

VASIL AZHAYEV

FAR FROM MOSCOW

A NOVEL
IN THREE PARTS



BOOK THREE

FOREIGN
LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
MOSCOW 1950

ВАСИЛИЙ АЖАЕВ

**ДАЛЕКО
ОТ МОСКВЫ**

РОМАН
В ТРЕХ КНИГАХ



КНИГА ТРЕТЬЯ

ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО
ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ
МОСКВА 1950

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CHAPTER ONE

THE MAIN ACHIEVEMENT

Rogov thoroughly examined the section's affairs as he took over the management. He was amazed at the gross carelessness with which stocks and property were stored and accounted for. Merzlyakov maintained an apathetic silence. Chief Accountant Kondrin, a tall thin man with a narrow, pock-marked face and sharp eyes, argued that he was a new man here and had done everything he could to keep proper account of stocks.

"But this is Socialist property! It's a crime the way it's handled here!" Rogov cried disgustedly.

A good deal of equipment and materials had been shipped out to the works' section by sea during the navigation season. Only a part of these supplies were required for laying the pipe line across the strait. The rest were to have been transported inland and to the island. Cases, machine parts and steel tubes lay strewn about the beach, half-buried in the snowdrifts. Only food supplies and some of the more valuable materials were stored in rudely-built wooden sheds with gaping cracks in the walls.

Rogov got together all the men he found in the barracks and ordered them to clear a patch of ground, dig the equipment and materials out from under the snow, lay them together and put a shed up over them. An animated crowd poured out onto the beach. Watching the progress of the work, Rogov considered what had to be done that day, tomorrow, and in the next few days. So many urgent matters needed attending to that it was difficult to decide what to deal with first.

Merzlyakov and Kondrin hung on Rogov's heels. Batmanov appeared on the ice of the strait. Merzlyakov followed every movement

of the construction chief who had so suddenly deprived him of all rights and privileges.

"Admiring the landscape?" Kondrin said, giving his lips an ironical twist and nodding towards Batmanov.

"You can keep your landscape!" Rogov retorted with asperity. "The chief's figuring out the best way of making a road across the ice—the one you forgot to make. And look here, Accountant—quit contemplating the scenery and help me take over the property. Everything's got to be entered up and taken in hand, from tractor to nails."

Batmanov meanwhile was scanning the boundless expanse that opened up before him. When the sun appeared from behind a cloud, the distant shores of the island glimmered in a wavy silhouette through the blue mist. Cape Perilous reared up out there like the head of some gigantic monster who had shaken himself awake. Batmanov was in fact searching for a possible road. He was rather disturbed by Beridze's warning that the ice of the strait was liable any day to break away from the shore—at least so the old inhabitants said. Beridze intended exploring the strait in several places. He thought the ice was not thick enough yet, and would not bear the weight of

the trucks, let alone tractors. Batmanov strode along, stamping his feet heavily, and it seemed to him that the icy armour held securely from shore to shore.

Catching sight of Filimonov coming towards him, the construction chief turned back to the shore.

"We'll turn all the people out on the ice tomorrow, to the last man, and clear a road to the island in two days. After that we'll switch them over in the direction of the Adun," Batmanov said.

"The road's the main thing as far as I'm concerned. Give me a road, and I'll give you motor traffic. I'm not worrying about the trucks and the drivers," Filimonov answered.

The fact that he would have to wait until the road was ready somewhat discouraged him. Filimonov did not believe it could be done in two days or even a week. The talk about the thinness of the ice worried him still more.

"The main thing's not the road, but the drivers and the trucks," Batmanov observed, noticing Filimonov's uneasiness. "I see you've got a touch of the blues and are shilly-shallying instead of showing more snap and go. I advise you to wean yourself from that dependent habit all you transport people suffer from

—you want everything served up to you. Give us a good asphalt road, give us this, that and the other, and then we'll go."

It was such a far cry to an asphalt road on the works' section that the gloomy Filimonov involuntarily smiled.

"Let's go and see your drivers. I haven't been at their place yet," Batmanov proposed.

They climbed up to a lone roughhewn log hut clinging to the side of the rocky promontory. The grey stones were swept clean of snow by the winds.

The little house was crowded. The men were lying on bunks, sitting on benches or standing around the red-hot stove. The flame from the open stove seemed brighter than the daylight which barely filtered through the two smoky little windows. Reddish spots of light danced on the faces of the drivers. Blue tobacco smoke hung in the air in layers.

Batmanov and Filimonov squeezed their way to the stove. Batmanov took off his cap.

"So you're having a smoke?" he asked after a long silence.

"Thanks for the tobacco issue, Comrade Batmanov. We've missed our smokes terribly," answered a strapping youth with a broad good-natured face, sitting nearer than the

rest. "And thanks for the glad news about Moscow—it made mighty good hearing and has bucked us all up."

"You're a truck driver? What's your name?"

"Remnev. Truck and tractor. But I haven't got either."

"And how long do you intend sitting here smoking and warming yourself, Comrade Remnev?"

"Why?"

"It's time you started earning your bread. The news was good, you say? But it looks as if you only made a note of it and let it go at that."

"We're not sitting round this stove because we want to. Some of the boys were sent out this morning for water and firewood, but no jobs have been found for us yet."

"No jobs?" Batmanov said in astonishment, and looked at Filimonov. "That's interesting. Now bear this in mind—beginning from tomorrow I'm going to sell bread here myself. And if you don't look out you'll find yourself getting dependents' instead of workers' rations." The humourous sally had a sting in it.

"What are we to do if there are no roads, and not likely to be any soon? Many of our

trucks and tractors are out in the taiga," Remnev said. He seemed to be acting as spokesman for the rest.

"So you're waiting until uncle gives you a road, until uncle brings the trucks up for you and gets them running, and then you'll start, eh? Is Smorchkov here?"

Smorchkov got up from the corner where he was sitting. He looked a different man—clean-shaven and trim.

"Why didn't you tell them how we met yesterday? You gave your word too, if memory doesn't deceive me—something about not needing to be egged on now."

"The road has got us stumped and that's a fact, Comrade Batmanov," Smorchkov said quietly. "We've been worrying our heads about work since the morning. We went to the old section chief, but he wouldn't listen to us, and the new one told us to turn out and lend a hand clearing the snow for the time being. 'Wait a day or two,' he says, 'let me get the hang of things.' We have serious doubts about the road across the strait. The ice is still thin and it may break away from the shore—it happens every year here. Don't you think it would be better to forget the strait for the time being and get busy with the road on the mainland?"

"Now, that's more like it!" Batmanov said approvingly. "Speak up, Smorchkov! Let's put our heads together and think of a way of tackling the problem. That's just what I want of you. Of course, you can sit back with folded hands and wait to get the cue from the administration—they know better, they read the newspapers—and feel quite virtuous about it. But I don't fancy that kind of virtue. It doesn't lead to any good. Here you are, done a little rejoicing over the victory at Moscow and now quietened down. Got a little firewood and are now warming yourselves!"

"Quite right, Comrade Batmanov. Give it to us hot—we haven't tackled real work for ages!" Remnev cried.

"We'll test the ice on the strait," Batmanov went on. "I don't think it's as bad as all that. And you'll build the road yourselves. Not on your own, of course, but together with the whole section. We can't forget the strait—it's our chief task. I give you two days for the road, no more. Will two days be enough, Comrade Filimonov?"

"We'll manage," concurred Filimonov, who but an hour ago had doubted whether a week would be sufficient.

He wasn't sure of it now, either, but Batmanov and the drivers looked at him in such a way that he could not retreat, and so he repeated:

"We'll manage it." And having said it, he realized that now there was no other way out—it had to be done.

"You'll bring the trucks and tractors down from the taiga yourselves too, not later than by noon tomorrow," Batmanov said. "I'm going to hire every man on the job anew—with his truck and tractor in good working order, of course. Those I turn down can go and work as storekeepers for Liberman."

The drivers broke out into an excited clamour.

"You only show us the way, you won't be able to stop us afterwards!" said a stalwart giant of a driver, whose head almost touched the ceiling when he got up.

"All right, that's settled then!" Batmanov said, eyeing Filimonov with an amused twinkle.

Batmanov found all the members of his group gathered in Kotlyarevsky's house. He came in with Filimonov and Rogov. Liberman was busy laying the table for dinner, while the

rest of the company sat round the fireplace listening to Tanya Vasilchenko's story about the island. She had already managed to make the trip there and back on skis.

"‘Taisin’ means ‘abode of the gods,’" the girl was saying with raised eyebrows. "I don't think much of the god's abode! A wild deserted spot. Gives you the creeps! I took a quick look round and cleared out pretty quick."

"How can you go on such excursions all alone?" Alexei rebuked her. "They say that's how Pankov went, and he didn't come back. You deserve a good spanking for such mad-cap pranks."

The girl's face clouded at the mention of Pankov. Beridze, happy to see the girl safe and sound, questioned her at length concerning the strength of the ice on the strait.

"I wonder where Karpov has disappeared to?" Alexei asked. "It worries me."

"Karpov won't get lost," Beridze answered. "Don't you remember what he said that time in the blizzard—‘the Adun's my home!’"

Batmanov began taking his things off in silence. His sheepskin coat, frozen stiff, flopped to the floor where it looked like a man squatting on his heels. Batmanov picked it up and hung it on a nail.

"Wherever I go I find loafers wagging their tongues and taking it easy," he said, rubbing his face. "You wait a bit with that dinner, Liberman, let 'em earn it first. Karpov runs off, Vasilchenko makes sports outings on skis, and all the rest stick round the fire."

"We've got to take a look round, Vasili Maximovich!" Beridze answered. "Alexei and Kuzma Kuzmich and I have been all over the coast and have something like a plan worked out already."

"The men are expecting firm and wise leadership from us. It can take you one day, and it can take you ten days to look over the place. We haven't got ten days, we've only got one. It's time you all dispersed and tackled the section from all sides. Let's get this clear at once—no going about in a crowd and treading on each other's heels. Uncoordinated actions are ruled out. There's Rogov, for instance—he's herded together the whole section to-day, clearing the snow and stocktaking. That's all very well, of course, but it's not the main business! There are a lot of us chiefs here, but if we all start clutching the same wheel we'll soon drive the car into the ditch. I'm against confusion, commotion and officious-

ness. We need a general plan, clear-cut and coordinated."

"The tasks should be allocated so that each one knows what he's responsible for," Beridze prompted.

"Quite right, we'll begin with that. I release you for the time being from general supervision, Georgi Davydovich. With Kovshov, Topolev and Kotlyarevsky you go into the purely engineering side of the business. Rogov will tackle the supply and service arrangements and, together with Liberman, put living conditions right. . . ."

"You've given orders for Merzlyakov to be sent to Novinsk," Rogov interrupted, "but I can't let him go until he's signed the act of transfer."

"All right, but keep him out of my sight. You, Filimonov, will take over the transport and all the mechanization. Tanya Vasilchenko knows her job, we've already settled that between us. I and Karpov will take charge of the road to the island and on the mainland. Now let's see what resources we have at our disposal."

Dinner forgotten, they all crowded round Batmanov. Beridze, with a sheet of notes in his hand, reported about the section's man pow-

er. The men were there and then assigned to various jobs.

"Dinner!" Batmanov suddenly yelled in a playful mood, and adroitly sat down to the table first.

He said he would get together the whole collective in the evening and discuss the work to be done. He told Filimonov to pay a visit to the power station and see to it that the barracks had electric lights that very evening.

Inside the tumble-down shed which housed the power station it was as cold as outdoors. Seryogin the mechanic and two electricians were finishing assembling the motor after repairs. Filimonov made their acquaintance and inspected the station's simple equipment.

"You'll switch on the light as soon as it gets dark. Will you manage?"

"We'll do our best," Seryogin answered laconically. He was a broad-faced young man in blue overalls worn over his padded jacket.

Filimonov was curious to know why the section had been deprived of electric current and why the power station was in such a sad state of neglect. Seryogin answered his questions grudgingly.

"Why make a secret of it?" one of the electricians broke in. "We weren't given what

we needed to keep things going normally. We were told to economize on fuel and lubricants. No one cared whether the station worked or not. The chief, Merzlyakov, demanded only one thing—that we should keep his house lighted. And that's all we did."

"We're going to build a new power station, a big one," Filimonov said. "We'll go into that in detail later on. But today I want you to give the barracks light, and keep up a steady current...."

"We'll give the current," Seryogin promised confidently.

Soon after Filimonov left, the accountant Kondrin dropped in at the electric station. He said a few words by way of making conversation, and motioned the mechanic aside with a nod of his head when the others were not looking.

"The big pots have come down, and I was thinking maybe you'll want to have a jaw with 'em," Kondrin muttered through clenched teeth. "Let me warn you again—mind you don't squeal on me. I'll get even with you...."

Seryogin wiped his hands on a rag with an air of preoccupation and said nothing, as though Kondrin's words did not concern him.

"Didn't you hear what I said, Horsey?"

the accountant demanded, his sharp eyes boring Seryogin's face.

"I've got a man's name," the mechanic growled.

"Oh, so we've become tony! All right then, let's talk educated," Kondrin said with a sneer. "Will you please, Comrade Seryogin, forget me and my address. You don't know me. . . ."

"What are you after, Somov? What are you doing here on this section? Why are you going under a false name?" Seryogin began in agitation.

"Lay off that, you rat!" hissed Kondrin, his eyes darting from side to side as he clutched the mechanic's arm. "You're asking for a knife in the guts, I see. Well, you'll get it! You know I always plant it right, straight on the knob! And if I don't do for you, someone else will. . . ."

"What do you want of me," Seryogin stammered, visibly cowed. "I don't want anything to do with you. Keep to yourself and leave me alone."

"That's better, now you're talking," Kondrin said, looking relieved. "You'll keep your mouth shut and we'll remain pals."

Kondrin looked at the mechanic with narrowed eyes, and said reassuringly:

"You've got nothing to be afraid of, I'm not going to do you any harm. I simply want to turn over a new leaf, start with a clean slate. I don't want anyone to know my name's Somov and that I've been in jail."

"Then why can't you go about it on the straight?"

"Everyone likes to do things his own way," Kondrin answered with mock gaiety. "You've gone straight under your own name, and you've got a small piddling job. But I've started living straight under the name of Kondrin, and my job's quite another thing—chief accountant, one of the big bugs, and I have a say in many things. See? Well, that's settled—you know me as Comrade Kondrin, the chief accountant. You can depend on me. If you start acting funny and call me by any other name, you may as well make your will. . . ."

The head office men sat in Kotlyarevsky's house and listened to Batmanov dictating instructions to Kovshov concerning section affairs. The light went on so suddenly that a cry escaped Tanya's lips. Karpov appeared in the doorway. His sheepskin coat spread a chill around him, and he was all covered with rime. The fisherman took his cap off, greeted

the company and said in a tone of intense satisfaction:

"I've brought something, lads. We'll be able to feed the men now with fish and seal meat. The Nivhi have sent it as a gift."

Karpov looked over his shoulder and stepped aside. Behind him stood a short Nivhi in high fur boots, a deerskin shirt, and trousers of sealskin. On his head sat a cone-shaped fur hat.

"Kolkhoz chairman, Nikifor Gibelka," Karpov introduced him. "Good day!" the guest said loudly, his whole body swaying. His eyes, barely visible in their narrow slits, had a merry gleam. "Take the goods!"

Four reindeer sledge teams loaded with fish stood outside with their drivers. The reindeer nervously tossed their antlers and glanced askance at the people who came rushing out of the house. Batmanov warmly thanked the Nivhi and invited them to tea.

Rogov chose the roomiest barrack for holding the meeting. The floors were washed three times and the stoves heated twice. Seryogin and the electricians fixed up several electric lamps and the place became as bright as a

stage. The long table running between the two rows of bunks was covered with bunting, and a portrait of Stalin hung on the wall.

The barrack was filled with men who had poured in from all over the section long before the appointed time. They accommodated themselves on the bunks, three men to a bunk, and the overflow huddled close together on the floor. There was a great deal of shifting about to make room for the new groups of men who continued to arrive.

"Come in, come right in, there's room for all!" Rogov shouted hospitably.

"Climb up to the gallery," Remnev called down from the upper bunk to Smorchkov who had come in late.

The gathering was in high spirits, and joking and laughter could be heard on all sides. When Batmanov came in they responded to his greeting with a cheer that shook the rafters.

Rogov stepped up to the bunting-covered table.

"Comrades, allow me to declare the general meeting of the collective of Section Eleven opened. . . ."

Tumultuous applause broke out. The men were glad that here, at the world's end, life

was resuming its normal course. Umara Mahomet shouted out something, but his words were drowned in the general uproar. When the applause had subsided, he cried out:

"You said the right thing—'the meeting of the collective!' We've got a collective now! We didn't have it before."

Rogov gave the floor to the construction chief. Batmanov's speech was so stirring and of such vital concern to all present that the men listened with rapt attention, drinking in his every word. In point of fact Batmanov was giving his men a day-by-day account of his activities since the moment of his arrival at the construction job. He told them how the plan of battle for the pipe line had gradually come into being and what difficulties had had to be overcome in the process. He explained the new construction project, which Stalin himself had approved. The task now was to put that project into effect as quickly as possible.

Batmanov dwelt at length on the tasks that fell to the collective of Section Eleven. He, too, stressed the word "collective." For the first time the men were given a clear idea of the difficult and complicated job that confronted them in laying the pipe line under the Jag-

dinsk strait, and they vented their enthusiasm in exclamations and applause. Seryogin, the mechanic, was clapping excitedly along with the rest, when, chancing to look round he caught sight of Kondrin sitting in the next row. With a mocking look in his direction the accountant raised his hands high above his head and began clapping ostentatiously. The mechanic wilted at once.

Batmanov announced his intention to introduce iron discipline and a strict schedule of work for each day.

"I don't promise you a quiet life, my friends. We shall have to work with a will and rough it a good deal. You can take it from me, that is real life. We, Soviet people are not out to live on Easy Street, like those philistines who only think of their personal interests. We stand for a life of labour in the name of a bright future. The days are short just now—we shall snatch a few hours from the dark winter night by working under electric lights. . . ."

When he had finished a noisy excited babble broke out. Everyone began speaking at once. No one asked for the floor, neither did Rogov attempt to observe formal order. The workers spoke one after another, and each

had some sensible suggestion and advice to offer.

Zyatkov, the old labourer, lifted his toil-worn hands above his head, saying:

"I've shovelled thousands of cubic metres of earth with these here hands and worked on some of the biggest construction jobs, and everywhere I had a good name. I shan't disgrace myself here either—I'll give five hundred per cent output."

Remnev mentioned Merzlyakov and began cursing him.

"Forget about Merzlyakov, Comrade Remnev," Batmanov answered him. "He doesn't exist. I, Rogov and Beridze are to be held accountable from now on—we're here in place of Merzlyakov."

Umara elbowed his way forward and went close up to Batmanov.

"We trust you! Demand whatever you like—we'll do it. . . . Look at us, what a power we are!" he shouted.

At dawn the next day Beridze and Kovshov went out to the strait with several workers to measure the thickness of the ice. Batmanov did not wait for the engineers' report

and decided to turn out the entire population of the section onto the ice. Liberman, who had been busy all night, provided the men with a square meal at breakfast. The workers, dressed warmly in dark padded jackets and *valenki*, poured out of the barracks in a noisy stream. Only the sick remained at home, and Merzlyakov, who refused to work.

Goncharuk, the foreman, though he was down with the grippe, would not hear of staying at home. He went out with the rest, and busied himself handing out the tools which had been brought up on a truck. Zyatkov, suppressing a smile, silently handed Batmanov a heavy crowbar.

"Thanks," Batmanov said, throwing him a keen glance.

Rogov formed the men in a column, and they set out, carrying pickaxes, spades and crowbars on their shoulders. Karpov, at the head of the column, struck up *The Three Tank-men* march in a strong baritone, and the men caught up the tune in a loud discordant chorus.

"Our job is to clear a road all the way to the island before darkness falls," Batmanov said, surveying the crowd of builders assem-

bled on the beach. "I shall take charge of the work, and I appoint Karpov and Umara Mahomet as my assistants."

"What if the ice breaks away from the shore? Aren't you afraid of that, Vasili Maximovich?" Karpov asked him in a low voice.

"When is that going to happen, d'you know? Today or next month?"

"True, I don't know. . . ."

"Nor do I. We can't wait. We'll have to run the risk. Work is like battle, comrade—you have to take risks."

Rogov broke the workers up into two columns. Karpov and Umara discussed the assignment of work areas. Remnev sang out from the crowd:

"Comrade Batmanov, don't you think it would be best to tackle the road from both ends? Some of us to remain here, and the rest to start from the island."

"That's no good," Rogov objected. "Too much time and energy will be wasted getting to the other end."

Batmanov did not agree with him.

"It's a good suggestion," he said, and added for Rogov's own benefit: "Don't you understand? It's competition. And it means a

wider scale of work. Let's think how it can best be organized."

"What d'you say, lad, if we do it this way," Karpov said, livening up. "Both teams work in the same direction. One team starts here from the beach, the other goes four kilometres ahead and starts there in the same direction, towards the island. When the first team catches up with the second the two teams can agree on sharing the rest of the way."

"I endorse your plan, Ivan Lukich," Batmanov approved. "We accept it."

He looked closely at Karpov, and the latter understood that he was to go out to the middle of the strait.

"Don't you worry, Vasili Maximovich, we'll be careful," Karpov said.

"Leave a couple of dozen men on the island to clear a space on the beach for the freights," Batmanov instructed him.

Umara was pleased that he was remaining on this side, with the construction chief.

"Let's compete! I challenge you!" he cried to Karpov.

"I accept your challenge, lad. But you're going to have a hard time competing with me, I can tell you that beforehand."

"A hard time, eh? We'll see about that!"

"You ought to give us a handicap, Vasili Maximovich," Karpov said. "We'll be at a disadvantage at first. By the time we've walked those four kilometres, Umara will have a good bit done here with fresh energy."

"We'll make allowance for that, Ivan Lukich," Batmanov reassured him. "And we'll have dinner brought down for your men, and a shot of vodka besides."

"D'you hear that, lad?" Karpov said, nudging Liberman.

"I hear every word of it. Didn't you know I've got a musical ear?"

"Comrades!" Karpov called his team to attention. "We're going out on a new trail and may find ourselves on thin ice, so don't stick together in a crowd. Spread out. Line up in single file, keep four paces apart—quick march to the island!"

The long line of men with the fisherman in the lead, strung out over the pack ice of the strait, was long visible to those on shore. They had no sooner disappeared than Umara set his team out in groups of several men. Batmanov and Umara struck the first blows on the ice. Three hundred pickaxes and crowbars followed suit, simultaneously attacking the pack

ice. There was a tinkling noise as of glass being splintered. Umara deftly wielded his pickaxe and kept looking over his shoulder at Batmanov.

"Wait till you see me welding, chief! You must think Umara talks big and welds bad. I can write with fire. You don't believe? Don't go away until I've welded the first joint—then you'll see."

"I know that you're a master of your trade," Batmanov answered. He drove his crowbar easily and powerfully into the icy hummocks, turning his face away to avoid the flying splinters. "I don't intend going away. We'll work together for some time yet. And I'll see your first joint, depend upon it...."

The engineers meanwhile had taken several measurements of the ice. Kovshov sat doing some calculations on an ice hummock before a small round hole in which the black water seethed angrily.

"Not very encouraging results," he said. "This thickness won't bear the weight of a tractor, even without a load. It's risky on a truck, too. The ice is uneven and very thin in places." Alexei got up. "We must tell Vasili Maximovich—he's in too great a hurry with this road across the strait."



Beridze looked with curiosity at the big fish that poked their pointed snouts out of the water in the ice hole.

"He must be told, of course, but let them go on with the road," Beridze said.

"What for?"

"We'll send trucks across partly loaded. Batmanov's right—you can't make allowances for everything in a calculation. Besides, the ice will solidify quicker on the road when they've cleared away the snow and ice packs."

"That road's a hazardous business, both for the men and the trucks. They'll fall through the ice before you know it. You'll regret it then, but it'll be too late!"

"You don't understand Batmanov, Alexei. In building that road he'll make friends with the men and at the same time give them a chance to realize their own powers. He's set them the task of clearing the way to the island in one day. Tell me now, what is the standard time allotted for a job of that kind?"

Silin came towards them from the shore. They did not immediately recognize him—the tractor driver had shaved off the reddish side whiskers that had surprised them in the little house under the snow. Silin was delighted to

see the engineers and greeted them like old friends.

"How did you get here, Semyon?" Alexei asked, hugging him.

"Oh, I managed fine. The tractor's safe and sound, ready to be started."

Silin vouchsafed no further information, but Alexei could well imagine what this modest, sturdily-built man had undergone before he succeeded in bringing his huge tractor to its destination.

"Where did you disappear to? We were looking for you."

"Everything was so dark and dreary on this section that I couldn't stand it any longer and made tracks for where the light shone," Silin said humourously.

"Where's that?"

"After the Party meeting, when we warned Merzlyakov for the last time, he had it in for me and Umara worse than ever. Me, he simply dismissed. Smorchkov very nearly met the same fate for kicking. Umara sent a report through to the regional Party committee, and we were waiting for results. Then we consulted and decided that things had to be speeded up somehow. We simply couldn't stand it any more. Well, I started out and

reached the frontier guards. . . . The outpost chief got in touch with Rubezhansk, and they told him that Batmanov and you had come out here. So I came back. . . ." He broke off and turned to Beridze. "I have three questions to ask you."

"Go ahead, Semyon Ilyich."

"Merzlyakov dismissed me, but I still consider myself employed on this section. The thing's got to be formally arranged, though. Kondrin, the accountant, says there has to be an order to that effect."

"That's simple. Go and tell Rogov, he'll give the order."

"I think Batmanov ought to be told about Merzlyakov dismissing him," Kovshov said.

"The second question is this," Silin went on. "I see all the men are out on the road tackling the ice packs with crowbars and pickaxes. Do I have to take a crowbar too?"

"You don't fancy it, eh?"

"No, I don't mind. But I have a counter-suggestion to make—to use a bulldozer for breaking the road instead of a crowbar. D'you remember the way we did it near Novinsk? I'll fix the whole thing up quickly if you'll only let me."

Beridze looked at Alexei with a sudden gleam in his eyes, but the latter said gruffly:

"Can't be done, Silin. The ice is thin, and you'll be drowned before you know it!"

"You leave it to me, I assure you everything will be all right," the tractor driver insisted.

"Out of the question!"

"Alexei Nikolayevich is right, it's impossible," Beridze said gently, placing his hand on Silin's shoulder. "It's even risky to send a truck across that ice. I guess you'll have to take a crowbar, my friend. Never mind, Batmanov promises to have the road ready by this evening without machinery. Go on, give him a hand."

"My last question, Comrade Beridze. It's about Kondrin, the accountant. I have suspicions about that fellow—he's a bad egg."

"Well, this is a surprise!" Beridze said. "What makes you think so?"

"Comrade Chief Engineer, you ought to keep an eye on that man! He's no better than Merzlyakov."

"What makes you suspect him?" Alexei asked.

"I can't say myself," Silin answered with a shrug. "But the fellow's got something about

him that puts your back up. He's an unpleasant type."

"Is that all?" Beridze said with a laugh. "You can't judge people so lightly. A man may be unpleasant sometimes, but he's the right kind.... He's probably had words with you and you took offence...."

"I don't like the man," Silin said, shaking his head.

"All right, we'll make a note of it," the chief engineer said.

"You tell Batmanov about Kondrin too," Alexei advised him. "You go and see him. Give him this note while you're at it."

The tractor driver found Batmanov amid a crowd of men within two kilometres of the shore.

"We mustn't try to make things easier for ourselves," Batmanov was saying. "We need a good road, not just anything. The width has got to be not less than six metres, but we've narrowed it again. Two trucks will never be able to pass each other here. And it's got to be as smooth as a parquet floor, and we have it all humpy. You're sacrificing quality for the sake of speed, Umara. Is that clear?"

"Clear as daylight!" Umara responded.

He was eager not to lose a minute, but the men still lingered around Batmanov. Umara was on tenterhooks. He threw off his padded jacket and seized a crowbar with a gesture of impatience. His hat had slipped to the back of his head, revealing a black mop of stiff wiry hair.

"Go at it, comrades! Karpov's not dozing out there, don't let him get ahead of us!" the welder cried, reassigning his men to their places. "Step over here, level down the road. Careful you there, don't make holes in the ice. . . . What we need is a roller!"

He ran to Batmanov to consult him about the roller, and saw the construction chief conversing with Silin.

"Don't interfere, you can talk afterwards," Umara said to the tractor driver. "Vasili Maximovich, couldn't we think up some kind of roller?"

"Wait a minute, Umara. I'm talking to this comrade. I'll join you later," Batmanov answered.

Umara threw Silin a resentful look and dashed back. Batmanov gave the tractor driver an attentive ear. Silin stood before him with a heavy crowbar in his hand, holding it like a rifle.

"The bulldozer idea is ruled out," Batmanov said. "If the engineers say no, there's nothing more to be said about it. They tell me here in this note that the ice is too thin. I'll bear in mind your warning about Kondrin, though you're very vague about him. So Merzlyakov dismissed you?" Batmanov said with a sudden smile of amusement, searching the tractor driver's open face with narrowed eyes.

"Yes, I didn't suit him. But he didn't bring it off. It's he who got the bird, not I."

"He could never bring it off. I'll tell Rogov about you—he'll fix it up. Look me up after work and we'll have a chat. And now go to Filimonov, you two put on your thinking caps and see if you can fix up some sort of roller for the road as quick as possible. You can see how badly it's needed."

Batmanov walked towards the beach, musing on what Silin had told him about Kondrin. It would be advisable to keep an eye on the chief accountant and check his work. And in general, it was necessary to get to know people better. Pisarev probably knew what he was talking about when he advised vigilance. Experience had shown that often enough all kinds of suspicious characters lurked in the remote parts of this frontier region, wreaking mischief.

His thoughts were interrupted by Umara Mahomet. The welder looked worried as he caught up with the construction chief.

"Why do you leave us, Comrade Batmanov? You said yourself the road is the main task. And now you're quitting! Let's finish it together!"

"Take charge yourself for the time being," Batmanov said, a smile forcing itself into his face. "Don't be angry, let's have a smoke."

They lit up, shielding from the wind. Batmanov's frost-nipped hands—he was stubbornly injuring them by Tanya Vasilchenko's method—could scarcely hold the cigarette, and he surveyed them disapprovingly.

"Umara, what do you think of Kondrin, the accountant?"

"He's a bad man!" Umara said, making a wry face.

"In what way is he bad?"

"He doesn't look you in the eyes. He has an ugly laugh. Why did they send such a man down here?"

"The way a man laughs gives no grounds for thinking ill of him. We must keep an open mind."

"Open mind? He should be kicked out! He and Merzlyakov are birds of a feather. You

kicked Merzlyakov out, and you should kick him out too. What are you keeping him for?"

"We mustn't be hasty, Umara. We knew Merzlyakov inside out, but we know nothing against Kondrin. You can't kick a man out just because you don't like his face. We'll check his work first, then we'll decide. And now, run back to the men. Put your jacket on, button it up—you'll catch cold."

"I'm not afraid of the frost," Umara rejoined. "You better button yourself up and put on your gloves. You'll freeze your hands! . . ."

As Batmanov climbed up the bank over the bare ice-covered stones, a stranger dressed in an old black sheepskin coat accosted him.

"May I speak to you, Comrade Batmanov?" he asked. "I'm Sanin from Umi Bay. A man of yours came down and told me you wanted to see me."

"How are things at your base—is everything in order?"

"More or less in order now."

"Tell me about Pankov. You were the man he ran into on his way to the strait, aren't you?"

"Yes. Things were in a bad way at the base, we had run out of food supplies. We couldn't get any assistance from the section. I decided to make my way to the nearest section on the Adun. When I came out on the Adun I met Pankov. He gave me a horse and sledge and food and told me to go back to the base. He promised to take measures and said he would come to the base together with Merzlyakov as soon as he reached the strait. After waiting four days I sent a man down to the section to see Pankov and found out...."

"What could have happened to him—what's your opinion?" Batmanov asked impatiently.

"No one knows. He went out all alone.... He must have lost his way. It's over twenty kilometres to our place."

"Did you search for him?"

"I did. I turned all my men out to look for him.... I only met him once, but I saw right away that he was a good, just man...."

Batmanov stared out over his interlocutor's head with a stony face. Sanin stood waiting in silence.

"He was a very good man, strong and dependable," Batmanov said at length with a sigh. "I don't know what to think. Is it possible that such an experienced taiga man, a

former partisan, could have lost his way in the forest? We're going to continue the search, and you, Comrade Sanin, are going to help me. . . ."

Rogov and Tanya Vasilchenko, sitting under a big shed where coils of wire, insulators, and various other telephone equipment had been collected from all along the coast, were engaged in an argument. Kondrin sat on a packing case, writing something down in a book.

"Batmanov told me to make preparations for running the telephone line out to the island," Tanya was saying. "The most important item is the submarine cable. Fedosov told me definitely that the cable had been delivered here. It's got to be found."

"Let Fedosov come and look for it himself then," Rogov growled. "He must have delivered it straight to the bottom of the sea."

"It's no joking matter."

"Still quarrelling?" Batmanov asked, coming up.

"She's demanding the cable from me," Rogov said with a smile, "and I haven't got it."

"It must be here. It was shipped out long ago by sea," Batmanov confirmed. He glanced at Kondrin, who was writing out figures with

a businesslike air. "Comrade accountant! You'll have to put in a lot of work now. Everything's got to be found—down to the last screw. I shall check all your stock sheets myself. They'll find your cable, Tatyana Petrovna, don't worry."

"Of course we'll find it. We'll take stock of everything," Kondrin said, looking Batmanov squarely in the eyes.

"There, that's fine."

"Merzlyakov's demanding payment for the cow, the pig and fowl that were requisitioned from him by your orders," Rogov said. "He's handed me his claim with all the items calculated at market prices. It's a pretty round sum! What are your orders?"

"Pay it, if you're rich," Batmanov returned. "I haven't got the money. I can only give him a thrashing. Prison is crying out for that customer, and all he thinks of is money...."

Kondrin chuckled.

"Does the bookkeeper agree?" Batmanov asked him.

"Absolutely. Merzlyakov's a bad lot, a self-seeker," Kondrin confirmed. "He's come by his property by dishonest means, at the expense of the state, I'm sure of it...."

"There you are, the accounting department also says the only thing due him is a thrashing!" Batmanov said with a laugh.

Dismissing Merzlyakov from his mind Batmanov gave Rogov orders to have timber carted up and carpenters put on the job of building dispatcher cabins on the ice road. Batmanov's idea was to put a cabin at every kilometre of the road equipped with telephone, stove, table and benches.

"These cabins will control all traffic along the road," he explained.

Tanya asked his permission to go out and meet the linemen and return with them and the wire the next day to the section.

"I had different plans for you—I wanted to put you on the road-building job too," Batmanov said. "I need an umpire for the competition between Umara and Karpov. Never mind, I'll manage somehow—don't want to divert you from your main job. Go out and meet your boys and girls and bring them here as soon as you can. We shall give you a hearty welcome. . . . Where are the engineers, Rogov?"

"At home. Busy drawing," Rogov answered in a somewhat condescending tone.

"Now, now, don't sound so patronizing—they're our general staff! Tell Beridze and

Kovshov to draft an order awarding a bonus to the telephone team. You and Liberman fix up a nice treat for them. The young people have earned a little holiday."

"I shan't tell the girls and boys anything. Let it be a surprise to them!" Tanya said deeply moved. She thought of Genka Pankov and her heart felt sore. "What about the boy, Vasil Maximovich, what shall I tell him? If you only knew how eagerly he's been looking forward to meeting his father!"

"Don't say anything, I'll tell him myself," Batmanov answered with decision. "I confess, Tanya, that my heart aches when I think of the lad. He has no mother, has he?"

"No. He lived in Novinsk with an aunt. . . ."

Batmanov followed Tanya's retreating figure with his eyes. She ran lightly and softly in her small *valenki*, her red scarf fluttering behind her.

He caught Rogov's sullen gaze upon him.

"What are you sulking for, Alexander Ivanovich?"

"Aren't there any thanks coming to my old section?" Rogov asked. "I'm not thinking about myself, Vasil Maximovich. My men at Tyvlin worked no worse than the line-men. . . ."

"You don't have to remind me of that—a good thing is never forgotten. Your former section will be properly thanked—they're going to be awarded the head office red banner. Satisfied?"

"Quite!" Rogov said, visibly cheered.

"Well then, now you see what you can do to win the banner from them for your new section!..."

Kondrin rolled up his stock lists and called out to a bookkeeper who was passing by. Together they walked off to the next warehouse.

"Keep an eye on that man," Batmanov said with a nod in Kondrin's direction. "Some people here don't trust him. As you're taking over section affairs you've got a good excuse for going carefully into the books."

"Very well. True, he hasn't been here very long...."

"Don't trust him too much, be more careful.... When you're convinced that your suspicions are unfounded, you can give him your full trust then."

Batmanov consulted his watch. The appointment he had made the day before with the truck and tractor drivers was drawing near. With a nod to Rogov he made his way to the parking place outside the power station where

it was arranged the trucks should collect. At a bend in the road he met a train of three horse sledges. They were carrying thermos containers with the dinner for Umara's and Karpov's teams. At the head of the train walked Liberman.

"Stop! Hey there, stop, can't you!" the supply man called out to his helpers who were driving the sledges. "Don't you see the construction chief has his eye on us!"

Liberman invited Batmanov to "sample his wares." Batmanov, chilled through and hungry, complied, and before he knew it had consumed a bowl of fish soup, followed by cereal washed down with a mug of hot tea.

"You're a fly one, aren't you? Fed me dinner without my noticing it," said the chief, observing a satisfied smirk on Liberman's face and picturing the supply man gleefully passing on the story that evening to Filimonov or Rogov. "I'm glad to see your hard heart is softening, Liberman. When I first came to Novinsk you didn't want to give me anything to eat at all. Remember? What, you've forgotten? Very well, I'll forget it too! Excellent meal. I thank you both for myself and for the men—I'm sure they will be pleased as well."

"Pleased to serve you!" rapped out Liberman, drawing himself up in mock salute.

"Up to your old tricks, eh?" Vasilj Maximovich rebuked him. "Why do you do it? You're not a circus clown or an entertainer to be always cracking feeble jokes and grimacing." He produced his cigarettes and invited Liberman to help himself. "Any news from your family? Have they managed to leave Leningrad?"

"They left Leningrad but I don't know where they've gone. I haven't had word from the wife for over a fortnight," a shadow of anxiety crossed Liberman's face.

"Zalkind sent out two telegrams requesting that they be sent out here. Have a little patience, your wife and daughter will come, rest assured!"

The sledges descended the slope to the ice of the strait. The horses' hoofs slipped and skidded. Umara's workers could be seen far out in the strait, where they looked like flies on a sheet of grey paper. The shores of the island were shrouded in a dense pall of mist.

"Hey, you, easy there!" Liberman shouted.

Batmanov stood watching him, his mouth set in lines of approval. Even that "difficult customer" had now become fairly reliable as

an assistant. The construction chief had constantly observed Liberman throughout their trip along the line. The supply man had noticeably changed. He was as energetic, smart and cunning as before, but he now took the interests of the construction closer to heart, and what was most important, he had seemingly come to realize that the main purpose of his job was to minister to the people's needs.

"Liberman!" Batmanov suddenly called out. The supply chief turned round and lifted the big ear flap of his shaggy fur hat. "I appoint you competition umpire between the teams of Karpov and Umara. Remember Karpov was handicapped at the start. When I come back we'll talk over what to give the winners."

"Right you are!" came up from below.

The trucks rolled up one after another and parked in a row. The hum of their engines mingled with the roar and clatter of new arrivals as they swung round and manoeuvred into place. Filimonov checked them on the spot and jotted down something in a little book.

"He's making notes. Tight as a clam Doesn't say a word," the truck drivers commented to one another.

Two trucks had not turned up at the appointed time. They were evidently stranded somewhere in the taiga. Filimonov still hoped they would come up before Batmanov got here.

But the construction chief had already arrived, punctual to the minute. He had not expected to see so many trucks, and was agreeably surprised. A breath of warm air seemed to go out to him from the throbbing engines. He walked down the front of the column, Filimonov reporting to him as they went along. They came to Smorchkov's truck—the driver, standing by the radiator, looked at Batmanov with shining eyes.

"Please take special note of Comrade Smorchkov's splendid work," said Filimonov. "He brought up four trucks all by himself. And his own is in excellent condition, despite the long run from Novinsk."

Batmanov wrung Smorchkov's hand. "I'll have a separate order of commendation issued about him and Silin. Let everyone know the kind of lads they are!" he reflected.

Filimonov beckoned to the drivers, and they crowded round Batmanov.

"I take you all back on your old jobs, comrades, and will put you on the rations' list,"

the construction chief began in a tone that was half-serious, half-humorous.

A roar of engines cut off the rest of his remarks. Two more trucks rode up, each with another in tow. Batmanov looked questioningly at Filimonov, who shrugged his shoulders.

"They're not ours."

Two men and a girl climbed out of the drivers' seats. Five more men stood up in one of the trucks.

"Who said they were not ours?" Batmanov said, recognizing the newcomers. "They're from Section Five, Komsomol members Makhov, Solntsev and Musya Kuchina. And the Pestov brothers, the two carpenters. . . . And lumbermen Shubin and Fantov. And the cook Nogtev. Fine!" He went forward briskly to meet them and shook hands with each in turn. "I congratulate you! You've made good speed, I wasn't expecting you so soon!"

"We didn't come on foot," Solntsev said, stroking the radiator. "Picked up a couple of trucks abandoned in the taiga on the way down. Folks along the line said you were collecting them."

"Well, what do you think of it, Makhov?" Batmanov asked noticing that the driver was staring about him curiously.

"So this is the world's end!" Makhov exclaimed. "I've never come this far! . . . I wonder whether there are any traces of Admiral Nevelskoy's expedition."

"That's a good one!" cried Solntsev. "You'd better think about the present instead of worrying about the past!"

"How are things, my dear?" Batmanov said to Musya, with a broad smile.

The girl looked tired and somewhat distraught.

"Do you regret having come out all this way?"

"No," the girl said, pulling herself together. "I was just thinking. . . ."

"We can start work right away, Comrade Batmanov," said Makhov.

"No fear, you're no use to me in this state—you're dog-tired!" Batmanov answered, gazing affectionately at the young man. "Meet your mates here, and go and have a rest. Filimonov, see that they get everything they need." He turned to the crowd of drivers standing by in expectant silence. "My friends, let me introduce to you Stakhanovite-drivers Makhov and Solntsev, dispatcher Kuchina, and the rest of the comrades. They've come out to give you a hand. Please take them into your family."

The strong crowd, smelling of benzine and sheepskin coats, stepped up to the newcomers, and the latter were swallowed up in it.

There was a good deal more the builders had wanted to do but the winter's day was all too brief. The glowing sky had already faded and turned grey, and soon night would close in. Having scolded Filimonov for not showing enough speed in providing more light to the work site, Batmanov went to join the engineers. "Everything has been going rather too smoothly today—all I can do is to make acknowledgments all round!" he reflected.

Smorchkov and Silin followed him. He had invited the truck driver, and Silin had joined them en route. Silin was telling Smorchkov that he was thinking of adapting the small petrol tanks as road rollers. They were hollow, considerably lighter than the usual cast-iron rollers and would do the job just as well. But since horses would not be able to pull them they would have to be towed by truck.

"Have you got one of those gadgets ready?" Smorchov asked, greatly interested.

"I've fixed one up. It was quite simple. I passed a thick steel cable through the openings

at the ends of the tanks making a sort of axle. But what's the use? They can't be hauled out onto the ice just the same."

"I think the chief intends sending me out on the ice by way of a trial," Smorchkov whispered confidentially. "I'll hitch on that tank of yours. Run off and get it ready on the quiet! . . "

The engineers, as Rogov had said, were sitting and drawing. It was warm and quiet in the room. Batmanov took his things off with pleasure, and invited Smorchkov to do the same. He sat for a while relaxing, and chaffed Topolev and Alexei, whose capacity for work amazed him. The two engineers—the young and the old—had managed to cover several large sheets of drawing paper with designs. Batmanov examined the ice-work plan and scratched his head—every step the builders had to take was to be an assault. Alexei handed him the order concerning the telephone linemen which he had drafted. Batmanov, in a fine clear hand, altered three exuberant epithets in the text to more restrained ones, and Alexei set about rewriting the order in block letters on good paper.

"I want to send the trucks across the ice today," Batmanov said without further warning. "I'll drive over with Smorchkov first on an

empty truck, then we'll try it with a load. Rogov is preparing timber for the dispatcher cabins. It would be a good thing to transport the logs out over the ice right away. What's your opinion, comrades engineers?"

Alexei was against it.

"Kotlyarevsky is taking measurements every hour. The ice is steadily thickening, but we must wait, the risk is too great."

"How long must we wait? A day? Two days?"

"Obviously longer. A week, I should say."

"Phew! Perhaps two weeks? A month? Are you so rich in time? And what does the chief engineer say? Is he just as conservative?"

"Let's try it, but without being foolhardy," Beridze agreed.

"I would advise attaching long crossbeams to the chassis," Topolev said in answer to Batmanov's interrogative glance. "If anything happens the truck will remain suspended on the beams which will rest on the edges of the ice."

Batmanov threw the old man a look of gratitude and began to put on his coat.

"Kuzma Kuzmich's proposal is adopted—d'you hear that, Smorchkov? Run and get your truck ready. Drive it down to the beach. So that's that, my cautious young man!" Batma-

nov rallied Alexei, as he tied the strings of his cap under his chin.

"In any case, there's no need for you to go testing the strength of the ice," Alexei retorted, snatching up his coat and fur cap. "The chief of the construction is needed on top of the ice, not under it! . . ."

On the beach Smorchkov and Silin, under the supervision of Filimonov, were attaching two crossbeams to the truck and hitching on a small petrol tank with a cable. They were being helped by drivers whose trucks stood lined up on the shore.

"What are you all doing here?" Batmanov demanded. "I didn't call any of you—Smorchkov's the only man I need."

"We understand, Comrade Batmanov. There won't be any foolishness on our part," Makhov said. "We'll move out onto the ice only when you give the command."

"You here? And Solntsev too? Didn't I tell you to go and take a rest!"

"I can't lag behind my comrades, Vasili Maximovich. Besides, it's so interesting!" Makhov said so earnestly that Batmanov desisted.

"What's that drum? What have you hitched that tank on for, Smorchkov?" he asked in sur-

prise, upon seeing Silin's contrivance. "It's only extra weight."

"That's all right," Kovshov, who had already examined the tank, reassured him. "It's a good idea—a light and simple roller. Once we've decided to take a chance, we might as well run the drum down too."

"You haven't forgotten the food supplies, have you?" Batmanov asked. "One team is staying on the island and we've got to provide them with everything they need."

"The food's in the truck," Smorchkov answered.

He started the engine and climbed into the cab, leaving the door open. Batmanov was on the point of stepping up to the truck, when Alexei slammed the door shut and barred his path.

"That's all right, Vasili Maximovich. We'll see to this ourselves."

"Off you go, Smorchkov!" Filimonov commanded.

Alexei and Silin jumped onto the running board on the right and left side of the truck. The truck rolled slowly down onto the ice. Behind it, towed by a cable, jolted the petrol tank, levelling down the snow with a crunching, clanging noise. Batmanov, after a min-

ute's pause, sped after it. Rogov followed suit. The crowd of truck drivers swept after them on a single impulse.

"Let me start also!" Makhov and Solntsev cried in one voice.

Filimonov flung out his hands.

"Hold on a while! Makhov, get ready!"

"Right!" the latter cried delightedly.

Smorchkov's truck was moving across the ice. The revolving petrol drum rumbled hollowly like a bell. Batmanov and Rogov strode swiftly behind it, hard put to it to keep up with the truck. Suddenly Batmanov stopped and listened. An ominous snapping sound had reached his ears.

"Back!" he shouted, and dashed towards the truck. "Alexei, turn back at once!"

"That's all right, Vasili Maximovich," Rogov reassured him. "The cracking is deep down in the ice—it's freezing harder!"

Batmanov listened again, then turned round to the shore and waved his hand to Filimonov. The second truck rolled down onto the ice. Batmanov waited until it had come up and climbed in beside Makhov.

"D'you know what we're doing, Makhov?" he said gaily, taking his cap off and wiping his perspiring brow. "We're driving down

Jagdinsk strait, where your Admiral Nevelskoy once sailed!"

Behind them the trucks on the beach, half-loaded with timber, began descending one after another. They kept an interval between them and moved out in a column along the newly broken road. The engines throbbed rhythmically, and the broken ice crunched under the tyres. The drivers were noisily agog with excitement. The column swung out in the direction of the island, steadily gathering speed.

Dusk descended over the strait. Its icy expanse was now veiled. The hum of many voices was carried up from a distance in an ebb and flow of changing volume. Umara Mahomet's and Karpov's teams, having completed the road, had met on the ice within a kilometre of the island. The men rushed to each other with glad cries. Some, throwing down their picks and crowbars, embraced. Karpov and Umara kissed each other.

"Look at that! How touching—a kiss in the frost!" Liberman cried mockingly, himself as deeply moved as the others. "Attention! Listen to the decision of the umpire. Comrade Karpov's team has won first place in the competition!"

There was noisy applause on Karpov's side, and cries of protest on Umara's.

"How d'you make that out?" Umara demanded indignantly. "We did more—you can't fool me! We had a lot of ice packs on our section, and Karpov covered two kilometres without any ice packs at all. It's an unfair decision! It must be revised!"

"Listen to me, Comrade Umara!" Liberman yelled, trying to shout him down.

"It's an unfair decision! We'll complain to Comrade Batmanov!"

There were more protests. Umara turned to his men and spread his hands, as though seeking support in that quarter. Karpov stood chuckling, as if the dispute did not concern him, and surveyed the crowd with a merry twinkle.

"Look, lad, there's the trucks!" he suddenly cried.

A truck appeared on the road out of the darkness, followed by a second, then a third. The men flung up their hands, and the echoes of the strait were awakened by a tumult of applause, which was sustained as long as the trucks kept riding up—and they came up in a seemingly never-ending stream. The applause grew louder when Batmanov was seen to

climb out of the second truck. He came along clapping too—applauding Umara, and Karpov, and all of them who had cleared the road.

“Comrades!” he said, when silence was restored. “I congratulate you! We have a road now! Tomorrow morning we’ll start transporting pipes and machinery to the island. And now Smorchkov and Makhov will complete their trip and take two teams and food supplies out to the island. The rest will unload the timber—that’s an urgent job. And then we’ll all take a rest. Do you agree?” Batmanov asked Umara.

“I don’t agree! I and my men have been unfairly treated!”

“Unfairly treated? By whom?”

“By him!” the welder said, pointing at Liberman.

“You’ve awarded Karpov the palm?” Batmanov asked, guessing at once what was in question.

“It isn’t right!” the men began shouting.

“Don’t get excited, comrades. just a minute!” Batmanov said, pausing for a moment to consider the problem. “Liberman made allowance for the fact that Karpov’s teams were handicapped at the outset. But I think our umpire won’t take offence if we collectively revise

his decision. In my opinion neither of the columns can be said to have taken second place. They're both first! In other words they both share first and second place. Isn't that right?"

"Aye, quite right, lad!" Karpov assented.

"Is that right, umpire?" Batmanov said, turning to the supply chief.

"A Solomon's decision," Liberman agreed. "My cocoanut didn't think of it."

Umara, however, was still unsatisfied. He looked suspicious and ill at ease.

"Well, what are you sulking for? Aren't you satisfied?" Batmanov asked him. "You've both won first place. You've both done a good job."

Umara laughed.

