

VASIL AZHAYEV

FAR FROM MOSCOW

A NOVEL
IN THREE PARTS



BOOK ONE

FOREIGN
LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
MOSCOW 1950

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Vasili Azhayev
FAR FROM MOSCOW
A Novel in Three Parts

STALIN PRIZE

1948

ВАСИЛИЙ АЖАЕВ

**ДАЛЕКО
ОТ МОСКВЫ**

РОМАН
В ТРЕХ КНИГАХ



КНИГА ПЕРВАЯ

ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО
ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ
МОСКВА 1950

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VASILI NIKOLAYEVICH AZHAYEV, author of *Far From Moscow*, was born and brought up in the village of Sotskaya, Moscow Region, in 1915. His father was a furrier by trade.

After finishing secondary school, Azhayev took a course in chemistry and then went to work at a Moscow chemical plant. He began as a worker and later became a shop foreman.

Azhayev evinced a literary bent at an early age. While still at school he wrote verses and tried his hand at short story writing. His first story was published in the *Smena*, a Moscow youth magazine, in 1934.

The following year saw Azhayev in the Far East working on a big construction job. The creative labours of Soviet people, the courage and persistence with which they transformed the rugged nature of the Far-Eastern wilds, made an indelible impression on the young man. It was here in the Far East whose stern and majestic nature had enchanted him from the first that Azhayev felt irresistibly drawn to the noble and honourable calling of writer.

While working at the construction job, Azhayev took a correspondence course at the Gorky Institute

of Literature of the Soviet Writers Union in Moscow, graduating in 1944.

Azhayev spent nearly fifteen years in the Far East, years rich in events and experiences which were later to take shape in a novel that is strikingly true to life.

Far From Moscow is the first major work of the young Soviet writer. The events described in it cover a period of a single year. This was the first year of the Great Patriotic War, and the bitterest for the Soviet people. The fascist hordes, carried away by their easy victories in the West, had treacherously invaded the Soviet Union.

Imperialist Japan was awaiting an opportune moment to realize its long-cherished dream of encroaching on the Far-Eastern frontiers of the U.S.S.R. An air force stood in readiness, and killers armed with deadly poison weapons were waiting for the signal to attack the peaceful Soviet working folk. It is well to keep this in mind when one reads Azhayev's novel the better to appreciate the heroism of the Soviet builders whose story he relates.

Azhayev does not give the actual geographical location of the construction site. Neither the Adun River nor Taisin Island can be found on the map. The names of the builders of the pipe line too are fictitious. Everything else in the novel, however, is based on fact. The writer did not observe his characters from the sidelines, he lived among them, he was one of them.

Many of those whose portraits he presents in his novel have been decorated by the Soviet Government

and are living and working in the Far East to this day.

The construction of the Far-Eastern pipe line was begun shortly before the war. It was originally planned to take three years, but the outbreak of war necessitated speeding up the tempo of work.

Azhayev shows how the engineers Beridze and Kovshov, moved by feelings of profound Soviet patriotism, fulfil their task in the face of overwhelming odds. This patriotism is the wellspring from which the Bolshevik construction chief Batmanov draws the courage to endure personal grief at the death of his son and the strength to cope with the arduous and responsible task with which he has been entrusted. It is their determination to speed the delivery of the much-needed oil to the front and thus hasten the defeat of the enemy that helps the truck drivers to haul unwieldy pipes through roadless country in the teeth of raging storms and blizzards.

Working under the rigorous conditions of the Far-Eastern winter, the Soviet builders lay the pipe line through regions where the soil is permanently frozen, through dense forests on the banks of the Adun, over hills and under the frozen waters of the strait. As he joins the pipes the welder Umara Mahomet works with the enthusiasm and fervour of a Soviet fighting man fulfilling an important combat assignment. Umara Mahomet believes in the victory of the Soviet people, he thinks of life, not death, and his selfless, indefatigable labour is accomplished in the name not only of the present but of the future.

The youth too, headed by the Komsomol organizer Kolya Smirnov and the tele-communications engineer Tanya Vasilchenko, is depicted with great warmth. A memorable character is the plucky youngster Genka Pankov who though much younger than his comrades staunchly endures all the hardships of work in the severe Siberian frosts.

The native inhabitants of the Far East—the Nanai—also figure in Azhayev's novel. Brutally persecuted and oppressed under tsarism, the Nanai have been given a new lease of life in Soviet times. In the novel we see them intensely interested in the pipe line and taking an active part in discussing the route of the line and in the actual building work.

The book has a large number of characters. It is a novel about a collective of Soviet people, a well-knit, purposeful body of men and women united in their firm resolve, notwithstanding the proximity of the lurking enemy, to fulfil their task: to lay the oil pipe line in one year instead of three.

Azhayev does not embellish the truth. He shows us not only the foremost Soviet men and women, but also men like chief engineer Grubsky, an engineer of the old school whose petty vanity and personal pride cause him to place himself in opposition to the will of the majority. It is some time too before the old and experienced engineer Topolev comes to realize the error of the position adopted by Grubsky, and before his unquestioning faith in the "scientific" authority of Grubsky and others like him is finally shaken.

A whole gallery of portraits of people typical of the Soviet epoch pass before the reader, and the novel owes its success in large measure to the deep insight it gives into the spiritual world and moral make-up of Soviet men and women.

While it cannot be said that the young writer is a mature master of his art, he has contrived to give an intensely realistic and sincere picture of Bolsheviks—members of the Party as well as non-Party people—and through their daily deeds to show what Bolshevik leadership means. The Bolsheviks in charge of the pipe line construction—Batmanov, Beridze, Kovshov, Party organizer Zalkind—and the Komsomols and Stakhanovites are all people the like of whom the Soviet reader encounters every day in real life. He knows them well. Stern and exacting in their work, both of themselves and others, they are also revolutionary romanticists who have a clear vision of the radiant future and are passionate, inspired builders of the new Communist society.

The Bolsheviks on the construction job not merely carry out the government assignment. They instil in those around them a deep sense of responsibility to the state as a whole for what they are doing, be it a minor or major job in the undertaking as a whole. In the struggle to fulfil the state plans which are the concern of the whole people, the Bolsheviks unite the working collective into a single, harmonious family of builders, each member of which is given every opportunity to apply his abilities and talents to the full. This, combined with constructive Bolshevik criticism

and self-criticism, serves to overcome all the conflicts and differences that are bound to arise in a collective consisting of people of diverse positions, education and character. Graphically and convincingly the author shows how criticism and self-criticism help to overcome the survivals of capitalism in the minds of men, to enrich their inner world and strengthen the feelings of comradeship and mutual respect.

In addition to his literary activities, Vasili Azhayev devotes much of his time to public work. For some time he was a member of the Khabarovsk Soviet of Working People's Deputies. In 1950 he was elected member of the Board of the Union of Soviet Writers of the U.S.S.R.

The novel *Far From Moscow* has won wide recognition among the Soviet reading public. It has gone through several editions since it was first published in 1948 (Azhayev worked on it for four years), and large new editions are planned.

In 1949 the Council of Ministers of the U.S.S.R. awarded Azhayev a Stalin Prize, First Class, for the novel.

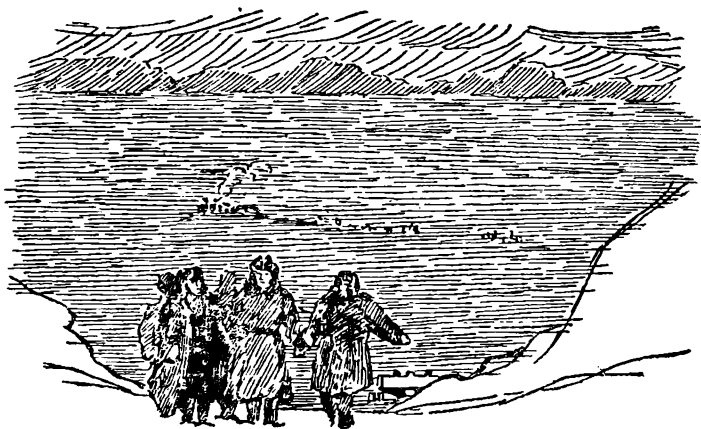
At the present time the writer is working on a book about industrial Moscow.

The Publishers

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FAR FROM MOSCOW



CHAPTER ONE

GOODBYE, MOSCOW!

NOT UNTIL the very last moment did engineer Alexei Kovshov believe that he was really going out to the East, deep into the country's hinterland. When he was told at the Central Administration that his appointment had been finally decided upon, he was overcome by a feeling of depression, and he listened apathetically to the hasty instructions given him in the personnel department as if they did not concern him.

"Get in touch with Batmanov, the construction chief, and Beridze, the chief engineer," he was advised. "They haven't left yet."

Alexei wandered down the corridors looking into the offices. The Administration was being evacuated from the capital. Many of its personnel had left. Army men, who were to take over the entire building, were already establishing themselves in the empty offices whose floors were littered with papers abandoned by the previous occupants.

At last Alexei found Beridze. He had flown in just the day before from Georgia where he had spent his vacation basking in the Caucasian sun after the completion of the construction job he had been engaged on in the South; it was a defence job and he had been in charge of it ever since the beginning of the war.

The two engineers embraced. Beridze seemed to emanate the fragrance of the southern wind, the sun and the sea. He smiled and cracked jokes with a merry twinkle in his eye, and there was nothing in his manner to suggest either worry or alarm. The corners of Alexei's mouth drooped in disapproval as he surveyed his comrade's dandyish get-up: a new

suit, stylish shoes and felt hat all the same shade of chocolate brown.

"Surprised?" Beridze asked gaily.

"I should say so. I'm used to seeing you in a shirt open to the waist and unpressed pants tucked into enormous seven-league boots. The beaver doesn't go with that natty outfit. You'd better shave it off."

"I don't agree with you, Alyosha. I'll take it with me to the grave. All my strength is in my beard, you know," Beridze said, stroking his black beard which reached down almost to his necktie. "What I'll have to do is change my clothes."

With a sudden movement he took Kovshov's arm. Wincing, Alexei pulled himself away.

"You'd better take the other arm, Georgi," he said. "The wound's healed but it's still sensitive."

"Sorry, old man!"

Beridze's keen eyes surveyed Alexei, noting the gloomy, lined face, the faded tunic, the heavy army boots and civilian trousers.

"You're not so easy to recognize yourself, you know. Look rather grim. So you've had a sniff of gun powder, eh? Good for you!"

"Nothing so good about it. I was wounded in the very first action," Alexei said morosely.

"Don't let it worry you. You still have battles of another kind ahead of you and you'll have plenty of opportunity to make up for lost time. I'm glad we're together again. When I heard last night that you were in Moscow I was delighted. I dashed over to Batmanov and told him: 'He's our man, you won't find a better in all of Moscow.' Why the sour look? Drank some vinegar? Or maybe you don't want to work with me on this job?"

"I want to fight," Alexei burst out. "I want to go to the front. This confounded arm makes me wild. In the hospital it was one thing, there was nothing to do but wait. When they discharged me on a two months' convalescent leave I didn't want to sit at home. So I came here to ask for a job somewhere near the front—and this is what I got myself into! You got away from a draft deferment once, they said, but this time it's going to stick. Then you had to show up! They gave me the order and I had to sign on the dotted line and now I've got to go traipsing to the ends of the earth!"

Beridze listened patiently

"I see your point, old man. Been through it myself. But there's nothing to be done about it, you've got to turn your back on the warfront for the time being. This job is a big thing, you know!"

"Do you really think they can't get along without us there?" Alexei snapped. "What is the sense of taking people from here and shipping them to the Far East? I'm certain we're needed more right here."

They were standing facing each other in the corridor. Beridze regarded his comrade with affection.

"My, but you're crabby! Have one of these maybe it'll make you feel better."

Beridze pulled out two oranges from his pocket and pressed one of them into Alexei's hand. The latter's first reaction was to throw it away but the sun-kissed fruit got the better of him and he began to peel off the golden rind.

"Who needs an oil pipe line ten thousand kilometres from the front?" he persisted. "It's such an indefinite proposition. The job will be finished just in time for the next war."

"Don't try to be smarter than the Council of People's Commissars," Beridze went on as

patiently as before, sinking his teeth into the orange. "They must have had a good reason for passing a special decision to speed up construction. Our appointments make sense too. They're sending Batmanov, myself and you over there. The three of us. Neither Batmanov nor I are newcomers to those parts; we've done some building there before this. As for you, although you're new to the Far East, I know you well. I wouldn't want a better assistant. In a word, I don't see anything indefinite about the proposition, my friend. I'm afraid your imagination's getting the better of you."

Beridze took Kovshov to meet the construction chief. Batmanov was a disappointment to Alexei who thought him a whit too spectacular in appearance, with his tall, well-built figure and fine carriage, ash-blond hair, high forehead and finely chiselled lips. He seemed quite at home in the strange office.

"A stuffed shirt, most likely," Alexei thought gloomily. In these days he felt drawn to army men, men who looked simpler and less sleek and wore high boots and belts and sidearms.

A young girl ran into the office.

"I've been looking for you everywhere, Vasili Maximovich," she said, smiling to Batmanov. "The car's waiting outside."

The construction chief thanked her with a nod. He spent no more than an hour with the engineers. Alexei did not like Batmanov's penetrating gaze or the fact that during the conversation the chief addressed him more often than Beridze. Alexei got the impression that Batmanov was sizing him up.

"I have to go back to the South for a few days to turn over a job I've been engaged on latterly, and then I'll run over to the Crimea to say goodbye to the family. From there I'll fly straight to the Far East. There is no point in discussing the construction job with you at the moment. Everything will be clearer on the spot. And in general there is nothing we can do here. You need not see the chief of the Central Administration; I spent a whole day with him. As a matter of fact, most of the Central Administration has been loaded into railway cars. Everything we need for the job—judging by the reports of the supply people—is either on the spot or on the way there." Batmanov rose and collected the papers in front of him into a leather letter case. "All I ask is that you start off as soon as pos-

ble. You'll have a difficult time with railway tickets; the stations are jammed with thousands of people; it will require both energy and skill to get away. Taking your family along?" he asked Alexei.

"The old folks don't want to go. Father has lived all his life in Moscow. And the other day we saw my younger brother off to a military school." For some reason Kovshov said nothing about his wife, Zina.

"Talk it over with your parents once more," Batmanov advised him. "Perhaps you can persuade them to go. They'll be better off with you."

"It's no use. They won't go," Alexei said with finality.

The two engineers saw the chief to his car. Letting Kovshov go ahead, Batmanov turned to Beridze.

"Are you certain you have chosen an efficient assistant?" he said nodding in Alexei's direction. "He strikes me as being rather too young for the job and I can see he is not at all elated at the prospect of going to the Far East. From your description I pictured somebody quite different. It might be better to take an engineer with substantial standing. But I dare say it's too late now."

"Don't worry, Vasil Maximovich. I trust him as much as I trust myself. He's young, no getting away from it, and inexperienced too; he may even be naive in some respects. But he knows how to work. He's very capable and persistent. I told you what a splendid showing he made down South; he was better than a great many veterans. Now he's had his baptism of fire and he's grown tougher, more mature. You'll see that I'm right. . . ."

"I have nothing against him; it's you I'm thinking about. The task ahead is not an easy one and you will have need of a good assistant."

Batmanov took polite if rather curt leave of the engineers, slammed the shining door of the car to with an accustomed movement, and drove off, dignified and imperturbable.

"Honoured art worker. Opera and ballet star. Where'd you dig up a chief like that?" Alexei asked.

"I knew you'd take it like that!" Beridze laughed. "Stop hissing and looking at me with those vicious goose eyes of yours. He comes from the same ballet troupe as you and I. You ought to know something about his background, plenty has been written about him,

you know. He's been by turn a stoker, engineer, and Party worker, and he's a graduate of an academy and was in charge of the biggest construction job in the country. That's a great deal for a man who isn't forty three yet. The People's Commissariat hasn't many construction chiefs like him. Do you think I'd work with a poor one? You don't get the Order of Lenin twice for nothing. He's always being assigned to jobs that couldn't be entrusted to others. Is that enough for you? Of course not! I know you, Alyosha, I can see right through you."

"Why did he advise me to take my family with me when he's leaving his in the Crimea?" Alexei observed.

"His little son's got a bad case of t.b. and his wife, Anna Ivanovna, lives with the youngster in Yalta."

The two engineers went back to the Central Administration for their papers. Now their time was their own. Somewhat at loose ends, they wandered through the streets.

"I waited for you in Georgia," Beridze said. "But you pulled a fast one and didn't come. Couldn't tear yourself loose from Moscow's stones. Went and fell in love with a blonde and didn't even send me an invitation

to the wedding. When did the big event take place?"

"Sunday, the fifteenth of June...."

"Why don't you introduce me to her?"

In silence Alexei produced a photograph from his breast pocket.

"She's pretty," signed Beridze. "A sweet, kind face. Bright, clever eyes. But I don't believe in pictures. You must introduce me to her; otherwise I won't let you take her along."

"She's at the front," said Alexei gloomily. "Or if you want to know exactly, beyond the frontline."

Beridze stopped short.

"So that's it!" he said after a momentary silence. "How did she get there?"

"She was in her last year at the institute studying radio. As soon as I joined the people's volunteer force she enlisted in the army, through the Komsomol district committee. Now she's fighting to defend the country while I...." Alexei made a gesture of disgust and walked ahead.

Beridze followed his comrade with a look of concern, then caught up with him.

"Take a good look at Moscow while you can, Alexei, feast your eyes on her! There's

no telling when we shall see her again....' He spoke with a great vehemence, wishing to take Kovshov's mind off his gloomy thoughts.

Alexei's heart constricted painfully. They were walking down Sadovaya. The moist pavements shone. The setting sun was bidding farewell to the anti-aircraft gunners at their rooftop stations. Singing echoed from Krasniye Vorota; marching troops were singing a song born of the war. In the middle of the wide street soldiers were hauling along the huge hulk of a barrage balloon, and when cars sped past, their tires singing on the smooth asphalt, it seemed that the current of air they set in motion would send the balloon up into the air along with the people carrying it.

"There she is, the city we love, with all her windows pasted crosswise with strips of paper as if to ward off evil spirits," Beridze was saying. "She's anything but gay—not a single light at night. Imagine Moscow blacked-out! For that alone I'm ready to cut the Nazis' throats."

"It is my duty . . . to defend each of these siones . . . to my last breath . . ." Kovshov muttered through clenched teeth, stumbling slightly over the words. "Instead, I'm trail-

ing behind you ... the devil knows where to!"

"Enough of that! We've got to go. Nobody's going to countermand the order now," Beridze said firmly. Looking up at Alexei he noticed that the young man's face had grown black and peaked, and he took him by the arm. "Take yourself in hand, man, don't torment yourself so. You'd better go home to your parents and stay with them for a while. I'll go to the station and when I've got the tickets I'll come over to your place."

CHAPTER TWO

AT THE NEW SITE

KOVSHOV spent the first night at the new site in the office, on a couch covered with imitation leather which made a rather cold bed.

Waking up, he opened his eyes with difficulty, and it took him some time to realize where he was. The spacious room was flooded with the rosy glow of a sunny, crisp morning. Beridze's bedding lay carefully folded on another couch. The chief engineer was seated at a desk and going through some papers. Near the window a flabby, elderly woman wearing pince-nez attached to a cord was sitting on the edge of a chair and talking.

"I sent Natochka and her child away and remained alone in the big country house where a family of ten had lived before," she was saying in a weary voice. "Day after day I was faced with the same problem: whether

to watch the things or to seek safety in a slit trench. After all, bombs are the most terrible thing in the world. So I got into the trench with the other old people and shivered there like a miserable cur. For some reason or other there wasn't a single level-headed person among us—you know the kind of old man who crops up everywhere with comforting things to say. We, on the contrary, had an old chap of quite another order. 'The Germans are sure to come and settle scores with our Muza,' he used to console us. 'I'm sure they'll string up our dear neighbour on the highest tree they can find.' That was me he meant. You see, my son-in-law was a commander in the Red Army. Tell me, why didn't we ever notice these malicious people before the war? This nasty old man had lived next door for about fifteen years and I always thought he was quite nice and pleasant. Am I interfering with your work too much?"

"Not too much," Beridze replied without looking up from the papers.

"One whole street of cottages was completely demolished. All that was left of it was a heap of smashed lumber and rubbish and piles of broken glass. I lost heart completely.

I am old enough not to be afraid of death, but all the same I was frightened. Friends persuaded me to leave. At the station there was a jam and my suitcases and baskets were left behind with the people who were seeing me off—they probably hung back on purpose. God help them! Some kindhearted young men helped me into the coach, ‘rammed’ me in, was how they themselves put it. Jolly youngsters they were. And so the foolish old woman travelled to the ends of the earth. Perhaps I am bothering you?”

“Not at all,” said Beridze, stroking his black beard as he looked up at the woman.

“I was so glad to hear that you had come, my dear Moscovites! I’ve been living here for more than a month but I just can’t get used to the place. Even the air is not the same as back home. They say it’s bad for the heart.”

“The air’s not bad. Fresh, anyway. And there’s a lot of it. You don’t have to go to the country here,” said the chief engineer, absent mindedly keeping up his end of the conversation.

“There’s no one to talk to. I was moved to tears when you agreed to take on an old woman like me as your secretary. Usually

they pick young girls for secretaries, the younger and prettier the better."

"I am glad to have a Moscovite, a person with culture, for a secretary. I don't particularly care to have very young and gay girls working with me," Beridze said, flashing a look in the direction of Alexei who was listening to the conversation in silence. "I have made a list here of what has to be attended to first, Muza Filipovna. I need all the volumes of the project and the annotations to them immediately. We'll begin interviewing the staff at twelve o'clock."

"I'll start at once," Muza Filipovna bustled. "When you have some free time will you tell me about Moscow?"

"I too ran away from Moscow and from now on I shall also be taking a detached interest in it," thought Kovshov, a heavy weight pressing on his heart.

"Trying to steal a march on me, comrade chief engineer?" he asked, following the secretary with his eyes as she went out.

"Just trying not to lose time while you're sleeping, old man," Beridze returned.

Alexei sprang to his feet lightly, walked over to the window and opened it wide. Wearing only trunks, he went through a few

setting-up exercises, his muscles rippling under the sun-tanned skin. Beridze watched him with a smile.

"It would be interesting to know when the change will set in and you'll abandon good habits like gymnastics for bad ones like smoking or a drink before dinner. I've noticed that a man is bound to acquire bad habits as he grows older."

"I'll do my best to resist that law of nature," said Alexei.

His usually pallid face took on a warm glow and a lock of fair hair fell over his brow. He breathed deeply and felt the blood coursing faster in his veins. Sitting down on a chair, he began to massage his left arm. From wrist to elbow it was scored by three wide scars.

"How's the arm, Alexei?"

"Quite all right. Soon be as good as it ever was."

They looked out of the window. The four-story brick building housing the offices of the construction job overlooked a sharp incline. Down below, the river, eternally alive, spread out its broad back, the ripples on its surface playing in the rays of the newborn sun. On the opposite bank the broken silhouette of the

hills loomed through the blue haze. The earth was garbed in browns and yellows and golden hues—a sign that the year was on the wane.

“Old Man Adun is magnificent!” Alexei said with a note of awe in his voice. “You wouldn’t be able to swim across that stream.”

Somewhere in the distance a locomotive emitted a plaintive wail, reminding the engineers of their twenty-day ride across the endless fields, forests and mountains of their country. They both sighed.

Alexei shivered. He dressed quickly and ran out to wash.

“Let’s stick together, shoulder to shoulder, or, as sportsmen like to say, run nose to nose,” Beridze said when Alexei returned. He saw the longing in his assistant’s eyes and sought to cheer him.

Beridze outlined a plan of action. The first thing to be done was to get something to eat, visit the bathhouse, find lodgings, obtain newspapers and a map, and then make a detailed study of affairs at the construction job.

“Enough to begin with, isn’t it? What else do highly-skilled experts need in order to get settled down and working?” Beridze asked.

"Nothing. I would make breakfast the first item," Alexei said.

"All right. Let's get started!"

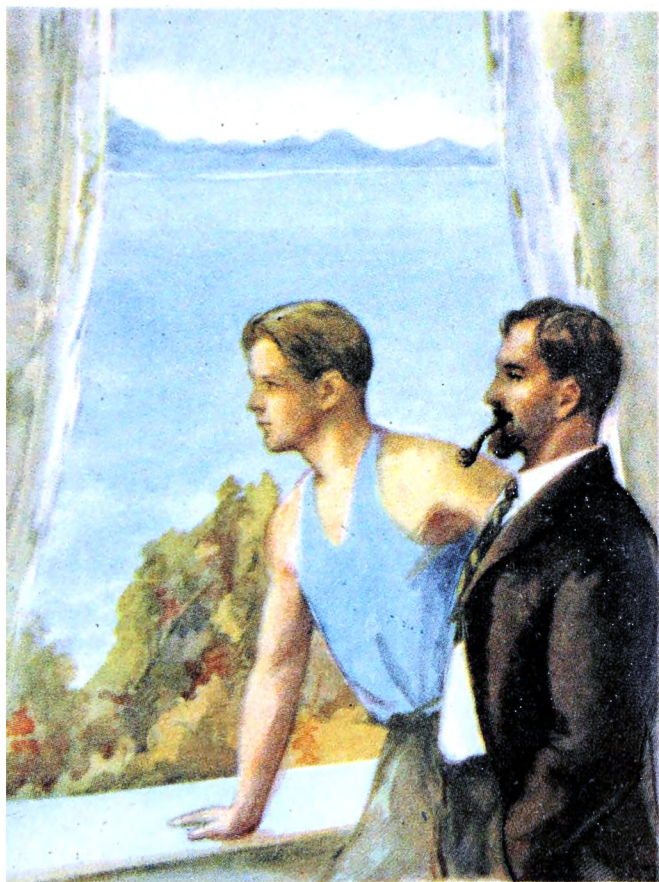
Beridze telephoned to the supply chief. It took some time before he could make the latter understand who was talking.

"I'll find out," he finally said vaguely.

"There's nothing for you to find out," Georgi Davydovich's face was red with annoyance. "Let me repeat: this is chief engineer Beridze speaking. I want you to make arrangements for breakfast for my assistant, Comrade Kovshov, and myself. Also see to it that we are provided for in general."

The supply chief said he knew of only one chief engineer, Grubsky, and his assistant, Topolev. Moreover he took orders only from the chief of the construction administration. Beridze phoned the dining room and was told that breakfast would be forthcoming if the supply chief issued instructions to that effect. Beridze slammed down the receiver in a fury and swore. Alexei laughed.

At this point the door was flung wide open and in walked Batmanov. The two engineers had arrived during the night and had not seen him yet; they had only spoken to him over the phone.



The construction chief was in army uniform which altered his appearance completely. Alexei was amazed: the man he had been introduced to in Moscow had looked like an actor or an artist, and here before him was the perfect commander—everything about him was irreproachable from the white edge of the collar showing from under the tunic to the polished boots. Alexei involuntarily glanced down at his own dusty boots and passed his hand over his unshaven chin.

Batmanov welcomed the engineers with obvious pleasure, almost with affection. It seemed as if only his habitual reserve prevented him from kissing them. He questioned them in detail about the trip and their impressions. He himself had come by plane.

Beridze gave an account of events en route. Near Danilov the train had been attacked from the air. It had been standing at a small station when a raider had suddenly appeared; the aerial pirate found the standing train an excellent target. A bomb hit one of the coaches, and turned the adjoining ones into a tangle of wreckage. The window frames of the coach Beridze and Kovshov were traveling in were blown in and the interior was swept by flying glass.

The events of those minutes impressed themselves indelibly on the men's memories. Alexei shuddered at the recollection of the experience so vividly revived by Beridze's account. When the bomb exploded Kovshov had fallen on top of the chief engineer, protecting the latter with his body. When they picked themselves up they were hardly able to believe that they had escaped without injury. True, Beridze was frightened at first when he saw blood on his comrade's face and hair, but it turned out that apart from a few slight cuts Alexei was unhurt.

The German plane came over once more, this time not to bomb but to survey the damage done. Kovshov and Beridze carried a woman whose legs had been crushed into a culvert. When they laid her down the woman thought she was being abandoned and she screamed: "Don't leave me! Oh, good, kind folk, don't leave me here to perish!"

Alexei leapt onto the track, shouting to Beridze:

"It's a disgrace, do you hear me, a disgrace to hide in ditches! To hell with everything!"

A hospital train had come from Danilov. The uninjured passengers set to carrying the

wounded. Beridze pulled out from the wreckage of a coach a boy whose face had been smashed but whose heart was still beating. The doctor was curt with him when he brought in the boy.

"You'd better attend to the wounded. Leave the dead: it's too late to help them now," he had snapped at Beridze.

"But he was alive."

"Weil, he's dead now. You'd hurry back for the next one."

The hospital train pulled out. Alexei and Georgi Davydovich went to the near-by woods to persuade the passengers who had taken cover there to return to the train. Finally the mutilated train continued on its way. There was some delay in Danilov. The stationmaster could not provide another train. The passengers wrote a telegram to the People's Commissar, lodging a complaint against the stationmaster and asking for assistance. The railwayman, beset by worries that had rained down on him together with German demolition bombs, marvelled at the naivete of the message.

"One might think that you people were the only ones in the world to be bombed by the Germans today. Do you think the People's

Commissar has nothing more to do than to read your telegram? I suggest you tear it up without showing it to anybody. I'll send you on in the same train to Kirov—that's far in the rear and they'll be able to fix you up there."

Again they had to take to cover; for the sixth time that day there was an air raid on the station. The locomotive whistles blew. Anti-aircraft guns and machine guns spoke up from the two munitions trains standing at sidings; the earth rocked and the air was shattered.

All the way to Kirov the train went without a stop. The passengers crowded in the corridors to be as near as possible to the exits. At Kirov the railwaymen wanted to detain the exhausted people and then send them on in small groups whenever possible, but the latter begged that their train be allowed to proceed. So they travelled all the way to Sverdlovsk in cars without windows or doors. Crowds met the train at the stations and when it pulled out many wept bitterly for those whom they had come to meet and who were no longer on board.

As he told about all this, Beridze did not mention the clash he had had in Danilov with Alexei. Standing there beside the bombed train,

Kovshov had suddenly announced that he was going back to Moscow.

"I've got to take my place in the ranks. My place is at the front. I am a soldier," he had stubbornly countered Beridze's exhortations.

As if vaguely guessing what had happened, Batmanov looked at Alexei.

"We'll call a halt here," he said. "Just now the most important things for travellers are breakfast, bath, barber and a place to stay."

Kovshov said nothing although the construction chief was addressing him. It was Beridze who spoke.

"You came in just as we were trying to straighten out things with the supply chief. The first attempt was a failure; he refuses to recognize us."

"You leave the supply chap to me. I'll settle his hash," Batmanov said, his features hardening. "Let us agree for the time being that you'll concern yourselves with engineering, go into the technical end and the condition of the construction job and look into the project. For the time being organizational matters should not concern you—that's my monopoly until I get hold of the reins properly."

Batnanov walked out.

"Now what put our fine chief's back up?" Alexei asked. "We haven't had time yet to misbehave."

"You don't understand him. Batnanov was sore about the chill reception we got from the supply man."

For some time they sat there waiting.

"Looks as if he won't get hold of the reins properly so soon," Alexei sighed. "Before he gets things moving we run the risk of starving to death."

As if in reply the telephone jangled. It was an invitation to the dining room.

"Things are beginning to move," Beridze said, brightening up.

Two hours later they were back, washed and clean-shaven, their hunger more or less assuaged. Beridze had obtained a local newspaper, and Alexei read aloud the war communiqué and an editorial reprinted from *Pravda*. The German divisions were continuing to press hard on our forces. The editorial called upon the army and the people to defend every square metre of soil and to destroy everything in the towns and villages left to the enemy.

All that day the engineers studied the project with the help of Grubsky, the previous chief engineer who was also one of its authors. A small man with a birdlike face and a bald brown head, Grubsky had an exaggerated sense of his own importance and behaved accordingly.

"What can I do for you?" he asked when he put in an appearance after the fourth summons. "I am exceedingly busy at the moment and came only because the highly estimable lady with the pince-nez forced me to interrupt urgent business. A very persistent person, I must say."

"The most urgent business for you at the moment is to acquaint us with the situation as soon as possible," Beridze put in.

"That I do not know," Grubsky's thin lips twisted ironically. "With your permission I shall adhere to my own ideas concerning the duties which I have not yet turned over to you."

"Is that of any importance? After all, you'll begin to turn over duties tomorrow, not a year from now."

"I shall begin when my chief orders me to do so. I can start tomorrow if he says so. Today. An hour from now. I shall be only too

glad to shift this heavy burden on to your shoulders."

Alexei scrutinized the engineer's hatchet face and thin neck with the prominent Adam's apple and listened to the strained conversation, and a dull sense of irritation welled up in him. He got up and walked over to the window—out on the river rowboats and motor launches were scurrying about incessantly, and in midstream a large steamer staidly churned on its way.

"There is very little I want to ask of you to begin with: just to help us obtain a clear idea of the technical concept involved in this construction undertaking," Beridze went on.

"I am willing to help. I shall be with you in an hour after attending to a matter which I nevertheless consider urgent."

He returned exactly in an hour. He talked smoothly, using both popular and highly specialized, complex language. He knew the ten-volume project by heart and lost no time in finding the sheets with the required designs or tables. According to him, the job could not be done in anything less than three years.

The purpose of the construction undertaking was to lay a pipe line to provide the

shortest possible outlet for Taisin Island oil to the refinery at Novinsk on the mainland. The idea was to eliminate the difficulties involved in transportation over sea and river routes as well as the need to transfer the cargoes of black gold from seagoing ships to river vessels. In winter the waterway froze over and the supply of oil from the island was interrupted and throughout the long winter months tremendous quantities of oil accumulated at the latter. This dependence on the winter and transport facilities had long acted as a brake on the development of the oil field. Taisin could produce a great deal more oil than could be transported by water over the sizable distances involved. The oil pipe line was a vital necessity: it would cut the cost of the oil, eliminate tremendous wastage in transport and, what was most important, make it possible to keep up a steady, uninterrupted, year-round supply to the factories.

Grubsky insisted on stressing the difficulties encountered in the course of the construction. The route of the pipe line stretched for a great many kilometres through wild tundra country intersected by ranges of high hills, streams and swampy spots. This was the first time that an oil pipe line was to be built in

an area where the summer was short and the winter long, with blizzards, deep snow drifts and fifty-degree frosts; hence there was no previous experience to fall back on. In Grubsky's opinion the winter months could be discounted completely inasmuch as the most eminent foreign experts had written voluminous works most definitely forbidding the welding and laying of pipe lines in winter time. Some complex technical questions still remained unsolved. The war had added to the difficulties and complicated matters further. The pipes and other materials had to be hauled to the construction site, but there were no roads yet and to build them would take a great deal of time and effort. Excavation work requiring a great expenditure of labour was to be done, but there were not enough workers—and where was one to get them at a time like this? How could one talk about completing the job of laying the pipe line when all the pipes and other equipment needed had not been fully delivered and no one knew whether they would? The personnel was of a poor grade, it was out of the question to see the job through with their assistance, and there was not the slightest chance of getting reinforcements.

It seemed that there would be no end to Grubsky's complaints. When he stopped at last, Beridze said with a note of irony in his voice:

"You're right, the job is not easy and there are a great many difficulties ahead. We are much obliged for your detailed statement. But you did not tell us the most important thing: what changes have been made in the technical aspect of the project in connection with the latest decision of the Government cutting the time limit for the laying of the pipe line from three years to one. I would like to ask you to touch upon this question as well."

"We have already dealt with that in a report to the Central Administration. I thought you were acquainted with it. I have a copy which you may read."

"I read the report in Moscow. You claim that the pipe line cannot be built in a year. Is that all you have to say?"

"Let me repeat that seven months out of this single year allotted to us fall into the winter season."

"But in reply to your detailed report Moscow issued definite instructions to proceed at once to carry out the Government

decision, and in particular to revise the project."

"We realize ourselves that a Government decision must be carried out in practice without any reservations whatsoever. Yet is it not better to be honest and say that the time limit set is infeasible rather than deceive the Government by making what to all intents and purposes are dishonest attempts to cut construction time to one-third?"

"Why dishonest?" Beridze's big eyes flashed.

"I'll tell you why. In planning the conduct of the war, the Government evidently counts on our oil pipe line and hence has decided to expend on its construction precious manpower as well as materials and other technical means. Is it not our civic duty to show that the manpower and materials ought to be put to serve war needs somewhere else, where the investment will result in immediate help to the front?"

"Did you send a detailed report on this score as well?" Beridze asked.

"A telegram. It said in effect that being of sound mind and in full possession of our faculties we could not renounce the viewpoint set forth in the first report."

"Damn it, man!" Beridze cried in irritation. "Time is priceless in wartime and here you've been wasting it compiling all sorts of reports. You've been hypnotized by this ten-volume project—you've grown as accustomed to it as to your wife. You ought to have resolutely recast this prewar product instead of trying to revise a Government decision."

Grubsky rose. He was no less incensed than Beridze, but he kept himself in hand.

"Here is your chance to succeed where we failed: to display boldness, resolution and other leonine qualities which we evidently lack. I shall be happy to witness your exploits," he said almost dispassionately, and walked out.

Beridze got up and paced the floor with a rapid stride, his back slightly bowed, his fingers locked behind his back.

"That turkey cock will now wash his hands of everything and laugh at us from the sidelines," he said, coming up to Alexei who was sitting passively on the window sill. "What do you say?"

"As regards the turkey cock I would say that there is some logic to his arguments. As a matter of fact I did not expect him to be so straightforward about it."

"Logic there may be, but nevertheless the way he argues is a disgrace," Beridze cut in.

"Disgrace? I think his reasoning is quite sound. The Nazis have come in deep, they're driving for Moscow in an armoured avalanche, it is only a matter of days before the outcome of the war will be decided. Who needs this oil pipe line even if it will be completed in one year instead of three? Either there will be a decisive battle soon and we'll smash them, or..."

"Don't say it, Alexei!" Beridze cried. In one bound he was at Kovshov's side.

The engineers were now standing face to face at the window; Alexei as white as a sheet and Beridze flushed with anger.

"Now remember this—get it into that thick head of yours: there are no 'or's' about it! The war will last as long as is necessary for us to win! A year, if need be. Three years, five years, ten years! And get this too through your head: if the Government has decided to continue work on the pipe line, it means that it is badly needed and has to be ready no later than a year from now." Beridze caught his breath and then continued in more level tone: "Do you really think

we were sent here to give our support to all kinds of questionable 'logic'?"

"I wasn't sent here," Alexei retorted quickly and turned away. He knew that he was in the wrong, but unable to suppress the desire to contradict, added remorselessly: "You were sent here. You simply took me along for the sake of company."

Beridze looked long at Kovshov without a word. His clenched fists rose and his eyes grew black with anger.

Alexei appeared to be unaware of Beridze's state of mind. Realizing, however, that it was best to cut the conversation short, he leaned back on the window sill and, seething with self-reproach and regrets at having hurt his comrade, gazed with unseeing eyes at the sweeping vista outside the window.

"I vouched for you to Batmanov," Beridze panted. "I told him I trusted you as I trust myself. If you value our friendship and everything we hold sacred, don't shake that confidence, Alexei! Do you hear what I say?"

Kovshov made no reply. Beridze threw up his hands, turned sharply on his heel and all but ran out of the room.

CHAPTER THREE

IS THE OIL PIPE LINE ESSENTIAL FOR THE WAR?

ALEXEI had a great deal of time on his hands during these first days of his stay in Novinsk. For the time being his work was confined to perusing materials pertaining to the project and scanning progress reports. Moreover, Beridze had withdrawn into his shell after their unexpected tiff and now was not on speaking terms with Alexei, although they continued to occupy the same office.

On the third day after the altercation Alexei set out on foot for the post office. The offices of the construction administration were located in the vicinity of the railway station, eight kilometres from the town proper. He turned off the dusty, humpy road to take a short cut across the hills. The hills lit up by the sun seemed from a distance to be

covered by a smooth brown carpet, but as he approached them Alexei discovered that they were shaggy and multicoloured.

The account Beridze had given him of the Far East in the train on the way from Moscow had held out a promise of much that was interesting and novel. Alexei had indeed been much impressed by the Far-Eastern landscape from the very beginning.

The slopes of the hill Alexei ascended were covered by a growth of dwarf oak. The large rust-coloured leaves stirred faintly in the wind, but did not fall to the ground. The naked branches of larch rose above the oaks and the discarded needles of this coniferous tree that sheds in the autumn rustled underfoot. Here everything was quite different from the Moscow countryside; oak leaves clung to the branches through the winter while coniferous trees shed their needles.

Alexei descended into a gulley and pushed his way through grass which grew almost to the height of man. In vain had it waited for a mower and now it stood there whispering, yellowed and dried in the sun. A profusion of bright autumn flowers, yellow and violet and dark blue, resembling huge bluebells, were scattered among the grass.

The blossoms reached toward the sky boldly as if summer, and not winter, was in the offing.

He quickly picked a bouquet of the unfamiliar flowers, very pretty but without any fragrance, and turned back toward the road. On the way he passed thickets of dry, ugly bushes. He paused to look at them and a wry smile hovered on his lips when he told himself that these were rhododendrons, and recalled how phantastically beautiful he had imagined them to be in his childhood from the description in Jules Verne's books.

Novinsk too was a disappointment for the Moscow man.

Was this the town he had read so much about? Where were the tall, handsome buildings, the evenly delineated streets? Most of the buildings were wooden structures. Instead of stone pavements and asphalt there were poor dirt roads. Pedestrians picked their way along planks laid close to the houses. All the main streets of the town began at the river front and reached for several kilometres inland in parallel rows of standard houses, with here and there a sparse sprinkling of brick buildings—large, crude, boxlike structures without any architectural finish.

There was no mail for Alexei at the post office.

"They're still writing," the girl clerk said with a pert smile.

Kovshov felt annoyed; he had hoped to find a letter from home. His mother-in-law had promised to write him as soon as she heard anything from Zina. Evidently there was no news. Alexei handed in at the wicket a letter and a telegram—a twenty-word ration for long-distance outbursts of emotion. He had made up his mind to write to Zina in the hope that eventually it would be possible to forward his letters and telegrams from Moscow and that they would finally reach her.

The girl behind the wicket counted the words in the telegram, read them over and threw a curious glance at Alexei.

"Whom are the flowers for?"

"Nobody. I can present them to you."

Gravely he handed her the flowers, bowed and walked out of the post office. The telegram to his wife had reopened the wound in his heart. The growing ache in his breast was almost physical. He paused in the middle of the road and pulled out a carefully folded slip of paper from his pocket.

"I've gone for my exams. Think of me. Only don't worry too much—I'm sure I'll pass. Zina."

How much it had meant to him, this brief note which Alexei had chanced to find in the drawer of his desk after discharge from hospital! He could spend hours reading it over and over again.

Alexei looked upon his presence in Novinsk, deep in the hinterland, in security and idleness, as a misfortune.

"Who are you anyway?" he asked himself indignantly. "Who are you to be roaming about the peaceful countryside so complacently when your wife and comrades are fighting for the country, when that which is nearest and dearest to you, that without which life itself is unthinkable—the future of your people, Moscow—is in mortal danger?"

How had he allowed Beridze to override his objections in Danilov! It would be more difficult to leave from Novinsk, for any attempt to do so would undoubtedly be met with violent opposition on the part of Batmanov and Beridze. They would misconstrue his motives, they would not understand his real intentions or believe that he simply had no other choice. On the other hand, the altercation with Beridze might work in his fa-

vous, for Batmanov would not hold him back if Beridze had already changed his mind about him. . . .

A passenger car came around a bend in the road and passed Kovshov, enveloping him in a cloud of choking dust and exhaust fumes. A short distance up the road it drew up. When Alexei came alongside the driver called out to him and offered to give him a lift.

The car sped on, swerving from side to side to avoid bumps on the road.

"Where are you bound for?" the driver asked.

"The offices of the construction job Batmanov is in charge of. Know where it is?"

The driver nodded and cast a quick, sharp look at Kovshov.

"But I don't think I know you," he said, shifting his cigarette from one corner of his mouth to the other. "Can't remember having seen you before."

"Must you know everybody?"

"Absolutely. At any rate, if I had seen you once I'd be sure to remember."

"You're right, I'm a newcomer. Arrived here only three days ago."

"From Moscow? In that case I know who you are. Engineer Kovshov. Right?"

"Now, why Kovshov? There are three of us new arrivals. True enough, one of the three has that name."

The driver threw away his cigarette and smiled, a gold tooth flashing in his mouth like a tiny flame. His keen eyes surveyed Alexei's face.

"I established your identity by elimination. You're not Batmanov."

"And why not?"

"Batmanov is a man of my age with the same deplorable symptoms of fading youth," the driver said, passing a hand over a greying temple. "Moreover, Batmanov is a well-known personality."

"In that case I'm Beridze."

"You couldn't be," the driver smiled. "Judging by his name, Beridze is a Georgian. And you are a Russian, and from Moscow to boot. Your Moscow accent and Russian snub nose give you away. Beridze has a hook nose and a black beard. And although he speaks a pure Russian without an accent it's not the same as you hear in Moscow."

"How do you know about Beridze's black beard and the fluency of his Russian? Have you met him?"

"I must confess that Beridze and Batmanov are old acquaintances of mine. Three years

ago I saw them off when they left the far East for the West. Beridze had a beard even then and Batmanov was past forty. You'd better own up, Comrade Kovshov."

"All right, I give up. It only remains for you to introduce yourself and we can consider ourselves acquainted."

The car bumped across a corduroy bridge.

"I won't tell you my name. Suppose you try to guess yourself," the driver said jokingly.

Alexei examined the man behind the steering wheel. A grey suit, and a freshly laundered grey silk shirt with the two top buttons unfastened. Dull black, fine-curved hair with a touch of silver at the temples. A sun-tanned face and a pleasant smile. When he smiled a web of tiny wrinkles appeared around the eyes and his features softened.

Conscious of the probing look, the man laughed.

"Quite a riddle, isn't it?"

"It's hard for me to guess who you are because I have nothing to go by. Only one thing is clear: you are not a chauffeur by profession although you're an excellent driver. You probably hold some responsible job connected with the pipe line construction."

The man behind the wheel laughed again. He obviously enjoyed a joke.

"You have been to town, I suppose. Did you like Novinsk?" he asked after a momentary silence as he turned the car toward the buildings in the vicinity of the railway station.

"No," Kovshov replied curtly. He was somewhat irritated. "I did not like it at all. Do you call that a town? A few thousand identical wooden houses strung out in rows. Nothing to look at. To all intents and purposes everything you have now will have to be torn down before a new town can be built. I can't see why the papers have been so lavish in their praise of this Novinsk of yours."

Kovshov's remarks obviously did not please his companion.

"I'm afraid you've judged Novinsk a bit too harshly. I would say, even tendentiously. I can understand why you're biased: you've come here straight from Moscow and you are comparing Novinsk with it. I think you will soon change your mind about our town. You haven't seen the factories, for instance. They would compare favourably to any in the world. One of them, incidentally, is the oil refinery to which you will have to lay the

pipe line. You haven't seen the factories now building. Neither have you seen the theatre, nor the Palace of Young Pioneers. Novinsk deserves praise. It takes centuries for cities to grow, but our Novinsk isn't ten years old yet—it's still a youngster. You've been spoiled young man; it doesn't even occur to you to compare what is with what was. To appreciate Novinsk today you must take into account the scale on which the town was built in the past and on which it will be built after the war. For the last fifteen minutes we've been driving diametrically across the city of the future. You may not know it, but only a few years ago the Nanai used to trap sables right here. All this huge flat clearing has been wrested from the taiga and the forests pressed back to the far side of the river. You ought to take a look at the project for the future Novinsk. Could city builders in the olden days ever plan so far ahead?"

"Aren't you a little too vehement in your defence of Novinsk? You sound as if you were either the architect or the manager of the department of public utilities. Which is it?"

"You'll find out in time. I'll get even with you for running down Novinsk."

"That doesn't frighten me. You won't have a chance. I'm getting ready to go back westward."

The car came to a standstill in front of the sprawling four-story brick building which housed the construction offices.

"You can drop me here and continue driving diametrically across your beloved town. We probably won't be seeing each other any more. Thanks for the lift, anyway. Goodbye."

The stranger smiled.

"Goodbye, goodbye. . . ."

He too alighted and followed Alexei. Alexei stopped.

"Coming to see us?"

The stranger nodded.

"What did you mean when you said you were going back?" he asked gravely, almost sternly. "Was it a joke or are these the orders?"

"Oh no! On my own initiative I'm going to do everything I can to be sent back West. Ever since I got here three days ago I have been burning with shame at the idea of living here in all this comfort."

The two men stopped at the entrance.

"Ah, now I declare you my enemy," the stranger said in a chill tone. "A person who

slights Novinsk and runs away from the Far East is my personal enemy."

At that point it dawned upon Alexei who the man was.

"I've guessed it: you're Zalkind, the secretary of the Novinsk city committee of the Party, aren't you? Beridze told me about you. You once declared him your personal enemy too."

Zalkind beamed.

"Beridze told you about me? He hasn't forgotten me, then. I've forgiven him now that he's come back. You, however, can consider me a ruthless enemy. By the way, you might be interested to know that since yesterday I'm not only the secretary of the Novinsk city committee but the Party organizer for the construction job as well."

In the evening Kovshov wrote a memorandum to Batmanov. He covered two sheets of paper with insistent arguments proving the urgency of his need to leave for the West. Having handed the paper to the construction chief's secretary Alexei settled down to wait for an answer.

The rooms of the dormitory opened into the corridor. Alexei's was the very last one. The house manager flung the door open before him.

Inside was an iron bedstead with a thin mattress, flat pillow and a grey army blanket. A night table such as you might find in a hospital. A small table and two chairs. A portrait of Molotov on the wall and a black office lamp shaped like a question mark on the table. A blue paper blackout curtain was pulled halfway down the window.

They entered together and the room at once seemed crowded. The house manager looked dubiously at Alexei and seemed surprised to hear him say:

"Splendid. I wouldn't want anything better."

Carrying a towel, Alexei walked down the corridor, which was dimly lit by a single lamp. Opening the last door he saw a large kitchen, dirty and inconvenient—of the type sometimes found in communal apartments. In a wide hallway he found the washstand—two sheet metal troughs one on top of the other, the upper with a row of outlets for the water jutting underneath. Trying to make as little noise as possible, Kovshov washed his hands and face.

Not all of his neighbours were asleep. He heard the front door open and slam to, and in walked a girl wearing a leather jacket and

high boots. Heedless of any need for quiet, she unlocked her door singing in a loud voice: "The dark hills aslumber. . . ."

"Hush! Folks here are people trying to get some sleep," Alexei said.

"Oh! I didn't notice you. Are you the new janitor?"

"A new lodger, and one interested in having some quiet here at night."

She came over to him, examining him with curiosity.

"So it was you they got the room ready for this morning. The house manager said it was for the new chief engineer or his assistant. That's you, isn't it?"

"Guilty."

"I gave the manager a piece of my mind. They've given you an icebox instead of a room. It's chilly even now, so you can imagine what it'll be like in winter. It's only fit to be used as a storeroom for vegetables; no human being can stand it. You ought to refuse to take it, make them give you another room."

Alexei welcomed this intrusion into his irksome solitude and he listened with pleasure to the girl's chatter. She went into her room and reappeared a moment later without the leather jacket, wearing a light silk

blouse. Fixing her hair with plump arms bare to the elbows raised to her head, she went on:

"There will be plenty of vacant rooms soon. They say the new construction chief is going to send us all packing. Practically everybody working at the administration is ready to leave with the old chief."

"Must you talk so loud?" Alexei asked.

"Why not? We're not used to being bashful, as you'll see for yourself around six in the morning. They all talk just as loudly. Grechkin, the chief of the planning department, lives in the room opposite. He has four children who always cry in chorus. But that's not the worst. The very worst is Lizochka, Grechkin's wife. She's a little bit of a thing, but your ears will always be ringing with her shouting."

The girl gave Alexei a brief description of the other people who shared the apartment. Without waiting for an invitation, she walked into his room, examined it critically and found it wanting.

"It's damp. Poorly scrubbed; look at those wet patches next to the baseboard. Furnished with junk picked up at random. No mattress to speak of; they've given you a sheet of cig-

arette paper instead. You can't sleep on that without your bones aching."

"It will do quite well," Kovshov declared. "Especially since I shan't be spending much time in bed."

The girl finished inspecting the room and turned her large, kindly eyes on the engineer.

"You must be a bachelor used to living any old way."

"I am a married man, though not of long standing."

She looked at him in amazement and burst out into a peal of laughter.

"And you left your bride behind? That's a nice thing to do!"

Alexei did not like the turn the conversation was taking and he immediately lost all interest in what the girl was saying. She noticed the change and, bidding him good night, withdrew.

Alexei had no desire to sleep. He pressed his forehead against the cold windowpane. Outside it was as light as day. The lifeless, phosphorescent moonlight poured down on the barracklike buildings and the multitude

of tree stumps that studded the clearing whence the taiga had been forced to retreat. To the right, beyond the last barrack, glistened the majestic Adun. Somewhere a circular saw whined and whimpered incessantly, sometimes crying like a woman.

Dreary thoughts again possessed him. During the day he had received a letter from his brother. Mitya, who was eighteen, wrote from a military school that he was learning how to give it to the Germans and that he would shortly be leaving for the front. For Alexei these few sentences were a bitter reproach.

His gloomy reflections were interrupted by the arrival of Beridze. As he entered Alexei sprang to his feet, his face betraying both embarrassment and joy, for the feeling of guilt for the break between him and his comrade weighed heavily upon him.

"I've come to give you a dressing down," Beridze said going over to Alexei and putting his arm around the latter's shoulders somewhat awkwardly.

The chief engineer too was dissatisfied with Kovshov's room.

"They tell me the walls get covered with hoarfrost. And it's a miserable dump, enough to dampen anyone's spirits. Supposing you

move over to my place, it's warm there and the landlady will take good care of you."

"Thanks, I prefer to stay here for the time being. The room suits me perfectly."

"Have you really made up your mind about returning to Moscow?" Beridze asked point-blank.

"I have," Alexei replied bluntly. He knew why Beridze had come to see him. "Did Batmanov tell you? Well, is he going to let me go or not?"

"Batmanov told me nothing about you. Have you already seen him about it?"

"I handed in a memorandum to him yesterday."

