

THE THAW

Ilya Ehrenburg

THE THAW

HARVILL LONDON

PUBLISHED BY
THE HARVILL PRESS LIMITED
23 LOWER BELGRAVE STREET
LONDON, S.W.1

1955

Reprinted March 1955

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
THE CHISWICK PRESS
NEW SOUTHGATE
N. 11

CHECKED

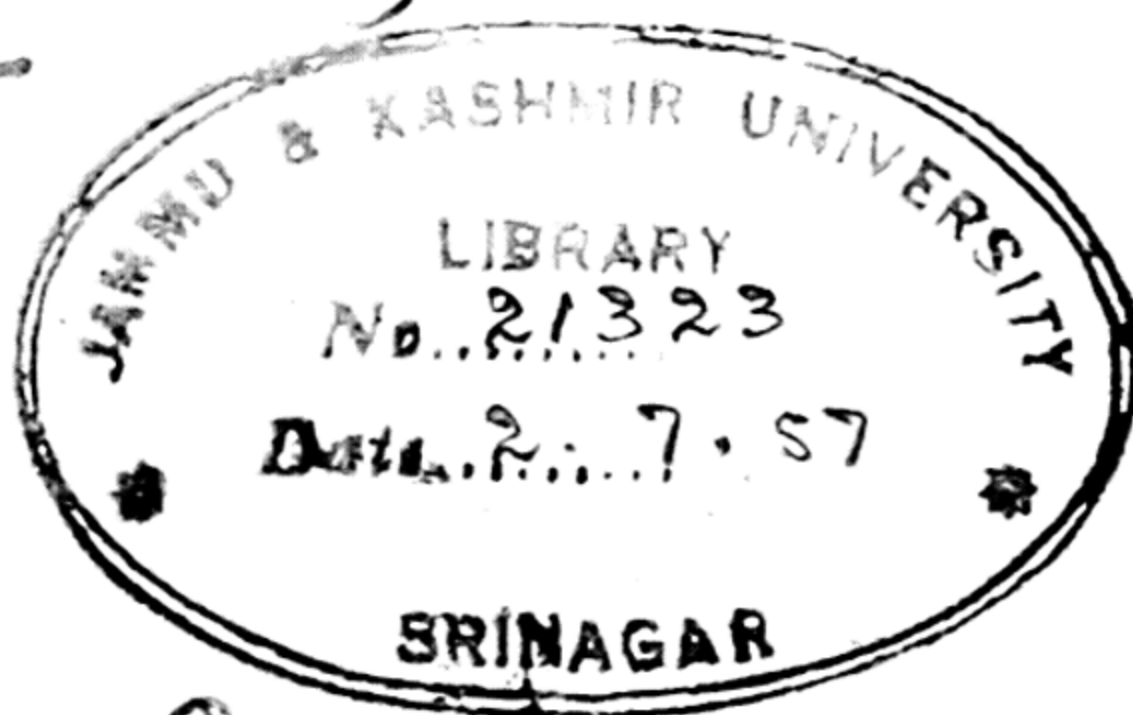
4

Translated by Manya Harari

F

Ehr 7

ST-82



Py

8

All rights in this translation reserved



ALLAMA IQBAL LIBRARY



The Russian text first published

in volume form by

SOVIETSKY PISSATEL, MOSCOW, 1954

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

In Russian a person may be addressed (or referred to) by his surname (e.g., Juravliov), his first name (Ivan), the diminutive of his first name (Vanya), or his name and patronymic (Ivan Vassilievich). For the convenience of the English reader, the main characters in the novel and those whose names appear in several forms are listed below:—

Koroteyev, Dmitry, Dmitry Sergeyevich,
engineer

Juravliov, Ivan, Vanya, Ivan Vassilievich, factory
director

Lena, Elena Borissovna, his wife

Shura, their daughter

Kalashnikova, Antonina Pavlovna, Lena's mother

Pukhov, Andrey, Andrey Ivanovich, school-
teacher

Nadejda, Nadya, Nadejda Yegorovna, his wife

Sonya, their daughter, a student

Volodya, Vladimir Andreyevich, their son,
painter

Savchenko, Grisha, engineer

Orlova, Tanechka, actress

Sherer, Vera, Vera Grigorievna, doctor

Saburov, painter

Glasha, Glafira Antonovna, his wife

THE THAW

Sokolovsky, Evgeny Vladimirovich, head
designer

Maya Balabanova, his former wife

Masha, Mary Vandervelde, their daughter

Yegorov, Pavel Konstantinovich, chief designer

It should also be noted that surnames ending in 'ov' take 'a' in the feminine, e.g., Chijov, Chijova.

Notes to the text will be found at the end of the book.

I

THE Librarian felt nervous, her spectacles had slipped down her nose and her pepper and salt curls danced about. She announced: 'I call on Comrade Brainin to speak next. Comrade Koroteyev will speak after him.'

Dmitry Koroteyev slightly raised his thin dark eyebrows in an expression of surprise; yet he knew that he would have to speak at the readers' meeting; the Librarian had asked him well in advance and he had accepted.

Everybody at the factory treated Koroteyev with respect. The Director, Ivan Juravliov, had recently admitted to the Secretary of the Party Town Committee that without him the release of the new precision-cutting tools would have had to be put off to the following quarter. Nor was Dmitry valued only as a brilliant engineer—people were impressed by his many-sided learning, his intelligence and his modesty. Even Chief Designer Sokolovsky, who was known for his sharp tongue, never said a word against him. As for the Librarian who had had a discussion with him about literature, she told everyone: 'His feeling for Chekhov is unique.' It was evident that the readers' meeting, for which she had

THE THAW

worked over a month like a schoolgirl for a stiff examination, could not possibly be held without him.

Engineer Brainin spread a heap of papers on the table. He spoke too fast, as though frightened of not having enough time, with painful hesitations while he put on his spectacles and searched among his notes.