"Oh, you're cunning, chief! All right. Let's have the bonus! What are you going to give?" he enquired in a businesslike tone.

"Two cases of *makhorka* to each column, an extra helping and a full glass for each man!" Batmanov said promptly, stealing a look at Liberman, as though asking—have I overdone it? The supply chief nodded assent.

Night closed in swiftly. The timber was unloaded in the dusk.

"Hurry up, comrades, hurry up!" Batmanov encouraged the men.

He kept stealing glances at the island, anxious about Smorchkov and Makhov. At last the noise of approaching trucks was heard—they were coming back!

Karpov went up to Batmanov.

"I don't like to upset you, lad, but I must," he said hesitatingly. "We've done a good day's work, but I don't like the looks of the weather—I'm afraid we're in for a storm tonight. My fisherman's bones are all aching. Look at the sky, it's all overcast and the wind's rising."

Batmanov looked round. Sharp gusts of wind blew fitfully across the strait. There was something ominous in their moaning, but so many reliable men stood about and the road underfoot was so good that Karpov's uneasiness seemed exaggerated.

"You're over-anxious, Ivan Lukich," Batmanov said.

"There's no harm in being on your guard," Karpov said, refusing to give way. "The men had better all get off the ice for the night. I'd take the men off the island too. And ship the timber back ashore."

"Well, there's no harm in taking precautions. We're not going to leave the men and the trucks on the ice. The team on the island

will be all right—I sent them enough food to last a month. There's no sense in dragging the timber back—it'll be a damper on the men, and their morale is more precious to me than timber. Let's go home and get a rest, old fisherman. We've got more important things to tackle tomorrow!...

It was late in the evening when Batmanov, Rogov, Alexei, Liberman and Karpov returned to the section. The rare lights of lanterns were lost in the inky darkness that hung over the site. In the dim light of the windows outside the house where Merzlyakov had lived, Batmanov made out the figures of Tanya Vasilchenko and her assistant Smirnov.

"Look at that," he said, turning round to his companions. "Our Little Red Ridinghood is back already!"

"Comrade Construction Chief!" the girl's voice rang out. "Vasilchenko, chief of the linemen's column, reporting. Your assignment has been carried out. Temporary communications between Novinsk and Jagdinsk strait have been established. All the people under my charge are well and now at rest."

"Splendid! Now that's a present!" Batmanov cried, overjoyed. He drew Tanya to him and kissed her on both cheeks. "Rogov, Liber-

man! Prepare the linemen a treat! We'll make it a party. Invite the road builders and the truck drivers as well. Get going!" He turned to Tanya again. "I don't suppose you've had time to instal the apparatus?"

"The apparatus is installed! The line's working!" Vasilchenko answered crisply. She was like a taut string just then, ready to vibrate at the slightest touch.

"Wonderfull!" Batmanov exclaimed.

He rushed indoors, throwing off his sheepskin coat and cap as he went, and made at once for the desk. Beridze was sitting at the selector telephone, talking with Zalkind.

"Here, let someone else get a word in too!" Batmanov said with playful ferocity, pushing the chief engineer aside.

He settled himself comfortably on the stool, put on the earphones and drew the microphone towards him with a happy smile.

"Hullo, attention on the line!" he shouted in a slightly husky voice, winking gaily at Alexei. "This is Batmanov speaking from the strait. All section chiefs and Party organizers listen to my talk with Comrade Zalkind!" He drew breath. "Mikhail Borisovich, greetings! I want to make a progress report for today, to boast of our first little successes!..."

"That's fine!" Zalkind was heard to say. "It just happens that Temkin and Melnikov and Khlynov are on the line too. We were talking about you when Beridze cut in. Go ahead, Vasili Maximovich, we're all ears!"

Everyone, including the linemen, truck drivers and road builders, was tired out to the point of exhaustion after the day's strenuous work. Yet so powerful was the wave of enthusiasm that swept everyone up on its crest that no one thought of going to sleep. All were eager to attend the party.

The supper had to be arranged in two barracks, since one barrack could not accommodate all the people. The arrangements were simple, being the best that could be done under the circumstances. The workers, with their vodka and sandwiches, settled themselves wherever they could, and no one wished for anything better, except a few who wanted to be in the first barrack where the guests of honour, the linemen, sat and where the construction chief himself presided.

The barrack was crowded. Batmanov stood by the table with a tin cup in his hand,

surveying the frost-nipped faces that were turned to him.

"We shan't make a night of it," he said, "can't afford to. We've got more hard work facing us first thing in the morning. There's no need to make long speeches—I promise to say only a few words myself." He lifted his face to the light. "What is our main achievement today? It's not the fact that we've built a road to the island in one day, put the trucks in order, and stretched the telephone wire to the strait. The main thing is that to-day you and I have seen that when our purpose is clear and we are properly organized and act in unison, there is no task we cannot accomplish. Now we can fully appreciate the truth of the saying that 'there is no limit to human powers when those powers are the collective.' Let us drink, then, to our fine, our strong collective!"

He raised his cup and everyone drank the toast. Then Topolev, in his rumbling bass voice, read out the construction chief's order of commendation concerning the linemen. Tanya Vasilchenko got up to speak next. She had managed to change into a new jumper of dark-blue wool and looked very attractive. Looking at her, Alexei was sorry that Beridze

was presiding in the other barrack and could not see her.

"Among us telephone workers I'm the oldest. I'm twenty-four, and our youngest, Genka Pankov, is fifteen," Tanya said. "We honestly confess to you, comrades, that it was a hard job hewing our way through the taiga. But every one of us was spurred on by the thought of his country's destiny, the fate of Moscow. And every one of us carried in his heart the image of our great Stalin—with him we are immune to fear! We, telephone workers, know that there are difficult tasks ahead of us. And we assure you, Comrade Batmanov, as the man who has been sent out here by Comrade Stalin, that the Komsomol telephone team will do everything you command!..."

No sooner had she finished when Umara asked for the floor. Then, one after another, Karpov, Smorchkov, Zyatkov and Silin got up to speak. Time passed quickly and the party did not break up early as Batmanov had intended it should. The workers seemed to be waiting for something more. Batmanov himself was reluctant to part company with them.

Someone voiced a regret that there was no music, and music was forthcoming in an instant. Makhov drew a magnificent accordion

out of its case. The men sitting next to him made way, and he, pressing the accordion to his face grown suddenly grave, began playing *The Song of the Fatherland*. Tanya caught up the tune in a ringing voice, supported by Karpov's rich mellow baritone, then the whole barrack joined in. The first song over, someone started a second, then a third. Then, by making way a little more, a circle was cleared for dancing.

Next to Kolya Smirnov sat Genka Pankov, watching the proceedings with bright eyes. Tanya had told him that his father was not at the section just now—he had gone out to the island. The lad, however, soon forgot his disappointment and was caught up by the general festive mood. Batmanov, who was watching the boy from afar, decided at last to join the young people. With a sinking heart, he sat down between Kolya and Genka and put his arms silently round their shoulders. Tanya came up to them at once. Genka looked at their grave faces with a feeling of alarm.

"Gennadi. . . . You're not a child any longer, you have the courage of a grown man," Batmanov began amid the noise of the room, trying to keep his own voice steady. "You

must face the bad news I'm going to tell you bravely, as befits a Komsomol member.... We're not definitely sure yet, but it's possible that—that your father—has lost his life....”

The strained look in Genka's suddenly narrowed eyes was almost more than Batmanov could bear. Then the tears streamed from them, and Genka started up, wanting to run away, but Batmanov restrained him. The lad crumpled up and buried his face in his knees.

Tanya, unable to control herself, hastily moved away. Kolya Smirnov held his young friend's hand.

“Try to pull yourself together,” Batmanov urged him. “You have my deepest sympathy.... There's nothing I can say to console you. But you must not despair. You'll go to school. You have good comrades. Kolya, Tanya, a whole family....”

“We'll always be with you, Genka,” Kolya said. “You're like a younger brother to me....”

“You are your own master, and no one will force himself on you. But if you wish I shall be a second father to you,” Batmanov said, bending low over Genka. “I have also had a misfortune.... I lost my son.... Come, lift your head up, sonny, be a man....”

Batmanov put his arms round Genka and raised him. The lad submitted and suddenly clung to him, sobbing piteously.

No one noticed this scene amid the festivities that were still going on in the barrack. Someone pushed Musya Kuchina out into the dancing circle. She went round the ring with her hands on her hips and her dark eyes full of saucy mirth. She stopped for a second before Rogov with a bow, and he followed her into the circle with mincing steps.

"Livelier, Makhov!" Solntsev cried, jumping down into the circle from somewhere above. The others looked on with smiles of admiration as his feet beat a swift tattoo in time to the quickening tempo of the music.

What with the singing, the hum of voices and the stamping of feet, no one heard the blizzard raging outside. The wind roared ever louder and fiercer. And when the barrack suddenly shuddered from the first wild impact of the storm, everyone was startled into silence.

The wild moaning of the wind was now distinctly audible in the ensuing hush. It was soon drowned in a thunderous crash. At the same instant the lights went out in the barrack, and a voice was heard yelling in the darkness:

"The ice has broken away from the shore! The ice is moving in the strait!"

"That's goodbye to the road!" Karpov said with a bitter sigh.

A tumult arose in the barrack. Everyone made a rush to get out, but the door proved to be bolted on the outside. They began to batter it down. Flashlights in the hands of the drivers stabbed the darkness.

"It looks like foul play!" Batmanov heard Rogov's voice close to his ear. "Make way there, will you!"

Rogov made a rush for the window, knocked the frame out with a powerful blow and flung himself out. Batmanov, pressing Genka to him, felt men forming a close silent circle round him. He sensed them by their touch—Kolya Smirnov, Alexei, Karpov, Umar, Smorchkov, Silin and Filimonov. He waited a second, then shouted out in a resonant voice:

"What's all the excitement about, comrades! It's not for us to give way to panic! Steady now, keep your heads. D'you mean to say you were scared by the storm! We'll build another road. We'll find some way around the open patches and start over again. And we'll do it again in a day—we're equal to any

task! . . . Everybody report for night duty! All Communists, chiefs and team leaders—this way! . . .”

These words, uttered with commanding power and forcefulness, brought everyone to a stop. The darting beams of the flashlights from all sides of the barrack crossed in a single patch of light, and the face of Batmanov leapt out of the darkness, energetic, strong-willed and calm.

CHAPTER TWO

LET THERE BE LIGHT

LIFE on the strait began now long before the dawn and ended only after midnight. The hundreds of electric suns that illuminated the site stretched out the winter day far beyond its natural limits.

A strict military-camp routine was introduced on the section. A whistle sounded the reveille, the morning toilet and breakfast were gone through in a matter of minutes, dinner and supper were served on strict time, and the lights out was also announced by a whistle. Everybody approved of this routine, and Rogov, who had a penchant for military discipline, took good care that no one violated it. He said there was only one man to whom these regulations did not apply—the man who had introduced them, Batmanov.

The construction chief slept little, as is usually the case with men who are conscious, day and night, of their responsibility for the fate of many people and a big job. He invariably woke up at one and the same hour—long before the whistle had sounded. . . . Quietly, so as not to disturb his comrades sleeping in the same room, he dressed himself fumblingly in the dark, washed in ice-cold water and went outside.

The world was wrapped close in the black cloak of winter's night. There was not a gleam of light anywhere. . . . Batmanov made his way slowly down to the beach with an unerring sense of direction. He stopped at his favourite spot—on the rocky headland. . . .

The darkness was full of sounds. A hollow moan came from the ice-bound water of the strait. The wind whistled, now softly, now loudly. The measured beat of an elk's thudding hoofs could be heard in the distance.

Batmanov stood listening, lost in thought. During these early morning minutes, when his head was particularly fresh and clear, ideas took shape which later in the day found expression in orders and advice to his subordinates. Batmanov verified in his own mind the correctness of what had been done the day

before. Thoughts associated with work mingled with abstract ideas which suddenly leapt to his mind he knew not whence.

He liked to think that he and all the other men of the section out here at the eastern extremity were the first in the country to greet the dawn of the working day, an honour which they perhaps shared only with the frontier guards. A strange and wonderful sense of power swept over him, and he squared his shoulders, barely suppressing a happy laugh. That sense of power came to him like a warm wind from the whole of his native land. Vasili Maximovich Batmanov, a Soviet man, was no jackstraw without kith or kin. He was fond of recalling that Russian pioneers had once been here, and that Nevelskoy had sailed in these waters. Batmanov thought of those early pioneers with respect and something akin to sadness. How alone they had been in their fierce battle with wild nature and the numerous enemies! These feelings were not unmixed with a sense of superiority over his remote ancestors, a fact which Batmanov considered quite natural and legitimate. It was a feeling devoid of conceit and vanity, it expressed pride in the new social order and the Soviet people, in the new Russia which stood such a mighty bulwark

for every one of her sons! It galled him to remember that Nevelskoy had come to these shores on his historic mission at his own risk with a mere handful of men. How much stronger than he was Batmanov, sent out here at the head of an immense collective and with all the resources of modern science and engineering at his command!

Side by side with the admiral he conjured up a vision of Yekaterina Ivanovna Nevelskaya, the heroic Russian woman who, undaunted by hardships and disappointments, had set at naught the amenities of society life to which she had been accustomed, for the sake of glorifying her country's name in deeds of daring. Batmanov had seen the portrait of the admiral's wife at the regional museum in Rubezhansk. Nevelskaya.... Imagination, for some reason, drew a mental picture of her in the likeness of his wife, Anna Ivanovna....

To his entreating telegrams Anna at last answered by a letter enclosing their son's photograph:

"This is all that remains of Kostya—the war has taken him from us. We have lost our only child, Vasili Maximovich, but we must bear up, remembering that the grief of mil-

lions of fathers and mothers is as inconsolable as ours.... I do not know whether your warm words come from the heart or not, but often, waking and sleeping, I see you standing sternly before me with reproach in your eyes. Yes, I failed to save our son, I failed! You ask me to come out and join you.... But how can I? I am in uniform, and I consider myself a soldier, like everyone else. My duty is here. Our son is dead, and we should not try to make things easier for ourselves. I hope that by the time we meet again we shall both be prepared to begin life together again and make it better than it was before.... Better, wiser and without separations...."

How his heart ached for her at this moment, how he wished her there at his side! "Anna!" the dear name was torn from him in a soundless cry. "It is for you to put an end to this separation. Why don't you? We must be together. Our life will be different now, I swear it...."

He sighed, freeing himself, as it were, of a load of painful memories, and consulted his watch. The luminous dial showed twenty minutes past five. He tarried another minute, all tensed, then mentally uttered: "Let there be light!"

In the same instant the whistle began its blithe song and the dazzling lights blazed forth. One!—on went the lights of the settlement. Two!—the whole site was lit up. Three!—the lights flashed along the shore and down the twenty-kilometre ice road, right out to the island. The spotlights on the hills and coast towers, and the lampposts scattered all over the section proclaimed the day and flung the night back into the taiga.

"I said 'let there be light' and there was light—just like the Almighty," Vasili Maximovich chuckled. "Well, we can't very well wait until the sun awakens in all its glory."

For some time past Batmanov had been aware that he was not the only one abroad in the early morning darkness. Under one or another pretext Karpov would hover somewhere in the vicinity. And Rogov too—although the latter was less easy to discern for he would vanish like an apparition if Batmanov looked his way. When Batmanov first noticed the presence of the other men he chaffed Karpov loudly so that Rogov should hear as well.

"What are you shadowing me for, lad?" he called. "What's the idea of this voluntary bodyguard!"

"Why bodyguard? Is it forbidden to take a walk in one's spare time for a breath of fresh air?" Karpov replied innocently.

But the following morning they were there again and Batmanov decided to ignore them.

...After a while Vasili Maximovich would hurry back to the house which he shared with the rest of the team. He had forbidden anyone to call the place Merzlyakov's house.

"We've had the place disinfected and now let's forget its former owner," he declared.

Batmanov liked to watch his assistants sleeping. Alexei, his face invariably serene, slept calmly and quietly on his right side. Liberman, on the other hand, was a restless sleeper; he snored and muttered in his sleep and his face wore an expression of care and anxiety that was absent during his wakeful hours. Tanya Vasilchenko—he would peep into her room as well sometimes—slept with her head turned appealingly to one side, her hand under her cheek. As for Beridze, he slept like a babe, with his arms spread out, his cheeks puffed out and his lips making sucking noises.

For a moment Vasili Maximovich would gaze tenderly down at the sleepers and then mercilessly wake them.

"Get up, you lazy good-for-nothings! You came out here to snooze, did you! There's work to be done!" he would thunder.

Batmanov made a practice of visiting the workers' lodgings every morning in the company of Rogov and Liberman. Bidding the men good morning, he cracked jokes with them, asking what dreams they had had, thoroughly inspected the premises and always had some fault to find which he held up to the new section chief and to Liberman.

"Why is it cold in here?"

"Who says it's cold? You just look—fifteen degrees!" Liberman said, running to the thermometer.

"Never mind the thermometer, this isn't a research laboratory! There's only one thermometer for you to go by—the workers. After being out in the frost all day, they should be able to sleep in their underclothes and bask in the warmth. Look at our caretaker there, muffling himself up in his overcoat—what d'you call that!"

"Yesterday evening and in the night it was quite hot," the caretaker interposed. "It got chillier toward the morning. Don't mind me, I'm always muffling myself after Central Asia—I'm used to high temperature."

"Anyway heat the stoves better, don't be afraid to use firewood."

The workers quickly got used to these morning visits. Apart from the fact that during the rounds one could approach Batmanov with any requests and questions, it made them feel that he had their interests at heart. This solicitude on his part, expressed roughly and sternly, if it was expressed at all, touched them and drew from them an eager desire to respond in one way or another. The truck drivers would go up to Batmanov in the barrack and give him their pledge to make an extra trip. On one such morning visit from the chief, the workers engaged in digging the foundations proposed installing a transporter for discharging the earth onto the surface.

As a rule there were no complaints about the living conditions. "We have clean, warm living quarters, and the food is filling—what more does a man need?" they said. Only Umar Mahomet, to Liberman's annoyance, was always voicing his dissatisfaction and demanding things.

"Chief, we could do with portraits of the leaders here—tell them. It would be good to clear a corner and hang up a mirror. It's awkward to shave without it. We want a

musical instrument of some kind—Makhov has an accordion, and we've got nothing."

And Liberman and Rogov were given orders to find portraits, to rig up a barbershop, and to get a musical instrument for the barrack.

"Here is the criterion of our demands—mine and that of the comrades," Batmanov said. "The lodgings should be as clean as a hospital, as warm as a bathhouse, and as cosy as a girl's room."

Batmanov often reminded Rogov:

"Those lodgings you specially got up for my inspection at Section Five were not bad at all. When will these be like it?"

Rogov did not need reminding. In a thorough inspection of the abundant stocks and supplies with which the section had been provided, he and Liberman had unearthed mats for the floor and curtains for the windows, and a guitar and dominoes, draughts and books.

Batmanov and the other head office men breakfasted together with the workers in a big warehouse which was still in the process of being converted into a messroom. Breakfast lasted no more than fifteen minutes, but that brief space of time was enough for Liberman and Nogtev, the cook, to hear some unpleasant

truths. On one of the first days the construction chief, who had partaken of some thin soup made of fish cubes followed by a diminutive egg-powder omelette, remarked with disgust to the supply man and the cook:

"This is a meal for a child of five!"

"I have to manage with what the supply chief gives me," Nogtev, who was extremely anxious to please Batmanov, hastened to explain.

"The calory content is in exact conformity with the standard requirements for an adult worker," Liberman interposed with an air of importance and handed Vasili Maximovich the menu. "There are more than 1,500 calories in that breakfast. I, for one, am perfectly satisfied."

Liberman assumed an expression of smug satisfaction but avoided Batmanov's eyes.

"Now you listen to me and don't turn away," Vasili Maximovich said sternly. "When the war is over you can get yourself a job in the research department of the food industry. Yes, there is one in Moscow. When you're there you can measure every morsel of food and every drop of bouillon by calories. But so long as you work for me, your only measure must be your sense of honour. I want every

worker to leave this messroom with a full stomach. Understand? Let Nogtev cook a good nourishing cereal. You've got potatoes. You've got fish. Only don't dilute everything with water as you have today. Let it be quite clear that it's fish we're eating and not just water."

The supply man attempted to protest. "Aren't you forgetting about rations?"

"Perhaps, but I'm remembering the people. And here's my advice to you, you needn't forget about rations, but you've got to think about the people you're feeding. If you do that you'll be all right."

At five: forty-five the teams went out to their respective jobs, and punctually at six o'clock the section began its workday.

The road all along the section's line had been completed in record time—four days. Freight transportation was now being organized. Smorchkov and Makhov, competing with one another, headed the respective motor columns carrying pipes, food supplies and materials. Makhov's column used the "Batmanov road" to the island, which made a detour of the large lane of open water in the ice. Smorchkov led his truck train in the opposite direction, down the mainland towards the Adun. Before setting out on their trip, Smorchkov,

grave-faced and concentrated, and Makhov, secretly amused, would step up to each other and shake hands, like boxers in the ring before commencing a bout.

A rattling noise as of rifle shots could often be heard at the building site where the foundation pits for the oil reservoirs and the Diesel pumping station were being excavated with the aid of explosives. Blaster Kurtov and his helpers prepared several dozen boreholes—"fox-holes" they called them—at a time, charged them with explosive and left heaps of broken-up frozen soil in their wake. The shovelmen set to work at once in the foundation pits.

Under an awning running the length of the pumping-station site mechanics were assembling several concrete mixers. Concrete worker Petrygin, staid and leisurely of movement, who had arrived at the section with a large brood of young graduates from the industrial school, was receiving barrels of cement, rubble and sand brought up by truck.

There was a ringing of axes and the whine of a circular saw outside one of the barracks where the Pestov brothers at the head of a team of carpenters were building new lodgings, a clubhouse, and a dining room with a kitchen.

Down by the shore of the strait Silin's and Remnev's tractors kept up an incessant clatter. They were levelling down with rollers a large site, two kilometres long, where pipe-welding operations were to be carried out. Umara Mahomet, Fedotov, Kedrin and other welders set up their equipment.

On either side of them the builders had laid the foundations for two medium-sized log cabins—one to house a diving station to be headed by senior diver Smelov, who had arrived recently with his crew, and the other for Tanya Vasilchenko's line-workers. A third building, for the blasting teams, was being hurriedly erected further along the beach. The house was less than half-finished but the tall fence around it was complete, and behind it engineer Nekrasov and his men were preparing for the big blasting operations to be carried out on the strait.

The power station was being expanded—there were six portable installations now. Two capacious buildings, a garage and a machine shop, were going up rapidly next to the power station.

Work on the foundations for the pumping station had only just begun when Filimonov, leaving Polishchuk to take care of the truck

drivers and taking Seryogin as his assistant, set about the initial stages of the assembly of the pumps and Diesels. The separate parts and sections of the equipment had been piled temporarily on the earthen floor of the power station pending the completion of the machine shop. The machinery was of a new type, and no one was familiar with the design. The American firm from which they had been purchased had failed to send a complete set of blueprints and it looked as if some of the parts were missing: either they had been lost en route or else the firm had "forgotten" to ship them.

Batmanov spent the whole day on the section. He could be seen in the cab of Makhov's truck, going out on one of his regular trips to the island to check the line for dropped pipes, stranded trucks and dawdling drivers. Or he would pay a visit to the welders and listen attentively to the excited patter of Umara Mahomet who was extremely finicky about his tools and always found fault with them. Then Batmanov would remind himself of Nekrasov, an experienced demolition man, and go to watch him preparing powerful charges, and climb down into the ditch to have a chat with old Zyatkov.

The old man worked briskly and tirelessly, rarely taking time off for a rest or smoke. His movements, worked out by long experience, were economical. The Stakhanovite used a capacious scoop shovel with a bent handle. Holding the shovel with the bulge of the handle pressing against his knee, he pushed the handle end down almost without bending his body, and the shovel scooped up the earth seemingly of its own accord. A jerk, and the clods shot out onto the transport belt moving upwards.

Batmanov noticed that Zyatkov threw out twice as much earth as any of the young labourers.

"Let me have a try," he asked Zyatkov.

"Why soil your hands? Your job is head-work," the old man said.

"It's the hands that teach the head. There'll be many a million cubic metres of earth to be dug out on this construction job, and this shovel of yours will come in handy at the other sections as well."

Batmanov shovelled up the frozen earth and threw it on the belt. His movements were swift and sure, but too jerky. The curved handle hindered rather than facilitated his movements.

"Steadier.... Don't press so hard," Zyatkov prompted, watching the construction chief closely.

The workers were curious to see Batmanov at work, but Zyatkov waved them back to their places.

"I've lost the knack," Batmanov said ruefully. He was considerably out of breath.

"You know how to handle a shovel, I see," Zyatkov said.

"Yes, I worked as a fireman on a locomotive once. A useful shovel, yours, only it wants getting used to." His glance ran over the workers. "I don't see any of the others using it—they should. It is unquestionably superior to the kind they are working with."

"They're not keen on taking it up," Zyatkov said, but there was no resentment in his tone. The shadow of a smile crept into the old man's dark face. "They call it a camel, the scoffers."

"By the way, I've been wanting to ask you for some time.... I once knew a man named Zyatkov, Peter Zyatkov. We were in the same class at the engineering academy and we got quite friendly. Later on I came across him in Zaporozhye, he was the director of a plant there. Any relation of yours, by any chance?"

"My younger brother...."

"Is that so? Where is he now?" Vasili Maximovich livened up.

"That I can't say.... I did hear he was with the partisans. But I've lost track of my folks. My son was somewhere around Leningrad, but I haven't heard from him for a long time. My old woman stayed behind in Svobodny with our daughter. I'm from the west myself, but after working on the Turksib I made tracks for the Far East. Worked at the goldfields for a number of years."

"How did you happen to come to this job?"

"I heard workers were needed here so I asked for a transfer."

"Don't you find it hard shovelling earth at your age? We could find you a lighter job, you know."

"I don't need a lighter job, don't you worry about me."

Zyatkov adjusted his mittens and set to work again with his crooked shovel. Batmanov went back to attend to other business, of which there was plenty. Nothing of any importance escaped his attention. He spoke with the line sections and the head office on the selector

several times a day, issued ever new orders and instructions and controlled their execution. He was always in touch with the men, teaching them how to work and learning from them himself.

Suddenly, when it was least expected, he would order Rogov to sound an air-raid alarm. If this happened early in the morning or at night the lights would be switched off immediately, and the air-raid defence squads, who were being trained by the borderguards, would run to their stations. All work would cease, the builders transformed at once into soldiers, ready for action.

Vasili Maximovich's face had become as weather-beaten as everyone else's on the section; it had turned a coppery red from constant exposure to the frost. One day he stopped Tanya and showed her his roughened hands twisted out of shape by the frost.

"You were right," he said. "Your hands can get used to any temperature. I go around without my mittens now even in a high wind, and I don't feel anything. Thanks for the good advice."

For a moment the girl did not catch his meaning, but when she did, she looked up at him with renewed respect; it gladdened her to

discover ever new depths in this man's soul. She had an impulse to take his red, swollen hands in hers and press them warmly.

Batmanov had more than once said half in jest and half in earnest:

"Soon the day will come when we, common labourers, will step aside, climb up on that little hill over there and make way for our engineers. It'll be their turn to show the stuff they're made of."

And that day came in due course. One fine calm morning the engineers marked off a stretch of ice on the strait five hundred metres long, beginning at the shore and running toward the island: the first trial explosion was about to be made. It was the first step toward the fulfilment of the section's principal task and simultaneously a test of Topolev's proposal.

Karpov came down to the strait with several teams of workers. They set to work with mattocks and axes to hew out broad holes in the ice five metres apart. Blue chips of ice, sparkling in the sun, flew into the air to the harsh accompaniment of the tools. It was hard work and progress was slow. Kovshov

kept looking at his watch and hurrying the men on.

Nekrasov, an elderly man with a heavy, dour face, who was a good fellow at heart, went down the line of holes with Kurtov and his mates laying down an electric wire on the ice. The blasters ran connecting wires off to the holes, at the ends of which were attached waterproof paper bags containing ammonal. When all the holes were ready, a hundred men grasped the bags of ammonal and simultaneously lowered them into the seething water of the strait.

According to Topolev's idea, the charges laid in a line at the bottom of the strait were to explode with equal force upwards against the thick of the ice and water, and downwards into the earth, where they would cleave a trench. It was intended to sink the pipe line into this trench and thus safeguard it against freezing in the winter (the trench would quickly be covered by alluvial deposits) and against possible damage caused by the keels of ships plying the strait in the summer.

Nekrasov gave several short sharp whistles—the way the militiamen do in town. This was followed by the sounding of the alarm, produced by striking suspended pieces of rail.

In an instant, the strait as well as the building site on the beach were cleared. The only men who remained on the shore were Nekrasov and diver Smelov who crawled into a blindage set up at the edge of the ice for observation purposes.

Batmanov permitted those who were not working in the immediate vicinity of the blasting to suspend work as well. Several hundred men climbed to the top of the little hill overlooking the settlement. The whole hillside teemed and hummed. Lower down the slope stood Batmanov, Beridze and Kovshov.

Keyed up with suspense, the keen-eyed Makhov pointed them out with a grin to Musa Kuchina and Solntsev, saying:

"They look like the three *bogatyr*s!"

They did in fact look like the warrior-knights of Russian folklore, standing there on the hillside in belted white sheepskin coats and ear-flapped hats that resembled ancient headpieces—tall and sturdy Batmanov, powerfully built, black-bearded Beridze and well-knit Kovshov. All they needed to complete the picture were shields and swords.

Topolev toiled panting up the hill towards them. He drew himself up before the construction chief and uttered with solemnity:

"You have my blessing to give the signal for the explosion, Vasili Maximovich."

The old man was visibly agitated, and made all too frequent raids on his silver snuff-box with a kissing couple on its porcelain lid. Alexei put his arm round Topolev's shoulders and whispered in his ear:

"I have just remembered a phrase I once heard: 'I've overfulfilled my plan in life. I desire nothing. All I want is a quiet life.' What old man said that?"

Kuzma Kuzmich laughed himself into a fit of coughing, and answered, his whiskers brushing Alexei's cheek:

"What about our compact, my dear boy? Didn't we agree never to bring that up again. I must confess, Alexei, that I'm shaking in every limb, I've done much blasting work in my life, but I can never get used to it. And today's blasting is a special one—either you'll shake Topolev's hand, or put the old duffer on the shelf."

Batmanov drew a revolver out of his pocket. Every one followed the upward movement of his hand spellbound.

A shot! There was a moment of deathly silence, broken only by Topolev's rapid breathing. Nekrasov in the blindage switched on the

current and sent it flashing down to the detonating fuses at the ends of the wire. The earth shuddered with a sudden shock, and the ice split with a crash that shook the air. A gigantic pillar of water, snow, ice and earth shot skywards, hung poised for a second in the air like a great mushroom, then rushed down with a deafening crash.

From his blindage Nekrasov, slightly stunned, had a clear view of the bared sea bottom with a deep cleft in it produced by the explosion. The trench was filled with bunches of seaweed and wriggling fish. Seconds passed, and still the water displaced by the explosion did not flow back again. At last it surged back with a rush and closed over the sea bed.

The people on the hill stirred and began shouting and clapping, though no one yet knew the results of the explosion.

Lumps of earth and ice were still flying about in the air when Kovshov seized Topolev by the arm and raced down the hill. The excited uproarious crowd dashed headlong after them.

The beach looked as though it had weathered a storm. The rocky ledges were flooded, and the seashore was strewn with lumps of ice, clods of silty earth, seaweeds and dead

ish. A huge gash cut across the grey expanse of the strait.

Kovshov and Topolev ran to the ice hole into which the diver in his spherical diving helmet had just disappeared.

"There's a ditch all right! Straight as can be! I saw it with my own eyes!" Nekrasov shouted out to them.

Batmanov and Beridze, curbing their impatience, made their way unhurriedly to the strait. The others overlooked them. Batmanov said he had tarried too long here, and it was time to go back to Novinsk. Beridze listened to him absently, burning with impatience to learn the results of the explosion.

"I got a message last night that Pisarev had enquired whether I was here and wanted to know how long I would be staying," Batmanov continued "Does that mean I must hasten back to the head office, or on the contrary, stay on here? I wonder if he intends coming down here?"

"It would be a good thing if he did. We'll show him everything on the spot and tell him about all our needs," Beridze said.

Engaged as they were in conversation, Batmanov and Beridze did not immediately notice Topolev running towards them. Kuzma Kuz-

mich stumbled several times, and once he fell. They ran forward to meet him.

"Poor old man, something's happened. I wonder if that trench has turned out a failure?" Batmanov said anxiously.

Topolev all but dropped into the arms of Beridze. He was unable to utter a word, and could only wheeze and gasp.

"Now, now, Kuzma Kuzmich, don't take on so, my dear man," Batmanov said gently, supporting Topolev under the arm. "You oughtn't to run, even if something's happened. There's always someone younger can do that."

"No—I had to—myself!" Topolev said jerkily. "Nekrasov saw it—the ditch! Smooth—as if made with a shovel. There.... I'm so happy ... to report it ... I haven't let you down!..."

"Thanks, Kuzma Kuzmich!" Batmanov said feelingly. "The strait problem can now be considered as solved."

The old man blew his nose loudly into a handkerchief and boomed:

"I'd have liked to go on with the blasting, do the job at once. But we need at least three or four days for each operation. It's getting dark already—good thing we've managed it today "

Batmanov looked about him in surprise.
"How quickly the day has gone!"

The construction chief, accompanied by the engineers and the workers, walked cautiously down the wide opening, several metres in breadth, that had been blasted through the ice. Snaky fissures ran out from it in all directions. Vapour rolled out from the opening in clouds and drifted over the ice.

"Another advantage of the blasting method is that the ice doesn't have to be hollowed for submerging the pipe line—the ice hole is ready made," said the chief engineer.

Umara Mahomet went up to him and touched him on the shoulder.

"You've seen enough here, Comrade Beridze, come and watch me start welding the pipes."

Beridze had promised Umara the day before that blasting and welding operations would be done simultaneously. The electric welding equipment, however, was not yet ready for use, and the engineers, absorbed in the first blasting, had forgotten all about Umara.

"The welding transformers have got to be checked yet," Beridze said. "We must prepare everything properly first before we start."

"All right, we'll begin electric welding afterwards. But what about gas welding? Why can't we start that," Umara hung on doggedly. "We've got carbide and oxygen, I have everything ready."

"It's late now, my dear fellow. Getting dark. Wait till tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Umara said in alarm. "I've been waiting a long time! I haven't held the fire in my hand for months! I'm all frozen, my heart's frozen! I haven't slept nights thinking of the day when I'd start welding..."

Beridze exchanged looks with Batmanov, Topolev and Kovshov. They smiled with chilled lips. Umara's eyes travelled pleadingly from face to face.

"Let him do it, Georgi Davvdovich," Topolev said, unable to resist Umara's appeal. "Once we decided to begin welding today, I don't think we ought to postpone it."

"I daresay you're right. Go ahead, Umara!"

"Thank you, chief! Thank you very much! You won't be sorry for it!" the welder cried and ran off to the beach.

Three immense lengths of pipes were laid end to end on wooden supports all down the long welding site. Next to one of these pipe chains stood Umara Mahomet's gas-welding

outfit. His crew, consisting of his mate Vyatkin, a strapping jovial fellow, and three helpers, were waiting for him.

Umara shouted a command to them as he ran. His helpers at once applied themselves to their poles to bring the first two lengths into alignment. Umara carefully examined the pipe ends which had already been cleaned till they shone and reached out to his mate for the welding head, from which two long hoses ran to the welding unit. He dipped the blowpipe into a tin with smouldering oil-soaked waste that was lying on the ground next to him, and a quivering tongue of bluish flame appeared. As Umara turned on the oxygen a powerful jet of flame burst forth with a deafening sound suggestive of a rifle report and pulsated in his hands. A shout of exultation burst from his lips as he played with the roaring jet, tossing the welding head from hand to hand.

In a flash Umara's face was serious—"enough fooling, time to work," he seemed to be saying. He regulated the flame, dropped the shield in front of his face with a light movement of his left hand, took a strip of iron from his assistant and set to work.

Under the jet of flame a red-hot spot that soon turned white appeared on the metal. The

welder touched the iron rod to the spot under the flame and molten metal filled the gap between the two pipes at that point. At two other points around the circumference of the joint Umara joined the pipes, linking them firmly together. Then the welder slowly passed the blowpipe from bottom to top along the side of the pipe. A quarter of the circumference thus covered, he stepped over the pipe and continued work on the other side.

Now only the top and bottom quarters of the joint remained to be welded. A glance from Umara, and the helpers set to turning the pipes until the welded sections were on top and underneath and the unwelded on the sides.

"Here, Vasili Maximovich, you have what we've been looking forward to so much," said Beridze. "Umara Mahomet doing turnover welding at the strait."

"The first joint," the construction chief said in a voice that betrayed his emotion. "The beginning. . . ."

Illumined in the dusk by the blue glare of the welding torch, a crowd gathered round Umara, watching the thick-set figure of the little welder with the keenest interest. Chilled to the marrow as they were by long hours of exposure to the frost, they felt warmer beside



this man, who seemed to be fired by a flame as pure as the one that roared in his hands.

After a while Umara leapt aside and tossed back his face guard with a careless gesture. He threw a merry glance at Batmanov and Beridze and strode further down the line of pipes.

"Vasili Maximovich!" he suddenly shouted. "I'm going to weld the last joint as well. Give me your word for it!"

"Very well. You have it!"

The workers began fitting the next pipe. The welder kept looking at Batmanov and Beridze and chuckling to himself. When the pipe was ready he lowered his face guard and set to work on the second joint.

Aléxei closely examined his handiwork in the light of an electric torch. He looked at the welder with a sudden gleam in his eyes and beckoned to Batmanov, Beridze and the rest. He passed a finger slowly round the pipe and read out aloud:

"Long live our Moscow! Glory to great Stalin! We shall win the war! January 1942."

With these words, engraved in fire for all time on the metal of the first joint, Umara Mahomet the welder laid the beginning of the pipe line.

CHAPTER THREE

HOW THE PIPE LINE WAS LAID

THE BUILDERS climbed the hilltop again to watch the blasting from a safe place. When with one accord they looked up into the sky, following the shooting pillar of surface ice and sea bed, they saw an airplane directly over the strait. It lurched with the blast and quivered like a wounded bird, but levelled off and headed for the landing. Batmanov and Beridze rushed precipitately down the hillside.

The plane landed lightly on a levelled stretch of the ice road. Dudin, the secretary of the Regional Party Committee, Pisarev, the State Committee of Defence representative, and Zalkind alighted from the machine. Dudin and Pisarev both wore the same type of khaki coat with grey caracul collars and tall grey fur hats.

"A fine welcome you give us, I must say. A salute from a thousand guns!" Zalkind said

jokingly, noticing the look of dismay on Batmanov's face.

"I can't make out how it happened," Batmanov said, standing stiffly at attention before Pisarev.

The latter held his hand out to him with a faint smile.

"It's our own fault for not warning you."

"Nothing's happened though. Just got a little jolt. Our pilot's a good man, he didn't lose his head," Dudin put in, looking round him. "Well, let's hear how you've been getting along here, Comrade Batmanov."

Pisarev and Dudin, accompanied by Batmanov and Beridze, made an exhaustive tour of the section. They visited the welding site, the settlement and foundation pits, and had talks with the workers and the foremen.

"Fine, you've got things going full swing," Dudin said with satisfaction, when the tour was over.

They came to the "office," as Kotlyarevsky's cottage, occupied by the engineers, was now called. Alexei had dropped in just before them to check something up on the blueprints. He had not even paused to take his things off, and was leaning over the desk engrossed in some computations, still wearing his outdoor clothes.

He made to withdraw when they came in, but Dudin detained him.

"I can't quite imagine how you're going to shift those half-kilometre pipes from the shore onto the ice," Dudin said, addressing him. "They're colossal! And how are you going to lower them into the strait?"

Dudin took his things off, and the others followed suit. Alexei threw off his coat, spread the drawings on the desk and began explaining. The visitors listened to him with interest. Dudin came closer and glanced at the plans over Alexei's shoulder. Pisarev, his large head slightly cocked to one side and his intent gaze fixed on Kovshov, asked:

"What is the technical basis of your time schedule for the pipe-laying work? Have you calculated your resources carefully—will you have enough labour to build the station besides? What technical resources do you dispose of for handling the island job?"

Alexei threw a look at Batmanov, Zalkind and Beridze who sat a little apart. He was actually being asked to make a full report. The Party organizer chuckled, and Beridze shrugged comically, as if to say "there's no help for it, brother!"

The construction heads perceived that Du-

din and Pisarev wanted to make sure that the personnel understood their tasks. The same tendency had been evident in their talks with the other construction workers.

"It's no use looking at Batmanov and Beridze, they won't help you," Dudin said jestingly to Alexei.

Alexei drew his notes out of the desk and gave a comprehensive report about the plan of winter work on the strait and island sections. He knew the plan by heart in all its details and spoke confidently. Towards the end he even began to warm to his subject. Alexei's report evidently satisfied the visitors, for they asked no further questions.

"Why haven't you told us, Comrade Batmanov, how you found things at this section twenty days ago?" Pisarev asked, turning to the construction chief. "Outrageous, I imagine? Confusion and chaos?"

"Not as bad as all that. I don't quite remember now what it was we found here. Of course, we had to put in a good deal of work. But then that's what we came here for."

Zalkind touched his shoulder and said with a laugh.

"Then why did you drive Merzlyakov out, Vasili Maximovich? If there wasn't an outra-

geous mess here, then you've dealt too harshly with him, it seems. What are we taking legal proceedings against him for? Why did the local Party organization exclude him from candidacy to Party membership? By the way, we met him along the line coming down. He handed Comrade Pisarev a complaint against you for treating him with disrespect."

"I was too lenient with the scoundrel," Batmanov muttered through his clenched teeth. "Set himself up a regular *kulak* establishment here, fenced himself off from the section with a medieval wall and didn't have time to devote to the construction. So I relieved him of his job.... Let him herd his cow and pigs now...."

"But you took his cow and pigs away from him! You've sent him begging! What's the man to do now?" the Party organizer said banteringly.

"By the way," Dudin interrupted, "Comrade Zalkind has brought you a gift."

The Party organizer drew out of his brief case a telegram from Comrade Stalin: "Tractor Driver Semyon Ilyich Silin, N—Construction Head Office. Novinsk on Adun. I thank you, Semyon Ilyich, and your wife for your

patriotic solicitude for the Red Army. Stalin." Another agreeable surprise was a copy of the regional newspaper featuring an article about the pipe-line builders.

"We must call a meeting and read these out to all the men," Batmanov said, handing the telegram and the article to the engineers.

Beridze underlined a passage in the newspaper with his finger nail, and Alexei's face grew radiant when he caught sight of his own name among the construction notables mentioned in the article. "Here, on the Adun, they are fighting for their country," wrote the correspondent.

Silin was called out.

"Did you make a donation for a tank?" Zalkind asked him in a jovial tone.

"I did, Comrade Party organizer."

"Did you write to Comrade Stalin?"

"Yes."

"Here you are then!"

Silin took the telegram and nearly dropped it when he realized who it was from. The tractor driver read it and reread it, then for some reason turned it over and contemplated the blank side. His face, childishly ingenuous, betrayed all his emotions, and tears sparkled in his eyes. He turned about and

walked out in silence, pressing the telegram to his chest.

"I understand why you don't wish to speak about Merzlyakov," Pisarev said to Batmanov. "On the whole you've acted right in regard to him, and I'm not sure I'd have been more gentle with him in your place. He's not in your way any more, and you've forgotten about him. But he still exists, and his fate to a certain extent will depend on me. I'd therefore like to have a clear picture of the man and form an opinion about him before deciding whether or not he should be prosecuted...."

Batmanov, suppressing his aversion for the subject, gave an account of Merzlyakov. The latter had proved to be more dangerous than an open enemy. To say that he had failed to cope with the job was a gross understatement. He, the chief of the section, had displayed utter indifference to the fate of the men under him. The cares and anxieties of the collective might have been no concern of his for all the interest he took in them. The false rumours that Moscow had been taken by the Germans and about the alleged Japanese attack which were current on his section did not affect him in the least. The only thing he showed any en-

thusiasm about in these difficult days of general hardship was his own welfare.

"We'll have to take a good look into that man's record," Dudin decided. "I shouldn't be surprised if we discover there some of the roots of his present behaviour. Although it wasn't you, Comrade Batmanov, who appointed Merzlyakov to the post of section chief, let this business serve as a lesson to you. You must know a man very well and have great trust in him before promoting him to a position of authority. Comrade Zalkind has been telling me about Yefimov—a very deplorable case! But Merzlyakov's case is ten times worse. Unfortunately we often promote people we know very little about, sometimes on very slight acquaintance. 'Oh, I dare say he'll make a go of it, he seems a decent fellow.' What that sort of attitude leads to we've seen today while touring the section. Look at all the people whom Merzlyakov has antagonized and who hold us responsible for his sins! Go on, Comrade Batmanov," Dudin added, touching his knee.

"I can't say that Merzlyakov is directly responsible for Pankov's death, but deep down I consider that Pankov died through him."

Zalkind leapt to his feet at these words and began pacing the room agitatedly. Batmanov

broke off in the middle of what he was saying and looked up at him. The others, too, looked at the Party organizer.

"Pankov and I have been friends for over twenty years. He saved my life twice," Zalkind said. His face was contorted with pain. "I was commissar of a partisan detachment in nineteen twenty-one and a wanted man with the Japanese and the Whites. They were hunting me, and one day I and several other partisans fell into their trap. The Whites were about three hundred strong, and they soon had us surrounded. It was impossible to break through the ring. Only one of the boys succeeded in slipping through at the start. We had no hopes of being rescued, and lay in the underbrush shooting back at the enemy determined to sell our lives dearly. Rescue came unexpectedly in the person of Sergei Pankov, who swooped down on the Whites with a handful of partisans, struck terror into their hearts and scattered them all over the taiga. It afterwards transpired that Pankov had undertaken this daring and noble act at his own risk, in defiance of orders. The commander had sent him on a scouting assignment and forbidden him to involve himself in any engagements. We were saving our strength then

and every operation was carried out with great caution. Pankov rescued us without casualties, but it might have been otherwise—he might have failed to help us and come to grief himself. The victors, of course, are not judged, but Pankov nevertheless got it hot from the commander. I can still hear the answer he gave: ‘That’s the way I’m made, I can’t help it. If my comrades are in a tight corner I’ve got to help them. I’d never forgive myself if I hadn’t helped Commissar Zalkind and his boys!’...”

Beridze suddenly leaned over to Alexei and whispered excitedly:

“Alexei.... Listening to Zalkind took me back to the days of Fadeyev’s *The Nineteen*. I almost fancied it was Levinson standing before me....”

Struck by this thought, Alexei seemed to see Zalkind in a new aspect, as though the latter were really the hero of a book which had been his favourite since childhood.

“You, Vasili Maximovich, made Pankov’s acquaintance only recently, you knew him as a mature man. You’re right when you say he was able and experienced. But the trait of character you least knew in him was the ruin of him. He was extremely impetuous in cer-

tain cases. His love of people was so great that he was capable of acting rashly when he heard that anyone was in trouble. And when he heard from Sanin, whom he had met on the way, that men were dying somewhere he had no thought for anything else. I can well imagine him going to Merzlyakov and demanding that he should accompany him immediately to the Umi base! It's a pity the man was Merzlyakov and not someone else, more intelligent and more decent. He would have done what Pankov demanded, and everything would have been different—Batmanov would not have found the section in such a state, and Pankov himself would be sitting here with us now...."

"Are you quite sure that further search is useless?" Dudin asked Batmanov.

"We've searched all over, combed the whole coast. I've been out myself twice. There isn't a trace of him."

"We'll take care of his family," Pisarev said. "He has a son, I believe, and a mother and sister?"

"I want to take his son into my own home," Batmanov announced, and glanced at Zalkind. The Party organizer sat with his face turned away to the window.

"Something must be done to preserve Pankov's memory, too," Dudin observed. "I'll consider how best to do it."

"Comrade Batmanov," Pisarev said, after some minutes of silence. "We've been talking in Rubezhansk about the necessity of exercising special vigilance. The Japanese are interested in the pipe line, and that being the case, this strait section will hold a special attraction for them. I don't like that barrack incident, you know. I can hardly imagine the barracks being locked on the outside during the meeting by sheer accident. I believe there's no harm in viewing the Pankov affair with suspicion, too. Was it really an accident, or was it foul play? Pankov was well known in the region, and might have been standing in somebody's way. I'll ask the State Security comrades to probe deeper into Merzlyakov's case. . . . And generally, they'll take this section under special observation. But that doesn't relieve you of the duty and obligation of showing vigilance. . . ."

"Are you sure of all the men? Isn't there anybody you'd prefer to have removed from here?" Dudin asked.

"After Merzlyakov we dismissed one of the bookkeepers and a storekeeper and sent them

to Rubezhansk. They were stealing rationed food and trying to sell it to the Nivhi. Generally the men who were sent out here were carefully selected, and the collective on the whole is a good one. It only needed proper leadership. I believe the builders here have got it now in the person of Beridze, Rogov, Kovshov and Filimonov—it's quite obvious now that they'll have to stay on at the strait and island section until the end of the winter."

"I heard something about the chief accountant—what kind of a man is he?"

"We've checked his work and found everything in order. He's a conscientious worker and knows his business. He and Rogov have quickly put the stocks and books in order. Possibly the objections against Kondrin are due to the fact that he's tight-fisted when it comes to spending state money and is pedantic in settling accounts. In all fairness to the man there's nothing that can be held against him. Nevertheless, we are keeping an eye on him. We've got four men here, who have served time—the mechanic Seryogin, one foreman, a truck driver and a carpenter. They have an excellent character, learned a trade during their term in prison camp and did good work. They've got a good reputation here

too. I don't think we need touch them as long as they haven't given grounds for it. I remember your instructions about being vigilant, Comrade Pisarev, and I will see to it that every man on the section bears them in mind...."

Dudin and Pisarev flew out to the island the same day, taking Batmanov, Beridze and Kovshov with them.

The frozen desolate taiga stretched monotonously under the wings of the plane. There was not a sign of human activity to be seen anywhere.

"A writer visited this place at the end of the nineteenth century and came to the sad conclusion that the northern part of Taisin Island would never be of any use to man. Just a worthless bit of planet," said Dudin, shifting his gaze to Batmanov. "I'm very glad that the honour of upsetting that notion has fallen to our lot. Little did the writer suspect what a wealth of black gold there was here. By next autumn oil will be running through these jungles along your pipe line. Think of it!"

The taiga came suddenly to an end as the plane approached the northern extremity of

the island. The landscape underwent a sharp change. On the right stretched the boundless grey expanse of the strait, on the left a ridge of low hills densely wooded with evergreen trees, and in the middle, all along the coast as far as the eye could reach, rose a forest of oil derricks. From above they made a curious lacework pattern surrounding the town of Konchelan that lay spread on the shores of the bay.

"Far-Eastern Baku!" Dudin said in a pleased tone with a jerk of his head towards the derricks. "I prefer that forest to the taiga any day."

The visitors walked over the oil fields and adjacent town till nightfall. Oil filled the huge reservoirs in the harbour and on the foothill. Oil seeped through the black earth. Oil spurted from the borings. The very air smelt of oil. The houses, the people and even the food they ate seemed to be saturated with it.

The engineers proceeded to inspect the pumping station. During the navigation season the station pumped oil to the reservoirs and tankers in the port. With the advent of the pipe line, the station was to begin pumping the oil along the line to Chongr, the chief pumping point. Dudin and Pisarev waited

while the engineers looked over the premise and equipment. The inspection over, Beridze reported to them what additional work would be required for the station to cope with its new assignment.