"That's too bad!" Beridze said with chagrin. Obviously upset, he began pacing up and down the room, three paces forward and three paces back. "You're no longer a child, Alexei, and you have your own mind, but as a friend I want to tell you that it was a mistake to start this business. You haven't begun working yet. That's why you are so restless. Let me tell you it's all nonsense. You've got to overcome this frame of mind."

Kovshov was sitting on the low bed, his head bowed. Beridze checked an impulse to go over to him and stroke his fair hair.

· “It would be unfair to Batmanov, old man. He’s having a hard time of it now. The organization is in a chaotic state and people are scattering. We came here together with him and he relies on us more than on anyone else. And here you suddenly go and tell him you’re leaving. It smacks of a stab in the back.”

“You’re letting your eloquence run away with you, Georgi Davydovich. I assure you, the chief wouldn’t see it in that light at all. For him I’m a minor cog and he can get along without me perfectly well.”

· “Of course he can. But I am not so sure that he will care to. At any rate your memorandum is bound to put his back up. You’re putting me in an awkward position too; after all, I did vouch for you. I see trouble ahead.”

There was a knock at the door and Zalkind, wearing a light summer coat, walked into the room. He examined the room with interest.

“Made it up again?” the Party organizer asked Beridze, seating himself on the bed next to Alexei. “Shouldn’t have. As for me, I have no intention of making peace with him.”

"Did you hear that he has already turned in a written application to the chief?" Beridze said.

"So much the worse for him," Zalkind said, laying a hand on Alexei's shoulder. "I'm afraid you'll regret it one day."

"Why should I?" Alexei asked with irritation. "I am not asking to be sent to a health resort."

Zalkind rested his head on his hands. "Some people around here reason this way," he said. "Everything's staked on the war, they say, the country is exerting every effort, each man and each bullet has to be strictly husbanded. Yet there are large armed forces inactive in the Far East. They must be taken from here without delay and sent to the West. The Far-Eastern divisions are well trained and equipped and they will help stop the fascists. If the Japanese take advantage of this to snatch the Far East away from us, that's nothing to worry about—we'll manage without the Far East. The cities, villages and lands of Russia proper are nearer and dearer to us than the inhospitable expanses of the Far East. What would you call that kind of reasoning?"

"Disgusting! I wouldn't have much patience with people who argued like that."

"That's the right, patriotic view!" Zalkind approved. "Every stone and every stream—even the tiniest creek—is precious to our country. We would not have the right to yield a single grain of Far-Eastern sand—and here every grain of sand is golden, by the way—even if we were no more than descendants of Yermak* and Poyarkov.** But we are not merely the descendants of Yermak, we are the heirs of Lenin, we are Soviet people, we are the people who have injected new life into these parts."

"That's all very well, but what has it got to do with engineer Kovshov?" Alexei asked.

"Engineer Kovshov, although he has condemned unpatriotic opinions quite patriotically, is prepared in practice to yield the entire Far East to the Japanese. He loves Moscow and Moscow only."

Alexei's eyebrows lifted.

"I've already handed the Far East over to the Japanese, I suppose?"

* Yermak Timofeyevich was a Cossack ataman under whose leadership the conquest of Siberia was effected in the sixteenth century.

** Vasili Poyarkov was a chief of a military expedition to the Amur Valley in 1643. He was the first explorer to bring back valuable information about the Amur and the inhabitants of the region.

Zalkind disregarded the remark.

"There's no need to dwell on the role of the rear in waging war," he continued. "We all know that the stability and efficiency of the rear are as important as the army itself. What do we mean by the rear? Factories, kolkhozes, diverse construction jobs, hundreds and thousands of big and small state institutions, all geared to war...."

"Very interesting indeed," Alexei smiled. "True, it sounds very much like the latest editorial in the local paper. Do you really think that I am ignorant of such elementary truths?"

"It is your unwillingness to understand some elementary truths that has distressed Beridze and myself. Our pipe line will play as big a part in the war as a munitions factory or an armoured division. The construction of this pipe line has a direct bearing on the armed forces stationed in the Far East. You are indignant at people who propose to remove the army from the Far-Eastern frontiers; why, then, do you give them your support in practice by denying that the pipe line is essential for carrying on the war?"

Kovshov got up, pushed past the table and the bed and sat down at the table in the cor-

ner, facing Beridze. The chief engineer was toying with a pocketknife fitted with a collection of tools from can opener to gimlet.

"I deny nothing. Only I can see that you can't possibly build it fast enough. Hence it's not destined to play a part in the war."

Zalkind took the knife from Beridze and began to open one blade after another.

"That argument holds no water. You have no idea of the general plan for the conduct of the war and you don't know the resources there are to draw on or the time involved. We, naturally, aren't in the know about everything either. Only our top leaders in Moscow know everything, and they're the ones who do the deciding. The oil pipe line was one of the million questions they have had to consider. Grubsky argued that it could not be built in a year, but they didn't agree with him. The pipe line is essential for the war and its construction simply cannot be put off. Hence the decision to complete the job in a year. It's tantamount to an order to stick to your guns and accomplish the impossible. This explains the change made in the leadership of the construction job.... Now things are in reliable hands. Did you ever read the feature article in *Pravda* about Batmanov and

Beridze? The title was 'Men Who Do the Impossible'...."

"I don't remember seeing it," said Alexei.

"It was worth reading," the Party organizer said proudly. "I was delighted to hear that the Council of People's Commissars had decided to speed up construction. I regard that decision as additional proof of our strength. Just think what wisdom and foresight has been invested in the general plan for defeating the fascists if an oil pipe line located several thousand kilometres from the front is essential and has a definite place in the conduct of the war even though it won't be ready for a whole year."

"I understand that very well, and I agree with you!" Alexei exclaimed, leaping to his feet. "But can't you see my point of view? I want to go to the front, I want to be in the thick of the fighting. Weren't we taught from childhood in school and in the Komsomol not to run away from hardships, that our place is where the danger is the greatest."

"Weren't you also taught to be disciplined? After all, you've got to listen to older comrades," Zalkind put in sternly. "Weren't you taught not to set yourself apart from the common effort? If you weren't, then even at

the front you will be arguing: 'This is taking part in the war and that isn't, this is important and that is not, this suits me and that doesn't.' But perhaps you don't consider us your elders? Beridze told me that you'd had your baptism of fire. I must admit that you don't show it. I would advise to give some thought to what we have told you...."

Zalkind returned the knife to Beridze and got up. The chief engineer also rose. Alexei pressed his back against the wall to allow the two to pass. As he went by, Zalkind nudged him with his shoulder and smiled:

"We've pressed the fellow up against the wall in more ways than one!"

"What do you want of me, elder comrades?" Alexei asked.

"What do we want of him, Georgi Davydovich? Tell him."

"We want you to stop thinking about leaving, old man. You know how much I count on your help; it's time you got down to work in real earnest. There's another consideration, too. Your going would have a bad effect on the staff of the construction administration. People are restive as it is. I'll fix things with Batmanov. I will take your appli-

cation back from him and you won't have to do any explaining."

Alexei gave his nocturnal visitors a searching look.

"You needn't bother to do that. I'm not afraid to explain. If need be, I can speak to the chief myself."

"That's a good idea," Zalkind smiled, evidently visualizing the forthcoming interview. Poking Alexei in the stomach with his finger, he went out. Beridze stood for a moment in the doorway, and then followed him.

While the circular saw whimpered and groaned outside Alexei undressed and lay down on his hard bed.

CHAPTER FOUR

EVERYBODY WANTS TO LEAVE

ON ONE of those sunny, transparent crisp days in which the Far East autumn abounds, Beridze and Kovshov made their first flight over the route of the pipe line. It followed the right bank of the river swerving away from it slightly only in a few spots.

From the air the broad-bosomed Adun presented an even more impressive aspect. Looking at it from the plane you could see how the solid expanse of water spread out and fell into innumerable bays, channels and arms, all sparkling and glittering in the dazzling sunlight.

The taiga, a dense mass of vegetation, stretched away to the horizon on both sides of the river. In its boundless fastnesses hardy northerners like the larch and the bilberry thrived alongside the delicate southern cork tree

and grapevine; and the tiger, that terror of the tropical jungles, stalked the northern reindeer.

Surveying the landscape one might have thought that man had never set foot in these primeval expanses. Yet suddenly the first settlement with neat rows of houses and the fresh golden yellow of grain fields hove into sight. Soon cosy-looking villages appeared with increasing frequency on the river front, speeding by under the wings of the plane.

The route of the pipe line crossed the Adun at two points—at Novinsk and near the small town of Olgokhta, also on the river. Slightly below the latter spot the river and the pipe line separated. The Adun swept on majestically to the right, while the route of the pipe line swung northward to the left. Running down to the sea, it followed the coastline to Chongr Cape, whence it was to cross the stormy twelve-kilometre Jagdinsk strait at its narrowest spot over to Cape Perilous on Taisin Island. The oil fields were in the area of the town of Konchelan in the northern extremity of the island, and it was to them that the line was to be laid.

Georgi Davydovich was satisfied with the inspection flight. Some years before he had investigated the banks of the Adun on foot as

a member of a surveying party, and now he had a bird's-eye view of familiar parts. He had some new ideas, but as yet he was not prepared to talk about them; he merely hinted darkly that he intended to launch an offensive against Grubsky.

As soon as they climbed out of the plane which had landed at the small airdrome beyond the birch grove not far from headquarters, the chief engineer hurried to his office and buried himself in blueprints, all the while reciting Mayakovsky under his breath; he was a great admirer of the poet and knew a great many of his verses by heart.

*But it seems
that before the singing can start,
you toil and sweat with the song's
fermentation. . . .*

For Alexei the flight over the route of the pipe line had been a depressing experience. The magnificence of nature's autumnal garb failed to draw his attention; he was too preoccupied to admire its beauty. Instead the engineer searched for signs of life on the construction site. These, to his great disappointment, were few and far between: here

and there the taiga had been felled and stretches of road occurred now and again, but between lay tens of kilometres of untouched terrain, with huddles of tents or freshly built log cabins marking the various construction sectors. The route of the pipe line as such existed only in the imagination of the surveyors and compilers of the plans.

"But nothing has been done on the route!" Alexei said to the chief engineer with a note of alarm in his voice. "It's practically untouched!"

Beridze, although he was in high spirits, had nothing consoling to say.

"The situation is worse than you think, Alyosha," he said, revealing his white teeth in a smile framed by black moustache and beard. "In my opinion we do not even have a route. We'll have to find a new one. What we've just seen is all wasted effort."

After the memorable conversation with Zalkind in the dormitory Alexei had lost all hope of being able to leave, although he still waited for a reply from Batmanov to the memorandum he had submitted. Worries connected with the construction job beset him more and more. He marvelled at the equanimity of Batmanov and Beridze.

"How much time will Batmanov need to finish taking over the management?" Alexei was indignant. "Our much-lauded chief is in no hurry. The head office is a mess, can't make head or tail of it. For some reason or other the old management doesn't leave and keeps on butting into everything. And the new management calmly looks on and waits instead of taking over!"

Beridze and Kovshov were impatient to take an active hand in matters. Work on the plans demanded the removal of Grubsky, reorganization of the production personnel, placing of people in jobs they were best fitted for.

"Hold your horses," Batmanov kept telling his engineers. "Give me a chance to take over the outfit properly first."

He did not give them permission to go out on the pipe line site. He actually lost his temper when the others insisted.

"What have you got to go to the construction site with, comrades engineers. A lot of good you will do there with empty hands and nothing in your heads. At every section you'll be showered with thousands of questions that you can't answer. Education won't help—you can't run things, you're not prepared to do that yet. You'd be bound to make a hash of

things and the mess is bad enough as it is. I shan't let you go out and I won't go myself until we're thoroughly prepared. Remember, in the primary organizational stage of any construction undertaking everything depends on the work of the headquarters."

The only field in which Batmanov took a resolute hand from the start was the shipment of materials, equipment and food by water to the island and other distant sections of the job. As a matter of fact, the bays of the island and the landing stages of the construction sectors in the taiga on the mainland could be reached only by water. In the few days that remained before the Adun froze over as much cargo as possible had to be sent all along the route of the pipe line so that there should be less to transport over the ice during the winter months. Batmanov pressed on Sidorenko, his predecessor, inducing him to make several visits a day to the landing stage where barges and ships were loaded, to telephone the head office of the river shipping line, and send dozens of telegrams to Rubezhansk, the territorial centre, and Konchelan, on Taisin Island.

For the rest, Batmanov seemed indeed to be procrastinating. Beridze invariably justi-

fied the chief's actions and carried out his instructions to the letter. Alexei wondered at this submissiveness, so alien to the chief engineer's character.

"You're judging by first impressions, whereas I've known him for a long time," Beridze said mildly. "I am accustomed to carrying out his orders without question because I have faith in him, and he has never yet failed my trust. . . . When you get to know him better you too will stop grumbling; he is very methodical and has a great deal of common-sense. It may sometimes be more gratifying to have a chief who rushes about panting with his eyes popping out, shouting orders right and left. Batmanov is a serious man, he does not believe in such theatrical effects."

Beridze was right. Moscow had taken a hand in the affairs of the construction job, it had set a new policy and changed the management. Everything else was left to the new men in charge. And Batmanov quite correctly considered it his first task to realign his people, to prepare them for the big job ahead. There could be no question of completely renewing the personnel—who could have provided so many people at once? It remained to rejuvenate the old labour force—a task far

more complex than to build it up anew. Batmanov had to size up people quickly and decide what to do with them.

The trouble with the personnel as a whole was that its efforts were not geared to the war. People were aware that somewhere very far away there was a war on. They knew what was at stake, they suffered pangs of anxiety and apprehension, listened eagerly to the radio, studied maps and discussed what they had read and heard. Yet they did not know the most important thing: what part in the war each of them was to play. Life on the construction site proceeded almost as it had before the war, according to peacetime standards.

The men in charge of the undertaking had not been able to assume the leadership of the collective of people and lead them forward. The task of cutting the time required for laying the pipe line to one-third was their first wartime test, and they had balked at it. The peacetime project based on a three-year time limit remained the law on the construction site. To the old executives it seemed impossible to revise a project that represented years of work; to draw up another project would take at least a year.

And, what was most important, the former executives could not believe that a construction job located so far from the battle fronts and requiring so much time to complete could be needed urgently by the state. They expected at any moment to be recalled from the pipe line project and transferred to some really urgent war job.

The appointment of a new management caused surprise and bewilderment. People, at a loss, clung to the old managers, and many openly expressed hostility toward the new arrivals. Running up against one of the innumerable snags he encountered on the job, Alexei Kovshov said indignantly:

"What is our chief thinking of? The sooner he sends this crowd packing the better. They've been stagnating here. Fellow workers of this sort are worse than our Western allies!"

"Now then, Alyosha," Beridze calmed him. "Now so fast! There'll be plenty of time and to spare, you'll see! Vasili Maximovich and Zalkind will take care of the stagnant ones."

The members of the head office staff conducted themselves variously. Grechkin, the head of the planning department, for instance, came to see Batmanov without waiting to

be called. After introducing himself in a few words, he opened a folder and proceeded to give a businesslike report of the situation at the construction site. Batmanov on his part listened as if he were already accustomed to hearing Grechkin's reports.

"Latterly we have practically no increase in returns on the capital invested," Grechkin concluded, pointing with his pencil at the tables spread out before Batmanov. "In cases like this we economists consider an organization bankrupt. People get paid, they eat and drink, they putter at something without having anything to show for it. The construction job is in a blind alley."

"Are those the very latest figures?" Batmanov asked as he looked over the papers.

"Yes, but frankly speaking they are rather old. I get my information by mail. They deliver it as best they can—by dog team sometimes. I would like to register a complaint at once. We can't get along without a telephone line. For some reason or other the former chief engineer thought that a telephone was needed only for me to get reports in from the line. He himself managed to get along without any contact with the construction sectors."

"I suppose you also intend to leave?" Batmanov asked, although he already guessed what the answer would be.

"If you kick me out, I'll go," Grechkin replied without hesitation.

The chief looked at him with interest. People who did not know him, were wont to smile at Grechkin's appearance. His squat figure and short, fat legs contrasted queerly with his large torso and huge head. His face, somewhat puffy and with a fleshy growth on the chin, was anything but handsome. He spoke sententiously, with a marked Volga accent, and had a habit of opening his greenish-yellow cat-like eyes wide as he talked.

"Have you any children?" Batmanov asked.

"Four of them."

"You must have started early. You can't be more than thirty."

"Thirty-five. I just can't resist the kiddies, comrade chief. They keep coming one after the other. What can I do?"

"In other words, you don't want to leave because of the children," Batmanov concluded. His words sounded like a reproach.

"Nothing surprising in that, is there?" Grechkin said, somewhat hurt. "Children aren't kittens. It isn't so simple to travel with them."

from one end of the country to the other. I lost one child on the road as it is: caught a chill, sickened and died. But if necessary I am ready to move with the whole family. The youngsters are pretty sturdy and Lizochka, my wife, is used to travelling. It's just that I wouldn't like to go away without having done anything. Never in my life have I left a construction job before it was finished. Here in the Far East I've worked at two building sites and got commended by the Government both times." He looked quizzically at Batmanov and asked with an innocent air: "Well, are things going to begin moving here or not?"

"I think they will," Batmanov smiled. "Been decorated?"

"Twice. The Distinguished Labour and For Valorous Labour medals."

Vasili Maximovich tried to picture the two medals on the broad expanse of Grechkin's chest and smiled again.

"Supposing we do this," Batmanov said, rising. "You introduce me to all the people working in your department; I'd like to see what sort they are. You will report to me every morning on the progress of work. As for these sheets, you'd better redo them; there's

a hundredweight of figures in them now." As if weighing them in his hand, Batmanov lifted a batch of tables showing plan fulfilment. "These things will have to be simplified, made shorter and more to the point. Think over your daily reports; so far I don't see any businesslike analysis in them, and that 's something you must see to. Later on we shall organize a dispatcher service, which I think you ought to head. Generally speaking I intend to expand your department. But all in good time.... For the present—in this respect you are absolutely right—the most unpleasant thing is the lack of communications. We need them badly indeed. For without them we are blind and deaf. I am accustomed to having a selector telephone right here"—he gave a resounding rap on the glass top of his desk. —"I must be able to contact the route of the pipe line and talk with the people there at all times."

Vasili Maximovich extended his hand in parting and the head of the planning department seized it eagerly. The handclasp seemed to seal their compact to work together.

In the outer office sat employees whom Batmanov had summoned. Joking to conceal their nervousness, they kept casting glances

at the cupboardlike door leading into the chief's office.

"Well, how did you make out?" one of them asked Grechkin as he emerged from the inner office. "I see you're sweating; was it that hot?"

Grechkin glanced at the others with amusement, then, fixing them with a goggle-eyed stare, he said in a mysterious whisper:

"I'm all right. Sweating from sheer satisfaction. But you'll find it cold, freezing, in fact. It's all up with you. God has given us a chief as sharp as a razor. He'll give you a close shave, sure enough."

With that he turned away to hide his grin and waddled out of the room in his huge, ill-made boots.

Batmanov and Zalkind called in the heads of departments and all the people working under them. First the heads reported on the work of their respective departments, and then the staff members gave an account of their own work. Some of the questions put to them struck them as queer and tactless and either evoked smiles or made the blood rise to their cheeks.

Beridze, who had run in to see the construction chief, laughed as he told Kovshov about the conversation he had overheard between Batmanov and one of the department heads.

"He was an insolent fellow, bloated like a balloon with a sense of his own importance, but in three minutes he was down to his natural size. When Vasili Maximovich learned that he was a truck driver by trade he told him: 'I have not quite finished taking over the management, but as soon as I do, I shall see that justice is done: I'll give you a truck and send you down the line. Anybody can be an indifferent chief but good truck drivers are scarce. In the meantime you might as well dig up your driver's license and get ready to go to work.' "

"Oh yes," Georgi Davydovich added. "He told me to send you in. You'd better go and see him, Alexei."

As he walked down from the third floor to the second. Kovshov mentally ran over the speech he would make in defence of his memorandum. However, he was not destined to make any such speech. Batmanov responded drily to his salutation.

"Comrade Zalkind and I are meeting the

staff," he said. "I'd like you to sit down and listen."

The chief was standing in front of a door leading to a balcony in a flood of sunshine that poured in through the glass door and the four windows of the spacious office. Zalkind sat behind a long conference table that had been moved up against the chief's desk. He waved Alexei to a seat next to him.

"Call in the next, please," Batmanov said to the secretary.

A tall, spare-featured man entered.

"Filimonov, engineer," he mumbled laconically.

"What department do you work in? Where's your staff?" Batmanov asked.

"I don't work in any department; I work by myself. The position is called that of transport engineer. I am directly subordinate to the chief engineer."

Filimonov spoke with obvious reluctance.

"Where were you educated and when did you graduate?"

"The Moscow Transport Engineering Institute. In 1938."

"And you came directly from the institute to the Far East?"

"Yes. Worked as a mechanical engineer on road-building jobs."

"Where were you born?"

"In the Donets Basin," Filimonov answered. "All this information may be found in the questionnaires I have filled out for the personnel department," he added with a wry smile.

"Is it too much trouble to answer questions?" Vasili Maximovich retorted quickly. "So far I have put you a few preliminary questions which certainly have not been offensive either in form or substance. I intended to follow up these with some unpleasant questions. We must come to an understanding on one or two matters from the very beginning. Sidorenko told me about your request, but I do not intend to let you go. Shall we continue the conversation?"

Filimonov shrugged his shoulders. Batmanov threw a quick glance at Kovshov who was leaning forward in his seat.

"You said that the position you hold is called that of transport engineer. Perhaps you have a different name for it? Will you answer a rather indelicate question? What have you been doing on this construction job since the beginning of the war?"

Batmanov had a way of keeping his eyes fixed on the person he was addressing. Unlike many executives he did not have the ridiculous habit of fumbling absently with papers as he talked to people.

"That is not an easy question," said Filimonov. "I can answer it either by giving you some sort of excuse in a few words or else by telling a long story."

"That is up to you. Do as you think best. I might as well tell you that I would prefer to hear the long story."

After a brief pause Filimonov began. He spoke frankly, he did not mince words and made no attempt to justify himself. The chief listened carefully, his head resting in his hand. The telephone on the desk rang twice but he ignored it.

Batmanov left his desk and took a seat closer to Zalkind and Kovshov. On the whole he spent little time at his desk. As often as not he would pace up and down, or take up a position in some corner of the room. Evidently he felt hemmed in behind the huge desk with the heavy marble inkstand representing a group of lions on a crag.

"May I sum up what you have said?" he said when Filimonov had finished. He paused:

and continued in a slightly altered tone. "I am dissatisfied with my work on the construction site. In wartime one wants to work more and better than before. I don't know, however, whether it is worth while bothering with this construction job. From the very beginning of the war everybody here has been waiting for orders to discontinue work, and so have I. Like everybody else, I am carrying on here only by inertia. My stay here is as illusory as that of the entire collective. I sincerely asked to be allowed to go to the front, and I am asking the same thing now.' That's all, isn't it?"

"I believe so," Filimonov said. He had grown paler, for the conversation had agitated him. "If my reasoning is faulty, I am afraid I still fail to see where my mistake begins and where it ends."

"I'll help you find both the beginning and the end," Batmanov promised "And not in words, either. We shall not discuss matters in the abstract any more."

"Am I to understand that you intend to keep me on here?" Filimonov said. "What am I to do?"

The chief rose and so did Filimonov. Vasilii Maximovich walked over to the window

and back. The green strip of carpet muffled his footfalls.

"I propose to introduce certain organizational changes in the office, and, in particular, to set up a new big department to take charge of motor transport and mechanical facilities. How do you look upon it?"

"That is unquestionably the proper thing to do," Filimonov agreed at once.

Batmanov and Zalkind exchanged glances.

"I was told that at one time you insisted on the establishment of such a department."

"I did. The pipe line can't be built without laying a road in the taiga first and putting transport on a proper footing. Before the pipes can be welded they must be hauled to the spot and laid out end to end all along the line. We have a great many trucks and other machinery but nobody sees to their utilization. The one and only so-called transport engineer could cope with no more than the statistics and the reports. I couldn't make the former management see the most elementary things."

"Why?" Zalkind asked.

Filimonov was somewhat taken aback.

"My suggestion was looked upon as an attempt to set up a department for myself and to climb to a higher rung on the execu-

tive ladder. The chief of the construction job actually said as much. 'I'll increase your wages without taking on more people,' he said. 'Why have departments sprouting up without rhyme or reason?'"

"You'll have to set up the department and take charge of it. We can't leave our motor transport and machinery without anyone to look after them," Batmanov said. "I've decided to appoint you chief of the new department."

Filimonov's face changed, the lines on his cheeks and around his mouth deepening.

"I've got nothing to recommend myself for the job. Are you sure I can do it, that I won't fail you? It's a big undertaking. I think it would be better if I were only one of the employees of the department."

Vasili Maximovich skirted the long table and went up to the engineer.

"The questionnaires in the personnel department to which you referred me show that you were in charge of a motor transport office. The same source tells me that you had occasion to work on mechanization at a construction job."

Filimonov made a deprecating gesture, but Batmanov forestalled his protest.

"You want to tell me that the scale on which things are done here is a hundred times greater. True enough, but a person must always progress from lesser things to greater. I shall tell you frankly that I'm going to demand a great deal from you. On the other hand, you'll have an opportunity to make up for lost time."

"I'll think it over," said Filimonov.

Batmanov gave a low laugh. Vasili Maximovich had a charming smile; it transformed his stern features in a twinkling, making them soft and intensely human.

"You misunderstood me, comrade. I do not intend to return to the question of your appointment. You don't need to think it over any more: consider yourself appointed. You will have to think about building up a department as quickly as possible."

Filimonov looked in turn at Batmanov, Zalkind and Kovshov who were watching him expectantly.

"A 180-degree turn, eh?" he said goodnaturedly. "I'll get it from my wife now! She's already sold the chickens and kitchen utensils."

Everybody laughed. Filimonov went out with an air of serious concentration.

A long-distance call came through. The chief took it. Zalkind, listening to Batmanov's end of the conversation, said:

"It's a call from Rubezhansk. Either the territorial committee of the Party or the representative of the State Committee of Defence."

Batmanov had to shout into the receiver to make himself heard. It was an effort for him and his voice gave way under the strain.

"During the elections to the Supreme Soviet of the Republic he had to do a great deal of public speaking," Zalkind explained. "He addressed meetings of voters on the town square, at the railway car shops, the bridge building site and at the fisheries. The frosts were severe at the time and his voice broke."

"No need to come here," Batmanov shouted into the mouthpiece. "I'll look into it myself! I'm finishing taking over. The sooner he leaves the better. I said: it's better if he leaves soon. He is in my way here, after all. I can't keep on raising a fuss with him over every trifle. He's waiting for orders from Moscow. He's waiting for instructions where to go from here, I said. You've got the instructions? In that case I would ask you to wire him."

The telephone conversation dragged on and on. Red in the face from the effort of shouting, Batmanov reported on the shipment of materials and food to the construction sectors on the line, all the while impatiently tapping the glass top of his desk with his wedding ring.

Kovshov, who was studying him critically, had been aware of the ring for some time.

"Don't you think it strange that Communist Batmanov should wear that obsolete symbol of marriage?" he asked Zalkind. "Don't tell me he had a church wedding?"

"It's got nothing to do with religious rites. He's had to live away from his family for long stretches of time and before one of these separations he and his wife agreed to wear rings. Batmanov jokingly says that it helps them think of each other. He jokes about it but continues to wear the ring."

"I believe I heard his family was in the Crimea," Alexei recalled. "I wonder what's become of them now that the Crimea has been cut off. . . ."

"There's no news from Anna Ivanovna. Batmanov has not been able to find out whether they left or not. His only consolation is

that Anna Ivanovna is an energetic woman and will no doubt manage to leave."

Alexei looked at Batmanov with sympathy in spite of himself.

"How did you like Filimonov?" Zalkind asked.

"He'll find his proper place right away and nobody will ever hear a word of complaint from him," Kovshov said with conviction. "The trouble is there are too few people like him around here. Most of them are tough ones like Grubsky or that supply chief Liberman. Batmanov's wasting his time bothering with them. They ought to be tied into a bundle and tossed into the Adun, or something like that," Alexei said, scowling. "There'd be less people, but the air would be fresher."

"Drown them in the Adun?" Zalkind said. "Extravagant, aren't you!"

"The war has been a test for human relationships. Now that a man is asked to give everything he has in him he shows himself in his true colours. We've got to be stricter in our approach to people now. I must admit that I'm not pleased with everything I see here. There are still some petty people about who don't seem to understand much about Socialism, although they've lived in the land

of Socialism for a quarter of a century. I don't see anything socialist in Liberman, for instance. Or in Topolev. I was glad when I heard that Topolev worked here. I knew him to be a prominent man in his field; they used to set him up as an example to us at the institute. And here I see he's nothing but a saboteur. The old man hasn't learned anything after living among us for so many years."

Alexei's words shocked Zaikind. He stopped listening to Batmanov's telephone conversation and regarded Alexei intently.

"I see you're dumping everything into one pile indiscriminately," Zalkind said, taking a long pull at his cigarette and blowing out a cloud of smoke. "We'll have to do a little sorting out of things. True enough, at times like these people show the stuff they're made of. Say there's a town being evacuated. Now suppose some Communist executive, or rather, someone who is regarded as a Communist and an executive, clears out of town first, before anybody else, loading all sorts of petty personal effects into his private car at a time when women and children are left behind under bombing. A person like that is neither a Communist nor an executive—he is worse than the enemy. He has managed to camouflage

himself, for twenty-five years he has hidden his wretched soul revealing it only at the critical moment when he is gripped by fear for his own skin. That sort comes to the top like scum rises to the surface of boiling water. No need to waste time talking about them. Dante has something that applies to them very well: 'We won't discuss them. Look, spit and pass them by.' I added the 'spit' myself for emphasis. . . . Here too there were some people, Communists and executives among them, who in anticipation of hardships stocked up food for a year or more. There can be no two opinions of such people either. However, sometimes the circumstances are of a different and much more complex nature. I barely know Liberman, Topolev and the other people working in the main office. Nevertheless I feel that you are doing them an injustice and that your opinion of them is bound to change in the future when our collective grows stronger and everyone finds his proper place. At times we are apt to judge people by inconsequential attributes or depending upon the mood of the moment."

Zalkind pulled at his cigarette several times in succession. He was a heavy smoker. Alexei waved away the smoke.

"Don't you feel that what you have just said could in equal measure be applied to yourself?" the Party organizer went on. "Try to take an objective view and tell me whether your own behaviour here hasn't been enough to create an unfavourable impression. After all, you are a Communist and your post is not a minor one."

Alexei hung his head.

"Now, of course, you'll take every opportunity to throw that memorandum of mine in my face," he muttered. "Is my request really so hard to understand in the proper light?"

"We do understand you, at least Beridze and I do. Batmanov too, most likely. I had no intention of throwing anything up to you. I merely cited your own example to make things clearer. It is wrong to judge of a person hastily without coming to know him properly. Judging by everything you're a decent young man and you know your job. And yet there is bound to be some other young man who won't like you. He will form a false opinion of you and curse you up and down. Not everyone has the right to judge others."

"And I least of all?" Kovshov looked up. Zalkind shook a finger at him.

"Don't confuse the issue. I only want to say one thing: you spoke about not making allowances. We are justified in making less allowances for you than, say, for Topolev or Liberman. Or aren't we?"

"You are," Kovshov agreed.

"What an intricate business is human nature!" Zalkind said, but there was more of satisfaction than resentment in his tone. "I cannot forgive myself for having formerly underestimated this complexity. I must frankly admit that there were people whom I knew only by the personnel records, by their speeches at conferences, or from casual encounters in the workshop, the office or on the construction site. Fragmentary impressions seemed sufficient to arrive at fixed and definite opinions about people and to classify them as good, sincere, tested workers fitted for their jobs or, on the contrary, poor, insincere, ill-placed workers. It is not easy to plumb the depths of the human soul. Sometimes you can't help regretting that so much time has had to be spent on all kinds of meetings and spectacular mass undertakings."

A truck engine roared just outside the window. The noise made it hard for Batmanov to hear and he kept looking at the win-

dow in annoyance as he shouted hoarsely into the telephone repeating every phrase two or three times over.

"It is clear to everyone now that the lesson of the last quarter of a century has not been lost on the vast majority of the people in our country," Zalkind continued in a low voice, leaning closer to Kovshov so as not to interfere with Batmanov. "There is no doubt about it, our people are spiritually richer than ever before, as you can see from the attitude of any citizen toward the war. They all want to get to the front. And even when a man mistakenly insists on being sent to the front, there is something admirable about his error. He just doesn't know any better, and though he may be mistaken, he has the country's interests at heart, rather than his own. It would be ridiculous even to compare Soviet people to people of the capitalist world, wouldn't it?"

"It would," Kovshov agreed.

"All of which means that you must not be shocked to find shortcomings in people. It stands to reason that the very best of our people are still far from being perfect. You can't wash off the birthmarks of capitalism with soap and water. Haven't we been taught that man will finally be rid of the ballast of the

past only under Communism? Now you've discovered a new method: to drown the birthmarks of capitalism in the Adun. It may be a quicker way but obviously unsuitable for all that. You might drown the people along with the birthmarks."

Zalkind laughed into his hand. Batmanov had hung up and was mopping his face with his handkerchief.

"What's the whispering and giggling about?" he asked curiously.

"We were talking about Filimonov and the local people in general," Zalkind said.

"Yes, there are a great many excellent people here," the construction chief said with conviction. "We'll build up a good staff yet."

Zalkind looked at Alexei but said nothing.

"Next we'll have a talk with Rogov," Batmanov said, looking at the list in front of him. "He phoned me a long time ago and demanded to be released at once. As a matter of fact, 'demand' was exactly the word he used."

Rogov, the head of the business management department of the construction administration, took the offensive as soon as he stepped into Batmanov's office.

"Why have you issued orders not to make out my discharge papers? Construction chief

Sidorenko released me. How long am I going to be penalized?" He spoke in a loud, somewhat hoarse voice, almost shouting. "Can't you see I'm sick and tired of worrying about housing repairs, firewood, charwomen and typewriters. It's invalids you want for work like that. Ever since the war began I've been insisting on being sent to the military commissariat. I shan't feel like a man again until I'm at the front, fighting. Goddamit, it's a disgrace to go about here with a full belly spending my time in piddling office work. I'm perfectly healthy, I'd make a line commander all right. I would ask you not to raise any obstacles if it depends on you."

Rogov poured all this out in a rush, without pausing to catch his breath. As he listened, Batmanov's eyes roamed from him to Kovshov and back again. Rogov's outburst had made a deep impression on Alexei who sat with cheeks flushed and lips trembling. Vasili Maximovich thought: "A transparent youngster, you can see right through him."

Batmanov liked Rogov. He had already made up his mind what to do about him: "A fellow like that can move mountains. Have to give him the most difficult section on the line and freedom of action. Sidorenko made a

mistake putting him in an office job. In the head office he's like a bull in a china shop." Batmanov could tell by Zalkind's expression that the latter shared his opinion of Rogov.

"Is that all?" Vasili Maximovich asked as Rogov broke off in the middle of a sentence. "Now I'll have my say. You're right, whether you can go or not does depend on me. Well, I do not intend to let you go."

"Why not?" Rogov demanded sharply.

This broad-shouldered man who seemed to be made of iron was seething with suppressed energy. His tunic clung to his powerful frame and seemed ready to burst its seams at each sharp gesture.

"Because you're needed here."

"A very speedy decision, isn't it? Aren't you taking a rather shortsighted view of the situation?"

"No," Batmanov retorted firmly. "On the contrary, I am taking the long view. I have had some experience in dealing with people on construction jobs, and I know what I'm doing. It's you who are taking a one-sided, personal view of the matter. Who gave you the right to pick and choose your occupation in wartime?"

"Who's picking and choosing?" Rogov cried indignantly. "I have a perfectly legitimate

desire to help my country in her hour of trial!"

"Your country doesn't happen to need that particular kind of help from you at this moment. What it needs most at the given moment is order, perfect organization in the rear. If each one of us is going to pedal his own bicycle we're lost. Don't you think I too would like to help my country in her hour of need? Or perhaps you think I liked the idea of coming here in the opposite direction to the front? Perhaps you consider yourself the only decent person in the rear?"

"I can't work in the rear, it's a torture to me. I've got to get at the Nazis' throat. You must let me go. I insist on it!"

"I shan't let you go. And I wouldn't advise you to insist. But what I can do for you is to promise you the most difficult and important section of the line. It will be hard work, extremely hard work. You won't have it any easier than our comrades in the trenches. It will take all the energy and grit you've got and more. And here's another promise: if war should start here in the Far East I'll let you go to the army at once."

"You're not doing the right thing," Rogov protested.

Batmanov frowned in annoyance.

"As this is the first time we have met I shall overlook your rather boisterous manners. But please remember in future to cut out the exclamation marks."

The chief paced the strip of carpet.

"Suppose Comrade Stalin were to tell you: 'We need an oil pipe line, and we need it as soon as possible.' You'd tell him he was wrong, I suppose?"

Rogov said nothing, but the look on his face showed that the words had struck home. Kovshov, as disturbed as if he were in Rogov's place at this moment, looked up at the chief and flushed darkly: Vasili Maximovich was looking straight at him and not at Rogov.

Listening to Rogov's desperate pleas and Batmanov's harsh retorts Alexei had barely refrained from putting in a word on Rogov's behalf, and, incidentally his own. He was convinced that the chief would be unable to oppose the noble impulse of a man eager to face danger. The passionate words rose to his lips. But he did not utter them. They died under the look in Batmanov's eyes which seemed to pierce his very soul.

"Comrade Stalin can't show every man personally to his place in the firing lines,"

Vasili Maximovich went on, his eyes moving from Rogov to Kovshov. "He has millions of soldiers. He handles them through organizations, through us executives, in the various sectors. He signed the order appointing me to this job and by doing so he gave me the right to use you as I think fit."

The siren howled in the yard. Rogov started.

"That's the air-raid alarm," he said, "I'll have to be off. Please, comrade construction chief, give me work that'll make my bones crack and drive some of the nonsense out of my head. A fellow can't help feeling like a scoundrel unless he's doing a man's job at a time like this."

Vasili Maximovich nodded and Rogov dashed out. The chief looked out of the window. People were running hither and thither in the yard, the fire-fighting squad took up position outside the office, and over to one side a girl was climbing with awkward haste into a pair of green rubber overalls. Three planes tore over the birch grove flying low.

"What are we going to do with this young hothead?" Batmanov said turning to Zalkind. "We'd better let him go, I suppose, so he'll stop whining."

He did not look at Kovshov. Alexei stepped forward.

"Please give me back my memorandum."

"Now that's what I call talking sense," Zalkind said approvingly. "I see I'll have to change my mind about him. Looks like we'll be friends instead of enemies after all."

Batmanov picked up Alexei's memorandum from the desk, glanced at it and put it into the safe with a laugh.

"I happen to be more persistent in my rancour. I'm not going to return your memorandum. It is a hobby of mine to collect curious documents. This memorandum will make a nice addition to my collection. The time will come when it will be particularly embarrassing for its author to acknowledge his literary effusion; I shall wait for that moment to produce it from the collection and return it."

"They want to be in the thick of it and it's hard to keep them back," remarked Batmanov reflectively after Alexei had gone and he and Zalkind were discussing the people they had met during the past few days. "The war will soon complete their education. The conception of the fight for Homeland and for Communism has become more real to them than ever before. Those youngsters have real-

ized how precious is life in the Soviet land, realized it when the Nazis tried to take it away from them. There's only one thing that worries them now and that is not to be left out of it. I look at Rogov and Kovshov and I know they ought to be scolded, given a good dressing down for the sake of discipline, but all the time I'm longing to shake them by the hand and send them off with my blessing to the front. Yes, Mikhail Borisovich, the Soviet power has brought up some splendid people! Glory to it!"

They were standing in front of the map of the war zone where the black flags showing the disposition of the enemy armies had moved up to the very proximity of Moscow.

"You ought to shift that flag, Vasili Maximovich. We gave up Oryol yesterday...."

The two men stared at the map in silence, unable to tear their eyes away from this abstract representation of the calamities that had befallen the Homeland.

CHAPTER FIVE

TAKING OVER

AT LAST it was Grubsky's and Topolev's turn to be interviewed by the new construction chief. Batmanov devoted a whole evening to them. The former chief engineer talked for three hours. He sat stiff, almost motionless, in his chair and delivered his report in an even monotone, now and again passing his tongue over his dry thin lips.

Batmanov in his favourite posture, his head resting in his hands, listened without interrupting. When his cigarette went out he lit it again. His keen grey eyes studied the speaker, noting the Adam's apple that slid up and down in his throat, and watching the expression of the long face with its sharp, beaklike nose.

Topolev, a tall, angular old man with a greenish-grey moustache, did not open his

mouth all evening. His large, heavy eyelids drooped over stern, lustreless eyes. He appeared to be dozing. Now and again he would rouse himself to produce a red handkerchief from his pocket and blow his nose loudly; then he would take a large pinch of green snuff from a silver snuffbox and inhale it noisily. Vasili Maximovich watched the procedure curiously out of the corner of his eye.

Batmanov allowed Grubsky to talk himself to the point of exhaustion and when at last he finished, the construction chief summed up the lengthy report in a few words:

"From what you have said one can conclude, firstly, that the job cannot be completed within the new time limit; secondly, that the project already accepted is the best possible under the circumstances inasmuch as other variants were rejected in the course of the field survey. Is that right?"

"Quite," assented Grubsky. "I consider it my duty once again...."

But this time Batmanov interrupted him:

"No need. I have heard what you have to say and read your report and I understand you perfectly. What about you, Comrade Topolev, have you nothing to say to me?"

The old man rose from his chair, his shoulders hunched.

"Pyotr Yefimovich Grubsky," he said, "has given you an exhaustive outline of the situation. I could do no better. He and I surveyed the line together, we worked together on the project and compiled the report together. I have nothing to add."

Batmanov summoned Beridze and Kovshov.

"We have no more time left to argue about the impracticability of the time limit and similar abstract theoretical problems," he said addressing all four. "Our task is to lay the pipe line within the time limit set by the Government. Before proceeding to practical work we must compile a plan for the solution of our technical problem that will conform and not conflict with our goal. Hence the present project must be altered."

The engineers stood in pairs: Beridze and Kovshov, Grubsky and Topolev. The chief stood between them, his hands in his pockets.

"I daresay the compilation of a new project will go into the category of creative work and hence no definite time limits or stiff conditions can be set for it," said Batmanov, and his words had a touch of irony in spite of the

earnestness of his tone. "Hence I shall stipulate neither time limits nor conditions. I must, however, warn you that this is the preparatory stage of the work. While I am getting the personnel ready, dispatching materials to the sections and reorganizing the office staff, you may stand aside and look on. But the minute the preparatory stage is over you will have to take charge of construction."

"In other words, by that time we are to have the new project ready?" Beridze said.

"That's it exactly," Batmanov confirmed.

Kovshov laughed. The corners of Batmanov's mouth twitched, for Alexei's laughter was infectious.

Grubsky's face was a picture of bewilderment and annoyance. Vasili Maximovich was not slow to notice it.

"I see you are surprised. Here you have wasted an entire evening explaining the situation in great detail to someone who appears to have understood nothing. But, you see, you don't understand me either. I cannot give the Government another memorandum in place of a pipe line."

Batmanov went up close to Grubsky and Topolev.

"I cannot expect you to be able to shake off the influence of your project all at once. It is not easy to overcome the inertia of habit. The brunt of the work and the responsibility for revising the project will clearly have to be borne by Beridze and Kovshov. From you we expect help, comradely, conscientious, wholehearted assistance. Today you are the carriers of engineering knowledge on this construction site, and we cannot leave you out of the picture entirely. And I would beg of you not to succumb to any false and petty sense of personal injury or hurt pride. Tomorrow we shall take over from the old management and then everyone will take his place on the job. You, Comrade Grubsky, I appoint my technical adviser. Comrade Topolev will be transferred to the office of the chief engineer."

"I shall have to take the matter up with Comrade Sidorenko. So far I have received my orders from him. As far as I know he had different plans," said Grubsky.

Batmanov threw an ironical look at him.

"You may do as you wish, of course. But please see to it that you let nothing interfere with what I have told you this evening...."

Batmanov took a particular interest in Liberman, the supply chief. This corpulent individual, surprisingly agile for a man of his ample proportions, was one of those who were almost openly hostile to the new management.

He lost no opportunity to declare to all and sundry that he intended leaving with the former chief, and that in the meantime he was going to do his best to give the newcomers a thin time. And, indeed, the newcomers, and especially Beridze and Kovshov, soon felt the hand of the supply chief in a host of minor discomforts. The dinner they ate in the messroom was made entirely of vegetables and cereals and was served up cold. The new chief engineer and his assistant often went hungry. Kovshov went to the market to look for something to add to their meagre diet but found nothing on sale beyond potatoes and large yellow cucumbers. On his second trip, however, he chanced to pick up a large fresh salmon at an enormous price, and for three days the engineers partook of its somewhat dry meat cooked for them by Grechkin's wife.

The supply chief boasted to everyone that he had compelled the new engineers to go hunting for food in the market. One day Beridze spoke to him about the unsavoury meals

and the disorder in the mess. Liberman's round, freckled face was a picture of amazement.

"Goodness gracious! You talk as if you'd dropped from the skies. Don't you know there's a war on? What do you expect at a time like this? This isn't the Hotel Metropole, it's the wild taiga backwoods."

Batmanov received Liberman in the presence of the former construction chief. The supply man paused by the door, crossed his hands over his stomach and fixed his small, leaden eyes on the chief.

"It is a rule of mine to check up personally on the execution of any important instructions I issue," Vasili Maximovich said to Liberman. "I have given you four important assignments since I arrived here. You have not reported to me about them at all, and now it turns out that you have simply not troubled to carry them out. May I ask why?"

"Excuse me, Comrade Batmanov, but I'm afraid this foolish head of mine hasn't quite grasped your meaning: what exactly are you referring to? If you only knew how many orders of all kinds a poor supply chief has to cope with you wouldn't blame me for forgetting one or two? You'll just have to excuse me."

With his leaden little eyes raised to the ceiling he looked surprisingly like a crafty, sanctimonious monk.

"I have no intention of excusing you!" Batmanov said curtly. "I refer only to important assignments affecting supplies to the sections and the transfer of the management. As far as I can judge you are deliberately ignoring my instructions."

Liberma clutched his head with a histrionic gesture.

"Goodness gracious! Me? Ignore? God forbid!"

"That will do, Liberman, it's no use appealing to God, you haven't any to appeal to.... You have adopted the wrong tactic. Who are you trying to intrigue against? Do you wish to cross swords with me? I'm not talking about the pretty swinish conditions you have arranged for me and my chief engineer. That's another matter and I intend to return to it at some more appropriate occasion."

Batmanov spoke calmly and drily. This cool, clipped manner of administering a reprimand disconcerted the supply man who was accustomed to the stormy but rapidly subsiding wrath of Sidorenko.

"I've always taken my orders from Yakov Tarasovich," the supply man muttered, appealing to the former chief who stood silently at the window. "Have I ever failed to carry out any of your instructions, Yakov Tarasovich?"

"I must say that Liberman is an excellent worker and a model of discipline," Sidorenko said without turning around.

Batmanov laughed.

"That's good! Your efficient, disciplined supply chief isn't carrying out my orders; he does not consider them obligatory. He only takes orders from you, Yakov Tarasovich. Why is that?"

"Why?" Sidorenko echoed turning round.

"The answer isn't very hard to find. Liberman is turning over the job to the new management together with you, but he isn't taking over together with me. That is why he has not given me the information I need about the resources at the sections, about food supplies and materials, and that's why he is holding on to unused drafts for supplies. I still have only the vaguest idea of what the various sections along the line have and what they haven't got. Liberman intends to leave. And although he is a smart fellow, he has miscalculated."

"How's that?" Sidorenko wanted to know.

"He isn't going with you. He's staying here on the job."

Liberman's light eyelashes blinked rapidly.

"I assume that I may be permitted to take a few of my own people with me," said Sidorenko. "They have worked with me for a long time, they are used to me. I have trained them."

"For that I am duly grateful," Batmanov replied with a mock bow. "Incidentally, every administrator ought to train his personnel. I have no alternative, however. Why should I look for an excellent, disciplined, efficient supply chief when I have Liberman here on the spot?"

"I beg you to let me go," Liberman crossed his hands over his ample chest in an imploring gesture. "I am extremely attached to Yakov Tarasovich. My methods of work might not appeal to you."

"You will have to get used to me. When you do, your methods will appeal to me. I promise to take a particular interest in your methods," Batmanov said with a chill smile.

Liberman stepped forward.

"But..."

Batmanov stopped him with a gesture.

"You are wasting your time. Please leave us."

The two construction chiefs the new and the old, stood by the window. The first snow was whirling in the air. The Adun was dark and swollen. Ragged tufts of black cloud scudded low over the water, chased by the wind. One doughty little motor boat was fighting its way across the broad, storm-tossed waters of the river, rising and falling amid the foamy waves.

"You'd better leave at once. No use delaying it any longer," Batmanov said in a low voice. "It would be well to complete all the formalities today."

"So you're driving me off? I'm in the way?"

"Yes. You are in the way, very much so, Yakov Tarasovich," Vasili Maximovich admitted.

Neither spoke for a while. Batmanov paced the office enveloped in a cloud of blue tobacco smoke. Sidorenko followed him with a hostile look in his eyes.

"You and I have no need to stand on ceremony with each other or indulge in sentimental cant," Batmanov said at last. "We must take a sensible, rational view of the situation. For the sake of the cause let us sacrifice eti-

quette and false pride. It is useless to waste time arguing about why I am here and why it is necessary for you to go. The matter has been settled for us. You are to get another appointment and I am to carry on here."

Vasili Maximovich went over to Sidorenko. A violent gust of wind set the window-panes rattling. Thick flakes of snow and yellow leaves swirled about outside. The hills on the opposite bank of the river disappeared in the grey mist that enveloped the water.

"You see yourself how my hands are tied so long as you are here. The collective as a whole is cracking up. The people are wandering around like lost souls. The other day I looked in at the head office and I saw people sitting about on crates and suitcases as if waiting for the train to pull in. They report for work in the morning, but instead of working they spend their time speculating about what life is going to be like in Karagaada. They have no doubt that you are going to take them along. But, after all, there isn't going to be any train. Why should you mislead people? Kovshov is getting impatient. Only yesterday he said to me: 'Time is flying. How long are you going to stand aside and look on?' He is right. Time is flying and to waste it at this

juncture is criminal. I am sure that you will go away still unconvinced that I really will have to build the pipe line in a single year. But you haven't been in the West, Yakov Tarasovich, the smell of gunpowder hasn't reached this far yet. Our pipe line—you started it, I'll finish it—is the younger brother of the Caucasian line and it is as essential to the country as tanks or shells."

"You reproach me with entertaining peacetime sentiments as if I did not want to take part in the war," Sidorenko said, stung to the quick.

"I have no doubt that you want to do your bit. Of course you do. But you haven't seen weeping women and dead children on the roads."

"Have you? After all, the war has only been going on for four months."

"I had to evacuate a town in the South, to leave the town empty and in ruins when the Germans came. There is nothing more heart-breaking than to uproot people from their homes, or to tear machines out of the sockets in which they whirled so merrily. Is four months not sufficient to harden a man's heart and will? I had to build a railway line in the war zone. A trifling job—no more than three kilometres long. We laid it several times. No

sooner had we laid it than the bombers came over, about a hundred every hour, and we had to start all over again. Isn't it our duty to tackle the building of this oil pipe line every bit as earnestly as we would if Nazi bombs were exploding all around us?"

Sidorenko went over to the desk—he hadn't sat at it since Batmanov's arrival—unlocked the lower drawer and pulled out a shabby little booklet and a revolver.

"I want to make you a present of this book," he said in a voice softened by emotion. "Look it over at your leisure. You will find a few words there about Sidorenko. He isn't such a bad fellow after all. This is a token of a friendship which may continue for all we know.... But we can't afford to give way to our emotions even for a moment. Let's have a smoke." They lit up. "I want to tell you this: do everything you consider necessary. Take over command, don't pay any attention to me. I shall submit to you in everything. Things haven't been altogether smooth between us, but I think you will understand that there was no malice or enmity involved, just ordinary human frailty. After all, we're human beings, not blocks of wood. We are all prey to feelings of hurt pride, disillusionment,

self-pity. It is not easy to be rational and businesslike all the time."

Batmanov was glancing through the booklet. It was the story of the men who had built the Turkestan-Siberian railway. A look of wistful sadness came into his eyes.

"Our first-born," he said. "And to think," he added bitterly, "that the Dnieper power station will have to be built over again...."

Yakov Tarasovich, watching the way Batmanov's fingers seemed to caress the booklet, said suddenly in a firm tone:

"Let's wind up the formalities of turning over the job at once. Call in the department chiefs. I'll tell them a few home truths before I leave. It doesn't matter if they take offence at their old chief. That will only make it easier for the new chief," Sidorenko sighed. "I can't for the life of me imagine how you're going to manage here," he confessed.

Vasili Maximovich asked his secretary to call in the leading executives. The old and new chiefs watched the men as they entered the office. Grubsky came over to Yakov Tarasovich, called him aside and proceeded to whisper something in his ear. Sidorenko waved him away with a gesture of irritation.

"Never mind that now."

Grubsky continued his agitated whispering, casting sidelong looks at Batmanov.

"Why bother me?" Sidorenko exploded. "He's in charge here now, not I."

"The appointment hasn't been signed yet. They can't run things without knowing what it's all about," Grubsky persisted.

"I've told you not to appeal to me any more!" Sidorenko almost shouted.

The next day the ex-chief of the construction job left town. He and the employees who had been released with him occupied a whole railway car. Almost the entire staff of the head office came to see them off and to offer all manner of advice and good wishes. Batmanov, Zalkind and Beridze found Sidorenko in the end compartment. He was downcast and silent.

"Cheer up, Yakov Tarasovich. You'll feel better as soon as you get to your new place of work," Zalkind consoled him.

On their way back from the station Beridze remarked:

"Sidorenko reminds me of a commander who has fled, leaving his troops encircled by the enemy. . . ."

Batmanov interrupted him. "I have a suggestion to make. Let us agree not to say any

more unkind things about Sidorenko. We are in charge of construction now and it won't do to succumb to the unworthy temptation to lay the blame for everything on the former management, to complain that we inherited a wretched legacy and all that sort of thing. Let us introduce an honest rule—to depend on none but ourselves. To blame none but ourselves. We'll say that it's our own fault if things have come to such a pass and do our best to remedy the situation."

