries in his field diary—to bear out the fact that he had actually come to the place of meeting. He would therefore not have to justify his conduct to his superiors. Besides, it was so easy for two men to miss each other in the taiga, especially if one of them happened to be a greenhorn.

The sun was quite warm, and there was a pleasant smell of fading grass. Svetlov stretched with gusto, lay down on the ground, and fell asleep.

He woke up towards evening, built a fire, and for a long time sat watching the orange flames curling lissomely. He was thinking that in ten or twelve days he would be in Kirovskoye and in another ten days or so would fly to Irkutsk. But the prospect of home-coming left him cold, for once he had hoped to take Sonya with him when he went back.

After drinking his tea he fell instantly asleep—the strain of many days spent on the route was telling. In the morning he set unhurriedly about getting ready to start. As he packed the rucksack, he kept thinking that he ought to wait till afternoon. Vetrin was a scoundrel who deserved no pity, of course, but still—Svetlov had taken himself to task so many times for what he believed to be absurd scrupling, but it seemed that he would die as he had lived.

What do I care whether Vetrin loses himself in the taiga or not, he reasoned with himself, putting the rucksack aside and lying down on his padded jacket again. And then, why must he do so if I'm not around?

At the end of half an hour he said to himself that since he had decided to wait, it was foolish staying there and he might just as well go out to meet Vetrin. Suppose he had broken an arm or leg, and was struggling to reach the Upper Biya where Svetlov now was? Svetlov found such a thing perfectly possible. What did those conceited boys know about mountain trails? They'd go and tumble down from a steep slope, and then someone else would be

called to account. Indeed, everyone would be pointing at Svetlov if Vetrin failed to turn up, and saying that he had sent Vetrin to his death because of Sonya. Try and prove then that you did nothing of the kind.

Svetlov spread out the map. Vetrin could reach the Upper Biya through either of two gorges. But Svetlov had no idea which of the two Vetrin had chosen, for they hadn't co-ordinated their routes. The two gorges were very different. One of them, wide and wooded, was easy to pass. But the other, with steep slopes and with basic rock that must be well-exposed, was all but impassable. Svetlov himself would certainly have preferred the latter route, because it was so much more interesting and richer in material. But which gorge had Vetrin chosen? And what sort of a geologist was he? Naumenko had said that Vetrin was no good as a geologist, but then Naumenko couldn't be trusted, he didn't mind running anybody down.

After all, I mustn't think other people are more stupid than I, he thought. Only fools imagine they are the cleverest.

Taking nothing but his map-case, he set out for the more difficult gorge. The farther he went, the more he feared that something was wrong with Vetrin. He couldn't tell what made him fear it, but he did fear it, and his imagination suggested scenes that became more gruesome as he went on. At the same time he felt his anger rising.

He walked on and on for hours, and when the sun began to dip westwards, he saw a man with a large rucksack on the trail ahead. It was Vetrin. He was coming up at a carefree pace, and Svetlov's anger reached the limit when he realized that his intuition had misled him.

They didn't shake hands.

"By the way, it's the fifth of October today," Svetlov said thickly, barely controlling himself.

"By the way, I didn't ask anybody to wait for me, let alone come out to meet me. I'm sure I could have found my way back without your help."

"Now look, you'll talk all you like when you're chief. In the meantime, you must carry out orders."

"Oh, cut it out!"

"So?"

They stood facing each other, one short and stout, the other tall and slender, both full of hatred, but in different ways. Vetrin's hatred was mingled with the victor's scorn for his defeated rival. Svetlov's hatred, on the other hand, breathed outraged pride and, moreover, the fury of a man who had lost his happiness but refused to resign himself to it or admit for a moment his rival's superiority. That meeting would have been easier for Svetlov to go through if he had actually found Vetrin in need of help, for that would have placed them on an equal footing. But to see Vetrin hale and hearty, and smiling that brazenly triumphant smile! Svetlov shifted his gaze to Vetrin's lips, which were full and pink, and said to himself that those smiling lips had kissed Sonya. His blood rushed to his head again as it had done the last time they met.

"We've been standing here long enough," he said huskily. "Go on ahead of me!"

Vetrin pulled his rucksack straight and with a carefree air passed by Svetlov, almost brushing him. He walked on ahead with a slight swagger, jumping easily from rock to rock as if to show what a splendid mountaineer he was.

You'll jump yourself into trouble yet, my good fellow, Svetlov thought, falling gradually behind Vetrin.

And then came this: Vetrin leaped easily from one knoll on to another that was covered with a cushion of moss, and suddenly his foot sank through the moss and into a crevice. Svetlov saw him lurch forward as if he had tripped. The next moment Vetrin's rucksack hurtled over his head, and before he could extricate his foot he fell with a short, piercing cry.

"How long are you going to lie here?" Svetlov asked, walking up to him with unhurried step.

"My leg—" Vetrin said in a faint voice.

Svetlov didn't succeed in pulling the rocks away at once. The moment he touched Vetrin's leg Vetrin shuddered violently and gritted his teeth. Svetlov released the injured limb, and slit the trouser leg open with his knife.

"A fracture! That's what comes of jumping like a bloody fool! What am I to do now—carry you in my arms?"

Vetrin, who reclined on the slope, made no reply. Svetlov looked at his distorted, ashen face and was appalled. He had quite forgotten that a mere hour ago he had longed to find Vetrin in somewhat the same condition, and now cast about painfully for a way out. He couldn't expect any help, but then it was far from a gratifying prospect to have to carry a hefty fellow through fully a hundred and fifty kilometres of taiga and, moreover, raft with him down a turbulent mountain stream.

"That's what comes of jumping like a bloody fool," he repeated mechanically.

"Go away," Vetrin said hoarsely.

"Shut up!" Svetlov let out a long string of filthy abuse. "You should have stuck to your wife's skirt. A fine partner she's got herself!"

"Listen, you!" Vetrin strained forward. "If you dare mention Sonya's name again"—his hand searched the ground for a rock—"I'll kill you!"

Svetlov laughed, first hoarsely and unnaturally, then in uproarious peals, his heavy, thickset body shaking all over.

"I'll kill you!" Vetrin had found a rock at last.

But Svetlov didn't stop laughing. He merely turned his back on Vetrin and walked downhill. He went farther and farther down. Vetrin relaxed his grip on the rock, and finally let go of it. He stared at Svetlov's receding figure, his blood throbbing in his temples. He knew that he was doomed if left alone, but still he didn't call Svetlov back to ask his help.

Svetlov dropped out of sight behind the trees. Then Vetrin turned and lay on his back, as if crushed to the ground by infinite despair. That feeling spread gradually to the slope on which Vetrin lay, and then to the river and the valley and the whole taiga and the whole Transbaikal, and suddenly took on Sonya's shape. Sonya. . . . He would never see her again. And that was despair. Vetrin felt like shouting, crying, calling Sonya, running to her. But he just lay there, staring with dry eyes at the clear sky, which had brightened before sunset. Sonya. . . . He must see her once more, must crawl to her since he couldn't run. Feverishly he tried to think of some way out, his own helplessness making him bite his lips with rage, and the pain in his fractured leg seemed to subside a little.

Splints, he thought, and raised himself on his elbows. What I need is splints!

But it was a good two hundred metres to the forest. The pain in his leg seemed to pervade his whole body, and Vetrin fell back. He had no idea how long he lay like that, but it seemed like eternity. Solid silence surrounded him, with nothing to break it but the faint noise of the stream running down the gorge.

There was a white wormwood shrub growing close by Vetrin's head. As he looked at it he fancied he was looking into a thicket in which the branches were tangled into a quaint pattern. A huge brown grasshopper with greenish eyes crawled slowly up the branches, swinging them. It made itself comfortable on a stalk, straightened its wings with its hind legs, and began to chirr without paying the slightest attention to the man lying beside it. The chirring was ear-splitting. As Vetrin stared at the grasshopper, his infinite despair drained into it.

It was some time before he heard the faint sounds that forced themselves into his ears through the grasshopper's chirring. He didn't see Svetlov until the other had come up very close to him. Svetlov held in his hand two care-

fully trimmed sticks that he had cut for splints. It was more than Vetrin could bear. Tears ran down his cheeks, and he was unable to keep them back although he clenched his fists and bit his lips.

It hadn't for a moment occurred to Svetlov that he could be suspected of wanting to abandon a helpless comrade, so he interpreted those tears in his own way.

"You sissy!" he said with the utmost contempt.

He splinted the leg, took Vetrin's map-case with the diaries, and slung it over his shoulder.

"I wish I could have a pair of crutches," Vetrin said, but Svetlov ignored that.

"Get up!" he commanded brusquely.

Vetrin got up on one leg, leaning on Svetlov's arm. Svetlov squatted, and offered him his square back.

"Lie down with your stomach across my back."

"I could make it by myself if I had a pair of crutches."

"Don't keep me waiting!"

Svetlov had made no more than three hundred metres when he felt an urge to lay down his burden. It was terribly hard to carry a man weighing fully seventy kilogrammes down a steep wooded slope, doing it carefully, too, so as not to brush a rock or tree with the injured limb and cause more pain. After another two hundred metres he felt done in, but kept going, picking each foothold as carefully as he had done so far.

After a long march, a long rest, he said to himself.

He had made not less than a kilometre before he stopped and laid Vetrin down. He sprawled beside him face downwards, and lay thus for about a quarter of an hour. Then he turned over on his back. Half an hour later he rose and again offered Vetrin his back.

Anyone who goes on expeditions finishes by developing an almost infallible sense of distance. Whether he is walking, riding on horseback or driving in a car, he can tell how far he has gone without making any calculations. Svetlov therefore guessed accurately that the distance which

he had covered at the third try was less than a kilometre, and at the fourth try he was as limp as a rag when he had scarcely made half as much. At the fifth try, he made another half-kilometre but felt that that was all he could do that day. Night was falling, and he had to think of a place to camp.

He chose a suitable glade and built a fire. They had neither utensils nor food, except for the three biscuits and four lumps of sugar which Svetlov had taken with him just in case. Svetlov divided the biscuits and sugar in two parts, and silently held out one half to Vetrin. Vetrin accepted the food just as silently and began to eat, yearning for a mug of water. The river was a stone's throw from the fire, but still he couldn't bring himself to ask Svetlov for some water. Svetlov finished his biscuits and sugar, lay down on his side and fell instantly asleep.

Vetrin tried hard to sleep but couldn't. His disturbed leg was aching badly, but the shame he felt was probably more of a torment than that.

It would have been different if something had happened to Svetlov and I had rescued him, he thought gloomily.

The chilly, humid night air crept under Vetrin's shirt. He shivered and moved closer to the fire. But he couldn't sleep all through the night, and dropped off into a brief doze only just before daybreak, when, almost immediately, Svetlov roused him.

They didn't camp again until midday. Svetlov had a bite and went back for Vetrin's things. What he was concerned with above all else was food and rock samples. Before starting he told Vetrin to build a big fire as soon as it got dark, so that he wouldn't have to wander in the darkness. Vetrin promised, but Svetlov had scarcely gone when he fell asleep, warmed by the sun and feeling thoroughly worn out by the pain and the sleepless night.

He woke up from a kick in the ribs. It was pitch dark. Over him stood the enraged Svetlov, who was swearing at

him so viciously that his drowsiness was all gone in a moment.

"Just play another trick like that and I'll give you up like a mangy dog!" Svetlov roared. "Here am I laying myself out for a skunk like you, and you won't even keep up a fire!"

"All right, stop it!" Vetrin flared up. "I dozed off, that's all. Did such a thing never happen to you?"

"I'll show you how to talk back, you son of a bitch!"

Vetrin didn't sleep any more that night. He was resolved to make himself a pair of crutches and dispense with Svetlov's help. He said as much at breakfast.

"Go ahead," Svetlov replied, without so much as glancing at him.

Vetrin began cutting off a slender larch with his knife, but Svetlov silently cut off four for him. All Vetrin had to do was to trim and bark the trunks. While he was fashioning the crutches, Svetlov sorted out their things, putting aside all that he thought unnecessary. But the things that could be discarded turned out to be very few, so that the load left weighed almost two poods.

When he was through with the sorting, Svetlov discovered that there was less food in Vetrin's rucksack than he had expected.

"I should have taken more," Vetrin admitted, throwing Svetlov into a fresh fit of rage.

"What now? Do you expect me to feed you? I've got hardly enough for myself. And it's just not enough for the two of us!"

Vetrin had nothing to say. It was his fault again. He had taken with him less food than he should have, and sometimes had thrown away in the morning what was left over from supper. And now there was nothing he could say.

By midday he had one crutch ready, and Svetlov, who until then had been busy with other things, helped him finish the other. But the crutches didn't live up to expecta-

tions. Vetrin made very slow progress because he didn't know how to use them and was afraid of hurting his leg. In the end Svetlov, who had been carrying both rucksacks, flung them down and fell to thinking, biting a grass stalk.

Vetrin sat down with difficulty, leaning against a larch and stretching out his leg helplessly. Drops of sweat stood out on his forehead and temples. He chanced to catch Svetlov's gaze, and smiled guiltily.

"Ye-es," Svetlov said. He got out his axe and went down to the river.

Soon Vetrin heard axe blows, and less than half an hour later Svetlov came back, pulling a few firs behind him. He said nothing to Vetrin, but Vetrin guessed that Svetlov was going to make a drag. When finished, the drag looked very comfortable with its thick bedding of fir branches and the cape for a cover. Between the ends of two firs serving as shafts, he fastened a strap by which he could harness himself to the drag.

The next morning Svetlov laid Vetrin on the drag, placed the two rucksacks beside him, and started downwards along the river. The valley of the Upper Biya was fortunately wide enough, and in some places woodless, so that Svetlov could pull the drag fairly fast. He had to break through larch underwoods, wade small bogs or carefully thread his way through debris. By the end of the day he was thoroughly exhausted, but had not less than ten kilometres behind him. It took him a great effort to make himself build a fire and set up a trivet. After that he lay down on the drag and closed his eyes. Meanwhile Vetrin, sitting by the fire, busied himself with keeping it up and seeing to the millet soup cooking in the kettle. They had had to renounce the idea of porridge from the outset to save millet.

Svetlov, warmed by the fire, lay thinking of how complex life was, with its all but impossible web of coinci-

dences, thinking of Sonya. He could never have imagined that he would some day have to drag Sonya's husband like that, all but carrying him through mountains and forests, putting every ounce of his strength into it. He smiled bitterly, and without opening his eyes he tried to imagine Sonya's reaction when she was told everything and saw the two of them together. He saw her as vividly as if she were standing beside him. He even gave her a smile, somehow feeling no longer angry either with her or this boy Vetrin, who sat stirring the fire with a stick as he made their supper.

Svetlov thought of how amazingly tangled things got sometimes. Once relations between him and Sonya had seemed so simple and clear. He recalled their first meetings and vague allusions to love. He recalled how slowly and warily she had responded, how he had finally put his arms around her and kissed her, and how she had hidden her face on his chest, breathing deeply and excitedly. He had loved her with a belated, strenuous love. He still loved her, and cherished his memory of her as the greatest treasure of his heart. He could probably forgive her everything. But she would never ask his forgiveness because she loved, or thought she loved, this boy who was crawling about the fire.

"Soup's ready," Vetrin said.

Svetlov hated to go back to reality, and for a while he lay without opening his eyes. Then he half rose and held out his bowl, trying not to look at Vetrin.

He hauled the drag for another three days—uphill, downhill, uphill, downhill—straining hard at the strap, cursing his fate and everything else, but above all himself and Vetrin.

On the fourth day, when they had already started on their way, low, heavy clouds overcast the sky and made it look like a giant wet bed-sheet bellying out towards the mountains below and threatening at any moment to spill the moisture accumulated in it.

The rain came at about eleven. It was an exceedingly fine drizzle that seemed to be coming through a sieve. And because it was so fine, neither Svetlov nor Vetrin heeded it. Before they knew it the rain, which had gone on gathering strength, had drenched their padded jackets and bare heads, and they didn't think better of it until they felt the cold rain-water trickling down their necks. Then came a real downpour, steady and overwhelming, and the taiga filled with the monotonous swish of rain lashing at the trees.

They ought to have camped and taken shelter from the rain, but the soaked Svetlov had decided that time was too precious and so the rain could go hang. He trudged on, his bald head bent obstinately forward, his mountain boots slipping on grass, fir needles and rocks. He trudged on panting heavily when going uphill, and swearing if he had the strength and breath for it. Vetrin listened to his oaths without saying anything, even though he was soaked to the skin, and deep in his heart wished Svetlov would get tired soon and pitch camp.

Some two hours later, a mixture of rain and grey snow began to fall, and in another hour the rain completely gave way to snow. The taiga became hushed and still, as if cowed by the menace of approaching winter. Svetlov plodded stubbornly on, steaming with water and sweat, and heedless of the snow. Vetrin sat freezing on the drag but didn't venture into negotiations. Svetlov tripped, jerked the drag, and fell into the snow. He lay for a moment, muttering in a half-whisper, but then rose, straightened the strap and started again, climbing tenaciously up the slope.

When Vetrin couldn't stand it any longer, he struck up a merry song in a feeble, wailing voice. Svetlov was irritated by the singing, but he didn't try to cut it short because he knew why Vetrin was doing it.

At last Svetlov decided to camp for the night. Before pitching camp he took out his flask, which he had so far

had no use for. He shook it to make sure by the sound that it was full, and proffered it to Vetrin.