"Won't I celebrate when these contraptions start pumping the oil to Novinsk!" Beridze said wistfully to Alexei as they came away.

"Don't forget to invite me, I like celebrations of that kind," Dudin, walking ahead, said with a laugh.

They wound up their tour of inspection with a visit to the Japanese concession. A podgy little Japanese, the manager of the concession showed them around. His manner was obsequiousness itself, and he answered every question with a low bow and a display of big yellow teeth.

"Talk about polite, the rake-toothed tyke!" Alexei muttered. He had never yet seen a Japanese at such close quarters. "I can imagine what that samurai's got at the back of his mind."

That night, in the office of the Konchelan Party Committee secretary, Alexei was haunted by a vision of a boundless sea of black oil, sparkling with iridescent lights that blinded and dazzled.

"D'you remember those empty tanks, Alexi, at the refinery?" Beridze asked, seeming to read his thoughts.

The secretary of the City Committee reported to Dudin that oil output would begin to decline in a month's time, owing to lack of storage facilities. Accumulated stocks already ran into six figures.

"It's a huge powder magazine which the enemy will endeavour to strike at as soon as hostilities commence," Pisarev said. "That's when we'll rue the absence of the pipe line!"

The Regional Party Committee secretary and the State Committee of Defence representative went into all the details of the construction's needs and promised to meet all Batmanov's requests.

The welding of the first piping-piece designated for submersion was nearing completion. The work-teams of Umara Mahomet and Kedrin were closing in upon each other. Umara had marked off the middle of the piece by pegs driven in on each side, and had now made a deep inroad into his rival's "territory," having in the course of three days outstripped him by at least a whole day's output.

Upon completing the joint he had in hand, Umara sprang back from the pipe, lifted the fibre face guard, and while his helpers were fitting the next two pipes end to end, he shouted teasingly to the approaching Kedrin:

"You're moving at a snail's trot! You'd better show some speed!"

A breeze, laden with a fine snow dust, played over the spacious welding site. The blue incandescence of the flame was almost indistinguishable in the dazzling sunshine. Batmanov often came here and stood for a long time near Umara, admiring the welder's skilful fire-play and the smooth efficiency with which his team worked. Umara had so drilled his men that they seemed to form with him a single living organism.

The usually expansive and fiery Umara was transfigured the moment he began welding. His gestures were few and restrained. He had allotted an equal amount of time for each pipe, and not a second more did he spend.

... Now he hurries over to the next joint. It is time to change the electrode and he does so as he goes: picks a steel rod out of his kit and attaches it. His helpers have already cleaned the edges of the pipe, fitted them together and are waiting for their senior. He is silent—

the others understand him without words, and they too waste no words: there is work to be done and nothing must distract the attention. Umara dons the face shield and bends down applying the electrode to the pipe joint. There is a loud popping sound, a sheaf of golden sparks flies crackling into the sky and an arc of bright blue flame appears, burning into the metal. . . .

Batmanov held a stop watch—it was better that way to follow the work of the two teams. The hand running round the dial helped one to appreciate the difference between the old and experienced welder Kedrin and the master-artist Umara Mahomet. Umara, his body bent over the pipe, seemed to Batmanov to be forcing down the very lever of time with all his weight, and time yielded submissively to his pressure. Second by second, second by second! Umara had already welded six joints to Kedrin's four.

The construction chief hurried away from the welding site, thrilled by Umara's magnificent performance. He felt strongly tempted to applaud the man, but overcame the impulse. Work was the thing! Work, work, with not a minute to lose. . .

On the second day of their competition Kedrin had refused to believe the evidence of

his own eyes. It seemed impossible that Umara had outdone him so swiftly.

"It must be a mistake," he argued. "Or else Umara's sacrificing quality."

Umara being told of this, he thought nothing of running a kilometre down the section of pipe, tucking the welder's arm in his and propelling him, despite his protests, to where his team worked.

"Have a look at my joints. Look at the quality!" Umara clamoured.

Kedrin thoroughly examined the welding, and finding no faults with it, walked away without a word. Umara ran after him.

"Why don't you say anything? Why you don't say how the welding is?"

"What are you nagging me for? This isn't the time for holding exhibitions!"

"Why did you throw a bad word on the wind? Now say a good word."

"Oh, all right, all right," Kedrin yielded with a smile. "You win. But we haven't finished yet!"

Batmanov did not like the way Umara and his mates were doing overhead welding. Everything had gone well while the separate pipes, lying on supports, were being welded and the joints were conveniently accessible. But when

it came to joining together the welded sections the welder was obliged to lie down on the ground in a ditch specially dug for the purpose and to direct the electrode upwards, since it was impossible to turn the heavy sections over.

The cold of the frost-bound earth quickly penetrated the men's padded clothes, and Batmanov noticed that when the welders got up they shivered. Output steadily dropped. On the third day two of the men were brought down with pneumonia. Alarmed, Batmanov demanded that the engineers do something to lighten the men's task.

Umara rose from the ground and began running round the bonfire in an effort to warm himself, when he suddenly noticed Batmanov standing next to him.

"How's the work? How d'you find my welding, all right?" he asked.

"It's fine! Work like that should be shown on the stage—it's art," Batmanov said in sincere praise. "We'll have to award you the red banner."

"Can I write now to my two brothers at the front and to my sweetheart in Kazan?"

"You have a sweetheart too?"

"Certainly. Every man must have wife or

sweetheart. My girl works in Kazan. A beautiful girl, and modest. She loves me and is waiting for me. When the war's over we'll get married."

"Why wait till the war's over? Bring her out here and marry her."

"She's a compositor in a printshop, printing a newspaper. If you need a printer—call her out."

"I'll think of it."

"It's no use thinking. She won't come anyway. She wants to go to the front. She'll work on the army newspaper out there."

Umara lay down on the ground again to join the two halves of the enormous piping-piece.

"There, one piece is finished," Umara said, crawling out from under the pipe. "Two hundred and fifty per cent output." He looked at Batmanov, his own face blue from the cold, and asked sympathetically: "You must be frozen, Vasili Maximovich? Why don't you wear your mittens?"

"Never mind me," Batmanov answered in a tone of chagrin. "You and the other welders are having a bad time of it, lying on the frozen ground."

"That's nothing, we're tough."

"Tough be hanged! Look at the way you're shivering. I'm having thick mattresses made for you to lie on. You'll have to make more frequent breaks, and keep the fires going stronger."

Umara looked up at Batmanov and said wistfully:

"They say you're going away soon? It's a pity, we've got used to you."

"Beridze is staying on at the strait—he's a good, capable man and everything will be in order," Batmanov said. "It's high time for me to be going—this is a big construction job, and there are ten more sections besides yours. I'll see the engineers lower this 'whopper' into the water and then be off...."

The "whopper," a thick pipe, half a kilometre long, stretched over the welding site like a gigantic black serpent facing the strait. This huge pipe weighing fifty-odd tons had to be dragged onto the ice and lowered into the trench at the sea bottom through the ice opening.

The task proved to be exceptionally difficult and the engineers were baffled. When the plan of work at the strait had been drawn up

in Novinsk two methods for welding the pipes and moving them onto the ice had been proposed. Kovshov had suggested welding sections of three pipes on shore, moving them by truck onto the ice and there joining them into longer sections. But Beridze did not agree. In his opinion overhead welding on the ice would be out of the question; it would entail either lifting the heavy pipe sections onto high supports, in order to weld the underside of the pipes, or else hollowing out depressions in the ice.

Kovshov concurred with the chief engineer's arguments and accepted his proposal: to weld sections, half a kilometre in length, on the shore and move them by tractor onto the ice.

But when this method was tried it too failed to work. Two powerful tractors were unable so much as to budge the pipe section. Alexei was for using a third tractor or a fourth, if need be, but Beridze pointed out with justice that hauling the pipes in this way would lay too great a strain on the welded joints which might be seriously weakened in the process. Another thing to be considered was that the ice might give way under the weight of the metal sections.

"No good, Alyosha," said Beridze, "we'll have to think of some other way."

"We'll find a solution," Alexei said confidently. "The first section will give us a lot of trouble but once we find a way of tackling that one the rest will be easy. Now here's what I think. . . ."

Kovshov proposed running a narrow-gauge track down from the welding site and moving the pipe line out on trolleys. The rails, however, reached only to the edge of the shore ice. It was then decided to move the piping-piece down to the edge by rail, and further along the ice by sledge. Two days and nights were spent in laying the track, and the carpenters, in the meantime, made the sledges under the supervision of Karpov.

The enormous sagging pipe, with the aid of winding tackle and the observance of sundry precautions, was rolled onto the trolleys. A team of two tractors, with Silin in charge, hauled this unusual freight down to the strait. On the beach the pipe was transferred to thirty sledges. The tractors rode out onto the ice, hitched up the gigantic trailer and started off with a jerk.

"Stop!" everyone yelled in a chorus.

At least half the sledges broke down, and

the pipe slipped off. The men struggled with this one piping-piece for two days.

The whole section followed the progress of the work with anxiety. Batmanov announced a competition for the best proposal providing the speediest means of moving the pipe out.

Musya Kuchina, who was now at the strait with her refreshment booth, would run out to the drivers as they drove up with the inevitable question:

“How’s the pipe coming along?”

“Neither coming nor going.”

The lads from Petrygin the concrete mixer’s team started an argument: would they manage to haul out the pipe onto the ice or not? Petrygin overheard the argument and waxed indignant:

“How can there be any doubt about it? What have men been given brains for? We’ll think up something, don’t worry...”

He had already submitted his own proposal: to move the sections out onto the ice on wooden rollers. But the idea was rejected since the wooden rollers would not be able to bear the weight of the pipe, and moreover, they would get out of control when in motion. Dozens of other suggestions poured in from all sides.

"Perhaps we should make short lengths and lower them to the bottom?" old Zyatkov suggested to Batmanov.

They went together to the engineers.

"We discarded that idea from the start," Beridze demurred. "The submersion of short lengths in the strait is out of the question. You just try to imagine it, and you'll see the idea's impossible."

"I would suggest welding lengths of only three pipes ashore, and doing all the rest of the welding on the ice," Topolev advised.

"We thought of that, too, and gave it up. That method is no good. It would entail welding thousands of joints by the overhead method. The whole ice track would be dug up. Besides, it couldn't be done—the ice isn't solid enough to dig ditches in. It would be worse for the welders, too, as you can't light bonfires on the ice."

"What's to be done then?" Batmanov asked, beginning to feel seriously alarmed.

"I think there is a way out," Kovshov said, coming up. "Karpov has hit on a good idea. The pipe section could be loaded on the trolleys, and sledges tied to it in the spaces between the trolleys. . . ."

"How will it work out?" Batmanov asked eagerly.

"The trolleys will swing off along the track to the right at the shore, but the pipe with the sledges lashed to it will not stop but glide straight onto the ice in the wake of the tractors."

Karpov's idea appealed to the engineers. The men busied themselves again round the pipe. Alexei waved his mitten to Silin as a signal. The trolleys with the section lashed to the sledges rolled down the narrow-gauge track. Failure again! As soon as the weight of the pipe shifted from the front trolleys to the sledges, the lashing snapped and the front part of the pipe crashed onto the ice. The whole train was thrown out of gear. The trolley wheels clanged and grated. The sledges snapped. Kovshov, who was running at the side, leapt awkwardly and fell, struck on the legs by a piece of sledge runner. Beridze uttered a cry and rushed towards him, followed by Karpov. But Kovshov had already risen to his feet and came towards them, limping painfully.

"Did you hurt yourself, Alexei?" Beridze asked anxiously.

Alexei dismissed the matter with a wave of his hand.

"You had better go and lie down, lad. It was a bad knock," Karpov said.

"Hell, no!" Alexei said furiously, then smiled. "We'll put that infernal whopper in its place! Ivan Lukich, tell Silin to haul it back. We'll start all over again...."

Batmanov, who had come down to the beach in search of the engineers, arrived just in time to see the pipe section fall onto the ice. He cursed roundly and turned back. According to schedule the line was to have been laid across the strait in three months, not later than the middle of April, when the ice would start melting. Every moment of every day was strictly accounted for—and now this maddening waste of time.

The pipe was hauled back on the trolleys. Silin looked down from his driver's seat at the engineers, wondering what the next step would be.

"There's no coordination of movement," Alexei maintained, walking beside Beridze. "As soon as the tractor starts hauling the pipe we leave it to the mercy of fate."

"What else can we do with the damn thing?" Beridze answered with a shrug. "Hire a thousand nursemaids for it?"

"That's the idea! We must put a man to

each sledge and trolley and coordinate all the movements by a general signal. Every man must be given a pole lever."

"That's right, lad. It ought to work that way," Karpov assented, grasping the idea at once.

"We might try it," Beridze said. "But I'm afraid a hundred men won't make that whopper behave properly...."

"Get everything prepared, select your men, and we'll start," Alexei said, turning to Karpov. "I'll tell Silin myself what he has to do."

"Right you are!" Karpov said, starting off.

He was stopped, however, by Umara Mahomet. This was probably the tenth time the welder had come running down to see how things were going and to whip up the engineers.

"You're getting no place fast!" he shouted to Karpov. "We're finishing the second piece already!"

"Take my advice, lad Umara, and be off," Karpov told him. "The engineers are wild enough as it is without you nagging them all the time. You'll catch it from Beridze."

Alexei proved to be right. Fifty men tackling the pipe with pole levers made it, as it were, an animate object. When Batmanov and

. Zalkind arrived on the scene the pipe lay with its long body on the ice, one end pressed against the shore. Batmanov had just been complaining to Zalkind about the failure, and the sight that met his eyes cheered him up at once. He slapped Rogov on the back.

“And you said the engineers wouldn’t do the trick!” he cried, though Rogov had said nothing of the kind. “Russian acumen plus higher mathematics and physics—that’s some power I tell you, my dear chap! Those pipes will go easy now, it’s the first stroke that’s half the battle. Now to see that plaything lowered to the bottom of the sea, and I can go back.”

CHAPTER FOUR

BATMANOV PAYS COMPLIMENTS

BATMANOV studied the men about him with the deepest interest and attention. Utterly forgetful of self, they had no other thought but for those ponderous pipe sections which had to be moved into position as quickly as possible. The savage pertinacity of the engineers and workers and their sheer self-renunciation enabled them to accomplish the impossible.

Kovshov, who was supervising the work on the ice, seemed to have aged in a few days. His face was covered with a growth of beard, his eyes were red from constant exposure to the winds and the blinding sun, and his cheeks were haggard. There was so much dogged determination in the hard set of his jaw when he looked at the refractory pipe, in his swift impatient gestures, in his rather stinging jokes

and short angry commands that Batmanov wanted to tell him: "Good for you, my lad! That's the way to live—persevering, game to the backbone." Batmanov stopped Beridze and pointed to Kovshov, saying: "You were right that time in Moscow, Georgi Davydovich—your assistant's made of the right stuff. It strikes me that he only got a whiff of powder at the front; it was here on this construction job that he learned to fight."

Batmanov often observed Silin at work. Stalin's telegram had made his workdays a holiday. He drove his tractor for days at a stretch and was the first to tackle the hardest tasks.

The construction chief had an eye for Genka Pankov too. In his padded jacket and trousers the youngster darted to and fro between the telephone team's house and the building site with a preoccupied air. He did not wish to lag behind his comrades, yet was anxious not to miss anything of what was going on over on the ice.

Topolev had contracted a cold and coughed badly. The old man was strictly ordered to keep to his bed, but he could not bear to remain idle. He slipped out of the house and worked all day with the blasting team, or

visited the pumping station site and the telephone linemen—wherever his experience could be useful.

And Zyatkov, that fifty-year-old labourer, who could shovel as much earth as four men, he too had racked his brains for some way of helping the engineers in their trouble with that big pipe. . . .

The construction chief also noticed an unusual restlessness about Rogov. The latter frequently approached him as though wishing to say something but seemed unable to pluck up the courage to speak.

“What’s the matter with you, young man?” Batmanov finally asked him, while making the tenth trip from the welding site to the strait in his company. “Why do you keep clinging to my apron strings?”

“While you’re still here I’d like to ask you—” Rogov reddened. “But I’m afraid you’ll go for me.”

“In that case you’d better keep quiet,” Batmanov said drily.

Rogov, with a gesture of despair, took the plunge.

“It’s dull for me here, Vasili Maximovich.”

“Speak to Makhov this evening, he’ll play you a foxtrot on the accordion.”

"No, seriously, Vasili Maximovich. There are plenty of chiefs here, and there isn't much for me to do. And, while you're here, you're taking the brunt of all the work upon yourself. We've got things running practically smooth now, and there'll still be a lot of bosses left when you go—there's Beridze, and Kovshov, and Filimonov. I understand, of course, that the engineers should be in charge here on the strait. . . ."

"Well?" Batmanov said impatiently. He had stopped and was regarding Rogov with interest.

"I want a tougher job. Something tougher than Section Five was. A job like this one, say, but without you being on it. I want to test myself on something big and difficult."

"What are you driving at?"

"Let me have Taisin! While the engineers are busy laying the pipe through the strait I'll attack the taiga."

"It's too early to tackle the island yet," Batmanov answered at once. "We cannot start on Taisin until we're thoroughly prepared for it. What will you do there now? We must first ship out the pipes, materials and food supplies—that's going to take time. Besides, we can't spare the men, they're needed here.

I can understand how you look at it. You think, 'I found things at Section Five in a chaotic state and put them in order with my own hands.' But, first of all, the island's a job ten times more difficult. And secondly, I don't want to repeat the history of Section Five. If you want to know, our weakness was demonstrated at Section Five. D'you think it's right that you were thrown upon your own resources there? Remember what happened here—Pankov was as good a man as you are, yet he couldn't do anything on the strait."

"With Pankov it's another matter—that was an accident. He didn't have the chance to do anything."

"You're wrong. You don't know what the island has in store for you, now do you? The incident with Pankov is another sign of our weakness. I'm not taking any more chances like that. D'you know how we're going to attack the island? In overpowering force! We're not going to tackle the taiga with little hatchets. You look at the engineers' plans and you'll realize that we're going to take the island by storm."

"When will that be? We have to hew a lane through the forest jungles, and make a road, and get the pipes transported out

. while the winter lasts and build living quarters and stores. . . .”

“I don’t intend putting off the island assault until the spring. We’ll hop across to Taisin when we’ve got about half the freights shipped out there and the pipe line laid half-way down the strait.”

They approached the welders. Batmanov was pleased to see Kedrin lying on a wadded mattress instead of on the bare ground. The other welders were similarly provided. In addition, two cabins had been put up where the welders could go in to warm themselves. Batmanov turned back.

“Your attitude towards me has changed lately,” Rogov began, still trailing after Batmanov. “It’s very painful to me.”

“I see you’re bent on effusions today,” Batmanov said with annoyance. “It’s harmful to talk so much in the frost, you might chill your throat. What’s more, men are supposed to be able to control their emotions.”

Rogov felt crushed by Batmanov’s words and the tone in which they were uttered.

“Don’t hang your head. It doesn’t suit you—not with such a strong neck as you have,” Batmanov added, suppressing a smile. “To get things clear between us once for all

I'll risk an effusion myself. The question of the island has no connection with my attitude towards you—please get that out of your head. My method of approach to the island is different to what it was on Section Five, and even the strait. We builders are continually gaining experience, and our tactics change too, don't they? Now about you and my attitude towards you. I talked it over with Zalkind before this conversation and have decided to put you in charge of the island job."

"I'll justify your trust!" Rogov said swiftly with emotion.

Batmanov grimaced.

"Again those exclamation marks! You might as well add: 'I pledge myself to the following obligations.' Don't you realize there are many things between men that are clear enough without words? You don't understand my attitude towards you? I think it's obvious enough. Are you fishing for compliments? You're not a young lady. D'you want me to tell you your faults? I can if you wish. Let's take the latest example. I've heard from you more than once—give me some terrific job. Bursting with energy, full of spirit and dash, eh? All right, let's presume that's the case. But why play the

lone strong man, a sort of Vaska Buslayev?*

That model's out of date. You called Makhov an individualist—but the joke's on you. Hasn't it occurred to you that that long word fits you better than him? The engineers, if you please, are already in your way! It seems to me that you underrate the role of the collective too."

Rogov uttered an inarticulate sound by way of protest.

"If I'm wrong all the better. You said something about respect for me. Can't you see, for all your respect, that without the engineers and the collective I'm nothing but a cipher. I confess it without chagrin. On the contrary, I'm glad that it has been given me to realize this. Not to understand it is to be like the man who chops off the limb of the tree he sits on."

Batmanov, taking too deep a breath of the frosty air, began coughing. "This talk of yours has vexed me, I must say, Alexander Ivanovich. Look how many worthy people there are here, yet nobody kicks, no one plumes himself upon his strength or demands supernatural tasks—they've forgotten about themselves entirely, they've harnessed themselves to the cart and are pulling away with all their might."

* Vasili Buslayev, hero of ancient Novgorod ballads.

"Aren't I pulling with the rest?" Rogov asked in a hurt tone.

"You are, but that's not the point. You're capable of doing a lot and you are doing a lot. But what interests me is the means you use, your methods of work. I dare say the Americans are capable people too, but their methods don't suit us. I watched you when you were still at Section Five."

"You just can't forget those trucks!" Rogov said bitterly.

"Wrong again! The trouble with you is that all you remember is those trucks. As a matter of fact I wasn't thinking of them at all. . . . What I was interested in at Section Five was to understand the means by which you achieved success. And I saw it—it was your ability to appreciate the power our people represent when they are welded in a collective, it was your ability to cooperate closely with the Communists and get the Nanais interested in the construction job. I was glad to see that you had the makings of a real organizer. . . . You've wrung a compliment from me after all! But the medal's not so good on the other side. There's those trucks again, and the fish, confound it, and your tendency sometimes to be overbearing in your relations with the men—

where the dickens d'you get it all from? And there's that supercilious attitude towards the engineers, not clever of you at all—why, man alive, they're the lawgivers of Soviet science!"

Batmanov's words wounded Rogov so deeply that he recoiled.

"Don't be scared, Alexander Ivanovich. I admit I am not mincing words, but you're not obliged to take what I say to heart. You'll say—that about the engineers was only a joke, and the affair with the trucks is exaggerated.... Believe me, when one takes an interest in a man, everything about him is important—the fact that he's done a big job that may earn him a decoration, or something that he said, let fail, in a casual way. Shall I be frank with you to the last? For goodness' sake stop looking so hurt."

Batmanov slipped his arm through Rogov's.

"As you know, I'm working without an assistant and I could do with one badly. They sent down a man—you didn't see him, nor did any one else for that matter—but Pisarev immediately recalled him. He wasn't a bad man, but he wasn't ripe for the job. The same with you—you're not ripe yet. I mean to say, I'd take you with pleasure as my assistant, but

I realize that it's too early. Why should you climb to the third floor with a load that you had better leave on the first floor?"

Thus conversing, they reached the settlement before they were aware of it. Zalkind stood on the office porch. Batmanov quickened his pace when he caught sight of him.

"I'll be going, Vasili Maximovich," Rogov said in a jaded voice. "My head is whirling. I want to be alone for a while to think over what you've just told me..."

"Run along then and think it over," Batmanov said to himself with a chuckle.

While Batmanov was warming himself, the Party organizer informed him that Pushchin had arrived with a printing outfit.

"I sent him to have a rest, and told him to have the first leaflet ready by tomorrow. He must issue pithy little newspapers that will hit the nail on the head. They need be no bigger than the palm of your hand. Pushchin was editor of a factory newspaper, so he knows what's wanted. We could do here with a newspaper, a collective organizer and propagandist. What do you say, Comrade Chief?"

Batmanov, holding the glass with still chilled fingers, sipped the hot tea and nodded his acquiescence.

During the time he had spent on the section Zalkind had done a great deal to bolster up the work of the Party organization. A Party meeting was to be held the next day, where he was expected with impatience. The meeting was to reelect a new bureau. Zalkind had made a good study of the workers, and talked with all the Communists and with the non-Party people. He observed that the Communists had won a firm place in the esteem of the collective by their devotion to the job, their efficiency and integrity. Turning over in his mind possible candidates for membership to the bureau he thought of Karpov, Rogov, Umara, Goncharuk and Nekrasov—those five men were fully capable of being leaders of the collective on this the most important section of the construction job.

"The Party is going to get some fine new members tomorrow," Zalkind said, showing Batmanov several applications. "Take Polishchuk. D'you remember how we made his acquaintance at the Start?"

Zalkind broke into a laugh. Batmanov smiled.

"I happened to hear a talk Alexei Kovshov had with Topolev. Has the old man handed in an application for membership in the Party?" Batmanov asked.

"He has. He is being recommended by Kovshov, Rogov and Nekrasov. Alexei writes in his recommendation that he has known Topolev as an eminent Russian engineer from his student days."

"The old man is splendid! It would be a good thing to speak about him at length tomorrow. His example is instructive for the young Party members and the young people generally."

"You start it then," Zalkind advised.

"Very well. But I think it would be better if Alexei brought it up. I like that friendship of theirs! When you look at them you can't help thinking: surely there never was such a friendship as this. An old man and a young man, little more than a youth. . . . Is theirs the relationship of pupil and teacher? No. Could you say that Alyosha is a pupil of Kuzma Kuzmich? No, it is rather the reverse. Are they kinsmen, then? Neighbours? Chess partners perhaps? No. This is a stronger, more intellectual friendship. They are friends because they share the same views about the future.

Now isn't it curious when you come to think of it? We were all wrong about the old man—you, myself and Beridze. We failed to find the right approach to him. To all intents and purposes we simply tacked Topolev on to Grubsky in the beginning, or rather we nearly did. Kovshov with his more sensitive soul turned out to be more discerning than we, he saw that Topolev's punctilious loyalty to Grubsky was the typical pose of the intellectual of the old type. 'So the new management is down on Grubsky! Then I shall praise him. I might have been down on him myself if he were in power. But now that he is a nobody I shall give him my support.' What's more, Alexei not only understood Topolev, but he succeeded in finding the key to his heart. Beridze, you know, washed his hands of the old man and came to me demanding his transfer to some other job. I talked it over with Kovshov and he hotly defended Topolev. 'I am certain that he will change, I promise to influence him, but give me time.' And he did influence him!"

Batmanov lapsed into silence and gave his attention to his tea. Vasili Maximovich was fond of strong tea.

"What other applications are there, Mikhail?"

"There's one from Silin. He is a candidate member of the Party and he asks to be made a full member." Zalkind found the application among his papers. "'Here in the Far East,' he writes, 'I grew up and learned how to work. This is wartime, and it has fallen to my lot to take part in the battle of labour on our construction job. If I am worthy please accept me as a member of the Party. I want to be a Communist builder.'"

Batmanov told the Party organizer about his conversation with Rogov.

"He's a tower of strength, that lad. You have to bring your shoulder into play when you want to turn him round. I could almost hear his frame creaking when I spoke to him. I'm afraid I put the screw on too tight this time though." He paused, then a gleam came into his eyes and he exclaimed: "It was the funniest thing listening to him begging to be given the island!"

Batmanov perceived from the expression on Zalkind's face that the Party organizer was deeply interested in what he had to say about Rogov. This heightened interest piqued Batmanov's curiosity. He could not contain himself.

"Do I imagine it or are you really sizing

me up?" he asked. "Have you forgotten me during the time I've been living here?"

Zalkind got up quickly and went over to the window. Nearly the whole site as far as the strait, bathed in sunshine, was visible through the clean unfrosted glass. Zalkind turned to Batmanov with his good-natured smile and said:

"I was thinking about you, and your account of your talk with Rogov happened to coincide with my thoughts."

"Thinking about me? What could you think about me?"

"I'll tell you, don't be in a hurry. . . . A bit of history. . . . Once, some five years ago, you were discussed at the bureau of the town Party committee. It was about your not being very fond of criticism. That you rather slighted the ordinary man, overpowered him, as it were, with your authority and position. Some of the comrades laid it on thick, sure enough. Someone even called you a little Napoleon."

"That's interesting!" Batmanov said, obviously nettled.

"You take it calmer—it's past history. Anyway, to some innocuous degree, you did carry in you the germ of what you saw in Rogov. When we were thrown together again in Nov-

insk last autumn I was naturally interested to see whether Batmanov had changed. You know as well as I do that things with us sometimes turn out this way—a strong, worthy man, who enjoys the Party's trust, becomes a leading figure. For a time everything goes normally. Then that comrade loses touch with the source of his strength, he ceases to realize that without the people, without the collective, without the Party he is a mere cipher, as you say. He begins to believe that he himself is the source of strength and the prime mover."

"You and I have had many talks. D'you remember that night, on November Seventh? Yet you have never spoken about this. . . . So you think I've become a little Napoleon?" Batmanov asked in a tone of incredulity and surprise.

"No, I don't. These questions of yours are superfluous. We started jointly building up the collective of our headquarters. To tell you the truth I was afraid at the time that you were attaching too much importance to the head office, or rather underestimating the importance of the sections, where the pipe line was actually being built. It seemed to me that you were spending too much time in the office. There is such a thing as the bureaucrat-

ic, office way of getting things done, in contrast to the real creative way. Everything looks right—beehive activity, typewriters clicking away, pens scratching. . . .”

“You know as well as I do the importance of the machinery of leadership on a construction job, especially during the organizational period!”

“I do, and that’s why I appreciated the singleness of purpose with which you set about the job. We were all eager to get out into the field, and so were you, but you kept a check on us all.” Zalkind smiled slyly. “If you remember, I went specially out of my way to pit the sectional representatives against the head office men at the Party conference—d’you remember Tanya Vasilchenko’s speech, and Kotenev’s? I was very glad to see then that criticism went down well with you. You’re not afraid of it and you don’t try to dodge it. That’s the way we cleared the decks for our strategic battle for the pipe line. Of course, there were mistakes and oversights as well. Admittedly, we were a bit late in coming out here to the strait. I reproached Umara and the other Communists for not having taken care of Pankov, for leaving him on his own. D’you know what they answered? ‘We admit

it, and are prepared to bear the responsibility.... But where were you? Why did you leave Pankov on his own?" "

"Don't let us speak about Pankov.... We were late coming to the strait—I admitted as much to Dudin when we were in Rubezhansk. Why do you want to rub it in again?"

"You don't give me a chance to go on. Here at this section many things pleased me. Here I saw you—"

Zalkind wanted to smoke, and began looking for his matches.

"Never mind smoking for a few minutes. You can smoke three cigarettes one after the other as soon as we've finished," Batmanov said. "Tell me, what sins of mine have you seen here?"

"You spoke about Alexei's friendship with Topolev. I want to say something about friendship too . . . your friendship with the men, the rank and file. I noticed this friendship before. But here it has taken on a new colouring—simpler, I should say, more heartfelt. That's very good. And your prestige has risen still higher on account of it. The fact that you have warned Rogov is another good sign. I'm glad to find myself working with a Batmanov like that."

Batmanov snapped the lid of his cigarette case in obvious embarrassment and said gruffly:

"You've wound up on a note that jars. Shall we agree in future not to pay each other compliments?"

"Motion adopted," Zalkind said, drawing his stool up closer and sitting down next to Batmanov. "We agree from now on to tell each other only unpleasant home truths. I'll start right away, may I?"

Batmanov rubbed his neck and laughed.

"I can't back out now, I've asked for it."

"Zyatkov told me that you had been practising his method. Umara also bragged that he was teaching the chief to weld pipes."

"You've got me wrong there!" Batmanov said with annoyance, getting up. "I'm fond of workmanship, and my hands itch for something to do. It's so interesting to try your hand at things."

"I'm not saying anything against that! Humanly speaking I can quite understand you."

"Zyatkov's method will come in useful at the other sections, Umara's too."

"That's just what I mean! You mustn't confine the spread of good work methods only

to personal exhibition. You're not Peter I and these are different times. Let us organize real technical propaganda, something on a sweeping scale! We'll get Pushchin to print leaflets about Umara and Makhov.... We'll appoint Zyatkov and Petrygin instructors in Stakhanovite methods. Let's start Stakhanovite conferences, first local ones at the sections, then a general conference from all over the construction. Is it a go?"

"It's a go, Comrade Party organizer," Batmanov said, proffering his lighter. "Now you can smoke your three cigarettes. I would have grudged you even a light for those compliments. Would you like some tea?"

They drank tea and silently exchanged friendly glances.

"I'd like to touch on another ticklish subject, Vasili—may I?"

Batmanov nodded.

"Go ahead...."

"I understand that you want to adopt Genka Pankov."

Batmanov grew alert. He put down his glass of tea.

"Don't you approve?"

"Why shouldn't I? I only want to warn you, as a friend. My Lenka is an adopted son,

too, you know. . . . But I took him into the family when he was three. Genka is fifteen! You're alone now, and you have a heavy weight on your heart—I mean, don't frighten the lad off."

"I've been thinking of that too and I understand the position," Batmanov said. He got up and began pacing the room, a prey to some deep emotion.

"Pankov allowed him a good deal of freedom. He was a sensible father and guided the boy without his being aware of it."

"I shan't impose my will and feelings upon the boy."

"Quite right, Vasili. Your influence should be imperceptible. You'll have to use self-restraint until he gets used to you as to a father."

"Poor kid, I'm so sorry for him!" Batmanov said with a painful sigh. "I went down to the telephone team yesterday, and there he was, standing by the porch, crying his heart out. It's terrible!"

Batmanov sat down and clasped his head in his hands.

The construction chief and the Party organizer did not immediately return to their

duties. Zalkind decided to interview the men of the section and was about to leave the room when Batmanov stopped him.

"Work here," he said. "I have a big accumulation of mail, orders and instructions from the People's Commissariat, and generally I've neglected the mail these days. I'll wade through it quietly without a secretary—I shan't be in your way."

They sat in different corners of the small room, each engrossed in his own affairs. The section staff, Communists and non-Party men, came in to see Zalkind one after another. Batmanov pulled a sheaf of papers out of a capacious brief case and began going through them, writing superscriptions, making notes and swiftly drafting telegrams and letters without a single erasure. His recent conversation with Zalkind still hovered in his mind, and he stole frequent glances at the Party organizer and caught himself lending an ear to his talks with the visitors.

Karpov came in. Batmanov tried to make out from the nature of Zalkind's questions what he had invited him for. Karpov, lowering his voice and casting glances over his shoulder at Batmanov, spoke enthusiastically about work on the ice. "Mikhail expects Karpov is

going to be elected secretary of the local Party organization, and he wants to size him up again," Batmanov thought.

"Ivan Lukich, on the way here I dropped into Nizhnaya Sazanka and paid a visit to your folks," said the Party organizer. "They remember how they parted with you and were sorry there had been any unpleasantness. They feel you ought to be the first to give some sign of yourself. Don't you think it's time to drop them a line, eh? Write as if nothing had happened. . . ."

Karpov laughed.

"No, lad, let them write first. After all, they stirred up my whole family, hoping that I would get scared and give up the idea of coming to the construction job. . . . All right, I'll think about it, maybe I will write. We all know each other too well to let a quarrel separate us."

When Karpov had gone the Party organizer called in Goncharuk and Umara. After them came Smorchkov, then Kovshov. Batmanov was surprised at the severe and dry tone in which Zalkind spoke to Alexei. Zalkind's manner toward the young engineer was usually gentle and fatherly.

"Why did you detain Smirnov, Comrade

Kovshov? He was to have gone out to Novinsk five days ago on my instructions to attend the lecture course."

"I need Smirnov badly, Mikhail Borisovich. You know work on the strait is now in full swing. Tatyana can't manage by herself. I don't see any great harm in Smirnov missing those lectures."

"I'm sorry to see such narrow practicality in you. I didn't notice it in you before. You ought to know by now that Party studies mustn't suffer under any circumstances. I was perfectly aware that work was in full swing at the strait when I gave instructions for Smirnov and three other comrades to be sent to Novinsk from this section. Rogov will answer to me for the other three, and you for Smirnov. What's the idea of taking it upon yourself to interfere in something that doesn't concern you?"

"I did it with the sanction of the construction chief," Alexei said, puzzled by the severity of the Party organizer's tone.

"Comrade Batmanov acted wrongly in this case," Zalkind said in clipped tones. "He had no right to countermand instructions issued by the Party organizer of the construction job. But what interests me, and frankly, annoys

me, is this sudden initiative of yours. At least you might have got in touch with me about it, instead of taking the matter to the construction chief."

Kovshov, considerably disconcerted, looked at Batmanov for support.

"Yes, I did give my consent for Smirnov to be detained," Batmanov admitted. "And thereby became a party to your wrong action, Comrade Kovshov. Please rectify our mistake at once. Let Smirnov go and attend his studies."

Alexei stood by the table toying with a tape measure. He was loath to go away without having it out with Zalkind.

"It was wrong, of course," he said ruefully. "Please don't misunderstand me. I didn't mean to annoy you in any way, Mikhail Borisovich. The matter looked simpler to me than it really is."

"That's not much of an excuse," Zalkind cut him short. "Let's leave it at that. Bear it in mind in future, that's all."

Kovshov left reluctantly. Zalkind broke into a laugh, and his face instantly softened.

"I see we're in each other's way, after all. I suppose we mustn't share the same den."

"Let us try to endure it for today at least and not crawl off to different dens," Batmanov answered in the same jocular vein.

They went on with their work. There was a knock at the door and Kondrin came in. The Party organizer had summoned him to find out what voluntary subscriptions had been made to the Army Gift Fund for the purchase of a flight squadron to be christened "The Pipe Line Builder." Zalkind was also interested in hearing the chief accountant's opinion of Merzlyakov and whether there were any proofs of the latter having dipped his hand in the state pocket.

Kondrin was taken aback for the moment, but he quickly recovered himself and answered the Party organizer's questions calmly and sensibly. Batmanov tore himself away from his papers again and subjected the chief accountant to a close scrutiny. The man appealed to him no more than he did before, though he was obviously no fool and knew his business. He bore himself well, except perhaps that he seemed a trifle too eager to please.

"Can one's aversion for a man be aroused merely by his unprepossessing appearance and someone's unproved suspicions?" Batmanov asked himself. His gaze shifting to the Party

organizer, he thought: now, this man's appearance speaks for itself—a bold open countenance, eyes that look straight at you, unconstrained gestures.

"Vasili," Zalkind called out, when Kondrin had gone. "Aren't you fed up with that mail department of yours? Let's go and take a stroll over the section. I want to remind you—we've got to present the red banner to-day to Umara's team, and the pennant and red radiator hood to Makhov."

Kondrin was seized with a sudden misgiving when he heard that Zalkind wanted to see him. The first thing that flashed through his mind was that Seryogin had not kept his word. The accountant went to Zalkind with the intention of making a confession. But that proved unnecessary—the conversation was calm and businesslike. Yet Kondrin could not shake off a feeling that the Party organizer was studying him closely. Perhaps he studied all new people that way? In any case, the very fact that Zalkind had called him out for a talk played havoc with Kondrin's nerves. He sat about aimlessly in his office, then went out and prowled about the building site until he

suddenly found himself outside the mechanical shop in which Seryogin worked.

The mechanic's cabin was separated from the general workshop by a fresh wooden partition. The workshop itself was still under construction. Seryogin sat on a cast-iron machine part humming a tune and examining a large drawing that was spread on the floor. He and Filimonov had just sketched the design of an important detail for a pump, and Filimonov had run off with it to Beridze. Engrossed in his work, Seryogin did not notice Kondrin until the latter kicked a metal part out of his way and swore.

"Singing while you work, you son of a bitch?" he demanded viciously.

Seryogin said nothing. He moved up the metal part that Kondrin had kicked away and gave his attention once more to the drawing. His face assumed a stubborn expression.

Kondrin, his ire rising, gave the innocent machine part another savage kick and seized Seryogin by the scruff of the neck.

"Here, what the devil's bitten you, let me go!" Seryogin said, struggling to free himself. "Go to hell."

"Oh, no, Horsey, you can't send me to hell," Kondrin hissed, giving him a shake.

"You and I are hooked up on the same bit o' string. You're not going to pull out from me to Zalkind. There's only one way you can skip up on me, and that's the grave. I'll see you comfortably laid in it, don't you worry."

"Let me go, I tell you! I'll shout!" Seryogin cried in a smothered voice, terrified by the sinister look on Kondrin's contorted face.

Kondrin drew his head in with a startled look round and released his grip on the mechanic. Seryogin, rubbing his neck, went over to a lathe standing by the window.

"I see you've reformed and want to sell out. You've got a short memory, Horsey! Don't forget you're a jailbird, same as me."

"I'm not, I'm a free man now! I've made good!"

"Poppycrack! You'll never wash the stain off, you'll always go about with it."

"What d'you want of me? I'm not interfering with you, am I?"

"I want to know whether it was you squealed on me to the Party organizer. I don't like the way he looks at me."

"I didn't say anything. But I will if you don't leave me alone! I don't believe you've turned honest. A plug-ugly you were and a plug-ugly you'll remain...."

Kondrin reached his side in a single bound.

"Another word, and you're a dead duck!" Kondrin snarled, holding a knife to Seryogin's breast.

"A fellow can't say a word to you." Seryogin muttered, his eyes glued to the knife.

"You'd better think what you say then." Pleased with the effect he had produced, Kondrin put the knife away. "You know me, Horsey—just another word from you, and I'll do for you."

"What do you have to fly off the handle for, what have I done? I'm not interfering with anybody, just doing my work."

"Work," Kondrin mocked. "How d'you like that enthusiast! Donkey!"

Seryogin glared at the accountant, but checked the words that rose to his lips. Kondrin sat down on a stool and began smoking. He recalled the details of his talk with Zalkind and gnashed his teeth. Suddenly he jumped up, and hurried out.

"Don't forget your word, Horsey.... Remember it sleeping and waking, if you value your life," he threw out from the doorway.

Filimonov soon came back to the workshop and ran into Kondrin as the latter was com-

ing out. Filimonov was struck by the mechanic's altered appearance—he looked gloomy, and of his former animation there was not a trace. He listened apathetically to the information that Beridze has received a telegram from Terekhov, the manager of the Novinsk works, saying that he agreed to manufacture the missing parts for the pumps.

“What's Kondrin been doing here?” Filimonov asked. “What's there between you two? He's too old to be your pal, and you can't have any common professional interests. . . .”

“There's nothing between us,” Seryogin answered hastily. “He's just an old acquaintance, drops in now and again for a chat—” The mechanic suddenly broke off in confusion—Kondrin had forbidden him to even mention the fact that they were old acquaintances.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE BUILDERS' WORKDAYS

THREE lengths of pipe sections resting on low wooden supports, lay end to end on the ice of the strait alongside the jagged ice hole formed by the blastings. They ran out from the shore far into the horizon like a black arrow.

Dozens of men, under Goncharuk's command, were busy cleaning the pipe-run of outside slag and rust. It was hard painful work. The rasping clanging noise smote the ears. The air was filled with acrid dust. Under the sickle-shaped metal scrapers and brushes moving swiftly backwards and forwards the black tubing underwent a rapid transformation—it grew brighter, turning brown, and finally reddish, and no longer gave off any dust during the cleaning. Goncharuk was an exacting taskmaster, and some of the men even grumbled at him.

"He wants to make the thing shine like a new toy...."

"It'll be dirtied just the same."

Indeed, taking advantage of a brief spell of warm weather, the insulating team began covering the cleansed pipe with a thick coating of some hot, black mass resembling pitch. This mass—a mixture of boiling bitumen and other ingredients—was prepared straight on the spot in large cauldrons. After the first coating the pipe was swathed in jute serving and another coat of bitumen laid on top of it. Only the welded joints were left bare, pending tension tests before submersion.

A small inlet for compressed air was welded to a section of pipe and both ends of the latter were closed tight with wooden plugs as thick as telegraph poles. The compressor began pumping air into the pipe. Beridze and Alexei stood next to it watching the pressure gauge. Any drop in pressure would have meant that one or several joints had sprung a leak.

Umára and Kedrin were also there. Umara tensely followed the engineers' every movement, ready to take a hand any moment. Kedrin feigned indifference, but he too hovered about in nervous anticipation. The welders' fears were unfounded, however: the pipe

passed the test. Kovshov ordered the air let out of the pipe, the joints insulated and the section prepared for submersion into the strait.

"What a pity Batmanov and Zalkind are not here to see us burying this whopper!" Karpov said.

Alexei waved his hand with a gesture of annoyance. He had thoughts just now for nothing but the pipe which was to be lowered into the water.

Karpov's men hitched the pipe by cables tied round the middle to four tractors standing in a row on the other side of the ice opening, and by similar ropes at the ends to two winches, one of which was mounted on the beach and the other on the ice within half a kilometre of the first.

This important operation had been thoroughly worked out and rehearsed beforehand, and the submersion of the pipe-run was now carried out swiftly, with Alexei, stop watch in hand, giving the signals.

Kovshov waved his mitten, and the tractors, with a roar of engines, moved off in a line away from the ice opening. The steel ropes twanged taut and rolled the shiny black pipe over the log supports that had been pre-

viously laid on the ice. The winches winding up the end ropes creaked and groaned.

The pipe trundled towards the ice opening with a hollow rumble, and Alexei made an involuntary crouching movement as though this gigantic mass of metal were dragging him along with it.

The engineer swiftly straightened his back and waved his mitten again. The tractor drivers instantly unhitched the cables, and the pipe, crushing the edge of the thick ice, disappeared into the water, throwing up a heavy muddy-green wave. The next instant it reappeared again on the surface.

"That's smart!" Silin exclaimed with relief. "I was afraid she'd break loose and go down. She's such a monster! It's a miracle she doesn't sink."

"She's hollow, that's why she doesn't sink. Besides, the winches are holding her up on the cables," Karpov explained to the men who had gathered round him. The quondam fisherman was thrilled and exultant. "Now we're going to drown her. It's all mighty interesting, lad!"

"Leave the talk for afterwards! Back to your stations, boys!" Alexei shouted, looking back and noticing the crowd gathered on the ice,



At Kovshov's command the winches hoisted the ends of the pipe above the water. The wooden plugs were pulled out, and a metal mesh was attached to the beach-end of the pipe.

"Lower her!" Alexei shouted.

The coast winch, with a loud rattle, began running out the cable. The steel tubing nose-dived, and the air rushed out of the upreared end with a loud noise. Soon the whole piece was submerged. Only the mouth of the tube jutted out of the strait. Meantime a box, looking like a little wooden house, was being hauled out on a big sledge. This was intended for covering the pipe opening to avoid an ice plug forming in the exposed pipe.

"She's lying at the bottom in a sort of arc, lad," Karpov said in reply to the men's questions. They had gathered about in a crowd again. "This is where the divers come in."

Smelov and two other divers on the beach made ready to go under the ice. They were equipped with electric torches and hydromonitors, from which thick hoses ran to a pump on the beach. The divers disappeared under the water, where they began checking whether the pipe lay level with the sea bed. Any unevenness they came across was

washed away with a powerful jet from the hydromonitors.

Smelov overdid it the first day, and the divers were pulled up half unconscious. Smelov himself was obliged to lie in bed for a day and night before he was fit to resume his duties. Tanya Vasilchenko dropped in to see him frequently and time and again the same conversation was repeated.

"No use asking me, I won't agree," the diver would say.

"Be human, Smelov! Can't you see it's essential for the work," Tanya would argue. "I must take charge of laying the cable in the strait myself."

"I've never seen a woman diver and I never want to."

"Look here, you conceited male. I am stronger than you! Shall I prove it?"

"Not just now. Let me get on my feet first."

"Well, is it agreed then?" Tanya would begin all over again.

"No," Smelov would reply curtly and turn his face to the wall. "Let me lie in peace."

And Tanya would go off in a huff.

Several days later the trench in the sea bottom was extended by another kilometre, the

fourth piece of tubing lay ready on the ice of the strait, the insulating team cleaned and tarred the third piece, and the second was dragged into the strait by tractors. Sealed at both ends, it floated on the water held up by steel ropes.

Umara Mahomet received orders to weld the ends of the two pieces—the submerged and the floating one. Only after that could the second length of pipe be lowered into the water.

The plugs were removed from both ends which were then polished until they shone. A flanged sleeve was then slipped on one of the pipes and moved aside for the time being.

Umara did the welding on a floating wooden platform, using a gas blowpipe. The platform rocked on the restless surge of the strait, and splashed Umara's clothes and face.

"Damn it altogether!" the welder swore.

"Have a rest, Umara," Alexei advised. "Or else stop welding and let's think of a way to tie the platform fast."

The welder didn't answer. He lay down on the raft under the joint of the raised pipes and directed the flame upwards.

Umara had been working afloat for over two hours, but was still far from completing

the job. He was all covered with ice and had even stopped swearing and shouting.

"Get out onto the ice, Mahomet!" Kovshov demanded. Umara glared at the engineer and bawled:

"You don't understand nothing and you shout! I can't stop, I mustn't!"

The sleeve was slipped over the welded joint, and Umara directed the blowpipe at the flanges. The water in the strait rose and fell, and the pipe moved as though it were alive.

"You'd think she was breathing," Karpov whispered. "Breathing in and out."

One such extra powerful "expiration" agitated the water, and the gigantic steel pipe shook and pressed slightly on the platform. The wooden raft capsized, and the blue flame described a circle in the air. Umara pitched backwards into the water. The whole thing happened in the twinkling of an eye. Karpov alone did not lose his head. He threw himself down on the ice and gripped the welder by his jacket. Umara, whose drenched clothes swiftly began to freeze, was seized under the armpits and carried off to the beach to dry and warm himself.

The platform was made fast, and Kedrin took his place on it. Working carefully and

unhurriedly he finished the welding. The sleeve was then covered with a coat of insulation.

"Look out!" Alexei shouted.

All the men ran back to a safe distance.

"Lower her!"

The raised welded joint of the two pipe sections sank into the depths amid a heavy swirl. Soon the whole of the second piece was submerged, only one end sticking up out of the water.

"Well, we've caught up with schedule, Alexei," Beridze said, becoming aware for the first time that his beard was frozen.

"Now we've got to get ahead of it," Kovshov answered. He looked round, considering what else could be done that day.

"Nothing doing," Beridze said with a laugh, catching Alexei's avid glance.

True enough, darkness was already gathering. The winter night was hurriedly closing in, and all work on the ice was suspended in the dark.

"You can never feel yourself the master here," Alexei complained. "How can you be sure that the ice won't break away from the shore during the night or that some other such accident might not happen? I am often haunted by nightmares like that."

"The strait is perfectly quiet just now," Beridze objected. "But, of course, we have to make haste."

A siren sounded from the shore, now dropping to a low whine now rising to a shriek. Lights were switched on illuminating the site and the ice road.

The engineers set out for home, conscious only now of an overwhelming fatigue which bore down on them like some intolerable burden weighting their limbs with lead.

"I could drop down right here," said Alexei, "right here on the ice and fall asleep...."

"Alexei, I forgot to tell you.... When Grechkin called up this morning to report as usual on the progress of work at the sections he mentioned Zhenya Kozlova," Beridze spoke with an effort, barely forcing the words out of his lips.

"Why, is anything the matter with her?" Alexei asked in alarm.

"Nothing at all. She wants to be transferred out here. Grechkin says he needs her badly in his department, and she has a great many Komsomol duties besides, but if I wish he can release her for a month or six weeks."

"Well, and what have you decided?"

"Grechkin was obviously reluctant to dis-

cuss the matter over the telephone, he only said rather significantly: 'Tell Kovshov that Zhenya is asking to be sent to the strait, it's for him to decide whether she ought to go or not.' And so it strikes me, Alyosha my boy, that Zhenya is less interested in our section than in you. Perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me how things stand exactly between you two...."

"As far as I am concerned, our relations are purely friendly and have been from the start."

"And what about her, do you think it is more than friendship on her part?"

Alexei shot a keen glance at his comrade.