'In spite of the defects, rightly pointed out by those who have preceded me, the novel has, so to speak, a great educational significance. Why did the agronomist Zubtzov fail in his afforestation scheme? The author has, so to speak, posed the problem correctly—Zubtzov under-estimated the significance of criticism and self-criticism. It is true, of course, that he could have had the help of the Secretary of the Party Organization, Shebalin, but the author has clearly shown the results of neglecting the principle of collective leadership. If the author takes account of criticism and alters certain incidents, the novel will be worthy, so to speak, of inclusion in the golden treasury of our literature.'

The club was crowded, there were even people standing in the gangways and against the doors. The book chosen for discussion, a locally published novel by a young author, had made a stir. But the audience was worn out by Brainin's long quotations, his 'so-to-speaks' and his dreary bureaucratic

voice. Everybody brightened up when the Librarian announced:

'I call on Comrade Koroteyev. Comrade Stolyarova will speak after him.'

Dmitry spoke well and was listened to attentively, but the Librarian frowned: it was not like this that she had heard him speak of Chekhov. Why did he attack Zubtzov? You could see he did not like the novel, yet he was praising it. The characters of Shebalin, the conceited Secretary, and of Fedorova, the honest young Communist, were realistic and Zubtzov himself was quite alive.

'Frankly, what I didn't like at all were the author's revelations about his hero's private life. To begin with, the incident he describes is improbable; there is nothing typical about it. Are we really to believe that the agronomist, an over-confident but honest man, falls in love with the wife of his colleague, an empty-headed flirt who has nothing in common with him spiritually? It seems to me that here the author searched for nothing but a cheap effect. Surely our Soviet people are more honest and more responsible than he has made them out to be. This love affair might have been lifted straight out of the pages of some bourgeois novel.'

He received prolonged applause. There were those who liked his wit: he had spoken caustically of young authors commissioned to write a creative work, who arrived at the prescribed place, whipped

THE THAW

out their notebooks, briefly questioned all of a dozen inhabitants and then declared that they had 'collected enough material for a novel'; others were flattered at the thought of being more high-minded than the hero of the story; still others applauded Koroteyev because he was 'a clever fellow'.

'He trounced him properly, there's no doubt about it,' said Juravliov loudly to the Librarian (he was sitting in the praesidium); she said nothing.

Juravliov's wife, Lena, a schoolteacher, was perhaps the only one who had not clapped. 'Lena has to be out of step,' sighed her husband.

Dmitry had sat down and was thinking confusedly: 'I must be getting 'flu. Nuisance . . . with Brainin's project on my hands . . . I shouldn't have spoken. Only fed them the old platitudes.' His head was aching. The room was stuffy.

He had not been listening to Katya Stolyarova and was startled by the applause which interrupted her. He knew Katya from the factory. She was a cheerful girl with a white skin and flaxen hair, no eyebrows, and a permanent expression of delighted astonishment at life. He forced himself to listen:

'I don't follow Comrade Koroteyev. I wouldn't say the novel was a classic. It isn't *Anna Karenina*. But it holds your interest and I don't see what bourgeois novels have to do with it. The way I look at it, a human being has a heart, and so he suffers. What's wrong with that? I'll say straight out, I

myself have had such moments in my life . . . The book grips you, it's no good just brushing it aside.'

Dmitry thought: 'Who would have imagined that giggling little Katya has had time for tragedy? "A human being has a heart".' All at once he ceased to listen, ceased to see the room, the Librarian, the books, the spiky, grey-brown potted palm under the window; he gazed at Lena and all the torment of the past few months revived in him. Lena had not once looked at him; he longed to meet her glance and was afraid of it. That was how it was between them nowadays. And yet last summer they had talked, joked, argued unconstrainedly. He had often visited the Juravliovs; in his heart he did not like Ivan, he thought him too complacent; he went because he found it interesting to talk to Lena. She was intelligent; Dmitry had not met her like in Moscow. Of course, here, in this provincial town, there was less bustle, people had more time to read, to think; yet even here, Lena was an exception; you could feel that she had depth. It was even difficult to understand how she could live with Juravliov; yet they seemed to be on friendly terms, and they had a daughter who was five years old.

In those days Dmitry had known a peaceful pleasure in Lena's looks. Savchenko, a young engineer, once said to him: 'She is a real beauty.' Dmitry shook his head: 'No, but her face is memorable.' She had gold-flecked hair which turned red

THE THAW

in sunlight, and green eyes; their expression was elusive, at times teasing, at others sad, but most often incomprehensible. Sometimes he felt, another moment and she would vanish, be caught up and lost in the dusty slanting ray of indoor sun.

'How good it was in those days,' thought Dmitry. He came out into the street. 'Whew! What a snow-storm!' Yet earlier, when he was going to the club, it had been calm and fine.

He walked half-consciously, without a thought of the readers' meeting or of his speech, his head filled with Lena, the havoc in his life, the feverish dreams of the past few weeks, the helplessness he had never known before. His friends thought of him as a lucky fellow for whom everything worked out right, and indeed in the past two years he had gained universal recognition. But there were other years behind him. He was thirty-five and he had not been often spoiled by life. He had had to struggle. He had a strong will; you could tell it from his long, dry face with its domed forehead, his grey eyes, which could be either cold or gently condescending, and the stubborn lines about the mouth.

Dmitry was in the tenth grade at school when he had to face his first great trial: in the autumn of 1936, his stepfather was arrested. The following morning, outside his house he saw his best friend Misha Gribov and called out to him; he would have

THE THAW

liked to share his grief, to ask advice; but Misha grimly pursed his lips without a word and crossed to the other side. A few days later, Dmitry was expelled from the Comsomol. His mother wept: 'What has it to do with you?' He comforted her: 'You mustn't think of it like that. This is just an individual case.' He went into a factory. Neither embittered nor shut in, he made new friends, he was contented with his work, and at night he studied, saying to his mother: 'You'll see, one of these days I'll go to the University.'