"Have a swig," he said.

Vetrin did, and almost choked with the strong, undiluted alcohol. Svetlov waited till he had stopped coughing.

"Have another," he said then.

Vetrin took a big gulp and thrust a handful of snow into his mouth. But Svetlov didn't touch the liquor. He carefully tightened the cap, shook the flask again to see how much of the alcohol was gone, and put it back in the rucksack. He then chopped some brushwood and with dry birchbark kindled the slightly damp wood. He made a slanting shed above the drag out of the cape so that it would throw back the heat of the fire at them, and changed into dry underwear. Vetrin couldn't do the same by himself, and Svetlov had to help him. He did it almost mechanically, too tired to think of anything. He knew that he must kindle a fire, make a shed and change into dry things, because if he didn't do all that they would not survive the stormy night in their soaked clothes. And so he did everything, and even stored up some wood for the night. Then he lay down on the drag behind Vetrin and instantly dropped asleep.

Vetrin, feeling warm and slightly tipsy, watched the tea-kettle humming over the fire. He was thinking that Svetlov was a fine chap and that things had worked out very foolishly between them. If he'd known beforehand what kind of a man Svetlov was, he'd never have sought to win Sonya's love. He'd have given her up even if he'd loved her as he did now. He'd have been strong enough to do it, because there are things which are above the strongest feeling that a man may have for a woman, and cannot be sacrificed to it. Wasn't this selfless comradeship, which had come out deep in the taiga where there was no one to appreciate and admire it, superior to the most ardent love? Vetrin believed it to be superior to love—far superior and more humane. And he swore to himself never to

forget these days, and to tell Sonya everything in great detail, without concealing or garbling anything, and make her admire Svetlov and his feat.

Then, in his mind's eye, he saw himself and Svetlov meet on a new expedition three or four, or perhaps ten, years later. Once again they'd go into the taiga as they had done this time, and something would happen to Svetlov—he'd fall from a cliff, or a rock would drop on him—and he, Vetrin, would find him helpless and dying, and would rescue him. Only he'd treat Svetlov better, and wouldn't shout or swear as Svetlov did now, because he realized that nobody was safe from an accident. Vetrin saw himself, worn out and emaciated, enter the village, carrying Svetlov in his arms. He saw people running to him, among them were his comrades of the expedition, and Sonya. They all made much of his feat, congratulated him and shook his hand. And Svetlov himself, having recovered after the fall, stretched out his hand, smiling a friendly smile but not thanking him, for they both knew what genuine comradeship was, they knew that it needed no gratitude.

The tea-kettle began to boil and spilled over on the embers, which sizzled loudly. Vetrin took it down from the trivet and made tea. He put one and a half lumps of sugar in Svetlov's mug, slipping only one in his own, poured him some tea and woke him up. Svetlov drank the whole mug without quite waking up, and immediately fell asleep again. But Vetrin slept by fits, his eye on the fire.

In the morning they found that their things weren't dry yet, and they had to put off the start, for in weather like that a spare set of dry underwear was an absolute necessity.

The taiga, weighted down by the snow, seemed lower than the day before, and also more dense and difficult to pass. Stumps and windfallen trees had turned into snowdrifts, but still it kept snowing so hard that under the weight of the heavy snow the sky had sunk almost to the larch and cedar tops. Instead of falling from above, the

snow seemed to arise out of the air just overhead, and floated smoothly to the ground or the trees from a height of a few metres. Everything was smothered and overwhelmed by the snow. Only the river had darkened, as if someone had added soot to the water during the night. It rushed swiftly on between its white downy banks, and the snow-flakes dropping into the inky water disappeared at once. All of the two men's hopes were linked with the river. It flowed southwards to where there were people, and it could carry them down to some settlement. But they must make haste about using its unsubdued power, for, great as that power was, the winter would break it one day. The river would submit, and there would scarcely be any hope left for them. The Uluk, its tributary, below which they could raft down the Biya, was still about a hundred kilometres away.

The breakfast didn't satisfy either Svetlov or Vetrin. But they had to make their food last, and had drastically cut their day's ration. Now all they had in abundance was hot tea, of which they drank several mugfuls apiece twice a day, using sugar very sparingly.

Towards noon the sky lifted and brightened a little, and it stopped snowing. Jays were clamouring in the cedars, heralding fair weather. Svetlov harnessed himself to the drag, and they kept going till dusk, leaving a broad, deep track in the virgin snow.

The next day they had to cross the Biya. The river, describing a huge loop, hugged the left rim of the valley, and Svetlov found no passage. Alone he could have got across by jumping from boulder to boulder, but he couldn't possibly carry Vetrin over. He had to strip and to cross the river to the other bank and back several times, with a load strapped to his shoulders, wrestling with the current and occasionally sinking waist-deep in the icy water. During the very first crossing he cut his feet badly on the jagged, slippery underwater stones. He scarcely stopped to get warm between trips. Vetrin thought Svet-

lov was going to rail at him, and braced himself to bear the most injurious attacks with stoicism. But Svetlov said nothing throughout the day, and this affected Vetrin more than the vilest abuse could have done.

It wasn't long before they began to suffer from under-nourishment. In the day-time Svetlov stopped more and more often to rest, gradually deviating from his own rule: after a long march, a long rest. Now they took a whole day to make a meagre seven kilometres, though Svetlov did his utmost. In the morning they often woke up later than required, after a deep and heavy sleep that was more like a fainting fit.

One day Svetlov felt giddy while climbing a steep slope. Dark rings whirled before his eyes, and he dropped down on the snow.

That evening Vetrin, who as usual was doing duty as a cook, divided the watery rice soup into three parts instead of two, and offered two parts to Svetlov.

"Don't be an ass," Svetlov objected laconically, pushing the pot aside.

But Vetrin refused to go back on his decision, and Svetlov, who on sober consideration found the suggestion reasonable, ate the soup.

From that day on Vetrin invariably divided the food in the same way. On the march he sat holding the fowling-piece charged and ready, hoping to down some bird. Only once did he succeed in shooting two nutcrackers on the wing. In the evening he plucked and cooked them, and the two of them picked the thin bones clean. On another occasion, in the ash-grey morning twilight, a large bird settled on a near-by tree. The wakeful Vetrin grabbed the fowling-piece and fired a double shot. The bird fluttered noisily and dropped with a heavy thud.

"A black grouse!" Vetrin shouted joyfully to Svetlov who was startled by the double blast.

"Black grouse yourself," Svetlov grumbled sleepily. "Must be a wood grouse."

It *was* a wood grouse, and Vetrin, riding on the drag, plucked the fowl with a rather proud air. But that was rare luck, for it was hard to hit the mark while in motion, and Svetlov said they couldn't afford the time for proper game-shooting.

After a few sunny days the snow was almost gone; it showed in bluish-white patches only in the more shady spots, on the northern slopes and behind large boulders. But they were not deluded by this temporary improvement in weather. The winter, which had withdrawn to the mountain tops, was gathering strength there and any day might bring back winds so cold that they would blow away the remnants of warmth altogether. The taiga was ready to meet the winter. The larches had shed their yellow needles and stood bare, thrusting up their dark, scraggy boughs with the small round cones. Vetrin sometimes felt as if they were moving across a lifeless expanse of burnt-out forest that would never end.

The weather did change a few days later. The sky was overcast with dense, smoke-grey clouds, the temperature dropped below zero, and the thin ice crust along the river-banks, though brittle, didn't melt.

Neither Svetlov nor Vetrin used a mirror or took any notice of each other's looks. But both of them had changed beyond recognition. Their haggard faces, hollow-eyed and hollow-cheeked, were covered with bristly beards. Their clothes were ragged and their movements unnaturally sluggish. They had become extremely irritable, and were so exhausted that a night's sleep wasn't enough to refresh them. They might as well have been two tramps who hadn't had a roof over their heads for at least a year. They quarrelled over any trifle, shouting at each other for a long time, gasping for air.

By the time Vetrin had almost spent all the charges, Svetlov decided to do some game-shooting too. When he saw that Vetrin had only two cartridges left, he began to shout at him, and once more they had a row that, like

most of their quarrels, got them nowhere. With those two cartridges Svetlov downed two squirrels as they were passing through a cedar wood. They ate them in the evening, and the next day Svetlov contrived to noose an over-inquisitive hazel grouse. The grouse fluttered a bit, and was soon consumed too. But this extra food wasn't sufficient to restore their energy.

They were about a dozen kilometres from the mouth of the Uluk when a fresh blizzard began. The crisp, prickly grains of snow, driven by a strong, raw wind, whipped their chapped faces, blinded them, and all but checked their advance. After two hours' fruitless struggle Svetlov collapsed on the snow. Vetrin crawled up to him in an attempt to help. But Svetlov shook with rage the moment he saw him. He clenched his fists and shouted that it was all Vetrin's fault, that Vetrin was a scoundrel whom he ought to have left in the taiga long ago. He then mentioned Sonya, and completely losing his self-control, screamed in a breaking voice that he wasn't going to carry him to her on his back any longer.

Vetrin lost his temper.

"Shut up!" he cried in a falsetto. "Shut up, d'you hear!"

He snatched up a handful of snow and larch needles and hurled it at Svetlov. But Svetlov merely burst out laughing. Then Vetrin crawled back to the drag, hoisted all his outfit on his back, and hobbled ahead on his crutches. His fury had lent him strength and he moved fast, sped on by Svetlov's malicious laughter.

But the moment Vetrin disappeared behind the trees Svetlov stopped laughing. For a while he lay staring dully in the direction where Vetrin had vanished, then got up and started to pull the strangely light drag in the other's tracks. A hundred metres farther on he saw the fowling-piece discarded by Vetrin, but he didn't pick it up—why carry a useless load? After another hundred metres, he saw Vetrin's hammer but didn't pick it up, either. But when he came on Vetrin's axe he told himself that without

an axe that fool would be lost in the taiga, and threw the axe on to the drag. He was curious to know whether Vetrin would also discard his rucksack with the samples and his map-case with the diary, and he even hastened his step, or at least tried to. Having walked some two hundred metres more, he came on Vetrin himself. He sat leaning against a fallen tree, with eyes and mouth shut tight. Svetlov looked at Vetrin's outstretched broken leg, and the footprints told him that Vetrin had struck it on a stump.

"Look here," Svetlov said softly, almost gently, touching Vetrin's shoulder, "time is scarce. You lie down on the drag."

He helped Vetrin on to the drag and arranged their things in such a way that they wouldn't slip off while the drag was in motion.

Late in the evening, while they sat in a sheltered nook warming themselves by the fire, Vetrin opened his map-case and produced the chocolate bar which Sonya had slipped in just before he started on the route.

"Here," he said to Svetlov, "eat this."

Svetlov carefully unwrapped the bar.

"Eat it all."

Svetlov shook his head.

"I want to bring you back to Kirovskoye alive, or else this epic of ours will be pointless."

He broke the bar and returned one half to Vetrin.

The next day they passed the mouth of the Uluk. From the bank they gazed for a long time at the dark water, gauging with their eyes the width of the ice crust along the banks, which held the swift stream in an icy vice, threatening to close in a matter of days.

"We'll make it," Svetlov commented.

For two days Svetlov kept felling trees, while Vetrin lopped off the branches. Then they tied the logs together with withes, and the raft turned out to be so large and heavy that it was all the two men could do to move it.

"A fine raft," Svetlov said.

While repacking his things in the morning before the start, Svetlov took a rock sample out of a small bag, dipped it in the water, and held it out to Vetrin.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

Vetrin took the rock and examined its smooth surface, on which streaks of a delicate violet, with a touch of dark blue, alternated with streaks of bluish grey and pale yellow.

"Sapphirine?"

"Yes," Svetlov confirmed happily. "A fine rock, isn't it?"

He carefully stowed his treasure away in the bag, and fastened the things to the raft. Using a pole as a lever, he shifted the raft down to the water until its front edge came to lie on the ice.

"Get on," he said, and when Vetrin had sat down he began to push the raft on. The thin ice caved in with a crackle. Svetlov pushed himself off from the bank for the last time and jumped on to the raft bobbing on the water amid bits of ice. The dark current caught the raft and spun it round its axis, but Svetlov got hold of the steering-oar, and the raft sped smoothly downstream.

Svetlov wouldn't trust Vetrin with steering the raft, and sat at the steering-oar day and night, snatching an occasional hour or two of sleep. He was sailing an unfamiliar river and didn't know what was in store for him round the next bend. It could be calm water or rapids, a waterfall or a barrier of fallen trees or ice....

At night he listened intently for any suspicious noise, peering in vain into the darkness slightly brightened by the snow. There was sludge floating downstream, and the raft soon grew heavy with a crust of ice, but still it sped on to where there were people.

As he sat at the steering-oar, thrusting his benumbed hands into his pockets to warm them up, Svetlov sometimes thought of Sonya. He did it calmly, without the vexation and hatred he had felt for her and Vetrin before. He didn't care how he and Sonya met. Sometimes he was surprised by his own indifference.

Vetrin wasn't thinking of anything. With all his being he longed to arrive in Kirovskoye, to meet Sonya, to find himself in a hospital bed. He dreaded the very thought of missing Kirovskoye and therefore didn't sleep much, either, looking ahead and to the right and left all the time and carefully consulting the map.

Finally some houses came into sight on the high bank ahead. It could only be Kirovskoye. Svetlov steered towards the bank, and the raft butted heavily into the ice. They threw all their things on to the bank, then Svetlov helped Vetrin to land on the ice, and jumped off the raft. His push rocked the raft and sent it floating away from the ice rim. Caught in the swift current, the raft sailed downstream. Svetlov watched it go.

"Wait here, I'll send for you," he said.

He climbed panting up the steep bank and paused on the bluff. A woman was running towards him in shoes put on her bare feet. It was Sonya. Someone must have seen them landing and told her.

"Where's Sasha?" Sonya asked.

She glanced at Svetlov's face but took no notice either of his sunken eyes with the eyelids red from lack of sleep, of his chapped and peeling skin, or of his reddish beard. Svetlov didn't realize at once that Sasha was Vetrin's first name, but the moment he did he gestured downwards with his hand. Sonya gave a low cry and rushed downhill.

As Svetlov watched her go, she shrank in size faster than she should have according to optics. When she reached Vetrin and fell on the snow beside him, they both seemed to him so small that he couldn't believe they were real. It also seemed to him that he had no connection with them or that if he ever had had any, it had since been lost in time and space.

Calmly he turned, straightened his map-case with a habitual movement, and started with unsteady step up the broad village street towards his comrades, who were hurrying to meet him.



ANDREI MERKULOV
(b. 1924)

Andrei Merkulov's artistic career has only just begun. "I began my first story," he writes, "with a dedication to the memory of the pilot Perelyot. I was told of his action by the matter-of-fact engineers of an aircraft designing office. Alexei Perelyot was killed after doing everything possible to save his crew and the experimental aircraft he was piloting, which had suddenly caught fire in the air. In the real picture of this man who remained true and straight to the last I could not help recognizing the kind of hero who had lived before in my imagination." Life provided a young writer with the subject for his first story, it will continue to provide him with such living themes.

IN FLIGHT

*In memory of
Alexei Perelyot,
test pilot*

1

It was a dark night; the car was already waiting outside the office. Zhenya got in beside the driver and said in a voice that he thought sounded curt and impressive:

“Airfield.”

Rain streamed down the wind-screen and glowed white in the head lamps of oncoming traffic. The black shiny ribbon of wet asphalt vanished in to the rain at a hundred metres. At first there were a few houses along the side of the road, then, as the car drove out of town, they gave way to a drooping straggle of trees.

“What a summer! Rain every day,” the driver grumbled.

“Yes, it’s a bad summer,” Zhenya agreed. But if someone had told him it was a good summer, he would have agreed just the same.

The noise of the rain and the wet leaves suddenly fluttering past in the beam of the headlights neither irritated nor depressed him. This was the happiest summer in his life. He thought so because he was twenty-two and already a journalist and working on a big paper, for which he was now going off to cover an important flight. Some-

thing that could only have been a dream before was now possible. Not everyone could go up in a new type of aircraft with a famous pilot at the controls; not everyone could meet that pilot and talk to him. That alone was enough to make one excited. And Zhenya smiled joyfully in the darkness of the car, and the rain went on streaming down the windows.

At the airfield gate a man in a hooded cape checked his pass, and the car turned off the road and drove across the field to where a huge aircraft stood silhouetted in the beams of searchlights. The car squelched its way slowly and carefully through the puddles and suddenly became very small beside the aircraft. Under its wide-swept wings a group of men was sheltering from the rain. Zhenya said good-bye to the driver and went up to them.

"Who should I speak to? My name's Kovrigin, I'm from the press," he said to a tall middle-aged man in a glistening black mackintosh. He can't be one of the crew, Zhenya thought, not with that tired ordinary face, like a post-office clerk's. He must be one of the ground staff.

"Navigator Vasilyev." The tall man with the unexpressive face held out his hand. "We shall be taking off soon. You can stand here for a bit, out of the rain."

Apart from the captain of the aircraft, Vasilyev was the most famous member of the crew. Zhenya felt ashamed. How could he write about these men, when he couldn't even tell one from the other?