"An admirable suggestion!" Zalkind said in approval, casting a look of respect at the construction chief who was striding along at his side.

CHAPTER SIX

WINTER CAME

TWO seasons were grappling with one another. Winter was on the offensive, autumn on the defensive. The attacking force began by conducting reconnaissance, sending out brief frosty spells accompanied by keen winds and whirling snow. The bushes and trees were stripped of their leaves and the grass withered. A thin brittle layer of ice covered the pools and streams and icy fetters formed on the Adun only to be broken up by the pressure of the water.

Winter's general offensive began unexpectedly. The sky seemed to descend upon the earth. It was blotted out by a dense white mass through which it was impossible to distinguish anything even at close range. Within twenty-four hours a layer of snow one metre thick cloaked the rusty brown earth. Every-

thing was garbed in white: the hills were blanketed with snow; the withered grass and tree stumps vanished from sight. The trees stood weighted down by the snow. The roads disappeared, and all train, automobile and horse traffic was paralyzed.

Barely had it stopped snowing than the population of Novinsk came out en masse to clear the roads. Batmanov had ordered spades prepared in advance so that the office staff could begin at once clearing the railway track leading to the pier, and the roads in the vicinity of the settlement. He put Rogov, Beridze and Kovshov in charge of the work, each one being responsible for a different section.

That morning Vasili Maximovich was up as usual before dawn. Waiting for the sun to rise, he wandered about his spacious apartment, shivering with cold. He had made no changes in the house he had inherited from Sidorenko. He liked everything about it, the dining room, the bedroom, the study and nursery. If only Anna Ivanovna and Kostya could come! The only things he did not like were two large oil paintings, one depicting a storm at sea and a shipwreck, and the other, a nude emerging from the water. When he had first looked over the house he had paused beside

these pictures and expressed his astonishment at the lack of taste displayed both by the artist, a local man, and the former owner of the flat.

"The poor things obviously never saw either the sea or a beautiful woman, let alone real art," he said and ordered the janitor to remove them.

The brief hours Vasili Maximovich snatched for rest from his work in the office were spent in the study. As he walked through the dark rooms now he reflected, not for the first time, that it would be well to get some large family or else one or two bachelors like Beridze and Kovshov to move in with him. But something within him rebelled at the idea. To give up the house would be a tacit admission that he had abandoned all hope of ever finding his own family. The scene of his parting with his wife haunted him now more and more frequently. Asleep or awake he saw Anna and Kostya on the road hand-in-hand looking after him. She stood motionless as if turned to stone, a look of profound sadness on her face. The boy was shouting and waving to him. . . .

Batmanov passed his hand over his eyes to banish the vision. The sound of a woman's

voice singing softly reached him in the silence. Yevdokia, his housekeeper, a little, bustling old woman, was singing one of her endless songs.

"How's life today, Yevdokia Semyonovna?" Vasilj Maximovich enquired looking into the kitchen.

"Why, no worse than yesterday," she replied with a smile. "I've got the stove going nice and hot. In an hour the place will be warm and cosy. Pity of it is you're hardly ever here. Breakfast is ready. I'll have it on the table in a moment."

Batmanov always read while he ate, a habit acquired during his student days and one Anna had never approved of. Now he placed a slim volume of *Eugene Onegin* beside his plate. He turned to Pushkin whenever he felt in need of mental poise.

Impelled by the genius of Pushkin he followed with deep sympathy the destinies of people remote and utterly alien to him. Those people had been unable to find their place in life, they had not known what to do with their time and energy. They had had no common cause to dedicate themselves to and the range of their interests was limited to their own private affairs. And all that shocking indolence,

the balls, the duels, the interminable love intrigues!

Batmanov shook his head. They wasted their lives, they did not know how precious life was.

"Surely," he reflected, "the future will produce men of genius who will chronicle our times with the brilliance of a Pushkin. Our great-grandchildren will inherit the Communism we are building, and they must know and appreciate this life of ours with its ceaseless activity, its profound sense of responsibility to history, this life that is unselfish and rich in great things, if sometimes meagre in the minor amenities...."

The telephone jolted him back to reality.

"Vasili Maximovich," Rogov reported in his slightly cracked voice, "I have brought my team out to the pier and we're clearing the snow. I wanted to ask you whether the loading of the barges should continue. It's coming down pretty thick, you know. I hear the City Soviet has given orders to stop all traffic on the river."

"Don't listen to anybody. So long as the Adun is free of ice we'll go on loading the barges and shipping them off. There's still

time to send three or four down to the nearest sectors. I'll be over directly."

The blue haze melted slowly outside the windows. By the time Zalkind called for Batmanov it was broad daylight.

Mikhail Borisovich found the chief on the terrace. The snow mounds reached all the way up to the squares of coloured glass in the terrace windows which cast red, blue and yellow patches of light over the face and leather-coated figure of Batmanov as he stood in his white felt boots, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, mentally drafting his first order of the day.

"The driver is waiting but I don't think the sled will be able to make much headway," said the Party organizer, as he shook hands with Batmanov.

"Let's try," said Batmanov. "If we can't make it, we can always get out and walk."

They had not gone more than a kilometre before they had to climb out of the sled and plough through the deep snow on foot. The dark figures of people scattered all about traced live dotted lines designating the direction of the roads. Curious looks followed the progress of the construction chief and the Party organizer.

"You ought to have waited until we got the road cleared!" a roly-poly figure in a padded coat and trousers shouted to them as they passed.

Batmanov recognized Grechkin. The members of his staff were vigorously wielding their spades under his direction, raising a cloud of silvery dust.

Part of the branch line was already cleared. In a trench dug into the snow they saw Beridze. The chief engineer, his face ruddy from his labours, stood beside the locomotive which was puffing noisily in anticipation of imminent departure. As soon as thirty or forty metres of track was cleared, the engine moved up with a deafening shriek.

About a kilometre further away Kovshov was working with his teams. He had stationed the office workers in checkerboard formation on either side of the track.

"Let's change places!" a tall girl shouted to Alexei. "You take my spade and I'll take charge."

The engineer recognized his neighbour.

"I'm willing," he said and reached for her spade.

"No. I'm no good at giving orders. I just wanted to attract your attention."

Alexei picked up a spade and set to work opposite the girl. They flung the light, powdery snow over their shoulders, chatting as they worked.

"You'll catch cold," said Alexei. "It doesn't pay to trifle with the Far-Eastern frost."

Under her open padded jacket she wore a thin cotton blouse. Her thick curly hair covered with hoarfrost peeped out from beneath her woolen cap.

"Oh, I'm a hotblooded creature, you'll see." Then she caught herself and laughed: "Oh, I didn't mean it that way. I'm not afraid of the frost, I was born in these parts."

As if by accident she showered him with snow and glanced curiously at him to see how he would take it. But the engineer did not even pause to shake it off; he continued conscientiously to swing his spade.

"You mustn't be like that," she said in a tone of censure.

"Like what?"

"Always the chief, engrossed in your work. You are acting like a man of fifty and doing a good job of it."

"How would you advise me to get younger?"

"By taking an interest in those around you."

"In everyone? I do. I already know everybody in the head office."

"That's a purely business acquaintance. It makes no distinctions. I don't mean that."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"You might at least be interested enough to ask me my name."

"As it happens, I know it already. Your name is Zhenya Kozlova. Grechkin told me. He gave me your testimonial—said you were not a bad clerk. I heard a few more things about you besides."

"I think I can guess. Lizochka has been complaining that I am taking her husband away from her."

"She would hardly say so without reason."

"Oh wouldn't she! It's true there aren't many young men left, but Grechkin doesn't go into that category."

"You're afraid of Lizochka, then?"

"Not half as much as he is. You see how far he sent me to clear the snow! He was afraid Lizochka might find out if he put me next to him. Perhaps you would condescend to be friends with a 'not bad' clerk?" she added, after a brief pause.

"What exactly do you mean by being friends?" Alexei asked with a smile.

"By being friends I mean not avoiding the accountant, not pretending you don't notice her when you happen to meet, skiing with the clerk and once a month inviting her to the theatre or the movies."

"And that's all?"

"Of course. What else?"

They both laughed. Batmanov and Zalkind, who happened to pass by at that moment, watched Alexei unobserved for a minute or two.

"You see, the lad is getting adjusted, he even looks brighter," remarked Batmanov.

"He's got his bearings. Now all you have to do is load him down with work, he'll pull any load," said Zalkind.

The Party organizer was not mistaken. Kovshov had indeed acquired a certain mental poise, in so far as his constant anxiety for the fate of Moscow permitted. "Your army unit is defending the capital here. The orders are: not one step back!" This had been Zalkind's formula and Alexei could not but accept it.

A contributing factor of no small importance were the letters Kovshov had at last received from his parents and his mother-in-law. His father had written to him about his

comrades, telling him which of them were in the army and which were working in the rear. The old man himself was spending nights on the roof doing air-raid duty, and Alexei's mother too was taking turns fire watching. The old man refused point-blank to come to Novinsk. From Alexei's brief notes he had divined that all was not well with his son and he took him severely to task: "What are you fussing about? Even an old man like me can see that to build a pipe line like yours is the same as being in the fighting services. . . ."

His mother-in-law wrote that someone had told her Zina was alive and well, that her comrades thought highly of her as a staunch and courageous fighter. . . .

Batmanov and Zalkind reached the edge of the steep bank which dropped down to the pier. There was nothing for it but to slide down in a sitting position. Zalkind set the example. Sending up a cloud of white snow he dug a deep groove in the snow. Batmanov, laughing gaily, followed in his wake.

The Adun continued to resist the force that sought to fetter it. An endless stream of black, angry-looking water carried along an

icy mass, grinding it against the shore and the piers. A dull, incessant roar hung over the river, as if a hundred giant grindstones were crushing the ice to powder.

Two barges stood by the pier. Foodstuffs, bags of flour and cereals, barrels of vegetable oil and fish were being loaded onto one; horses, tools and building materials, on the other. About a hundred workers were busy clearing the warehouses and platforms. Standing on the gangplank, Rogov was arguing with the launch boss. The latter refused to tow the barge which was now loaded and ready to leave.

"Are you blind, or what? The river will freeze over any minute and then I'm done for," the man cried angrily.

"You can make it ten times back and forth, Polishchuk. Don't be a rabbit," Rogov coaxed.

"Scared is he?" Batmanov queried as he came up to the two men. "It's very important, comrade, to send the barges off now; if we don't we'll be sweating blood later on."

"It's all right, he'll go," Rogov said soothingly.

Polishchuk, red in the face, glanced at Batmanov and without saying a word moved off with a rolling gait. Rogov took Zalkind

and Vasili Maximovich into the dispatcher's office—a tiny cabin clinging to the water's edge.

It was very hot inside the cramped premises heated by an iron stove. They had barely time to warm up and Rogov had just begun to report what had been shipped off within the past twenty hours, when the door burst open and a man all but fell into the room and began to tear off his frozen garments. His padded jacket and trousers, *valenki* and even his fur cap were solid lumps of ice. He was blue with cold, he shivered violently and his teeth chattered.

"The *Typhoon* has run aground on the sand spit," he said, forcing the words out of his frozen lips. "Must have help. Welding equipment . . . tools . . . amonall! There's about . . . a hundred people there. Panic . . . I set out in a small boat . . . capsized . . . had to swim."

Rogov glanced at Batmanov and dashed out of the dispatcher's office. Running down to the pier, Vasili Maximovich saw Rogov's broad back in the blue pea jacket on the tow boat which was already moving away from the shore.

On the barge, the stevedores and the crew of the tow boat crowded round Batmanov.

"Shall we unload, chief?" the leader of the stevedores' team asked.

"Made us tow the barges for nothing. Sensible folk put up for repairs in weather like this instead of sending launches into the ice."

Batmanov recognized the ruddy features of Polishchuk with whom Rogov had been arguing a while ago.

"There will be no unloading, and you weren't made to tow the barges for nothing," Batmanov said.

"That barge on Peschanaya bar is done for. It has passengers and valuable cargo on board. Who's going to answer for that, eh?" Polishchuk demanded.

"The barge will be taken off the spit, don't worry, I've sent Rogov over there. He'd pull the devil out of a swamp if he had to."

The chief ran his eyes over the faces of the frozen, dispirited men around him.

"I won't have any panic!" he shouted. "You are behaving like a pack of snivelling babies! If you make a funeral out of every mishap your eyes will never be dry. Get ready to put out!" he said turning to Polishchuk.

"You haven't got any right. There's an order from the city executive committee closing navigation," the latter objected sullenly.

"You're mistaken, my lad, I have every right. I wouldn't advise you to waste time checking up on my right. I'm not going to force you to do anything, because I'm sure you'll understand without that." Batmanov moved his numbed fingers inside his leather gloves. "We have a lot of people out at the different sections. As soon as the Adun freezes over we'll be sending out more. How are we going to feed them? Before we make the ice road over the Adun and begin shipping supplies by cart or truck much valuable time will be lost. And those people have to carry on in the meantime. There's a shortage of tools and the most essential materials over there. You can't go on long working with your bare hands. They need horses as well, to haul timber from the woods. According to you the people out there don't matter a damn, let them die of hunger, let them haul timber from the woods on their backs, let the work go hang."

"I didn't say the people don't matter," objected Polishchuk.

"Do you want me to recall them then? Figure it out for yourself, how can I recall the people from the taiga and lose time when there's no time to spare? They must settle

down there and prepare for the winter work, and when the Adun freezes over they will have to build a road over the ice. But perhaps you know of some other way out?"

Vasili Maximovich spoke calmly and sternly. Polishchuk lost his temper.

"You're making fun of me, chief! I don't know any other way out. And you don't have to tell me what it's like at the work sections, I've been there, I've seen the people and talked to them. They'll never be able to hold out."

"They will if we can get these two barges out to them," Vasili Maximovich looked at the men. Suddenly he flared up: "Are you scared or what?"

"Sure we're scared. Why shouldn't we be?" someone in the crowd admitted. "What'll be the good of it if the stuff gets lost and we perish into the bargain. It's a hard job you're asking us to do. Can't be done."

"I didn't know that you were only willing to tackle easy jobs," said Batmanov. He pointed to the man who had spoken. "Do you think our comrades at the front are given such easy tasks to do? You ought to be ashamed of yourselves!" He turned again to Polishchuk. "Casi off, I'll go with you as gang boss."

"Nothing doing," said Polishchuk, after a brief pause. "It would be a fine thing if the construction chief had to escort every barge." He drew on his mittens, each as big as a spade, and pulled down his cap.

"Are there any Communists among you?" shouted Zalkind. He too had climbed onto the barge with a group of men. "We'll take both barges down the river."

"Mikhail Borisovich!" cried Polishchuk, stung to the quick. "I'm not a Party member so I'm not wanted, is that it? I'd never be able to show my face in town again if word got around that you'd taken the barges down the river instead of me! Now, get off my boat!"

At a gesture from their leader, the crew of the tow boat ran quickly up the gangway clattering with their heavy boots.

CHAPTER SEVEN

HOW THEY DISTRIBUTED THE FUNCTIONS

THE FACT that the work had to be started in the winter made things particularly difficult for the builders of the pipe line. To build an oil pipe line in the winter was contrary to all the laws of engineering. At any rate eminent foreign authorities, whose opinion Grubsky deeply respected, considered it to be out of the question. It looked indeed as if there was nothing for Batmanov and his comrades to do but consent to sit with folded hands in their offices and let the wind and blizzards work their will.

But this meant subscribing to Grubsky's memorandum arguing the impracticability of the time limit set by the Government. No less than seven of the twelve months allotted for laying the pipe line were winter months. How could they afford to waste so much val-

uable time? Batmanov and his assistants had no intention of giving up without a fight and consequently there could be but one program of action for them: they would not yield winter a single month, a single week, a single day. They would simply ignore it! That, however, was easier said than done. Winter had no sooner set in than the builders had their hands full coping with it.

The very first snowfall—and how many of them were still to come!—had upset the normal work of the head office and the sections which were obliged to devote themselves exclusively to clearing the roads. As simple a matter as the dispatch of a few barges to the sections assumed the proportions of a major problem. Rogov, who had rushed off to the rescue of the barge stranded in the middle of the Adun, had not yet returned and no one knew exactly where he or the barge were. A grapevine message from him had been received to the effect that the barge had been removed from the sands and had continued its journey. The fate of the last two barges towed by Polishchuk was also uncertain. Communication with the work sections had ceased; the water route no longer existed and the ice road had yet to be built. The sole means of communi-

cation was by air, but even a plane could do little more than drop mail at the sections, for it was impossible to land anywhere.

The Adun had turned completely white and in colour was undistinguishable from its banks. On closer scrutiny one could see the icy surface moving slowly under pressure from the water; although icebound, the river refused to submit.

Gazing down at the river through the window of his office, Batmanov dictated his first order of the day. In it he outlined the tactics for resisting the onslaught of winter: preparations were to be made at once for a prolonged spell of cold weather, stocks of fuel were to be laid in, buildings had to be weatherproofed, winter clothing and footwear repaired; log cabins and dugouts, bakeries and messrooms, bathhouses and laundries, warehouses and clubs were to be built on the sections; as soon as the Adun froze over completely an ice road was to be laid over the river with branch roads leading to the various sections; food, pipes, equipment and materials were to be shipped from the warehouses to the sections in a constant flow.

Detailed instructions drawn up by a commission of experts were appended to the or-

der. Nothing had been overlooked: there were directions as to what to use for stuffing mattresses, how to catch fish under the ice, how to prepare a brew of pine needles as a remedy for scurvy, how to prevent the heat from escaping under the floors and through the doors, and in general keep the dormitories warm.

The order was sent out to the sections by plane. At the same time Zalkind sent along a letter announcing that a Party conference would be held early in November and calling for preparatory work on the spot. At the last moment, just as the plane was about to take off, the Party organizer decided to go with it. As it turned out, however, the plane was unable to find a suitable landing place and Zalkind returned to the base disappointed.

"It's too bad my plan didn't materialize," he said that evening to Batmanov and Beridze. "I would give a lot to be with the folk over there along the line at this particular moment. I can imagine what a hard time they are having!"

Beridze nodded sympathetically. Batmanov, who had been looking over some correspondence from the Central Administration and the People's Commissariat, looked up at the Party organizer.

"I am not sorry that your plan didn't materialize," he said. "It was a passing whim. I have no doubt that if you had spent about fifteen days at one of the sections you might have accomplished a great deal. But, after all, you are the Party organizer for not one but twelve sections. I repeat for the hundredth time, and will continue to harp on this until you have all understood me: the most important thing for the construction job at the present moment is to build up a strong, efficient, smooth-working headquarters. The People's Commissar says exactly the same thing in connection with the failure of construction job No. 215," Batmanov picked up one of the letters and handed it to Zalkind. "On the spur of the moment you and I almost sailed off on that barge in Polishchuk's place. Luckily for us, that lad had the sense to restrain us. If he hadn't, the job might have been left without leaders. Don't you think I want to be out on the line as much as you do? Now, suppose we were to succumb to our mood and dash off there, all three of us. We'd be bound to get stuck on one of the sections. What would we gain by it? Only this: we would find ourselves the chiefs of one section of the job

instead of being in charge of the job as a whole. . . .”

Having delivered himself of this tirade Vasil Maximovich threw the letter back onto the pile on his desk. Zalkind and Beridze watched him in silence.

“Have a little patience,” Batmanov went on in a warmer tone. “The time will come when we will lock you out of the main office altogether and you’ll have to live on the line.”

The Party organizer and the chief engineer realized the justice of Batmanov’s argument. They too were exerting every effort to organize the work of the main administration. And with each succeeding day its resemblance to a smoothly working army headquarters grew. In this headquarters Batmanov, Zalkind and Beridze were three centres from which, as from storage batteries, current flowed to all sections of the job.

On one occasion they half-jokingly distributed the functions among themselves thus:

“I do the dirty work: cleaning snow, bargaining with Liberman, feeding and clothing the people, laying in wood for the winter and so forth. When I’m done with these odds and

ends I'll stand aside and chew sunflower seeds while you fellows work," said Vasili Maximovich.

"My job is even easier than yours," Zalkind chaffed, adopting the same bantering tone. "All I have to do is chew the rag with the workers, entertain them a little so they won't be bored."

Beridze slapped himself on the back of the neck in mock despair:

"That means I'll have to hitch the rest of the burden onto my own poor back. Too bad for me!"

A great deal of Batmanov's time was taken up with problems of supply. Several times a day he summoned Liberman to his office or kept him on his toes with frequent telephone calls. The supply chief would clutch at his large red head and hastily dig up diverse invoices and other documents to submit to the chief. By making a careful study of the figures, Batmanov probed through to the truth. One unpleasant surprise was the shortage of clothing supplies at the sections.

"I see you are meeting the winter in shorts!" he scolded Liberman. "We're expecting fresh personnel to arrive any day and you haven't any warm clothing or footwear prepared."

Forty and fifty degree frosts will soon be setting in along the line. How do you intend to provide the people with adequate clothing and footwear?"

Liberman went out and returned with a fat folio labelled "Personal Correspondence" from which he produced three dozen reports he had submitted to the former construction chief.

"You see I warned the former management that there wouldn't be enough clothes and boots, and that we'd be left without anything by the time winter came. But they wouldn't listen to me."

"You needn't waste time referring to the former management. What was the purpose of keeping this file—just to be on the safe side, eh? No good, Liberman. A hundred tons of papers won't help you when you will be called upon to answer for your sins. And just so as to dispel any false illusions you might be entertaining I shall confiscate this folder." With these words Batmanov deposited the folder in his safe. "In general, I wouldn't advise you to start any such personal correspondence with me, otherwise for each report you risk earning a headache that will last you for a week. All I want from you at this moment is

a straight answer to the question: how do you intend to provide the workers with clothing and footwear?"

"Goodness gracious! Where am I to get them from? You can't buy anything on the market, and the centre doesn't send anything. Please sign this telegram to the chief administration."

Liberman's telegram was a desperate appeal for help:

"Construction work threatened due lack of clothing for workers. Situation catastrophic. Rush padded jackets, trousers, coats, fur jackets, *valenki*."

"You're quite a humourist, Liberman, a poor imitation of Mark Twain," Batmanov remarked as he tore up the telegram. "Why don't you read the papers?"

"I read the *Pravda*, *Izvestia* and the local paper as well. . . ."

"No, you don't. If you did you would never have submitted this sort of telegram for me to sign. Here's a newspaper, take a look at it. What is the whole first page about?" Vasili Maximovich thrust the newspaper under the supply agent's nose.

"'Collect warm clothes for Red Army men,'" Liberman read aloud.

"Zalkind is organizing the collection of things among the office employees. We've got to help him. Set aside half of the new sheepskin jackets, *valenki* and caps you have for the Red Army."

"Goodness gracious! How can we do that?" the supply man cried in horror. "We haven't enough for ourselves as it is. You just said that the workers have nothing to wear."

"Don't make me repeat myself, please. Do as you are told. You are a great disappointment to me, Liberman. I took you for a man of broad vision, and it turns out you're nothing but a storekeeper, a petty hoarder. I suppose you use up all your initiative compiling useless reports. Why, there are heaps of clothes and footwear under your very nose, only you don't see them."

"Where?" Liberman wrinkled his bulbous, pimply nose.

"I have spoken to the army people, they have agreed to give us their cast-off uniforms. It's your business to turn them into winter outfits for the workers. Go to Rubezhansk and get the stuff. That's your first assignment. Here's the second: organize a large clothing workshop. Find suitable premises. Zalkind has promised to get the housewives interested.

The workshop must be functioning within a week from now."

Feeling that it was too much to expect Liberman to handle everything from nails to butter, Batmanov had decided to separate the food and other supplies from the technical materials. The organization of the new department, however, had been delayed owing to the lack of a suitable man to head it.

"We haven't any supply men at all," Liberman complained. "There are plenty of engineers and technicians and as many economists as you like, but supply men are simply not to be had. In my own department those who aren't fools are crooks. There's no one to do the work, got to do everything myself. And I'm no Julius Caesar, God knows."

"You remind me of an old anecdote," was Batmanov's reply to Liberman's tale of woe. "It's about a batman who had the same theory as yours: he believed that the world consisted of two categories of people: to the first belonged the respectable people like his officer and himself; and all the rest were crooks, scoundrels and fools. That batman was your ideological mentor."

A chief for the new department was discovered quite by chance and moreover among

the very personnel of whom Liberman had spoken so slightly.

Vasili Maximovich frequently dropped into the different departments to observe his people at work. One night rather late, impelled by a desire to discover who else had remained in the office at this late hour, he glanced into some of the rooms on his way out of the building. Nearly all were dark and deserted. The exceptions were the offices of Zalkind, Beridze, Kovshov, Grechkin and Filimonov, where the lights still burned and voices sounded. In the supply department a handsome, rosy-cheeked lad with curly hair was having an argument with someone over the phone. Vasili Maximovich heard him as he came down the corridor and from the heated nature of the argument he judged that Liberman, then in Rubezhansk, was at the other end of the wire.

"You should've been an actor instead of a supply worker! I said, you should've been an actor, you take such pleasure in putting on an act, pretending to be bigger than you really are!" the young man was yelling into the receiver. "It's easy to see you envy your brother Lazar's success before the footlights. What? You can't hear me? You don't want

to hear me. I haven't any brothers on the stage and I'm not looking for bouquets. I said, I'm not out for bouquets. I don't mind being a plain supply worker. That's my modest ambition!" The lad paused to listen for a moment, and continued: "Well, I won't shed any tears at parting with you, don't worry. In fact I'll have a drink to celebrate the occasion. And you needn't bother about me, I'll find something to do. I'll go to Batmanov, I hear he has work for everybody.... Stop threatening me, I'm not a baby. You'd better watch out for yourself—don't forget your Yakov Tarasovich is gone and there aren't any patrons of your art left!"

Noticing Batmanov standing in the doorway, the lad sprang up, and dropped the receiver.

"Who are you?" Batmanov asked.

"Fedosov, in charge of technical supplies."

"Why don't I know you?"

"We rank and filers are apt to be overshadowed by our department chiefs. Liberman keeps all us supply workers in the shade," Fedosov replied, looking Batmanov straight in the eyes.

"Yes, his frame is big enough to blot out a great deal," Vasili Maximovich assented.

"May I ask how my name happened to crop up in the course of your vigorous argument?"

"I wanted to ask you to give me some work not connected with Liberman. I'm sick of all this pretence. We're doing a poor job but we manage to put up a good front; instead of trying to do better, we try to make it look as if everything is fine. We mislead you by submitting encouraging reports compiled in terse military language: assignment fulfilled . . . job completed . . . request attended to. . . . And actually nothing has been attended to, nothing completed and everything is in a mess. We work without any plan. The sectors howl for stuff and we calm them down by telling them a pack of lies. There is a shortage of a lot of materials; they might not be needed at this particular moment but they soon will be, and then the work is bound to be held up. Instead of taking urgent steps to remedy the situation, we try to protect ourselves with all sorts of papers and documents."

Fedosov blurted all this out in one breath; it was evident that he was at the end of his patience. The telephone receiver he had dropped crackled and sputtered. Batmanov picked it up and put it to his ear.

"Hullo there, Fedosov!" Liberman yelled at the other end of the wire. "I forbid you to go to Batmanov. Goodness gracious, what's the use of washing your dirty linen in public? This isn't the first time you and I have had words, we'll make it up again. These things happen in the best of families. I wouldn't advise you to pick a quarrel with me," Liberman urged in honeyed accents.

"Liberman," Batmanov said into the receiver, "you certainly have plenty of dirty linen to be washed. I discovered that by dropping into your department by chance. Do you hear me?" Liberman did not reply, rendered speechless evidently by the shock of hearing the chief's voice. "Come back to Novinsk at once. I have good news for you: it turns out there is another supply man on earth besides yourself, what's more he's not a fool and I don't think he's a crook either. That batman theory of yours has led you astray."

As soon as Liberman returned from Rubzhañsk, Batmanov divided the supply department into two. He called in the two supply chiefs and introduced Fedosov to Liberman as if the two had never met before.

"And now," he said, "let us wash some of that dirty linen of yours."

Fedosov told the chief how matters stood with regard to supplies at the sections. Not once did he attack his former chief, he did not even mention him, yet everything he said struck Liberman like a whiplash.

There was a shortage of a great many things on the job: pipes, valves, sleeves, welding apparatus, electrodes for welding, submarine cable, liquid glass, bitumen and other materials. The list Fedosov read from appeared interminable. Every item he mentioned had its own complicated history. The piping, valves and part of the equipment for the pumping stations had had to be ordered through the People's Commissariat of Foreign Trade and hence could not be expected for a long time. Some materials had been shipped out by plants in the South at the beginning of the war and had been lost en route. Now these plants were either moving eastward or else were already settled in some new place and producing exclusively for the front.

Fedosov sought to give the construction chief as clear and unembellished a picture of the situation as possible. He himself was curious to see the chief's reaction to his report. He expected an explosion. But Vasili Maximovich's face expressed nothing but interest

and concentrated thought. He was glad to know at last exactly where he stood with regard to the difficult business of technical supplies, and he was already considering what urgent steps could be taken.

Liberman, who stood listening with an air of injured innocence, waited in vain for the storm of the chief's wrath to descend upon him, but the long speech he had prepared mentally in his own defence was destined never to be delivered. Vasili Maximovich called in his secretary and dictated a brief order concerning the organization of the new department with Fedosov in charge, and signed it on the spot.

"One more question, comrade chief," said Fedosov. "So far all supplies have gone through a single balance sheet and the same financial accounts. Is it possible to separate us in this respect as well?"

Suspecting that Liberman would make trouble for Fedosov at first, Batmanov gave instructions by phone to open a separate account for the new department.

The head bookkeeper was opposed to making such operations in the middle of the fiscal year. He suggested waiting until the end of the year, and in general advised against the

measure on the grounds that it was not in the interests of accounting.

"Perhaps not," retorted Batmanov, "but it is in the interests of the job. When will you realize that your accounting exists for the construction job and not vice versa? I don't want to wait for your annual report. And please don't annoy me with those fearsome complicated balance sheets of yours or else I might give the matter my urgent attention and make them less fearsome and complicated." He turned to the two supply men. "Now go and get to work. And remember, I won't have any intrigues or chicanery. You may hate each other as cordially as you please, but on the job you're obliged to help one another, to be on friendly terms and even to kiss each other if the work demands it. Don't let me hear of any monkey business!"

Lieberman's wide, chubby face with its large nose and lustreless eyes expressed irony and hauteur. Observing this, Vasili Maximovich dismissed Fedosov and asked Lieberman to remain behind.

"You deserved a good dressing down for all that dirty linen. I refrained from administering it in the hope that you would draw your own conclusions and appreciate my tact.

I see from your face that I was mistaken, you have drawn no conclusions, you don't appreciate my delicacy. I can't understand you, Liberman. You're not an enemy, but neither are you a help here—at least not yet. Everything is wrong about you. You don't seem to be a fool, yet your behaviour is anything but clever. You ought to do a little thinking on your own account, otherwise you risk slipping down into a quagmire you won't be able to extricate yourself from. There's a war on, you know."

"Perhaps it would be better to release me altogether. I'm no good. I can't work any more," Liberman said submissively but his words did not ring sincere.

"Drop that, Liberman, and stop putting on an act. I don't like it. What I want from you is sincerity and straightforwardness. Be yourself, man, stop pretending, present things as they are in reality. I am anxious to prevent you from having any more dirty linen to wash in public. After all, what concerns you concerns me too, doesn't it? Well, then, let us keep our linen immaculate."

"I work day and night. I do my level best, God knows. But it isn't any good. . . ."

"You've got to alter your methods of work.

Remember that talk we had about your methods? I'm sorry to have to repeat myself. I warn you there won't be any more repetitions."

Batmanov paused, waiting for Liberman to reply. The latter stood with his face averted so that the chief saw only his profile.

"Have you ever read Tolstoy's reflections as recorded by his relatives?" the chief asked suddenly.

"I think so," Liberman replied uncertainly. He was clearly puzzled by the question.

"I remember one thing he said and I think you would do well to bear it in mind. Lev Nikolayevich said that a man is like a fraction in which the numerator is what he is in reality, and the denominator, what he thinks he is. The bigger the denominator the smaller the fraction. And if the denominator is infinity, then the fraction equals nought. Good that, isn't it?"

Liberman made no reply. There was a mulish stubbornness about his bent head with its close-cropped red hair and his thick neck.

"Learn to look people straight in the eyes when they tell you bitter but honest truths," Batmanov said, raising his voice slightly. "To use Tolstoy's formula, you are in danger of

reducing yourself to nought." Vasilj Maximovich described a nought with his fingers. "I shall give you some time for reflection. Either you and I come to terms or else I shall have to demote you to the job of junior clerk in Fedosov's department."

After this conversation the construction chief left Liberman alone for a time; he was confident that his admonition would have the desired effect. In the meantime he applied himself energetically to the job of helping Fedosov to put his department in order. He interviewed each member of the staff and took part in the first conference of the new department.

Together with Fedosov he went over the central warehouse, checking over all the valuable items and listing the priority freights to be dispatched to the sectors as soon as the winter road opened.

Batmanov personally selected the site for the shipping base not far from the pier. Within the space of three days a tent settlement mushroomed up on the banks of the Adun. They called it the Start. This marked the beginning of the future ice road along the Adun. The pipe line could be considered as starting from this point.

At the same time the chief decided to send reliable people to all the big cities of the Far East, Siberia and the Urals in search of the lacking materials and equipment. He and Zalkind selected likely candidates for this important mission.

The Party organizer had his hands full these days. He was busily preparing for the Party conference scheduled to be held before the November celebrations. The plight of the people along the line scattered over such a vast area and without so much as a telephone line, worried him almost to distraction. Zalkind wanted the conference to be the link that would unite all the construction workers. The important thing was to make the acquaintance of the Party leaders at the various sections, to learn from them about life in the sections and through them to explain to the builders the tasks confronting them.

A Party meeting was held at the head office to elect a new bureau. Besides Zalkind and Batmanov, the new Party bureau included Kovshov, Grechkin and Filimonov. On the initiative of Zalkind a conference of active Komsomol members was called. The young people had their own bone to pick with the management. Kolya Smirnov, a broad-should-

uered young technician with an energetic face and a restrained manner made a long businesslike speech in the course of which he turned to Zalkind and Batmanov and observed with some bitterness:

"At the present time we're more of a liability here than an asset. It hurts to know that at a time like this we've got to twiddle our thumbs because of the shortsightedness of the management. We've got to make up for lost time. Give us real work to do right away. We are doing something but it isn't enough."

Much to the satisfaction of the Party organizer, Kolya Smirnov was unanimously elected secretary of the Komsomol committee of the head office.

Permission arrived from Moscow to publish a newspaper on the spot. Zalkind was overjoyed; then and there he got together an editorial staff, and brought two newspapermen in from town. Quartered temporarily in the Party organizer's office, they immediately set about putting out the first issue of the paper.

Talks on current events were held every day before work. A huge bulletin board was set up in the vestibule of the main office showing the progress of Socialist competition among the various departments. Grechkin

and his staff were the initiators of the emulation movement.

With all this Zalkind found time to help Batmanov. Vasili Maximovich had on more than one occasion noted with gratitude the interest the Party organizer took in the administrative end of the work. The Territorial Committee of the Party had permitted Zalkind temporarily to hand over his duties as first secretary of the City Committee to the second secretary. Nevertheless he invariably exercised his rights as first secretary when this was in the interests of the construction job.

He himself offered to accompany Batmanov, Beridze and Fedosov on their visits to the directors of Novinsk plants for the purpose of establishing contact with a view to rendering one another assistance. Batmanov hoped to persuade the town's enterprises to manufacture the equipment the project still lacked and to obtain some of the materials in short supply. The very first visit they made showed him how wise Zalkind had been to have joined them on this mission.

Director Terekhov, a tall, pale-faced young man of about thirty, gave them a warm and cordial reception, but the moment Zalkind spoke of the purpose of their visit, he said:

"In the first place I should like to know which Comrade Zalkind I am addressing—the secretary of the city committee or the Party organizer of the construction job?"

"Both," was the answer. "Zalkind, the Party organizer, asks you to help the project. Zalkind, the secretary of the city committee, fully aware of the potentialities of your plant, will see to it that its managers take the proper Party attitude to the needs of the construction job."

Zalkind did not smile until Terekhov threw up his hands and cried:

"I surrender! I'll take the order for electrodes. I can give you two welding apparatuses and I'll share my metal with you. I'll have to think about the other requests."

It took two days to cover all the town's plants and factories. Batmanov was given a good reception at other plants as well. He liked the directors, some of whom still remembered his previous work in the region. He saw that the town was taking a lively interest in the construction job.

"Even if they do half of what they have promised we can be very grateful," Batmanov said, highly pleased with the results of the trip.

"They'll do more than they promised," Mikhail Borisovich assured him. "They always do."

The problem of personnel was an added item to the construction executives' burden of cares. According to estimates made by Beridze and Grechkin, the number of workers would have to be at least doubled. The sectors were short of carpenters, drivers, acetylene welders, telephone operators and unskilled labourers. The plans for winter work were in danger of falling through for lack of necessary labour power. The wave of evacuation from the West did not reach as far as Novinsk. There was but one way out: they would have to find people on the spot, although at the best of times the region suffered from a lack of workers. Batmanov and Zalkind decided to take a trip to Rubezhansk to settle the question.

Preparations for the winter work went on in spite of the fact that no new engineering projects had as yet been submitted.

"Batmanov is going ahead as if we had already handed him a new project on a silver platter and everything was as clear as day-

light," Kovshov remarked with some uneasiness as he and Beridze emerged from the chief's office after one of their regular conferences.

"He is relying on us, Alyosha," returned Beridze. "What's more, being a smart fellow and something of a diplomat he knows how to handle people like you and me. Whether you like it or not, you can't help feeling that your debt is piling up and that in general you're to blame for everything, that you're practically holding up the works. Right?"

"That's about it. As a matter of fact I had just made up my mind to get my men together and tighten the screw a bit."

Indeed the search for new methods of solving the technical problems was far from over. Soviet engineers who had been working in the Far East for some ten or twelve years had accumulated considerable experience in building railways, bridges, complex industrial structures under local conditions and had probed many of the secrets of permafrost. But no one had ever built an oil pipe line in these parts.

The careful study of the locality and conditions, the prospecting and experimentation that precedes every construction undertaking

was all the more necessary in as novel an undertaking as the laying of a pipe line. What Grubsky, Topolev and their assistants had done in this respect was totally inadequate and at best could serve merely as a starting point in the search for the only correct technical solution to the problem.

There was no time left for lengthy preparations. Beridze had to do everything at once: reorganize his staff, conduct research, draw up plans and give practical leadership to the sections. He completely reorganized the production and technical department, dividing it into several sections to handle the different branches involved and adding a large designing unit in which he placed all the specialists familiar with designing work. He put Kovshov in charge of the department with Topolev as his assistant. Batmanov and Beridze felt that the energy and resolution of the young engineer combined with the experience and circumspection of the old and distinguished specialist ought to yield the desired results.

The new department was put to work at once. The chief engineer showered Alexei and his staff with assignments. Beridze's ideas came thick and fast and seemed so ambitious

and unusual that even experienced engineers were nonplussed. Literally snowed under by propositions, they were inclined to be somewhat dubious.

Beridze's proposal to organize the shipment of freight by motor truck, tractor and horse over the ice road went through with relative ease. Georgi Davydovich conceived this highway over the frozen Adun as a powerful artery that would operate with the precision of a railway trunk line. After studying the assignment, Alexei had explained it in full to his designers who were now busy working it out in every detail, including methods of keeping the road free of ice blocks, means of combatting snow drifts, and equipment for transporting heavy freights such as pipes, locomobiles and bulky subassemblies.

A certain amount of scepticism was aroused by Beridze's order to revise the original plans for the "hurdle points," as the most complex jobs requiring the greatest expenditure of labour, such as river crossings and pumping stations, were called. Beridze insisted that the amount of work on secondary installations be cut to the minimum.

And then to the amazement of everyone the chief engineer came out with the unexpect-

ed proposal to change the direction of the pipe line altogether, shifting it from the right bank of the Adun to the left over almost the entire land route. The designers considered the suggestion to be incorrect and completely unfeasible. True, the changeover would straighten the line, shorten it and make it possible to skirt the chain of hills on the right bank. Previous prospecting, however, had rejected this course after it had been established that the left bank of the Adun was submerged during the spring floods. Moreover to shift the line at this juncture would mean scraping all that had been done to date on the right bank and starting everything from scratch on the left.

Opposition to the idea was general in the designing office. "He's like a bull in a china shop," it was whispered about the department. Kobzev, in charge of a group of designers—a hardworking, conscientious engineer with soft, rather flaccid features and tousled hair, took the matter to Alexei (he had taken an instant liking to the young Moscow engineer).

"He'll lead us into a mess if we're not careful, Alexei Nikolayevich," he warned his chief. "Better have it out with him now and

caution him instead of submitting and wasting time on work which is bound to be thrown into the wastebasket."

Kobzev and all those who had participated in drafting the old project had not yet fully realized that they were bound to help Beridze find some way of building the pipe line within the prescribed time. Beridze seemed to them impulsive and headstrong and they sympathized with Alexei, assuming that he was carrying out Beridze's instructions under compulsion, as it were, and that like themselves he was something of a victim of circumstances.

Alexei found himself caught between two opposing currents. He was Beridze's closest assistant and executive. At the same time, he was in charge of people who were not yet free of Grubsky's influence. The young department chief patiently strove to convince his staff of the soundness of Beridze's proposal and missed no opportunity of instilling in them his own faith in the chief engineer. Who knew better than he the value of these ideas that seemed to spring with such ease from the chief engineer's fertile brain? Beridze was one of those technical innovators whose best projects are born at the time when they are

most needed, when, indeed, they cannot be dispensed with. Beridze had the astonishing knack of being able to select the crux of a problem and concentrate on it; he was not afraid to take risks and had excellent theoretical and practical training. His life had been one long succession of construction jobs. And if one had sought to discover what had been the salient feature of Beridze's engineering career, one would have found the answer in his search for and discovery of ways out of diverse critical situations.

The idea of shifting the pipe line to the left bank had not occurred to him on the spur of the moment, nor had it been a divine inspiration. While still in Moscow he had realized that the success of the undertaking would depend on whether means could be found of reducing the time needed for the job to one-third. Since then his brain had wrestled with this problem. As had been the case so many times before, he had no alternative but to find a solution. Beridze was thoroughly familiar with the Adun area: several years before he had taken part in a prospecting expedition in these parts. He had been much surprised when he found that the right bank, which he knew to be unsuitable in many re-

spects, had been chosen for the route of the pipe line. Together with Alexei, he had taken a plane at once and flown over the left bank to survey its advantages from the air. Poring over the materials that had been used in drawing up the old project, he discovered that prospectors had advised laying the line along the left bank but the proposal had been turned down by Grubsky on the grounds that the left bank was flooded in the spring months. "Dozens of pipe lines have been laid in other countries. We are doing it for the first time. And if recognized authorities tell us that you can't build under these conditions we have to take their word for it because they know better than we," was the line of reasoning that led Grubsky to shift prospecting to the right bank.

The new chief engineer was not accustomed to following blindly even the most eminent authorities. The proposal Grubsky had rejected was too promising to be waved aside so lightly. Beridze wanted to ascertain for himself whether the danger of the left bank being flooded was really as great as was believed. And even if such danger did exist, he made up his mind beforehand to question the ban on building pipe lines in flooded areas.

No one, not even Alexei, guessed how much thought the chief engineer had given to the question of altering the direction of the line. He had flown over the area four times, forcing the pilot to circle for hours over the Adun, and later, locked in his office, he had pored over the maps and blueprints, covering them with corrections and puffing on his pipe until the air in the room turned a murky green. At home he spent long nights pacing up and down his room or lying motionless on the couch, his dark beard pointing upward.

Alexei, Batmanov and Zalkind were the first to learn of the chief engineer's decision. The construction chief and the Party organizer approved of the idea even though it appeared to be somewhat risky at first and involved reorganizing the work of many of the sections. When he saw the advantages Beridze's proposal would yield, Alexei was jubilant: So much so in fact that the chief engineer had to curb his assistant's enthusiasm.

"Don't let yourself be carried away by the idea, Alexei. You'd better prepare yourself for a tough time," he counselled as he gave Kovshov instructions to proceed at once to work on the new project. "It will be hard going before we can make the proposition

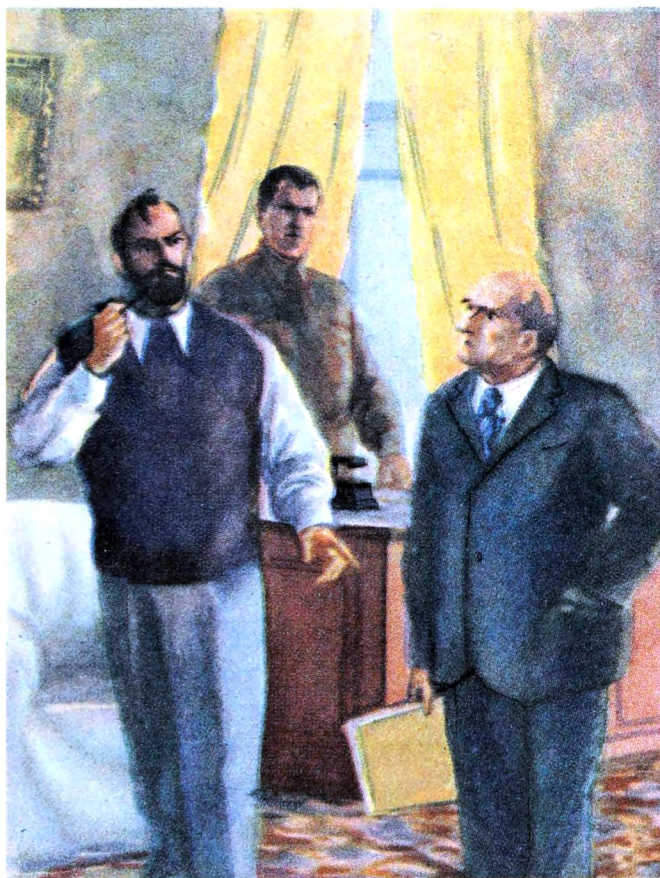
clear to everyone concerned. You'll find that some people won't like the idea at all."

He proved to be right. The following day a somewhat crestfallen Kovshov told Beridze how coldly the personnel of the designing office had received the new assignment. Alexei asked the chief engineer to talk to the men himself.

"I can do that, of course, Alyosha," Beridze assented. "But if you ask me, hard work is the best remedy. Put them to work night and day on the new project and mark my words they'll get so interested in it that your Kobzev and the others will turn out to be our most ardent supporters."

Grubsky and Topolev held aloof from all these perturbations. Topolev sat in his office day after day to no apparent purpose. After one or two unsuccessful attempts to make friends with him Alexei decided to leave the old man alone for the time being. In his capacity as advisor to the construction chief, Grubsky faithfully carried out Batmanov's assignments but took no active part in the work. He observed the efforts of Beridze and Kovshov with a supercilious smile and mockingly dubbed them the "discoverers of America."

When he learned of Beridze's latest pro-



posal, the former chief engineer remarked maliciously to Kobzev's draughtsmen who had come to him for advice:

"That hothead is leading us straight to the dock. I have no desire to join the society of felons and hence I shall continue to stand aside and calmly contemplate the disaster that must inevitably befall both him and yourselves."

He was unable, however, to confine himself to the role of passive observer when he learned that besides setting Kovshov to work on the new project Beridze had given orders to stop all operations on some of the sections on the right bank and to move over to the left. Upon Batmanov's return from a two-day visit to Rubezhansk, Grubsky in his presence accused Beridze of erroneous and criminal actions.

"Your project has not yet been approved in higher quarters," he said drily. "What's more, it is not yet ready. I consider your hasty orders to be downright irresponsible. Explain them if you please."

"You are not a public prosecutor and I do not intend to defend my actions for your benefit," was Beridze's reply to the little man's bitter outburst. Grubsky turned to Batmanov.

"You must countermand Beridze's orders. They are erroneous and fraught with disas-

trous consequences," he said. "As the chief of this construction job you will have to answer for his impulsiveness with your head."

Batmanov had almost foreseen Grubsky's objections and was prepared for them. Now he felt that he must put Grubsky in his place and at the same time impress Beridze with the weight of responsibility he would have to bear for his action. Batmanov patiently listened to the heated argument between the two engineers, and then said firmly:

"I have no intention of being the chief engineer's guardian. He is as much the boss of this undertaking as I am. He must function within his rights and duties. And please don't worry about my head, it is planted quite firmly on my neck."

Grubsky was taken aback. He had expected a different reaction from the chief.

"It was my duty to warn you. If you do not choose to heed my warning, I can only wash my hands of the whole affair," was his caustic and rather dramatic comment as he withdrew indignantly from Batmanov's office.

CHAPTER EIGHT

EMISSARY FROM THE LINE

ON THE seventh day of her trek on skis Tanya Vasilchenko sighted Novinsk. Dressed in a brown baize ski suit and a red knitted cap, and carrying a knapsack and a quilted jacket folded into a compact roll on her back, she looked like a participant in a long cross-country ski run. Only the customary ribbon with the club emblem or contestant's number was lacking.

Batmanov, Zalkind and Beridze spotted her from the Start. The tiny figure now disappeared, now reappeared in the midst of the endless expanse of the Adun.

The head office had done its best not to miss the moment when the Adun froze over. The various departments laid wagers on when that would happen, and the parties to the bets were continually looking at the river through

the window or rushing down to the shore to make sure. The great stream seemed to have come to a complete standstill, yet from time to time the river's icy surface would still shake itself magnificently to the accompaniment of a rumbling reverberation from the distance.

At last the Adun was firmly icebound—though no one noticed the exact moment it grew still. The river's gigantic sinews petrified in a chaotic conglomeration of pack-ice.

... The last of the mist that had hung in ragged patches over the river dispersed and the cold winter sun blazed forth brightly. Here and there the prisms, pyramids and shapeless slabs of ice rearing skywards glittered with the blinding brilliance of diamonds. In the sun's rays the hoary brushwood lining the shore resembled rose-tinted coral.

Batmanov, Beridze and Zalkind went down to the ice. They threaded their way with difficulty among the hummocks of ice, sliding and stumbling against the jagged teeth that jutted up from the river's surface. A fresh wind swept the river, hurling along the powdery snow and searing the men's faces. The

construction chief ordered work to be started on clearing a road and a tractor to be brought down on the ice. Just then the lone figure of the skier appeared again, this time already quite near.

"Little Red Ridinghood on the Adun," Beridze smiled. "I wonder where the lone traveller is coming from and where she's going."

Some distance away from the Start, Tanya Vasilchenko took off her skis and lifting them on her shoulder climbed up the steep bank. Wishing to relax and tidy up after her wearisome journey, she proceeded to one of the two-family cottages in the settlement near the head office, where her friend Olga Rodionova, the doctor, lived. No one answered her knock. Tanya stood on the porch for a few minutes and then standing her skis up against the door she turned and took the path leading to the head office.

She wandered about the corridors for a long time in search of her friend Zhenya Kozlova, the planning department clerk. She could not find her, for everything was changed since she had been there last. The familiar rooms were occupied by strange people.

"A promising beginning for the new management—shifting things around. This is more

like a Krylov fable than a head office," Tanya grumbled.

She found Zhenya at last on the fourth floor. She was sitting in a tiny room behind an absurdly large desk and checking over columns of typewritten figures with another accountant. She greeted Tanya's unexpected appearance with a cry of joy.

It was a good half hour before the two girls had finished kissing, hugging and examining each other. The other accountant finally lost patience and rapped his pencil against the glass desk top.

"What about getting back to these tables?"

Zhenya made a mock gesture of despair and complained to Tanya that Grechkin, the head of the department, had gone crazy; he sat in the office day and night making changes in the plan, making the accountants revise their calculations five times over, and giving them no time to catch their breath. In confirmation of her words the telephone rang insistently. The accountant picked up the receiver and, glancing significantly at Zhenya, assured the party at the other end of the line:

"We're checking the last tables. We'll soon be finished."

Zhenya dashed over to the table, then ran back to her friend.

"I'll go over to your place," Tanya said. "I'd like to get some sleep. We'll have a good talk this evening."

Zhenya gave her friend a resounding kiss and escorted her to the door with a flood of chatter.

"It's awfully cold in our place. Wrap yourself up warmly. It doesn't matter how much we heat the stove, we just can't keep the place warm. It isn't so bad in my room. In the corner room where engineer Kovshov is staying there's snow on the walls. He's nice, by the way, only a bit too serious. There are three newcomers and they're all interesting. The construction chief is terribly handsome—tall, slim and such grey eyes. They say he's very severe, though. But the chief engineer's a dear. I took the bulletins to him once. He's always laughing and joking and stroking his beard. A black beard all the way down to here," Zhenya pointed to her waist.

"By the way, have you seen Olga?" she asked suddenly. "Her place is nice and warm. I usually go there to thaw out."

Tanya remembered that she had intended calling Rodionova at the hospital and picked

up the receiver. The telephone operator recognized her voice although she had not been at the head office since August.

"Hullo, Tatyana Petrovna, have you come back to stay?" she asked but connected Tanya with the hospital before she could reply.

Tanya waited until the nurse on duty went to fetch Olga and a smile rose to her lips when she heard her friend's calm, stern voice at the other end of the wire grow warm and tremulous as soon as she greeted her.

"I know, I know," Olga interrupted her. "You can't convince me that you're not tired after that long ski trek. Run along at once to my place and lie down."

"Thanks for your hospitality, but your place is locked."

"So it is!... I forgot. Serafima said she was going to town. What shall we do? Beridze has the other key. That's our new chief engineer. He's staying with us. Go in to his office."

"I think I'd better go to Zhenya's."

"Don't you dare do anything of the kind. Her room is icy. You have to warm up."

Tanya left her padded jacket and duffle bag in Zhenya's room and went off to hunt for the key of Olga's flat. The chief engineer

was not in his office. Muza Filipovna, sitting in the long narrow anteroom informed her with an air of importance:

"The management has gone down to Start. The clearing of the ice road is beginning today."

"I'm out of luck," said Tanya ruefully. Pausing to consider her next step she was conscious that the older woman was staring fixedly at her. "Is there anything wrong?" she asked frowning.

"No, it's just that you remind me so much of my daughter, Natasha. I lost her during the evacuation and I can't find her. She is pretty like you." The woman slipped her pince-nez off her nose and let it hang on its cord. Pain and sadness filled her eyes. "Maybe you are my little Natasha?"