A few years later, in stifling August weather, he was marching, gloomy but not disheartened, across the steppe; his division was in retreat. He happened to be the one on whom the General chose to vent his rage, cursing him for a coward and threatening him with court martial; Dmitry calmly told his friends: 'Good thing he's cursing, means we'll be all right.' A little later he was wounded in the shoulder; he spent six months in hospital, then went back to the front and stayed for the duration. He fell in love with Natasha, a signals officer. Not until Breslau did he discover that she also loved him. She told him: 'You look so cold, I was even frightened of you; but your heart I knew at once.' He dreamt of happiness after the war; but Natasha died senselessly—a mine exploded in a Leipzig street on the tenth of May, when nobody was any longer thinking about death. Steadfastly he lived

THE THAW

down his sorrow, letting no one guess what he was going through. Only much later, when his mother asked him: 'Why don't you get married? You're over thirty; when I'm gone there won't be anybody to look after you,' he confessed: 'I lost my happiness in the war, Mother. Now marriage doesn't even enter my head.'

He had one remedy against desperation—work. He took a course in machine construction. His thesis was well received and there was a plan to keep him at the Institute, but somebody pulled strings and the post was given to another man; Dmitry was sent off to a factory in the Volga district. This was where he suddenly became the clever fellow who was destined to succeed in everything. Juravliov, normally distrustful of young people, recognized his gifts at once. He was elected to the Town Soviet where he often spoke. The workers trusted him and talked to him freely, they looked upon him as an honest man, unspoilt by his position.

And what had happened to him now? Why had he lost his self-possession? Why was he striding bleakly through the snowstorm, his head filled with thoughts of Lena?—Not thoughts even, rather a feeling that he could never oust her from his life. How stupidly it had all worked out, how childishly. And how out of keeping with his past.

The wind blew, the snow was blinding, deafening. There was nobody about, yet Dmitry stopped

THE THAW

suddenly, slightly raised his eyebrows and burst out laughing. 'Isn't it comical!' he thought. 'I get up on the platform and calmly prove that these things simply don't exist. The novelist thought up Zubtzov, made him fall in love with his friend's wife, shamed him publicly and, to tie up the ends, sent him to the Arctic. Naturally Koroteyev can't put up with that! "It's a cheap effect, it isn't typical." Well, well, just bear that in mind, Dmitry Sergeyevich, people like yourself and that Zubtzov just don't exist. You're inventions, puppets, there simply aren't any such people.'

'What must Lena be thinking now? That I'm a bureaucrat? A cheap liar? She must guess, whoever else doesn't. Women understand these things. I hardly dared say anything to Natasha almost till the end, and yet she told me afterwards: "I knew right from the beginning. At Soja—remember?—there was an air raid but you insisted on shaving—that was when I guessed." I'm all right at sorting out machines, but when it comes to feelings . . . Surely Lena must be laughing at me.'

'But what's the good of thinking of it? Lena is Juravliov's wife, our paths are different. This nonsense can be dealt with. But why ever did I say: "Such a thing can't happen"? I don't know. Certainly not to mislead. After all, my feelings are my own affair, my private business. A book is different, that's a public matter. Why write about

THE THAW

such things? They can't help anyone. Zubtzov messing up his job, that's something the reader can get hold of, he can draw conclusions from it that are useful to himself. But what Zubtzov feels about a colleague's wife—that's simply an absurd survival. Love is a cement—everybody says it is, but this is a corrosive. I was right in what I said. That's not the trouble. The point is that I must take myself in hand.'

Near the bright round street-lamp the snow was like a flock of startled or excited birds, fluttering up and falling and fluttering up again. Underneath stood a pair of lovers lost in an embrace. Was it perhaps Katya, thought Dmitry. The girl gave an exclamation and they walked on. Dmitry smiled. 'Katya or another . . . That was how Natasha and I wandered in that park outside Berlin. There was a grey lake in it, and water lilies, and once the Major swooped down on us . . . Fine, so long as you are young. I must get this nonsense out of my head, once and for all.'

The streets were empty, everybody had gone home—whether they had sat in judgment on Zubtzov, or been to see *The Lady Vanishes*, or heard the lecture on cattle breeding or spent the evening visiting their friends. The new houses, dreary in daytime, now looked like a theatrical décor, their golden windows struggling with the snow. Inside them there were people—sleeping, quarrelling, suffering, rejoicing—there was every kind of thing in

THE THAW

life. But all that was secondary, the important thing was work.

Feeling that only work could save him, he hurried on and, as he struck matches on the darkened stairs, thought happily: 'Now I'll settle down to Brainin's project.' He spread the drawings on the table. The heating was full on, he couldn't breathe. He threw open the casement, the snow whirled in. 'Must be getting 'flu . . . But perhaps that's also nonsense? Must work.'

Usually, when he worked, he sat motionless; he could sit like that through half the night. But now he kept shifting restlessly, leaning back, moving the position of the ashtray or the lamp, getting up and striding up and down, his big shadow like a frightened stranger, darting over the whitewashed walls.

'Brainin is right, a lot depends on the welding; the danger is the warping. Tomorrow I'll talk it over with Juravliov. Now they will be having tea, Lena will say: "Koroteyev spoke like a stuffy clerk." She'll laugh, and he'll defend me: "Novels aren't in his line, but then he's all right at his work, that's the important thing." Quite right, Ivan Vassilievich, it's work that matters. When Lena laughs her eyes darken, sometimes when she laughs her eyes are sad . . . Rubbish! Must tell Juravliov about the reduction gear . . .'

At five he told himself contentedly: 'With these

THE THAW

modifications, Brainin's project can be recommended . . . Not worth going to bed now. But to stay awake is difficult—all that nonsense will crawl back into my head. Shall I put down the modifications in the form of an official note? That will make it more convincing to Juravliov, and it will kill an hour. . . .'

When he went out, the snow was still drifting but the streets had come to life, people were hurrying to their work. The street lamp shone as brightly, the same white birds fluttered, only the lovers were no longer there. Snatches of conversation were flung at him:

'A wonderful film, I couldn't sleep all night.'

'Tell Yegorov, he'll let you go, silly to wangle sick leave . . .'

' . . . such crowds, you can't get through . . . '

Dmitry was thinking: 'What nonsense it all is! And yet how it sticks! Will it ever leave me? I've read about it in books, seems you have to live it.' Unexpectedly he smiled: 'It's absurd, but I think I'm happy.'