It would have been embarrassing to pull out a notebook and start asking the navigator questions on the spot, and Zhenya was very much afraid that the response would be gruff and reticent; he had heard that airmen did not like reporters, and besides he was very young and evidently did not inspire confidence. Meanwhile the navigator had been looking him over; his glance was friendly in the quivering light cast through the rain by the searchlights, and there was a faint smile on his face. Zhenya did not

know it but the navigator's elder son was just the same age as Zhenya, and the navigator Vasilyev was smiling at the thought that he would soon be going home on leave to his family in Yaroslavl and seeing his son again.

Vasilyev had often flown with the famous test pilot Alexei Kostrov, Hero of the Soviet Union. Zhenya asked him how long they had been flying together.

"Quite a time. We worked together in bombers all through the war."

Zhenya liked the way he said "worked." These men had been risking their lives every day, doing heroic things, and they just called it "working."

"Nice weather," Vasilyev said. "Just what we need at the moment."

The sky was pitch black and the rain poured down ceaselessly. Quivering white strips of light lit up the huge aircraft and the dark figures moving round it; in the rain and darkness it all seemed unreal and yet filled with profound meaning, and Zhenya already found himself thinking up the opening paragraphs of his article. Men who not so long ago had covered themselves with glory during the war were now engaged in quite different, peaceful work. Kostrov's crew had just finished testing a new transport aircraft and had now been assigned the task of flying it over mountains and taiga in bad weather to give its new instruments the final test. Zhenya felt a thrill of joy that it was he, Zhenya Kovrigin, who had been given the job of covering this flight and writing about Kostrov and his crew.

A man in a wet raincoat came up to Vasilyev.

"Alexei, this is Kovrigin, the journalist who's flying with us," Vasilyev said raising his voice above the noise of the rain hammering on the wing, and with a habitual gesture pulled an empty pipe out of his pocket.

"Glad to meet you," the man who had just arrived said to Zhenya, and held out his hand: "Alexei Kostrov."

He was not very tall, but well built and quick in his movements, and his alert light-coloured eyes seized on things quickly; for a second they remained vigilant and firm, then softened into a gay friendliness. It was as though he had through long habit developed two kinds of glances—one for enemies, the other for friends. So this was Alexei Kostrov. Zhenya had imagined him taller and broader in the shoulders.

What shall I ask him, he thought agonizingly. He felt it would be bad form not to ask some serious and intelligent question. And suddenly he asked—not for the article but for himself—something he had always wanted to ask a man like Kostrov.

“Tell me,” he said, looking expectantly at the pilot, “do you still find flying as interesting now, in civil aviation, I mean? There’s nothing like the opportunity for heroism that you used to have, is there?”

“Heroism?” Kostrov looked surprised, then his eyes gleamed with amusement. “I suppose you think the only thing we live for is heroism! Not too much of it, of course, that’d be too tiring. But, let’s say . . . at least one act of heroism a week!” And he laughed so sincerely that there was nothing to be offended at.

Vasilyev the navigator was also smiling openly at Zhenya.

“Don’t mind us,” Kostrov said quickly, in his clear voice. “I was keen on heroism myself. That was a long time ago, of course, when I was at flying school. But people take a different view of things in war-time. They just do their job and do it as well as possible. And sometimes you get in some tight corners, but you still have to do the best job you can. It’s hard, but people manage it. And then it turns out to have been a feat of heroism. People don’t go looking for such moments, they happen by themselves, usually when you’re not expecting them and don’t feel in

the mood. . . . And then you just have to go on being yourself."

He hesitated a moment as if it was all rather hard to explain, then said: "Life is unsteady, but a man's attitude to it always ought to be steady. Understand? That's the only difficult thing. But we'll have another talk later on. About the job, and—about heroism!" he added slyly. And he thought to himself: "Just a kid. His head's still full of romantics, he still thinks life ought to be one big thrill. But that doesn't matter. Perhaps he's right, perhaps that's how life should be. . . ." He was still thinking about it, when someone called him away.

"You can go inside now," said Vasilyev and took Zhenya over to the tall ladder that had been wheeled up to the fuselage. They climbed into the aircraft and Zhenya found himself looking down a long corridor with rows of closely curtained windows on either side. It was well lit by plastic-covered lamps in the ceiling. Zhenya still found it hard to realize that this huge machine would soon rise lightly into the air and fly away through the rain on its long journey.

Vasilyev went out again and Zhenya was left to himself. He remembered that Kostrov had said something very good and simple about heroism, and that he must make a note of it. Soon the fuselage door was closed. The lights in the ceiling went out and a hatch slammed. Zhenya pushed aside the blind and saw that rain was still streaming down the window and glittering in the beams of the searchlights. He could see the ladder being wheeled away and people stepping clear. Zhenya was glad that no one could see him at the moment, and that no one knew that he had never flown before in any kind of aircraft, except the kind that buzzed round and round a post in the recreation park. The thing he wanted to describe most was the moment when the aircraft left the ground. But at the same time he was afraid he would feel sick. He had heard about air-

sickness and he was afraid the crew would laugh at him.

Suddenly the engines burst into life. Their loud, menacing howl rose to a high note, then suddenly sank to a steady roar. Inside the aircraft the roar of the engines was muffled and Zhenya said to himself aloud:

"I'm flying. I'm going to make a real, long flight!" And he realized that his voice could be heard quite clearly and it was possible to talk quite easily in the aircraft.

The roar of the engines rose and sank intermittently, then the plane began to move slowly down the long asphalt runway in the beam of a searchlight. After going a little way it stopped; then the engines began to roar louder than ever and the heavy aircraft again moved forward, and puddles and wet patches of earth flashed past in the electric light faster and faster until they became a continuous stream. But though the ground was moving very fast, it was still the ground. There was an almost imperceptible bump and Zhenya knew he was in the air only because the ground had dropped away and he felt as if he were looking down on it from a four-storey house. Then the white and red lights of the airfield suddenly became very distant and disappeared, and a string of lights suspended on matchstick-like posts turned out to be the lamps on the main road; the plane climbed rapidly. Now there was only rain and darkness outside the window. Zhenya pulled the blind—there was nothing else to see.

2

Zhenya began to feel bored by himself. He went into the crew's quarters and found a group of men in leather flying jackets talking to each other as if they were not in the air at all. It was all so ordinary, and the comfortable, well-lighted compartment with white curtains at the windows was so like an ordinary train compartment that Zhenya could have forgotten he was in the air altogether but for the noise of the engines, the faint vibration of the

aircraft, and that peculiar feeling of bodily lightness that affects one only in flight.

Zhenya introduced himself and discovered that most of the men were engineers observing the aircraft's test performance. They gladly told him about their work and about the new aircraft, which they themselves had had a part in making. Then they began recalling various incidents from their past experience. Zhenya did not want to start making notes in case it upset the flow of their conversation and he remembered nearly all that was said by heart.

"Now you'd better go forward and have a look at the pilots," said Ivan Petrovich, a stout, noisy man, who was in charge of the test.

In the pilots' cabin it was dark except for the gleam of instrument panels. The two seats for the pilots stood side by side under a broad dome of perspex. Innumerable dials and needles glimmered green on the instrument panel like glow-worms. The co-pilot had taken over and Kostrov was lying back in his chair, resting. On a lower level, almost entirely enclosed in perspex, was the navigator's seat. A small shaded lamp illuminated the chart on which Vasilyev was plotting their course.

Kostrov noticed Zhenya and called him over. He adjusted the right arm of his chair, which could be made into a kind of saddle seat for anyone who needed to sit beside the pilot.

"Dark, isn't it?" he said. "No one can see a darn thing, and yet we can fly at high speed by our instruments. They see everything for us. It's nearly as easy as flying in daylight."

And a vivid picture came into Zhenya's mind. In the dark night high above the earth a plane weighing many tons was rushing at enormous speed through the wind and rain, cleaving the clouds with its huge wings. Guided by the greenish light of his instruments, the pilot made occasional adjustments to the controls. From time to time

navigator Vasilyev glanced at his illuminated chart. The four engines roared on steadily. It was as calm and peaceful as on earth, but it was high in the air and the plane was hurtling through the night and wind at a speed of eight hundred kilometres an hour.

Vasilyev got up and went to see the engineers about something and Zhenya followed him.

"You've got everything so well taped in this plane I don't suppose anything can happen to it," Zhenya said to Vasilyev. "It's just the same as travelling by train."

"Don't ever say that in the air," the navigator replied, frowning suddenly. "You never know what may happen. It may seem like being in a train, but it's not."

Zhenya was surprised at the reply. He had never expected the navigator to be superstitious. But that was not the reason. Flying had taught Vasilyev to be always on his guard for the unexpected when he had no firm support under him, and only air and clouds round the plane.

"Why don't you go and have a rest," he suggested in a more gentle tone.

Zhenya went back to his seat and soon fell asleep, lulled by the steady drone of the engines. As he dropped off, he told himself that he must discuss everything in detail with Kostrov next day. When he awoke, the dawn had risen, and far below in the mist he could glimpse a large forest. They had passed over the mountains during the night. As he stared through the window he reflected that from above the forest looked like a rippling dark-green sea flecked with white. Just under the window stretched the huge wing made of silvery sheets of metal. Two big engines were clamped to it and the fuel for them was stored in the wing itself. Zhenya wondered what the plane's fuel consumption was. He went up to the flight engineer but the engineer was busy. He was staring fixedly at the other wing of the aircraft, where from time to time a tongue of flame, scarcely visible in the morning air, was flickering round the

outside engine. There was no sign of flame round the other engines and for a moment it occurred to Zhenya that there might be something wrong. When he turned to ask the flight engineer about it, he was astonished at the abrupt change that had come over the man's face. His eyes were harsh and there were deep folds at the corners of his lips.

"Engine!" he called sharply to the chief engineer.

A man in a leather flying jacket ran forward to the pilots. Zhenya saw Alexei Kostrov also turn round and look at the wing. The aircraft banked suddenly and began to sideslip towards the forest below. The flames vanished. When the plane came out of its sideslip the forest was much nearer.

Although there was nothing more to see, everybody in the plane was staring at the wing. It was still cutting through the air, both engines were droning steadily, and there was no sign of any flame.

Only now did Zhenya realize that this was not part of the flight routine. He remembered the navigator's angry face when he had said you could never be sure of anything in the air.

"Looks as if it's all right again. Perhaps we won't have to leave her after all...."

As he listened to the hurried conversation of the engineers, Zhenya noticed Ivan Petrovich's plump face twist painfully at the words.

"Surely not? We've put so much work into her. Kostrov will get us down," he said firmly. "There ought to be room near the town. It's only a few minutes' flying."

The forest thinned out, they flew over scattered wooden houses and a town loomed below, not far away.

"What made the engine catch fire?" Zhenya asked.

"Who knows. It's not so easy to get the hang of a new engine. We'll find out on the ground," the flight engineer replied reticently.

The plane lost altitude and roads and houses the size of match-boxes came clearly into view. It banked to make

a turn and the earth grew still nearer; a main road flashed by underneath, then a small river; the plane was circling in search of a place to land. So the situation was serious and might have been even more serious. Zhenya was very disappointed that such an interesting flight should be marred by this unpleasant incident. But it was all over now, before he had even realized what was happening. He settled down to watch the landing.

A shout almost in his ear and the sound of violent cursing took him by surprise. All four engineers were again looking at the wing. He followed their gaze and saw bright tongues of flame spreading up the wing. In the field below he glimpsed running figures. The wing had burst into flame just as Kostrov was about to land.

The field he had chosen turned out to be too small for landing the heavy aircraft without risk. In addition there was a ditch across it. Once again he had to put the burning plane into a climb and fly on. The town and the fields round it dropped out of sight and again they were flying over forest. The flames had died down a little but the wing was still flickering pallidly.

"Captain's orders: bale out!" someone called sharply.

At that moment Zhenya saw Vasilyev. Everyone had started putting on their parachutes. The rest was a dream. Vasilyev suddenly noticed Zhenya, and stared at him as though he had never seen him before and had no idea why he was there. Then he gripped him by the shoulders, heaved him out of his seat, shook him and began helping him to strap on a parachute.

"But I don't know how to jump," Zhenya said weakly. He was afraid and at the same time ashamed of the delay he was causing.

"Don't worry, I'll tell you how," the navigator said with unexpected warmth in his voice. "Follow me."

He led Zhenya to the door in the tail. Nearly everyone had already assembled there. They had formed up calmly at the door as if engaged in a routine exercise. The

door was already open and the wind was making the curtains flutter. The engineers paused to embrace each other; then Ivan Petrovich waved his hand to everyone, plunged through the door and disappeared. Zhenya watched the men leaving the plane one by one and could scarcely believe what was happening. He remembered that he had not yet managed to talk to Kostrov and felt a pang of disappointment. His turn came to jump. Vasilyev was standing beside him, and behind Vasilyev stood a tall man with a stern face. Zhenya recognized him as the wireless operator Kaidanov.

"I'll tie a rope to the rip-cord and your chute will open by itself," said Vasilyev. "When you open your eyes you'll be in mid air. Hang on to the shroud lines. Bend your knees as you land."

Zhenya went to the door. Like all the others he waved to Vasilyev. But at that moment he looked down the long corridor and saw a small figure sitting in the glassed-in nose of the plane. It sat there calmly in the pilot's seat, as if at the wheel of a car.

"What about Kostrov?" Zhenya asked.

"He'll jump last, with me," Vasilyev answered impatiently. "Hurry up, don't be afraid! Just let go and drop. But don't look down. Better shut your eyes."

Zhenya nodded silently and was about to step out of the door. But when his foot lost its support he could not help looking down, and as he saw the earth moving slowly along far below him, with strips of mist or cloud hovering over it like smoke, his whole body became aware of a terrible emptiness, and this bottomless emptiness gripped him and froze his heart, his brain and every limb with an icy cold. He remembered nothing more.

He did not feel his fingers close convulsively on the door rails. And the burning plane went flying on across forest and clearing with a man clinging to the rail round the open door, unable to jump.

When Vasilyev saw Zhenya's hands seize the handles and prevent him jumping, he himself suddenly felt a sickening rush of fear, as though someone had gripped his heart, squeezed it hard for an instant, then let it go. He knew that the plane was on fire and might blow up at any moment. He knew that this young man was not to blame, that this kind of thing happened to people when they first saw the earth far below them. With Kaidanov's help he tried to loosen Zhenya's fingers, but it was no use.

Vasilyev groped inside his jacket, pulled out a heavy pistol and frowned at Kaidanov as if to warn him against drawing the wrong conclusion; but Kaidanov understood and nodded. With the heavy butt of his pistol the navigator began to hammer on Zhenya's fingers. He had to do it to save Zhenya's life. The flesh on his fingers grew bruised and torn but they did not lose their grip. Zhenya's eyes were still closed; he knew nothing of what was happening.

Then Vasilyev again looked at Kaidanov and said: "Jump. I'll stay here with him. Alexei's still on board and I wouldn't go without Alexei anyway."

"Wait, Mishal!" Kaidanov shook his head furiously and again tried to loosen Zhenya's smashed fingers.

"Bale out! Do you hear! Bale out!" the navigator shouted and pulled Zhenya's rigid body a little aside to make way for Kaidanov. The wireless-operator said something that was half a sob and plunged out. Now there were only three of them left.

All this time Alexei Kostrov had been flying the plane and trying to keep the flames from reaching the fuselage. When he glanced round he realized at once what had been happening at the door during those few seconds. And he thought: "What silly things happen sometimes. This poor youngster and both of us may get killed simply by accident. None of us know why the plane caught fire, there was nowhere to land it, and now the lad has got scared

and can't jump, and we can't leave him, we can't do that..." But he thought no more of death and did not let his mind wander into reminiscences. Because he had been in worse situations than this and come out of them alive, and because he was accustomed at such moments to carry on with his job, he was convinced that this alone could save him and this alone was what mattered. And he went on doing his job all the time, expressing his impatience with a single angry gesture to Vasilyev that meant: "Jump out quick!"

Then Vasilyev pushed Zhenya with all his strength and finally managed to push him out. With relief he noted that his parachute had opened and not caught fire. Then the plane suddenly began losing height rapidly and in a few moments it was too late to jump. Vasilyev and Kostrov were left in the burning plane and Kostrov again made an attempt to land.

3

Zhenya Kovrigin opened his eyes in the air. He was being jerked about on the lines of his parachute and a field was rushing up to meet him. As he bent his knees and braced himself for the shock he caught a glimpse of the burning aircraft disappearing behind the trees. When he hit the ground, he rolled over and the parachute dragged him along, but soon caught in a haystack and wrapped itself round it. Zhenya again lost consciousness.

When he opened his eyes, he saw a tiny bluebell on a long stalk with a green beetle crawling up it. The beetle stopped in its ascent and scratched its whiskers on the stalk. A grasshopper jumped in the grass close by. This was the earth, and everything was living and moving on the earth. Consciousness returned slowly and hazily. Someone had put his arms round him and was trying to lift him. He saw a woman's face above him with frightened eyes and felt water being splashed in his face. Beside

her there were other women and a lad with a cowherd's whip. Someone kept repeating "good gracious" in a grieved voice. Not far away a herd of cows gazed thoughtfully at the scene. A car turned off the road and came bumping over the field in a cloud of dust. A man in a faded tunic without shoulder-straps jumped out while it was still moving and ran up to them. Zhenya saw everything but could not understand what it was all about.

"Chairman," said the woman's voice that had been repeating "good gracious." "What shall we do with him? And so young too..."

The man in the tunic knelt down beside Zhenya, ran his fingers quickly over his chest, legs and arms and lifted his head slightly, then ripped open his jersey with a pen-knife and passed his hand over his body. Zhenya felt what he was doing and looked at him with open eyes, but could say nothing.

