SOVIET ANTHOLOGY

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Selected and Edited by

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SIX RATS

MARK VOLOSOV

(*Translated by Alec Brown*)

THEY were caught to special order near Port-au-Prince. Our ship called at that Haiti port five days out from New York to coal and at the same time take in fresh fruit; juicy small pineapples, huge alligator pears tasting like clotted cream and bananas. The rats were 'specially selected', and practically each of them had its own distinguishing cast.

Their names are eloquent enough: Blackie, Grey Girl, Ginger, Giant, Fatty, and Tanker, who, being of exactly the same diameter throughout, head to tail, resembled an iron oil-drum.

For these six little animals of prey, which have no equal in the animal kingdom for strength, pluck, greed and even intelligence, the third steward paid twenty dollars, the huge cage included. The rats were exceptional specimens, but for that matter, their purpose too was quite unusual, and the outlay, speaking commercially, was 'a profitable investment'.

The cage, of thick three-millimetre wire, had a floor of thin, carefully planed, but not quite closely fitted planks. In spite of its considerable weight, the third steward himself carried his precious burden the two, if not more kilometres which separate the poor quarter of Port-au-Prince from the harbour. Then, at the wheel-house end of the upper deck, from packing-cases, ropes and tar-paulins an amphitheatre sheltered on all sides was constructed, and the steward with his own hands installed the cage. A handful of passengers who had not been minded to go ashore during the stay in Haiti and who happened at that moment to go up on the upper deck, viewed the whole business with some curiosity. Their astonishment would have increased a hundredfold had they known that the rats were installed on the vessel with the captain's know-ledge, if not with his approval.

Why were rats – choice rats, moreover – needed on a ship which already contained a multitude of their race? I shall tell you, but must first make a brief deviation.

The ship was the S.S. *Shikosha*, so called in honour of a town of the Middle West of that name, Shikosha in that particular Indian dialect meaning 'Level Prairie'. It was a vessel of some 15,000 tons displacement, pretty big for a tourist vessel running between New York and South America. We were bound for Ecuador. The usual course was as follows: the ship made straight for the Bahama Islands, scattered about the Tropic of Capricorn (the islands frequently serving for bunkering), then left Cuba to starboard, unless for some special reason a call there was scheduled, then continued to Port-au-Prince in south-west Haiti, where it would lie some twelve to fourteen hours, after which, entering the equatorial zone, it would avoid Jamaica and by way of the Panama Canal reach the Pacific, where it steered straight for an Ecuador port.

During the summer months there are few well-to-do Americans anxious to go to South America and shipping companies employ all manner of cunning devices not to have their ships idle. Tens of thousands of brilliantly coloured handbooks are distributed, lauding the comfort, service and amusements of the voyage itself and the ports of call, the variety of food provided, the beauties of South America and the cheapness of it all. Americans are particularly fond of the last. The moths fly straight to the candle, leave their own cool seaside places, buy special trunks to bring back souvenirs to sisters, aunts and partners ('see what we've brought you back from South America . . .') and off they go to the offices of shipping companies, where well-trained, obliging clerks 'draw up' planned voyages for them. However much an American may curse himself for daring the equatorial zone in tropical heat, he would never admit this to anyone else. Would anybody like to admit that instead of having a rest and entertainment, he had been stewed in his own juice and, despite the doctor's prohibition, swallowed a dozen bottles of cooling drinks a day?

The captain's lot was not to be envied! From considerations of economy the shipping company had cut down staffs. There was no third mate, no assistant radio-operator (though to satisfy the law, the purser was entered as one); and the seamen were expected to be carpenters, smiths, mechanics, etc. The eight firemen had to be content, even if they burst, with four assistants, and the three senior

stewards had to manage all the staff on their side – though, for that matter, this too was heavily cut.

Discipline on an American passenger ship falls little short of that on a man-of-war. Nothing very startling. The least peccadillo and it's good-bye to that ship. The company pays off the whole company, inclusive of service staff, at the end of every run and takes on men again on the very eve of sailing. Why feed the whole crowd for five or six unnecessary days and pay them wages into the bargain? On the basis of laws passed in the U.S.A. in England's day and still in force to-day, the captain may have any rebellious or disobedient man put in irons and kept in the hold on bread and water for from 24 hours to three days; or – much simpler, less bother – providing the local consul is informed, put him ashore at the first port. There's no hope then of returning to America! A man may die of starvation before he finds a captain who will take pity on him and consent to 'take him home'. Also, be it noted, the man will not have received a cent of his wages, though before being put ashore he will be compelled to sign for them.

On these murderous trips in the tropics, the atmosphere, as well as the air on the ship, becomes over-heated. The men are dissatisfied with their food ('do you bastards think we're going to feed you on oysters?'), the officers take it out of the men, the stoke-hole complains of the lack of cold water ('and we don't think much of the ventilation, boss!'). Worst of all are the passengers: they go mad with heat and boredom and there's no suiting them. They wolf piles of oranges and lemons, tons of ices and drink whole rivers of cooling drinks. They don't care a fig for the beauties of nature. Dancing is out of the question. The ladies' frocks cling quite indecently to legs and loins and their partners' paws leave imprints far from snow-white on silks, batistes and linens, while their collars turn to limp rags and those who are fat turn apoplectically purple. The ship's sole doctor and nurse rush about like lunatics, spreading an odour of valerian, ammonia and aromatic vinegars. The de-luxe passengers come near to attacking the captain with naked fists, wailing about 'service worthy of a decent American citizen'. 'We shall complain, we shall write to the papers, we, we . . .' Poor captain!

The upper deck is the only place to which everybody has access and where the borderline between owners, or passengers, and slaves or crew, seems to disappear. There, in their huge cage, each as if about to leap, crouched Blackie, Grey Girl, Ginger, Giant, Fatty and Tanker. They had taken up positions so that each could see all the others. The distance between any two rats was about thirty or forty centimetres (half a yard), a trifle less than twice the length of Fatty, who, in circumference, measured rather more. They sat without budging, but, if you looked closely at them, you would see that their tails were quivering slightly; long, powerful, pinkish, curly tails.

The first three days the rats were not only kept without food, but without water. In the positions they had taken up they saw the clock round and round, though if one did stir the least, all the others immediately seemed to be taking a new foothold.

When hunger and thirst bring small beasts of prey to their limits, one, the least observant or that which the others divine weakest, is torn to pieces and devoured. Even throughout the darkest, starless night, caged rats by instinct maintain their distances. But only a little time has to pass, and then comes the turn of the next victim. And so on and on, till only two are left, and, finally one, the victor. This provides a show no less thrilling than bull-fighting or cock-fighting, and the spectator's pleasure is far more lasting.

News of the rats' existence flashed through the ship. It entered the fo'c'sle, where the stokers who had just come off were deep in unhealthy sleep. 'Jackie, the third steward's brought some rats on board. There will be fun!' 'Get out, you bastards, let a feller rest, blast you!' This voice came from the opposite wall, where a deck-hand was sleeping. From five to eight that morning he had hauled a hose up and down and washed the decks, then for two hours polished the brasses which fell to his lot, and his throat was still choked with chalk and ammonia, and his fingers were corroded by 'Lightning' cleaning paste. Then he had scrubbed floors in the engineers' cabins, the engine-room crew's cabins, and so on. (There is always plenty of work for a deck-hand, all the more when the hands are halved.) His head fell back again on his hard pillow. But the news insinuated itself into his brain: 'Ben, the third steward's

brought some rats, and what rats! There *will* be fun! . . .' The deck-hand raised a heavy head, which might have had lead run into it. Automatically the words came: 'Not really! . . .' And sleep no longer crushed him so mercilessly, nor could weariness cramp his sinews. He would be unable to refrain from just running up to take a look at those rats.

Nor did the rumour miss the stinking cage where six half-naked Chinese washed the ship's linen, moving like wraiths through thick clouds of soapy steam. They did the work of ten men. Perhaps twenty. Their white bosses knew what they were about. Every day there were smugglers bringing Chinese over from Cuba and Jamaica, live yellow goods, Chinese emigrants who had been unable to get legal entry into rich America. Oh, not one of those poor devils would protest against being plundered. Six Chinese doing ten men's work. They had to help the mechanics, thrust their arms into the hot, nearly boiling water, and, at an unbelievable pace iron, by hand, those garments which could not be put into the ironing machine without risk. For any garment spoiled – an officer's white tunic torn, or a scorched blouse – deduction from pay! Their pay was a dollar and a quarter and keep (kitchen scraps) for sixteen to eighteen hours' work. In New York – there were wives and kiddies. The Chinese laundries, too, had their petty tyrants. They would not take on a new man unless he brought three or four or even five hundred dollars into the business. Where were such sums to be found, when the savings of years had been paid to get themselves smuggled into America? It was luck, anyway, to get in at that price, for smugglers trying to escape from the coast-guard cutters had simply thrown two motor-boat loads of live cargo – eighteen men – into the sea. Besides, in New York itself arrest and deportation might come at any moment. Here, there was no danger. The shipping company would look after its own interests and would not surrender its *chinks* so long as they did the work of two for half the money a white man would want.

'Hi, you bloody Chinks, you yellow monkeys! The third steward's brought some rats aboad.'

'A-a-h! Bling-ee lats? Intelesting. Good lats? Big – a-ah? Intelesting.'

'Bloody good rats. Here, you chink, want to bet on the quarter I owe you for doing that boiler-suit of mine?'

'Bet? No, mate, no bet. You get money, you pay me. I poor man, no bettee. . . .'

'Come on, you bastard. You won't bet, but you'll hang on to your quarter, won't you. Come on, chink, fork out five cents.'

The Chinese were glad the rats were there. They had some experience. They did not care which rat came out top, but the rats meant an easier time; less complaints from officers, stewards, passengers.

In the stewards' quarters there was particular rejoicing. What a fine fellow that third steward was. Now, please God, the passengers would be less spiteful and that meant life would not be one incessant threat of fines because of complaints. The work of waiter-stewards is hard and degrading. Shipping companies, being highly moral, have dismissed all maids so that there should be no temptation in the path of the crew, the officers or passengers. But, of course, temptation was not the real reason: why pay maids, when the stewards themselves could do the passengers' cabins? Could any real lady be embarrassed by a steward?

Orders went out not to let on to the passengers till next morning. But you can't keep a thing like that dark. The passengers had not had time to exchange impressions of Port-au-Prince before one and all, not excepting the seventy-year old missionary on his way to Peru to convert erring natives to the true faith, knew of the rats. Immediately there began a constant flow of pilgrims to the upper deck, which continued up to the almost momentary onset of tropical darkness.

That evening the senior stewards heard not a single complaint of the service. The captain did not ring for iced soda and for the first time since we had left New York did not drink his pint of illegal whisky, nor yet once again tell my weary, staggering self how the accursed 'huns' had knocked the hell out of the 25,000 ton ship which sometimes became thirty-five or even forty thousand, on which he had ploughed the seas between America and the Old World.

The son of the cold queen of the North, the capital built on marsh and swamp by imperious Peter, now sailing aboard this ship in

thirst of adventure and new life, played some small part in this rat business. My office bore a high-sounding name: 'assistant buffet attendant', which in plain English meant 'everyone's lackey'. This, however, I learnt when too late. Only on the voyage, on the high seas, did I learn what hosts of duties fell to my lot.

I had only recently turned sailor and here, on my second trip, it was geography that had seduced me. Haiti, Jamaica, the Panama Canal, Ecuador! Names I had known only in text-books. They told me that from the ports we were sailing for, Peru was only a few hours away. There a divorce cost but a few dollars or you could be taken to see Indian villages which were still matriarchal. What a host of glittering pictures it all suggested! Especially after my first, most memorable voyage, as stoker on an ocean liner. In the stoke-hold it was nearly boiling and even my chief and instructor, a Javanese negro of giant dimensions, would practically faint from midday to four, and in a four-hour watch, we would together gulp down five gallons. That is why, foolishly enough, when we were signing on once more, I was delighted when the man in front refused the job of assistant barman and said he would rather be stoker. Let me mention a few of my duties: getting hundredweights of cheese up out of the hold; or boxes of eggs, five hundred to each; or cases of oranges, lemons and grape-fruit; or opening and serving two hundred bottles of iced drinks; or helping the barman prepare dozens of all manner of salads and sweets; or seeing there were always plenty of clean glasses on hand. But this last was easily managed: you upended the dirty glasses and ranged them along by the pipe that fed steam to the scullery – in a jiffy they were clean, though sometimes you had to rub off the pink rim left by lipstick.

Everyone else had a certain amount of work and then a night's sleep. But not on my job! True, the head barman was supposed to share some of my duties. But Nils Sorensen was fifty-five and weighed twenty stone (of which at least a third was his belly). He took a paternal interest in my humble person. Could I let him hop out of his bunk in the night hours to take coffee to the captain, or get some luminal for the overstrung lady in No. 6? I was scarcely twenty-three and alone could raise a hundredweight case on my back and carry it from the hold up the greasy hatchway. And I certainly

climbed and descended a thousand steps in the twenty-four hours. But always I thirsted for new impressions and was always wondering about other people. Meanwhile, Nils kept me primed with the tastiest, most delicate foods the bar had. Still a man does require sleep. I should have slept about ten hours a night – as it was, I barely got even five. Sometimes, when I dropped in for a chat and Sorensen was getting some order ready, I would sit myself down 'for a sec' . . . and only waken ten minutes later at his friendly touch and calm voice saying, 'Come on, Jim, or The Old Bitch'll start snarling'. Then I would leap and rush off to Cabin-de-luxe No. 2, occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Grieg, known to us stewards as 'bitch', 'old witch' and 'that cow'. And of course, there she would be, already flinging her weight about, howling for the first steward and captain ('what sort of service do you call this, making people wait *hours* for a fruit salad') since Madame could not possibly take her powders without fruit salad. Sometimes the 'bitch' would snatch the dish from my hands, and dig her polished nails into the flesh above my elbow.

Pull myself free? But what if the 'bitch' started to squeal? The de-luxe passenger's capable of anything. It didn't, for instance, bother her in the least that her flaccid breasts (elongated like those of certain tribes who suckle their babes by throwing the breast over the shoulder) were flapping out of her dressing-gown, or that her flabby dark-veined leg showed well above the knee (The Roman slave bathing his mistress – brother in suffering, hail!)

I made Lady Gwen's acquaintance the moment she stepped on board. No other passenger brought so many bales and trunks and suit-cases: no one was seen off by so many friends, with such quantities of flowers, boxes of chocolates, magazines and new novels. Cabin-de-luxe No. 6, my Lady Gwen's suite, was a couple of rooms (sitting and dining-room), which could easily have housed a decent working-class family of six or seven persons. And these cabins-de-luxe, as the first steward spent some time drumming into me, were my first and chief care.

Our ship left New York just before sundown. The passengers spent the first evening settling down. Only a few appeared at supper. About eleven, by which time I had got to know my boss

pretty well, had gained some idea of all my various duties and was getting ready for bed (to be up and doing at five) the bell jangled, and there on the signal board was number '6'. Off I went, pleased with myself for still being up and very excited at my first appearance in my new part. I knocked, one-two, as Nils Sorensen had taught me, and heard a gentle voice say 'Come in'.

I entered ('first and foremost, James, shut the door behind you, even if you've only entered a cabin for an instant') said 'good evening' and waited. A glance, absolutely devoid of any interest, turned my way, as one might look at something you had once seen somewhere. But this only lasted the fraction of a second. Then Lady Gwen smiled, and I saw a row of healthy, white, but not too white, not very small teeth. Lady Gwen was trying to remember where she had seen me before. It was a distant smile, cold but human. A load lifted from my mind.

'Would you mind bringing me a large bottle of bromide, in crystals, and a bottle of mineral water? All this seeing off is enough to split one's head.'

With a slight nod of the head I confirmed the order, and went to waken the bar-tender. For de-luxe passengers night might as well be day. Al Hawkins opened a special cupboard and got out the bromide.

'Another time,' he grunted, seeing I had no intention of paying, 'don't forget to collect the money in advance. And don't forget to bring me seventy-five cents to-morrow morning.'

I went to the buffet, got some 'White Rock' Mineral Water off the ice, grabbed an opener and again knocked at the door of No. 6 Cabin.

'And how much will that be?' asked Lady Gwen. 'By the way, what is your name?'

I was trying to balance the tray, the bottle, the baby mineral and a tall glass in an airy way, as though I'd been doing it for years, and also striving to shut the door behind me with my free hand, when the bromide bottle fell to the floor. Fortunately, it did not break. I bit my lips, replaced the bottle as though nothing had happened and set the tray on a little table as I said: 'I am called Marsi. Seventy-five cents, please.'

'Is that all?' she said, with a scarcely noticeable smile.

'Yes,' I answered and added, 'the water is free.'

'Here you are,' she said, and handed me a dollar bill. 'Don't bother about the change, Marsi. But I would rather call you by your christian name, if you don't mind. What is it?'

'James, Your Ladyship,' I answered.

We had talked exactly as some real 'lady' and well-trained servant would have done in a Galsworthy novel. But with only one difference. When Lady Gwen handed me the dollar and said 'Don't bother about the change', I won't say my hand started back, but certainly my elbow jerked back a little, for it was my very first tip. Her keen eye caught my start. Swiftly, to cover my confusion, I said: 'Thank you, Your Ladyship,' and added, 'shall I open the bottle?'

'Do, please, James. And the bromide bottle. Put half a teaspoonful in the glass and a little water. That's all. I can manage to drink it myself.'

Again a smile at her own joke: an innocent smile, quite permissible with a servant.

At eleven thirty I undressed, stretched out on my bunk and was awakened by Nils Sorensen at a quarter to five. My first working day at the new job had begun and my first thought was of my boss's instructions. 'Don't forget, the captain won't complain. If he's not satisfied with you, you'll find yourself wintering in Panama or even Peru.'

The captain – Captain Shaughnessy – would always wake at a quarter past six 'reg'lar as a clock'. For fifteen minutes he went on stewing his old bones in bed, then at six-thirty leapt out, doffed his pyjamas and made straight for the shower, first hot, then gradually down to ice-cold, then hot again to finish with cold. On the stroke of seven the first mate, chief engineer and first steward would report. Finally came boatswain Bob Clasy with a composed smile on his lips as soon as he was sure the others had gone in. Bob Clasy ashore was a regular typhoon, but afloat the very model of discipline. Half Scotch, half Irish, he was a good catholic (till you wanted him to go to church), a super-American patriot, the terror of negroes and foreigners and, if one ignores the half-dozen wives scattered about

here and there, a staunch bachelor: Bob was as sound as a bell, thirty-eight years old, and a typical merchant seaman.

Five or six minutes were given to each officer. This was generally the way it went.

CAPTAIN. All okay, Mr. Kirby?

FIRST MATE. All okay, Captain.

CAPTAIN. And you, Mac?

MacPherson, first engineer, bosom pal and, ashore, bottle crony of the captain, his neighbour at Oak Park, Chicago, and fellow Mason, would answer 'Full pressure, Captain. Valves of third boiler have begun to rust again; time they were overhauled.'

CAPTAIN (*dissatisfied*). 'Just you try, just you try and have them overhauled, when they whittle down every dollar in the office like Shylocks, blast them! All right, when we get back we'll see. Meanwhile, keep an eye on the gauges.'

CHIEF ENGINEER. 'Aye, aye, sir, I'll keep an eye on the gauges.'

CAPTAIN (*to first steward*). 'What about your department, Mr. Mortimer? There are more complaints about your men. I'm a very patient man, but if I get complaints from the de-luxe, the office shall hear of it, I can promise you.'

The chief engineer had not thought it necessary to report that a sudden burst of steam had scalded mechanic Steve Styvers' arm up to the elbow. When, cursing God and the captain and the office, he had started to tinker with the corroded valves, Steve had been forced to keep his arm submersed in oil for some time, and then, grinding his teeth with pain, work full in the blast of a broken steam pipe. For Steve the result was very serious. Again, the first steward, not anxious to air his dirty linen, was silent about the fight between the first chef, a massive and ageing Yankee and the skinny young Argentine under-steward. While dishing out the crew's food, the chef had dropped some rissoles on the floor and had casually picked them up and put them on the Argentine lad's plate. The chef was a true-blue Yankee patriot, so he despised South Americans and refused to recognize them as whites. He had already broken a plate on a black boy's head, smashing his ear, because 'that's the second time you've brought me cold coffee'.

Soon after seven, I went to the captain's cabin to take his order

for breakfast. Shaughnessy, devoted servant of his skinflint employers, was a fine old boy. I have an idea he breakfasted alone in order to charge up with half a pint of whisky from our precious stores against the many complaints of 'shocking service, sir, not fit for an American citizen', so as to take it without turning a hair.

The captain never showed any interest in my name. Only when we were back in New York and all paid off and I was making for the gangway, suit-case in hand, did I suddenly hear his voice from the bridge, 'Hi there, Pantry!'

'Pantry' was short for 'assistant pantryman', the proper title for assistant barman. Nearly everybody called me 'Pantry', and I was sometimes quite startled when I heard the call 'James!' Only the head laundryman, Ong Li, addressed me politely as 'Mistel Malsi'.

Well, I looked up and saw the captain smiling down. I set down my suit-case and went to him.

'Will you sign on with us again?'

'Perhaps, Captain; thank you.'

'Good luck!'

And we went our ways for ever.

When we began our voyage I am sure the captain could not have told you what the man looked like, from whom he ordered his breakfast (and often supper too); the man who brought bottles of 'White Rock' to his cabin, and in the silent watches of the night, often strong coffee. Young or old? Tall or short? I don't think he ever looked at me. When I knocked and entered the cabin and he glimpsed my white tunic from the corner of his eye, he would order this or that calmly, politely and immediately forget my existence. I was 'pantry': an object, neuter gender.

But on the third day out there was a row which provided me, if not with a name, at least with a face. The electric freezer broke down, which meant that only the de-luxe passengers and a couple of dozen ordinary passengers could have ices. No amount of explanations from the steward-waiters, or assurances from the senior steward who specially appeared on the scene, could pacify the outraged passengers. A whole delegation set off to complain to the captain. And Mr. Shaughnessy, some-time commander of a transatlantic passenger vessel of over 25,000 tons burthen, was forced to demean

himself and begin an investigation. Of course, he already knew all about it. The ice-machine was on its last legs, and the company refused to instal a new one. But still, willy nilly, he gave a serious dressing-down to the electrician, first chef, first steward, and some other quite innocent persons. And absented himself at supper. Nils Sorensen was a wise old boy!

'James,' he said, 'cut along to the captain and take him a bottle of iced 'Rock'. I know the old man: he'll swallow at least a pint to-day'.

It seems I really was a *deus ex machina*: that evening the captain had barely rung before I appeared. He did not show any curiosity, did not enquire how I could have responded so swiftly, but merely shot a glance at the frosted bottle, then at me – for the very first time, I am sure of it – and said 'Thanks. Open it. There's a bottle of Hiram Walker in the cupboard, on the first shelf. Pour me out a glass.'

Pour out . . . but how much? The American way is for every man to pour his own whisky and fill up with mineral water or soda to taste. I poured as slowly as I could. It seems I did the right thing. The captain did not take his eyes from my hand: then when the glass was two-thirds full, cried 'Stop!' I filled up with the bubbling mineral water and held out the glass on a tray to the captain. That sea dog, already well on in his sixties, forced to apologize to 'a bunch of wretched counter-jumpers' because the ices had given out, felt a need to confide in somebody. Thus it was that three or four times on that voyage, I sat in the captain's cabin, and delighted his fine old heart by listening attentively to stories of his long and drab existence. As a reward I could drink the finest of whisky, but of course without ruining it with rubbishy water. We drank glass for glass, but mine were unadulterated, which amazed and delighted my superior officer. Seeing me, for the first time, drink my whisky neat, he smacked his tongue and said that before the war he had had a Russian on his ship who also had drunk it neat. But that Russian was a lunatic, it seemed.

The second morning out from Port-au-Prince I observed a change of tone in the exchanges between the captain and his first assistants. But first let me relate two 'visits' which I made before

reporting to the captain for his breakfast order. I had been running down to the hold on a number of errands ('James, get some Roquefort up, and some Camembert and Cheshire, two dozen pineapples, a case of oranges. We've enough lemons – two dozen grape-fruit, ten packets of butter – I don't think we need any eggs – but we shall want a can of olive oil'). With Nils I had got the buffet cleaned up, and everything was ready for the coming working day, right down to supplies of bread. Nevertheless, when all this was done I found I still had ten minutes to spare. Without discussing it, as though we guessed each other's thoughts, Nils and I left the saloon and as fast as his weight allowed him (not so slowly either) made for the upper deck.

You would have thought the rats had not budged once since their arrival on the ship. When at rest, these creatures wind their tails round their flanks, and Nils Sorensen assured me this was always anti-clockwise. But these animals, with the exception of Fatty and Tanker who apparently found nothing strange in their new world, had them stretched out as tight as a bow-string. Still, it was clear that the rats, tortured by hunger and thirst, had examined every inch of the cage in the night, and discovered there was no escape from it. They could scarcely get as much as their snouts between the uprights, and it was not worth while gnawing through the wood floor, since they could see the wire bottom of the cage beneath it.

Even in the few hours which had already elapsed the upper deck had been visited not only by the whole working population of the ship, but by a considerable portion of the passengers. Still, no bets were yet being laid, for first some idea of the qualities of each rat had to be got: some idea which of them showed most aggressiveness and capacity for self-preservation. So far Giant was favourite – a huge black dog-rat with an absolutely conical head and pelvic-bones that thrust out under the hide. Giant was nearly a head longer than the others, heavier built than all save Fatty and larger than all, save Tanker. That sort of rat can bite through a lead pipe without difficulty and their claws are almost as sharp as a cat's. Indeed a pair of such rats would certainly attack a cat. Still, much

was bound to depend on cunning, vigilance and endurance, and the final victor might well be the ginger female, whose thick, bright-pink tail quivered viciously, or the black buck rat, with no pelt worth speaking of whose powerful, pointed incisors glistened in the snarling mouth.

They crouched most of the time immobile, with their powerful tails outstretched. They seemed to be drowsing, looking neither to right nor left, totally unconcerned by the presence of human beings. Still, I was sure that even with closed eyes they were well aware of each other. If one but made the slightest movement, all six would stir faintly – as though ripples ran through the cage. Something rustled behind me and I turned: It was Steve Styvers, the mechanic with the burnt arm, and Rob Simson, able seaman and ship's carpenter who had crept up silently to watch the rats. Rob Simson could have gambled his own father away at cards or dice, or even sold him for a quart of whisky or gin. At his side, with wide open mouth and staring eyes was my mate, though under me, Lincoln Hafeker, a voteless negro without rights. Somehow, I sensed a new turgid atmosphere aboard, charged with cross-currents of animal and human passion.

I had only just got back to the saloon bar, next to which was our hole, when No. 6's bell rang.

Lady Gwen, the only Englishwoman on board, was of medium height – her head came to my shoulder – and wore her hair short in the fashion of the day. It was silky ash-coloured hair. Her nose was perfect, daintily set in a slightly oval, pale face. Thin eyebrows over large grey-green eyes sloped upwards towards her temples. When I first set eyes on her, I had reckoned her about thirty or thirty-two, but at the moment, without make-up, she looked a good thirty-six, though a young girl might have envied her figure. She was in bed, half-sitting, and an elegant little book in tooled morocco lay on the eiderdown. I recognized it: the jewelled poems of that ancient epicurean Omar Khayyám: sonorous, lovely verses marvellously translated into English.

'Good morning, James! You're always so fresh and cheerful. How I envy you. Why, last night I drank a thimbleful of cognac ashore – brr! – and I've such a thick head. But that isn't

what I want you for. James, tell me, yesterday I think I overheard a number of people talking about rats. What's it all about? What rats? Are we on fire; are all the rats quitting this old tub?'

I told her everything, concisely. She divined that I had no time for conversation; that, if some people were to luxuriate in bed, others had to be up working.

'Am I keeping you, James?'

'I expect the captain's grousing already,' I said, in place of a straight answer, and venturing to be witty, added 'Old Shaughnessy loves accuracy, punctuality and whisky.'

My reward was a smile which made her ten years younger. Her gentle lips became enchanting. She let me go, but as I went, said 'If you've a grain of affection for me, James, whenever you've a minute to spare, bring me a citro-vanilla powder.'

As usual, the captain gave no sign of noticing my appearance. He did not release me immediately with his usual, 'The same as yesterday, Pantry', or 'Nothing greasy to-day, only porridge, a boiled egg and tea'. At other times he would break off talking to whomever it might be, even in the middle of a sentence, not to keep me a second too long, as if aware that passengers were particularly touchy and difficult of a morning. But this particular morning, there I stood at the door like a white wraith and he did not seem even to notice my presence. All the senior officers were present: first mate, chief engineer, first steward and boatswain Clasy. Something unusual was afoot, some sort of council, or perhaps I should call it dispute. The next moment I grasped what it was. The first mate and chief steward were suggesting putting the upper deck out of bounds to the crew during certain hours, because the passengers now often went there and the mingling of passengers and crew might prejudice discipline. MacPherson, the chief engineer, resented this angrily, even rudely. With open scorn on his face, he said that this wasn't England but democratic America, and first and foremost, with half a dozen hands short in the engine-room and stoke-hole, what was the point of rubbing the men you had the wrong way unless you were looking for trouble. As for boatswain Bob Clasy, he dared not give an opinion at all though Mr. Shaughnessy kept looking invitingly at him. It was clear the captain was inclined to agree with the

chief engineer, but found it difficult to disagree with his first mate, particularly as the latter was nearly related to one of the directors. Yet again Mr. Shaughnessy looked at the boatswain, but the latter maintained strict neutrality. Suddenly the captain, with ironical condescension said, 'And what do you think, Pantry?'

The question staggered everyone present. It was as though a monarch had asked his slave for advice! For that matter the captain gave me no time to speak but continued, 'If you've got any decent sardines, bring me some. And some toast and tea'.

But the slave had the guts to speak; human dignity stirred within him. 'If I may say so, sir,' I said, 'you might have put it out of bounds yesterday, but it's too late to do it to-day.'

The chief engineer and captain nodded to me with evident gratitude before I turned to go, but I had set one man against me for good – the first mate. The second mate had been my enemy almost from the outset of the trip. His name was Wagner.

Theophilus Hieronymus Wagner had been born in Kiel and was now forty-six years old. Two of his brothers and almost every other relative on his father's side had sailed in German warships, as had his father and grandfather before him. Early in the Great War he himself had been first officer on a torpedo-boat. Later he had served in a destroyer, after which, receiving the Iron Cross, Second Class, he had taken command of a submarine. But something went wrong and Captain Wagner sank his own ship. Though acquitted at the court martial his career was finished. The pirate became a staff rat. He served his Vaterland honourably but ingloriously to the end of the war, and in 1918, soon after the armistice, crossed to forgiving and forgetting America, where influential relatives got him placed on the S.S. *Shikosha*. Despite his unremarkable stature – five foot eight –Wagner gave you the impression of being a giant; his shoulders were absolutely square, his chest was powerful and his thick neck supported a head like a bull. His massive wrists missed reaching his knees by barely a couple of inches, and his enormous feet, like pile drivers, seemed to hammer in stakes at every step. He had a short bristling moustache and a stiff brush of sand-coloured hair on a red skull, while tiny, piercing little eyes looked out from under wispy, colourless brows and his cheeks were

permanently distended and purple. He was the perfect caricature of the Hun. Behind his back no one ever called him anything else.

Wagner took a fierce dislike to me from the first glance, as though I had been a Belgian, and I, for him, felt the vilest repulsion. I even saw his immense, red hairy hands in my dreams. 'My God,' I would ponder, 'to think how many German sailors must have suffered at the hands of this gorilla, especially during the war!' The whole crew hated his guts with an animal hatred. No watch of his ever passed without rows, curses, punishments and even hand-to-hand fighting. The negro boy simply turned green, not merely when he saw him, but even when he heard his cabin-bell ring. As for Mr. Milche (whose ancestor, Henri-Jacques Milche, had accompanied Lafayette to America): Mr. Milche, who with wife and step-daughter occupied No. 1 de-luxe cabin with its two bedrooms, each with private bath, its huge sitting-room and its cage for the maid, if there was one: Mr. Milche, owner of the huge reach-me-down factory in Philadelphia: Mr. Milche, the large-scale capitalist, so sought after by Congressmen and Senators, since he swayed thousands of Philadelphian Jewish voters – no less a person than the highly-educated, genial Louis Abraham Milche simply shuddered when he first caught Theophilus Hieronymus Wagner's eyes fixed on him as though he had touched a sleeping scorpion and dropped his step-daughter's bag.

Of course, it is always possible that my supposed nationality was not responsible for the incident which occurred on my first day aboard, when that Prussian drill-sergeant's ugly mug first struck my gaze. It was about ten at night when the ring came from the officer's watch, and the bell to the saloon was only installed as an extra precaution. Was it possible that the services of two men, at the same time, could be required?

I was at the watch in less than half a minute, but there was no need to knock, for in the doorway stood the second mate, Mr. T. H. Wagner. With eyes that bored me through (although in order to do so he was forced to tip his head back) he said, in what had nature allowed would have been the tones of a poison-snake, 'How long do you expect me to wait for you?'

'You' simply meant all of us, all the representatives of the lower

castes. Before I could answer, he went on, 'Bring me some strong coffee, and plenty too, at five past twelve'.

'Very well, sir,' I said and added, 'Your strong coffee shall be brought at five past twelve.'

'I said "bring me"; I mean "you". You can go.'

'Yes, sir. Only allow me to point out that the boy will bring it.'

'I told you to bring me coffee at five past twelve.'

I turned and left him. Of course, I was mad. I had expected all sorts of trouble from the passengers, but had always understood that the officers on American ships were pretty decent to the service staff. I told my chief about it, but Old Nils guffawed

'Okay, Jimmy. Don't take any notice. Go to bed. I'm always awake at midnight, I'll take his coffee to the watchroom before he comes off the watch; he won't even know who brought it.'

Next morning, however, just as I was going to the captain (for the first time, so I was nervy) there was the bell: second mate's cabin. I scented trouble and was inclined to tell Old Nils, who was preparing a fruit salad, but then thought it stupid to behave like a small boy asking uncle for protection and went off to the officers' sleeping quarters. I knocked, entered, and shut the door behind me.

'I am going to breakfast here. Open the porthole.'

He had not even answered my good morning.

'Yes, sir,' I said, unscrewing and opening the port. After which I added, 'I'll give your message to the boy.'

And without waiting to hear what the Hun had to answer, I went out to find the second steward.

'All right,' was his answer, 'I'll send in his breakfast. Only you'd better try not to rub him up the wrong way. There's never a trip without some trouble with the Hun. Try and humour him a bit. Even old Shaughnessy doesn't like crossing his bows. As for the boy' he ended, with difficulty keeping a straight face, 'he's so terrified, he just drops the plates before the Hun's even got his mouth properly open.'

From that moment the Hun never missed a chance of spiting me. If, leaving the captain, he met me face to face as I was climbing the hatch, balancing my tray on one hand over my head (the only way of keeping one's balance on iron steps worn smooth by the years),

he would sneer revoltingly and walk straight at me while his huge trunk filled the companion way and I would have to retreat to the bottom, backwards. Once, one night, with a desperate longing to read, I went to the empty officers' wardroom at eleven ('Careful, Jimmy, not more than an hour,' old Nils had warned me), and had installed myself comfortably in an arm-chair, with the latest issue of the *Cosmopolitan*, when suddenly the Hun came in. He had not long come off duty and should have been snoring at that hour. I got to my feet and hung about my chair, knowing he had come in unintentionally and would soon be going again. Not he! With his usual nasty sneer he sat himself heavily in an arm-chair on the far side of the room, took out a cigar, carefully nipped off the end with his yellow teeth and lit up. Then he stretched out his legs, fixed his eyes on the ceiling and puffed clouds of smoke. I had to go: I had no right to sit there, in an officer's presence.

The very first day after leaving Port-au-Prince, I had an unpleasant surprise. On the lower deck, right in the bows, late at evening, I saw two figures obviously deeply engrossed. It was – the Hun – and Lady Gwen. I felt somehow insulted, and yet full of pity, as though some lovely chrysanthemum which I had admired from afar were being trampled underfoot by a gorilla. But even at that distance I could distinguish what she was saying loudly, feelingly: 'How cruel you must be, Mr. Wagner!'

'You shouldn't say that, Lady Gwen. "The iron law of Nature throws up those best fitted to survive", your great countryman, Darwin, said.'

He spoke English perfectly, though his harsh pronunciation, his thick-sounding 'r's, and his inability to say anything but 'meshshur' for a word like 'measure' must have been an outrage to Lady Gwen's ears upon whose lips English had the charm of music. It was clear they were talking about the rats. That day, all over the ship, nothing but *rats* could be heard in every key. You would have thought people were incapable of discussing anything else. The time-honoured disputes and bets on the number of miles we had done in the past twenty-four hours, fell into oblivion. The one topic was Blackie, Ginger, Fatty, Grey Girl, Giant and Tanker. On this second day the six rats still remained exposed to the scorching

sun. Not a drop of water had they had and, of course, no food. It was easy enough to imagine that the savage quadrupeds would soon be playing the parts assigned by the 'civilized' bipeds.

For the first time breakfast passed in an atmosphere of lively chatter. Already, there were backers of this or that rat. Astounding stories were told of the strength, the ingenuity, keenness of the senses and savagery of the race. Someone remembered the legend of Bishop Hatto. The stewards tactfully informed passengers that all bets should be made through the third steward, who would give any further information desired. Like everything else on board, even amusement was organized according to American business methods. But most curious of all, the passengers no longer seemed to feel the heat, which was stifling, and stopped complaining that the butter was no better than cart-grease, the tea really sawdust, and the cold roast beef, both in texture and taste, chewing gum. No one tapped impatiently with knives on plates, no one shouted rudely to waiters or made indignant complaints. And immediately breakfast was over everyone made haste to get to the deck in order to study the points of the rats. Only a handful failed to succumb to temptation: Mr. Milche, whose ancestor had fought for the independence of the United States, whose grandfather had been a Brooklyn rabbi, whose father had grown enormously prosperous by outwitting other Jews, who had fled from pogroms and military service; a fat dame (with a bosom that reminded you of those old-fashoned twin samovars), whose lower lip quivered at the mere sound of the word rat; an old lady, a senator's widow accompanied by a youngish, repressed, frightfully ugly niece, who spent ten hours in her cabin, where she took all meals, and the rest of the day outside, in a deck-chair; and, finally, the Reverend Mr. Hotchkiss, on his way to Peru to redeem the errant souls of the descendants of the proud Incas.

'You'll see, Jimmy,' said Nils Sorensen, as he taught me to make mayonnaise, 'that rotten little Jesuit 'll creep up in time, too.'

He was not a bad judge of people. Four days later, when two of the rats had already been eaten, round midnight I saw a form sneak past that sought to avoid the streaks of moonlight. Hiding behind a funnel, I watched how the missionary's eyes fed greedily on the

rats. No doubt he was cursing his cloth that made it impossible openly to enjoy watching them feed on each other.

The first victim, to everyone's surprise, was Giant. I have already explained how the rats were left without food or water. But after three days, in such sweltering heat, the rats might have gone mad and the charm of the whole game would have vanished. Whereupon the third steward brought up a pail of water and a flat-edged narrow ladle with a long handle, which was used for casting lead. Slightly bending aside the bars of the cage in order to introduce it (at the first human touch on the cage, the rats seemed to stop fearing each other and huddled together in a corner) he held it to each snout in turn, while agonizing thirst forced each beastie to plunge its furry snout into the deep, narrow ladle. In five minutes he had watered them all. Scarcely had he departed, when the rats like well-trained sentries took up their old positions. But even after recovering from the pangs of thirst, the rats looked very different from the powerful, lissome hunters they had been the first day. The hair of each, save Fatty's, stuck up on end, so that from a distance they looked a bit like birds with rumpled feathers, or hedgehogs. Their eyes turned dull and reddish and their tails, no longer at rest, continually switched to and fro. Their original watchful immobility had completely left them and their restless paws seemed eager to slip into some hole or escape; the crisis was near.

Now I give stoker McKitchin's story. It was five in the morning when he came off duty. Before taking a shower, he thought he would lie on the upper deck a bit and get some fresh air. Before he knew it he was standing in front of the cage and found himself the sole witness of the drama enacted that dawn. It began with Giant. Squatting near the cage, finishing his cigarette, McKitchin suddenly saw Giant fly at Fatty like a streak of lightning, obviously meaning to bury his teeth in the back of her neck. Immediately, as at a signal, the four other rats turned towards Fatty, ready to participate in the attack. Fatty was not particularly agile to look at, and seemed the best object to attack. But Giant had made a bad miscalculation and paid for his error with his life, in spite of being largest and most powerful. Whether because Giant was nearest (her other neighbour

was Ginger, who was not likely to open the attack) or because some almighty instinct suddenly spoke, the fact remains that she seemed to be expecting the attack and met it half-way. Extending her enormous jaws, no less swift than Giant, she made a right-about turn to face him, snapped her jaws on his snout and held him helpless. That very moment the other four attacked. His tail was nipped clean off, his belly ripped open, his head half bitten through from the back. All this took no more than thirty seconds.

When Giant lay finally stretched out, with his greyish belly uppermost and his quivering limbs in the last throes, the remaining rats trotted back and in the most businesslike fashion began putting themselves to rights: one licked her tail clean of blood, one smoothed out the fur on her thigh, like a cat, while with a paw a third smoothed the skin round her ear. They seemed now to have stopped fearing each other, and reared up on their legs and circled about. And a great load seemed to be lifted from their minds. Then, as if by chance, Blackie with a few tiny runs, crept up to the conical grey stick which had so recently been Giant's tail and began to eat it. It was a signal to the others who immediately surrounded the motionless carcass and began to lick up the blood that lay all about Then very methodically Blackie began to devour the body. Soon the cage was completely tranquil, but scattered about were small tufts of grey fur, a purplish patch near one of the corners and a few scattered scraps of whitish bone with bits of flesh still sticking to them. . . .

McKitchin became a popular hero. Against all the rules, at any time of the day, he might be met anywhere on board, recounting for the twentieth, fortieth time, the fall of Giant. Smokers, offering Mac 'Camels' or 'Old Golds' would be sure to add: 'Take two or three, for after'. Everyone thirsted to hear his story and with every possible detail. In the engine-room and stoke-hole they smoked the cigars McKitchin got from the passengers.

That day there was a downpour. People breathed easier, their spirits rose, the ladies wore their prettiest dinner frocks and there was dancing till one. Giant's death had revivified these people languishing with inactivity and boredom. And, again, the fiercest-seeming of the rats being gone, the odds had become far more

unpredictable. Nobody could prophesy now which of the remaining rats would succeed in the struggle for existence, with the result that endless bets were laid. The third steward could scarcely find time to write them all down. With the exception of the Chinese and a few, a very few passengers, everyone on board had caught the rat fever. The majority of passengers were ready to pay anything to see, with their own eyes, the rats eat their next victim. Heaven heard their prayers. Two days later, more than two hundred people densely crowded round the cage watched Ginger's valiant efforts to defend herself. But before she went, Grey Girl was eaten.

Her end came purely by chance. After Giant was devoured a sort of re-grouping took place in the cage. Blackie, Ginger, Fatty and Tanker occupied the four corners, while Grey Girl found herself between Blackie and Tanker. Naturally no one would put a penny on her now, though she was quite as big as any save Fatty: but Fatty was exceptionally nimble.

Giant's death had hastened matters. In broad daylight, in full view of dozens of passengers, officers and stewards, first Blackie, then Tanker, attacked Grey Girl. Ginger and Fatty were not far behind them, for their hunger was less keen. But Grey Girl's teeth, unlike Giant's, were still capable of biting, and the struggle continued for quite three minutes. And when Grey Girl, at last, lay stretched out motionless, the remaining rats went on licking their wounds for some time before beginning their feast, thus showing the wounds were pretty serious. For instance, Ginger from time to time would stretch out one of her hind legs in which the tendons had apparently been cut, and this her neighbours did not fail to notice. A piece of fur to which the flesh clung, had been ripped off Blackie's side and no doubt that too had been noted.

Grey Girl was devoured but twelve hours after Giant: 'l'appetit', it seems, 'vient en mangeant'. Then once again immobility settled on the cage. Four rats now sat in their corners. I wondered greatly how any rat that was attacked would act now. There was a good distance between any two rats, and it would not be possible to cross the intervening space unnoticed.

Then, two days after Grey Girl had been buried in the bellies of

her partners, during breakfast, while the third steward was superintending the service, the black boy Hafeker ran breathlessly up to him and whispered something in his ear. Whereupon a murmur rustled through the huge dining-room, as when someone runs a hand over the keyboard of a piano. In less than ten seconds everyone knew that, in the cage on the upper deck, hostilities had begun. The third steward's reconnaissance service had been organized well. There was no chance now of the passengers being deprived of this pleasure and excitement: of another rat being eaten unobserved.

But what had happened to their drawing-room manners? They had just been passing one another the salt, the cream, or the biscuits. Like a flock struck by panic the passengers leapt to their feet, flung napkins into the butter or peach jam and went pouring through the two doorways. Their eyes gleamed, especially those of the women, and you could hear their stertorous breathing.

(Now I understand how, when the *Atlantic* went down, gentlemen jumped over women and children and struggled fiercely with each other for a seat in the lifeboats. All their fine manners were merely a cheap veneer.)

A few dozen people only remained in their places: the fatter of the passengers and the more serious, such as the missionary and Louis Abraham Milche, whose face was frozen in a sarcastic smile.

Officers coming off duty also soon learnt too what was afoot. I myself leapt up the companion-way three steps at a time and rushed to the spot, but found the best 'seats' already taken. Stokers, stewards and sailors clustered around in the ships' boats, not in the least afraid that the first mate or the Hun might take exception. Others took up position on bollards and on the winch. The cage was closely ringed by agitated human bodies. Social distinctions were swept aside. By the side of an exquisite woman passenger stood the black boy, but the third steward soon sent him packing to make place for Mr. Grieg and his 'old bitch'. Her eyes blazed with a vulturous rapacity, her lower lip hung pendulous, and her flabby revolting bosom rose and fell spasmodically. I saw her thin fingers dig into her husband's arm.

All the same I managed to find a place in one of the boats, and thus had an excellent view of both passengers and rats. Neverthe-

less, it surprised me unpleasantly to see the Hun beside Lady Gwen. But the third steward was in his element. The important thing was to please as many passengers as possible. 'Gentlemen, gentlemen, make a little more room, please! A little more room for the ladies, please! Please act like gentlemen!'

In the cage, however, something incredible was happening. The whole floor was covered with blood. Every moment one or other of the rats would fly into the air, as it tore itself free from the teeth of an enemy. As I learned later, the attack seemed to have been planned. Blackie and Tanker had scuttled across the space which divided them from Ginger, with Fatty following, keeping her distance. This had happened three or four times. Ginger, however, was determined to sell her life dearly. Her ruddy fur stood on end, showing the grey under-fur beneath it. Tanker led the attack, flying straight at Ginger, but as Ginger prepared to meet the onslaught with sharp fangs, Tanker swerved nimbly and ripped open her side as he leapt away. That very instant Blackie attacked, and buried her teeth in Ginger's thigh, wounding her badly. Then Fatty attacked, and extending her huge jaws seized Ginger by the head and just below the ear. With an incredible muscular effort, Ginger threw Fatty off but had no time to leap out of reach before both Blackie and Fatty were at her hind paws. Tearing herself away, somersaulting like an acrobat, she once more got herself free. But Tanker attacked under her front paws, and the squeal which burst from the unhappy victim was like the howl of a wild beast.

Still Ginger would not surrender. Her teeth tore at her enemies with as fierce a rage and madness as theirs. This battle must have lasted five full minutes. All four rats were smeared thick with blood and there were pools of blood all over the floor. Yet, even with the sinews of her hind legs bitten through, Ginger continued to defend herself with desperation and managed to tear a mouthful of flesh from Blackie's spine, from which the blood streamed.

Fascinated, I watched this battle, though glancing from time to time at the faces of the spectators. On many, as in an open book, the worst instincts of the human soul might be read, though others bore an expression of horror and disgust. Most frequently, however, I looked at Lady Gwen. She was clutching the gold braid on the

Hun's sleeve and he was glancing sideways at her with distended nostrils. One heard the powerful breathing forced from a hundred breasts; the ship creaked, the engines rumbled dully.

The *coup de grâce* came unexpectedly. It seemed as though Ginger might hold out some time. But Tanker leapt and bit into her throat, while Blackie and Fatty at the same moment fastened on her neck: there was a revolting sound of crunching and the rat fell in its death throes.

For the first time the rats appeared to perceive the clustering people. They ran to their corners and began licking their wounds. Tanker, the most aggressive, had clearly suffered most – and Fatty least. Gradually the onlookers returned to normality: loose smiles and spasmodically twisted lips were replaced by ordinary expressions. I heard Lady Gwen fetch a great sigh as though she had sobbed. Then, uncertainly, she said 'Brrr! How frightful!'