II

AT home, after the readers' meeting, Lena laid the table and went into the kitchen to fetch the tea and the cold cutlets left for supper. She managed to talk, yet Ivan noticed that she was not herself. Fortunately, instead of asking her straight out what was the matter, he suggested: 'Worrying about the bad marks you handed out today?' Relieved, she answered: 'Yes.'

Ivan picked up his newspaper (he had not had time to look at it in the morning); reading as he ate, he commented from time to time: 'Nikiforov got a proper dressing-down', or: 'There's a shortage of compressors, no doubt about it.' Lena hastily agreed.

She was glad that he was reading. It gave her time to think. She had just realized that what had happened to her was irreparable. It was terrible to have to live through such a thing alone.

As a student Lena had had many friends but nowadays she at times felt lonely. There seemed nobody at the factory for her to talk to. She felt drawn to people with more experience of life than she had (she laughed at it—a teacher and still wanting to be a pupil!). At the school, until a year ago,

THE THAW

there had been Pukhov who was one of the most remarkable people in the town. An old Bolshevik who had fought in the Civil War and a gifted schoolmaster, he was universally respected. Lena looked upon him as her saviour. He had guided her in her work and comforted her when at first she was bewildered by the noisy, self-willed children. He had treated her as his own daughter and she had come to rely upon him more and more; but last winter he had fallen ill; the doctors had diagnosed *angina pectoris* and forbidden him to go on working. He was better now and sometimes visited the school—he could not bear to keep away—but Lena thought it wrong to bother him with her difficulties. She told herself crossly, she was not a little girl, she would soon be thirty, it was time she stood on her own feet. All the same, she found it hard to have nobody with whom to talk things over.

Another of her friends was Doctor Vera Sherer. She had met her just about the time Pukhov fell ill. She was never to forget that meeting for it was that day she realized that her husband was a stranger to her; after it she cried all night. Lena was attracted to Vera but she saw her seldom; Vera was always busy. And she was locked up in herself. She had lost her husband in the War; she told Lena: 'It can never work a second time.' It was embarrassing to intrude on her—she had her own sorrow.

With Dmitry Koroteyev Lena had made friends

THE THAW

at once. He told her stories of the War, of Germany, of his friends; he made them seem alive, Lena felt she knew them. They argued over books. She could not believe in Voropayev's luck, Dmitry thought it was convincing. He was fond of Listopad, Lena thought him soulless. Of Grossman's novel Dmitry said: 'He writes honestly about the War, that's exactly how it was, only his heroes reason too much, that's why sometimes you can't believe in them.' She laughed: 'As though you didn't reason!' He blushed and muttered: 'We mustn't be personal. . . . I expect I've bored you . . .'

He never told her anything of Natasha or of his childhood, but she felt that he was not as 'lucky' as her husband thought him. She guessed in him an inward strength and a profound though hidden restlessness; to her this was a real person.

At the time of the Korean Armistice she had heard him read a paper; it dealt competently with the failure of the strategy of the United States and the conclusions to be drawn from it: this war had ended differently from the war in Spain, the aggressors would have to think again and the friends of peace the world over would raise their heads. As they came out of the club together, Dmitry had said to her: 'At our Institute there was a Korean girl—a tiny little thing, like a child . . . I keep thinking of her . . . She had such a wonderful smile. Isn't it wonderful that she can smile again, after all

THE THAW

they've been through . . .' Lena wondered if perhaps she was the only one who knew the whole of him—both the Dmitry who had read the paper and the one who told her of the Korean girl.

But there were also things she could not understand in him. One day she told him of a tenth-grade girl, Popova, who had only just escaped disaster. 'Can you believe it, they chucked her out of the Comsomol. Never heard her out, never sorted it out properly. In the end the Party Town Committee intervened and she was reinstated. But can you imagine what it means to go through this at seventeen? A real tragedy. Fomin's fault, and he hasn't ever been reprimanded. Isn't it intolerable!' She had expected Dmitry to agree with her, but he said nothing. He seemed to be remembering something. Had it been her husband, she would have thought: 'He's frightened.' But Dmitry she respected; she told herself that there were still a lot of things in life that were beyond her.

Imperceptibly she became attached to him. If he stayed away she missed him and asked her husband: 'Are you sure he isn't ill?' That was last summer, when her relationship with him still seemed good, straightforward, simple. Then he went on holiday to the Caucasus. He came back looking so gloomy that she wondered: 'Did he meet a girl he liked and then it came to nothing?' He began avoiding her. Twice she met him in the street; he said he had a

THE THAW

lot of work but he would be sure to drop in soon, sure to. She made wild guesses at what was keeping him away and suddenly caught herself wondering: 'Why am I thinking of him such a lot? Can I be in love with him?' She reassured herself at once: at her age people didn't do such silly things. It was simply that there were so few people who were interesting to talk to, and after all, they had been good friends.

She had been unwilling to go to the readers' meeting; it bored her; there would be speeches read from notes, quotations from reviews and endless summaries of the story. But Ivan had insisted that she must go, the Secretary of the Town Committee would be there. 'Everybody is going. What's the point of making silly demonstrations?' Besides, she would be interested—the Librarian had said that Koroteyev would be speaking. Lena lost her temper: 'As if I cared.' Ivan churckled: Women! One day almost hero-worshipping Koroteyev and not caring to listen to his speech the next!

Lena had no idea of what that evening was to mean to her.

As soon as Dmitry began to speak she longed to run out of the room or to hide her face . . . Wasn't it to her that he was saying this? He had decided to explain why he had stayed away. 'Now it's all quite clear. He considers me an empty-headed flirt like the heroine of that novel. He has made up his mind

THE THAW

I am in love with him, and now he's lecturing me! He is a decent man, he has other things to think about, and anyway I must understand that this sort of thing simply doesn't happen. It's a lesson to me. But why does he have to say it publicly? Couldn't he have come and told me? He has weighed it up—this way it's more insulting, he wants to make quite sure that I'll stop pestering him. He needn't worry. He'll never see me again.'