"No bones broken, no blood," the man said calmly. "His hands have been crushed." He examined Zhenya's fingers. "Suppose we try and get up?" And he firmly but carefully began to lift Zhenya to his feet.

Zhenya did not want to get up from the earth. It was the earth, it was life. It smelled faintly of rainy dampness and rotting grass. But consciousness was returning and he allowed himself to be lifted.

Suddenly he began to remember. Everything came back in a rush, right up to the moment when he had stepped up to the door. Then words came to him, and he asked: "Where's the plane? Did anyone jump after me?"

He did not recognize his own voice, it sounded like someone else speaking.

"The plane?" The man in the tunic looked away. "We saw some people jumping out before you," he said reluctantly, "then the plane went out of sight behind the forest... Where shall we take him—to the village or the station? Better to the station, I think. The doctor will get

there quicker. And your people will be brought there soon, too..." he added, half to himself.

Zhenya was carried to the car and laid on the back seat. As soon as the car started, he fainted again, and all through the long drive he kept coming to himself and fainting again. When he finally opened his eyes, the car was standing outside a large wooden building; there were storehouses near by and a hen was pecking about in the burdock by the roadside. The day was still cloudy. Black jackdaws were flapping about in the trees. A thin, high-pitched voice was saying excitedly: "Yes, all alight like a candle, then the forest..."

Zhenya still did not understand, but recognized the speaker as the driver who had brought him to the station along the bumpy forest road. He was standing on the station steps talking to a bearded man in a creased and faded railwayman's uniform. Blue rings of tobacco smoke hovered above their heads. The man who had been addressed as "chairman," and another railwayman in a red peaked cap, came down the steps.

"Can you walk?" he asked Zhenya. "Come on then."

He took his arm and led him to the station master's office, where the gloomy, stern-faced wireless operator from the plane was sitting on a leather sofa. His left arm was bandaged and supported by a sling. He gave Zhenya only a cursory glance and, turning to the station master, asked fiercely: "Well?"

"No news yet."

"Does it take you a year to ring up from this place, blast the lot of you!" the wireless operator snorted.

Then a boy ran into the office. At the sight of the wireless operator his face fell.

"Could I speak to you a minute," he began, addressing the station master.

The wireless operator jumped up and strode over to the boy. With his sound hand he gripped the lapels of his jacket, as if he wanted to lift him into the air.

"You're going to tell m^e!" he ground out through clenched teeth. "I'll find out anyway, so you'd better tell me now!"

"Tell him, it makes no difference," the station master said wearily.

"We got through to Luchansk in the end," the lad replied when he had got his breath back and straightened his jacket. "And they told us. . . . The plane blew up in the air, just near Kushchovka. These two were the last to get away. The ones that jumped before are at the next station and they'll all be taken to the regional centre when the first train comes through. That's all. . . . What did you shake me like that for?"

The wireless operator made no reply but his face twisted as though someone had grabbed his bandaged arm and crushed it. Then his whole body seemed to droop. He sat down on the sofa and said quietly: "So Kostrov's dead. And Misha Vasilyev. Such fine chaps they were! The finest I've ever known. . . ." And it was strange to see tears rolling down his distorted face.

A distant rumble grew louder and a train steamed into the station. It was a long-distance train and should not have stopped at the little station of Povodyri—Zhenya had noticed the name—but it did stop. They went out on to the platform and were met by a man in a dark semi-military uniform.

"My name is Dorokhov," he told the wireless operator and Zhenya. "I have been told to take you to the regional centre. Get in, I've got seats for you."

They boarded the train and it started immediately. Beds had been made up on the lower bunks of a first-class compartment. Ivan Petrovich, the chief engineer, and other members of the crew of the missing plane were sitting in the next compartment.

When they had all assembled together, Dorokhov said to them: "The burning plane was spotted in our district at 7.30. We saw people jumping out of it. The last to

jump were Kaidanov and Kovrigin. After that the plane flew on over the forest, reached the village of Kushchovka and came in to land on a field near the village. Then quite unexpectedly it started climbing again, just as it was reaching the ground. It flew over the village and got over the forest again. . . . A few seconds later there was a heavy explosion. The people of the village have searched the forest. A few scraps of molten metal and glass and an oxygen cylinder were found; one of the engines flew out of the wing and ploughed a path through the forest. They also found part of an arm . . . a map-case . . . a blood-stained flying helmet. . . . And that was about all."

"He was afraid he'd set fire to the village if he landed," Ivan Petrovich said quietly and gripped his bandaged head in his hands.

"First he wanted to save the aircraft . . . then this lad who couldn't jump . . . then the village. That's what he wanted. And he was only thirty-two. But Vasilyev was due to retire in six months and he had three children. He was talking about going on leave only this morning," Kaidanov said in a strained voice, half coherently.

When he said that, they all turned and looked at Zhenya and it was unbearably painful to feel their condemnation, although he still did not know why he was to blame, and could not remember how he had jumped out of the plane, or when his fingers had been smashed. But it must have happened as Kaidanov had said: he had been unable to jump at once, he had hesitated and wasted the time that Vasilyev and Kostrov had needed to make their jump. And he was to blame. When he realized this, he couldn't understand why their looks expressed not so much condemnation as something else.

"Give him a mirror," someone said.

Someone handed him a pocket mirror and, still uncomprehending, he looked into it, aware only of the swaying of the carriage and the fact that it was difficult to hold the mirror with his injured fingers.

But this was not his face. He scarcely recognized it. It was a strange, stern face, and much older. There was scarcely anything left in it of the Zhenya of yesterday, and it was not the kind of face people have at twenty-two. He thought for a moment that it might be the face of the engineer beside him and he moved the mirror about. But then he realized that this scorched hair in the mirror was his hair, and the strange face his face. But somehow it didn't matter. He was too tired even to be sorry for himself. He had felt tired ever since he learned how quickly and unexpectedly Alexei Kostrov had died.

Then they began talking about ordinary things, but they spoke very quietly, as though their two comrades had not been blown to pieces in the air but were lying in the next compartment. The engineers were going to the regional centre to meet the commission of inquiry that had already left Moscow by air. Ivan Petrovich told Zhenya that it was not always possible to establish the direct causes of a crash. There was always an element of chance in the air. But in any case, if anyone was to blame, it would be him, the engineer in charge of the test, and also the engine-checker or the flight engineers, although they had all inspected the engines with absolute thoroughness before the take-off.

Zhenya remembered that his editor might ask him for a report on what had happened. It was very hard to talk about it, let alone write, but Zhenya had only one thought: how would Kostrov have acted in his place? Kostrov had always done what he considered to be his duty. And it was Zhenya's duty—no matter how much he was to blame, or how overcome he was by the tragedy—it was his duty to see to it that the whole country knew about Kostrov's heroism, about this man who had thought of other people's lives and saving a valuable new aircraft first, and of himself last. Zhenya knew that Kostrov had been in dangerous situations before, during test flights, situations that could not be foreseen; but Kostrov had always tried

to save his aircraft if there was the slightest possibility of doing so, and for that he had been considered the best test pilot at his factory. And that was why he had stayed in his burning plane to the last, although he had known better than anyone else how great a risk he was running. Zhenya pulled out his notebook and began to write; but it was very difficult because his bandaged fingers could scarcely hold a pencil.

In the evening they got off the train in the regional centre. A car from the Regional Party Committee was waiting for them and they were driven to a hotel. Zhenya and Dorokhov went straight on to the Regional Committee. As he was still unable to write, they called in a shorthand typist and he dictated his first brief telegram to the paper about what had happened. Then he began to dictate an article, an article about a man with keen, merry eyes, about a brave, straightforward man called Alexei Kostrov. And still it seemed to him that he was not saying what he meant to say about Kostrov, but he went on dictating, because now everyone had to know what kind of people Kostrov and his navigator Vasilyev had been. Zhenya had read about heroism before in books, now he had seen what it was like in life.

Now he understood what Kostrov had meant when he had said that the main thing was to have a steady and convinced attitude to life, to its humane principles, the kind of attitude that shows itself in everything, but particularly vividly—although it is then hardest of all—in times of danger. The test pilot never knows beforehand where he is going to encounter danger. On the day of the take-off Kostrov had not prepared himself specially for a feat of heroism, he had simply gone to work like everyone else. Perhaps he had even signed an attendance book somewhere.

As he dictated his article, Zhenya Kovrigin reflected that it was hard to put into words everything about the difficult and dangerous work of test pilots, which is nev-

ertheless considered just an ordinary profession, like any other. And if he did put it into words, the editors would probably delete it and no one would ever read that when Vasilyev and Kostrov were given their funeral, the coffins that were carried to their graves would be empty, because there was nothing to put in them, and there would just be two new caps lying on the lids.

People came in and out of the room, many of them looked in surprise at Zhenya, at his scorched hair and banded hands, but he saw only the long corridor inside the plane and the pilot's seat in the glassed-in nose, where a man who had stayed at the controls of his burning plane till the end was sitting alone. That was how he had last seen Alexei Kostrov.

Translated by Robert Darglish



YURI NAGIBIN
(b. 1920)

"Sometimes you open the window in spring and the cool spring breeze full of the scents of the awakening earth and something else inexplicably exciting blows not just into your face but into your very soul. . . . Your heart leaps and you catch your breath for an instant and in that instant you glimpse the future, a wonderful tempting future, bearing a promise of great happiness." This was how Yuri Nagibin once told his readers about his own joy in living and creating. And many of the stories of this young writer, who entered literature only a few years ago, are indeed filled with that cool freshness of spring. His stories are about life, full of joy and sadness; his characters are good people and bad, and there is no lack of drama or conflict in his tales, whether they are based on the old legend "The Pipe" or on modern life, as in "The Nocturnal Guest," a story already known to English readers.

NEWLYWED

It wouldn't be easy to find a huntsman in the village, the old woman who punted Voronov across the Pra told him. She was a tall well-built old woman with sturdy legs in high canvas-topped boots; under her padded jacket her shoulders were broad and sloping. Though it was summer, she wore a warm army cap that concealed her grey hair, and when she turned her little wrinkled face away from Voronov to wield the pole, it was pleasant to watch her. Time had spared her figure but ruined her hands which were gnarled and discoloured, and though her face was taut with wrinkles the eyes with their bluish whites were still dark and gleaming. There was even a hint of coquetry in those unfaded eyes as the old woman volubly explained:

"You've come a bit too late, my dear. There's not a huntsman to be had round here two days before season, and now we're in the middle of hunting. It used to be easier, I know. But now there be some, like my youngest, Vaska, who've dropped it altogether because there's more to be earned in the collective farm, and some who've gone to work for the state. The best huntsmen be looking after the lake nowadays. Take Anatoly Ivanovich now, my oldest. But you wouldn't have heard of him in Moscow..." In this last statement there was more of contempt for Voronov's ignorance than regret that her son's reputation had not reached the capital.

"Yes, we have," Voronov retorted. "I've often heard of Anatoly Ivanovich. They say he's the most reliable man in hunting."

"You Moscow folk don't know much about Meshchera," the old woman said disapprovingly. "As if our Anatoly Ivanovich had nothing better to do than show you townspeople around! Why, he's on guard over our region!"

"Well, what do you advise?" Voronov asked.

Voronov was fond of hunting, he had endurance, a keen eye and a steady hand, but he was not a real hunter, and besides he had never been to the Meshchera lakes before.

"Can't advise you anything," the old woman replied, steering the small boat across the waves. "All I can say is you might try to get one of the old men on the job, they haven't any work to do and they're fond of that game. But I don't think you've got much chance." The boat scraped on the bottom and jerked to a standstill. It was still three or four yards to the shore. Gathering up her skirt, the old woman stepped out of the boat, leaned against the stern and pushed the boat out of the water.

Voronov lurched forward as the boat came up against the unyielding bank. He pulled a ten-ruble note out of his pocket and held it out to the woman.

"Wait for your change," she said, and in reply to a gesture of protest: "That's our rule. Ferry, five rubles, bed for the night, three, and huntsman, twenty-five a day. Look, you might try that cottage over there. Ask Grandad, maybe you can persuade him."

Voronov thanked her and made his way along the uneven grassy bank to the cottage.

The door was opened by an old woman remarkably like the one who had just brought him across the river. A youthful figure with a little wrinkled face and dark animated bead-like eyes. And the clothes she wore were the same: a khaki padded jacket, canvas-topped boots, and a

cap with ear-flaps still bearing the mark where the Red Army star had been removed. The old women round here still seem to be waging a little war of their own, Voronov thought, smiling to himself.

"No, dear, Grandad won't go with you, he be ailing," she said. "Real worn out he was when he came back from Velikoye Lake yesterday."

But she let Voronov into the cottage where the ailing master of the house lay on his bed surrounded by pillows and half buried under a pile of overcoats. The only part of him that was visible was a tobacco-stained stump of beard sticking up out of the heap.

"I can pay you well," said Voronov.

"Hear that, Mother? What about it?" came a weak voice from the depths, and the tuft of grey beard quivered for a second.

"Don't you think of it!" his wife answered sharply. "Puffing like a steam engine and he wants to go out again! I'm afraid we can't do anything for you, my dear," she added sternly to Voronov.

"But where shall I find my huntsman?" Voronov persisted.

"You can't find one if there aren't any. And that's that!" the old woman answered crossly.

A few years ago such a conversation would have put an end to Voronov's hunting expedition before it started. Formerly he had been inclined to exaggerate the difficulties of life and even minor obstacles had seemed insuperable. But with the years he had developed a cheerful assurance that life had no insoluble problems, and that calm and sober persistence could overcome any obstacle. His voice sounded almost gay when he repeated: "But where am I going to find my huntsman then?"

The old woman's sparse eyelashes went up with a jerk.

"I don't know, I'm sure, my dear," she said, but now more in confusion than annoyance.

"But I'm asking you," said Voronov.

The old woman looked one way, then another, as though there might be a huntsman hiding somewhere close by and this man from Moscow was perfectly aware of the fact.

"I don't know, I'm sure. . . . Maybe you could get our Newlywed to go?"

"I don't think he would," came the voice from under the heap of coats.

"He'll go," Voronov answered for the old woman. "Where can I find him?"

"The last house down the street," the old woman explained. "Go and see him, dear, you may be able to persuade him. But he's given up hunting since he got married."

"He won't go," came the voice from under the coats again, "he won't leave his wife."

"What's his name, this Newlywed's?" asked Voronov.

"Vaska," the old woman replied. "That's what everybody calls him."

"He won't go," the old man's voice reached Voronov in the passage and he decided that the newlywed's power of resisting the temptation of easily earned huntsman's fees must be a local phenomenon of which the people round here were very proud.

Voronov had forgotten to ask what side of the street Vaska's cottage was on, but of the two last cottages he chose the one that looked cleaner and had an iron weathercock on the roof and carved freshly whitewashed shutters. It was the kind of neat little cottage, with a touch of gaiety about it, where one would expect to find newlyweds. Voronov pushed open the door and walked into a wide dark entry that smelled of calf, rotting straw and fowl droppings. To this ordinary enough smell of cottage entries was added the more pungent, exciting odour of game that was slightly high. A fair-sized bunch of mallard and teal with tufts of grass sticking out of their tails hung from a rope slung across the middle of the passage. So he hasn't given up

hunting altogether, Voronov reflected. A curly-haired broad-shouldered fellow in riding-breeches and a white vest with the sleeves rolled up rose from his knees—he had been shaping a log with an axe—and asked Voronov who he was looking for.

“I’m looking for you,” Voronov replied.

The young man drove the axe into the log and led the way into the house. In the doorway he stepped aside to make way for a little woman who was coming out with a full basin in her hands. The newlyweds’ home was as pleasant inside as it was out. A freshly whitewashed stove, gay wallpaper, pots of geraniums on the window-sills, cut-outs from the illustrated magazines on the walls. In the corner there was a sideboard with a lace runner and a little tumbler out of cheap coloured glass, two of those big heavy shells that you can hear the sea in, a frame with various photographs in it and, true to tradition, a photograph of the young couple in the middle.

On a bench near the door sat an old woman in a padded jacket and canvas-topped boots and Voronov was beginning to think that such old women must be an essential part of all Meshchera homes when he recognized the old woman as the one who had brought him across the river and realized that she was the mother of the newlywed Vaska. On another bench by the window sat a young woman with a kerchief round her shoulders. Her print blouse was taut and heavy with the weight of her big firm breasts.

“Well, as a matter of fact, it’s you I’m after,” Voronov said, addressing her. “Will you let the master come hunting with me?”

The woman glanced in surprise at Voronov and lowered her eyes. She had fine eyes, slightly protuberant, with blue in the whites.

“She hasn’t got a master yet,” Vaska remarked with gentle irony. “She’s my sister.”

Voronov bit his lip in annoyance; he ought to have guessed this was not the mistress of the house. She was sitting

in the ceremonious manner of a village guest, and apart from anything else bore a striking resemblance to her brother. The same wavy auburn hair and dark flushed face, the same liquidly attractive eyes with their bluish whites.

"Well, what do you say to my proposal?" he asked Vaska.