"Yes. When you and I returned that time from our ski trip there was a moment when I very nearly overstepped the bounds of pure friendship. I felt very lonely at the time, and she gave me such a warm welcome and seemed so naturally drawn to me that for a second I caught myself thinking: after all, it would not affect my love for Zina if I were to take the girl in my arms and fondle her. But I was ashamed of myself at once. I felt that it really would spoil everything for me, my love and my whole life, that I would cease to respect myself. And I managed to control myself.

I am afraid Zhenya was hurt. I said something to her in a cold tone and in general I put a damper on what began as a pleasant evening. But I couldn't help it. You understand me, don't you?"

"I do. I understand you very well, Alyosha!"

"I should never have been able to forgive myself afterwards. The woman I love is at the front, risking her life, and here am I unable to resist some momentary desire. It would be unfair to Zhenya too, her love is sincere and genuine."

"Good for you, Alyosha. Here, let me embrace you for that."

"Never mind that," laughed Alexei, moving away from Beridze.

But the latter caught him and gave him an awkward hug.

"I don't think Zhenya ought to come here. She is a nice girl and a good worker and she would be useful no doubt. But it is better for you two not to be together. Better for her too. It will be easier for her to get over it if she doesn't see you. Don't you think so?"

"I daresay you are right.... Do as you think best.... Thank goodness we're home at last!"

With a feeling of infinite relief Alexei seized the doorhandle, his only desire being to get to bed as quickly as possible.

The last to leave the strait was Kovshov's icework assistant—Karpov. He took a good look round before leaving, his mind busy planning for the morrow. . . .

He found Smorchkov waiting for him at home. The driver had just returned from a long trip to the Adun where the fishermen had given him a letter for Karpov.

"Thanks, lad," Karpov said, squeezing his hand.

Karpov twisted the envelope about in his hands but did not open it. He took his things off, washed, and waited until the driver had gone before he read the letter.

"Why don't you write, you good-for-nothing," his wife wanted to know. "You've vanished into thin air. Folks keep nagging me—'where's Ivan Lukich, is he alive, why don't they write about him in the newspapers? When he was in the kolkhoz they used to write about him often.' We got a newspaper from Rubezhansk with a whole article about your construction job. They mention a hun-

dred names but not yours. Perhaps you'll come back to the kolkhoz? Folks are still sore at you. Or maybe you'll come home for a short stay, just to show yourself.... It ought not to be hard for you to get away—there are hundreds there like you, and if you go nothing will happen, they won't even notice it. I simply don't know what to do with you! It's the second time you've got yourself tied up with this construction job. You're not a young man any more, but you act just like a kid who begs to be sent to school. The girls send you regards, but father doesn't say a word. He didn't expect you'd go away, and he's wild with you. I suppose I ought to take it harder too, and not write to you. But somehow I feel sorry for you. I have an idea you're not too happy out there...."

Karpov gazed at the sheets of paper covered with jerky handwriting and smoothed them out lovingly, conjuring up a vision of his tidy home; he saw his wife and little girls seated around the table, listening to the old man reading aloud to them from a newspaper.... Ivan Lukich tore a page out of a copybook and sat down to write an answer which he could send off tomorrow to Lower Sazanka by a truck that was going that way.

"...I didn't write you because you drove me out and made a scene in front of Batmanov. But let's forget about it—let bygones be bygones. I see you understand me, though not quite. Do you really think it would be better for you if I came back to the kolkhoz without anything to show and left the construction job unfinished? You're quite right that there are a lot of men like me here. I was the first lad in the village, and here I'm nobody. You know the education I've got—seven grades. But I don't mind. Fate has thrown me together with educated men, and I'm satisfied—I'm learning from them a good deal. You shouldn't blame me for being keen on schooling, it's nothing to be ashamed of. We've got an engineer here by the name of Alexei Kovshov—I'm working as his assistant—and he explains mathematics and physics to me whenever we have a free moment. He told me about communicating vessels—that's a kind of device—and he said in a joke: 'One man knows more, another less. And knowledge flows from one to the other like the water in these vessels.... You'll soon know as much as I have learned from my university professors, Ivan Lukich.' Jokes aside, I have learned a good deal from the engineers. It's awfully interesting here!

You ought to see how we're laying the pipe line. I simply can't describe it, you have to see it for yourself...."

The sheet coming to an end, Karpov tore a second page out of the copybook. He went on to say that they need not worry about his name not being mentioned in the newspaper, that was of no consequence. It was too early to write about him, but they would later on. Karpov declined to go home even for a short stay. There were thousands of builders on the job, to be sure, but every man was needed and every hour was precious. He wound up by inviting his wife to pay him a visit. "You'll see things with your own eyes and you won't believe them. It's not a long journey, only about two hundred kilometres. There are trucks travelling regularly down the line and anyone will give you a lift. If you decide to come better dress warm. Kiss the little girls for me, I miss them badly. I dream of them every night...."

Pushchin's arrival at the section made itself felt the very next day with the appearance of the first printed leaflet. Two or three more days passed, and the leaflets were seen all over

the section, like sea gulls over the coast in the summertime. They made white patches on the bodies of the trucks going out into the taiga, on flame-spitting welding apparatuses, on the walls of the buildings going up row upon row, and even on the pipes which the tractors hauled across the ice of the strait.

A quiet, unobtrusive man with a pale face and eyes of a bright ultramarine, Pushchin proved himself to be an energetic and tireless worker. He quickly mastered many of the section's mysteries, found time to be everywhere and issued as many as ten bulletins a day. The truck drivers jokingly called them "extra fuel," and this very aptly described them. They were able in a few sentences to fire men's enthusiasm, spur them on to making an extra trip, to welding an extra three pipes, and giving an extra cubic metre of earth to those dug in excess of quota. The Pestov brothers started assembling four barracks of prefabricated wood constructions, and Pushchin announced the fact the same day.

"Comrades of the pipe line!" his current leaflet would announce. "The third pipe section has been lowered to the bottom of the strait today. We are five days ahead of schedule. Umara Mahomet's red-banner team still

holds the lead in welding." Or else it would be addressed to the concrete workers: "Petrygin's team today has laid fifty cubic metres of concrete over and above quota in the pumping station foundations. Comrades concrete workers! Catch up with the leading builders!"

And it caused no surprise that Umara Mahomet sent his mates out a hundred times a day to get the latest leaflet and find out whether any of the other welding teams had topped his record.

"D'you want to lose the banner to Kedrin?" Umara shouted to his men, running up to the welding apparatus where the red banner stood with the inscription: "To the best welders of the construction job." "I don't want to give it up. That banner's ours until we win the war."

Three leaflets in which his name had been mentioned Umara had already sent to his brothers at the front and his sweetheart in Kazan. He asked them in turn to "send me a newspaper in which they write something good about you too."

It caused no surprise that Smorchkov, upon returning from a gruelling run to the end of the section line, dashed off at once to the dispatcher office and asked first thing: "How

many pipes did Makhov and Solntsev bring in?"

Pushchin had a numerous voluntary staff of worker-correspondents—hundreds of eyes, an incorruptible collective conscience. With their aid he overlooked nothing, missed nothing of merit and condoned nothing of demerit.

When Semyonov's lumbering team tried to pass off on the foreman eighty cubic metres of timber for a hundred and ten, a leaflet exposed the "fraud" to the whole section. "Shame on Semyonov," it read, "for trying to deceive the collective and the state at a time like this. . . ." When Karpov found the fourth finished piece of pipe line plugged up with a padded jacket, a leaflet sounded a note of alarm: "Comrades! there are enemies among us. They have been trying to damage the pipe line in its most vital spot. Be vigilant, comrades, at every step and every minute of the day!"

The collective shared common interests, the leaflets became an integral part of life on the section, and their editor, a full-fledged and respected member of the building community. Neither his praise nor his criticism was ever misplaced. True, once he made a mistake and gave a wrong description of foreman Gon-

charuk's rationalization proposal for speeding up the work of pipe cleaning, and was called sharply to account at the next work conference.

Everything that happened at the works' section became common knowledge, even those incidents and events which Pushchin did not ventilate. One incident, which was the cause of animated and humorous comment, driver Solntsev scathingly called "the leaflet that didn't come off the press."

Komsomol member, Makhov, had soon won the lead in the drivers' competition. The construction chief and the Party organizer had presented him with a red radiator cover and "The Best Driver" badge. Smorchkov and Solntsev, try as they might, were unable to beat him. Naturally, Pushchin often gave the best driver write-ups in his leaflets. The other drivers were jealously aware of the editor's interest in Makhov, and even noted the fact that the editor bore a resemblance to their lucky comrade—"the same chestnut hair and blue eyes." They jokingly referred to them as brothers.

Pushchin had indeed taken a definite liking to Makhov, and went out with him on his trips more often than he did with the other drivers. Even their cots in the lodgings stood

side by side. This bond between the two men was due not only to the fact, as it transpired, that they had both been schoolmates and had both joined the Komsomol together, but largely to the fact that the driver's sheer grit and ingenuity in fighting for precedence strongly appealed to the editor.

One particularly hard day for Makhov, when Smorchkov and Solntsev were literally treading on his heels, Pushchin shared the driver's cabin with him in the course of several hours, taking advantage of the brief spells during loading and unloading to dash off items for the leaflets. The incident in question took place during the last trip.

Makhov, in trying to avoid a huge patch of sludge ice that kept encroaching on the road, landed in the soft mixture of ice and water with the whole weight of his heavily loaded truck. The wheels skidded, and the truck refused to budge.

"There goes our hot coffee at Musya's," Makhov said gloomily, hinting at their recent talk of that pleasant prospect.

While Makhov was trying to drag his "duck out of the muck," as he remarked with grim humour, and Pushchin ran for help to the team engaged in making a byroad three kilometres

further up, time went, and gasoline too. The road workers took a sympathetic view of the case and came running up to lend a hand. The truck was pulled out. Makhov and Pushchin had not driven a kilometre when the engine suddenly stopped—they had run out of gas.

"That blasted sludge, the devil must have put it there on purpose!" Makhov cried. "There's only a kilometre and a half to go. Solntsev will soon flash past us like a fleet-footed deer. Oh, hell, what a shame! I'll be ragged to death! I'll have to give up the pennant."

"Stop bemoaning your fate and do some quick thinking," Pushchin advised. "Isn't there anything we can do?"

"We can run down to the base for gasoline—it's only fifteen kilometres," Makhov suggested sardonically. He himself was racking his brains for a way out of the predicament. "I was thinking, if it's not too awkward for you as editor, and if you're a pal and really want to help—"

"Out with it, man, we're wasting time!" Pushchin broke in.

"If you'll lie down on the mudguard and help the carburetor with the intake, maybe we'll be able to make it on the last few drops. Only mind you don't freeze your hand, other-

wise you'll have to write your leaflets with your foot."

Pushchin, without a word, lay down on the mudguard and did what the driver told him. The truck started and moved off. Pushchin's bare hand quickly began to freeze and grew numb. An icy wind beat into his face. Pushchin, gritting his teeth, "squeezed" out the last drops of gasoline. The truck went on for some eight hundred metres, then came to a stop, for good.

"Get off, we've arrived!" Makhov announced.

Pushchin jumped off the running board and dashed back to the road workers, shaking his hand as he ran to restore the circulation. The road workers, who had been watching their desperate progress from afar with interest, came running down of their own accord to lend a hand. Luckily the rest of the way was down an incline, and the team, putting their shoulders to the loaded truck, pushed it home.

That evening, in the barrack, Smorchkov and Solntsev ragged their rival unmercifully. In spite of everything he had contrived to hold the lead. Solntsev, with assistance from all the drivers, composed and read out an imaginary article to the newspaper entitled. "Back to

Grandfather!" The article described the invention by truck driver Makhov of a method whereby pipes could be transported on a truck without the use of gasoline, merely by the aid of a team of thirty men, and with one editor in the capacity of carburetor attachment.

Pushchin, lying in his bed and shaking his bandaged hand which ached painfully, smiled in silence. Makhov took the ragging in good part and answered tit for tat.

The wheel of life which Batmanov had wound up at the strait revolved ever faster and faster. The head office Red Banner, which had first been in the possession of Khlynov's collective, and then of Temkin's section, was now transferred to the strait and presented to Rogov.

Beridze, who managed during the day to visit every spot where work was being carried on, was often amazed at the swift transformation these "world's-end" wilds were undergoing. The new houses going up under the hills already shut off the wretched barracks that Merzlyakov had built and formed a long cheerful street. The centre of the building site was occupied by the future pumping station—the

heart of the pipe line—where the foundation was being laid. To the right an excavator was digging up the earth for huge reservoirs. Nearby stood a completed metal tank, and another was being riveted. On the other side of the pumping station was the section's "industrial and power base"—the electric station, garage and mechanical workshops. The truckers had already transported a large amount of freight along the ice road across the strait. Kovshov and Topolev had pushed out to the middle of the strait, and it was time to shift operations to the island to continue the pipe line from that side. The scene of building operations hummed with sound all day and most of the night—trucks throbbed and chugged, tractors roared, disk saws rasped and pneumatic hammers beat a devil's tattoo. The voices of hundreds of men were drowned in the din and clatter.

Beridze's thoughts reverted ever more often to the island. The moment was approaching for the building army to leap into the attack of the island with the full force of its massed strength. Rogov enquired every day—"when?" Not so long ago the laying of the pipe line through the strait had presented a baffling problem, and even now the building site was

the scene of an incessant battle with nature, yet the chief engineer now looked upon the mainland section chiefly as a bridgehead for the assault of the island.

He sent Kotlyarevsky with several dozen workers by plane to Konchelan to reconstruct the island pumping station. Technician Chernov with the telephone team went out to weave their metal web over the taiga on the island. But this was, as it were, merely reconnoitring in force.

With the departure of Batmanov, Beridze became absolute master of the remote work sections, where he established himself for a long stay. His days were spent in constant contact with the hundreds of Luilders and in tackling the difficulties that cropped up incessantly. A room was set aside for Beridze in the telephone house. Here, next door to Tanya, he had his work room and living quarters; here he received telephone calls from all along the line. Not for a single day had he been relieved of the duties as chief engineer of the construction job. Technical problems and snags were continually cropping up at all the different sections and rarely were they settled without his participation. It was not easy to combine the work at the strait section with technical

supervision of the entire construction job. His very dreams seemed to be a continuation of the work day. In his sleep he listened to Grechkin reporting about the position on the sections, in his sleep he roared out orders to Melnikov not to begin welding, or else he would run out to the strait to watch a pipe section being lowered, help Filimonov to figure out some puzzling detail of the pump, or climb down into the pits to see whether it was not time to oilproof the sides of this future container of liquid black gold.

But no matter how many cares and worries rained down on him, Beridze never lost his head.

"Easy, easy, my friend," he would say when men came to him in despair, reporting their troubles to him. "To begin with you must know exactly what you want then you're bound to get it." This was his favourite saying.

Beridze belonged to that category of Soviet men who act with all the more confidence and determination the more difficult the situation becomes. Even in those cases when he was fairly swamped with work and harassed on all sides, his equanimity never deserted him. Occasionally, it is true, he lost his temper—and rather violently—but he quickly

recovered his good humour and showed marked kindness and even gentleness to the person he had been shouting at an hour before.

Kovshov and Topolev were his unfailing assistants. Beridze appreciated this and gave them full freedom for initiative. Alexei's tenacity and indefatigable energy found as wide application as did Topolev's encyclopedic knowledge of construction work.

Everything concerned Beridze on this patch of Soviet territory, yet he preferred to devote himself to what he called creative engineering. "How wonderful it is when science directly influences life!" he said enthusiastically. He never tired of warning the engineers and workers of the dangers of the permafrost. Beridze was almost jubilant when it first made itself felt—now the people would see for themselves how justified his warnings had been.

One morning early Umara Mahomet ran to him in great excitement.

"Comrade Beridze, a disaster, a catastrophe, come quick!"

A powerful jet of icy water had suddenly burst through the floor of the welders' barrack. The men had barely had time to escape. The water rapidly filled the premises and was now pouring out of the doors and windows. Beridze

found a large crowd of builders on the spot gaping in amazement at the unusual spectacle: a wooden barrack filled with solid ice. Freezing instantly, the water formed fantastic waterfalls (or "icefalls" as someone called them) of ice all round the house.

"How did the water get into the house, where is it coming from? Why in our house and not somewhere else?" the indignant Uma-ra wanted to know.

"My friends," Beridze proceeded to explain, "this is a typical trick on the part of the permafrost. The heat from your barrack has warmed the ground on which it stands. And what was the result? The impenetrable layer of permanently frozen soil below and the upper layer which, freezing deeper and deeper, gradually pressed down on the subsoil waters and they began to search for an outlet and found it in this point. But such unpleasant surprises can be avoided by building cellars under the houses so that the warmth of the buildings will not affect the frozen soil."

"Your house acted like a suction pump on the subterranean waters," said Topolev, who had followed Beridze to the scene of the mishap. The old engineer told of an incident he had once witnessed: for no obvious reason

ice had begun to form in the middle of a yard, and it was found that the underground waters had burst to the surface in a spot covered by an empty barrel standing bottom up. The barrel acted as a sort of suction pump because the soil under it had frozen less solidly than all around.

"Where are we going to live? We've got to find quarters," Umara said, looking at the damage with something like dismay.

"Don't worry, we'll find quarters for you," Beridze reassured him.

A week later another queer thing happened: the stove began to settle in the bakery and in three days it practically disappeared into the ground. Rogov issued instructions to the bricklayers to lay a new one on top of the sunken stove.

"You'd better countermand your orders, Alexander Ivanovich," Beridze said to Rogov.

"Why, Georgi Davydovich? We've got to do our baking somewhere, now that the damn oven's gone down under."

"The trouble is that you've got a layer of permafrost, that is, a mixture of soil and ice, under your bakery. The stove melted the ice underneath and a fissure developed. Now if you put in another stove it'll go the same

way. Here we've got another example of the shortsightedness of the builders who were here before us. You'll have to build a new bakery, Alexander Ivanovich, and think up something to appease Dame Eternal Frost."

Another time Beridze took Alexei and Topolev to see one of the barracks which had been built in Merzlyakov's time. The floor slanted noticeably and the doors opened with difficulty.

"Another trick played by permafrost, Alyosha," Beridze said as he showed the two around. "The ground is buckling up under these two corners,—that's where the ice has been expanding down below, lifting up one side of the building as if trying to turn it over. In another year the building is going to collapse. It's a good thing it wasn't built too well to begin with and is slated to be torn down; otherwise it'd be a great pity indeed. A treacherous business, this permafrost!"

Topolev, whose store of practical experiences was inexhaustible, could not refrain from drawing on it:

"Ten years ago I had occasion to make a trip to Siberia in the winter with a technical commission—our job was to check up on the condition of railway bridges. Just imagine,

ninety out of one hundred bridges had been raised by this same buckling by as much as three centimetres. A treacherous business indeed!" he said echoing Beridze's words. "The moisture-saturated top layer of earth expands under the action of the cold in wintertime, and since it can't force its way through the solid floor of eternal frost underneath, the expansion goes upwards and the earth begins to buckle."

Alexei who previously had not encountered anything of the kind and had been inclined to believe that Beridze was exaggerating the danger arising from the permafrost, now realized that the chief engineer had been right a hundred times over when he had insisted in Novinsk that the foundation designs for all brick buildings be changed.

At the construction site of the Diesel pumping station Beridze gave instructions to lay the foundations on piles driven deep into the earth. The frozen ground was as hard as rock and to drive even a single pile into it required superhuman effort. Zyatkov came to Beridze as a spokesman for all the workers.

"Do we really need these piles?" the old worker said, coughing into his glove. "It's torture driving them, and sometimes it seems

it takes all the guts out of you. Now if we can't do without them, maybe you'll tell us why. At least we'd stop doubting."

And Georgi Davydovich had to explain things all over again to the builders.

"Our site is located in an area of eternal frost, and that's something you can't joke with, because it'll take pitiless revenge on lightminded people. Would you like it if the pumping station were to show cracks a year from now and start to fall apart in two years? The oil workers who'll come here after we've finished the job would never forgive us."

"Nobody wants that. We've got to build solid," Zyatkov said.

"That's what I think," Beridze went on. "Soviet scientists and engineers have created an entirely new branch of science which explains the riddles of the permafrost and helps us to fight it. This science recommends to us builders two rules of construction when we're building on soil that is perpetually frozen." The workers listened attentively and Beridze warmed to his subject. "Either the frozen soil under the building must be kept frozen, or it must be deliberately thawed out. When the frozen layer is a thick one and the building will not give off much heat, we try to preserve

the soil regimen as it was by using insulation materials in the foundations and leaving a ventilated space between the floor and the ground. But if the frozen layer is not very thick and the building will give off a great deal of heat, steps must be taken to make sure that the foundation should not rest on thawed-out soil in a year or two. In such cases we lay the foundations on piles driven into layers below the frozen soil. With a foundation like that we have nothing to fear from this treacherous frost. Whatever happens to the soil, however badly it may buckle, the foundations and the building itself will stand firmly on the piles. That's why we've got to drive in piles."

"Seems it's a serious business," Zyatkov said. "Which means we'll drive the piles. Let's put our heads together, fellows, and see whether we can't think of something to make the work easier."

"On my part I promise to think up something together with the other engineers."

Topolev proposed using steam to drive the pile holes.

"I thought of that," Beridze said, "but where'll we get the steam from? We'll need a lot of it too."

"What about the *Kamchadal*?"

“What’s that?”

“The steamboat which they say was wrecked last summer. Polishchuk is overhauling it and says that the boiler is in good condition.”

Three days later Beridze and Kuzma Kuzmich came down to the workers in the foundation pit. The old man was carrying a long metal pipe with a pointed nozzle. It was attached to a long hose trailing behind like a snake.

“Will you come over here,” said Kuzma Kuzmich to Zyatkov and handed him the pipe. “You can start now.”

Zyatkov drove the pipe into the earth.

“Steam!” Beridze shouted to somebody on top.

With a rumble the steam filled the hose and the pipe and hissing and whistling rammed into the frozen soil. Topolev timed the operation. The soil thawed out and the mud bubbled around the nozzle as the pipe sank down comparatively fast. The labourers working next to it had not dug a half a metre into the ground when the “steam needle” (as Topolev dubbed his device) had already bored a hole four metres deep. A pile—a thick timber five metres in length—was driven into it.

"Do you approve of it?" Beridze asked Zyatkov.

"A neat idea, I must say."

"No more digging by hand, comrades," Beridze said, pleased. "We'll use 'steam needles' from now on."

Old Topolev who but a short while ago had shunned Beridze, had got used to him at the strait and praised him to Alexei on more than one occasion. Once, after having spent the whole day on the pumping station site in the company of Beridze, Topolev had told Alexei, much to the latter's pleasure, in rather high-flown language:

"There's something Mozartian about our chief engineer. His is a prolific and facile talent—he solves the most difficult problems in passing, as it were. He has an enviable disposition—abandons himself to the torrent of life without any fuss, and the torrent carries him along without bumping him into the shore or running him aground. I wonder whether Beridze ever has doubts, moments of indecision and misgivings?"

The old man would not have spoken thus had he been able to see into Beridze's heart. The latter's love for Tanya had come suddenly, with the impact of a blow. He had gone

about the first few days like a drunken man, and had immediately unburdened his heart to Tanya without reserve. The very act of declaring his love had made him happy. The suddenness of it had startled Tanya. She did not believe in a love so instantaneous, as she called it, and hence short-lived. Beridze had given his word to be patient, and locked his feeling up within himself. And now, concealed from the world, it grew and flooded his whole being. At times the "fire within his heart" burned so furiously that his self-possession bade fair to desert him.

He found it ever harder to live without Tanya and he yearned for her company. Though he tried to take himself in hand, there were times when he could not stay away from her. He came to see her more often than business actually required, inasmuch as they lived under the same roof. He had sent Chernov to the island instead of Tanya, not only because she had taken upon her shoulders the more complicated task of laying a cable under the strait, but also because he did not wish to be parted from her.

But in his meetings with Tanya he did not reveal his feelings. His attitude towards her, once so frank and clear, had changed. He no

longer expressed his open and somewhat naïve admiration of her. This was not due to the fact that he had been able to put a curb upon his feelings. It was simply that he was no longer able to speak to Tanya about his love. In her presence he felt as tongue-tied as a boy and his only thought was not to cut a ridiculous figure in her eyes and the eyes of others. When they were alone the impulse to tell her that he could no longer hide his feeling became clamorous, but he dreaded now to hear those rebuffs which he had once treated with a light heart.

Tanya noticed this change in him. Where previously the easy candour with which he had expressed his feelings had annoyed and even shocked her, now, when real love had awakened in her, she wanted to hear those confessions and waited for them. She wondered with a sense of bewilderment what could have happened to him, why he had changed. Usually quick of apprehension, she now failed to understand the state of mind he was in.

Matters eventually came to a head one day.

Tanya had finally succeeded in persuading the head diver Smelov to allow her to take part in underwater work in connection with the laying of the telephone cable. She proceed-

ed to this task after a preliminary training with Smelov and two other telephone workers, good, experienced men. She had deliberately withheld from Beridze her intention of taking up diving. Without the knowledge of the chief engineer she put on a diver's suit for the first time and went down with Smelov. Beridze, upon hearing of this, came running down to the ice hole. He ordered Vasilchenko to be immediately returned to the shore. Not giving her time to come to herself after the novel experience of her first trip to the sea bottom in a diver's suit, Beridze fell upon the girl in a rage.

"Who the devil asked you to poke your nose in there!" he shouted, stamping his feet.

Tanya had never seen him in such a state before, and she failed to grasp that it was caused by deep feeling for her. She was unaware that during the agonizing minutes he had spent waiting for her to come up, the conviction was borne in upon him that he could not live without her.

After his wild outburst, Beridze felt ashamed of himself and could not look her in the eyes. And Tanya, casting restraint aside, asked in a pained bitter voice:

"Why have you changed so, Georgi Davydovich? I was right then, when I doubted the

sincerity and constancy of your feelings? It's as I thought—it came in a flash and went in a flash."

He had not thought that Tanya could interpret his behaviour thus, and his heart flooded with tenderness. Of his recent wrath not a vestige remained. He looked at the disconcerted Smelov and his mates and said:

"Let's go somewhere, they're staring at us here."

Forgetting everything, they wandered down the beach.

Beridze made up his mind to speak up and demand a definite answer from Tanya. But he no sooner opened his mouth than it flashed across him that her negative reply would put an end to everything, and instead of a sincere fervent speech he mumbled a few confused incoherent words. Annoyed with himself, he fell silent. Unnerved by the silence Tanya stopped.

"You never speak to me now about your love," Tanya said in a barely audible voice, and she looked at him as though taking leave of him forever.

Beridze at last chose a day for storming the island. A conference of executives had been held the evening before at which the plan of

action was discussed in every detail. Its realization however, was prevented by a blizzard which the builders called "Enemy No. 1."

The wind on the strait practically never abated. It swept snow and sand up from the ground, it roamed at will over the building site, played havoc with the roads, whistled among the empty skeletons of the buildings and howled dismally in the metal reservoirs. The men were accustomed to working in the wind, and the rare occasions when the weather was calm were considered a holiday by them. The wind, when it rose to hurricane strength, was a real calamity.

The wind upset all work schedules. The men were obliged to switch over from active offensive operations to defensive tactics. The blizzard over, no little time was lost in making good the damage it had wrought. Sometimes this damage was very considerable, especially on the strait.

The blizzard was liable to cause a shifting in the ice, and then the surface end of the last pipe section lowered into the strait would sink to the bottom. The gigantic force of the jagged ice packs was capable of mangling or drowning the pipes that lay on the ice waiting their turn to be lowered. The ice road to the island,

now levelled by traffic to the smoothness of a city road and equipped with warming stations, dispatcher points and filling stations, would inevitably be destroyed.

At the first signs of the approaching gale Beridze formed emergency teams and threw them into the battle with the blizzard.

Batmanov and Zalkind rang up from Novinsk and asked for the chief engineer, but he was out on the strait. Tanya Vasilchenko, whom Beridze had left on duty at the telephone, took the message.

"Tell Beridze. . . . He must save the strait line at all costs. . . . At all costs. . . . Do you hear?" came Batmanov's rumbling voice. Tanya could imagine how the construction chief now regretted that he was not with them. "Any other damage can be remedied. . . . Report what steps the chief engineer has already taken."

The men on the ice were split up into two groups. One group, under Beridze, were making fast the surface end of the pipe line with the aid of extra cables. The other men, under Rogov, tried to haul the immense welded sections lying on the ice back to the beach by means of tractors, but they soon realized that this was impossible.

"Fasten them down with ropes and cables," Rogov yelled at the top of his voice.

The men worked against time, but the blizzard, too, was gathering force with amazing speed. The men were buffeted about like so many toy figures. Thrown off their feet, they stumbled up again, and rushed back to the pipes which had to be saved at any price, be it even the price of one's life.

Beridze, in the rush, was nearly run over by Silin's tractor, and he ordered the driver to get the tractor back onto the beach at once before it was too late. The tractor driver could not bring himself to leave his mates in the lurch, and he helped them unwind the stiff cable, staggering about in the impenetrable snowstorm at the imminent risk of tumbling into the ice hole.

Rogov and Polishchuk were lifted bodily by a furious blast and dashed onto the ice with such stunning force that for several moments they were unable to rise. Leaping to their feet they clutched the thick steel wire again and pulled it towards the winch.

"Heave-ho.... Once again, Alexander Ivanovich!" Polishchuk cried encouragingly, unaware that blood streamed from his nose.

Foreman Goncharuk, struck heavily by the taut steel cable, dropped down dead. A gust of wind hurled two men into the ice hole before Alexei's eyes. An attempt was made to save them, but without success. The identity of the drowned men was not established until later.

The blizzard raged all day and all night, and throughout that time everyone was gripped with anxiety for the fate of the pipe line. The whole construction line awaited the end of this battle with the elements in silent suspense.

On the second day the storm suddenly subsided. They set to work to calculate the damage and casualties it had caused. The ground was covered with a heavy layer of snow. The roads were obliterated. Buildings were snowed under. Mountainous snowdrifts now towered above the huge gaping holes that had been dug for the oil reservoirs.

As was always the case after a storm, the builders, to the last man, turned out to clear the roads, work places, dwellings, stores and machines. If only the sections of pipe on the ice were intact! They were reached at last, after a deep trench had been shovelled through the snow. Luckily the alarm had proved unfounded—the pipe line was safe and undamaged.

Three men were killed in the battle with the blizzard—foreman Goncharuk, truck driver Kozyrev, and welder Maslov. Two were missing—carpenter Semyon Pestov and labourer Firsov. The latter were believed to have been swept away by the storm. The little dispatcher cabin standing on the headland was blown over the cliff, and the dispatcher Berezov, who had survived by nothing short of a miracle, never ceased wondering at his luck as he related the story of how the hurricane had lifted both the cabin and himself in the air, whirled it about for a minute or two, then dashed it down on the rocks.

The dead were buried in a common grave on the beach.

"The people will not forget your names, brave defenders of your country," Rogov said in his speech at the funeral.

It was some time before Topolev's disappearance was noticed. Alexei went white as a sheet when it suddenly dawned on him that the old man was missing. Beridze remembered having driven him and the half-sick Nekrasov off the strait where they had come running down with the rest of the men. Now Nekrasov was missing too. Alexei's search brought him to the little house of the demolition men standing

slightly apart from the settlement. But the little house was not there—all that was visible of it was the chimney sticking out of the snow.

A crowd of men set to work to dig the house out of the snow. Alexei shovelled the snow furiously and cursed himself for having forgotten the old man in the rush and excitement. He was prepared to give his life if that would help find the old man safe and sound.

Almost tearing off the door as he rushed in ahead of the others, Alexei ran into Topolev standing in the doorway, and he embraced him in silence. Nekrasov's head could be seen peering out behind the old engineer's back.

"If we'd have known this would happen we would have laid in a stock of wine and provisions for a week," Topolev said in his rumbling voice, deeply moved by Alexei's display of filial affection.

The demolition man, in reply to the jokes of the men who had dug him out, let loose a torrent of profanity that embraced the blizzard, and the snow, and the gods. . . .

"Nature is grim in these parts, lad. You have always to be on your guard," Karpov admonished him with a grin.

"Damn Nature if that's the kind of trick she plays on decent folks," Nekrasov growled.

CHAPTER SIX

TAISIN—THE ABODE OF THE GODS

THE PIPE-LINE builders knew that some thirty kilometres down the coast, on the right, there was a fishery and a settlement, and ten kilometres farther, a Nivhi village. But here, at this spot where they had crossed the strait, there was not a sign of human life. The rocky promontory of Cape Perilous towered desolately over the flat dead shores of the island. Its forbidding name sounded as a warning reminiscent of the fate that met a handful of nameless Russian people who perished on this coast a century before in their unequal struggle with the elements. The granite cliffs stood as a monument to their heroism.

The island was wrapped in a cloak of dense morning mist. The rising sun struck at it with golden rapiers. The mist quickly melted

and dispersed, and the taiga stood out, dimly at first, then ever more distinctly.

So far only a strip of seashore was in the hands of the builders. They established themselves here as though on a beach head wrested from the enemy, with the materials, pipes, machines, and food supplies which they had brought up. The taiga stood hard by, a mighty wall, challenging the men as it were to measure their strength with it, and resolved to bar their path. The trees rose in several tiers. Above all towered a symmetrical colonnade of larches and ashes, lower down birches, cedars and firs, and below all these a dense shrubbery. Together they formed a single wild barrier of thickly tangled trunks and bristling branches. The taiga lay silently brooding, as though waiting to see what these newcomers were going to do next.

Beridze, Rogov and Kovshov viewed the scene, dismal even under the sunlight, from the top of the cliff.

"Taisin means 'abode of the gods,' eh? Not a very comfortable abode the gods chose for themselves, if you ask me," Alexei remarked jocularly.

"Yes, the heavenly quartermaster is not worth his salt," Rogov added.

"This, Comrade Chief Engineer, is one of those blank patches on the map we have often spoken about and will now have to tackle," Alexei observed.

"That's all right, we'll soon have it ringed off," Beridze reassured him.

They descended the cliff to an old round hut, evidently put up by the fishermen, standing near the forest where it was barely distinguishable. Next to it stood a ramshackle barn on piles—"quite a fairy tale hut," as Rogov noted. Beridze for some reason had chosen this hut for his headquarters, although an entire tent settlement had already sprung up on the beach.

"A royal palace!" he said ironically, taking in the blackened walls of the hut, the already blazing stove and the table smelling of freshly planed wood. "Here, in this residence of the Taisin kings, we shall issue our order for the offensive."

In the hut the engineers went over the plan of action once more. Kovshov, with Topolev and Tanya Vasilchenko, was to take charge of pipelaying work from this shore. Rogov received an assignment to move inland and clear the new section of the line. All points of the plan having been discussed, they went out to the strait.

An endless chain of trucks with men moved along the ice. Huge tractors with powerful bulldozers crawled slowly with clanking treads. The voices of the men and engines mingled in a single roar, the grim and martial music of the assault.

The attack on the taiga was launched by two columns of tractors. One column was headed by Silin, the other by Remnev.

"Tanks, forward!" Silin yelled gaily, his little black eyes flashing.

He drove his tractor across the beach and made straight for the forest without stopping. His bulldozer hit the trunk of a tall larch which stood out from the rest of the trees like a sentinel. The engine roared menacingly and the whole machine quivered with the tension. In a matter of seconds the tree yielded, leaned over and crashed to the ground, cleaved through at the roots. The tractor jolted forwards, crushed the underbrush and attacked the next tree which came down as easily. Slightly to the left of Silin there followed another tractor, still more left another, then a fourth, a fifth. . . . Remnev's column deployed in the same order, several yards to the left of the first column. The tractors were hitched together by a thick steel cable. It trailed along behind, grip-

ping the trees, bending them, and tearing them by the roots out of the hard frozen earth with inexorable force.

The tractors snarled and the trees fell with a deafening crash. Clouds of snow dust shot up in the air, wreathing the forest as though with the smoke of battle. The taiga resounded with a startled hum. Silin, his face burning with excitement, looked round and shouted:

"Give it to her, give it to the taiga! There. . . No, you don't. . . . Not if I can help it! You're coming down. . . . That's the stuff! Go it Silin!"

Beridze looked on, almost intoxicated with excitement. Nikifor, the Nivh, who had come down again to visit the builders, hung at his side. With head drawn into his shoulders, which made him look still smaller, he gazed in consternation at the powerful machines playing such fearful havoc with the mighty forest. The reindeer snorted in terror and tugged at the reins in the hands of the Nivhs who had arrived together with Nikifor.

"Comrade," Nikifor said, pulling the chief engineer's sleeve. "It is no good to squash taiga like this. The taiga is wicked—he will take revenge. You must leave some of the trees."

"We'll leave some, don't you worry, plenty for you and your grandchildren," Beridze answered absently.

The machines passed out of sight, but their progress could still be followed by the broad track they left in their wake, like a gigantic knife which had cut clean through the forest.

Silin rushed on. His huge machine, resembling a tank, suddenly slumped into a hole. There was a roar of a beast in pain. The tractor driver had run into a bear's den. A great brown bear rose above the chaos of felled trees, raised his shaggy paws aloft as though threatening his slayer, and dropped dead.

"Fancy that, crushed poor Bruin with my treads! Serves you right, for getting in the way!" Silin exclaimed, bending his whole body forward as though straining to come to grips with the wild jungle that stood in his path.

The masters of the taiga had not yet come to realize that they had to submit to Silin without offering resistance. Attracted by the noise, a whole herd of wild boars rushed out of the thickets. They had been wandering about nearby, apparently in search of fodder under the snow. At the sight of the snarling black monster bearing down on them, they stopped dead in their tracks, pricked up their ears, grunted

savagely, began to work their jaws, and suddenly, to Silin's amazement, rushed towards him.

"What heroes!" Silin said, and drove his machine straight into the herd.

A wide clearing was formed through the taiga, encumbered by a jumble of felled trees lying about with torn-up and crushed roots. The clatter of the invading tractors had barely died down in the taiga when the lane was filled with men who began clearing it for the building site. Horses were used to skid the felled trees off. Crews of lumberworkers plied their axes and saws preparing telephone poles and logs for the corduroy road to be laid across swampy tracts. The singing of Fantov and Shubin echoed in the clearing that was being hewed into the forest.

*Cutters down of wood, make sure your
axe is true. One, Two!
Till it's evening will you chop and split and
hew. One, Two!
When it's evening, then your working day is
through. One, Two!
Rest till morning when you'll chop and hew
anew. One, Two!*

The carpenters, and with them the welders, insulation workers and blasters, were

busy pitching camp and the canvas tents mushroomed up until there was a town of them. Four portable power plants were set up in a row and they already generated current for the tie mill. The carpenters of Pestov Senior's crew were only beginning to work to put up shelter around the naked mill when its circular saws were already whirring and singing and whining as they neatly sheared the logs hauled in from the forest into beams and boards.

Rogov equipped a big tractor column with food supplies and tools loaded on capacious heavy sledges hitched to each tractor. He intended taking this column into the heart of the section over the newly-cut track. At the same time, Polishchuk, his trusted companion and assistant ever since their acquaintance on the stranded barge, was preparing a column of trucks for the same journey. The hard tracks made by the tractor sledges would serve as a ready-made motor road.

Pushchin, clad in a clumsy sheepskin coat several sizes too large for him, stood with Smorchkov next to the latter's truck, hastily jotting down the driver's pledged work obligations—to deliver his freight down the new line intact and on time. Smorchkov was the

first driver to whose lot it fell to drive through the taiga, which only a few hours back had been impenetrable.

Some five days later the builders felt as though they had been living on the island for quite a time. Every hour of life was so packed with impressions and demanded such physical and mental exertion that one day might well be considered the equivalent of a week of normal living. As on the mainland, it was nearly always light here, and night came into its own for a brief space, during which the tired men slept and recuperated their strength.

The pipe-line builders announced their arrival on the island by a thunder of explosions, begun two days after their landing, by the loud hum of the startled taiga and the clatter of motors, and soon guests began to visit them. Oil men flew down from Konchelan, and almost simultaneously another plane landed on the strait bringing representatives of the workers of the oil refinery from Novinsk. Both delegations brought letters from their collectives inviting the builders to enter into competition with them in honour of the anniversary of the valiant Soviet Army. They were fol-

lowed by fishermen who brought down frozen codfish. Lieutenant Baturin came galloping down with a group of frontier guards. In the course of the conversation Alexei learned that Baturin was the son of the old foreman, "the vagranka king," he had met at Terekhov's plant.

"Last week the old man sent me a letter," the frontier guard said. "He had some good news to share with me: Dudin and Pisarev had been over at the plant to present them with the challenge Red Banner of the State Committee of Defence."

One night the geologist Khmara emerged from the taiga on short broad hunter's skis with a haversack on his back and a carbine hanging from his neck. He asked for Kovshov and was conducted to a new frostproof tent-house, built in accordance with Topolev's instructions, in which lived Beridze, Topolev, Kovshov and Tanya.

The engineers sat round the table in a convivial company, drinking tea. Their little tent was warm and light. The floor was carpeted with bearskins and reindeer skins.

Tanya was relating how she had inspected a sunken warship with the other divers at the bottom of the strait, in its deepest spot. Smelov

said they knew about that ship and would raise it in time.

"A victim of the Japanese war I suppose," Topolev hazarded. "I wonder whether I'll live to see the day of retribution for the loss of the *Varyag* and for Port Arthur? Two of my brothers were killed there."

"You'll live to be a hundred, and if that's not enough we'll prolong it by another hundred," Alexei said jokingly.

Something akin to envy stirred in Khmara's breast at the sight of this happy little family.

He took his cap off and walked up to the table. Tanya was first to recognize him, and an exclamation of surprise involuntarily escaped her.

"A peaceful visitor, my dear Tatyana Petrovna, don't be alarmed," Khmara said good-humouredly, proffering her his hand.

"I wasn't alarmed at all. You came in so suddenly," Tanya answered, stressing the formal "you" in contrast to the familiar "thou" which he had used in addressing her. She shook hands coldly.

Tanya stole a glance at Beridze. The latter's eyes were fixed on the guest with a sort of watchful look. He noted Tanya's agitation

and shrewdly guessed that her association with this man was not that of a mere acquaintance.

Khmara shook hands all round, murmuring civilities, and sat down beside Alexei, who, none too pleased with the guest's appearance, was obliged to act the amiable host.

"So we meet again," Khmara said, eyeing him fondly and fishing out a bottle of wine from his knapsack. "D'you remember that evening in Rubezhansk? It was because of you, one might say, I hiked these ten kilometres through the taiga. The whole island is shaking with your explosions. I thought it might be interesting to have a look what's going on there."

Topolev stared fixedly at Khmara and his moustache twitched in a hostile way. He had met Khmara once or twice at Grubsky's, and the man's appearance at this juncture had spoilt his good humour.

"What are you glaring at me for, Kuzma Kuzmich?" Khmara enquired with a smile. "You've fallen out with your former patron, but what have I got to do with it? Come, don't be angry."

"To tell you the truth this visit surprises me. D'you mean to say you undertook such a tiring journey through the taiga just for the

sake of exercise?" the old man asked incredulously, and turned away from the smiling guest.

"Believe it or not, I came down without any business whatever, just to have a look at the famous pipe line builders. Your fame has spread far and wide. The Nivhi are crazy about you. . . ."

Beridze declined the wine Khmara offered, got up and went over to his desk, switched on the light hanging over it and busied himself with his notes and papers. His attention, however, was still focussed on the newcomer. He remembered what Alexei had told him about Khmara. Beridze had not attached any importance at the time to Alexei's statement that the geologist was acquainted with Tanya. Seeing them now together, Beridze became aware of a sudden sharp twinge that he had never experienced before.

"Have I succumbed to that notorious disease called jealousy?" he asked himself.

He had left the table to avoid being rude to the guest and not to see Tanya's intent gaze fixed on Khmara.

Tanya studied the guest with a look of dislike. Three years ago she had met Khmara at the Rodionovs'. Soon afterwards she decided

that she loved him. It all ended abruptly one evening—she was repelled by his cynicism. Was it love he was offering her? Trustful as she had been before, she suddenly lost faith in him and found in herself sufficient moral courage to break with him for good.

Tanya now could not understand why that parting had hurt her then—there was nothing now in Khmara that attracted her. His lively and witty account of how he lived in the taiga, prospecting for tin, did not interest her. Khmara had spoilt their evening tea. How pleasant it had been to sit vis-à-vis Beridze! She noticed that he had grown gloomy. She wanted to go up to him but hesitated. Then Tanya repeated to herself her favourite rule—“be straightforward, and if the conventions don’t allow you to be, cast them aside.” With this thought Tanya went up to Beridze. He looked up expectantly.

“I don’t want that man’s shadow to be cast on me,” she said in a low voice. “I shan’t conceal from you—we very nearly became close friends. Rather, I thought I could love him. I realized my mistake in time.”

This had not been easy for her to say. Colour flooded her face. He answered nothing, feeling crushed as it was by the knowledge

that there had been any kind of relationship between Khmara and Tanya. The girl lingered for a while by his side, then withdrew to her corner behind a partition.

Khmara watched the scene with a cynical smile, then asked Alexei:

"Engaged couple, eh?"

"Does that put your nose out of joint?" Alexei asked.

"I feel robbed when I see a pretty woman with another man," Khmara parried jocularly, then added in a different tone, grudgingly, as one speaks of something unfulfilled: "Tanya and I spent some pleasant evenings together."

Beridze, who overheard scraps of the conversation, called Alexei over and said grimly:

"For goodness' sake get him out of here. I shan't answer for the consequences if he stays here. I simply can't breathe the same air with that man and listen to his chatter."

After treating the guest to tea and partaking of his wine, Alexei led him off to his lodging for the night. A place was found for him in Nekrasov's tent.

Kovshov left him there and took a stroll over the building site. The moon shed silvery beams over the taiga, imparting a pallid hue to the frozen trees with their denuded

branches. Night murmurs were wafted up from the forest. Alexei stopped to listen. An instinctive sense of alarm gripped him. A group of men passed not far away, and he challenged them.

"Friends, Comrade Kovshov. We're having a look round ourselves to see if there's any strangers about," Silin's voice answered out of the darkness.

Alexei noted with satisfaction that the watchmen were at their stations. The sense of hazard, however, did not leave him. Filimonov had come across from the other shore that morning and reported that someone had attempted to drive wooden plugs into the surface end of the pipe line on the strait. The malefactors had apparently been disturbed, for they had dropped everything and run off before they had time to perpetrate their dark deed. At about the same time, the plans of the pumping installation were discovered missing from the workshop.

"I have reported it to the proper quarters, but you'd better keep your eyes open out here too," Filimonov had warned.

"Who are those scoundrels?" Alexei thought with bitter hate. The half-finished pipe line across the strait was as dear to Alexei as

his own flesh and blood, and the thought of any dangers threatening it made him furious. "What's Khmara knocking around here for, what does he want?" the thought struck Alexei suddenly. He could find no fault with the geologist—the man had given no direct grounds for suspicion, yet Alexei was aware that his anxiety was due no less to the arrival of this uninvited guest than to what Filimonov had reported.

Alexei walked down to the beach. The road across the strait glimmered in the distance—a chain of lights stabbing the darkness—and brought up faint sounds of traffic which did not cease even at night.

Alexei's thoughts reverted to what had been troubling him these last two days. A letter from his brother—a travel-stained front-line letter folded into a triangular envelope—had been forwarded to him from Novinsk. Shortly before that he had received a notice that Mitya was wounded, was lying in hospital and would soon return to his unit. His brother had not written him from the hospital, apparently not wishing to upset him. He had written this letter much earlier, during the Moscow battles, but it had only been delivered now.

"Alexei, I'm writing just a few lines. The

order has been given for an offensive. I'm going into battle, Alexei! I'll be glad to shed my blood for our dear Moscow. If anything happens to me try to make up to Mother and Dad for both of us. Only now do I really appreciate our parents. How I'd like to have just one look at them and you! D'you remember scolding me for being disrespectful and frivolous? How far away it all seems now, though it was only a few months ago. I swear by my honour, that neither you nor my good parents will ever have reason to blush for me...."

"At such a moment he remembered my having scolded him for being disrespectful and frivolous!" Alexei thought remorsefully. Returning home after a three-years absence at the construction job in the South he found that his little brother Mitya had grown up. His mother complained that Mitya smoked on the sly. "I met him on the street the other day with a girl.... And he isn't too fond of studying. His father is displeased with him.... But you know what a kindhearted lad he is, and as affectionate as a young calf. He'll get into some sort of scrape and then he'll come to us with his winning ways and father and I soften immediately. You talk to him, Alyosha, perhaps you can influence him...."

That evening the two brothers went for a walk. Mitya gladly accepted the suggestion to "get some fresh air." Swift of movement, lighthearted and gay, he took an avid interest in everything about him, had a joke for every occasion, and a keen eye for the girls they passed.

"Do you know that the old folks are not pleased with you?" Alexei asked him sternly.

"Yes. Both at home and at school you are always being held up as an example to me: 'Your brother was our best pupil,' or 'Alyoshenka doesn't smoke even now.' Why the dickens did I have to be born after you!" Mitya responded.

"Is it so hard for you to study properly? After all, you have ideal conditions. Is it so hard to please such nice old folks as ours?"

"It isn't that it's hard. But I just can't help it, Alyosha. I can hold out for a week but no more. After that I go off the deep end again...."

He confessed it with such sincerity that Alexei had difficulty in suppressing a feeling of indulgence toward his younger brother. But he had to go on with the lecture.

"You talk as if you were incapable of taking yourself in hand. That is what happens to confirmed drunkards who have lost their will power. They know that they mustn't drink, but they can't help it."

Mitya glanced over his shoulder. Seeing that no one was in sight he threw his arms around his brother with an impulsive gesture and kissed him.

"Don't be sore at me, Alyosha. You can't imagine how glad I am that you've come. I've missed you so much."

"You calf!" growled Alexei, deeply touched, in spite of himself. But pushing his brother away he said in a stern tone: "A man ought to have more restraint and self-control."

"Who knows what a man ought to be! Do you think you yourself are all a man should be, Alyosha?" The younger brother looked up at Alexei with a mischievous grin.

"Never mind that, you better tell me what you plan to do when you leave school, you scamp!"

"I'm going to join the army," Mitya replied gravely. "Everyone says there's going to be a war soon, Alyosha. We must learn to fight. But before I join the army I want to have a good time for a year. Don't take it

too hard if you sometimes hear complaints about me. After all, I'm not really as bad as all that."

"Now I'm a hundred times sorry I wasn't kinder and gentler to you," whispered Alexei, stepping over the snow-swept seashore of Jagdinsk strait on the Island of Taisin. His brother's face, looking unfamiliarly stern and mature, pale with loss of blood, floated before his eyes.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHAT THE SPRING BROUGHT

IN THE MIDDLE of February Karpov came back from the hunt and presented Tanya with a bunch of dry bare marsh rosemary twigs.

"That's a first instalment on a spring posy, my dear. Put it in water."

Alexei said teasingly:

"Why put it in water? It'll make a nice whisk broom. Don't talk about spring, Ivan Lukich, it doesn't happen in these parts." And he sang a ditty that had become quite popular at the section:

*As an island
Taisin's a hummer!
Twelve months of winter,
The rest, summer!*

"Your winter's done with, lad, done and dished. You'd better get a move on with that

job out there on the ice. Spring is here, take it from me."

"You crazy fisherman!" Alexei protested, and dragged him outside. "Look! Snow all round and forty degrees below zero. It doesn't even smell of spring."

"It does, lad. Oh, yes it does! You must have a cold in your head if you don't smell it. Here spring creeps up on the sly, very cautiously. She doesn't rush headlong into a fight with winter."

Kovshov failed to notice what was clearly visible to a native of the Adun—that springtime regeneration of nature had already begun. The snow carpet was quickly vanishing. The snow did not melt (on account of the cold)—it evaporated. The roads darkened. A hard grey crust formed on the big snowdrifts outside the buildings. Came a day with the first drops of thaw, clear as a teardrop, and icicles hung from the roofs.