'The law of Nature, Lady Gwen. Only the strongest survive,' I heard the Hun's voice.

Lady Gwen's glance was fixed on something behind him. For a time she gazed into distance, her eyes remote, and it was impossible to guess at her thoughts. But the manner in which she talked to the Hun affected me disagreeably: there was a sort of warmth. I wanted her to hate him as the whole ship did.

It turned out rather a cool day. The sky was often covered with cloud. One could be sure there would be a dance that evening. The third steward rushed round the ship full of business and showed great democratic feeling, for whomever he met – seaman, steward, or de-luxe passenger – with equal readiness he would produce his notebook and put down their bet on one rat or another. Now the favourite was Tanker. Blackie might be stronger, Fatty might be bigger, but Tanker's exceptional nimbleness could not fail to win. Yet many felt sure that that exciting beast would not end well. Still everyone could wait, with relief, another day or two, for the rat-meat on which the live rats had started, the moment their audience had left the upper-deck, would be sure to stay their hunger that length of time. For that matter, quite a number of passengers remained by the cage until not even a bone of Ginger was left.

After breakfast, during my work, I told old Nils about the battle. He was silent a long time, then said, 'I'm not affected by what drones who claim to be civilized do. And what does it matter to me if many of our crew go home to their families without a bean, when we've finished this trip. What does upset me is the way it corrupts people. You'll see. . . .'

We were sailing in latitudes where summer is always a time of terrific storms. People feel suffocated. If they are plethoric their eyes start from their heads: if they are anaemic the colour drains from their eyes. Imagine the agonies of the stoke-hole; every shovelful seems a ton: at any moment the bearings may seize or the gauge needles stand at danger. . . .

For the present there was only a dead swell, but even that meant real hell for us. Only a few selected passengers appeared at meals, though dozens of cabins demanded lemonade, orangeade or the ship's doctor. Then Mr. Painter would hurry around looking distracted, trying to be everywhere at once and filling the air with the aroma of his patent nostrums. Still, to be just to him, he soon learnt which of the passengers, especially women, found things particularly unbearable. The old medico had grown accustomed to seeing humans almost dehumanized by sea-sickness, while some had to be forcibly restrained from jumping overboard. In that respect the dead swell was hardly better than a storm.

But generally speaking, being a dry-land sailor, I had so far paid little attention to the sea. I had not yet got a taste for it, so to speak. After all, when had I time to admire or love the sea if, from five in the morning to eight or nine at night, I hardly glimpsed 'god's daylight', but spent it all racing about inside the ship? Had I been skilled, possibly I should not have wasted so much energy. But I was still a novice and so, late at night, when all was dark, I would just go on repeating 'the sea, as sea, simply makes me sad . . .' It was all very well for people who, stretched out in deck-chairs, could enjoy watching the multitudes of small mirrors scattered over the vast waters, or follow the flight of an albatross, or awed gaze down into the powerful foaming wake of our propeller, or give themselves dreamily up to a *dolce far niente*, their eyes fixed on our bows as we ploughed the watery depths. But none of all that was for us.

Still, I was young, I wanted to see deep into the souls of all with whom fate brought me in contact. I wanted to know what my boss, Nils Sorensen, meditated so long and ponderously, he who had been at sea forty years as boy, stoker, carpenter, steward and barman, and what he had to say of the rats. He had never managed to acquire a family of his own, and on shore owned nothing but a cottage in Vikersuns, not far from Oslo; a cottage bought with many years' savings for a widowed sister, over-burdened with children.

'There is no wilder beast on earth than humans, James', he said to me, soon after the rat business started. 'People claim that tigers and giant squids are cruel and bloodthirsty, but they kill because they must from hunger, not in the least for pleasure. Now look at most of our passengers? Don't they devour each other on land? Don't they, with their money, turn whole races into rats, cannibal rats? Doesn't what just happened in that cage remind you of what we all saw not so long ago, when we called it "the Great War for Democracy" instead of calling it "the war for the dollar, franc, pound and krone".'

He was silent for some moments. Then, in the tones of a man who wishes to convey, 'If you ever tell anybody I said this, I shall swear you're a liar and never did,' he added, 'If you want to know, Jimmy, boy, there's one country, only one, where they've grasped what justice means and fight for it, and that's Russia. But just look how all the "democrats" attacked Russia. There's the truth of it, Jimmie! I used to be a Social-Democrat myself once, but now all I know is I'm an old fool.'

I said nothing. Nobody wanted my opinion. I undressed and went to bed.

I was so scared of making some muddle in my work, of forgetting something and so letting old Nils down, that even in my sleep I used to go through the whole day's routine. And that's how it happened, about five days out from Haiti that, in the middle of the night, suddenly I remembered I had forgotten to get out the paste for the biscuits the Americans adore. I pulled on my trousers, slipped my bare feet into my canvas slippers and hurried off to the hold.

In the mist which just before that dawn enwrapped the vessel as it moved stealthily forward over the silvery glimmer of the ocean, I dropped swiftly from deck to deck till I came to the hold and there switched on my torch, without which it was dangerous to go into the bowels of the ship for, if one happened to tread on a rat's tail the rat might bite and there might be nasty surprises. I trod rapidly, purposely shuffling to clear a way for myself till I came to the refrigerating chambers where the temperature was always some degrees below freezing. One compartment contained huge stores of milk products, another a mountain of long narrow cases of eggs. The door of the latter happening to be ajar, I stood transfixed in amazement. Then I remembered. That morning I had got down a case from the very top, and had meant to take down another to save the trouble on my next visit. I might have insisted on having a steward to help me drag up the clumsy heavy cases, but a sort of pride, a childish bravado which many carry with them all their lives, made me prefer to manage by myself. All the same, I had handled the case rather clumsily, so that to prevent it falling and crushing my toes, I succeeded in taking it full in the chest. That had put me in a bad humour and so, when I went out, I had not properly closed the door, which was of inch-thick steel, on silent castors.

Now I heard a squeak that came from the egg-store and proved that the thieves had already got down to business on something particularly nice. Whereupon I shot a sharp beam of light at the foot of the door, then suddenly swung it sideways. The next instant a fluffy wave rushed over my feet and squeaking loudly the rats ran all ways and disappeared. Surrounding this whole section of the ship, devoted to the stores, there stretched a thick concrete wall, insulated with rubberoid, as hard as bone. The rats must have bitten a way right through it.

I had heard much of the ingenuity of rats, so though I was frightfully tired, I switched off my torch and stood stock still. Near by a bulb glowed dimly, covered with a thick layer of dust. I did not budge, waiting. Soon a faint shuffling and squeaking was once more audible in the egg-room. Then, five or six rats peeped out, ran half up to me, and concluding I was harmless, hastily

whisked back. Soon after, I heard something like a finger nail scratching a plank against the grain. But it was more than one nail, it was at least ten. That lasted five minutes. The rats were eating a way through one of the long upper planks of the case I had lowered that morning. At the same time, there was a desperate racing and fussing all round, just as though a crowd of visitors were settling down to a merry dinner-party. All at once the scratching stopped. I could hear the rustle of the shavings in which the eggs were packed. They had got to the eggs. But how would they get them out to their holes? I had heard that rats break eggs by knocking them against each other in order to lap up the contents. Were they going to eat them on the spot?

There before my eyes an amazing scene unfolded itself. Anyone not acquainted with the inventiveness and gumption of rats would have thought he was watching well-trained circus animals. Two large old rats set their hind legs firmly on the floor and placed their fore-paws on the case. From the case there then appeared a rat holding an egg in its front paws. The old rats took it from him and cautiously, though confidently, lowered it down. While down below . . . As I was staring at the case, the following had been taking place: on the floor, from the case to the corner where a number of pipes met, set in a grey-black frame, a sort of whitish ribbon was now apparent. It was the bellies of a chain of rats on their backs, the head of one between the hind legs of the one in front of it. What I saw was a perfect conveyer-belt in motion: methodical, precise and smooth as some lovely piece of machinery. Each egg, urged forward by the paws, floated from belly to belly, and in less than a minute was at the far corner of the room, having travelled a full quarter-circle. Presumably the job was just as well arranged inside the case for, as though ejected by a spring, the rat appeared at regular intervals, handed an egg to the two outside, who then lowered it neatly down to the belt. All the time rats were constantly whisking about the store-room like scouts. Once or twice they came right up to my legs but, assuring themselves that I was unmoving, turned back to the case while the paws continued to push the eggs forward with well-timed thrusts and a scarcely audible rustle.

If, as occasionally happened, an egg rolled off the belly of a somewhat clumsier rat, it stayed on its back but squealed plaintively. Then two or three of its comrades would immediately run up and dribbling like skilled footballers and using their sharp little snouts to help their feet, would roll the egg to the nearest rat in the chain. Whereupon one would lift the egg up, press it to the other's belly and off it would start on its destined way. Fifty eggs passed my eyes in this way without the speed in any way slackening and without an egg being broken.

At last I decided to close down the show. I switched on my torch, threw a sharp beam on the case and whistled loudly. The same instant, the belt became a turmoil of confusion. For a minute there was a desperate squeaking and the rustle of hundreds of little paws. The last to escape was a rat which seemed to have hidden itself among the shavings, no doubt hoping the disturbance would die down and the job continue. But, hearing my approach, it could not hold out and hissing menacingly rushed from the case.

Loading up with the things I needed, I carefully shut the egg-room and stores and returned to my little cabin, not in the least sorry to have thus broken my sleep.

My boss's prophecy was beginning to come true. Never had the ship's officers addressed each other in such harsh, challenging tones: never had the chief engineer or first mate heard so many complaints of insolent answers or behaviour. The passengers could not complain: they had to deal only with the stewards, three-quarters of whose earnings consisted of tips. Obviously it was not in their interest to quarrel with the passengers.

I also began to notice, more and more often, that passengers and many of the crew reeked of whisky. Flasks which many had brought from the States, which others had bought and smuggled aboard at Port-au-Prince, came into use. I was run off my feet taking bottles of 'White Rock' to the cabins. During dances, the air was thick with the reek of whisky, gin, vermouth and even absinthe. I knew that the enterprising third steward was supplying the men from his own secret stores. And since the officers had to apply to the very same source – at a suitable price – they had

nothing to say. The great thing was to keep it all nicely quiet, to preserve order and decency.

Passions rose higher and it was impossible to say how things would end. One day two partners at bridge came almost to blows. The 'old bitch' stuck either a hat-pin, or a pair of manicure scissors – it was never clear which – into the black boy's cheek, because she had slipped in the bathroom and nearly fallen. The black boy had rushed howling from the cabin, and had not the husband managed to fix it, poor Lincoln Hafeker would have run to complain. Of course, that would not really have mattered, but it would have looked very bad. 'Complaints about a passenger, and a de-luxe, too!'

In the stifling kitchen, full of greasy steam, conflicts arose between the assistant-cooks and even between them and the chef.

In the stoke-hole, there was a fight between two of the stokers which might have ended badly for the one who tripped over a water bucket and would certainly have fallen against the red-hot furnace door had not his mate managed to grab him in time. But here I ought to do justice to old Mr. Shaughnessy who by now had begun to have a shrewd idea that all was not well aboard. What made it worse was that it would be days before we reached Ecuador. That very morning I had heard his voice speaking in great excitement, either to the first mate, chief steward or chief engineer. At sight of my white tunic he stopped short, then ordered his breakfast. He did not trust me. I may be imagining things, but I suspect that the first mate or the Hun had found it not beneath his dignity to stir the captain up against a 'rotten foreigner'. But the very day that Ginger fell I knew the sweets of revenge.

The dancing was over. The last pairs were separating and I was already in anticipation enjoying my four or five hours of sleep when the first steward happened to notice me and asked me to go along with him and get some bill or other for my boss. On the way back, taking a short cut over the deck bathed in silvery moonlight, suddenly I heard voices and stood still. It was the Hun. His insistent accents seemed to be trying to persuade somebody. Then I heard the slightly scornful, melodious voice of Lady Gwen in answer. Clearly she had been drinking.

'Oh, go to bed, Mr. Wagner,' she said, 'we've both of us had more than's good. I'm sleepy.'

And again there came the harsh, methodical tones of the Hun fraught with the persistence of the male, intent on his desire.

'Let go my arm, Wagner!' I then heard. 'Do you hear, at once, or I shall never speak to you again!'

But apparently the Hun was not easily scared. There was a scuffle, followed by a ringing slap. I held my breath. Immediately after I heard a cabin door bang and ten seconds later the second mate passed where I stood in the shadow of a pile of deck-chairs. Thank you, Lady Gwen! If I had been a trifle annoyed with her, I was now ready to ask forgiveness.

Two events helped to improve the atmosphere aboard – grown so tense with latent human savagery – and greatly helped to discharge it. First was the typhoon. About two in the afternoon when everyone, and of course the stoke-hole, engine-room, laundry and kitchen were on the point of collapse because of the incredible heat, a small cloud appeared in the sky, astern. A fresh breeze sprang up and a sigh of relief burst from every lung on deck. The cloud grew rapidly. I had just come out of the captain's cabin. I thought I was seeing Pushkin's *Tornado in the Steppes.* In another ten minutes the whole horizon was obscured by huge clouds and, where there had been the burning dazzling disc of sun, now only a dark-purplish spot could be distinguished. Then that disappeared. Crests of foam appeared here and there over the sea and waves began to lash first the lower deck, then the middle deck and soon were swirling around the boats on the top deck. The ship tossed like an empty shell and at times seemed to buck, while its huge screw threshed out of the water. At such moments, I am sure, fear seized not only my landlubber's heart. Then a furious downpour, almost horizontal, lashed us: but only for a few minutes. Wind and waves strove furiously in their efforts to sink us. The captain and first mate remained throughout on the bridge. The chief engineer did not leave the engine-room an instant. Life on board seemed to have completely died down.

Only honest old Dr. Painter, grasping at anything that offered

some kind of support, still moved, answering the desperate calls of 'dying' passengers though at times he almost had to crawl into some cabin. All ports were screwed fast and the air was choking. Some of the passengers stood in their doorways, legs braced against the frames to prevent being hurled headlong when the ship heeled thirty or forty degrees. Every light was switched on to combat the Stygian blackness. The ship creaked and groaned. That miniature hell continued for forty minutes – not more – but it seemed an eternity. It was a good thing we were still relatively close to the South American mainland, for the mountain ranges gave us great protection. I thought with horror what sailors must undergo in ships ten times smaller than ours, when such storms last days.

At lunch not more than forty to fifty passengers showed up and, of the women, only Lady Gwen. She was pale, dark under the eyes, but still radiating her composed pleasure with life. And the rats? They seemed completely forgotten except by the 'showman', our third steward.

As soon as the typhoon threatened he had hastened to move the cage and rats down to the second deck and, helped by the bos'n and a deck-hand, had hung it under the gantry in the bows, carefully lashed down. Then, as the typhoon began moving away, some went to take a look at the quadrupeds – and found only two: Fatty and Tanker. Blackie had met her end during the typhoon, and there was no reason to suppose the struggle had been either long or fierce. Now, Tanker's bright-grey pelt was covered with dark, apparently swollen, patches. Similar swellings could be seen, on closer scrutiny, on Fatty's almost black coat. In addition, Fatty had lost an ear and showed a gaping wound on her back, at the root of the tail, and kept on stretching out her right hind leg. Like Grey Girl before her she seemed to have had a tendon severed.

The cage was re-established in its former position, and again the pilgrimage to the upper deck began. The first to honour it with a visit was the first mate, well-groomed and English, to whom all other races were but a slight improvement on rats. For a few moments he stood by the cage, deaf to the steward's seductive commentary; then, with the same impassive expression made his way down, after saying something about the ship's boats to the bos'n.

The captain, so far, had not once seen the rats. All he knew of them was the daily reports from the assistant barman – pretty detailed, for that matter – and, no doubt also, from the third steward.

The final denouement was approaching. The third steward was busy taking down new bets in his book and there were very few people on board who had not lost anything from one to ten dollars. Some had even lost hundreds because, after Giant's death, many backed Ginger, Blackie, even Grey Girl. Now the cards were reshuffled. Most were inclined to favour Tanker. That creature might be smaller than Fatty, but Fatty had never yet shown any initiative; she would never make anything but flank-attacks, though once in the battle she would defend herself well. But what sort of a match was she for Tanker? Would it take long for Tanker to get her teeth into Fatty's spine? On the other hand, Fatty's advantage was her immense jaws which had already brought down Giant, besides which she somehow gave the impression of knowing how to handle herself in a fight. Thus opinions were divided, with a modest majority in favour of Tanker. Four days still remained before we would reach Ecuador.

But now we had to count on a temporary truce, for Blackie had only just been eaten and again, being face to face with each other, the rats would start their duel only when agonized with hunger. Thus, to hasten the end, the third steward very logically decided to withhold all water. That, of course, was bound to make them fiercer and pluckier, particularly since just having feasted on Blackie they were soon bound to be horribly thirsty. The passengers, without exception, approved the line taken by the steward. The crew, however, took it differently. Greaser Davis, unanimously backed up by the whole engine-room and stoke-hole, resolved on a piece of unheard of insolence. Ignoring the chief engineer and first mate, he went straight to the captain and in the name of them all protested it was time to put a stop to this 'rat madness', that it wasn't decent for civilized beings to encourage a savagery that reeked of the middle ages, that there had never been so much scrapping among the men as in the last few days, that of course rats should be destroyed, but not turned into a bloodthirsty form of

sport. Much more than this was said to the captain by calm, restrained Davis, not long released from St. Quentin Prison. In 1917, when America entered the war, 'guided purely by spiritual motives' (leaving aside such trifles as the loans to England, France and Tsarist Russia amounting to milliards of dollars, all of which would have vanished had Germany won), Davis not only refused to join the army but even fought against it in his Union, much to the rage of that time-serving working-class leader, Gompers. The captain knew that Davis enjoyed some authority, not merely in the engine-room, and that he was also a first-rate, methodical worker. Mr. Shaughnessy heard him out patiently, then said, 'Charlie, it's (by which little word he, so to speak, excluded himself from the whole rat business) gone too far now. Can't you see what a howl the passengers would raise? Why, the company'd fire me. Just bide another day or two and we'll hope one of the rats finishes the other off. Then we'll throw it and the cage to the devil.'

And Davis saw how humiliating it would be for the old sea dog to be carpeted over this rat business. Besides, the rival English, French and Scandinavian companies might easily make lots of capital out of the incident and then Mr. Shaughnessy might have to retire before his time, and at fifty-six it was no use hoping for a captain's job with another company. So Davis saluted and went out.

Now, the passengers spent most of the day on the upper deck, as though that were the fashionable place for promenading. For hours on end they would stand about the cage, greedily hoping that next moment the two rats would fly at each other. Although the third steward let it be known that everybody would be informed at the first hint of the coming duel, they preferred not to be far from the cage, so that the upper deck, against all rules, was littered with deck-chairs. There were always, too, a number of women and, of course, among them, 'the old bitch', who would never let her husband move an inch without her. It was worth seeing how her eyes blazed at the least hint of excitement near the cage.

But two days after the typhoon and death of Blackie, an event took place which upset every calculation. When the first curious eyes that morning examined the cage, they saw the following amazing sight: Fatty was sitting in the middle of the cage, and her right

hind leg was still jerking spasmodically. Only, now she was no longer fat, but had turned into the most ordinary of rats: nobody would have put a cent on her now. But it was not merely the change in herself that was important; where her greyish belly had shown through the dark outer fur there was now a handful of bright grey, almost white, writhing baby rats. Upon which counting followed and the final conclusion was – seven.

That day I was frightfully busy, as preparations for the 'Captain's banquet' had begun – an affair always held just before we entered our port of destination. It was therefore not till just before lunch that I could snatch a moment to run up. Then, what struck me more than anything else, and before anything else, was the expression on Mrs. Grieg's face, the 'old bitch', 'old cow', and so forth. She was sitting close to the cage, gazing at Fatty with a hypnotic stare, and her watery-blue, shifty, self-satisfied eyes now wore a look of fixed gentleness, of concentration, of calm and even mildness. And her jaws went on gaping, like a fish on dry land.

Tidings of the new family had flashed through every corner of the ship and that day even the captain and missionary appeared on the upper deck (the latter pretending it was his first visit). Also Louis Abraham Milche, and all six Chinese laundrymen, *in corpore*. The ship buzzed like a hive. If the rats had seemed the chief topic of conversation when we drew out of Prince-au-Port, now there was no doubt it was. But still we were a far from peaceful hive. Hitherto there had been two camps aboard: one, the working population: the other, the bored drones. Now, there was a complete split in the passengers' camp and it seemed the arch-cause was none other than the steward's *bête noire*, the 'old bitch'. She had put forward a request that the rats be set free. When one passenger objected it was impossible to give such vermin their liberty, she answered tartly that God alone knew how many rats were running about her cabin and what difference would it make if there were a few more running about the pestilential, rotting old tub. (The owners had been talking of gassing the rats these three years, but could not decide to start, since it would cost some two thousand dollars.)

Mrs. Grieg found many supporters, principally women, even

among those who had put money on Tanker and could now count on a pretty certain win. There was a real ferment, too, among the crew and service personnel. Seamen with a deep-seated hatred for rats had now become 'ratophile'. They also feared that Tanker would attack Fatty since he was now unquestionably bigger and stronger, and that he would first eat all the little rats. A show-down was imminent. It was nearly precipitated by the black boy who was caught just about to throw them some cheese parings. Another most interesting circumstance now came to light which heaped still more shame on those who wanted the game played to the end. Tanker, who, Blackie being done for, had taken up the corner opposite Fatty – either expecting attack, or preparing for it – now ran about unconcernedly, sniffed at the bars, often squatted on his hind legs, and, even more, often went right up to Fatty who showed not the least alarm. It was the primitive, all-powerful respect for motherhood. The only question was, how long would that instinct restrain Tanker from attacking: how soon would the most powerful of all instincts, hunger, to which was added unbearable thirst, win the day?

That evening, or rather that night, since we never went to bed before midnight, Nils Sorensen said 'Jimmy, there's a deal of evil in man but no less good. Now, to the end of my days, I shall believe that man has at least no less nobility in him than that rat, what's its name? – Tanker.'

Before this, there had been an incident on the ship which gave the captain something to think about. About eight one evening, just before the watch was changed, the second mate stood near the fo'c'sle door, giving instructions to the bos'n. At that moment the black boy, Lincoln Hafeker, rushed by, as usual out of breath. 'Here, you black scum,' the Hun shouted. Hafeker stopped as if shot and turned round. 'If you dare ever feed those rats again I'll feed them with your skin!'

'You let Lincoln alone,' said greaser Davis, who had just emerged from the fo'c'sle, without raising his voice, but enunciating every syllable clearly. 'He isn't under you; complain to the first steward if you like.'

What happened next showed how badly the 'rat madness' had

fretted the men's nerves. Regardless of the presence of an officer, Bob Clasy, model bos'n, with one spring attacked the greaser. But Davis was not caught unawares and with one terrible upper-cut sent Bob Clasy flying. Davis was not one of those weakling party organizers – more than once he had had to use his fists against provocateurs and thugs hired by the yellow leaders of the working-class movement. The bos'n was soon on his feet, ready to rush again at Davis, but some stewards and sailors had already grabbed hold of both. The Hun did not utter a word. He turned purple. His pig eyes burned with rage. He swung sharply round and went away, no doubt to the first mate. The atmosphere thickened. The bos'n had friends and things might take a serious turn.

Nils Sorensen's last words as he stretched out in his bunk were, 'When you come to think of it, Jimmy, all of us, not only in this rotten ship, but in any country where money's made, are just so many rats in a cage.'

Dear old captain, you will never know to whom you owe the relief of such a burden lifted from your shoulders. You would have liked to get shot of those rats, but were afraid of the passengers who wanted a thrilling spectacle: two ravenous creatures at each other's throats. You would have resigned yourself to things going their way to the end, but the Bob Clasy brawl made you see how rotten things were on board.

Late that night the bell rang. It must have been ringing some time, for I slept like the dead and only awoke when old Nils, from his bunk, began insistently calling 'Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy . . . !' I leapt to my feet, pulled on some clothes and dragged on my tunic as I ran. The ring came from cabin-de-luxe No. 6.

Lady Gwen was still fully dressed, but her feet were in soft morocco slippers. She sat on her bunk, and in one hand held her favourite *Omar Khayyám*.

'Jimmy,' Lady Gwen said warmly when I entered, 'I want to ask you to do something . . . Perhaps it's sentimental and hypo-critical – after all, only yesterday thousands of human lives were being sacrificed and nobody knows for whom or for what idea –

but I can't stop thinking of those little rats which will be eaten to-night or to-morrow. It makes me feel sick. Couldn't you . . . let them out quietly, and let them go where they want?'

Creeping like a shadow and hiding like a criminal at the least rustle, I made my way as soundlessly as a spirit to the upper deck. It took me more than twenty minutes. But there I was. In the grey half-light I could clearly distinguish the cage and two dark little outlines in it. I took a step forward. But even as I put down my foot, I distinctly saw eyes watching me. My first thought was: it's a cat! But there were no cats on our ship, and cat's eyes don't gleam like that in the dark. I could distinguish two huge whites. Gradually my eyes grew used to the darkness and then I made out a head. It was Lincoln Hafeker! What was he doing there? Again trying to feed the rats? But that was bound to be discovered and then he would certainly be in trouble. I made two swift steps forward. Black-skinned Lincoln rose from his knees, moved towards me and confidingly put his hand on my arm. Then, still wordlessly, he pointed to the cage. I bent down and saw that the door was wide open. But both rats were still in the cage, though Tanker still ran from side to side in it. But at last she went up to the open door, paused for an instant undecided, then darted out and disappeared into the greyish darkness.

We must conclude that Fatty soon followed her example. I desperately wanted to see how she would manage her little ones. But common sense dictated we shouldn't stay one second longer than necessary. I stood upright, took the clumsy darky's hand and shook it firmly. I was full of profound respect for this son of Africa who had thus risked much unpleasantness for himself and shown more nobility than the white gentry he served. Dear old Nils would be pleased.

We turned together, separated and in silence made our way down from the upper deck.

KNIVES

VALENTIN KATAEV

(Translated by Alec Brown)

THE Sunday stroll up and down the boulevard is a remarkable way of fixing what a man really is. Pashka Kokushkin began his Sunday stroll at Chistyé Prudy at six that evening. The first thing he did was to drop into the Moscow Country Products bar and drink a bottle of beer. That immediately made his proper approach to life clear, and gave him self-assurance.

Then he bought a couple of little measures of roasted sunflower-seeds from an old woman who kept a stall, and took his time down the main walk. On the way he met a gipsy woman who fixed on him.

'Fine gentleman, young gentleman,' she whined, 'give me your hand, I tell you all the truth, I'll tell you for whom your heart aches, young gentleman, and I'll tell you what's on your mind, I'll tell you everything, fine gentleman, I won't keep anything back from you, and you give the old gipsy-woman a penny for her pains, won't you? If I tell your fortune, it'll come all right; if I don't, you'll be sorry.'

Pashka thought it over, and said, 'Look here, mother, fortune-telling by the palm is all prejudice and twaddle, but here's something for you. Come on, tell away, it doesn't matter, it'll all be twaddle.'

The gipsy-woman slipped the coin into her gaily-coloured skirts, and bared her blackened teeth.

'Young gentleman,' she said, 'you're going to have a happy meeting, and the meeting will make your heart ache, and there's an elderly man stands in your way, but you don't be afraid, only, young gentleman, you be afraid of a knife, because you'll have a great unpleasantness through a knife, don't you be afraid of your friends, but you be afraid of your enemies, and I can see a green parrot will bring you happiness in life. Go on your way, young gentleman, and be happy.'

The gipsy stuck out her enormous belly and waddled off with a

very important air, with her broad heels shuffling in the gravel of the walk.

'Damn the woman,' said Pashka to himself, 'there's something in all that she says.' Then, with a wink and a guffaw, he went on his way.

As he went, he tried all the delights that life offered him. First he pulled himself up on to a rickety weighing machine, and found he weighed four pouds, fifteen pounds. A little later, squatting on his heels with the exertion, he tried his strength, and squeezed the quivering needle of the strength meter up to 'powerful adult male'.

Then came another little walk, and he tried his nerves by electric current, that is to say, he took hold of little brass handles, and ants ran in streams all over his joints, jabbing deep into him: his joints filled with soda-water, his palms stuck to the handles, but all the same, his nerves turned out to be strong.

At last, he sat down on a chair in front of a picture hung on a tree, representing a view of the Moscow Kremlin from the Kamenny Bridge, cocked one leg over the other, put on a bestial expression, and in that condition had his photograph taken. When ten minutes later they gave him the limp bit of pasteboard, Pashka examined himself at great length, and with tremendous satisfaction: there was the check cap, the familiar nose: there were his leggings, his apache shirt with open neck and his jacket, all absolutely it – he really was pleased, and could even not quite believe that he really was so handsome.

'Not so bad,' he said, rolled the still wet photo into a tube, and continued towards the lake and the boats.

To crown all these delights he had experienced, all he had to do was to find some suitable lassies and go for a boat trip with them. But, as things turned out, he went on past the boats until he came to a booth he already knew. There was a crowd in the wide-open doorway and you could hear the clink of metal and loud laughter.

'What's all this?' Pashka asked of a little Red-Army man elbowing his way in at the entrance.

'Quoits, jolly amusing. If you get a quoit on it, you can get a samovar.'

With some curiosity, Pashka peered over the heads of the audience

into the booth, which was brilliantly lit inside by lamps. The whole of the end wall was stretched with canvas. There were three tiers of shelves, with knives sticking up in them. Among the knives were laid out all manner of attractive prizes. On the lower shelf were baskets of sweets and cakes: on the second, alarm clocks, pots and pans and caps, and on the third, right up under the ceiling, in half-darkness, were really attractive presents: two balalaikas, a Tula samovar, chrome-leather knee-boots, a Tolstoy shirt, an Italian harmonica, a wall cuckoo clock and a gramophone. You got your prize according to the shelf you ringed a knife on. But it was almost impossible to ring a knife – the knives were very springy. Interesting.

Making good work with his elbows, Pashka got in. At the barrier was a little old man in silver spectacles taking in the money for the quoits, forty a shilling. A red-faced lad, with forelock wet with sweat and a stupid grin on his face, was just throwing up the last dozen. His coat flew open. The iron quoits flew from his coarse fingers, clanked among the knives, and rolled back into the sack awaiting them below. The lad grew purple. The knives rang with good steel as the quoits touched them, quivered in a sort of mist, and bent aside from the quoits.

'Blast the knives and the quoits!' the youth cried, at the end. 'I've spent a rouble and a half for nothing, I haven't even got a bag of Babaiev cakes,' and shamefaced, he made his way out.

'Last Sunday somebody got a pair of boots,' said a boy in patched trousers, 'it cost him ten roubles.'

'Well, now you let me,' said Pashka, pushing his way firmly up to the barrier. 'Now, we'll see.'

The little old man gave him some quoits.

'So,' said Pashka, in a masterful way, 'if I get a quoit on the lower row, I get some Babaiev sweets, do I?'

'That's right,' said the old man, in a bored voice.

'A bit higher, and it's an alarm-clock.'

The old man nodded.

'Interesting. Ah-ha! So I suppose, if I want a samovar, I've got to pitch one right up there, under the ceiling.'

'Look here, you get a bit of cake first, then you can cackle,' came an impatient voice from the crowd. 'Come on!'

Pashka put his photo on the barrier, elbowed the crowd away on either side of him, leant on the barrier, took aim; but then all at once his hand shook, the quoit slipped from his fingers, fell to the floor and rolled away. A wave of ice had gone through Pashka. Beside the shelves, on a chair, with her little hands neatly folded in her lap, was a smartly-dressed girl of such beauty that Pashka's eyes were clouded. The girl got up swiftly, picked up the quoit, gave it to Pashka without even looking at him, then suddenly gave a faint smile, with only the very corner of her lips, to one side – and that was Pashka's ruin.

'Come on, lad, what's the matter with ee? Come on, get your samovar! Get on with it!' shouted the onlookers behind him.

Pashka came to his senses and started tossing the quoits, one by one, blind to everything but the lowered lashes of the girl and her fine lips – like a cleanly divided cherry. When he had tossed all forty rings she gathered them together and without a word put them on the barrier, but this time did not smile at all: she only shot her grey eyes at Pashka and straightened a wisp of her auburn hair which had escaped from behind one ear.

Pashka had another set. The quoits flew, clumsily, one after the other. The crowd laughed loud and pressed on Pashka's back. The knives buzzed like bees. The old man crooked one finger and indifferently scratched his nose.

Having wasted good money, without getting a single quoit on a knife, Pashka in despair forced his way out and walked along under the lime trees and down the rose alley, away from the cascade. The lake was now covered with a faint mist. He felt a freshness over his hands. The cinema mirrored itself in the water in columns of fire. More than one pair of bobbed girls with green or blue combs in their hair scurried arm in arm past him, turned round at him, giggled and pretended to push each other – he really was a wonderful fellow! – but Pashka strode on without even noticing them and, deep in thought, continued singing:

'The gipsy woman told it, the gipsy woman told it,
The gip-sy wo-man told it, when she took my hand.'

During the night he fell in love, finally, irrevocably.

That whole month Pashka went to the booth every Sunday to throw quoits. In this way, he blew half his wages. He did not take his holiday, missed his turn, was absolutely ill with it. As always the girl lowered her eyes and gave him the quoits. There were occasions when she smiled, but as if smiling to herself. Yet it did happen that, when she suddenly caught sight of Pashka in the crowd, she went scarlet, but such a deep scarlet that it seemed even her bosom through the thin marquisette showed like swarthy peaches. But however hard Pashka tried, he simply could not find a moment to have a word with the girl; either the crowd was in the way, or there were the old man's hostile eyes peering over his spectacles, while he crooked his finger and scratched his nose, just as if warning Pashka off – 'don't you try, that girl isn't for you. Scoot!' Then one day, only a few people were there and the old man had just run out with a stick to drive some little hooligans away.

'Excuse me,' said Pashka, and his heart thumped hard. 'What is your name?'

'Liudmilla,' the girl whispered, swiftly and warmly. 'I know who you are, once you forgot your photograph on the barrier, and I took it for myself, I simply fell in love with it, it's so fine.'

She slipped her fingers in her bosom and on a locket-chain there was a crumpled little square of pasteboard. Her eyes fluttered and she went deep scarlet.

'And what is your name?'

'Pashka. Will you go to the Coliseum with me? There's an awfully interesting film on, "The Woman with Millions", it's the first instalment.'

'I can't. Daddy won't let me.'

'You slip out.'

'Heaven forbid. If I do they'd never let me back again. Mummy's worse still, she's got her own stall in the Sukharevka market. You simply don't know what severe parents I have, it's really frightful. We live in Sretenka, Prosvirny Pereoulok's our street, not far from here. Number two, in the courtyard, to the left.'

'Well, Liudmilla darling?'

'I don't know. Quick, throw your knives, there's daddy coming.'

Pashka scarce had time to begin throwing, when there the old man was, with his stick, shooting savage glances at his daughter. So Pashka had to go without any result. The next Sunday, when he came – the booth was boarded up! All it showed was a signboard saying 'Practical American Quoits, Try your Luck'. And there, in the corner, was a painting of a green parrot with a pink tail, and a quoit in its beak, while the breeze stripped yellowing lime leaves from the trees and bore them past the parrot and piled them up round the booth and the flower-beds were bedraggled and not a soul was in sight: it was autumn.

Then only Pashka recalled the fortune-teller's words: 'There's a man getting on in years stands in your way . . . you will suffer great unpleasantness from knives . . . a green parrot will bring you luck . . .' and he felt so sick and so mad with that gipsy you couldn't have described it. He threatened the parrot with his fist and went on his way, his mind blank and the wind blowing through him whichever way he turned, straight ahead down the deserted boulevard.

Coming out on to the Sretenka, he found himself in Prosvirny Alley. It was one of those noisy, overcast, empty autumn days. And there, no doubt about it, opposite a tumble-down church, was No. 2. Pashka entered the courtyard and turned to the left, but then he was at a loss where to go next. At that instant, a hurdy-gurdy began playing, and there on the hurdy-gurdy sat a green parrot, with a green tail, watching Pashka with impudent round eyes under cherry-coloured lids.

An instant later a little window on the second floor opened, a tender hand appeared and a coin wrapped in a piece of paper fell at his feet. And through the double window, over the padded felt and stuff half way up the double winter panes and through the curtains and aspidistras, he beheld Liudmilla. She was gazing at him with delighted eyes, her bright rosy cheek pressed to the pane, making signs with her fingers, her hands, her arms, yet he could make nothing out of it all. So Pashka began waving back to her to come out, damn the parents, I can't live without you – when suddenly in front of little Liudmilla was a stout, moustached woman in a Turkish shawl, who slammed the little window, and threatened Pashka with her fist.

Pashka went home with his tail between his legs, spent a fortnight in agony, hung about Prosvirny Alley at night, got in people's way like someone without visible means of support, frayed his nerves to tatters, and the third week, when Sunday came round, cleaned up his clothes with wet tea-leaves, put on a pink tie, polished his gaiters and set off to take the bull by the horns and offer his hand and his heart. Liudmilla herself opened the door, gasped when she saw him, clutched at her heart. But Pashka made straight for the living-room, where the parents were sitting at their after-dinner tea and said, 'Good afternoon. Excuse me, Daddy, and you, Mamma, excuse me, only I simply can't live without Liudmilla. It happened the moment I saw her. You can do what you please, but here I am, for what I am, a qualified mechanic of the sixth class, plus overtime, I don't touch spirits, I've been a party member, since 1923, I don't pay any alimony, so as far as that goes, everything's straight, clean bill.'

'Look here, young fellow,' yelled the old man, in an unbelievable voice, 'I'm not daddy to you, and my wife is not mamma to you. Forget it!'

'And I'd like to know what sort of goings-on you call it,' chimed in mamma, in a deep bass voice, 'hanging about the yard, listening to the hurdy-gurdy and breaking into other people's homes. You keep that to yourself. I never heard tell. And I never saw the likes, a young man for my daughter! To think of it, sixth class mechanic! Why, last year there was a manager of a block of flats in Miasnitzka Street came after her, and I sent him away with a flea in his ear too. Get out, if you please, Citizen. And we'll keep our girl. 'She's not just anybody. We don't want any mechanics here, especially party mechanics. '

'Just by practical quoits,' interposed the father, hotly, 'I make as much as a clear thousand roubles a season. And I've got four hundred roubles' worth of prizes. Liudmilla wants a husband with a bit of capital, to expand the business a little. In other words, good day to you.'

'So you won't let me marry her?' Pashka asked, in a voice of desperation.

'Not on any account,' the old man squeaked.

'Very well, sir,' said Pashka, in terrible tones, 'if capital to expand the business is what you want, the meeting's over. You'll remember this. I'll show you . . . Good-bye, Liudmilla dear, don't give in, wait for me!'

As for Liudmilla, she sat in the hall, on a chest, and wrung her hands.

Pashka set his jaw and went out into the street, where he made for the Sukharevka market and bought a sharp kitchen knife. He went home and shut himself in. Winter came and went. The blocks of ice were brought in from the lake in the park, whole loads of it. Pashka went regularly to work, never lost a minute strolling about but instead spent the long winter evenings shut in his room, and his neighbours heard sounds of vibrating metal – was he learning to play the guitar? Nobody knew. The spring breaking of the ice came. The sun began to be warm, the world grew green, the trees came out and the boats were brought out of the boathouses on the lake in the park. The park photographers hung out their Kremlins and moonlit nights. The evening life of the boulevard began again.

Every Sunday, regularly, Pashka came down by the lake – to see if the booth had opened again. It was closed. The green parrot with the pink tail still sat on the sun-faded blue ground and held a quoit in its beak, while overhead drooped the fresh lime leaves. Pashka was thin and dour. Then one fine morning he found the booth open. A crowd of idlers stood in the doorway and the lamps inside were burning fiercely. There was the sound of clinking metal and laughter.

Pashka shouldered the crowd aside and with great decorum approached the barrier. His cheek-bones stood out stark and bare and his reddened eyes burnt. Liudmilla was collecting the quoits. He had scarcely set foot in the booth when the colour left her cheeks and she became absolutely transparent; her eyes darkened, her fine lips became still more beautiful, like cherries. Papa put his spectacles straight and seemed to draw back a little.

'Excuse me, Comrade,' said Pashka grimly, and shouldered aside the lad who was throwing the quoits. Then, without so much as a glance at the old man, he nodded to the girl. Like a mechanical

thing she handed him the quoits. He touched her ice-cold fingers and tossed the money on the bench.

From behind him a wave of sniggering rose. 'Hi, comrade, you'd better get a barrow to take your samovars away,' somebody shouted.

Without turning to see who had spoken, Pashka took a quoit and tossed it negligently. The knives did not even stir. There was merely a dull thud. The quoit had fallen without touching the knife at all. The old man gave his nose a quick rub and, a trifle apprehensively, handed Pashka a packet of Babaiev sweets. Pashka moved it aside, drew back, then let the second quoit go, absolutely as though not trying. Just as lightly and neatly it ringed the second knife. And the old man had not had time to reach the shelf to get the second packet of sweets before Pashka had sent three more quoits after the others, which just as lightly, just as silently, settled round three more knives. A deathly silence fell on the booth.

The old man turned to Pashka and his little eyes blinked nervously. There was a dark bead of sweat on his forehead, like a beetle. The seat of his trousers went baggy, and seemed to have grown too big. Pashka stood with his legs crossed, leaning on the bench, rattling the quoits.

'Well, what about Liudmilla?' he asked, very quietly, looking about as though the whole world was his.

'Not for you,' the old father answered.

'No?' said Pashka, sleepily. 'Very well. Here, sonny, you run down to the Pokrovska gate for a porter and barrow to take the samovar. Daddy, mind stepping aside a moment?'

Pashka's face became solid metal. A vein started up on his forehead. He drew back his taut arm a little. Lightnings flashed from his fingers. The knives buzzed as the quoits caught and ringed them round. The crowd howled, thundered, grew ever larger. There were people flocking up from all sides. Pashka scarcely looked where he was aiming. His eyes seemed to wander loosely all over the place. He was menacing. Not one quoit missed its aim. In five minutes it was all over. Pashka wiped his forehead with his sleeve. The crowd fell away from him – the barrow had arrived.

'Load up,' said Pashka.

'Here, what's going to happen now?' the old man managed to say, treading about round the shelves.

'Nowt! All this junk's going straight into the lake, and that'll be the end of that.'

'Here, what do you mean, Citizen?' whined the old man like an old woman. 'Citizen, there's four hundred roubles' worth there, not to count the enterprise.'

'That's all the same to me, even if there's a thousand roubles' worth. The junk's mine now. I haven't stolen it. I won it in fair play. I've got witnesses. I've practised the whole winter, cut myself short of sleep. And now I'm going to do as I please. If it pleases me, I'll keep the stuff for myself; and if it pleases me, I'll throw it in the lake.'

'That's right!' shouted a delighted voice from the crowd. 'We can swear to that. Only don't throw the gramophone in, old man.'

Volunteers from among the onlookers soon piled the stuff on the porter's barrow.

'Off we go,' said Pashka.

'Here, steady on, where?' shouted the old man. 'I mean, I . . . I . . . citizens . . . how'll I go home . . . You're not really going to throw them in?'

'Not half!' said Pashka. 'Come on, down to the landing-stage.'

'You might at least have a bit of respect for Providence.'

'Providence is only a remnant of obscurity, Daddy! Just like your green parrot. Say another word, and . . .' He brandished his massive clenched fist.

Surrounded by a living ring of intensely-interested people, the barrow moved off down to the landing-stage, where they halted. Pashka took a pair of chrome leather boots from the top of the pile, and threw them into the water. The crowd gasped.

'Half a mo!' cried the old man, beside himself, and clutched at the barrow. 'Stop that!'

Then Pashka laid his powerful fist on top of the pile, lowered his eyes, and said calmly, 'This is the last time, Daddy, straight. Let all these folk be witnesses. Let me marry the lass, and here's your junk back. I won't come nearer the booth from now on than one

hundred paces, or I could ruin you, absolutely, Daddy! I cannot live without Liudmilla.'

'Then take her!' the old man shouted, waving his arms. And he spat in his indignation. 'Take her, quickly!'

'Liudmilla, darling!' cried Pashka, and drew back from the barrow, pale as death.

She stood at his side, shy, with her arm hiding her face from the onlookers. Even her slender arms were scarlet, she blushed so.

'The show's over, citizens. Come on, off we go,' said Pashka, and took the girl by the elbow as tenderly as if she were made of fine porcelain.

At this moment the whole boulevard was redolent of jasmine. There was jasmine everywhere, in their hair and in the water. Low down over the limes, in a dense violet-coloured sky, the moon rose like a curved knife. And its youthful light, reflected in the lake, was multiplied and subdivided in infinite betrothal rings of living gold.

And yet you assert that great passions are out of date. Not in the least, I assure you.

THE COPPER PLATES

KONSTANTIN PAUSTOVSKY

(*Translated from the Russian*)

BERG fanned the bonfire. Deep night hung over the wood, and summer lightning played over the lake. In the thicket, the air was so full of the smell of the golden leaves that it made one's head dizzy.

Lionya Ryjov, a komsomol, commonly known as 'Carrotty' Lionya, woke up and listened.

In the marshes, the ducks and cranes cried out, and the fish leaped in the lake. They had tea at dawn, and then went to look for woodcock in the woods. The woodcock fed on bilberries. A blue glow shot up into the zenith. Berg was sorry that the night was over and that they had to leave the bonfire, the sharp smell of damp autumn leaves and the summer lightning reflected in the black lake.

Walking was tedious and Berg said:

'Lionya, do tell us something amusing.'

'What shall I tell you?' asked Lionya. 'Well here is a true story about those two old women, your landladies. These old ladies are the daughters of the famous artist Pojalostin. He was an Academician—his family had always been shepherds—people of no account. His engravings hang in the museums of Paris, London and our own Ryazan. Have you seen them by any chance?'

Berg remembered the exquisite engravings, slightly yellowed by time, hanging on the walls of his room.

He had taken lodgings with two bustling old ladies at Zaborie, a remote village. Berg took them for former school-teachers. They didn't sleep at nights, used to keep watch over their orchard which had run wild, sighed, were rather afraid of Berg, used to complain a little timidly about the injustices of the village soviet, and their room smelt of dried mint.

Only now did Berg remember the strange impression that the engravings had made on him at first. They were portraits of people of former times, and Berg couldn't get away from the expression in their eyes. Whether he was cleaning his rifle, or writing, these ladies and gentlemen, the latter in tightly buttoned frock-coats, leftovers from the 'seventies, watched him from the walls with grave attention. Berg would look up and encounter the glance of Polonskie or Dostoievsky, turn his back on them and go on cleaning his rifle, but somehow would fail to go on whistling.

'Well,' asked Berg, 'and what next?'

'Next was the very devil. Our blacksmith Yegor comes to the village council. You've probably seen him — so lean his trousers scarcely hold up. And demands copper. He says he has nothing to do the folks' repairs with, and wants to have the bells taken down from the holy church.

'As it happened, that woman Theodosia, from Pustinya, a chatterbox and a bad lot, took part in the discussion: "What, you are going to take down the church bells, when at the Pojalostin's, those old women are walking on copper! I've seen them myself. And something is scratched on the pieces of metal — I can't understand it — and I can't understand why they hide them and don't give them up

as scrap metal to the Government!" So the chairman of the Soviet gives me an order: "Go, Lioshka, to these old women, and take away the plates. They are no use to them!"

'I went to them and explained all about it. I caught only the hunchbacked one. She looked at me, began crying, and said, "What are you thinking of, young man? You'd never dare touch those plates: they're national treasures. I wouldn't give them up for anything!"

'I said, "Show them to me please, and we will see what can be done about it." So she brought the plates, all wrapped up in a clean cloth. I looked at them and was spellbound. Goodness! What exquisitely fine work, and what a powerful hand! Specially Pugachev's portrait. The sort of thing one can't look at for long – one feels as if one were talking to him.

'I thought for a bit and then said to the old lady: "You can't possibly keep those plates here in this house. They're State property. Here anyone can get at them – the blacksmith, Theodosia or the devil himself – and these precious portraits will be used for nails for the soles of people's boots. They must be taken to the museum." The old lady was adamant and began to tremble: "I won't give them even to the museum. Let them stay here till we die, and then you can do what you like with them."

'I went back to Stepan, the chairman of the village soviet, and told him those copper plates must be handed over to the Russian Museum.

' "To the devil with you!" he shouted, "if you won't get them someone else will have to," and he sent Yegor to collect them, armed with an official demand. All very well, thought I, and ran off to the old ladies, getting there before Yegor, and said:

' "Give me those plates for safety, otherwise Yegor will melt them down. Our chairman is an ass – he doesn't understand such things."