"No need for him to go! He's no time for that silly game!" It was the little woman they had met in the doorway who spoke. She was standing on the doorstep, her head far short of the low lintel, with the empty basin under her arm. Voronov noted with disappointment the contrast between Vaska's good looks and the plainness of his wife. She was no size at all and there was nothing attractive about her face either. It was small and freckled and her eyes were a bottle green. Besides, the bride was not very young, twenty-five at least. She wore an old frock that was too short and too tight, and broken-heeled slippers. But there was character in her and Voronov was not surprised when in response to his wife's curt reply Vaska merely smiled and spread his arms in a gesture of submission.

"Grandma, you're an old friend, won't you back me up?" Voronov said, turning to the old woman.

"I'm not the mistress here," Vaska's mother answered. There was no resentment or challenge in the remark, it was a simple acknowledgement of a perfectly correct and generally accepted situation.

Now Voronov knew how to act.

"May I have a word with you?" he said to Vaska's wife.

They went out into the entry. Voronov explained to the little woman in some detail that he would need her husband for not more than three or four days, that he knew the local arrangements, and, because he was a busy man and allowed himself the pleasure of hunting too rarely to grudge the expense, would pay exactly double the usual fee. Finally, unlike other Moscow hunters, he would not object to Vaska's shooting as well.

The little woman's lips moved as she listened. Evidently she was calculating how much they would gain by the transaction. Satisfied by the result of these calculations, she flashed him a smile from her bottle-green eyes and with vigour, yet not ungracefully, offered him her hand.

"That's settled!"

Her cuff slipped back, exposing her round well-formed wrist and shapely arm, and Voronov, made condescending by success, reflected that there was something about her after all.

"Vasily, go and get yourself ready!" she called out peremptorily. "You're going out hunting."

Vaska's soft girlish lips formed a smile.

"Maybe we ought to ask our chairwoman...."

"I'll tell her myself. She was only saying the other day, 'How is it all the men keep asking for time off and yours stays around as if you'd got him on a lead?' And I must tidy up and wash the floor anyway, you make such a mess when you're about."

Vaska looked at his wife, sighed, then overcoming some inward feeling, began to make ready.

The huntsman's preparations did not take long. After sprinkling a handful of hay in his rubber boots, he wrapped his sturdy feet in warm soft cloths and pulled the boots on tightly. He filled a cartridge-belt with old discoloured cartridges and slung it round his waist, then tied up a number of rubber and wooden dummies in a knapsack. Voronov enjoyed watching his carelessly vigorous yet precise movements. Vaska whistled through his teeth while he worked, apparently quite unaware of the picturesque appeal of his own fine physique.

"Glad to get away from home!" his wife remarked jealously, as she washed clothes behind the stove.

"I won't go if you don't want me to," Vaska responded readily.

"I won't go! Aren't we rich all of a sudden!"

Voronov emptied his rucksack, leaving nothing but essentials: bread, butter, tinned food, a thermos of strong tea, spare socks and a blanket. Vasily went out into the yard and brought in a wicker basket with a decoy-duck quacking inside it.

Vasily's wife saw them off. She put on a waisted velvet-jacket and high galoshes and at once looked younger.

"Give me that," she said to her husband and took his shot-gun. "Are you going to Velikoye?"

"Ozerko," Vaska replied.

Her eyebrows arched in surprise and Voronov felt disturbed. The advice he had been given in Moscow was to hunt at Velikoye and now the suspicion crossed his mind that Vaska simply did not want to go far from home.

"Perhaps Velikoye would be better?" he said.

"Velikoye's too crowded," Vaska answered, looking not at Voronov but at his wife.

Voronov also turned to Vaska's wife, expecting her support. But she shrugged her thin shoulders and went on quickly towards the canoe that could be seen over the tall sedges. Evidently her supremacy at home did not challenge her husband's authority in matters of hunting.

Vasily nudged Voronov and smiled as he nodded towards his wife; the butt of the long Tula gun was knocking against her heels.

"Only mine and my brother's wife see their men off hunting," he said with a touch of pride and added thoughtfully: "And he's disabled so he couldn't manage without her anyhow."

When they reached the stream, the canoe was already untied and spread with fresh dampish hay which Vasily's wife had collected straight from the bank. Vasily stowed away the rucksacks, the basket and the guns, covering them carefully with his tarpaulin jacket, then he pulled out a shovel-like paddle from under the hay.

"Jump in, hunter, I don't know what to call you."

"Call me Sergei Ivanovich." Voronov dropped clumsily

into the canoe and pitch-black marsh water slopped over the side.

"Cheerio!" Vaska said to his wife.

With a sombre glance at Voronov she snatched swiftly at her husband's sleeve, clung to his side for a moment, laughed shyly, then pushed him aside and strode away through the tall grass without looking back.

Vaska pushed off with the paddle and the boat slid down the narrow corridor of water, bumping gently on the snags and thrusting apart the bladed sedge with a dry rustling sound.

Voronov unbuttoned his collar. His troubles and anxieties were over, and he was speeding towards his goal. In Moscow he had been told so much about the difficulties he was likely to encounter in Meshchera, about the eccentricities of the local people, who had to be coaxed into showing their gentle obliging side, for if the opposite happened they could be inflexible and stubbornly un-cooperative. How easily he had adapted himself to circumstances and got what he wanted!

He took pleasure in watching Vaska's clean strong sweeps with the paddle. The lad's sturdy body seemed to quiver with delight in exercise that was welcome after overmuch resting. One could almost feel the ripple of those taut muscles under his shirt, the steady easy rhythm of his breathing.

Presently the channel began to zigzag and if Voronov still had faint suspicions that Vaska had chosen Ozerko as the easier journey, they now quickly disappeared. The long canoe could not take the sharp bends and at every turn Vaska, using the paddle as a pole, drove the boat aground. He then jumped out into the water, lifted the canoe round by its stern till its bows pointed in the right direction, and pushed off again. The canoe was very heavy, but Vaska refused to let Voronov help him.

"The wife told me to do my best for you. 'If our guest's not satisfied,' she said, 'I won't let you in the house.'"

But just before they reached the Pra, where the narrow channel spread out into a shallow marshy creek, the canoe got so firmly stuck in the mud that Voronov had to step out and lend a hand.

"But you shouldn't . . . I could have done it myself," Vaska protested in confusion, helping Voronov to climb back into the canoe.

"Never mind, I won't tell your wife," Voronov assured him with a smile.

Vaska laughed, and Voronov asked: "Do you love her?"

"But who wouldn't?" Vaska said in joyful surprise. "You saw what she's like. . . . What am I compared to her?"

He stood knee-deep in water, the sleeves of his vest rolled up to the elbow; young, hot sweat was running down his dark face, deeply tanned neck and muscular arms; the skin looked as though it had been varnished. Vaska was so good to look at, so artless and unspoiled in his feelings that Voronov found himself thinking: "Ah, my lad, she's got the far better bargain!" Naturally he didn't say so and they paddled on along the wooded bank of the Pra.

The Pra at this point was not in the least like a river. It spread out in a broad lake, with flat green islets and rushy creeks where the canoes of anglers showed darkly among the reeds. Gulls skimmed the water, wild duck plied aloft, alone and in flocks. A kite that had been hovering just below the clouds swooped to the water, touched it for a second with its hooked legs, and soared up with a roach in its claws. Then a crow flapped away from the top of a pine in pursuit. It quickly overtook the kite and snatched away its prey. On returning to its look-out post, it gobbled up the roach and resumed waiting for the hard-working kite to catch another.

They again turned into a side channel, unlike the first in that it was straight as an arrow. Now and then the narrow corridor widened and its waters spread out in patches as it led from one marshy lake to another. Here,

too, the banks were low, but the tall sedge, higher than a man, mingling with bushes at the water's edge, encased the channel in a gloomy dark-green tunnel. It seemed to grow dusk suddenly and Voronov began to worry that they might be late for the evening shooting.

"Oh, we'll be there in right good time," Vaska assured him.

Now and then snipe swept fearlessly low over their heads, a woodcock whirred up out of the grass and from under the dark flat leaves of a water-lily a tiny duckling fluttered into the water in front of them. Unaware that he had hatched out too late to grow up into a full-sized duck, the little fellow made frantic efforts to save his young life. Flailing the water with the pitiful stumps of his undeveloped wings, he floundered up the channel under the very bows of the canoe and at last darted into the undergrowth of the bank. Just as it did so, the black tattered shape of a mallard rose with a great whir in a bright gap between the bushes and at the same moment Voronov was dazzled by the pink flash of a shot. Before the echo died away, the mallard curved in its flight and dropped into the bushes.

Voronov was taken aback not so much by the unexpected shot just behind his ear as by Vaska's uncanny speed and agility in dropping the paddle, snatching his gun and aiming with such amazing accuracy. For some reason it seemed to Voronov that Vaska had again made a special effort in honour of his wife and the lad's jubilation began to irritate him. In a radiant mood like this Vaska would bag all the duck and there would be nothing left for him.

"Look here, Vaska, let's make an agreement. We can both shoot at birds on the wing, but when they're sitting I have them to myself."

"Right-ho, Sergei Ivanovich!" Vaska pulled in to the bank and stepped out of the canoe straight into the tall grass. The grass closed behind him, and when it opened

again Vaska reappeared with a large emerald-necked drake in his hands.

"We've made a start, Sergei Ivanovich!"

"It looks like it," Voronov agreed drily.

The lake opened up before them suddenly. Sunset-tinted clouds were floating in the round mirror of the water but the edge of the lake was dark with the reflection of the dense fir forest flanking its shores. Without pausing to choose the best place, Vaska at once paddled the canoe to a half-flooded island pointing into the sunset near the left bank. Here he tossed the dummies into the water, released the fluttering decoy-duck, then paddled the canoe into the bushes.

"Got a good view, Sergei Ivanovich?" he asked.

"I can see all right, and they can see us all right from up there," Voronov replied grumpily.

"Never mind," Vaska assured him.

Voronov prepared himself for the long wait with which most hunting begins, but almost immediately he heard Vaska's calm voice whisper: "Teal to the right, Sergei Ivanovich."

Voronov started and ran his eyes quickly over the water. But he could see nothing except the dummies, with the decoy looking very large and rather unreal among them.

"By the far dummy on the right," Vaska said in the same calm whisper.

Voronov fired with the feeling that he was firing at a dummy. The shot slashed the water like a broom and one of the two equally motionless teal merely swayed slightly, exposing its invulnerable wooden side, while the other collapsed in the water with outstretched neck, displaying in death the life that had throbbed in it before.

When they paddled out to fetch it, a mallard that had been just about to settle soared into the air. Voronov fired and the duck somersaulted into the water. It reap-

peared about thirty yards away from them and Voronov, who had managed to reload, finished it off.

"Good shooting," Vaska said approvingly.

But this was only the beginning. Voronov had rarely known such luck in hunting. With one shot he killed three teal, then two full-grown birds and a great swan-like pin-tail duck. Vaska did not waste his time either. He winged three duck in flight, but one of them flew away, and another hid in the rushes and he was unable to find it in the dark marshy thickets.

The lake was a small one and the fierce firing scared off the duck but even in the lull that followed Voronov still tingled with the oblivious happy tension for which he valued hunting so highly. He came to himself only when the first star peeped out in the sky. Its pure brilliance was etched cleanly in the darkening waters of the lake.

"Well, Vasily, that'll do for today, lad!"

They went back down the channel to spend the night. Near its mouth they found a place to camp; right at the water's edge stood a broad-lapped rick of sedge hay. Vaska pulled the bows of the canoe up on to the bank, unloaded the rucksacks and began making a bed, stamping down the soft marshy-smelling hay.

Then they had supper and drank tea from the thermos. It grew quite dark. The stars came out and the yellow hip of the moon bulged above the distant firs. It was still warm but there was a nip in the air that rose from the creek. While he munched soused perch and washed it down with sweet tea, Voronov recalled the details of the day's hunting. Vaska answered monosyllabically, often chuckling quietly to himself, and Voronov decided that this must be a habit of the professional, not to talk of past hunting when there was hunting to be done on the morrow. Gradually his own excitement waned, the intoxication of success wore off and it became one of those things that had happened, that had exhausted itself and could exercise no influence on the future.

A pleasant weariness overcame his body and he felt tranquil and at peace with himself.

"Sergei Ivanovich, are you married?" It was Vaska's voice.

"Of course, I am," Voronov replied, aware of a certain displeasure in his own voice.

"Is your wife in Moscow?" Vaska asked tentatively.

"No, she's on holiday."

"By herself or with the children?"

"We haven't any children."

Vasily raised himself on his elbow, eyed Voronov for a time, then said very seriously: "Aren't you afraid to . . . to let her go away by herself?"

Voronov burst out laughing. He felt no resentment at the huntsman's naïve question. On the contrary, he experienced a pleasant sensation of invulnerability. He had complete faith in his wife, and besides he was not in the least concerned with her conduct.

"What will be, will be, old chap," he said with an air of superiority.

Vaska made no reply. In the darkness Voronov could not see his face but he felt the lad grow tense and thoughtful. Voronov finished his tea and lay down on the bed. Bestirring himself from his reverie, Vaska came up and covered him considerately with his tarpaulin jacket, tucking the edges under the hay.

"Good night," said Voronov.

"Sergei Ivanovich," Vaska began uncertainly. "Would you be afraid of sleeping here by yourself?"

"Of course not, why should I?" Voronov replied, suppressing a laugh. He realized that Vaska was prompted not by jealousy but by that sudden acute longing for the person one loves that may seize the heart even during the briefest separation. And yet Vaska seemed rather a ridiculous and pitiful figure to him at that moment.

"I'll just slip home for a bit. I'll be back by dawn for sure!"

"All right, go along," Voronov said and, to show Vaska that the subject was closed, turned away and pulled the jacket over his head.

He heard Vaska pushing the canoe into the water; the keel swished through the sedge; the coarse sand on the edge of the bank crunched drily, then there was a loud splash and Voronov felt a gust of cold air under his tarpaulin jacket. The lapping of water under the bows of the canoe died away—Vaska had gone off to see his wife. Voronov imagined the journey Vaska would have to make along the two channels and the river, he recalled all the turns he would have to negotiate, pulling the canoe out of the water and turning its bows; and then there would be the sandbank that had given the two of them such trouble. And all this in darkness and the damp cold of night. The journey would take a good four hours. Four there and four back. If he was to be back by dawn, Vaska would not have so much as an hour with his wife. What power of feeling was it that had sent him on such a hellish journey?

Voronov suddenly drew a deep breath and flung back the jacket. But hadn't there been a time like that in his own life, when he had been capable of dashing off anywhere, at any time of the day or night at the first call, and even without call? He, too, had been full of that passionate turbulent anxiety that had sent the young hunter away in the darkness. And then he had suddenly taken fright for himself, for his peace of mind, for God knows what else! Up to the very moment of the break he had known that it could all be put right—he had only to let loose that fund of devotion that was in him. But he had told himself it would be better, easier, simpler not to. And to cut off his way of retreat he had married his present wife, whom he had known for a long time as a kind, intelligent and loyal person. If there had been no joy, there had at least been no pain, and that was worth something anyhow.

And now meeting this lad had disturbed Voronov and forced him to remember things he preferred not to remember. But, of course, it would happen to Vaska one day too, and he would see his wife as he, Voronov, for instance, saw her. A plain, freckled, irritable, demanding woman, up to her eyes in domestic cares. The awakening would probably be bitter. Voronov frowned. Surely he wasn't comparing his own life with Vaska's!

The sky hung very low and was so heavily loaded with stars that it seemed as though it might drop them. And they were dropping. Some diving steeply, some in broad arcs, they fell to earth, turning into green crystals as they fell. Warm vapours rose from the overheated earth. And the sky seemed to rise up into the darkness, then sink with growing brilliance; it seemed to be breathing.

Voronov was awakened by the sharp chill of dawn. All in a moment his clothes, the jacket covering him, the hay, flat and crumpled under his side, and the hat on his head, seemed as though by agreement to stop preserving the warmth of his body. And the hay and the clothing that had kept him so warm all night suddenly turned out to be cold, damp and heavy, and hostilely uncomfortable. Voronov jerked his shoulders and the shiver aroused by this movement sent a little charge of warmth and cheerfulness through his body. He pulled himself to his feet, knowing that his next reaction would be one of annoyance at finding Vaska absent. Then he saw the clear sky, grey and seemingly overcast in its early morning lack of blue, the bright band of the dawn beyond the forest, the dew-grizzled sedge—and the black wet bows of the canoe sticking up over the edge of the bank.

Voronov went up to the canoe. Vaska was sitting in the stern, drawing the ducks they had shot the day before.

"Hullo there, Newlywed!" Voronov hailed him.

Vaska raised his face, slightly pale under its deep tan.

"She didn't half tell me off, Sergei Ivanovich, for leaving you alone!" he said with a smile joyfully unsuited to what he was saying. "I said you sent me. You won't give me away, will you?"

"No, don't worry."

Vaska gave him a cautious, slightly sideways glance.

"You mustn't think I don't trust her. I suddenly had a feeling I must see her. It just came into my head that she might have chosen someone else, might have been with somebody else just then. And those thoughts got me so worked up!" Vaska made that familiar gesture of incomprehension with his arms. Then he shook his curly head suddenly, gave a laugh at some thought that had crossed his mind, and bending forward slightly, added: "I'm a hopeless chap, I am!"

A dullish intoxicated gleam came into his dark, blue-tinted eyes.

"I suppose you won't feel much like hunting now?" Voronov remarked. "You've worn yourself out!"

"Not a bit of it, Sergei Ivanovich! The things I could do now! Why, I'd..."