Afterwards, when they went out into the snow-storm and Ivan wanted to call a taxi, she insisted on walking home, she thought the walk would do her good. All the way she seethed with indignation against Dmitry. But as she came into the house, suddenly she understood: there was no reason for her to be angry or indignant, the trouble was in herself. Only now did the realization come to her that she loved Dmitry, that all these weeks his absence had been a torment to her, that there was to be no happiness for her, no peace of mind. She hurried into the kitchen. The kettle took a long time to boil and she could grieve a little without feeling Ivan's puzzled eyes on her. She was no longer angry. Dmitry had been right. He had to warn her, the form in which he did it was immaterial. He had only done his duty. He had seen what she had failed to understand and he had made a clean break. Now she had to go on living. But how?

THE THAW

She served supper in the dining room and sat watching Ivan eating while she pretended to drink tea. Lucky that he was reading and that the article was a page long . . . She asked herself in astonishment: 'Can this really be my husband?'

Lena met Ivan one evening at her Institute when the students had put on a play. She was finishing her teacher's course and he had recently arrived in town; he said that he was never happier than among young people and often visited the Institute. Lena had a small part in the play (she wasn't a good actress) but afterwards, when there was dancing, Ivan asked her to dance with him. They danced and talked together all the evening and at the end of it he saw her to her hostel.

This had been six years ago. Since then Ivan had greatly changed. He was stout, flabby, loose cheeked and a little bald (people thought of him as middle-aged, though he was only thirty-seven), his eyes which had been dreamy were now calm and confident, his voice was peremptory, and his laugh was such that nobody felt like laughing with him. Everything in him had changed.

Or did it only seem so to his wife? In the beginning he had attracted her by his cheerful zest for life, his optimism; he was never downcast; even in the darkest moments he always said there must be some way out. In this he was unchanged, but

THE THAW

now it angered her. A few days before, Yegorov, the Chief Engineer, had come in looking as white as linen and told them, hardly able to control his voice, that his wife had cancer. Lena forced herself not to cry and Ivan said: 'You mustn't worry. She'll get better. Medicine works miracles these days.' And a moment later he was asking: 'Tell me, Pavel Konstantinovich, how are the machines for Stalingrad, what's the position? This is the third time they've been on to me about them.'

There was another incident she could not forget. Last summer, the Secretary of the Town Committee had told him in front of her that the dilapidated hovels and hutments of the workers were a disgrace; the building fund had been approved a year ago, and what had it been used for? 'The new precision casting bay', said Ivan unruffled, 'was an absolute necessity. Without it we could never have fulfilled the quota, we'd have disgraced ourselves, there's no doubt about it. Weren't you the first to clap us on the back because our output was sixteen per cent above the target? As for the houses, don't worry, they'll outlast us all. I've seen worse in Moscow.'

'Nothing upsets him,' Lena thought. 'He has one answer to everything—"We'll get by." He's selfish all through.'

In his youth, his light, good-tempered gaiety had given him charm, but this had left him with the

THE THAW

passing of the years. He had had his troubles in his work. Three years ago, there had been rumours that he would lose his job; twice he had had to go to Moscow. He had got by. But perhaps it was because of this that he smiled less often? Or did he now feel crushed by his responsibilities? Or had he simply put on weight? Though even now he brightened up when he was talking of multiple lathes, or of the welcome he had had in Moscow, or of Nikiforov who had tried to ruin him and had himself got into trouble. Lena thought this only smugness. In reality he was devoted to his factory and proud of it. He felt at moments that the factory and he were one—if he received a friendly handshake it seemed to him it was a welcome for the whole collective and if the output were below the target, it was his, Ivan's, personal misfortune.

He had one hobby; going off to fish on Sunday mornings, or arguing with Khitrov about the bait, he suddenly looked seventeen. It got on Lena's nerves. Couldn't he read a book or go and see a play? No, his greatest joy was to sit for hours gazing at his float.

Nor could Lena understand his friendship with Khitrov. Competent at his work and comfortably married, Khitrov was pink and fat like a grown-up baby, and had a way of telling the same funny story for the hundredth time, laughing in a pleasant bass. He had an unshakable belief in Ivan's brains and in

THE THAW

his lucky star. Together they fished, or they went shooting, or played draughts over a cosy pint. Ivan remarked: 'He knows his onions.' Sokolovsky, the Chief Designer, commented nastily: 'Khitrov never went near a river, now he swears that he's been keen on fishing all his life. He even says, "It's harder to catch a pike than a gudgeon, no doubt about it".' Knitrov disgusted Lena, she thought he was a lickspittle and asked Ivan crossly: 'How can you talk to such a yes-man?' He shrugged his shoulders: 'Khitrov is no fool. Sometimes he has the most original ideas. You always judge things lightly, you don't know him.'

Ivan was fond of her and of their little girl, Lena was sure of that; but it was not of such a feeling she had dreamed when she decided to become his wife. He thought her high-falutin'. He mocked: 'They say in the old days the cabby used to ask a rouble and accept ten copecks. That's like you. You make demands on life. But life is simpler. And harder.'

In their first years together, Lena had tried discussing love, the aim of life, what happiness is made of. He would smile tenderly but always cut the conversation short, saying he had work to do. He considered her a good wife; he was happy with her. True, she had a weakness, she always wanted him to talk about his feelings, but a woman might have worse defects than that.

THE THAW

Ivan was pleased when she made friends with Koroteyev. He felt no jealousy: Lena was sensible, she simply wanted somebody to talk to, perhaps even to flirt with, that was natural. He himself had neither time nor talent for keeping her amused. Dmitry was sound enough, just fond of showing off his knowledge, it flattered him to have Lena listening to him open-mouthed.

When Dmitry ceased to come, Ivan was puzzled. Could Lena have got sick of him—of such a clever fellow? He thought: 'The trouble is, she is too fond of me, no doubt about it.'