'The old ladies were frightened, and gave me the plates and I hid them. Yegor came to my house and was going to make a search, and if you want to know, I hit him and kicked him out and sent the plates off to the museum at Riazan. Only after I'd got rid of them did I feel comfortable.

'Well of course they called a meeting and had me up for this business. I stood up and said "I did what was right. It's true I hit Yegor in anger. We won't talk about the engravings — you can't understand their value — but your children will. What we will talk about is the honour due to labour. This man rose from shepherds. For years and years he studied, while all the food he got was black bread and weak tea. On each plate untold labour was spent, sleepless nights, trouble, talent. . . ."

'"Talent," repeated Lionya thoughtfully. "One has to understand it. One has to guard it and value it! How can one achieve the new life without talent?" Well, to cut it short, I did not deny my guilt and I had enough trouble over it. But one thing did come of it — Stepan was dismissed from the village soviet — his work was a disgrace.'

Lionya stopped talking. Through the copse of aspens, shedding their lemon leaves, ran a woodcock. It took refuge in the dense undergrowth, and made a noise like a bear.

'To hell with that,' said Lionya, 'I'd like to know what you think about it — was I right or not?'

'What are you talking about,' replied Berg. 'It's obvious.'

The wind was blowing the dried leaves from the birch trees on to the lake.

He looked at Lionya with a smile. Autumn breathed out a smell of the woods, cold water and freshness. Lionya bent down and sniffed at the moss-covered stump of a tree, and smiling said:

'Pure ozone!' as he slung his rifle over his shoulder. 'Carry on!'

FRITZ

NIKOLAI TIKHONOV

(Translated by Alec Brown)

In the van of the German forces, according to rule, rode two scouts.

The scouts had got very far ahead of the remainder of their cavalry unit, so they were ambling along, chatting, as if out for a gentle

little ride at home. Their horses' heads rose and fell smoothly, there was a spring sound about the sand the horses churned up, and nothing alarming in the forest. Thus they rode from rise to rise, combe to combe.

Suddenly, a detachment of Russian Hussars leapt out on them.

One of the Germans – the eldest – swung his horse round and galloped away. The younger German lost his head, and broad-shouldered, jolly troop leader Lopoukha was at him in a second, seized the mane of his horse and, in business-like fashion commended: 'Off you get, you've done enough fighting old cock: off you get, end of the journey. . . .'

The German was not much more than a boy. He began to tremble, slipped off his horse, and they led it away. He strode away between the Hussars, repeating one word – Siberia, Siberia, Siberia.

He was sure he would be packed off to Siberia at once where he had heard there were white bears and on holidays men ate a ration of candles.

'Get rid of that twaddle about Siberia,' said Lopoukha, spitting far to one side. 'We'll give you some fodder in a minute. Don't shake like that.'

They handed the German over at Headquarters, and that is where this long yarn begins. Behind him the German left a large ginger-haired, quiet horse, which Lopoukha introduced to the Squadron.

'Hi! there!' he shouted, 'who is without a horse. Forward!'

Nobody answered, but Lopoukha was surrounded by curious inquirers, one of whom said, 'Purmel has lost his mount.'

'Fetch him here.'

Purmel was dragged out of the shelter. He was small, not at all strong but very nimble. His horse had been killed so he was forced to sweat behind the lines and was not a little out of humour at it. Now he appeared, slipping and stumbling, took one look at Lopoukha and one look at the horse and said indifferently, 'You have brought this for me?'

'For you, old man,' Lopoukha said, 'it is a first-class German horse. Call it Fritz.'

The horse shifted uneasily from one leg to the other and looked about it. The strange faces and strange scents worried it, and it kept

flapping its ears wildly. It was of ginger colour, massive, clean and with a business-like and detached air.

'Well, best of luck with him,' said Lopoukha.

Purmel gave the horse a good slap on the neck and led it to the stables.

II

The Hussars had saddled their horses and were standing waiting orders.

'Mount!' shouted Lopoukha.

All the horses stood motionless while the Hussars mounted – but one horse suddenly sidled up to the fence. It was a massive ginger-haired horse that sidled quietly and confidently up to the fence.

Everybody was already mounted, only Purmel was running after his horse and trying to talk it round: 'Stand still, stand still beast, where do you think you're going?'

While the horse pulled and pulled – towards the fence.

Purmel did not know that his German had always mounted from a fence and had trained the horse that way.

All the Hussars set up a rich guffawing. There was Purmel, squeezed up against the fence, hopping about feeling for his stirrup, as savage as a hungry flea. But as soon as the horse felt the foot in the stirrup, the animal wanted to help and stepped closer than ever up to the fence. Purmel was filled with mortification. Before the whole Squadron he had to clamber on the fence and thence mount, after which the horse dutifully joined the line.

'Look at him, uses a fence. The old hen mounts his horse from the fence!'

It was to the accompaniment of such greetings that Purmel tried to take his place in the ranks.

The Hussars rode off in field formation, in threes; and then Lopoukha noticed that there was one man who, with arms clanking like an old samavor, would insist on making a fourth column.

The horses snorted and shouldered him aside, but he was obstinate and tried to edge his way in first from the left and then from the right.

'What tomfoolery,' shouted Lopoukha. 'What tomfoolery is that there?'

Lopoukha was the leader and could shout much louder than anybody else.

Wherever he tried, the others drove the intruder away, but in clouds of dust a man tugged helplessly at the reins of an immense ginger-coloured horse. Lopoukha saw it was Purmel.

'Student,' he shouted again, 'student do not get so heated, pull the snaffle on the right – shorten your grip – come in at the tail end.

'I can't,' said Purmel almost in tears. 'This Hun won't obey me. I cannot, this Hun doesn't know any drill.'

And, indeed, Fritz did keep attacking the other horses, snuffling at them and then shying to one side. These were all strange horses and strange men. Purmel simply could not make him keep his place in the ranks.

Then Lopoukha's voice came in a hushed, horribly penetrating bass. 'About turn, ride thirty paces behind us, you weak-kneed ninny.'

And Purmel rode thirty paces behind us like one accursed, and his ginger horse behaved in a very peculiar way. At one moment it would rear up, at another it would kneel down – it certainly did not know its Russian drill and it was completely at a loss; then, reaching a brook, it stopped short so unexpectedly that Purmel went flying from the saddle.

The little Hussar, purple with rage, got to his feet and set about flogging Fritz with the reins.

'Beating a horse!' yelled an officer riding up. 'Three days guard. Don't you know your field orders?'

'Yes sir, no sir,' said Purmel.

'What are field orders?' yelled the officer.

'I do not remember, sir', said Purmel giving Fritz a look of intense hatred.

'Forgotten, have you indeed? Ten days!' shouted the officer, riding off.

And that evening, there was Purmel with his full field kit slung all round him, his gas mask at his side and his rifle on his back, standing on guard, sabre in hand, like a Turkish holy man. He had

to keep that up for two whole hours, and although it was a triumphant pose it did not suit Purmel at all.

One evening, a week later, Purmel was sitting at the fire with his unit.

'I can't bear it any longer,' he said. 'That ginger-haired cow costs me too much.'

But there was still a strain of pertinacity in his voice. 'Purmel,' I asked in an innocent voice, 'has Fritz let you down, can't he canter?'

'Very nearly,' he said. 'I've had ten parades and four hours' field duty in a week. If it goes on like that much longer I will be a dead man long before that horse is tamed.'

III

While we were on the road we did not unsaddle our horses sometimes for three days on end, and grooming wasn't done, except a bit for show. Even the men did not wash more often, but just splashed a little over their faces without even looking to see what sort of water it was.

But when we made a real halt, there had to be cleanliness because a horse is a noble animal and loves spit and polish.

One miserable morning, after climbing our Purmel found Fritz's belly upholstered with whole cushions of mud. The clay had dried as hard as sugar candy. If he tried with the curry comb it would hurt the horse, so Purmel set about getting it off with his fingers, but huge ginger-haired Fritz twisted and squirmed and whinnied like a girl. 'You are ticklish, are you,' muttered Purmel, 'you think I will put on gloves to scratch your belly! Oh, you dear little pussy!'

Fritz was, indeed, shrieking like a pig, and there was a whole crowd of horses looking on and listening in amazement.

At last they could bear it no longer and the stables quivered to a whole choir of outraged horses. Fritz's stable neighbour, a grey mare called 'Decoration', leant over and, with her ground-down, yellow teeth, gave Purmel a hefty bang in the loins.

His thick tunic stood it, but his shirt was split across and he lost a patch of skin as big as an almanack. Purmel yelled out with

mortification. 'Ten parades I have had on your account and now I am going to be bitten for you,' and just as he was, he ran out of the stable, desperate and indignant and, because he was young and inexperienced, sat down and wept softly.

The horses were led down to be watered. The yard was full of horses, crowding round the narrow trough, drinking and shaking their heads with satisfaction. The whole squadron had already passed when suddenly Purmel saw Fritz quietly standing there with two grey horses, drinking and sniffing them in such a friendly way you would have said he had known them ten years. Nobody was holding Fritz. He was just standing by himself, drinking. The three horses nudged each other like three old women.

With a malicious smile on his face Purmel went up to them: 'Ah, what a wonderful party; you b —— Huns'.

The forage man smirked into his whiskers. 'Let them have a word with each other. My two beasts are German too, impossible creatures.'

'Do they make your life a misery?' asked Purmel.

'I'd like to see them disappear under the earth – they're living sores – they won't do anything properly, they're used to Huns. There's no managing them.'

Purmel felt better now that he knew he had a comrade in misfortune. Then I went up to Purmel and said, 'I say, Purmel, why don't you go and have a word with Mukhaedianov, he is a great man for anything like that. I have never seen a horse he couldn't twist round his finger. You ask him for advice.'

Purmel looked at me and very nicely said: 'You go to hell.'

IV

But all the same Purmel thought it over and did go to see Mukhaedianov, a former Caucasian Hussar who was sitting with unbuttoned tunic in front of four soldiers' billy cans piled full with juicy pieces of boiled meat.

Round him were four Hussars ragging him as fiercely as they could, for he was busy ramming piece after piece into his mouth,

wiping his thick greasy fingers on his trousers, clearing his throat and . . . .

'Hullo, Purmel,' he drawled, and pushed a billy can towards him, 'that was a fine little foal, but it broke its leg – do help yourself.'

'Don't you touch it, Purmel!' cried the Hussars, 'we have got a bet on. He has got to eat the foal all by himself, all four pots at one sitting. . . .'

'Oh, what tasty meat,' said Mukhaedianov, 'do try a bit, just for company. What about it?'

Purmel looked at each Hussar in turn, then whispered timidly, 'Mukhaedianov, I have come to see you on business. Will you come outside a minute.'

'Why outside? Talk here. Join me and talk.'

Purmel shot a glance at the two empty cans and two full ones, and the calm strength of Mukhaedianov's stomach amazed him.

'Just a minute, I will be through with it in a tick . . . in sixteen minutes . . . I will be out there. You take a little walk. . . .'

Mukhaedianov did come out a little later, heard Purmel's story and answered thus: 'A German horse doesn't understand a Russian, the drill is different, the language is different, the religion is different. Now you train it your own way. Give it some sugar, some water; give it some good hay – ride it once or twice up and down, then find a Hun book and learn the lingo; talk to it in its own language, that will be the way. In three weeks it will be as smooth as a piece of silk. You will be able to do what you want with it.'

The next excursion we made Purmel tried to give Fritz a sea bath. It was difficult to get Fritz into the water, and once there he had a nervous breakdown. He fell down, together with his rider. Five big waves broke over them before they managed to get out on shore.

Then, in a little shop kept by an old woman, Purmel found a dog-eared old German grammar and began to learn German.

He would lead Fritz some way from the rest beyond the dunes, so that nobody saw them, then sit down on the sand, put the horse in front and talk to him in German like a teacher of the people.

'*Mann* – *Soldat* – that's me,' he would say to Fritz pointing to

himself, and then reach out to the horse a nice bunch of fresh grass.

'*Wollen Sie fressen?* Do you want to eat?'

Fritz tossed his head and reached for the grass.

Now, have you got that clear, you beast; you're a *Pferd*, that's what you are.

Then he would get into the saddle, book in hand. 'When it's right, I say *rechts* . . . *rechts*, I say *rechts*. . . .

One morning, while the troop was getting ready, Purmel observed that the mare, Decoration, was chewing something not a bit like hay. When he went up to her, with an air of scorn, she spat out at his feet the remains of his German grammar.

He gave Fritz one look. With sympathy, Fritz nodded his head.

Then Purmel got desperate. This is how he told the story to me: 'I could see it was all the same, there was no life with that animal, never before had I had so many parades. My legs ached from standing under full pack. Oh, you wait, says I to myself and I took Fritz and galloped him up and down the shore; up and down I galloped him till he was all of a muck sweat and so was I. Then I drove him straight down to water. . . .'

I was shocked. 'What, water a horse, do you mean to say you watered a horse that was all of a froth?'

'Double blast it!' said Purmel.

'Go on, out with it, did he get cramp?'

'Cramp! why nothing on earth would make that horse drink, that's the trouble . . . The more I beat him, the more hopeless it was, he wouldn't take in a drop.'

'Yes,' I said, 'you're in a bad way, old man. You'll have to fall ill yourself.'

At that moment, Lopoukha and Mukhaedianov came into the room. They were both drunk. Never have I seen such wild faces. Lopoukha was waving some sort of white balls in the air. When I took them away I found they were short pants blown up like rubber balloons.

'Well, if we're going to be lost, we might as well do it to music,' said Lopoukha, 'drink to-day like one man. To-morrow we will all be dead.'

'Drink!' repeated Mukhaedianov, 'that's right, there aren't any

more first-class foals. Drink!' and he pulled a bottle of home-made vodka out of his pocket.

'The old devil himself, the Colonel, is drinking,' said Lopoukha. 'The Germans will soon be kicking us out of this place; everyone will go but we shall have to stay' – here he took a gulp straight from the bottle – 'to fight a rearguard action.'

'We shall stay behind,' growled Mukhaedianov, 'all the bugles will blow, but we shall have the river at our backs, a big river. We shall drown to a man.'

'And what are these pants for?' I asked. 'If we drown, they will drown too.'

Mukhaedianov took a good drink from the bottle and answered: 'Well, and the Colonel says we are going to have a rehearsal to-morrow, a drowning rehearsal: all the squadrons are to go into the river and pretend there is no beach – go right into the water. And how do you think a man is going to dive if he hasn't a boat. You just blow up your drawers and dive.'

'And what will the Colonel say?'

'The Colonel may give you guard duty, or field punishment,' said Mukhaedianov, 'but for all that you will be alive, and so shall I and so will he. Oi, all the same we are in a bad way, just as bad a way as that little horse in the depths of my belly.'

That was the sort of conversation they made, interrupting one another and drinking till nightfall.

Purmel suddenly went off to the stable and gave Fritz an extra ration of hay.

'Eat that!' he said. 'Eat that: to-morrow you are going to be drowned. Eat that, it's your last chance.'

The next morning the river was full of naked men. They were rehearsing a withdrawal. The good swimmers hung on to the tails of their horses and swam, and the bad swimmers held on to a rope which had been thrown across the river and hauled themselves across, swallowing water all the time, while weapons and saddles were taken over on rafts, and dinghies picked up those who were drowning.

A horse raised a hullabaloo, men raised a hullabaloo, but the Colonel riding up and down the bank, fat and terrifying as a mad bull

raised a still bigger hullabaloo; the Colonel had his knife into anybody who seemed a bad soldier. He was giving whole troops field punishment, issuing threats all round, and handing out reprimands like medals, when at last he came on Fritz with Purmel beside him. But it was impossible not to see him.

Seven Hussars were dragging Fritz down to the river and Fritz was doing all he could not to go, breathing hard and rocking from side to side. But they did get him down to the water and then for the first time in his whole life Fritz began to kick.

'Let him have it,' yelled the Colonel, 'let that swine have it, drive it into the water, into the water, into the water!'

And they did drive Fritz into the water. Purmel, naked, slipping along the rope, losing himself every now and then under water, saw Fritz being driven down the sloping bank. For a few moments Fritz splashed about in shallow water, but the chaps all drove him deeper in, away from the shore and boats. Then he seemed to make up his mind, and went into that river as if out to commit suicide.

By now Purmel was having such a bad time that he no longer kept his eye on Fritz. His own mouth and nose and ears were full of water and he felt like a drowning diver. At last he came to the end of the rope and got his feet on the cold sand. He staggered on twenty paces and then, getting out of the shallows, sat down beside some naked soldiers getting their breath in the sun as far as possible away from authority.

Next to Purmel sat a very respectable naked man, the bugler, who was trying to comb his hair with his fingers.

'Ah, you've had a bath, old fellow-me-lad,' he muttered, 'and don't you forget it; your mother had three sons, two with their heads screwed on straight, and the third was a bugler. Making a bloody fool of a man, I call it, at my age.'

Purmel paid no attention to him. He was looking for his horse in the water and could see it nowhere.

'He's drowned,' he said to himself delightedly and stretched out on his belly on the burning sand, but then his gaze fell on a large ginger-coloured horse, just coming out of the river, shaking itself and stumbling, snorting loudly and looking all round. Purmel was up like a shot, grabbed a pretty big stone and let fly at that

horse—but the stone fell short. Fritz gave himself one more shake and made off along the shore.

Next to the Hussar Regiment was a horse artillery division. The artillery men cleaned their weapons, gambled and played cards, drank, washed down their horses and quarrelled with the Hussars. I paid a visit to one fine company leader whom I had not seen for a long time, when I happened to witness the following restrained, though savage, scene.

Three artillery horses and Fritz were tied to some trees, but Fritz was not a bit like the good old ginger Fritz: he was as speckled as a water melon. His belly was a network of green strips, there were most picturesque dirty green patches all over his back. In front of him was Purmel, moving to and fro, dipping a large house decorator's brush in a bucket, shaking the surplus paint off, then covering his Fritz with all the patterns that came to his fancy.

The horse's cruppers were a series of triangles, green serpents, and completely incomprehensible marks. The artillery men were also very busy decorating their horses, and before my eyes all the animals were turning into quiet green monsters, which looked round at their torturers in amazement and snorted cautiously to keep off the flies.

'Purmel,' I asked, 'what is the meaning of this?'

'Shut up, don't interfere,' he said with a sigh and a wave of his brush, 'now the bastard's sure to die:' and he gave the horse a sound smack on the nose with a good brushful of green.

The artillery men worked with concentration and without hurry. They were camouflaging their horses, as war demanded, for military science now prescribed that everything should be as green as possible. The poor horse looked on and sighed.

That evening I came on Purmel again. Once more, there he was, standing like a Turkish saint against the guard-house wall, doing field punishment with a dark scowl on his face.

When he saw me he turned the other way, and his sabre quivered in his hand as if it were alive.

'Don't you come near,' he said, 'you might get your head cut off. Don't you come near me.'

I halted at a healthy distance and asked: 'What is this for, Purmel, did the bastard die, is Fritz no more?'

My stroke missed. Purmel looked up at me with enraged eyes.

'The squadron commander said that if he finds a single green spot on Fritz it's court martial for me.

'So Fritz is alive, then?'

'Fritz alive? Two hours I've been washing him clean with a scrubbing brush and soap, my hands are all cracked over it,' said Purmel, and again the sabre quivered in his hand. I saluted and retired in amazement.

The Hussars were taking up a new position, moving along a forest road. Suddenly, the whole column stopped because somebody's light wagon had tipped over in the ditch, and the horses were kicking away with their tongues hanging out. The atmosphere of oaths hung over it all like a July day. Purmel saw it was the same baggage man who had, on a previous occasion, brought his horses down to water.

'B—— Huns,' he shouted, 'they just won't understand Russian.'

Meanwhile the horses kicked to one side and another, dragging the wagon deeper and deeper into the mud. Purmel sniggered maliciously. Suddenly there was a shout — aeroplane — and that instant a Hun machine chirruped over our heads from behind the forest, making for us.

'Scatter everybody, scatter!' the cry arose. The horses leapt through the undergrowth into the woods. The Hussars all abandoned the road and hid under the trees. Fritz got his front legs caught in a fallen tree, stumbled and fell on his side in the ditch.

Purmel stood beside him and tugged at the bridle, but Fritz lay there in the ditch, as snug as if he had gone to bed, while the aeroplane went on its way. Once again the road filled with cavalry, but Fritz lay like a statue. The others reined in all round Purmel to give him advice on pulling.

In the end Lopoukha ordered three Hussars to dismount and help Purmel. Purmel was done. He was up to his knees in mud, desperately trying to undo the saddle girth. Together they got a stout piece of timber under Fritz and with some difficulty turned him over. There he lay as if dead, only rolling his eyes.

Purmel got the strap undone and took off the saddle, when in an instant the animal, much relieved, leaped up and jumped the ditch. Thick mud was oozing from him.

'A little way down there there is a stream,' said Lopoukha. 'Off you go and sluice him down. Look lively!'

'What do you think I am, his nanny?' said Purmel. 'When I don't mess him up he b—— well messes himself up.'

After each bucket of water he tipped over Fritz, Purmel hit the animal on its nose with his fist and said: 'You think I'm going to forgive you for this, do you? Not half, old boy, not till my dying day.'

Then Purmel saddled him and galloped after the others. As he galloped past the baggage wagon stuck in the ditch Purmel shot one glance at the two German horses which were still trying to pull out the wagon, and in a hoarse voice said to Fritz: 'Take them for an example, would you. . . .'

VI

By now Purmel no longer got guard duty or any other punishment for the disorder he caused, but soldiers would clap him on the shoulder and laugh about Fritz. However, Purmel was like a lost man.

The expedition continued on its way. Hungry and grey with fatigue, we wandered blindly through forest and valley. One dark night we were lucky enough to come to a farm which had just been abandoned by the farmer and his family, and there was an eager search for food.

'Here,' shouted Mukhaedianov to me, 'quick, here's first-class soup.'

I did not wait for a second invitation. There, in a bucket, was something watery and greasy.

'Tuck in!' he said and we went hard at it – first-rate chicken broth.

It wouldn't be kind to inquire the origin, or why it was in a bucket. When the first pangs of hunger were satisfied, I rolled away from that bucket and said, 'Just a minute, I will go and get Purmel.'

'All right,' said Mukhaedianov, 'but I have had enough too, I will get Lopoukha. I'll put the bucket here under the tree.'

Purmel, hungry and not in the best of humours, was just going to

sleep when I brought him up to the hospitable tree which concealed our supper. The moon had already come up and in its pale light I could see the bucket and above the bucket the tall dark silhouette of a horse. With terrifying clarity, through the night air, came a faint gurgling.

Purmel was grey with hunger. I could hear his very stomach creaking. We ran up at all speed and there was Fritz's great ginger snout swaying to and fro to greet us. He was so scared that he bumped the bucket over and the little there was left of the precious soup made tiny zigzags over the ground.

'You would,' was all Purmel said, and he took Fritz by the bridle and led him home.

Purmel's calm terrified me and I followed him. What I saw didn't please me at all. There stood Fritz under a pent-house roof like a penitent sinner, head down, and there was Purmel bringing the muzzle of his rifle up to Fritz's head.

'Here, drop that!' I said catching him by the arm. 'Drop that, that gun might go off.'

With rage Purmel lowered his rifle.

'I will shoot that damned animal, I can't bear it any longer.' There was no longer any sense of threat in his voice. He meant what he said.

'Life hasn't been worth living since I set eyes on it. Come on, I've had enough. I can forgive everything, but not that soup. That brute knows I have been hungry since yesterday. I gave him two armfuls of hay and some oats and still he isn't satisfied. Come on, I'm going to finish it. Now will you please get out of the way?'

'No,' I said and led Purmel aside. 'You gave him oats and you gave him hay, but tell me, did you give him any water?'

'My God!' said Purmel in a whisper of despair, 'I forgot.'

The next day we made a very stupid attack on the Germans.

The Germans sat there quite quietly in the woods and worked their machine guns. Our attack was fierce, but beaten off. Our men were scattered on all sides.

Past me galloped our plump Colonel with his forage cap jammed down on his head, and his shoulders bent to the horse's mane: past me went Mukhaedianov bare headed, one arm dangling helpless

with sabre at the end of it: past me flashed Lopoukha, emitting such a stream of oaths that the undergrowth parted in front of him. All was confusion. The woods were nothing but smoke and dust. It was at that moment that I saw Purmel. I saw him dismount and unsaddle Fritz as if before a parade, preparing for an inspection.

My first thought was that he was wounded and I called out. Purmel looked round, saw me, and with the first smile I had seen for a long time, said: 'I'll tell you all about it in a minute.'

He finished unsaddling Fritz, turned him round to face the Huns, gave him a terrific swipe with the saddle girth and shouted: 'Off you go, back to your own people, you miserable devil! Now then, be quick about it, off you get.'

Cautiously, Fritz lowered his head and began to chew some forest flowers.

Then at a slow pace he left us and made his way between the thickets across the open ground towards the Germans.

Only then did Purmel seize me by the arm and say: 'You be my witness, swear he was killed in battle.'

I couldn't but laugh while I watched Fritz. There he was, browsing like a cow, without paying the least attention to the firing. The machine-gun fire was not coming our way.

'You see, his life is charmed,' I said.

Purmel had slung the saddle on his shoulder and was trying to hurry away.

'Quick,' he said, 'only don't forget, he was killed in action.'

'All right,' I said. I looked over my shoulder and saw Fritz for the last time. He was eating away as he walked, without looking back.

I walked my horse with Purmel at my side. He was staggering under the heavy pack saddle. But he had to get that saddle to headquarters, for those were military orders, and Purmel had sinned much of late.

After a few paces Purmel stopped short, gave me one more significant look and said: 'Look here, I'm going to send this to hell too.'

So saying, he raised the saddle as high as he could in the air and flung it into the dense thicket.

Then he heaved one tremendous sigh. 'And now,' he said, 'haven't you got anything to smoke?'

THOMAS THE OSTRICH

VENYAMIN KAVERIN

(Translated by Stephen Garry)

THE flamingoes were the cause of it all. Their legs looked like pairs of callipers, their beaks like snuff boxes. One of them was asleep with its head tucked under its rose-coloured wing. It slept like a soldier on guard, and when it awoke it rinsed out one leg and then scratched itself behind the ears with it.

'Kra-ak!' it groaned, and the other flamingoes groaned after it, as though all over a house the doors were all being banged shut and flung open at once.

The flamingoes flapped their wings, but they did not fly away, only stalked farther into the lake and began to catch fish. They walked about gravely, dignifiedly, and their legs, long and thin as they were, seemed still longer and thinner as they were reflected in the still water of the lake.

I stopped to watch these worthy birds, and lost the friends with whom I was visiting the Zoological Gardens at Askania-Nova.

I was with two others, Cheberda and Kulikov. Cheberda was tall, bowed and morose, Kulikov was short and risible.

Strictly speaking, there was not the least resemblance between the two. For instance, Cheberda was greatly respected in the camp, while Kulikov was not so much. Cheberda was taciturn at work, but Kulikov sang. Yet during the last few days, in their very weariness, they had come to have some resemblance to each other.

Yellow-faced, and with their cheek-bones protruding like Mongols, they wandered about the camp, and with every further sleepless night they seemed to shrink a little more. But now almost all the grain was harvested, it was already pouring down the funnels of the elevators into the trucks, it was already being loaded on to the steamers in the Dnieper river ports, and at last I had persuaded them that we could rest for a couple of hours or so from the clanking of tractors, from the heat and the stink of petrol.

'D'you think I've never been in a menagerie before?' Cheberda

asked when I suggested the visit to Askania, and all the way to the Zoo he grumbled that here he was enjoying himself, taking things easy, and meantime the talliers in the experimental fields would get something wrong, or make some inaccurate statement.

But all the way to Askania I swore at him and argued that the talliers would not tell lies, that Askania was not in the least like a menagerie, that in menageries the animals were kept behind bars, but that in Askania you could meet them in the streets just like meeting old friends, you could have a chat with an ostrich, and shake hands with a marmot.

I spent a great deal of time in convincing him and Kulikov, but I succeeded in the end. And now I had suddenly lost them and was left alone with these ridiculous birds, who did nothing but stalk about in the water, catch fish, and scratch themselves behind the ears.

'You're to blame for all this, you scoundrels,' I said to the flamingoes. 'If you hadn't had such thin legs, such absurd beaks, and such rosy wings I wouldn't have lost my friends, who as it was were not too easily dragged into this outing. Tell me, which way did they go: to left or right, forward or backward?'

The flamingoes were silent. One of them turned towards me and suddenly drew up one leg somewhere into its belly. It stood on one leg and meditatively gazed at me with its flat red eyes.

So I said good-bye to them and went off, wandering a long time up and down the interminable paths of the Askania park, looking for my friends. Once I thought I saw Cheberda's bowed shoulders among some bushes in the distance. I hurried in that direction. But I found no one there, only some very polite, handsome cranes who were strolling about in a puddle and respectfully bowing to one another.

'Well, if I can't find them I can't,' I told myself. 'It can't be helped, my friend; you'll have to return to the camp on your own.'

I had hardly said these words when I heard a soft whistle a little way off. It was so distinct, so fluid, was that whistle, that at first I thought it was not a human being whistling, but a bird. However, it was a human being, and a moment later I saw him pass round a dense clump of reeds and come out into the open.

THOMAS THE OSTRICH

A boy of between ten and twelve years old was perambulating about the open space beyond a lake. He was walking backward, and whistling, and a whole flock of chattering young ostriches was running after him.

He halted for a moment, and they at once huddled together, jostling and climbing over one another. He moved on, making zigzag dashes, and, craning their necks, the ostriches ran after him.

I had to pass round the lake in order to reach him, and when I came up the young ostriches were no longer following, and he was no longer whistling. The ostriches were all in their house (it was a very fine house, though not very big: the walls reached only up to my waist and it had no roof) and were chattering away, while the lad was squatting on his heels and feeding them with barley mash and onion.

Now I took a closer look at him.

He was stocky, sunburnt, round-faced, and was wearing an oriental skullcap and a blue jersey which fitted tightly across his shoulders, the strings being tied negligently over his chest. His hair was black and stiff, his cheek-bones broad like a Tartar's, and, but for the turned-up nose and blue eyes I would have said unhesitatingly that he was a Tartar youngster.

When I examined this ostrich herdsman I was reminded of a school friend of mine named Takanaev, whom we had taken as a model in order to study the differences between Mongols and Europeans. Takanaev had been the smartest in the class, and when it became necessary to fight the Whites we had let him go first. He was daring, energetic, and once made a bet that he would ride a horse into the gymnasium during the break. And he did. He was expelled the very same day, and I never met him again.

As I watched the lad feeding the ostriches on barley mash and onion, I had, of course, no idea that for bravery and quickwittedness he was in no way behind my dare-devil school friend.

Guzzling, flapping their little wings, the young ostriches boldly flew at the mash. The boy called each of them by name, and it was obvious that he had them perfectly under his control.

'Maruska!,' he said sternly to one of them, the very smallest, who did not even seem to know how to walk properly, but

managed somehow to tumble forward, desperately craning its neck. 'Maruska! Where are you off to? Halt! Get into reverse, top speed!'

I took a good look at the ostriches.

'Why have they got such fat knees?' I asked him.

The lad took a spoonful of the mash and carried it to Maruska, who, although she had fled at top speed into the farthest corner, was opening her beak so wide, and craning after the mash so eagerly, that it looked as though her head would be severed from the neck.

'They've got rickets!' the boy muttered contemptuously.

I was astonished.

'Oh, the poor things! Rickets? Why, surely they don't suffer from any lack of sun here in Askania?'

Squatting on his heels, the boy fed the ostriches out of his palm.

'Lack of sun!' he answered sarcastically. 'Why, there's so much sun here that you can keep yourself busy all day long wringing out your shirt. They suffer from lack of sun all right, I don't think! They've been spoilt too much, that's all.'

He rose and came closer to me.

'Where are you from?' he asked. 'From the camp?'

'Yes.'

'No!' he said in a tone of joyful surprise. 'And is it true that the camp has just got another caterpillar tractor?'

I remembered that a few days previously Kulikov had driven to Central Village to take over new tractors.

'But I don't know,' I added, 'whether there was a caterpillar tractor among them or not.'

'There must have been,' he hurriedly assured me. 'Caterpillars are as strong as devils. I've worked it all out. If one bison is equal to three and half horses, a caterpillar tractor is equal to seventeen and one-seventh bisons. Seventeen and one-seventh! Why, that's a whole herd!'

'But how do you get that one-seventh?' I asked in amazement.

'Wait a bit . . . and reckoning it in ostriches,' he said enthusiastically, and his blue eyes glittered with pleasure. 'Full grown ostriches, of course, not these chicks. Then what do you get? One ostrich is exactly equal to three-quarters of a horse. And a caterpillar

is sixty horse-power. So it is equal to eighty full grown African ostriches. Now that's talking! There's power for you!'

I stared at the boy. And even under the tan I could see how flushed was his face. His eyes grew large and happy.

'Well, what of it?' I said unconcernedly. 'In the steppes of Salsk I've seen a machine of a hundred horse-power. The "Monarch" tractor. That's not any old caterpillar, my lad! I reckon it alone could drag off all your bisons and ostriches.'

He screwed up one eye and began to mutter to himself, wriggling his fingers. Then he bit his lip and screwed up the other eye, as he mentally calculated.

'Twenty-eight and a half bisons!' he announced rapturously. 'Grand! I'd like to see that machine. What's it like: is it big? Is it on tracks or wheels?'

I found this young sprout very amusing, and I badly wanted to find out who he really was, how he lived, where his father worked, and whether he liked being in Askania. But apparently he did not hear my questions. He was fully occupied with the 'Monarch' tractor.

In the attempt to extract all I knew concerning this extraordinary machine of twenty-eight and a half bison power, he completely forgot the young ostriches, who seemingly ate twice as much mash as they were entitled to. He pulled a scrap of paper out of his pocket and sketched on it all the types of tractor he knew: the small, clumsy Fordson with its slanting slats on the front wheels, a heavy caterpillar like a tank, with one torpedo-shaped headlight, and the 'International' with its chimney, which for some reason gave off a thick, shaggy smoke.

He absolutely wore me out with his questions about the 'Monarch', and was only satisfied when I openly admitted that I had seen the machine but once, and then only took a casual glance at it, so I did not know all its differences from other tractors.

'Well, that's enough!' I said at last. 'It's time I was going. It'll be five o'clock before I get back to the camp. But before I go, tell me your name. I may be visiting Askania again, and if I do I'll look you up and we'll have a chat.'

'My name's Piotka Kovaliov,' said the tractor enthusiast.

He thought for a monent, then added:

'If you take the road you've got four miles to walk, but if you go through the Great Enclosure it will be barely a couple.'

I realized that the Great Enclosure must be some part of the Zoological Gardens. 'But I suppose I can't go that way?' I asked tentatively.

The boy shook his head. He fussed around the ostriches for a moment or two longer, then locked them in and halted in front of me with a thoughtful look on his face.

'You won't tell anybody if I show you the way through the Great Enclosure?'

'Of course not.'

'On your word of honour?'

'On my word of honour.'

He took one last solicitous look at his charges.

'Well, all right then! Come on.'

I had not expected that the high plank fence which I could see a little way beyond the ostriches' house was the fencing of the Great Enclosure. We reached it in five minutes, but then for at least another twenty made our way along beside it, for Piotka was afraid of the keepers, and would not let me climb over.

At last he halted.

'You can here!' he whispered, though there could not have been anyone within half a mile of us. Suddenly, taking a run, he scrambled like a cat over the fence. I climbed over after him.

Then I saw that the Great Enclosure was an enormous area of bare land, so broad and long that I could not even see the other fences. And over this piece of land reindeer, antelopes, deer, zebras, yaks and other animals were roaming. They wandered from spot to spot, grazing.

I had paid many visits to Zoological Gardens and had seen all these varieties of animals many a time before. But this was the first time I had seen them so quiet, so calm, so unconcerned about man, whom they apparently treated as an equal among equals.

We passed round a lake in which three magnificent Manchurian stags were standing up to their knees in the water, while close by a mountain llama, with ears set back, narrow of muzzle, was shelter-

ing from the sun in the shade of trees around a small spring. It spat in our direction as we passed, and Piotka cursed it vigorously.

'Why, Piotka, you don't seem to like animals very much,' I said, recalling how harshly he had treated the young ostriches.

He shrugged his shoulders with the utmost contempt.

'And why should I like them?' he asked. 'They're all weak. What's the strongest animal of all? The elephant. And how many elephants could one "Monarch" tractor drag away?'

Without doubt he would once more have set to work to calculate this problem, but at that moment we alarmed a flock of very strange-looking sheep with big muzzles. They were sleeping on a mound, and when we approached they lazily rose and wandered off, rolling from side to side.

'What noses!' I said to Piotka.

'They're Saigak antelopes,' Piotka explained in a rather important tone. 'It's an antelope which has a very big nose.'

It certainly was a big nose! Fat, gristly, all wrinkled, it wriggled like a trunk. It seemed discontented and stupid, and, judging by the nose, the whole of the antelope was stupid.

As we went on we fell in with a gnu. I had never thought such an amazing creature as a gnu could exist in this world. It was a little dove-blue horse with an enormous bullock's muzzle, with horns. Honestly, it was blue, and honestly it had got a bull's muzzle, only the nose was snub, bearded, and very bad-tempered. The gnu was much worse-tempered than a bull!

As we passed it suddenly sprang towards us and shook its head very suspiciously. Then it made two or three more leaps, and, putting down its horns, tore straight at us. But for Piotka I would certainly have turned and fled at top speed from that ill-tempered animal. But Piotka clutched at my shirt and restrained me.

'He won't touch you,' he shouted when the gnu was only about ten paces away and I could distinctly see its evil eyes, densely overgrown with bristly hairs.

Piotka was right. The gnu halted a little distance from us. It danced about for a moment or two in the one spot, then sneezed and for no apparent reason tore after a peacefully grazing flock of long-haired sheep.

'But he'd got good brakes, hadn't he!' Piotka asked me eagerly. 'That's his idea of play.'

But it wasn't my idea of play.

We had reached the middle of the Great Enclosure – we could see the line of the opposite fence in the distance – when, happening to turn round, I saw a large African ostrich tearing after us at full speed.

Smoothly brandishing its tail it ran up to us, stood on tiptoe, then took one more enormous stride, cocked its head on one side and blinked, blinked. After a moment's thought it cocked its head on the other side and blinked, blinked.

It was a very estimable ostrich, very respectable, though its legs were absolutely bare.

Evidently it was blinking at Piotka, and although he tried to conceal his satisfaction I could see that Piotka was very pleased because the ostrich had run after him and now stood blinking.

'Well, what do you want, Thomas?' he sternly asked the ostrich. 'What are you straining your neck for?'

Thomas hopped about on the one spot in his embarrassment.

'He's not an ordinary ostrich,' Piotka explained to me. 'He's a hero of the civil war. He stole a packet of reports from one of Denikin's officers and ate it.'

'Ate it?'

'Yes. It was like this. In 1919 the Denikin army was quartered here in Askania. And one of their officers came up to the fence and wanted to pat Thomas on his back. But the officer had got a packet of reports stuck in his cuff. The moment he stretched out his hand Thomas grabbed the packet and ate it. There was a shimozzle! The officer chased him all over the enclosure, and wanted to kill him and rip him open. But they wouldn't let him.'

Bending his head back to somewhere in the region of his tail, the hero of the civil war caught flies on his own back while this story was being told. And to perform this feat he opened his beak so wide that you would have thought every fly was as big as a small melon.

'He and I are old comrades,' Piotka said. 'He'll follow me all the way to the fence now.'

When we started off again the ostrich followed us, as Piotka had said he would. Half opening his wings with an important air, he strode along like an old-world lady in a crinoline, in a sumptuous dress with white feathers as panniers at the sides.

We left him at the fence of the Great Enclosure, and although Piotka contemptuously remarked more than once that an ostrich's strength was not worth considering, it wasn't more than three-quarters of a horse's, all the same he stroked the bird on its neck quite gently, and, fishing a piece of bread out of his pocket (his own meal, probably) thrust it right into Thomas's gaping beak.

It was beginning to grow dark when, safely climbing the fence, we saw in a hollow the tents' four-cornered sails bellying out in the wind, the green caravans, and the lofty mast on which a lantern was swinging. There below us lay the camp, and the mast was the camp lighthouse. In those tents and caravans lived the mechanics, the ploughmen, the book-keepers, tractor drivers and other workers on the Soviet grain farm. Nearby, surrounded by barbed wire, were cisterns of fuel oil, and in the midst a post on which the words 'no smoking' and a skull and crossbones had been burnt into the wood.

In one spot stood an enormous combine harvester, looking like an ancient pirates' ship. There, too, were the tractors which so greatly interested the lad who did not like animals. A little way off were the graders, sullen-looking machines which excavated and laid roads.

Piotka suddenly came to a halt.

'Look over there!' he said in an anxious tone. 'What's that?'

I gazed in the direction he was pointing. To the left of the camp, far away in the steppe, a lighted building of some sort was moving, and from time to time clouds of smoke, darkly translucent, billowing, and lit up from below, rose above it.

'Oh, that's only the stubble burning,' I said.

'No, that's not stubble.' Piotka shielded his eyes with his palm. 'That's not stubble, they haven't harvested out there yet. That's the experimental fields on fire, I tell you.'

The experimental fields? I recalled how Cheberda had refused to come to Askania with us at first, because he was anxious about those

fields, and how he had grumbled all the way, while I argued that nothing would happen to the experimental fields. And now they were on fire! So his anxiety hadn't been altogether unjustified!

Piotka had already set off for the camp at the full speed of his legs, and I strode along faster and faster. At last we reached the field kitchens and the tents, and the familiar shower, made from the cases in which Piotka's beloved tractors had arrived from America.

I strode past the shower; by the light of an acetylene lamp men harnessed into waistbelts were turning the circular drum of the well gear, and two buckets on chains dropped turn by turn into the deep well.

Around the well there was a deafening hubbub, the drum over which the chain ran quivered with the tension, and the old mare, worked right off her legs, stood close by and gazed with stupid amazement at the drum, which she had never before seen turned at such a speed.

The enormous trough into which the water was being poured was now almost full; two small tractors, coupled to the shafts of water-barrels, stood beside it, and Kulikov, dishevelled, raging, in a dirty, unbuttoned boiler-suit, was standing on one of them, supervising the work.

I shouted to him; he only waved his hand.

I found Cheberda in the caravan used as a camp office.

Haggard, and already dark of face, he stood at the telephone, and the mouthpiece trembled in his hand. He made no remark when I entered. It appeared that he could not get any answer from the fire station. He waited a moment, then gently pressed the hook up and down.

Still no answer.

He tried again.

It was half dark in the office; only one hurricane lamp lit up the narrow bunks.

Cheberda stood quietly, bowed over the telephone, saying nothing. Finally he hung up the receiver and turned to me.

'There's no answer; the line's down,' he said in an unnatural voice.

'The line's out of order; I expect the posts have gone,' he told

Kulikov, who ran up to him the moment he went out on to the caravan steps. 'There's no help for it; we'll have to drive there.'

'Where to?'

'To Central Village.'

'What for?'

'For the fire brigade.'

Kulikov suddenly clutched his head with both hands. He shook his head, then gave himself a swinging blow on the chest with his fist.

'But what are we to drive in?' he cried in a despairing tone. 'All the machines are out; we've got no horses, and you don't expect me to do twenty-five miles on my own two legs, do you?'

Next day I recalled that during this talk Piotka was hovering around, close to us. At first he circled around us at a distance, but then he came up and placed himself at Cheberda's side. A tiny black figure, he stood with his skullcap stuck on his head, his eyes shifting from one to another, and when Kulikov began to bawl Piotka stared right into his mouth.

But soon after he disappeared, and as we had to run to the stores for spades and to the kitchen for buckets I forgot all about him.

But he had listened closely to every word, and had taken it all in.

When he left us he walked slowly along past the line of tents, sunk in thought, paying no attention to the excitement and bustle in the camp. He walked on and on, then abruptly halted, pulled his hands out of his pockets, took a deep breath, and ran off at top speed in the direction of the Great Enclosure.

It was dark, too dark to see your hand before your face, when he climbed over the fence.

It was dark, and it was quiet; only the awakened starlings were assembled in flocks and making a great to-do, evidently taking the glare of the fire for the dawn.

Piotka whistled. Then he listened, and whistled again. Thus, whistling and listening, he roved for some time about the Great Enclosure.

'Thomas!' he called angrily at last.

For answer he heard the bleating of sheep and the whistle of shepherds; the neighing of horses, the croaking of frogs, the creak-

ing of windmills, the howl of dogs – the starlings were imitating the various noises they had heard during the day.

Piotka must have wandered for at least half an hour around the Great Enclosure. From time to time he looked away to the glare, spreading ever higher and wider; already half the sky was covered with the motionless, dark red reflection of the burning steppe. Then he turned to searching for the ostrich still more diligently and persistently.

He was on the point of giving up all hope of finding the bird, when a great, high breast of feathers on top of long legs suddenly emerged out of the darkness to meet him. It was the ostrich.

'Well, where have you been all this time?' Piotka asked Thomas in a reproachful tone. 'When you're wanted you're not to be found, but when you're not wanted you shove yourself right in my face!'

He turned out his pockets, and shook some breadcrumbs into his palm.

'Here, brother; I haven't got any more at the moment; when we get there I'll feed you on chicken,' he said, and walked along under the fence, the ostrich following him.

They came to the gate which led from the Great Enclosure straight into the open steppe.

Piotka unwound the wire which held the gate in place of a padlock, and the ostrich stalked out into the steppe, lowering its head in order to avoid the upper crossboard.

'Well, brother, full speed, top gear?' Piotka asked.

Thomas stood before him blinking, his head cocked on one side. Of course he could not talk, but, judging from his look, if he had been able to he would certainly have said:

'Well brother, if it's to be full speed, full speed it is.'

But it was not so easy for Piotka to climb up on to the ostrich's back. Holding Thomas by the neck with one hand, he scrambled up to the top of the fence.

'And now, my dear ostrich, hold on!' he said, and seated himself on the bird as though it were a horse.

Thrusting his legs between the wings and the neck, he sat on

the spot which would correspond with a horse's withers, and quietly whistled.

Swaying, the ostrich took the first step. . . .

Piotka told me all this next day. Of course he did not go into many details, and his story was short, though it was not very clear, because he sprinkled his remarks with words drawn from a motor-mechanic's vocabulary.

For instance, he only incidentally and briefly mentioned how he had flown right off the ostrich at certain sharp turns. And when, some two miles outside Central Village, the ostrich suddenly came to a halt and, like Balaam's ass, refused to take another step, he described the situation in the cryptic terms: 'Here my motor began to phut out, and I had to give it more gas.'

He also told briefly how at the entrance to Central Village the ostrich had come upon a brood of sleeping ducklings and exultantly swallowed the lot, one after another, then had thrust its head through the broken window of the co-operative shop and had seasoned the ducklings with a door-hinge lying unguarded on the counter:

'After he had gobbled up the ducklings I steered him towards the fire station; but he went into reverse and made for the co-operative. I tried to jam the brake on, but he put his head in at the window, guzzled the hinge, and went forward again.

As for the welcome which this lad, riding on an African ostrich, received in Central Village, he told me nothing at all. I heard that part of the story from a mechanic friend of mine.

This mechanic was working in the third night-shift, and he was sitting in the kitchen eating some soup, while the cook was frying fritters for him on the stove top.

Suddenly the door flew open and in strode the ostrich. The kitchen was large, but it was not large enough for all the ostrich to get inside, and its tail remained sticking out through the door. The cook dropped the frying pan and fritters into the fire, crumpled to the floor and began to squeal, while the mechanic choked himself with his soup and in his consternation jumped on to the table. Then he noticed that a boy was sitting astride the ostrich.

'Where's the director?' the boy asked, and began to kick his

heels about in his impatience. 'Fetch him here! Camp number five is on fire, tell him to send out the fire brigade. . . .'

Meantime, while Piotka was tearing on his three-quarters of a horse to the Central Village for the fire brigade, we, knowing nothing of his plans, did all we could to fight the disaster that had unexpectedly come upon us. Two tractors set out to drive in a great circle around the camp, each going a different way. Each drew a three-shared plough, and ploughed up a broad strip which the fire could not cross.

Desperate, dishevelled, Kulikov drove one of the tractors, and, although he put the machine into its fastest possible speed, he swore at it thunderously. It still seemed to be going too slow for him; but the tractor crawled and groaned along, shuddering until in its zeal it seemed ready to fall to pieces.

Cheberda and I went off to try to save the experimental fields.