"Maybe I am. Look closer," Tanya replied with a gentle smile. "Perhaps you could tell me whether it is worth while waiting for the chief engineer. Did he say he would be back soon?"

"Aren't you scared, dearie?" Muza Filipovna said in a sudden whisper, bringing her face with its dilated eyes close to Tanya's. "I am old and helpless. Perhaps that's why I'm afraid? You are so young and calm."

"What are you talking about? What are you afraid of?" Tanya asked, puzzled.

"Everybody here is talking about it. They say the Japanese have started a war against us. For some reason there has been no official announcement. They say Japanese troops have been landed by parachute in the forest on the right bank of the river. They're searching for them now. . . . Can you imagine what it'll be like to have bombs raining down on you, to hear shouts and groans all around?"

"I don't understand. You're just repeating silly rumours. If the Japanese had started something there would be an official announcement at once. There's no need to be nervous. We must control our nerves, especially we women."

"Yes, yes, dearie, you're quite right."

Muza Filipovna regarded Tanya with tenderness. Evidently the girl really did resemble her own daughter.

"I'm so glad you came. You have made me feel ever so much better," she confessed. "I can't think why I allowed myself to be so weak. There are so many strong clever people here, there's no need to be afraid of anything. You know, I used to live such a narrow, cramped sort of existence. But here it is

different. To look at the Adun makes your heart swell as if you were standing on the top of a tall mountain. Before I came here I had only read about big construction jobs like this. I never knew how thrilling it could be. It is a struggle that is being fought every day, every hour. Isn't it wonderful that there are such people in the world like our Beridze? Have you known him long? I can just imagine you together. A splendid couple you'd make."

"You're mistaken. I've never met him. Couple indeed! I have come to see him and talk to him about the job. I'm from the line."

"Oh, are you? I can take you to his assistant Alexei Nikolayevich Kovshov if you like. You could talk to him."

The older woman hurried out of the room and Tanya mechanically followed her. They found Kovshov in a large office full of desks with sloping drawing boards at which engineers and technicians seated on high stools were at work.

"This is the designing office. They're working on the project," Muza Filipovna informed Tanya. "It's the main job at the present moment."

They made their way through the narrow passage between the desks to the far end of the room where Alexei, bent almost double, was scrutinizing a sheet of drawing paper pinned on the board before him. Kobzev, the head of the designing office, was sitting at the desk, his hands sunk in his tousled hair, completely engrossed in the delicate tracery of lines on the drawing.

"Here's someone to see you from the line, Alexei Nikolayevich. On urgent business," said Muza Filipovna and with grave dignity withdrew, whispering to Tanya as she went: "Drop in whenever you can. To see me, not the chief engineer."

Alexei looked up at Tanya and down again at the drawing. His hand sped over the paper as he made swift pencilled calculations in the margin. Tanya looked about her. Friendly nods met her on all sides. Nearest of all sat Petka Gudkin, nicknamed Petyunchik in the office because of his youth. The typists liked to tease him. "Just imagine a youngster like that being a senior draughtsman," they said. Petka greeted her from the other side of his desk with a mock handshake, pressing his right hand with his left in which he held his ruler.

"That Kovshov must be a terror," Tanya surmised, noticing how surprisingly little noise there was in a room as crowded as this.

"It's stuffy in here. Look how thick the air is," she said in a deliberately loud voice.

"Open the window somebody and air the room," Kovshov ordered without looking up.

Petka shot up from his stool with a clatter and climbed on the window sill.

"We're afraid of catching cold. Look how pink Tatyana's cheeks are from the frost," he remarked to his neighbour, a man wearing a green scarf around his neck. "Ah, how sweet the air is." Petka raised his face and hands to the white cloud of frost that swept in through the open window.

Tanya touched her wind-burned cheeks: they felt hot.

"Shouldn't spend so much time indoors. You can't build a pipe line in the office, you've got to get outside." Tanya looked at Petka as she spoke but her words were addressed to Alexei. She was determined to provoke him.

Kovshov threw his pencil down in annoyance and rose. Petka hastily returned to his seat.

"Have you urgent business with me?" he demanded, sceptically.

"I was looking for the chief engineer, really. His secretary brought me to you."

"Then what was the need of interrupting the work here? Go and see the chief engineer."

"Well, since I have had the good fortune to make your acquaintance, permit me to ask you one question."

"If it is only one, you may."

"You are not very cordial, are you? Perhaps you haven't quite finished admiring your blueprint. Go ahead and admire some more, I can wait."

Petka snickered.

"Do you mind getting down to the point? This isn't a dance hall after all."

"I'm from the ninth section. We got the chief engineer's instructions to stop all basic work and to shift over to the opposite bank. What is it all about?"

Kovshov stood with an absent air engrossed in his own thoughts. Without answering the girl, he turned back to his drawing board. He was reluctant to allow anything to interrupt his train of thought.

Tanya shrugged her shoulders. "Perhaps your staff has learned to read your thoughts,

but I am afraid I am not so gifted. I should like to hear your answer."

Petka giggled again. The ink was drying in his tracing pen which he waved at Tanya to express his sympathy.

"Don't waste precious time. Get to work," Tanya advised him softly.

"What's that?" Petka queried, but Kovshov looked up at that point and the little draughtsman hastily bent over his work.

"If the instructions are to stop work, that means you must stop," Alexei said. "Is there any need to ask for the whys and wherefores?"

"Of course there is," said Tanya indignantly. "We are human beings, not machines, and we take pride in the work we have done. Naturally, when out of a blue sky we are told to drop it we want to know why. We realize there must be some reason, but we want to know what it is. You talk as if you alone are responsible for the construction job."

The broad grin that spread over Alexei's features made him look suddenly young and friendly.

"Well put, I must say," he said. "How on earth did you get here, my belligerent young friend? As far as I know there aren't any roads yet."

"Where there's a will there's a way. You don't expect us to wait until you find the way to us, do you?"

"Good for you!" Alexei cried in sincere approval. "I suppose you've come for the Party conference. You're a little too early. What's your name by the way?"

"Vasilchenko."

"First name and patronymic, please?"

"Tatyana Petrovna."

"I could give you some explanations, Tatyana Petrovna. But for a number of reasons I think it might be better for you to see the chief engineer first. After you have seen him you can come back to me and we'll talk over all the business of your section. Is that all right?"

Petka ran after Tanya as she was walking down the corridor.

"Tatyana, I haven't said hello to you properly. You've come in the nick of time. You don't know what's going on here. Sidorenko has cleared out, your old enemy Grubsky has been knocked off his perch. A new era has dawned in the history of this construction job."

"Don't get excited, Petyunchik, your freckles might fly off," Tanya playfully touched

the freckled face of the young draughtsman. "Funny thing, they don't come off even in winter."

"That's not fair," said Petka, striking a defensive attitude, and added: "You'd better watch out or I might get sore and beat you up! Have you seen Kolya Smirnov yet? He's our Komsomol organizer now. He's mobilizing the youth. You might come in handy too."

"You don't say!" ejaculated Tanya and hurried on down the corridor. "Run back to your bench, my lad," she threw over her shoulder to Petka, "before your boss gives it to you for wasting time. When we get together this evening we can talk about the new era, about mobilizing the youth and about who might come in handy for what."

So stirred was Tanya by all she had seen and heard in the head office that she completely forgot her intention to rest. The first thing to be done was to see the Party organizer and find out why no one from the ninth section had been invited to the Party conference. She had heard about the conference while en route to Novinsk and now the news that it

was to be held at such short notice brought Muza Filipovna's hysterical talk about the Japanese back to her mind.

In the Party organizer's outer office the secretary, a young girl with a baby face, was whispering animatedly with a young man. Her smile froze into an expression of severe formality as soon as Tanya addressed her.

"You're too early," said the girl. "I can register you and issue you meal coupons, but there wasn't any need to be in such a hurry."

"I'm not asking you to register me and you can keep your meal coupons," Tanya retorted.

"Aren't you a delegate?"

"No I'm not, and I'd very much like to know why?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders. "How should I know?"

"What section are you from?" the boy asked, staring at the good-looking newcomer.

"Oh, I've come a long way. From the ninth. Why?"

"Because the outlying sections weren't invited to the conference, that's why," said the baby-faced girl, unable to conceal her displeasure at the lad's undisguised interest in the stranger with the peremptory manners.

"Why weren't they invited?" Tanya wanted to know.

"Most likely because it wasn't necessary. You'll have to excuse Comrade Zalkind. He forgot to consult you on the matter."

The girl spoke in the defiant tone frequently adopted by women when discussing business matters with a member of their own sex. On hearing the familiar name of the Party organizer, Tanya lost interest in the secretary and skirting her desk slipped into the inner office.

Two men were sitting with their backs to the door reading a newspaper proof. Tanya advanced unobserved and glanced over their shoulders at the proof sheet which smelt of fresh printer's ink. The leading article dealt with construction problems, selfless labour in wartime, valour in labour comparable to exploits on the battlefield, and vigilance. There was not a word about a Japanese attack.

"May I ask a question?" Tanya asked in a loud voice after she had read the article through. One of the newspapermen jumped with surprise at hearing her voice. "Why do you call the paper the organ of the construction job?"

"Outsiders aren't supposed to read the paper before it comes out," a pale young man

with startingly blue eyes remarked, turning the proof sheet on its face.

"Too late, to turn it over. I've read it all."

"Who the dickens are you and what do you want?" the blue-eyed young man demanded irritably.

"Don't worry, I'm not an outsider. I'm as much the boss here as any of you. Are you the editor?"

"I am. Pushchin is the name if you're interested."

"Can you tell me, Comrade Pushchin, why this paper is called the organ of the construction job when it is written by and for the head office exclusively? I don't see a single item about the work sections. Why is there nothing about our section, for instance?"

"You're from one of the sections? A delegate? Splendid! Now sit down and write an item. We'll squeeze it in."

The newspapermen livened up at once. One of them pushed a chair forward for Tanya, the other placed a sheet of paper and a pen in front of her.

"I'm not a delegate. I came to find out from Zalkind why our section is being neglected."

"But you are from the line, aren't you?"

"Of course. Do I look like a wretched penpusher?"

"You certainly don't. Well, it doesn't matter that you're not a delegate. Write anything you want as long as it's about the line. The paper's just started, this is our second issue. We haven't had time to contact the sections, we had to pick up copy right here on the spot."

"It's too bad. You ought to get your copy out on the job, on the construction sites, not in the offices. Look at the war correspondents, they write their dispatches under fire and put out their papers in the trenches. I came here all the way from the ninth section. Why couldn't you come to me?"

"You came here alone, on skis?" marvelled Pushchin. "Why not write about that? Say how you came, why you came and what you're going to do now you're here."

To Pushchin's surprise Tanya proceeded to write her piece without raising any objections.

"A bit skimpy," he said regretfully when, twenty minutes later, she handed him a sheet of paper covered with a careless scrawl.

"It's long enough. I'm afraid this won't get in either. You won't have the courage to print it."

Tanya had not minced words in her item; she demanded that the management of the job pay more attention to the sections. "It's time to emerge from the four walls of the head office into the wide open spaces," she wrote. Pushchin himself was of the opinion that it might be well to raise this question in the paper.

Tanya went back to look for the chief engineer but he had not yet returned. Recalling the missions entrusted to her by her fellow workers in the field, she decided to pay a visit to Liberman. She found the supply chief talking to a man in a sheepskin jacket seated at his desk.

"Everything to the last nail will be delivered to your section with the first baggage train," he exclaimed. "Now take your pencil and make a list of the items I've prepared for you...."

"The old faker," Tanya said to herself. "That man must have come here intending to have it out with him and he'll send him away feeling quite content."

Sure enough the man, evidently a repre-

sentative from one of the work sections, pressed Liberman's hand warmly, thanked him twice and went out, clearly satisfied with the result of his visit.

"Tanechka, my angel! Queen of my heart!" the supply chief exclaimed on catching sight of his visitor. He rose from his desk and went to meet her with outstretched arms.

"A little less passion, Liberman, if you don't mind," said Tanya, holding him at a distance. "I haven't had any cause to change my mind about you."

"I can't help that, my dear. I have long since reconciled myself to your indifference. Goodness gracious, a mere glance from your lovely eyes is all I ask! It is enough for me to breathe the same air as you. 'If but once a week to see you in our village,'" Liberman quoted jestingly. "Sit down, my lovely lady in the ski pants."

Tanya shook her head disapprovingly and regarded the antics of the supply man with contempt.

"I am really surprised that you weren't driven off the construction site. I hear Batmanov is a clever man, surely he can see through you? I suppose you couldn't bear the thought of giving up such a cushy job and so

you managed to fool the new chief the way you fooled that comrade who was just here. He went away charmed by your personality. Or perhaps Sidorenko finally decided to get rid of you?"

Liberman squealed with amusement and gazed at her in admiration.

"I shall never stop delighting in you, my queen. A rare combination, beauty plus brains. Even Helen of Troy was not endowed with so many attractive qualities. But you're mistaken about me, as always. You can't imagine how upset Yakov Tarasovich was when he found out I was being detained here. I was upset myself."

"Who detained you here? Who would be foolish enough to do such a thing?"

"Batmanov. He positively fell in love with me at first sight. Where could I hope to find another supply man like you, he says."

"He's right. Thank goodness supply men like you are rare. So two chiefs squabbled over you, eh? One didn't want you here, the other refused to take you with him? I suppose your commercial abilities helped you."

"You leave my abilities alone. You know very well I am the unhappiest of men and that I'd be only too glad to give up my job

any time to anyone who wanted it. I have other ambitions...."

"I know," Tanya laughed. "I've heard that story so many times before. Your ambition is the stage, the theatre. Your brother Lazar is an honoured actor and histrionic talent is in your blood. It's time you thought of something more original. As for giving up your job, why, you couldn't be torn away from it with a 60-horse-power tractor."

Tanya's words did not offend Liberman in the slightest. He listened with obvious pleasure and even made an attempt to kiss her hand.

"I am so glad to see you, Tanechka. It was good of you to drop in and pay me a visit."

"I came here on business, Liberman. Let's get down to it at once. When will this outrageous neglect of the work sections stop? In spite of your promises you failed to ship us all the materials we needed before the navigation season closed. We are short of tools, our fuel supply is practically exhausted, the motor oil is unusable, the road building machinery lacks parts. Here is the list of our shortages."

Liberman glanced at the list, and nodded with sympathy.

"Yes, it's an outrage! There's no other word for it! Somebody ought to be prosecuted for it, if you ask me! How about food supplies, any complaints? What about the clothing situation?"

"Fortunately, we laid in our food supplies early in the summer. We're not starving. The fish we catch helps. And we still have clothing, but if any new people come there will be nothing for them."

"The new people will come with complete outfits. Any more complaints?"

"Aren't these enough? What are you going to do about the shortage of materials?"

"I advise you to take it up with Batmanov. Really, the situation is catastrophic!"

"I certainly intend to take it up with Batmanov and I'll see to it that he gives you hell."

"Oh no, he won't," Liberman snickered. "I don't have anything to do with materials any more, thank goodness. Vitamins, shirts, boots—that's my job now."

"What nonsense is this? Some new hocus-pocus of yours?"

"Not mine, dear heart, Batmanov's. He has split up supplies into two. Opened a new department for technical supplies, with hand-

some Fedosov in charge. And there you have the result. No wonder Fedosov's department has already been nicknamed the Hold-up-the-Works Department."

Liberman seemed extremely lively and gay. Nevertheless Tanya suddenly found herself feeling sorry for this fat, noisy, fussy man who always appeared to take pleasure in making caustic remarks and outwitting his fellows

"You're a queer person, Liberman," she said gravely. "All these petty intrigues and stale jokes. Don't you see what a difficult time we're going through? How can you go on clowning at a time like this? But perhaps that's your way of hiding your real feelings?"

Her words had a startling effect on Liberman. His face clouded and he seemed to shrink in his chair.

"Curious creatures, human beings, Tanechka," he said, after a pause. "I'm not responsible for the way they're made. A man considers it shameful to bare his soul to others. Am I to blame for being what I am? You may consider me flippant and lighthearted if you like. Difficult times, you say. Yes, they are difficult for me too, believe me. I haven't told anyone else, but I can tell you

since you have placed your finger on my sore-spot. My relatives were left behind in Mariupol and Berdyansk. My wife and daughter are stranded in Leningrad. They left here before the war and didn't manage to get back in time. Am I an enemy to my own family?"

Liberman seemed to have grown aged and worn in those few minutes; he sat hunched up in his chair, his hands hanging limply from his sides. Tanya rose softly and slipped out of the room.

On the floor above she found the technical supply department. The office was crowded. Fedosov was talking into the receiver, holding it to his ear with his shoulder, and signing a pile of telegrams at the same time. Replacing the receiver on its hook, he proceeded to talk to two of his subordinates at once while continuing to sign the telegrams. The telephone rang almost ceaseless'y. Tanya prepared for a long wait. But in a few minutes Fedosov turned his attention to her.

"Yes?"

Tanya proceeded to give an exhaustive account of her complaints. After listening for a few minutes, Fedosov pulled out a folder of papers and began to go through them rapidly, making pencil notes on the margin.

"Lay aside your papers for a few minutes, they won't run away," said Tanya.

"I am listening to you, don't let the papers bother you. Continue. You stopped at copper wire and electrical equipment. What is your section most urgently in need of?"

Fedosov reached for the telephone. Tanya laid her hand on the receiver.

"Have a little respect for others. Only great men can be excused for acting queer and disregarding their environment, and not always at that. When you get to be a great man your manner of doing everything at once will evoke admiration."

Fedosov looked up with interest.

"You're from the kindergarten, I suppose?"

"Why the kindergarten?"

"Kindergarten tutors usually develop that professional manner of sermonizing people."

"Don't change the subject. I want a businesslike answer."

"Your conversation isn't particularly businesslike."

"I'm not asking for lipstick, am I? I'm demanding technical equipment for the section."

"I have made a note of all your requests. I'll look them over and see what can be done."

Liberman left things in a nice mess, it will take time to unravel the tangle. Come back in a couple of days. And keep your hands off my phone."

"No, you must look over that list and see what can be done right now."

"I can't. I'm too busy. I have to give Comrade Zalkind material for his report at the conference by evening and I have nothing ready yet."

"I'll prepare the material for Comrade Zalkind myself. Any objections? By the way, do you know the nickname your office has earned out in the field? Hold-up-the-Works Department! You deserve it."

"It's not true," Fedosov objected hotly. "Liberman invented that and he's circulating it himself. You got it from him, didn't you?"

"I did. Doesn't it apply though?"

"Tartuffe!" Fedosov said flushing with chagrin. "He's trying to trip me up all the time."

The girl thought of Liberman and smiled. Tartuffe was the perfect name for him. Fedosov and his jealous regard for his department appealed to her. She realized that he had not made a note of her requests merely to pacify her, and decided to leave him alone.

The chief engineer had not returned yet. As Tanya stood in the corridor trying to decide whether to go to Zhenya Kozlova or wait for Beridze, Grubsky passed by and greeted her with his crooked smile.

"You're quite a stranger, Tatyana Petrovna. It's a pleasure to see you here again. Well, after your experience out in the field I daresay you have realized that your telephone line is after all not the most important thing in the world?"

"I'm afraid I cannot return the compliment, comrade ex-chief engineer," Tanya said with deliberate emphasis. "I am not at all pleased to see you. You are right. I have realized many things after working in the field. For one thing I have realized that a head office run by smug, indifferent people isn't much use. I would advise you to go out into the field yourself. It is most instructive."

She climbed up to the fourth floor to Zhenya's office only to find that her friend was busy with her chief. Tanya put on her jacket and went down to the pier, now known as the Start.

CHAPTER NINE

THE START

A WIDE road dropped abruptly from the top of the bluff to the gradually sloping flat where the tent encampment was laid out. Two strings of motor trucks passed each other on the incline: one, heavily laden, moving down toward the sheds, and the other, returning empty, noisily climbing the hill on the way to pick up a new load at the railway siding where supplies were being transferred from railway cars into trucks. In front of the tents long rows of tractors and trucks stood waiting for the completion of the road on the ice.

Tanya was everywhere: in the warehouses that were filled with sacks, barrels and bales; in the big tents with bunks arranged as in railway cars, and in the long shed with the wide doors where machine tools and work

benches were already being installed while work on the roof was still in progress. Nearby under an awning several men were assembling huge sleighs of an unusual shape. Two drivers waiting for their trucks to be unloaded were examining the sleighs and exchanging brief remarks. Tanya knew one of them—a lean man with a slightly pock-marked face. She went over to him.

“Hello, Smorchkov!”

The truck driver’s worried look vanished. He threw down his leather gloves and shook the girl’s hand vigorously.

“What sort of sleighs are these?” Tanya asked.

“They’re making them for us truck drivers. Sled trailers for hauling pipes. Those pipes are pretty heavy—a ton a piece. Which means that the sleighs have got to be both sturdy and light at the same time. What are you doing here? Come back to work in the head office, eh?”

“They sent me in from the line to see what’s doing here. You don’t happen to be the new chief engineer’s chauffeur by any chance?”

The question occurred to her because Smorchkov had been Grubsky’s chauffeur be-

fore he started driving a truck at the beginning of the war.

"They offered me the job but it was a bit too soft for my liking. Better to be a Stakhonovite," the driver smiled. "There've been a great many changes here. You know that Filimonov is in charge of our outfit now?"

"I know. He's just the man for you rough truckers."

"No smart cracks at our expense. We're a big factor on this construction job now. Batmanov, the new chief, called us together and told us that the success of the job depends entirely on the truck and tractor drivers. If we don't get the pipes and materials hauled to the spot in the course of the winter there won't be any pipe line." He turned eagerly to Tanya and continued: "You're fresh from the line. What do you think of this idea? I suggest driving the trucks down to the farthest sections where they're badly needed. Filimonov can't make up his mind about it. Says it's too far, too cold, and there aren't any roads."

"I'll have to think about it," Tanya said studying Smorchkov with renewed interest. He had confided to her what was clearly a cherished idea of his. "Filimonov's right. You

need a good road. At present you can get through only on skis."

"But they're already laying a road on the Adun," Smorchkov pointed to the river. "I'll undertake to make the first run, even if I have to haul this monster." He made a gesture toward the sleigh. "You'd better make those supports stronger, my lad," he said to one of the carpenters, "or else the weight of the pipes will snap them if there's the slightest list."

"Smorchkov! How long are you going to keep the truck waiting!" came a shout from the nearest freight shed.

"So long, Tatyana Petrovna!" Smorchkov said as he ran off.

The Start operated smoothly and efficiently. The loaders, carpenters and truck drivers went about their work with intent eagerness. Snatches of a song popular among the builders of Novinsk reached Tanya from one of the freight sheds. She stepped inside.

Coming in from the bright outdoors with its dazzling snow, she could not make out anything in the gloom of the shed for a few moments.

"Look who's here, Nikolai. It's Tatyana!" someone shouted, seizing her by the arm and leading her past the stacks of crates.

As her eyes became accustomed to the darkness Tanya saw Kolya Smirnov in the dim glow of an electric lamp. Lightly dressed in sweater and ski pants, he stood there feet planted apart and arms akimbo and looked down at the girl. Next to him was fifteen-year-old Genka Pankov, whom everybody called "Kolya Smirnov's shadow"; he was dressed like Kolya and had struck the same attitude.

"My, how tall you are," Tanya said, genuinely surprised as she looked Smirnov over. "Have you grown or have I simply forgotten what you were like?"

"Grown, of course. A person must always grow and develop, you know. How did you know I was looking for you?"

"Looking for me? I hadn't the slightest idea."

"I've been giving our chiefs an earful about you—told 'em we've got a live wire of a girl who happens to be a good tele-communications engineer but who's been the victim of conservative management. They wanted to call you in."

"Why should they want to see me?" she asked with a touch of resentment in her tone.

"What a question! To put up a telephone

line, of course. Take a look at all this stuff here waiting to be used."

He pointed to the telephone and selector apparatuses laid out on shelves, the rolls of wire and gleaming bunches of insulators.

"I see you've become a stockroom clerk, Nikola," remarked Tanya noting with obvious pleasure the orderliness of the storeroom.

"Not me! I've only been getting this stuff ready for shipment. As soon as the road is open we'll send it up the line. The new construction chief and head engineer are keenly interested in communications. Not like the former chiefs. There's an order out already for telephone lines to be laid first thing."

"Who's going to do it?"

"The sections themselves."

"Are there any telephone men at the sections? Have any been sent?"

"Now then don't go talking like Grubsky. Nobody's given us telephone linemen. What we're going to do is to open training courses next week. You and I'll be delivering lectures."

"How interesting!" Tanya said with sarcasm.

"What's wrong with that?" Kolya asked, surprised, bending down to look into the girl's eyes. "Why don't you like it?"

"I think it's splendid! Especially considering that by the time the linemen finish your university the pipe line will be completed. The telephone line has to be laid in five or six weeks."

"Know how it can be done?"

"I do. But I won't tell you. You've been heading me off everywhere as it is."

Tanya was hinting at the fact that before leaving for the field she had been the head office Young Communist League organizer. Kolya's face betrayed genuine amazement.

"What's the matter with you, Tatyana? You must be sick. You're not like yourself at all."

"She's just green with envy, that's what it is!" Genka put in and ducked behind Smirnov to escape Tanya who reached out for the carrotly tuft of coarse hair sticking out from under his cap.

"Listen, you brat, if you're going to make such accusations I won't pass on the regards your father sent you," Tanya said.

"Did you see him?" Genka asked, incredulous. "How is he?"

"Hale and hearty. He asked me to kiss you for him."

"Now, none of that," Genka replied and to be on the safe side moved behind a pillar.

"The child is right, Nikola," Tanya admitted. "I'm green with envy. You know how I fought with Grubsky and Sidorenko—and here I discovered I'm left out in the cold! We've got to have a serious talk because I've also got an idea. But not now. I'm looking for Beridze—he seems to be pretty elusive."

"You'll find him down on the Adun where they're making the road."

Tanya took Genka's advice and went down to the river. At this point the Adun swept around the town in a mighty semicircle. Along the grey belly of the river a black living belt stretched out into the distance. The air reverberated with a crunching and clanging as hundreds of people toiled to break down the slabs of ice jutting up from the surface. The road builders had already advanced a kilometre or two, leaving behind them a broad ribbon of even, clean-swept road running between the jagged hummocks of ice.

Tired though she was, the girl felt a sense of satisfaction as she walked along the ice. She saw this highway that was being laid to

the construction sections as the crowning point of the numerous preparations she had observed at headquarters.

Beridze was not to be found anywhere. The smooth road came to an end and Tanya pushed her way forward with difficulty past people swinging crowbars and picks to even out the ice. Bluish splinters of ice that glistened in the sun flew on all sides.

Near-by a lone tractor crawled along. Raising a deafening din it nosed up against the jutting protuberances of ice with its bulldozer attachment, and when they did not give way, halted and came on again. The blocks of ice were sheared off at the base emitting a horrible screech that set Tanya's teeth on edge. Never before had she seen a tractor used for this purpose. "They're an enterprising crowd," she thought. "Weren't afraid of running that heavy hulk on the ice."

The tractor was accompanied by a small group of people. Tanya walked over to them hoping to find the elusive chief engineer among them. No one paid any attention to her; they were all intent on watching the bulldozer at work. Tanya recognized Filimonov in the group. He was wearing a long black sheepskin coat, unbuttoned, and a fur hat with the

earflaps down. Two of the others were strangers to Tanya. She guessed that they were the chiefs.

Each time the tractor came to a standstill the driver, oblivious of all but the test, looked down and each time Filimonov, after a cursory examination of the obstacle, said:

"Try again, Silin. Only take it easy, don't ram it."

Silin nodded his agreement and the tractor, obedient to the driver's skill, pressed forward smoothly, slicing off a neat slab of ice.

Filimonov told the driver to stop and the two proceeded to inspect the bulldozer. Tanya took the opportunity to approach the other two men in the group who now had removed their mittens and were hurriedly lighting cigarettes.

"Could I speak to chief engineer Beridze?" she asked, looking at Batmanov, who had also put on a long sheepskin coat over his leather coat.

"Little Red Ridinghood!" Beridze exclaimed. His beard was grey with hoarfrost and his face too chilled to reflect the smile that danced in his eyes. "I am the chief engineer. Beridze's my name."

Tanya had intended asking him for the key to Olga's apartment but now she hesitated.

"I'm from Section Nine. I have two questions to put to you, one on behalf of the section and one for myself."

"Section Nine? Well, well!" Beridze marvelled. "Did you hear that, Vasili Maximovich, Little Red Ridinghood has come all the way from Section Nine. We saw you in the distance. Weren't you scared to make a long trip like that all alone?"

Tanya did not like the penetrating look Batmanov gave her and turned away from him.

"Will you be going back to the office soon?" she asked Beridze.

"It really is time to get back," Batmanov replied for the chief engineer and led the way, swinging his arms encased in a pair of huge mittens as he strode along.

"Now what was it you wanted to ask me?" Beridze said, falling in step beside Tanya.

"We received your instructions to stop work on the right bank and to move with all our equipment to the left bank. We could not understand the order; it upset us."

"Is it the section that wants to know or you personally?"

"The section. Naturally I too am interested. Why must we abandon the right bank after so much work and hardship?"

"What else do they want to know at the section?"

"A great many things. We know, of course, about the changes that have taken place in the head office. At first everybody on the line was glad that a new management had taken over; people had good things to say about you. We settled down to wait for things to happen. Now the days are slipping by one after another. Frankly speaking, we don't find things much better on the job."

"Worse, perhaps?" Beridze put in. "In other words, we have not lived up to the expectations of the people in the field? Vasili Maximovich, the people on the line seem to have lost faith in us already," the chief engineer called after Batmanov who had not slackened his pace.

"So you decided not to carry out instructions until their meaning was made clear to you, is that it?" Vasili Maximovich turned around.

Tanya gave him a scornful glance.

"I shall try to give a complete account of our actions to the chief engineer."

"By all means. But don't ignore me. I'm interested too."

"That's Batmanov, the chief of the construction job," Beridze whispered to the girl.

Tanya was somewhat taken aback.

"How do you do, Comrade Batmanov? I hope you will forgive me," she said with embarrassment. "When I get sore I jump down everybody's throat."

"So I see. You've already scared the chief engineer so that his beard has turned grey. Now let's hear about things out at your section."

Beridze now walked ahead while Batmanov fell behind with Tanya.

"You mustn't think that the section is not obeying orders from headquarters. We've got Pankov in charge—he's a strict manager who likes to do things properly. We made all the preparations for shifting over to the other bank in good time, so as to lay a road as soon as the Adun froze over, transfer all the property across and get settled at the new site. There have been a great many difficulties. The section's short of some of the most necessary things which can't be done without.

I dropped in to see the technical supply chief. He made a note of our needs and promised to help. . . . But the most important thing is that the people want to know how you're going to handle the construction job. Everybody's worried about whether we'll be able to finish in time."

"Were you sent by the others or did you decide to come yourself?" Batmanov asked.

"It was decided at a Party meeting to send someone to you with a letter. I have it with me, but you can't say everything you want to in a letter. I was elected to come because I can ski—we couldn't afford to wait until the road was laid. Another consideration was that I have a personal question to take up with you. And perhaps my stubborn character had something to do with it too." She laughed.

"Yes, you do have a formidable character," Batmanov smiled and requested Tanya to give him a detailed account of what she had seen on the way. "I want to know everything," he said. "The mood of the people, their complaints and wishes, and what each of the sections is doing. . . ."

Tanya gave an exhaustive account of her observations. The chief was particularly in-

terested to hear about Rogov, whom Tanya had met on the way. Escorting the last barges to the fifth section, Rogov had found things in a bad way there. The men in charge had been guilty of gross mismanagement and the District Committee of the Communist Party had sent its representative to the spot on the insistence of Communist Party member Kotenev and others to help the section's personnel put things in order. Rogov arriving at this juncture had had to remain and take over management.

"How is he making out? How are things at the section?"

"At the moment, of course, everything's fluid, in a state of chaos. Not that there's any lack of unity and organization on the part of the workers. Rogov has managed to make friends with the Nanai and they are lending him a hand. He's quite at home in Tyvlin, the Nanai settlement. One advantage of moving over to the left bank is that the construction workers are assured of shelter."

"Does he need more workers?"

"He didn't ask for anything," Tanya said after a moment's thought. "It seems to me though that he could do with an assistant with some technical training. Engineer Pribytkov,

his construction superintendent, is a bit too academic if you ask me. Too fond of drawing up timetables."

"Do you think Rogov is satisfied with his job? He was always begging for a tough assignment. A glutton for punishment." Batmanov smiled at the memory of his conversation with Rogov.

"He asked me to remind you," Tanya said as if in confirmation of his thought, "that you promised to let him go to the army the day the Japanese start making trouble." Tanya had her own reasons for mentioning the Japanese at this point.

"Yes, I remember that promise. By the way, you mentioned something about Pankov. Do you know him well? I hear he is an extremely resolute and intelligent man. Is that right?"

Tanya's lucid, matter-of-fact answers to his questions pleased Batmanov.

"Pankov is a very valuable asset to the job. I assure you, the ninth section is the best on the line. Pankov knows how to place his people. And they think the world of him."

"That's fine," Batmanov said approvingly. "I plan to remove Pankov from the best sec-

tion and send him to the worst. Hold on a minute. I want to see what's going on over there."

The construction chief jumped lightly over an ice hummock and made his way, slipping and stumbling, to a knot of people beside a circular hole in the ice. A little further away technician Khlynov, a man of giant proportions, was taking depth soundings and measuring the thickness of the ice. Zalkind, dressed in a sheepskin jacket held together with a soldier's belt, black thigh-length *valenki* and huge mittens reaching to his elbows was delivering a brief impromptu talk. It was perhaps the tenth talk the Party organizer had given that day. He was well known on the construction site and he had only to appear anywhere for people to begin gathering around him so that in almost no time a small crowd would collect.

He had a knack for getting people to talk and was invariably showered with questions of all kinds. Today three questions were uppermost in the minds of all. Would the Red Army hold Moscow or would it continue to retreat? Would the Allies open the second front or would they let us down—could they really be trusted? What were all these ru-

mours about the Japanese going into action? If this was war why was it being spoken about in whispers, and if it wasn't, when could a Japanese attack be expected?

Batmanov, squatting beside Khlynov, watched the dark water seething and bubbling in the hole. The blue, metre-thick ice dropped down into the restless, gurgling deep.

"I went out to Nampi this morning," Khlynov told the chief. "The pack ice ends about a kilometre before the village. It will be hard going for ten kilometres but further on the ice is smooth and it'll be only a matter of clearing away the snow. The people at the first section are out working on the ice. The Nanai are lending a hand."

Batmanov stood up. "Comrade Khlynov," he said, "I want to send you over to Rogov's section. We can always find the people we need around here, but Rogov needs help badly. As a matter of fact, I intend to expand your duties. When you are with Rogov do your best to go into all aspects of the job. Drop in to see me this evening and we'll discuss the matter in greater detail."

The setting sun was turning crimson. The breeze over the river died down and in the translucent air the dense primeval forests of

the right bank were clearly delineated. Over the tall straight wooded strip rose the purple chain of hills delicate-hued and shimmering like a mirage ready to float away and melt in the air at any moment.

Rubbing his nose and cheeks with his mitten, Batmanov called to Zalkind.

"Let's go, Mikhail, I'm frozen stiff. Chir-wagging in a frost like this is no way to keep warm. Swinging a pick is more like it! That reminds me, there's an emissary from the line waiting for you here. She came all the way from the ninth section to give us a piece of her mind."

Beridze shook his finger at Zalkind from the distance.

"You'd better come and face the music, Mikhail Borisovich," he said.

"Hello, Comrade Party organizer! I would never have believed it of you..." said Tanya.

"Why, Tanya!" cried Zalkind recognizing who it was. "How did you get here? And what have I done to incur your displeasure?"

"I don't mind the slight to myself so much. It's the slight to my section that rankles. How could you have called a Party

conference without inviting us? If I hadn't chanced to come to the head office I wouldn't have known anything about it."

"We couldn't invite the distant sections, Tanya. There are the tenth, the eleventh and the twelfth besides yours, you know. It was out of the question to get them all to come here. We would have had to postpone the conference, and we can't do that. You see that, don't you? Now am I forgiven?"

"I don't see anything of the kind."

Beridze burst out laughing

"Now you're in for it, Mikhail Borisovich!"

"Very well, I shall try to win your good graces by inviting you here and now to attend our conference as a delegate from the ninth section. What's' more, I am even prepared to let the ninth section speak first. Can we call it quits on these terms?"

"Perhaps we can. But that doesn't exhaust the list of my complaints by any means. I have already managed to scrap with all your people over at the head office. I think it's scandalous the way a huge construction job like this has been squeezed into a four-story building, full of people pushing pens, chattering, whispering, frightening one another

er with bogey stories about Japanese parachute troops. Nobody gives a thought to the line! You'd think it didn't exist. But it does exist, comrades chiefs, it's too bad you've overlooked it!"

"Good, Tanya, that's fine," said Zalkind, patting the girl lightly on the shoulder.

"I don't see anything good about it."

"It's good that you've come to us. Mahomet and the mountain, you know. The line is beginning to press down on the head office, that's a good sign. And what's most important, Tanya, our head office can stand any sort of pressure. Fine!" Zalkind moved his numb lips with difficulty.

"You are not being quite fair to the head office," Batmanov, walking ahead with Beridze, remarked over his shoulder to Tanya.

"Nevertheless I want her to speak her mind at the conference about the head office people confining themselves within four walls," Zalkind said. "Be as severe and sensible in your criticism as you can, Tanya. I must tell you, Vasili Maximovich, this Tanya of ours is a person of note on the construction job. She came to me at the City Committee of the Party before I had been appointed

to the job and demanded that we investigate the situation on the pipe line long before we ourselves realized the need for it." He threw a warm glance at the girl and took her by the arm. "You see, Tatyana, by pulling together we have pushed the cart over the hump."

Batmanov turned back and took Zalkind's place beside Tanya.

"Now, comrade chief," she warned him. "You are going to accuse me of taking a prejudiced and superficial view of the situation. 'The silly girl doesn't understand much about the functions of the head office. After all, the organizational kernel begins in the office, no matter how you look at it. Headquarters is headquarters, whether it is directing a battle or a building job. The telephone, telegraph and the ability to write are great human inventions making for efficiency in work.' Isn't that what you were going to say?"

"Well, something like that," Batmanov admitted.

Beridze and Zalkind laughed. The construction chief scrutinized Tanya's face intently. Wisps of dark hair whitened by the frost had escaped from beneath her knitted cap on

to her clear sun-tanned forehead. Her deep-set, almost black eyes framed in rime-coated lashes met his glance unflinchingly.

"We can't afford to come out into the field just to have a cup of tea with the lineworkers, exchange views on the world situation and voice our regrets that things are in a bad way. Beridze and Kovshov have been giving me no peace from the very first day about letting them go out to the line. But I wouldn't let them. We'll come to the sections when we have something to show for ourselves. But before we can do that, we must have time to prepare and muster our forces. That will take a month, at most six weeks. Too much? I can account for every day of that time."

Tanya said nothing. She walked on, covering her face to the eyes with her hands in their heavy woolen mittens.

"I don't think I need to explain things to you," Batmanov observed softly. "You have good eyes, you can see for yourself."

"Yes, I did see something," Tanya said, uncovering her face. "And what I saw I liked when I understood what it meant. And I dare say what I didn't understand I'll get to like in time. Can you imagine, Comrade Batman-

ov, I even liked Liberman. Or rather, I disliked him less than before."

She went on to speak about the supply men, about the grain of healthy competition she had detected in their mutual hostility, about Tartuffe and the Hold-up-the-Works Department. Batmanov roared with laughter at that and inhaled such a draught of frosty air that he nearly choked.

"Now tell me, fair emissary from the line, what is your full name and what exactly is your position on the section," he said, after the fit of coughing had subsided. "I presume you are Tanya Vasilchenko?"

"You must forgive me, I have lost the habit of introducing myself. No one ever bothers to ask me my name, they just come up and act as if they had known me all their lives. You are right, I am Vasilchenko, telecommunications engineer."

"Aha! Now it's your turn to get a dressing down," Beridze crowed. "Why isn't there any telephone or telegraph line on the job yet? Why, it's scandalous!"

"Well, that's certainly not my fault. I have been given practically everything else to do but that."

"How's that?"

"That happens to be the second question I intended to take up with you. It is a matter that affects me personally. I have always been of the opinion that communications ought to go ahead of the other phases of the work, and I still think so. Grubsky was of a different opinion. He and I had some strong words about it—I don't know how to get along with people I don't like. He drove me out of the office into the field, as he put it. I can't understand why you have let him stay on here, Comrade Batmanov. I met him in the office today and he did not miss the chance to say in that mocking way of his: 'Well, I hope you have realized by now that your telephone line is not the most important thing in the world?' "

"Well, and have you?" Beridze teased. A deep flush of annoyance glowed through Tanya's dark, almost chocolate-coloured tan.

"I was not very polite to the ex-chief engineer. I would not like to begin my acquaintance with you in the same way," she retorted. Beridze's remark upset Tanya. She felt that he was prejudiced against her.

Beridze took her by the elbow. "Don't be angry with me, Little Red Ridinghood," he

said placatingly. "I was merely trying to be funny."

"Faster there!" shouted Zalkind who had overtaken them and was now standing by the waiting car.

In their bulky overcoats they barely managed to squeeze into the small sedan. Tanya was almost crushed between Zalkind and Beridze. Her legs which had had a great deal of exercise that day began to ache.

"Grubsky maintained that we have no communications workers on the spot and that we'd have to wait until we got some from elsewhere," she said. "He was opposed to rigging up a temporary line on trees. 'Better build a permanent line from the start.' Sure, a hundred years from now, when the pipe line will have been laid!"

Batmanov, sitting with the driver, listened with interest to what Tanya was saying.

"Do you think we could open a brief training course for line-workers and put up a temporary line, say, in three months?" he asked her turning in his seat.

"You don't need any courses for that. You can train people directly on the job. I am firmly convinced that we could install a line right up to Taisin within six weeks. I have

worked out a plan, as a matter of fact. I intended to submit it to you."

"Smart girl!" said Balmanov and turned to throw a glance at Zalkind and Beridze.

"What is your plan, Tanya?" Zalkind asked.

"Not to scatter the workers over the different sectors, since there are so few of them, but to organize a single shock column and divide the work into a number of simple operations. The main thing will be to get a hundred Komсомol members to volunteer for work in the taiga."

Tanya waited expectantly to hear what the construction chiefs had to say about her proposal. But they said nothing, their thoughts occupied not so much with what she had said as with the girl herself. Balmanov's soul was rejoicing. "There they are," he was reflecting exultantly, "those golden cadres you were dreaming of. They're coming to you themselves, Vasili. Now take care you make proper use of them for the good of the cause." Beridze was studying the girl over the top of his upraised collar.

"Let me answer your first question," he said. "You are right: the sections have every right to be informed of our intentions, they

must have a clear idea of what they will be expected to do...."

Tanya listened without turning her head. Beridze spoke about the revision of the plans, and about the left-bank project.

"The problem has to be visualized in its entirety, and not in part. The ninth section is not high enough a peak from which to survey the entire scene. It may be hard for you to understand our decisions at this juncture, but later on you will."

"I think I understand already," said the girl, turning finally to face Beridze. "Did you get that left-bank idea all by yourselves or have you been going over our memorandums?"

"Your memorandums? I've never seen any memorandums!"

Batmanov looked at Tanya with interest.

"Ever since the war began people out in the field have been talking about the need to revise the plans. One man, Karpov's his name, insisted that the line ought to be moved to the left bank."

"Who is he, an engineer?"

"No. A fisherman, a native of the Adun area, from Nizhnaya Sazanka Village. He's in charge of a big fishing kolkhoz. He came to

the section one day and asked for a job. 'I want to learn from you people.' He turned out to be a remarkably capable man. He hasn't had much education, no more than seven years of schooling, I believe, but he can do anything he sets his hand to and is amazingly quick at catching on to the most complex problem. What interested him most about our job was the road. He said it was not by chance that there are so many settlements on the left bank of the Adun and practically none on the right. The left bank was the logical place for settling because of its favourable natural conditions. To build a road on the right side of the river he declared was going contrary to the Adun's history. It was the left bank that needed the road: it would connect Nampi, Olgokhta, Chilma, Chomi and a lot of other settlements with Novinsk and give the needed impetus for the development of the district in the North. On the right bank there was only one settlement that could use a road and that was Ulyagir. Moreover, on the right bank the road would have to cut across a solid range of thickly wooded hills. On the left bank it would run through the broad sloping river terrace rising above the flood lands. And he vowed that the builders

of the pipe line could rely on the assistance of the entire Adun population on the left bank, whereas on the right bank there was nobody to help them!"

"The devil take it! You are quoting my own arguments in favour of the left bank!" Beridze cried, barely able to contain himself with excitement. "Do you mean to say that fisherman of yours figured all that out for himself?"

"Aha, that got you, didn't it?" Tanya laughed in her turn. "Don't worry, he won't steal any of your thunder. To tell the truth, I have embellished Karpov's idea a bit in the telling by adding suggestions made by other comrades." Tanya sneezed violently; she had caught cold after all. "You said something about vision and the petty interests of a single work section. As you see, some attempt was made to consider the undertaking as a whole."

"Where is Karpov at the present time? At your section?" Zalkind wanted to know.

"No, he has left the job and gone back to his settlement. I met him in Olgokhta and told him about all the changes I had heard about. He listened to me and sighed. Evidently he hasn't much faith in changes. In any case

he hasn't any time to bother with us, he's too busy running his kolkhoz; they're behind with their plan, he told me. Spent about an hour explaining to me the intricacies of fishing under ice."

"Was there any reaction to that proposal?" Batmanov asked.

"Oh yes. Old man Topolev wrote: 'Before criticizing plans you ought to learn to fulfil them.' In other words, attend to your own little affairs and leave the big ones to those concerned."

"Those records must be hunted up. When you find them," said Batmanov to the chief engineer, "I'd like to see them. If the old man isn't careful I'll send him out to Karpov's kolkhoz to catch fish."

As she climbed out of the car, Tanya was conscious of an intense weariness. It was an effort to move her limbs. When Beridze invited her to drop in with him to see Topolev she stretched out her hand and said: "No, thank you, it's your key I'm after."

"What key?"

"The key from your treasure chest! I want to get into Rodionova's flat and I've spent all day running after you, or rather the key."

Georgi Davydovich hurriedly searched his pockets. Suddenly he remembered that he had left the key in the pocket of his coat which was hanging in the office. Tanya was obliged to accompany him back to the head office. Grumblingly she climbed the stairs. Outside one of the offices she paused.

“Topolev’s here if I’m not mistaken. Let’s go in. I want to pay my respects anyway. He’s an old dear and a good friend of mine. Bear that in mind, please, and be nice to him.”

CHAPTER TEN

HOSPITABLE HOME

TOPOLEV sat alone in a bleak empty room. He had latterly grown accustomed to his self-imposed isolation. The changes on the construction job had in no way altered his routine. Grubsky's attempts to paint an awe-inspiring picture of the new management had failed of their purpose.

"I'm not afraid of the big bad wolf," was Kuzma Kuzmich's reply. "I have lived for sixty-odd years and I have done more than my share. Any management ought to respect me and the more fool they if they don't."

As Tanya and Beridze entered the room they noticed the old man's head bob up with a start at the creaking of the door. Georgi Davydovich raised his hand to his mouth to hide the smile that rose to his lips; he recalled the anecdotes which Kovshov had told him

were being circulated in the office at the old man's expense. It was rumoured that the aged engineer often snoozed in his office with the telephone receiver at his ear or a pen in his hand.

An issue of the wall newspaper devoted to the question of discipline had carried a drawing of the old man dozing at his desk. Topolev's distinctive appearance, his height, his bowed shoulders and his long moustache, served as excellent material for the cartoonist. At Zalkind's suggestion the editor withdrew the cartoon but not before "friend" Grubsky had drawn Topolev's attention to it. Kuzma Kuzmich had studied the drawing for several minutes before he finally grasped its meaning, and then a dark flush mounted to his face, he sighed heavily and with shoulders hunched more than usual walked slowly back to his office.

As the chief engineer came forward, Topolev rose, a lean lanky figure, from his chair and wiped his greenish-grey moustache with a red handkerchief. He caught Tanya's hand in both of his and his face lit up as if illumined by a ray of light.

Beridze asked Topolev to look up the correspondence between the head office and the

ninth section on the subject of alterations in the plans. Kuzma Kuzmich paused for a moment to refresh his memory, his moustache twitching, then went over to the cabinet and after a brief search produced a thick folder in which the correspondence with the sections was filed.

Georgi Davydovich took the folder and sat down at once to study its contents. While he was thus engaged the old man and the girl carried on a whispered conversation, throwing occasional glances in his direction.

"So you didn't want to go with Sidorenko?" Tanya said. "Come to think of it, you and he didn't get along so very well."

"I didn't lift a finger either to leave or remain. Nobody takes any notice of me any more, Tanya. I'm too old, I suppose. No one asked me to leave and I don't remember anyone urging me to stay. Nothing much matters to me any more, my dear. All I want is peace and quiet. Not long ago I read a splendid passage in a book, by Jack London, I believe: 'Having discarded all desire, we know neither hope nor fear.' It's a relief to know you're not wanted. Believe me, Tanechka."

"You can't make me believe anything of the kind, Kuzma Kuzmich. I couldn't go on

living if I knew nobody needed me at all." She shuddered at the notion. "What a crazy, dismal idea! You're making it up. I know you, granpa. You're out of sorts, that's all. Better tell me about Volodya. Where is he? What does he write?"

"He doesn't write about himself. He writes about artillery and about his general. 'Russian artillery is the best in the world,' he writes. 'Our general is a marvel, not an old dodderer like you. He remembers' you, mentioned you twice in fact and asked me to convey his greetings.' The letter was from Minsk area. I guessed that from the hint he dropped. 'We're giving hell to the Fritzes in the place where you built a factory,' he wrote."

"This written opinion here is yours?" Beridze asked, pointing to the heavy folder,

"It is," Kuzma Kuzmich replied.

Georgi Davydovich went on reading. He had a habit of twiddling restlessly with something whenever his mind was occupied. As he pored over the letters he fingered his beard, winding wisps of it around his pencil. Tanya burst out laughing.

Kuzma Kuzmich was startled. "What is it?"

"That new chief engineer is nice," she whispered.

"You're mistaken. He doesn't appeal to me at all, neither do the others for that matter: a tactless, noisy lot who scoff at everything and try to tell you how to live and how to work. But do they know themselves? The chief engineer is just a new broom trying to sweep everything clean with that beard of his."

"I'm not a hundred years old and so I haven't acquired the doubtful wisdom of taking everything with a grain of salt. You wait, in time you'll find that Beridze is a fine chap. I'd advise you to hurry up and try to see him as he really is. He probably told you a few unpleasant truths and you don't like people unless they tell you what you want to hear. Like that Grubsky of yours. I can't understand how you can be friends with such a creature."

The chief engineer laid aside the papers and came over to them.

"That is an exhaustive and well-considered opinion you gave," he said to Topolev. "You evidently approved of Karpov's idea. As a matter of fact, you actually elaborated it," Beridze paused expectantly.

"The ideas outlined in those letters seemed to me to be both correct and timely," Topolev confirmed.

"Then why did you treat them in such a formal way? You turned them down in a tersely worded note of three lines. Surely you didn't reject a valuable proposal merely because someone had criticized your own plan?"

The old man stood, his large heavy hands with the prominent blue veins hanging limply at his sides. His face had flushed darkly and he breathed noisily.

"I can't understand why you took the trouble to write such a detailed opinion when you appear to be neither for the proposal nor against it." Beridze shrugged his shoulders.

Tanya noticed that the chief engineer's look directed at Topolev was softening. Beridze involuntarily felt a sympathy for this stern and truculent old man. He could not force himself to adopt the same attitude to him as to Grubsky, although the two held together. Beridze could not help respecting Topolev for his past activity which was well known among builders.

"Such things are regrettable, very regrettable," Beridze said. "I am sure you yourself

are conscious of the injustice of your formal reply to the ninth section."

"May I answer for Kuzma Kuzmich?" Tanya could no longer restrain herself. "Kuzma Kuzmich is an intellectual of the old school. He is inclined to be guided sometimes in his actions by a false sense of loyalty."

"Tatyana Petrovna!" said Topolev in a stern, hoarse voice, raising his bushy eyebrows wrathfully.

"Hush, if you can't speak up for yourself I'll have to do it for you!" Tanya flashed back. "It was Grubsky who wrote that nasty note, not Topolev. Can't you recognize his style? I can easily imagine what happened. Kuzma Kuzmich, moved by the best intentions, brought his opinion to Grubsky. Grubsky laughed at him and dictated his famous three-line reply." She turned to Topolev. "Why don't you want to understand, Kuzma Kuzmich, that although Grubsky is your chief and an old friend of yours he is not the person whose opinion you should respect?"

Tanya broke off, struck by the look of reproach in the old man's eyes.

"Of course, that paper isn't important," she went on with less heat. "The work was held up not because of that. And if it hadn't

been held up you wouldn't have had to come all the way out here to the ends of the earth. So it's an ill wind that blows nobody no good, after all."

Tanya wanted to ease the tension with her jest, but the old man turned away from her and stood there glowering and grim. . . .

The key obtained at the cost of such effort proved unnecessary after all, for Seralima, Rodionova's elderly aunt, was home by the time Tanya returned to the house. A woman of vast, balloon-like proportions, Seralima filled the entire kitchen in which there was barely enough room for her to move back and forth between the table and the stove. Slapping her thighs, she rushed to meet Tanya and folded the girl to her massive bosom.

"Tanechka, my golden one. How's my lovely darling," she cooed.

The good Seralima's embrace and the heat from the blazing fire in the stove, which was evidently never allowed to go out in this house, warmed the girl. She lost no time in pulling off her ski suit and administering a vigorous rubbing to her shoulders and feet. Stretched out on the small couch wrapped in

Olga's familiar blue velvet dressing gown, Tanya thought with affection of her friend.

Nothing in the room had changed. Samples of Olga's needlework were in evidence everywhere—tablecloths, cushion covers, wall hangings. Olga's skill at embroidery astounded even the stolid Serafima. Tanya noticed some new embroidery done in Nanai design hanging prominently over her friend's neat little bed. There was the shelf with Olga's medical books, the small table with the victrola and records, the dressing table, a present from the hospital carpenter, a rather crude mirror and, on a strip of lace in front of it, some miniature elephants with upraised trunks, bottles of perfume and eau de Cologne and a large comb. On the desk were Konstantin's books and papers brought over from his room. Over the table hung an embroidered cloth letterholder, full of odd scraps of paper, prescriptions, newspaper cuttings, and higher up, the inevitable portrait of Konstantin—his head with its thinning hair, his large horn-rimmed spectacles and his lips curved in an ironic smile.