"Look, Alexei Nikolayevich, it's spring," Karpov said, pointing to them.

But the next day snow fell. It came down long and heavily, in dry flakes, covering the ground with a thick white carpet. The wind strengthened—a chill cutting wind that froze the face.

"Is this what you call spring, Ivan Lukich?" Alexei asked.

During these snow-stormy days the little bunch of marsh rosemaries, Karpov's gift, imperceptibly blossomed forth. One morning Tanya threw a casual glance at the window and uttered a cry of delight. The dry twigs, recently lifeless, were aglow with the lavender flames of tender blossoms.

The engineers stood admiring them, until Beridze suddenly remembered that they were a herald of spring. He frowned and bestirred himself. The work of laying the pipe line across the strait was not yet finished, and there was still a good deal of freight to be shipped out to the island.

The moment came when the last pipe section was to be lowered to connect both halves of the pipe line laid from either shore (the piece was to be submerged in the deepest fairway of the strait). Umara welded this last pipe in two joints; it was then dragged into the ice hole by the aid of tractors and the divers, equipped with hydromonitors, set it firmly into place on the sea bed. The twelve-kilometre pipe line across the strait now became a single whole.

The builders had every right to celebrate

a victory: they had laid the pipe line across the strait twenty days ahead of schedule, under incredibly difficult conditions and by methods hitherto unknown in engineering. On behalf of the collective of both sectors—the mainland and the island—Beridze sent a wire to the head office reporting fulfilment of the assignment and setting forth the amount of labour power and fuel economized thereby. The estimates showed that the blasting method of making the trench and laying the pipe line from the ice had proved several times cheaper than the method proposed by the old project.

“The collective, not content with what it has achieved,” the report ended in the traditional Soviet manner, “is proceeding with trebled energy to complete the laying of the second line and prepare for the spring with all speed.”

This terse businesslike document in which there were more figures than words rang out over the construction job like a paean of triumph, and congratulations came pouring in. “Your success is the best gift to our glorious Soviet Army on its anniversary,” read a telegram signed by Dudin and Pisarev from Rubzhansk. Congratulatory messages were

received from the oil workers at Konchelan, from the workers of factories in Novinsk and from the collective farmers of the different Adun settlements.

The builders had forgotten when they last had a day off. Even now, on such a joyous occasion, they had no time for a respite. The men celebrated the event with a brief meeting and a small portion of liquor at dinnertime, and set to work immediately laying the second pipe line across the strait.

According to the project this was to have been done considerably later, after the launching of the first line. But having convinced himself of the technical soundness of the project and put the collective to the test, Beridze had a fortnight previously made a proposal to Batmanov that the second line should be started at once and finished before the advent of the spring. The proposal was as alluring as it was risky. The end of the winter was not so many days ahead, and the season of ice shifting on the strait was approaching.

"Decide for yourself, you know best," Batmanov answered. "It'll be good enough if you manage the one line, we don't expect more. As for anything you do extra, I'm prepared to bow down to the ground in gratitude."



"Discuss it thoroughly with the men, make sure you can manage it, don't bite off more than you can chew—it will mean taking a very big risk," Zalkind advised.

Beridze called a conference at which it was unanimously decided to go on with the second line. Topolev, with the best welders, and Nekrasov with his blasting team moved out to the mainland. Once again the frozen echoes of the strait were awakened by the crashes of explosions. In one week the blasting men completed the trench—a second jagged ice lane, a kilometre north of the first one, ran darkly across the ice of the strait. On the day Kovshov lowered the last piece of the first pipe line off the island shore, Topolev on the mainland lowered the first two sections of the second pipe line to the sea bottom.

Alexei walked several kilometres across the ice to meet Kuzma Kuzmich on the strait. The old engineer made a striking figure in his sheepskin coat, with rimy white whiskers and brows.

"So you've finished with the first line, Alexei? My congratulations!" Topolev said in his deep-chested voice. "Now start on the second one, we'll push on from both sides. That's a surer way of forestalling the spring."

Alexei, arm in arm with the old man, set off amid the ice packs as though taking a stroll on a smooth street pavement.

"I've already started on the second line," Alexei said. "I didn't come here for your congratulations, I came to throw down the gauntlet." He took off his mitten with mock gravity and threw it down on the ice. "I challenge you to the struggle. You've got the lead on me by two pipe lengths, but never mind, I'll come to the middle before you."

Topolev bent down, groaning and puffing, and picked up the mitten.

"I accept your challenge. Those two lengths can be thrown off the score, we don't need your favours. I shan't boast beforehand—we old fellows are modest. We'll see...."

They discussed the conditions of the competition in a businesslike vein and sealed the compact with a cup of tea.

The two engineers, the old and the young, were now moving out towards each other and often talked to each other over the telephone.

"Comrade Topolev, we have laid the first pipe section forty hours before scheduled time," Alexei hastened to report. "How d'you like that?"

"Comrade Kovshov, you promised to leave us old fogies nowhere. I don't see you doing it," Topolev answered exultingly. "We've got the third piece prepared and are fifty-two hours in advance of schedule."

"We've got too great a respect for old age, that's why we're not hurrying," was Alexei's swift rejoinder, and holding his hand over the microphone, threw out to Karpov: "They've shot ahead of us again, the old devils. Quick, run and tell the boys...."

Spring, nevertheless, was drawing near. And cold cloudy weather was ever more often replaced by sunny warm days. Karpov, who contrived to put in an hour or two hunting now and again, was forever bringing in fresh tidings.

One day he told Alexei in great excitement that a host of grey flies resembling the common domestic variety had appeared on the southern slopes of the hills. "Girl friends," he called them.

"Well, how are the 'girl friends?'" Alexei asked him the following day; the mercury had taken a sudden drop during the night.

"Gone, every last one of them," Karpov admitted with surprise. "Curious thing, I've been observing them for many years, lad, and I've never ceased wondering about it: as soon as it gets the least bit warmer they're here,

and the minute it gets colder they're gone. You're an educated man, tell me where do they go, and where do they come from?"

But Kovshov had no time for the curious naturalist.

"As if I had nothing else to do but worry about your flies!"

Batmanov enquired from Novinsk of Beridze: "Can you release some of the men for the army? Replacements are needed and we're drafting men." Karpov called a Party meeting, then a general meeting, at which it was decided to send a group of builders to the army.

"I can see you're thinking hard, Semyon flyich. D'you also want to go?" Beridze asked Silin. "I remember how eager you were to go to the front. If you insist, we'll let you off—make up your mind..."

"I'd like to go with my comrades, of course. If you order me I'll go, but I shouldn't like to leave the job on my own. I've put all my soul into it and I'm dying to see the oil start running to Novinsk."

The "islanders"—as the island section builders were called—saw their mobilized comrades off with due ceremony. Among the latter were Stakhanovites Solntsev and Remnev

"Smash the fascists! Strike 'em good and hard! And we here will give you oil!" Umara said in his speech at the send-off meeting.

"I swear, comrades, I'll send as many Nazis west as the trees I felled in this here taiga," the giant Remnev said.

Baturin arrived for the send-off with a group of frontier guards and brought a present of uniforms from the outpost. Remnev and Solntsev swaggered about in new greatcoats, caps with the red star and top boots.

"We pledge ourselves to do the work of the men who have joined the army," Zyatkov said on behalf of the labourers. "Each of us will increase his output. . . ."

No sooner had the builders seen their comrades off than they had an unexpected visit from a member of the managing board of the Lower Sazanka Kolkhoz, the notable fisherman Zobnin, together with Karpov's wife and his two daughters. Makhov, on his way back from one of his trips, drove them over to the island.

Ivan Lukich caught up the little girls into his arms as they ran to him, and his wife Katya he greeted with such affection as though they had never quarrelled. The woman, who, in spite of everything, remained obdurate, began by declaring that she had come on business from

the kolkhoz and not of her own free will. Karpov turned a deaf ear to her remark, and there was nothing for Katya to do but join in the animated conversation that had started between her husband and his daughters. Alexei gave Karpov a twenty-four-hour leave, and the family retired into the old hut. The iron stove blazed hotly, Katya got busy at the table laying out the fare she had brought from the kolkhoz, while Ivan Lukich sat happily regarding the scene with the keen narrowed eye of the hunter.

"Granpa said we were to hug you for him. Like this!" the younger daughter said—a fair, curly-headed little girl—and clasped her hands round her father's powerful neck.

"We thought of you every evening," the elder girl added. "Granpa read the newspaper to us where they wrote about you—I remember it all by heart."

Katya gave him numerous regards and told him in detail about the affairs of the kolkhoz. The chairman had sent a letter in which he reported that the kolkhoz members were preparing for the spring fishing season and asked whether Ivan Lukich would be good enough for old time's sake to write back his advice and suggestions.

Zobnin meanwhile was being conducted over the section. The old fisherman inspected everything with a strict and critical eye.

"Just like a newly appointed chief," Beridze said, with a nod in his direction. "We're making as much haste as we can, Comrade Zobnin. You're looking forward to spring with impatience, but as far as we're concerned she's a blessed nuisance."

"Quite, quite," Zobnin answered vaguely.

There were many things on the section that staggered him—those huge snakelike pipes hauled by a string of tractors on a train of thirty sledges, the divers in their gleaming suits, and the busy motor traffic on the ice road—but he did not betray it by any sign.

"Call all the folks together," he requested. "I must speak to the builders on behalf of the fishermen."

The "islanders" gathered in the evening in one of the biggest tenthouses, and only then was the purpose of Zobnin's and Katya Karpova's visit revealed. The kolkhoz was challenging the works' section to a competition. In addition, Zobnin, in accordance with instructions received at a general meeting of the kolkhoz members, expressed gratitude to their fellow-villager Ivan Lukich Karpov for

his good work on the construction job. The fisherman kissed Karpov twice on the cheeks and handed him the kolkhoz's present—a brand-new gun. The Stakhanovites Umara and Makhov, the fishermen presented with a silver watch each.

"We sent a special man down to Novinsk for those presents," he did not forget to mention.

The guests spent three days on the section, and then hurried home. Karpov saw them off as far as the Adun. On his way back he observed ever new signs of approaching spring. Thoughts about the situation on the war fronts mingled with worries concerning the work section and the kolkhoz. Karpov cast frequent glances at the sky, expecting the coming of the birds. Indeed, he no sooner stepped ashore on the island than he caught sight of a flock of Dauria daws. Tanya called them actors because of the white rings on their necks, and snow-white plumage on their breasts, which resembled "collars and shirtfronts."

"These are the local rooks, lad, the harbinger of spring," Karpov informed Alexei in a worried tone.

Butterflies appeared. They sprang up everywhere like living flowers, separately and in little bouquets—aphrodites, violet tips and gorgeously coloured peacock butterflies. Great flocks of geese and ducks flew over, bound for some place beyond the “world’s end,” and cranes strung out high in the sky in martialled ranks singing their melancholy song.

Batmanov, in the words of the telephone staff, “hung on” the selector day and night. Appearing at different places along the works’ line, he called out all the section chiefs and insistently repeated:

“The winter roads are thawing already, in another few days traffic will stop. Make quite sure that you haven’t overlooked any inland point in the matter of food supplies and materials. Squeeze all you can out of the motor transport and tractors, make the fullest possible use of every man and every minute. Bear in mind that the thaw will keep us tied up for a month, and if you don’t give your attention to the roads now we’ll be properly in the soup. Switch over to the building of summer roads.”

The conversation invariably ended with one and the same enquiry addressed to the remote section:

"How are things out there at the strait, Comrade Beridze?"

The sun grew hotter from day to day. It stirred the dead frozen taiga to life. Brooks awoke with a noisy babble. They washed the grey winter's scum from the earth and laid bare the previous year's grasses. The dry branches of the trees came to life. The little scales began to stir on the catkins of the alders, and golden stamen appeared on the white fleece of the willows. Lilac-tinted and crimson-hued snowdrops studded the southern slopes of the hills. The voices of the birds could be heard in the forest, and loudest of all was the song of the tomtit.

Beridze dashed up and down the strait in his runabout.

"My friends ... for the sake of victory over the enemy, for the sake of our great cause, multiply your efforts," the chief engineer pleaded, passing from one team to another.

To demand more he had no moral right, for he saw that the men were straining every nerve and muscle to rush the completion of the strait pipe line. The work went on without a minute's interruption, not even at night. The tractor drivers, welders, insulating men and labourers went without sleep. Karpov had

well-nigh to resort to force to induce one or another team to go ashore for a rest. when he found it had been on the ice for two days and nights at a stretch.

At last Topolev and Kovshov met on the strait. Alexei had outdistanced Topolev by two pipe lengths. The old man heartily congratulated Kovshov on his victory

"That's a bottle of good wine on me, Alexei. Well, I must say I've worked to my heart's content—never worked like that in all my long life. That's what competition means! We would not have done half of it in the ordinary course."

"Ah, Kuzma Kuzmich, it's too early to rejoice yet. Our labours may prove to have been wasted. Look what's happening!" Alexei said, looking about him uneasily.

And there was indeed cause for alarm. It remained to join the ends of the pipe line in the middle, but the ice was already covered with water. Thousands of rills flowed down from the taiga and were rapidly eating away the site on which the builders were still working. The steadily thinning ice crust was liable to collapse at any moment under the terrific weight of the last unsubmerged pipe section that lay stretched upon it.

Beridze banned the use of the tractors on the ice. The trucks still plied between the mainland and the island, but with a reduced load. The wheels splashed up fountains of water in which gleaming reddish rainbows were momentarily revealed.

The last section was lowered by hand, by the joint efforts of hundreds of men. Beridze himself took charge of the operation. Silin watched with a pang the tremendous exertions the men were making as they shifted the steel giant towards the ice lane inch by inch. He thought the chief engineer's fears concerning the ice unfounded, and rated him mentally and aloud. Taking advantage of the moment when Beridze, called out to the phone by the head office, raced past him on his car, Silin drove his tractor out onto the strait.

In the heat of the moment nobody noticed it. Alexei did not hear the familiar clatter until the tractor was quite close. The engineer started, and dashed towards the oncoming tractor. He threw his arms out and yelled wildly:

"Back! Back at once! The ice'll collapse! Back! You'll ruin everything. Damn you!"

As though shattered by the impact of this cry, the ice in front of the tractor crumbled

with a deafening crash and the huge machine, growling and crushing the ice fragments under its treads, plunged into the depths. Alexei stood for a moment as if paralyzed, then rushed to the spot where the tractor had disappeared. He crawled on all fours to the yawning hole. Drawn by Alexei's cries, men came running towards the spot from all sides. Silin did not even appear upon the surface of the swirling water—he had apparently been drawn swiftly under the ice by the force of the current. Shaken by the tragedy, the men could not tear themselves away from the watery grave of their comrade. All attempts to recover at least his body proved futile.

At this juncture the chief engineer came back. He had just reassured Batmanov with his usual "everything's in order." Beridze saw the abandoned pipe and the crowd of men gathered round the ice hole. He gave but cursory attention to Karpov, who was telling him how it had happened, and turned on Kovshov in a towering rage:

"How did you dare allow it, you puppy! I no sooner turn my back than you start doing what you like! Now I'll be held responsible for the man's death! Silin's drowned, do you understand that or not? Silin! Why

did you let the tractor out on the ice? What for?"

Alexei did not even resent the unfair accusation. He merely answered bitterly:

"I'd have shouldered the responsibility gladly... if that would give us back Silin."

Kovshov suddenly reminded himself of the work they had dropped. They had to make up for every lost minute. He called the men and ran back to the pipe. Karpov told Beridze in a tone of reproach:

"You should apologize to him. Insulting the boy and wronging him at such a moment. What for, lad? He's not to blame, nor is Silin for that matter. Everyone's caught up by the same spirit, and we're all ready to give our lives...."

With the aid of winches, winding tackle and three trucks the last section of the second pipe was finally lowered into the strait. But the joy of labours crowned was marred by the death of a comrade. Beridze ordered the worn-out dejected men to go home and rest up. Alexei, who had not slept for three nights, hurried away with the rest. The haunting scene of the recent tragedy, of Silin's tractor plunging into the depths of the strait, was enacted again and again before his eyes.

Beridze caught up with Alexei, stopped him, and, unmindful of the men around, embraced him.

"I'm sorry, Alexei, I spoke to you like that in the heat of the moment."

"Oh, that's nothing, Georgi," Alexei answered wearily. "You and I will quarrel and make up a million times. But we've lost a good man and nothing will give him back to us."

Early in May snow suddenly began to fall—in large lingering flakes. This was followed by a fine and steady spring drizzle. The warmed-up earth was covered overnight with soft fleecy grass and became greenly radiant.

Beridze issued orders for the suspension of all traffic on the strait. Leaving Kovshov in charge of all work on Taisin in the vicinity of Cape Perilous, the engineer, in the company of Karpov, proceeded inland to the assistance of Rogov.

The winter road was washed away, the forest lane was a quagmire in which trucks and tractors hopelessly floundered. The only means of locomotion was the saddle horse, and that not everywhere. All the men were

employed on the building of the summer road—a corduroy road, consisting of logs laid side by side transversely and joined together. The builders were obliged to bring up these logs on their shoulders. It was especially hard for the teams working in the treeless valleys. The nearest forest was sometimes two kilometres distant from the line and the builders were obliged to haul the logs one and two at a time, floundering, and often slipping and falling in the quashy mud.

The chief engineer, much against his will, was obliged to reconcile himself to this barbarous method of work. He eagerly seized upon any proposal that made the work easier, and in two places, having discovered some roils of thick wire in the warehouses, helped to rig up a cable way to carry the logs from the woods to the line.

“We ought to be thankful that at least we have the best season in the taiga to work in,” said Karpov.

And indeed, the ordeal of the frost and blizzards was over and the hot summer with its tormenting clouds of midges and mosquitoes had not yet arrived. The air was soft and warm. Under the white bark of the Manchurian birches the sap had begun to stir, and everyone

along the line was drinking the sweetish acidy fluid, the life-giving "wine of spring" out of homemade birch-bark cups.

On the fourth day of their journey through the taiga, made now on horseback, now on foot, waist-deep in the swamp, Beridze and Karpov were overtaken by a cold wind blowing from the strait.

"The ice is on the move, lad!" Karpov guessed at once.

The last man who risked crossing to the island from the mainland over the still inert but already unreliable ice of the strait was Kondrin. This was not his first trip to the island, for Beridze had instructed him to assist the less experienced accountant of the island section. In asking leave to go out, he explained to Filimonov that the ice drift would last two or three weeks and that would give him time to check the state of accountancy at all the stores and trading points scattered over the island. Actually this was not the only reason why Kondrin was in a hurry to get out to the island. His relations with Seryogin had come to a head. When the loss of the blueprints was discovered, Seryogin came to the chief accountant in an angry excited mood and demanded:

"Hand over the blueprints that were stolen from the workshop. That's your doing! And stop your dirty game! Otherwise I'll get even with you."

"Have you gone dotty, Seryogin! What plans, what dirty game? What have I got to do with it?" Kondrin said indignantly.

The mechanic was not to be put off and stuck doggedly to his guns. In his opinion, Kondrin was directly involved in the strange occurrences on the section, in the barracks incident and the attempt to plug the pipe line.

"Clear out of here, and I'll forget you," Seryogin kept repeating. "Let me and all the other men work in peace. Because of you, suspicion falls on us as well. I've lost my peace of mind, worrying all the time that you might be doing some dirty work."

Kondrin had previously had ample opportunity of convincing himself that Seryogin was completely engrossed in assembling the pumps and had lost interest in everything else. Seryogin scowled at the accountant whenever he visited the workshop, even though it was his official duties that brought him there. In the heat of the moment he was capable not only of reporting him, but killing him outright.

Kondrin tried threats and even coaxing, but to no avail. The mechanic had his mind firmly made up before coming to Kondrin, and nothing could shake his resolve.

"I'll wait till tomorrow," Seryogin said firmly. "If those blueprints are not back in the shop by six in the evening and you don't clear out of here, I'll inform on you."

Shortly after this conversation, Kondrin set out for the island, despite the warning that the ice would be moving at any minute. After his departure the mechanic Seryogin had an accident during the night. As he was passing the pumping station site a heavy beam dropped on his head from above. The incident was reported to Beridze. Seryogin was lying unconscious and his condition was hopeless.

Alexei and Tanya looked down at the animated scene on the strait from the headland cliff on Cape Perilous. The ice packs were crumbling up. Large ice floes piled up one on top of the other and hurled themselves against the cliffs like live beasts. Freed of its winter shackles the torrent boomed and hissed. The maelstrom of sound deafened the people standing on the beach. An infuriated wind

roared and howled. The ice layers split and cracked with a shattering sound that resembled gun shots. The ice floes ground ceaselessly against the shores. The swift spouts of eddying gurgling water emitted a musical tinkle. And the thoughts of Alexei and Tanya, as they watched the ice drift, flowed on and on like those endless ice floes. Alexei was thinking that it was two months now since he had last had news of Zina. He had sent her mother telegram after telegram, but received no reply.

Tanya was trying again to unravel the tangled skein of her relations with Beridze. He had gone, and she missed him terribly....

... Beridze, with the thought of Tanya never out of his mind, made his way through the taiga. The cold wind had abated. Everything in nature was now rejoicing. The bird cherries hung in snow-white clusters. The oaks had cast off their winter raiment—leaves stiff and rusty as though made of iron—and draped themselves in young dark-green shoots and bursting buds. The marsh rosemary was in blossom too, and the hill slopes were ablaze with mauve and crimson flames.

Karpov, who accompanied the chief engineer, noted everything. "D'you hear that, it's the birds," he said, pricking up his ears. "Look,

lad, that's the first swallow." There was so much wild fowl in the taiga that one could shoot game almost without taking aim. The little lakes fairly bubbled from the flushed ducks. Karpov could never keep a straight path, he always had to go out of his way. He would come back to Beridze with fowl dangling at his belt and a handful of violets, primroses and marsh marigolds. Beridze gratefully accepted these sumptuous gifts from him. The chief engineer could often be seen on the corduroy construction sites gesticulating with a bunch of flowers. And when, as frequently happened, he would get into some heated argument or pause to put his shoulder to a refractory log, the violets and primroses would go flying into the swamp. Dozens of bouquets met the same fate, bouquets which could have been presented to Tanya, whom Beridze would gladly have made a gift of all the flowers in the taiga.

At the close of the fifth day Beridze and Karpov reached the big taiga river, the Oi. Here Rogov was building a wooden bridge. Several kilometres of ready-made road led up to this bridge. The work was nearing completion. Rogov, nevertheless, was dissatisfied and grumpy.

"This river is enough to get anyone's goat," he told Beridze in exasperation.

Food supplies had not been brought up here on the winter road, since the base was only twenty kilometres away. The spring thaw, however, had made even this short distance almost impassable. Only the bare necessities such as flour, salt, and tinned food could be brought up on pack animals. The food was consequently meagre, and the bread, baked over the campfires, tasted of horse sweat and smoke. In addition, the builders were plagued by a strange disease. The men complained of weakness and loss of appetite, said they would die out here and begged that something be done about it. Rogov, having put the road to the base in order, had been able to bring up food products and improve the men's diet, but he was powerless to fight this strange disease.

Rogov, on Beridze's advice, rang up Olga Rodionova and tried to find out, over the wire, how to treat this mysterious malady, from which the men were rapidly wasting away.

"Isn't it scurvy?" Olga asked from Novinsk. "Do the gums bleed? Are there sores on the body? Make them all drink pine-needle infusion. And drink it yourself."

"We're drinking that infusion of yours. We choke on it, but we drink it. And we're eating that foul ramson too. Two men are down with scurvy, but this blessed complaint is something different," Rogov answered.

He was upset over the business, yet glad of the opportunity to talk with Olga. He could almost see her just then, bending over the microphone, disturbed, eager to help.

"Alexander Ivanovich, I'm afraid it looks very much like sleeping sickness. Beware of the ticks!" Olga shouted. "Bring the sick men out at once to the strait. I'll examine them, and if necessary take them back to Novinsk with me."

"You're coming down?" Rogov yelled, tingling with joy, and looked round to see whether he was being overheard. (As though it were possible to keep a single word secret over the selector!) "That's grand, come down. I'll be expecting you."

"I'll come," Olga said softly, pausing as though to overcome some doubt. "I'll ask Batmanov to let me go, and I'll come down. Rather, I'll fly down. Let me know when you send the sick men to the strait."

"You must come, if only for the sake of the sick men," Rogov said, agreeing to anything.

"I'll come not only because of that," Olga suddenly observed.

"Eh, what did you say? Repeat it!" Rogov yelled, but Olga said nothing more.

Karpov volunteered to escort the sick men to the strait. Weak and apathetic, they followed him through the taiga, by the corduroy road where it already existed, or floundering through the swamp where it did not. Karpov's heart went out to his comrades. He looked after them during the halts as though they were little children, and promised them all the time that he would find the miraculous all-healing ginseng root for them. Beridze and Rogov meanwhile were moving further out to Konchelan.

The summer road was not yet quite finished when Batmanov at one end of the projected pipe line and Beridze at the other began thinking about getting welding started all along the line. Construction had now proceeded to a point when welding constituted the next highly important and complicated stage in the undertaking.

Batmanov decided to have the new tasks ahead discussed collectively. The leading tech-

nical personnel, job superintendents and Stakhanovite welders on all the sections from Novinsk to Konchelan were asked to take their place at the telephone at a certain hour for a conference of the kind known only to builders and railwaymen when the participants debate matters and reach decisions while separated from one another by great distances.

The chief engineer conducted the conference.

"Welding, comrades, is the most important stage in the construction of the pipe line," Beridze said. "Only after it has been done will the thousands of pipes lying all along the line be linked into a single installation. Now, the success of the welding depends on whether it has been properly organized. We talked a lot about it when we were working on the project and I know the kind of debates that are now going on at the sections. We shall have to settle two questions. Firstly, how is the welding to be done at the sections: starting from one end or beginning at both ends at once? Secondly, what is the best way to organize the welders' work? You all know what answers the project gives: each section to work in one direction and the welders to be organized in one strong team. Now serious objections have

been raised to this method. A second-front idea, that is, beginning simultaneously at both ends of each section and working toward a linkup in the middle, was advanced at several points along the line at once. Our welding experience at the strait prompted us to question the advisability of uniting all the welders into a single team. We are duty bound to size up things once more before making the final decision. Let us put our heads together and arrive at the correct decision."

Engineer Pribytkov of Section Five declared that the section had everything in readiness for welding and was in favour of adhering strictly to the project.

"The two-front idea means scattering both men and machines. You can divide up a drum of gasoline but if I happen to have only one technical superintendent for the welding work I can't cut him into two and stick the two halves at the opposite ends of the section," the elderly engineer lisped firmly. "Our section is nearly eighty kilometres long. To agree to start work from both sides would mean to weaken control deliberately. I can assure you that a great deal of the work done would be defective. Instead of saving time we would on the contrary lose time redoing things."

Engineer Kotlyarevsky of Konchelan agreed with Pribytkov's view. Topolev, speaking from Cape Perilous, refuted their arguments.

"My colleagues, whom I can understand perfectly although I cannot see them, are right in one respect: it will be comparatively easy and simple to work from one end," Kuzma Kuzmich said in an unhurried, impressive voice. "Yet ought we not to give up the easier variant for the sake of saving time? I do not like Comrade Pribytkov's suggestion that defective work would be inevitable. We must have more faith in our welders; if we do, there need be no work done that will not pass muster. I would suggest appointing some of the best Stakhanovites to assist the line superintendents. That will only make control stricter."

"Right!" put in Umara. Pribytkov and Kotlyarevsky had irritated him and he was fidgeting as he impatiently waited for his turn to speak.

"I'm glad to hear that my friend Umara agrees with me," Kuzma Kuzmich went on. "Now I want to touch upon the second question. The project proposes—and Comrades Pribytkov and Kotlyarevsky agree to this—to

put all the welders on a section in one team. I am most definitely against it. In my time I have had occasion to work a good deal with welders and in spanning the strait I realized once and for all that you cannot put more than ten welders in a single group under one foreman. Don't forget, comrades, that we have sections with as many as twenty skilled welders and their helpers. This would mean that the chief of a welding crew would have to supervise the work of twenty welding units or sixty men! Our quota is ten joints per man. Umara does three times as much. I pity the chief who tries to keep up with sixty such welders! Don't forget you have to see to it that Umara has everything he needs for his work, remove any impediment to his productivity, and inspect his work—as you see there's a great deal to be done, more than any one man could manage. . . .”

After Topolev the Stakhanovites spoke, and they all supported his view.

“Georgi Davydovich, Comrade Beridzel! Enough talking, let's get down to the resolution!” Umara broke in. “The welders are for the second front. The country needs the pipe line and we'll give it to her ahead of time. We promise to have no rejects in our work. What

grounds has the engineer who spoke here—I forget his name—for saying that the work wouldn't measure up to standard? It was insulting to hear him. The work will measure up to standard. You can put this down on paper, Comrade Beridze: 'Umara Mahomet promises to chalk up 350 per cent and nil rejects.' I challenge all the welders to competition!"

Other welders took the floor to accept Umara's challenge. Batmanov and Zalkind were called upon to speak but neither did so.

"We've nothing to add to what Comrade Umara said," the Party organizer said. "You can sum up, Georgi Davydovich...."

"We do not suffer from false pride, and are not afraid to renounce those elements of the project which life itself has rejected," Beridze said in closing the conference. "We shall work on two fronts with the welders organized in small crews. I ask those in charge of the work to revise their schedules, submit them in revised form to me tomorrow, and begin welding. My advice to Comrade Pribytkov and all other engineers is this: we are entering a period of hard work which will necessitate your being on the line all hours of the day or night, so you might as well take up residence in your cars for the duration."

CHAPTER EIGHT

SAD TIDINGS

IT WAS no wonder Tanya Vasilchenko was proud of her handiwork—the selector. Not for nothing had the telephone team suffered all those hardships in the winter taiga. The wire, stretched from the head office to the last point of the works' line on the island, had become, as it were, a living nerve in the body of the collective. To take this selector away from the builders now would be to deprive them of sight and hearing.

Day and night, a ceaseless flow of human speech and the multitudinous undercurrents of life—important or unimportant, public and private, tragical and comical—was carried over the wires. The radio broadcast the disquieting news of a German offensive in the Izyum-Barvenkovo direction. The medical assistant on the strait read out to Doctor Rodionova a re-

port concerning the accident with mechanic Seryogin—he was dying. Zalkind congratulated truck driver Smorchkov and informed him that his parents had at last been traced—they had evacuated in time and moved from Oryol to Kansk on the Yenisei. The section engineers reported to Beridze in turn on the progress of welding. Liberman from Novinsk remonstrated with his subordinate at Section Eight: “Look here, what have you gone and done with all those groats? Are you feeding porridge to the bears or what?” The planning economist on Section Ten droned off the day’s output figures to the head office. The dispatcher girl of Section Seven remarked to the dispatcher boy of Section Two: “You’ve got a nice voice, I wonder what you look like.” “I’m ginger,” the boy answered. “You’re kidding.” “Come down and get an eyeful.” Section Chiefs Temkin and Khlynov compared notes of the last day’s work. Pushchin from Novinsk asked Karpov what the situation was on the island, and told him in turn about fishing progress in the region, concluding with a request to call Makhov to the phone for a moment.

“Alive?” the editor asked his old schoolmate.

“I think so.”

"The pennant still on the radiator? No one grabbed it from you yet?"

"It's soldered down so's you can't tear it off."

"How's Musya?"

"As busy as ever, serving sandwiches and hot coffee and smiling to the good-lookers."

"To you too?"

"Sure, aren't I a good-looker?"

"When's the wedding? The wedding, I say! When is it?"

"There's no registrar here yet. We'll soon have one."

"That's too long to wait. A long time to wait, I say."

"That's all right, we've got plenty of patience. We went down to one of the Nivhi camps looking for a shaman to marry us."

"He refused?"

"They've passed out of the picture, it seems, the shamans. The last of 'em was buried a little while ago."

"I have no more questions. My love and kisses. Don't let go the wheel. I shake the horny hand."

"Same to the smooth editorial. Hang onto the pen."

Second to Batmanov, the biggest man on the wire was chief dispatcher Grechkin. He used the line often, several times a day, always clearing up points of information and never satisfied. He sensed the slightest change at the work sections from the figures they sent in, and was not to be shaken off until he had got to the bottom of the matter. An increase in output put him as much on his guard as a drop. And after dispatching a vituperative telegram signed by Batmanov, he would ring up the lagging section shortly afterwards to find out how they liked it.

On the island section Alexei spoke frequently with the chief dispatcher. This time, too, Grechkin called Alexei out to the phone.

"I was asking, how are things at the strait? Is the ice still moving?"

"It is. The devil only knows where it all comes from," Alexei answered. "It's time Beridze and I got away from here."

"You islanders are trying to run a line of spoof. Spoof, I said."

"I don't understand that slang of yours, Comrade Chief Dispatcher."

"Yes you do, don't pretend. It works out according to your report that you've done nine kilometres of corduroy in a single day. How

d'you figure that out? Aren't you making it up?"

"Certainly not, we're honest people here. We've done nine kilometres in a day. We'll soon send you a report about its completion. You don't hear? I said, the road will soon be finished."

"I can't believe it. How d'you account for such a rate of output?"

"Account for it? Multiply your output rates by the men's patriotism. If you don't believe me, come down and see for yourself."

"That's just the trouble, I can't come down. The chief won't let me go. Every day I write about different methods of welding, and haven't the faintest notion what the blessed thing looks like. You fellows will lay down the whole pipe line and I won't even get a chance of seeing it," Grechkin complained.

"Never mind. . . . You'll come out here on an excursion in ten years' time, then you'll see it," Alexei mocked him. "I daresay you'll get permission to have a look at the pipe line. For won't you have an 'Active Participant' badge shining on your manly chest?"

"You've run amok on that island, Alexei—grown quite witty," sighed Grechkin. "But your conversation bores me. Zhenya Kozlova

here wants to tell you something. Are you interested?"

"Very."

Zhenya complained that she was fed up with papers, ink and figures.

"It's the height of spring, and I'm sitting here within four walls, locked up by Grechkin."

"You give him the slip and come down here."

"I would have run away before," Zhenya sighed, "but it can't be done now. I preach discipline myself at every step. I'm the Komso-mol organizer now."

"Shall I help you to get a transfer? I said, do you want me to get you transferred?"

"I'll transfer you!" Grechkin flung in. "Don't you go luring away my workers. She'll run to Borneo with you if you only call her."

"You let her come to Taisin meanwhile. I say, let her come to Taisin."

"Alexei, there's a telegram here for you! And two letters," Zhenya said. "They all came together. Shall I forward them to you?"

Alexei's heart began pounding.

"Send them as quick as you can," he asked. "No, read out the telegram now."

"‘Dearest Alexei be brave our Zina has been killed....’" Zhenya read swiftly, then suddenly broke off.

This phrase, which reached Alexei's ears distinctly amid the crackling noises and faint hum of voices, slashed at his heart.

"Go on!" he implored, steeling himself.

"‘... Wrote but you have not received my letter,’" Zhenya read on slowly. "‘How to bear this terrible blow....’"

A hush descended on the line, broken only by the plaintive whine of the Morse Code. The builders were fond of the engineer, and they now expressed their sympathy by silence.

"Read the letters, Zhenya," Alexei said after a while.

Zhenya did not answer. Alexei repeated the request.

"Look here, Alexei. We'll better forward them on to you, you'll get them in two or three days," Grechkin answered instead of Zhenya.

"Read them!" Kovshov demanded.

"One is from the chief of the military school," Grechkin complied. "‘Dear Comrade Kovshov, your parcel was delivered here after Dmitri Kovshov had left for the front. Your

brother was our best trainee, and I think it would be right to give the parcel to the best trainee of the new draft. Please confirm your agreement by telegram....’”

Alexei merely sighed by way of reply.

“What?” asked Grechkin. “What’s to be done with the parcel?”

“Send a telegram, let them dispose of it at their own discretion,” Alexei answered in a tone of despair. It flashed across his mind: “The man was wounded and then rejoined the ranks.... Perhaps he is wounded again, and the parcel is still looking for him.”

People at different points along the line listened with bated breath to this conversation between Grechkin and Kovshov. There was utter silence on the wire. Even the Morse signals had ceased.

“Courage, Alexei. Don’t lose heart, dear friend,” Beridze’s voice was suddenly heard to say.

He was at Konchelan at the time and had come to the selector to ring up Batmanov. Grechkin, who had fallen silent, was glad of Beridze’s interference. But Alexei had not forgotten about the second letter.

“Read the next one!” he said with unnatural calmness.

"We'll send the letter on. Have a little patience, Alexei," Grechkin pleaded. Perhaps the letter bore more sorrow for his comrade.

"Don't torture me, read it, be a friend!" Alexei said in an agonized voice. "It's from Zina's mother.... I must know."

A sound of sobbing, that of a woman evidently, broke in upon the ensuing stillness, and then all was quiet again.

"Darling Alexei, I kept it to myself as long as I could, I wanted to save you the sorrow," Grechkin shouted out again. "'I kept waiting all the time for some more news that would refute the first. But I can't keep it up any longer, I have no right to conceal it from you. I received all your telegrams and letters ... and suffered many pangs on account of you. And your father, too, told me many times: 'Write him the whole truth, concealing it won't help.' And so I am writing you now. Some comrades from out there visited us, and they said....'"

"What's that? I can't hear you!" Alexei shouted, when Grechkin paused for breath.

"She writes: 'Some comrades from out there visited us and said that Zina had gone out on a combat assignment and failed to return. It was a very difficult assignment. She

and four others went out. They carried out their task, but lost their lives. Their comrades tried to find them and rescue them, but did not succeed....’”

“What?” Alexei queried, fearing to miss a single word.

“They didn’t succeed, she writes, in rescuing them—they lost their lives.” Grechkin’s hoarse voice, strained by his daily talks over the telephone, sounded like a signal of distress. “‘We have both lost our dear one: you, your wife, and I, my darling daughter. What’s to be done now, Alexei dear? I don’t think I can bear it....’ Can you hear me? ‘What’s to be done now, I don’t know. The pain is more than I can bear....’”

“Alexei, d’you hear me? It is I, Zalkind. There’s sorrow these days in every family. I don’t mean to comfort you, I want to help you take a grip upon yourself. Remember, you’re not alone, you have friends, many friends.” Zalkind was speaking from Novinsk, and all those who heard him were glad that he had given utterance to the thought that was in all their minds.

Alexei sat a long time before the selector. The hum of many voices flashed back and forth across the wire. Karpov stood over Alexei,

fretting and anxious to ease his comrade's suffering.

"Keep your chin up, lad. Don't let it bend you," he whispered.

Alexei got up and went out, staggering like a drunken man. He wandered about aimlessly. He did not wish to see anyone, and avoided Karpov, Topolev and Tanya who hurried out after him. He passed the section site and found himself in the deserted taiga. Karpov overtook him and caught his arm.

"Where you going, lad? I shan't let you go! Come along home."

"Leave me alone, Ivan Lukich. I want to be by myself a while," Alexei said softly but firmly.

His stricken face startled Karpov and he fell back.

The rivulet Oktanka ran in a narrow limpid current amid a radiant birch copse. Soon the birch trees were swallowed up among the larches which came down to the water's edge in serried ranks. Below them sprawled a wild tangle of underbrush. Some beast whom Alexei had scared could be heard trampling the bushes. Nutcrackers kept up an incessant cackle. A flying squirrel, spreading the parachute-like folds of skin on its legs like wings, leapt

high overhead from bank to bank, and a common little squirrel chattered and whistled to it. Fat geese rose from the water with a lazy honking.

Alexei saw nothing of this. He parted the bushes with a mechanical gesture as he stumbled on. Karpov, following at a distance with a carbine in his hand, saw the whiskered face of a big wild cat peering out from behind a bush. He threw up his gun, but the beast disappeared with a flash of its round yellow eyes.

... How many times at night in Novinsk, in winter on the Adun, and here on the island have you not dreamt, Alexei, one and the same sweet and thrilling dream that made you so childishly happy—a dream that you were back in Moscow again! You walk the familiar streets, and descry in the distance the humpy little turning, the museum of your childhood, now proudly named after a famous designer. At last you reach the crossing, turn the corner, and before you stands your cherished home. You quicken your pace, and they speed and hurry towards you, those people who are nearest and dearest to you—your old but still buoyant father, your little mother, your long-

limbed brother who raises both hands to you in greeting. And in front of them all runs she, the most impatient of them all. . . . And there the dream always broke off, for your heart beat so wildly with the joy that filled it, that you awoke. . . .

"We said to each other, Zina, that nothing would part us. And now I am alone," Alexei whispered.

How much had been crowded into that short life with Zina! Now that she was no more it all came back to him with amazing vividness. He saw her before him, touched her with his hands, distinctly heard her voice.

. . . One evening during his vacation, after the completion of a construction job in the South, Alexei had gone to see a friend of his living on the same street. As he climbed the stairs he met a girl. She stopped in amazement, and peered into his face with a searching eager look. Alexei had stopped, too, surprised. Her clear blue eyes were glued to his.

"There, you have come back at last," she said with undisguised joy, and sped lightly and gracefully downstairs.

He looked back at her, at the fair hair falling to her shoulders and the slight figure in a simple well-fitting dress, and experienced a

poignant feeling of regret that the girl had passed him and in another moment would disappear.

"Just a moment!" Alexei cried. "You must have made a mistake."

She turned with a smile that made her lovelier still.

"No, I haven't. I couldn't have done. Don't you remember me, Alexei?"

"I've never seen you before."

"But I've known you ever so long. I know you very well," she said earnestly, and proceeded on her way.

Alexei greeted his friend absently, was introduced to his young wife (there had been many changes in Moscow while Alexei had been away at work), and lost no time in making enquiries about the girl he had met on the stairs.

"That's Zina. You used to pull her plaits when you were kids and tease her '*Zinka-korzinka*,'" his friend reminded him. "She used to live in our house, and she often comes to visit her girl friends here. I can introduce you to her if you wish. All over again, so to speak."

"... We have both lost our dear one, Alexei. You, your wife, and I, my darling daughter," he could hear again the voice of Grechkin.

Alexei sought to escape it and dashed into the thickets. He ran on blindly. The shrubbery caught at his hands and shoulders.

"I don't believe it, I don't believe it!" he shouted, and his voice echoed hollowly through the woods.

He saw Zina, he saw her alive, and only alive! Memory turned over the leaves of the past. Fragmentary episodes, meetings.... Snatches of speech, exclamations, laughter. He yearned to recapture the memory of what had been most important and cherished in their lives, but everything—the big and the little—merged into one memory, and that memory was happiness.

They had spent a day, their first and last, in the country. The earth and the trees had only just turned green. It was spring. Zina and Alexei wandered about for a long time until they came to an old pond. They had sat on the grass until dusk. Stars glimmered in the darkened water. Girls were singing somewhere very sweetly.

"What's on your mind, Alexei? Are you sad?"

She gazed at him with a long look. Her face was as sweet and wistful as the song of

the girls in the distance. Alexei leaned over and kissed her.

"Hush," she said, when he started to speak. "Let's be silent and let the memory of this moment remain with us forever." And then after a minute's pause: "It isn't true that we've known each other only a few days. I have known you all my life! All my life! I've been used to thinking of you ever since childhood, and I grew up under your imperceptible influence. And I always felt—always, d'you hear?—that we two were bound to be together."

Alexei took her hands in his—her fingers were cold, and he warmed them tenderly in his.

"You didn't even suspect it, but my heart was always with you. You graduated the institute and went away to the construction job—for such a long time! They said about you: 'He's young and inexperienced, he'll have a hard time.' I wanted things to be easier for you, and I thought about you all the time. I believed, and I still believe, that it helps a person when another loving person thinks about him. Does it seem strange to you, Alexei dear, that I suddenly confessed my love to you first?"

He demurred, but Zina interrupted him.

"Still, it is queer the way it happened with us. I really did not know you properly at all. My imagination pictured Alexei Kovshov as I wanted him to be.... Sometimes I used to think in dismay—what if he proves to be different, and my love fades?"

Zina fell silent for a minute, struggling with her emotions, then went on still more warmly:

"I had many acquaintances. Some of them were interested in me. But none of them interested me. I would sometimes get angry with myself—whom are you waiting for? How can you be waiting for a man who doesn't know you, who doesn't want you, doesn't think of you? Perhaps he doesn't even exist, the man you are waiting for?"

The stress of her emotion was so great that Zina could no longer master it. She got up quickly from the ground and pulled him up by the hand.

"Then at last we met, on that staircase. I could not pass by, because I realized that now we had to be together. How good it is that you have turned out to be better than the Alexei of my dreams! More real, a finer, deeper personality!" She threw her arms out with an

impulsive gesture and cried exultantly: "I'm ready to embrace the whole world for this love that has been given me!"

"Our Zina is dead. What shall we do now, Alexei? What shall we do?"

It was true then, she was no more, Zina was dead—can't you understand it? He blundered forwards, trying to imagine her at the front, carrying out a combat assignment.

And suddenly he recalled an incident which, simple and matter-of-fact in itself, had struck him profoundly by the self-denial and depth of feeling it betokened.

Shortly after their marriage, three days before the war broke out, Zina's mother had asked them jokingly:

"What are you going to do with your lives now, you newlyweds? What are your plans?"

Alexei had replied in the same jocular vein. Later on, when they were by themselves, Zina told him about an invention a comrade of hers, a graduate of the same institute, had made.

"What are we going to do with our lives now?" Alexei repeated the question with a smile. "What are our plans?"

"We're going to live right," she said without hesitation. "The chief plan is never to live apart, to be always together. Isn't that so?"

"Of course," he concurred, and grew thoughtful. "You have another six months to study. And then you'll take up a post-graduate course, I suppose?"

"Why, yes. That's settled. Actually I'm doing my second scientific work already."

Zina began dilating upon it, and it was some time before she noticed that he had got up and was moodily pacing the room.

"I know, if I tried I could find a situation in Moscow in some designing office," Alexei said disconsolately. "But I don't like the idea. You've never been on a construction job, and you can't imagine what it is like. But I've always dreamt of construction work in out-of-the-way places. After this job in the South I'll never be able to stand it in a Moscow office. Besides, my department has already decided to send me out either to the Far East, or to the North, somewhere round the Pechora...."

Alexei stopped by the window. Scenes of the recent construction job rose to his mind—the battle to save a bridge during a flood, the first train launched on the new trunk line he had built.

"We mustn't live apart. And we shan't either. I shall go with you," he heard her saying in a calm quiet voice. "Whether they

send you to the Far East or to the Pechora, it's all the same. I go where you go. We'll give up the post-graduate course and Moscow. It's a pity, but still.... One must overcome the inertia of habit. What's to prevent me carrying on scientific work at a construction job? You'll help me, won't you, darling?"

Her words stirred him deeply. That was Zina all over, he thought—she would think nothing of giving her life for the sake of the man she loved. Though he considered himself incapable of sentimental impulses and fine gestures, he had gone up to her, dropped suddenly on his knees and began kissing her hands, overcome by a flood of tender feeling.

"She carried out the assignment, but lost her life!" Grechkin's toneless voice came back to him. And then Alexei distinctly saw Zina standing before her commander.

"It's a very dangerous assignment. You're going to your death. If you do not feel equal to it, you had better not accept it."

"I have made up my mind. You may rest assured I'll manage it," she answered firmly and coolly.

"Look out, lad!" there came a loud cry, followed instantaneously by a deafening rifle report. Something dropped to the ground close by with a heavy thud.

Alexei stood leaning against a tree and did not stir. Karpov came up and touched his shoulder. After a while the engineer turned to him a face bathed in tears.

"Another second and she would have pounced on you, the hellcat!" Karpov said, kicking the carcass of the huge wild cat that lay prostrate on the grass. Her glazed eyes had not yet lost their malevolent expression.

Karpov was disturbed by the apathy with which Alexei glanced at the beast.

"Pull yourself together, lad!" he said. "You're like a dead man. Look at the life around you."

Life's never-ending stream flowed brimmingly all round. The limpid current of the Oktanka ran on with a tinkling murmur. Two musk deer came down to the water to drink, but catching sight of the men, dashed into the thicket at a single bound. Somewhere overhead a woodpecker was tirelessly at work.

Karpov suddenly grew alert and threw up his carbine. Someone was running along the bank. The hunter's keen ear caught the

sound of heavy breathing. The man, whoever he was, seemed to be in a great hurry. He came in sight at a bend in the river. Kondrin! Karpov pointed him out to Alexei. Kondrin had not seen them. He stopped near-by to drink from the river. Soon he disappeared among the trees.

"What's he up to in the taiga, lad?" Karpov asked wonderingly.

"Go on, Ivan Lukich," Alexei said wearily. "I'll come back alone. Don't look after me, there's no need. Leave me the carbine if you don't mind."

"No fear," Karpov demurred, "say what you like, I'm not going to leave you here. If you don't feel like going back yet, we can take a stroll together in the taiga. We can drop in on the geologists, to get you out of yourself a bit. It's close by. I ran across that acquaintance of yours twice, and he keeps asking when you'll pay him a visit."

Alexei mechanically followed Karpov.

Half an hour later they approached the bivouac of Khmara's expedition—several tent houses with wooden walls and tarpaulin-covered roofs scattered in a little glade by the river. Two horses at a hitching post tossed their nose-bagged heads. Oil derricks

could be seen on the bank. There was not a soul in sight.

"Where have they all gone to?" Karpov wondered. "There was a regular bazaar here three days ago."

They walked towards the tent houses, and were halted by a frontier guard whom they had not noticed standing among the bushes. He challenged them, then recognizing Kovshov, relaxed.

"Lieutenant Baturin's here, Comrade Engineer," he said affably. "If you want to see him he's in that tent over there."

The lieutenant, attracted by the voices, was already coming towards them. He told them that geologist Khmara and two other men of the expedition had been arrested and sent to Konchelan by plane. The rest had wound up the expedition's work and gone to Chongr.

"There was a bit of a fracas here. Your friend didn't behave very nicely, and we had to knock a little sense into him," Baturin smiled, winking at Karpov.

The intelligence did not surprise Alexei.

"I'm sorry we missed it. It would have given me great pleasure to teach the scoundrel a little lesson myself," he said gravely, his fists clenched.

CHAPTER NINE

BETWEEN ISLAND AND MAINLAND

THE ICE floes drifted on and on as though they were converging on this narrow strait from all over the sea. Now the water would be entirely free of them, now they would appear again ocean-bound, like an endless flock of sheep on the spring pastures.

Polishchuk's small fleet of eight cutters and a dozen barges was ready for navigation, but the season could not be opened yet on account of the ice. This irritated Beridze, who was in a hurry to get back to the mainland as quickly as possible. His trip across the island from Konchelan to the strait by the completed road had convinced the chief engineer that the island section could safely be left to the care of Rogov. What worried him more was the construction of the oil-pumping station on the other side of the strait. There

were ten other work sections, besides the two on the strait, and welding work had commenced all along the line which demanded proper supervision. He was impatient to leave.

Beridze arranged his future plans with Batmanov over the telephone. He and Kovshov were to spend a week at Chongr, help Filimonov with the assembling of the pumps and Diesel engines, organize welding work at the headmost section of the mainland from the strait to the Adun, and then move up the line to Novinsk. The chief engineer was taking Topolev and Tanya with him. Topolev was to take charge of the pumping station construction, and Tanya was to go to Novinsk from where she was to start running up a permanent telephone line on poles. Chernov was left on the island with a similar commission.

Filimonov telephoned to enquire whether he was to start assembling and mounting the Diesel engines and pumps or to wait for the chief engineer. Beridze wished to be present at the starting of assembling work, yet was loath to have it held up. He decided to cross to the mainland without delay. Polishchuk urged him to wait another two or three days.

Rogov, true to himself, poured oil on the flame.