That was not exactly an easy task. Reeling dark columns of smoke rose above the steppe; the wind drove them straight towards us, and before we had driven a couple of miles from the camp we found it almost impossible to breathe. I looked at Cheberda: he sat huddled, his mouth moodily pursed up. And I could not bring myself to tell him what I thought of our chances.

So we drove on, and the air grew more and more stifling, the tears came to our eyes, I had forcibly to resist a fit of coughing.

At last we came within half a mile of the experimental fields; above them hung a crimson sickle moon which shed no rays, and everything around seemed as though we were looking through smoked glasses.

'Turn to the left now,' Cheberda shouted to the driver.

We turned off to the left.

With our caterpillar, which was dragging a three-share plough, we proposed to cut right across the experimental fields, which were no more and no less than four miles wide. That was Cheberda's plan.

And it was not virgin soil that we had got to plough through, nor stubble, but ripened grain, all ready for harvesting. And we had to crush it down with our heavy machine, and choke it beneath the earth turned over by our plough.

I saw the fire crawling along parallel with us on our right hand, sometimes coming so close that the driver involuntarily swung the wheel round in his alarm, then withdrawing into the grain, agile, lurking, crimson.

It seemed to me that the fire was overtaking us, and I was on the point of saying so to Cheberda (he was still sitting taciturn, moody, and his shoulders were grey with ash), but he anticipated me.

'It's getting round us; over to the left!' he shouted to the driver.

Once more we bore to the left.

Rubbing my streaming eyes almost continuously, I gazed at the dark crimson arabesques of the fire roving among the grain. It did not seem in the least dangerous, and there were none of those terrible pictures which Fenimore Cooper and others have described in their stories of prairie fires.

It was light, was this fire, and cautious; and it crept so low along the ground that but for the ears of corn which from time to time burst into flame and scattered in ash you might almost have lost sight of it.

But, on the other hand, the sky hung so low that it seemed you had only to stand up and your head would reach it. It was low and heavy, strewn with smoke in banks – dark crimson, golden and blue – and a coppery moon hung amid the glare in the clouds.

'It's getting round us!' Cheberda shouted again. 'Swing more to the left.'

When we turned to the left this time I saw several black balls roll out of the smoking wheat and run across the strip which our machine had crushed flat. They were hedgehogs hurrying away from the fire.

Behind the hedgehogs, leaping along absurdly, fled a long-eared jerboa.

Cheberda stood up, pulled his cap over his brow, and the shadow of his head and angular shoulders fell away on our left hand. He stood and gazed from under knitted brows not at the burning fields, to which so much labour and thought had been given, but into the steppe, in the direction where the white sails of the tents could be vaguely surmised rather than seen.

'It's passing right round us!' he said hoarsely and wearily. 'It's

overtaking us; there's nothing we can do to stop it. We haven't got to the middle of the fields yet, and it's already gone a long way into the steppe. It's getting a long way into the steppe!' he suddenly shouted. 'Into the steppe! And supposing they haven't managed to plough right round the fuel dump in time?'

Only then did I realize the danger which was drawing down on the camp – and not only the camp, but all the steppe around. The fuel dump, which was packed to overflowing with cisterns of paraffin, barrels of diesel oil and cans of petrol, the dump in the middle of which rose a post, and on the post a skull and crossbones, and under the bones the words: 'No smoking'. That dump lay between the camp and the experimental fields. And if the fire got a good hold on the steppe. . . .

Suddenly two brilliant azure searchlights slashed through the darkness, from the direction of the road which ran from the camp to Central Village.

Then we heard the sound of a bell, the roar of a motor horn. It was a harsh, desperate bellow, but at that moment it was more pleasant to our ears than the merriest of songs.

'Stop!' Cheberda shouted to the driver.

We stopped. That roar came nearer and nearer, the bell rang louder and louder, and the azure bands of the car headlamps stretched out towards us like long, friendly arms. At last the great red machine flew round a bend in the road. The firemen in their broad canvas trousers were standing on it as it flew along, and their brass helmets glittered in the streaming light of their torches. One of them furiously turned the handle of the klaxon horn, a second rang the bell, a third – a small, bewhiskered man – puffed away at the bugle. And so with a roar and a rattle, with a ringing and a rumble, the motor came up to our tractor at full speed and stopped, and all the firemen leaped off and ran towards us.

Next morning, we sat dirty and sooty in the kitchen tent and drank tea sweetened with honey. We had prevented the fire from reaching the camp or the fuel dump, but three-quarters of the experimental fields were burnt out, though somehow we managed to save the fourth quarter.

We sat silently drinking long, long drinks. We were all there – Cheberda, Kulikov, the fire brigade, and Piotka, the lad who did not like animals. The ostrich stood beside us, tied by its leg to a field kitchen, and blinked.

I finished my tea first, and handed the cup to my neighbour.

'Well, Piotka,' I said, 'you were telling me yesterday that animals were just good for nothing, that none of them had any strength. But if it hadn't been for your Thomas the whole of the steppe from Askania right to the Sea of Azov might have gone up in flame.'

We all gazed at the ostrich. It shifted from foot to foot, cocked its head on one side, and blinked, blinked.

'Maybe,' said Piotka, as he poured his tea into a soup basin. He crumbled some bread and onion into the tea, thrust the basin under the ostrich's nose, graciously tickled it around its neck and sat down again.

'Maybe,' he repeated. 'But after all, it was only by chance that all the machines happened to be out. And if we'd even had one old Tin Lizzie here. . . .'

He suddenly broke off and screwed up one eye. He began to whisper, wriggling his fingers, then bit his lip and screwed up his other eye as he reckoned:

'Say a Ford has got twelve and a half horse-power, and an ostrich has got three-quarters horse-power exactly. Well, you reckon up for yourselves how much faster I'd have driven to Central Village. Sixteen and one-eighth times as fast . . .'

'But this time you're wrong,' I said. 'It's sixteen and two-thirds.'

IN THE CELLAR

I. BABEL

(*Translated by Alec Brown*)

As a boy I was a liar. Reading did it. My imagination was permanently aflame. I read during lessons, during break, on the way home, at night – hiding under the table with the cloth pulled over

to make a curtain. Through reading I played truant to all the affairs of this world – I cut lessons to go down to the harbour, began billiards in pubs in Greek Street and went to sea. I had no friends. Who wanted anything to do with a fellow like that?

One day I saw our head boy at school, Mark Borgman, with a book about Spinoza. He had just finished it, and simply had to tell all the chaps round him about the Spanish Inquisition. But the way he told it, it was a mere scholar's jumble of facts. There was no poetry there. I could not but put my spoke in. I told all who were ready to hear me about old Amsterdam, about the dark ghetto streets and the diamond-cutter philosophers. To what I had read in books I added a lot of my own. I could not live without doing that. My imagination heightened the drama of it, altered the endings and made all the plots much more mysterious. Spinoza's death, that lonely, free death of his, was in my sight a struggle. The Sanhedrim tried hard to bring him to repentance, but he was unbreakable. I even brought Rubens into it. I was sure Rubens was beside the death-bed, taking a death mask.

My school fellows gaped and drank in my fantastic story. It was told with inspiration, and when the bell rang nobody wanted to go. In the next break, Borgman came up to me and put his arm in mine, and we became friends, walked together. Soon we were intimates. Borgman may have been head boy, but all the same he was not an unpleasant person. To his powerful brain the cleverest thing in school life was a mere scribble on the pages of the real book – and greedily he sought that real book. Even we twelve-year-old stupids knew that before him lay an extraordinary life, a learned life. He did not prepare his lessons, he merely listened in class. That really brainy, dignified boy attached himself to me through that ability of mine to re-hash everything in the world, the simplest things you could think of.

That year we went up into the third form. My position in form was a chronic one, just above the bottom. My teachers could not bring themselves simply to put me right at the bottom, because the nonsense I wrote was so peculiar. When the summer began, Borgman invited me to stay with him at the Borgmans' out-of-town summer villa. His father was manager of the Russian Bank for

Foreign Trade, one of those men who made Odessa into a Marseilles or a Naples. There was a vein of the Odessa merchant of the good old days about him. He belonged to the company of sceptical but obliging loungers. He never liked to talk Russian; he preferred the coarse broken lingo of Liverpool sea-captains. When the Italian Opera visited Odessa that April, Borgman gave them a lunch at his town house, and the bloated banker – the last of the Odessa merchants – managed a two months' love affair with the rich-bosomed prima donna, and when she left she bore with her memories which did not burden her conscience and a necklace tastefully chosen but cheapish.

The old man held the position of Argentine consul and chairman of the Bourse Committee. I was invited to the house to be presented to Borgman's father. My aunt, Bobka, told the whole street all about it. She did her best too to dress me up. I went by tram as far as the sixteenth station on the Grand Fountain line. The villa stood absolutely on the edge of a low red cliff, by the sea, and there was a garden laid out with fuchsias, and thuyas cut into nice shapes.

I came of a poor and ignorant family, and the furnishings of the Borgman villa took my breath away. There were arbours, pergolas, and cane armchairs under the greenery. The dining-table had flowers on it, and green frames to the windows. There was a low, spacious wooden colonnade in front.

In the evening the bank manager arrived home. After dinner he put a cane armchair on the very edge of the cliff, facing the moving plain of the sea, put up his white-trousered legs, lit a cigar and began to read the *Manchester Guardian*. The guests, Odessa ladies, played poker on the veranda. At the corner of the table a slender samovar with ivory handles was simmering.

The lady card-players were sweet-toothed and untidily fashionable; they were secret whores with scented underclothes and wide hips, and waved black fans and put in gold pieces as stakes. Through a trellis with wild vine the sun penetrated. The sun's fiery circle was immense. Coppery gleams made the women's black hair still heavier. Sparks of sunset penetrated their diamonds – diamonds stuck everywhere, in the ravine where their breasts divided, in their painted ears and on their puffy blue-veined spoilt-female fingers.

Night came. A bat rustled through the air. The sea rolled blacker on to the red cliff. My twelve-year-old heart grew big with delight and the ease of someone else's wealth. Together with my friend, arm in arm, we strolled up and down the farthest garden walk. Borgman told me he was going to be an aeroplane engineer. There was talk, he said, of his father being made manager of the Foreign Trade Bank in London. Mark would be able to have an English schooling.

In our home, Aunt Bobka's home, nobody talked about things like that. I had nothing to give in return for that steady flow of grandeur. So I told Mark that although my family lived very differently, my grandfather Levy Isaac, and my uncle, had been all over the world, and had had all sorts of adventures. I described their adventures one by one. Immediately all sense of the limits of the possible had left me, and I conducted my Uncle Wolf through the Russo-Turkish war, then to Alexandria and Egypt. . . .

Night had stood upright among the poplars, and stars rested on the drooping branches, while I spoke with vast gestures, and the fingers of the future aeroplane engineer trembled on my arm. With difficulty he tore himself out of those hallucinations and promised to visit me the following Sunday. Fortified with that promise, I went home on the tram to Aunt Bobka.

The whole week following that visit I imagined I was manager of a bank. I concluded deals in millions, with Singapore and Port Said. I bought a yacht and travelled about in it, alone. But on Saturday came the time to wake from the dream. The following day little Borgman was to visit me. And none of what I told him came to pass, but something else, much more astonishing than what I had invented. But at twelve I was still not quite clear about my position in the world. Grandfather Levy Isaac was a rabbi, expelled from his own place because he forged Count Branicki's signature on some cheques, and our neighbours and all the kids round thought Granddad was mad. Nor could I stand Uncle Simon Wolf, because he was so queer, full of pointless fire and thunder and oppression. Auntie Bobka was the only one I could get on with. Bobka was proud to have the son of a bank manager as my friend. She counted that friendship a foundation to my career, and so she baked

a jam strudel and a poppy-seed cake. The whole heart of our race, a heart steadfast in tribulation, was baked into that cake. Granddad with his torn top hat and the rags on his swollen legs we packed away with our neighbours, the Appelhots, and I begged him not to turn up till Borgman had gone. We also managed Simon Wolf all right. He went off with his horse-jobber friends to the Bear to drink tea, and as they served vodka with tea in that pub, we could count on him staying. Here I ought to explain that my family was not like other Jewish families. In its ranks our family numbered drunkards; we had seduced Generals' daughters and then left them at the frontier. My uncle, as I say, had forged signatures and written blackmailing letters for abandoned women.

I put all I had into keeping Simon Wolf away the whole day. I gave him three roubles I had saved. You can't get through three roubles as quickly as all that, so Simon Wolf would come home late and the bank manager's son would never discover that my story about my uncle's kindness and strength was all lies. Though, to tell the truth, it was not a lie really. Only, a *superficial* glance at dirty, loud-mouthed Simon Wolf might easily prevent you realizing the truth about him.

On Sunday morning Bobka dressed in a brown cloth frock. Her good fat bosom lay all round. Then she put on a three-cornered kerchief with black printed flowers, which is worn to synagogue on the Day of Judgment and Rosh Hashana. Then Bobka put out the cake and the jam and the pretzels on the table, and waited. We lived in a cellar. Borgman raised his brows when he came along the humpy floor of the corridor. Just by the doorway was a tub of water. As soon as Borgman came in I set about taking his mind off things with all sorts of wonders. I showed him the alarm clock which to the last screw grandfather had made with his own hands. There was a lamp fixed on the clock so that at the hour and the half-hour the lamp lit up. I showed him a little tub of wax, the composition of which was Levy Isaac's invention, a secret he revealed to no man. Then, together we read a few pages of my grandfather's manuscript. This was written in Hebrew, on yellow, square pages as big as a map, and it was called *The Man without a Head*. It contained a description of all Levy Isaac's neighbours,

during the whole seventy years of his life, starting from the towns of Skvira and Belaia Tzerkov, then coming to Odessa. Grave-diggers, synagogue cantors, Jewish drunkards, women cooks, wandering circumcisers – such were Levy Isaac's heroes; all good-for-nothing people, uncouth, with spiky noses, carbuncles on their bald patches and crooked backsides.

While I was reading, Bobka came in, in her brown dress. She floated across the room, with the samovar on a tray and the tray folded round by her good fat bosom. I introduced them, and Bobka said, 'Pleased to meet you', and held out sweating, stiff fingers, and shuffled her feet. Everything was going swimmingly, and the Appelhots were doing their bit, keeping granddad away. I pulled out his treasures, one by one: grammars of all manner of languages and the sixty-six volumes of the Talmud. The tub of wax, the cunning alarm clock and the pile of the Talmud took little Borgman quite off his feet, all being things you couldn't see in just every house.

We drank two glasses of tea each and ate the strudel, and then Bobka nodded her head, backed to the door, and disappeared. I began to feel really happy, stood triumphantly in the middle of the room and began to declaim poetry, which I loved more than anything else in life. Antony stood over Caesar's body and addressed the Roman people: Friends, Romans, countrymen, I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him. . . .'

Thus begins Antony's part. I took a deep breath, put my fingers on my breast, and went on:

'He was my friend, faithful and just to me:
But Brutus says he was ambitious;
And Brutus is an honourable man.
He hath brought many captives home to Rome,
Whose ransoms did the general coffers fill;
Did this in Caesar seem ambitious?
When that the poor have cried, Caesar has wept;
Ambition should be made of sterner stuff:
Yet Brutus says he was ambitious;
And Brutus is an honourable man. . . .'

Before my eyes, in universal mist, floated Brutus's face. It became whiter than chalk. Muttering, the Roman populace moved forward against me. I raised my arm – Borgman's eyes obediently followed it – my clenched fist shook, I raised my arm . . . and in the window saw my Uncle Simon Wolf striding over the courtyard with dealer Leikach. They were carrying a hat-rack made of reindeer antlers and a red hall-chest with pendants in the form of lion's jaws. Bobka too saw them from the window, and, forgetting all about my visitor, she flew into the room, and her little hands grabbed me, and she cried, 'Oh, my dear heart, he's been buying furniture again. . . .'

Borgman in his little uniform stood up amazed and made a bow to Bobka. They burst in through the door, and there was a noise of heavy boots in the corridor and the chest being dragged along. Simon Wolf's voice and ginger Leikach's voice were like thunder. They were both a bit merry.

'Bobka,' yelled Simon Wolf, 'guess how much I had to give for these antlers?'

He shouted like a trumpet, yet there was something uncertain about his voice. Though he was drunk, Simon Wolf did not forget how much we hated ginger Leikach, who prompted all those purchases of uncle's – which filled the house with unnecessary, pointless, furniture.

Bobka said nothing. Leikach said something to Simon Wolf in a hoarse whisper. To silence that serpent voice, and my own concern, I shouted Antony's speech:

> 'But yesterday the word of Caesar might
> Have stood against the world: now lies he there,
> And none so poor to do him reverence.
> O masters, if I were disposed to stir.
> Your hearts and minds to mutiny and rage,
> I should do Brutus wrong, and Cassius wrong,
> I will not do them wrong; I rather choose
> To wrong the dead, to wrong myself, and you,
> Than I will wrong such honourable men.'

At this point there was a crash. Bobka had fallen, struck down by

her husband. No doubt she had made some caustic remark about the antlers. Then the daily scene began. Simon Wolf's brass voice would seal every cranny of the universe.

'You suck glue out of me,' he yelled in a thunderous voice — 'glue to seal your own dog's chaps . . . Work has taken my soul. I have nothing to work with, neither arms nor legs . . . You've tied a millstone about my neck, there's a millstone round my neck. . . .'

Cursing me and Bobka with Jewish curses, he promised us our eyes would melt out of their sockets, and our children would rot even in their mother's womb, that we should not have time to bury one another, and we should be dragged by the hair to a common grave. . . .

Little Borgman stood up. He was pale, and looked round on all sides. He could not understand all the expressions invented by Jews, but he knew Russian swearing, and Simon Wolf did not despise that either. The bank manager's son stood, twisting his cap in his hands. I could see him double, as I tried to shout down all the evil of this world. My death throes and Caesar's death, already accomplished, welded in one. I was dead, yet I still shouted. Hoarsely the words rose from the very fundament of my being.

'If you have tears, prepare to shed them now.
You all do know this mantle; I remember
The first time ever Caesar put it on;
'Twas on a summer's evening, in his tent,
That day he overcame the Nervii: —
Look, in this place ran Cassius's dagger through:
See what a rent the envious Casca made:
Through this the well-beloved Brutus stabb'd;
And, as he pluckt this cursed steel away,
Mark how the blood of Caesar follow'd it. . . .'

But nobody could have drowned Simon Wolf. Bobka was sitting on the floor, sobbing and wiping her nose. Leikach, absolutely unmoved, was busy getting the chest round behind the partition. At this point my lunatic grandfather got the idea into his head to come and assist me. He got away from the Appelhots, crept up to the window and began scraping his fiddle, no

doubt to prevent the neighbours hearing Simon Wolf swearing. Borgman looked up at the window, which was on the level of the courtyard outside, and fell back in horror. My poor old granddad's bony face was grimacing against the glass. He was wearing his dented top hat, a black quilted kaftan with bone buttons and ragged boots on his elephantiasis-swollen legs. His tobacco-stained beard hung in tufts against the window-pane. Mark ran.

'It doesn't matter,' he mumbled, when he got outside, 'really, it doesn't matter. . . .'

And his little uniform and school cap with the turned-up edges flashed through the yard.

When Mark had gone, my trouble vanished. I waited till evening came. When my grandfather had covered another square sheet with his Hebrew hooks (he was writing a description of his day with the Appelhots) and had lain down on his couch and fallen asleep, I crept into the corridor. The floor was of beaten earth. I went forward, barefoot, in the darkness, in my long, patched night-shirt. Through the cracks between the boards, lit by flashes of light, the cobble-stones glittered. In the corner, as usual, was the butt of water, and I lowered myself into it. The water cut me in half. I put my head in, choked and came out above water again. Over my head a sleepy cat was looking at me from a shelf. The second time, I stood it longer, the water gurgled round me, and my groan entered into that water. I opened my eyes, and at the bottom of the butt I saw my shirt like a sail and my two poor legs pressed close to one another. Once again I was weak, and came up. Beside the barrel stood my grandfather, in his night-shirt, and his one tooth seemed to ring like a bell.

'My grandson' – he spoke very clearly, and scornfully – 'I am going to take a dose of castor-oil, so as to have some sort of offering to cast into your grave. . . .'

I cried out, beside myself, and went into the water with a great rush. My grandfather's weak arms dragged me out. Then, for the first time that day, I burst into tears, and that world of tears was so vast and so lovely that everything but those tears vanished from my eyes.

I came to myself in bed, wrapped in quilts. My grandfather was

walking up and down, whistling. Fat Bobka was warming my hands in her bosom.

'How our little ninny shivers,' said Bobka. 'Where does the child find the strength to shiver so?'

My grandfather plucked at his beard, gave a whistle, and set a-walking up and down again. Through the wall Simon Wolf snored, with agonizing out breath. His days were full of struggle; at night he never wakened.

NIGHTPIECE

PIOTR PAVLENKO

(Translated by Stephen Garry)

TOWARDS evening a bank of thundercloud blew up from across the Volga. Broad and heavy, it piled so low over the fields, covering them so completely with its steely, blue-black mass, that the air at once grew stifling and close in the threshing-floor – as though it were a cowshed. Everybody rushed to save the corn. Sheaves had been lying ready since morning. The salesmen of the mobile village co-operative worked side by side with the collective farmers, the teachers, the scalesmen and the timekeepers. Fortunately, the rain was slow in coming. Just as it seemed as though the storm would blow over, a thunderclap burst with a hollow, spacious power as though it were aiming to reach into the far distance, and passed on: passed on to burst and storm with its threat of disaster.

'It's playing with us. Everything'll be soaked,' said old Kharlai, who was working at the scales. The work went on with a will. The girl combine-driver continued to drive her machine as though impudently defying the storm.

'Hey, anti-gas defence!' she cried. 'Look, here comes a raid on Madrid!'

The wagoners drove wagon after wagon out to her, carting back to the threshing floor load upon load of warm and still juicy, unrustling grain, fragrant in the stifling stormy atmosphere. It lay

in piles around the floor, almost to the rafters. And no matter how much was carted off for payment of the grain tax, for delivery to the collection point, and to the mill to be ground for advances, like the grain in the fable the mound never grew less.

Even when the rain cloud was right overhead, the workers continued to carry the grain from the combine to the scales, pouring it out to dry, shovelling it into sacks, loading it on to three-ton lorries, and covering it with straw.

The girls sang as they worked at the winnowing machine. During the day they had borrowed money from the lads in order to buy material in the travelling shop, and, now, glancing again and again at the brigade leader, they sang challengingly:

'We all go a-harvesting
In Tereshek under the hill.
Everywhere we've borrowed money;
Now they won't let us go home.'

'Stop the machine,' they shouted to the brigade leader; 'how many more times are we to tell you? The combine driver's only a youngster, she'll spoil the whole lot the way she's overdoing it.'

But it is not easy to stop a combine harvester which was out in the fields at work before dawn. It rolled on and on, swaying over the furrows; and the ruddy dust of the grain rose behind it in a visible cloud.

The combine had been harvesting the corn for seventeen hours on end. There had been a heavy dew in the morning, but the harvester went out and reaped. The heat of the day had been sufficient to bring any reaper to a halt, but the harvester went on. Towards evening, just before the storm, a wind sprang up and bent back, tousled the corn, – the combine still went on. More than once the brigade cook had climbed on to the platform of the machine with a dish of honey and milk-loaf in her hands, and had pleaded, almost in tears:

'For goodness sake eat something, you devil! The others'll outstrip you yet, because you'll have no strength left.'

But the day had been a success, and so it seemed short and light; and the combine driver did not want the honey.

'How much have our neighbours done?' she shouted to the cook.

'We're well ahead; why worry?' the cook answered.

It is not easy to harvest corn in a wind. The light, crumbling wave of corn flattens and twists below the knives, trickily eluding them. The steering wheel is continually spinning in the hand. The engine is racing one minute, then throbbing regularly the next; one moment the knives are passing over the very crest of the yellow wave, catching at the yellow foam of ears, cutting without breaking them, and the canvas transporter carries the ears down to the sieves, until a dark living stream of cleaned, warm grain pours into the bunker, straight from the field.

At such a time who can stop to have a meal, or even to be ill? Even the cook remained a long time on the platform.

In the threshing floor they talked of the splendid combine driver the collective farm had been sent. They compared her with others, and while they praised those others up to the skies, they all declared that their own driver carried off the palm because of her pluck and enthusiasm, her grit, and her joyous love of her work, which is not a quality found in everyone.

'Why, the girl isn't twenty-five yet,' said old Kharlai, who for the first time for several years had left the farm apiary, where he usually worked, to go and give a hand in the fields. "I suppose," I said to her, "you've reaped and harvested your own land in your time?" "No, daddy," she said, "I've never had anything to do with corn before; I was brought up in an orphanage." "But surely you've held a sickle in your hands?" I said. "What could I do with your sickle?" she said. "I'm a dressmaker. But I'll plough as much as you like with a tractor; I can harrow, and I'll get all your harvest in for you with this combine." She's quite small to look at, but she stands there as cool as a cucumber.'

Not for a long time had Kharlai seen the corn at the hazardous harvesting season, which always arouses a thousand anxieties in the peasant's heart. He worked at the apiary, and had been called up as a reserve to help the girls at the winnowing machine and the scalesman at the scales. He did not regard that as a man's work, and although he was too old to do anything else, he took offence. Yet

in his soul he was happy; he had lived to see the corn once more as it is in its full and glorious strength.

He was only too anxious to talk, to think aloud, to moralize, but he was surrounded by young people, who were harsh and curt of speech. He waited impatiently for night to fall. It came on together with the storm, low, dark, uneasy. Then suddenly the storm passed over, left the evening to draw on slowly into night. The clouds broke in a clap or two of dry thunder, and scattered into shreds; and at once the air grew fresher over the fields, the sky turned azure. Through the last scraps of cloud the moon appeared.

The combines worked on by the light of their two or three headlamps apiece, seeming to clatter more noisily and hollowly than in the daytime. They filled the darkling fields with agitated tension. The sleepy wagoners carting the grain plunged into the darkness, but soon returned, smothered with dust and chaff, to the threshing floor.

'And there's still more to come in!' they announced as they swarmed around the scales. 'Where's it all coming from, for goodness' sake?'

'Grain knows when man is strong,' Kharlai remarked. 'It answers to strength, my lads. If you're weak, then the grain's weak. We know that, my lads!'

'It's time you cleared off to bed, daddy,' the brigade-leader said. 'Strength is one thing and age is another; look out, or you'll die through overdoing it.'

'I will?' Kharlai retorted.

'And who else d'you think I'm referring to? Sanka!' he shouted. 'Come and take Kharlai away and put him to bed in the stable.'

But it was cheerful and noisy at the threshing floor; the youngsters sang song after song, and played the gramophone. And the old men had no desire for bed.

'My love never kisses me,
Only makes me promises.
But love without kisses
Is strictly forbidden,'

the girls sang, laughing and bandying jokes with the lads.

'Shura, Shura, I'm no fool,
I'm not going out into the porch;
I shall never kiss you,
Though I lose my ring.'

Again and again they turned to dancing on the hard-beaten earth of the threshing-floor, to the strains of the accordion and gramophone. At last the youngsters wandered off to bed, but three old men went outside to sit for a while before sleeping, to idle away half an hour.

'Why don't you go to bed, Kharlai?' the watchman asked. His duties did not permit him to sleep, and so he was jealous.

'And what have I got to go to bed for? Because I've done some work? And what work have I done?' Kharlai answered contemptuously. 'I used to want to sleep in the old days, but I've got no reason to sleep now.'

The stableman was a sickly sort. Like Kharlai, he had been called upon to give a hand when the collective farm forces were mobilized to deal with the harvest. He usually worked for the fire brigade. He did not agree with Kharlai's view, and objected:

'No reason to sleep? That's all very well, but I can't straighten up my back. By God, I feel like I felt at Mukden in 1904. As soon as you've given the horses their feed the brigade leader's on at you to be out on the job again.'

'Grain knows when man's strong, it answers to strength,' Kharlai said as he had said before, and as he spoke he felt that he was young again, and capable of working all night without sleep.

That day, as on every previous day of his life, he had risen at dawn. Then he had eaten his fill of honey, and until the noon break had shovelled up the grain on the threshing floor, had helped the girls at the winnowing machine, the scalesman at the scales. Then the cook to the tractor column had invited him to be her guest in the clean, tidy little caravan kitchen, and had regaled him on greasy cabbage soup with lumps of meat cooked in it, after which he had dozed for a while in the shade behind the caravan.

At one time, thirty years before, Kharlai had cultivated a narrow strip of land somewhere closeby, nearer the river. That little strip

of land was not to be distinguished, not to be found amid all the stretch of many acres of drowsy grain. But the memory of it wearied, gnawed at him. And when he awoke he asked to be allowed to ride on the combine.

'You can ride till it's dark if you like, daddy,' the combine driver answered.

It was the first time he had ridden on a combine, and the old man was amazed by this new experience.

He stood on the platform, absently looking around the field, with the bulk of other combines and horse-drawn reapers scattered in black patches here and there. He plunged his hand into the bunker, into the gracious grain, which came pouring in a dry stream out of the funnel. He pulled on the rope of the straw-thrower or watched sternly as the wagoners loaded the grain from the combine on to their wagons. For a long time he could not identify any one spot in all this sea. But suddenly, screwing up his eyes, he recognized the contours of the land, cleared his throat, and muttered:

'This is it: just here.'

The combine was now driving over all his life. Here – how well he still remembered it! – they had fought with stakes over a question of the field boundaries; there, by a little bush, his elder daughter had been born; farther on, close to the road, the wheat had once caught fire; and somewhere near by a wandering pilgrim had died in 1917 after telling of the end of the war. Now grain, level, thick, a single flood, was growing over all those memories.

When he had made one round with the combine he returned to the task of shovelling up the grain. And now, although he was tired, he felt in splendid fettle, and queerly restless; and not for anything did he want to go to bed.

The watchman was glad to have company to sit and talk with him.

'We never had such grain in our time; no, never!' he sighed. 'The Soviet Government came to our help rather late, the more's the pity.'

Kharlai and the stableman turned their gaze on him.

'Now if we were only forty or so, wouldn't that be fine! Don't you agree, Kharlai?' he asked in an undertone.

'Well, I wouldn't mind being forty-five,' the stableman modestly remarked. 'We could have done a thing or two even at that age! Ah, then I'd start to live!' He lingered fondly over his words, uttering them rapturously and fervently, as young and healthy lads talk.

'I had children when I was fifty,' Kharlai said with dignity.

'Don't tell us that yarn! You make me forty or maybe forty-five, and I'll show you!' the stableman caressed the words again. With all his being he craved to be in the full flush of his strength, and with strong arms to embrace this new day, which yet in his dreams and in legends was the good old life, and never let it slip again from his hands.

'But you sang a different song then, you behaved differently then. Have you forgotten?'

The stableman cleared his throat.

'I didn't know any better,' he said. 'And besides, who'd have dreamed . . . you judge for yourself. Why, if I'd known, my God . . . I'd have fought with both hands.'

'You did fight with both hands, but not for the right side,' Kharlai sternly interrupted him.

'But d'you remember when a man came to see you from Volsk? And what did you say to him?'

Breaking in on one another, the old men fell to talking about the past, the now almost forgotten past, about their terrible, ignorant way of life, and their many mistakes. They passed judgment on themselves, on the ignorance of their lives, on their failure to foresee and realize the life that was coming to meet them.

Kharlai quickly had the stableman admitting his errors. 'Well, then, pass sentence on me: the death sentence if you like. I don't know any better,' he asserted about some incident known only to the two of them.

'It's all very well sentencing you now, but it would have been better if we'd saved Yakov Gregorevich then.'

'Ah he was a man to suit the Soviet regime! He should have been alive now, and making his way in the world.'

'And there was Grishin,' the watchman added. 'He was killed over nothing, d'you remember? They ripped him up one night, and only because he clouted the policeman.'

'And Ksenia Parfenova? She'd have made a fine combine-driver if anyone could.'

'Which Parfenova d'you mean?' the stableman asked.

'Which Parfenova? Why, the one we called the Virgin Mary, don't you remember?'

'Why, of course, of course! The one that worked in the smithy you mean? She was a darned good sort. I heard that the Whites hung her head downward.'

And again the three old men broke in on one another, chattering away and growing more and more excited. After condemning their failure to recognize the new great reality, they called to mind the finest men and women of their own generation, those who they thought would have been of more service to the Soviets than they themselves were with their old age, decrepitude and many mistakes. These men, whose lives had been filled to overflowing with innumerable labours, deprivations and failures, now wanted to see not themselves, but stronger, finer and more reliable people working under the Soviet regime.

Yet they felt sorry for themselves not because they were old, but because of the stupid and idiotic lives they had lived in past years; and they were still more regretful over those who had died without living to see the Soviet regime, those who had been unable to set their hands to its tasks, with all their clear, spacious and courageous spirit. They were ashamed and unhappy because they had failed to preserve these long departed men and women for the present life, and even, possibly, had themselves hastened their death, because they had not understood and recognized the hidden germ of the great cause, which in those days had seemed impossible of realization.

If only they could have brought back not their youth, not their early vital strength, not their own long forgotten happinesses, but just a few days! If only they could have wiped out of their memory those most shameful and oppressive days when they had made mistakes which now could never be atoned for, and so had reduced themselves to impotence for years after.

Long the three old men sat silent, long they sat gazing into the luminous darkness of the vaguely shining night. That night was

slow in passing away, it lingered on as though sitting with them; but now everything was said that could be said, and each of them had long been waiting for dawn to come.

At last in the distance, across the river, they heard the throbbing of an engine.

'Well, it's time to wake everybody up!' the watchman said in a pleased tone, and went off with a businesslike air to the combine drivers' caravan.

But the stableman bent down to the piled grain, gathered some in his palms, and buried his face in it. He stood so a long time, slowing turning his head to and fro, as though washing himself with the grain.

KARL-YANKEL

I. BABEL

(*Translated by Alec Brown*)

In my young days there was a smithy run by Ionna Brutmann on the Embankment. It was meeting-place for horse dealers, draymen and carters and Odessa slaughter-house butchers. The smithy was on the Balt road. As observation post it served well to catch peasants bringing in oats and Bessarabian wines. Ionna was a timid little man, but in constant good training as far as liquor went; you might say the very soul of the Odessa Jew lived in him.

In my time he had three sons growing up. He came up to their waists. There in the embankment for the first time I came to give thought to the powerful forces which move so mysteriously within Nature. Those three well-foddered young stalwarts with their ruddy shoulders and feet as big as shovels could carry their wizened old father down to the water like a child. Yet there was no doubt about it, he had begot them, none other. The smith's wife went to synagogue twice a week – Friday evening and Saturday morning; it was a Chassidic synagogue, and at Easter they danced there till they dropped, like dervishes. Ionna's wife paid her dues to the

missionaries which were sent all round the southern provinces by the Galician tzadiks, or righteous men. The smith never interfered in his spouse's relations with the Almighty – when he finished work he went down to a little cellar near the slaughter-house and sipped away at cheap rose-coloured wine and listened gently to the talk – talk of cattle prices and talk of politics.

The sons, in height and strength, took after their mother. Two of them when they grew up joined the Partisans. The elder was killed near Voznessensk, the other Brutmann, Semyon, went over to Primakov, joining the Red Cossack division. He was elected commander of a Cossack regiment. With him and a handful of other youths from our suburb began that surprising strain of Jewish Red Army men, commandos and partisans.

The third son followed his father and became a blacksmith. He works at Gens Plough Foundry in the old place; he is not married and has no family. Semyon's children wandered about together with his division. The old woman wanted a grandson to whom she could tell all about Ba'al-Shem and she got her grandson from her younger daughter Polia. That lass, of all the family, was the only one like little Ionna. She was timid, short-sighted, delicate-skinned. She had a whole crowd of suitors. Polia chose Ovsey Belotzerkovski. We could not understand her choice. What was more surprising still was the news that the couple were living happily. But women have their own minds; an onlooker can never tell what it is breaks the pot. But certainly Ovsey Belotzerkovski broke it. A year after his marriage he went to law against his mother-in-law, Brana Brutmann. Taking advantage of the circumstance that Ovsey was away on duty, and Polia had gone into hospital to treat her milk fever, the old woman stole her new-born grandson, bore him off to Naphtula Gerchik the circumcisionist, and there in the presence of a dozen bits of dilapidation, a dozen miserable old human antiques, stalwarts of the Chassid synagogue, the infant was circumcised.

Ovsey Belotzerkovski did not hear the news until he got back. Ovsey was down as candidate for the Party. He made up his mind to talk it over with the Cell Secretary of the Gostorg – Bychatch.

'They have messed you up proper,' said Bychatch to him, 'you will have to go to court about that. . . .'

The Odessa State Prosecution Department decided to make an example at the trial and hold it in the Petrovski factory. Naphtula Gerchik, the circumcisionist, and Brana Brutmann at the age of sixty-two found themselves in the dock.

Now in Odessa, Naphtula was a sight and a treasure equal to any statue of the Duc de Richelieu. We saw him go by our house in Dalnitzkaia Street with his battered and greasy midwife's bag in his hand. In that bag he kept his simple instruments. From it he could produce either the knife or a bottle of vodka with a bit of honey cake. He would take a sniff at the cake before drinking his tot, then toss the vodka down and begin to drawl out the prayers. He was ginger-headed, was Naphtula. As ginger-headed as the most ginger-headed man on earth. When he had cut off what he was supposed to cut off, he did not drain the blood through a glass tube, but stuck out his own lips and sucked it out. He used to smear the blood all over his dangled beard. When he came out to the assembled company he would be quite tight. His bearlike little eyes would be gleaming with delight. Ginger as the most ginger man on earth, he would cry out a blessing over the liquor. With one jerk, Naphtula would tip the vodka through the thicket of ginger hair, into the skewed, fire-breathing gulf of his mouth, while in the other hand he held out the plate. On the plate lay the little knife, purple with the infant's blood, and a piece of muslin bandage. Making his collection, Naphtula went round the company with his plate and elbowed his way among the women, pressing against them, catching hold of their breasts and shouting so that the whole street could hear:

'You fat Mammies,' the old man shouted, flashing his codlike eyes, 'mark down your boys for Naphtula, flay your wheat on your bellies, roll up for Naphtula . . .' 'mark down your boys, fat mammies.'

The husbands threw money into his plate. The women with their napkins wiped the blood off his beard. There was no scarcity in the households of Back Street and Hospital Street, they were swarming with children, like the mouths of rivers full of fish fry.

On went Naphtula with his bag like a tax collector. State Prosecutor Orlov brought up Naphtula with a jerk.

'Do you believe in God?' he asked Naphtula.

'Let him who draws the two hundred thousand ticket on the lottery believe in God,' answered the old man.

'Were you not surprised when Citizeness Brutmann came at such a late hour through the rain with a new-born child in her hands?'

'I am surprised,' said Naphtula, 'if a human being does anything like a human being, but when a human being does idiotic things I am not surprised. . . .'

These answers did not satisfy the State Prosecutor. There was some question raised about the tube. The State Prosecutor maintained that by sucking out the blood with his mouth the accused subjected the children to danger from infection. Naphtula's head – that tousled mass of head – was rolling about somewhere in the vicinity of the floor. He was sighing, hiding his eyes, with his bent fist wiping the dripping corners of his mouth.

'What is that you are muttering there?' asked the President of the Court.

Naphtula gives a glance from his dull eyes at State Prosecutor Orlov.

'The late Mossoo Süssmann,' he said with a sigh, 'your late Papa had a head such as you cannot find in the whole world . . . and praise be to God he did not get an apoplectic fit thirty years ago when he called me in to circumcize you. And behold, we see how you have grown into a great man of the Soviets, but Naphtula got nothing which would be of any use to him later . . .' He twitched his little bear-like eyes, shook his ginger mop and fell into a silence.

He was answered by a roar of laughter, thunderous volleys of guffaws.

Orlov, whose original name had been Zucmann, waved his arms and shouted something or other inaudible in the din. He demanded something to be put on record. . . .

Sasha Svothov, who wrote the stories in the *Odessa News*, sent him a note from the press box, saying:

'You sheep, Sim, knock him down with a bit of irony, it's the comic that counts . . . Yours, Sasha.'

Silence fell upon the court when witness Belotzerkovski was brought in.

The witness repeated the allegation he had already made in writing. He was a lanky fellow dressed in riding breeches and cavalry boots. According to Ovsey, the Balt Party Committee Director Tirespolski afforded him full support in his work of harvesting oil-bearing seeds. While in the fever of preparation he received a telegram about the birth of his son. After consultation with the organization chief of the Balt Party Administrative Committee, he decided not to interrupt work, but merely send a telegram of congratulations, and himself went only a fortnight later. In all, in the district sixty-four pouds of oil-seeds were harvested. When he reached home, the witness found nobody but witness Mrs. Kharcherko his neighbour, washerwoman by profession, and his son. His wife had gone away into hospital and witness Mrs. Kharcherko was rocking the cradle, which in itself was a sign of backward political development, and singing a silly little song to the child. Being familiar with witness Mrs. Kharcherko and knowing her disposition to alcoholic liquor, witness did not consider it necessary to go into the substance of what she was singing, but was greatly startled to notice that she called his son Yasha, whereas he had given instructions to christen his son Karl in honour of the great teacher of mankind Karl Marx. Unwrapping his baby son, witness beheld clear proof of the misfortune which had overtaken him.

The State Prosecutor put a number of questions. The defence announced that it had no questions to put.

Witness Mrs. Polia Belotzerkovski was brought into the court and, on unsteady feet, took her place in the dock. Her face was still strained and bluish from her recent confinement and there were beads of sweat on her forehead. With one glance, she took in the little smith, who had put on his Sunday best as if it were a holiday — new elastic-sided boots and a ribbon round his neck — and her mother's face, coppery and grey moustached. Witness Mrs. Belotzerkovski on being asked what she had to say to the charge, made no answer. She declared that her father was a poor man, who had worked for forty years without a stop at his smithy in Baltskaia. Her mother had borne six children, of whom three had died,

one was a Red Commander, another was working in Gens factory.

'My mother is very pious, anybody can see that, she always suffered because her children were unbelievers, and could not bear to think of her grand-children not being proper Jews. You must take into account the sort of family mother grew up in. The whole world knows what the Medzhibozh suburb is like, the women there wear wigs to this day.'

'Would the witness tell the court,' the sharp voice interrupted . . . Polia stopped short, new drops of sweat leapt up on her forehead and her blood seemed to be soaking through her thin skin. 'Will the witness tell the court,' repeated the voice, which belonged to former solicitor Samuel Lining.

Now, if the Sanhedrim had existed in our days, Lining would have been head of it. But there is no Sanhedrim, so Lining, who after twenty-five years had learnt Russian well, in his forties took up appeals to the Court of Cassation, no whit poorer than the pleadings of the Talmud.

The old man slept through the whole hearing, his jacket powdered with ash. When he heard Polia he woke up.

'Will the witness tell the court,' and the fishy row of his blackened loose teeth quivered, 'if she knew of her husband's decision to call her son Karl?'

'Yes.'

'How did the mother have him christened?'

'Yankel.'

'And will the witness tell the court what she called her son?'

'I called him my Popsy-wopsy.'

'Why did you choose the word Popsy-wopsy?'

'Because I call all children Popsy-wopsy.'

'Let us proceed further,' said Lining. His teeth fell out, but he caught them up with his lower lip and thrust them back again. 'Let us proceed a little further . . . When the child was taken to the accused man, Gerchik, you were not at home, you were in hospital . . . am I right?'

'I was in hospital.'

'In which hospital may I ask?'

'Dr. Drizo's Nursing Home, Nezhinskaia Street.'

'Oh, so you went to Dr. Drizo.'

'Yes.'

'Are you quite sure of this?'

'How could I make a mistake?'

'It is my duty to suggest a slight correction to the court,' and Lining's lifeless face rose over the table, 'out of which the court will be able to see that, at this very time with which we are concerned, Dr. Drizo was away, attending a Child Medicine Congress in Cracow.'

The State Prosecutor had no objection to this correction.

'Let us proceed a little further,' and the witness leant with all her weight on the front of the dock. Her whisper could hardly be heard.

'Perhaps it was not Dr. Drizo,' she said leaning on the dock. 'I cannot recall everything, I have had such a bad time.'

With his pencil, Lining scratched his yellow beard, rubbed his bent back against the bench, and moved his false teeth about.

When asked to put her insurance papers before the court, Mrs. Bélotzerkovski answered that she had lost them.

'Let us proceed a little further,' said the old man.

Polia wiped her forehead. Her husband sat on the very edge of the bench, a little bit separate from the other spectators. He sat very upright, with his long legs in their cavalry boots tucked under him. The sunlight was falling on his face, compact with the folds of the skin over his small malicious bones.

'I will find the papers,' said Polia in a whisper, and her hands slipped from the dock.

At this point a child's crying rang out from the court. Some baby was crying, shrieking, outside.

'What are you thinking of, Polia?' shouted the old woman in a deep bass voice, 'the child hasn't been fed since morning; all this noise would wake any child. . . .'

A stir passed through the Red Army Guards, as they drew their rifles close to them. Polia slipped still lower on her seat, her head fell back and she fell to the floor. Her arms flew up, fluttered in the air and then fell lifeless.

'The court adjourns,' shouted the presiding magistrate.

Immediate din arose in the hall and with glittering metal, Belotzerkovski's stork-like legs with giant strides went up to his wife.

'Come on, feed that kid,' shouted a megaphoned voice from the back benches.

'It'll be fed, it'll be fed,' came a woman's voice answering from afar, 'without your help.'

'The daughter's all in a muddle,' said a workman sitting next to me. 'The girl's got herself. . . .'

'It's family, old man,' declared his neighbour. 'All sorts of dirty work happens at night, more than anyone can sort out in the daytime.'

The sun's rays sliced across the court-room. The crowd turned heavily about, breathing fire and sweat. With difficulty I elbowed my way out into the corridor. The door of the Red Corner was ajar. Thence came the whimper and the gurgles of Karl Yankel at the breast. In the Red Corner hung a portrait of Lenin – that one which shows him speaking from the armoured train at the Finland Station in Leningrad; the portrait was surrounded by coloured diagrams showing the Petrovski factories' earnings. Along the length of the wall were banners and weapons in wooden stands. It was a work woman with Kirghiz features, head cocked on one side, who was nursing Karl Yankel. Karl Yankel himself was a plump personage, five months old, in knitted socks with a white cap on his head. Holding with tight lips to the Kirghiz woman, he cooed with delight, clenching his fists and beating her ample bosom.

'Oh, what a noise he makes,' said the Kirghiz woman. 'Somebody has to feed him . . .' In the room, busying herself, there was also a lass of about seventeen, with a red kerchief and cheeks like fir cones; she was busy rubbing Karl Yankel's nappies out.

'He will be a soldier,' said the girl, 'listen how he bellows.'

The Kirghiz woman, stretching herself a trifle, had just removed her nipple from Karl Yankel's lips. He had raised his voice horribly and threw his head back in despair with the white cap dangling down . . . The woman freed her other breast and gave it to the child. He gave the nipple one glance with his misty little eyes and

then something sparkled fiercely in them. The Kirghiz woman looked at him with proud and comic black eyes.

'Get away with you,' she said putting the kid's white cap straight, he won't be a soldier, he will be an airman, he will fly right up to the clouds.'

At last the court assembled again.

Now came a duel between the State Prosecutor and the experts who produced their guarded opinions. The Social Prosecutor rose from his seat and banged on the desk with his fist. I could see some of the front rows of the public – they were Galician tzadiks, with their beaver caps on their knees. They had come to the trial because, in the words of the Warsaw papers, it was the Jewish religion that was on trial. The faces of these Rabbis seated in the front row drooped in the sallow and dusty light of the sun. 'Shame! Down with them!' shouted a member of the Communist youth who had pushed his way to the very front. The struggle grew fiercer and fiercer.

Karl Yankel, with his eyes fixed on me in a dreamy no-knowing, sucked hard at the Kirghiz woman's breast.

Through the window, these straight streets I had trod in my childhood and my youth took wing: Pushkin Street towards the Station, Malo-Arnantskaia down to the Park by the sea. I had grown up in those streets. Now had come Karl Yankel's turn. But they had never fought about me as they were fighting about Karl Yankel. Nobody had bothered very much about me.

'It is absolutely impossible,' I whispered to myself, 'for you not to be happy, Karl Yankel . . . it is absolutely impossible for you not to be happier than I was.'

A GREAT KING'S LOVE

MICHAEL ZOSCHENKO

(Translated by Alfred Fremantle)

IN the year 529 B.C. King Cambyses of Persia, son of Cyrus the Great, asked the Egyptian Pharaoh Amasis II for his daughter's hand

in marriage. Cambyses had never seen his bride. In those days travel was no light matter. The journey to Egypt lasted several months.

But rumour travelled fast, and it was well known that Pharaoh's daughter was a maiden of surpassing charm and beauty.

So the mighty Persian king, whose father had conquered half the world, sent an offer of marriage to her.