"The same Konstantin Andreyevich. The cold-blooded philosopher and psychologist," Tanya remarked drily.

"Yes, he's just the same. The same swine he always was," Serafima hastened to agree. She stood on the threshold, filling the entire doorway.

"What is going on between them? I couldn't make anything out from Olga's letters. She always shuts up like a clam when it comes to Konstantin."

"You're right, m'dear. I don't understand her myself. He's not the man for her. Poor thing, she mightn't be married at all for all the good he does her. Doesn't she see he's no good? Maybe she does but she can't help herself. What is it? Perhaps you know the answer, Tanechka?"

"I suppose it's just that she's used to him. After all, they've lived together for three years. Do you think she is suffering?"

"I've got eyes in my head, haven't I?"

Serafima folded her plump arms beneath her apron and released a flood of chatter.

"I don't know how they got along in Rubzhansk. But if you ask me, it wasn't for nothing she left the place. I heard the professor there fairly swore by her, said she was his best assistant. And one fine day she goes and throws up her job and leaves. Of course, she's the head doctor at the hospital here and

everybody thinks the world of her. I'm not saying she's worse off here in the way of work. But it doesn't take much brains to see she couldn't get on with Konstantin nohow. If you ask me he wasn't faithful to her. Would ye believe that, the dog! And so they separated and you'd think she'd forget him. But not a bit of it! She was miserable. Then he moved here. She shouldn't have let him in, but she did. They stayed for a bit together. You were here, you saw them."

"I was only here twice. I can't bear the sight of him!" Tanya made a grimace of disgust.

"Well, he went back to Rubezhansk, thank goodness. I don't know whether it was because he got fed up with the place or whether they had a quarrel. Anyhow he went, and the trouble started again. He began sending letters. 'I'm lonesome, I embrace you, I kiss you.' And at the same time: 'Send me my suit, I've nothing to wear,' 'Get me some cloth for trousers, they ought to have some decent stuff in your shops,' 'Send me some money, I'll return it when I get rich.' Another woman in her place would have given him up, but not Olga. She did everything he asked her, though she could ill afford to. Why, she even

sold some of her own things without telling me."

"He came here again not long ago, didn't he?" Tanya asked in a sleepy voice; she was dropping off to the accompaniment of Serafima's chatter.

"He did.... In the middle of summer, August it was. I was sick at the sight of him. As for Olga, she didn't know what to make of it. Told me he had come here on business. Well, I'm not blind, I could see he had come to stay this time. But nothing came of it. They had some sort of scene. I wasn't home that day, so I don't know what happened. When I came back Olga had shut herself up in her room and Konstantin was packing his bags. She didn't even come out to say goodbye to him. He opened her door and shouted from the threshold: 'So you're throwing me out! Well, you'll be sorry!'"

"Good for her!" Tanya said, shaking off the drowsiness that threatened to envelop her.

"Yes, but I could see she was wretched again. I couldn't make out whether she was sorry for him or what it was.... Last month around the twentieth she got another letter from him. There it is up there in the pink envelope. It had a bit of news that was like

a bombshell. Told her he had volunteered for the army. 'I want to shed my blood for my country!' he wrote."

Tanya was so surprised that she sat up. That was the last thing she would have expected from Konstantin.

"Do you think he was in earnest?"

"He seems to have gone, all right."

"Well, that certainly is a surprise," Tanya eyed the pink envelope sticking out of the embroidered holder with distrust.

"But that isn't all. He went to the front and a good job he did. Maybe it'll do him good. But she's just as unhappy as she was. Still eating her heart out...."

Serafima waddled out to the kitchen—she had something on the stove—only to return in a few minutes.

"What is she waiting for, I'd like to know? It isn't as though she couldn't find a decent husband if she wanted to. There's that Rogov. He's a fine looking man, strong, generous and warmhearted. He's cared for her for ages, ever since Rubezhansk. And how that man loves her! Why, if she wanted the moon, Alexander Ivanovich would get it for her. When he was director of the fish canning factory he was always sending her smoked fish. There was

so much of it, I didn't know what to do with it all, the pantry was stuffed with it. He said to me once: 'In Rubezhansk I didn't dare to look at her. After all, she had a husband. But when she left him I was hopeful. But nothing has changed. What's the trouble?' he asks me. 'Don't you think I'd suit her?' What could I tell him? He's a good man. And if you ask me she likes him. But she won't listen to him. She's driving him crazy...."

Tanya remembered that she had a letter for Olga from Rogov. Loath to rise from the comfortable couch, she asked Serafima to get the envelope from her knapsack.

"And supposing she isn't quite sure of Rogov," her buxom hostess went on, rummaging in the knapsack. "But is he the only one? We have the chief engineer staying here. He's a fine man, as nice as could be and a bachelor to boot. Why doesn't she take to him? No, I don't understand her at all."

Tanya mentally placed Beridze and Olga side by side and the result did not please her.

"Beridze wouldn't suit Olga," she observed coldly.

"Why not? Who would he suit then?"

"Nobody. Stop jumping from one thing to another."

"And what about yourself, Tanechka? Still waiting for your Prince Charming?" Serafima enquired with eager curiosity. "I see Zhenya is smarter than the two of you. She gets along fine without any heartbreaks and sighs, and she always seems to have a good time."

"Now, auntie, you're off on the wrong track," Tanya said in annoyance. "You were quite sensible up to this and now you're being absurd. You can't be serious for long, can you?"

Serafima took the hint and changed the subject. She informed Tanya with pride about her household achievements, the pigs, hens and geese she was keeping, the barrel of cucumbers and cabbage she had pickled, and the sacks of potatoes she had put away in the cellar. Tanya had to get up and admire all this wealth.

They looked into the room now occupied by Beridze. A few trifling touches had completely altered the appearance of the room which had been so distasteful to Tanya for the simple reason that Konstantin had inhabited it. The mingled scent of tobacco and eau de Cologne ("smokes heavily, trims his beard a lot, sprinkles it with eau de Cologne," the irrepressible Serafima volunteered); fresh tech-

nical journals with strips of white paper stuck between the pages ("comes home late and sits up reading half the night"); an open volume of Mayakovsky, several pipes, a hunting rifle on the wall and a camera on a nail underneath ("offered to take Olga's picture, but she refused, so he took a snapshot of me; teased me, said he could hardly fit me on to the film"); the photograph of a sweet-faced old lady ("that's his mother, she lives in Georgia in the same town where Stalin was born; always speaks tenderly about his mother, writes to her and sends her money"); cunningly made models of bridges, a model of some cylindrical structure, a pile of photographs of the Far-Eastern taiga and the Adun ("told us he had travelled all over the country working on all sorts of building jobs, laughs and says he's going to go on building until there won't be any unsettled places on the map and then he says he'll build himself a monument and let them bury him under it").

They were still talking when Olga arrived.

"Been having a nice gossip?" Olga asked, taking in Serafima, her friend and the portrait of her husband in a glance. "I'm sure you haven't given Tanya any rest with your chatter, auntie."

Seratiima subsided at once. She picked up her niece's clipped lamb coat and withdrew. The friends embraced warmly. -

"Why, my little Egyptian girl, how thin you've grown! Your eyes are bigger than ever," Tanya said gently.

"I've been sick again," Olga replied, holding out her bandaged arms.

Twice a year she suffered from attacks of rheumatism. Her large, light-grey eyes rested calmly on Tanya. There was an expression of infinite sadness about her face with its finely chiselled features, the faint lines of bitterness around the mouth and the hair drawn back severely from the forehead and parted in the middle.

Tanya threw her arms impulsively around Olga. Though they were of the same height the two young women were strikingly dissimilar in appearance. Tanya looked so much stronger and sturdier than the delicate, frail, dark-skinned Olga.

"You are pitying me, my dear, aren't you? I see Serafima has been telling you all sorts of absurd tales and you've taken it all to heart."

Olga withdrew from Tanya's arms and asked her friend to untie the tapes of her

smock at the back. Dusk gathered swiftly and night crept up to the windows. The girls sat in the darkness waiting for the power station to switch on the current. Olga nursed her aching arms, rocking now one, now the other like an ailing infant.

"You ought to be in bed instead of going to the hospital every day," said Tanya. "I can imagine what a lot of work you must have there. I hear that half of your medical personnel has been called up. . . ."

"Yes, there aren't many of us left. And that's precisely why I cannot afford to stay at home. As a matter of fact the more work I have the better for my rheumatism. Besides, I love the hospital, Tanya. I simply wouldn't know what to do without it."

As is customary with intimate friends who have not met for a long time they touched on a host of subjects, jumping from one topic to another.

"Does your lodger bother you?" Tanya asked with studied casualness. Beridze interested her for some reason.

"Not at all. He is extremely tactful and polite. As a matter of fact he is rarely home. He is most courteous."

"To you?"

"To everyone. He has a big heart, there's room enough in it for many people. Serafima simply dotes on him and she insists on exploiting him. I've scolded her time and again about it. She's forever asking him to bring her wood or carry something for her. But I must admit I feel more secure with him in the house for some reason. Is it so essential for us women to have a man near-by?"

"I couldn't say, I have no experience in such matters," Tanya said mischievously.

"Now, you know that wasn't what I meant, Tanya. Is it likely I'd be thinking of such things now?"

The words were spoken more in sorrow than in anger and Tanya glanced up at Rodionov's portrait with dislike as she saw Olga's eyes turn in that direction.

"Why should you be so upset about his going to the army? You weren't living together anyway and you couldn't have gone on that way forever. Serafima tells me he volunteered. That was noble of him. You'll forgive me, but frankly speaking I never expected such a gallant gesture from him."

"That's just it. It's too gallant," Olga agreed rather to Tanya's surprise. "If he had

only gone like an honest man!" Olga glanced over her shoulder at the door and lowered her voice. "He came here, you know, and I believed him when he told me he'd had himself transferred to our town because he couldn't live without me. But afterwards I discovered he had another reason. He had heard that he was to be taken off the draft deferment list and so he found some pretext to come here. At first I couldn't make up my mind whether to believe him or not. And then one day he asked me to find him a job. I told him to go to the front. 'You're a doctor and a healthy man,' I told him, 'why shouldn't you go?' You ought to have seen the look he gave me! I'll never forget it as long as I live! 'Will you give me another life?' he said. 'There are plenty of heroes without me. You'd better help me to get a discharge from the army, you have important connections here besides being a member of the selective service board. You are my only hope.' He said it calmly and defiantly and it was like a slap in the face. I saw red and ordered him to get out at once!"

"Quite right!" Tanya said, revolted.

"I must confess I felt better when he had gone. And then that letter came. It is false

through and through. You can read it and see for yourself. I wonder what he has been up to? Is it another hoax? Or has he really decided to reform finally? Oh, it is driving me mad!" Something like a groan escaped her. Tanya made an involuntary movement toward her friend, but Olga quickly mastered her emotion.

"You see how harshly wounded feminine vanity can judge a man," she said with forced gaiety. She seemed to have hardened. "It's ill-natured to speak like that about a man who has gone to risk his life for his country."

Olga got up as voices sounded in the hall. Beridze had come home bringing Kovshov with him.

"Forgive me, my dear hostess. I couldn't let this homeless waif go. Permit him to bask a little in the warmth of your hospitality."

Presently Zhenya dropped in and filled the house with her shrill chatter and ringing laughter. Serafima beamed—she loved company—and hurried off to set the table in Beridze's room. Before long salted salmon, pickled vegetables and venison made their appearance.

"The food isn't grand, but it's all our own Far-Eastern produce, every bit of it,

"That is, all but the drink, eh Georgi Davydovich?" she said to Beridze, pointing to a large brown bottle of alcohol. "You do the diluting yourself, will you please?"

Beridze, chuckling in his beard, busied himself with the alcohol. Alexei, pleasantly surprised by the unexpected warmth and comfort of the place, was moved to reflect that a man, if he were a good man, could perhaps make life pleasant even in a house of solid ice.

"I believe I've fallen in love, Alyosha," Beridze whispered in his ear when they were sitting at the table. "I feel cupid's proverbial dart piercing my bachelor's heart. Now guess which of these lovely ladies is to blame?" he enquired, his eyes glued to Tanya's face.

"That's easy," said Alexei.

"It isn't polite to whisper, you two chiefs," Tanya remarked reproachfully. She felt that they were talking about her and was pleased to have attracted Beridze's attention.

"Georgi Davydovich has just told me a riddle," said Alexei.

"A terribly hard one," Beridze added.

"Oh, do tell us. We adore riddles," Zhenya begged.

"Well, it's this: which one of the ladies present would I be soonest likely to fall in love with."

"It would be harder to guess if you'd stop looking at Tanya," Zhenya said with a frown of displeasure.

"Now, don't be so sure. You see, the trouble is I can't choose because I fell in love long before I came here."

"Oh yes, I forgot. He's on his honeymoon!" Zhenya cried. She was eager for a bit of gossip and only Alexei's look restrained her.

Tanya turned to Kovshov. "You had me properly scared over at the head office. I trembled when I spoke with you," she said. "You seemed so stern and formidable and there was a metallic ring in your voice. But now I can see you're really quite different."

"In what way?"

"The way you are now, for instance. I shouldn't be surprised if you wrote verse on the sly."

Zhenya giggled. Alexei also laughed.

"Don't laugh, I'm quite serious. In my opinion a poetic soul, provided it is really poetic, is a fine thing for anyone to have."

"There she goes!" Zhenya wailed. "The girl philosopher. Serafima, help!"

"Now then, Tanechka, that's enough poetry for one evening," Serafima commanded. Having attended to the guests' wants, she had seated herself at a corner of the table beside Olga. Now she raised a glass of diluted alcohol. "Georgi Davydovich, you do the honours."

"But I'm not the host, Serafima Romanovna, I merely have the good fortune to board and lodge in this pleasant house. However, permit me to make use of that privilege to be the first to address our small impromptu gathering." Beridze rose to his feet. "There are many merry toasts one could propose. But I feel that our first toast tonight ought to express the finest emotion that lives today in the hearts and minds of each one of us. Let us drink to our beloved Moscow. . . ."

The guests complied. The brief silence that followed was broken by Serafima. She related a quarrel she had had with some woman who had predicted that Moscow would be given up to the Germans. The woman had referred to the tactics of the war of 1812.

"Tactics! I gave her tactics! She couldn't get away from me fast enough, the viper!" Serafima shook a powerful fist.

She sprang lightly to her feet and ran out to the kitchen, returning with a huge platter piled high with steaming meat dumplings.

"I have a good toast to propose," said Zhenya rising. "Let's drink to the Far East, the remote rear that at any moment may become the front. Our Moscow comrade had better not try to avoid drinking to that!"

Zhenya clinked glasses with Alexei and tossed off her drink with a flourish making a wry face and waving her hands as it went down.

"I accept your toast with all my heart," Alexei said gravely.

The others drank to it as well.

Beridze, seated opposite Tanya, was gazing at her in frank admiration. "If an artist were to paint a face like that," he reflected, "no one would believe it was real. She is lovely."

"Tatyana Petrovna, are you also a newcomer to the Far East or a native of these parts?"

"No, I'm a Fareasterner born and bred. I was born in Rubezhansk. My mother still lives there. She is a schoolteacher, quite an old lady now. I have tried to get her to come and stay here with me but she won't be separated from her school."

"And your father?"

"He was killed at Volochayevka." Tanya glanced at Beridze as if trying to make up her mind whether or not to continue her story. "I was only four at the time, so I don't remember him at all. But I have heard a great deal about him and I'm very proud of my father. Boiko-Pavlov—you have heard of him, of course—used to visit us quite often. He always spoke well of my father. He came to our institute on graduation day and made a long speech. He addressed me personally. 'Your father, Pyotr Vasilchenko,' he said, 'was a true Communist and a brave partisan. Don't you ever forget what you owe him. . . . I deeply regret that my gallant comrade-in-arms did not live to see this day!'" Tanya checked herself. "But really, you can hardly be interested in all these details."

Beridze, however, had been listening to her with rapt attention. Her story moved him. He found himself taking a deep interest in

everything that concerned this girl. Amid the hubbub of voices hers was the only voice he heard.

To Serafima's dismay the guests soon rose from the table. And there were the *pirozhkee* in the kitchen waiting their turn to be served. It was all Zhenya's fault, she had sprung up first and ran off to Olga's room to start the gramophone. Serafima could have spanked her.

"*On the Hills of Manchuria*, a waltz," Zhenya announced from the doorway. Her cheeks were flushed pink with excitement and her eyes danced. "The ladies will have to take the initiative since there are more of them. May I have this dance, my dear Moscovite?" she queried approaching Alexei.

"I'm sorry."

"You don't dance? Don't be funny. Whoever heard of a Moscovite who didn't dance."

"I'm sorry," Alexei repeated.

"Now what do you think of him?" Zhenya appealed to the others, seeking to hide her confusion with a jest. "Personal affront, I call it. Poetic soul! I'll have to dance with Serafima then."

"We'll see about that," said Tanya. She got up and went over to Alexei. "May I have the honour?"

Alexei refused again. Even Beridze was surprised.

"What's up, lad?"

"I've said I can't," Kovshov replied with some irritation. "You will have to excuse me."

"Invite me," Georgi Davydovich said. "I'm not much of a dancer but I promise to whirl you around until you cry for mercy."

Tanya threw a searching look at Alexei's downcast face and held out her hand to Beridze.

"All right, let's take a turn. Only see you don't turn my head."

Zhenya would not leave Kovshov alone.

"You're a big silly tying yourself up into knots like that. Come on, let's dance."

"Stop it, Zhenya," Olga said in her deep vibrant voice.

Zhenya looked from Olga to Alexei, then with a hopeless gesture ran off to join the others.

Olga regarded Kovshov with sympathetic interest. She had heard a great deal about him from Beridze.

"Do you mind helping me get a light?" she asked him, her bandaged hands fumbling with the matches.

Coming over to her with a lighted match, Alexei chanced to meet her eyes and it seemed to him that for a moment he had a glimpse of the pain that lay in their depths.

"Eyes are supposed to reflect the working of the mind, these seem to reveal the heart," he thought.

"I don't like to see women smoke," said Kovshov, waving away the smoke. "If I were making the laws I should put a ban on smoking for women. Let them blow smoke into our eyes figuratively."

"Medical folk smoke a lot. It's a professional habit. As a matter of fact I am not much addicted to tobacco." She crushed out her cigarette. "Tell me, is it true that you don't dance?"

"Not exactly," he replied after a pause. "You may also think me absurd but somehow I just couldn't . . . well, I just couldn't dance right now. You see, my wife is at the front. Or rather beyond the front, behind the enemy lines. . . ."

"I don't think you absurd at all," Olga said with feeling and her swathed hand pressed his awkwardly.

They sat listening in silence to the wistful melody of the waltz.

"I should like so much to have you for a friend," Olga said. "One needs a wise and loyal friend so much sometimes. What did I want to say to you? Ah, yes. I am happy for you, yes, happy. You are extremely fortunate even if at the moment your heart is sore. You see, there is nothing uncertain about your love, it is quite obvious that your wife's love for you is as pure and loyal as yours for her. But there is another sort of love, a sinister, agonizing emotion. Imagine falling in love with someone for the first time, deeply, passionately, only to discover one day that your love is misplaced, that it brings you nothing but misery. Yet it is there, and you can't get rid of it. You must have heard the saying 'If you want to be loved, you must be able to love'? That is a false saying. Yet I believed it. I thought that my love was strong enough to make a good man out of a worthless one." Olga closed her eyes; her swathed hands lay in her lap, motionless and pathetic. "And finally I have come to see that it was all hopeless, futile.... That the only thing left to do is fight it. What a terrible struggle that is! It must be fought singlehanded, and victory brings no joy with it."

Olga rose and went over to the door and leaned forlornly against it. Her sadness was transmitted to Alexei. He could not resist the impulse to go to her but when he did, he found that he could not find words to comfort her.

"Olga Fyodorovna. . . . I am so glad to have met you," he said at last. "I should like you to believe that I will be your friend. I want you to know that I shall always be ready to come to your aid. I shall do anything I can to help you."

He pressed his lips to her bandaged hand, which smelt of antiseptics, and slipped unobserved out of the house.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

OLD SINS

ON Tatyana Vasilchenko's insistence Kolya Smirnov called a Komsomol meeting. He had just announced the agenda and given the floor to Tanya when Batmanov, Zalkind, Beridze, all the members of the Party Bureau and some of the department chiefs appeared. The Komsomol members, from the oldest down to Genka Pankov, realized then how much importance the management attached to this meeting called at the suggestion of their former organizer.

"Let's continue, comrades," Smirnov said and nodded to Tanya.

After giving a businesslike outline of her idea, she called upon the Komsomol members to volunteer for the line crew that was being formed to rig up a temporary telephone line.

"This is our chance to prove our patriotism," Tanya wound up.

Batmanov asked for the floor.

"My friends, we cannot get along without a telephone line any longer," the construction chief said. "It has become as essential to the job as eyes, ears and a mouth are to a human being. You heard Vasilchenko say that the line can be laid in six weeks."

Genka Pankov, who was sitting closest of all to Batmanov, watched Vasili Maximovich with rapt attention, his lips slightly parted. Batmanov noticed the youngster and glanced frequently in his direction.

"We could, of course, appoint all those whom Vasilchenko names to the crew by issuing an order to that effect. But I do not wish to do that. The line crew will have great hardships to face, they will have to work in the taiga in severe frosts. This is the kind of work that has to be undertaken voluntarily, resolutely, with all one's heart, the way fighting men at the front go on important missions. Those who do not feel strong enough, who lack the resolution necessary for such a job had better stay where they are."

"Who wants to take the floor? Any motions?" Kolya rose to his full height to survey his comrades.

"No need for talk, better begin signing up!" someone shouted.

"Put me down!"

Smirnov tapped on the table with his pencil.

"Order, please."

A motion was adopted to support Tatyana Vasilchenko's proposal and to ask the management to entrust the laying of the telephone line to the Komsomol members as a separate assignment.

"Now, who wants to volunteer?" Kolya asked.

Young men and women—draughtsmen, clerks and typists—went up to the table. Among them Tatyana noticed Zalkind's secretary, the baby-faced girl she had met before.

"Good for you, Zina!" the Party organizer said in approbation.

Alexei started at the sound of that beloved name, and looked closely at the girl.

Petya Gudkin was excitedly whispering in Tatyana's ear.

"I would give a lot to be going with you, Tatyana. But as I told you before, Kovshov is putting me on the project. It's the work I've been dreaming of for so long."

"You can stay with your dream," Tanya said, turning her back on the draughtsman.

"Should I go or shouldn't I?" Zhenya asked Alexei.

"It's up to you to decide. How do you look at it yourself?"

"It's all the same to me," Zhenya shrugged her shoulders. "I'm a clerk, and the work I'm doing here is needed. Frankly speaking, I don't much care to leave this place."

Kovshov did not like her reply.

"In any case Grechkin won't let me go," she added. "He says he relies on me. I'll bet he's whispering about me to the chief right now."

Sure enough, Grechkin seated next to Batmanov was arguing that while it was a good thing that all the Komsomol members were ready to go with Tatyana Vasilchenko, some of them nevertheless could not be spared since they were experts at their jobs.

"We'll see about it when we get around to approving the composition of the crew."

Kolya Smirnov sent a note to Zalkind. The Party organizer read it and went over to Batmanov.

"Smirnov wants to go. I think we ought to let him; he'll make a reliable aid to Tatyana."

"Right," Batmanov agreed, at the same time drawing Zalkind's attention to Genka Pankov with his eyes.

The boy had chosen this moment to go over to Smirnov and ask that his name be entered on the list.

"Who's the little boy?" Batmanov said in a deliberately loud, stern voice.

"It's Gena Pankov. I've been telling him that he can't come along but he doesn't agree with me."

"I'm not little. I'm as strong as anything. I'll work just as good as the others, a sight better than the girls anyhow!" Genka blurted out angrily, taken aback by the attention paid him by the chief of the construction job.

"I cannot allow any juveniles to be taken along!" Batmanov said sharply, addressing Smirnov and Tanya Vasilchenko. "Let me remind you again that you have a difficult task ahead of you: it's not child's play."

The next day the construction chief called in Tanya and Smirnov. Zalkind and Beridze were present.

"I have approved the list of people for the crew. The chief engineer will see to it personally that you are properly outfitted and equipped within five days. Exactly five days from now you will set out." Rising from his seat behind the desk, Batmanov went over to Tanya. "I suggest we make an agreement, Tatyana Petrovna. Supposing you give me a schedule showing how many kilometres of line you propose to put up daily. I'll approve it and then follow your progress daily. And if you fall even a kilometre short of the mark, you'll have only yourself to blame if you get it in the neck."

"I'd be glad to sign such an agreement!" Tanya said.

"No need to sign anything, we'll just shake on it."

Batmanov clasped the small, hot hand of the girl firmly.

"You'd better look out now, Tatyana!" Zalkind warned her, half jokingly.

As they left the chief's office, Smirnov and Tanya saw Genka in the corridor outside. He stood huddled miserably against the wall and he met them with a stony look.

"We can't do it, don't you see that, we just can't! Why don't you believe me?" the

Komsomol organizer said, putting his arm around the boy.

"You could do it on the quiet and nobody'd be the wiser," Genka muttered, shaking himself loose. But Kolya would not let him go.

"Now, don't take it like that. You can see for yourself everything depends on the chief, and he says no."

"You know what? If you're not afraid to, go and talk to Batmanov about it," Tanya suggested. "If he says it's all right, we'll take you. Won't we?" Tanya winked to Smirnov.

"Of course we shall."

"You can go and talk to your Batmanov yourselves. I don't need your advice!" Genka retorted irritably; he had a suspicion that Tanya and Kolya were merely humouring him.

That evening, however, the chief's secretary walked into his office and said:

"There is a boy by the name of Gena Pankov to see you. Shall I show him in?"

The youngster entered the large office confidently and paused by the door. Vasili Maximovich was somewhat surprised to find himself moved by the visit.

"Come in, comrade. What can I do for you?"

Genka's courage failed him and he stood there tongue-tied, those keen, bright eyes of his which had appealed so much to Vasili Maximovich, glued to the floor.

"Still insist on having your way?" Batmanov asked.

"All the fellows are going. I don't want to stay behind," Genka said in a hurt tone.

"It's nobody's fault that you're only fifteen, is it? The job will be a hard one—an ordeal even some adults would not be equal to."

"I would."

"Suppose something happened to you? Your father would never forgive me."

"My father would have let me go," Genka said firmly, looking up at Batmanov finally.

"You think he would?"

"Yes. He took me along on expeditions a couple of times."

Batmanov walked slowly up and down the room. Genka followed his every movement. The construction chief paused in front of the boy and placed his hands on the youngster's shoulders, feeling their angular, boyish leanness under his fingers.

"All right—it seems there is nothing I can say to dissuade you. You may go, but mind, no complaints or tears!"

"Not me!" said Genka and made a dash for the door.

Reluctantly Batmanov let him go, and for a long time after the boy had gone he stared in silence at the door that had closed behind him. Presently he rang for his secretary.

"For the time being I'm not in to anyone," he said in a low voice.

The delegates began arriving for the conference. As dissimilar as they were, these people were alike in many respects—windburnt faces, restless eyes and fighting spirit. They had been nursing a great many complaints against the head office and were eager to register them, quite forgetting that they had a new management to deal with now.

Batmanov and Zalkind sensed immediately the frame of mind prevailing among the spokesmen of the line.

"They are asking us to foot Sidorenko's and Grubsky's bills," Vasili Maximovich grumbled, as one of the section chiefs he had been receiving left his office. "Ready to overthrow the management by assault. We've got to talk about this at the conference or things may take a one-sided turn."

"I don't agree with you," objected Zalkind. "Let them attack the head office people, Fedosov and Liberman in particular. We've got a headquarters staff now that can withstand any pressure. People down the line are dissatisfied with the head office because it has not been able to give them leadership and has ignored their needs. Many of them—Tanya Vasilchenko for one—are bound to level some harsh accusations against us. On the other hand, some will probably defend the headquarters staff. Personally I attach much importance to this clash between head office people and people from the line." The Party organizer smiled. "After all, you can't tell them what to say. We'll just have to listen and take it."

"I am opposed to making excursions into history. Is there any need to recall old sins?"

"They're not so easily forgotten, Vasili Maximovich," Zalkind continued. "You said yourself we've got to answer for the legacy we've taken over...."

Batmanov gave a warm welcome to Rogov whom he had not seen since the latter left Start in the motor launch to go to the rescue of the stranded barge.

"I want to say how much I appreciate your initiative and the resolute, competent action you took on Section Five, Alexander Ivanovich," Batmanov said with feeling as he surveyed the sturdy figure of Rogov in his well-tailored suit of military cut.

Rogov gave a detailed account of the situation at Section Five, then frankly set forth his complaints and assailed the supply people. Vasili Maximovich agreed with him and made notes in the large pad before him. Rogov had something to say in passing about the engineers as well.

"You've got a lot of people around here. I saw them sitting in the office and drawing, but there's no sign of any project yet."

There was an unmistakable note of disdain in his voice.

"Projects usually take years to make," Batmanov replied drily. "Beridze and his assistants are doing everything they can to produce one inside two or three months. If they succeed, it'll be a record. For that matter, the project is already visible to those who want to see it. The fact that you and your section are already on the left bank is part of the new project."

The conversation had dampened Batmanov's spirits. He said no more and turned his attention to his papers.

...The head office club, a large log building, had undergone a transformation. The interior had been whitewashed, new furniture installed and streamers with slogans hung on the walls. Flowers had been procured from some unknown source and placed under the portrait of Stalin.

The conference opened on a high note. The delegates enthusiastically elected a working presidium, an honorary presidium, a credentials commission and a secretariat. Zalkind in his opening address began by congratulating the delegates on the opening of the first Party conference to be held on the construction job. The Party organizer spoke simply, confidently and with that power of logical persuasion characteristic of experienced Bolshevik political leaders. He spoke of the grave situation on the fronts, and reminded his hearers that the whole country, at the leader's call, had been united in a single army camp. The construction job did not yet resemble part of this gigantic army camp. Compared with the rest of the country, the process of mustering all forces for the task in

hand was still lagging. Zalkind dwelt in detail on the tasks confronting the Party organizations at the work sections.

"We have to speed up readjustment," he said. "Each section must without delay become a smooth-working enterprise, producing for the front, its output being measured in the number of kilometres of pipe laid. I appeal to you once again, comrades, you Communists must take your places in the front ranks of our constructive battle for the petroleum line!"

True to his promise, Zalkind had intended calling upon Vasilchenko to open the debate. But Tanya passed him a note saying that she had changed her mind about taking the floor. Seated beside Alexei she was chaffing him about the criticism being levelled at the chief engineer and his staff by an engineer from the fourth section for keeping the work on the project too much to themselves.

"Open the floodgates to mass initiative!" said the speaker, a young man named Melnikov, who spoke rapidly with much gesturing. "The new project is more than just a charting of the direction of the line, it is compounded of thousands of rationalization

proposals flowing into the State Defence Committee fund."

"That's right!" Kovshov shouted. Tanya laughed softly.

"Look at him! He actually enjoys getting it in the neck," she marvelled. She had already observed that trait in Alexei—his straightforward, unresentful acceptance of criticism.

"There's nothing so helpful as a good, honest calling down," Alexei whispered to her as he jotted something down in his notebook. "I can thank you too in advance for that vicious attack you're going to make."

"And suppose I don't?"

"It wouldn't be like you to miss such a golden opportunity for a scrap."

"Where is the chief engineer, Alexei? Why isn't he here? I met him on my way in and he made some vague excuse when I asked him."

"Beridze isn't a Party member," Alexei replied, involuntarily taken aback by the question.

"Not a Party member? Why?" Tanya was surprised.

"I'm afraid I can't answer that. But you can believe me, Beridze is a true non-Party Bolshevik."

"You will have to speak on his behalf as well in that case."

"Yes, I know," Alexei glanced at her with gratitude. He was glad to see that Tanya was thinking of Georgi Davydovich.

The speech by Kotenev, Secretary of the Party organization of Section Five, put all thought of Beridze out of Tanya's mind. All the representatives from the line who addressed the conference had something to say about the work of the head office. Kotenev was especially critical. The inactivity of the old management and its refusal to admit the urgency of the job had paralyzed the collective of Section Five, he said. As a matter of fact, the collective, lacking a fixed purpose, had gone to pieces and ceased to be a collective. The Communists on the spot had spoken of the need to replace the incompetent section chief and his two assistants, but their advice had gone unheeded. And, indeed, why should Sidorenko have taken these three men off the job when he contemplated liquidating the section itself and the job as a whole?

"Can there be any excuse for keeping hundreds of building workers idle when they might have been helping to defeat the enemy

as soldiers at the front," Kotenev asked bitterly.

Zalkind stole a glance at Batmanov seated next to him. The construction chief was listening with calm, concentrated attention to every word that was being said. Tanya Vasilchenko did not like Kotenev's speech.

"Whom is he addressing?" she wanted to know.

She scribbled a note to the presidium asking for the floor.

"Comrade Smorchkov is next! Vasilchenko follows," Zalkind announced with a pleased smile.

"The way I understand our chief problem this winter," said Smorchkov, "is that we've got to have the pipes delivered all along the line before the spring sets in. That means good trucks and competent drivers. We've got the trucks and drivers, they're getting into shape, and the roads, though not as good as they might be, are navigable. But it seems to me that it mightn't work out just the same."

"Why not?" Batmanov asked from the presidium.

"Well, it's not easy to move heavy freight long distances in the wintertime and in sub-

zero weather with the roads snowbound half the time, I can tell you. And we're going to have a miserable time with those pipes. Have you seen them? Eleven metres long and every one of them weighing a good ton. Can you imagine what it's going to be like hauling a few of those monsters at a time a hundred kilometres or so over a bad road? That's the problem."

"Do you think it can't be solved?" Batmanov asked.

"I haven't any doubt that it can," the driver replied quickly. "But we'll have to prove it to all the other drivers."

"How do you propose to do that?"

"By taking one loaded truck all the way down the line, regardless of the weather or the condition of the roads. I'm ready to drive a loaded car from Novinsk to the Jagdinsk strait if you'll let me. I give my word as a Communist at this Party conference to do it. My mate, tractor driver Silin, asked me to tell the conference that he undertakes to make the same trip by tractor."

An outburst of applause led by the construction chief was the response to Smorchkov's words.

The truck driver had finished his speech before Tanya had time to jot down an outline of what she wanted to say. A murmur arose from the gathering as she appeared on the platform. Many of the delegates knew her and were eager to know what she had to say.

Vasilchenko's speech proved to be a surprise, and not only for Batmanov.

"Comrade Kotenev here spoke with righteous indignation about the head office," Tanya began. "But it was not clear to me which management he had in mind: the new or the old? If he was referring to the Sidorenko administration I heartily endorse his statement. We have all learned by bitter experience what a poor management can be like. We have suffered enough from that head office and no one has a good word to say for it. Was it that Kotenev had in mind?"

Tanya paused. In the commotion that followed voices were heard shouting: "Now then, Vasilchenko, you know very well what he meant!" "It's the old management he has it in for!"

"The old? Fine! But what's the use of talking about the old management when it's

gone? If you ask me there isn't much sense in bothering with the dead. Comrade Kotenev is a bit late with his claims! Evidently he hasn't anything to say about the new management yet. In that case permit me to fill in the gap."

A ripple of amusement passed over the hall and someone shouted: "Go ahead, Tatyana Petrovna, fill it in!"

"She has all the tricks of the public speaker," Batmanov remarked to Zalkind.

"You may think it strange, comrades, but I am going to speak in defence of the new administration," Tanya went on. "I want to put in a good word for it."

Tanya went on to tell the conference how she had come to Novinsk with the intention of fighting for her proposal and for the interests of the line in general, and how she had gradually understood the plan of action Batmanov's headquarters had drawn up, its strategy and tactics and the scale of its preparations to promote the work of the construction job as a whole.

"We are too accustomed to waving aside the head office," said Tanya, accompanying her words with a careless gesture. "But we'd

better be careful or we may wave once too often. We have a headquarters now that can issue sensible orders and see that they're carried out too!"

Amid the hubbub of applause Zalkind bent over to Batmanov.

"You see how things work out in practice, man!" he said plainly triumphant. "Not as you expect, but far, far better!"

Tanya made her way laughingly back to her seat exchanging banter with the delegates as she passed up the aisle. Batmanov followed her with a warm glance. Then, unexpectedly he asked for the floor to make a brief announcement out of turn.

"I am sincerely grateful to Tatyana Petrovna for taking up the cudgels so splendidly in our behalf," Batmanov said, rising to his feet. "In my turn, however, I should like to say a few words in defence of Comrade Kotenev and the others here who have come out with such severe criticism. We are the heirs to the old management and we cannot ignore its debts and its sins. So please do not hesitate to criticize, and the sharper the better."

Vasili Maximovich resumed his seat and glanced at Zalkind through narrowed eyelids.

The Party organizer was smiling. He was pleased—everything was going well. Strained relations were being smoothed out and friendly ties were being strengthened. He was delighted with Alexei Kovshov's honest and straightforward recital of the progress and defects in the work on the project. Grechkin came down boldly and justly on the heads of the near-by sections for lack of system in distributing their workers. Rogov told of his experience in organizing a section on the left bank and made a highly valuable suggestion about drawing the Nanai and the whole Adun population into the construction work.

A new party of workers just arrived from Rubezhansk came to greet the conference. Zyatkov, an elderly labourer, addressed the delegates on their behalf. He was followed by Temkin, secretary of the Party organization of Section Three. Temkin touched on the important question of the role of an executive in a small collective, how he ought to work and what his relations with the Party organization should be.

Short of stature, Temkin was all but hidden behind the rostrum. He had a barely audible voice with a curious sibilant quality to it. Patting down his sparse fair hair which

he wore parted in the middle he complained about Yefimov, the chief of his section.

"The chief sits on everything. He shouts and raves day and night. Doesn't trust anybody, insists on doing everything himself. He won't take any advice from anyone. He carried out the orders about moving to the left bank in his own way: sent the workers across and stayed behind himself along with his office and all the communal services. Wouldn't come to the conference, too busy. I don't know what's come over the man. I worked with him before the war, he was quite different, we got along nicely. But now we're always yelling at each other."

"That's right, he yells and you whisper back at him!" someone shouted from the hall.

Zalkind could not suppress a smile in spite of the fact that he had taken careful note of what Temkin said. He knew Yefimov from his work in Novinsk and Temkin's report was an unpleasant surprise for him.

He made a note for himself to pay a visit to Yefimov's section without delay. His notebook was covered with similar memorandums. Every speech had opened a fresh channel of

ideas. "A complex organism, this construction job," he reflected with an anxiety not unmixed with satisfaction; and he decided then and there to ask the regional committee and Moscow to release him from his duties as secretary of the city committee. He could see that the construction job could no longer be a sideline.

The conference went on for two days. Before it ended, the delegates adopted a letter to Comrade Stalin pledging their word as Communists to lay the pipe line within the time limit set by the government.

CHAPTER TWELVE

UMARA MAHOMET HURRIES TO THE JOB

THE ROAD ran in a dark, almost black line over the smooth whiteness of the Adun. Every ten minutes loaded trucks slid down the steep incline onto the ice to disappear around the bend.

The head office was taking advantage of the spell of fine weather to ship as much food and materials as possible to the work sections. Moreover groups of workers were arriving daily from all parts of the region and they too had to be sent on down the line before the blizzards began.

A party of building workers was preparing to start out for the farthestmost section situated on the strait, a journey of several hundred kilometres. Batmanov had instructed Kovshov, Liberman and Rodionova to see that they were properly equipped for the journey,

impressing upon all three that he would hold them personally responsible for each member of the party.

Early the following morning they were at Start. Inside the roomy barrack the heat from the two iron stoves was well-nigh unbearable. A huge electric lamp suspended from the wooden rafters by a cord shed a glaring light. The room was filled with the noisy hubbub of three hundred men preparing for a long journey. Olga Rodionova, in her clipped lamb coat and a hood of some fluffy grey wool, was inspecting the clothing and footwear of the men, making sure that each man had a tube of vaseline in his kit in case of frostbite.

Outside the barrack a captious Liberman was checking the food supplies, field kitchen, spare outfits and personal belongings of the workers being loaded onto two trucks. He found fault with everything. Downright inefficiency, rank carelessness—he fumed. Goncharuk, the job superintendent in charge of the party, a tall, beetle-browed man with cheeks blue from shaving, listened gloomily to his scolding.

“How was I to know you were going to give us fish besides!” he said with irritation.

"You ought to have taken care of it before instead of blaming others at the last moment."

"Now, then, no need to get sore. You ought to demand things. The more you demand the more you get, you know—it's a law of nature."

Kovshov called Goncharuk aside and together they went over the lists of workers and jotted down instructions. Remnev, a tractor driver and a hulking monster of a man, wanted to know exactly where the party was going and how long it would take to get there. The others were equally interested.

"Your section is the farthest away and the toughest of them all," Alexei told them. "You will pass through all the other sections on your way. You will travel by truck as long as the road lasts, but you'll have to hike the rest of the way. I may as well tell you that you will have plenty of hardships to face both en route and on the spot."

"Hardships don't frighten us, son. We're used to trouble," observed a stoop-shouldered old man of extremely powerful build. It was Zyatkov, the labourer. "We want to hurry up and reach that there strait as quick as

possible. Once we're there and on the job the rest will take care of itself."

Olga was having an argument with a short, thickset man with broad shoulders.

"I can't let you go, you have a bad chill," she said calmly but firmly. "You'll be laid up on the way. Better to get over it here. Nothing will happen if you are delayed three days."

"I'll not get sick," the man objected doggedly. "Me sick? I'm healthy like an ox. Never mind the cough, I always cough. Smoke too much."

"There's no need to go over all that again. I simply can't let you go," Rodionova said with finality and moved on to the next man.

The little man stepped ahead of her and barred her way. He was angry. He took off his cap revealing a pair of large ears and a head of black wiry hair that grew in bristly tufts.

"You must! I'll be worse here I gotta work. For me no work is dog's life. Dudin, secretary of regional Party committee, sent me here. And you want to hold me back." He was working himself into a rage. "Why are you so hardhearted, doctor? How can I stay behind when comrades go. We want to be all together. Want to be at section by

November Seventh. Want to fulfil plan. Can't waste time. Must go. You can't stop me."

"But it's for your own good, man!" Rodionova explained patiently.

"Don't want good."

The others stood listening with amusement to the argument.

"Let him go, he'll be all right!" Remnev spoke up for his comrade.

"It's Umara Mahomet. A welder," Olga explained to Alexei who came over. "He's got a chill and he's making a fuss because I'm not letting him go."

"I'm all right, nothing hurts me. Comrade engineer, you tell her to leave me be. Does soldier at front stop fighting because he have cough or cold?"

Umara now concentrated on Kovshov, gazing pleadingly up into Alexei's face with his beady black eyes. Alexei passed a critical eye over the welder's sturdy figure in its thick new padded outfit.

"Let him go. I'll take the responsibility. If he get's sick I'll take care of him when I get to the strait."

"Thank you, engineer! Umara never forget this. Never!" cried Mahomet, picking up his rucksack lightly and rushing forward

to be the first to clamber onto one of the ten covered trucks that were waiting to carry the workers part of the way to the strait.

Just before the column was due to set out Zalkind drove up. He was wearing a long, sheepskin-lined coat and fur boots. It turned out that the Party organizer was bound for the third work section. Temkin was with him. Zalkind sent his car back to the garage and climbed with Temkin into one of the trucks with the men. As the heavy cars slid slowly over the ice, Umara Mahomet stuck his head through the tarpaulin flaps and shouted to Olga:

"Ehe, Doctor! Come, please, pay me visit out at section. Be glad to see you. You watch me welding, you get warm. You see I strong, healthy man. I wait for you!"

Alexei and Olga walked a short way after the trucks as if in response to Umara's challenge. Olga seemed downcast. But Alexei shrank from asking any questions. He had not seen her since that memorable evening.

"I want to have a talk with you," Olga said falteringly, raising her large, sorrowful eyes to his. She looked very girlish in her fluffy hood. "I must."

"Go ahead."

"You have forgotten us. Serafima is forever talking about you. She and Beridze are like nursemaids, you know. They both have a positively maternal urge to take care of someone. I'm afraid I frightened you that time with my confidences. Is that why you haven't been to see us? But you mustn't let me frighten you." Faint mocking lights danced in her eyes. "I shall expect you."

She smiled and quickened her pace. Somewhat perplexed, Alexei turned and was about to go off to look for Filimonov when Olga called him back.

"Alexei Nikolayevich," she said, "you must forgive me. I'm not quite myself today and I keep saying the wrong thing. I need your help. You offered it to me, remember? Well, now I want to take advantage of that offer." She slipped her bandaged hand out of its mitten and laid it against his chest. "You see, I have no one to advise me. I am rather shy of Beridze. And Tanya doesn't quite understand. Rogov left yesterday, and in any case it would be awkward for me to speak to him about this. I feel I can trust you . . ."

"What is the matter, Olga Fyodorovna?"

"I had a telephone call from an acquaint-

ance of mine. His name is Khmara, a friend of my husband's. I knew him in Rubezhansk. A shady character!" Olga shuddered. "He told me that my husband, Konstantin Rodionov . . . died on his way to the front . . . very suddenly. . . ."

Her hand flew to her throat. Kovshov took it in his.

"Calm yourself, Olga Fyodorovna. . . . You are a brave woman. . . ."

"No, no. You see, I don't know whether it is true that he died. . . ."

"But. . . I don't understand. . . ."

"The news was such a shock that I was struck dumb. Khmara called to me five times before I could answer him. And even then I could only stammer stupidly: 'It can't be! Why not,' he said. 'We're all mortal.'"

Alexei listened in agitation, holding her hand in his.

"I can't believe that he died. There is something queer about it all. Something strange and frightening! It is terrible enough if he died but even more terrible that I can't believe it! Khmara is coming to see me late tonight."

Filimonov came up at that point. Alexei excused himself to Olga.

"I'll be at your place this evening without fail," Alexei assured her.

Tractor drivers in oil-stained sheepskin jackets were waiting for Kovshov and Filimonov outside the workshop.

"All aboard!" shouted Filimonov to the men. "The 'snails' will go later on after we've tested them."

The runners of the heavily-laden, tarpaulin-covered trailer sleds scraped noisily over the snow as the tractors, loaded with supplies for the work sections, moved off with treads rattling and took to the ice road. They had a journey of about two hundred kilometres before them.

The four "snails" left behind at the Start were large, covered wooden trailers on sled runners, each with a door and two windows and a chimney through the roof.

The "snail" was tractor driver Silin's idea; drawn by a tractor it was intended to service the ice road. The tractor driver and his mate were to keep the road in repair and render help to trucks in case of mishaps. The trailer could serve at once as workshop, living quarters and stockroom.

Silin, a sturdily built lad with an open face and small, rather crafty eyes was waiting for Kovshov and Filimonov beside one of his "snails."

"So your perambulating houses are ready?" Kovshov greeted him. "We'll have to see what they're like in motion. We're sending Smorchkov off today and then it'll be your turn."

"I'm ready to start at once if you wish. . . ."

The proposal made by Smorchkov and Silin to run trucks and tractors over the entire line had been accepted, and for several days now the truck and tractor drivers had been carefully preparing for the arduous journey.

"Let's have a look at that apartment of yours, Silin," said Filimonov.

The tractor driver ran up the wooden steps leading into the "snail's" interior. The engineers followed him, bending their heads to avoid bumping against the lintel. The little house smelt of freshly-sawn timber, iron and cabbage soup. It was a tight squeeze for the three men in the tiny room which contained two sleeping bunks one above the other, an iron stove with a bent chimney, a bench and vise, two stools, crates of food, coal and fire-

wood, diverse scrap iron, and boxes of tools and spare parts.

Silin made a hasty attempt to tidy up his miniature dwelling. He kicked a sack out of sight under the lower bunk, removed a bowl and a hunk of bread from the bench and straightened the blanket on the cot.

"Excuse the disorder. I didn't expect anyone would want to look inside," he apologized.

"Don't bother tidying up for us. You ought to keep the place neat for yourself," Filimonov remarked with a smile. "While we're here, you might drive us over to the supply base."

Silin ran outside and in a few minutes the chug-chugging of the engine was heard. A shiver, a creak, a couple of violent jolts and the little house moved. Kovshov and Filimonov, nearly jerked off their balance, sat down on the stools near the stove and eyed each other like strangers sharing the same compartment in a train. The two engineers had become quite friendly in the brief period since Alexei's arrival. Their work brought them into frequent contact with each other and they often sought one another's advice. And now they were together testing one of the many new technical improvements that

were being introduced on the construction job.

"First-rate thing, this," Alexei observed. "Ought to make a few more of them, only we'll have to give a bit more thought to the design of the interior. Everything is just thrown together in this one."

"Shall we have a bite?" Filimonov suggested, pulling some bread wrapped in newspaper out of the pocket of his sheepskin jacket.

As they munched the frigid bread, spread with frozen salmon caviare, they discussed the problem of welding pipes under winter conditions. Grubsky, the former chief engineer, had declared it impossible to weld pipes in winter and had cited engineering authorities to prove it. It was argued that joints welded at low temperatures in winter would be subject to greater internal strains in summer when the temperatures are higher. This would make the pipe line less durable and the joints might part under the high operating pressures.

The argument seemed convincing to Alexei, and without giving up the idea of welding during the winter he had proposed doing it under less rigorous conditions. Without bothering to consult Beridze, he worked out a

technology for winter welding under more moderate circumstances: to protect the metal from the low temperature of the air, Kovshov decided that the welders should work in portable prefabricated shelters which could be heated inside. The idea had appealed to Filimonov as well.

The matter had taken a most unexpected turn. Beridze scrapped the idea offhand, easily proving that the welding shelters would not pay for themselves either technically or economically. He declared Grubsky's arguments to be abstruse and insisted that for all purposes winter temperatures did not affect the durability of the joints. To cap it all he gave Kovshov a dressing down for wasting time on useless notions. Without a trace of resentment, indeed with evident enjoyment, Alexei now recounted to Filimonov his talk with the chief engineer.

The scraping and jolting of the "snail" stopped. The engineers stepped out. After the half-gloom the dazzling brightness of the snow in the sun was almost blinding.

Silin came over, eager to hear the engineers' opinion of the "snail's" performance.

"It's all right," Alexei said. "You can get ready to start out."

The loading of pipes was under way at the supply depot. Trucks with trailers on runners drove up to the racks, stretching for a full kilometre along the waterfront on which the pipes were piled, and took on their loads. While two workers turned down the sturdy uprights on the sledges, two others seized a pipe by both ends with hooks and sent it sliding down onto the sledges along a pair of inclined rails. The pipe resembling the barrel of a heavy gun slid down screeching and scraping to settle smoothly on the trailer. Each truck took four pipes.

"This looks better: three minutes to load a truck," Alexei said, timing the loading operations by his watch. "And easy too—to think they used to *carry* these whoppers!"

"Let's go and see Smorchkov, he's around here," Filimonov suggested.

With a preoccupied air the driver was making a thorough inspection of the trailer, the uprights which held the load of five pipes in place, and the coupling connecting the sledge with the truck; it was obviously not the first inspection he was making.

Smorchkov's fellow drivers stood around waiting. They were talking among themselves.

"He's going right up to the strait, and there isn't any road that far."

"Don't tell me he's going to haul those pipes all the way to the end."

"No, he'll dump them at Section Seven and take on an ordinary load there."

"Risky business!"

"You don't say! We've got some heroes among us drivers who're afraid of a couple of hundred kilometres' run. They go out of their way to think up reasons for not doing it. I would like to see them refuse after Smorchkov makes his through run!"

"Well, Comrade Smorchkov, how's everything?" Filimonov asked as he came up to the truck.

"I'm ready. Just waiting for you to give the signal," the driver replied.

"If you're ready, off you go."

"I wish you luck," said Alexei fervently, shaking the driver's hand. "I hope to see you at the strait."

Smorchkov said goodbye to the engineers and his fellow drivers, climbed into the cab, called out to his mate and stepped lightly on the starter. For a moment the engine struggled to overcome the inertia of the loaded trailer, then labouring heavily, jerked it into mo-

tion. The engineers caught a side view of Smorchkov looking straight ahead as he slid past them. In his fur cap with earflaps down he looked very much like an aviator.

As had been anticipated at headquarters, the first stretch of the Adun ice road was quite navigable. By evening of the day on which they had left the Start, Goncharuk's column reached Section Three whither Zalkind was bound. The Party organizer had not wasted his time en route. Moving from truck to truck he had made the acquaintance of his traveling companions, talked to them about the job and answered their innumerable questions.

The men behaved like members of some big family moving from one place of residence to another. They were united by a common anxiety for the fate of Moscow and by the knowledge that in this hour of trial their joint efforts were directed to a common goal. No wonder they listened with such eager hopefulness to the Party organizer's words; each of them had a personal reason too for being interested in the outcome of the battles that were being fought in the West. Old Man Zyatkov's son was fighting near Leningrad, his

younger brother, down on the Black Sea. Goncharuk's parents and sisters had been left behind in German-occupied Ukraine. Tractor driver Remnev had recently seen some of his best friends off to the army. Two of Umara Mahomet's brothers had trod the bitter path of retreat from the Byelorussian frontiers to Moscow. . . .

The new builders chafed at their temporary idleness, they were impatient to get to the strait and plunge into the work. The column's unhampered progress over the ice road cheered them and their spirits rose.

"Who said this was going to be a rough journey," said Remnev, turning his huge hulk cautiously to avoid crowding his comrades lying next to him. "We'll be there in no time."

"Don't delude yourselves, my friends," came Zalkind's voice out of the dim interior of the truck. "You have a long and difficult journey ahead. You'll get your share of hardships."

On reaching Section Three the Party organizer instructed Temkin to arrange for putting the men up for the night, took leave of them and went to the office. He wished that it was light enough to inspect the section then

and there. Temkin's report was now confirmed. In the face of orders from the head office, Yefimov had not removed from the right bank of the river.

Zalkind thought about Yefimov, as he picked his way over the pack ice, using his flashlight to light his way. Mikhail Borisovich remembered when Yefimov had come to Novinsk with the first party of Komsomols. Beginning as a carpenter he had done well on the job and had been promoted. In due time he had joined the Party. Shortly before the war he had been sent to work on the petroleum pipe line.