Vaska spoke with an ingenuous simplicity that seemed to confirm beyond all possible doubt that it was in his devotion to his little harassed wife that he found the strength and joy of living.

Voronov felt a fresh stirring of annoyance with Vaska, he found the lad's happiness depressing and humiliating. He was about to tell him that there would come a time when this young, greedy passion would exhaust itself and lose its edge, but instead he asked almost sadly:

"What makes you love her so much?"

"But how can you say?" Vaska responded in surprise, as though the thought had never entered his head. "Who was I without her? Just Vaska. And now I'm a man, a husband. Father of a family, you might say. But that's not the reason..."

"Just a minute," Voronov laughed. "Hold your horses! It's a bit too early to call yourself father of a family. You need to have children for that, you know."

"But we *have* got children!" Vaska laughed happily. "There's Katka and Vaska, the twins. And then there's Senka, but he's only a tiny tot, he's at Granny's."

"Well, I don't understand a thing," said Voronov with an unpleasant feeling. "How many years have you been married?"

"We're getting on now, soon be six years."

"Then what the dickens do you mean by calling yourself a newlywed?" Voronov asked roughly.

Once again Vaska spread his arms.

"People just call me that, I don't know why...."

But I know, the words formed in Voronov's mind, and the unpleasant feeling that had gripped him took on a clearly defined shape. It was an acute despondent envy, as oppressive as anger. He, Voronov, was a beggar beside this lad. He had been robbed of the most precious thing in life. He could have known joy, pain, anxiety and jealousy, even defeat—even defeat has a living pulse—and he had preferred to all this the niggardly poverty of a peaceful life.

Translated by Robert Daghish



ALEXANDER TVARDOVSKY
(b. 1900)

"Stovemakers" (1958) is one of the few prose works that Tvardovsky has written. He is better known for his lyrical verses and the poems "Land of Muravia" (1936), "Vasily Tyorkin" (1941-1945), "A House by the Road" (1946), and "Far Beyond." "Stovemakers" is a peculiarly Russian story in spirit and character. Of Tvardovsky's lyrical hero it is true to say that he is "the real Russian character, fearless and unselfish, devoted in feeling, brave and persistent in work, in appearance rather simple and docile, in action bold, noble and merciless to himself," the character that held out in the grim days of the Patriotic War of 1941-1945 in order to build peace on earth.

STOVEMAKERS

That stovemakers were very unusual people and the trade of the stovemaker a very unusual trade, with a touch of mystery, even magic about it, I had known ever since I was a boy, not so much from personal experience, it is true, as from the innumerable stories, legends, and tales I had heard about stoves and stovemakers.

In the place where I was born and grew up there was a stovemaker of great renown called Mishechka. We used this diminutive form of his real name, in spite of his advanced age, perhaps because of his being so small, although it was a common thing with us to call grown-ups and even old men by this particular diminutive form: Mishechka for Mikhail, Grishechka for Grigory, and so on.

Among other things, Mishechka was famous for his habit of eating clay. This I had seen him do with my own eyes, when he relaid the burnt-out bottom of our own stove at home. Having carefully mixed the clay with warm water and kneaded it with his feet till it glistened like butter, he took a good-sized lump on his finger, tucked it away in his cheek, chewed it and swallowed it, smiling as he did so, very much like a conjurer who wishes to show that the performance of his trick causes him no difficulty whatever. I remember how Mishechka crawled inside our stove and, sitting under its low vault, hacked out the old floor bricks between his parted legs with a

special stovemaker's hammer. How he managed to get there—he may have been small but he was not a baby—I simply couldn't understand. One winter I had a cold and my grandmother had tried to give me a heat cure in the stove, but it was so cramped, hot and frightening inside that I yelled at the top of my voice and struggled out so violently that I nearly ended by falling off the ledge on to the floor.

Now I realize that the idea of Mishechka's innocent trick of eating clay in public was to stress his exceptional professional qualifications. It was as if he were saying: "See, it's not everybody that can do this, and it's not everybody that can build a stove."

But Mishechka, like the good spirit of legend, was kind and harmless and never used the opportunities inherent in his trade for doing people a bad turn. Not like some other stovemakers, who if they took a dislike to a customer for some reason, could cause him a great deal of worry and bother. It was a favourite trick to fix the neck of a broken bottle somewhere inside the chimney so that the stove would sing in all kinds of dismal voices, foretelling ill luck and disaster for the house and its occupants. Or a brick would be hung up in a certain spot on a piece of string that was only strong enough to last the first trial heating. Everything would go well until the second or third day, when the string burnt through, causing the brick to fall and block the chimney, so that the stove would not light and there was no way of finding out what was wrong except by pulling it to pieces and rebuilding it.

There were other tricks of a similar kind. Besides, stoves of the same design differed from each other in the way they warmed up and gave off their heat, and in length of life. And so by tradition the people in our parts stood rather in awe of stovemakers and went out of their way to please them. One must also take into account what a large place, both literally and figuratively, the stove

used to occupy in the old peasant home. It was not only a source of warmth, not only a kitchen in itself, but a bakery, a drying cupboard, a bath-house, a laundry, and finally the cosy nook for a well-earned rest after a long day's work in the cold, after a journey, or simply when it was a matter of curing various aches and pains. To put the thing in a nutshell, no stove means no home. That I have learned by experience, and of late I have thought so much and so deeply about stoves and stovemakers that I could probably write a thesis on the subject.

I had been given a place to live just across the road from the school. It was a peasant's cottage attached to two similar cottages in which other teachers lived. My cottage was divided into two rooms and the partition came in the middle of a big two-piece stove which jutted out into the front room as a cooking range, and into the other half of the cottage as a huge Dutch-type stove. And it was this stove that for a long time caused me great vexation and misery, verging at times on utter despair. In class, during lessons, in any place, in public or alone, at any occupation, I had only to think of the house I lived in, and the stove in that house, and I would feel that my thoughts were getting muddled, and that I couldn't concentrate, and that I was turning into an embittered and unhappy man.

It was very difficult, almost impossible to get that stove going. The range could be heated after a fashion, though for me, who was living temporarily without my family, the range was not of much importance. But as soon as we ventured to light the Dutch stove to heat the back room, where I worked and slept, we had to open the windows and doors to let out the smoke that filled the whole house. When I first saw the care-taker struggling vainly with it, I tried to light the stove myself, but the same thing happened to me. Smoke poured out of the door, out of the fire-box, seeped through hidden chinks round the chimney and even found its way

out of the rings of the cooking range in the front room. It couldn't have smoked worse if I had forgotten to open the flue.

Many were the tricks we tried to light this stove, drawing on the whole wealth of experience and resource of people who had to deal with ten or more school stoves that were constantly in use.

The care-taker Ivanovna and her husband, Fyodor Matveyev, a cripple, were real experts at the job. Each had his own method or system, quite different from the other's but equally efficient. Briefly the difference between them could be stated like this. Ivanovna started with fire, and Fyodor with wood. I learned both these methods thoroughly. Ivanovna, a nimble, competent little woman, would light a curled bit of birchbark, a handful of shavings, and a few scraps of newspaper or wood chips in an otherwise empty stove and by gradually adding handfuls of chips and shavings would build up a strong lively flame on which the logs could be piled until there was no room for more.

Fyodor, on the other hand—mainly, I suppose, because he was a cripple and could not move about quickly—preferred to build up the wood first in the shape of a cage or a tent, carefully selecting the pieces of wood and arranging them as if he were solving some complex problem of design. And only when he had done this would he set fire to his structure with birchbark, shavings or scraps of paper. And the result was just as good as his wife's. The stove would get going quickly, the wood would burn evenly, there would never be any fumes, and the stove never cooled before it should. But my stove gave equally bad results no matter what the method.

I began to think quite seriously that some trick, like the ones that used to be played in the old days, had gone into the making of it.

In my misfortune I gradually found out the whole history of this unlucky stove. It turned out that no one

wanted to live in this cottage because of it. The history teacher, so I was told, had put up with it for a while, then run away. In the summer Ksenia Arkadievna, the maths teacher, had lived there while the next-door house was being done up, but in the autumn she had moved out even before the decorators had finished.

The stove had originally been built by German prisoners of war, after which it had twice been rebuilt by various unknown stovemakers, but always with the same ill luck. It was a ticklish matter for me to propose to the head master that the stove should be rebuilt once more. But it would have to be done eventually, only I didn't want the fourth attempt to be a failure.

I had been told that there was one man in the district, a certain Yegor Yakovlevich, who could build a stove that was guaranteed to work, but lately he had been very unwilling to take on such jobs; he had his railwayman's pension to live on, a house and garden of his own and he just wasn't interested. We sent him a note by his grandson in the fourth form but there was no answer. Fyodor went to see him once, and another time met him somewhere in the village. But it was always the same story, either he was ill or else he had undertaken some job elsewhere and couldn't promise anything in the future.

Still the matter couldn't be put off any longer. The November holiday was over and winter was coming on. Now I could only get to sleep in my room because of my experience of sleeping in the trenches; and I had to correct my pupils' dictations and compositions at school, in the teachers' common room, when everyone else had gone home. On top of everything, I was very much afraid that my wife Lolya, in spite of all my stern warnings, might suddenly descend on me with our five-month-old son before I could get the place in order.

The whole wretched business quite wore me out. It was not only the stove that got on my nerves, but all the

talk and speculation about it that went on among the other members of the staff, the head master, the caretakers and even, I was sure, the pupils as well, for children always know all about their teachers' private lives. Even now that the whole silly story of the stove is over and done with, I feel I can't make light of it in the telling, and that I discuss it with a seriousness it scarcely deserves. But just ask anybody, particularly a housewife who has to make do with stove heating, how much a bad stove means to her in her everyday life, what an effect it has on her temper, on her work, and she will tell you that a bad stove can turn you grey before your time. And besides, I had to think of all this trouble with the stove from the point of view of my wife Lolya, a town-bred woman, and a young mother to boot, who would have to live with me in this house.

One morning I was wakened earlier than usual by the reflected light of snow that had fallen overnight and a clear, simple and hopeful solution occurred to me.

I remembered the local military commandant's office and the major I had talked to there when I had called to register as an officer of the Reserve. What a fool I was not to have thought of it before. I would go and ask him to help me. All he would have to do would be to look up his files of people liable for service and find someone who had his name down as a stovemaker, and that would be the man for me.

The major received me in his tiny cubby-hole of an office divided from the rest of the big log-walled room by a boarded partition.

He had a plain worried face with wrinkles that folded up under his thick dark hair and made his forehead low and narrow and gave him a very fierce expression. And now that face lengthened with sympathetic understanding.

"Well, that's not so easy," he began, lighting a cigarette, "it's not a very common trade. It would be differ-

ent if you wanted a cobbler or a smith. But a stove-maker. . . ." Suddenly he smiled, exposing his big nicotine-stained teeth and broad upper gum. "Every soldier is his own stovemaker. I'll have a look."

It turned out that there were some stovemakers, but one of them was disabled and had only one arm, another lived too far away, a third was chairman of a big collective farm, so there was no point in going to him, and the last one had only been born in 1926. The major himself said a stovemaker ought to be older than that. There were other candidates whom we also rejected for one reason or another.

"I'll tell you what to do," the major said, after he had heard all about my troubles. "You go and see that miracle-worker Yegor Yakovlevich yourself. I've also heard he's a very fine craftsman. Go and talk to him. And if it doesn't work, come back here and we'll think up something." And again he gave me that big toothy smile of his, furtively covering his mouth with his hand, as people who have lost a front tooth do when they smile, particularly women.

This last suggestion of his, for all the sympathy he had shown, seemed to me nothing more than ordinary non-committal politeness.

The next day I set off along the muddy verge of the main road through the village to see Yegor Yakovlevich. The snow had fallen on unfrozen earth, and there was nothing left of it except in the gardens and yards where no one walked.

It was early and I was glad there were so few people about. I didn't want anyone to see me and know where I was going. I felt as though I were wearing boots that were too tight for me, that they were pinching me, and that though I tried to hide the fact, everyone knew about it and was sorry for me—sorry but at the same time a little amused. If there is anything I dislike it's being the object of pitying amusement. And I think I had been much more

sensitive about it since I became a married man, the head of a family; I shouldn't really have cared at all if I had been just a bachelor.

But now I walked along feeling that the old woman in rubber boots by the well, and the girl with a loaf of bread under her arm and chewing a bit of it, and the two little boys who greeted me at the cross-roads, all knew not only where I was going, but also that I had not long been married, that I was inexperienced and lacked confidence in arranging my domestic affairs, and perhaps they even knew that my mother-in-law, who was a doctor in town, a very handsome woman, by no means old, and still rather unwilling to acknowledge the fact that she was a grandmother, had no very great respect for me, and that I was either shy or afraid of her. And that when we had been living in her flat Lolya and I and the baby had occupied the smaller room, while she had the big separate room all to herself.

I had little faith in the success of my mission, for I already had a picture in my mind of Yegor Yakovlevich as an old man with many ailments and little incentive to earn money. There is nothing worse than asking someone to do something he doesn't want to do or has no need of doing.

I turned off down a sloping slippery path along a fence that one had to cling to for safety and, entering a gate, went up to Yegor Yakovlevich's glassed-in veranda.

The veranda door was locked. I looked in and saw that the floor was strewn with cabbages, beet and carrots. A long severe face with a straggling beard appeared at one of the windows and a hand signalled to me that the entrance was on the other side.

I went round the house, climbed a muddy flight of steps and, for propriety's sake, knocked at a heavy door padded with rags.

"Pull it!" a hoarse yet powerful voice called from within. "Pull it!"

I entered a large kitchen with two windows. At a table by the right-hand window sat an old man—not really old but of a pretty good age, with a long, stern, rather sallow and unhealthy face and a wispy beard that had once been ginger but was now a brownish grey. On the table were a samovar, the remains of a meal (yesterday's presumably) and an empty vodka bottle. The man was calmly, and with what seemed to me deliberate disregard of my presence, slicing an apple into a glass of tea. So this was Yegor Yakovlevich.

"Can't do it," he said briefly and with a kind of cold sadness, almost before I had explained what I had come about.

I was standing on the doorstep and I could either take a chair at the table, if he offered it, or I could sit down on a wooden bench by the door, which was cluttered with boxes, felt boots, flower-pots, and other odds and ends. I could take a seat there without invitation, although conversation would be difficult, like trying to talk to someone across a street.

Nevertheless I sat down on the bench and again began expounding my request, trying, of course, to put in a word here and there about his great reputation as a stove-maker. I deliberately attempted to present my troubles with the stove in a humorous light, putting all the emphasis on my own helplessness and inexperience in such matters.

But he treated all this as something in the nature of things and of no interest whatsoever. He didn't interrupt me, but the effect was as if he had said: "You can go on talking just as long as you like, it's all the same to me, while I'm having my tea." He didn't even look at me, being more occupied with looking out of the window at the muddy uninviting street, at the bushes in his garden and the wet discomfort of the yard, all of which is a pleasant enough sight when you are sitting in your favourite corner drinking tea in the warmth of a good reliable

stove. Obviously he knew the value of his old man's morning hour for tea and a smoke and leisurely, untroubled contemplation.

I soon began to feel that the kitchen was very much overheated. "Advertisement," I thought, and added to my discourse yet another servile compliment about how warm and nice it was to come in out of the cold into such a well-heated house.

"No, I won't take it on," he interrupted me again, moving aside his glass and saucer and proceeding to smoke.

"But Yegor Yakovlevich!"

"Yegor Yakovlevich, Yegor Yakovlevich," he mimicked me idly, pointedly ignoring the flattery implied in my zealous use of his name and patronymic. "I've told you I can't do it. And that's all."

It would be true to say that no district or even regional inspector of education or any other highly placed official with secretaries, telephones, and a queue of people waiting to see him could have spoken to me with such aloofness and languid arrogance. No matter how severe and remote, he would have had to give some sort of explanation as to why he was unable to satisfy my request.

"Why not, Yegor Yakovlevich?"

"Because," he replied in the same melancholy and impressive tone, "there's only one Yegor Yakovlevich and too many people wanting him to do things. I've only got two hands, you know." He held out his big bony hands with wrists protruding from the short sleeves of his much-washed vest and tapped his lofty forehead with his finger. "Two hands and one head, that's all."

These gestures were of an explanatory nature, as though specially adapted to the level of my intelligence, and they showed that Yegor Yakovlevich was far from underestimating his own importance.

"But, Yegor Yakovlevich," I ventured, "if it's the payment you're worried about, for my part I'm quite willing...."

"Payment's got nothing to do with it!" He gave a careless wave of his big heavy hand. "Everyone knows how much I charge. What I'm saying is I won't take it on. Do it for one person and someone else will come asking. So it's better not to do it for anyone, then no one will feel hard done by. There was a man here yesterday," he indicated the vodka bottle with the cigarette in his left hand, "tried everything to persuade me. . . ."

"But perhaps you could, Yegor Yakovlevich?"

"I've told you already," he again lifted that heavy-boned hand to the empty bottle, almost touching it with his little finger, "there was a man here yesterday. . . ."

He indicated this empty bottle with such conviction as evidence of some suppliant visitor that I found myself regarding it almost as a living person who, like myself, was also in dire need of Yegor Yakovlevich's good will.

And then I realized a simple fact that should have occurred to me at the outset.

"Well, what about it, Yegor Yakovlevich?" I said resolutely, approaching the table, "suppose we make a day of it? . . ." I lifted the bottle gently to make my meaning clear.