Pharaoh, who doted on his only daughter, had no wish to send her away to an unknown country. But at the same time he dared not offend this mighty potentate. So he picked out the prettiest slave-girl he could find, and sent her to Persia in his daughter's stead. She was well trained for the part, and could walk and talk like a princess.

History relates that after their marriage Cambyses fell madly in love with her, but when the imposture was discovered, he forthwith put her to death, and, wounded in his tenderest feelings, made war upon Egypt.

That must have been one of the most powerful love dramas ever performed, showing how suddenly the star of love may rise, and how it may come down like a sky-rocket.

We can picture the tragic moment of disillusion.

There they sit, closely embracing, on the Persian divan.

On a low stool at their feet are sherbets and choice wines, oriental sweetmeats – Turkish delight and gingerbreads and what not. A paunchy seneschal is chasing away the flies from these dainties with a fan of peacock's feathers.

Cambyses, having tossed off a glass of cherry-brandy, or some such tipple, takes a rapturous look at his enchanting consort and pants out a string of tender speeches: 'Akh, my little gyppy-girl!. . . How did you enjoy your life in Egypt? . . . I'll bet Poppa Pharaoh spoilt you! . . . How could anyone help spoiling you! You're my little Princess Petling, and I fell in love with you right from the word "go", for the sake of your imperial gait and bearing.' And so on, and so forth.

At that moment, relying on her feminine charm, or for some cryptic feminine reason, she smiled bewitchingly and pointed out that that was a queer kettle of fish. Pharaoh's daughter was sitting

pretty in Egypt somewhere, and – lo and behold! – he, the Persian King Cambyses, had fallen in love with herself, who had nothing to do with Pharaoh's daughter. He'd fallen in love with a poor slave-girl. Such power had love over the heart of man.

We shudder at the scene that followed.

You may be sure Cambyses started roaring like a bull. Bounded from the divan in his under-pants. A slipper fell from one of his bare feet. His knees were shaking.

'Wo-o-ot!' he bellowed in Persian. 'Say that again!' He shouted for his ministers. 'Seize, apprehend, arrest the shameless baggage!'

The ministers ran in. 'Oh, dear, oh mercy on us, what's the matter? Calm yourself, Your Majesty! . . . Look, you've dropped one of your slippers – you forget your royal dignity!'

But, of course, it's not so easy to calm oneself when a staggering blow has been dealt to one's *amour-propre*.

In the evening, when the poor slave-girl's head had been chopped off, Cambyses held a long conference with his ministers.

He paced up and down the room, tossing his head and flourishing his arms.

'Isn't he a wallowing swine, that Pharaoh?' he exclaimed.

The ministers sighed obsequiously and threw up their hands, exchanging a stealthy leer or two.

'What am I to do now, gentlemen, after such an outrageous insult? Do you think we could make war?'

'War could be arranged, Your Majesty.'

'But he lives a long way off, the skulk . . . Egypt . . . Why, that's in Africa . . . Take us nearly a year on camels. . . .'

'Never mind that, Your Majesty . . . The troops'll make it.'

'I took her to my arms,' exclaims Cambyses, firing up again, 'received her with royal honours, loved her to distraction – and I find she's an impostress . . . What do you make of that, gentlemen? Am I a dog, that his daughter's too good for me! And he goes and sends me a base-born scullion . . . Akhh!'

The Minister of Foreign Affairs gasps out, in an agony of suppressed laughter.

'The worst of it is, Your Majesty, there'll be a world-wide scandal. . . .'

'That's what infuriates me. The scandal! What on earth shall I do now!'

'The worst of it is, Your Majesty, it'll all get into the history-books . . . Persia . . . Reign of Cambyses . . . who married the slave-girl by mistake. . . .'

'Are you trying to stall me off, you son of a plucked chicken? . . . Call out the troops! . . . We'll march, I say . . . We'll conquer Egypt, sweep it off the blasted map!'

Cambyses led his army into Egypt, and in a short time overran it. But meanwhile the aged and unhappy Amasis had died. His nephew Psametik, having no pleasant prospect to look forward to, committed suicide.

A certain professor of my acquaintance told me that Cambyses did not kill the Egyptian slave-girl but gave her to one of his ministers for his harem. Be that as it may, the king's love vanished like smoke.

Hence we may gather what the market-price of that commodity was among kings and emperors of old.

THE RUSSIAN FOR 'PARALLEL'

DAVID BERGELSON

(Translated by Stephen Garry)

THE late October, glorious with the hues of fading autumn, was raging over the sunburnt hills and through the sunburnt valleys. The bitter and tantalizing scent of wormwood was spicy and pungent, like a blend of ginger and cinnamon. The scents were heavy with the exuberance of nature in her wildness, like the dense undergrowth of the virgin forest, and like this Birobidjan taiga all around, which merged into the mountains at the very edge of the low-hanging sky.

I was returning on foot from Tioply Lake to a mountain settlement which still bore its ancient Tunguz name of Londoko. In Londoko the Jewish colonists were finishing the construction of a

great lime works. I was wilting with the heat. My head was aching after listening to a two-hour lecture on fishery problems. Yes, in this wild fastness of remote mountains, where the Ussurian tiger is still sometimes found, I had just been present at a lecture 'on methods of fish breeding'.

My way lay along a lonely track, which led me now up, now down, the slopes of the mountains. I was limp with the heat. All around me were boundless expanses which had never been trodden by human foot. They stretched away to the very confines of the universe. The chirrup of the grasshoppers in the undergrowth exhausted and enervated me with its monotonous chant.

I was aroused from my mental lethargy by the headmistress of the school at Londoko. I unexpectedly fell in with her at a sharp turn in the track. I at once shook off my stupor and recovered a sense of reality. I again began to grasp that here in these boundless primeval spaces a young, arduous and joyously fervent life was forcing its way along like an underground flood. The headmistress was one little runnel of this flood. In the lonely highland settlement of Londoko she had built up and equipped a very fine school. The school windows, so clean that they sparkled, looked out on the flourishing settlement as bravely and joyously as the eyes of children. The headmistress was no longer young. She talked slowly, with a sing-song drawl. That was how they talked in her native district, in Volhynia. I at once mentally pictured her mother: a small-town Jewish woman in an old-fashioned wig.

'What's forced you to come out in this heat?' I asked her.

'You've said it! "Forced out" is just the right term,' the headmistress declared.

She shielded her eyes from the sun with her palm and stared moodily down at the Russian settlement scattered around the foot of the mountain.

'Not merely forced out!' she added. 'Absolutely driven out! Kicked out, you might even say.'

She nodded in the direction of the Russian settlement.

'I reckon this time I'll give them such a piece of my tongue as they've never heard before. In one whack I'll let them have all that's been gathering in my heart for days.'

'Why, what's the matter?' I asked in surprise.

'Don't ask! It's just one great worry! Of course, it's all my fault. I was silly to let it happen.'

'But what has happened?'

'Oh, of our free will we've lent them our teacher.'

'What do you mean?'

'What I say! We've lent a teacher to the Russian comrades in that settlement down there!'

'What?' I exclaimed. 'What do you say you've lent them?'

'Why, I've told you, a teacher!' she answered. 'A mathematics master.'

'A teacher?'

'Yes, yes, a teacher. A real live teacher. But why the surprise?'

'Oh well . . . You see . . . I knew you could lend out money, or a jug, or an oven-fork, or anything of that sort . . . a wash-basin, for instance. But I've never heard of anyone lending out a teacher. . . .'

. . 'I quite agree,' the headmistress commented. 'Of course you can't lend someone else your own eyes! We haven't got such a lot of surplus teachers on hand around here. In fact, we haven't enough for ourselves. But what are you to do when every blessed day they come and plead and beg. And besides, they're our neighbours. We celebrate our holidays jointly. If any misfortune occurs, we always run to help one another. And children have to start learning from the beginning of the school year, and their mathematics teacher hasn't arrived yet. A let-down like that throws out all the plan for the year. And so we lent them our teacher. We only agreed to lend him for ten days, but they've kept him for close on three weeks now. And there's no sign of their ever intending to return him. So I've had to throw up all my work to-day to go off and see them about it. I'll let them have it so hot that I'll be remembered in that village down to the seventh generation.'

'Wait a moment,' I said. 'If you don't mind, I'd like to come with you.'

I was curious to see this teacher who had been lent out; I was also interested to know how the headmistress would extract her arrears of payment, and how she would get her live property home.

We found the inhabitants of the Russian taiga settlement hard at work in the square. A group of men, their shirts caked with their salty sweat, were squaring stout timbers. The chairman of the village Soviet, a tall, well-built man of some forty years, with a Red Army bearing, was working among them. With axe in hand he was bent over a hefty beam.

'You've got no conscience or sense of shame whatever, Pavel Alexandrovich!' the headmistress at once went into the attack, and she even tried to drag me in as a witness. 'You've tricked us. We made you a loan. We lent you our teacher. We agreed that he was to stay with you for exactly ten days. And what do you do? You keep him for three weeks! And then you dare to fall back on such stuff as friendship between nations and so on. . . .'

'Now, just a minute!' The chairman revealed a praiseworthy habit of thinking a little before answering. He slowly turned his head first to the right, then to the left.

'Stop; wait a moment! How did you put it? "You made us a loan? You lent us a teacher", you say?'

He wiped the sweat from his face, thought a little more, and gazed straight into the mistress's eyes.

'And how about us?' he asked. 'Didn't we let you have anything in exchange? Then what's that? A homeless dog?'

He pointed to the unglazed windows of a large building on the farther side of the square. Above the door was the notice, 'Club'.

My companion and the chairman went on wrangling. I learned that the mistress of the Jewish school at Londoko had needed glass for its winter double-window frames. The Russian settlement were expecting a consignment of glass any day, and decided to meet their neighbours half-way. To save the Jews from waiting, the Russians gave them the glass from the windows of their own club. On the other hand, the Jewish school let its Russian neighbours have its mathematics master. Service for service.

'Well, all right,' the headmistress was forced to admit. 'I grant all that. But we agreed to let you have our teacher for not more than ten days. Is that so, or isn't it?'

'The truth's the truth,' the chairman admitted in his turn. 'That was the agreement; that's what we decided on: ten days, and no

more. But you see, you lent us a teacher who doesn't know the least thing in Russian. We had to put our own teacher to work teaching him. And she's teaching him the names of various things in Russian. As soon as he's learnt the terminology he'll teach our children for not more than ten days. Then we'll return him. Did you think we were trying to rob you, or what?'

'Lord!' The headmistress clapped her hands. 'Does it take a whole three weeks to learn what the Russian terms are? Where is he?'

'Over there.' Pavel Alexandrovich pointed towards the school building. 'You go and talk to him yourself, if you don't mind. Maybe he'll listen to you. You're a woman of weight! Tell him to learn a little faster!'

He picked up his axe again.

In the school a cleaner was sweeping the floors and sprinkling them with water from a great tin kettle. The windows were flung wide open. The mountain wind carried down wild and pungent scents, a blend of ginger and cinnamon. They mingled with the scent of the damp dust settled on the floor.

Through a wall we heard animated talk and the sound of merry laughter coming from a classroom. We made our way towards the sound. We found a young Jew with a shock of thick black hair sitting at a desk. A fair Russian girl about nineteen years old, her hair cropped like a boy's, was standing with her back to the window. A narrow blue belt girdled her slender waist. She had a slightly turned-up nose, and an eager, merry look. Her eyes were light, translucent and large, like great grapes.

When they saw us, the couple were embarrassed. The girl turned towards the window. Now we saw only her back. The lad sat motionless for a moment. Then he abruptly snatched up the exercise book lying before him and, his elbows on the desk, zealously began to cram:

'"Trapezium",' – in Russian, "trapetsia". "Square" – "Kvadrat". "Pyramid" – "Piramida".'

The headmistress stared fixedly at the young Russian teacher. Then she turned slowly to me, bit her lower lip and quietly whispered right into my ear:

'But she's a dear! Now I can see it all! It's as clear as daylight!'

She gazed at the lad for a minute, but this time there seemed to be a hint of respect in her look. Then she asked me:

'Well, now what am I to do? Use your wits, and advise me. What does one do in such circumstances?'

'The Russian for "Radius" is "radius",' the lad pegged away. ' "Parallel" – "parallel". "Diagonal" – "diagonal." "Perpendicular – "perpendikular".'

The headmistress had a preoccupied look.

'Listen, my lad!' she said after a pause. 'I'm going to stay here for a day or two. I'll help you myself to learn all this terminology . . . I think you'll learn it much faster with me to teach you. What have you got to say to that?'

'You mean . . . what do you mean?'

The youngster trailed off into silence. The girl turned from the window and stared at him challengingly, waiting for his next remark. Their eyes met.

'No!' he muttered in his embarrassment. 'Why should you bother to stay here? I think I know the terminology already. I mean . . . I've learnt it already.'

He held out the exercise book to us, as though proposing that we should examine him:

'The Russian for "Trapezium" is "trapetsia". "Pyramid" – "piramida"; "Perpendicular" – "perpendikular".'

'Why, of course!' I said to the headmistress. 'What more do you want? He's learnt the terminology splendidly. I'm sure he knows it perfectly now. And he'll stay and work off exactly ten days here, and then he'll come back to you.'

The headmistress and I returned to Londoko together. The evening came on. Gorgeous with the hues of the fading year, the late October was roaming crazily over the land. The headmistress talked of her school work. But I was thinking that after all she had had her windows glazed.

Yet continually there sounded in my ears:

'The Russian for "Perpendicular" is "perpendikular"; "Diagonal" is "diagonal"; "Parallel" is . . ."parallel"

IN THE TOWN OF BERDICHEV

VASSILI GROSSMAN

(Translated from the Russian)

It was strange to see Vavilova's dark weather-beaten face turn red.

'What are you laughing at?' she said at last. 'Don't be silly.'

Koziriov took a paper from the table, looked at it and, shaking his head, burst out laughing again.

'Oh, I can't help it,' he said laughing, '... report ... of the Commissar of the first battalion ... forty days' leave because of pregnancy.'

He became serious.

'Well, all right. But who will take your place? Perelmutter, of the political section?'

'Perelmutter is a staunch Communist,' said Vavilova.

'You're all staunch,' remarked Koziriov, and, lowering his voice, as though he were talking about something shameful, asked:

'Are you going to have the baby soon, Claudia?'

'Yes, soon,' answered Vavilova and, taking off her fur cap, wiped the perspiration off her forehead.

'I would have got rid of it,' she said in a bass voice. 'But I waited too long: you know yourself that at Groubeshov I never got off my horse for three months. And when I went to the hospital the doctor refused to do it.'

The corners of her lips drooped as though she were going to cry.

'I even threatened the damned fellow with my Mauser, but he refused – he said it was too late.'

She went out, and Koziriov remained sitting at the table and looking at the report.

'So this is Vavilova,' thought he. 'Nothing very womanish about her – carries a Mauser, wears leather breeches, has led her battalion in the attack any number of times, and even her voice is not a woman's – yet Nature must tell in the end, apparently.'

And for some reason he was resentful and felt a little sad.

On the report he wrote 'Order', and waving his nib hesitatingly over the paper, sat frowning – how should he word it?

'Leave of forty days to be given from this day': he pondered a little and added 'On account of illness,' then above that scribbled in 'woman's illness', swore to himself, and crossed out 'woman's illness'.

'Now make soldiers of them!' he said, and called his orderly.

'Our Vavilova, eh?' he said loudly and angrily. 'You've heard, I suppose?'

'Yes, I've heard,' answered the orderly, and shaking his head spat on the ground.

Together they condemned Vavilova and all women generally, made a few jokes, laughed, and then Koziriov ordered him to fetch the Staff Commander and said:

'You must go and see her – to-morrow, I should say; find out whether she is in a private house or in hospital, and how she's getting on.'

Then he and the Staff Commander hung over the table till next morning, their fingers moving over the map, speaking in short abrupt sentences – the Poles were approaching.

Vavilova went to live in a room requisitioned for her.

The little house stood in the Yatki, as the market-place was called, and belonged to Chaim Abraham Leibovich Magazannik, whom the neighbours and even his own wife called Chaim Tuter, which means Tartar.

Vavilova's entry into the house was not effected without a scandal. She was brought to the house by an employee of the communal department, a thin lad in a leather jacket and Red Army helmet. Magazannik swore at him in Jewish: the youth was silent and shrugged his shoulders.

Then Magazannik went over to the Russian language.

'What impudence these whipper-snappers have,' he shouted to Vavilova, as though he expected her to share his indignation. 'That's all they could think of. Of course, there are no bourgeois in the town. There's only one room left for the Soviet, and that one belongs to the poor man Magazannik. Only from a working-man with seven children can they take a room. What about Litvak the

grocer? And Khodorov the clothier? And Ashkenazi, the leading millionaire in the town?'

Around him stood Magazannik's children, seven ragged curly-pated angels gazing at Vavilova with their coal-black eyes. As big as a house, she was twice as tall as their father. They thought it all terribly funny and very interesting.

Finally Magazannik was pushed aside, and Vavilova passed into her room.

Such a concentrated smell of human beings coming from the sideboard, the flat feather beds which were as dark and flabby as the breasts of the old women who had once received those feather beds as part of their dowry, and the chairs with their gaping seats, assailed her nostrils, that she took a deep breath as though she were going to plunge into deep water.

At night she could not sleep. The Magazannik family snored on the other side of the wall like an orchestra composed of many instruments, from the droning double-bass to the high flutes and violins. The closeness of the summer night, the heavy smells – everything seemed to suffocate her.

What smells there were in the room!

Of kerosene, of garlic, of perspiration, of goose dripping, of unwashed linen. The odours of the human animal.

She felt her swollen dilated belly; at times the living being within her kicked and turned round.

For months she had struggled with it, honestly and persistently: sprung heavily from her horse; at 'Subotniks'[1] in the towns, silent and strenuous, she rolled about pine blocks weighing many pouds; drank herbs and infusions in the villages; used up so much of the iodine belonging to the regimental chemical stores that the surgeon thought of sending a complaint to the sanitary department of the brigade; scalded herself with boiling water in the bath-house until she was covered with blisters.

But it obstinately went on growing, preventing her from walking and from riding; she suffered from nausea, vomited, and was drawn down to the earth.

[1] Saturday (Sabbath). A collective voluntary effort to hasten the completion of some job.

At first she laid all the blame on that sad and ever-silent man who had been stronger than herself, and had found a way through her thick leather jacket and cloth tunic to her woman's heart. She saw how he was the first to run on the little wooden bridge which was so terrible in its simplicity, how the enemy's machine-gun crackled, and how he seemed to vanish: the empty greatcoat threw its arms up and falling, hung over the brook.

She flew past him on her ardent little horse and the battalion, as though it were pushing her, poured after her.

After this it remained. It was to blame for everything. And now Vavilova lay conquered, and it victoriously kicked her with its heels, and lived in her.

In the morning, when Magazannik was getting ready to go to work, and his wife was giving him breakfast, driving away flies, children, and the cat, he said, speaking in a low voice and glancing at the wall of the requisitioned room:

'Give her some tea, a plague on her.'

He basked in the sunlit columns of dust, the smells, the children's cries, the cat's miaowing, the grumbling of the samovar. He did not feel like going to the workshop: he loved his wife, his children, his old mother, and he loved his home.

He went away sighing, and in the house only women and children remained.

The Yatki market-place seethed the whole day long. Peasants were selling birchwood, white as though it had been chalked all over; peasant-women were rustling their wreaths of onions; old Jewish women sat over fluffy hills made of geese with their legs tied together. Out of this luxuriant white flower the goose-seller would pull a living petal with a sinuous neck and her customers would blow on the tender fluff between its legs and feel the yellow fat under the soft warm skin.

Dark-legged girls in coloured kerchiefs carried tall red pots full to the brim with wild strawberries, and timidly, as though they were going to run away, looked at their customers. Moist yellow lumps of butter wrapped in downy leaves of green burdock were being sold from carts.

A blind beggar, with the white beard of a wizard, wept tragically

and as though in prayer as he held out his hand, but his terrible grief touched no one: everybody passed him with indifference. A peasant-woman tore the smallest onion off her wreath and threw it into the old man's iron basin. He felt it all over, and leaving off his prayers, said angrily:

'May your children provide for you like this in your old age,' and once again started crooning his prayer, the prayer which was as ancient as the Jewish people.

People were selling, buying, touching, feeling, raising their eyes thoughtfully to the heavens as though they expected somebody in the tender blue sky to advise them whether they should buy a pike or whether it were better to buy a carp. Meanwhile everybody went on making a deafening noise, swearing, abusing each other, and laughing.

Vavilova tidied up and swept the room. She put away her greatcoat, fur cap, and boots. Her head was bursting from the street noises. The little Tuters were making a noise inside the house, and she seemed to be asleep and having an unpleasant strange dream.

When Magazannik came in the evening after work, he stood amazed in the doorway: at the table sat his wife Beila and by her side sat a huge woman in a wide dress, with loose slippers on her bare feet, and a bright kerchief tied round her head; they were laughing together softly, talking to each other, and holding up tiny toy-like baby clothes in their big fat hands.

In the day-time Beila had gone into Vavilova's room. Vavilova was standing by the window, and Beila's sharp woman's eye saw her condition.

'I beg your pardon,' said Beila with determination, 'but you're pregnant.'

And Beila, throwing up her hands, laughing and lamenting, started fussing round her.

'Yes,' said she. 'Children – you don't know yet what a misfortune they are,' and she pressed and squeezed the youngest Tuter against her bosom. 'They're such a misfortune, such a calamity, such a nuisance. Every day they want to eat, and not one week passes but one has a rash, or another the fever, or another an abscess.

And Doctor Baraban, God bless him, takes ten pounds of the best rye flour for every visit.'

She stroked little Sonia's head.

'And they're all alive – I haven't lost one.'

She discovered that Vavilova knew nothing, did not know how to do anything, and understood nothing. She bent down immediately before Beila's great knowledge. She listened to Beila and asked her questions, and Beila, laughing with pleasure at the Commissar's knowing nothing, told her about everything.

How to feed and bath the baby and put him to sleep, what must be done to prevent his crying at night, how many napkins and shirts one must have, how new-born babies scream themselves hoarse, turn blue, and it seems as though one's heart must stop beating for fear that the baby may die, how to cure diarrhoea, what causes the itch, how the spoon suddenly begins to make a noise in the baby's mouth and by that you can tell that he is beginning to cut his teeth.

A complicated world with its own laws, customs, joys, and sorrows.

Vavilova knew nothing of this world. And Beila condescendingly, like an elder sister, introduced her to it.

'Get out of the way,' she screamed at the children, 'out into the yard!' And when only the two of them were left in the room, Beila, her voice lowered to a whisper, started telling her about the confinement. Oh, this was not a simple thing. Like an old soldier, Beila told the young recruit about the great pangs and joys of childbirth.

'Giving birth to children,' said she, 'you think is a simple matter, like a war: bang-bang and it's all over; oh no, by no means, it's not nearly as simple.'

Vavilova listened to her. For the first time, during the whole of her pregnancy, she had met a person who spoke about this accidental and unpleasant thing which had overtaken her as a happy event which would be the most important and necessary occurrence in Vavilova's life.

And in the evening the discussion was continued, this time with Tuter participating. No time was to be lost: after supper Tuter took a candle and climbed up to the attic and making a great din,

dragged down an iron cradle and a bath for the new human being.

'Don't worry, Comrade Commissar,' he said laughingly, his eyes sparkling. 'Our business, which you are taking on, is in full swing.'

'Be quiet, be quiet, you rascal,' uttered his wife. 'It's not for nothing that people call you the Tartar.'

At night Vavilova lay in her bed. The heavy smells no longer oppressed her as they had done the night before. She had become used to them, and did not even notice them. She did not want to think about anything.

She seemed to hear horses neighing somewhere, and to see a long line of brown horses' heads: each had a white patch on the forehead. The heads were incessantly moving, nodding, and baring their teeth. She thought about the battalion, and remembered Kirpichov, the political instructor of the second company. All was quiet on the Front. Who was lecturing about the July days? The surveyor must be rated soundly for having delayed the arrival of the boots. And then they could cut up cloth themselves for puttees. In the second company there were a good many dissatisfied men, especially that curly-headed fellow who sang songs of the Don. Vavilova yawned and closed her eyes. The battalion went away far far into the distance, into the pink corridor of the dawn, between the wet stacks of snow. And her thoughts about it were somehow unreal.

It pushed her impatiently with its little heels. Vavilova opened her eyes and sat up in bed.

'A girl or a boy?' she asked aloud. And she suddenly felt how the heart in her bosom became big and warm and began to throb.

'A girl or a boy?'

The confinement began in the day-time.

'Oh!' screamed Vavilova hoarsely, woman-like, as she felt a sharp, all-penetrating pain seize her suddenly.

Beila put her to bed. Sioma ran gaily for the midwife.

Vavilova held Beila's hand and said quietly and rapidly:

'It's begun, Beila, and I thought it would start only in ten days. It's begun, Beila.'

Then the pains passed away, and to Vavilova it seemed that they need not have sent so quickly for the midwife.

But half an hour later the pains started again. Vavilova's face turned quite dark and the sunburn on it looked dead: as though it had been laid on by accident. Vavilova lay with clenched teeth; she looked as if she were thinking of something shameful and painful, as if she were about to jump up and cry 'What have I done, what have I done?' as she covered her face with her hands in despair.

The children were peeping into the room, the blind grandmother was heating a large saucepan of water on the stove. Beila kept looking at the door: the expression of anguish on Vavilova's face frightened her. At last the midwife came. Her name was Rosalia Samoilovna. Her hair was cut short and she was stocky and red-faced. The house was immediately filled with her querulous penetrating voice. She scolded Beila, the children, and the old grandmother. Everybody started running around her. The primus stove in the kitchen started humming. The table and chairs were taken out of the room; Beila washed the floor with as much haste as though she were putting out a fire; Rosalia Samoilovna herself drove the flies away with a towel. Vavilova watched her and it seemed to her as though the Commander of the army had arrived at Staff Headquarters. He was also stocky, red-faced, and querulous, and he used to come when something had gone wrong at the Front, and everybody would read the communiqués and look at each other and whisper, as though a dead or dangerously sick man lay there. And the Commander would brutally tear aside this veil of mystery and silence – shouting, abusing, giving orders and laughing, as though baggage trains cut off and regiments surrounded by the enemy were none of his business.

She submitted to Rosalia Samoilovna's dictatorial voice, answered her questions, turned round, and did everything she ordered her to do. At times she seemed to be losing consciousness; the walls and ceiling seemed to lose their sharpness of surface and outline, to be breaking and falling on her in waves. The midwife's loud voice would bring her to herself again and she could see her red perspiring face and the white tail-ends of the kerchief round her neck. She thought of nothing now. She wanted to howl like a wild beast and to bite the pillow. Her bones seemed to crack and to break, and the clammy sickening perspiration stood out in drops on her forehead.

She did not scream, however, but only ground her teeth and, convulsively tossing her head about from side to side, gulped in the air.

Now and again the pains left her as though she had never had any, and in astonishment she would look about her, listen to the noise of the market, and gaze with wonder at the glass on the stool and the picture on the wall.

But when the child, furious in its desire to live, started tearing at her again, she felt the horror of the renewed pangs and a confused feeling of joy: let it be as soon as possible – after all it was inevitable.

Rosalia Samoilovna said in a low voice to Beila:

'If you think that I should have liked to have my first child at thirty-six, you're mistaken, Beila.'

Vavilova did not hear her words, but she felt frightened because the midwife had spoken in a low voice.

'What, shan't I live?' she asked.

She did not catch Rosalia Samoilovna's answer.

Beila stood in the door pale and flustered, and said, shrugging her shoulders:

'Well, well. And who wants this torture – neither she, nor the child, nor the father, may he perish, nor God in heaven. Who was the clever person who invented it for our misfortune?'

The confinement lasted for many hours.

When Magazannik came home he sat on the steps outside. He was as worried as though it was his Beila who was in childbirth. The twilight deepened, and the windows were lit up. Jews were returning from synagogue, carrying their prayer shawls under their arms. In the moonlight the empty Yatki market-place, the little houses, and the streets seemed picturesque and mysterious. Cavalry-men in riding-breeches marched about the brick pavements clinking their spurs. Girls were eating sunflower seeds and laughing at the Red Army men. One of them was saying in a quick patter:

'And I eat sweets and throw the papers at him, and I eat and throw the papers at him.'

'Ay,' said Magazannik, 'we didn't have enough troubles of our own, but the whole Partisan Brigade must come and be confined in my house.' Suddenly he began to listen intently and half rose from

where he was sitting. From behind the door he heard a man's hoarse voice.

The voice was shouting such violent obscene oaths that Magazannik, after listening for a while, shook his head and spat on the ground: it was Vavilova, mad with pain in the final phase of labour, fighting with God, with woman's cursed lot.

'That I understand,' said Magazannik, 'that I understand: a Commissar is having a baby; while Beila can only say one thing "Oh mother, oh mother?" '

Rosalia Samoilovna slapped the new-born baby on his wrinkled damp buttocks and announced:

'A boy!'

'What did I say!' exclaimed Beila triumphantly, and opening the door, cried out exultantly:

'Chaim, children, a boy!'

And the whole family clustered in the doorway and talked excitedly to Beila. Even the blind grandmother felt her way to her son and smiled at the great miracle. She moved her lips, her head trembled, her dead hands felt their way over her black kerchief. She was smiling and whispering silently. The children pushed her away from the door but she stretched out her neck and tried to get in: she wanted to hear the voice of ever-triumphant life.

Vavilova looked at the new-born child. She was surprised that such an insignificant bit of reddish-blue flesh could have caused such terrible suffering.

She had imagined that her child would be big, freckly, and snub-nosed, with a bristling red head, and that he would immediately start fighting and kicking, crying loudly, and trying to get away. But he was a weak little fellow, like an oat-stem grown up in a cellar; he could not keep his little head up; his small crooked legs moved about as though they were dried up; his whitish-blue eyes were blind; and his whimper could hardly be heard. It seemed as though, if the door were suddenly opened, he would be extinguished like the thin bent candle that Beila had fastened to the edge of the cupboard.

And although it was like a hot-house in the room, she stretched out her arms and said:

'He is cold: give him to me.'

The little man whimpered, moving his head about. Vavilova was afraid to move, but she looked at him sideways and watched his movements.

'Eat, eat, little son,' she said, and began to cry.

'Sonny, sonny,' she murmured, and one by one the tears fell from her eyes, and the transparent drops ran down her dark cheeks and over the pillow.

She remembered the silent man, and felt pity for them both with a sharp maternal pang. For the first time she wept for him who was killed in the battle at Korosten: for he would never see his son.

And this tiny helpless creature was born without his father, and she covered him up with her blanket so that he should not feel cold.

But perhaps she was crying for quite a different reason. At any rate Rosalia Samoilovna, smoking a cigarette and sending the smoke through the open window-pane, said:

'Let her cry, let her cry. That calms the nerves better than bromide. My patients always cry after childbirth.'

On the third day after the baby was born, Vavilova got up. Her strength returned to her rapidly: she walked about a great deal, and helped Beila in the house. When no one was at home she would sing softly to the little man: the little man was called Aliosha, Alioshenka.

'You ought to see,' Beila said to her husband, 'this Russian woman is quite mad. She has already been three times to the doctor with him. The door mustn't be opened in the house, because he might catch cold, or be woken up, or he's feverish. In fact, she's just like a good Jewish mother.'

'Well, why not?' answered Magazannik. 'If a woman puts on leather breeches do you think she turns into a man?' And he shrugged his shoulders and closed his eyes.

A week later Koziriov and the chief of staff came to see Vavilova. They smelt of leather, tobacco, and horse sweat. Aliosha was asleep in his cradle, which was covered by a piece of muslin to protect him from the flies. Creaking in a most deafening manner,

like two new boots, they went up to the cradle and looked at the thin little face of the sleeping child. His face was twitching in his sleep: the twitching was due only to movements of the skin, but these movements gave the face various expressions – sometimes of melancholy, sometimes of anger, and sometimes a smile.

The two commanders exchanged a look.

'Yes,' said Koziriov.

'Yes, indeed,' said the Chief of Staff.

Then they sat down and started telling Vavilova the latest news. The Poles had taken the offensive, and our forces were retreating. Of course this was temporary. The fourteenth army was rallying at Zhmerinka. Divisions were approaching from the Urals. The Ukraine would be ours. In a month's time a change would probably take place. But meanwhile the Poles were making themselves unpleasant.

Koziriov uttered an oath.

'Shut up,' said Vavilova. 'Don't make such a noise – you'll wake him.'

'Yes, our blood is always up,' said the Chief of Staff, and burst out laughing.

'You're always ready with your jokes,' said Vavilova and added with the air of a martyr: 'You might leave off smoking too: you're smoking like a chimney.'

The two army men suddenly felt bored. Koziriov yawned. The Chief of Staff looked at his watch and said:

'We mustn't be late at Lissaya Gora.'

'And his watch is a gold one,' she thought to herself with exasperation.

'Well, good-bye, Claudia,' said Koziriov, and got up. 'I've ordered them to send you a sack of flour, some sugar and fat: they'll bring it to you to-day in a trap.'

They went out into the street. The little Magazanniks stood round the horses. Koziriov climbed into the saddle with a groan. The Chief of Staff clicked with his tongue and jumped on his horse as it was moving.

When they came to the corner, they both unexpectedly, as though by common consent, drew in their reins and stopped.

'Yes,' said Koziriov.

'Yes, indeed,' answered his chief. They laughed, struck their horses, and galloped to Lissaya Gora.

The trap arrived that evening. Magazannik dragged in the sacks of food, and going into Vavilova's room, said in a mysterious whisper:

'What do you think of this news, Comrade Vavilova: Tsesarsky's brother-in-law came to our workshop —,' he looked about him, as though he were excusing himself before Vavilova, and said in a surprised tone of voice:

'The Poles are in Choudnov, and Choudnov is forty versts away from here.'

Beila came into the room. She listened for a while, and then said with determination:

'What's the use of talking? The Poles will be here to-morrow. So I want to tell you this. Poles, Austrians, Galicians, whoever they are, you can remain with us. You have been sent enough food, thank God, to last you three months.'

Vavilova was silent. For the first time in her life she did not know what to do.

'Beila,' she said, and stopped.

'I'm not afraid,' said Beila, 'do you think I'm afraid? Give me five like them, and I'll not be afraid. But have you ever seen a mother who left her child when he was a week and a half old?'

All night long outside the windows there could be heard the neighing of horses, the rumbling of wheels, and excited angry voices. Baggage trains were going from Shepetovka to Kazatin.

Vavilova sat by the cradle. The child was asleep. She looked at the little yellow face, and thought to herself that after all nothing special would happen, Koziriov said that they would return in a month's time. Just as long as she had intended to be on leave. But if she were cut off for longer? Even that did not worry her.

When Aliosha became a little stronger, they would make their way through the front.

Who would touch them — a peasant-woman and a baby-in-arms? And Vavilova pictured how one early summer morning she would cross the fields, a coloured kerchief round her head, with

Aliosha in her arms, gazing around him and holding out his little arms. How delightful! She started singing in a thin voice:

'Sleep, sonny, sleep,' and rocking the cradle, fell into a doze.

In the morning the market was busy as usual. People seemed particularly excited that day. Some were watching the unending chain of military carts and laughing happily. But soon the baggage train had passed. The streets were full of people. The inhabitants – 'the population', as the commandants called them in their orders – stood at the gates. Everybody was talking in an excited whisper. and looking over his shoulder. It was said that the Poles had already occupied the small town of Piatka, fifteen versts away. Magazannik did not go to work. He sat in Vavilova's room and philosophized to his heart's content.

An armoured car thundered past in the direction of the railway station: it was thickly covered with dust and it seemed as though the steel had become tarnished as a result of weariness and many sleepless nights.

'I'll tell you the truth,' said Magazannik, 'this is the best time for people: one rule has gone, and the other hasn't come yet. No requisitions, no contributions, no pogroms.'

'It's only in the daytime that he's so clever,' said Beila. 'But when at night the whole town is in a hubbub, shrieking for help from the bandits, he sits as pale as death and trembles with fear.'

'Don't keep on interrupting,' said Magazannik, angrily.

He kept running out into the street and returning with the latest news. The Revolutionary Committee had already evacuated the town during the night, the Party Committee had followed it, and the staff had left in the morning. The station was already empty. The last division had gone.

Suddenly cries were heard in the street. An aeroplane was in sight. Vavilova went to the window. Although the aeroplane was flying high, white and red circles on the wings could be seen distinctly. It was a Polish observation plane. The machine made a circle over the town and then flew towards the station. Guns began to be heard booming from the direction of Lissaya Gora: shells flew over the town, and from somewhere in the distance, beyond the level crossing, came the sound of exploding missiles.

First the shells wailed like the wind, then the guns sighed heavily, and a few seconds later the explosions rang out joyously. The Bolsheviks were hindering the advance of the Poles. Soon the Poles started replying: shells burst in different parts of the town.

Bang! went the exploding air with a deafening roar; bricks fell and scattered, smoke and dust hung over the shattered walls of houses. Silence descended on the streets, severe and deserted, as in a picture. Each explosion was followed by such quiet that the hearts of the inhabitants were struck with terror. And all the time the sun shone in the cloudless sky and radiantly lit up the town which lay prostrate beneath it like a corpse.

The whole town lay hidden in cellars and basements, sighed and groaned with terror, shut its eyes, and held its breath without knowing why.

Everybody, even the children, knew that this bombardment was called artillery preparation, and that before entering the town, the troops would send out a few more dozen shells. And then everybody knew it would become incredibly quiet and that suddenly, their horses' hoofs ringing, a reconnoitring party would gallop along the wide street from the direction of the level crossing. And then, dying of fear and curiosity, everybody would peep from behind their doors, curtains, and cracks in the shutters, and covered with perspiration, would come out on tip-toe into the street.

A detachment would arrive in the square. The horses would stoop and snort; their riders would talk excitedly to each other in a marvellously simple human tongue, and the Commander, delighted at the total submission of the prostrate conquered town, would shout in a drunken voice, discharge his revolver into the muzzle of silence, and draw up his horse.

And then from every direction infantry and cavalry would pour in; dusty tired men, thrifty peasants in blue greatcoats, good-natured but capable of murder, would run about from house to house, searching greedily for the population's chickens, towels and boots.

Everyone knew this, because the town had changed hands fourteen times already, had been occupied by Petliura, Denikin, the Bolsheviks, Galicians, Poles, Tutunik's and Maroussia's bands, and

'nobody's' Ninth Regiment. And each time it was the same as before.

'They're singing!' cried Magazannik. 'They're singing!'

And forgetting his fear, he ran out into the street. Vavilova followed him. After the stuffiness of the dark room Vavilova breathed the light and warmth of the summer day with particular pleasure. She had awaited the Poles with much the same feeling as she had experienced during her confinement: let them come quickly. The explosions had frightened her: she was afraid that they would waken Aliosha; she brushed aside the whistle of the shells as she would have brushed aside flies.

'Be quiet, be quiet,' she sang over the cradle. 'You'll wake Aliosha.'

She had tried not to think about anything just then. She had made up her mind already: in a month's time either the Bolsheviks would return or she and the baby would make their way to them through the Front.

'I can't understand anything,' said Magazannik. 'Have a look.'

Marching along the wide and empty street in the direction of the level crossing, from which the Poles were to have come, was a detachment of military cadets. They were dressed in white canvas trousers and tunics.

'May the Red Flag be the symbol of the working people,' they sang slowly as if sadly.

They were marching towards the Poles.

Why? For what reason?

Vavilova watched them. And suddenly she remembered: the great Red Square, several thousand volunteers of the working-classes who were going to the front thronging round a hastily set-up wooden platform. A bald man, waving his cap, was making a speech. Vavilova stood quite near him.

She was so agitated that she could not understand half the words the man was saying in his clear though slightly guttural voice. The people standing near her listened to him and breathed heavily. An old man in a wadded coat for some reason or other was weeping.

What had happened to her in the square, under the dark walls, she did not know. Once in the night she had wanted to tell that

silent man about it. She thought he would understand. But she was unable to explain anything. But when they marched from the square to the Briansk railway station, they sang that song.

And as she watched the faces of these singing cadets, she again felt what she had felt two years ago.

Now in the street Magazannik saw a woman in a fur hat and greatcoat following the cadets and fitting an iron ring into her big tarnished Mauser as she went.

Magazannik followed her with his eyes and said:

'These were the sort of people who used to be in the Bund. These are real people, Beila. Are we real people? We're just scum.'

Aliosha had woken up and was crying and trying to kick off his napkin. Coming to herself, Beila said to her husband:

'Listen, the baby is awake. You had better light the primus — I must heat up some milk.'

The detachment disappeared round the corner.

A BOY

MAXIM GORKI

(Translated by Moura Budberg)

IT is hard to tell this little story — it is so simple.

When I was a young lad I used to gather the children of our street on Sundays, in summer and spring — and take them to the fields, into the forest. I liked to live on friendly terms with these little people, gay as birds.

The children were glad to leave behind the dusty, stuffy streets of the town, their mothers supplied them with loaves of bread, I would buy some sweet lozenges, fill up a bottle of *kvass* and, as a shepherd, follow the carefree lambs through the town, across the fields, towards the green forest, beautiful and tender in its spring attire.

We usually left the town in the morning, while the church bells

were ringing for early mass, accompanied by the sound of bells and clouds of dust, raised by the nimble feet of the children. At midday, when the day was at its hottest, having tired of play, my friends gathered at the edge of the forest; then, having eaten, the little ones went to sleep on the grass, in the shade of the bushes, while the older youngsters, assembling around me, begged to be told a story, and I did so, chattering with them as readily as they did with me. And often, in spite of the conceited self-assurance of youth and the funny pride in the insignificant knowledge of life which is so characteristic of it, I felt as a twenty-year-old child among wise men.

Over us spreads the cover of the eternal sky, in front of us the rich variety of forest, buried in a wise silence, a breeze flutters past, a soft whisper rushes through, the aromatic shadows of the forest tremble and once again a blessed silence fills the soul.

White clouds swim slowly in the blue vastness of the sky; watched from the earth warmed up by the sun, the sky seems so cold and it is puzzling to see the clouds melt in it.

And around me all these fine little people, called to learn all the sorrows and the joys of life.

Those were my good days, they were real feasts, and my soul, already sufficiently sullied with the dark sides of life bathed and refreshed itself in the clear wisdom of childish thoughts and feelings.

One day, when I emerged from the town into the field with a crowd of children, we encountered a stranger – a little Jew, barefooted, in a torn shirt, black-browed, slender and curly-haired as a lamb. He was upset about something and had obviously just been crying, the lids of his lustreless black eyes were swollen and red, showing sharply on the bluish pallor of the hungry face. Butting into the crowd of children, he stopped short in the middle of the street, set his feet deeply and firmly in the cool morning dust, the dark lips of his well-shaped mouth opened up in fear – and in the next second he found himself, in one swift leap, on the pavement.

'Get hold of him!' the children shouted in a gay chorus, 'the little Jew, get hold of the little Jew!'

I expected him to run, his thin, large-eyed face expressed fear, the lips trembled, he stood amidst the noise of the jeering crowd and

pulled himself up, as though growing taller, pressing his shoulders to the hedge, his hands folded behind his back.

Then, suddenly, he said, very calmly, distinctly and primly:

'Would you like me to show you a trick?'

I first understood this offer as a method of self-defence – the children at once were interested and drew away from him, only the elder and more brutal ones continued to look at him with suspicion and mistrust – our street was on bad terms with the children of other streets, they were firmly convinced of their own superiority and were not fond of noticing, in fact *did* not notice, the prerogatives of others.

The small ones treated the matter more simply.

'Come on, show it!'

The handsome, slender little boy drew away from the hedge, bent his thin little body backwards, touched the ground with his fingers and flinging up his legs, stood on his hands, saying:

'Up!'

And then whirled round, as though scorched by a flame, playing nimbly with his arms and legs. Through the holes of his shirt and trousers showed the greyish skin of his thin body, the shoulder-blades, knees and elbows protruding in sharp angles. And his collar-bones were like a harness. It seemed as though, if he bent once more, these thin little bones would crack and break. He sweated from his effort, the shirt on his back was all wet; after each exercise he peered into the faces of the children with an artificial, lifeless smile, and it was unpleasant to see his lustreless black eyes dilated, as if in pain: they flickered strangely and there was an unchildlike tension in the glance. The children encouraged him with loud cries, many of them were already imitating him, making somersaults in the dust, falling, shrieking with the pain caused by clumsy movements, failures, envy and successes.

But these merry moments came to an abrupt end when the boy, stopping his exercises in agility, looked at the children with the benevolent glance of the experienced artist, and said, stretching out his thin hand:

'Now, give me something.'

They were all silent, and somebody asked:

'Money?'

'Yes,' said the boy.

'That's a good one!'

'We might have done it just as well ourselves for money. . . .'

This request provoked among the little audience a hostile and contemptuous attitude to the artist – the children walked on towards the field, laughing and cursing a little. They had none of them any money, of course, and I had only seven kopecks. I put the two coins into the dusty palm, and the boy touched them with his finger and said with a good smile:

'Thank you.'

He moved away and I saw that the shirt on his back was covered with dark stains and had stuck to the shoulder-blades.

'Wait, what is that?'

He stopped, turned round, looked at me intently and with the same good smile said quietly:

'That, on the back? We fell from a trapeze giving a performance at the fair during Easter – father is still in bed, but I am all right again.'

I raised the shirt – on the skin of the back, from the left shoulder downwards to the thigh, stretched out a large dark scar, covered with a thick dry scab; during the exercises the scab had broken in several places and scarlet blood had spurted from the cracks.

'It doesn't hurt any more now,' he said with a smile, 'it doesn't hurt, it only itches. . . .'

And bravely, as befits a hero, looking into my eyes, he continued in the tone of a serious, grown-up man:

'You think I was working for myself just now? Word of honour – no! My father – we haven't a farthing. And my father is badly injured. So you see, one's got to work. Also we are Jews and everybody laughs at us . . . Good-bye!'

He spoke with a smile, quite gaily, and then, giving me a nod with his curly head, walked away quickly, past the gaping houses which stared at him with glassy eyes, with deadly indifference.

All this is insignificant and simple, isn't it? But often in the hard days of my life I remembered the courage of this boy – with gratitude.

FOR CHILDREN

MICHAEL ZOSCHENKO

(Translated by Moura Budberg)

PETIA was not such a very small boy, after all. He was four years old.

But Mummy still considered him a tiny baby. She fed him with a spoon, led him about by the hand and dressed him every morning.

One day Petia woke up in his bed and his mother began dressing him.

She dressed him and put him down on the floor by the bed. And Petia suddenly fell down.

Mummy thought he was being naughty and lifted him to his feet.

He fell down again. Mother, very much surprised, lifted him up once more. The child again fell down.

Mother got frightened and rang up father's office. She said to him: – 'Come home at once. Something has happened to our boy – he can't stand on his feet.'

Father came home and said:

'This is all nonsense. Our boy can walk and run perfectly well and it's impossible that he should fall down.'

And he put the boy on the carpet. The boy made to go and join his toys – and fell down again.

Father said:

'We must get a doctor to come at once. Evidently there's something wrong with our boy. Perhaps he has eaten too many sweets?' They called the doctor.

The doctor arrived, spectacles on his nose, a stethoscope in his hand:

'What's all this about? Why are you falling down?'

Petia answered:

'I don't know why, but I seem to fall a little.'

The doctor said to Mother:

'Well, undress the child, I'll examine him.'

Mother undressed Petia and the doctor began to examine him. He listened here, there and everywhere and said:

'The child is in perfect health. And it is very remarkable that he should fall like that. Put his clothes on and get him down on the floor.'

And the doctor put his spectacles on his nose to see better how the boy would fall.

As soon as he was put down on the floor, the boy fell again. The doctor, greatly surprised, said:

'Call the professor! Maybe he'll be able to guess why this child keeps falling.'

Father went to ring up the professor, and in the meantime Petia's little friend Kolia came to visit him.

Kolia looked at Petia, laughed and said:

'I know why Petia keeps falling.'

The doctor said:

'That's a learned little monkey. He knows better than I do, why little children fall.'

Kolia said:

'Look at the way he's dressed. One of his trouser legs is hanging and both his legs are pushed into the other trouser leg. That's why he keeps falling.'

Everybody started shouting and crying.

Petia said:

'Mummy put on my clothes.'

The doctor said:

'We needn't get the professor. We know now why the child kept falling.'

Mummy said:

'I was in such a hurry in the morning to get his porridge ready, and I got into such a fluster. That's why I got him dressed all wrong.'

Kolia said:

'I always put my clothes on myself, and such silly things never happen to my legs.'

Petia said:

'Now I, too, will always dress myself.'

Everybody laughed. So did the doctor. He shook hands with everybody, also with Kolia. And went on with his round of visits.