His section occupied the site of the small settlement of Girchin abandoned three years before by the Nanai. Zalkind had visited the place at the time when the inhabitants of Girchin had moved to the left bank and merged with another settlement to form a single collective. The low round Nanai huts alternated with the broad one-story buildings put up by the section. The office of the section appeared to be a spacious affair. Yefimov had the entire building to himself.

Noticing a number of trucks standing outside the building, Zalkind went over to talk to the drivers grouped at the entrance.

"You'd better ask Yefimov why we're still here," they replied in answer to his query. "This shifting back and forth from one bank to the other has got us dizzy."

"We're waiting for the new order the construction chief is supposed to issue. Been waiting since morning."

Yefimov ran his office as if it were part of some large-scale institution. He had his private office, his secretary and a large waiting room. The latter was full of people sitting, standing, conversing in loud tones or arguing with a flabby, phlegmatic-looking woman sitting at the secretary's desk. Several men were grouped around Smorchkov who was telling them about the Party conference. Catching sight of Zalkind, Smorchkov hurried over to him.

"Hello, Smorchkov!" the Party organizer greeted him. "You here already?"

"What do you think of this, Comrade Zalkind?" Smorchkov began heatedly. "I must be getting on, ought to have been on my way since early morning. But you can't get anything done round here. They won't give me any gasoline. Haven't even had the decency to offer me something to eat. The section chief has all the power, the rest are mere

pawns. But it's easier to get in to see a people's commissar than him. You've got to do something. . . ."

"That's all right, Smorchkov, you'll get everything you need. Just have a little patience."

Zalkind sat down, lit a cigarette and struck up a conversation with the men waiting to see the chief. They were frankly disgusted with Yefimov. The foremen had to wait all evening for the section chief to inspect and endorse the work plan for the following day. An indignant supply man had been trying in vain to obtain Yefimov's signature to an order for bread for the workers on the left bank (the bakery along with all the other services still remained on the right bank). The commandant of the workers' settlement was worried about being unable to get firewood from the timber yard in time because Yefimov for some reason had not issued him a permit for the trucks he needed.

"He thinks his two hands and his addled head are better than a thousand hands and five hundred good heads," was Smorchkov's verdict.

There were several people waiting inside Yefimov's private office and judging by the

grim expression on their faces they had been waiting for a long time. Zalkind noticed a carelessly-made bed standing next to the stove. It looked very much out of place in the office. Yefimov was shouting into the telephone as Zalkind entered and with the receiver still at his ear he rose from his seat to shake hands with the Party organizer. From Yefimov's shouts Zalkind gathered that he was talking to the chairman of the local fishing kolkhoz and demanding the return of a loan of fifty kilograms of nails. Gaunt, unshaven and apparently unwashed as well, with his grey hair and inflamed eyes, Yefimov looked like a sick man.

Having shouted his fill, Yefimov dropped the receiver, dismissed the people waiting to see him and turned to Zalkind with a weary smile.

"It's a long time since I've seen you, Mikhail Borisovich. Come to pay me a visit? Take off your things, it's nice and warm in here."

"How old are you, Comrade Yefimov?" the Party organizer asked.

"Thirty-three. Why this sudden interest?"

"Remember Terekhov? He's your age, yet you look like his grandpa, or at least his

father. Grey, hollow-cheeked, a regular old man. Anything wrong with your health?"

"There's nothing wrong with my health, it's the work on this section that's doing it. It's hard going in wartime, you know. Not enough competent people to work with, shortages of this and that. I can't understand what's got into the head office. What's this business about moving to the left bank? We've just got things organized here and now we have to start everything all over again. It's a terrible grind from morning till night. Not a minute's peace. By evening your head is ready to burst. If it weren't for my headache powders I don't know how I'd be able to carry on."

As if to corroborate his words, Yefimov produced a pyramidon powder from his desk drawer, shook it onto his tongue and washed it down with water. Zalkind watched him with an irritation he could barely suppress.

"So you don't think you'd be able to carry on without headache powders? That's too bad. If you're not careful they'll carry you off."

"Yes, I suppose I'll peg out soon at this rate. Just burn myself out on the job, as they

say," Yefimov assented eagerly. "I'm afraid you'll have to look for another section chief soon."

Zalkind lost his patience. "Neurotic!" he burst out. "I thought you'd make a go of the job, but I see you've about as much gumption as a rag!"

He got up and went up to Yefimov's desk. The latter rose bewildered from his seat.

"What's the meaning of this, Mikhail Borisovich? What have I done?"

"You've made a mess of things! You haven't done what was expected of you!"

"I am doing my best. I don't think anybody could do more. If there's something wrong. . . ."

"Everything is wrong. You don't realize what you're doing."

"I work day and night. I don't give anyone any peace. I live right here in this office. As you see, I've even had my cot brought here."

"That's just it! You've made a nervous wreck of yourself and everybody else. You have to fuss with every single kilogram of fuel instead of letting the supply men handle it. You're afraid the workers might eat an extra loaf of bread. People have to get your permis-

sion for every trip a truck makes. You call that fighting for economy? In short, you have decided to run the section singlehanded, trusting nobody. You have learned nothing if you have overlooked the most important thing, namely, that the whole power lies in the collective. Your people have every justification for saying that you use them as pawns."

"Why, I've never heard anything of the kind," Yefimov muttered helplessly.

"Well, you hear it now! I had a reason for reminding you of your friend Terekhov. Do you think he has it any easier than you? He's a real director, in charge of a big factory collective, not a clerk like you. And what's more, he isn't getting grey and old either. Terekhov is always clean-shaven, spruce and neatly dressed at work, it's a pleasure to look at him. And he isn't thinking of dying, he knows that the Party and the State need people healthy in body and mind to win the war. I was at his factory just the other day, and it was like a whiff of fresh air. It isn't such a long time since he got his war orders and he's already producing ammunition for the front. But you can't bear to give up your office and you sit on here when your work

and your workers are on the other bank. I see the Party organization was right in suggesting that you be removed from the job for incompetence."

Yefimov blanched, his lips trembled and twitched.

"Remove me? What for? My devotion to the work?"

"Devotion is not enough. A great deal is expected of you, Yefimov. You're an executive, after all."

Zalkind passed his hand over his face and sat down, calming himself with an effort. Could he have been mistaken in Yefimov? Would it be really necessary to remove the man from his job? Yefimov swallowed another powder with a grimace.

"You've blundered off the right path," Zalkind stormed. "Can't you see how you've blundered? You ought to have listened to Temkin. His voice isn't loud, but it's true. Why didn't you ask the head office to help you? It isn't so far away and now there's a good road to take you there. How could you have become so swell-headed? You didn't even condescend to come to the Party conference. Too busy with important work like getting fifty kilograms of nails out of someone. A

fine businessman! Your trouble is that you haven't grasped what war really means!"

Yefimov stuck his hand into his desk drawer again, but Zalkind stopped him.

"No! You've swallowed enough powders. I'll prescribe you a different medicine."

They sat for a while in silence. The sound of voices reached them from the outer office. Zalkind cocked his ear to listen.

"What am I to do, Mikhail Borisovich?" Yefimov said in a voice of despair. "You've given me a terrible blow."

"A terrible blow, eh," Zalkind smiled grimly. He leaned on the table and looked into Yefimov's eyes. "I daresay Batmanov will insist on removing you, and he'll be justified. But, after all, I supported your application for membership in the Party and it hurts me to see you go wrong. I don't want to see you worrying yourself into the grave before your time. I'll take your section under my personal care. I'll see what I can do to patch things up between you and your personnel. Give you a chance to show whether you can work with a thousand hands instead of your own two. You'll be toiling day and night just the same, but you will get along without powders. It's one of two things, either you become a

normal section quiet or you'll just have to begin again at the bottom as a plain carpenter. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Yefimov replied in a weak voice.

"Why, your voice is as soft as Temkin's now," Zalkind smiled. "But he's shouting out there to beat the band, hear him?" They both glanced at the door. "Go and call them in, all of them. They want to work, man. There's no sense in having them hanging around in your waiting room."

Zalkind threw off his sheepskin coat and took up a position in the centre of the room to receive the men as they filed in uncertainly with anger and frustration written all over them. . . .

Rodionova herself opened the door to Alexei. She was frankly delighted to see him and stood beside him waiting while he removed his coat.

"Serafima is out visiting. Beridze's home," she said. "But I want you to myself. . . ."

In the bright light of the lamp under its yellow silk shade Alexei noticed that Olga was dressed for the street, in a suit and over-shoes.

"Are you going out?" he enquired.

"No. Not now. But if you had come five minutes later I'd have been out looking for you. It was good of you not to have forgotten."

Olga touched her temples with the tips of her fingers. Her long slender fingers were slightly reddish at the joints. She started at the slightest sound.

"You mustn't be so nervous. You will work yourself up into hysteria that way. Let's talk this over quietly and soberly."

"You are right. I am afraid I shall lose my mind if I go on like this much longer. You must have thought me mad this morning when I spoke about my husband's death. . . ."

Haltingly and incoherently she began to tell him about Konstantin. They had met in the Rubezhansk medical institute when Olga was still a student and he, a successful young lecturer with a chair in neuropathology and a gift of eloquence. Rodionov began to press his attentions on Olga from the very first lecture. There was a dogged persistence about his courtship that allowed of no appeal. Their life together began as soon as she graduated. It was not altogether unhappy, indeed there were times she could recall without regret. Konstantin could

be so gentle, considerate, tender even when he wished. Yet he had made her miserable. Until then she had not known that there were people who could deceive those who loved them, betrayed their sacred trust. There was no need to recall all the circumstances, trifling some of them, which gradually led her to lose her faith in him. When enlightenment finally came, it was complete. It happened during his last visit to her. After a prelude of tenderness and affection, Konstantin had bluntly brought up the matter of exemption from military service. He had added cowardice to his other failings.

"I cannot understand it, I simply cannot, how there can be people like that in a Soviet society," Olga said in an agony of revulsion. "How can they have survived all this time? Look at their frivolous attitude to life, the way they sneer at work, at their duty to society, their family, at love, children. . . . Konstantin is like that, Khmara is just the same. They were drinking companions. Always together. The only difference is that one was a doctor, the other a geologist. How I loathe them both!"

She went over to the door, thinking she heard Khmara coming.

"Just before you came I reread Konstantin's letter. Lies, all of it! Is it likely that a man who evaded the draft yesterday could honestly write a letter like that today? You may read it yourself if you wish," she snatched up the pink envelope and handed it to Alexei.

"I'd rather not," Kovshov said looking at it with disgust.

"I'll never believe it, never! They have been up to something foul, the two of them. And I can't help feeling as though I were mixed up in it."

Olga sat down next to Alexei. He felt that she sought his protection and he did his best to calm her. To some extent he succeeded, yet her distress and agitation were communicated to him and Alexei too found himself listening involuntarily for the sound of Khmara's arrival.

"What shall I say to Khmara? I'm so afraid I shan't be able to control myself." Olga looked expectantly at Alexei.

"Here's what we'll do," he said, after thinking it over. "You must take yourself in hand. Try to receive this man without prejudice. Most likely he is no more than a bearer of sad tidings, in which case your

suspicious and mistrust are absurd. On the other hand, if he really is a party to some deception and his purpose is to convince you of your husband's death, you will merely put him on his guard if you treat him with suspicion. I can stay here when he comes if you wish me to. But I think it would be wiser if I didn't. He is liable to be more outspoken than he would be in the presence of a third party. I'll go and pay a visit to Beridze in the meantime. If you need me I shall be within call."

"I think you are right, Alexei." Olga got up quickly. There was a new resolution about her. "That is what we will do. I'll speak to him myself."

"May I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead, Alexei."

"You say Rodionov and this geologist Khmara are bad medicine, dangerous even, and you seem to know what you are talking about. But do you mean dangerous in relation to yourself or would you say they were socially dangerous as well? What do you think they might do?"

"Your question is quite justified. I am sorry I have never put it to myself that way." Olga said after a pause. "Yes, it seems to

me that one could expect the worst of them. And not only as regards myself. . . . Don't imagine that I say this out of injured dignity or hurt pride. I am trying to be objective. Judge for yourself. They are egoists to the marrow. What we consider to be the main thing in life is a matter of complete indifference to them. I may be mistaken in other things but I do know how morally depraved they are. This love of theirs for money. for possessions, for pleasure. Their mocking at everything that is precious to decent folk. Their stupid partiality for everything foreign. Their disrespect for others. I wonder I didn't see all this before! It's true I did see through Khmara long ago and tried my best to induce Konstantin to give him up."

Olga went over to the portrait of her husband and turned it round facing the wall. For a full minute she stood there with her back to Alexei, then she turned the portrait back again, found a piece of black ribbon and draped it over the frame.

"Mourning. Dead or alive, it's just the same," she said in a tone of stern resolve. Looking down she noticed that she still had her overshoes on. "I'll have to go and change. Will you excuse me for a moment?"

"I'll drop in to see Beridze in the meantime."

"Very well, but don't tell Beridze Khmara's coming, please. Tanya's there. She can't bear him. I wouldn't want her to interrupt us."

The door of Beridze's room was slightly ajar. Alexei, standing in the passage, saw Tanya and Beridze seated side by side at the table, their faces faintly discernible in the shadow cast by the dark shade of the table lamp.

"Not a bad couple!" thought Alexei with pleasure. "It's about time Georgi settled down. He could search for a hundred years and not find a girl like Tanya."

"I am glad you will be here for the celebrations," Beridze was saying. "I was nearly frantic before Batmanov agreed to postpone the departure of your party. Even three days to see you, hear your voice. . . ."

"I'm not pleased a bit. I wish we were starting out tomorrow. Why can't you leave me alone, Georgi Davydovich?"

"I've told you why. I'll tell you again. I'll go on telling you until you believe me. I love you! Don't you understand, I love you!"

Beridze made the declaration with a sort of solemn triumph.

"Don't say that!" Tanya protested. "How can you? I know how it is. You're lonely, that's all. And then it's your nature to insist on taking care of people. You think you're in love with me but really you are just aching to take care of someone. There's a difference. So please let's drop the subject."

"You're going away with your column and we won't be seeing each other for a long time. Why can't I tell you now what I'll have to tell you later on in any case?"

Kovshov found himself in the awkward position of an unwilling eavesdropper. But there was no way out. He could not return to Rodionova's room now. He thought of closing Beridze's door, but changed his mind. He was heart and soul on his friend's side and he wanted to know the outcome of this conversation.

"Why won't you believe me!" Georgi Davydovich pleaded. "I am only making a sincere confession of my feelings."

"I don't doubt your sincerity. But I don't **believe** in love at first sight. How long have you known me?"

"Can I help it if I fell in love with you the moment I set eyes on you. That's the way I'm made. How can I prove my love to you?"

Beridze must have attempted to embrace the girl for Tanya moved her chair sharply away from his.

"Don't touch me, Georgi Davydovich. I'll go if you do."

"Aha, beaver, you're done for!" Alexei thought, smiling to himself.

"How can you love someone you hardly know? What for?" Tanya asked in a puzzled tone. "It isn't so easy to get to know people. I'm afraid you are one of those who fall in and out of love very quickly."

The pendulum clock on the wall ticked loudly in the ensuing silence.

"What am I to do, Tanya?" Beridze said at last with a sigh. "Tell me, I'll do anything you say. . . ."

"I suppose the best thing will be to wait. I think you'll find it will pass as quickly as it came."

. . . At that moment someone rapped loudly on the outer door. Olga ran out to open it. Kovshov took advantage of the opportunity to close Beridze's door and slip across the

passage to the kitchen--Serafima's domain, warm and fragrant with the savoury smell of meat pies.

The nocturnal visitor looked most imposing. He wore a leather overcoat, black felt *valenki* turned down at the top, a caracul cap, and the tunic and breeches affected by many Soviet executives. He had a prepossessing appearance: a broad-featured, weatherbeaten face, dark eyes, a direct gaze and firm, slightly compressed lips.

"Olga, my dear girl, how are you!" he exclaimed, looking Rodionova full in the face as he kissed her hand. "Forgive me for fulfilling my mission so clumsily. All the way to Novinsk I tried to think of some way to break the news to you gently, but it was no use. Poor Konstantin! What a sad affair!"

He bore himself without constraint yet with the faint air of perplexity in his manner that befitted a man in his position. Nevertheless, Olga, keenly watchful of Khmara's every word and gesture, thought she could already detect a false note.

Without waiting for her questions, the visitor launched into his story. It had taken a

long time before Konstantin had received an answer to his application and then everything happened very swiftly: he was summoned to the military commissariat and given two hours to pack his things. His death had been reported by his travelling companions in the troop train, and it was they who had sent back his things. Everyone had been shocked by Konstantin's death for he had not looked like a sick man. He had been most anxious to get to the front, desperately anxious in fact, but, poor fellow, it was not to be. Of course, it would have been better to have died in action. But it couldn't be helped—men did not die only on the battlefield.

Olga listened with her eyes lowered. Unable to utter a falsehood herself, she could not endure to hear others lying. She wanted to stop him, to shout in his face: "It's not true! Konstantin never wanted to go to the front, he was a coward, like yourself! And I don't believe he died!"

Khmara gave her the suitcase with Konstantin's things, stressing that she would find everything in perfect order. Olga put the suitcase on a shelf without opening it. Khmara, evidently considering the sorrowful part of his mission over, brightened.

"Well," he said breezily, "don't you think we ought to follow the old custom and drink to the memory of the deceased. What about a spot of vodka and something to go with it, eh? I've got the devil of an appetite." Khmara paused, then went on with a laugh. "You weren't very nice to me in Rubezhansk. you know. Sometimes I was actually afraid to visit your place. You tried to set Konstantin against me too. That was a pity. I have been a true friend to both of you."

Olga went out to the kitchen to get something for supper and found Alexei sitting there unobtrusively by the stove.

"I don't trust him! I don't believe a word he says! He's lying!" she whispered in his ear.

When Olga returned to the room Khmara was sitting by the table staring at the portrait with the strip of black on the frame and muttering to himself with a sardonic smile on his face. As Olga came into the room he turned to look at her with his expression unchanged and she felt as though someone had dashed scalding water into her face. She had been waiting for Khmara to give himself away and now he had. Now she was convinced that she was being deceived. But she gave no sign.

At supper Khmara regaled his hostess with stories about life in the regional centre. Khmara confessed that he still liked a drink and a good meal and was not averse to having a good time either. In fact he managed to get plenty of fun out of life. He had a good solid job that didn't give too much trouble, he was appreciated, and his earnings and opportunities were on the whole no worse than before the war.

"You're a handsome woman, Olga. Quite a goddess!" said Khmara with honest admiration. "Konstantin never really appreciated you. If you promise not to be angry with me I'll give you a bit of advice: don't eat your heart out about him. Tears won't bring him back to life. And he was a great sinner. Better try and balance his sins with your own. God will forgive you!" A few drinks had loosened Khmara's tongue. His courteous manners vanished. He laid his large heavy hand on her shoulder.

"That will do!" Olga said sharply, moving away. She could no longer endure Khmara's insolent chatter and waited impatiently for Alexei to appear.

To Alexei who had distinctly heard every word that passed between Olga and Khmara,

the latter's story sounded plausible enough at first, and he had begun to feel that Olga was letting her dislike for the man prejudice her against him. But as Khmara's loquacity increased Alexei's confidence in him lessened, and though he had not seen the geologist he felt a strong antipathy for the man. Kovshov shrugged his shoulders. Why was it that people endowed with a certain amount of intelligence and ability deliberately chose such a miserable fate for themselves? How incongruous was Khmara with his petty little vices! And that other one who had stooped to such depths of vileness to avoid going to the front. Even if Rodionov was not physically dead he was nevertheless dead to society.

On hearing Olga's exclamation Alexei left the kitchen.

"May I come in, Olga Fyodorovna?" he enquired loudly behind the door. Khmara threw a questioning glance at his hostess.

"A neighbour. An engineer from our head office," she explained.

Alexei appeared to make a favourable impression on Khmara. The geologist chatted affably with him. He explained that he had come to Novinsk on business for his office, evinced some knowledge of the affairs of the

construction job and referred to Grubsky as an old friend of his. In Khmara's opinion the feeling in Rubezhansk was that it was a waste of time to build a petroleum pipe line at this time when all forces had to be concentrated on the battle fronts. Alexei would have paid little heed to a statement of that kind a few weeks earlier. But now coming from Khmara it roused his ire. With difficulty he checked the impulse to retort in his usual brusque manner.

At last the visitor rose. He expressed the hope to see Olga and Alexei in Rubezhansk some day. Donning his overcoat, he remarked to Olga:

"Remember my advice. . . ."

Kovshov clenched his fists, the cynicism of the man infuriated him. As soon as the door closed on the visitor Olga dropped wearily onto the bed. Her eyes filled with tears.

"Now, then, pull yourself together!" Alexei touched her shoulder. "I think I'll go after him. I'd like to have a word with him."

"As you please," Olga assented listlessly.

...Kovshov went outside. Khmara was standing near the house beside a waiting car.

"You have quite upset our hostess," Alexei said.

"I'm sorry, but it can't be helped. It wouldn't do to deceive her!"

"It has all been so sudden that Olga Fyodorovna can't bring herself to believe Rodionov is really dead," Alexei said, moving quite close to Khmara.

The geologist, broad-shouldered and powerful of build, stood with his hands thrust into his pockets and his legs slightly apart.

"She doesn't, eh? In that case she ought to make enquiries. He was buried at Taishet station. There's a woman for you! After all that trouble he gave her she still cares for him. It's a great pity! She ought to put him out of her mind." He looked at Alexei with a leer "With your help I should think she'd be able to forget him. You are lucky, young man!"

And before Alexei had time to retort, Khmara got into his car, wished him a good night and drove off.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

**THE MORNING OF NOVEMBER
SEVENTH**

STALIN's voice came suddenly, taking everyone by surprise although they had been waiting for some time to hear him speak. Now they held their breath to listen.

Stalin spoke calmly and unhurriedly, with a tremendous inner power. Some of his words, travelling over thousands of kilometres, were lost in space amid the hum and crackle of the ether. The people gathered in the club missed the beginning and it was the general impression that the local relay station had been late in picking up the broadcast.

"Missed it, the blockheads!" Grechkin hissed wrathfully, but lapsed into immediate silence in response to a vigorous prod in the back from Alexei who stood behind him.

Kovshov, his face pale, his eyes glued to the loud-speaker, stood drinking in every

sound, at times guessed at rather than heard. The entire conscious life of Alexei's generation was inseparably linked with Stalin; his work, his books, his speeches. From Alexei's very schooldays, beginning with the day when the words: "We vow to you, Comrade Lenin..." had been uttered, Stalin had become for Alexei Kovshov and other young people of his age the sole mentor whose authority was invariably lucid and infallible. When the war had broken out and many of the strongest and stoutest hearts had faltered, thoughts had turned with hope to Stalin. And they had heard his heartfelt words: "Comrades! Citizens! Brothers and sisters! Men of our army and navy! My words are addressed to you, dear friends!"

... And now Stalin was on the tribune once more. At this moment Alexei was oblivious to all but the sound of Stalin's voice. That voice infused him with faith and courage.

Stalin did not offer solace. He knew that it was not consolation the people wanted, they wanted the truth. And as always it was the truth the people heard from Stalin's lips: "... far from having abated, this danger is greater than ever. The enemy ... is threatening our glorious capital, Moscow..."

He who had instilled in the nation the consciousness that man is the most precious capital on earth, courageously informed the people that hundreds of thousands of Soviet men and women had died fighting for their Country. A profound grief could be felt in his voice as the words came slowly forth.

Suddenly Zhenya began to weep. She wept unashamedly, sobbing and wailing like a child. A hot lump rose to Alexei's throat choking him. Batmanov who was standing next to Zhenya raised his hand and silently stroked her hair, and the gesture seemed to embrace all those gathered there, as if the tears of this merry, vivacious girl were expressive of the grief felt by all.

"Ours is a just cause—victory will be ours!"

For several moments a veritable tempest of applause raged in the loud-speaker. And here too, far from Moscow, at the dead of night, the three hundred people assembled in the log cabin club on the banks of the Adun stormily applauded Stalin.

The roar in the loud-speaker suddenly subsided to be replaced by the solemn strains of the anthem. Then silence. . . .

"How lucky we are to have Stalin with us, comrades! What would have become of us without him?" Tanya's clear young voice resounded in the stillness. And again a tumult of handclapping burst forth.

As Alexei was elbowing his way out of the crowd he was stopped by Beridze, a pale, agitated Beridze with inflamed eyes.

"Let's go over to my place, Alexei. I want to talk to you. . . ."

"I'm sorry, Georgi Davydovich, I can't. I must be alone for a while. Let's put it off till tomorrow morning. For that matter it must be morning already. Can you wait a couple of hours?"

"I suppose I can." Beridze returned curtly, and turning sharply on his heel, strode off without looking round.

"Wait a bit, Alexei Nikolayevich!" Alexei heard Grechkin's voice behind him. "I'm going your way. . . ."

The engineer quickened his pace pretending not to have heard. Stalin's words were a living presence within him and he was loath to allow the deep import of what he had heard to be diffused in a welter of trifling, insignificant, mundane matters. He drew his sheepskin jacket closer about him, pulled his cap

down over his ears and ran lightly over the smooth slippery road in the direction of home. The moon floated high overhead; the stars were a myriad of glittering drops in the remote sky. Snow, an endless vista of snow, greenish and phosphorescent in the moonlight, spread all around.

Alexei paused for a moment or two outside the house, inhaling deeply of the fresh frosty air. People emerging from the club were scattering in all directions and their voices had a brittle staccato sound. Alexei saw Grechkin approaching with Tanya and Zhenya and he slipped quickly into the house. One of the doors in the corridor opened as he entered and Lizochka's head with its straggly fair hair peeped out. Fixing him with her sharp eyes, she enquired in a dubious tone:

"Have you seen that man of mine, by any chance?"

"He'll be in directly...."

"Always gadding about! With four children and a fifth on the way, you'd think he'd have a bit more sense."

"I saw him a moment ago at the celebration meeting. We heard Comrade Stalin's speech," Alexei said with suppressed irritation.

Lizochka started, and blinked rapidly.

"Gracious me! Why wasn't I told anything? What did he say? Will the war be over soon?"

"Your husband will tell you all about it when he comes," Alexei said shortly and hurried past her to his own room.

He wanted to treasure that feeling of uplift that filled him. He entered his room and locked the door. The place was as chilly as usual: a white cloud of steam issued from his lips at every breath, and a velvety layer of hoarfrost clung to the ceiling and the outer wall.

Alexei undressed swiftly and got into bed and for a long time he tossed restlessly on the hard lumpy cot, with his sheepskin jacket thrown over the blanket for warmth. Voices reached him from the passage. Lizochka was meeting Grechkin with reproaches: why hadn't he told her about the speech and warned her that he would be detained. Grechkin parried with excuses that sounded feeble and timid.

Zhenya intervened. It always made her indignant to see that Grechkin, so resolute and self-reliant at work, could allow himself to be so much intimidated by that Lizochka of his.

The voices rose higher. Then a door slammed violently. The quarrel had moved to the Grechkin apartment.

Presently Alexei heard the soft shuffle of *valenki* outside his door and a light knock. He made no response.

"Gone to bed. The sleepyhead," Zhenya remarked disgruntled.

"Leave him alone. Why must you run after him?" Tanya reproached her softly.

"I must speak to him. I tried to approach him in the club but he didn't take any notice of me."

"Why don't you make a scene right here outside his door the way Lizochka does," Tanya laughingly advised.

Presently the girls moved away from the door. The house quietened down and all was still but for the wind whining like a mosquito through the narrow crack between the joints in the windowpanes.

The night was on the wane but sleep still eluded Alexei. Thoughts swarmed through his brain. "The enemy . . . is threatening our glorious capital, Moscow"—the words rang in his ears again and again. He tried to imagine what was happening there at this moment. How were his parents, his little brother

Mitya. Where was Zina? Oh, to be able to see them, to exchange if only a few words with them, to hold them close! Alexei had no longer any doubt that the pipe line was of prime necessity for the prosecution of the war, and that he himself was needed on the job. His position here had proved to be no less important and responsible than any he could have occupied in the defence of Moscow. Zalkind had been right. "You must leave it to your older comrades to decide where you are to do your share of the fighting. Our fighting assignment is to defend Moscow on the banks of the Adun." To dispute that was tantamount to denying the inexorable truth that the front and the rear constituted a single entity.

That was all well and good. No use going over all that again. And yet at times it was hard (for the heart, not the mind) to admit that the role of an engineer poring over blueprints in the quiet of his office was equal to that of a platoon commander who leads his men into battle amid the thunder of artillery. When the news from the Moscow front was particularly alarming one could not help wishing one might be a soldier instead of a builder.

Alexei thought of the poster that hung in the passage outside his office and the face of the wounded soldier who looked out accusingly at passers-by with the stern query: "What have you done for the front?" Conscience itself might look like that if one had ever sought to depict it. "The enemy is threatening Moscow—What are you doing to defend it?"

At length Alexei fell into a troubled sleep which lasted perhaps hours, perhaps minutes. His dreams were trivial, absurd. Yet when he awoke he felt that his face was wet with tears. He had been with Zina at the Moscow agricultural exhibition. They had sat on the terrace of the Arctic pavilion eating strawberry ice cream. There had been music somewhere in the distance. Zina picked up a large strawberry in her spoon and held it out to Alexei.

"This is better than your Far-Eastern bilberry, isn't it?" she said.

And Alexei felt the tears start to his eyes.

"Why are you crying, Alyosha?" Zina asked in concern, bending over to him to wipe his eyes with her lace handkerchief.

"Yes, we were like that once! Like happy children!" said Alexei.

"Were?" repeated Zina in amazement. "Are we dead then? I don't know what you mean, Alyosha."

"We aren't like that any more," he said. He wanted to add that the war had put an end to their halcyon days, but checked himself: "No need to worry her yet, let her enjoy the peace a little while longer...."

After Stalin's speech the construction chief and the Party organizer left the club and went to the head office.

"If only we had a telephone line to the island we could contact all the sections and have a good talk," said Batmanov as they entered his private office.

On his desk stood the selector apparatus. It connected the head office only with the near-by sections up to Tyvlin where Rogov had his headquarters. Vasili Maximovich seated himself at the desk and drew the apparatus toward him with an accustomed gesture. Zalkind paced up and down the room engrossed in his thoughts.

"I must find Beridze and get him to come over," said Batmanov. "I'll wager he isn't sleeping."

"Don't call him, Vasili. I gave him my word that today, November Seventh, we would consider his application for Party membership. He ought not to be bothered just now."

"That's right, I'd forgotten. Gave him a recommendation myself, too. Why don't you take off your coat and sit down. Stay here a while, we'll call up the sections and find out how our people intend to respond to Comrade Stalin's speech."

"All right, I'll wait and have a word with Yefimov, and after that I must run down to the Start. The boys down there have also decided to make November Seventh a working day."

Zalkind perched on the arm of a chair, unbuttoned his coat and removed his hat. Batmanov switched on the selector. Somewhere down the line a weather report was being droned off. A woman dispatcher from Section Two reported in a jerky, nervous voice that a truck that had left Novinsk three days ago was missing. Two male voices were heard above the others: one, deep and gruff, belonged to engineer Nekrasov of Section Three, and the other, high-pitched and resonant, to engineer Melnikov from Section Four. Melnikov was giving the other an outline of Stalin's speech.

Nekrasov could not get over the fact that his section had not heard about the speech until it was too late. Back of the voices was a steady hum compounded of vague, curious noises.

"Our line is very much alive, alive and fighting," Batmanov said softly.

He sat motionless at the apparatus, his cheek resting in his hand, listening intently. Listening-in to the line had come to be one of his favourite occupations.

"Comrade Melnikov, Rogov speaking. First let me congratulate you on the coming anniversary and on the gift Joseph Vissarionovich has made us," came the slightly hoarse voice of the fifth section's chief.

"Thanks. Congratulations," Melnikov returned. "Joseph Vissarionovich has put new heart in us."

Batmanov and Zalkind exchanged glances.

"We held a meeting and decided that our section would challenge yours to a Socialist competition," Rogov went on. "Our Party secretary, Kotenev, will be over tomorrow with the agreement. This is just advance warning. Can you hear me?"

"I hear you," Melnikov confirmed. "So you've beaten us to it! We here have been

trying to decide whom to challenge—you people or Section Three.”

“Here’s what we undertake—you’d better make a note of it,” Rogov said tersely. “To speed up the work on the winter road, have it in perfect order within two weeks. All the necessary premises, living quarters and service buildings—storehouses, barracks, garages, bakery, bathhouse—to be up by the end of this month.”

“Hear that!” Batmanov exclaimed, turning to Zalkind.

“That’s not all. After meeting Stakhanovite Smorchkov, our drivers Makhov, Solntsev and the others have taken separate pledges to begin hauling pipes at once without waiting until the road is absolutely perfect. Have you got that?” Rogov’s tone was a trifle patronizing.

“I’ve got it, I’ve got it,” Melnikov replied somewhat testily.

“So I can report to the head office that you’ve accepted our challenge?”

“Of course you can, man! Have you ever heard of anyone rejecting a competition challenge? Send over that Kotenev of yours.”

“Hear that, Comrade Party Organizer?” Batmanov repeated, leaning back in his chair with satisfaction.

"I'm worried about the third section, about that Yefimov," Zalkind rose. "See if you can get him and Temkin on the line."

At that point Rogov began calling Novinsk. He was delighted when he heard Batmanov answer; his voice betrayed his pleasure at having this opportunity to talk to the construction chief on such a momentous occasion.

"We're working today. Two hours from now the whole collective will be on deck," Rogov reported. "With the help of the Stakhnovites we intend doing two things today: cut connecting paths from the ice road on the Adun to the line and begin building a settlement for our truck and tractor drivers. I promise you to have model quarters ready for the drivers by the time you visit us out here, Vasili Maximovich."

"Better not make rash promises, I may turn up tomorrow. I'll be quite satisfied if you build ordinary living quarters so long as they're warm and clean."

Zalkind was striding impatiently up and down the room, and Batmanov hastened to end the conversation.

"Alexander Ivanovich, have you seen Goncharuk's people? Those I sent out to the strait?"

"They spent one night here and moved on the day before yesterday."

"By truck?"

"Yes. I'm afraid they'll have to foot it after Section Six, though. That's about as far as the road goes."

"How did they feel? Anybody sick?"

"No, they were all quite fit. I wanted to keep them here for the holiday but they wouldn't stay. There's one hothead there, Umara Mahomet, he's in such a hurry to get to the strait you'd think he was going to a picnic. I'm sorry I let them go. I could make good use of them here today."

"Just one more question," Vasili Maximovich cut in hastily. "I sent a message by relay to Pankov at Section Nine. I want him here urgently. Did you get it?"

"I did, and I sent it on with Smorchkov. He's a reliable chap, he'll deliver it."

"Good! Well, that's all for the moment, Alexander Ivanovich. Go and get an hour's rest, and then, to work!"

The head office dispatcher had some difficulty in getting Yefimov on the line. Zalkind had given it up as a bad job and was about to leave when the harsh voice of the third section's chief was heard on the line among

the general hubbub of sound. Batmanov left the desk and motioned to Zalkind to take his place. Yefimov began solemnly to congratulate the construction chief and the Party organizer on the occasion of the anniversary, but Zalkind would not let him finish.

"What side of the river are you speaking from?" he wanted to know.

"From the right bank so far," Yefimov replied lamely. "But we're practically moved. All the equipment is on the other side. I'm packing up myself."

Zalkind's face grew red with anger and his eyes narrowed and darkened.

"At this rate it'll take you a whole year to pack up!" he shouted. "I see it doesn't do any good to reason with you. That's all I have to say to you now. We'll resume the conversation at noon tomorrow when you are on the left bank. Where's Temkin? Helping you to 'pack.' I suppose."

"He's on the other side. We're holding a meeting in the morning and everyone will go straight to work from there."

Batmanov came over to Zalkind. "Tell that man," he said, "that if he doesn't shut up shop at once and get across to the left bank he needn't bother to hurry. I'll give

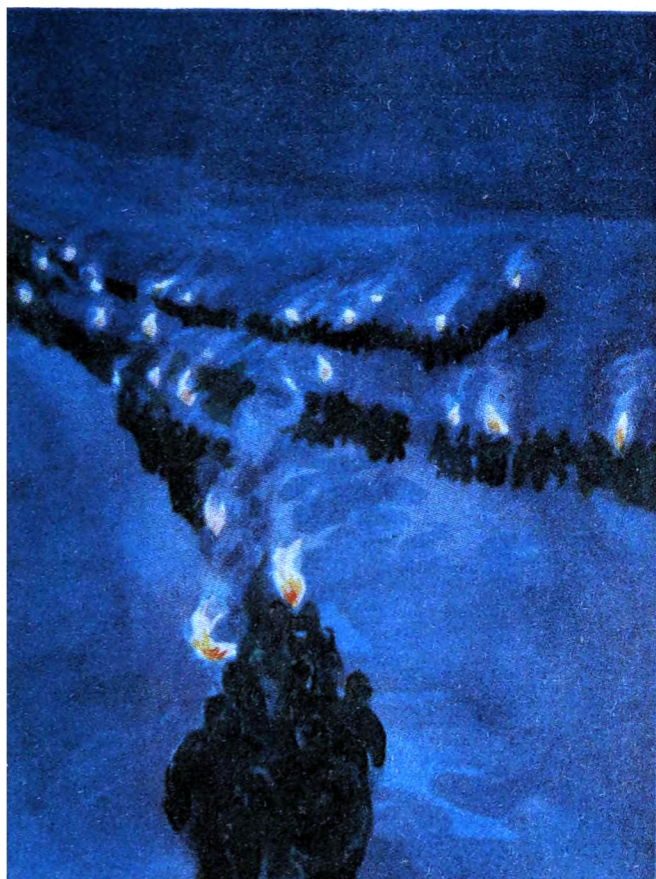
orders not to let him land on the left side at all."

For a few minutes after the Party organizer had finished speaking, Yefimov remained sitting at the selector as if dazed. Then he hastily collected his papers, snatched the calendar, clock and inkstand off the desk, cast a last farewell look around his private office and went outside where a car was waiting to take him to the other side of the river.

...The workday on November Seventh began at 6 a.m.

Standing on a felled tree, Temkin in his soft voice told the section's builders gathered around him about Stalin's speech. The darkness of that early winter morning engulfed the clearing at the river front, the tent encampment and the men themselves. Only a few of those who stood in front were visible in the red glow of the storm lanterns Nekrasov and Yefimov carried.

...At the very same hour the flickering lights of numberless torches brightly illumined the Nanai settlement of Tyvlin. A large crowd of building workers and Nanai jammed the broad street of the settlement. The hum of voices, laughter and singing reached



the Adun in a mighty wave of sound. Out of the collective farm office stepped Rogov, Maxim Hodger, the chairman of the village Soviet, Pribytkov, the section engineer, Kotenev, and Rogov's assistants, Khlynov and Polishchuk. Standing on the porch they admired the play of the dancing torches.

"Get your teams together," said Rogov. "I repeat, Maxim, your objective is the road from the line across Krivaya Creek to the Adun. Polishchuk will take his men down the river to Shaman Island, and from there cut a path to the line through the snow. Pribytkov, Kotenev and myself will go with the rest to prepare a site for the truck drivers' settlement."

Hodger, Khlynov and Polishchuk stepped down from the porch and merged with the crowd. The crowd swayed and roared even louder than before, and presently two fiery streams detached themselves from it and poured in opposite directions.

A group of drivers stopped Rogov. They carried spades, picks and torches made of tin cans filled with hemp soaked in kerosene and stuck on poles.

"Which way are we to go?" Makhov, a handsome young man with a delicate girlish

complexion, demanded of the section chief. "Being drivers we're interested in roads, but we'd like to lend a hand with the building of our own living quarters too."

"All right, come along with me," Rogov yielded grudgingly. "I suppose the roads will have to be done without you..."

Alexei was awakened by Lizochka fussing outside in the passage. His cross-grained neighbour had scant consideration for others. One of Grechkin's four children was howling lustily and Lizochka was scolding him at the top of her voice.

Brushing back his hair, which had all but frozen to the pillow, the engineer threw off the blanket and sheepskin jacket and got out of bed, trying to ignore the frigid temperature of the room. He switched on the light and glanced at the clock: the working day, November Seventh, had begun for him too.

As an ex-soldier, Kovshov had been put in charge of military training for civilians on the construction job.

In trousers and undershirt he hurried down the corridor to wash. Three small boys

and a girl, all with pink chubby faces, flaxen hair and light blue eyes, stood in a row in the passage, ranged according to height. The eldest, aged six, proudly carried a small red flag. Grechkin, roly-poly in his quilted outfit, stood in front of the miniature file marking time with his huge grey *valenki*.

"Left right . . . left right . . ."

Lizochka stuck her head out of the half-open door to grumble good-naturedly:

"Shame on you, a grown-up man playing at soldiers!"

Alexei shook hands with each of the children in turn and congratulated them on the occasion of the Twenty-Fourth Anniversary of the Revolution.

"I owe you a bar of chocolate," he said to the little girl.

"Not much of a holiday this year," Lizochka complained. "Nothing to give the kiddies even."

"Uncle Alexei, I want a flag like Kolya's," the little girl piped up.

"That's something else I'll be owing you," Kovshov replied, picking up the plump child and kissing her cold cheek.

Grechkin followed Alexei down the passage with the children trailing behind single file.

"What happened to you last night, Alexei Nikolayevich?" Grechkin asked. "The way you ran away from me I thought surely something was wrong."

"Nothing was wrong.... I just wanted to sleep, that's all."

"I heard the girls knocking at your door...."

Grechkin halted at the sink. The children did likewise. Five pairs of eyes intently watched Kovshov perform his ablutions and then escorted him back to his room in the same formation. Zhenya, dressed in a green ski outfit, dashed out into the passage toward the sink, combing her hair as she went.

"I'm not late, am I? You can never tell with that clock of mine, when it isn't fast it's slow."

Alexei put on his quilted jacket, fastened on his broad army belt, and threw his gas mask over his shoulder. He and Grechkin picked up their skis and hurried to the training ground. Outside it was still quite dark and bitter cold.

"Greetings, Alexei Nikolayevich!" cried Zhenya, catching up with him. "This will be the first time in my life I'll be working on November Seventh."

"Never mind, Zhenya," Alexei consoled her. "We'll make the Nazis pay for this workday."

The drill began with a ski run. Kovshov cut a track for his platoon through the deep snow. Before long he felt a warm glow all over his body, the frost ceased to nip and his hands grew so warm that he had to take off his mitts and stick them behind his belt. So far Alexei was the only one who could ski properly, the others were novices. He now quickened now lessened his pace, keeping an eye on the stragglers. Blazing a winding trail through a thin birch grove filled with the pearly light of dawn, he climbed onto a steep hillock and, with arms outstretched, sped swiftly downhill with birdlike grace, ordering his men to follow suit. The inept skiers lost their balance and slid down, legs in the air, raising clouds of powdery snow.

"Now go back and do it without falling!" Alexei commanded. "What about you?" he demanded of Grechkin who was stamping his feet beside him. "Waiting for a special command?"

On the drill ground Alexei was a stern and exacting commander who made no allowance for anyone. He treated Grechkin, Fedosov,

Kobzev and Petya Gudkin as rank-and-file soldiers irrespective of the position they held at the office. He refused to be moved now by the look of mute entreaty on the face of the planning chief.

"Grechkin, you heard the command!"

Grechkin bent his knees and moved gingerly toward the edge of the slope, about to descend. The next moment his skis had slid forward while his body instinctively held back with the result that he lost his balance and slid downhill on his back. Alexei ordered him to try again. This time Grechkin made the descent without mishap until he reached the foot of the hill. He got up looking quite pleased with himself.

Alexei called a halt. While the men lit hastily-rolled cigarettes, holding them awkwardly in their reddened fingers, Alexei took them to task.

"You ski as if you were walking the tight-rope. You're afraid to move in case you fall. The *Pravda* editorial I read you last time talks about fighting on skis, and you haven't learned to stand up on them properly."

They went back to the club to get warmed up and listen in to the latest news bulletin. Next in the morning's program was drill.

Again Kovshov kept at the men unmercifully. Grechkin got the worst of it. He was slow in responding to commands, he seemed incapable of marching in step and invariably made the wrong turns. Kovshov ordered him to step out of the line and for several minutes drilled him alone, firing commands at him hard and fast. Mustering every effort, Grechkin made a heroic attempt to follow the commands. The others looked on with amusement. Alexei himself was hard put to it not to smile at Grechkin's awkward movements and the set, grim look on his face.

"You can't afford to be clunisy," he remarked to the planning chief as he dismissed the platoon. "You ought to train more outside of drill hours. There won't be any time for training when you're called up to fight the Fritzes, and you won't be much use without it."

"Don't worry, I'll be all right," Grechkin retorted, nettled. "I won't do any worse than some of those fellows with training."

In the messroom, Alexei found Zhenya waiting for him. She had taken him under her wing, and now instead of having to wait until the busy waitress could attend to his wants, he found his breakfast waiting for him

on the table. The girl's concern for his welfare touched him especially this morning. Avoiding her eyes he bent over his earthenware bowl where a bright red sliver of salt salmon reposed on a mound of mashed potatoes.

"Didn't get much sleep last night, my dear Moscovite, did you?" Zhenya enquired. She looked at him with dark, anxious eyes over the top of her big earthenware mug as she sipped her tea. Her round face was still rosy from the frost. "I doubt whether anyone slept very much."

"Why not? I for one slept like a top and dreamed prewar dreams all night. I dreamed I was in the Arctic pavilion at the exhibition eating strawberry ice cream. No war or anything."

Alexei had intended to reply in a bantering tone, but in spite of himself a tinge of sadness crept into his voice. "When I woke up I found that my head had frozen to the pillow. Must have been the ice cream."

"I didn't sleep a wink either," Zhenya went on, ignoring Kovshov's attempt at levity. "I was born on the night of November 6 and I was always proud of the fact. It was a double celebration in our family."

She waited for him to drain his tasteless, barely sweetened tea, and rose. Their breakfast was over in five minutes.

"Congratulations, Yevgenia Ivanovna, accept my sincerest best wishes," Alexei said fervently. "Too bad you didn't tell me yesterday about your birthday. We might have had a quiet little celebration."

"Did you hear the way I bawled yesterday? Imagine me breaking down at such a time and with all those people around. But I couldn't help it, I felt so miserable. We were always so happy on the November holidays. And now all this suffering and bloodshed, all those young people like you and me being killed."

He took her hand in a friendly gesture and together they mounted the stairs. Zhenya responded with a grateful squeeze of her plump little fingers.

"I wanted to tell you all about this last night, but you didn't answer when I knocked. You must have been asleep. Tanya was with me. Afterwards she went to Olga's and I had a good cry all by myself." She fell silent. "Everybody will be congratulating me today: 'This year, Zhenechka, we wish you to find a good husband,' they'll say. Grechkin said it

already in just those words. As if that was all I needed to make me happy! I'm so glad you didn't wish me that."

She was not her usual gay, mischievous self today. An unwonted gravity seemed to have taken possession of her. Kovshov watched her go with a look of surprise.

Topolev was already at his desk. He had arrived very early that morning. At Beridze's suggestion, Kovshov had given the old man a desk in his private office—"He'll get into the swing of things quicker that way." They shook hands, but it was a cold, silent greeting. The relations between the two men were strained. Topolev being the older of the two had set the tone. For days on end he sat opposite Kovshov, occasionally raising his heavy lidded eyes from his papers to cast an apathetic glance at the people who came to see Alexei. In his relations with Topolev the young engineer was very considerate. He took care not to treat him as a subordinate and gave him assignments in the name of the chief engineer. Topolev performed his duties accurately but with a marked lack of interest. At times the old man's impassivity annoyed Kovshov

and he barely restrained the desire to have it out with him. Topolev alone of his staff remained totally indifferent to the arguments and excitement caused by the new project.

Looking over the memorandum he had made the evening before of matters requiring urgent attention, Alexei sighed. The list was lengthy and some of the items had been outstanding for several days.

He no longer had cause to complain of wasting his time or that the management was too slow in getting things started. The work had begun to pour in like a flood. The chiefs of the construction job seemed to be in league with one another to increase his burden by every conceivable means. His immediate superior was the chief engineer, a fact of which Beridze was constantly and pointedly reminding Alexei. Beridze seemed to be under the impression that Alexei was devoting his time to matters other than engineering. Batmanov gave him assignments without bothering to find out whether he was in a position to carry them out. Zalkind too gave him no peace and it was a rare day that passed without some Party work to attend to.

True, Alexei's duties and worries might have been less numerous had he refused some

of the work entrusted to him. But he refused nothing. He was anxious to keep as busy as possible: hard work was the only cure for the pangs of anxiety that beset him. And when at the height of the working day some new task would be given him by Batmanov, Zalkind or Beridze—always more urgent and important than the previous—Alexei would smile. Zalkind noticed his smile one day and observed understandingly:

“Life is much more interesting when you’re up to your ears in work, isn’t it? Remember, Alexei my boy, the more a man is given to do, the more is expected of him and the more indispensable he is to the collective.”

In his last letter to Zina Alexei had written: “The task I have set myself and the people working with me is to cope with any assignment given us. It seems to me now that there is no limit to what a man can do when it is demanded of him. It is a simple matter of proportion: the heavier the burden, the more you can haul. Perhaps I have stumbled on a new law of nature for productivity of labour?”

He sent his letters to his mother-in-law’s address. Although he could not tell when they would reach Zina, whether indeed they would

reach her at all, he could not help writing to her now and then about his life, his work and the thoughts that stirred him. It had become something of a spiritual necessity. They were more like reports than letters, and he often sat up far into the night filling the equivalent of a thick writing pad with these conscientious accounts of the past week's events. On one occasion he had endeavoured to write a diary of a single day, but the result was so lengthy that he shrugged his shoulders in surprise at the realization of how much work was compressed into a mere twenty-four hours. It occurred to him that the effort represented by a routine workday would have been enough to fill the lifetime of some wastrel of last century, one of those to whose doings the classics of literature had dedicated dozens of volumes.

Today too Alexei was swept into the vortex of work as soon as he reached his office. He usually devoted two or three of the morning hours exclusively to the project. These were the best hours of the day, when his head was still fresh and there were fewer visitors.

The wind found its way into invisible cracks in the wall and window frames and

blew the warmth from the room. After sitting without his jacket for half an hour Alexei put it on again. Kobzev of the unruly mane, and three other engineers sat around Kovshov's desk puffing at makhorka cigarettes.

Knitting his brows and tapping his temple with his pencil Alexei was checking the piezometric calculations for the section of the pipe line on the left bank. These calculations provided one proof of the advantages of the new route projected for the line. Beridze proposed building one pumping station on the mainland instead of two as called for in Grubsky's project. The need for the second station had been dictated by a range of hills on the right bank. Since there was no such obstacle on the left bank, the additional station was obviously superfluous.

"What'll the pressure be at the end of the line? One and a half?" Kovshov asked without looking up.

"One and a half atmospheres," replied Kobzev, who was following every movement of his chief, now making some calculation on his slide rule, now jotting something down on paper.

"So what's the conclusion?" Alexei demanded.

"No need for a second station."

"Right," said Alexei with a glance at Topolev. "One station will be sufficient to pump the oil from Jagdinsk strait all the way to Novinsk."

With an irritated expression, Kuzma Kuzmich waved away the clouds of makhorka smoke that floated toward him and paid no attention to Alexei's remark. But the latter, pleased at the result of the computation, was determined to break through the old man's reserve.

"It will mean a saving in electric power alone of a hundred kilowatt hours per ton of petroleum," he said in a loud voice. "Not bad, eh? And that is in addition to cutting the time required for construction and saving in labour and materials besides."

His words were so obviously addressed to Topolev that Kobzev turned to look at the old man. Kuzma Kuzmich, intent on refilling his snuffbox from a large bottle, did not so much as glance their way.

The telephone had been ringing for some time. Now the bell rang in long, insistent peals. Alexei looked at the apparatus quizzically without removing the receiver and chuckled.

"That's Beridze, I bet. He won't give up! We won't be able to keep him quiet with your computation, Kobzev. He'll be at us about the strait. You'd better hunt up all the data you have on the strait, and be quick about it!"

The telephone stopped ringing. Kobzev brought in a heap of working drawings and tables and laid them out on the desk. The problem of crossing the stretch of water between the island and the mainland remained the toughest in the entire project. It was impossible either to bridge or skirt this twelve-kilometre water barrier. The pipe line would have to cross under water, and difficult as it was to lay it on dry land, the problems involved here were obviously far more formidable.

The original project called for welding the twelve-metre lengths of seamless pipe into sections ranging from one hundred to two hundred metres in length; this was to be done on shore in the course of the summer. Then these flexible fifteen-to-twenty-ton monsters had to be hauled from the shore on board large barges. The successive lengths were proposed to be welded to the end of the submerged section of pipe directly on the water, all of which was highly inconvenient

and precluded the use of mechanical devices. A trial attempt to join two lengths on the unceasing swell of the strait ended in a mishap: both lengths of pipe went to the bottom when the substantial seagoing launch used for the purpose capsized like a toy boat.

Apart from the difficulties attendant upon welding, another problem arose. To protect the pipe line from freezing in winter it had to be sunk two metres underground throughout. Now, the shallow part of the strait—four kilometres on each side—froze to the very bottom, which meant that here too the pipe had to be dug into the bottom. Only in the deeper section where the water did not freeze solid could it be left unburied. To sink the pipe into the bottom of the strait in the shallow sections, a trench had to be dug under water. During the summer dredges had been engaged on this job, but by the time they had to be removed to prevent them from freezing in only part of the work had been done.

Naturally enough the chief engineer had kept the strait constantly in mind from the very outset. Hitherto it had been believed possible to dig the trench, using dredgers, and to weld the lengths of pipe during the sum-

mer season only. This, however, meant that it would take no less than two summers to finish the job, besides which doubts had arisen as to whether the prescribed method of welding on the water was at all practicable.

To count on doing the job in the course of two summers was entirely out of the question; the builders had only one winter and one summer at their disposal. Hence Beridze's decision to violate all established rules and continue work at the strait through the winter.

As Georgi Davydovich saw it, the first task—welding the pipes in winter—could be solved satisfactorily: he proposed doing the job on shore and then hauling the welded sections onto the ice by tractor. Kovshov was making good headway in working out the practical aspects of welding under these conditions. The second task, however, defied solution. Neither Beridze nor Kovshov had the slightest idea how the trench was to be dug in the bottom of the strait in wintertime.