"Get going, you fellows, as quick as you can—I'm fed up with you! Too many chiefs about the place. There isn't room enough here to swing a cat. And you, Polishchuk, don't try to get the wind up of the folks. Captain that ship of yours and brave the seas."

"Get the cutter ready!" Beridze ordered.

Polishchuk ran off to do his bidding with alacrity. In his heart of hearts he was pleased, for he had been longing to get out on the water all winter.

Following Beridze and his companions, the cutter was boarded by Kondrin, escorted by a sergeant. While Beridze was busy making final arrangements with Polishchuk, Kovshov told Tanya and Topolev what the chief accountant had been arrested for. The man had concealed his real name and his old sins and obtained the job under false pretences. Seryogin, upon regaining consciousness, had told Filimonov the whole story. The mechanic accused Kondrin of having attempted his life and of being implicated in the affair of the missing blueprints and the attempt to plug the pipe line. The State Secu-

rity authorities at the same time had detained a suspicious character on Filimonov's section, who, upon examination, deposed that he had arranged Seryogin's accident on Kondrin's orders.

"Has Kondrin confessed?" Tanya asked, looking at the chief accountant with hatred in her glance.

"Not he. He's a hardened criminal, they say, with a bad record."

The cutter no sooner put off from the shore than Beridze became his old cheery self again. If there was anything he detested it was procrastination and delay in something that had been decided and settled. Once launched on an undertaking, he was immediately inspired with confidence in its successful accomplishment. His companions, too, were glad of a change, even Alexei livened up when he stepped on board.

Alexei's state of mind had been causing Beridze considerable anxiety these days. After two days' wanderings in the taiga with Karpov, Alexei had returned with a streak of grey in his hair and a face petrified in lines of imperturbable calm. Beridze did not hear a single word of complaint from him; it was as though nothing had befallen him.

The strait crossing was rough. The vessel and the sparse ice floes around it rolled lightly on the waves, leaden-hued under an overcast sky. A fine spray dashed on the decks from all sides. The shores of the island quickly retreated, and the distant coast of the mainland was hidden in a whitish shroud.

The passengers were chilled—the wind on the water, raw and cutting, penetrated through their raincoats and other clothing. Tanya set an example by going below. Beridze, Alexei and Topolev followed. It was warm in the cabin, which shone with the fresh-blue oil paint of walls, ceiling and benches. Alexei sat down next to Tanya, and Beridze and Topolev took a seat opposite.

“What would each of us do first if we found ourselves back again amidst the amenities of a big city?” Beridze asked.

“Manicure,” Tanya answered, ruefully surveying her hands. “I can imagine the manicurist fuming over these paws. Then I’d drop in at some house where they know what good cooking is, and put away a good meal, taking no notice of my shocked hosts. Afterwards I’d go to all the movies, one after another, and see all the films.”

“I would take a ramble about the parks

and boulevards, just to watch the passing crowds," said Kuzma Kuzmich, "and admire the little children with their mothers. It's a long time since I've seen them! There was only one woman on the whole island—Tanya. But she doesn't count, she's neither a mother nor a child."

Beridze reminisced:

"Umara said to me: 'When I've welded the whole pipe line you're going to give me a vacation. I'll go to Kazan and marry the day I get there—it's no good for a man to live alone, a man needs a family, children, a cosy and comfy life.'"

Tanya waited for him to go on. Her look disconcerted Beridze, and he turned to Alexei who sat brooding in silence.

"And you? What would you pounce on when you got back from the taiga?"

"I'd get myself invited to live in Zalkind's cosy house, rent a corner with a soft sofa, and loll about on it reading all the fat adventure books I could get hold of, something in the style of the *Three Musketeers*." Alexei expressed his wish with a touch of sadness.

Beridze's heart contracted. "Poor boy, that's what you really need, some nice home

with wise, warm-hearted people to take you under their wing at least for a week." Aloud he said:

"A man lives in normal cultured conditions, yet he's never satisfied, always grouching and grumbling and finding fault with one thing and another. But when he's spent a year or so in the taiga or the Arctic he begins to appreciate every little thing he left behind at home."

"When you show up in town you'll get a summons from the barber," Tanya said, looking at his beard. "They'll say—aren't you tired of carrying that weight!"

"No barbers for me! According to statistics there are only three beards like this in the Far East—one belongs to an old partisan, the other to the seventy-year-old hotel janitor at Rubezhansk and the third to me. When those old fellows die I'll have the monopoly."

The conversation came round to causes of premature old age.

"Every month of war is equal to years," Topolev observed. "A youth who has turned twenty these days, will in a year be as mature as a man of thirty. I don't mean as regards appearance, of course."

Alexei caught Tanya's searching look upon him and asked her:

"I've grown old, haven't I? Where this grey has suddenly come from I don't know." He touched the grey strand that was conspicuous even in his fair hair.

Tanya did not conceal what she had been thinking of him.

"You have changed, Alexei. The grey hair has nothing to do with it. Before, you were like a house with all the doors and windows open, and now the house is nailed up."

Beridze would have added: "Alexei, it isn't right to shut yourself up like that—it's hard for a man to fight his troubles by himself," but he refrained, not wishing to add salt to the wound.

The cutter's sides grated against something, the moorage apparently, and came to a stop, much to the surprise of the passengers: they had not expected the crossing to be over so quickly. Polishchuk met them at the companion way.

"We're in a fix, Comrade Chief Engineer," he said guiltily.

Beridze bade Tanya and Topolev stay where they were, while he and Alexei went out on deck. The wind had freshened. The

cutter was ice-locked among big floes that had choked the fairway.

"I tried to steer clear of them, but it didn't help. The ice started drifting in a dense mass. I thought I'd be able to slip through, tacked as best I could. What a nuisance! We're no more than four kilometres from the shore too," Polishchuk reported in a disheartened tone.

"Only four kilometres," Beridze muttered, scanning the dim outlines of the shore as it slowly floated past.

"Try to push off that accumulation of ice floes," Beridze suggested.

"I've tried."

"Let's try again," said Alexei, joining the crew who were trying to push the ice floes off with the aid of boat hooks.

Polishchuk ran to the motorist. The boat's siren sounded the distress signal—it reverberated over the strait with a hopeless regularity. The cutter shuddered, nosing into two big hummocks that had closed in on the bows.

"Don't waste all that elbow grease, man, let 'er go to the bottom," Kondrin said with an attempt at humour, standing on deck with the sergeant. The coolness of the men around

deceived him as to the gravity of the situation. "Give the word to sing a funeral song, Comrade Chief Engineer."

"Stop your snivelling and shut up altogether!" Beridze snapped.

He gripped the boat hook with which Alexei was trying to push off an oncoming ice floe.

"I can't forgive myself, Alexei! I was in too much of a hurry with this trip, and now I've got you all into trouble."

"That's right, beat your breast, you'll feel better." Alexei retorted, red in the face with exertion and breathing heavily.

"Careful!" Polishchuk shouted to one of the sailors who nearly slipped overboard. He looked at the engineers appraisingly, and said in a tone of command. "We'll take it in turns, otherwise we'll soon be played out. Go down to the cabin for the time being. I'll call you up when I need you. You, Comrade Sergeant, give us a hand."

"Right," answered the sergeant, and ordered Kondrin: "Here, take this boat hook."

The howling of the wind and the crash of the ice could now be heard in the cabin. The siren hooted hoarsely and jerkily. The engine alternately stopped, then began thudding

again, sending a shudder through the boat's frame.

"Why this worried look? There's no cause for alarm. We'll wander a little out of our way, that's all," Beridze said, his teeth flashing in a smile.

He sat opposite Tanya. The girl's heart was in her face as she gazed at him.

"What eyes you have!" Beridze said, unable to conceal his admiration. Her glance spoke volumes and lifted the cloud from his heart.

"What eyes?"

"Eloquent, sort of. . . . It's hard to express. I can read your thoughts in them. . . ."

"I'm glad they've spoken for me."

"D'you know what Heine said about your eyes, Tatyana?" interposed Topolev. "He said: Has she big eyes? How do I know? Can you determine the calibre of a cannon that is trained at you to strike you with a shell."

Tanya and Beridze laughed. Alexei looked at them with sad sympathy, the while he listened to what was going on above.

"Let's tell stories," suggested Beridze "or try to solve eternal problems. We'll solve them all by the time we make land."

"What problems?" asked Tanya.

"Oh, there are plenty. Problems of love, life, death. What would you say was man's strongest emotion?"

"Love, I suppose," Tanya hazarded.

"And what if I prove you that the chief human emotions are governed by the stomach? I can tell you a convincing story to illustrate it."

Beridze made the proposal with a straight face, but Tanya dubiously shook her head, shrewdly suspecting a joke. Topolev chuckled softly.

"What are you laughing at, Kuzma Kuzmich?" Tanya asked. "D'you know that stomach story?"

"No, I don't. I just shut my eyes for a minute and fancied we were sitting in a comfortable room over a cup of tea."

"It looks like it," Tanya said with a touch of irony. "Over the evening tea the elders are recounting incidents from their dark past for the benefit of the young generation. Georgi Davydovich will tell us about the triumph of the stomach over the heart, and then it will be your turn."

Beridze was not given time to tell anything. A burst of spray broke through the

suddenly opened hatch and Polishchuk looked down.

"Please relieve the crew. Comrade Topolev and Tatyana Petrovna had better not trouble, I daresay."

Kuzma Kuzmich, left alone with Tanya, drew her to him with a fatherly gesture.

"Scared, little girl?"

"No, Kuzma Kuzmich. I inured myself to everything out in the taiga. When things were very hard I used to think—at the front death hovers over you all the time. I'm not aware of any real sense of danger now, because I'm with you, Georgi Davydovich and Alexei. You can't feel low in such a company. On the contrary, all I wish is to help keep our spirits up."

"It's galling to feel one's own helplessness," the old man sighed. "Just to sit and wait until the wheel of fortune turns in your favour."

"Never mind, Kuzma Kuzmich, it will turn." It was Tanya now who calmed Topolev's fears, though they were all for her.

Dark clouds scuttled across the sky. The strait seethed in white foam in which the

ice floes that beset the cutter were almost indistinguishable. Polishchuk's crew were taking a rest in the warmth of the engine room. He himself kept the watch all the time. The engineers and Kondrin, at his signals, darted from place to place with their boat hooks trying to thrust off the ice floes that closed in upon the vessel. It was difficult to keep one's balance on deck. The wind almost tore the long heavy poles out of the men's hands, and threatened to drag them into the watery chasm. The craft, like a cockleshell, would suddenly be thrown up on the crest of a mountainous wave that appeared seemingly out of nowhere, and then go plunging down into the abyss.

"Look out!" warned Polishchuk, crouching against the boat's side.

A torrent of water rushed over the boat. Polishchuk straightened up and levelled his pole. The engineers and the sergeant also vigorously plied their poles. Polishchuk's glance lighted again on Kondrin. The accountant had dropped his pole and was convulsively clutching the rails.

"Get the hell out of here!" Polishchuk shouted savagely.

"Comrade Beridze, let him go down into

the cabin," the sergeant said with a nod at Kondrin. "He's only in the way here, and it's sickening to look at him."

"All right," Beridze assented.

"Get down into the cabin!" the sergeant commanded.

Kondrin obeyed with alacrity. Slowly and carefully he made his way to the hatch.

"What are we going to do with him if we have to abandon the boat?" asked Kovshov.

"I'll swim him ashore if I have to. Comrade Polishchuk will give me one of the sailors to lend a hand."

"The wind may save us from this ice," Polishchuk said in a confident tone. "If only it doesn't start blowing a gale."

Alexei and Beridze returned to the cabin breathless, excited and wet. Their dripping raincoats formed a pool on the floor.

"How different you both are, yet how alike!" Tanya said, frankly admiring them. She felt proud of them and wanted them to know it.

The engineers glanced at each other and sat down side by side. Kondrin sat on the ladder, to be nearer the exit. He was cowed and frightened and did not conceal it

"In what way are we alike?" Beridze asked gently, unable to tear his eyes away from the girl's face. She had thrown a kerchief over her head which gave her an added charm.

"A sailor of my acquaintance back in Rubezhansk told me once about a real shipwreck," Tanya said, emphasizing the word "real." "A small vessel of ours was caught in a storm in the Sea of Okhotsk. Only three of the crew were saved...."

Tanya closely regarded her companions. Alexei was perfectly calm, he seemed quite indifferent to what was happening. Topolev smiled at some thoughts of his own and twirled his moustache. Kondrin's eyes darted from side to side with an expression as though he expected the little cabin to cave in at any moment. Beridze, with a quizzical glance at the notice on the wall "No Smoking," took a cigarette and offered Tanya one. She lit up awkwardly bringing her face close to his in doing so. Up on deck Polishchuk was firing again.... The engine pounded nervously....

"The way our little boat's creaking, one would think she had no metal plating on the sides," Beridze said.

Tanya laughed, and choked on some of the smoke she had swallowed.

"Never tell fibs, Georgi Davydovich, you're a bad liar. The boat's creaking because it has no metal plating on the sides at all."

"You were saying something about a real shipwreck," Kuzma Kuzmich reminded her.

"Yes. They fought for dear life, but they weren't afraid to die. The man who told me the story—he was one of the survivors—said something that struck me very forcibly at the time: 'If danger or even death stares you in the face, and you know it, you must take yourself in hand and thrust fear from you. Then, everything that you treasure in life will help you to be firm and strong. You will keep your human dignity to the last and die bravely.'"

Kondrin turned to Tanya with a harassed bewildered look.

"Well said, by jove!" Topolev said hoarsely. He had managed to catch a cold while standing on deck. The girl's courageous attempt to cheer the men up delighted him.

"It's all bosh and nonsense," Kondrin flung in gratingly.

He scowled at the company with reddened little eyes. He might not have been there for all the notice they took of him. Tanya alone was provoked to say:

"What is bosh and nonsense?"

"All this drivel you're spouting, the whole lot of you. There's nothing decent like that in life. Every man takes care of his own hide, and everybody's afraid of death. You wouldn't like to drown, now, would you? Just now you're kind friends and comrades because you hope to be saved. But when the time comes you'll be tearing at each other's throat over a life belt."

This sudden outburst, and more still the tone of vicious conviction in which it was uttered shocked Tanya. She looked at the man in utter contempt, and his eyes fell before hers.

"We're not going to tear each other's throat," she said. "On the contrary, we'll be glad to hold out a helping hand to each other. Yours is a bad case, if that's the way you think. It means you're capable of snatching a life belt away from a comrade."

Kondrin was going to say something, but was startled into silence by a sudden jolt which caused the vessel to heel over for the

fraction of a minute. The roar of the wind grew louder.

"It's a gale, comrades," Beridze said.

Another blow shook the vessel. Tanya and Alexei were thrown out of their seats. The girl fell on Beridze's chest—he sat opposite—and Alexei fell over Topolev. Beridze, on a sudden impulse, kissed Tanya. Kuzma Kuzmich whispered into Alexei's ear:

"I'm ready to give away my old life, if only yours were saved, my dear boy."

Tanya, to hide her embarrassment, asked Topolev:

"Tell us something, Kuzma Kuzmich."

"What exactly?"

"Well, anything—about your first love, say."

"That's a difficult task for me. These things have faded out of my memory. I don't even remember whether I had a first love or not!" the old man said, and his eyes twinkled with amusement. "Long years of life have swept my mind clean of remembrances. It's like a big explosion in the forest. There were trees standing and birds singing until people suddenly took it into their heads that they needed the place cleared. And so there's no more forest, only bare dead stumps

sticking up out of the earth. And that's what I'm like—a dead stump of a once green tree."

Beridze glanced at Kovshov, who understood him without words. The engineers climbed the ladder and threw back the hatch with an effort. The roar of the storm tore into the cabin. Kondrin made to follow them. A shower of water drenched him, and the hatch banged to. The accountant returned hastily to his seat. Tanya watched him with a scornful smile.

Beridze and Alexei made their way with difficulty to Polishchuk's side. He shouted breathlessly to the engineers, his face grim and blue-white:

"I'm closing in with the shore after all! If only we can keep afloat a little longer!... The engine's failing! But we're out of the ice! Afraid we shan't avoid a wetting!... Get the old man and Tanya prepared! Throw off all extra clothes! Take the life belts."

The boat shook and was tossed about so violently that it was difficult to sit in the cabin, even holding onto the bench with both hands. Nevertheless, the walls of the cabin seemed to the engineers a haven from the storm that raged without. Thus does a

traveller, caught in a blizzard, see salvation from the snowy whirlwind in a flimsy shanty that he has chanced to run across. Beridze met Tanya's eye and smiled to her.

"Let us get out of here, my friends," Alexei said calmly, and began throwing off his raincoat and jacket.

"Take these, just in case," Beridze said, handing Tanya and Topolev the life belts.

"What about me—have I got to die! Give me a life belt!" Kondrin shouted down from the ladder in a shrill voice of panic.

"Go on deck, the sergeant will give you one," Beridze said, turning away from him in disgust.

The accountant clambered up swiftly. The water poured in through the open hatch.

"And you?" Alexei asked Topolev. The old man was in no hurry to take his overcoat off.

"You leave me out of the reckoning, Alexei. You'll need your strength without having to fuss over me."

"Don't say that, Kuzma Kuzmich!" Tanya cried with a pang. "How can you!"

"I'm an excellent swimmer," Beridze declared. "You'll support Kuzma Kuzmich in the water, Alexei. Our sailors will help Tanya."

"I don't need any help, Georgi Davydovich. I was born on the Adun, I swim like a fish," Tanya said.

"And don't you try to kid us, Georgi. I know how you swim," Alexei said grimly.

He helped Topolev off with his coat as though he were a child. Tanya was deeply disturbed by what Alexei had just said. She looked at him imploringly. He understood her glance and nodded.

A violent heave of the cutter knocked them all off their feet. There was a loud splintering noise, as if the frail craft had been broken in two. They made a dash for the hatchway. The face of a sailor appeared over the hatch.

"Hurry up! Get out, quick!" he shouted.

Alexei snatched up the life belts. He put one over Topolev and the other over Tanya. The girl clung to him for a moment.

"Alexei, save Georgi," she whispered, and kissed him affectionately.

She darted to Beridze to say goodbye. Alexei swiftly bundled Topolev up the swinging ladder. They rushed out on deck. The roaring wind stunned and deafened them. In this mad frenzy of the elements, sky, shore and strait were mingled in a blinding chaos.

The cutter stood stock still one minute, then shot forwards with terrific speed.

"The engine's gone dead!" Polishchuk threw out to Beridze. "We'll have to take a dive."

In the turmoil and uproar Alexei caught sight of Kondrin. The accountant, with a face contorted with terror, stood clutching the rail. He wore a life belt. Seeing a similar belt on Tanya, he shot out one hand and began pulling it towards him.

"Let go!" the sergeant shouted, giving him a shake.

"You and the boys save Tanya and Topolev. I'll look after Georgi Davydovich," Alexei said, making final hasty arrangements with Polishchuk.

The boat listed heavily. It was thrown up again by a wave.

"Abandon ship!" yelled Polishchuk.

"Jump, you swine!" the sergeant shouted to Kondrin who was gibbering with fright.

Alexei dived overboard, drawing Beridze down with him. The icy water seemed to freeze his heart. Alexei could feel Beridze struggling in his hands, preventing them from coming to the surface. Alexei tugged sharply at his hair, and Beridze, understanding what

was wanted of him, ceased struggling. They instantly shot up to the surface.

"Swim this way, here's the shore!" Alexei gasped, supporting Beridze.

There was not a sign of anything around—neither of the boat nor their comrades. The waves hurled themselves at the swimmers like infuriated beasts, shot them skywards, then dashed them down and rushed over their heads.

Beridze twisted his head about anxiously and made repeated attempts to shout, only to be left spluttering and choking.

"Easy, Georgi! Save your strength!" Alexei shouted, while he himself could feel his muscles freezing, and he steeled himself not to give way to despair.

CHAPTER TEN

THE LEGEND OF THE BOGATYRS

ALEXEI dreamt of the Nanai boy Volodya Hojer chanting his tales. The voice of the narrator, a lilting, girlish treble, sounded in his ears, but try as he might, Alexei could catch no glimpse of Volodya.

How strange and mysterious it was! The words of the tale conjured up a series of swiftly changing scenes, and most marvellous of all, he himself was a participant in them.

The first story was the legend of the Nivh sniper named Makar from the village of Mylvo that is on the Jagdinsk strait.

"...Makar learned to shoot well, very well. Granpa Gibelka taught him. Hunting in the taiga, Makar could hit a squirrel in the eye—such a fine marksman was he. And it served him in good stead at the front. The

German dropped with a hole in his forehead from Makar's first shot.

"The Nazi dropped, and Makar put away another match in his box. When his box was full, Makar sent it to granpa Gibelka in the Far East.

"Makar's soldier mates laughed at him. Why does Makar send matches home?

"'Have you no better gift, friend? That's a poor parcel to send home.'

"Makar did not laugh. But we know our Makar—he never laughs, even when he was a little boy he was grave as an old man.

"'They like to get my parcels at home. I have a granpa named Gibelka, he did not go to school and doesn't know figures. It's easier for him to count on matches.' That is what Makar answered his mates.

"'Then take another dozen boxes of ours, and let your granpa count to his heart's content.'

"'He doesn't need your matches. I gave granpa Gibelka my word that I would only send my own.'

"Makar's gift arrived in the camp of Mylvo. Gibelka was pleased. He counted all the matches, did not miss or drop a single one. He put them back in the box and put the

box away. Have you seen Makar's photo cut out from the newspaper that hangs in the old man's hut? Next to it on a little shelf lie three boxes of matches. In each box there are fifty matches, altogether a hundred and fifty matches—and that means a hundred and fifty Nazis done away with. Very good. Good boy, Makar.

"Granpa Gibelka went to the chairman:

"'Nikifor, call the folks together—we shall write back to Makar.'

"The Nivhs made speeches in the club, and all the words were written down, and that is how a letter was made up to Makar. The men and women gave Nikifor money for an airplane. Some gave money, others gave skins. If a little more money is collected there will be a third airplane. And the letter to Makar has flown to the front: 'Thank you for the gift, thank you. We are waiting for more. Fight the Nazis. . . .'"

Pictures rise up, like illustrations to the tale chanted in that clear strong voice tinged with humour.

Now Alexei is Makar, hunting the Fritzes at the front. He puts matches away in his box, one by one, and when he has a boxful, sends it out to the Far East.

Alexei, now grandpa Gibelka, sits in his hut in the camp of Mylvo leisurely counting his matches, then he makes a speech in the club, hands Nikifor skins of the sea beast and taiga beast as a contribution towards an airplane, and gives the postman a letter to Makar with his own hands, begging him not to lose it.

Alexei, Engineer Kovshov, lies on the ground next to Beridze, and cannot make out what is happening around him. He had heard many a fairy tale read to him, had read them himself and seen them acted on the stage, but he could not remember ever having heard them and seen them and participated in them himself.

The second song was a legend of the Bearded Engineer. Alexei saw Beridze and rejoiced for his sake. "See, Georgi, you have become famous, the people have already made up a legend about you. And you thought that our deeds would remain unknown."

Then the tale went on to speak of the Big Chief and Young Alexei. And Alexei had a vision of Batmanov, Beridze and himself.

"...All three went boldly into the taiga, and the taiga made way for them. The bear,

the tiger and all the beasts of the forest ran away. The Big Chief, the Bearded Engineer and Young Alexei went swiftly and broke down the forest, and behind them a road sprang up. Along that road a tractor ran, puffing and smoking and dragging an iron pipe behind it. It was black and long—one end here with us, the other could not be seen—it reached the sky.

“The Big Chief, the Bearded Engineer and Young Alexei came to the sea. The big belly of the water lay before them.

“‘On an island far out at sea there is oil squirting out of the ground. It squirts up and is wasted. Let that oil flow through a pipe to the front. Stalin has thus commanded,’ the Big Chief said.

“A tractor was driven on the water, and it sank. A motorcar was driven out, and it sank. The pipe was lifted onto a steamship and was nearly drowned. How to drag the pipe to the island? All three stood by the shore and thought. Young Alexei lay down on the ground and grieved, saying:

“‘There is not enough benzine at the front. The tanks will stop, the trucks will stop, the airplanes will cease to fly. What can we do?’



"Fisherman Ivan hurried swiftly to them from the Adun.

"I wish to help you...."

Alexei, in his dream, was overjoyed.

"And so Karpov's in the story too! How do you do, Ivan Lukich!"

"... The Big Chief said:

"Swim all three to the island The Bearded Engineer shall show the way and drive off the waves Young Alexei and Fisherman Ivan shall drag the pipe out. I shall remain on the shore and push it. Swim quickly, make haste, for the front is badly in need of oil When it begins to flow through the pipe I shall start shooting and you will hear."

"The Big Chief remained standing by the water The Bearded Engineer, Young Alexei and Fisherman Ivan swam towards the island The pipe was heavy, and it was terribly hard for Fisherman Ivan and Young Alexei to keep it from dragging them down to the sea bottom. They were very tired, but they swam on, carrying the pipe on their backs. The Bearded Engineer was in front and he kept looking back at them. He wanted to help them, but he had his own work to do—to point the way, scatter the waves and drive off the grampus....

"They came close to the island, not more than a stone's throw away. But the biggest of the grampuses attacked them. The Bearded Engineer began wrestling with it, but could not overcome it—it was a very strong fish ..."

Alexei, lying on the ground, heard a groan—it came from Beridze, tossing next to him. Alexei wanted to jump up and run over to his comrade, but he could not. Again the voice of the storyteller reached his ears.

"... Fisherman Ivan and Young Alexei reached the island and dragged the pipe out onto the beach, and they saw the oil spouting from the earth, a black pillar higher than the taiga. They turned this pillar of oil into the pipe, and the oil ran through it. The Big Chief on the other shore gave a loud shot. This meant that the oil had flowed past him on its way to the front. Fisherman Ivan and Young Alexei shouted 'hurrah.' But the Bearded Engineer was still fighting with the grampus on the sea—it was hard to overcome it. Fisherman Ivan stayed on the island to keep watch over the pipe, and Young Alexei went back into the sea to help the Bearded Engineer. Between them they quickly killed the grampus.

"Young Alexei caught the Bearded Engineer with one hand and they swam towards the shore where the Big Chief stood. They had reached to the middle, when another misfortune befell them—a storm broke over the sea. They were carried far, far away. The Bearded Engineer could swim no more. He said to Young Alexei:

"'Leave me. Let me die, and you will save yourself.'

"Young Alexei did not listen to him. He swam on and on. A big wave threw them both ashore. And our Nivhs found the Bearded Engineer and Young Alexei on the beach, fed them and put them to bed. Let the Bearded Engineer and Young Alexei rest in peace, no one shall harm them, the Nivhs are their friends—their great friends...."

The narrator's voice was soft and mellow, and it was a pleasure to listen to him. But suddenly it was drowned in a loud cry:

"What are you thinking of, Alexei! She's drowning! Quick, Alexei, quick! She mustn't drown!"

Alexei tensed every muscle. That was Beridze crying, calling to him, he needed him!

Alexei made a painful effort, as though tearing off some invisible fetters, and woke

up. He looked up at the flimsy walls and roof of a shanty. Beridze lay at his side tossing in delirium. It was morning. The light filtered timidly through a triangular opening in the shanty. Outside some Nivhs sat around a campfire, mending nets and conversing in low tones. Alexei recognized the kol-khoz chairman Nikifor. Next to him lay an old man with a pipe in his mouth, leisurely stirring some broth in a pot over the fire. This was apparently grandpa Gibelka. Which of them had been chanting the fairy tale so ably and with such youthful zest?

The Nivhs fell silent, listening to the oddly changed voice of Beridze, which in delirious disjointed phrases, now shouted out, now trailed off to a whisper:

"Only we are left, only we two. Why don't you speak, Alexei? This silence is terrible! Ah, I understand you, I understand! You're not able to speak a comforting word.... Nor am I...."

Nikifor picked up his pipe and said:

"It's a big heart the Bearded Engineer has. It's very hard on him. He mourns for his wife, he mourns for his comrades. They're all drowned...."

Alexei was horror-struck. So all hope was lost—the Nivhs had not found Tanya, nor Kuzma Kuzmich, nor Polishchuk and his men, nor the sergeant. For Kondrin alone he felt no pity—serves him right, the scoundrel.

The men at the fire suddenly turned their heads in the direction of the strait. Gibelka snatched up his carbine. A man stepped up to the fire, a ghastly figure Kondrin!

"I'm from the wrecked cutter. The only survivor, all the rest are drowned," he stammered. "Let me warm myself. And give me something to eat. I must have a rest too."

The Nivhs gave him a place at the fire and began fussing around him. They fed him with fish from the pot. Kondrin bolted his food and kept looking greedily into the pot. Nikifor shook his head pityingly.

Alexei staggered to his feet. His head reeled. He stood for a while swaying, then went out. Upon seeing him, Kondrin sprang up and dashed away. He stumbled over some tree roots and fell with a cry. Then he leapt up and plunged into the bushes. Alexei staggered off in pursuit. Nikifor and Gibelka raced past him with carbines in their hands.

"Is that a bad man? Why does he run away?" Nikifor asked.

"He's a criminal! He mustn't escape! Catch him!" Alexei gasped.

"You mustn't run," Gibelka said, gently pushing Alexei aside, and following bot-foot on Nikifor's tracks. He skipped along in a droll way and shouted shrilly as he ran.

Alexei went back to the campfire. A Nivh youth (it must have been he who chanted the fairy tales) peered at Alexei anxiously and solicitously, touched his head, and showed him his hand. There was blood on it. Alexei's temple was badly bruised. He tore a strip of linen from his shirt, wiped away the blood and stood listening intently. The sounds of muffled shouts and shots were heard in the taiga. Apparently Nikifor and Gibelka were hot on the trail of the runaway. There was another shot, then all was silent. The fisherman at the campfire relaxed.

Nikifor and Gibelka came back. Nikifor rubbed his hand and looked at Alexei shamefacedly.

"A bad man. He fought and bit my hand, and beat me on the head. Broke away and ran again. We shouted to him not to run. But he wouldn't listen."

The old man examined his carbine, reloaded it, and began calmly stirring the pot again, as though nothing had happened.

"Shall I put another match in Makar's box?" Gibelka asked Alexei. "What do you think?"

Kovshov did not immediately understand the question. Then he answered:

"You can put in ten. They say he was a very dangerous enemy."

Gibelka pondered this and demurred:

"No, ten is too much. I'll put this." The old man held up one finger. "Such a man is not worth more. Tfui!"

"You keep this," Nikifor said, handing Alexei Kondrin's sodden documents.

Alexei spread them to dry before the fire. Nikifor examined the deep bite on his wrist.

Gibelka sampled the contents of the pot with an approving smack of the lips.

"Rich fish, very tasty," he said, placing the pot before Alexei. "Eat, eat.... It will do you good, you must get strong...."

Alexei forced himself to eat the hot pulp of soft-boiled fish.

"Now we'll boil more fish for the Bearded Engineer," Gibelka said with satisfaction,

when Alexei had eaten. "You must sleep, go, it will do you good."

Alexei shook his head. He sat with his hands stretched over the fire. His fingers trembled. Alexei shut his eyes, and again the painful scenes rose before him—the green water, and the waves rushing towards him. He shuddered, opened his inflamed eyes and stared into the fire.

The engineers together with the Nivhs searched for their comrades till late in the evening. They scoured the coast for a good thirty kilometres but found no one.

"Drowned. The water has eaten them up," Nikifor concluded. "No use looking for them."

Alexei could not believe that Tanya and Kuzma Kuzmich had perished. It was impossible to conceive the death of these two, so different in age and so alike in youthful vigour. He felt that they must turn up at any moment, safe and sound. Alexei reluctantly agreed to postpone the search. It was night-fall, and both he and Nikifor with his men were utterly exhausted.

Alexei, stunned as he was himself by the disaster and with a gnawing relentless pain in

Makar, framed with birch bark. On a little shelf next to the portrait lay the famous three matchboxes.

Alexei made an attempt to get in touch with Novinsk from the kolkhoz office--the village line, at the request of Nikifor, had been connected with the construction trunk lines that winter.

Beridze sat there too. Throwing occasional glances at him, Alexei reported to Batmanov about the disaster in guarded vague terms. Batmanov grew excited and began scolding Alexei for his incoherent account.

"Never mind me, Alexei," Beridze said. "Give him the whole story."

Batmanov heard Alexei out, and a long, painful silence ensued.

Alexei thought that the operator had switched them off.

"Don't shout at the girl, I hear you," Batmanov spoke up at length. "Don't lose heart. Continue the search. Get everyone out on it, don't give up until you've found them. Where's Beridze? Why doesn't he come to the phone?"

Wishing to protect his friend from a conversation which might unwittingly add salt to his wound, Alexei answered that he had

gone out. But Beridze picked up the receiver. The look of anguish in his eyes softened as he spoke, and a load was lifted off Alexei's heart. It was as if an icy lump in his breast had melted.

"Batmanov is coming down by plane," Beridze announced joyfully, as though hoping that Batmanov would find Tanya, Topolev and the sailors.

They were found before Batmanov arrived. One of the Nivhs ran across Polishchuk and brought him into the camp in a state of extreme exhaustion. Polishchuk told them where they could find the others. It appeared, that on coming out of the water they had struck off from the coast and gone into the taiga in the hope of finding a Nivh camp, but had lost their way. According to Polishchuk, Tanya and the old engineer were in a serious condition and were unable to walk. Kondrin and the sergeant he reported drowned.

Beridze was transfigured in an instant, and all his old energy came back to him with a rush. He fairly tore through the forest, cleaving his way through the underbrush. Alexei and the Nivhs could barely keep up with him.

Tanya and Kuzma Kuzmich lay beside a campfire, covered with clothing and twigs. The crew of the cutter sat there too, in tattered shirts.

Beridze rushed to Tanya, lifted her head and gazed breathlessly at the girl's flushed feverish face. She opened her eyes with a moan and seeing Beridze she clung to him.

"You're safe.... Safe! Georgi.... I'm so happy.... Don't let me die now," Tanya whispered, as she stroked his face with burning hands in a kind of ecstasy.

Topolev lay dying on Alexei's knees. There was a rattling noise in his throat, and he gasped for breath. He fought hard to overcome the physical pain.

"It's good you have come in time, Alexei," he uttered slowly and painfully. "I wanted to tell you... a sort of testament. It's all been worth it, dear boy—every day lived... I was thinking now how little I managed to do.... I pass it on to you, like in a relay race. My unfinished works. The library.... It's in Moscow. Mistakes.... God, how many I made in three score years! Don't repeat them, take a lesson. The honour of an engineer.... Tell Grubsky if you see him—the

old man remembered him before he died... was sorry for him. The snuffbox in my pocket, Alexei—take it, a keepsake.... And at home in Novinsk everything you take a fancy to is yours."

The old man fell silent. Presently he asked to be raised up and a groan escaped him. Then, as if ashamed of his weakness, he hurried on:

"Never forget what we talked about. The broad perspective. Don't get old at heart, don't peter out whatever happens. Be brave in sorrow and hardships...."

Alexei raised the old man up to ease his breathing, but life was ebbing swiftly from his breast with every word he spoke, every breath he took. His face turned grey and his eyes dimmed.

"You have my blessing. Make good your life," Topolev suddenly said in a perfectly distinct voice. His hand, which he attempted to lift, dropped lifeless to the ground.

Batmanov flew over together with Rodionova and Grubsky. The wild roses were everywhere in bloom these days in the taiga. Red roses stood in vases all over Beridze's room,

where Tanya lay ill, and the air was filled with their sweet fragrance.

Olga sent the men about their business and carefully examined her friend. She diagnosed, as she had expected, pneumonia.

Though weakened by the high fever Tanya was cheerful and buoyant, and Olga was satisfied that her friend was out of danger.

"My darling, don't be only a doctor," Tanya said, smiling with parched lips.

Though her soul was in a tumult, Olga outwardly maintained an air of austere calm. Now Tanya's words and the weak state she was in stirred her deeply. The friends fell upon each other's necks and wept a little.

"I'm so happy. . . No illness will get the better of me," Tanya whispered into Olga's ear, although there was no one in the room besides themselves.

Tanya reminded herself of Topolev, whose death had been concealed from her, and she urged her friend:

"Go and see him, Olga, do something for him. They say he's very sick. And let Rogov know that you're here. He loves you so much, Olga darling!"

Rogov had already come down to the section and was looking for Olga. They met on

the road leading to the settlement, as Olga was on her way to examine the sick men Karpov had brought out of the taiga Rogov was thrown into confusion. He shook hands awkwardly, and angry with himself, announced brusquely that he had come for her and was taking her at once to the island.

"May I be allowed to examine my patients, and generally to dispose of my time as I see fit?" Olga asked with mock severity, and proceeded to the medical station.

Rogov mumbled something under his breath and trailed doggedly after her. Olga stopped.

"Don't follow me about, Alexander. Please don't. . . . I'm all in a daze as it is," she said gently. "Go and see Batmanov in the meantime, he probably needs you—he's at the club. We'll have a talk when I'm through."

Rogov, instantly tamed by these words, went to the club. A coffin stood in the middle of the hall in which lay Topolev, calm and serene, bearing a remarkable resemblance to Maxim Gorky. The red banners, which the section had now won, hung over the coffin, which was bestrewn with flowers from the taiga. Among the guard of honour stood the chief of the construction.

Here, by the remains of Kuzma Kuzmich, the meeting between Grubsky and Beridze took place. Grubsky had been standing before the coffin for half an hour. Then, he kissed the old man's waxen forehead, and on his way out of the club met Beridze coming in.

Beridze's prejudice against Grubsky gave place to a feeling of poignant compassion as soon as he saw him. Grubsky looked an old man, his hair completely grey and his back bent. He was under stress of such great emotion that he could not speak. Beridze too was silent.

"At such moments there is no room for dishonesty and insincerity," Grubsky said at length "Believe me, I have come to you profoundly aware of my errors. These last few months of life have been bitter. . . . But I deserved to suffer. . . . I had lost my place among my fellow men. . . . If you only knew how terrible it is to be left alone! I have come to realize that only here can I recover my dignity as a Soviet man and a Soviet engineer. Take me as your subordinate, Comrade Beridze. Pisarev and Batmanov are placing my fate in your hands. It is for you to say."

Beridze was silent. Grubsky pressed his hand to his reddened eyes.

"Give me the hardest and roughest work...."

He looked round at the coffin and cried in desperation:

"How sorry I am that I had no chance to speak to him again! I had looked forward to this meeting so much.... Who could ever think it would be such a sorrowful one."

He looked up at Beridze. The latter stared hard at him, then held out his hand.

"I'm glad that we will be together. Take a look round the section and decide yourself what work you would prefer."

A large granite slab was hewn out of the face of the dark grey cliff that jutted into the strait. Petrygin and his mates had carefully polished it. Alexei carved out on it the inscription:

"Kuzma Kuzmich Topolev, engineer. Gave his life for the Soviet Motherland. June 1942."

Kuzma Kuzmich was buried on the little hill from the top of which the builders had watched the first explosion last winter. They all followed the coffin, borne on the shoulders of Batmanov, Beridze, Alexei, Grusky,

Rogov and Umara Mahomet, to the burial ground.

"We have lost a comrade whom we have all learnt to know and love. He was a man wise and pure of heart, and he loved his work," Batmanov said over the grave. "It is a grievous loss. Let us be reconciled to it by the thought that Kuzma Kuzmich has not lived his life in vain, that he succeeded in leaving his mark upon it. Here on this spot the first Russians blazed the trail—the known and the nameless pioneers of the old days. And here now has been laid the steel thread of our pipe line into which has been fused the labour of Engineer Topolev. Soon we shall start the oil running from the island, and that will be our best memorial to him, splendid Soviet engineer and faithful comrade that he was."

The granite tombstone was placed over the grave. It was hidden by the wreaths of live flowers. The red ribbons of the wreath which Rodionova and Alexei had placed on top fluttered in the breeze, and it looked as though red butterflies were beating their wings, lingering over the grave.

The frontier guards and the Nivhs who had attended the funeral fired several volleys

into the air from their rifles and carbines. The whistles on the building site chanted their solemn dirge. The builders descended the hill in silence. Alexei was left standing alone at the graveside.

Nikifor, the Nivh, stopped Batmanov and told him that he had brought down the body of Kondrin.

"The birds have pecked him a little," Nikifor said apologetically. "But he's all there. What are we to do with him?"

"Bury him in the taiga. Flatten down the grave, so that there should be no trace of it."

After making the rounds of the section, Batmanov proposed to Beridze that he should fly back to Novinsk together with Alexei and Tanya.

"Take a little rest, you all need a change of scene. Look after Alexei, the lad's almost crushed by the load of misfortunes that have come tumbling down on him. Wait for me at the head office and then we'll plan the job to the end."

Batmanov resolved to go thoroughly into the affairs of the remote sections. What worried him most of all was the pumping station with its complicated machinery that had to be mounted.

Upon learning that Batmanov was sending Rodionova to Novinsk with Tanya, Rogov approached the chief with a request that Olga be left on the island for at least a month.

"What for?" Batmanov asked in surprise, with a glance at Rogov and at Olga who was present during the conversation.

"I have some men down with an unknown disease. Something must be done for them," Rogov answered quickly, without batting an eye.

Batmanov looked at him again, thought it over, then asked Olga:

"Do the hospital affairs permit your absence for a fortnight?"

"Everything's in order there now. Besides, I have a reliable assistant," Olga answered, then added, a trifle disconcerted: "But the patients are not on the island any more. As for the unknown disease—"

Batmanov interrupted her.

"Go out to the island and help Rogov get to the bottom of that mysterious malady. I give you a fortnight for it."

As he hurried out to elude Rodionova's objections, he said to himself: "Well, well, that's life—funerals and weddings all in one!"

Left alone with Olga, Rogov insisted that she should leave with him for Taisin at once. He seized her hand and dragged her along.

"The cutter *Pearl* is waiting for us. We must get there while it's still light."

"You crazy man, what will I do on that island of yours?" Olga laughed, embarrassed and thrilled "I'm not going on any *Pearl*."

"You will. Once Batmanov said so, you won't wriggle out of it—his word is law to me. Now, don't let me hear anything more. You'll live in a native hut, sleep on bearskins, eat trout, drink springwater, listen to the woodland canaries, hunt the Manchurian deer and cure my mysterious disease of the heart."

The engineers and Tanya flew out to Novinsk. Rogov and Olga sailed to the island, and Batmanov spent the whole day with Filimonov at the pumping station. The airy spacious building with its huge windows was completed in the rough. The floor was being tiled, and the painters were flourishing their brushes: Filimonov and his assistants began mounting the Diesel engines and the pumps. A detailed explanation of the assembly diagram left no more doubt in Batmanov's mind,

and he instantly cheered up. Filimonov, emboldened by the sight, asked for help in obtaining the lacking measuring equipment; Fedosov had been unable to find it anywhere. Vasili Maximovich at once sent off a telegram to Pisarev in Rubezhansk and another to Terekhov in Novinsk. With the latter, Batmanov had formed a relationship that was founded on mutual assistance.

Filimonov surprised Batmanov by being unusually talkative that day. Three times he returned to the subject of Seryogin. The mechanic, he told the chief, was recuperating and though still confined to his bed had elaborated one after another four methods for speeding up the work of assembling the pumps. His proposals were workable and very valuable, Filimonov declared.

"What are you beating about the bush for? Tell me what you want me to do," Batmanov said.

"Go in and see him, he's been begging for it. He wants to speak to you."

Batmanov went to the medical station, where he found Seryogin lying alone in a clean little room. The mechanic looked extraordinarily thin and pale, and his head was swathed in a white bandage. He was holding

a small drawing board in front of him and drawing something on it. When Seryogin saw the construction chief he started up, dropping the board on the floor.

"You shouldn't excite yourself. Lie still," Batmanov said sitting down before the bedside table and lighting a cigarette.

Seryogin obediently lay back, then screwing up courage he plunged into an excited, stumbling account of how Kondrin had suddenly cropped up in his path like a ghost out of the past and disturbed the new life of honest work that he was leading. He should have exposed Kondrin immediately and told of his suspicions but he had been afraid.

"I thought I could stand aside and let him be so long as he left me in peace. But that was wrong. I see it was wrong! By not telling about him I gave him a free rein! That means I'm more or less a party to his dirty work."

Seryogin was keyed up to a nervous pitch, and his bloodless face broke out in hectic patches.

"I won't be trusted now, and it's my own fault. They didn't believe me when I told them about Kondrin—they thought I was

raving. My God, the man may be plotting mischief every minute. He's a very dangerous man. I'm afraid for the pumping station! Don't forget those blueprints were stolen."

"The bandit's been shot," Batmanov said.

Seryogin dropped back on the pillows.

"That's a load off my mind!" he said with a sigh of relief. Then his face hardened again. "I'm guilty. I understand that. I'm prepared to face the music. Only please help me, Comrade Batmanov."

Seryogin broke off in confusion. Batmanov's interest was aroused.

"How can I help you?" he asked.

"Don't drive me away from here! Let me go on working. I'll swear I won't run away. My whole life's now in the pumping station. I see those machines working in my dreams. Let me see them started. then I'm prepared even to face the firing squad."

"I believe you," Batmanov answered. "I believe you, because a man must be a hopeless case if, after having worked in a good collective, he fails to realize the difference between the rich life of an honest toiler, an equal member of our society, and the miserable lot of a criminal, a social outcast."

You've received a harsh lesson in all respects, but I think it will be to the good. You can't just lightly dismiss the past. You must actively fight its manifestations in yourself and others." Batmanov paused. "I think I'll let you stay on the construction job. I'll vouch for you. And remember this—a man's future nearly always lies in his own hands."

Seryogin lay with his face buried in his hands, and his shoulders shook.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ZINA RETURNS

ALEXEI, it seemed, should not have gone to Novinsk—the trip did not do him any good. After several months of tense activity, night and day, his was now the condition in which a man finds himself after a battle, when the roar of guns and the shouting are silenced, and the sudden stillness pounds in his ears. Alexei found himself in quiet surroundings. Nothing was asked of him, no one bothered him, and the work went on without him. He was given plenty of leisure, and that was just what he did not need at the moment.

The head office those days consisted of a small dispatcher staff, which Batmanov himself controlled through Grechkin. Most of the head office staff were out on the line. Of Kovshov's department only a small group remained, and Kobzev was fully capable of

managing it. After the endorsement of the project, the character of the department's work had undergone a change. It was now engaged in the designing of details, solving problems arising at the local work sections. Technical leadership of the construction line was being effected from the strait by the chief engineer.

Alexei therefore found no interest in his department. Kobzev, who tried to give his chief a conscientious account of head office affairs, was amazed at the change in Alexei. He was apathetic and absent-minded, and even depressed. Kobzev knew of the misfortunes that had befallen his chief, he understood the state of mind he was in, and could not bring himself to go away and leave Alexei alone.

"Where's Petya Gudkin, I don't see him?"

"He's at Section Four. He's one of the chiefs now, been appointed construction foreman," Kobzev answered for the second time, trying not to show his surprise at the repeated question on the part of Alexei, who was known to have such a good memory.

"You should call him out, I need him."

"It's been done already. Tomorrow Petva will be here."

Alexei was waiting for Kobzev to go. When he did, Alexei felt worse. In the stillness he could almost hear his heart groaning with the anguish that smote it. Old Topolev, in his heavy fur coat with the raised collar, the scarf round his neck and the red handkerchief in his hand, as he stood before him that memorable morning—rose from behind his desk and came up to him. The conversation, that had engraved itself upon his memory for all time, was resumed.

"Alexei, dear boy," Kuzma Kuzmich boomed, "remember—a man should always be dissatisfied with himself. Never blame circumstances for your failures, blame only yourself. . . . Don't make your mind easy, don't cool off, don't let your heart grow old. Don't be tempted by the petty, easily accessible joys of life to the exclusion of the joys that are less accessible but genuine and great."

The heat of early summer poured in through the windows together with the scent of the blossoms languishing on the flowerbeds outside. But to Alexei the world was still bound by winter's ice and snow. He shivered as if with cold and hastened away from this room with its depressing memories.

As soon as she saw him, Muza Filipovna proceeded to share with him her happy tidings. Her Natchka had been found at last. She was in Chelyabinsk working at a factory. The old woman showed him a drawing Natchka had sent her of the interior of her room in Chelyabinsk. "The table stands here, here is the bed, and over in that corner are three whole bags of potatoes."

Everyone tried in some way or another to divert him and cheer him up. But there were only three people he cared to see in these moments of weakness—Zalkind, Zhenya and Petya. They were all away. Zalkind had not yet returned from Rubezhansk, and was expected any day. Grechkin had sent Zhenya out to Section Two with a team to check the excessive expenditure of labour. Petya Gudkin was now probably on his way back to Novinsk.

Beridze did not forget Alexei and tried to drag him off to his place, where Tanya lay sick in Olga's room. Sincere as was the sympathy of both Georgi and Tanya, who were eager to help him in every way they could, Alexei could not stay with them long. They were incapable of concealing their happiness. It created a special atmosphere around them.

Every word, every gesture of Beridze and Tanya revealed their yearning for each other, and unwittingly made him feel that his presence alone kept them from expressing their love by a tender word or kiss. They evoked memories of his own love, and made the spectacle of their happiness too painful to bear. It was like witnessing someone's merriment at the funeral of a dear friend.

Serafima dragged him into her own domain, but her kind sympathy was too obvious and material, taking the form of patties, delicious roasted meat and sweetened blueberry juice, intoxicating as wine. Alexei hastily declined these good things. He could not tickle his palate when his heart ached with that relentless pain.

He spent half the day with Grechkin. The chief dispatcher sat with an air of importance in the middle of a large room whose walls were covered with bulletin boards, where the progress of work at the sections was chalked up every hour. On his enormous desk telephones connecting him directly with the sections stood in chequerboard arrangement. There was an incessant ringing of telephones, recording of figures, compilation of tables and issuing of orders—this was the repository of

the labour achievements and setbacks of the builders.

Grechkin was kept so busy that he had no time to talk to Alexei.

"I'll be with you in a moment," he kept assuring him, but the next minute he would be picking up the receivers of two telephones that had started ringing at once in different keys. His eyes popping out and his brows wrinkled with the exertion, he would shout into the receiver:

"Why've you stopped welding? No electrodes? Then why the hell didn't you say so yesterday?"

Alexei studied the neat rows of figures and the index curve on the bulletin boards in an effort to discover whether one could form an idea of the situation at the sections from them. As he did so a vivid picture of the line rose before him, and noting discrepancies in Grechkin's schedules, he lost interest in them at once.

Grechkin who had a few minutes' respite from his telephones looked up at Alexei and guessed what was in his mind from the expression of his face.

"We can't keep pace with life, my dear fellow," he confessed. "Nobody coming

straight from the line ought to look at those boards. But you'd be surprised what a help they are to us. After all, we do know more or less accurately what is happening at the given moment." And Grechkin added with a touch of vanity: "It's not for nothing my dispatcher's office got a write-up in the Rubzhansk papers. You haven't read it? I'd advise you to. I'll show you the paper."

Alexei went over to Topolev's apartment. Marya Ivanovna greeted the young engineer as though he were her late lodger's son. She cried and kept remembering what a good man Kuzma Kuzmich had been. His room was still untenanted, and everything stood as he had left it.

Alexei looked at the things the old man had bequeathed to him—at the books with notes in the margins, and notebooks covered with fine handwriting, at the snuffbox Topolev had presented to him, and the photograph of his nephew, a nice young man with shrewd eyes and a humourous mouth—and it seemed to him that Kuzma Kuzmich would come in at any moment, look down at him from under his bushy brows with a glance of mock severity, pass his hand over his moustache and say: "Making yourself at home, eh?"

"You'll live here, of course?" Marya Ivanovna asked in a tone that was half affirmation. "Liza Grechkina has been here with the house manager and said the room was to be left unoccupied in case you wanted it."