Father went back to work, Mother to the kitchen, Kolia and Petia remained in the nursery and started playing.

The next day Petia put on his trousers himself and no more of this nonsense ever happened to him.

A LETTER

I. BABEL

(Translated by Alec Brown)

HERE is a letter home which I wrote for a lad of our detachment, named Kourdioukov, at his dictation. It deserves recording, I have copied it out without any touching up, and give it, word for word, exactly as it stood.

'My dear Mother, Evdokia Fiodorovna. In the first lines of the present letter in all haste I inform you that, thanks to the Lord, I find myself alive and well, which same I hope to hear from you. Also most humbly I bow down to you, from white face to damp earth. . . . [Here follows a list of all relations, blood and marriage, and spiritual relations — god-fathers, etc. Let us leave them out and pass to the second section.]

'My dear Mother, Evdokia Fiodorovna Kourdioukov. In great haste I write to tell you that I am in Comrade Budyenny's Cavalry Army, where also is your relation in God Nikon Vassilievich, who at present is a Red Hero. He took me on as his companion for this expedition of the Political Department, where we take literature and newspapers about the front, namely the Moscow *Izvestia*, the Moscow *Pravda* and our own newspaper which shows no mercy, *The Red Cavalryman*, which every single fighter in the advance positions wants to be able to read, whereupon with heroic spirit he cuts down these scum the Polish squires, and so I'm getting on very first rate here with Nikon Vassilievich.

'My dear Mother Evodkia Fiodorovna. Please send me whatever

you can manage, what you have to send. Will you please kill the young black and white hog and make me up a parcel to the Political Section of Comrade Budyenny, for Vassili Kourdioukov. Every night I lie down on an empty stomach and without anything to cover myself with, so that I am terribly cold. Write me a letter and tell me about my Steve, is he alive or dead, I beg you please look after him well and write to me about him, does he still over-reach or has he stopped that, and how about the itch in his front feet and have you had him shoed or not? I beg you, my dear Mother Evdokia Fiodorovna, don't fail to wash his front feet with the soap I left, it's behind the eikons, and if Father has used it all up, buy some more in Krasnodar and God will be with you. I can also inform you that it's very poor country in these parts, the peasants take their horses and hide from our red eagles in the woods, there is little corn to be seen and what there is, it's very stunted, we laugh at it. The farmers in these parts sow rye and likewise oats. There are hops too in these parts growing on poles, so that it's all very neat and trim and they make home-made spirits with them.

'And now I write a few more lines to hasten to describe to you about Father, as he cut down my brother Fiodor Timofeich Kourdioukov a year ago to-day. Our Red Brigade under Comrade Pavlichenko was advancing on the town of Rostov when there was treachery in our ranks. Now at that time Father was in Denikin's army, he was Company Commander. Those who saw them say they were wearing medals and all like in the old days. And as a result of the treachery we were all taken prisoner and so Father saw brother Fiodor Timofeich. And Father he began cutting Fiodia about and calling him a cur and a red scum and a son of a bitch and a lot more and cut him about till dark, until Brother Fiodor Timofeich passed away. I wrote you a letter at the time to tell you how your Fiodia was buried without a cross, but Father caught me with the letter and said you mother's whelps you ... spawn, that whore's, I bellied your mother and I'll belly her again, my life's ruined, I'll bring my seed up the way it should go and a lot more. I suffered at his hands like our Saviour Jesus Christ, only I got away from Father quickly and ran away and got through to my unit under Comrade Pavlichenko.

'Our Brigade then got orders to proceed to the town of Voronezh to fill its ranks and when we got there we did get reinforcements, also horses and haversacks and revolvers and all we needed. As for Voronezh, my dear Mother, Evdokia Fiodorovna, I can tell you that it's a very fine little town, a bit bigger than Krasnodar, and the people are very handsome, with a river capable for bathing. There we received two pounds of bread each a day, half a pound of meat and the sugar we needed, so that when we got up in the mornings we could drink sweetened tea, and sup the same and so we forgot being hungry, and to dinner I used to go to Brother Semyon Timofeich to eat pancakes and roast goose, after which I used to lie down to rest. At that time on account of his desperation the whole regiment wanted Semyon Timofeich for Commander and orders were issued by Comrade Budyenny and he got horses, proper uniform, a cart for his gear separately and the order of the Red Banner and I was recognized as his brother. So now if any of the neighbours takes it in his head to get uppish with you, Semyon Timofeich can slit his throat for him proper. Then we began to push General Denikin back, cut down thousands of them and drove them into the Black Sea, only no sign of Father, and Semyon Timofeich looked for him everywhere, because he was very cut up about Brother Fiodia. Only, dear Mother, as you know what our Father's like, what a stubborn man he is, so what did he do – he had the impudence to dye his beard from ginger to black and he was living in the town of Maikop in civvies, so nobody there had any idea that he was nobody else but an old Tsarist mounted gendarme. Only truth will out and Nikon Vassilich caught sight of him one day quite by chance in a cottage and wrote to Semyon Timofeich to tell him. Then we got our horses and covered those hundred and fifty miles in no time, I, Brother Sim and some lads from our outpost who wanted to go with us.

'And what did we find in the town of Maikop? We found that the rear of the armies was all out of sympathy with the front lines and in that town there was treachery all over, and large numbers of Jews, like under the Tsar. And Semyon Timofeich in Maikop had a stand-up row with those Jewboys, because they wouldn't let Father out of their hands, but locked him up in the prison and said

there were orders from Comrade Trotsky that no prisoners were to be killed; we'll try him ourselves, they said, you keep calm, he'll get his deserts. Only, Semyon Timofeich had his own way and proved that he was Commander of a Regiment and had all the Orders of the Red Banner from Comrade Budyenny, and threatened to cut down anybody who stood out for Father's person and refused to give him up, and all the boys stood for Semyon Timofeich. Only when Semyon Timofeich got hold of Father he began flogging Father and all the boys were paraded in the courtyard in proper formation. And then Sim splashed some water on Father Timofey Rodionich's beard and the dye ran out of it. And Sim asked Timofey Rodionich:

'"Do you feel all right in my hands, Father?"

'"No," said Father, "rotten."

'Then Sim asked:

'"And when you cut Fodia up did he feel all right, in your hands?"

'"No," said Father, "rotten."

'Then Sim asked:

'"And, Father, did you never think you'd feel rotten some day too?"

'"No," Father said, "I never thought I'd feel rotten."

'Then Sim turned right round to the crowd there and said, "Whereas I do think that if I get into the hands of your people there'll be no mercy for me. And now, Father, we're going to put an end to you. . . ."

'And Timofey Rodionich then began insolently cursing Sim and swearing at him, . . . his mother and the Virgin, and hitting Sim in the jaws, and Sim sent me out of the yard, so dear Mother, Evdokia Fiodorovna, I cannot give you any description of how they finished off Father, because I was sent out of the yard.

'After that we were stationed in Novorossiisk. As for this town, I can tell you that the dry land ends there, and further on there's nought but water, the Black Sea, and we stayed there right through till May, when we came out on the Polish front, where we're knocking the stuffing out of the Polish squires.

'I remain your Loving Son, Vassili Timofeich Kourdioukov. Mother, do keep your eye on my Stevie and God will be with you. . . .'

There is Kourdioukov's letter, not a word in it changed. When I had finished writing it, he took it and tucked it away under his shirt, next to his skin.

'Kourdioukov,' I asked the lad, 'your father was a tyrant, was he?'

'My father was a devil,' he said sullenly.

'And your mother's better?'

'Mother's all right. If you'd like, here's our family . . .'

He handed me a dog-eared photograph. It showed Timofey Kourdioukov, a broad-shouldered mounted gendarme, wearing his uniform cap and with well combed-out beard, stolid, high-cheek-boned, with a harsh glint in his stupid, colourless eyes. Beside him, in a basket chair, was a frail little peasant woman with loose-hanging blouse and consumptive, clear-skinned, timorous face. And behind, against the wall, one of those miserable country-photographer back-cloths with flowers and pigeons, were two tall lads, monstrously stalwart and stupid-looking, standing stiff and gawky – with broad faces and staring eyes, as if being drilled – the two other sons, Fiodor and Semyon.

A BARE YEAR

THIRD WING OF A TRIPTYCH (the most sombre of all)

BORIS PILNYAK

(*Translated by Alec Brown*)

THE whole world wrapped in chill twilight – that twilight of autumn, when the sky looms with snow and winter, at sun-up will crumble to snow. The whole world soundless and black. The steppe. The black soil.

The deeper into these plains you go, the higher are the stacks, the squatter the cottages, the rarer the hamlets. And then – a pillaged desert waste.

Through the black crevice twixt sky and steppe blows the winter wind. The low weeds, laid bare now harvest is over and the last grasses and wheats and barley are reaped, makes a faint rustling. Soon the glassy moon comes up. If the clouds gather there will be snow, or icy sleet.

Cornlands.

At the crossing, oxen; pulled up, a long time. Their necks stretched down. They stand submissive, gazing submissively into the plains, born of the plains. The train crawls past them and away. There is no church in this hamlet, only a miserable mosque.

The steppe.

The train creeps slowly on – the lead-coloured horseboxes as full of people as the people are full of lice. The train is dead silent. People cling to the roofs and the footboards and the buffers. And at the tiny station, Mar Junction, where trains never stop and even staffs are not exchanged, the train howls with a human howl: people yelling from roof to roof, so too the engine; gruesome somehow in the chill twilight. And Gavrila pulls up the train. The younger man on duty, in forage cap with red band, from sheer misery of boredom meets the train at the platform. People from the train rush to pools for water. The train buzzes like a hive, buzzes, then strains, creaks like an old swung coach, and a peasant woman with eyes starting for pain is left on the sleepers. She runs after the train, crying in despair, 'Mitya pet, Mitya, look after my little ones!'

Then she waves her bundle and runs blindly off over the sleepers, howling and whining like a frightened bitch. In front of her lies the waste space of the plains. She turns aside and runs to the station house to the young clerk who from nothing better to do is still standing on the platform, thoroughly miserable. The woman cringes towards him and her lips quiver, and her eyes are full of pain.

'What do you want?' asks the young clerk.

She doesn't say a word, just shrieks at a spasm of pain and runs blindly off again howling and waving her little bundle. The watchman, an old Tartar, says sourly, 'It's her bearing come on the woman. The woman's having a kid. Hallo, you, missus, come you here . . . Russian woman, she like a cat' and the old man leads the woman into the station house into his little room, where on a bunk lie a mouldy straw mattress and a sheepskin coat. The woman, he was quite right, flops down onto the bunk like a cat and whispers savagely:

'Go away, you rogue, go away . . . bring a woman.'

But there isn't a single woman in the station.

The clerk strides up and down the length of the platform, and stares into the dark plains, and thinks, savagely – 'Asia.'

The plains are empty and soundless. Up into the sky goes the tiny, glassy moon. The wind rustles, harsh and chill. The clerk walks up and down the platform a long time, and then goes into his office. Through the wall come the howls of the woman. The clerk rings up the next station and says (like all Russian railway clerks) 'Akhmitovaaa! Fifty-eight out-t-t! Anything this way-y-y?'

But there is nothing this way.

He sits down on the hard railway settee and turns over the pages of *The Clarion* that he has turned a thousand times, and then he lies down, merely not to go on sitting. The old man brings in a lamp. The clerk dozes sweetly.

When his duty is over he goes to his village home. Mar Junction (at which trains do not stop and even staffs are not exchanged) is immediately lost in the darkness. All around is waste, the empty plains. The clerk goes past the *Mar*: the barrow rises dead and silent from the plains – silent as to what wandering folk, and when, threw up the earth of it, and what is hid within. The feathergrass on the barrow rustles like an old tale. The black soil of the country has panned as hard as asphalt, and rings under foot.

The village is soundless: nothing but the dogs' spasmodic barking. He goes through the Tartar hamlet and down into the ravine where the Finnish settlement is, and then climbs up the opposite slope. In the cottage the soldier's wife puts kasha and pork dripping and milk on the table. The clerk wolfs his meal, dresses in his best, and goes off to pay a visit to the schoolmistress.

At the schoolmistress's he puts a fresh chip in the bracket, and as its glow begins to dissolve the darkness he says:

'Asia. Not a country, just Asia. Tartars. Finns. Beggary. Not a country – just Asia.'

And thinks of his own beggardom.

The schoolmistress is standing by the stove, wrapped in a downy shawl; she is beginning to show her years. After a while she heats the samovar and makes some barley coffee. . . .

Late in the night the clerk goes home to sleep in his little room at the soldier's wife's. The bed creaks, a guitar tinkles and in the corner,

behind the stove, snores a pig. The soldier's wife clears the table, and goes out. Through the thin mud wall he can hear her ease herself and drive away the dog eager to gobble up her droppings. He listens to all that and extraordinary thoughts come into his head: of money, beautiful, finely dressed women, fashionable frocks, wines, parties, all the best – all of which he is some day going to have. . . . The woman prays at great length, mumbling away. The light goes out, and she patters barefoot over the clay floor, scratching, into bed with the clerk.

Night passes over the plains. The stubble weeds rustle sharply. The feathergrass on the barrow rattles. Microscopic Mar Junction lost to sight in the plains.

Mixed train No. 58, creeping across the inky plains.

People: human legs, arms, bellies, heads, backs and droppings; people as thick in lice as the wagons are in people. People herded in it maintain their right to travel by sheer force of their fists, because out there, in the famine districts, scores of famine refugees rush the train at every station, struggling inside over heads and backs and necks and legs of other people – and these strike out, and those strike out, tearing off and throwing down those already aboard. The scrimmage going on till the train starts and bears off those that happen at the moment to be stuck on – and then those that had got in the last time get ready for another fight at the next station.

They travel for days twixt filth and cleanliness, and have learned to sleep sitting, standing, or dangling. The horsebox, lengthwise and crosswise in several layers, holds wide shelves, and on these bunks and under them, on the floor and on the shelves and in every crevice, sitting, standing, lying, are people, huddled, silent – storing up their noise for the stations. The air in the coach is shattered by human bowels and homemade tobacco. At night the wagon is in darkness; the doors and ventilators are all closed. It is cold in the wagon; the wind whistles through the cracks. Somebody croaks as he breathes, somebody scratches; and the wagon creaks like an old swung four-in-hand. It is impossible to move in the wagon, as one man's legs are on another's chest and a third sleeps on top of them both, with his feet on the first one's neck. And yet – they do move. . . .

One man, whose lungs, no doubt, are nearly eaten away, instinctively huddles against the outer door, and folk press by him, men and women, and force the door a little open, and hang or squat over the endless sleepers and ease nature — so the man learned all the tricky private ways each man or woman had.

This man, burning in the final glow of tuberculosis, has strange muddled sensations. Thoughts of stoicism and honour, his own little room, his pamphlets and his books, and the famine — have gone to the devil. After innumerable sleepless nights his thoughts have differentiated like those of a man in fever, and he feels his 'I' turning into two, then three; and his right hand living and thinking on its own, independently, and quarrelling about something with his split-up 'I.'

Days and nights, wagon after wagon, station hamlets, third classes, footboards, roofs — all mixed up — and let 'em walk over him, spit on him, drop their lice on him. Stoicism-pamphlets on socialism and tuberculosis and books about God — he thinks of a new and strange brotherhood: of falling, mown down by sleep, and clinging to another man — whom, why him? A syphilitic? Typhus? Warming him and being warmed himself by the warmth of his body . . . horns, whistles, bells . . . His brains seem to be tipped on to down, and because down is always hot and burning, his thoughts are burning and strange, persistent and passionate, on the borderland of the nirvana of fever. . . .

And it rattles, that joist of the door, rattles, and the door creaks, and women, women, women, squat and dangle over the chain of sleepers. Now, sex. . . .

Yesterday at a small station a peasant woman had wanted to get in. A soldier was standing at the door.

'Darling,' the woman said, 'for the love of Jesus, darling, let me in. There's no room anywhere, you see, darling.'

'No room, Auntie! Don't you try. There ain't no room at all,' said the soldier.

'For the love of Jesus Christ our. . . .'

'How'll you pay me back?'

'That'll be all right.'

'Are you on for . . .?'

'That'll be all right . . . we shan't quarrel about that. . . .'

'Right-ho! Come along. Get under that there bunk. There's our coats. Eh, Semyon, let the wench in.'

The soldier crawled under the bunk, the people crowded round, and the tubercular man's heart filled with the sweetest and most bestial pain – he had a longing to cry out and let out and fling himself on the first woman that came along and be as hard and as cruel as he could and there and then in front of them all rape her and rape her and rape her. Reasoning, decency, shame, stoicism – to hell with all that! What we need is the beast!

Again the door frame rocks to and fro in his brain . . . Women, swarming, crowding, women . . . his personality going two ways to the very point of pain, so clearly divided and his heart persistently warring with something in his breast . . . The wagon creaks and bumps as it creeps along.

He falls asleep standing, and, mown down by sleep, he falls at somebody's feet. Something falls sprawling on him. He sleeps sweetly, as dead sound as a stone. The whole wagon is dead asleep . . . A station, whistles, bumping . . . For a moment he wakens. His head, with his 'I' twofold, threefold, tenfold, is lying on a woman's naked belly. Under his nose is a putrid smell like rotting fish; his thoughts flock to and fro like gawdy peasant wenches at a fair – God damn it – animals and instinct; and he kisses the naked woman flesh, kisses and kisses, passionately and painfully – who is she, where from?

And the peasant woman slowly woke up, scratched herself, muttered sleepily:

'Enough, you rogue' . . . then . . . 'my, you are a dab though. . . .'

And her breathing grew fast and irregular.

The steppes; a waste; endless expanse; dark and icy cold.

At the station where the train met the sunrise they ran to the empty wells and to standing pools for water, and lit fires to get warm and cook potato – and there in the empty wagon they noticed a corpse: an old man; the day before he had been in the agonies of typhus; now he was dead.

A dull grey turgid dawn. From the black crevice of the steppe

horizon blows a cold and evil wind. The clouds run low – there will be snow. The track, the wagons; swarming people. The red light of fires and the smell of smoke. At the fires where they are cooking there are people pulling off shirts and blouses and breeches and petticoats and shaking out the lice and cracking the nits. People travelling for weeks through the plains – in search of corn. Nothing to make bread of; no salt to be had. They gobble their potato. The train has stopped; it may stand there a day, it may stand two . . . Now, at daybreak, in their hundreds they swarm over the surrounding villages (the further out the squatter the cottages and the higher the stacks) and little groups of them are begging. Women standing outside windows, bowing low, chanting and whining!

'Oh, give me allll-llums for the saaaaake of the Loooord.'

The train may stand for a day, may stand for two. The guards go to the clerk-in-charge and from him to the *Extraordinary Committee*. The whites have been here; the station consists of a closed wagon taken off the rails, a row of wagons, holes broken in for doors. In the office – a dark wagon – a smoking sheet-iron stove, a smell of sealing-wax, wires humming, people crowding.

One man whispers something in the clerk's ear.

'Impossible, impossible,' says the clerk in a contented bass voice. 'Fully made up. Seventy-five wagons, one hundred and fifty bogies. Impossible. . . .'

Braid strokes braid, hand brushing hand; the man slips the bundle of notes across.

'Comrades, it's quite out of the question! I only accept when I can do something, but in this case – seventy-five wagons, one hundred and fifty bogies. I really can't.'

Once more braid strokes braid – that is, suggesting a little *lubrication*. . . .

But yet it seems the clerk could. Late in the afternoon another train comes in, new hundreds light fires, squash lice – and at night this train is the first to leave.

They run to the clerk, and he isn't to be found, another man is on duty (it was so-and-so, the guards pacify them – and he's gone off duty, can't you hear . . . Don't you know that this very week he's been attacked seven times) . . . and they run to the *Extraordinary* –

but by nightfall a detachment of Red Guards turns up, and combs through that train.

A Red Guard climbs into a hushed wagon.

'Come on, who's here? Out with it!'

An old man on the bunks takes off his cap and passes it round.

'Let's make it up between us, lads,' he says, 'two and a half each man. . . .'

At the next sun-up that train leaves.

The clerk appears on the platform, and thousands of voices from the train bid him farewell:

'Swiiiiiine! Briiiibe-takeeerrrr!'

The train goes at a walking pace. The waste of the steppes. Cold and famine. By day a sleepy sun rises above the waste. In the autumn silence flights of rooks, mournful rooks, fly over the pillaged fields. From the cottages, these mournful cottages of rare hamlets, rises the bluish smoke of burning straw.

During the night it snows, and the earth meets the morning with winter; but together with the snow comes warmth and once more it is autumn. It comes on to rain, and the earth, swept by a chill wind, wrapped in a wet sky, weeps. The snow lies in grey tatters. The rimy mist is like grey wadding.

Nobody in the village of Old Kourdioum, that lies in the hollows by a stream in the steppe like so many scattered fly turds, knows that just over there, where the horizon is, Asia sprawls.

In the village of Old Kourdioum, in the Russian quarter, in the Tartar quarter and Finnish quarter – in squat barns in front of the cottages, in stacks behind the cottages, are stores of corn, wheat, barley, rye, oats – food. All their harvesting's done; it is their season of rest and repose.

This very day in the Russian quarter of Old Kourdioum the steam bath is put on. The bathhouse is a mudlump building down by the stream. The village girls carry in the water, barefoot; inside the proprietor dissolves his ashes and collects rags, and they all go to steam themselves – the old peasants and sons-in-law and children and mothers and wives and daughters-in-law and virgins – all together. There are no chimneys out of the bathhouse – and in

carbon dioxide and steam and red glow and confusion the white human bodies jostle, all washing in the same lye; and the proprietor gives everybody's back a rub and then they all run down to the stream for a dip, in the mist-rimy early grey morning. The snow is beginning to collect in the hollows by the stream.

And in the Tartar quarter, on the opposite bank, where the minaret rises, at this moment (it being after Friday) the Tartars spread out their mats and pray to the east to the sun they cannot see, and then wash hands and feet, and in stockinged feet and flat caps make their way to a round hut spread with carpets and cushions, and sit on the floor in the centre of it, and eat mutton, champing away, with fingers dripping grease. And the old man gets the eyes. The women (who, it appears, are not expected to pray or to eat) stand behind the men with jugs of water.

And at this moment the band of folk foraging for food arrives at Old Kourdioum.

By the common, by the long arm of the shadoof at the well, stands a tight-pressed group of Finns, the women with horns on their heads, and legs like timbers; and squat little peasants with bast beards and hats like earthenware bowls, and tunics down to below their knees, belted round the chest, and embroidered tails hanging from their belts: a savage little race more silent than the sphinxes of antiquity. A miserable little peasant runs up to the incomers, and, squirming and squatting and screwing and screwing up his bloodless face, whispers:

'Silba mony give . . . mony . . . Givee bahlly, givee wheatee . . . Silba mony. . . .' and then runs back to his own folk.

A woman with horns and legs like timbers takes his place.

'Silba mony,' she says, 'givee. Givee bahlly, givee wheeeetee,' and then she in her turn smiles and screws up her eyes and runs back, and her eyes are like sunflower seeds, and dull like worn-down soldiers' buttons.

Out of the bathhouse in a hollow nearby springs a stark naked wench, with her hair streaming down her back, and rushes madly to the stream, and from there to her cottage and then back to the bathhouse. From the opposite bank of the stream come Tartars, on horseback, their legs dangling loose, and their brats and the barking of dogs go with them. The Tartars surround the incomers, and their

legs dangle to and fro as they hold their horses in and reach out to shake hands. One of them, with a villainous laugh, cries out:

'Buy ferom me, a am d sovyat and d camittee and d cammisar! Buy ferom me. Hunderad roubals. Hungary? I bartar.'

He smiles craftily.

'Come alonga me. I roas a shape. I am d savyat. I say wan d sal. Wan I say not d don sal. Don go to d odders.'

The snow lies grey and tattered, the rimy mist is like wadding, and no end to the space of the plains can be seen. Nobody in the village of Old Kourdioum is aware that just over there where the horizon is sprawls Asia. A peasant woman – that very same that the soldier let in the train – thinks:

'Rye if you reckon it in flannelette isn't bad at ten roubles, or if you reckon in money, a hundred . . . and tick too, print and gingham – black alpaca too, for old women. . . .'

A couple of men with bundles under their arms come along the street. The woman is standing by the well. One of the couple comes stealthily up to her, and stealthily asks:

'Mistress, won't you be changing some flour for some goods?'

'And what goods may it be?' is her question.

'Cotton goods, I mean. All kinds.'

'Wait you a while. . . . You come into the house that I be show you. . . .'

She signs to them. They go up to the cottage. They knock foreheads on the lintel and go in. Half the cottage is taken up by the low stove, on which are an old woman and a half-dozen miserable brats; in one corner of the cottage is a pig, in the eikon corner the master of the house, and eikons and a lithographed general and the imperial family.

They cross themselves. They bow to each other. They shake hands, first the master of the house, then everybody else in turn. Then they ask for food – and eat without a word, ravenously, wolfing – pork, mutton, kasha, pork dripping, gruel, bread, more dripping, more mutton. In the eikon corner sits the master of the house; watches them without a word – his eyes lost in his beard.

He calls his daughter-in-law.

'Dounka,' he orders, 'make ready the bath.'

They go to ablute, and while they are steaming Dounka brings them water to sluice down. When they come back the master says to Dounka.

'Dounka, get the urn hot.'

And to his visitors he says:

'Well, and what sort of goods have you got. Show em!'

The men unfasten their bundles. The master looks on with a businesslike eye, in silence. The women – his own women and others who have pushed their way into the cottage – fasten on to the goods like flies at honey. One of the men lays some sort of scrap of red on the mistress of the house and pokes her in the side and cries playfully:

'Look, master. Twenty years younger – looks younger than the youngest gal there. Now then, missus, you'd better be getting up there on the stove, this'll ginger him.'

'Oh, dear. What are you saying!' – and she spreads like a pancake.

But the pedlar ingratiatingly warps a kind of cheviot meant for breeches round his knees, and sticks his knee out before them all and praises his goods. The women pick out useful things and useless things too. The second pedlar engages the master of the house – about the harvest and the war and the famine and how there in Moscow the people have got as much madapolam and sewing machines and print as they want, and how in Moscow people drop dead in the streets from starvation.

Tea is served. They all poise their saucers on their five fingers and sup their tea. When a half-dozen cups have been put away the master of the house props himself up on his elbow and asks, dourly.

'Well, and what about the price, eh?'

The women make for the door, their faces now naïvely indifferent, lurkingly afraid – their lord and master has come into the game.

'Your goods are our money,' the fellow is ready with his words – 'we want flour.'

'We know that. Flour here costs sixty-two the poud.'

The visitor's face is distorted in pain and offence, and like a peasant woman he whines.

'A-a-ah . . . you value your own goods, you don't value ours . . . A-a-ah? . . . and who put the price on? We, of course . . . a-ah? . . . we can drop dead in the streets for want of food, and yet you're out to skin us clean . . . A-a-ah! Who put the price on? Who put the price on? We, of course . . . a-a-ah?'

Once more the saucers were poised, and they drink, and once more they bargain. Then again saucers and supping; and once again bargaining. The women, submissively silent, keep over by the door. For the tenth time the old woman on the stove asks:

'Who's come?'

The lads, after having chased them round the whole village, have now joined the girls in the porch. The little pig snorts. The cockerels under the stove try to crow.

At last up go both parties' hands, and palms are clapped together; the bargain is done; all they'd brought, sold at three arshins the poud. The master of the house is satisfied, because he has diddled the pedlars. The pedlars are satisfied, because they have diddled the master of the house. He treats them once more to a meal — shchee with pork and wheat pancakes with butter, and cream, and kasha with mutton dripping — and then takes them to the inn to drink moonshine vodka. Varangian times.

Wisps of hay flutter in the grey wind mournfully from the grid on the wall of the inn. All over the village dogs keep barking. In the Tartar quarter, where they washed their *marchants'* feet and entertained them on the floor, crowds drag from cottage to cottage at the heels of the foragers. The lifeless Finns stand, no children with them, all like so much timber. Through the small windows the endless, borderless steppe can be seen. From the steppe a cold wind blows, it is raining, the earth weeping. In the inn the peasants drink moonshine vodka, and, half drunk, go to the Tartar Commissar to pay him for permission to take the rye they'd sold to the station; the carting will be done by night, hidden by a load of timber.

Both reds and whites have passed through the village of Old Kourdioum a number of times, and whole streets have been wasted and razed. The people of Old Kourdioum are simply buried by their corn, and they have swine and cattle which they feed on corn; but they live by the light of flares and light their flares with

flint and steel and live half-naked. Over the plains, in vast waves, come and go ravaging bands and counter-revolution and make the nights lurid with the flares of distant faraway burning houses, and clamorous with the loud clang of the tocsin . . . There are no young men in the village of Old Kourdioum; some have gone to join the whites, some have gone to join the reds.

Twilight. In the grey twilight a soldier's wife of thirty (sweet it is at night kissing with such a soldier's wife) stops a man. He is burning low with the last glow of tuberculosis. She beckons him and whispers:

'Come wi me, laddie. Dere's nobody back dere. I'll give you corn. D bahd is ready.'

And in her bathhouse, in the lurid glimmering, the man sees on the woman's belly and groin an even cold rose-marble syphilitic rash. . . .

Through the twilight the muezzin, a peasant like them all, frenetically cries something from the minaret. In the twilight the Tartars pray, their mats spread out, their eyes eastward into unseen Asia.

The last black necklace of rooks at their mournful wedding flies past.

And mixed train No. 57, loaded with people and with food, creeps back across the plains.

And Mar Junction, where in the old days staffs were not even exchanged, is having a fabulous career; the dreams of the young clerk are coming true. A *Preventive Detachment* (excise, that is) has taken up quarters there, and now trains stand for days on end in the station. And day and night there are fires alight and crowds about the station. There is no longer a drop of water in wells or pools. They go two versts for water, to a little river. You can't walk two steps without treading in human droppings. The sanitary wagons are full of patients. From the Excisemen's train, out of which machine guns poke their solemn snouts, comes the sound of jolly singing and of a dozen harmonicas; but all round is groans, cries, weepings, prayers, curses. The clerk is curt with the chief

excise officer – he knows very well what gold braid stroking gold braids means – it is in his power to send a train on after ten minutes, or not till twenty-four hours. He has it in his power to let a train in and out during the night, when the excisemen *do not work for want of light* – and now he has women, drink, money, new clothes, first-rate tobacco, chocolates from Einem and Sio, and talks like a field marshal – curtly; and now he has no time for loafing wearily up and down the platform.

Train No. 57, plundered by the black plains, creeps along – a mixed train, cramful of people, flour and filth . . . Into the waste of night falls and falls the damp snow; the wind whirls; the wagons rattle. Night. Pitch darkness. Cold. And for a lot longer the red fires will glow at Mar Junction, terrible as the dull flare of fever. In the wagons, where there are people sitting, people standing on people, nobody sleeps, yet the silence is deadly. The train gradually slows down, in the hollow night, to a stop, the wheels groaning. There are fires burning, and by the fires in the snow, people huddled, sacks lying on the ground. The station cottage is dead silent. In the inky night the train guards gather in a group. Mixed train No. 57; snow; hurricane. A couple go away; come back. For a moment the clerk appears at the door of the house and says something, like a field marshal.

Silence.

Whispers.

And the guards run quickly through the wagons.

Inky darkness inside the wagons. The guard shuts the door behind him. No one speaks.

Then

'What is it?' asks a hoarse voice.

The guard breathes quickly; he seems to be pleased with things.

'Lasses, and wenches,' he whispers quickly, 'it's you I want. Orders; all lassies married or unmarried, the best of 'em, to be sent to 'em, to the Red Guards . . . I can't help it, he says. . . .'

None in the wagon speaks, there is nothing to be heard but the guards breathing.

'Well, my lassies – well, my wenches, what about it?'

Silence.

'The women'll have to go. 'Tis the only way out,' says someone in a surly voice. 'Flour, remember, we've got flour with us.'

Then another silence.

'Well, Manyoush, shall we be going?' – the voice sounds like a frayed fiddlestring.

Out from the train into the darkness into the snow, carefully go the women, and the doors are quickly closed behind them. The women, in dead silence, without a word, draw together into a tight-packed group. They wait. Somewhere nearby hum the telegraph wires. Someone comes up, peers at them and whispers:

'All ready? all of you . . . follow me . . . No way out . . . because of the flour. Save us, lassies! Now the lassies as is whole 'd better not go . . . hm? . . . Well. . . .

Then the women stand for a long while outside the last wagon of the Red Guards' train till a youth in an unbelted tunic runs up:

'Ah, girls! Tired o' waiting, eh? . . . We want some skirts – till pay-day comes round again,' he said, jocularly. 'But there's a whole flock of you! Good God, we don't want as many as that – Jesus Christ! you are a hot lot. Now then, look lively, pick out about a score of the best looking of you for yourselves. And take care they're all sound.'

Night. Snow, steady, falling. The telegraph wires humming. The wind howling. The flames of the fires flickering.

In the station office the guards crowd round the clerk and fash their voices into a nasty sort of sugary, a revolting sort of wheedling tone, and they vie with each other in buying his goodwill – with melons, with spirits, with cognac (swill), with cigarettes, with tobacco, with cotton stuff, woollen stuff, tea . . . The clerk, to while away the night, in his field-marshal tones tells smutty stories and the guards modestly look at the floor and snigger in a revolting sugary way. . . .

At sun-up mixed train No. 57 whistles, strains with a sudden jerk, as if the bells of the bellpost were being torn off, grinds out of Mar Junction.

Food! . . .

Outside the junction, in the open plains, rises the barrow from

which the junction got its name. Some time or other a man was murdered near Mar, and on his gravestone an unknown hand had traced in straggling letters

I once was what you are
You will be what I am.

Snow had now covered the endless plains and capped the barrow, and of the inscription on the gravestone all that remained visible was the two words

I once . . .

NERO AND HIS MOTHER

MICHAEL ZOSCHENKO

(*Translated from the Russian*)

THE Emperor Nero was an expert plot-hatcher and poison-brewer. There was nothing he would not do to reach his ends.

But his mother was almost a match for him. He was determined to clear the decks of his imperial mamma, who spoke her mind too plainly and was always poking her nose into high politics. He tried to murder her, but had no luck at first. She was as sharp as a ferret and as slippery as an eel. Knowing her son's hobbies, she took an antidote before every meal, to be on the safe side.

Now Suetonius tells us that Nero ordered a special ceiling for his mother's room.

'This ceiling,' says Suetonius, 'was constructed with an outer casing, which, by the aid of a machine, could be made to collapse upon her while she slept.'

You may imagine the conversation that occurred when this ceiling was ordered.

'Make your mind at ease, Your Majesty!' said the contractor. 'We'll build you a ceiling — a regular beauty! Holy snakes, that was a bright idea of yours, Your Majesty!'

'None of your rotten wood in it, mind!' said Nero. 'Rotten wood's no use to her. I want something pretty hard. You know what mamma's made of.'

'All Rome knows her, Your Majesty. She's tough as nails. Rotten wood'd only bounce off her. Ah, but it's a beautiful idea, Your Majesty! I'll put in a fair-sized beam, plum over your ma's brain-pan.'

'Well I don't mind how you do it,' said the emperor. 'But it must be a dead certainty. Crash, bang! – and mamma's gone west!'

'Leave it to me, Your Majesty. Consider your ma's in the Elysian fields. Before she opens her peepers – blonk! – down comes the ceiling on her. It'll be just an accident, an Act of God, like an earthquake. Nobody to blame, and mamma can't give evidence. Brilliant idea of yours, Your Majesty!'

But the contractor was too enthusiastic – so enraptured was he with the scheme that he took half the neighbours into his confidence, and it came to the ears of the imperial mother, who, of course, didn't fancy the idea, and flew out of the hospitable palace in a rage.

But Nero was not discouraged.

He sent for the High Admiral and ordered him to build a collapsible ship for the Dowager Empress. The stern was so constructed that it could be suddenly detached and everything in it would be tipped into the sea.

The old lady, anxious to be out of her son's way, welcomed the admiral's offer of a voyage, and stepped hopefully on board the ship.

And suddenly she found herself in the water. She screamed and shrieked, of course. It's a bit of a shock to be capsized in your imperial purple! Nevertheless, accustomed to such hazards by her son, the old lady didn't lose her head. She kept it above water, struggling and swimming and clinging to the wreckage.

Presently her friends came to the rescue, and brought her safe to shore.

For a while she concealed herself with them in one of the suburban palaces.

But Nero soon got wind of her hiding-place, and sent a hired murderer to despatch her.

So at last he outwitted the old lady, who was as villainous a monster as himself.

THE ILLITERATE WOMAN

MICHAEL ZOSCHENKO

(Translated from the Russian)

A CERTAIN man lived with his wife in Leningrad.

He was a responsible Soviet worker, a lusty fellow in the prime of life, class-conscious, enlightened – you know the sort I mean – devoted to the cause of socialism, and all the rest of it.

And although he was a simple man, country-bred, without any kind of higher education, yet during the years which he had spent in town, he had got the hang of most things and could make a speech to any kind of audience. He could even argue the point with all manner of scientific specialists, from physiologists to electrical engineers.

But his wife Pelageya was an illiterate woman. And though she had left the country at the same time as her husband, she had learned nothing at all – couldn't so much as sign her name.

This weighed on the man's mind. He racked his brains for a remedy. He was too busy to teach his wife himself; so he said to her:

'Look here, Pelageya, my love, it's about time you learnt to read, or at least to sign your name. Our country is gradually emerging from darkness and ignorance. We're liquidating illiteracy over the whole educational front, while there you sit, the wife of the manager of a bread factory, and can't tell B from a bull's foot. It worries the life out of me.'

What could Pelageya say to that! She just threw up her hands and answered:

'Akh,' said she, 'Ivan Nikolaievitch. What's all this fuss and bother? I've no call to be a scholard. All this time I've let it alone, and now the years are slipping from me and my youth's fading and my hands are getting stiff – they won't take kindly to them pencils. Why should I learn to make my letters. Let the young pioneers[1] go studying, and welcome! And let me grow old in peace!

Her husband, of course, sighed bitterly and said:

'Ekyh, Pelageya Maximovna! . . .'

[1] A Soviet youth organization.

But one day – lo and behold! – Ivan Nikolaievitch brings home a spelling-book.

'There you are, Polya,' says he, 'there's the very latest textbook for you, based on the data of scientific pedagogy! Now let me explain it to you. And please don't raise objections!'

Next morning Pelageya smiled patiently, took up the book, looked at it upside down and sideways and stowed it in the cupboard. 'Let it lie there,' she said, 'till one of the young folks wants it!'

So there it lay for weeks. But one afternoon Pelageya took out her needle. The sleeve of her husband's coat was torn.

She put her hand under the coat; she could hear something rustling.

'I wonder if it's money?' thought Pelageya.

She looked in the pocket. A letter. A wonderfully clean letter, in a smart envelope with dainty writing on it – and the paper was scented too – eau de cologne or some such thing.

Pelageya's heart throbbed.

'I wonder if he's up to tricks?' she thought. 'Carrying on with some smart lady behind my poor ignorant back?'

Pelageya looked at the envelope, took out and unfolded the letter – but of course she couldn't make head or tail of it.

For the first time in her life she was sorry that she couldn't read.

'It ain't my letter, but it's my place to know what's in it. Perhaps it'll change my whole life, and I'll have to go back to the country and work in the fields again.'

The poor thing's heart burned with vexation and bounded with suspense; she felt baffled and insulted.

'Ah, well!' she thought. 'I must be terrible fond of Ivan Nikolaievitch if I suffer and feel so jealous all because of this bothersome letter. It's a shame I can't read it! If only I could, I'd have something to go by.'

And with that she burst out crying. She began to remember all sorts of little things about her husband. Certainly Ivan Nikolaievitch had changed lately. Begun to be particular about his clothes, brushing them night and morning, as he never used to do. He was always washing his hands nowadays. And he'd bought a new cap too.

Pelageya sat and sat, thinking of all this, gazing at the letter and crying her heart out. But, of course, she couldn't read the letter, and she was ashamed to show it to a stranger.

At last she put it away in the cupboard, sewed up the coat and waited for her husband.

When he came she showed no signs of distress. On the contrary, she chatted quietly with him and even hinted that she wouldn't at all mind learning something and was quite tired of being an ignoramus.

Ivan Nikolaievitch was delighted.

'Well, that's excellent! I'll start you off myself!'

'Start me then!' said Pelageya.

And she stared hard at her husband's neatly-clipped moustache. And again her heart burned, and her soul filled with bitterness.

For two months, day in, day out, Pelageya studied. Syllable by syllable she puzzled out words, shaped letters and learned phrases. And every evening she took the scented letter from the cupboard and tried to fathom its mysterious meaning.

But that wasn't at all easy.

Not till the third month did Pelageya master the little manual.

One morning, when her husband had gone off to work, she took out the letter and began to grapple with it.

She struggled and gasped over the fine flowing handwriting. But the faint perfume of the paper tantalized her and roused her to new efforts.

She read the address: 'Ivan Nikolaievitch Koutchkin,' and so forth.

She read the letter:

'Respected comrade Koutchkin,

'I am sending you the manual I mentioned. I think that in two or three months your wife should master it. Do please promise to make her do so. You must impress on her how disgraceful it is for her to be illiterate.

'You know that we are busy liquidating illiteracy throughout the Republic by every means in our power, but we must not forget our own families.

'Now mind, Ivan Nikolaievitch, you must promise me to see to this!

'With communist greetings,
'Maria Vlokhina.'

Pelageya read the letter twice. Again she felt insulted, and began to cry.

But later, when she thought of Ivan Nikolaievitch, and how smoothly things would run henceforward, she calmed down and put the manual with the long-dreaded letter in the cupboard.

So in a short time, spurred on by love and jealousy, Pelageya learnt to read and write with ease and fluency.

A striking episode in the history of the struggle against illiteracy in the Soviet Union.

THE ROOT OF LIFE

NIKOLAI VIRTA

(Translated by Stephen Garry)

I

VASILY ANDREEVICH had worked in the foundry for thirty-five years. His father, a cheerful, blackbearded man, had died in the same forge, by the anvil. The years passed, men came and went, some died, others went off elsewhere, and nobody heard any more of them; in their place appeared new men who looked about them awkwardly at first; then they settled down, and everybody regarded them as old hands.

In the foundry yard also there was the same continual renewal: new shops arose; blacksmiths' shops, offices, and stores; the fencing was shifted farther and farther out and took in more and more pieces of land; and now the little river Valechka found itself enclosed by the fence; then the river also vanished: the channel was filled in, the water was canalized in pipes, and only such old inhabitants as Vasily Andreevich knew that somewhere under the foundry ran a river, while where the toolshop now stood a cemetery used to be.

Vasily Andreevich could remember the times when in the autumn and winter the workers had made their way in single file from shop to shop along planks laid down in the mud; the mud was reddish, rusty, and smelt of iron. Later the yard was paved with cobbles; but now the cobbles had gone too, and the yard was asphalted.

Everything was continually changing; in Vasily Andreevich's own eyes everything all around altered.

Only that one old forge stood inviolable amidst this continual succession of life. It was not reconstructed and not enlarged, and the works administration even ceased to have it painted regularly, for the soot and dust completely smothered the paint within three days.

Its grey walls were covered with a whitish deposit, a similar whitish, unusually stout spider's web hung from the roof, and although Vasily Andreevich knew that the spider's web was swept down quite often, it always seemed to him that it had hung there uninterruptedly ever since the first day he had looked inside the forge.

At that time he was nine years old, and his first impression of the large, twilit building, the roar and unbearable glare of the furnaces, the enormous blocks of iron scattered about, the men dancing with hammers around the anvil and encouraging one another with shouts, had always remained in his memory. He did not feel shy and was not astonished; he only felt respect for the place where, with the aid of fire and human strength, large and strong pieces of machinery were made.

That first impression remained all through his life. He not only respected his work, but he felt an inexplicable reverence for the furious, raging flame in the furnace, for the metal from which he forged parts of great locomotives.

He knew that the parts which he hammered out must be strong and without fault, otherwise accidents might happen on the line, and human beings would sacrifice their lives. And he worked to make those parts strong.

But as soon as he was confident that he had done his job well, that the part was without flaw, he forgot all about it. He was not

concerned with what happened to it afterwards; who would give it the finishing touches, what locomotive it went to build up, or what reciprocity of action it would have with other parts.

From time to time the size of the parts he forged was altered. He knew this meant that the whole works was turning over to the production of a different type of engine. He remembered all the types the works had produced ever since he had been employed there, and he liked looking at the new locomotives glittering with the high polish of their finish. But it never occurred to him to look for the parts he himself had made or to see them in action.

During all this thirty-five years of labour he had never set foot inside the assembly shop; he was not interested to see how other men built up the thousands of different parts into an almost living machine. He had only scorn for work where the result was known in advance, where everything had been made by other hands.

'You try growing an apple tree!' he used to say. 'Any fool can make a puree of the apples.'

In time the other men came to say of him respectfully:

'That old devil knows everything!'

He did his utmost to confirm this view. He would affirm that the root of life was stable and inviolable, and that only the visible changed; and no one could ever dispute his statement. He used to adduce his own forge in proof of his argument, for he regarded it as the very heart of the works; and there was none to gainsay him.

'You come and live with my shop,' he would say, his spectacles glittering sagely; 'then you'll understand what's what. Ah, you've built up shops all around it. But do you think you've shifted the very root of our life? That root goes on growing the same as it's always done; you won't shift it, my lads; it's got too deep a tap root.' He went on to remind them that though all kinds and types of locomotives had been turned out by the works, the iron for them all had been forged in the one forge.

'And there's the root of the matter,' he ended his remarks, looking at his audience quizzically.

'He's an expert!' the other men exclaimed admiringly. 'The old root!' they called him behind his back, and he came to know of the nickname and was proud of it.

2

So the smith began to believe that he really was the very centre and root of the works. He developed certain mannerisms in talking to the other men, even to the technical staff. He would listen with a sarcastic look on his face as an engineer explained something to him, and would say nothing, only cunningly winking at the other men.

'But we go straight to it!' he said, when the engineer had finished. 'We manage without your logarithms. We just take a sniff at the metal, and then everything's as clear as daylight. I've worked here for thirty-five years without logarithms, and not once have I made a mistake, if you'll excuse me saying so. . . .'

It was true that he had never made a mistake, though many of his measurements were judged solely by the eye. He could tell infallibly the temperature of the forge by certain signs which only he understood; with his ear he listened to all that was going on in the metal, and he knew at once if there was any flaw in it.

He was fond of using his own terminology, such as 'dry' or 'wet' flame, 'metal with character', and 'metal without character'. When he was asked to explain what he meant by these phrases he went off into long, involved and vague periphrases, and again used terms and words in a sense which he alone understood. Yet his fame grew as a man who could explain everything and who knew everything.

He even spoke at meetings solely in order to explain what lecturers had said, and in fact after he had spoken the audience seemed to have a better understanding of the question. But then the lecturer would speak again immediately after and flatly deny that he had said anything approximating to the smith's interpretation. But that did not disconcert Vasily. He would go back to his seat, a cunning look on his face, winking to his neighbours and whispering as he passed them:

'I've given him something to think about! He'll remember it!'

3

On rest days Vasily Andreevich put on his velveteen trousers and his blue shirt, belted himself with a narrow thong, and went off to

the pub to gossip with his friends. He did not like beer, and he had to force himself to drink so much as two or three mugs; but he liked sitting in company which showed him so much respect.

When he appeared in the light, spacious tavern which had been built in the place of the old smelly pub he became the centre of attention. He was always given his favourite seat opposite the wide window, through which the works was visible as though on a stage; the barman himself brought him a mug of beer, salt and eggs; everybody took turns to clink glasses with him, asked after his health, his grandchildren and the forge. Unhurriedly, suppressing his loathing, the smith sipped his beer, wiped his red beard, took an egg, knocked one end on the table, stood it up, and said:

'Ah, you can even set an egg up on end! Look at that!'

They all laughed, though he had done that trick a thousand times before. He had other favourite jokes, too, and they all knew them by heart; but they excused him, for they liked to listen to his stories of the past days of the works and the town.

He could remember every one of the directors and foremen who had ever worked there; he knew the sort of life they had lived, he could recall many amusing and many tragic stories from his own experience; he had taken part in every one of the strikes in pre-revolutionary days, he had been a member of the Red Guard during the Civil War, had been the last to leave the works during the years of economic decline, and had been the first to return to it.

There was not another smith in all the Donietz to compete with him for quality and speed of work. For several years now he had been regarded as a shockworker; he carried the works banner at all the demonstrations – he would not yield that honour to anyone; he was among the first to subscribe to the various State loans, he was the finest shot in the 'old men's command', he had the first seat in the first box at the theatre, and he even managed to get his works pass numbered 'One'.