Lena had made it a condition of their marriage that she would go on teaching. It was not to become a housekeeper that she had taken her degree. She found her work enthralling and tried to share her passion for it with Ivan, showing him the children's essays, going into raptures over old Pukhov, complaining of the headmaster. Ivan said: 'Do you think I haven't enough troubles of my own? Of course, teaching is not an easy job. But a factory isn't a small thing either.'

About his work opinions were divided. There were those who said he was just a formalist and a re-insurer¹; if the factory had got on, it was thanks to Dmitry, Yegorov, Sokolovsky, Brainin: Ivan had only hindered them. Others said he was a good administrator, an honest man and that this mattered more than anything. Nobody put any passion

THE THAW

into defending or attacking him; he did not arouse strong feelings.

Lena thought him self-assured, and yet he often lacked self-confidence; but he never shared his doubts with his assistants, he believed that the responsibility should rest on him alone. Dmitry thought Ivan's reports to the Ministry were too rosy. Ivan shrugged his shoulders—Dmitry might be good at his machines but of the mysteries of management he understood nothing. Ivan knew what would happen if he were to mention his difficulties to Moscow. They would only frown up there and say: 'Juravliov is panicky.' People liked honey and if they were served with pepper instead it made them cross. He told his wife: 'You have to know how to say nothing.' To Lena this was cowardice. And yet Ivan had served three years in the army, he had fought in the defence of Rjev at the hardest moment and was remembered by his comrades as a man of courage. Talking about the War, he said to Lena: 'Yes, you could be killed, no doubt about it. But, then, to die, that's nothing much. It's not as if you were put on the carpet and told: "Now give an account of yourself"; that's a different kettle of fish.'

Whatever his opponent said, the factory was in good standing—not a single stoppage in six years. True, the Deputy Head of the Ministry had told him that in using the money earmarked for the

THE THAW

workers' dwellings to build the foundry he had acted outside the law, but Ivan thought: 'That's only for form's sake. The Ministry, like myself, is interested above all in output.' Naturally he hastened to reassure the Deputy—all the workers had their proper allocation of space, there was nothing catastrophic in the situation; in any case, preparations were in hand for building three new blocks of flats. Indeed, plans and estimates were passed by the New Year, but Ivan wasn't in a hurry to start building. After the Plenary Session of the C.P. Central Committee, Sibirtzev, the Chairman of the Works Committee, asked him cautiously: 'Have you seen, Ivan Vassilievich, what the papers say? . . . They think it's high time the workers were given their allocation of space.' 'They'll get it,' replied Ivan, but he gave no further thought to Sibirtzev's words. Ivan was not a fool, but his mind was not remarkable for its suppleness.

That autumn *Izvestia* had published an article about the factory. Ivan had said sternly to the correspondent: 'No point in writing about me. I've given you the output figures—stress production. You might mention Koroteyev, he has deserved it. Above all, interview the workers, here's the list.' All the same, the journalist had written up Ivan, 'one of those managers of Soviet industry in whom daring is combined with sober calculation and great experience.' The Chairman of the Town Executive

THE THAW

Committee telephoned to congratulate him. At the Eve of the Revolution celebrations of November 6th Ivan sat in the Praesidium next to the Regional Military Commander. 'Juravliov is on the up-and-up,' said the town.

No wonder that the artist, Volodya Pukhov (son of the old schoolmaster) who a year ago had returned from Moscow, was doing Ivan's portrait for the yearly exhibition. 'I only back winners,' Volodya liked to say. His reason for choosing Ivan was so that his subject should ensure his own success. In its review of the exhibition, the local paper would devote a column to Pukhov and the portrait would be bought by the museum. Ivan was represented wearing all his decorations and seated before a huge table on which stood the model of a machine. Lena, catching sight of the unfinished portrait, made a face—Ivan looked rather like a turkey cock.

It seemed to Lena that she saw right through her husband; in reality there was a lot in him she failed to see. Thus, he was genuinely upset at the death in agony of Yegorov's wife, even though he kept repeating cheerfully, almost until the last day: 'Don't worry, she'll get better.' In the same way, his expression darkened as he peered into the damp, bleak hovels sheltering his workers; they recalled his childhood to him—he came from a poor village in the Kaluga district. It saddened him that people lived in such conditions. But he reassured himself:

THE THAW

'The houses will last a while. And if we hadn't built the foundry we'd have been in a nice mess, no doubt about it. Anyway, the men aren't so badly off—you can't compare it with the way their fathers lived. Next year we'll build three new blocks.' He believed that if you said everything was all right, that in itself would make things better. 'The great thing is not to get demoralized. Yegorov must have wanted to be reassured when his wife was ill. That's the great secret—the less you look at the dark side, the less of it there will be.'

Once a fire broke out in the assembly shop. Ivan showed himself at his best; he kept his head and took all the necessary measures competently so that the fire was quickly dealt with. Afterwards, to make up for the loss of time, he worked a whole night-shift with the men, encouraging them by his presence. Talking of this event, which caused excitement throughout the factory, Dmitry said to Sokolovsky: 'Didn't Juravliov astonish you? Here's a man without the least initiative, yet he didn't lose his head.' Sokolovsky, who invariably made fun of the Director, now said thoughtfully: 'That's true. You know, gardeners talk about a dormant bud. It can stay dormant for years, but if you cut off the main shoot, suddenly it comes out. That's like Juravliov—he's a very ordinary bureaucrat, it needs a storm to wake him up.'

The turning point in Lena's attitude towards her

THE THAW

husband had come, not over Dmitry, but a year ago, over a conversation which had passed unnoticed by Ivan. That day their daughter, Shura, ran a temperature. It happened that the town children's doctor, Filimonov, was ill himself. Lena panicked; she was convinced Shura had pneumonia. She 'phoned Ivan and he suggested: 'Send to our own hospital for Dr. Sherer.' Vera Sherer came and said that it was ordinary 'flu, the child had nothing on her lungs. Lena was overjoyed, but in her agitation she insisted: 'Are you sure? Her breathing is so odd.' Vera unexpectedly lost her temper: 'If you don't trust me, why did you call me in?' Lena blushed: 'Forgive me, I don't know what I'm saying. Truly, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. This is awful!' Vera's eyes had filled with tears; she said quietly: 'It's you who must forgive me, it's my fault. My nerves are on edge. Sometimes people say such dreadful things . . . It's since the announcement . . .² It's very bad—a doctor shouldn't behave like this.' Lena blushed a still darker red. She took Vera home. From that day they became friends.