"Yes, I'll live here," Alexei said. He could not bear to think of a stranger living in Topolev's room.

"Then make yourself at home," Marya Ivanovna said in a pleased tone, spreading her hands in a gesture of welcome.

"Certainly . . . certainly," Alexei concurred, and hurried to get away before the woman guessed the state of his feelings.

Liberman invited him to his home. His wife and daughter had at last managed to escape from blockaded Leningrad and join him. There was no need to hear their story, it sufficed to look at them to realize what the people of Leningrad had been through.

Liberman's wife, a woman of forty, looked sixty. Her hair had turned grey, she had lost nearly all of her teeth through scurvy, her once plump body was shrunken from starvation, and the skin on her face and neck was yellow and withered.

"That's how I looked before the blockade," she said, showing Alexei the photograph of

a youngish pretty woman posing with a coquettish air.

The little girl had the sorrowful eyes of one who has seen and suffered much. A miniature replica of "Daddy's nose" was conspicuous in the thin little face.

Weeping, the woman spoke in a toothless lisp of her experiences and her voice sounded now plaintive now fierce. She spoke of a well-known actress in a fur coat girded with a bit of string, with her head wrapped in a blanket and an ice-crusted bucket in her hand; of an abandoned tramcar standing at the corner of a street with the stiff frozen corpse of a single passenger in the trailer; of their six-story apartment house with its population latterly reduced to ten tenants; of how they had dragged the bodies of her niece and aunt to the cemetery bundled one on top of the other in a sled; of the inky black darkness at night; of the gibbets at Peterhof; of Jambul's verses *Leningradians, children mine, Leningradians, the pride of my heart!*

"I would never have quitted Leningrad if it hadn't been for mother!" the little girl cried fiercely. "I want to see them drive the Germans away!"

She marvelled at everything she saw in Novinsk—a town in which there was no blackout, no bombings, no shellings. She asked questions which made the grownups wince.

“My God! My God!” Liberman whispered, his eyes full of anguish as he looked at his wife and daughter. “I’m a peaceful man, but give me a rifle so that I too may wreak my vengeance on those ghouls.”

Petya arrived late in the evening. He was dressed in a striped jersey, light trousers and white sport shoes on his bare feet. The lad’s face was sunburnt, with freckles grown as large as ten-kopeck pieces, and his nose was peeling. He found Alexei in the little public garden facing the head office building. It was very quiet here, and the clusters of white flowers exuded a heady fragrance.

The youth saw Alexei from afar, sitting motionless on a bench, and he hesitated to go up to him. Then overcoming his timidity, Petya went up to him from behind and put his arms round the engineer.

“Mitya,” burst from Alexei. His young brother was wont to creep up to him in that way.

Seeing that it was Petya, Alexei drew the lad towards him in silence. They strolled for a long time about the settlement and along the moonlit banks of the Adun. Petya spoke excitedly about the work he had been doing at the section. He was in charge of eight welding teams and had placed them at opposite ends of the ten-kilometre section. He was in the saddle all day and managed to keep an eye on welding work on the two fronts. Petya was greatly interested in Umara Mahomet, and Alexei was obliged to give him a detailed account of the work of the construction's best welder, of how long it took him to weld one joint, what methods he used and how his mates worked.

Alexei had called Petya out from the section in the hope of taking him out to the strait, where he intended returning himself. But seeing how keen the lad was on his new job and how wrapped up he was in his welders, Alexei did not mention his proposal. In an hour more Petya was on tenterhooks—he was loath to leave Alexei, yet afraid to miss the truck that was going back to the section. The lad had planned everything to the minute—to get back in a sixteen hours' ride and be in time for the next day's nightshift. Petya

was already trying to figure out whether his welders had fulfilled their obligation that day—to double their quotas—while at the same time listening gravely to Alexei's account of Topolev's death and funeral at the strait.

"You and I are his heirs, his successors," Alexei said with emotion. "The unfinished job must be passed on from him to me and from me to you, as in a relay race. Don't confine yourself only to the day's cares, Petya. There's a good deal besides the welders waiting for you. It's time to think of your own five-year plan of development, my friend."

They took leave of each other like brothers, unembarrassed, with a kiss and a strong embrace. Petya peered into Alexei's face, swallowed a lump that rose to his throat, gritted his teeth and ran off with a springy stride, his elbows pressed against his sides.

Willy-nilly Alexei was obliged to go home. He overtook Liza Grechkina who was returning from the kindergarten where she and Paulina Zalkind had had a conference with the nurses and tutors. At Liza's invitation he went in for a minute to the Grechkins' to admire their cosy home. All four children—

three boys and a girl, remarkably alike with their flaxen hair and rosy cheeks—slept in their little wooden cots ranged against the wall.

In his own room, lovingly arranged for him by Zhenya and tenantless all the winter, he could no longer escape from the memories of those he loved. Their eyes, staring out at him from the photographs, exercised a spell over him.

On the left, Topolev gazed sternly out at him from a little darkened photo. Mitya smiled at him from a large family portrait. His friend Sergei had photographed the whole family together on the day Alexei had arrived home from his southern construction job. They had all been in high spirits. Witticisms had flown from Sergei to Alexei, from Alexei to Mitya and back again like a ball game. They had sent Father into fits of laughter. Sergei had waited a long time for the necessary gravity of expression, and had been obliged to give it up. He snapped them all smiling.

Sergei had taken Zina's photograph too. He had tried to make the girl hold her head at what he thought a particularly attractive angle, but she would have none of it. "It's

no use trying to make me look prettier. Alexei loves me as I am. Don't you, Alexei?" Now Alexei could not tear his eyes away from the photograph. Zina's glance was so lifelike, questioning. The long eyelashes seemed to stir.

Alexei broke down and sobbed bitterly. The muffled heartrending sounds of inconsolable human suffering that could no longer be suppressed reached the ears of Zhenya who had just returned from the section. Grechkin had told her of Alexei's arrival and she had run home in search of him....

... Formerly Zhenya Kozlova had given little thought to her own life. The river of life had borne her gaily along on its broad bosom, and with lighthearted unconcern the girl had suffered herself to be carried forward by its mighty current. There are a good many people for whom life even when childhood is past seems much simpler and pleasanter than it is in reality. But that illusion does not last. Sooner or later this thoughtless attitude to reality is replaced by a more sober and serious approach. In Kozlova's case, although she was as yet unaware of it herself, everything had been changed by Alexei Kovshov.

She had met him by chance and he had taken her fancy. Zhenya was involuntarily drawn to him and she had succumbed to the attraction without giving it much thought. Much the same had happened to her several times before—Tanya Vasilchenko called it her giddiness. Zhenya almost frankly sought Alexei's society, and found excuses for meeting him. She mistook his friendly affability for a deeper interest in herself. Zina of whose existence she had learned during the very first hour of her acquaintance with Alexei she did not take into any serious account. Zina after all was so far away and that made her unreal for Zhenya.

But as soon as her growing affection for Alexei began to demand something more than ordinary friendship, Zhenya realized that Alexei loved that distant Zina and that he was beyond the reach of anyone else. It was then that the girl's feeling matured and crystallized into a love that took possession of her whole being. That happened in the course of a single night, perhaps within those few minutes during which she listened to his passionate avowal of his love for Zina.

Zhenya knew the bitterness of unrequited feeling. She suffered as she had never suf-

ferred before, and, frightened by the shattering power of her emotion, she resolved to stifle it. She even endeavoured to cultivate a dislike for Alexei. But if at times she succeeded, it was not for long. Absorbed by his own love, Alexei did not understand at first what was amiss with Zhenya and hence he made no effort to hold himself aloof from her. His customary cordiality disarmed her and all the ugly feelings she had sought to nurse against him would disappear the moment she saw him. A brief period of estrangement brought about by herself served but to add fuel to the fire of her passion. But can you deaden your feelings, dear heart?

Try as she would, Zhenya did not succeed in suppressing her feelings and she could not deprive herself of his friendship, however unsatisfactory it was for her. She accepted all his invitations, she was his companion at meal-times, and went with him to the rare concerts and film showings in the club. Noticing that he was not taking proper care of himself she took him under her wing. Somewhere deep down hope still lingered.... One day as she was sitting in Alexei's office waiting for him to return from a conference with Batmanov, Kuzma Kuzmich Topolev, who evidently

guessed the state of her feelings, uttered significantly, as though in passing, "true love wins in the end."

Zhenya's sufferings were particularly intense during those anxious days when Alexei toured the line with Beridze and nearly perished in the blizzard. Somehow the conviction had grown within her that since her love for Alexei was not to be denied she must on no account reject it, but must do her best to make him reciprocate. If only nothing happened to him and he returned unharmed! For some reason she felt sure that his feelings for her had changed; he might not be in love with her yet, but she felt she was more to him than just a comrade. And then Alexei came back, and they met. How she longed for him to take her in his arms and caress her! But he did not. Alexei's momentary hesitation and his subsequent coldness did not escape her. She was deeply wounded by this sudden sharp change in him.

Later when she had thought it all over she understood what had happened. And then her respect for him increased, and with it her bitterness at the thought that this man with his strong moral principles, this man

capable of such a pure and faithful love was lost to her forever.

Gradually she succeeded in taking herself in hand and reconciling herself to a purely comradely relationship between them. Once, chancing to meet him after a three days' absence she gave him a friendly hug. He had interpreted the gesture wrongly and she was hurt. Yet she found excuses for him.

Alexei left for the strait and before long the construction job hummed with news of the section where the decisive battle for the pipe line was being fought. Zhenya asked Grechkin to transfer her to the strait. He promised, but later told her that Alexei had been opposed to the idea. Zhenya was deeply hurt, but again she soon forgave him. For she had learned to love Alexei more than herself.

In the few months of their acquaintance Zhenya had fallen completely under his influence. She thought of him constantly and found herself, unconsciously at first, doing what she thought he would have wished her to do. She had always tried to evade social work, but knowing that Alexei attached much importance to such community activities, Zhenya to please him began to accept various commis-

sions. Some time passed and she found that she was enjoying the work, that indeed her duties as Komsomol organizer and leader had filled an important gap in her life.

She looked at many things now through Alexei's eyes, or rather, she often tried to imagine what he would have done in her place. Perhaps he would have acted differently, but the very fact that she pondered the matter helped her to make more thoughtful and considered decisions. Whenever she succeeded in her work she yielded half of the credit to him; for it was he after all who had helped her to take the right step.

The same thing happened to Petya Gudkin. The lad had asked to be transferred to work on the line, but Kobzev would not release him. "It's too bad Alexei Nikolayevich isn't here," he complained to Zhenya. "*He* would have let me go, he would understand." And Zhenya thought: "That's true, Alexei would have helped Petya." And so she went to Zalkind and persuaded him to influence Kobzev. The upshot was that Petya went to the line. Afterward she felt embarrassed when the lad expressed his gratitude to her; she felt that it belonged by right to Alexei.

Alexei never suspected that Zhenya was sharing with him his successes, his difficulties and his sorrows. How happy she was when she read a newspaper article in which Alexei and Beridze were referred to as talented engineers of the new Soviet school. The calamity that had befallen him had struck her down as well. Alexei had indeed shown more self-control that time at the telephone than she had. She grieved as sorely as if Zina had been her own sister. Indeed it did not even occur to her to regard Zina as her rival.

Zhenya had decided that she must be with Alexei at this time. She felt that none of his friends—neither Beridze, Topolev nor Tanya—could give him the comfort and support that she could. She even dreamed that in his solitude and anguish he had called to her. She begged Grechkin again to let her go to the island. She did not dare to insist for she felt that her reasons were unconvincing and Grechkin, divining her feelings, sent her out on commissions along the line with the intention of giving her a chance to forget her troubles.

... And now at last she saw her loved one. Alexei's face was pressed against the

table, his body was shuddering with grief, his light hair had fallen over his forehead and eyes.

Pity, like any other human feeling, takes a multitude of forms. Sometimes it is akin to contempt. Often it humiliates the person to whom it is addressed. But the pity of a loving heart for the loved one is a great and powerful feeling. Overwhelmed by this feeling Zhenya rushed to Alexei. She bent over him for an instant as if bowing her head before his grief. Then she drew him violently away from the table and turned his tortured, grief-stricken face with its closed eyes toward her and covered it with kisses in which there was more maternal love than passion.

"I can't bear it, Zhenya! I can't bear it," he groaned relaxing trustfully against her.

Pressing his head to her breast she rocked him as one rocks a child.

"You have many friends, Alyosha, and you have your work. In time the pain will grow less, you will feel stronger and then it will be easier. Only remember, you are needed, we all love you and we grieve with you. I wish I knew what I could do to make things easier for you. If you won't drive me away I will

be with you always, always. Pull yourself together, dear, be strong as you always are."

Batmanov came back and immediately summoned Beridze, Kovshov and Grechkin. A little fan stood buzzing on the construction chief's desk. It was hot, and Batmanov strode up and down his room with his shirt sleeves rolled up and his fine silk shirt open at the throat.

"Now let's do some arithmetic," Batmanov said, after a desultory exchange of words. "There are three figures that worry me, like Herman's three cards.* And they've got me right here." He slapped the back of his neck.

The three fateful figures Batmanov had in view were the number of days left for the completion of the job on government schedule, the volume of welding and pipe-laying work still to be done, and the amount of labour required for the purpose. The figures were certainly not encouraging. There was very little time left, welding had only recently commenced, and there was a shortage of labour.

* An allusion to Pushkin's *The Queen of Spades*.

"I noticed a certain falling-off both on the island and at the strait," Batmanov said, approaching the fan and holding his face and chest up to the cooling breeze which ruffled his hair. "The winter has been successful, and the men have eased up. It's taken for granted that we're going to give the oil on time. This over-confidence, to my mind, is no better than uncertainty. There is no spirit of restlessness on the construction, no keyed-up sense of time. People don't seem to be aware that the day when the pipe line has to be launched is drawing nearer and nearer, while time is flying inexorably, hour by hour, day by day."

Kovshov felt Batmanov's words, uttered anxiously and gravely, rouse in him a sense of alarm. It smothered the unremitting gnawing pain, the aching void in his heart. His thoughts going back to the island section he had recently quitted, Alexei realized that Batmanov was exaggerating—the builders were not as complacent and blindly self-confident as all that. But in one respect the chief was right—the moment had come when time must be counted by the hours and minutes, and not by the day. Alexei, having been out of touch for a while with the line, took Bat-

manov's words as a personal rebuke. Every hour was precious, and here he was wasting so many days immersed in his private emotions.

"What's to be done, if as Grechkin's calculations seem to indicate, we fail to coordinate these fateful three figures?" Batmanov reasoned. "One of three things—either we'll have to postpone the date of opening, or get some more workers, or else shorten the pipe line. The first and last alternatives are beyond our power to decide. The only thing we can talk about is additional skilled labour. Zalkind in Rubezhansk is doing his utmost to get reinforcements. But I'm nevertheless convinced that the region won't give us any men—it simply hasn't got them. We can figure on the help of the Adun population only to a limited extent. These months are the busiest on the kolkhozes for fishing and harvesting. Where's the way out then?"

Batmanov passed his eye over the company, waved away a wasp that hovered about his head, and announced weightily:

"There is a way out!"

On the island Rogov had boasted to Batmanov that a hundred men on his section were fulfilling their output norms by two hundred and fifty per cent. Later, when

discussing the plan of work still to be done, Rogov, on the basis of official output rates, had demanded several hundred extra workers for digging the trench.

“‘You don’t need these extra men,’ I told him,” Batmanov related. “‘How do you make that out?’ Rogov asked in surprise. ‘If four hundred men on your section will give three norms each, and five hundred two norms each, will you cope with the job?’ I asked him. ‘I will. But I haven’t got so many Stakhanovites,’ the mogul of Taisin protested. ‘That’s your lookout,’ I told him. ‘What’s the sense in the Stakhanov method if only one man in a hundred has mastered it? Put the thing properly to all the builders, show that you’re capable of spreading the Stakhanovite experience, and most of your men will fulfil their norms two and three times over.’ Rogov turned it over in his mind, then said: ‘But how can you bank on that? Maybe there’ll be a thousand Stakhanovites, maybe only five hundred. A plan has to be realistic and precise.’ I tucked his arm in mine and took him over the building site. ‘The plan and its reality are living men. Have you forgotten those weighty words, Alexander Ivanovich? Let’s go to the people, and hear what they say.’”

Rogov and he, Batmanov related, had gone over the whole section and spoken to the workers, bringing up everywhere the same question—could they dispense with extra labour? The response throughout had been a pledge to double and triple output. Work conferences were held on the spot where the workers took upon themselves the obligation to do the work of two, three and even four men.

“We must immediately introduce a daily hour-by-hour schedule for the construction as a whole, and for every section and team separately.” Batmanov paced measuredly up and down the room. “Every builder, dreaming and awake, should know what he’s obliged to do every hour and every shift according to output norms, and what the state asks him to do over and above these norms. And if his heart lies in the job, if he really wants to launch the pipe line on time and help the front, the second figure will become law to him.”

There and then Beridze, Kovshov and Grechkin sat down to work out the new increased output rates for the sections and teams. Alexei drew up the work schedule, while Grechkin, swiftly manipulating his slide rule, entered the figures in the table.

Beridze jotted down notes of his own, lending an attentive ear at the same time to what Batmanov was saying.

"We are told—'you have a decently organized collective.' Without false modesty we can say, yes, we're not badly organized. But today we have to draw the hoops of our organization tighter so that we ourselves feel and let others see that we are excellently organized! The time has come for some changes on the construction line; we ought to introduce combat areas and combat formations on the line. After recovering from the whaling they got at Moscow the Germans are making a drive south. Our builders hear every day about the enemy's superior forces at Sevastopol and Kharkov—let us help our people to give still more purposeful and intelligent expression to their wrath and hatred for the enemy."

Batmanov propounded his idea of combat areas. He suggested creating three such areas in place of the existing two—the island, the oil pumping station at Chongr, and the line section stretching from the strait inland as far as the Adun.

"We'll call that the construction's eastern district," Batmanov said, "and put Beridze

in charge of it. We have a chief of the combat area on Taisin—Rogov. We have a combat area chief at Chongr too—Filimonov. And we'll find a good man for the third area, someone on a par with the other two."

"I have just the man," Beridze said, looking up. "Alexei Kovshov. I don't think we could find a better commander for the headland section."

"We'll see how he'll behave," Batmanov said, glancing at Alexei. Actually, he had already made up his mind to appoint Alexei at the headland section. "I have no objection. Say, then, we appoint Kovshov to the third area. That gives us three captains who will vie with each other tooth and nail. Zalkind suggested a good idea—to institute a special red banner prize for the combat areas. The chief of the area which holds the banner when victory day on the pipe line arrives will win the right to sign his name first under our report to Comrade Stalin. What are you staring at me for?" Batmanov asked, catching Kovshov's intent gaze upon him. "Take a pen and write, I'll dictate the order. So we're dividing the whole construction into three districts—the Eastern, headed by Beridze, the Central under Zalkind, and the Western dis-

strict which I'll take upon myself. We'll see who'll turn out best. You start writing it, Alexei Nikolayevich, while we break up the central and western districts into combat areas."

It was at this task that Zalkind, who had just flown in from Rubezhansk, found them. He was visibly excited and stirred. Hurriedly shaking hands with Batmanov. Beridze and Grechkin, he gaily greeted Alexei, put his arm round him and drew him aside. Batmanov and Beridze exchanged glances, and Grechkin shook his head deprecatingly. This gaiety on the part of Zalkind, usually so considerate of people's feelings, puzzled them.

"I've got two little surprises for you, my boy," Zalkind was meanwhile saying to Alexei in a low tone. "I am happier than I can say to hand you this and this."

He thrust into Alexei's hands a telegram which Zhenya had just given him, and a copy of the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* which he had brought from Rubezhansk. Alexei's lips quivered and he stiffened like a taut-drawn string as he read and re-read the lines of the telegram: "Darling I have come back send you love kisses wire immediately ever yours Zina." He mechan-

ically unfolded the newspaper and among several pictures on the third page saw at once the photograph of Zina—the same portrait that stood on his table. The whole page under the photographs was filled with an article entitled *Moscow's Brave Daughters*.

"Go on out and feast your eyes on it all by yourself," the Party organizer said, propelling Alexei towards the door.

Having bundled the bewildered and speechless Alexei out of the room, Zalkind slipped off his jacket, mopped his face with a handkerchief and announced solemnly:

"His Zina has turned up—come back to Moscow with honours and a decoration."

The news was received with delight. Beridze wanted to rush out to his friend, but Zalkind stopped him. They spoke about Talalikhin and Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya and other young heroes of the Patriotic War. Zalkind related the latest news—the launching of the first metallurgical works in the Far East, the successful completion of the sowing campaign in the region, and the new offensive by the Germans which was considered a very serious and dangerous one.

Zalkind showed a letter from Solntsev. The former truck driver received his baptism of

fire at Kharkov where he had opened his account of smashed enemy tanks. "Far-Easterners are thought much of here," the Party organizer read out. "Tell everyone I shan't lower our Far-Eastern prestige. Write me how the pipe line is getting on. All the men of our unit know about you, and are anxious for you to deliver the oil on time..."

"I have a very nice letter, too," Batmanov said, producing a blue envelope from his desk. "You'll never guess who it's from. Sidorenko, ex-chief of our construction."

"You don't say so?" cried Grechkin.

"And d'you know where it's from?" Batmanov held the letter up significantly.

"From the Kazakhstan construction job?" Beridze hazarded a guess.

"No, from the front. He asked to be sent to the front. He's commanding a sapper regiment. He's been wounded, and has two decorations. I was thinking they did the right thing in sending Sidorenko to the front, instead of to another construction job."

"Read us what he writes," Zalkind said interestedly.

"...I've been lying about in hospital for about a month. The Nazis drilled a little

hole in me. The doctors have patched it up and now I'm going back to my unit. I can imagine you shrugging your shoulders as you read this letter. I confess I often think of you, dear comrade. I went away feeling sore, and that feeling did not wear off so quickly. Then I began to see things in a different light—with a sense of guilt if you like. I realized that I had mismanaged the job. I wasn't exacting enough, got myself accustomed to yes-men and fawners, placed too much trust in men like Grubsky, and lost touch with the collective. If it isn't asking too much, please write and tell me how you've tackled the job, how you've got things going. Don't mistake this for idle curiosity on my part. I'm really interested. I trust you and I will meet again some day....'”

“That's fine!” said the Party organizer, and catching the interrogative glances turned on him, explained: “I mean it's fine that everything in our country helps a man to find his place in life. Somewhere in America, say, a man who has erred or failed in his particular line will find no support anywhere—he will inevitably go from bad to worse. All men there are rivals in the struggle for wealth or

a crust of bread. Now with us even war—just think of it, war!—has a beneficent influence on people, quickly shapes and ennobles human character.”

“I’d give a great deal to see Sidorenko now,” Batmanov said, turning to the window deep in thought. The current of air from the fan played with the silk of his shirt.

Beridze asked what news there was in Rubezhansk, and Zalkind, casting glances at the preoccupied face of Batmanov, reported that a group of spies who had operated at the big construction jobs had been arrested. A geologist by the name of Khmara was found to have been associated with them.

“By the way, d’you remember Kondrin, whom the Nivhs shot?” Zalkind asked. “His real name was Somov. He had a hand in the sabotage at the strait. He worked through accomplices who wormed their way in among the builders. My comrades reminded me about Kondrin—he’s an old acquaintance of mine. Back in twenty-two our detachment smashed up a Whiteguard punitive force headed by a big kulak from Zeya by the name of Fyodor Somov. Kondrin’s his son. There’s every reason to suppose that Pankov’s death is his handiwork too.”

"What about Konstantin Rodionov—did he have anything to do with the spy ring?" Beridze asked.

"It's hard to say just now exactly what he was, that man who died such a shameful death. But his friendship with Khmara speaks enough for him."

"Alexei and I were looking through Rodionov's notes the other day," said Beridze. "This so-called doctor went in for 'scientific research,' and advanced all sorts of crack-brained theories. One of those theories alleges that the human in man is just a flimsy hull and that his real essence is brute instinct. Another of his theories seeks to demonstrate that normal people don't exist—everybody is more or less insane. How d'you like that! I'm glad for Olga's sake that she got rid of him."

"This affair of Kondrin and Khmara has upset me, my friends," Zalkind said. "Lenin often warned us that the old, as it dies, poisons and befouls the atmosphere. We sometimes treat this wise warning of Lenin's merely as a splendid maxim. We ought to make sure that we know our people thoroughly, then the hostile elements among them will stand out more clearly."

Batmanov got up and looked out of the

window—something there had attracted his attention.

"I take it we aren't to expect any reinforcements from Rubezhansk, Mikhail Borisovich?" he asked Zalkind, changing the subject abruptly.

"The question was discussed at the Regional Party Committee Bureau. They thrashed the matter out from all sides. Pisarev at first actively supported me. But both he and I realized that men were nowhere to be had. There's a labour shortage in the local industries, in agriculture and on the railroads. They advised us to start a competition drive among the builders. Pisarev and Dudin intend coming out here to lend a hand."

"We've got enough bosses here, goodness knows," Batmanov growled, then brought his hand down smartly on his desk pad. "All right. Let's get back to this order we're writing. We agreed not to waste a minute. Where did I leave off, Grechkin?"

Batmanov resumed dictating his order concerning the final phase of construction work, the introduction of a daily and hourly work schedule, and the organization of three districts and eighteen combat areas on the construction line.

CHAPTER TWELVE

AN ANXIOUS MORNING

LATE one night Batmanov called the chiefs of the three competing sections on the wire—Rogov on the island, Filimonov on the strait, and Kovshov on the mainland.

"Good evening—or rather good morning," Batmanov said. "I have the Party organizer here beside me. We want to check up the results of the last five days' competition. Are you ready?"

"We are," Rogov slipped in quickly.

"Who's that answering for the others? Rogov? Have you such a good view from the island that you can see what Filimonov and Kovshov are doing on their sections?"

"I have, Vasili Maximovich," Rogov answered, his husky voice gay. "I know every step they take. I can tell you, for instance, that Filimonov hasn't come out of the pump-

ing station for seventy-four hours, and Kovshov lives in his runabout and has stopped taking food—he hasn't had dinner all week. Labour enthusiasm—please make a note of it."

What with Karpov, Umara Mahomet and the section works' foreman Grubsky, Alexei had quite a roomful in his tiny cubicle—a temporary dwelling which he changed as often as the welding teams moved farther and farther inland. They all stared fixedly at the mouthpiece as though expecting to see the face of the construction chief in it. The latter's voice came through in full clear volume and was not muffled or distorted by the distance.

Alexei could visualize the men at the other end of the wire—Batmanov, rather tired but ever spry, leaning on his elbow with a lock of hair hanging down his forehead, Zalkind, half reclining in an easy chair with the invariable cigarette in his mouth; Filimonov, hollow-cheeked and red-eyed and stubbly, next to him Beridze stroking his beard with a faraway look in his eyes, and broad-faced Rogov surrounded by a group of men with whom he cracks an occasional joke.

"Your collectives have undertaken additional obligations," Batmanov went on. "Comrade Rogov, since you're the perkier, you report first."

"Very good," Rogov rapped out so smartly that he set the receiver rattling. "We undertook to finish pipe transportation to the terminal point of the line, that is the oil wells, by tomorrow—sorry, by twelve o'clock today. The results are: we have a hundred pieces, more exactly a hundred and two pipes, left to transport. All the pipe carriers of my section are now loaded up and will start out at dawn. Then they'll make a second trip and that will clinch the transportation job."

"By twelve o'clock?" Batmanov queried.

"No, by eleven," Rogov said.

"Filimonov! And how's it with you?"

"We've just this very minute finished mounting the Diesel engines and pumps. I've given the teams a six-hour break. The men haven't had any sleep for days. We'll start tests in the morning after a night's rest."

"Kovshov! And you? You haven't spoilt the game, I hope?"

"No fear," Alexei answered. The eyes of his assistants and Umara were now trained on him. "Our obligation was to complete

the welding of the first thirty kilometres of pipe line on the headland section, lay it into the trench and make hydraulic tests by six p.m. today. Umara Mahomet sitting here reports that he personally welded the last joint two hours ago."

"That's right, Vasili Maximovich, I welded thirty kilometres quite complete," Umara, unable to contain himself, shouted into the mouthpiece.

"Before Umara finished welding, we started test preparations," Alexei went on. "We have fixed up outlets for the air and have begun to fill the pipe. We're pumping in water with two pumps—been doing it the last twenty hours, so the line should be filled by morning."

"What are the men on the section going to do—have they been told?"

"We've assigned for the testing job only those who are absolutely essential. The rest will carry on at kilometres thirty-one and thirty-two."

"So you think you'll be through by six o'clock?"

"Yes, it's all been worked out and timed."

"Chief Engineer, can we take their word for it? Aren't they being carried away by

their enthusiasm, these young men?" Zalkind asked. "Where are you now? With Kovshov, I suppose?"

"You've guessed wrong, I'm at Filimonov's. Can't tear myself away from the pumps and Diesel engines. I can confirm that all three have reported the strict truth."

"If that's the case, thank you my friends!" Batmanov said with feeling. "Tentatively, of course. We'll make it warmer after the eighteenth."

"We serve our Soviet Homeland!" Rogov ejaculated, getting in again before the others.

"Kovshov still holding the banner?" Zalkind asked, though he knew perfectly well who held the head office banner which was awarded the best section once every five days.

"I've got the banner. And no 'still' about it. It's going to stay here," Kovshov retorted, with a flashing glance at Umara. Karpov, and Grubsky, who responded with a vigorous nod.

"I think you'll be lugging that banner out to the island tomorrow," Rogov remarked, and the men standing around him could be heard murmuring their approval.

"You needn't trouble to carry it all that way. I'll detain it at the strait and put it in the pump house," Filimonov said.

"What's the use of haggling? We're not going to carry that banner anywhere! Here it is and here it stays till the job is done!" Umara yelled excitedly into the mouthpiece, gripping the flagstaff in the corner as though defending it from seizure.

Batmanov and Zalkind burst out laughing. Rogov joined in. The line carried their laughter from Novinsk to the island.

"He laughs well, lad, the construction chief does. Straight from the heart. You've tickled them all, Umara," Karpov said with a broad smile.

"Well, Umara, we'll see whether you'll yield up the banner or not. It's all the same to me, I haven't got it, but of course you feel differently about it," Batmanov said good-humouredly, and Alexei could imagine him winking at Zalkind. "Let's come to an agreement, friends, that whoever finishes on the dot rings us up at once and sends official confirmation by telegram. Beridze, as usual, will be umpire, and takes responsibility for the authenticity of the report. And now, Georgi Davydovich, though you can't double

yourself, I'd ask you to supervise the test personally both at Filimonov's and Kovshov's sections."

"Certainly," Beridze acquiesced. "You needn't worry about that, everything will be done in proper style."

"It seems to me, comrades, that you don't quite realize what a momentous day this is," Zalkind broke in. Not even the wire could conceal his agitation. "Kovshov and Filimonov are not just finishing a given volume of work. They're about to make tests of the first completed constructions of the pipe line. It's a new epoch on the pipe line job! And much, very much depends upon the success of those tests."

"And another thing," Batmanov added, "don't forget that Rubezhansk and Moscow are interested in these tests."

"They won't let us down," Rogov affirmed stoutly. "I vouch for them."

"Ah well, good luck to you!" Zalkind cried. "We're not wishing you good night, it's morning already, and an anxious morning too. We wish you all three every success."

Kovshov sat on discussing the details of the forthcoming test with Grubsky and Karpov. There was nothing to prevent Umara

from going to sleep, but he sat on too, thrilled by the preparations, gazing alertly from one to the other and hanging on their lips.

"Hullo, Georgi Davydovich!" Batmanov's voice came through again. "Put Filimonov to bed directly the test is over, and keep him there twenty-four hours. Place Kovshov in the care of a nursemaid, and let her feed him out of a spoon."

"That's quite right," Rogov approved. "I was beginning to worry that the fellow might die of starvation. Who would I compete with then?"

"Don't butt in, I haven't finished yet," Batmanov pursued. "Try and drop in on Rogov too, Georgi Davydovich. I have a suspicion he's overfeeding and oversleeping."

"I've got the same suspicion," Alexei exclaimed. "He's grown as fat as a pasha."

"Look here, my dear neighbours! Seeing that tomorrow's a sort of holiday I invite you all out to the island," Rogov said, apparently quite seriously. "It'll be a splendid blow-out—the best of everything my island can provide."

No one went to bed that night.

"The section's got to work normally all day; the test should not affect output. You can increase output, by all means. There will be no break before the pressure test is over." Alexei said that upon noticing Umara's keyed-up festive mood. "D'you hear that, Mahomet? You've welded thirty kilometres of pipe, and now carry on. The section's long enough, goodness knows! You'd better go and turn in, and come out fresh for the next shift. Set an example of self-control."

Umara rolled his eyes in anger and he fetched a deep sigh. His wiry hair was tousled, and he fumbled with the collar of his shirt.

"You're a funny fella, I can't make you out!" he cried, and snatching up his cap ran out in a huff.

He was outside the door when he shouted back:

"Self-control! Where shall I get it? Go to sleep yourself! Come out fresh yourself!"

The section was astir betimes, before even the sun had risen. The teams moved off to their stations in tense silence.

The forest on both sides of the line was wrapped in a dense mist, the veil of which

lifted slowly and had so far disclosed only the upper terrace of the taiga. The white wisps stirred in the underbrush like living things, creeping outwards and upwards. The mist and the bleak sky gave a dismal cast to the scene.

Alexei, hatless, in a checked shirt with rolled-up sleeves, and breeches tucked into his top boots, stood on a mound overgrown with hazelwood. His hair, which he wore combed back, had been bleached by the summer's sun to the colour of corn and the streak of grey was invisible. His face, hands and neck were tanned a dark brown. He had managed to get a shave, and one could never tell from his fresh young face that he had not had a decent sleep for days. A breeze wafted up a chill dampness from the little lake near-by. The engineer shivered and waved away the mosquitoes and swarms of midges that attacked him.

Two pumps were forcing water into the pipe line from the lake through thick hoses. A tractor trundled up with a pressure gauge on an iron frame, made at Terekhov's factory. The eyes of all the pipe line builders were now fixed upon its manometers.

The gigantic pipe line, stretching away to the very horizon, rested peacefully in its deep

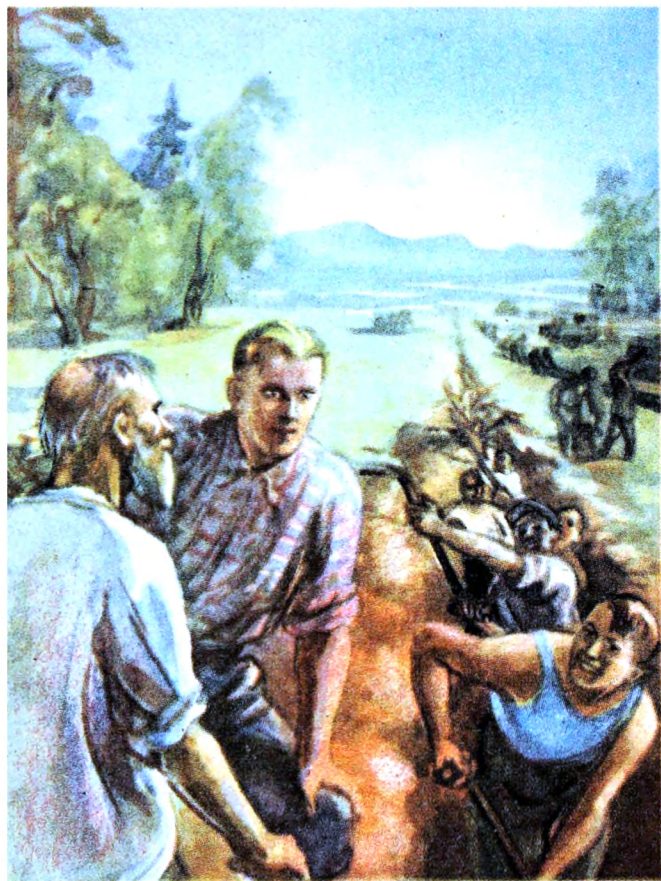
bed of earth like a fabulous black serpent. It ran from here all the way to the strait, a distance of thirty kilometres. Alexei mentally reviewed this stretch of the line which he had been over hundreds of times. It was but a fraction of the whole construction, and the grandiose scale of it was borne in upon him with startling clarity.

Leaving the test preliminaries to Grubsky, Alexei rode down the length of the trench in his car. His chief task was now to have all the air pumped out of the pipe line. The test could not begin until the water filling was completed and the last bubble of air discharged.

Alexei stopped the car at every control point, and not content with the report of the line foreman, he checked up for himself to make sure that the stopcocks were still emitting air or drawing water.

The filling of the pipe line was nearing completion. Water had already reached both extremities.

Kovshov got out of his car at the block-post standing at the start of the thirtieth kilometre—the last kilometre of the completed pipe line section—and called Beridze to the telephone. He was still at Filimonov's



section. It was some time before Beridze was found.

"Hullo, friend Alexei!" Beridze's voice came through at last. He sounded excited. "This is a red-letter day all right. Aren't you thrilled?—I am."

"I don't know about thrilled, I'm worried to death," Kovshov said. "Do hurry and come down, we've got to start the pressure test without delay."

"I'll soon be down," Beridze promised. "Have everything thoroughly prepared. We must avoid unpleasant surprises. I understand your state of mind perfectly. You'd think, now what's a pressure test, not much of a muchness! But it's not as simple as all that. It's a test, my dear boy, of the hard work of honest simple men under the pressure of seventy atmospheres. If the welded joints stand the test—all very well, splendid. The men will get a sense of confidence and success. But what if the joints don't stand the test? Then it's bad. Very bad!..."

Alexei got back into his car and rode out beyond the test area limits, where his men were welding and laying new kilometres of pipe line. There was not a man on the construction who could remain calm and indiffer-

ent during these hours of suspense. Alexei could not help noting the men's excitement and anxiety. What is more, he sensed their mood. Neither the welders, intent upon their job, nor the black-faced insulating men, and the men stripped to the waist, who were digging the ditch, were able to conceal their emotions from him.

Unaware of it themselves, they were working today at high tension, forgetting to take time off for a smoke, and they followed the movements of their section chief, as he rode or walked down the line of pipes, with a searching look.

"Just a minute, Alexei Nikolayevich!" Zyatkov called out.

The old workman stood on the banked-up earth, leaning on his crooked spade handle with both hands. His sweat-drenched shirt clung to his stooping shoulders and broad bulging back.

"Will you start soon?"

"Yes, soon. Can't get on with the job, eh?"

"I'm worried. I guess you feel the same. I was building a big bridge once, and you can't imagine the state I was in until the first train passed over it! It's the same

everywhere, at any construction job. This pipe line of ours is strong enough to look at, made of steel, yet I feel uneasy about it."

The old man disappeared again into the trench, and Alexei was on the point of moving on when Grubsky and Karpov overtook him in a truck.

Grubsky, in a rumpled suit with his necktie twisted awry, mopped his sun-blackened face and bald head.

"The pressure gauge is in order, and we have reports from all the control points. We can start the test. Please give the order, Alexei Nikolayevich."

"No, Beridze will do that. Go back to your places. The chief engineer will soon be here."

Beridze, however, appeared to be in no particular hurry. Karpov, unusually quiet and subdued, met Kovshov's eye and understood him at a glance.

"Ring him up? Tell him everything's ready? I'm off, lad!"

To beguile the anxious minutes of waiting, Alexei went out to the welders. They were already working on the thirty-second kilometre. Alexei stopped next to Umara's team.

The welding apparatus stood on a truck the body of which was belted with a strip of bunting bearing the inscription: "The construction's best welders." The prize banner hung motionless on a tall flagstaff attached to the roof of the driver's cab. Already somewhat faded from the relentless rays of the sun, it had been Umara's constant companion ever since the spring when Batmanov had first presented it to him.

Umara lay on the ground doing overhead welding on two pipe sections. Having finished the joint, Umara got up, switched off the apparatus and went up to the engineer with the face guard in his hand. His mate, the ever smiling Vyatkin, in a blue sport shirt, followed him like a shadow.

Umara, short and stocky and perspiring, heated by the sun, the welding flame and excitement, fell upon Kovshov, yelling (the noise of the welding was still in his ears):

"What are we waiting for? Why don't you turn on the pressure? What's the matter?"

"We're waiting for the chief engineer—can't begin without him," Alexei answered calmly.

"Then why don't he come? Isn't he interested? Look, we're all worrying our heads off...."

"Nobody's worrying except you, as far as I can see," Alexei retorted, annoyance at Beridze's tardiness rankling in his breast. "Please don't worry so much and get on with your job."

Alexei walked on, and Umara shouted after him:

"Why d'you speak like that? Aren't you worrying yourself? Can't you see how everyone's waiting—you're not blind. I'm worrying more than anybody because I have the right to. It's my welding, it's my work being tested. Please, give the order!"

Karpov returned considerably out of breath and reported:

"I couldn't get hold of Beridze. The operator said: 'We're testing the Diesel-pumping station, lad. The chief engineer and all the others are there now and nobody's got any time for you.' I wish I could see those Diesel engines and pumps at work! Look at all the trouble they gave the mechanic. Assembled and mounted them without any designs, without experience. I hear they're going to pardon Seryogin on account of the job he's done."

Alexei was furious. Beridze had done him an ill turn. Filimonov would now steal a march on him.

"Go down to the station, Ivan Lukich, and kick up a shindy in my name."

"I'm off, Alexei Nikolayevich!"

On his way back Kovshov, as usual, could not pass Umara without stopping to watch him at work. The offended welder pretended not to notice him. Alexei stood there several minutes. At the sight of the pure flame burning in the welder's hands, at the whole aspect of the man who had grown almost as dear to him as a brother, his grimy lovable snub-nosed face with the high cheekbones and tousled hair, Alexei felt the ice of his irritation and annoyance melting within him.

Alexei had barely moved away when Beridze's car came racing up amid a swirl of dust. Alexei's joy was quickly dashed—the car had come without the chief engineer. The driver in a tired voice repeated Beridze's strange order: "Engineer Kovshov was to come to the station at once."

"Go back and tell Comrade Beridze we've been waiting for him a long time," Alexei told the driver sharply. "Let him come down at once. Tell him Kovshov's wild and all the

men are excited, you can't keep them in such suspense."

"He told me not to come back without you," the driver said, nonplussed.

"Go on back, quick!" snapped Kovshov.

The driver shrugged and got back into the car, which started off again with a roar and a lurch.

Alexei finally got back to the spot where the pressure gauge apparatus stood. His hair was dishevelled, his face shone with perspiration and his boots were grey from dust. He suddenly noted with surprise that the sun stood high in the heavens and the air was sweltering hot. Not a vestige remained of the morning mist and coolness. The sun blazed in a cloudless blue sky. The little lake to which Alexei went up to refreshen his flushed face and parched throat gave off a faint exhalation.

A crowd of builders stood next to the testing installation listening to Grubsky's explanations. The engineer had at last divested himself of his jacket, collar and tie, and looked quite unfamiliar and homely in his striped undershirt. Among the crowd there were several truck drivers. Their vehicles stood close by.

The men exchanged anxious glances when they caught sight of the section chief—he looked so gloomy. Alexei dipped his hands in the lukewarm water and dashed it over his head. Makhov and Kuchina, those two inseparables, stepped out of the crowd and went up to him. Alexei ran his fingers through his hair, and his glance lighted on the driver and Musya. They were both wearing bright shirts and looked quite sportish. Spring had improved Musya's looks and Makhov's eyes had grown even brighter under the blazing sun.

"Alexei Nikolayevich, we want to ask you a favour," Makhov said irresolutely. "May we miss a trip and stay here. We'll make up for it afterwards. We shouldn't like to miss the test—we've been waiting for it so long! And we've never seen such a great big thing tested before."

Alexei's good humour was restored. He sat down on a hillock.

"All right, take a rest. Beridze's letting us down though. He's got stuck at Filimonov's. I sent Karpov after him. I suppose they'll both roll up soon."

"Isn't that them, raising the dust?" Musya said.

It was Karpov. He came back alone, looking excited and worried.

"Our Georgi the victor doesn't even think of coming down here," he reported. "He's waiting for you there. Something's happened, lad, I guess. Though I must say he's in high feather—smiling and stroking his beard. He showed me the Diesel engines and the pumps, they're working at full go. All the men are gathered there. Beridze made a speech. They've stolen a march on us, lad. It's a flyspeck they're working on in comparison with this pipe job of ours. You'd better go, Alexei Nikolayevich, he means business. Here, he sent you this note."

The note, scribbled on a scrap of paper in thick blue pencil, said: "I tell you a second time—come and see me at once—it's very urgent."

Alexei, swearing fearfully and nursing his wrath to keep it warm, tore off in his car to the pumping station.

The car, racing uphill, swept out onto the pumping station site which was bathed in sunlight. Everything had a festive air about it. Alexei threw a swift glance over the big stone

building of the pumping station. From a row of cylindrical storage tanks on the right came an ear-splitting din of pneumatic riveting. Clean freshly whitewashed buildings were scattered all over the site—blockposts, the telephone house, the dispatcher house, the power station, boiler room, and mechanical shop, and under the hillside the houses and lodgings of the builders. It was a whole town that had sprung up under Alexei's eyes.

The chief engineer, as was to be expected, was in the airy spacious premises of the pumping station. He and Filimonov amid a dozen or so assembling workers stood next to the pumps in silence. Seryogin was here too. With the control journal in one hand and a spanner in the other, he stood with an air of solemnity, like a sentinel. His eyes shone. The huge glistening machines worked smoothly and quietly. Filimonov, oil begrimed to his very eyebrows, could scarcely keep his feet from fatigue. Beridze's face, hands, shirt and trousers were also smeared with oil. One could tell by his eyes, by the expression of relief on his face and the way he toyed with his beard that the test had been a success.

"What d'you think of these gadgets, eh? I can't feast my eyes on them enough!" Beridze

cried to Kovshov. The latter's ferocious look amused him. "Aren't you going to say good day even, and congratulate us on the completion of the installation? At least you might congratulate this hero," he said, laying his hand on the shoulder of Filimonov, who stood smiling tiredly.

"Congratulations!" Alexei blurted out gruffly.

Everyone burst out laughing. Alexei stood looking at the working pumps, then crossed the clean tiled floor into the engine room and came back with a face from which the scowl had disappeared.

"Splendid. I don't mind if I have to bring the banner out to you on foot," he said, giving Filimonov a hug. "And I congratulate you all, comrades," Alexei said to the assembling men, shaking their hands in turn.

"We here with Georgi Davydovich and Rogov have already decided that you're to keep the banner," Filimonov said. "After all, you've had a tougher job than we."

"Well, switch off the machines, and off you go to bed!" Beridze commanded Filimonov. "Doctor Batmanov has ordered you twenty-four hours of sleep...."

Beridze went out arm-in-arm with Alexei. The chief engineer still had his combined office and dwelling in a single small room of the telephone house, whence there filtered through an incessant buzzing and crackling noise. The roar and splash of the surf was carried up from the strait.

"Please, Georgi, don't let us waste another second. Let's go down to my section. It's all red-hot out there," Kovshov said in a resolute tone.

Beridze drew off his oil-stained shirt, baring a powerful torso thickly overgrown with hair, and bent over the water bucket.

"I'll go, I'll go at once," he said at length, tearing himself away from the water for a moment. "But I'm going alone, my dear boy, without you."

"Without me?" Alexei looked at him blankly.

"Yes. By myself. And you're flying back to town. Batmanov has sent his plane for you."

"Have you gone crazy, or what?" Alexei shouted.

"Keep your hair on. You just take a peep at the bay—d'you see that plane? It's waiting for you."

"Plane be damned, who wants it!"

"You're going to fly on it, I say, back to town, to the head office."

"You must have your joke, Comrade Chief Engineer. I see it tickles you to play on my nerves. Go on, play away, I'm tough, I'll stand it," Alexei's voice had a ring of exasperation.

"Sorry, Alexei, I'm not joking. You've got to fly to Novinsk, and from there to Moscow. You're going to report at the People's Commissariat. I'm sorry to let you go, you're my trusty assistant. But there's no help for it."

"What report? What Moscow?" Alexei exclaimed. "What is it all about?"

"Just the ordinary Moscow, our capital. Ugh, what wouldn't I give to be in Moscow! Many people will envy you—I do for one."

"Are you serious?" Alexei's voice shook. "I'm not going or flying anywhere. I've got my section to look after, I can't leave at such a moment."

"You can trust the section to me, Alexei, I won't let you down. I'll finish the job with Karpov and Grubsky. And you'll have to fly out, whether you like it or not. You're going to Moscow, you silly, don't you realize it? You've been so keen on it all the time, and

you'll see your parents, your wife. Don't you remember how homesick you were all the winter?"

"That has nothing to do with it! I was keen then. I'm not keen now!"

"The People's Commissariat unexpectedly called Batmanov and me out. But you understand that we can't leave the job just now. We haggled a whole hour over the question of whom to send. And we decided that you were the only man."

"Oh, you did? Well, you and Batmanov can go yourselves! I'm not important enough, in charge of just a single section, and I'm not going to answer for the whole construction!" Alexei stormed.

Beridze laughed heartily as he splashed the water in the dipper over his chest and back. Alexei snatched the dipper out of his hand and flung it on the bunk.

"That'll do larking about! This isn't a bath!"

"Now look here, Alexei, I'm speaking seriously—don't lose time, it's three hours' flight to the head office. Hurry up. Batmanov's waiting for you. He rang up not long ago and asked whether you had left."

Kovshov stood fretting with the air of a man terribly pressed for time. The energy

and determination, however, gradually deserted him as the sudden information he had just heard began to sink in. His face fell and his bared muscular arms dropped to his sides.

Beridze, who had changed into a clean shirt, went up to him and took him by the shoulders.

"There's no need to explain things to you, Alexei, you understand yourself. You've got to go. You're the most suitable man for it. You know all about the construction job, the technical side and our resources. And then you're going home, Batmanov and I took that into consideration too. We thought you'd be crazy for joy. And here you are jibbing at it instead. When you get there, think of Beridze for a minute and say thank you to him. Pay my deepest respects to the grand old city. Tell her that we folks out on the Adun never forgot her for a moment." He shook his friend by the shoulders. "Let's say goodbye here. You don't need to look up the section, there isn't any time. Besides, the men are keyed up enough as it is. Well, goodbye. It hurts to part with you, my boy, I've got so used to you."

He kissed Alexei, went out first, and without a further glance at his friend so that the

latter should not see his brimming eyes, got into the car and drove off.

Kovshov followed the car with his eyes until it was lost to view, then went up the little hill to Topolev's grave.

Someone had been looking after the old engineer's last sanctuary with loving care. The grey granite tombstone was enclosed by a neat wooden fence, and fresh flowers lay on the grave.

"Ah, if you had only lived a little longer," Alexei said aloud, and sighed. "I'm going to Moscow now. Goodbye, dear friend."

He laid his hand on the grave, stood thus for a minute, then descended to the bay, where the construction chief's hydroplane stood rocking on the water.

The realization that he was actually setting out on a long journey came to him in its full impact only when he got into the cockpit. He bade the pilot fly low over the line.

He gazed at the swiftly changing scenes of the creative battle for the pipe line with mingled feelings of agitation, joy and wistfulness. The line was alive. Before him was unfolded that full-blooded life of which he and Beridze had dreamt with such yearning and heartache during their winter wander-

ings over the line, which had then existed more on paper than in reality.

The building site for hundreds of kilometres was marked off by a straight lane through the taiga with three clearly etched lines running within it—the line of the trench, the parallel line of the pipe-run, alternating with the stretched out lengths of as yet unwelded pipes. The line of the road could be seen crossing and running out from the latter two.