He watched jealously over his fame. The everlasting desire to overwhelm others with the weight of his knowledge drove him to read a great deal, but his favourite books were *Romping Through Physics* and the children's books written by Ilin, such as *A Hundred Thousand Whys*, which did not call for much mental effort, but

provided a superficial knowledge of a large number of different things.

'Well, we've got a lot of clever men here to-day,' he once said to the company in the pub. 'But how many of you know why there are holes in bread? Now, out with it, if you know!'

'I suppose it's some chemical process,' Ivan Petrovich answered. He was a friend of the smith's, a locomotive tester, and the only man who ventured to argue with Vasily and question whether he really knew so much after all.

'You and your chemical process! Tell me why!' Vasily looked triumphantly around him.

'Well, we can't all be like you!' roared Pankratov, the works cashier, a tall, consumptive old man with pendulous grey whiskers. 'You're our counsellor! You know, of course!'

'Of course I know!' the smith said graciously. 'And I'll tell you why there are holes in bread, you dolts. When the dough is prepared air is left in it: carbon dioxide, it's called. And when the bread's put in the oven this carbon dioxide bursts, and forms a hole.'

The company admiringly clicked their tongues, and the next evening astonished their own bosom friends with the same problem.

Only the taciturn Ivan Petrovich, who was stout and looked more like a cook than an engine-driver, rubbed his nose with one finger and said glumly:

'That doesn't get us any farther. You're a hole in a doughnut, my friend; that's what you are!'

But everybody thought Ivan was simply jealous, and told Vasily to pay no attention to him. The smith went on with his stories, while the others listened, and the barman went about on tiptoe.

There seemed to be nothing in the world which he could not explain. And he himself thoroughly believed that he knew everything and understood everything: especially how to handle people, how to handle metal, and how to handle fire. He hadn't lived for nearly fifty years for nothing.

'You'll go far!' the cashier told him admiringly.

'Yes, you'll go too far!' the engine-driver snorted.

4

For over twenty-five years the sullen, always preoccupied Platon, a man getting on in years, had been in charge of the other shift to Vasily's in the forge. Platon had never made friends with Vasily, nor with anyone else at the works, for that matter. One day when he was given a bad egg at the pub he flew into a rage and died on the spot. The doctor diagnosed that he had died of old age and a weak heart.

'You see,' Vasily Andreevich explained, 'his heart had thin walls. And when he flew into his temper the blood rushed to his heart, and it burst. Just like an engine-boiler.'

A new man, a youngster named Yakov, came to take over the second shift in the forge. He shook hands with Vasily, sat down in one corner, and watched the men at work. Vasily took a sidelong glance at him: he was sallow-faced and gaunt.

'He'll not last long!' the smith snorted. 'He's got tender veins.'

But Yakov did not clear out, as Vasily had expected. Little by little he grew used to the works and the other men. He always spoke respectfully to Vasily, and listened attentively to his stories.

One morning when Vasily arrived he did not recognize the forge. The thick, heavy cobweb had vanished, the rubbish and lumps of iron had gone, there was much more space around the anvil, the windows had been cleaned. All day Vasily felt a little peeved; he seemed to lack something, he had the feeling that he was working in a strange forge.

'A fine business, all this cleaning up!' he snorted. 'Who asked for it to be done?'

'The director came in the other day,' his assistant, Puntya, whispered ingratiatingly. 'He said it was a question of culture.'

'A fat lot they know! But you seem to be pleased about it, you fool!'

'What? Me? I was simply. . . .'

When Yakov arrived Vasily began to shout at him, and his reddish beard quivered angrily. But the youngster sat down on a block of metal and calmly lit a cigarette.

'He ought to be learning, and not teaching others!' the old man said venomously. 'He's young yet to be in charge of others.'

'Don't be so upset, Vasily Andreevich,' Yakov said mildly. 'Don't get upset, it's more convenient for us to work, now.'

'Well, I find it more inconvenient! I don't like it. Thirty-five years have I swung my hammer here. And he doesn't think it convenient. Did you hear anything like it?'

Yakov smiled but made no reply, and went out.

Next morning Puntya hovered around Vasily Andreevich, mysteriously spitting, smirking, and muttering to himself. At last he could keep his secret no longer:

'You know, Yakov has beaten you, Vasily Andreevich!'

'Wha-a-at?'

'I hear Yakov has put the rate up to 140 per cent.'

The smith would not believe him. But at dinner time the works newspaper was brought round, and in it was printed the news that, for the first time in many years, Vasily Andreevich had been surpassed by another worker.

5

How Yakov had managed to excel the old man, who, to use the cashier's expression, 'would have made mincemeat of any other three dogs in the forge,' was a mystery to everybody. The pub regulars and the smith's admirers stared at the youngster apprehensively, expecting him to put on airs. But he behaved quite naturally, didn't carry his head any higher, and made no answer when the smith gave expression to caustic remarks, such as, 'certain folk seem to think they've pulled up the root of life; but, praise be, it hasn't lost its grip yet.'

Only the engine-driver slapped Yakov on his back and shouted:

'That's right, you show him; you show him what's what!'

But Yakov smiled rather sheepishly, and did not give Ivan any encouragement.

All the next month the works followed the silent struggle between the two smiths. And the pub was shaken to its foundations when it became known that the older man had regained the first place.

The cashier was exultant, for it meant that the engine-driver

owed him twenty mugs of beer. Ivan sat gloomily in a corner and stared hatefully at Yakov. But Yakov was the same as before: quiet, unassuming, puzzling in his simplicity.

The one least pleased with Vasily's victory was the old smith himself: he knew how much it had cost him. Right at the end of the month he had spoilt a large and important engine part – either his instinct had betrayed him, or his ear had failed to catch all the noises of the furnace – in any case, the metal had to be rejected. And next morning the all-knowing Puntya quietly told the smith of a conversation he had overheard:

'Here, they've appointed a new commissar for the railways. Kaganovich, I think the name is. And they say he knows everything. They report to him that a faulty axle has been found in such and such an engine, and he sets to work at once to find out who made it. They return the part to the worker to make him realize his responsibility!'

'That's all rot!' Vasily snorted. 'He can't know all the smiths in the Soviet Union.'

'I was only telling you what I'd heard,' Puntya excused himself. 'After all, you should know. You're our counsellor!'

'Now, now!' the smith smirked with satisfaction. 'Get a move on!'

Although he did not believe Puntya, a tiny spark of anxiety settled in his heart. He had a feeling that in his haste he had turned out more than one defective part; but nobody knew about it, and the locomotives went out into service. He was troubled in his mind, but he showed no signs of his worry, and went to the pub as usual, joked, clinked glasses with his friends, and bragged of his victory over Yakov. Then one day the cashier fell to talking of a new works scheme.

'They're proposing to teach the whole lot of us,' he announced. 'They're going to open a school. If they 've assigned a kopek they've assigned seventy-five thousand roubles for the job. The idea is that we should all become specialized technicians in four years.'

'That's what Stalin calls wiping out the inequalities,' the engine-driver explained. 'I've put my name down for the course. And they're asking all the Stakhanovites to do the same.'

'Well, it's all learning,' said Yakov.

'You and your learning!' the cashier took him up. 'Our Vasily's a whole learning to himself. To teach such a man is a sheer waste of money.'

'You're right!' someone else chimed in. 'He'd beat all the professors. Nothing good would come of it.'

'He's a counsellor!' Puntya concluded, knocking on the table for emphasis. 'He's studied all the sciences to their roots.'

'It doesn't do anyone any harm to study, not even counsellors,' Yakov remarked. But nobody would listen to him.

During these days it seemed that Yakov had lost all desire to compete with the older smith. For two months in succession Vasily Andreevich retained his lead. He carried the banner at the anniversary celebrations of the October Revolution; on rest days he sat in the pub giving advice and instructing his juniors in age. Then one day the factory director dropped in on them. Vasily Andreevich made room for him on his bench.

'Well, how's things?' the director asked. 'Talking about anything interesting?'

'Why, yes, Sergei Ivanich. I was just saying that everything is in a state of flux, but the root always remains.'

'You and your root!' the director snorted discontentedly. 'You've found a fine fairy tale to tell yourself! Everybody else is studying and thinking out all kinds of plans for improving the work, but you go on saying the same old thing.'

'It would be absurd for him to study,' the cashier said, as though the matter was settled.

'He'd put all the professors to shame,' Puntya tittered.

'That's all nonsense!' the director retorted angrily. 'Now there's that fellow,' he nodded across at Yakov, 'he's been studying for two months, and he's already using his brains. He's suggested a reorganization of the forge. And he's right.'

'Now there's your root of life!' the engine-driver remarked ironically. 'He's got right down to the taproot.'

'It can't be done!' the smith settled the question. 'He's always talking!'

'Why can't it?' the director said. 'I'm off to Moscow for the

money to-morrow, at any rate. So there you are! Well, how are your grandsons? Are they doing well at school?'

'Of course!' the smith smiled. 'They've got brains!'

'Just like him!' the cashier intervened. 'Two chips of the old block.'

'Well, if they were to pass some on to you, you might learn something from them. You can't get far on instinct these days, brother!' The director finished his beer, and went out.

At the end of the third month it was announced that Yakov had beaten Vasily again. He beat him the following month too.

'It's because he's stronger than me!' the smith said angrily to Puntya.

'No, Vasily Andreevich; he's not so strong as you. But he's thought out a way of rationalizing his work. He arranges the furnaces differently, somehow. And I heard him remark that he's not proud, the old man could use his method if he liked.'

'Go to the devil!' Vasily shouted. 'I can manage without cheating.'

Yakov went steadily ahead, leaving the older man far behind. The other workers began to be unusually deferent to Vasily, and many were sorry for him; but others, more envious in their nature, laughed at him. First the director's decision to reorganize the forge had upset him, and now Yakov's victories put him right out of step. It did not occur to him to adopt Yakov's new methods, though they saved both labour and time. Instead, he obstinately drove Puntya on, and worked himself to the point of exhaustion. Still Yakov went ahead. One day the engine-driver came into the shop, looked sarcastically at the tired smith, streaming with sweat, and asked:

'Catching up yet?'

'Clear out!'

'You're in a bad way, my boy! He uses his head, but what do you use? You're a hole in a doughnut, that's what you are.'

'Clear out!' the smith bellowed.

6

The older smith began to lose his head; he made mistakes, the metal began to behave suspiciously. Puntya heard him using new

words; he would remark that the iron was 'groaning', 'creaking', and 'raging'. Puntya did not know what he was talking about.

Vasily walked about the forge, listening to the roar of the furnaces and shaking his head.

One day he messed up a locomotive axle, but he sent it out and did not tell anybody. And now he hated the young blacksmith of the second shift, though Yakov did not appear to notice it, and treated the old smith as before, asking his advice, talking about the works school, and about learning.

'Learn all your life and die a fool!' Vasily hissed.

'That's quite true, and yet . . . You ought to come along some time', Yakov tried to persuade him. 'We've got some good professors teaching us. And besides, it's interesting.'

The old man brushed the subject aside.

Soon after, trouble came upon him in earnest. A day or two later he was summoned to the directors' office. At the door he met the engine-driver. Ivan looked stern.

'You've done a fine thing!' he said. 'Counsellor! You've become famous all over the Soviet Union.'

'Why, what's the matter?' Vasily asked anxiously, and the sweat began to pour down his back.

'Come along and you'll find out!'

Ivan led the smith to the end of the yard. There a locomotive was standing surrounded by a crowd. The director and works engineers were examining a large part removed from the engine and lying in the snow. Vasily recognized it at once: it was the axle he had forged six weeks or so before.

'Kaganovich has sent you a present!' the director said furiously. 'Ah, Vasily Andreevich! It's time you retired! When I reorganize the forge I'll put you on pension. You can't get far by rule of thumb these days, my man. You'll come a cropper!'

Vasily burst into tears. The tears rolled down his cheeks and fell into the snow. The director's anger turned to pity for the smith. He went up to him, and took him by the arm.

'All right, I was joking!' he said. 'But how could you do it?'

Vasily Andreevich thrust him off and dragged himself away. As he went he was thinking that within the hour everybody would

know of his disgrace. At the office he ran into Yakov, who was writing something into an exercise book from a notice posted on the door. He greeted the elder man and stopped him:

'There's an interesting lecture on furnace temperatures to-day. Why not come along? We'll argue with the professors, we'll show them that we're not quite fools either; we know a bit about it.'

Vasily did not answer, but turned and went home. There he found only his grandchildren, sitting over their lessons.

'Grand-dad,' the elder boy called to him: 'Why is one group of stars called the "Great Bear" when it looks more like a saucepan?'

'I don't know,' the smith admitted for the first time in his life; and went off to his own room. But he could not remain indoors. He slouched off to the pub, and looked through the window. All his pals were seated there, laughing over something. He screwed up his eyes to stop his tears: he felt sure they were laughing at him. He sighed and looked up at the sky, which was sprinkled with brilliant stars. Right above him a saucepan was gleaming.

'Well, but it is strange,' he thought; 'that they should call it the "Great Bear".'

At that moment he realized that he had no real knowledge whatever; he did not know why the stars had their various names, nor the course they took through the sky, nor where they went in the daytime, nor how the world really lived. And he did not know what was the real root of man.

'I don't know the first thing,' he sighed. 'I'm only a hole in a doughnut.'

For several minutes he stood lost in thought. Then he turned and strode to the works office. The professor was due to arrive at any moment.

THE INFANT

VALENTIN KATAEV

(Translated by Stephen Garry)

I

POLECHKA had a thoroughly cushy job as servant to citizen Knigge. Not every girl is so lucky. Ludvig Yakovlevich was an old bachelor,

he earned a good salary, he did not have dinner at home, and he paid her wages regularly on the nail.

Polechka first went to work for him as a daily maid: to clean his rooms, and to make him barley coffee – Ludvig Yakovlevich did not drink tea. She worked for him on this basis for a couple of months or so, then she quarrelled with the old woman in Zatsepka from whom she rented a shakedown in one corner, and next morning arrived at Mr. Knigge's flat to polish the piano with tear-stained eyes. In the middle of the day she accidentally smashed a bowl filled with roses, broke down even more, and did not go home at all to sleep with the unpleasant old woman of Zatsepka.

When at half-past twelve that night Ludvig Yakovlevich returned home, he found Polechka asleep in the lobby, on a chest, with her knees drawn up to her chin. Her shoes were arranged neatly on the floor, her stockings and elastic garters pushed into them. Ludvig Yakovlevich saw a little bare foot poking out from the half fallen sheepskin with which she was covered; he delicately put out the light in the lobby, and tiptoed into his bedroom. He undressed with relief, got into bed, and the springs creaked under him for a long time after.

Ludvig Yakovlevich had a large room divided into two by a plastered and wallpapered plank partition. So in a sense he had two rooms, though there was only one. There did not happen to be any door between the two rooms, and they communicated with each other through an opening in the shape of an arch, which was curtained with a gaudy rug. The large room he regarded as his bedroom and study; the smaller room, through which one had to pass to reach the bedroom, was a kind of dining-room. In the course of time Polechka imperceptibly shifted from the chest into this smaller room, and slept on the settee; gradually she made herself at home, and even pinned two greetings postcards to the wall in a corner: one represented a pig with forget-me-nots, the other a lady on a bicycle. And now she felt free to make faces at the unpleasant old woman of Zatsepka.

Ludvig Yakovlevich displayed extreme delicacy in his attitude to Polechka's transmigration. In fact, he did not seem to notice it at all. When she had settled down she at once struck up a friendship

with Auntie Masha, an elderly Tartar woman in flat No. 31, who completely took the place of the horrid old woman of Zatsepka. Polechka ran along to Auntie Masha twenty times a day, but she did not mix with any of the other servants in the house, and it has to be said frankly that she paid no attention whatever to the local beau, Max the barber, whose full name was Maxim Petrovich, despite all his attentions. For she had come of high-class people: her father was a country parson.

2

After some time Ludvig Yakovlevich, who had been notorious hitherto for his frugality, began to drop in at the hairdresser's on his way home from the Conservatoire, where he was a professor of the oboe. If his elderly years be taken into account, and also the circumstance that for most of his life he had always shaved himself at home with a safety razor, this development must be regarded as highly significant. You can't get up your personal appearance at home as well as it can be done at a hairdresser's, where a ravishing mist floats around your steaming head, where the scissors flitting about the ear chatter away like magpies, where a fine warm and gently stinging rain is sprinkled over your eyelashes, and in the hands of barber Max the atomizer suddenly blossoms before your eyes into a bush of Persian lilac, setting the heart on fire with its maddening perfume. In short, citizen Knigge stepped out of the hairdresser's younger by ten years, so that anyone would unhesitatingly have declared him to be no more than forty-three.

In a good worsted overcoat with squirrel lining, and a caracul collar, closely buttoned up, big-nosed, crimson-faced, framed in a white, four-flapped squirrel cap fastened with tapes over the crown, in yellow goloshes which squeaked very pleasantly on the young snow, Ludvig Yakovlevich walked along, shedding fresh perfumes into the expanse around him.

His chin of German shape, bluish, and cleft like a plum, scraped absolutely clean of hair, and gently powdered, lay tenderly on his silk scarf. A gallant little packet of sweets hung from the top button of his overcoat.

While he walked with knitted brows through the empty yard,

past the dust-bin, where idiotic brown rats as large as kittens were eating garbage thrown out from the sausage shop, Auntie Masha, espying him through a small patch of clear glass which she had made with her hot breath in the frozen window-pane, said querulously to Polechka:

'Here's your boss coming. He's got some sweets. Run and take his goloshes off.'

'He can go to the devil with his sweets!' the girl snapped back hypocritically; crimsoning, she turned to the mirror and hurriedly fluffed up her fair little curls over her tiny ears. Then, throwing her kerchief over her head and biting her lower lip as though it were a berry, she ran down the stairs as if a waterpipe had burst in the house.

Meantime Ludvig Yakovlevich had climbed to the second floor, and, with beads of moisture on his Turkish eyebrows, was standing by the door, knocking the snow off his goloshes, and flapping his gloves across his shoulder, his cap and neck, which was as crimson and rough as a lobster shell.

'Just a second, Ludvig Yakovlevich, I'll brush you down,' Polechka said, panting a little with her hurry. And, dilating her violet eyes, she took the instrument case from her master's hand.

'Merci!' he pronounced with a gentle sigh of relaxation; 'I can manage.' And he opened the door with his Yale key.

3

Every day brought one and the same scene. He returned home and went into his bedroom. She timidly remained in the dining-room, ready to be at his service. They were separated by the rug. She heard him undress, and then with deft fingers let her little curls fall over her brow. He went across to the archway, shamefacedly hiding his pants behind the rug; an unbecoming little tongue of his zephyr nightshirt stuck out of his pants. Then he pushed his boots, which were covered with rosy dust from the goloshes, through the opening to her. She stretched out her trembling hand to take the boots. A simultaneous touching of the boots by the two hands at once was fraught with sentence of death. He snatched his hairy fingers away before her slender fingers with their sharp-pointed

little nails had properly gripped the boots, which fell with a crash. He and she both exclaimed 'Oh!' She seized the boots by their laces, and impetuously scurried away. The pungent smell of boot-polish spread along the corridor. A neighbour looked out of his door. The boot brush crackled like a black cat emitting electric sparks. Swiftly putting on his indoor trousers and undervest, Ludvig Yakovlevich came out into the dining-room. Finishing the boot polishing more swiftly than could have been expected, she also went into the dining-room, and caught him red-handed: he was hurriedly shaking sweets into a dish. She and he both exclaimed 'Oh!' Blushing all over, enveloping him in the smell of boot polish, she fled through the archway into the bedroom, and stood for some time in the middle of the room, turning the boots over and over in her hands, not daring to breathe. A lacquered reflection of the small window twisted round and round with the boots in her hand. Her white elbows made a flickering reflection in the varnished lid of the piano. All the room circled around the perfectly tuned instrument, which with all its strings echoed the 'oh' in chorus. He stood on the other side of the rug with the bag of sweets half emptied into the dish. The sound of one sweet dropping would have been sufficient to rock the house.

Each evening he picked up a small suitcase and put a clean handkerchief in his pocket. Standing on tiptoe, she handed him his overcoat.

'Have some sweets, Polya,' he said in a thick voice. 'Don't be shy.' And, not looking at her, he went off to the theatre to conduct an operetta.

Polechka ran upstairs and, thrusting her nose into the Tartar women's breast, quietly squealed and sniffed at the warm fustian, which was saturated with satisfying kitchen smells.

'Giving you sweets!' the Tartar woman snorted. 'You mind your step!'

When Ludvig Yakovlevich returned Polechka was already lying on the settee, her head wrapped in a ragged blanket, and looking like a harlequin. He walked past her warily, trying in the darkness to avoid stepping on her shoes. There was the sound of snoring: the girl was pretending to be asleep. He tiptoed into the bedroom. Her

heart standing still, she listened as he undressed. He undressed very quietly, but could not get off to sleep, so he lay listening to his servant's breathing. Then he also began to pretend to be asleep. He was ashamed to snore, and he emitted the breath through his nose with a delicate whistle, as though a fly had got entangled in each of his hairy nostrils. Then they both sorrowfully dropped off.

Next morning they awkwardly avoided each other. He diligently and languidly washed. She lit the stove, slamming the door and scattering the wood over the parqueting. A frosty gleam brilliantly and ominously burned on Ludvig Yakovlevich's cheeks, which he had rubbed till they were crimson, while as she squatted by the stove Polechka's tender features were caught to the roots of her hair with the fluid flame of the crackling birchwood.

4

One day after dinner there was a long ring at the bell. Polechka opened the door, and an elegant woman in a musquash coat swiftly walked into the lobby.

'Is Ludvig Yakovlevich at home?' she asked in a voice hoarse with the frost, and hurriedly fumbled with the fingers of her hands, endeavouring to free one small, frozen hand which was entangled in her bag handle. 'Ah, my God!' (At this point the hand escaped and broke away, music fell to the floor from under her arm.) 'While you're making your way up here you could go out of your mind. Downstairs I trod on a cat, and here it's impossible to breathe. Are your neighbours frying something in stale fat, or what? Pick up the music, my dear; you're not blind, are you?'

Ludvig Yakovlevich was about to come into the lobby in his undervest, below which his unfastened braces hung unbecomingly; but, seeing the lady, he was put to confusion and at once vanished. Waving her little hand to him, the lady took a rouble out of her bag and, tearfully biting her frozen lip, impatiently stamped her foot at Polechka:

'What are you standing there for like a fool? You're absolutely abnormal. Run and pay off the drozhki-driver. I don't suppose the driver's made of indiarubber.'

Although Polechka was not accustomed to such a boorish form

of address, she threw her kerchief over her head and, dignifiedly blinking her eyes, went out to pay the driver. When she returned she saw Ludvig Yakovlevich, in his closely buttoned velvet jacket, down on one knee, like a knight, panting as he drew the shoes off the lady's feet. Then they both withdrew to the inner room, and Polechka was ordered not to disturb them, or to interrupt their studies, but to sit in the lobby and guard the things. She sat down on the chest, under the musquash coat, hunched herself up, felt the lining – crepe-de-chine with a fine rosette design – pouted terribly, and, fixing her eyes on the shoes, which were squatting on the floor like hares, she put her fingers to her nose.

At this stage the grand piano thundered out and the woman's shameless voice was heard singing very loud, without thought for the neighbours:

'Men are all of one kind;
Beauty for them is the pearl of nature;
Always they delight to meet our wishes.
That is, . . . that is . . . man's devoir.'

Here the music abruptly stopped, and Ludvig Yakovlevich's furious roar shook the partition of the room:

'Stop! Nothing of the sort! I'm an octave higher, you're singing an octave lower. Listen!' And he shouted in a high falsetto, which made Polechka go all goosey: 'That is . . . that is . . . that is man's devoir.' Devoir! Top C! De . . . voir! And you're singing middle C. Where's your sense of pitch? You've got a bear's ear, I should think.'

'You're absolutely abnormal somehow,' the woman snapped back. 'I don't suppose I've got an indiarubber voice.'

'You ought to work in a laundry, not sing in an operetta. I can't transpose the entire piano accompaniment an octave lower just for you.'

And then there was a scene. She implored him to transpose the music. He swore that he would not permit such an outrage against the harmony. She threatened him with the theatre workers' committee. He shouted that the workers' committee consisted of cobblers, not musicians. She wept. He banged his fists on the piano

lid. Then threatening chords sounded, and the shameless voice sang: 'That is ... that is ... that is man's devoir.' 'Devoir!' Ludvig Yakovlevich roared furiously. And Polechka sat on the chest and kicked her feet against each other in her terror. However, nothing terrible happened, and an hour later Ludvig Yakovlevich and the woman came out into the lobby as though nothing unusual had occurred. Only Ludvig Yakovlevich's whiskers were fluffed up more than usual and almost completely hid his hairy nostrils, while the dame wrinkled her little powdered nose rather too much, making it look like a cuckoo's egg. Polechka handed her her shoes and coat. The lady held her plump little hand up to Ludvig Yakovlevich's whiskers, thrust her bag under her arm, and suddenly stared at Polechka as though seeing her for the first time.

'Look what a little hen he's got for himself!' she said, and waved her glove in front of the maestro's nose. 'You old libertine!'

'Your "esprit est mal tourné",' Ludvig Yakovlevich muttered as he opened the door. 'I love her like my own daughter.'

'You tell her so!' the woman sang out gaily, winking; suddenly, assuming a grim expression, with her roll of music she gave him a gentle dig in his belly.

Ludvig Yakovlevich groaned and doubled up. The woman broke into a laugh. The door slammed, she disappeared. An intellectual scent of kid gloves and strong perfumes was left behind in the lobby.

'She's a bit of a Tartar!' remarked Ludvig Yakovlevich, not looking at Polechka. 'A real prima donna! You simply must see her in the operetta.'

Soon after this incident Ludvig Yakovlevich gave Polechka a note, and she went to the theatre. The manager read the note and hurriedly thrust his well greased head and large, rosy ears out of his ticket office window.

'Well, but what a little chicken!' he suavely exclaimed, drawing his blue lips into a thin line. 'Ah, maestro, I approve!' And he allotted her a folding seat at the end of the fourth row in the parterres.

Her handkerchief and purse squeezed tightly in her sweaty hand, the girl went up the marble staircase and entered the auditorium.

The noise of the audience and the sounds of instruments being tuned caught her breath. Abashed by the squeaking of her new shoes, which were too tight for her feet, she sat down on the very edge of her seat and hurriedly licked her dry lips. The undulating tones of an oboe ran up the folds of the quivering curtain. Polechka felt that her cheeks were a brilliant crimson. Then suddenly Ludvig Yakovlevich appeared above the orchestra pit, like a jack in the box. He swept his coat-tails past the conductor's desk and turned to the audience. She gasped. He was wearing evening dress. She had never seen him in tails before. His enormous chest, a great expanse of starch, was like a lyre. His powerful neck, his sharp collar, with its edge like that of a visiting card and held with a white bow, supported his powerful head. The lamps faded down, and with them faded the superhuman beauty of Ludvig Yakovlevich. He tapped with his stick. The theatre was plunged into twilight. The orchestra struck up, and Polechka's fate was sealed.

When she reached home he had not arrived. Trembling, she undressed and got into bed. He came home soon after, and, as usual, went to his own room, undressed, and got into bed. For some time they both lay holding their breath, listening to each other's movements. At last the infatuated girl lost all patience and all hope of her master displaying any enterprise. She sighed quite loud and muttered as though in her sleep: 'Oh, lord, lord!' 'Did you say something, Polechka?' he at once asked, in a whisper. In her alarm she screwed up her eyes and bit the corner of her pillow-case. For some minutes he lay listening to the silence lurking around his straining ear. 'I think you said something,' he said even more quietly, rising on his elbow. The little hypocrite groaned miserably. Then, unable any longer to resist his desires and forgetting all prudence, knocking against the furniture as he went, he stole to the settee where his servant lay, and passed an uncertain hand over the blanket. The girl again emitted a painful sigh. 'What's the matter? Are you unwell? What is it?' he muttered stupidly. He hurriedly sat down on her bed and with clammy hands began to stroke her rounded shoulder, where it emerged from beneath the blanket. The shoulder was clothed in her nightdress, but through the coarse material Ludvig Yakovlevich felt its strong yet tender, burning heat.

'Oh, my God!' the girl groaned, trembling languidly and ready for anything; and she laid her flaming cheek on her lover's chest. But at this moment the old fool, who evidently had quite forgotten all he had ever known about the cultivation of friendship with young women, was seized with the mad idea that Polechka really had got a high fever and that she was talking in her delirium. Without wasting a moment he switched on the light and, knocking on the wall, aroused his neighbour, to ask him for some sal volatile. The alarmed neighbour, wrapped in a blanket like a Roman in a toga, at once arrived with a phial in his hand, sighed sleepily, took one discreet glance at the frightened, dishevelled Polechka and at Ludvig Yakovlevich in his pyjamas, and significantly retired. Ludvig Yakovlevich poured some sal volatile into a glass, and there was nothing else for the poor girl to do than to drink the unpleasant medicine. 'Now have a good sleep, my child,' he said with a sigh, retiring to his room. 'And you simply must buy yourself some goloshes, or you'll get inflammation of the lungs.'

He put out the light, and Polechka thrust her nose into the pillow and wept long, angry tears, biting the pillow-case and belching up sal volatile.

5

Thus the winter passed, and the affair made no progress whatever towards the end they both desired. But then one fine May night, returning in merry mood from the opening of the Summer Garden Theatre, Ludvig Yakovlevich abruptly felt an unusual influx of initiative. Pushing back his black plush hat off his brow and mentally imagining highly stimulating pictures, like a cat he crept up to the girl's bed and, groaning passionately, dropped on his knees beside it. 'Polechka, are you asleep?' he whispered impatiently and, letting his pince-nez fall in the dark, stretched out his hands to embrace the girl without further ado. But the bed was empty. 'She's out with friends,' the maestro thought mournfully, and wandered off to his bachelor bedroom. He opened the window, sat down on the window-sill and, cursing his previous irresolution, decided that whatever happened he would sit up and wait for her to return. The passionate wails of locomotives talking to one another came from

the railway station. Little by little it grew light. At last Ludvig Yakovlevich began to nod, opened his mouth as old people are wont to do, and dropped off to sleep.

Meantime, the door leading from the yard into the hairdresser's shop was half opened, and Polechka nimbly slipped out. She glanced stealthily around her, sat down on the step by the boot-scraper, and swiftly pulled off her tight shoes, which were torturing her. Hurriedly tidying her hair, which hung dishevelled around her raspberry cheeks, and drawing up her torn bodice with her teeth, Polechka put her slippers under her arm and ran on tiptoe through the damp yard, angrily hissing at the cats which roguishly entangled themselves with her feet. She went up to Auntie Masha and, sitting down silently on a stool in one corner, set to work to sew up her torn bodice.

'Ah, you shameless hussy!' the Tartar woman snorted, looking at her swollen lips and scratched chin. 'Been playing about with that barber all night! You watch out!'

'The barber can go where he likes, he can go to the devil for all I care,' Polcheka exclaimed coarsely and, furiously biting through the thread, she rested her head against the wall and wept.

After that she got completely out of hand: she began to do her work badly, clattered the utensils unnecessarily, snapped at everybody, went with hair untidy all day, had eyes continually red with weeping, and disappeared at night. Then, in the middle of the summer, as she was cleaning Ludvig Yakovlevich's shoes she felt ill and sick. Soon after this she gave notice, collected her things and, pressing her pale lips together, went off no one knew where. Ludvig Yakovlevich was so upset that he stopped washing himself and walked up and down the untidy rooms for days on end, dragging his feet in his slippers. He would get as far as the settee, gaze through his pince-nez at the empty wall, where only recently had hung two postcards, of a lady on a bicycle and a pig with forget-me-nots, would stand there for a moment, then would blow into his whiskers and go back to the piano. He would open the lid, play a few bars from Beethoven's 'Moonlight' sonata, and then in his perplexity would wander back to the settee.

In the house, however, the wildest rumours began to circulate

concerning Polechka, though Ludvig Yakovlevich had no suspicion of them. They all led to one conclusion: he had forced his servant to live with him, but had not registered the cohabitation legally at the registry office; he had put her in the family way; then he, the miserable devil, had shamelessly kicked her out; now she was hiding her shame somewhere and was preparing for the birth of the child at the end of February, and meantime she was selling cigarettes in the street market. Although these were all pure guesses, Ludvig Yakovlevich suddenly became the centre of general attention and contempt. The moment he appeared in the yard the housewives thrust their illboding faces, crimson from pumping up Primuses, out of all the windows, and the air was filled with scathing remarks, while the cheeky children, leaving their games, began to sing in chorus: 'The German, the sausage, he done a girl wrong, and now no one knows where she has gone.' And the tipsy water-cart man no longer took off his cap to Ludvig Yakovlevich, but deliberately shouted in an impertinent tone: 'I hope you're well, citizen of the free profession!' and winked with eyes as muddy and heavy as lead at the children's nurses.

Thus the autumn passed, and the winter season again arrived.

6

Meantime, barber Max was sitting in the evil old woman's tiny room in Zatsepka and was drinking tea, nibbling between whiles at the knob of sugar in his hand. He unhurriedly blew into the large dove-grey saucer balanced on three fingers at the level of his soldierly chin, and circumstantially explained in a tedious tenor voice:

'So I went to the Conservatoire to-day. You bet. I went to the Conservatoire. I had a talk there with a certain fellow. Yes. I got hold of certain details. From a certain fellow. . . .'

'Have something to eat, Maxim Petrovich,' the old woman said, curtseying.

'Don't interrupt! I haven't finished my tea yet,' barber Max observed unhurriedly, staring straight in front of him with unwinking, expressionless eyes. 'I'll drink it up. You bet. I got hold of certain details. From a certain fellow. And I went to the theatre

again. To the operetta. You bet. The operetta. I had a talk there with the doorkeeper. I got certain details out of him. Details, I said. You can pour me out some more tea now. And what's the result? Reckon for yourselves. From the Conservatoire he gets one hundred and ten roubles fifty kopeks a month, and from the theatre one hundred and forty-five roubles a month. Add them together. What's the result? You get two hundred and fifty-five roubles fifty kopeks. Now, how much alimony is one third of that? Divide by three. Eighty-five roubles and some odd kopeks.'

Barber Max stared coldly at Polechka, who was sitting opposite him with her arms folded under her apron over her belly, and unhurriedly repeated in a higher tone:

'With kopeks. Monthly. You bet!'

'My God, Maxim Petrovich, what rubbish you do talk!' Polechka shouted angrily, and her faded face turned the colour of a potato about to sprout. 'You can go to the devil, that's what you can do! How can I think of getting all that alimony out of a respectable citizen who's as innocent as a lamb?'

'We'll drag him to court!' hissed the pernicious old woman with a crooked nose.

'Don't interrupt! Keep quiet!' Max politely told the old hag, and the blue veins stood out on his bald temples above his short ears. 'Don't interrupt! Eighty-five roubles a month are not to be picked up anywhere. I bet they aren't! And you, Polya, you've got nothing on me, seeing as I didn't leave you in the street, but, on the contrary, like any decent man would, I'm keeping you at my own expense. And don't get upset. You can say thank you. You don't know when you're well off.'

7

One day after dinner, at the end of April, Ludvig Yakovlevich heard the noise of a brawl in the yard. He went to the window, and saw Polechka. She was standing awkwardly in the very middle of the yard, grown amazingly goodlooking again, and fresh. She was surrounded by an inquisitive crowd, while she wiped her eyes with a handkerchief. In her arm lay something wrapped in a little blue blanket. The old woman with a crooked nose was hovering around

her and scandalmongering at the top of her voice, addressing her remarks to the windows, which were filled with a swarm of staring, inquisitive faces.

A little way off was a group consisting of the tipsy water-cart driver, Auntie Masha, barber Max in his apron and holding a hone, a woman delegate from the domestic workers' union, in a red neckerchief, the neighbour who had provided the sal volatile, and a large number of other comrades and citizens, whose number grew with every minute.

'Is that you, Polechka?' Ludvig Yakovlevich cried in the greatest agitation, hurriedly throwing open the window. 'What's the matter, my child? Who's upset you?'

At that all the faces turned joyfully towards Ludvig Yakovlevich, and in her delight the old woman with a crooked nose even slapped herself on her flounced skirts.

'There's the very identical!' she screamed out. 'There's the old dog himself. Good afternoon! Take a good look at the old dog, citizens. Look how fat he's got, you wouldn't believe it, would you? How could you do such a thing, citizen? You can take up with a girl all right, but when you've got what you want you put your tail between your legs and say goodbye: she can go where she likes! And the child can swell with hunger, but as for paying a third for alimony, you're not all right for that! Once a dog, always a dog. There are too many dogs like you these days. . . .'

Not believing his own ears and completely at a loss to know what it was all about, Ludvig Yakovlevich clutched at the window-sill with trembling hands, and felt weak in the pit of his stomach. He turned livid, and, unable to hear his own voice for the roaring in in his ears, shouted down into the yard:

'You're a dog yourself! A dog tries to tell me. . . .'

'Ah, so you're still capable of abusing an old woman! Look at the dog he is, citizens! And for all he knows I may be her own aunt. For all he knows I may drag him to court about my own niece, the dog! Citizens, you're all witnesses. You'll be a witness, comrade delegate; and you, citizen barber, you'll be a witness; and you, citizen, you're that dog's neighbour.'

The crowd began to roar with indignation. Polechka stood more

dead than alive in the middle of the general tumult, with the child in her arms. With a clammy dew under his eyes Ludvig Yakovlevich staggered back into the room, feebly slammed the window behind him, lay down, seeing nothing around him except the copious unhappy tears which streamed on to the bed, and covered his head with the pillow.

Next day he was presented with a summons to appear at the people's court as defendant in case Number so and so. He at once put his pince-nez on his slippery nose and went to see the neighbour who had given him the sal volatile. Pressing the summons to his violently beating heart, Ludvig Yakovlevich circumstantially explained the whole of this unprecedented business to his neighbour, and exclaimed: 'And yet I loved her like my own daughter!' In old-fashioned, artificial phrases he invited the neighbour as a noble and extremely intelligent man to be a witness for the defence. Trying to avoid looking at Ludvig Yakovlevich, the extremely intelligent neighbour scratched his crown, twisted his far forelock around his finger, and with some embarrassment explained that he had already been summoned as a witness for the prosecution, but he would speak the absolute truth in court, and only tell what he had seen.

Ludvig Yakovlevich ceremoniously took his leave and went to the theatre to see the chairman of the theatre committee. The Chairman, who was the manager with rosy ears who had given Polechka her seat, listened with preoccupied air to the maestro and, when he had finished, remarked, with a sorrowful pout of his lower lip:

'You've made your bed, and you must lie on it!'

'I swear by my honour that I love her like my own daughter', Ludvig Yakovlevich said fervently.

'You tell her that!' the manager sang the refrain of a popular song. 'If you want the joys of love, you must pay for them.'

None the less he gave the maestro an encouraging pat on the sleeve and promised that he would certainly go to the court and, as the Trade Union's representative, would give Ludvig Yakovlevich the very best of social and political characters.

The maestro ceremoniously took his leave and, feeling his cheeks twitching impotently, went home.

8

Ludvig Yakovlevich spent the night before the trial in a very unpleasant fashion: he did not sleep a wink, but only smoked and thought. Yet he did not think of his approaching disgrace, but about his lonely life and his approaching old age. He turned up at the court with his hair carefully trimmed, freshly shaved, and a little pale. He was on his trial for the first time in his life. In search of the hall where his case was to be heard he wandered up and down the slushy staircases and the corridors, with their smell of carbolic, stumbling in the dreary early morning darkness upon smoky samovars and grey-looking people.

He had hardly taken off his hat and tiptoed into the court hall when innumerable familiar and strange faces were turned towards him. A mournful murmur of talk arose. The people's judge, a woman, hissed at the public. Ludvig Yakovlevich sat down on a bench. Right in front of him he noticed the barber's caracul collar and blond nape. Beside the barber the tipsy water-cart driver was sitting with a plaster on his grey neck, surreptitiously eating a pickled cucumber. Beyond him was the full-sleeved bodice of the old woman from Zatsepka, the rosy ears of the theatre manager, the head of the neighbour who had supplied the sal volatile, and the neckerchief of the delegate from the domestic workers.

By the judge's table, a young man with close-cropped hair and black moustaches, a woman with a baby in her arms, and witnesses were standing at wooden rails. The young man looked at the public from time to time, as, smiling wrily, wriggling his foot in his new golosh, he said:

'Of course, comrade judge, I'm not to know who citizeness Timofeeva lived with. I personally did not have any relations with her. It's quite possible that citizeness Timofeeva had relations with someone else. I personally didn't have any relations with her.'

'Ah, so you didn't have any relations with me!' the woman gave tongue, hastily wiping the baby's nose on its blanket. 'So you didn't have any relations with me! Then who did you have relations with? Where did the baby come from, if you didn't have any relations?'

In his horror Ludvig Yakovlevich hid his eyes, and came to himself only when the young man had been sentenced to pay fifteen roubles a month, and the clerk to the court began hurriedly to call the names of all those summoned in the case of citizen Knigge.

Hearing his name, Ludvig Yakovlevich forced out the word 'here!' in a voice not his own, and suddenly saw Polechka's jacket quite close to him. The old woman with a crooked nose solicitously pushed the girl up to the bar, throwing coarse looks at Ludvig Yakovlevich meanwhile. The witnesses moved along from the passageway between the benches. Ludvig Yakovlevich saw the tensely strained, yellow temples and lacklustre eyes of barber Max.

The judge shook back her grey, bobbed hair, adjusted her green, knitted coat, which was negligently sprinkled with cigarette ash, took a glance at the documents in front of her and fixed her bored, expressionless eyes on Ludvig Yakovlevich.

'Do you admit it?' she asked in a very weary tone.

'That's the dog himself!' the noxious old woman began rapidly, breaking in on the judge. 'What has he got to admit? Look out for your pockets! Once a dog, always a dog. He can manage to make a fool of a toiling girl, comrade people's judge, but he can't manage to pay out for the child's maintenance. And all the neighbours as one man can prove the definite fact and let the comrade woman delegate certify. . . .'

'Be quiet, or I'll order you to be put outside,' the judge frowned. 'Well, what have you got to say, citizen Knigge?'

Ludvig Yakovlevich gazed at Polechka. She stood crimson with shame, alluring, tear-stained, her mouth full of tears, her head drooping, and with trembling fingers replaced the teat which had slipped out of the infant's tiny coral lips.

Ludvig Yakovlevich's heart shook and was filled with fervour and tenderness.

'I loved her like my own daughter,' he said in a quivering voice; taking off his pince-nez, he carefully wiped his damp cheek with a large clean handkerchief.

'Be quiet for a moment. The proletarian court is not in the least interested in knowing that. Answer the question: do you admit the offence or don't you?'

'I admit it,' Ludvig Yakovlevich said, his heart sinking.

'But if you admit it, why did you behave so badly? You ought to be ashamed of yourself. An intelligent man like you! How could you throw a woman with a helpless baby into the street?'

'I didn't throw her into the street,' Ludvig Yakovlevich said. 'I always loved her like my own daughter. And I still love her.'

'Be quiet! Answer the proletarian court straight out: will you support the child or won't you? Will you live with the woman or won't you?'

'I will,' Ludvig Yakovlevich said, putting his hand over his heart. 'I will live with her, and I have never refused to live with her.'

The old woman with crooked nose clapped her hands and gave the barber a swift glance.

'Well, and you, citizeness, do you refuse to live with him?' the judge asked Polechka.

'No, I don't refuse,' the girl said almost inaudibly, with only her lips, lowering her lashes, which were weighed down with great tears.

'Excuse me!' the barber hoarsely exclaimed, and his ears went the colour of marble. 'Citizeness judge . . . Excuse me. . . .'

'Be quiet!' the judge waved her pencil angrily at him. 'Well, if nobody refuses, I don't understand what it's all about. It's all quite clear. You quarrelled, and now you've made it up. You know you can't come running to the people's court over every little trifle! Lovers have their tiffs for the pleasure of making it up again. You've made it up, and we'll leave it at that. Anisimov, cancel the case and publish the decision. Next!'

Courteously and tenderly Ludvig Yakovlevich took Polechka by the arm. Slowly they passed by the dumbfounded witnesses and left the hall.

A little later a drozhki drove up to the gates of the house where Ludvig Yakovlevich lived. And Polechka and Ludvig Yakovlevich were perched on the high seat of the drozhki as though on a throne, clinging to both sides of a striped mattress set up on end.

THE ALARM-CLOCK

LEO WEISENBERG

(Translated from the Russian)

AT a busy crossing Andrei was held up by the traffic. Through the drifting snowflakes passed a stream of pedestrians, tramcars, motors and buses, and above the brilliant face of a large electric clock shone like the sun.

'I'll see if my watch is right,' thought Andrei, and reached towards his breast-pocket. Instead of the shape to which his fingers were accustomed, they felt only emptiness. Andrei began to search through all his pockets, but the watch was nowhere to be found. What the devil! He remembered clearly that on leaving the house he had it with him; nevertheless, it was gone.

Andrei was aghast.

His father's gift, the watch had been his constant companion throughout his school and university life. It had served him – seventeen-thirty-two – for fifteen years the watch had served him. Could it possibly have gone beyond recall? Andrei could not believe it. It seemed to him that the watch was still ticking in his breast-pocket, close to his heart. In his imagination he felt it was still there, just as a cripple continues to feel an amputated limb. He even touched the pocket once more.

But the watch had vanished.

Andrei recalled its worn case, the wrinkled dial, yellow with age, and the black hands moving steadily round. Why, he could even hear its faint ticking. He thought of when sometimes it would stop, how he would uncover the mechanism and blow off the dust, and how his breath would revive the watch for a while and it would start again, limping, fitful. Suddenly, it seemed to Andrei as if it had been like an old man.

The snow still descended in large flakes, drifting over pedestrians, tramcars, and motors alike. Andrei kept thinking, 'The watch, the watch,' and his vexation grew. He decided to put off his visit to the publishing house where he had to deliver a manuscript. 'The watch,

the watch,' thought Andrei as he paced the streets, glancing absently into the shop windows. Suddenly he became aware of the sign 'Industrial Watch Co-operative,' and below, tier upon tier of clocks, pocket-watches and wrist-watches. They stood, or they hung on glass rods, like birds, gazing into the street with their owl-like faces, some as if burning with the desire for freedom, others drowsy and disinterested. Above them all, at the crossroads, reigned the huge dial with the red sign across it: 'The right time.'

'I must look around for a new watch,' sighed Andrei, and entered the shop.

He sensed the silent aviary of watches spring to life. Mechanisms, confined in metal, wooden and glass cages, began to tick, to turn, to sing in a hundred different keys. Andrei heard the gruff voice of that staid companion – the dining-room clock, the coquettish ring of antique chimes and the rousing call of the alarm. He heard the croaking of crude workmen's watches and the chirping of ladies' golden wristlets.

A symphony of time, he thought.

There were stop-watches which decided the commonplace destiny of the race-course gambler and listened to the violent heart-beats of the backer. Here were efficient counters which recorded the revolutions of a machine, there the modest adornment of a homely hearth or the ruthless judge of some defeated boxer lying in the bloodstained ring. Here were hustling neighbours and shrewd recorders of wind velocity. There were witnesses of tender first meetings and bitter partings; servants of time and masters of human destiny in infinite variety to appraise the punctual and censor the sluggard.

So the clocks and watches appeared in Andrei's imagination.

He fell into a day-dream, standing in front of a cabinet full of antique watches. He began to examine their curious old-fashioned forms, their enamelled dials decorated with landscapes, arabesques, and flowers. He began to decipher the inscriptions and trade marks: Pourzet, Recordon, Ernchaux, Jacques Souchet. It was a rich collection, and Andrei felt at home among them. He was especially attracted by a most curious watch. Approaching the glass to decipher the letters on the dial, he saw a diffused reflection of himself next to

an unfamiliar face. Obviously, someone else had become interested.

'That is a Breguette,' said Andrei, reading the label.

'Until the tireless Breguette would ring the dinner hour,' replied his neighbour.

The quotation was so unexpected that Andrei turned round sharply to see before him a plain-looking girl, wearing a simple grey coat and crimson beret, and holding a small valise in her hand. The girl smiled as though awaiting an answer. Andrei, however, was in no mood for joking. He again recalled his loss.

'Why do you speak of things which you don't understand?' he said sharply and, noticing the look of astonishment on the girl's face, 'Yes, don't understand,' he repeated.

But the look of astonishment remained.

'Well, tell me,' said Andrei, 'What does the word "Breguette" in your glib quotation mean?'

Her answering smile radiated self-assurance.

'A Breguette,' she said, 'is an old watch or chronometer, named after its designer, a Parisian watchmaker and mechanic, Abraham-Louis Breguette, who lived at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries.'