Yegor Yakovlevich looked up at me, his light-blue eyes slightly bloodshot with age, and the shadow of a smile appeared on his pale lips.

"I don't use it of a morning." And in the tone of this refusal there was not only aloofness but didactic disapproval. "I never use it of a morning," he repeated even more firmly and leaned on the table to get up, evidently wishing to show that the audience was over. "Of course, there was a man here yesterday. . . ."

And I decided that to him I was simply "a man," like the one who stood on the table between us in the shape of the empty bottle. There were many of us and only one Yegor Yakovlevich.

He saw me into the porch and, standing at the open door, for some reason made a parting remark that contained

a touch of sympathy for my disappointment: "If I happen to be passing I may drop in."

"Please do," I responded mechanically, though by now I couldn't see why in the world he should do so.

I left in the very depths of despair. I felt as if I had tried to do something low and mean and had been caught in the act. Why had I gone to this man, begging and wheedling at the expense of my dignity? Let others do that, it was not my job. But what was I to do? Wait until the head master "took the matter up personally," until one of the stovemakers who were supposed to be doing something at the station had time for me, until my wife after some disagreement with her mother decided that it would be better to live in a barn than without her husband and arrived before anything was ready?

The more I thought about the situation the more depressed I became and since I could think of no one to put the blame on I began to grumble about bad management in general.

Here we were building unique blast-furnaces out of hundreds of different kinds of brick, erecting buildings that would stand for centuries as memorials to our life and work on earth, examples to posterity of the greatness of our interests and aspirations, but as for building a stove, an ordinary stove like the ones they must have had way back in the days of Kiev Rus, a simple heating installation for the home of a working intellectual, a teacher of Russian language and literature, that was an impossible task!

I walked home building up an absolutely irrefutable argument to the effect that such a situation was quite intolerable and utterly abnormal. The phrases came into my head one after another, lyrically impassioned, bitterly sarcastic, full of conviction, truth and clarity. Soon I was no longer telling myself these things, I was composing a speech that I was to deliver to a large audience somewhere, or in an interview with some very highly-placed personage.

Or perhaps it was an article for the press, fervently and honestly drawing attention to the problem of providing for the needs of the rural intelligentsia. And I didn't stop there. I began to touch on the existing forms and methods of instruction, and so on and so forth. Little by little without realizing it I got away from my stove.

I felt a tremendous desire to talk to someone about all these things, to share my penetrating observations and irrefutable arguments, to recite aloud the purple passages of my mental tirade, throwing in a quotation here and there as if they had occurred to me on the spur of the moment.

I went to see the major without any thought of his promise to "think up something" about the stove. He lived not far from his office in a semi-detached wooden house with a porch exactly similar to the one next door.

I was told that he had already gone off to work, and it was there I found him, in his quiet little office. He rose to meet me, quickly closing a thick notebook and pushing it away into his desk. The excitement on my face produced by physical and mental exertion must have made him think I had been successful.

"Well, how's it going?"

I told him of my visit, and now everything struck me as rather funny, and much to my own surprise I found myself giving a humorous description of Yegor Yakovlevich and the self-important air he had adopted as he sat there drinking tea and turning down my request. I even imitated his gesture at the bottle: "There was a man here yesterday. . . ." And we enjoyed the joke together.

"Well," said the major, "it looks as if I'll have to build you a stove myself."

"How do you mean?"

"Out of bricks!" He laughed, showing his big teeth and lifting his hand to his mouth.

It was only then that I noticed something rather likeable and rather touching about that smile of his. It immediately transformed his gloomy worried face.

"You mean you want to remake the stove yourself?"

"Yes, myself. I'd give the job to my assistant but he couldn't do it." The major seemed to find a certain satisfaction in observing my confusion. "Tomorrow's Saturday, isn't it? We'll start tomorrow evening then."

It was all quite simple and yet at the same time a little embarrassing. After all the major was in a sense my commanding officer, and it was hardly the thing for him to hire himself out to me as a stovemaker.

"Don't you trust me? You've been to my house, haven't you? Didn't you see the stove? Made it myself. The wife likes it."

"I do, of course, I'm very grateful. But then we must reach some sort of agreement."

"About my fee?" he prompted me with a cheerful readiness. "Don't worry, we'll strike a bargain all right."

"But hadn't we better . . ."

"We'd better drop that subject. A fine thing that'd be—the district military commandant supplementing his salary by building stoves on the quiet! I'd like to know what headquarters would say if they heard about that!"

"But suppose they hear you are making stoves?"

"Let them. That's nobody's business but my own. I made this myself, too." He passed his hand over his tunic and trousers. "I get the cloth and make it up myself. I make all my children's outdoor clothes too, I could do the same for you."

The following evening he arrived at my place with a bundle under his arm. It contained an old pair of summer uniform trousers and a tunic, and also a stovemaker's hammer, a metal rule, a coil of wire, and some lengths of string.

He inspected the stove and the cooking range from all angles, then placed a chair in the middle of the room facing the stove, sat down and lighted a cigarette while he contemplated it.

"Hm . . ." he said after a time.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. It'll make a lot of mess."

"That doesn't matter. The care-taker will clean up afterwards."

"Have you got any wood?" he asked.

"Yes. But what for?"

"To light it with."

"When you've built the new stove, you mean?"

"No, first of all we'll try and light this one."

I thought he must be joking, or else he had forgotten all I had told him about my stove.

"But you'll only smoke the place out. Don't you believe me?"

"Of course I do. But we've got to light it all the same. Where's the wood?"

There was some wood in the corridor, including several charred logs that had been in the stove already.

The major stripped off his tunic and set about the job with such assurance that I began to wonder if Ivanovna and I had perhaps overlooked something that had been responsible for our failure in the past. Now the major would light the stove and it would turn out to be quite all right. That would be excellent, but what a fool I should look after all the fuss I had made!

To my great relief the stove smoked just as much as it had when lighted by Ivanovna, Fyodor, or myself.

"No, Comrade Major," I said.

"What to you mean 'no'?"

"It won't burn."

"All the better. That's just what we want!" he said with a laugh. "What we want to know is why it doesn't burn."

The kindling had burnt up; the thicker wood had merely blackened without even catching; the place was full of smoke as usual. The major went outside to look at the chimney. I went out too. It was still light.

How many times after lighting the stove had I run outside to see if a wisp of smoke was coming from the chim-

ney. It took me back to my childhood. As a boy, I remember I would sometimes stare very hard at the top of our chimney, perhaps just to see whether they had lighted the samovar at home, and the air would seem to quiver above the chimney but no smoke would appear.

The major went back into the house, took a length of string with a weight tied to the end of it and climbed the step-ladder on to the roof. I watched him lower the weight down the chimney and start fishing with it. It was just like someone trying to hook a lost pail out of a well.

Just then a tall man in a half-length coat with a rusty-looking fur collar and diagonal pockets on the chest stopped in the road and holding his left hand to the peak of his cap stared up at our roof. In his right hand he carried a light stick. When the major pulled his string out of the chimney and climbed down the roof, the man approached us and I saw that it was Yegor Yakovlevich. He nodded to me and, addressing the major, asked:

"Well, how goes it?"

"God knows. There doesn't seem to be anything in the chimney but it won't burn."

One might have thought that they had known each other for a long time and were both working on this troublesome stove together. We went into the house, which still reeked of smoke, and the major and Yegor Yakovlevich began talking about the stove. They kept referring to "him," meaning the unknown craftsman who had built it in the first place.

"Deserves a good hiding for a job like this," the major suggested with gloomy conviction.

But the old stovemaker retorted pacifically: "A hiding wouldn't do him any good. The point is he wasn't a stove-maker at all, must have been a cobbler or something. Linking up two chimneys, one from the range and the other from the stove, was a bit too much for his understanding." While he spoke, Yegor Yakovlevich drew his stick round the stove like a pointer, tapping it and leaving marks on the bricks. "Yes, just a cobbler, that's what he was."

He said this, as if comparing the trade of cobbler with something immeasurably more complex, with art or poetry, for instance.

The two stovemakers lighted cigarettes and went on discussing the problem at length. They were like doctors discussing a patient quite unconcerned by the presence of friends or relatives, who only understood half of their terminology, their unfinished phrases, their shoulder-shrugging and mysterious gestures.

"If you don't know how to do a thing, don't take it on," Yegor Yakovlevich concluded not without an allusion, so it seemed to me, to present company.

The major did not take offence. "I'm no stovemaker," he said, "I had to have a stove for my own place, so I made one. But when a man's in a jam like this," he nodded at me, "someone ought to help him, don't you think?"

"Of course, they should," said Yegor Yakovlevich, gratified at the major's modesty. "But help him so that he won't have to ask for help any more."

"Yegor Yakovlevich!" I suddenly felt a fresh surge of hope. "Yegor Yakovlevich, that's quite true. What about it?"

And the major backed me up in the best possible fashion:

"I'd be your assistant, Yegor Yakovlevich. It would do me lots of good to work under a master of the trade like you, really it would!" His mouth split open in that toothy smile and he covered it with the hand in which he held his cigarette. It is usually the plain folk who in the end find their way unerringly to the hearts of the most eccentric and aloof.

"Well, what am I to do with you? Assistance must be rendered," said the stovemaker and that "assistance must be rendered" sounded just like the resolutions that came down to us from district and regional headquarters: "assistance must be rendered" in this or that sphere.

Yegor Yakovlevich sat down on the chair in front of the stove just as the major had sat before him, and stared at it, muttering to himself: "Assistance. Assistance must be

rendered. . . .” And with a sweep of his stick first in the direction of the major, then at the stove, he said with a kind of deliberate drawl: “Well, my friend, for tomorrow I want you to pull this stove down and pile the bricks neatly, so none of them get broken. Understand?”

I noticed that he addressed the major familiarly, as if he already considered him his subordinate, although he must have noticed the major’s tunic with its badges of rank hanging on the back of the chair; and in this too he was just like any of our district or regional chiefs.

The major said he would go up on the roof straight away, and I, of course, expressed my readiness to help him, but Yegor Yakovlevich said there was no need.

“The stack’s got nothing to do with it, the old one will do for us, only it’s got to be propped up.”

Neither I nor the major knew how chimney-stacks were propped up. So Yegor Yakovlevich gripped his stick at each end and explained the task in a very popular manner, again addressing his remarks only to the major:

“Take a couple of good beams, not less than two inches thick. Find the shoulders of the stack in the attic and get those beams propped under them. . . . You can prop up a whole stove like that if necessary. What would you do if you had to pull down a stove on the ground floor and there was another one on top of it upstairs? Pull down both of them just for the sake of one? That won’t do. . . .”

And even from this first piece of practical instruction I could see that the old man had assumed his position of seniority not without reason. Before I had time to raise the question of payment he had departed with a nod, leaving rather a mess on the floor from his felt boots and home-made galoshes cut out of the inner tube of a motor tyre.

By the evening the major and I had pulled down the stove, leaving the range untouched and propping up the stack as instructed. I had been afraid that this propping up might lead to some disaster, but the major coped with

the task with a confidence that belied his inexperience. As far as I could see, he was one of those excellent fellows you often find in the army, who will tackle any job fearlessly, basing themselves on the well-known proposition that a man can do anything if he tries.

He made the props we needed out of a sixty-millimetre plank, by splitting it very neatly down the middle with an axe, which he then used like a plane to smooth down the two halves. With practised ease he freed the stove doors and dampers from the bricks and the wire loops holding them in place. It was easy and pleasant to work with him: he wasn't overbearing with his superior skill, never lost his temper, and his occasional jokes about my lack of skill were good-natured. We finished up by knocking together a box for the clay and making ready clay and sand so that everything should be handy for work, and while we were changing our clothes, the kettle boiled.

"I could do with some tea," the major agreed simply and we sat down together in the front kitchen, where it was cleaner. Over tea and cigarettes we got talking.

The major looked through my books, which I had brought in from the other room to save them from the dust, and, singling out a tattered volume of Nekrasov, remarked that it needed rebinding. And when I said it would be a difficult job to find a binder round here, he volunteered to rebind it himself and even to teach me how to do it. Of course it wouldn't be the same without a proper cutting press, he said, but the book would keep better. He loved books with that gentle respect and care that one finds only among the humblest readers. He went all through my tiny library, volume by volume, paying most attention to the poetry. I remarked that he must be fond of poetry, a thing which was not so common among people who didn't, so to speak, specialize in literature. He smiled shyly and yet with a certain defiance that was emphasized by the joking arrogance in his tone, and said: "I write poetry myself. And publish it too!"

"That's splendid," I said and, not knowing what else to say, asked: "Do you use a pseudonym, if you don't mind my asking? I don't think I have met your name in the press."

"No, I use my own name. But my stuff isn't published very often. Besides it only appears in the regional newspaper and in *Soviet Soldier*. You don't get them round here."

Having said this he seemed to grow a little sad, and this prompted me to show a greater interest in his poetry. I asked him to show me some of it one day. He at once consented and began reciting it to me by heart.

Here I should mention that I don't refer to the major by name because his poems actually are printed and someone might find out that he and the hero of my story are one and the same person. And I shouldn't like that to happen at all, for I am describing him just as he is in life. I tried to invent a name for him in this story but there was something distasteful about it and I couldn't find anything that would suit him, so I have decided to leave him simply as "the major."

The major recited several of his poems, I don't remember them; they resembled so many other poems that appear in the papers about the virgin lands, soldiers' heroism, the peace movement, hydro-power stations, dams, girls, little children growing up to live in the age of communism, and of course, poems about poetry. And the resemblance was not due simply to an inadvertent trick of imitation, which a poet would wish to avoid; it seemed as if every verse had been written for the express purpose of sounding like other people's, to conform to some ideal of what proper poetry should be. I couldn't tell him this: I felt too well disposed towards him on account of his kindness, his comradely sympathy, his jack-of-all-trades ability and his quite unaffected modesty. I said something about a rather weak rhyme; it was quite an insignificant remark.

"No," he replied quietly, "it's not a matter of rhyme. . . ." Arranging the books in a neat pile on the edge of the table, he repeated thoughtfully: "It's not the rhyming that bothers me. . . ." The reply left something sadly unstated; perhaps he himself knew something about his poems that I had not mentioned and, so it seemed to him, had failed to understand. And suddenly he began talking as if he were justifying himself and trying to answer in advance someone's objections to his poetry:

"You know I'm not such a fool as to think this has any real merit. But I'm not afraid of work, I'm stubborn as a mule and I can go without food or sleep to do something I want to do. I started writing when I was at the war, not while in action, of course, but during my hospital spells. A wound for me meant a new book of poems—a sort of creative leave." He laughed at his own joke and went on: "And I was lucky. I got wounded four times, not exactly lightly, but not very seriously, just about right for six weeks away from the front. Just enough time to have a good read and a scribble and then back to the front. And my luck held out. And the job I've got now gives me a clear day off once a week. Then there are the evenings and nights. Frankly speaking, I just can't drop it, I must master a thing once I've started it. It's like this stove business. Do you think I ever learned to be a stovemaker, ever took a course in it? I had to build a stove, there was no one to do it for me, and, quite frankly, I couldn't have paid him if there had been—I have a family of six, you know. So what did I do? I made it twice. First time I just did it roughly, heated it up, found out where the secret lay, then I took it to pieces again like we did this one—that one wasn't dry, of course—and then made a fairly good job of it. Yegor Yakovlevich might find something wrong with it, but it works." And again he gave a laugh, but rather an ambiguous one: there was a touch of bravado in it, but at the same time he was quite ready to dismiss the whole thing as merely an amusement.

In the course of our talk it turned out that we had been on neighbouring fronts and, relative though it was, this fact of being neighbours in the past brought us closer together, rather like two men attracted to each other by the equally relative fact of their coming from the same place. I walked home with him a little of the way, then came back and was a long time going to sleep in my cold and dusty room with its dismantled stove. It occurred to me that this pleasant man, busy with his army work and burdened with a large family, ought not to wear himself out trying to write poetry. It was clear to me that his verses were not really an expression of a deep inner need to say something that could only be said in verse. To write about the war as he did, he need never have spent four years at the front and have been wounded four times. In his verses about the children of socialism there wasn't a trace of the author—a father of five children; in the poem about the virgin lands the only thing I could remember was the line: "virgin soil would yield to toil"; and finally, even in the poems about poetry, there was nothing but a repetition of the axiom that poetry is needed in battle and labour.

Perhaps he wrote all this because he knew he had the ability to master any new craft not only without special training but even without any special inclination. But no, the urge to write must have a very strong hold over him; one thing was certain, that much disappointment and bitterness awaited him on the path he had chosen.

I was awakened by a tap at the window above my head—a gentle but insistent tapping of a stick. It was Yegor Yakovlevich. I switched on the light—for it was still pitch dark—and let him in. He was wearing the same short coat with a fur collar and carrying the same pointer-like stick as before. He had no tools or overalls with him. While I dressed and tidied up, he smoked and coughed, blew his nose and spat, and examined everything that we had left in readiness for the job.

"Having a good rest, eh? A good rest!" he repeated between his coughing and nose-blowing.

Evidently he was very pleased that he had caught me in bed and arrived before the major. But the major did not keep the old man waiting more than ten minutes.

"Today's a day off after all," he apologized with a smile as he unwrapped his overalls.