And it was also from that day that Lena despised her husband. He came home late, tired and hungry; he asked how Shura was and Lena told him of her conversation with Vera Sherer. Ivan said nothing. She insisted: 'But don't you think it's quite outrageous? What's it got to do with Sherer . . .?' Ivan said soothingly: 'Don't get so upset. I told you

THE THAW

to call her in myself, she's supposed to be very good, I've got nothing at all against her. Still, you've got to be careful who you trust, no doubt about it.'

Lena left the room without a word. Everything that had been seething in her suddenly boiled up. Sobbing, she kept repeating: 'And that man's my husband.'

Months later, after the fire, listening to Dmitry praising Ivan's conduct, she could hardly keep herself from crying out: 'If you only knew how cowardly he is, how heartless.'

When the newspapers announced the rehabilitation of the Kremlin doctors, Lena rushed immediately to the hospital, asked for Vera and threw herself into her arms.

That evening Ivan said yawning: 'Turns out they weren't guilty after all. So your Sherer needn't have upset herself.'

If she stayed with him, it was not from pity, though she knew he was attached to her, nor because the hardships frightened her—she had her job and could always make enough to keep herself and Shura. She stayed for Shura's sake. Shura loved her father; and he, too, became quite different when he played with her, younger, more light-hearted. How could she part them? 'It isn't Shura's fault,' she told herself. 'It's my fault. I chose him, now it's up to me to pay.'

She tried to tell herself that love was not so

THE THAW

necessary after all. She had her work, her friends, her daughter. These were not the times for personal drama. True, Ivan was selfish, cowardly, but he was not a traitor or a thief. And if she stayed, Shura would keep her father.

Her friendship with Dmitry had distracted her from her bitterness; and when he had ceased coming, she was consumed by her uncertainty and thus gave little thought to her husband. Outwardly, nothing had changed; she went on pouring out her husband's tea and asking him about the factory. She was convinced that she was living only for Shura and the school.

Only now, after the meeting at the club, did she understand that her heart was given to Dmitry. So little had she expected it that the knowledge stunned her. She sat wretchedly, waiting for Ivan to finish his last glass of tea.

Putting aside his paper, he said abruptly:

'Why didn't you like Koroteyev's speech? I thought it very good. Not that I have read the book, but he was right about the Soviet family, no doubt about it.'

She answered with unusual calm:

'I hardly listened. I told you I didn't want to go. I'm worried about the seventh-grade, the programme is overloaded and a lot of children can't keep up. You've finished? I'll go and look at Shura.'

The child was sleeping. She had thrown aside her

THE THAW

eiderdown. Lena covered her up and, sitting by her, burst into tears. Would Shura, too, have to go through this? 'It's easier for a man. Of course, I have my life, the school, the school-children. But if you knew how hard it was . . . Just to get through the day . . . Shura darling, what are we to do? I don't know, I just don't know.'

III

THE evening of the readers' meeting was also to be memorable in the family of the old schoolmaster, Andrey Pukhov, though none of them went to the club. His daughter Sonya had meant to go, but it was Andrey's birthday—he was 64—and his wife, Nadejda, said that whatever happened, they must give a party. For three days Andrey listened to Nadejda's lamentations—flour was scarce, there was not a turkey or a goose in any shop in town, and as though on purpose, eggs were unobtainable as well.

Andrey chuckled: that's what she was like, to hear her talk you'd think there would be nothing, yet the guests would eat so much that they could hardly get up from the table.

Nadejda wanted to invite her cousin and her husband, a contemporary of Andrey, the former headmaster now pensioned off, but Andrey said: 'Let's ask Sonya's and Volodya's friends, let them have a good time; you and I will enjoy ourselves looking at them.'

Andrey was sociable, he liked Brainin and the former headmaster and sat for hours listening to his wife's cousin talking about her rheumatism, her

THE THAW

mud baths and her new bee-venom treatment. He often visited the widower Yegorov who lived nearby and comforted him in his recent loss; they discussed machines, or Eisenhower's latest speech or Yegorov's daughter who taught music. But he was never happier than among young people; it may have been that he had kept a youthful fervour, or perhaps that he had taught for over thirty years and really knew the young—there was nothing he couldn't understand about the terrors of examinations or the tragedies of first love or youthful dreams of fame.

Only in his own family he at times felt lonely. He had lived happily with his wife for thirty years. In her youth she, too, had been a teacher—she had taught in an adult school. Their first child, Volodya, was born in 1920, the famine year. When Nadejda took him to the headquarters to show Andrey, the sentry stopped her: 'Look out, little one, don't drop him'—small and thin, with her short-cropped hair, she looked a child herself. A year later she had a daughter who died within a month; Nadejda was dangerously ill and had two operations. When Andrey went back to school-teaching she devoted herself to the duties of a wife and mother. By the time Sonya was born she had long forgotten the dreams she had had as a girl, the diary she had kept then, the books that she had read; she had grown fat and soft. On the rare occa-

THE THAW

sions when she recalled her youth she was amazed: it seemed to her that it must have been another woman who had addressed those soldiers' meetings, galloped, while she was pregnant, across the steppe or helped her husband to print leaflets. How long ago it was! Her world had closed in round her and grown compact.

When Andrey fell sick Nadejda felt that she must save his life. She complained to everyone of his not following the doctors' orders, of his behaving like a child unconscious of its danger. In reality Andrey knew he had not long to live and just because of this refused to be an invalid—he felt the moment he surrendered the engine would stop.

He announced that he was well and would return to work; for the first time in all their married life Nadejda became frantic. She screamed, wept, ran to see the doctors. Vera Sherer said: 'Of course he ought to be in bed, I've told him that. But sometimes a man knows better than his doctors. He told me he couldn't live without his work. If I were you I wouldn't worry him.' Nadejda did not give up, she went to see the Headmaster, the School Director, and the Secretary of the Town Committee. Andrey did not go back to work.