The answer was quite exhaustive. Andrei was astonished. He wanted to ask, 'How do you know?' but instead said drily, 'Yes. But still incorrect. In a sense, absolutely wrong. You, evidently, think that in this phrase Pushkin meant to convey that Onegin made merry until the Breguette – in other words, the watch – would strike the dinner hour, until it reminded him of dinner. Am I right?'

'Perfectly,' answered the girl.

'Nonsense!' said Andrei, 'nonsense! Pushkin was incomparably more subtle than you are, my dear young lady. "Breguette" in this phrase does not mean a watch at all, nor any kind of clock; but simply – strange as this may appear to you – the stomach.'

'The stomach!' Her mouth opened in astonishment.

'Yes, indeed – the stomach,' said Andrei significantly. 'Pushkin says so himself, somewhere else – do you remember? – "The stomach is our most exact Breguette." Am I right? The meaning of our phrase becomes clear. The poet intended a witticism. He said, "Until the never-sleeping stomach" – yes, stomach, of course, not

watch – "would call Onegin to dinner." In ordinary language, until the stomach would begin to rumble. The watch in this case is allegorical – as everything else, by the way, is allegorical in the great poet's works. Is that clear to you, my dear girl?'

'How interesting!' she said softly.

'As you see,' said Andrei, 'the stomach and time are quite closely inter-related.'

'That *is* interesting!' she repeated, and they turned to the door.

They had dinner together – her name was Anna – and then went to the cinema, and later on for a walk. The snow kept falling, and their faces became wet, but they were quite warm.

'Let us go up to my room,' said Andrei.

But Anna answered, 'It is late, it is almost twelve o'clock.'

Andrei pleaded with her, so they went in. Andrei switched on the electric kettle, spread a cloth, put some biscuits on the table and started a fire in the stove. Anna admired the room, but Andrei had never thought much of it. The tea was hot, the fire in the stove burned brightly. They told each other many things about themselves and felt very cosy. Anna was twenty-two years old, the daughter of a political exile under the Tsar. She was born in Siberia on the wide river Yenissei, which rushes through the ravines of the Sayansk Mountains before it reaches the valleys. Her whole childhood was spent there, but now she had been living in the City for years. She was a student and laboratory worker in the watch department of the institute of exact mechanics. In the watch department . . . Then that was why she knew so much about that Breguette. She lived with her sister, a good way off, on Vassilievsky Island. While Anna told of her work in the laboratory, time flew by. They felt very warm. They became silent until suddenly the clock in the next room struck three.

Anna sprang up. Could it really be three o'clock? Yes, it was three o'clock in the morning, but snow still fell in the street.

'I must be at work at nine o'clock,' said Anna. 'How shall I get home?'

'Stay here,' suggested Andrei. 'I will fix up a bed on the couch for you.'

'I am afraid I'll over-sleep myself,' said she. 'At home my sister wakes me. I mustn't over-sleep.'

Her face grew serious, like that of a studious schoolgirl concentrating upon a problem. Her expression suddenly changed, as though the problem were solved. It became gay and joyous.

'I have an idea,' it seemed to say. Anna bent over to her valise and opened it. Andrei watched her while she pulled out a box, tied with cord.

'What are you doing?' demanded Andrei, perplexed.

Anna untied the cord and opened the box. She pulled out an alarm-clock. She took it out carefully, lovingly, like an infant from its cradle, and put it on the palm of her hand. It was still silent and lifeless.

'I must be at work at nine,' said Anna. 'About twenty minutes for dressing and a half-hour for travelling. I'll set the alarm for eight.'

She wound the clock with skilful, decisive fingers. The clock became alive. It began to tick. Anna put it to to her ear. It had a strong heart. Then she moved the red alarm-hand to the figure eight, wound the alarm, and pulled the time-hand also to eight, so that both coincided. A sound was born and came forth; it cried loud and joyously, as if pleading and at the same time giving an order. It startled Andrei, and he laughed at its violence. The clock stamped its feet. It jumped in Anna's hands, like a lively infant. Tremendous forces, resilient and impetuous, beat within it.

'With such a clock one cannot over-sleep,' said the proud Anna.

Andrei prepared Anna's bed on the couch. She undressed quickly and fell asleep while he lay in bed, reading as usual. He found himself in the thick of a noisy, obstinate dispute.

This dispute, on the nature of time, went on and on in the pages of his book, a battle indeed. The warriors were the philosophers of many ages and schools of thought. Time ... Some of them, in their simple childishness, saw it as 'the sphere of worlds', others christened it 'the life of the soul', and dipped it in the dark fount of Christianity; others confined it in the brain of man, as in a prison, proclaiming it 'a manner of thought', or 'a window for the study of nature'. Some saw in it a symbol of illusion, others the proof of the

existence of all matter. Time . . . What a battle raged in the lines and pages of this book! How the grey-beards of the learned wagged in frenzy!

The alarm-clock kept on ticking and ticking as the hands crept round the dial.

Andrei closed the book and looked at the couch. Anna slept. He could hear her breathing, and for a time was entranced by her waves of fair hair. He turned off the light, and in the darkness heard the beat of the alarm-clock and saw its luminous hands brightly shining.

At length it seemed to him that it was his own heart beating and his eyes which shone so brightly. In the darkness, Andrei could almost feel the cool metal of the alarm-clock. Gradually the ticking ceased, the gleam of the hands faded and the iron form of the alarm-clock disappeared, like water between the fingers. Or, perhaps, had Andrei's heart calmed down and his eyes closed and his body become restful? Who can fathom those mysteries? Like water between the fingers. He was asleep.

A terrible sound burst upon Andrei in his sleep, like the clang of a distant tramcar, like the gong of a fire-engine, like the tocsin, strident and compelling.

It wrenched open his drowsy eyelids, it pulled off his blanket. It forced him to sit up and to see the alarm-clock pointing to eight o'clock. As before, the clock stamped its feet like a lively infant. As on the previous night, it leaped up and down on the table like a noisy child, full of energy. It had acquired tremendous new strength, elastic and impetuous. Now, it seemed to move, going towards Andrei, pushing him roughly.

Andrei longed to sleep.

'Devil take it!' thought he. He glanced at the couch, to see Anna's mass of lovely hair. The alarm-clock kept ringing incessantly and violently, as though asking and commanding. 'Devil take it!' thought Andrei.

'Turn round,' said Anna's voice through the ringing.

He heard her dressing, quickly and methodically. He heard her remove the bedding from the couch. He still lay in bed, his face to the wall, and gave directions. A clean towel was in the closet, soap in the bathroom, in a white saucer on the shelf. Bread and butter

were in the window. Then Anna went to wash, and the water from the tap came clear and fresh, like spring water. But he still lay in bed. Anna returned, her face glowing.

'I'll open the window,' she said. 'May I?'

'Certainly,' he answered with resignation. He dreaded the cold air, and pulled up the blanket to his very nose.

He gave her more directions, where to get a knife, a glass and plates – petty household directions. He gave orders, lying in bed, and the morning air poured in through the window. Anna drank her tea, cleared the table. washed the dishes and prepared his breakfast. She did all this differently and more rapidly than he could ever do.

'How handy she is!' he thought – 'an accurate machine.'

'It is twenty-past eight,' said Anna; 'in five minutes I shall be gone.'

Andrei glanced at the alarm-clock. 'It is so early,' he thought, 'so early.' He did not want her to go.

'It is so early,' he said.

But she did not understand.

'There is plenty of time,' she replied. 'I'll get there on time.'

She put on her coat and red beret, and became like the girl in the watchmaker's shop the night before. Andrei thought of their meeting, and again he did not want her to go, but felt that he was powerless to hold her.

'Anna,' said he, 'come back to-night.'

'I'll ring up,' she answered, and, waving her hand, was gone.

'Be sure you do,' Andrei called after her.

His voice from the crumpled bed sounded indistinct and hollow. Andrei remained alone in the silence of the room. Yet he felt the presence of a stranger. His heart beat faster. Suddenly he was conscious of a ticking sound. The alarm-clock, Anna had forgotten it. Andrei glanced towards it.

It showed half-past eight. 'So early,' thought Andrei.

The alarm-clock frowned at him. Its gladness of the night before had disappeared. It looked sternly disapproving and seemed angry.

'Devil take it!' thought Andrei, and, turning over, he fell asleep.

And again he slept, a deep sleep. . . .

Andrei awoke at one o'clock in the afternoon.

Usually Andrei would get up very late – at one or even two o'clock in the afternoon. He would dress, without haste, and leisurely eat his breakfast while reading or looking through his bookshelves. It was usually three o'clock before he sat down to work. But he did not work for long. Either he would have to go out, or ideas simply would not come to him, or it would be time for dinner. He would go out, and return late at night and get to work. Late rising had become habitual, but at the same time he found many justifications. His work kept him up so late that he rarely fell asleep before three o'clock. True, his work was not always an excuse, but the habit of late rising became rooted.

In the evening Anna rang up from the laboratory and promised to come. They sat talking till late, and she came again on the third and fourth days and stayed the night. Finally, she settled in his room as his wife and they lived together. She brought with her a different atmosphere. She was cheerful, but brisk and dominating. Their lives were so different. This side of her nature appeared at first in everything that she did.

Andrei took a dislike to the alarm-clock immediately, and with each passing day it became more and more unbearable. Its clamour sharply roused him each morning. This fat, iron creature tore his beloved Anna from his embraces, disrobed her with the roughness of a gaoler, and smothered the cries of its victim as she submitted to the ordeal by cold water. It forced Anna into the wet street, hurried her into a tram, and so to work. She became once more absorbed in the service of time, poring over watches and chronometers until the evening. It seemed to Andrei that Anna was too willing a slave to the imperious decrees of the alarm-clock.

In him it inspired feelings of rage, even jealousy.

Mingled with his tenderness and gratitude to Anna were the feelings of a stern and exacting master. Bitterly he resented her daily absence.

Once they quarrelled, and Andrei reproached Anna for being heartless, for loving her chronometers more than her husband. There was no sense in their living together, he said. Anna gathered up her things and went back to her old room. Andrei was greatly distressed. It was all caused by the hateful alarm-clock. Andrei

loathed the clock. He waited patiently, hoping that she would return in the evening, but she did not come, and at last he fell asleep.

He slept as if he was drugged, heavily ... And yet a part of Andrei's brain seemed to be alert, to watch, to listen for some expected sound. It was uncanny, this half felt premonition. It was hostile, this expected sound, and yet eagerly awaited. It seemed to Andrei's sub-consciousness that the silence would burst like a dam and the clatter of the alarm-clock would submerge him. It would be a relief to hear it once more. Nevertheless, his sleep was sound, and there was silence.

There was silence for two mornings, and then ten fresh, frosty mornings passed peacefully by, and finally a month. The memory of Anna began to grow faint. As for the alarm-clock, he even thought of it with affection, reminiscent perhaps of his fondness for the vanished watch. Life began to flow in the usual channels, and he slept soundly as he had formerly slept.

One evening Andrei met Anna in the theatre, alone. They met face to face in the narrow passage. Andrei became confused and sought to turn away, but it was impossible to avoid a meeting. They walked on together, met again during the intervals, and were soon telling the news since their parting as though they had never quarrelled. They decided to live together once more and never to part. As on that first evening, Andrei said: 'Let us go up to my room,' and Anna answered, 'It is late, it is almost twelve o'clock,' Andrei pleaded, 'Well, just for a little while.' Anna promised to return the next day. She came and brought her things, among them the fat, iron creature, just as before, and they sat up talking. Once more Anna wound the alarm-clock. They fell asleep very late.

The ringing of the alarm-clock tore Andrei out of a deep sleep.

Andrei was puzzled. The sound was different. A new sound. As though long expected, and now released. A new sound. It was joyous and free. It was welcome, as the rustling of a green branch above a desert spring to the weary traveller. Like a shepherd's pipe at dawn, like a hunter's horn, like a trumpeter, triumphant, it sang of comradeship and love.

Andrei's eyes opened.

He beheld Anna already refreshed by the cold morning wash and

with new gladness recalled their happy meeting. Ashamed, he began to dress, quickly, hurriedly. He splashed water over the bathroom and brushed his teeth vigorously. He rubbed his body till it glowed. He seemed to be taking part in a race. He rushed in just as Anna, humming a tune, was sitting down at table. She poured out his tea and sliced the bread, and Andrei, sitting beside her, a proud equal in the contest, thought how delicious was the tea and how fresh the air which poured in through the window.

'Why are you up so early this morning?' asked Anna.

'I couldn't sleep,' answered Andrei. 'I have work to do.'

Before leaving, Anna put her arms around him. He went with her to the door, watched her descend and heard the outer door bang below. He was alone, alone. But there was no solitude now, there was no loneliness. Neither was there the previous empty silence. He sat down at the table and began writing. Nothing remained of his previous awkwardness and uncertainty. He even began to hum a tune, a new one like the song Anna had sung, and the alarm-clock kept time with him. Andrei could sense its mechanism at work. The alarm-clock gaily ticking away the minutes.

Andrei rose early each day. It was the alarm-clock which awakened him, and which from early morning sang a song of comradeship between the three of them. Before, it had seemed to be a stranger; then, it had been an enemy which would part them. Now both Andrei and Anna opened their eyes at its first clarion call. They got so used to rising when it called that they did not always need waking. Sometimes they even got up before the hour. Sometimes Andrei, sometimes Anna, would awake first. In this early rising there was an eagerness, a kind of unexpressed competition, as to who should be first. In bed one evening Anna said:

'I have to be at work half an hour earlier to-morrow.'

'Shock-worker!' said Andrei, drowsily.

But Anna beat the clock, waking up a full half-hour earlier, as she had wished. From force of habit Andrei got up too, although he would have welcomed a little more sleep. When the time came for Anna to go to work, Andrei watched her get ready. She put on a new spring coat and hat, and arranged her lovely fair hair. He watched her closely, and she came over to him and, as always, before

leaving put her arm around him with a gentle touch, like that of wings.

Emotion surged within him. Tenderness and a fond jealousy filled his heart, filling it to overflowing. He could not bear to let Anna go. Where and why must she go? He was being deprived of his Anna chosen by him, cared for by him: as though someone were tearing away a part of himself, an arm or a leg. This same proprietory fondness filled Andrei's simple but self-seeking heart.

They stood thus for a long time in silence. Only their hearts beat until it seemed the beats changed to a different note, soft and far away, like the shepherd's pipe at dawn or the hunter's horn in the far distance, then like the crowing of a cock or the sound of a syren. The sound became louder. It rang out like a trumpet, it beat like the drum of marching troops and pealed like a bell. Then it burst forth like a cannon shot.

At that, their hands unclasped.

It was a clear, spring morning. Sparkling air streamed into the room. Men and women were off to work. Boys and girls were schoolward bound. Anna marched gaily in step with them. There was new life and purpose within her, radiant, invincible. The great clock hung like the sun above the cross-roads, 'eight o'clock' it seemed to shout; 'eight o'clock!' And the alarm-clock on Andrei's table, with its powerful beat, kept in step 'eight o'clock!' Andrei stood at the window and drank in the morning air. He threw the window open to the full and turned eagerly to his work.

MY BIRTHDAY

A. RASKIN AND M. SLOBODSKI

(*Translated by Alec Brown*)

THE other day I discovered I was twenty-eight years old. It was my birthday. I do not know what this meant to other people. I found it a very pleasing thought, and I had the idea of celebrating the event

in a quiet, homely sort of way, with a few intimate friends. So I sat down and began ringing them up.

Nicolai accepted, but with one condition.

'Either I bring my uncle, or I can't come at all,' he said. 'Uncle's come up all the way from Kineshma, and he's only a couple of days here, so he must be amused. He's a milk expert. . . .'

It wasn't entirely clear to me why a milk expert should come to me to be amused, but I held my tongue.

When I got her on the phone, Verotchka started by a flat refusal. Then she said, 'You see, I promised to go and see some girl friends to-morrow. Lerotchka and Mika. Twins, You know them. No? They're so nice, frightfully sweet, both of them, absolute darlings. If you like we'll all come round.'

I agreed. What else could I have said?

But there was no hesitation about Victor.

'Righty-o, old boy,' he said, 'Kira and I'll come round.'

'Who's Kira?' I asked, point-blank.

'Ah-ha, you'll see,' said Victor.

The next day I awaited my guests with some degree of curiosity. At nine o'clock the door-bell rang for the first time. I rushed at the door, but my mother happened to be in the hall, so she bore the first brunt of it.

'Here I am,' bellowed the visitor, 'three cheers, say I. First-rate, marvellous, silver wedding!'

'Whose silver wedding?' my mother asked.

'Isn't it a silver wedding? Oh, of course, it's the Kovrovs have a silver wedding party, the day after to-morrow, at ten. Yours is a christening, isn't it? Well, where's the boy? Ah, and there's the happy father! Congratulations! Oh ho, this is really a case for drowning all cares! How're y' off for vodka? Got enough in, granny?'

'I haven't got a grandmother,' I said, flatly, 'and I haven't got a son either.'

'Here, let's get this straight,' the visitor said, 'What then are we going to drink to? Look here, no hanky-panky! If you invite a chap to a christening, there must be a kid somewhere!'

'Comrade, you've got it wrong,' said my mother, 'it's a birthday we're celebrating.'

'A birthday! And here's me, come to a christening. No, of course, I remember, it's the Kliupov's christening to-morrow. Yours . . . yours . . . I say, excuse me, is it Vitka knows you?'

'I do know Vitka.'

'Now I've got it straight. Of course, it's a birthday. You see, Vitka had to go on duty, unexpectedly. So he sent me on all by myself. Give that old pumpkin Mishka my best wishes, he said. He's just twenty-eight. So you're the happy man!'

'I am.'

'By Jove, and what a man too! And I'm Kira. Congrats, old boy. But what are we standing here in the hall for? Let's go in. No, I know what, you stay here and welcome the visitors, and I'll look after things inside. . . .'

It turned out that Vera had to be at the theatre. But the twin friends turned up, nevertheless. They were dressed absolutely alike, in yellow Cossack coats, and their eyebrows and lips were alike. Whenever Lerotchka started a sentence, Mika wound it up with a bang. Though sometimes they spoke in duet.

'Congratulations,' said Lerotchka, 'on your birthday', continued Mika. 'Very pleased to meet you,' they wound up, together, and both stretched out their hands together.

'That's O.K., that's O.K., off with your things!' came Kira's commands. 'Mishka, help the ladies off with their coats. Don't worry, I'll be with you, half a tick, I've a little job on the commissariat side first.'

After the twin sisters, came Nikolai and the milk expert uncle. The milk uncle turned out to be advanced in years, and pedantic. When he took off his things, he took a piece of chalk out of his pocket and put his initials on his goloshes.

'Insurance against theft,' he explained.

We went inside. But immediately, there was Kira, hair all awry. 'Here, man, listen, where's the gramophone? Come on, don't waste time, where is it?'

'I haven't got one; why?'

'No gramophone? Well, I know what – I'll just ring up Rostik. He's got some marvellous records.'

'Who is Rostik?' I asked – I was getting worried.

'Oh, he's the goods, I tell you. It's true, he's a little off colour. He's a bit melancholic. But dance . . . my dear boy!'

The whole company was there, when Rostik and his gramophone, and a tall blonde, turned up.

'I . . . I mean . . . I mean . . . congratulations, I mean . . .' he muttered, turning to the clock. Then, after thinking a moment, he added, 'I'm . . . er . . . I'm awfully . . . glad . . . I mean. . . .'

'Birthday,' prompted Kira.

'Of course, that's right,' Rostik said, and shook Lerotchka's hand fiercely, so that she got the congratulations.

It soon became clear that most of the company had already met at other birthday parties, and all knew each other. When we sat down to supper, the conversation was most lively – among them. I did not find it quite so good. On my right-hand sat the milk expert. The nephew, being placed by Kira between Lerotchka and Mika, could not look after his visiting uncle, and the uncle stepped a little heavily on the spirits, trying meanwhile, from time to time, to impart to me the secrets of cheese-manufacture. I have no doubt he would have succeeded in the end, had not the tall blonde on my left interfered so much.

'Tell me,' she asked, 'isn't that young man over there an architect? You see, my first husband told me that architects earn such big money. You know, it's so interesting! Will you introduce me? You will, won't you? It must be awfully sweet, dancing with an architect.'

'But, he's . . .'

'Oh, I adore art! Everybody tells me I'm so gifted, don't they, Rostik?'

'Well . . . of course . . . I mean . . .' was Rostik's confirmation.

'You see? And who's that old man? An engineer? Did you know my second husband was an engineer. . . .'

At this point, the uncle interrupted. 'I might go so far,' he said, 'as to tell you that I'm the Union's leading cheese expert. I'd like you to be one too. You might almost say that the milk business is my speciality. I'll tell you all about it, in a minute.'

But the blonde wasn't going to give in so easily. 'I am nearly an engineer myself,' she said. 'I'm frightfully fond of all sorts of drawings and figures. Do you know, my third husband. . . .'

'You take ordinary, common or garden milk,' continued the uncle, 'and you transform the product into cheese. Roquefort, No. 3 standard. But how? You couldn't tell me that! But I'll tell you all about it, in a minute.'

Fortunately, they began dancing at this point. Kira made me and the uncle take the chairs out into the kitchen, while he opened the ball.

'Who's that idiot there, carrying chairs?'

'Which one do you mean? That old bore?'

'Yes.'

'I really don't know. Better ask Kira. . . .'

This was all more than I could stand. I sat the next half-hour out in the kitchen, between the sink and the kitchen-table. Then I took advantage of a moment when the din grew greater than ever, slipped out onto the stairs, and with some trepidation listened — I could hear Kira's voice.

'Permettez-moi! Now comes a world dance. . . .'

I had to waken the concierge, and ask him to take me in. That good old man gave me a chest to lie on. But I could not sleep. At four o'clock I summoned courage, and rang my own number.

'Misha's friend, Victor, speaking,' I said, 'I've just come off duty. Can I come round?'

'Come on!' answered Kira's over-cheerful voice. 'We're having a magnificent time. It's true, our host has skedaddled somewhere. But to hell with him. Tight, no doubt. Come on, hurry up. . . .'

I did nothing of the kind. I felt so comfortable, on that quiet, comfy oak chest. I felt quite a domestic feeling.

RUSSIAN HOSPITALITY

LEONID LENCH

(*Translated by Alec Brown*)

'LILY' Ivanovna, a sweet young girl who works in the cashier's office of the TEZHE stores, met old Mrs. Geraskin in the corridor of their

service flats. Mrs. Geraskin was in full field kit, with a bag in her hand, and 'Lily' Ivanovna was very excited, and said, 'Off shopping, granny? Would you do me a favour? Please! While you're shopping, buy me half a pound of petit-fours, and a jar of black-currant jam? Here's the money – you keep the change for yourself.'

'Oh, so he's coming to see 'ee, is 'e?' winked old Mrs. Geraskin, as she tucked the money away in her massive, cabby's purse, which had seen many a rouble pass through it as long back as Tsar Alexander III.

'It's . . . it's . . . a cousin of mine coming to see me,' said Lily, rather vaguely.

'Not an engineer, is it, dearie?'

'No. He's a lieutenant in the frontier guards. Just back from the Far East.'

When she heard of the Far East, the old woman gasped politely, then hurried off on her errands.

Lily had not known her frontier guard long. Now he was spending his leave in Moscow. They had been to theatres together, and the cinema. But yesterday, the lieutenant had rung up and said that he absolutely had to have a private meeting with her.

Lily went back and began to tidy up her room. She was so nervous and fussy about it that she broke her pet porcelain hare, which for so many years had observed Lily's unruffled life from the heights of its fretwork bracket.

The loss of her hare upset Lily frightfully. She took the fragments out into the kitchen and there was old Mrs. Geraskin, just coming back.

'There wasn't any black-currant jam,' she announced, cheerfully, 'so I got raspberry. It doesn't signify, your cousin can drink raspberry jam in his tea. Oh, heavens above, you don't say you've broken the little hare!'

'I have,' Lily said, sadly.

'Don't worry, my pet. It's good luck, breaking a hare. You're going to be very lucky. About your cousin.'

'Don't you like to run on, granny!'

At last, punctually at eight, there were the long-awaited four short and two long rings – each flat having its own combination –

and the lieutenant, freshly shaved and scented, with a bag of sweets in his hand, clicking his heels decisively, strode into the hall.

When they had drunk a glass of tea each – with raspberry jam – the lieutenant took Lily's little hand in his own big hand and said: 'Lily Alexandrovna, Lily. . . .'

But there came a loud knock at the door. Lily fluttered up like a frightened sparrow, and asked in a trembling voice, 'Who is it?'

'It's only me,' came the bass voice of Lily's neighbour, Nikodimov the engineer, 'just a moment.'

So she had to open the door and let the engineer in.

'Cheers, Lily Alexandrovna,' said the engineer, as he came in. 'Do forgive me butting in like this. But I just wanted to ask you in, neighbourly fashion, you know. And do bring your cousin with you,' and very politely, the engineer bowed to the lieutenant. Granny Geraskin told me you've just come from the Far East? Do join us, comrades! With such a visitor, we must open a bottle of vodka. Come on, come on!'

The engineer was so insistent, that they simply had to go.

An hour later, Lily, separated from the lieutenant by the length of a large table covered with bottles and *zakuska*, heard all Engineer Nikodimov's toasts with a sore heart.

'Comrades,' proposed the engineer, 'I propose a toast to Lily Alexandrovna and her heroic cousin. Comrade Lieutenant Nikolai Nikolaievitch, please tell us a story!'

'Do, do, do tell us a story!' echoed the whole table.

The lieutenant tried to wriggle out of it.

'All I can tell you,' he said, 'you've already seen in the papers.'

'That's just what we want!' they cried.

The lieutenant told them a great deal. The whole Nikodimov family saw him well on his way, when he left, and it was only with the greatest difficulty that Lily managed to whisper: 'Come tomorrow. At nine.'

Once again evening fell. Once again Granny Geraskin went out for raspberry jam, and some petit-fours. And once again the lieutenant had just taken the tiny hand in his and opened his mouth, as if to say something very, very important, when there was a knock at the door.

'Who is it?' Lily asked, nervily.

'Me,' came the voice of Bertha Abramovna, wife of Dr. Feinstock, Lily's other neighbour.

She had to let Mrs. Feinstock in.

'Lily dear, I've come for you,' said Mrs. Feinstock, in a decisive contralto. 'And your cousin. You'll come to us. We'll sit and have a lovely talk, then we'll dance. We're so anxious to meet your cousin, Lily dear. You see, he's from the Far East, don't forget!'

'We can't come,' Lily said, 'we're busy.' She said this very sadly and blushed.

The lieutenant looked at his spurs, in embarrassment.

'Nonsense, I don't believe you,' cried Mrs. Feinstock, waving her arms. 'You went to see the Nikodimovs, so you can come to see us. Come on, let's go.'

They had to go to the Feinstocks. There was another supper, with a lot to drink and once again they sat separated.

Another evening came. Once again, just as the lieutenant – you know the rest – there came the knock at the door. 'That'll be the Grigorievs,' Lily whispered, growing pale, 'or the Gurskis. I know the Gurskis have been roasting a joint of veal.'

Lily was quite right. It was somebody from the Grigorievs. After them, came the Gurskis, the Mouhins, and the Zilbruks. It was a large house. They each and all invited Lily and the frontier guard to come in – each and all made them sit apart while they stuffed them with food and drink and flattered them. The only snag was, that Lily and the lieutenant too wanted to say nice things – to each other – but without witnesses.

At last the day came when all the tenants of that rabbit-warren of a house had had their way, and once again they had drunk tea and raspberry jam.

'Lily Alexandrovna,' said the lieutenant, 'Lily.'

And there was a knock at the door!

'Oh heavens above, who on earth can that be!' cried Lily, in horror.

'It's only me, what are you afraid of?' came old Mrs. Geraskin's voice. 'Well, aren't you going to let me in?'

So they simply had to let Granny Geraskin in.

'Now you young people come along to my little abode,' the old woman declared, 'and you too, my dear boy. And I'll give you tea and gingerbread. Six roubles a kilo. I've got one hundred and fifty grammes for you.'

'Granny, we'll come some other time . . . later . . .' Lily whispered, in desperation.

'No, you've been to see everybody, you must come to me too,' she said. 'No, my pet, you can't wriggle out of it. Come on, Mr. Cousin.'

The gingerbread was stale, and the tea smelt mouldy. Granny Geraskin sat Lily beside some old woman, in an old-fashioned bonnet.

'Well, Mr. Cousin, do tell us how our dear boys are, out in the Far East,' Granny Geraskin ordered, in stern tones.

A few days ago I met that young couple, arm in arm, on the Petrovka. They were walking along, in the seventh heaven, all laughter. Lily was saying 'I've ordered the tickets. But Kolia, does it really take nine days to get to Vladivostok?'

It seems that after all, the lieutenant did succeed in getting out that important announcement.

PATHLESS

R. FREIRMAN

(Translated by Alec Brown)

[A party of partisans, eight in number, is being guided across untrodden country by a Tungus Siberian, named Alyoshek.]

THREE days the partisans made their way among the mountains.

The sky glinted blue, the rocks were the colour of a pigeon's egg, the slopes covered with cedars. The last trace of man vanished.

The higher they climbed, the more grim was Nebyvaiev's heart.

In crossing one saddle alone the Tungus deerskin moccasins wore through, and most of them took to their high boots again.

Their supply of biscuit was eaten.

They halted for the night early, to find a little white moss for the reindeer.

The third night they went to bed hungry, but slept well. Only Nebyvaiev suddenly awakened and sat up on his deerskin; he seized his rifle. 'That's bad!' he said to himself. There was complete silence. He thrust his head outside the tent. The moon hung over the ravine. An iron spoon which Oustinkin had stuck in the ground by the fire, glittered. The fire had gone out. Alyoshek had disappeared.

Nebyvaiev felt the ashes. They were cold.

'So he's been gone a long time.' Nebyvaiev lay down on the stones, beside the dead fire. It was frightful to think that now the detachment was guideless.

'There you are,' he said to himself, almost audibly, 'he's an enemy.'

And another voice answered him, just as softly: 'There's something fishy, Comrade Commander.'

Nebyvaiev raised his head. Dessiukov was kneeling beside him. His face had an earthy colour, his eyes gleamed in the moonlight.

'I'll settle the devil's hash for him. He slooped off somewhere yesterday too. It didn't enter my head then. I thought the chap had slipped off to ease nature. He ought to be shot.'

'He'll be shot.'

They did not say another word. They sat on a long time in silence, without reviving the fire. And all the time, the spoon glittered beside the cold embers. The ravine filled with the bluish smoke which came before daybreak. Suddenly a similar blue shade fell at Nebyvaiev's feet. He raised his rifle.

Alyoshek came up to the fire. He was wet through to the waist and breathing heavily. Nebyvaiev and Dessiukov exchanged glances, but asked nothing. Alyoshek squatted down beside them, struck his flint and steel, and was a long time getting a light to his pipe. It refused to burn. His heart could not bear to lie.

'Kill Alyoshek,' he said to Nebyvaiev.

'We thought you had gone off for good, and left us.'

The commissar's words seemed strange to Alyoshek. He sighed, picked up the spoon, put it on the bale.

'The moon is bright,' he said, 'but there's no track. I have looked for it two nights, and I shall look till I find it. I've crossed the ravine a dozen times. The track should run at the bottom, by the water. Nor can we go back. There is no moss for the reindeer. They have eaten what there was. We have to go on!'

Nebyvaiev listened to the silence of the breaking day. But neither wind, nor birds, were to be heard. Ahead – silence – like the mountains.

'Let us go on,' he said. 'But why do you look for the track by night?'

'Let the men sleep, let them not know the track is lost. Then their legs are stronger by day.'

Nebyvaiev gave a quiet laugh, reached out his hand, and pressed Alyoshek to him, like a friend. Alyoshek smelt of reindeer skin, moisture, and tobacco.

'Go on looking, brother, we believe you. We are not after gold, or skins. We are for the Soviet government. Understand?'

'Of course,' Alyoshek answered, solemnly.

Iceland moss grew rarer and rarer. The reindeer moved slowly. Their eyes discharged, their hooves cracked. And when Alyoshek could find no moss for them, he salted pieces of rock, and together with the salt, they licked off the red lichen, and seemed satisfied. Nevertheless, every evening Alyoshek chose the most miserable among them and pointed it out to the partisans.

They would shout, 'Close its eyes!' And Alyoshek would thrust his Yakut knife into the back of the animal's head. But even after that the eyes stayed open. The flame of the camp fire was reflected in them, and for a long time an expression of pain lingered on their glassy surface.

Alyoshek sucked the marrow from the shank bones, and hung them on a tree, while Oustinkin boiled the meat in a can. He no longer made pasties, and there was gloom deep in his huge body. Reindeer meat was tough, and even when heavily salted, without bread it neither had taste, nor satisfied hunger.

The country was lost in its own desertedness. There were thousands and thousands of kilometres of dead waste, birdless, to west, to north, to south, and it crushed them down.

Frequently Nebyvaiev asked Alyoshek whither they were going. One day, during a halt, he showed him a map and a compass, and glanced with some doubt into Alyoshek's narrow eyes. Alyoshek looked indifferently at the compass, but examined the map with curiosity. In those lines, he recognized the rivers, mountains and shores of his own hunting grounds. He was amazed by the experience of the red commander, who had thus drawn the land of the Yakouts and the deer. He imagined Nebyvaiev spending long hours embroidering his map, as Nikitchen embroidered her cloak. Only he could point out errors: the Nemoui did not flow like that, and the Keran's source was elsewhere. And Alyoshek squatted down on the ground, and with a charred twig corrected the map made by the imperial topographical society, nodding gently to Nebyvaiev, not to be offended. Even he — Alyoshek — made mistakes. He had lost the track in this valley. But wherever a Tungus found the way in, he could find the way out. And, to prove this, Alyoshek pointed on the map to where the winter track lay, and where the north, the west and the south. As for the east, he said, that was sea.

His eyes glanced up at the commissar, with a faint smile.

'How do you know?' Nebyvaiev asked, in astonishment.

Alyoshek shrugged his shoulders.

'I saw; young birds in autumn fly before the old ones. How do they know the way?'

Nebyvaiev laughed. Alyoshek's answers were smart. And sensible, too. He got to like the man during these days of marching.

The partisans too, even hard Dessiukov, known as 'the devil', took to him. It didn't seem so bad when Alyoshek, in his summer *doska*, his *rodvouzhni* trousers and his reindeer moccasins, tied with elk thongs, strode ahead.

His face was always open, bony, cunning, full of courage, determination, and he never complained of fatigue. The Winchester slung on his back seemed to have grown there. He never put it on the pack, like the partisans. Even his bed, a musk-deer skin he carried under his arm. He was sorry for the reindeer.

Meanwhile the passage grew more and more difficult.

All day they had been climbing a hill overgrown with young

cedars. Creeping shrubs, like hops, were matted into a thick mat over the whole slope. Alyoshek led the way over the uncertain, springing shrub, like an acrobat over a net. As they climbed, the reindeer hesitated a long time, picking each foothold. From the effort, drops of blood appeared in their nostrils. Their hair stuck to the unripe cedar cones, sticky with resin. The partisans made their way through that cedar forest as if going through thick snow.

And, when at last they were up, at the summit they came upon a swamp. Even Alyoshek cried out in mortification, and kicked a reindeer.

The same lilac-coloured irises as before hung swaying over the stagnant pools. Thickets of columbine rustled. Swarms of midges choked.

Kim fell to the ground and for an instant put his bite-swollen lips to a pool. The partisans bandaged their faces and their hands, and the bandages were immediately black with midges. Nobody bent to pick the flowers. The reindeer closed their eyes, contracted their nostrils, and with packs groaning rushed forward through the swamp. The men ran after them. The swarms of midges followed without a sound. Alyoshek kept looking round to make sure nobody had fallen. These Reds were tough; he was proud of them.

They spent the night on the opposite slope, which was covered with firs. The swamp was behind them. But midges and mosquitoes had not vanished.

Alyoshek made a smoke-fire, and surrounded it with staves, to protect it from the reindeer. They would not go away from the fire, but crept in to the smoke, treading the burning underwood. There was the odour of burned horns and hair in the air.

With swelled faces, the worn-out partisans slept, only to waken soon after to new agonies. The air rang loud with mosquitoes. Their thirst was as great as the sufferings of the men. If they could, were it but once, drink their fill of blood in their short lives. There was nothing alive round them. And when, in the morning, Nebyvaiev took off his canvas shirt and trousers, to shake out the ashes collected there, the partisans with astonishment surrounded him. He was tattooed. It was as if a tailor had cut out his clothes on him,

and marked them with a blood-soaked chalk. The mosquitoes had bitten all along the seams.

They were worse than hunger. And the partisans went on their way, without pausing to feed the reindeer.

After crossing the saddle, they came to better country. Before them lay the Siberian forest-lands, shimmering in the wind. Down the ravines they flowed, in black folds. The *taiga*! Alyoshek put on speed. How blessed the *taiga* now seemed to them. But this was only illusion. The *taiga* received them as harshly as the mountains had done.

The whole morning they fought their way through a forest felled by a storm. Silver firs and larches lay entangled. Two hurricanes had swept over them. One had borne trees down to the north, the other, to the east. The undergrowth rattled like iron, and concealed pits full of black water. Some reindeer broke their legs. The partisans finished them off with the knife, and carried the meat with them. The men's feet sank deep into rotted wood.

At midday they came on a stretch of burned forest, and halted before the strange sight. Firs rose in the air bare and white as bones. The fire had taken place in the spring, when the sap was rising. It had passed from tip to tip, caught the bearded moss hanging from them, and died down. The scorched bark had then fallen away, bearing the gleaming sap course. The trees glittered in the sunlight, with a tinge of pink, like porcelain. The little party entered that forest of silver. There was still the scent of burning in it. They dragged on, while overhead the bare fir tops hummed like taut strings.

That too they left behind them. Then again before them appeared valleys full from edge to edge with forest. Alyoshek found bear droppings and cried delightedly '*amaka*', which in Tungus tongue means 'grandfather', by which word they address bears. 'Don't fear us, we are poor creatures.'

Just before sundown they spotted mountain sheep far ahead on a cliff. They raced down, leaping the cliffs, and it seemed that anyone down there could find a heap of mutton.

But Alyoshek said, 'That's the *amaka*, the bear, chasing them, and they are tricking him, as they trick us. A mountain sheep's horns

are tougher than its rear. It can fall on them like one stone on another, and still be alive.'

That evening they counted up losses. There were left only two deer, one box of matches, a handful of salt, and three rolls of Manchurian tobacco.

The whole night they were on the look out for the bear, but it did not appear. Alyoshek blew a birch-bark decoy, to imitate the wild reindeer, but nothing responded. The barrel of the Winchester remained cold. At daybreak Alyoshek pluckily lowered himself down the cliff, where we had seen the sheep, and all he brought back was a bear's shoulder-blade with some putrescent meat on it. 'Look, a bear killed itself, chasing sheep,' he said, and added, 'We are haunted by bad luck.'

But there was no despair in the tone of his voice. He pointed out to Nebyvaiev a reindeer, lying motionless by the fire, with a pink froth at its snout.

'To-night it will die. Should I not finish it?' And Alyoshek gave a sad smile.

So that reindeer, too, had its throat slit, to bleed it.

The last reindeer died a death which astonished them all. It was of llama breed, a mount reindeer, the most spirited and tough of them all. It still had strength to jump a stream with full pack. It was kept alive in case one of them should no longer be able to walk.

The first to ride it was Kim. Without a word he showed the commissar his swollen feet. He was blue in the face, and exhibited extreme fatigue. They took the packs from the animal, and seven men divided them among themselves.

Alyoshek cut a staff, handed it to Kim, and showed him how to ride a reindeer. And that form of motion was a new torture to Kim. The saddle rested just behind the humped part of the neck. The animal's skin was loose. The sharp shoulder-blades moved about beneath it, like in a sack. In order not to fall, Kim had to use the staff first on one side, then on the other, to support himself on the ground. His legs dangled down the reindeer's neck. On occasions he forgot himself, and leant forward, and then the beast would toss its head up, and the antlers struck him. Tears oozed from under Kim's yellow lids. He rode behind the others, groaning and cursing

in Chinese. Four times he fell from the saddle and clambered up again. The fifth time he landed head first on the bolt of his Winchester. He got to his feet with white eyes, quivering with rage, took the rifle from his shoulder and fired.

Everybody swung round, hearing the shot. The reindeer and Kim were lying motionless, side by side. They could not see which of them was dead. At last Kim raised his head and gave his comrades a look. His eyes were still white. 'I have killed the last reindeer.'

Nobody said a word. They piled packs on the spot, and made a long halt.

Nebyvaiev brought Kim some meat. He ate it lying, pressing his cheek to the stock of his rifle. Nebyvaiev gave him some more: half his own share. He ate this too, then drank his fill of cold water. His eyes became darker, calmer. He sat up, took off his boots, and began opening the boils on his feet with a knife.

Nebyvaiev went to one side, put the rest of the meat on the grass, and for a long time looked at him with unseeing eyes. He was unable to eat. His teeth were loose. The least pressure caused him pain. He was sucking blood from his gums.

'Scurvy!' The word rang like an insistent cymbal.

Nebyvaiev glanced at the partisans, seated about the fire. Were they hiding their disease, as he was?

They had all finished eating already. Alyoshek, lost in thought, was shaving dry sticks for kindling; the splinters came from under his knife like a sprig of camomile. Dessiukov examined his tattered high-boots. Oustinkin was talking of bread. The others were listening to him, mouths wide open.

Nebyvaiev chopped the remainder of the meat into mince and filled his pockets with it. He would suck it as they went. Then he lay down, smoked, looked at yellow Kim, who was greedily drinking in Oustinkin's words, still about bread.

They rested till evening, and slept at this bivouac. The next morning they ate more meat, shared round cartridges, put on the last remaining moccasins, and went on once more.

High boots, tents, surplus clothing, stayed hanging on the trees.

Each of them now, like Alyoshek, carried his own reindeer skin under his arm, and his rifle slung over his shoulder. The ammuni-

tion belts crushed their chests. The straps of their haversacks, dragged on their belts. Kim was limping, Nebyvaiev sucked the chopped meat together with blood from his own gums. But so far nobody showed lack of courage, and that night, lying round the fire, they sang. Stepounov began it. He flung himself full length on his back, gazed into the constellations appearing over the *taiga*, and drawled out the stupid song. 'Three old women, oh, oh, oh,' he sang in a high-pitched, plaintive voice, and the inseparable Konyaiev brothers caught it up in triumphant bass voices.

Ryzhikh too sang — a lad with handsome eyes; and Oustinkin; morose Dessiukov sang too, without the least change in his solemn face.

Nebyvaiev laughed, though it hurt to move his lips over his diseased gums.

Alyoshek listened. He thought the song was beautiful. 'Whence do you come, oh night?' was his thought, 'to be so full of beauty and delight?'

They fell asleep late, beneath the watery glitter of the stars, and muttered in their sleep, of bread.

Morning came, and again they rose and went on.

The whole of that day they forged through a swamp, their faces wrapped in gauze. Oustinkin could not get his breath, and kept throwing off the mosquito net. His heavily-built body bore privations badly. He fell behind, staggered, his mouth showed fierce and black in his mosquito-bitten face. Kim, limping, led him by the hand.

That night, Oustinkin sat on a hillock. His loins and his legs ached. His eyes ran, and the tears, trickling down, made deep tracks on his cheekbones. It hurt to put the tip of his tongue to the roof of his mouth. He put his fingers into his mouth, pulled a tooth from his swollen gums and put it on his palm. Then he took it up to Nebyvaiev and took the commissar by the chest.

'Why did you give that flour away to the Tunguses? We should all have had enough to eat!'

Alyoshek shouted. The partisans rushed at Oustinkin. Nebyvaiev stopped them with a glance.

There was complete silence. As if down a precipice into

nothing, everything was swallowed by that silence – the men round the fire, the swamp, the darkness above the edge of the swamp.

And in that strange silence in the *taiga*, it seemed to Alyoshek that the commissar's voice was a trifling sound, no larger than that of a leaf falling – 'You bastard! What sort of a bolshevik do you call yourself, if you cannot suffer a bit for Soviet power?'

Oustinkin licked round his swollen gums, spat out blood, and went to one side.

Alyoshek watched the Reds with curiosity and respect.

Bolshevik? What was there in that word, which made a man forget suffering?

He examined each of the Russians in turn. Nikichen would not have known them now. Their clothes were torn to tatters, their beards had grown, their eyelids were swollen with blood, their lips maintained a harsh silence. And not one more reference was made by anyone to the flour given to the starving Tungus settlement.

'What do they want? If death awaits them at the end of their journey, at Ayan, why do they strive to get there? But if there is no enemy there, why do they seek him?'

Alyoshek turned eyes and hands earthwards, asking answer of it. But the grass had no answer, and the thickets of dewberry and the mosses were silent.

But whatever came at the end of the journey Alyoshek was guide to these men, and should care for them. He went to Nebyvaiev, stuck his finger in his own mouth and said, 'Must find *cheremsha*.'

He left his Winchester by the fire and went out of the camp with only a knife in his hand. Soon he came back, with a huge bunch of the herb. It smelled stronger than garlic, and the leaves were wide, like lily-of-the-valley leaves.

'Eat!' he said, severely, to each of them. Oustinkin he gave a double quantity. 'You will be well.'

Alyoshek led the partisans to a field of *cheremsha*. In the shade of the large leaves the dew clung long, and it too seemed to smell of garlic.

There they spent half a day, and then continued their way. Each man now carried on his back, together with his rifle, a huge bale of *cheremsha*. As they paced slowly on, they chewed at it.

Oustinkin no longer complained of the pain in his loins. Nebyvaiev no longer sucked blood from his gums. But to what purpose did his teeth grow stronger; he was shivering from hunger, and drank water from pools.

Again they entered a ravine. It was here, as they climbed, treading the catchfly thick between the rocks, that they saw the huntsman. It looked as if he had just slipped over the cliff, and did not move because he was hiding behind the peak of a silver fir, which grew under the edge of the cliff.

The huntsman was in a pelt coat, with a lynx cap and chest-plates of squirrel's paws. The tops of his embroidered thigh-boots were strapped to his belt. Over his left shoulder thrust the muzzle of a flint-lock gun.

As one man they halted. Nebyvaiev cried, 'Hullo there!'

The silver fir swayed and rustled like an aspen.

Alyoshek plucked the commissar's sleeve.

'He is dead, he cannot answer.'

They came nearer. Only then they saw that on the man's feet were Siberian skis.

'He was chasing a beast over the snow, and spiked himself on that dead branch,' Alyoshek said, in awe.

The partisans clambered up the cliff. There they found the hand-drawn sledge which Tungus people take with them when they go far, and hope to return with good booty. The huntsman had his back to them. Death had caught him instantaneously. The branch had thrust through his chest. It was sticking out of his back, through the fur coat. Even his skis still revealed speed.

On the sledge lay a reindeer sleeping bag, under the bag – a tea-pot, a kettle, a small birch tub full of pounded dried meat with cedar nuts, and three rye bannocks.

In a rag Alyoshek also found wild reindeer teeth – the record of his kill.

'This is who brought us here,' Alyoshek said. 'He set out with all he needed to go through the black *taiga* which roars round all earth and heaven. Only now what will he cut branches with for his fire. It was his axe we left behind in the valley!'

'True, brother,' Oustinkin said, brightening, for he was chewing

the mouldy, stone-hard bannock, and licking the crumbs from his fingers. 'Your axe will wait its master a long time there on the tree where we left it, and he on his tree will wait for his axe. It seems I was wrong, listening to you, when you said I should leave it.'

Alyoshek would not have taken the dead man's flour, or meat, even were he himself dying of hunger. Yet, seeing how greedily the partisans masticated the pounded meat, and the strength and delight which returned to their worn-out faces, he asked himself, 'Were they not right, to take from the dead, to feed the living?'

These stores they found, gave new strength to them all. There remained still for each a handful of dried meat, for supper. It became easier to march. They emerged from the short ravine, and entered a wooded valley, which they descended. Alyoshek turned eastwards. The finely-grown larch heralded the coast.

There were eagles in the sky. Squirrels chattered overhead. The partisans shot them in volleys and baked them, like potatoes, at the evening fire, in the embers. Alyoshek plundered the lairs of forest mice, and in no time had two full pockets of nuts. There were bears about hillocks, red with bilberry foliage. Salmon were leaping up the rapids of the streams. The salmon was already fatigued in the shallow water, and by kicking it the partisans succeeded in getting some salmon out. Alyoshek raked together heaps of dead fish under the bushes on the bank. The bears had torn them open, and bitten off the heads. They love salmon which has gone high.

'The road is at hand,' Alyoshek said.

And, abandoning their hunting, the Reds forged ahead.

The next morning they saw the first trace of their goal – grass trodden by reindeer herds. An hour later they caught the sound of the iron herd rattles, and then they scattered, to form a long chain and find and surround that sound.