In many places the trench line suddenly disappeared (“Still a lot of excavation to do,” Alexei sighed), or else it was the pipe line that vanished (“Laid in the trench already, that’s good”). Here and there the road alone was visible with the black squares of pipes stacked alongside it (“Good heavens! They haven’t transported the pipes out yet. That’s bad! They’ll have to hurry up!”).

They were hurrying up down below. Alexei knew it and he could see it. Dozens of trucks and tractors crawled along the road, dragging out the pipes. Ditch excavators were scooping out a trench and throwing smooth layers of earth out onto the surface. Thousands of builders and kolkhoz workers were digging the trench with spades, and the earth

from under their spades seemed to hang in the air in an endless grey ribbon.

The work of the welders was indicated by a multitude of flames visible to the occupants of the plane even under the sunlight. The telephone linemen were finishing the suspension of the wires on white poles running parallel with the construction line. They resembled from above a straight dotted line drawn across a green field.

The construction line was humming with life! All sound from below was drowned in the roar of the plane's engine, but Alexei, torn suddenly out of the rhythm of his section's life, could distinctly hear the voice of the line—the clatter of tractors, the hooting of trucks, the fractious hissing of the welding apparatuses, and the shouts and singing of the builders. He even thought he could make out the faces of the men, who left off work for a minute to gaze up at the plane passing overhead.

On the left flowed the mighty Adun, dazzling as though it had absorbed all of the sunlight, and on either side of it there stretched the endless boundless taiga.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

REPORTING TO THE HOMELAND

ALEXEI, upon landing in Novinsk, was not even given time to wash and change his clothes. A messenger was waiting for him at the airfield with instructions to report at once at headquarters where the construction chief was holding a conference.

Everyone at the head office already knew of Kovshov's impending trip to Moscow, and all the staff members he met on his way to Batmanov's office congratulated him and wished him success. Alexei unexpectedly ran into Zhenya in the corridor. She responded to his greeting in a bewildered sort of way and passed on hurriedly.

Liberman stood shuffling uncertainly in the waiting room leading to Batmanov's office. He had been at the supply base, and not having been told of the conference, he had come

late and could not make up his mind to go in. The appearance of the engineer was a welcome relief, he would feel bolder going in together with him.

"What's the conference about?" Kovshov asked.

"I like that! It's all about you! About fitting you out for your trip to Moscow. We're pretty late, the chief's summing up."

They went in together. It was very stuffy in the chief's office at this sunset hour. Many faces were shiny with perspiration. Batmanov, as was his wont, paced up and down by the side of his long desk.

He greeted Alexei and threw a stern glance at Liberman who was sneaking towards a vacant chair.

"I repeat, we've got to make a report to Moscow," Batmanov said loudly, with a keen look at Kovshov. Deeply sunburnt, in his checked shirt and dusty top boots, Alexei looked rather out of place here, and he himself had a feeling that he would be immediately ordered back whence he had come. "We haven't been idling about here, and we must give a lucid, exhaustive account of what we have done for the war, for the country and the people. Ours is a big concern worth many

millions, with vast resources in men and materials, and we're not going to get away with superficialities. We all realize that this is an account we are rendering not only to our immediate chief, but to the government. It isn't an easy thing for a man to stand and report before the government. You've got to consider carefully what to say and how to say it. I'm not satisfied with what the department chiefs have said here. They haven't come up to scratch."

Liberman touched Alexei's elbow with a hot moist hand and pointed to Grechkin. The planning chief was perspiring freely and darting scowling looks from side to side. He was convinced that nothing good would come of this conference, and in any case the report for Moscow would have to be drawn up by him.

"I can see by your faces," the construction chief went on, "that you will stick to your erroneous belief that the chief thing is to build the pipe line, as for reporting about it, that's an easy matter, that's the job of the accountants and economists, they get paid for compiling reports...."

"Quite right!" Fedosov said with a laugh.

"Quite wrong! That remark of yours is

characteristic. You'd prefer to spend two days procuring a ton of bitumen than two hours in thinking over such a question as your report to Moscow. That smacks of narrow practicality. Naturally, the main thing is to build. But don't you think it's important to grasp the full meaning of what you've done at the moment when the construction job is entering its final phase? You see, Fedosov, Moscow is far away and busy with the war, she has put the fate of the pipe line in our hands. But Moscow wants to be quite sure that we shan't let her down at the critical moment. The Germans are bent on getting our Caucasian oil and have mustered pretty large forces from all over Europe. The state is evincing a steadily increasing interest in our pipe line. But from Grechkin's figures and periodical reports it is impossible to tell whether the pipe line will be ready on time or not. There's very little time left and a tremendous amount of work still to be done, and the figures are not very encouraging. It's not surprising then that Moscow is calling us out—they want to get the position clear. Just think, Fedosov.... We have thousands of men working here—so many regiments withdrawn from the fighting ranks of

the army. We have hundreds of horses—there's your cavalry. And the trucks and tractors—aren't they also out of the arsenal of the Red Army? Don't you think it's our sacred duty to show what hard battles they've been in, our men, our cavalry, our motorized units, and what they have achieved?"

Alexei experienced an odd sensation, as though someone had split his mind in two. One half of it was with Batmanov. That man always swayed the minds of those he addressed. His speeches, counsels and even reprimands excited in men's breasts a healthy restlessness, they came away from him fired by a desire to be up and doing. It was hard for Alexei to listen to him, but not listen he could not.... The second half of his mind was far away from here....

"It's harder for me and Kovshov than it is for you," Batmanov said, and he glanced at Alexei again with the shadow of a smile. "He and I are giving an account of the whole construction, I as the man who is responsible for it and for you all, Kovshov as our envoy to Moscow. And we set this condition before you—lighten our task for us, make out your accounts each for himself. Bear this in mind though, it's not merely a question of a

formal report.... This is an opportunity to check ourselves from all sides, to make an analysis and a summing up which will show whether each and all of us holds a worthy place in the battle, and whether our labour army has not been caught in a kind of encirclement from which a way out must be sought at all costs. Kovshov will be leaving for Moscow in a few days. Formally we shall draw up and place in his hands a current report—twenty typewritten pages plus all kinds of tables, diagrams, charts and schedules. Informally it's our duty to sift out in our minds what cannot conceivably be squeezed into twenty pages of typewriting. Just think where Kovshov is going! Summon your conscience and your intelligence to his aid. When you go back from here to your departments don't let yourself be swamped by trivialities, sift the figures, facts and deductions through the sieve of analysis, like the mason, and the solid stones of important affairs will be left in the screen while the rubble will fall away...."

Zalkind sat by the window, feeling upon his back the pleasant coolness of the evening. He observed with interest the stimulating effect Batmanov's earnest speech was steadily exercising upon the men. The gold

tooth glowed in the Party organizer's mouth like a flame as he smiled to himself, thinking how readable were all those faces before him. Grechkin was already looking appeased, and he no longer scowled. Tanya Vasilchenko was all ears. Zalkind remembered how she had come bursting into the head office at the beginning of the winter hot from the work section and full of fight, ready to jump down the throat of the construction's new leadership. How many events and changes there had been since then! How people had altered! Zalkind's eye came to rest on Fedosov—aha, so he was interested now! Yet he had considered the conference a waste of time, saying: "A report, eh? That's nothing! Easy as winking." Not as easy as you thought, my dear man!

In calling the conference he and Batmanov had not put too great hopes in it either. They had not supposed that the department chiefs, upon leaving the conference, would think up anything outside the usual and long established formulas. But, dash it all, why shouldn't they have the disturbing thought of the moment's responsibility brought home to them! Why shouldn't they be worried and excited over the difficult

mission that Alexei was being entrusted with! Even if they contributed nothing special to Kovshov's report, they would at least profit by it in the interests of the work!

"I've been listening attentively to you all," Batmanov was saying. He stood with his back to the window and surveyed the company with a twinkling eye. "Let me deal with concrete examples. I'll begin with the chief accountant. He pelted us with figures, and many of you were bored. Is Kovshov to adopt the same tactics and overwhelm our Moscow chiefs with figures?"

"Figures are great things and you can't run away from them!" the chief accountant, a corpulent old man with a self-complacent face, threw out.

"No, it wouldn't do to run away from your figures! Besides, it wouldn't suit my position and years!" Batmanov said with a chuckle. A titter ran round. "Don't put the wind up us with your figures, Comrade Accountant. They're dead things by themselves and will never overtake us. They'll either doze peacefully in Kovshov's folder or fly in at one ear and out of the other of those people he'll have to report to." Batmanov's eye ran over the faces of the men sitting before him:

"Let us take another example. Comrade Stalin obligated us, the country's industrial and economic executives, to gear all our activities to wartime needs, and we have done that. We have displayed efficiency unknown in peacetime and have managed without Moscow's help in many things, even when that help seemed to us at times indispensable. What will you have to say about that? It's you I'm asking, Fedosov?"

Fedosov rose to his feet flushed with the heat and embarrassment.

"I understand what you mean, Vasili Maximovich. I can say it both with figures and the living word. The lion's share of the technical supplies we found on the spot without resorting to state allocations."

Batmanov stopped next to the supply man and listened to him with interest. He was plainly disappointed, however, as his wry face showed.

"Lion's share! A clumsy phrase, in which the king of beasts acts as the gauge for sheet iron and shovels!" The chief's words were drowned in a roar of laughter. Batmanov waited until the merriment had subsided. "Why don't you say in plain language—Terekhov and other fine Far-Eastern captains of in-

dustry came to our aid, they made the pressure gauges for us, for example, which we couldn't get anywhere else. They manufactured the missing parts to the American pumps for us. We learnt how to manufacture in our own workshops and laboratories electrodes, calcium carbide, tools, nails and various instruments." Batmanov glanced at Liberman. "You came late and I haven't heard you say anything. How do you intend rendering your account to the government?"

Liberman got up and stared at the construction chief in silence.

"I shouldn't like Kovshov to blink his eyes the way you're doing when he makes his report!" Batmanov said. "I can see by your face that you're offended with me. But it isn't my fault that you have nothing to say at such an important moment! Remember those endless telegrams and memoranda you brought me to sign, demanding warm clothes and boots? You even got up a special file of these telegrams and memoranda, just in case. D'you want me to take it out of my safe and give it to Kovshov? Let him flaunt those copies in Moscow and tell them—we wrote you but you didn't help us. Well, why are you

silent? Those papers of yours don't harmonize just now, eh? That's just it, Liberman.... If the account in your department will be made up by a man with the intellect of a storekeeper he'll dash off a wearisome report about so many boots, and socks, and jackets, and trousers issued to the workers, so much foodstuffs consumed with such and such a balance on the debit or credit side. A man who thinks in terms of the state will have something more to say than that. He will say that when winter came we had practically no warm clothing, yet we refused state allocations and gave the best we had to the Red Army. Nevertheless we clothed the workers... d'you mean to say you've forgotten that, Liberman? We sewed thousands of coats, padded jackets and felt boots out of scrapped army equipment! We learned to take proper care of old clothes, to mend them and patch them a hundred times instead of throwing them out right away. Have you forgotten the boots we made out of scrapped tyres, the wadding we obtained from old rags? And have we a right, when speaking of food, not to mention the help we have been getting from the Nanais and the Nivhs, and from the fishermen of

Karpov's kolkhoz? You just reckon up how much meat and fish they gave us."

Zalkind smiled to himself, pleased with the turn the conference had taken. Liberman was hurt, of course—see how sulky he looked. And there were others too who did not like it. But what would that same Liberman or Fedosov say if you were to ask them to tell you frankly whether they were really so dissatisfied with Batmanov as to prefer a different chief, someone milder and more tactful, not so restless and sharp of tongue?

Yes, Vasili Maximovich was stern. He was brusque, and sometimes ruthless. Nevertheless, there was not a man who would prefer anyone else in his place, Sidorenko, say. With Batmanov they had learned the meaning of what he himself liked to call Bolshevik creative organization.

"Look, comrades, what people we have working on the construction!" Batmanov said with feeling. "Pushchin in the newspaper very properly called them guardsmen of the rear. It's our duty to describe them as well in our report as the army political workers do in their dispatches about the men and officers who distinguish themselves in battle." Batmanov suddenly chuckled and his eyes

gleamed. "Take our personnel department! I bet you the comrades in charge of personnel will submit to us sheets of paper with words and figures stating that we have so many males and females, so many with a higher, secondary and elementary education. They'll give us another of their effusions—I've seen something like it before—showing competition progress by months in percentages. And amid this maze of words and figures—the main thing is lost—the human element. They will not tell the story of how we had no telephone workers, and how the Komsomol members on Tanya Vasilchenko's initiative became linemen, of how we were short of welders, and Umara Mahomet did the work of four, of how the road team dragged Makhov's truck out by sheer physical force to help him retain the lead in the competition, of how people perished because the job they were fighting for was dearer to them than their own lives. Have we a right to forget engineer Topolev, foreman Goncharuk and tractor driver Silin?"

One half of Kovshov's mind thrilled to Batmanov's speech and dwelt on what was going on here at this conference. The other was on the combat section he had been torn

away from. Everything must be seething with excitement there now! Beridze stood before his eyes. "Don't worry, Alexei. You can trust the section to me—I won't let you down!" He could imagine him now taking things in hand at the section. There he goes, swiftly striding down a length of the pipe line that had struck him as suspicious. His boots sink into the soft earth thrown out of the trench. Wet with perspiration, he hurriedly wipes his face with the sleeve of his shirt that is already grey from the dust. Meanwhile the water is still being pumped into the pipe line. The pumps are working ceaselessly. The men are waiting in an agony of suspense. Beridze alone is calm—he has no right to give way to his feelings. He has even succeeded in appeasing Umara Mahomet, who, no longer able to contain himself, has come down to the testing apparatus after all. Beridze tells him: "Now let's keep calm—come let's have a smoke, and I'll tell you a funny story."

A crowd gathers round Beridze and Umara, while the chief engineer lightheartedly relates an incident of his early youth, telling how he struck up an acquaintance with a pretty girl while swimming in the sea, far away from the shore. The crowd laughs and

no one exposes the storyteller, though many know that he can hardly swim. Alexei had barely succeeded in dragging him out of the strait. . . .

"What does our Inventions Bureau have to say?" Alexei heard Batmanov's question addressed to engineer Polozkov, a man of neat habits and punctilious politeness.

Polozkov rose to his feet.

"I think of giving Comrade Kovshov two diagrams illustrating the movement of rationalization-proposal receipts by months and the sum total of conditional annual economy derived from them."

The conference burst out laughing. Batmanov glared at Polozkov.

"We don't need your 'movement' and 'conditional economy'! Give us a live human account of the actual creative efforts of our engineers and rank-and-file builders. We've seen evidence of their inventive faculty at every step. The whole left-bank line of Beridze and Karpov—what is that? And Kovshov's and Makhov's method of 'inward' pipe transportation? And Rogov's and Kuchina's bonus booth? And Silin's bulldozer clearing the taiga? And Topolev's blasting method of trench excavation? And pipe welding in win-

ter conditions? And the handling of kilometre-long pipes on the ice? Why, my dear comrades, it's all sheer innovation!"

...Alexei could vividly picture to himself—the critical moment of the test has arrived. Beridze no longer moves away from the testing apparatus. Hundreds of alert tense eyes are glued to the manometers. The pressure in the pipe line is steadily rising. Either it will reach the red line—seventy atmospheres, and then there will be a storm of applause and wild cheers, and Beridze and Umara, gripped in strong hands, will be tossed above the heads of the crowd. Or else the compressed water will burst the joints, and then. . . . "They're so excited they don't realize the danger!" Alexei worried, and in answer to his thoughts he fancied he could plainly hear the warning command of Grubsky running down the thirty kilometres of line: "Keep clear of the ditch—it's dangerous! Keep away from the pipe! High pressure! Comrades, careful! Attention!"

"Speak frankly and boldly in Moscow of our faults, shortcomings, blunders and failures, Comrade Kovshov!" Batmanov's voice battered against his ears. "Traitors sneaked into our collective, and we didn't see through

them at once. There were deserters, tuft-hunters and cowards in our ranks—don't conceal it. We also had people who did not believe the pipe line could be built in a year. There were others who did not consider the pipe line a worthwhile job and handed in applications asking to be sent to the front."

Grechkin nudged Alexei:

"That's one for you."

"Tell them everything without concealment, Comrade Kovshov," Batmanov went on. "At first we didn't rightly understand the meaning of wartime readjustments, we gave no attention to living conditions. Our engineers shivered in ice-cold rooms, and the messroom kept people on a potato diet, giving wartime difficulties as the excuse."

Alexei counted the seconds in his mind. He fidgeted restlessly. "It's time.... Why is Beridze silent? Can it mean disaster?" The secretary came hurrying into the room, and with a glance at Alexei, began whispering to the construction chief. The latter reached out for the telephone. Alexei leapt to his feet....

A noise burst into the room, like the rush of water into an empty lock. It struck those present at first as a confused medley of sound, carrying with it a sense of something

tremendous and significant, something that sounded like the roar of breaking surf or the din of a great battle. Everyone sat listening tensely. The deafening chaos of sound suddenly resolved itself into separate elements in which one could distinctly hear human voices and shouts: "This is our gift to Stalin!" "Let's toss Umara Mahomet!" "Where's Comrade Kovshov? Where's our chief?" "Three cheers for Comrade Kovshov!" "Three cheers for Chief Engineer Beridze!" And the voices merged again with the growing surge of sound, this time a clear sound of hand-clapping and cheers from thousands of throats.

Alexei, with bated breath and clenched teeth, leaned over towards the receiver. He seemed to be drinking in the living echoes of his section.

The storm of sound gradually subsided, and Beridze's voice suddenly stood out:

"Head office! Head office!"

"I'm head office!" Batmanov answered.

"Chief Engineer Beridze reporting. The headland section has passed the test brilliantly! The pipe line has not burst in a single spot of all its thirty kilometres even under the top pressure of seventy atmospheres! I congratulate you, Comrade Construction Chief.

Please give our congratulations to Comrade Kovshov and the whole head office collective."

"I congratulate you, comrades, with all my heart!" Batmanov said warmly. "The work of the builders on the headland section deserves the highest praise. The head office banner will remain yours. We shall immediately notify Moscow and Rubezhansk of your victory."

"Chief, my welding is good, eh?" Umara Mahomet interjected. "D'you remember you said—'You weld quick but mind the quality.' Not one joint has burst. How about the reward you promised us welders?"

"You'll get my order about the reward tonight," Batmanov said warmly.

Applause broke out again—this time in Batmanov's office too. Everyone was on his feet, clapping and looking at Kovshov. Leaning tensely over the apparatus, he saw nothing. His lips stirred and his eyes blinked rapidly. The Party organizer drew Batmanov's attention to him with a nod of his head, the while he moved up to the selector and shouted into it:

"Comrades, builders of the headland section! Your Chief, Engineer Kovshov, is at the

microphone. He is flying out to Moscow on an urgent mission, that is why he is not with you just now. He wants to say a few words to you. . . .”

A hush fell upon the works’ section. Alexei, collecting his thoughts, was silent for a minute.

“Dear comrades!” he said, his voice quivering with emotion. “I was obliged to leave the section at the most critical moment. But here, hundreds of kilometres away, my heart has followed every minute and every second of the test. How glad I am, dear friends, that our pipe line is in order! Good lad, Umaral! Good boys, you welders! I wish I could shake your hands. . . .”

“Alexei!” Beridze’s voice was heard again, the voice of a man drunk with joy “They all ask me to tell you. . . . Everybody here misses you, I’ll try my best to fill your place. We’re proud that it’s you who are going to Moscow as the envoy of our collective. Tell the capital that all our thoughts are for her!”

“Tell Stalin—the whole pipe line will be like our section! Not a single burst joint! I give my word!” Umara said in solemn tones.

Alexei silently nodded his head. . . .

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

TO MOSCOW

IT WORKED out as Grechkin had anticipated—the report had to be drawn up by him together with Alexei.

“Now can you tell me who the dickens needed that conference?” the planning chief growled. “Batmanov only got the wind up everyone. I had it all clear in my mind what was needed, what figures and explanations, and now I’m all at sea. Here I have to sit and wait until the department chiefs bring me their varns.”

They divided the work between them. Grechkin collected the necessary data and figures, while Alexei together with Kobzev, figured out what maps, charts, drawings and tables he would need and considered the plan of the report.

Grechkin in two days managed to drag the memoranda out of the department chiefs.

They had come to him with excuses: "While we were listening to Batmanov our hands itched to take up the pen, but when we sat down to it nothing came of it."

"Better let's have a chat, I'll give it to you all in the living word," Fedosov had proposed with a guilty air. "I've been sweating and fagging at it, but it's no use. What is it I'm supposed to bring you, a novel, or what?"

Grechkin and Alexei showed the memorandum to the construction chief. Batmanov looked through them, read passages out to Zalkind and swore.

"I thought so! 'The telephone line team mobilized itself to overcome all difficulties.' If that's what Tanya Vasilchenko writes, what can you expect of Liberman! Or take this contribution from the Inventions Bureau: 'The sum and substance of the rationalization introduced by engineer Topolev consists in the following.' Then we have points 'a' and 'b'—the whole blessed alphabet. Poor Kuzma Kuzmich, these 'following items' would probably make him turn in his grave. There's nothing to laugh at!" Batmanov said, noticing the smiles on Alexei's and Grechkin's faces. "You'll write it up yourselves.

But just you dare bring me anything like this!"

Kovshov and Grechkin wrote and argued, argued and wrote with results that were "exactly what isn't wanted," to use a pet phrase of Grechkin's. Kobzev brought in a large skilfully drawn map of the Far East—his own handiwork—with the pipe line marked on it. Even on the drawing it looked immense, stretching like an oil-black ribbon across the whole sheet on which were traced the blue veins of rivers and the circles of towns and villages. Fine parallel coloured lines, drawn to the scale of ten kilometres per centimetre, flowed along both sides of the pipe-run. A red line denoted the motor road, a blue line the telephone wire, there was a brown line for pipe transportation, a green for the welding, a pink for trench excavation, a pale-blue for the cleaning, insulating and lowering of the pipe line into the trench; a yellow line stood for the water pressure test, a lilac line for the filling up of the trench, a violet line for the construction of the oil pumping station, and an orange-coloured line showing the public buildings and houses.

Only three lines ran the whole length of the pipe-run—the red (motor road), the blue

(telephone wire) and the orange (public buildings). The brown line (pipe transportation) was almost complete, except for breaks here and there. All the other lines looked as though they had been traced by a careless hand, suddenly breaking off, disappearing and reappearing for a centimetre or two to vanish again.

This simple and graphic illustration of the construction progress had a disturbing effect upon Alexei, and especially upon Grechkin. Every little line of the gay pattern on the map seemed to cry out how much work there was still left to do.

Green moths, their wings singing on the big electric lamp, dropped on Kobzev's map and the papers. With the onset of evening these creatures of moonlight flew in at the windows and darted about the room with a restless rustling of dry wings.

Alexei shook them off the map with a gesture of annoyance, and feeling upon himself the intent gaze of Grechkin, he asked:

"What are you studying my face for? Is it smudged with ink, or what?"

"Your face doesn't interest me, I'm not Zhenya," Grechkin retorted. "You've come from the remote sections, you've seen the

line—tell me, d'you think we'll manage it on time?"

"We will," Alexei answered without hesitation. "Not because the work is nearing completion—that's a long way off yet. And not because it's easy. We simply must manage it, we have no right not to manage it."

"Is that what you'll say in Moscow?"

"That's what I'll say."

"Moscow won't take your word for it, you'll have to prove it. You know what I'll tell you, as a comrade—you have a difficult task ahead of you. You won't believe me, but I'm rather nervous lately. Even Liza has noticed it. Generally it's good to work with Batmanov.... It's hard, of course.... Means pulling a heavy load. And you've always got to keep your eyes open, so you don't put your foot in it. But I don't mind that.... He's strict, and firm, and shoulders the hardest tasks. Says a kind word once in three years. But then you appreciate it all the more! With a chief like that I'll go all the way in any undertaking. But the time limit is running out, it's melting like wax. He poked fun at the accountant, and made me laugh too—I hee-hawed like an ass. But many people may say the same thing—you can't

run away from the figures. Those figures come to me from all over. True, they grow from day to day, get fatter, so to speak, and put on flesh. That's so. But you put yourself in my place and weigh today's output on the construction—why, it's half of what we've got to do if we're going to give the oil on time! What I mean to say is, you'll even have to refute in Moscow the figures I send out there every day."

Grechkin's eyes grew round, and an expression of dismay appeared on his broad homely face.

"Or maybe, having lived out on the line, you know more than I do?" he went on. "Where d'you get that confidence? Aren't you judging of things by your own section? I agree, that one will be ready on time by the looks of it. But on the other sections they've only got through half the welding work. We've only got one Umara Mahomet on the whole construction."

Alexei got up and walked to the door and back again. Grechkin didn't take his eyes off his face.

"True, there's a heap of work. Nevertheless, it'll all be done," Alexei averred without hesitation. "You're a funny chap,

comrade chief dispatcher. You know perfectly well what measures have been taken to send those figures skyrocketing. Output shot up as soon as the order concerning the combat sectors was made public. We've introduced an hourly schedule, it's only just beginning to take effect. Competition has not yet reached the high water mark. Umara is certainly not the only man on the construction. Didn't you read the appeal of Petya Gudkin's welders? Those men are almost treading on Umara's heels.... And Umara himself and his mates—Kedrin, Vyatkin and Fyodorov—have already been sent out to the sections as Stakhanovite-method instructors. You don't have to be told that the most laborious jobs like excavation work, digging and filling the trenches, are largely being tackled by the kolkhoz workers, our friends on the Adun. That's what we're writing about in our report. Or maybe you don't believe what you're writing?..."

Grechkin made a grimace and a vague gesture with his hand—it might have been in protest, or driving off the pestering moths and mosquitoes.

"Take a trip down the works' line, you bureaucrat! Live at least a month at the

sections, and see things for yourself, then you'll believe in them," Alexei advised him.

"I can see Batmanov letting me go! He needs me here, fiddling about with those index picture boards and those telephones, drat 'em!"

"We made the ice road across the strait in two days. According to the official rates it should have taken the men eight days. That scotched your rates! And they were scotched a thousand times while we were laying the pipe line in the strait. This is my second big construction job after graduating the institute, and before that I did some practice on two pretty big jobs, and I realized one thing—that a good construction collective peps up day by day the nearer it draws to the target. There comes a time in the life of a construction job when it has, say, four months left out of the twelve and only half the job done—yet it gets that other half done in four months, sometimes less! It's a special kind of growth rhythm. D'you remember at the beginning of the winter Batmanov often spoke about clearing the decks for the strategic battle? He prophesied then that we were preparing for the running jump, and when

we take it we'll get there with both feet! I bet you your output returns will be doubled in ten days. The teams are beginning to set the pace. You think they won't fulfil their obligations? Oh yes, they will! There hasn't been a case yet when they haven't kept their word. I have a record of the output of Zyatkov's team. It's simply staggering! Mind you, one and the same team, and its output rises by leaps and bounds. Incomprehensible, you would think, from the point of view of a standard rates man, but it's a fact. And you can't run away from facts either!" Alexei laughed and peered into Grechkin's eyes. "Well, have I won you over?"

"You have," Grechkin answered, looking decidedly more cheerful. It was a habit of his when in doubt to verify his doubts on someone he believed in.

Grechkin broke off the conversation and resumed his work as though nothing had happened. Alexei, too, bent over his report.

The five days which Batmanov had allowed for preparing the materials for Moscow had passed. They had been spent in sleepless nights and intensive activity. At last

everything was ready—the albums with tables, maps, diagrams and charts. The report, after changes and corrections, was retyped for the third time and read out by Alexei to Batmanov and Zalkind. Batmanov, in signing it, twitted Kovshov and Grechkin.

“Not exactly what I wanted, but better than what I would have got if I hadn’t put the wind up you at the conference.”

“Don’t pick flaws, Vasili Maximovich,” Grechkin said. “It’s a solid, honest report, with substantial data.”

Now, when it remained for Alexei to pack his things, he suddenly found himself unprepared. While he had been writing the report he had believed that it was the real and genuine thing—the account rendered to Moscow. But now these neatly got-up papers raised doubts in his mind. “Only art with its magical media is capable of recapturing in music, colours and the artistic word the vivid scenes of a life that has sunk into the past,” Alexei meditated as he kept turning over the leaves of the report and glanced again and again at the tables and diagrams. “What office documents could reflect the joys and the sorrows that have gone into the building of this pipe line? Topolev once spoke

about his 'share in the joint stock.' What figures can express his share, or the share of Smorchkov, Beridze, Silin?..."

The importance of his trip to Moscow seized hold of his imagination ever more strongly. Meditating on the construction job, Alexei visualized its entire progress, from start to finish, not in the abstract, but graphically and vividly. He called to mind the pleasant evening he and Beridze had spent in the builders' barrack one night at the strait during a boisterous blizzard. The stove was blazing hot, and all the men sat around it. Zyatkov asked Beridze to tell them how the oil would be started through the ready-made pipe line. The first pipe section had not yet been lowered into the strait, the work was only just getting under way and there were still plenty of failures and few successes, yet the men were convinced that the oil would arrive at Novinsk exactly on time, they even insisted that it would arrive before the scheduled time, be it only a day earlier!

"Shall we try?" Beridze had asked, kindling at the thought, then he began: "Several years passed..."

"The war was but a memory," Alexei caught up. "We won it, and gigantic con-

struction work was launched all over the country...."

"We are all on some new big construction job," Beridze went on. "In the Caspiau, say...."

"Laying a pipe line at the bottom of the sea..." Alexei said, continuing his thought.

"The thirty-second anniversary of the October Revolution is drawing near, and we pause to reminisce about our past struggles...."

"Better this way—the young workers and Komsomol members asked you to tell them how it all was here," Zyatkov suggested with a broad smile.

"Go on, speak, Georgi Davydovich!" Umara Mahomet shouted.

"Comrades!" Beridze said, getting up. His face was grave and his voice agitated. "We started the oil running three days before scheduled time, on the eve of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution. This is how it happened...."

"... Umara Mahomet lay in the ditch under the pipe line welding the last joint. When he got up and took off his helmet we saw that the welder was crying and laughing.

"'Dash it, something's got in my eyes,'

Umara muttered. He was angry with himself, and said to engineer Kovshov: 'What are you staring at, haven't you seen me before? You better look what I've written on the pipe. Our report....'

'The engineer went up to the pipe and read aloud the words that were engraved in fire on the metal: 'Comrade Stalin! The pipe line is finished. This is our blow at Hitler. We await your further orders, October 1942.'

"But the time for reporting had not yet come—the hardest part of the job still confronted us. That's how it always is with men who are building and fighting—the most difficult problems are always ahead of them.

"First of all the pipe line trench had to be filled up. That was a job in which all had to lend a hand—the labourers, and welders, and truck drivers, and the chiefs. The inhabitants of the Adun region, Nanais and Russians, came to our assistance. In an endless chain stretched out for several hundred kilometres, they attacked the trench with spades in their hands. And here again Zyatkov shone, there was not a man who could come up to him....

"But there was a still more difficult problem facing us. The pipe line had to be swift-

ly tested, washed through and launched. The frosts might spoil everything. If the frosts came suddenly the launching of the line would have to be put off until the spring. The pipe line could not be tested and washed at a low temperature, for the water would freeze and the ice burst the joints.... The pipe had to be freed of water and filled with oil at all costs before the onset of the cold weather. The engineers were constantly reiterating: 'Before the frosts set in we must make sure that it won't be the air that dictates its conditions to the pipe line, but the other way round.'

"A government commission headed by Pisarev, the representative of the State Committee of Defence, flew out to the island. The pumps were started in Konchelan, and they drove the water powerfully through the pipe on the island. Simultaneously the pumps at Chongr started working, and the water rushed up the Adun, against its current. The water flowed swiftly through the pipe, but it met no few obstacles in its path, and it was a week before it came running into Novinsk! During that time the men suffered more anxiety than they had known all through the building process.

“Something might happen at any moment. Technical conditions of the test allowed for one per cent of ruptured joints. There were tens of thousands of joints in the pipe line, of which hundreds were liable to burst! But not for nothing had Umara Mahomet and his mates given their word that there would be no flaws in their work. Only twelve joints burst under the pressure of seventy atmospheres. But how much heartache these twelve joints cost the builders! When a joint burst, the pumps, at a signal from the nearest block-post, ceased working, and the trench had to be dug up again, the pipe line exposed, and the weak section replaced. And that happened twelve times! On two sections pipe choking was discovered—after considerable trouble. The pipe line had to be cut open in several places before the cause of the trouble was removed—in one place a thick beam, in another a plug of hay.

“The chairman of the government commission gave the order for the oil to be started. The Konchelan pumps went into action, and the oil poured into the pipe line from the huge reservoirs. The members of the government commission and the representatives of the building collective followed its

progress through the line on motor cars: Batmanov, and Zyatkov, and Beridze, and Umara, and Tanya Vasilchenko, and Petya Gudkin, Grubsky and Karpov, and Genka Pankov, and Filimonov, and Alexei Kovshov—fifty in all. At the head of this motorized procession rode Smorchkov and Makhov. With Makhov in his driver's cab sat Musya Kuchina in place of his mate. The ride was a festive but very disturbing affair.

"They had already reached the mainland, not far from Lower Sazanka, where the fishermen, Karpov's fellow villagers, had accorded them a solemn welcome, when a joint suddenly burst! The oil rushed through the breach, threw up the layer of earth from the trench and spouted in a black jet high above the taiga, splashing the yellow trees, the dry grass and brilliant autumn flowers. The truck which Umara rode happened to be nearest the scene of the accident. The welder leapt out of the car and rushed towards the spot where the oil was spurting in a fountain.

"'Oil! Oil! Look, oil!' Umara shouted delightedly, dipping his cupped hands into the thick liquid and sniffing it greedily.

"Beridze flew at the welder in a rage—here was an accident and this crazy man

was dancing. But Umara stretched his oil-stained hands to the engineer and went on shouting:

“‘Oil! Oil!’

“Beridze looked at him closely and said nothing more.

“Kovshov was meanwhile giving orders. ‘Ivan Lukich! Ride to the blockpost at once! Get them to phone Chongr and stop the pumps. As soon as they stop them, shut off the damaged spot.’

“Four hours later the oil started running again, and the cars proceeded farther.

“‘What’s tickled you, lad?’ Karpov asked Umara. ‘So much oil wasted and you’re rejoicing.’

“‘Not much wasted, but look how much joy,’ Umara answered. ‘I see the oil’s come to your village, that means it’ll soon be in Novinsk....’

“The oil arrived in Novinsk on the eighth day, on the fourth of November. The whole town came out to the Adun to meet it. Thousands of people collected in a crowd round the refinery. Everyone was eager to secure a place nearer to the tank which was to receive the first supply from the pipe line.

“‘Whom will you appoint to receive the-

oil?' Batmanov asked Pisarev and Dudin, who were standing next to the tank.

"Pisarev cast an eye over the crowd of men.

" 'The oil will be received by you, Umara Mahomet, Zyatkov, Karpov, Tatyana Vasilchenko, Terekhov and Kapitsin, the refinery worker.'

"At that moment the oil appeared in the wide opening of the hose. It gushed out in a thin yellow jet, then rushed out in a black iridescent pillar. A thunder of applause broke out over the Adun.

"Zyatkov stepped out of the crowd, took off his cap and went up to the tank holding a jar. He held it under the oil jet with trembling hands. The jar filled in an instant Zyatkov wiped it with his cap, touched it reverently with his lips and handed it to Pisarev.

" 'Our gift to Comrade Stalin. Please send it by plane.'

" 'You'll take it yourself, Comrade Zyatkov. Together with Comrade Umara and Comrade Batmanov you will hand that splendid gift to our leader,' Pisarev answered.

"Another storm of applause broke loose, such as the Adun and old mother taiga had never heard in all their days.



"Meanwhile the oil continued to rush into the tank—nothing now could stop it. A sea of oil rippled and sparkled before the eyes of the builders and the inhabitants of Novinsk. The workers were already making preparations to switch the torrent over to another tank...."

...Beridze fell silent and eyed his listeners. Zyatkov wiped his eyes, unashamed of his tears. Everyone was deeply moved. Outside the blizzard continued to howl and roar. Umara Mahomet sprang lightly from the upper bunk, ran up to Beridze and seized his hand.

"Good for you, you're right. That's how it will be!"

Alexei was packing his things in a small suitcase when Liberman came in.

"I've been ordered to fit you out for the journey," he announced in businesslike tones. "I figured out what rations you're entitled to, but they all laughed at me—too skimpy."

"I have no right to expect more and I don't want it!"

"Goodness gracious, let me finish what I want to say! Batmanov, Zalkind and Beridze are giving you their month's food rations, and together with your own that makes

up a tidy amount. Since you're going by plane I'm giving it to you all in tinned food. No objection? I'm giving you fatback, condensed milk, tinned stuff and smoked fish. I wouldn't stint nothing for a good chap like you! Besides, it isn't every day folks go to Moscow with a report."

"Look here.... I don't need anything except food for the journey," Alexei said, deeply moved by his comrades' solicitude. "Two or three days and I'll be in Moscow. As for Batmanov, Zalkind and Beridze, you give them back their rations. I'm awfully grateful, but I'll manage without...."

Liberman eyed him pityingly.

"H'm what an unselfish comrade! You've got a father and mother, haven't you? Did you ever think what a winter they've lived through? I've heard you've got a wife too? D'you mean to come home with empty hands and sit down to their rations? No fear, we're not going to let you compromise this splendid organization. I'm giving you a gift for your wife—a posh box of chocolates, prewar standard! I've got several pairs of nice shoes in my warehouse, but there, you probably don't even know her size. Do you?"

"I don't!" Alexei confessed with a laugh.

He thrilled with a sudden sense of happiness. Soon, very soon, he would see Zina, speak to her, hold her in his arms!

"You're at an age when a man only looks at a woman's face and misses the ankles," Liberman chuckled.

While he was holding forth, and Alexei, paying him scant attention, went on with his packing, a clerk came in with the rations and gifts.

"What, all that stuff? Why, you've gone crazy!" Alexei cried in dismay.

"Goodness gracious, what a difficult man!" Liberman said with a grimace of annoyance, as he pushed Alexei away from the suitcase with an air of finality.

A messenger appearing at this moment calling Alexei to the construction chief, Liberman bundled him out.

"Go on, go on," he said, "you leave this to me. I used to be a commercial traveller in the old days and I've got some experience with suitcases."

Batmanov greeted Alexei cordially and made him sit down next to him on the sofa.

"No need to be overly modest before the Moscovites," Batmanov said encouragingly, laying his hand on the engineer's shoulder.

"But don't get swell-headed either. Be just yourself, don't embroider, our truth's good enough in its natural state. Think of the construction job, not of yourself, stand up for it, don't allow anyone to pooh-pooh it, if such an attempt should be made. Defend yourself if you're attacked, but don't ride the high horse. In short, keep your head, show real dignity, as behooves a representative of a worthy collective. Ask for what we need, but within reasonable limits, without foolish greediness. They'll give us what they can themselves without haggling over it. You'll stop over at Rubezhansk for a day. Dudin and Pisarev want to see you. They'll probably give you some advice."

Batmanov was unable to conceal his anxiety, and there was an agitation in manner that was unusual in him. Listening to him eagerly, Alexei could not make out whether this was due to his chief's fears for his sake, or whether he was upset over something.

"You'll very likely have to make a report at the industrial department too—they usually arrange these things in grand style. There'll be a big audience of substantial people. See that you prepare yourself well. The important thing is not to plunge about. Be brief.

precise and firm. Don't be too involved, but don't over-simplify either. Just tell them what a difficult job ours is. Don't take too high a note, you'll crack your voice." Batmanov laughed. "In my young days when I was preparing to make my first serious report, an elder comrade instructed me: 'Don't climb too high, Vasya, or you may have to crawl down on your belly in front of everybody.'"

He paused, as though appraising Alexei.

"Another thing it's important to bear in mind.... Very important," Batmanov pursued. "We're quite sure that we're going to launch the pipe line on scheduled time. That time is very near now. But we are already thinking of the future, we want to know what we're going to do further, we want to prepare ourselves for it beforehand. Tell them pretty firmly on behalf of all of us that it isn't advisable to break up our collective and reshuffle it. It's strongly welded. It's more profitable to switch it over complete to another construction job, preferably of the same kind, but something bigger and more difficult. If they preserve the collective intact we'll build quicker and better at a new place—we've learnt something here. Tell them we'll build a second pipe line like this not in a

year, but in nine months. D'you follow me, friend Alexei?"

Batmanov rubbed his forehead.

"What was it I wanted to give you before you left?"

"Thanks, Liberman is fitting me out as if I were going on an expedition to the North Pole. It's rather awkward."

"Never mind, you take it all, it'll come in useful." Batmanov got up swiftly. "I've got it! It's a paper I've been keeping in my safe. We can set it going now."

Batmanov got out Alexei's application in which he had asked to be sent back to the army at the Moscow front. Batmanov ran over it with laughing eyes, wrote a superscription over it: "Permission to go to Moscow granted" and handed it to Alexei.

"You asked to go to Moscow? There you are!"

Alexei wanted to tear up the application, but on second thought he folded it carefully and put it away in his pocket. It was time for him to take his leave, but he tarried with a feeling that there was something more Batmanov wanted to say. But Batmanov was silent. Alexei looked up at him questioningly and held his hand out.

"Goodbye, Vasili Maximovich. I'll do my best."

Batmanov detained his hand in his. Finally he asked:

"What would you say if I asked a personal favour of you...."

The suddenness of it caught Alexei unawares, and he answered after a pause:

"I'll do anything you ask, Vasili Maximovich."

"I simply can't get in touch with Anna Ivanovna, my wife. The best thing would be to speak to her over the phone. But it's impossible from here, you know. I heard, though, that it can be done from Moscow. You might try. I've prepared a note for you indicating through whom and how you can try to get in touch with her." Batmanov sighed. "There's another way, still better. If the chiefs in Moscow sanctioned it, you could fly out to the Caucasus and see her personally. You could do it there and back in two days. You see, if I was going myself to Moscow I could get it arranged...."

"So will I!" Alexei said quickly.

Batmanov squeezed his hand, thrust the note into it and moved away to the window.

"Tell her—I miss her, that I'm waiting for

her. Perhaps she'll be able to come out. For at least a month. Tell her what you think of me, what you know about me. Tell her about Genka Pankov, that I've adopted him—that's the main thing. It's so important that we three should meet!..."

Deeply moved by the request and the poignant yearning with which it was expressed, Alexei on a sudden impulse made a step towards Batmanov. The latter, without turning from the window, raised a warning hand.

"Go, Alexei.... Good luck...."

Alexei turned in the doorway and said firmly:

"I'll bring her back with me, Vasili Maximovich!"

Alexei spent the rest of the day taking leave of his comrades and accepting various commissions and errands for Moscow. There were quite a lot of them. Muza Filipovna asked him to go out to her country house, and gave him a list of what he was to attend to there. Kobzev was sending a small parcel for his brother. Liberman gave him a letter from his wife which was to be posted to Leningrad via Moscow. Grechkin instructed him to buy toys for the children and supplied him with a long list. Tanya asked him to bring her

a present for her bearded Caucasian; and left the choice to him.

Alexei suddenly remembered that he had not seen Zhenya anywhere. It turned out that she had left for Section Four that morning. He was so distressed that he was ready to call the girl back. She had obviously run away on purpose.

Alexei had a last talk with his section over the selector. Beridze asked to be remembered to Zina.

Everyone mentioned Zina and asked to be remembered to her, as though they all knew her personally. It was very pleasant to Alexei.

"How unpractical you are, lad!" Karpov shouted. "Why didn't you think of it, I would have given you some sable skins for your wife."

"I have a gift for her, Ivan Lukich," Alexei answered. "Maxim Hojer has made me a present of a big bunch of squirrel skins for a hat and a collar."

The conversation was long over, but Alexei still stood listening to the faint confused hum of the works' line, broken by the jerky sounds of human voices.

The last night before his departure he spent at Zalkind's place. Mikhail Borisovich

carried him off straight from the office. Despite the late hour Paulina Yakovlevna was not yet in bed. She sat writing. Zalkind quickly reached her side before she had time to get up, put his arm round her and pressed his face to hers.

"Keeping busy?" he said gently, glancing at the sheets of paper lying on the table.

"It's an article for the town newspaper about a dining room for servicemen's children. They're in no hurry to take up our idea," Paulina explained, and shyly removed her husband's arm—she had only just noticed Alexei.

She shook hands with him and looked at him with a caress in her dark wistful eyes.

"I haven't seen Alexei Nikolayevich for six months. The time has not flown in vain. He looks more mature and much stronger than before. A man like that can be relied on in anything," she said, addressing Zalkind, as though continuing a conversation about Alexei.

"Yes, he won't let us down," Zalkind confirmed with conviction. "That's how it is, friend Alexei—at the front you got your baptism of fire, but here on this construction job the war seared you properly, and you've become an officer, a commander...."

"It seems to me you've changed too, Paulina Yakovlevna," Alexei said, confused by Zalkind's compliment, and gazing at her face which looked fuller and curiously serene and gentle.

She gave a soft and happy laugh and left the room. The engineer then understood—the Zalkind family were expecting a new arrival.

"You keep it a secret and say nothing. And I would have come back from Moscow without bringing a present," Alexei said reproachfully.

"Call that a secret—it stares you in the face," Zalkind said with a smile.

Alexei had looked forward to a long talk, but after supper Zalkind said firmly:

"And now to bed, my boy. You've got to be at the airdrome at six in the morning. You'll suffer for it if you don't have a good rest. You have no less than five days of flying ahead of you. I'll allow you as much time for talking as it'll take you to smoke a cigarette. Any questions to me?"

Alexei confided to him what he had not dared tell Batmanov—his fears as to whether he would be able to cope with his mission.

"Haven't I taken it on too rashly? It all happened so quickly. Batmanov should really have gone out himself."

"Don't worry about it. If there had been such an emergency six months ago we would have hardly sent you. Did you hear what Paulina said? True, I'm not going to encourage you by saying it's going to be easy at the industrial department and in the People's Commissariat. I imagine that not all the people there properly appreciate the situation out here. There'll probably be some who'll say about us: 'deep in the rear, peaceful conditions, they haven't geared themselves to war.' Of course, you should be able to distinguish fair criticism from unfair. And I want to tell you this—" Zalkind brought his face close to Alexei's. "It may be that you'll have to speak before big people. Very big people. I have a presentiment of it.... Yes.... As to your doubts, you'd better leave them here, don't take them with you. You know the job inside out, you've eaten a good deal of salt on it, as the saying goes. It's for you to tell them what the pipe line is like now!" Zalkind threw his arms wide. "And have a talk about the future too, about a new assignment. See how the land lies in that direction. They may not tell you straight, but they may throw out a hint."

They wished each other good night. Al-

exei was in bed already when Zalkind came out to him again half undressed.

"Didn't Batmanov ask you to do anything for him? I mean, about his wife? I thought he—"

"I'll bring her, Mikhail Borisovich, you'll see."

... The hours passed one by one, dawn was nigh, but Kovshov did not sleep. He thought of Batmanov's and Zalkind's instructions and of how he would fulfil his mission. But dominating all these thoughts, like the highest voice in a chorus, ran the thought of his meeting with Zina.. "Ought I to send her a telegram?" he asked himself, and decided: "No, better not. She'll wait and worry. I'll come down on her suddenly..."

The next morning Alexei and Zalkind rose with the sun and bestirred themselves. The car that was to drive them to the airfield had not yet arrived, and Zalkind proposed going out to meet it.

A rain had passed in the night. The sky was shining bright. The blue distances stood out clearly in the limpid air. The rain-washed grass was emerald green, and big rain-

drops gleamed on the leaves and pine needles. The dreamy morning stillness was broken only by the twittering of the birds in the front gardens and the hollow echo of Zalkind's and Alexei's steps on the wooden sidewalk. The Party organizer greedily drank in the fragrant resinous air.

"You know what I was thinking just now, Alexei," Zalkind said. "This unexpected trip to Moscow is like a reward. You have earned it by good work, by not shirking difficulties, by putting all your soul into the job."

He glanced at Kovshov's grave face and, laying his hand on the young man's shoulder, went on in a different tone.

"The trouble is you'll forget about us in Moscow, my dear boy. Your heart's there already, and it's only the perishable clay that's tramping alongside me through the streets of dismal Novinsk."

"No, it's impossible to forget Novinsk!" Alexei said fervently. "Falling in with your mood I could say that half of my heart remains here, and the other half that's going to Moscow feels a bit sad...."

A motorcar swept out from a bend in the road ahead of them. The driver pulled up

sharply when he spotted them. Grechkin lolled in the back with Kovshov's suitcases.

"Zhenya's been looking for you," Grechkin informed Alexei in a whisper.

"She's come back! Then why didn't you take her along?" Alexei said with chagrin. "I'll have to go after all without having said goodbye to her!"

"I wanted to take her, but she suddenly vanished into thin air. The girl was half crazy...."

They rode out onto the broad paved road that led to the factory district and the air-drome. Alexei looked back at the big building of the head office and saw a girl in a white dress run out of the building and dash in their direction, waving something red above her head. Alexei guessed—it was Zhenya. He asked the driver to stop the car.

"It's a good thing that I noticed you," Alexei said, going up to the girl and taking both her hands in his.

Zhenya was breathless from running and could not speak. She had grown noticeably thinner these last few days. Her face, tanned by the summer's sun, had become severer and lost its childish curves.

"I've been looking for you everywhere," Alexei said. "It's been such a rush these days that we haven't even had time to speak to each other...."

He invited her to see him off to the airfield. Zhenya refused.

"I don't want to go there. Let's say good-bye here. I ran away on purpose to avoid it." Her breath came in gasps, but now it was from stress of emotion. "I came to the section and nearly went mad. If Petya hadn't got me a car I'd have come running back on foot."

"I was upset not to find you here...."

"Wait a minute, Alexei, don't speak. I want to tell you—I cursed myself.... I know it was wrong of me to love you! You'll never love me, you can't. Then I thought we could be friends. Only friends! And when I started thinking of where you were going, whom you were going to—I simply couldn't bear it.... I know it's stupid of me, but I can't help it!"

The car on the road began to hoot. Zalkind was reminding him it was time to hurry, they might miss the plane.

Zhenya said hurriedly :

"Go, you'll be late.... Don't worry about me. I'll get over it. I've almost got over it

already! Your friendship is dear to me, Alexei. And you are dear to me yourself. I don't want to lose you altogether, I couldn't stand the thought of your passing out of my life! Go, go, dear.... I wish you luck. And joy, the greatest of joy...."

She darted impulsively to Alexei, wanting to embrace him, then stopped with upraised arms, and gazed hungrily into his face through a blinding mist of tears.

He drew her towards him simply, with a newborn sense of freedom and kissed her. Zhenya turned and ran away, waving her red kerchief.

... The plane gained altitude, and the big town, the squares and rectangles of its blocks swiftly diminished in size. The mirrorlike sheen of the Adun was left far behind. The dense tangle of the trees, merging into a dark-green mass, sailed past under the wings of the plane.

Kovshov gazed out eagerly, and the scenes of the past year seemed to flash by him. It had been a hard year, a very hard year. But it had not been lived in vain. He had found here, far from his native Moscow, something that had come to be as precious to him as life itself.

The taiga below was suddenly cut through by a lane with two silver threads of railway tracks. A railway station, reduced to the size of a matchbox, flashed backwards. Alexei remembered having flown over the construction line several days before, and the amazing scope of it had struck him. Now he thought with a thrill—in comparison with the whole country our tremendous pipe line is also no bigger than a matchbox.

He almost physically sensed the immensity of his country and of everything that was taking place on its boundless spaces. He experienced such a sense of exultation that he could have sung with sheer joy. Never before had he, Alexei Kovshov, been so keenly, so palpably conscious, aware of his place in the life of his great Homeland, in her titanic struggle for the future.

T H E E N D