"Whose drawings and calculations are these?" Kovshov demanded of Kobzev, pushing the sheet of paper with the calculations for hauling the welded pipes over the ice toward Kobzev with a look of displeasure.

"What's the trouble?" Kobzev bent anxiously over the paper.

"Messy and full of errors."

Kobzev bent lower, his hair falling over his face.

"Whose work is this? Petya's? Call him in I'll have a word with him."

"You'd better tell me. I checked the drawings and passed them. It's my fault. I don't see anything wrong with it even now."

"Call Gudkin, I say!" Alexei insisted. "Don't act the kind uncle or you'll have so many nephews you won't know what to do with them."

Kobzev rose unwillingly and went to fetch Petya. Alexei felt the eyes of the old man on him and for a moment he thought he read sympathy and interest in them.

"What shall we do about digging trenches in the strait. Kuzma Kuzmich?" Alexei asked on an impulse. "Can you think of anything? Perhaps you have come across something of the kind in your experience?"

Topolev pondered the problem with his eyes still on Alexei's face. Kobzev and Petya entered at this juncture and distracted Alexei's attention. Both looked distraught. Kobzev had evidently taken the youngster to task

already. The old man paused on the point of saying something, shook his head and turned his face to the window.

"You asked Kobzev and myself to give you independent designing work to do," Kovshov began sternly. "You were sick of draughting. You assured us you had learned to do something more serious than copying. Well, we complied with your request. You were expected to turn in work of good quality. Do you call this quality?" Alexei pushed the sheet of drawing paper toward the lad. "This is a shockingly careless job. How can you do work like this in wartime?"

"I'll redo it, Alexei Nikolayevich," Petya said piteously, and reached for the drawing.

"No, you don't," Alexei laid a restraining hand on the paper. "That's no solution. If you put your signature to a piece of work it shouldn't have to be redone. If you considered it good enough to sign you ought to defend it. I may be mistaken."

"No, no. You're quite right!" Kobzev protested.

He had discovered an error in the calculations and crossed out the column of figures and formulae with a vigorous stroke of his black pencil. He turned wrathfully on Petya.

"Didn't I tell you to take special care in calculating the load on the ice! Didn't I warn you not to make a hash of it!"

"How can you call a thing like this a drawing? A mass of erasures, blots and scribbles, the text scrawled in anyhow," Alexei added. "I've told you people hundreds of times: every drawing has to be flawless."

"I was going to do it over but there wasn't time," Petya excused himself lamely.

"You must find time!" Alexei scowled as the telephone started ringing again. "Never use lack of time as an excuse for anything. Comrade Kobzev will report to me a couple of days from now whether there is any improvement in your work. If not, we will have to put you back at copying again."

"Alexei Nikolayevich!" Petya cried in dismay. "Forgive me just this once! I give you my word it won't happen again. I won't let it!"

And with that he punched himself fiercely on the temple. The engineers exchanged amused glances, and Topolev's greenish-grey whiskers twitched.

The door burst open and Muza Filipovna rushed breathlessly into the room.

"The chief engineer wants to see you at once. He's been trying to get you on the

phone all morning but you don't answer. Come at once!"

"All right," said Kovshov. He turned to Gudkin again. "So. Petya my boy, you'd better watch out."

"I'm not going back without you," declared Muza Filipovna. "He knows you're here whether you answer the phone or not. My orders are to bring you back dead or alive."

Alexei collected his drawings and followed the secretary out of the room.

"He's been upset all merning," she related en route. "He called in at your office before you came and had a run-in with Topolev. We've had to have his telephone fixed. He got so sore when you didn't answer that he threw the receiver down on the table and broke the diaphragm. . . ."

Beridze, bundled up in his overcoat, was sitting behind a large desk warming his hands at an electric stove in front of him.

A loud noise issued from the selector apparatus standing on a small table beside the desk. The chief engineer looked up for a moment as Alexei entered the room, then bent over to the microphone again.

"Comrade Pribytkov," he shouted, "I can't make out what the argument between you and Rogov is about."

Pribytkov's voice was barely audible. Alexei had to strain his ears to catch the gist of what the fifth section's engineer was saying.

"I've told you. . . . We cleared a site for the truck drivers' settlement: cut down the trees, uprooted the stumps and dug foundations. Rogov gave orders to begin building the hostel and garage at once. He says he promised Batmanov to have a model hostel ready by the time the chief comes here. Suppose he comes three days from now, he says. . . ."

"That's all right, the sooner the better," Beridze approved. "You want to take your time about it, is that it?"

"I have nothing against getting the building done quickly but it must be a proper engineering job at the same time."

"Meaning?" the chief engineer was growing impatient.

"Rogov has ordered the hostel built on an ordinary foundation without an air space between the floor and the ground for ventilation purposes, as your standard design stipulates. If there is permanent subterranean frost in those parts the building won't stand

for long. That will mean putting up another one for the people who come here after we leave. You have always said that all buildings we put up must be capital jobs so that the operation personnel after us will be able to use it for years to come."

"Well, you're the engineer on the section. What did you propose to Rogov?"

"I insisted that he keep to the standard design approved by yourself."

"Well?"

From the tone, the nervous gestures and the expression on the face of the chief engineer, who was a poor hand at masking his feelings, Alexei saw that Beridze was roused, and he wondered whether he could have been the cause. "Something is amiss," he concluded.

"Rogov wouldn't listen to me," Pribytkov complained. "Claims he doesn't need plans to build houses. In his opinion there is no permafrost in Tyvlin area at all. He says the Nanai houses prove it."

"What is your own opinion on the subject?"

"I don't know for certain but it's possible. After all, this is pretty far north. We'd have to make sure."

"What do you want of me then?" Beridze demanded angrily, tapping his thick pencil against the table.

"Order Rogov to keep strictly to the standard plans!"

"I cannot do that!"

"Why not?" Pribytkov sounded surprised. "What was the purpose of providing the sections with standard designs in that case?"

"I didn't expect to hear such questions from you, Comrade Pribytkov. You're an experienced engineer, not a novice. The standard plan is the sum of our basic requirements for building under permafrost conditions. But it is neither a dogma, nor a recipe for every occasion. Rogov may be right. I don't think there is any permafrost in Tyvlin area myself. In that case some part of the design should be discarded. On the other hand, of course, Rogov may be mistaken."

"I don't understand you," said Pribytkov. "What are we to do?"

"It's too bad if you can't decide that yourself. The section engineer is supposed to supervise the work, he lays down the law in technical matters. He isn't expected meekly to follow or copy plans given him. It is your duty to know whether there is permafrost on

the site where you're building or not. If there is, you follow the design, if not, you must find some other way out yourself."

"Yes, but Rogov doesn't want to wait until I check up on it."

"I don't blame him," Beridze replied with a dry laugh. "He wants to get the job done quickly while you evidently like to take your time about things."

"You think I ought to give in to Rogov?"

"Not at all! I forbid you to give in!" Beridze bellowed. "You've got to make Rogov recognize your authority as section engineer."

"Then you must help me to strengthen my authority!"

"I have no objections to helping you. But I refuse to be your nursemaid. If I were to be that he would certainly lose all respect for your authority. You've got to stick to your guns, insist on having it your way. But don't go too far. Don't let your arguments slacken the pace of the work. . . ."

The conversation over, Beridze switched off the apparatus and proceeded to fill his big pipe.

"He has his hands full down there with Rogov," Alexei remarked. "Pribytkov is a bit academic in his methods, designing work is more in his line. Rogov, on the other hand,

is inclined to underestimate the role of engineers in construction, I've observed."

Beridze glanced up at Alexei coldly as if he had been unaware of his presence until that moment.

"What does this mean, Comrade Kovshov? Why must I waste so much time on you? Either you're not in your office or you don't answer telephone calls. What do you mean by not answering the telephone?" Beridze rapped out, using the formal "you" instead of the customary "thou."

"I am at your service," Alexei replied in the same tone.

"Your service is not very efficient. You're not making any progress with the general project."

"What makes you think so? In my opinion we have made quite some progress."

"In your opinion!" Beridze snorted.

"Permit me to report," Alexei said quietly, his grey eyes resting calmly on Beridze's wrath-contorted face.

"I am very displeased, very," the chief engineer growled, at the same time examining with interest the drawings Kovshov laid before him.

"Our calculations have confirmed the possibility of managing with a single station on

the mainland if we go over to the left bank," Alexei reported.

"I never had any doubt about that. Your calculations are superfluous as far as I am concerned." Beridze carelessly tossed aside the drawing, but not before he had run his eyes over the figures. "It's the strait I'm interested in."

Alexei gave Beridze a detailed account of what he was doing on that score. Catching sight of Petya's slovenly drawing with the crossed out computations Beridze's choler rose again.

"I am not satisfied. The strait has stalemated you completely." He sat up and grasped the edge of the table. "You haven't even begun to tackle the matter of the trench."

"Couldn't you give us some idea of the angle to tackle it from?"

"Why should I?" Beridze made a sweeping gesture, causing his overcoat to slip from his shoulders. He made no attempt to raise it. "You don't want to use your brains at all, you prefer to wait for me to hand you the solution on a platter. I can't solve all the problems singlehanded. Get your engineers on the job, instead of letting them sit around twiddling their thumbs. Even in peacetime it

wasn't considered right to draw a salary unless you'd earned it."

"To whom are you referring?" Alexei asked quickly. "I would ask you to be concrete and fair about it. As far as I know, my people are working hard and conscientiously."

"Would you say Topolev is working hard and conscientiously?" cried Beridze. "The old saboteur!"

"That's another matter. I can't do anything with Topolev. I have spoken to you about him several times."

"You shouldn't have to speak to me several times about one pigheaded old man. It's your business to cope with your subordinates yourself. If you can't get him to do some useful work, send him to the personnel department, let them discharge him under article 'g' or something, without notice. We're not an asylum for superannuated good-for-nothings."

Alexei said nothing. He saw that it was useless to argue the point. It was obviously impossible to send as important an engineer as Topolev to the personnel department, the more so dismiss him.

"A ridiculous situation!" the chief engineer continued to fume. "The project is holding up the whole job, while the chief of the

production department occupies himself with all sorts of irrelevant affairs and shields his assistant besides."

"I'm not occupying myself with any irrelevant affairs, and I am certainly not shielding Topolev."

"I dropped into your office at half past eight this morning and there wasn't a sign of you. You're like the proverbial office clerk who wouldn't think of coming to work a minute earlier than the prescribed hour."

"I was at military drill. I came to work at five minutes to nine."

"That's just it, you have too many occupations that have no bearing on your main job. I can have you released from military drill."

"What for? Am I any better or worse than the others? I don't think the drill hinders my work in any way."

"You've got a live hindrance right there in your office. As soon as I started talking to Topolev I could see that he knows nothing whatever about what is going on. You aren't drawing him into the work."

Kovshov waited for the outburst to subside before remarking:

"Topolev requires special handling. We are all interested in him yet none of us has been

able to find the right approach. You mustn't forget the man is sixty years of age."

"Special approach!" scoffed Beridze. "Temperamental prima donna!"

"The fact remains that we have been guilty of considerable breaches of tact with regard to him," Kovshov went on. "You gave him a piece of your mind as soon as you met him, that's number one. You appointed him as my assistant without talking it over with him, that's two. I put him in my office and made him sit facing me like a schoolboy, that's three. The wall newspaper lampooned him, that's four. . . . To tell the truth I wouldn't mind if he was removed from my office. He cramps my style. Fixes me with those angry eyes of his, takes his snuff and sits there like a carven image. I tried to have a serious talk with him but nothing came of it, he cut me short and said something like: 'I've fulfilled my own plan in life. Now I'll sit back and see what sort of showing you're going to make.'"

"I don't want to hear any more about him," said Beridze. "You can stick him under a glass case like some rare cactus plant for all I care. That wasn't what I wanted to see you about anyway."

While talking, the chief engineer had been thumbing through some slips of paper pinned to the large chart of the construction job on his desk. This was Beridze's memorandum index: the most urgent problems were jotted down on a slip of paper, pinned to the chart and kept there until solved. Alexei remembered what a fuss there had been some days before when some new charwoman, mistaking the slips of paper for scrap, had thrown them into the wastebasket.

Georgi Davydovich caught a twinkle in Alexei's eye and went on irritably:

"We've got to hurry up with the project. Zalkind warned me today that we'll have a fight on our hands when Grubsky takes the matter up with the regional authorities. I intend to make a personal check of our basic premises. I'll take a trip down the line in a few days. I plan to cover the whole disputed mainland section on skis, and examine both the left and the right banks. It would be a good thing if you could come along. But, of course, I could manage without you."

He glanced questioninglly at Alexei, but the desk phone rang before the latter had a chance to reply.

"Yes, he's here. One moment," said Beridze and handed the receiver to Alexei.

"Hullo there, young man, congratulations!" boomed Zalkind, and Alexei reflected that there was kindness in the very voice of the Party organizer. "Are you awfully busy just now?"

"Not any more than usual."

"Could you drop in to see me?"

"I'll be with you right away."

He replaced the receiver on the hook and waited for Beridze to continue their conversation. Alexei felt that Georgi Davydovich had something important to tell him.

"You may go," Beridze said and rose.

"But you wanted to say something. . . ."

"Go and see Zalkind," Beridze insisted. "You said you would be with him at once. Don't keep him waiting!"

Beridze threw his coat over his shoulders, sat down and buried himself in his papers. Kovshov hesitated for a moment, at a loss to understand the reason for his friend's irritation. But Beridze seemed no longer aware of his presence.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
THE DAY AND EVENING OF
NOVEMBER SEVENTH

IN ZALKIND'S office sat Grubsky, resplendent in a new, faultlessly tailored grey suit with a grey pullover under the jacket revealing a snowy shirt and a silk tie. The Order of the Badge of Honour shone conspicuously on his chest. Zalkind too wore his decorations—the Orders of Lenin, the Red Banner and the Red Star—and he was likewise dressed for the occasion. Kovshov felt awkward in his everyday clothes.

"Sit down, Alexei Nikolayevich," Zalkind invited, pressing his hand warmly. Then he turned to Grubsky. "I am at your service."

"I have come once again to you as the Party leader here. Unfortunately my appeals to the construction chief have had no effect." Grubsky's tone was didactic, pompous and indeed a trifle solemn. "At first I decided to

wash my hands of the whole affair. But my conscience, the conscience of a citizen, compels me once more to lodge a categorical protest against the decisions Comrade Beridze has taken. They are hasty, erroneous and apt to lead the construction job into an impasse. I have given careful thought to my objections and have expressed them in a memorandum addressed to you."

"Another memorandum." Alexei thought.

"Why to me?" Zalkind asked. "I have told you before and I tell you again: I am in favour of Beridze's proposals and intend to give him all my support."

"You are making a grave mistake!" Grubsky exclaimed and half rose. His sallow face took on a darker hue. "I beseech you not to allow yourself to be misled by externals or by eloquent speeches. They are fraught with immediate disaster to our undertaking. You will regret it when it will be too late."

Alexei wanted to interrupt him, but Zalkind stopped him with a look. The Party organizer passed his hands over his face as though washing himself and said nothing for a few moments.

"You are evidently quite sincere in your insistence, Comrade Grubsky. But that does

not justify your position in this matter. I should like to ask you one question: suppose Beridze happens to be right? Let us assume that at the moment, although I am not an engineer, I am better able to judge which of you is in the wrong."

"If I am mistaken," Grubsky said after a brief pause, "you may turn me over to a military tribunal. And I shall forgive Beridze then if he spits in my face."

"But in the meantime you are trying to spit in his face," Kovshov could not help putting in.

"Don't be in such a hurry," Zalkind checked him. "It is you, Comrade Grubsky, who are mistaken and not Beridze and myself. It is too bad—bad for you, I mean—that it is taking you so long to realize the falseness of your position. But since you have come to me I promise to send your memorandum on to the representative of the State Committee of Defence or to the Secretary of the Territorial Party Committee. Let them decide which of you is in the right and which in the wrong. As for myself, I repeat I shall back Beridze's project. Does that suit you?"

"I leave it to you, and I want to hope that the people in Rubezhansk will understand

me," replied Grubsky. "I have given my memorandum to engineer Topolev to read and sign. He is a co-author of the project and supports my point of view. I shall take the material from him and hand it to you."

When he had seen Grubsky out, Zalkind seated himself on the small couch beside Alexei and offered him his leather tobacco pouch.

"Light up, Alexei my boy. It's no fun smoking alone."

Alexei awkwardly rolled a cigarette. Zalkind took the pouch away from him and in a twinkling had two cigarettes neatly rolled.

"Well, how did you like Grubsky?" Zalkind asked, exhaling a cloud of smoke.

"I don't like him at all. He's a nuisance. He's always getting in the way. An unpleasant fellow, maybe a wrecker for all you know." Alexei coughed as he inhaled the smoke.

"A wrecker? Nonsense!" Zalkind objected. "I was down at the Start early this morning," he continued after a brief pause. "Just before dawn there came a moment when everything was hushed and still and I thought to myself: What is it that makes this day remarkable?" Zalkind's face wore a pensive look. "I thought of the Moscovites in trenches

near Volokolamsk, the sailors on the rock-bound coast of Sevastopol, the Arctic workers, the people of Leningrad. I thought of our Far-Eastern border guards. And it struck me that today people cannot be quite the same as usual. I don't mean that they should suddenly be different from what they always are. No, that would be absurd. They will remain the same, yet the best that is in them will come to the fore."

"Has this anything to do with Grubsky?"

"It has. Even Grubsky seemed different from his usual self today. It was loyalty and observance of the proprieties, that brought him here, as you may have observed. He expressed his opinion about what you are doing with the project long ago. And that would have seemed to be the end of it as far as he was concerned. But you heard what he said? Even he felt compelled to talk about his civic conscience! He believes that he is right and he is doing his best to prove it."

"Very well. let us grant that. Grubsky is unusually active today. But doesn't it strike you that his activity is only doing the job harm? He ought to be kicked out, since he can't be taken to court!"

"Such vehemence! The situation is rather more complicated than you think, Alyosha my boy. We can always kick him out. But, after all, he is a prominent engineer, he enjoys some prestige among building engineers and moreover he is the author of a project which has not yet been cancelled. We have discarded the old technical conception of the construction job and we have almost worked out a new one. But officially our project will go into force only after it has been endorsed in Rubezhansk with the consent of Moscow."

"Grubsky can go on interfering then?"

"Oh, nobody is going to let him interfere! If you want to know, I consider that objectively Grubsky's presence has a certain salutary effect. Whether he likes it or not he is helping the new project to come into being." There was a sly twinkle in Mikhail Borisovich's eyes as he spoke.

"I don't see that he's much of a help!" Alexei laughed.

"Hasn't Grubsky given a fillip to your work? You revise his project and he criticizes your innovations. Doesn't that compel you to give more serious thought to every detail than you otherwise might? In the process

of fighting it out with him the new project will be more substantial and thoroughgoing. Even his latest memorandum will be beneficial. I shall have to send it on to Rub-zhansk and that will speed up the consideration of the project there. If it weren't for that memorandum the people in Rub-zhansk would wait until we submitted our own project. Now Pisarev will have to summon Grubsky and the rest of us at once for serious talks. That's why I keep telling Beridze and you to hurry."

"Now I understand Beridze's sudden decision to make a ski run down the line. That explains too why he jumped on me," said Alexei. "We have much of it ready, the biggest hitch is the strait crossing. As for Grubsky, you haven't convinced me—he's a scoundrel just the same."

"Why are you always in such a hurry to label a man? You know what photographers mean when they talk about contrast shots, black and white without half tones. Your mistake is that you see people as studies in black and white. Of course it is the easiest thing to label all questionable and wavering people as wreckers. But in life it isn't quite as simple as that. In our country wreckers

are rare, but people who arouse our dislike because of their many shortcomings are far more numerous. But it's a mistake to wave them aside! Grubsky is not an enemy; he is honest according to his lights. His trouble is that he is too self-assured and conservative and is not accustomed to self-criticism. But he is a competent engineer. He knows perhaps no less than Beridze. The difference between the two is that while Beridze is a trail-blazer by nature, Grubsky believes in following the beaten track. I have been told that the opinion of any foreign authority, scientific or technical, is final for him."

"What will become of him?" Alexei asked. "Have you decided to re-educate him?"

"That is not for me to do, Alexei. With us it is the collective, our whole system that changes a man and helps him to find his place. I foresee a decisive battle between him and Beridze. He will be defeated and then he will have to make his choice: either he will begin to work with Beridze on the new project or else he will have to leave."

"Do you think that if Grubsky finally does realize his mistake he will change?"

"I am sure of it. It will be a great shock to him to discover that he has been in the

wrong. When he gets over it he will become an enthusiast."

Alexei shook his head dubiously and pursed his lips.

"I'm afraid we shan't be able to wait for his enthusiasm. We'll have to build the pipe line without him. And without my aged assistant as well, for that matter. According to your theory Topolev too, that old fossil, ought to show himself up in a new light today."

"And he will. I advise you to watch him. On a day like this, Alyosha my boy, anyone who has a soul is bound to show it in spite of himself. But don't expect any sort of exploit from Topolev just yet, look for the extraordinary in the commonplace, look for it in some simple, almost imperceptible manifestation. That old man is worth watching. . . ."

"Now I come to think of it, a girl I know gave me a surprise today," Alexei admitted. "I had thought her a giddy, frivolous creature and yet she startled me with some heartfelt, serious words. Does that fit into your theory?"

"It does," Zalkind laughed his quiet hearty laugh. "I can also tell you something

about a girl—Tanya Vasilchenko. True, this doesn't prove my theory at all. I met her down at the Start this morning, she is getting her party ready for the road. We exchanged a few words and I felt that there was something amiss. You could tell at a glance. She's usually so self-possessed, sharp-tongued and aggressive in the best sense of the word. What's the trouble, I wondered. 'Well, Tatyana, happy at last?' I asked her. 'Very,' she answered. But her voice sounded anything but cheerful. It struck me that she was not too pleased to be leaving the head office at such short notice. I asked her what was the trouble, but she wouldn't say. I don't think she really knew herself. I wonder whether Cupid may have something to do with it?"

"Ekh, Georgi," Alexei thought. "This is your doing!" Aloud he said:

"Our beaver was another one who gave me a surprise today."

"Yes, this day has a special significance for him."

"He's as angry as a bull. Tearing mad, in fact."

"Angry?" it was Zalkind's turn to be surprised. "I should have thought you wouldn't

find a gentler man than Beridze today." He glanced at his watch and rose. "Well, Alyosha my boy, you'd better go back and make up for lost time. I called you in to warn you to speed up the project. Also to agree on when to hold the meeting of the Party Bureau today. We're going to take up Beridze's application today. I think three o'clock should be all right."

"Beridze's application?"

"Hasn't he told you? Queer!" Zalkind was amazed. "Last night he brought me his application for Party membership. I gave him a recommendation, Batmanov gave him one too. I thought he'd ask you for the third."

Alexei was staggered. He remembered Beridze approaching him at the club and now it dawned on him that his friend must have intended asking him for advice and a recommendation. And he, Alexei, had brushed him aside! Georgi's early visit to his office no doubt had something to do with it too. Now the reason for his comrade's irritability, his puzzling behaviour that day became clear. Alexei was so upset that he did not hear what the Party organizer said to him after that. Fortunately, the phone rang at that point. The third section was on the wire. Since there

was no selector in the office, the conversation was conducted through the telephone operator.

"Ask Temkin how things are coming along. Today should be the turning point over there. On a day like this people are capable of any exploit."

The intent expression on Zalkind's face as he listened showed how deep was his concern for the progress of this section. Temkin reported that the people were working tirelessly, with a will... After a few initial hitches, Nekrasov had redistributed the work among the crews and now everything was going smoothly. The shifting of equipment from the right bank was proceeding at a good pace. It had been decided to dismantle the more solid structures and haul them across piecemeal. At the same time they were laying a road inside the section and expanding the landing stage on the left bank.

"How is Yefimov? Where is he and what is he doing?" Zalkind wanted to know.

"He's with the others," was the telephone operator's terse reply and Zalkind gathered that Temkin was unwilling to give more details.

Alexei rose to go. Zalkind covered the receiver with his hand and said:

"That's not yet all, Alexei. . . . I want a good article from you about the project for the next issue of the newspaper. We've got to tell our people why it is being delayed, what has been done and what hasn't been done and why. An article like that ought to elicit some interesting suggestions from the people down the line. Remember what Melnikov said at the conference? I want that article tomorrow. Can you do it? And in the evening if nothing intervenes you and I will take a run over to Terekhov's factory. No objections? Fine. So long then until three o'clock."

Alexei's first impulse was to go to Beridze. He got as far as the outer office but lingered beside Muza Filipovna's desk, hesitating to enter Beridze's room. He could not imagine what reception the chief engineer would give him and he was unable to invent an excuse for seeing him. He did not want to evoke another angry outburst from his friend. Better to wait until he had calmed down.

Muza Filipovna, observing Kovshov's indecision, went in to Beridze on her own initiative and came back looking puzzled.

"He says he's busy. I don't know what's come over him. Have you quarrelled with him, Alexei Nikolayevich?"

"Something like that," Alexei replied and went back to his own office disquieted.

Grubsky was pacing up and down beside Topolev's desk when Alexei came in. "They've been signing their memorandum, the scoundrels!" flashed through Alexei's mind. Both engineers seemed wrought up about something. Grubsky's sharp little nose was quite blue and emitted a shrill whistling noise as he applied his handkerchief to it. Topolev sat motionless, his face wrathful, his walrus moustache quivering.

"So you do not agree, Kuzma Kuzmich," Grubsky was demanding in the tone of a public prosecutor.

"No, I do not agree, Pyotr Yefimovich. I do not agree at all," the old man barked and turned away from his former chief to look out of the window.

"I confess I am amazed and hurt," said Grubsky. He rolled up his memorandum and took himself off.

"A split in the camp of the enemy!" Alexei said to himself. "Mikhail Borisovich was right: the fossil is coming to life, it appears to possess a soul, after all."

Alexei felt his spirits rising. He stared at the old man so fixedly that Topolev finally

raised his eyes beneath their shaggy brows. The moment had come to speak and Alexei spoke.

"I need your help, Kuzma Kuzmich!" he said. "The Party organizer wants an article for the newspaper about the project. He wants us to explain to the collective the difficulties we are faced with. It might prove a fresh impetus for initiative from the people down the line."

"I'm not cut out for a worker-correspondent, never was much good at writing," was the old man's brusque reply.

Alexei realized that he had failed in his attempt to make use of an opportune moment to conciliate the old man. Topolev was clearly upset by his talk with Grubsky and it had been unwise to have chosen that particular moment to address him. Moreover, the reminder of the newspaper had been tactless. His resentment at the cartoon still rankled.

"Perhaps you could give me some idea at least how to tell the folks about the strait. We haven't decided anything about the trench yet. How are we going to dig the blasted thing?"

Topolev got up and left the room without a word. At that point the phone rang and

Kovshov snatched up the receiver with a violent gesture.

"Old crab," he said instead of "hullo" and burst out laughing when he heard Tanya Vasilchenko's voice at the other end of the wire. "I didn't mean you. You're a young goldfish, piscatorially speaking. You can come over right away, your problems require urgent attention. . . ."

Tanya came in together with Fedosov. They were arguing, Fedosov banteringly, Tanya with irritation.

"Look what this young lady is asking for, Alexei Nikolayevich. It'll make your hair stand on end!" Fedosov placed Tanya's orders for materials before Kovshov. "And she's got to have everything at once. Priority or any other considerations simply don't count with her. Fork out and that's all!"

"There aren't any considerations," said Tanya, dropping into an armchair and regarding the smiling, rosy-cheeked supply man coldly. "We're leaving tomorrow and we must have the most essential things today. The rest can be shipped on after us."

"No sooner did they make the girl a boss than she lost half of her charm," Fedosov's dark eyes danced mischievously. In Tanya's

presence he was livelier than usual and seemed to be preening himself.

"My charm has nothing to do with you or the orders for supplies. I'm ready to turn into a witch if that will help me to get the materials. Run along and issue them. You've got the permission. Or must I go to Beridze and complain about you again?"

"Can you believe it, Alexei Nikolayevich! Tanya went and complained about me to the chief engineer and he said a lot of nasty things to me. On a day like this too. And now I'm going around with a burning pain in my chest as if I'd eaten too much saltfish."

"She's right," Kovshov concluded, after he had glanced over the list of supplies Tanya was asking for. "I can only see one or two minor items that can be dispensed with. I've marked them. By the way, I see the chief engineer has endorsed this order. Isn't that enough for you? Why do you have to bargain about it?"

"Oh it's enough, more than enough," Fedosov picked up the lists with a sigh. "You're a fine lot. How can anyone talk business with folks like you. Where do you expect me to get all this stuff from!"

"Don't pretend. You've got it all tucked away in some vault," Tanya said with

something like malicious glee. "You're just too stingy to give anything away. You'd like the pipe line to be built out of thin air so your storerooms could stay padlocked and stuffed with supplies. You're getting meaner than Liberman."

"All right, all right, don't get huffy, Tanya. I'll see you get all you ask for, if it kills me," the supply man bent over to the girl and put his arm around her.

"I won't say thanks until I get everything," Tanya said, moving away from him.

"So you're off tomorrow?" Alexei asked her. "What about a farewell party?"

"Farewell party?" Tanya repeated with a sigh. "Too much on my mind. Besides, I haven't got a home here, where could I give a party?"

"At my place, of course!" Fedosov suggested eagerly. "I was going to invite some people anyway. We can ask Georgi Davydovich too."

"What has Georgi Davydovich got to do with it?" Tanya demanded throwing a suspicious glance at him.

The arrival of Filimonov and Liberman interrupted the conversation. They were on their way down to the Start and had come to get Alexei. Fedosov's face fell when he

saw Liberman. The latter shook hands with Alexei and Tanya but did not so much as glance in his direction. The feud between the two supply men continued, and many amusing tales about the tricks they played on each other were current in the head office.

Fedosov called Alexei aside for a moment.

"I mean it. Why not come over this evening? After all, it's a holiday. We'll have a drink and a talk and those who want to can have a game of cards. You ought to get around a bit more. You live like a recluse. It isn't right. I'll get Georgi Davydovich to come along. Tanya will come too."

"I'm not so sure," said Kovshov.

"A certain young lady is interested in you," Fedosov coaxed. "Incidentally," he added in a jocular tone, "I happen to be interested in that same girl and you're cutting me out. But never mind, for the sake of company I shan't hold it against you."

"I'm afraid we shan't manage tonight, there's still a lot of work to be done," Alexei responded, reflecting that the young lady in question must be Zhenya. "Thanks for the invitation though, I'll try to come."

A peal of infectious laughter from Tanya caused him to turn round. Tanya, her head

thrown back, was laughing at something Liberman was saying.

"It isn't funny at all," Liberman grumbled "You like the idea of that fellow making a fool of me."

"Who's making a fool of you?" Kovshov enquired. Looking with pleasure at the radiant face of the girl, he thought: "I shall certainly go to Fedosov's with Beridze and Tanya."

"Last night he got a phone call," Tanya explained to Alexei, nodding towards the supply man. "He picked up the receiver and said: 'Liberman speaking.' A man's voice at the other end of the wire said: 'You're an ass.' Liberman naturally got sore. 'Who's that, who says I'm an ass,' he yelled. 'Everybody,' the man answered and hung up."

"I'll get even with him, don't worry. I'll think of something a lot smarter than that," Liberman menaced.

"But are you sure it was Fedosov, perhaps it was someone else? Did you recognize the voice?" Filimonov asked seriously.

"It wasn't his voice. He put some other idiot up to it, of course."

Alexei left a note on Topolev's desk asking him to check over the new estimates for all types of wooden buildings and to look

through a few rationalization proposals that had come in during the day, and went down to the Start with Tanya, Filimonov and Liberman.

They saw off Silin. He drove the tractor himself. His mate stuck his head out of the doorway of the "snail" and waved his cap to them. The house-on-runners moved off slowly and was visible for a long time on the greyish-white stretch of river.

Tanya led Alexei over to the warehouse where her group was preparing for the journey. Tanya planned to travel by truck to the fifth section where the telephone line ended and to start laying the new line from Tyvlin. Alexei made a careful inspection of the line workers' equipment and ascertained what help they would require from the head office in the immediate future. The Komsomols were in high spirits and were looking forward eagerly to the following day. Tanya alone appeared worried and preoccupied. But she concealed her anxiety from her younger comrades who were not yet fully alive to the hardships in store for them.

"Don't worry, Tanya," Kovshov said in an undertone, guessing at the cause of her mood. "The harder it is the better for the

soul. Let the youngsters think less of Novinsk and more of Moscow and the young people like themselves who are fighting to defend it. You must harden your heart from the very outset, try to be as strong as steel, harder and stronger than you really are."

Tanya rewarded Alexei with a look of gratitude.

Alexei had been so busy with the line team that he almost forgot about the Party Bureau meeting and did not realize how late it was until Filimonov came in to the warehouse to fetch him.

Beridze was sitting with his head lowered and he did not look up when Kovshov and Filimonov entered the room. All the members of the Bureau were already there.

"You've kept us waiting ten minutes," Zalkind chided the latecomers and opened the meeting forthwith.

Alexei felt an unspoken reproach in Beridze's sorrowful pose. "At such a moment in my life you could not come on time," he seemed to be saying. Zalkind read out his application: "Today when our Country is in mortal danger I can no longer remain outside the ranks of the Lenin-Stalin Party." Then followed a brief account of his activi-

ties until then. Alexei, who had been in torment all that day over his misunderstanding with his friend, listened now with particular attention to the recital of facts relating to Beridze's background, perceiving them in a new light.

"He is thirty-five already," he noted. "I have the advantage of being eight years his junior. His wife died six years ago in childbirth. Georgi never told me about that. His father was killed in the Civil War. His mother—he often speaks about her—lives in Gori."

Georgi Davydovich's work record was impressive. Occasionally, in conversation, Beridze had casually mentioned having worked on this or that job, but Alexei had never paid much attention to the information. Now the simple enumeration of dates, places of residence and work built up a living history of the man.

He had graduated from an engineering institute in 1929. Alexei remembered Beridze once telling him that the beginning of his career as an engineer had coincided with the launching of the Stalin five-year plans. He had worked on the designing of a plant in Zaporozhye. Later he had been job superintendent on the construction of the Dnieper

Hydroelectric Power Station. He had built embankments on the Moscow River. He had taken part in designing the Berezniki Chemical Works. In Semipalatinsk he had worked on railway construction. He had drawn up a project for water supply to the gold mines in Jigda.

Later on he had volunteered to go to the Far East to survey the route of the great Baikal-Pacific trunk line. While there he had become interested in the hydroelectric resources of the Far East and had designed two power stations, one on the Olgokhta and the other on the Chongr. Somewhere in the Sikhote-Alin Mountains he had met Batmanov, who had been appointed to head the construction of the trunk line and had set up his camp in wild unexplored country. The two men took to each other at once and soon Georgi Davydovich was working as chief engineer on the job under Batmanov. Shortly before the war they had both been given assignments in the western areas of the Soviet Union. For three years Beridze had worked on a construction job in the South. It was there that Alexei had met him. His return to the Far East completed his career up to that time.

The Party organizer, as was customary, read out every detail relating to the applicant's past: he had been decorated with two Orders—the Red Banner of Labour and the Badge of Honour; he had repeatedly been awarded bonuses and earned commendations; he had incurred no penalties; had belonged to no other political parties; had never been charged before a court of law. Beridze had been recommended for membership in the Party by Zalkind, Batmanov and Pisarev, the representative of the State Committee of Defence. All three had known the applicant for many years. As he read out Pisarev's recommendation, Zalkind remarked:

"This was received today by air mail."

After all the documents had been read out Beridze was given the floor. The Party organizer asked the meeting to put any questions they wished to the applicant. No one had any questions to ask except Grechkin who was interested in some detail of the project of the Olgokhta power station.

"I have been waiting somewhat apprehensively, comrades, for you to ask me one question," Beridze said, a flush mounting to

his cheeks. "A question you would be perfectly justified in asking: why have I not applied for membership in the Party before this? After all, I am thirty-five years of age, I became an engineer in Soviet times.... You have not asked me that question. Nevertheless I cannot overlook it. Let me say honestly that there was no really serious reason behind it. It had always seemed to me that the actual joining of the Party was no more than a formality and that it was enough for a man to be conscious of his devotion to the Party.... When I attended the institute and during the first years of work I believed that if I joined the Party, public work and diverse other assignments might distract me from my studies and prevent me from giving all my attention to engineering. Something of the kind actually did happen in the case of a comrade of mine. I am ashamed to have to confess here to such an attitude, but evidently it persisted until quite recently too in spite of my years. Perhaps you wonder why Beridze should have suddenly taken it into his head to join the party. But this is not a sudden step on my part. Put me to any test, comrades, and you will find that I am a Communist!" Beridze

was visibly agitated and Alexei, listening to him, shared his friend's emotions. "From the first day of the war I have been painfully conscious of not being a member of the Party. Especially when I heard one scoundrel voice the opinion that in the event of a German victory it would be better not to be a Party member. After that, the fact that I did not belong to the Party was a constant torment to me."

Beridze paused to catch his breath.

"The other day a Party conference was held here. I tell you frankly I was miserable all the time it was in session. I asked myself: 'How could you have been left on the sidelines like this? Is that your place?' Someone, it was Tanya Vasilchenko, asked me: 'Why are you not at the conference, Georgi Davydovich?' And I hadn't the courage to confess that I was not a Party member. Yesterday when Comrade Stalin was speaking I said to myself: 'Beridze, you cannot remain outside the Party for another day, another hour!'"

Georgi Davydovich spoke with passion, his habitually restless fingers forever in motion, tugging at his beard or shifting diverse objects from place to place. The vote in favour of

admitting him was unanimous. Grechkin smilingly raised both hands.

"Just a moment. I have a word to say," Zalkind announced as everyone stirred on the assumption that the meeting was over. From the look in Mikhail Borisovich's eye, from his restrained smile and the way he spoke, Alexei saw that the Party organizer too was moved. "These are hard times, comrades, for our country, for our people and for the Party as well. It is a time of danger we have never yet experienced. . . . A time like this puts people to the test. Like an acid it separates the gold and the dross. Our finest people are realizing that their destiny is inseparably linked with the Bolshevik Party and they take their places beneath its standard. They want to share with the Party all the hardships of the struggle. At the front the fighting men scribble applications before going into battle: 'Please consider me, a Communist.' Comrade Beridze too is a fighter in our army, a fighter who has a hard job of work to do for victory, and he wishes to tackle it as a Communist. Accept my heartiest congratulations, Comrade Beridze!"

He pressed the chief engineer's hand in both of his, looked him in the eyes and embraced him warmly. Then Batmanov came

over and he too embraced Beridze, whispering: "High time, old man." Alexei approached behind the others. Beridze glanced at him and smiled. Alexei's face, an open book as always, revealed at once his embarrassment and the joy he shared with his comrade. Beridze pulled the young man toward him and kissed him heartily on both cheeks.

The day was coming to an end. Everyone hurried back to work. Zalkind, dressed for the street, caught up with Alexei in the corridor.

"Come along with me to Terekhov. Have you forgotten our date? No use looking at your watch, you'll make up for lost time afterwards...."

The car sped along a road that was like a deep trench with walls of snow. Zalkind held the wheel between his huge mittens and peered through the frosted windshield, throwing an occasional significant glance at the engineer beside him.

"Yes, friend Alyosha, as I said before, this is a great day! I was especially proud of Beridze today. I felt as if he had made me a handsome gift. When I read his personal data today I couldn't help thinking what wonderful people the Soviet power has brought

up: a multitude of highly skilled men, experts, and with a completely new mental and moral make-up. The Germans are doing their best to destroy everything live and precious in our land. But the war will come to an end one day and then all that has been destroyed will have to be rebuilt. And we are going to rebuild faster and better than before. Why? Because we have tens and hundreds of thousands of experts who are loyal to Stalin, a great many Beridzes with his experience and knowledge. Am I right, Alyosha?"

"You are," Kovshov assented, "I have thought about that too but from a different angle."

"Yes?" Zalkind shifted his gaze for a moment from the road.

"It seems to me that we young people who have been brought up by the Soviet system must be particularly exacting toward ourselves at this time."

"In the sense of being conscious of your duty, you mean?"

"No, that goes without saying. Loyalty, after all, is the basis of everything. Loyalty to the Homeland and the Party, readiness to sacrifice one's personal interests, to give one's

life, if need be. I mean something else. By the time he is about thirty the young Soviet man has no right to be half-educated. It is his duty to become expert in his chosen field. We have thousands of leading executives, engineers, architects, chemists, teachers and doctors who are real experts at their jobs. But we also have a great many semieducated people and many more who are downright ignorant. Yet they all had the same opportunities."

They had reached a section of the road that had been drifted over and the car, running at high speed, skidded in the loose snow. Zalkind swiftly shifted gears and manipulated skilfully with the wheel in an effort to get the car under control. It was some minutes before he finally cleared the danger spot.

"I thought we were stuck that time," said Alexei.

"Your fears were groundless. I'm a first-class driver, you know," Mikhail Borisovich remarked with mock pride.

With the car running smoothly again, Zalkind reverted to the topic of discussion.

"That was an interesting idea of yours, Alyosha. I too have often wondered why it is

that people with identical backgrounds, equal rights in society, and even, let us assume, equal natural abilities turn out so differently. Yefimov's case has distressed me sorely. I have been thinking about him all these days and I cannot help comparing him . . . well, with this man Terekhov we are about to visit. They are of the same age, they came to Novinsk at the same time. I believe they were in the same Komsomol group as well. They learned to work here, grew to maturity and became members of the Party. And now, while you may compare them perhaps, you cannot put them in the same category. Terekhov is a first-rate chap, as you will see for yourself. As for Yefimov, well, I have told you about him. Why is it that Terekhov today is an excellent commander of an army, or at least a division, of labour whereas Yefimov, frankly speaking, ought to be removed from his job. Why has this difference between the two manifested itself at a time of stress?" Zalkind glanced questioninglly at Alexei.

"I suppose their case is similar to that of Batmanov and Sidorenko?"

"Perhaps. Possibly it is a matter of a different attitude to oneself, possibly one of

them is less exacting toward himself than the other. Evidently Terekhov's development has been a steady, logical process, whereas Yefimov's has slipped, at some point. At the beginning they made an equally good showing and were hence promoted to positions of responsibility. Terekhov regarded his promotion as a sort of advance payment for work not yet accomplished. And so he went ahead and studied hard and managed to finish a correspondence course at a Moscow institute. Yefimov, on the other hand, took his promotion to be nothing more than a recognition of his abilities and he felt that he had already arrived. From that moment he ceased to grow and hence he has fallen behind. Am I not right, Alexei?" Zalkind spotted a rut in the road and jammed on his brakes in time to avoid it. "Or perhaps it is not Yefimov's fault but ours for having promoted him prematurely? Ah, friend Alyosha, how gratifying it is to see people making a success of their work and how distressing to observe their failures!"

The frost gathered rapidly on the windshield; it obscured Zalkind's vision and he had to keep wiping it. Alexei leaned back and closed his eyes.

The town with its long rows of standard frame houses had long since been left behind. For some time now the road had been winding between two ridges of snow-covered hills. The factory district came into view unexpectedly beyond the last hill; spread over a broad plain, it was neatly laid out with paved streets, large four- and five-story brick houses, and dozens of factory buildings surrounded by a high fence.

"Well, Alyosha, do you know where you are now?" Zalkind could not suppress a faintly ironic smile. "Remember how you scoffed at Novinsk when you first came? Why make such a fuss about a town that is nothing more than a construction site, you said. Well, look about you, my friend. See those factory buildings, those apartment houses? And there are clubs and a hospital, too. You can see them from here. But if you had happened to visit this place eight years ago you wouldn't have seen anything but a few Nanai huts and virgin forests...."

In the spacious room, adjoining the director's private office they were stopped by the secretary.

"Excuse me, Comrade Zalkind, the director is in conference at the moment. Will you please wait while I ask him whether he can see you." She disappeared and reappeared in a moment leaving the door of the inner room ajar. "Step in, please."

Terekhov, a clean-shaven, well-groomed young man wearing a smart navy-blue suit, rose from his desk to meet them. All the others present stood up as well.

"This won't take very long," Terekhov said to Zalkind. "If you don't mind we shall carry on. We'll be through in ten minutes."

"Go ahead. We'll sit quietly and listen. Might I enquire what this Far-Eastern ammunition plant is conferring about on an occasion like November Seventh?"

"I daresay you know, Mikhail Borisovich, that we have latterly been working hard to improve our production methods so as to raise output." Terekhov spoke quietly, addressing Zalkind and Kovshov in turn. "Today, November Seventh, we are introducing three major innovations: a conveyor in the foundry, the direct-flow production line in the machine shop, and an hour-by-hour operation schedule throughout the plant. All our depart-

ments have been on a Stalin Watch since morning. The first shift is nearly over and we have met to ascertain the results."

The conference went on. Terekhov conducted it speedily, allowing no one to speak for more than two minutes, whether he was a shop foreman, technologist or the chief engineer. All present had a clear grasp of the situation and no lengthy explanations were required. A brief report of the day's output figures and a few words about snags and hitches was all that was wanted.

Without raising his voice or indulging in strong language, Terekhov rebuked the chief of the technical supply department.

"I must criticize you today on behalf of the whole plant. Yesterday you promised to have the drying oil by morning. Where is it? You have let us down badly. If you couldn't get it you ought not to have promised. We won't get far if I and the chief engineer have to do your work for you."

He paused for a second and turned to the head dispatcher and the chief of the machine shop

"You two have not grasped the purpose of the hour-by-hour operation schedule which is to know exactly every hour whether produc-

tion is running smoothly, how many parts have been made in the course of the hour, at what point production lags and at what point there is an unhealthy spurt. But you haven't even been able to keep count of the parts made during the shift."

When the conference was over, Terekhov went over with a smile to where Zalkind and Kovshov were sitting.

"I don't want my carping and grumbling here to give you the impression that the plant is doing badly. On the contrary. The first shift turned out 140 per cent of quota in the main departments and that is 20 per cent better than yesterday. We've had a successful day and I am very satisfied. Incidentally, don't forget, Mikhail Borisovich, that we are the first in the region to be switching over to the direct-flow production line and the hour-by-hour schedule.

"No, Ivan Kornilovich, we could hardly forget that," Zalkind responded.

"I daresay you have come to check whether Terekhov is filling your orders?" Terekhov turned to Alexei. "Well, I am ready for you. Check away. I've accepted the order for the pressure units and turned it over to our designing department."

"No, we don't intend to do any checking today. You invited us to drop in and so we came. We're still in a state of primordial chaos over at our construction job—all formlessness and void. You here are at a different stage, everything has taken shape. Will you show us around yourself?"

"Yes, I'll take you. Easier to defend myself in case of trouble! But first let me register a complaint. I tried to phone you about it at the office a number of times but I couldn't get you."

"A complaint? You don't look as if you had anything to complain about? What's the trouble?"

"It's the City Committee. The comrades over there are down on me."

"Indeed? What have they against you?" Zalkind's interest was clearly aroused.

"I believe I mentioned this to you once before. I have mastered the technique of my job well enough to get along without a chief engineer. But I have discovered that I am not very strong on economics, which means that I am obliged to rely utterly on my accountants and bookkeepers. For example, when they bring me a plan or a balance sheet all I can do is sign it. I tried to figure it out

once or twice but it was no good: I don't know enough about it, with the result that I can only catch the minor errors that stare me in the face. I thought the matter over for a long time and finally decided to fill the gap in my education by taking a correspondence course at an institute of planning and economy. So I enrolled in the third course."

Terekhov produced a silver cigarette case, proffered it to his guests, and lit up with a chrome-plated lighter shaped like a miniature mortar shell.

"The other day the first test papers came from the institute," he went on. "That evening I got a few of the bookkeepers and accountants together and we began to study. I thought it wouldn't do them any harm either. As luck would have it, one of the instructors from the City Committee happened to drop in and you ought to have heard the fuss he raised! Said I was crazy to start such nonsense in wartime. I haven't been able to show my face in town without hearing all sorts of jibes. The 'student-director' they call me." He shrugged his shoulders and looked at Zal-kind. "But my studies aren't doing any harm and later on they are bound to do a great deal of good. The comrades are afraid that

I am wasting my time, they claim my studies are diverting me from my main job. But my time is my own business. I'm not wasting anyone else's time and I'm not asking to be relieved of any of my duties. It ought to be enough to see to it that I fulfil my plan and run the plant the same as if I were just a director and not a student besides."

"Good, Ivan Kornilovich," Zalkind rose. "I like the idea of your studying. In fact, I heartily approve of it. I'll give those scoffers a piece of my mind and they'll leave you alone."

Mikhail Borisovich's eyes met Alexei's and the young engineer saw the same expression of warm pride he had noticed on Zalkind's face an hour before when Beridze was admitted into the ranks of the Party.

They went to look over the plant. The director led the way, his hands thrust into the pockets of his jacket. A deafening din as if hundreds of wheels were racing over rails somewhere in the immediate vicinity met them in the huge, chill core shop. Girls were tending enormous sieves through which sand and red clay were being sifted. Then the clay and sand went into large, fast-revolving mixing drums—it was these that produced the

dull rumbling sound. Two young men were adding dextrin and drying oil, which were used as binding agents in the mixture, into one of the drums.

The greater part of the shop was occupied by long tables flooded with light on both sides of which stood women workers packing the core sand into patterns built into the tables.

"How's the working class making out?" Zalkind jovially enquired of one of the girls, whose hands moved with amazing swiftness as she chatted and giggled with the girl beside her, watching the director out of the corner of her eye.

"Couldn't be better!"

"That's what I thought! Doing your 50 per cent, eh?"

"Fifty per cent! My grandma Matryona did that much when she was 90."

"That's a sharp little tongue you've got," Zalkind laughed.

"Wounded vanity," Terekhov explained. "She and her friend turn out 150 per cent of their quota."

Surveying the shop and its busy occupants, Terekhov said: "There you have our working class. No men except for the specialists and the few who are doing work beyond

the strength of women and youngsters. Our plant gave the Red Army a whole regiment of fighting men."

At the entrance to the foundry they were met by a scraggy old man in a stained quilted jacket and a shabby pancake of a cap.

"This is our senior technologist, Ivan Ivanovich Baturin, king of the cupola furnace," Terekhov introduced him with a tender look in his eyes.

Baturin looked exhausted, his face was haggard and shrunken and his eyes were bleary and red from fatigue.

"As soon as the shift is over you must go home and take a rest, Ivan Ivanovich. I've told you before I won't have you staying on in the shop for days on end. We won't last very long if we overtax our strength, you know."

"Not today, Ivan Kornilovich, I beg you, let me stay today," Baturin replied in a voice surprisingly deep for one so puny. "I cannot leave the Stalin Watch, can I? As far as I know," he added with a sly smile, "you haven't been home for a week yourself."

"Your information is not quite accurate, Ivan Ivanovich. You see how spruced up I am, shaved and dressed in my best clothes," retorted the director.

"The old man is his father-in-law," Zal-kind whispered to Alexei.

They climbed the steep stairway that wound spirally around the hot, throbbing iron body of the furnace. Through the large charging window they could see the inferno of bluish flame inside. A wave of heat enveloped the visitors and took the chill out of their bones at once.

"The heat'll soon be on its way," Baturin explained. "The wood's burning and the air blast is on. We've already charged her with coke and now we'll put in the metal."

A tall lad with a smoke-grimed face straightened up for a moment to glance at the guests and exchange a greeting and then went on shovelling chunks of metal into the fire-breathing maw. Alexei stared fascinated at the swirling, roaring, hissing, writhing flame. When he had shovelled in the whole pile of metal scrap, the lad began to measure out the next portion of coke to feed the furnace.

"Been working at the furnace long?" Alexei asked Baturin.

"Long enough. I knew the furnace before I met my wife and we've been married forty-five years now."

"Where are you from, the Urals?"

"No, I'm a local man. My father was one of the peasants who settled here. But I've spent all my life in the factory. I used to work at the Rubezhansk arsenal. Heard of it?"

"Ivan Ivanovich is the patriarch of the large Baturin tribe," Zalkind put in. "He has sisters and brothers, sons and grandsons all over town. Your boys are away, aren't they, Ivan Ivanovich?"

"Yes, two are serving with Rokossovsky, one is here in a border guard unit. He is dissatisfied. Says he would rather be with his brothers than hanging about here doing nothing." The old man screwed up his eyes and fixed Zalkind with a piercing look. "What do you think, Mikhail Borisovich, are the Japs likely to stay where they are or will they try coming this way?"

"Now then, Ivan Ivanovich, you know far more about the Japs than I do, after all, you served with Boiko-Pavlov's partisans. What is your opinion: will the Japs attack us or not?"

Thus talking they went downstairs and crossed over to the foundry. Inside it was rather dark: the glow of the molten metal

eclipsed the electric lights. A conveyor consisting of an endless line of trucks strung together was moving along an elliptical narrow-gauge track. Terekhov, after a critical inspection, hurried over to the control panel, asking Baturin to show the guests over the shop.

Near the entrance sectional flasks were being prepared for casting mortar shells. The ready flasks with cores inserted were moving along the conveyor to the furnace.

A tall man wearing blue glasses and swinging a crowbar tapped the furnace and the molten metal poured down the trough casting a lurid glare around. Two foundrymen, oblivious to all but the job at hand, held a ladle under the fiery stream. The first ladleful they spilled out as skim and with the second hurried to fill the next mould in line. A gaseous flame spurted with a hiss from the bottom of the flask. Then they filled a second mould, spilled the remainder of the metal onto the foundry floor and took the place of another pair of founders at the gutter.

"Go easy on the metal—spilling too much!" Baturin shouted to them.

The visitors followed the conveyor. Further down workers removed the cores from

the flasks revealing the raspberry-hued castings inside. A foundry hand knocked them out of the moulds onto a hand truck. Still hot, the shell bodies were taken to the vibrator and clamped down for the metallic plunger of the machine to play a tattoo on until the now useless core was shaken loose. Hollowed out, the body of the mortar shell was now, ready in the rough.

The party turned to the control panel where Terekhov was.

"Warn the workers," he was saying to the shop superintendent, "that I'm about to speed up the conveyor." Noticing Zalkind at this point, he nodded to him. "I intend to prove that the conveyor must be run faster. There have been objections made that the workers will not be able to keep up with it and there'll be more culls. The fact remains, however, that we've got a good many culls simply because the cupolas run ahead of the rest of the process. So why not set a conveyor pace that'll keep up with the furnaces from the very start. The workers won't have any difficulty in getting used to the higher speed. It'll save retraining them later on."