"For some people it's a day off, but for you and me it's a working day," the old man responded coldly and his manner of address was formal, for the major was still in his army tunic with his badges of rank on the shoulder-straps. "It's a pity you didn't wet the clay overnight. We'll have a lot more mixing to do now. Wouldn't do any harm to have some warm water either. Not because we're afraid of spoiling our hands but to make the mixture stick better." He always called the mess of clay and sand the "mixture," as though ranking it with cement. Grunting, he squatted down over the foundation of the ruined stove, measured it up with his stick and said:

"Four by four—that'll be quite enough."

"Here you are, Yegor Yakovlevich," the major said, offering him a folding rule.

The old man waved his stick.

"I've got all the measurements we need here. If you don't trust me you can measure it again yourself."

But no one did measure it again. It was decided that the foundation of the stove was to be four bricks long and four bricks wide. Yegor Yakovlevich transferred his stick to his left hand and with his right quickly arranged the bricks in a square, then stood up and pointed at them with his stick:

"That's the way you will lay them." Then he scooped a lump of the clay the major and I had mixed out of the box, squeezed it in his hand, frowned and tossed it back. "A bit more sand. No, not that much! I said a bit. That's enough. Now mix it up well."

We started work, and right from the beginning each of us found his own place. I mixed the clay and carried the

bricks, the major did the bricklaying, and Yegor Yakovlevich supervised everything, so to speak, using his stick as a pointer, now sitting down, now standing up, and coughing and smoking all the time. Sometimes he seemed to forget the stove and plunged into a detailed and edifying discourse on the virtues of early rising, on the necessity of strict abstention from alcohol before work, on his cough, which was particularly troublesome first thing in the morning, and on the qualities of various kinds of bricks and many other materials. But I noticed that all the time he kept a vigilant eye on the work so that not a single brick went into place without close inspection and sometimes even an apparently casual tap from his stick. Yegor Yakovlevich was still wearing his warm coat, but the major and I, though we were wearing only our old tunics, were already warm from the work and mopping our brows and noses on our sleeves, for our hands were smeared with clay. Yegor Yakovlevich noticed this and did not miss the opportunity of giving us a little professional instruction on the matter.

“Stop for a breather, friend, have a smoke,” he said. And with crafty generosity he offered the major his packet of cigarettes. The major straightened up and spread his arms helplessly. “Aha! Nothing to take it with, eh? Got to go and wash your hands first? Is that it? Well, that shows you’re not a stovemaker yet.” He pushed a cigarette into the major’s mouth, lighted it for him and went on: “Why should I have both hands in the mixture? No, I only need one there, the right hand, and my left ought to be in the dry. Look.” He pushed the major away with his stick, put it aside and, deftly shaping back his sleeves, took a brick in his left hand, dipped his right in the pail of water, then scooped up a small lump of clay. “Look! I place the brick with the left hand, then put the clay on and smooth it out with the right. See?” He quickly laid a row of bricks and, though it made him slightly out of breath, it was obvious that he used a lot less energy in doing so than

the major. "Your left hand should always be in the dry. And it's not just a matter of being able to light up for a smoke and blow your nose without any trouble; it makes the work cleaner too. You want a nail—here's your nail, you want your glasses or anything else, you want to button something or unbutton it—it's easy." He showed us how he could do all these things with his left hand. "But your way you're stuck, like a scarecrow on a cabbage patch."

At this the stovemaker smiled, very pleased with his lesson and therefore prepared to allow his final words to be taken as a joke. I was very glad for the major: far from taking offence, he watched the demonstration with a delighted smile, covering his mouth with his hand, which he kept at a distance so as not to smudge himself.

He made an attempt to adopt Yegor Yakovlevich's method, but soon found it necessary to transfer a brick from left hand to right, and had to give in.

"No, Yegor Yakovlevich, you'll have to let me do it my own way."

"Carry on, carry on," the old man agreed, "it doesn't all come at once. I've known plenty of stovemakers, quite good ones too, who worked like you all their lives."

I am sure he would have been displeased and disappointed if the major had managed to acquire his style straight away. Perhaps the major realized this and did not try very hard. Then Yegor Yakovlevich, who was evidently in the mood for teaching us, placed two bricks edge to edge, and, holding his hand over them as if to pick them up, suggested to the major: "There, pick them up with one hand."

But the major burst out laughing and wagged his finger at Yegor Yakovlevich.

"Aha, that's an old trick, I know that one."

"You do, do you? Well, I should think so too. Some can't do it, you know. I've had them betting a bottle of vodka on it before now."

The trick, as they showed me, was to slip your index finger unnoticed between the bricks; then you could pick them up and move them about without difficulty.

The mention of vodka reminded me of breakfast, the more so since it was already quite light and nearly nine o'clock. I said I should have to go out for a while and went off to the station where I bought bread, sausage, one or two tins, and a bottle of vodka at a stall. On the way back I called in at Ivanovna's and she gave me a whole bowl of salted cucumbers, which in the fresh air smelled appetizingly of garlic and fennel. I was glad of the chance to stretch my legs and my back, which was already aching with the work, and I imagined the major would take a rest while I was away. But when I got back I saw that the work had gone on without a break and the new stove had risen to the height of the range; the doors had already been wired in, and Yegor Yakovlevich, no longer in his coat, but wearing a woollen jersey, was laying the first arch of the vault, while the major had taken my place and was handing him the bricks. They worked well together and the major could scarcely keep up with the old man's cracking pace. And they were still arguing.

"A man ought to have only one talent," Yegor Yakovlevich was saying; true to his maxim, his left hand was still "in the dry."

His body in the tight jersey seemed almost puny in comparison with his big, long, heavy-wristed arms that reached out like the claws of a crayfish. The argument must have developed out of what they had been talking about before I left—about craftsmanship and style of work, but by this time it had gone far beyond its original boundaries.

"Only one talent. And if you haven't got a talent for a thing, don't go in for it. Don't botch. That's what I always say, and you bear it in mind."

"But why only one?" the major argued calmly and with a touch of superiority. "What about the Renaissance? Leonardo da Vinci?"

Obviously it was the first time Yegor Yakovlevich had heard these names in his life and he was annoyed at his own ignorance, but he was not going to give way.

"That we can't tell; you and I don't know what happened in those days."

"How do you mean, we don't know, Yegor Yakovlevich?" the major protested, looking round at me. "Everyone knows that Leonardo da Vinci was a painter, a sculptor, an inventor, and a writer as well. Ask our friend here."

I was obliged to confirm what the major said.

"Well, if he was, he was," the old man snapped, now that he was cornered. "But *when* was he? Centuries ago. When everyone was a jack of all trades."

"Is that one at me?"

"No, I'm speaking in general. Things have a different development these days, different machines, everything's different, my lad."

I was quite amazed at Yegor Yakovlevich's historical approach to the problem, and, saying so aloud, interrupted the argument and invited them to have a snack.

At table Yegor Yakovlevich flatly refused to drink.

"Later on, when we light her up. . . . You have one though," he told the major, "it won't do you any harm."

"Won't you have a drop too?"

"No, I can't. Not at work. I've got no one to do my thinking for me."

The major didn't insist, nor did he take offence.

"Well, I'll have a glass. Good health to you!"

The major and I had a drink. And our conversation again turned to literature. We touched on Mayakovsky, of whom the major spoke with adoration, quoting him by heart with such enthusiasm that he even forgot to cover his smile with his hand. And I wondered why a man with such a love for Mayakovsky should write such neat, tidy verses, imitating everything under the sun except his idol. But I didn't ask him about it and merely remarked that when studying Mayakovsky with my pupils I often came across

words and turns of phrase that broke all the rules of our native tongue. The major protested hotly and, half-annoyed, half-joking, dubbed me a conservative and dogmatist.

Yegor Yakovlevich ate listlessly, sipped his tea and maintained a proud and remote silence. If I haven't heard anything about all this and don't know anything about it, his whole appearance seemed to say, with his grunting, and coughing, it's only because I've no use for it and it doesn't interest me and it's probably just a lot of nonsense anyway. But when we mentioned Pushkin, he said:

"Pushkin was a great Russian poet." And he said it as if he alone knew it, as if he had reached this conclusion by his own intellect and was the first man in the world to make the discovery. "A great poet!" He sighed, then screwing up his eyes, he, too, recited in an exaggeratedly expressive tone:

*Tell me, Uncle, 'twas not in vain
That Moscow perished in the flame
And by the French was ta'en?*

"But that's Lermontov," the major laughed. The old man merely glanced sideways at him and continued:

*Some fights there were,
'Tis said, none fiercer!*

"But that's Lermontov's *Borodino*," the major interrupted him with cheerful indignation and nudged me with his elbow.

*All Russians with good cause acclaim
The day of Borodino's fame!*

Yegor Yakovlevich pronounced the final words loudly and emphatically and even jerked his finger at the major, as if to show him he had known what it was all the time. Then he went on, determined not to be interrupted:

"And *The Battle of Poltava*: 'Glow the East with a new dawn. . .'"

"Yes, that's Pushkin, you're right there," the major persisted. "Only it's part of a long poem called *Poltava*. But it's Pushkin all right."

"Did I say it wasn't Pushkin? Who else could have written a poem like that? Your Mayakovsky? Not likely, my lad."

"Mayakovsky's dead now. No one knows what other poems he might have written."

"Pah!" The old man waved his heavy hand with the greatest possible scepticism. "Pah!"

"Well, you are a tough nut, Yegor Yakovlevich!" The major shook his head perplexedly and lifted the wrinkles on his forehead to the very roots of his thick black hair. "A real tough nut."

The old man apparently enjoyed hearing himself so described, but he immediately made it clear that this was no news to him either.

"Well, I'm past seventy, thank the Lord. When you've lived as long as I have, then you'll be able to talk." This referred not only to the major but to me and the whole of our generation.

But even now the major could not resist a moment of triumph.

"You may be a tough nut, but *Borodino* was written by Lermontov."

Yegor Yakovlevich said nothing and, having thanked me for the meal, rose from the table noticeably depressed. I think he himself knew he had made a blunder over *Borodino*, but to admit it would have been as sharp a prick as admitting that he had never heard of Leonardo da Vinci. I was sorry for him, as one is always sorry for an old man who suffers defeat at the hands of those who have the advantage of education and a youthful memory.

After breakfast the work went ahead even faster. Both stovemakers started laying the bricks: Yegor Yakovlevich

on the kitchen side, the major in the back room, with me as their assistant. But the work proceeded in silence, save for a few remarks strictly concerning the job. Perhaps this was due to their recent argument, in which the major had obviously come off best, but it may have been because the work itself was becoming more and more intricate, now that various dampers, flues and vents had to be fixed and the range had to be connected up with the main flue—a task requiring particular concentration.

I did not try to draw the stovemakers out of their silence, for I had my work cut out to keep both of them supplied with bricks and clay. And when they took a rest, I made haste to prepare and arrange things so that I could manage more easily. The body of the new stove had by this time risen to the hole in the ceiling, where the old stack was propped up; smaller than its predecessor, it looked rather smart and unusual. The heating surfaces of the stove and the "mirror," its wall facing into the other room, were all one brick thick. When Yegor Yakovlevich began making a kind of cornice for it under the ceiling, the stove became even more handsome and I could already picture it whitewashed; it would be quite an adornment to the room when I had tidied up and arranged everything for Lolya's arrival. But would it heat properly?

For the work at the top some sort of ladder was needed and we used stools and even the table, covering it as best we could with newspapers. Only Yegor Yakovlevich worked at the top and now he was indeed king of the castle.

When he needed some bricks of a certain shape for the cornice, he told the major to shape them for him. The major spoiled one brick, then another, and looking very hot and uncomfortable, tried a third, but that, too, split into three pieces. I was expecting impatience and sarcastic remarks from Yegor Yakovlevich, but he seemed quite sympathetic over his assistant's failure:

"It's rubbishy brick. Call this brick? Here, let me have it."

He took the brick deftly in his left hand, which was still "in the dry," tossed it on his palm and with a light tap of the hammer, like cracking an egg-shell, split it in just the shape he needed. He did as well with the second brick, and the third, and all the bricks he needed, except that sometimes it took him one or two extra taps to produce the required result.

"That's the way to do it!" said the major. "That's the way, by Jove it is!"

But the old stovemaker wished to be magnanimous. He attributed the enviable accuracy of his blows to the fact that the bricks were of different quality.

"Some of them are not so bad." And yet he could not resist a sly remark: "Fancy having quite a run of good ones all at once...."

The major and I burst out laughing, and Yegor Yakovlevich laughed, too, and I saw that he was more than compensated for his defeat in the other sphere. We both kept him supplied and were quite lost in admiration at the way he put in one brick after another under the old stack until the props could be knocked out; and when they were, nothing terrible happened, and everything fitted like a glove, although Yegor Yakovlevich had not once used a square or ruler.

It was dusk by the time Yegor Yakovlevich climbed down grunting from his perch and the great moment of trying out the new stove arrived. I wanted to switch on the light but Yegor Yakovlevich protested.

"No need for it. Shan't we be able to see the fire?"

He settled himself in front of the stove, but this time on his knees instead of his haunches, sitting on the heels of his huge felt boots, like peasants usually sit in a sledge, or round a fire or common pot on the ground. Having arranged some shavings on the still damp grating, he struck a match, but did not apply it to them at once; instead he lit a ball of paper and pushed it into the ash-box underneath, and only then put the curling, almost burnt-

out match into the shavings. The paper burnt up quickly in the ash-box, but the fire in the stove was slow to start—I scarcely breathed as I watched it—but in the end it caught. In dead silence the three of us watched it. Now it was blazing up, merrily licking at the bigger chips. Yes, but it had been like that with the old stove too at this stage—what would happen now? Yegor Yakovlevich began putting on wood, arranging it as Ivanovna did; the fire gradually gained a firm hold on the logs; and so it went on, better and better. Yegor Yakovlevich rose heavily from his knees.

“Well, congratulations on your new stove,” he said and began washing his hands in the pail.

So that was why he had not let me switch on the light—to make the fire look better in the stove. Yegor Yakovlevich was a poet in his trade.

When the major and I had washed and changed, I with some misgivings brought up the question of what payment Yegor Yakovlevich expected. “Everybody knows how much I charge,” I remembered his words, but I was worried whether I had enough ready cash to settle up on the spot. The stove was burning splendidly, the big logs had been put on and they too had caught, and everything was going so well that I forgot to run out and look to see if the smoke was coming out of the chimney. It must be, if the stove wasn’t smoking in the room.

“Oh, never mind that,” Yegor Yakovlevich seemed to brush the question aside. “Never mind. . . .”

“No, no, Yegor Yakovlevich, please tell me what I owe you.”

“The same as him, fifty-fifty,” he replied in the same half-serious, half-joking manner, indicating the major. “We worked together. And you ought to get your share too: you helped us.”

“Yegor Yakovlevich,” the major intervened, “I’m here on quite a different basis, I’m not entitled to anything. I said

in advance I wouldn't take anything, as I'm not an expert."

"And I won't take anything because I *am* an expert. See? So there's no more to say! But if you want to have a drink in honour of the new stove, I won't refuse now."

I tried to insist that the payment would be no burden to me, and that most of it would be met by the school, but at this Yegor Yakovlevich cut in sternly and touchily:

"Now, you're on the wrong track there, as if I would take money from our school. . . . I'm not as hard up as all that, thank the Lord, I'm not going to allow that kind of thing. . . ."

Perhaps this touchiness of his sprang from the fact that the major had again stolen a march on him by refusing payment in advance, but in any case I had to drop the subject.

The major heard all this and, when we sat down at the table, he gazed at Yegor Yakovlevich with an amused yet embarrassed look, and finally asked:

"Yegor Yakovlevich, are you cross with me about something?" The question was unusual. "Perhaps I've done something to offend you?"

"No. Why do you ask?" the old man said in surprise, and, as though he had never seen the major before, stared at his tunic with its insignia of rank and treble row of medal ribbons.

"Why should I be? We did a good job together, I can't see what we've got to quarrel about. . . ."

Now Yegor Yakovlevich was addressing the major formally; evidently he considered him no longer a subordinate, as he had been during the work.

"All right then. You're a good man, Yegor Yakovlevich, not to mention your skill at your trade. Let's have a drink—here's to you!"

"And the same to you!" They clinked glasses as though there had after all been something between them and now they were both glad to be reconciled.

At that point Ivanovna knocked at the door. She had seen the smoke coming out of the chimney. Fyodor limped in after her. They both drank with us, then praised the stove and praised Yegor Yakovlevich to his face. He drank three glasses, grew red in the face, and started boasting that he could build not only ordinary Russian and Dutch stoves, but Swedish stoves, and a round *burak*, and a fire-place, and a steam-heating boiler, and that no one else could do it as well, because he had the talent for it and talent was a rare thing. Perhaps he became a little boring and a bit too noisy, but when I wanted to pour him another glass he covered it firmly with his hand: "Had my ration!" And began to take his leave.

I volunteered to see him home, not only because he was obviously slightly tipsy, but because I was still hoping to be able to get him to agree about some sort of payment. But he thanked me ceremoniously and said good-bye.

"See me home? I'm not a girl. . . ."

"Well, he is a tough nut, I must say!" said the major when he had gone.

We sat on together for a while talking. Ivanovna brought in some fresh wood for the next day and started tidying up the room. The stove began to dry out and even heated the room a little, and I felt so content that it seemed to me that I should never run into any more trouble for the rest of my days.

Translated by Robert Darglish

TO THE READER

The Foreign Languages Publishing House would be glad to have your opinion of this book, its translation and its design and any suggestions you may have for the future publications.

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