Zalkind nudged Alexei to draw his attention to Terekhov. The young director with his

energetic, determined features looked handsome indeed as he stood there in the glow of the dazzling metal. Having increased the speed of the conveyor he strode rapidly alongside it in a direction opposite to its motion, watching the workers engaged in the various operations and exchanging brief remarks with them.

The group halted at the exit from the foundry; here Baturin said goodbye to the visitors for he had to return to the cupola furnaces. Zalkind gave him a long hand-clasp.

"When you write to your sons," he said, "give them my very best regards. I remember when they joined the Party. And you ought to take care of your health, Ivan Ivanovich. The director's right: we need lots of health, for there's a long fight ahead of us."

At the senior inspector's desk Terekhov signed to the party to stop. A slight, snubnosed woman who evidently found the shell body she was holding rather heavy was arguing with a husky young man in Red Army uniform.

"Your fault-finding is only causing losses and keeping our output down. Where do you

see a blister here? I know you, you simply don't want us to fulfil the plan on November Seventh!"

Straining herself she pushed the metal shell to the senior inspector's face. The latter calmly brushed it aside.

"I want to see the factory exceed plan just as much as you. But I can't pass sub-standard output. Take a good look yourself and you'll see the blister. Don't forget these shells are to be used as ammunition and not as kitchen utensils."

"They're husband and wife," Terekhov smiled. "She's an inspector for the factory and he's one for the army. A splendid combination! They argue all the time and are always asking to be put on separate jobs."

On noticing the director, the factory inspector dropped the heavy shell on the floor and ran up to him.

"Comrade Director! Ivan Kornilovich! When is this going to stop? Thanks to him I'm on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I wish you would transfer me to some other department, I can't stand the sight of him any more!"

"I can't agree with you. It would be against my interests to transfer you. Maybe

you'd better divorce him and look for a better husband," Terekhov teased her.

The visitors wound up the tour of inspection in the assembly shop. Here the mortar shells acquired final shape and were crated, two in a box. With an air of deep concentration a boy of about ten was painting a message on the crates: "A Blow at Hitler!"

As the guests were leaving the assembly shop the music that had been issuing from the loud-speakers, barely audible amid the hubbub of work, broke off suddenly and the announcer in a ringing voice informed listeners that he was taking them over to Red Square. Terekhov ordered work stopped wherever possible and into the resultant stillness swept the sound of the measured tread of marching men, the clatter and roar of tanks and the remote echoes of commands.

Kovshov glanced at his watch. It was five o'clock in the afternoon. Ten o'clock in the morning Moscow time. On the stroke of ten as always! A tremor of emotion shook him as he realized the significance of the familiar words "as always"! Volokolamsk, Mozhaisk, Naro-Fominsk, the disheartening news from the front in the past few days—

and now the parade on Red Square promptly at 10 o'clock as always. And Stalin from the mausoleum tribune addressing the people.

"Can there be any doubt that we can and are bound to defeat the German invaders?"

Hot tears of joy rolled unchecked down Alexei's cheeks

... Night was descending on the factory district as Zalkind and Kovshov set out for home. The car, its powerful headlights laying a bright path, tore along in the darkness.

"Is it not thrilling to be alive, Alyosha?" Zalkind was exulting. "Our children and grandchildren will envy us. Nobody could have put it better than Gorky: 'What a splendid job it is to be a human being on this earth!'"

When they reached town Zalkind stopped the car at a small house with a neat front garden, piled high with snowdrifts that reached all the way up to the windows.

"Come on, Alyosha, it's time we had something to eat," Zalkind invited.

The engineer hesitated. He had been aware for some time of a gnawing hunger but he was worried about the work he had

left unfinished. Zalkind settled the matter by taking his arm and pulling him out of the car.

"When will you learn the golden rule of obedience to your elder comrades!"

Mikhail Borisovich's wife, a little woman with live dark eyes, and their five-year-old daughter with black curly hair framing a chubby face, were waiting for him.

"Take off your coat, uncle, take off your coat," the little girl piped, echoing her mother's invitation.

"We are in a hurry, Paulina Yakovlevna," said Zalkind, and his wife bustled off to set the table.

Alexei could not refrain from voicing aloud his delight at the warmth, comfort and cleanliness of this cosy home, so heartwarming to a lonely and virtually homeless bachelor like himself. While Zalkind helped his wife to set the table, padding about the room in his soft fur boots which had replaced the felt *burki*, little Mira introduced Alexei to her dolls, and Mikhail Borisovich saw the young engineer's face light up with an inner glow.

Bookcases lined the walls of two rooms from floor to ceiling. Alexei was thrilled at the sight and he reflected wistfully that it was

a long time since he had browsed among books. There was little time for reading nowadays.

"I collected them volume by volume over a long period. Fortunately I have been living in one place for a number of years," Zalkind observed.

Most of the books were about the Far East, ranging from translations of treatises by arrogant Japanese generals about expansion towards the Urals down to the latest books on agriculture in regions of eternal frosts. Alexei turned the leaves of volume after volume. Many of them were quite new to him. He promised himself that he would read every book in Zalkind's library and chose a few of Arsenyev's works to begin with.

On a separate shelf beside the writing table lay a small pile of modestly bound books by Far-Eastern writers and a file of a local magazine. The autographs on the flyleaves spoke of the friendship between his host and the authors.

"They visit me sometimes," he said. "I like to tease them by showing them that all their works fit onto the palm of one hand. I have become very patriotic about Far-Eastern literature, it actually hurts me to see a good

book by any but a Far-Eastern author. I believe that the best and most authentic books about our region ought to be written right here. Who is better qualified to write about the Far East than we? Take them along and look them over when you have a spare moment."

"Some of our authors—those who have not gone to the front—are busy writing about fighting episodes they have never seen," Zalkind observed rather sadly. "Our region is the remote rear at the moment and they have forgotten it. Yet it's the rear they ought to be writing about, telling of the part the Far East is playing in the war." •

"In the war?" Alexei echoed with irony, and Zalkind shook a finger at him.

At dinner Alexei lavishly praised everything he ate.

"Why aren't you eating, daughter?" Zalkind demanded of his little girl. "You don't like the fish? Uncle Alexei says it's good and he's from Moscow, he ought to know."

"I came home this afternoon to find that she had been crying half the morning," Paulina Yakovlevna said. "She had been playing outside so long that she nearly froze her feet. I have to leave her by herself when

I go to school," she explained to Alexei. "I teach Russian and literature, you know. And then there is the housework to attend to."

"So she cried, did she?" Zalkind echoed in mock indignation. "Too bad I wasn't home, I wouldn't have allowed it. What's the idea of crying, eh? Lyonka never cried."

"It hurt so," the little girl complained. "If it didn't hurt so much I wouldn't have cried."

"Of course it hurt, but you ought to have smiled instead of crying, just to spite the pain."

Alexei could see that the Zalkind family was bound by a rich, staunch friendship that had survived many a trial. The tenor of life here was one of vitality and humour, of scorn for trifling discomforts and intolerance of any manifestation of weakness. Their consideration for one another was natural and habitual, and not assumed for the benefit of visitors as is sometimes the case in some families.

Zalkind threw a questioning glance at his wife.

"No," she said, understanding at once, "no letters or telegrams...."

"There was nothing in the City Committee either...."

"Whom do you expect to hear from?" Alexei enquired.

"My brothers. I have three of them, all at the front and I haven't heard from any of them for a long time. We are waiting for news from my wife's parents and sisters too. They lived in Mariupol and we have had no word from them since the war broke out. Then there's Lyonka, our son who graduated from navigation school in Vladivostok this autumn and who left at once on a voyage to America," Zalkind went on. "I have another daughter as well, Uncle Alyosha," he smiled. "She doesn't write either, but she telephones every day. She is studying in medical school in Rubezhansk."

"There's talk in town that the Japanese have sunk one of our merchant vessels near the Kuril Islands. Is that true?" Paulina Yakovlevna asked and a shade of anxiety crossed her face.

"I'm afraid so," said Mikhail Borisovich looking into her eyes.

"I'll make some coffee," she said, rising.

"No, you sit still. I'll do it."

Soon the delicious smell of coffee pervaded the house from the pot boiling on the electric plate.

"Those Japs are like a festering sore that has been bothering us for many years," Zalkind said. He turned to Alexei. "I have my own scores to settle with them. Twenty years ago I was a commissar in a partisan detachment. For brutality and atrocities the Japanese can give the Germans a few pointers. If ever they did attack we would have to send the women and children away into the forests. But they won't attack. Old man Baturin was right. They are waiting for Moscow to fall. And that isn't going to happen...."

Zalkind went out to the kitchen to fetch the cups.

"In 1921 the Japanese literally tore to pieces a dear comrade of Mikhail Borisovich's before his eyes." Paulina Yakovlevna said in a low voice. "Lyonka is that comrade's son. We adopted him when he was not quite three."

On returning to the head office Alexei plunged impatiently into the work awaiting him. Topolev had already gone home leaving on Kovshov's desk his opinion of the estimate and the rationalization proposals, written in

his neat round hand. He suggested a change in the estimates that would reduce the cost of wooden buildings, and had approved two of the proposals sent in from the line: one, a simple and speedy method of making shingles for roofing, and the other, a device for loading pipes onto trucks. Alexei called in the man in charge of inventions and rationalization proposals and instructed him to work out the technical improvements Topolev had approved of and send them out to the sections.

Petya Gudkin, who had been impatiently awaiting the chief's return for some time, came in timidly with the drawings and calculations he had redone, and stood by anxiously while Alexei looked them over. To Petya's surprise Kovshov had no fault to find this time. He even praised the boy for correcting his mistakes, and made no mention of the morning's incident. Alexei, still glowing from the warm hospitality of Zalkind's home, drew the young technician toward him.

"Good work, son. Now run away and have a good time. There's a concert and dancing in the club tonight."

Petya in happy confusion snatched up his drawing without a word and dashed

to the door, knocking over a chair on his way.

Alexei went in to the designing office to discuss some points of the project still outstanding. The biggest stumbling block at the moment was the unsolved problem of how to dig trenches at the bottom of the strait. The engineers pricked up their ears when Alexei told them that Grubsky had officially protested against the basic principles of the new project.

"We may be summoned to Rubezhansk any day now. We must hurry, there is not a moment to lose," Alexei said looking worried.

In his presence the engineers did not express their opinion regarding Grubsky's action but as soon as he had left them to go to the telephone centre for a talk with the second section, a heated argument arose in the designing office. Most of the designers had been working conscientiously on the new project, but not all of them were fully convinced that Beridze's solution was the correct one. A few were still sceptical about the advisability of shifting the line from the right to the left bank of the Adun and of laying pipes in the strait in wintertime. But only one of them, a well-dressed engineer named Fursov with

sleek, handsome features and grey hair, expressed violent opposition to the new project.

"Pyotr Yefimovich Grubsky has undertaken a noble mission and I admire his courage," he declared pompously. "Many of us secretly agree with him but we are afraid to support him."

"Don't speak on behalf of others," Kobzev objected with asperity, raising his shaggy head from his drawing board. "The trouble is that there are no grounds for supporting Grubsky. How can anyone defend the old project now that life itself has cast it aside?"

"But you yourself objected to that Caucasian hothead's idea, Anatoli Sergeyevich," Fursov reminded him.

"I did at first, but I don't now. I am concerned with the fate of the job, and since that depends on the new project, I am prepared to do everything I can to ensure its success."

"So you favour the left bank idea too? You, who know very well why Grubsky turned it down long ago?"

"It is time we designers stopped talking about the left bank and the right bank," Kobzev said firmly. "The decision has been taken to all intents and purposes and we've got to forget about the right bank. Experience

will show whether Beridze was right or not. Now that I have come to know the man better I have confidence in him and I am convinced that he will soon give us additional and final proof of the correctness of his decision."

"Blessed are the faithful," Fursov sneered, adjusting his scarf.

Kobzev leapt to his feet, throwing down his ruler and dividers with such violence that the sharp point of the latter pierced the drawing.

"There was some excuse for entertaining doubts when we first began working with Beridze and Kovshov. But there is no excuse now," Kobzev, usually so mild and gentle, now sounded harsh and brusque. "The other day in this very room Kovshov said: 'We here are all co-authors of the new project. Much of it is still unclear to us but we will do it just the same.' I did not raise any objections because I agreed with Kovshov. I am sure that the others here made no objections because they too are working honestly and conscientiously on the new project. If we had any doubts it was because we had the interests of the job at heart. But why, Fursov, did you not speak up and state your objections to Kovshov? You don't consider

yourself a co-author of the new project, do you? You sympathize with Grubsky, the author of the old project."

"No need to get so excited, Anatoli Sergeyevich," Fursov said in a conciliatory tone. "Surely I can have my own opinion and be free to express it when I wish? Pray do not be angry, I have no wish to quarrel with you."

"And I have no intention of condoning your attitude any longer. I shall ask the chief engineer and the department head to release you from your two-faced participation in the work on the project."

"Quite right. He runs to Grubsky twenty times a day. He might as well go and stay with him!" Petya spoke up. The young technician had listened with rising indignation to Fursov and was pleased to see Kobzev telling him off.

While his staff was engaged in hot debate, Alexei was negotiating with the sections. A call had come in from tractor driver Silin who had safely reached Section Two on his "snail" and who wanted to know whether he had the right to let the sections detain him if they needed his help or whether he ought to ignore their pleas and push on to

the strait. Section Two had asked him to help them rig up a bulldozer to clear the roads and to overhaul two tractors that had gone out of commission.

"To say the truth, I have a personal reason for wanting to stay," Silin explained. "There is a lumber camp not far from here where I used to work before I came to the job. My wife is driving my tractor for me there right now. I have an important matter I would like to discuss with her."

"I think you certainly ought to stay at the sections if they need your help," Alexei replied. "Don't let them keep you too long, of course, otherwise you'll never get to the strait. I shall not interfere with your family affairs. If you have something important to discuss with your wife, go ahead and discuss it by all means."

This remark brought a laugh from someone listening in on the line. Silin evidently thought it was Kovshov.

"Now don't you get the wrong idea," he said. "When I say it's important I mean it. I want to ask the wife whether she has any objections to donating the money we've saved up to buy a tank. I think what we've got ought to cover the full cost of a tank."

Someone overhearing the conversation emitted a low whistle of surprise.

"Very good, Comrade Silin. Neither Filimonov nor myself have any doubts about your conscientiousness. You can use your own discretion about staying depending on the situation. As for the tank, I think it a splendid idea. I can add something myself if there isn't enough. . . ."

Melnikov broke into the conversation at that point.

"Did you get that opus of mine?" he enquired.

"No. What opus?"

"Oh, just an idea I put down on paper. Maybe it will help to solve the problem of digging a trench at the bottom of the strait."

"It will take three years for your opus to get here. Couldn't you give me the gist of it in a few words?"

"The first thing to be done is to expose the bed of the strait," Melnikov shouted to make himself heard above the other voices on the line. "The solution is in the freezing of the water from the surface down. If you keep on removing the ice as it forms, you will gradually get a sort of corridor in the ice. When the bottom is exposed the second

stage of the job begins: digging a trench by some mechanical means."

Alexei made no reply. He was turning over the proposition in his mind.

"Hullo, Comrade Kovshov, are you there?" Melnikov called.

"I'm here. I'm just considering the merits of that idea of yours. I can't say I think much of it."

"Why?"

"You can use the freezing method to cross a small stream, but here we have to deal with a twelve-kilometre strait. Of course we'll take up your suggestion when we get your letter. I'm just telling you what my first impressions are."

... The list of matters demanding attention seemed endless. Alexei was just about to write an item for the wall newspaper when Grechkin entered.

The planning department chief was not one to bear a grudge and he had already forgotten his unpleasant experience at the military drill that morning.

"Batmanov has been asking for both of us, wants to know why the answer to the telegram from the People's Commissariat and the instructions for organizing winter

work aren't ready yet. He was in quite a stew about it, wants to see us at once...."

Together they compiled a long telegram to the People's Commissariat. Then they went over the estimates of materials required for winter work and were drafting the instructions when the telephone rang. It was another summons from the construction chief. They hurried to his office, making a mutual compact en route not to mention the instructions.

Beridze was in Batmanov's office busily figuring something on a slip of paper and puffing abstractedly on his pipe. Vasili Maximovich ran his eyes over the telegram, signed it and looked up expectantly at the engineer and planning chief.

"Well? Is that all?"

"Why, what else was there?" Grechkin asked innocently.

"Look at these two angels, Georgi Davydovich! You'd think they had no idea why I called them in. Thought they could get away with a telegram. Where are the instructions, where are your estimates? They ought to be here on my desk. Don't you realize what an important document it is? It's an order to start preparations for an offensive. Do you understand that or don't you?"

"We do," said Grechkin.

"Then what are you waiting for? Let's have it."

"It isn't ready."

"When will it be ready? Next spring?"

Grechkin pointed out that time had been short.

"We don't know what to do first," he complained. "Everything is urgent, extra urgent. . . . The machine is running full steam ahead now and it's hard to keep up with the pace. . . ."

"It's no use adopting that piteous tone, I can't stretch out the day to forty-eight hours for you. Better tell me when you expect to have the instructions ready." Batmanov turned to Kovshov. "Are you also having a hard time keeping the pace, don't know what to get your hands on first?"

"Well, there really isn't much time, you know. Of course, you can't do anything about that. But I have a question to ask you: have you shifted the time limit? As far as I remember we were supposed to have the instructions ready tomorrow?"

"No, I haven't shifted the time limit, but evidently I'll have to. I see I won't be able to get anything out of you people for another

week and there's no time for delays at this juncture."

"You'll have the instructions tomorrow," Alexei promised.

Outside Batmanov's office Grechkin pounced on Kovshov.

"Why did you have to do that? He didn't expect to get them tomorrow. Now we'll have to hang around here till morning. And the family's expecting me home earlier tonight. After all, it's a holiday."

But before they had climbed the stairs to their own offices the planning chief's good humour was restored and he suggested to Alexei that they work in his room.

"It's nice and warm in there."

A steam pipe ran through one corner of Grechkin's office making it warm enough to work in shirtsleeves. The planning chief sat down at his desk and immediately assumed an air of importance. Three of his staff members came in; they were going home and had come to pick him up.

"Go to the devil!" Grechkin said without malice. "You heard me—go to the devil and shut the door behind you." He laid out his papers, and puckering his forehead, unburdened himself to Alexei: "To be the chief

of a planning department is the worst thing that could happen to anybody. You're forever being hurried, always being bawled out and nobody will ever say a good word for you. Most people take vacations, I never took a vacation in my life. I've been decorated twice but I never have the time to go and collect my medals. Can't even find the time to get this bump of mine attended to." He pointed to the tumor that protruded on his neck "It just keeps growing. I did get permission once to take a vacation, but before I had time to pack my bags the war broke out and that was the end of my holiday "

They locked the door and agreed not to answer any knocks or telephone calls. Kovshov proceeded to outline the work schedule while Grechkin drafted the introductory part of the instructions. They worked undisturbed for about three hours until Lizochka, after innumerable fruitless telephone calls, came for Grechkin in person. At the sound of her voice behind the door Grechkin started up in alarm, snatched the papers from the desk and hurried home.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AFTER MIDNIGHT

THE NIGHT watchman was amazed to find Alexei still working when he came on duty after midnight. The head office was completely deserted. Like Grechkin, everyone had wished to spend the evening at home, to wind up this memorable work day in festive spirit.

"Everyone's gone except the construction chief and the Party organizer," the watchman told Alexei. "Comrade Beridze dropped into your office a while ago and left a note on your desk."

"Where have you got to?" Georgi Davydovich wrote. "Been hunting for you everywhere. You have forgotten me altogether. After all, we ought to celebrate today in some way. I am anxious to see you. You'll find me at Fedosov's. He says you promised to be there. . . ."

The note had evidently been written many hours ago and now it was hardly time to go visiting. Moreover Alexei did not know where Fedosov lived. At the same time his chill barren room had little attraction for him tonight. And so he sat on alone in the office. He started to write the promised article for Zalkind but his mind teemed with the impressions of the day and he was unable to concentrate.

Presently he heard footsteps in the corridor. The door opened and Fedosov came in. He was very gay, slightly tipsy indeed, his cheeks were flushed and his eyes bright. He told Alexei that Batmanov had called him up from home and had marked the occasion by giving him another dressing down, the third that day.

"Thank goodness I found you, that's some consolation anyhow for all my sufferings. not to speak of having come all the way here in this frost," Fedosov rattled on. "Come along, there's a nice big party over at my place. Everybody's there except you. Georgi Davydovich has been waiting for you all evening...."

To Fedosov's dismay most of his guests had gone by the time he and Alexei reached

the house. Four inveterate card players were engrossed in a game of whist at a table moved close to the stove. Zhenya Kozlova, curled up on the divan in evident boredom, was frankly delighted to see Alexei.

"I had a feeling you'd come, after all."

"Now get busy and play the hostess," said Fedosov.

Zhenya cleared a place for him at the edge of the table.

"Beridze gave up hopes of seeing you. He and Tanya left just a minute ago for the Start. She leaves in the morning with her group, you know."

Fedosov came over to Alexei with the vodka.

"I'm pouring out a big dose for you, and just a drop for Zhenya and me. That's the latecomer's penalty."

With the vodka glass in his hand, Alexei regarded Fedosov and Zhenya with affection. He was glad that his solitude had been broken. If only Georgi Davydovich were here as well. What a pity they had not met after all.

"I know your toast, you don't need to say it," said Zhenya. "Moscow, isn't it? He doesn't drink as a rule," she explained to Fedosov,

but when he does, he drinks to Moscow only."

"I am sure that everyone who had wine to drink today toasted Moscow," Alexei defended himself. "They drank to Stalin's being in Moscow, to the parade on Red Square."

"Hear, hear. I'm going to drink to that too," Fedosov supported him fervently.

He would never forget this November Seventh as long as he lived. Fedosov went on with grave earnestness. He had done more serious thinking than ever before in a single day. And never had he worked with such zeal. Alexei remembered his talk with Zalkind—could it have been that same day? The vodka sent waves of warmth coursing through his veins. Zhenya plied him with food.

Their host was called away to the next room—to settle a dispute over the card game.

"I'll have to leave you. But you won't mind, I'm sure. Two's company anyway," Fedosov remarked hospitably.

"He's right, two's company," echoed Zhenya when Fedosov had left them. "But perhaps I'm the only one who thinks so?" As Alexei did not rise to her bait Zhenya went on. "Do you know what I wanted you for?

Can't you guess? Now sit here a moment and think, I'll be back in a moment."

She returned with a plate of frozen bilberries.

"You haven't guessed, of course." She handed him a glass of homemade liqueur and took one herself. "It's my birthday today. Have you forgotten? I want to drink to the occasion with you. Just try and refuse!"

"Why should I refuse," said Alexei as he tossed off his drink. "Now it's your turn. Accept my congratulations, Zhenya. What shall I wish you? May the war be over by your next birthday."

"You shouldn't have been in such a hurry. I wanted to drink with you," said Zhenya ruefully. "Never mind. Try some of those bilberries. You told me you were being treated to strawberries in your dreams. I can't give you strawberries, but I think you'll find bilberries not a bad substitute."

Zhenya's directness of manner and light-hearted gaiety amused Alexei and he was touched by the girl's kindness. He took her interest in him to be no more than a token of that sociability that was part of her nature. She was friendly with everybody and people found her good company. Alexei too enjoyed

sitting and chatting with her. "Tanya is much prettier but I wouldn't be surprised if Zhenya, with her vitality and merry disposition, wasn't more popular," he reflected.

"Since this is my birthday you daren't refuse me anything," she declared.

"Of course not."

"Very well, let's dance!"

"But there isn't any music!"

"There is, inside of me."

And in a thin girlish treble she struck up a gay tune with a dance rhythm.

"Come along."

But Alexei shook his head.

"Why must we dance? Let's sit here quietly and talk instead...."

"What an obstinate thing you are! On my birthday too! I know I ought to be angry with you but I can't. I'll dance by myself then."

And she began to circle gracefully beside Alexei, singing to herself and regarding Alexei with eyes full of tenderness. Fedosov, watching from the next room, applauded her performance.

Zhenya's look and the solitary hand-clapping jarred on Alexei. His mood changed, he got up and went over to the other side of

the room. Zhenya watched him for a while in silence, but soon wearied and came over to him again.

"How quickly you change. Grechkin is always praising you for being so even-tempered. You're not angry with me, are you?"

"Why should I be angry with you?"

"Couldn't you try not to frown and mope for once, on my birthday at least? You look so much nicer when you smile."

"You don't expect me always to be merry and bright, do you? A person who always smiled would be a dreadful sight."

"How silly I was to be glad when Fedosov went away. There are three of us here just the same." Zhenya said suddenly. In reply to his mute query she added: "She is here beside us, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is. You're right."

"I never thought it possible for a person to be absent and yet present. Why doesn't anyone love me the way you love your Zina?"

"Someone will one day, Zhenya. And one day you will fall in love properly yourself."

"Perhaps I have already?"

Kovshov looked at her critically as if weighing the significance of her words.

"No, you don't look like a person who carries a deep love in his heart. You think love is just a pleasant pastime. But you're mistaken. You'll discover that yourself in time."

Zhenya paused for a moment, stung by his words at first. Then she tossed her fluffy head defiantly.

"I'm glad I don't love like that, so there! What's the use of tormenting yourself the way you and Olga do?"

"What a comparison! I'm not tormenting myself, I am only unhappy at being separated from Zina. My love gives me strength. Olga's love is a misfortune, something to be fought and overcome"

"How complicated it all is!" said Zhenya with chagrin. "Let's think of something pleasanter to talk about."

Alexei laughed and took the girl's hand in a friendly gesture, charmed by her childish impulse to shy away from everything complicated and difficult.

"Why are you laughing?" Zhenya asked, pleased to see that his good humour had returned.

"Just a whim of mine.... You remind me of what I was like myself once."

"In your youth, I suppose?" Zhenya teased.

"Yes, in my youth.... Half a year ago, to be exact."

"What were you like? Do tell me. I'm sure I would have liked you much better as you were then. I can imagine...."

"Wait, Zhenya," Kovshov stopped her. "I'll tell you a story."

He did not know why he told her. He seemed to be responding to some inner impulse. He began with his homecoming after his discharge from hospital. It had all been as before, the crooked little street, the old red brick house, his parents and the familiar objects—all exactly as he had left them. Yet he realized then that he had changed, he was not the same as before. Only three months separated him from the past, yet it seemed to him now as remote and carefree as early childhood....

"And when I look at you and observe your capacity for lighthearted enjoyment, amusement, dancing, I remember that I was like that too once. But I am not any more, and it seems strange that I ever could have been...."

"Alyosha, tell me, what happened to Zina?" Zhenya asked softly. "You haven't mentioned her."

"I hurried straight to her before going home that time. I had a curious presentiment that I wouldn't find her. Nor did I. . . . Zina was already where I had been before they had carried me away on a stretcher. . . . She is a very strong-willed young person. A week after I had left for the front she had managed to get herself sent there too."

Everything in the room where they had spent their few short days of happiness reminded him vividly of her, Alexei related. Rummaging among the papers on the desk he had come across a note in her handwriting and a sheet of drawing paper pinned onto a drawing board. But the war had intervened before she had time to complete the drawing and the paper was covered with a variety of scribblings. He had sat for the entire evening studying that sheet of paper as if it were some rich canvas. The lines, squares and designs were full of a profound meaning he alone could decipher. On leaving the house he had remembered how they had once walked hand in hand down this street

and a woman who happened to pass by had stopped to wish them happiness and to say that she hoped they would go through life together just like that, hand in hand.... A host of trifling incidents that had occurred in the course of their brief life together; incidents that might even have seemed absurd to an outsider but which were tremendously important to him, flashed through his mind in endless procession.... It was curious the way they had stuck so firmly in his memory when at the time they seemed so transient and insignificant....

"Alyosha," Zhenya interrupted him, with a shiver. "Do you mind bringing me my shawl. It's in the next room and I don't feel like getting up."

Left alone, Zhenya wondered idly why Alexei's story gave her such pain. Why had she interrupted him?

Fedosov threw down his cards and went to help Alexei find Zhenya's shawl.

"This is how we amuse ourselves—a game of cards, a drop of wine, light flirtation, blowing kisses and all that. Rather out of date, such pastimes, don't you agree. I was sitting there thinking I ought to be ashamed of myself playing cards on a day like this!

You know what I think, Alexei Nikolayevich? The way we spend our leisure is the most reactionary aspect of our lives. We work in a new way, we have developed a new attitude to property, we have a new sense of duty. But our home life is much as it always was. . . ."

"How old are you, mine host?" Alexei asked bluntly.

"Thirty-four."

"It's about time you got married and started a family. When you have a wife and children you will drop all such foolish notions about reactionary home life. And all that nonsense about wine, light flirtations and blowing kisses as well."

"You speak from personal experience as a family man, eh?" Fedosov twitted him, and then confessed a trifle wistfully. "As a matter of fact, my friend, you hit the nail on the head. Unfortunately there is a sort of philosophy, if you could call it that, current among some of us who believe a fellow ought to have a good time while he's young enough to enjoy himself. Well, I've had a good time. But I've nothing to show for it. Looks as if I've been chasing shadows."

"You ought to get married instead of philosophizing."

"I had designs on Zhenya, wanted to ask her to marry me, as a matter of fact, but you butted in!" Fedosov laughed.

Alexei returned to the other room and threw the shawl around Zhenya's shoulders. Her face looked drawn. Could she have been crying, he wondered. He gave her a searching look. Was there a grain of truth in Fedosov's jocular remark?

"What's the trouble, Zhenya?" he enquired cautiously.

"I feel just a little sad I don't know why, really. Perhaps it was thinking about life before the war that upset me, or maybe it's just that my nerves are on edge tonight."

"All right, we'll stop reminiscing then."

"No, please go on with your story. I want to hear the end."

"But there isn't any end to it!"

"Please tell me."

Kovshov hesitated. But the desire to look back with his newly-acquired vision at what had been was too strong, and he delved into the realm of memory, reliving the past all over again.

Alexei talked on, oblivious of the girl by his side. At last his narrative broke off. He sat with his head bowed. Could all this really have happened so recently?

Zhenya stared at him, her eyes dilated with misery. Suddenly she sprang up and ran weeping out of the room, trailing her shawl behind her....

Alexei, puzzled, hurried after her, but though he searched all over the flat he could not find her. He went outside. The full moon had turned darkness into daylight. The dome of the sky studded with myriads of stars was a pale green. At the horizon the dome rested on a tremulous strip of roseate light. The snow sparkled on the ground.

Looking around him Alexei caught sight of Zhenya. She was sitting on a tree stump, her figure silhouetted darkly against the snow. He went over to her..

"What's the matter, child? Why did you run away? I'm sorry I started that story."

"That's all right, Alyosha, don't worry," she said calmly, rising to her feet and shaking off the snow.

Fedosov met them at the door.

"I thought you had run off without saying good night. I want to go down to the

Start for a last-minute checkup on the equipment for Tanya Vasilchenko's group. Let's all go down and give them a send-off."

Ten minutes later they were striking along the smooth slippery road leading to the Start.

The construction chief had been at work for more than twenty-four hours. During the day he had endeavoured to snatch a brief rest on the couch in his private office, but the thoughts that besieged him drove sleep away.

It was close to two o'clock in the morning when Batmanov finally decided to go home. It was not that he felt conscious of any fatigue—no, Vasili Maximovich was noted for his remarkable power of endurance: moreover, like so many others that day he had been sustained by a powerful feeling of spiritual and physical exaltation. He was going home now simply because it was necessary to make some break in his work.

Batmanov had been busy throughout that great and significant day. The selector apparatus on his desk had been in operation at

most continuously, with calls coming in from the five nearest sections. Staff members had come in endless succession all through the day and Vasili Maximovich had issued them new assignments, expediting with relentless insistence fulfilment of previous ones. He had gone through three separate batches of mail and dictated telegrams, letters, brief memoranda to one or another department chief; held the daily conference of dispatchers; gone down twice to the Start; met parties of newly-arrived workers; seen Silin off on his journey to the strait; talked with Tanya Vasilchenko's group; observed the incessant dispatch of freight to the sections; and, with Beridze, watched experimental welding of pipes in low temperatures. Toward evening he had driven ten kilometres out of town to Nampi where he had addressed a meeting of building workers from Section One assembled on the ice of the Adun.

The day had not been wasted for the construction job. Batmanov had seen and felt this himself, and the progress reports he had received confirmed the impression. By the day's end there was a large pile of them on his desk. The timber that had been felled that day, the trails blazed through the taiga,

the kilometres of roads cut through the snow-drifts, the hundreds of cubic metres of housing and service buildings erected were all the concrete embodiment of the enthusiasm of the builders evoked by Stalin's words. Although normal communication with the remote sections had not yet been established, news had come in from there as well. By a roundabout route Pankov had sent a radiogram from Section Nine with the report that the removal of his section to the left bank had been completed that day. Rogov had somehow managed to obtain the latest news about Goncharuk's caravan of building workers. Uplifted by Stalin's speech which they heard at Section Six, they had spent the rest of the day helping to put up a warehouse there.

In only one respect had Batmanov failed to observe the country's biggest holiday—he had not managed to celebrate at home. He had intended inviting Zalkind and his wife, Beridze and a few other comrades over to his place for the evening and had telephoned instructions to Yevdokia Semyonovna to prepare supper for ten or twelve people. But everything had been swept from his mind by a letter he had found amid the pile of mail from Moscow.

As he picked up the blue envelope Vasili Maximovich had somehow felt at once that it contained news of his family. And he was not mistaken.

A friend who had been helping him in his search for his wife and son wrote that he had seen Anna Ivanovna in Abas-Tuman in the Caucasus. She had managed to leave the Crimea with her ailing son and had placed him in a tuberculosis sanatorium. But the ordeals and hardships endured in the course of the journey and the bombings en route had sapped the child's strength and all efforts to save him were unavailing.

"He died on October 10th. Anna Ivanovna told me that she could not bring herself to write to you of Kostya's death. She extracted a promise of silence from me too. But I feel I have no right to keep the truth from you any longer. You are a man of courage and are strong enough to endure your grief. I told Anna that you ought not to be left in ignorance, for that is worse than the truth. I think she will write to you herself soon, but you must give her time to recover from the shock. She was stunned with grief. She has persuaded herself that she is to blame: you entrusted the boy to her care and she betrayed that trust.

Otherwise she is bearing up splendidly: as an army doctor, third rank, she is working in a military hospital and a tuberculosis sanatorium and finds time for everything. Her chiefs have the highest praise for her. She cannot join you at present—it would perhaps be too painful for her just now. I did not raise the question. I would suggest that you write her yourself without waiting for a letter from her. It is hard for me, my friend, to be the bearer of such sad tidings. But it cannot be helped. War spares no one. In one way or another it affects all of us. Write or wire me if there is anything I can do for you. . . .”

Grechkin happened to be in Batmanov's office when he read the letter, and he could not fail to notice that the chief was upset, but Vasili Maximovich was able to conceal the full bitterness of the anguish that seared him. Had Grechkin been a trifle more observant and less concerned with his report he might have been conscious of the effort it cost Batmanov to suppress his feelings. His face froze, and his hands clutched the back of the chair so violently that the blood seemed about to spurt from the fingers. At last Grechkin left the room. Then and only then did a groan escape Batmanov's lips. Someone knocked at the

door. . . . Batmanov hastily threw on his coat and went out, encountering Filimonov and Fedosov in the doorway. Promising to see them later on, he drove off to Section One. The building workers, standing shivering in an icy wind, were deeply stirred by his passionate address although they could not know that the words of sorrowful tribute to the Soviet people who had perished in the war were uttered not only by a mourning citizen but by a bereaved father. His trip to Nampi helped Batmanov to regain his composure, and for the rest of the day none of his fellow workers detected any change in his demeanour.

. . . The head office had been long since deserted, yet he lingered on in his office, reluctant to return to his large—now needlessly so—house. It was Zalkind's companionship that he sought in his hour of trial. After a brief hesitation Vasili Maximovich telephoned to the Party organizer.

"It's time to knock off, Mikhail Borisovich. Come over to my place. I would be very glad if you would share my lonely supper with me."

Zalkind had just spoken with his wife and promised her that he would be home soon, and hence was about to refuse Batmanov's

invitation and invite him over to his place instead. Batmanov sensed his hesitation.

"I ask it as a favour, Mikhail..." he pleaded.

Something in Vasili Maximovich's voice checked Zalkind's protests. He called up his wife again. Paulina Yakovlevna was greatly disappointed.

"I was just going to wake Mira. She made me promise to let her sit up with us seeing that it's a holiday. Try and come in an hour or two, I'll wait up for you."

Batmanov's house stood forlornly apart amid the snow. Zalkind thought its occupant seemed similarly forlorn in this large, empty dwelling.

"Not very cosy, is it?" Batmanov remarked, observing his friend looking about him with distaste.

"No, it isn't," Mikhail Borisovich admitted.

The rooms indeed had that chill, barren appearance that betrays the absence of a housewife, and one missed the trilling touches that transform a house into a home.

"What! Only two of you?" Yevdokia Semyonovna gasped. "And I've cooked supper for a whole company."

"That's fine. With our healthy appetites we'll do justice to your supper," Zalkind laughed.

While the sleepy landlady bustled about setting the table, the men washed up. Vasili Maximovich removed his army tunic and changed into a loose silk Ukrainian shirt and in a twinkling was transformed into a tall, husky country youth, "the pride of the village." Only the accordion was missing to complete the resemblance. Zalkind in his shaggy clumsy fur boots looked puny beside him.

"It's a long time since we two sat down together to a home-cooked meal, isn't it? Four years, if I'm not mistaken," said Batmanov. "Today is a fitting occasion to drink to our friendship and have a heart-to-heart talk. Why those dark looks at the decanter? You haven't become a pious teetotaler, I trust? See what a modest amount I'm giving you. And don't worry about me, I don't intend to get drunk. My old man used to put away three quarts of liquor on his patron saint's day and remain steady on his feet. Of course, I am not capable of any such feat, but I can drink quite a lot without showing it. It only makes me a little

less reserved perhaps, but I intend to be frank tonight."

"I prize our friendship highly, Vasili, and shall drink to it with pleasure," Zalkind raised his glass.

They sat for a long while after supper was over. The decanter and food had been abandoned some time ago and now they were both smoking furiously, filling the room with a cloud of green tobacco smoke and the large ashtray with a mountain of butts.

"Stalin's speech has given us all added strength and wisdom. On days like this you can actually feel yourself growing a head taller. He always knows when the people need to hear him most. He said victory will be ours, and that means we will win. His words always come true. And when that happens the two billion inhabitants of this earth had better ponder on our strength. Today only our Stalin and his closest comrades-in-arms are capable of seeing ahead, beyond the limits of the war. But it is always well for us rank-and-file Soviet people to think upon the future. We would not be Leninists were we to assume that with the removal of Hitler peace and goodwill will reign on earth. No, an even more bitter struggle will yet have

to be fought. It is interesting to conjecture when it will take place, what scope and form it will take, what our part in that struggle will be and what will be the share of the future Bolshevik generations? You and I belong approximately to the second generation. The third has developed into a mighty host, millions of young people like Kovshov, Tanya Vasilchenko, Terekhov, Rogov. And they will be followed by a fourth, and a fifth. With the example of Stalin before us, we are in duty bound to give the best that we have to the upbringing of those generations. After all, the day will come when you and I will no longer be physically fit to carry on, and whether we like it or not the burden will have to be shifted to younger shoulders. It is our sacred duty to see to it that those who come to replace us are staunch, powerful, fearless and ready to fight for Communism until complete victory is achieved!"

Imperceptibly the conversation drifted to construction matters. Here they were the leaders, theirs was the prime responsibility for people and their labour. They discussed tactics for surmounting obstacles, methods of administrative and Party leadership, the people. . . .

"You set great store by people, each individual is precious to you. That is as it should be, of course," Batmenov said. "But aren't you inclined to be too lenient in some cases? I know how it is: when you think of all those who have perished in the war you want to cherish the living all the more. That is true too. The mediocre worker, the incompetent or the negligent is a Soviet person nevertheless, and hence we must help him, show him how he can improve, teach him. But isn't there a danger of condoning the faults of such people? Don't you think you might be spoiling some of them by your leniency?"

"Give me a concrete example, Vasili!" Zalkind demanded. "Otherwise we will be talking at cross purposes."

"An example? Well, take Yefimov. You are sorry for him, you feel a sense of responsibility for him, and consequently your attitude to him is the wrong one. Out of respect for you I am not interfering in the affairs of Section Three for the moment. Let that section be your responsibility."

"What strikes you as being wrong?"

"A man who has been given a position of authority ought to show himself worthy

of it. What sort of executive is Yefimov? With a few hundred people under him he is lost, he does not know how to manage them. He is actually an obstruction to them. They have a difficult job of work to do and they need a strong man to guide them."

"The section will soon be operating efficiently."

"No doubt it will, thanks to you. And, of course, no section as close to headquarters as the third can be out of order for long. But if things are set to rights there it won't be thanks to Yefimov but in spite of him. From the talk I had with the section today I could see what will happen over there if Yefimov is left in charge."

"Well, what will happen?"

"Temkin, as secretary of the Party organization will be virtually chief of the section. He has already taken things into his hands, knowing that he has your support. But what will be the good of your softheartedness? The section will pull itself out of the hole and Yefimov will pat himself on the back under the illusion that it is he, Yefimov, who makes the world go round. But actually he will not improve, he will remain the chief in name only. His weakness will stay with him, to

crop up the very next time he is put to the test. Suppose he is transferred to some more difficult job when this one is completed. What will he do if you won't be there for him to lean on? Who will take pity on the poor man and carry his burden for him?"

"Are you proposing to remove him from his job?"

"I propose to find something else for him to do. We helped Rogov, Kovshov and others to find their place. We can do the same for Yefimov. You say he made a good showing at the factory. We can find him work at a factory. Or else we can send him to some other section which has a strong, competent chief and a well-knit collective. Suppose we try sending him to work under Pankov?"

"All right, Vasili," said Zalkind, "I'll think it over. It had occurred to me that Yefimov might be transferred to work with Terekhov. But first I must be certain that Yefimov really is a failure as a section chief. Give me a little time, I will straighten it out...."

"Certainly. Believe me I shall be very glad if you prove to be right."

Batmanov lit another cigarette from the one he was smoking. Zalkind moved from the hard chair over to the sofa. He was

beginning to feel the strain of the long day.

"And now friend Vasili, it is my turn to do a little reproaching," he said. "Don't you think you are a trifle too harsh and severe in your dealings with people? Has it occurred to you that you are too hard on them sometimes? Would it not be better to be a little kinder and gentler? I can understand your being stringent and exacting when it comes to your office staff, and especially the department chiefs. But it's too bad if you are the same in your dealings with the ordinary construction workers. So far you don't have much to do with them since you are tied to the office. But very soon you will be living and working with them for a lengthy period of time. Will you be able to find the key to their hearts?"

"We shall see. You're jumping to conclusions without having any concrete facts on which to base your assumption."

"Possibly. I shan't state any definite opinion yet. But, after all, our department chiefs are also human. You have brought order into our headquarters, you have built it up anew and placed our people in the jobs they can do best—don't think I am blind to all that.

But I do believe you ought to try to be just a little warmer. Sometimes when you are talking to a man I can see him wilting under your lashing tongue. Strength of purpose and will are good things, but don't use them to crush people who haven't yet learned to work as well as you would wish."

"You talk as if I were a tyrant," Batmanov said gloomily. "Give me an example to make your meaning clear. Whose back have I broken?"

"Well, take that Liberman for instance. After all, he is a human being, although I can't say I like him very much. He always leaves your office in a huff. Is it necessary to be so hard on him? In general you haven't very many kind words in your vocabulary, have you? I can't forget how you spoke to Kovshov last week—now, why did you have to be so harsh? You knew the chief engineer was to blame in that case, but since it was awkward for you to haul *him* over the coals you brought the full weight of your sarcasm to bear on that splendid young fellow. And what about your talk yesterday with Grechkin? He looked so crushed, poor man! You mustn't forget that he is doing the work of four and he might be excused for overlooking

something now and again. 'Today you came down on Grechkin and Kovshov. I have no doubt that they are sitting up at this very moment working.... Why, comrade chief, didn't it occur to you that they too might want to celebrate a little this evening? Grechkin has a big family—I can imagine how his wife and kiddies must have been looking forward all day to spending the evening with him."

"You have upset me very much, Mikhail," said Vasili Maximovich, and indeed his face wore a strained, hurt look. "I suppose I overdo it sometimes. But you must admit that the instances you have cited are the exception, and I feel that on the whole I am right. I don't think you will succeed in making a gentle lamb out of me. But surely the kindness behind my severity is apparent? You spoke so movingly about Grechkin and Kovshov. You can say what you like, I cannot forgive them the slightest oversight! So much is demanded of them now. Moreover they are determined fellows. I admit Grechkin gets rather nervous, but Alyosha merely smiles when you lay into him. I was actually annoyed by that smile of his once. 'What's the joke?' I asked him. 'You ought to be

taking serious heed of what I'm telling you.' He looked me straight in the eyes and said: 'I am taking very serious heed, you may rest assured of that. But I am smiling with admiration at the way you can let go at people. It's marvellous. There's nothing like a good dressing down for helping a man to see shortcomings in himself which escaped his notice before....' But I shall bear in mind what you have told me nevertheless. I promise you. Incidentally, there is a good way of discovering which one of us is right. Talk to Grechkin and Kovshov some time about my tyranny, sarcasm and other brutalities and see what they say about it. Catch them one day just as they are leaving my office, red-faced and sweating, and question them cautiously. If they have any complaints to make about my behaviour I'll try to find a kind word for them or something like that next time."

"I see you haven't mentioned Liberman."

"You leave Liberman alone for a time. Yefimov is your responsibility, let Liberman be mine. He's a difficult customer, I assure you, and his background is much worse than Yefimov's. Incidentally, Liberman isn't a weakling either, his back isn't easily broken. With my help he has seen the error of his

ways partly, but he still has some blind spots. I intend taking him along when I make my tour of the line. It will do him good to get to know the people. . . .”

“I think you ought to try to effect a reconciliation between him and Fedosov first,” Zalkind laughingly suggested.

. . . The nocturnal talk between the two leading men on the construction job did not wane for a moment. They disputed and concurred, recalled blunders in each other’s work, and did not mince words with each other. Between the two men there existed a deep bond of mutual understanding and that genuine friendship that can survive the most brutal frankness.

“We have passed the organizational stage,” Batmanov observed. “Without fear of overstraining itself our collective is now ready to launch the offensive. Now all our attention must be directed not to the head office, but to the sections. . . .”

“It strikes me, Vasili, that here as everywhere else this day marks the completion of that mustering of forces Comrade Stalin spoke about. Don’t you agree?”

... Zalkind, who abhorred untidiness, had emptied the ashtray for the second time—the cigarette ends had almost overflowed onto the tablecloth.

"Let's have some tea," Batmanov said. "That was a fine talk we had. It has covered everything."

"Everything?" echoed Zalkind questioningly. "Are you quite sure? I thought you had something on your mind.... You promised to be frank tonight. But perhaps you would rather not confide in me?"

"No use trying to hide anything from you," Batmanov said in a low tone. His large head drooped as if he had difficulty in holding it up. Zalkind, alarmed, walked noiselessly over to the couch and sat down beside him.

"I can confide in you. You are my conscience," Batmanov rose and ran his hand through his hair. "A man is often obliged to conceal his grief or his weakness. Some do it out of pride. Others, because they do not trust the kindness of people. Men who hold positions of authority, leaders or army commanders, are sometimes in duty bound to master their grief or weakness in solitude. A leader is primarily a man of strong will,

he must be stronger than those he leads. And if he is hurt, if he is a prey to some spiritual weakness, he had better not expose it, but endure in silence. A wise commander if wounded in battle will try to conceal the fact from his men as long as possible, however badly he is hurt. Remember Bagration: though mortally wounded he was able to suppress his physical weakness by sheer strength of will...."

"Calm yourself, Vasili, and for goodness' sake sit down, I've got a crick in my neck trying to follow you," Zalkind begged.

Batmanov obeyed.

"I'm neither an army leader nor a historical personage," he went on. "Please don't think I am vain enough to draw any parallels. I am a construction chief, one of a great many. Nevertheless I am responsible for an important undertaking and for several thousand fine Soviet people. Have I the right to bare my wounds to them and cry out in pain? I think not. What sort of a leader would I make if at such a difficult time I should reveal myself to them feeble and anguished. They must believe in me, I must be a tower of strength for them in their hour of need, they cannot be allowed to pity me."

Batmanov got up again. He was too agitated to remain seated for long.

"I have no right to expose my wounds and embarrass people by showing my weakness. Very good. But if I do not weep and lament like a child or a woman does that mean that I do not suffer? My wounds are bleeding and sore, and they are of a sort that no medicine can heal. I can see the question in your eyes: 'What is this all about? What has happened?' I simply must pour out the bitterness that fills my soul. Imagine your arm aching, from rheumatism or some such other ailment, and aching so much that you are near the end of your endurance. You pace up and down the room, rocking it to and fro although you know that won't make the pain subside," Batmanov still pacing restlessly, rocked his arm in illustration of his words. "It isn't my arm that hurts me. Consider that this is my aching soul I am rocking before you. . . . You won't be able to help me, I know. But 'bear with me,' as Mayakovsky put it."

"What is the trouble, Vasili, please tell me," Zalkind sprang up in distress, but restrained himself and sat down again. "This introduction of yours has seriously alarmed

me. What misfortune can have befallen you?"

"I shall tell you everything if you wait. Remember what you said when we came in here tonight. 'I don't like the way you live, Batmanov. All alone like an orphan!' You're right, this is no way to live. More than once I have been on the point of inviting one or two of the bachelors to share this place with me. But I did not do it. You see, I expected to live here with my family. My family!"

Batmanov dropped heavily onto a chair which groaned under his weight. The stronger the man the more painful are his moments of weakness. It hurt Zalkind to look at his comrade sitting with bowed head and closed eyes, and he yearned with all his soul to help him. But how? Strong even in his weakness, Vasili Maximovich was not in need of consolation. Zalkind knew nothing of the letter the construction chief had received that day.

"Endure it, you will say. I know there is nothing else you can say. But how can I patiently endure when life has taught me to fight? To endure means to do nothing, it is like seeing blood flowing from a wound and

not attempting to staunch it. But I must act, always, under all circumstances, irrespective of whether the issue is personal or public. But what can I do now to help myself? I can do nothing." He raised his head and looked at Zalkind. A lock of his ash-blond hair had dropped onto his forehead, altering his appearance strangely. "When I telephoned to you I felt that you were not anxious to come here and that you wanted to invite me to come to your place. But I was afraid. I know what a cosy nest you have and I do not want—I could not look calmly on the happiness of another family! You might wonder why a man like me should want a family. After all, I am up to my ears in work and I come home only to snatch a few hours of sleep. Yet that only makes my need the greater. What matter if your wife grumbles when she meets you, or if your children are already asleep when you come home so that you can do no more than stand silently at their bedside, smile and sigh. . . ."

With a gesture as sharp as a blow Batmanov brushed his hair off his forehead and caught his breath in a sobbing gasp.

"Can I say that I really appreciated my family? I must be honest and admit that

I was hardly aware of it. At home my wife surrounded me with loving care, she wouldn't even let a fly buzz over me when I slept. No one dared to disturb me if I was working or reading, my slightest wish was gratified. . ."

His throat was dry and he turned thirstily to the glass of tea before him.

"Too much self-flagellation," Zalkind grunted. "You're putting ideas in your own head. As if I didn't know you better than that."

"For God's sake, Mikhail, don't defend Batmanov from himself!" Vasili Maximovich cried. "I cannot forget how often we lived apart. True, my work demanded it. But I can see now that we need not have been separated if I had really made an effort. We are inclined too often to agree lightly to be parted from our loved ones and to sacrifice our personal happiness. I left them in the Crimea, but could I not really have taken them with me and arranged for the boy to be treated here? And what is the result: I learned too late to cherish my family and my love. . . ."

Batmanov mopped his brow.

"I want to show you something," he went on. "A poem—in a little blue volume." He

went to his bedroom and returned with a book. "The poet is Shchipachev."

*Prize love! And as the years roll by
Yet higher prize thee love!
Love does not end with park-bench sighs
When dim the stars above.*

*There's rain ahead and sleet and snow
The road of life is long!
Real love is like a song, but, oh!
'Tis hard to make a song.*

Batmanov sat down wearily and laid the book aside.

"You have made your song, but I haven't. All decent people ought to live as you do: to go through life with a faithful loving wife and children by your side."

"You have a faithful loving wife and a son yourself. They'll come here one day and you will be as happy as larks!" said Mikhail Borisovich.

"Don't!" cried Batmanov. "I lived here miserably alone, looking forward to the day when they would join me. I expected them any day. They won't be coming, Mikhail. They won't be coming...."

"What makes you so certain?"

"I shall never see Kostya again.... He's dead. It's my own fault. I didn't take care of him. Anna was all alone.... She doesn't write to me...."

His voice dropped to a whisper and he buried his face in his hands. Zalkind sat still and shaken. Presently he went over to Batmanov and touched his shoulder.

"I cannot console you, nor do I want to. No words can give you back your son. But don't leave Anna alone. She loves you and she must come here. It is a good thing that you realize now how precious one's family is. I believe that you will yet make your own song, my dear comrade...."

Vasili Maximovich raised his head and looked at Zalkind with dry, anguished eyes.

"Don't brood over your sorrow," Zalkind went on. "Don't shrink into yourself. Open your heart. Take that trip out to the line as quickly as possible and get closer to the people. You think people will respect you less if they know of your trouble? Why, it will deepen their faith in you and your strength!"

Batmanov got up and with an impulsive awkward gesture embraced Zalkind, hiding his face from his friend. For a moment or two they stood thus, the disparity in height

and physical features accentuated by this proximity. Then Vasili Maximovich turned quickly away, went into his bedroom and closed the door.

Left alone, Zalkind paced the room for a long while with a cigarette between his lips that was constantly going out. He telephoned to his wife to explain why he had stayed with Batmanov. Paulina Yakovlevna gasped at the news. The Party organizer settled himself by the radio and fussed with it for a long time until at last through the noises of an agitated world he heard the voice of Moscow: the announcer was reading Stalin's speech.

Zalkind lay down on the couch, covered himself with his coat and listened. The grey winter morning stole on timid feet into the room.

END OF BOOK ONE

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