He was not idle. He looked after his former pupils, those of them whose fathers had fallen in the War and whose circumstances were particularly difficult. One had a mother who was a speculator

THE THAW

and sent him to the market, another had to nurse a younger sister who was ill, a third had been neglected and kept bad company. Andrey would help the mothers and do their homework with the children, telling them of long past days: how the Revolution was started, how he once saw Lenin, how the Whites were driven back.

Nadejda watched her husband growing weaker and every day she begged him tearfully: 'Couldn't you stay in bed at least a day?' He reminded himself that her eyes, cruel in their concern, were the eyes of love and hid his suffering, forcing himself to smile instead of groaning when he had a heart attack.

Volodya had been Nadejda's favourite from his childhood; he was a handsome boy with clever, mocking eyes. She told her neighbours: 'He looks so quiet and yet he worries me.' He was never naughty, never fought with other boys but, always with the same meek voice and courteous smile, behaved impertinently to his father whom he nicknamed 'The Old Guard'; he teased his school-fellows, composed rude verses about little girls and drew caricatures of the teachers. His love of drawing was already obvious when he was small and his mother asked herself with joy: 'Perhaps he's really gifted?'

He studied painting in Moscow; spending his holidays at home, he would tell his mother funny

THE THAW

stories about his teachers, about first nights, about the girls at the Red Poppy restaurant, talking like an old man tired of life. Horrified, Nadejda begged her husband: 'Do talk to him. He must have got in with the wrong sort of people.' Andrey sighed; he had long ago tried everything—arguing, begging, scolding. Fate was making fun of him; people said: 'Pukhov is even capable of re-educating criminals;' only with his own son he could do nothing. Volodya never disagreed, he only looked at him mockingly through narrowed eyes, and Andrey knew the boy was laughing at him.

After finishing at the Art School, Volodya painted a big picture called 'The Feast at the Kolhoz'. It was greatly praised. He was given a studio in Moscow, he sent some money to his mother and wrote that he intended to get married. The girl threw him over for a film producer. Volodya was offended. He was equally offended when the jury rejected his picture, 'A Meeting in a Workshop'. His nerves got the better of him. Unexpectedly even to himself, he lost his temper at an artists' meeting and trounced the venerable masters, laureates twice and thrice over. It was then that it was found he had been given the studio by mistake and it was required for an artist who had recently been made a laureate. At the same time his commission to paint the portrait of the distinguished steel worker was inexplicably cancelled. Volodya

THE THAW

realized that he had said the wrong things. He set about retrieving his position; he lavished praise upon the artists he had insulted, he ran down his own work, calling himself a boor and a bad comrade, and finally announced curtly that he was leaving for the provinces to gain experience of daily life at an industrial plant.

Thus, after his long absence, he was again at home. Of his failure he had said nothing; on the contrary, he made his mother happy by telling her he had been sent on a creative assignment and that he was pregnant with a great work upon a 'shock' theme.

Six months later, the editor of the local newspaper, looking at Volodya's painting of two workers reading a newspaper, was filled with admiration: 'Immensely talented! Look at the expression in those eyes! We must have a feature on it!' It was said that Pukhov's name would be put forward for a Stalin prize. His mother congratulated him on his success. He shrugged his shoulders. 'You like it? I think it's trash. Not that they do better than that in Moscow. On the whole I prefer not to think about it.'

Nadejda confided to her husband: 'That girl Volodya meant to marry must be terribly stuck-up, you know how easily he is influenced . . . Do you like his painting?' Andrey replied unwillingly: 'It's the way he thinks that I don't like. Yesterday I heard him arguing with Sonya about some book

THE THAW

or other. Sonya said there weren't any ideas in it; Volodya told her a writer wasn't paid to have ideas. "All that happens to you with ideas is that you break your neck. What you're meant to look for in a book is ideology. If it's there what more d'you want? It's lunatics that have ideas." You know you're wrong in saying he is influenced, he's much more likely to corrupt others. Even as a boy he was the same. It's that frightful cynicism . . .' Andrey's voice shook and Nadejda became alarmed: 'You mustn't get excited.'

Nadejda thought Andrey, as always, misjudged Volodya; he was always taking Sonya's side. She could not realize that though, indeed, he worshipped Sonya he now felt painfully estranged from her. He thought it was his own fault—it must be that he no longer understood young people, that he wanted her to be like him as he had been at her age; it was well known that fathers never understood their children. 'Volodya I have the right to judge, he's a careerist, there must be many people of his own age who disapprove of him. But what can I blame Sonya for?—Nothing. If occasionally we misunderstand each other it must be because I talk the language of the past. The only thing that's strange is that I don't feel this barrier with my pupils, or with Savchenko, or with Lena. Perhaps the more you love people, the harder it is to understand them.'

THE THAW

Sonya was exceedingly reserved, she hardly ever showed any enthusiasm and she never opened her heart to anyone. Her parents knew, of course, that she was not indifferent to Savchenko, a young engineer, who often came to see her, but when Nadejda tried to talk to her about him she answered quietly: 'He's nice, but you mustn't think . . . He's only an acquaintance.' Several times, her mother had invited Savchenko to dinner—once on Sonya's birthday, once to celebrate Volodya's homecoming; Sonya treated him the same as all her other guests. Only when she was alone with him did she change, her face softened, her eyes grew warmer. One day last autumn they went together for a country walk. All around them the September woods were full of sad and brilliant colours. Sonya stopped to pick some gold-leaved branches; then they walked on in silence. All at once Savchenko took her in his arms. For a moment she lost her head and kissed him, then she was herself again, hurrying back to the path. That evening she said to him: 'We'll have to wait. I'll know in February where I'll be directed to . . . Not much good getting engaged if we're to be in different places . . . Or perhaps you'd like me to be a kitchen wife! Anyway, you couldn't get a flat. Juravliov would never give you one, you haven't been here long enough.' Savchenko went away upset—why was she so sensible? He was not to know that after he had gone she threw herself face

THE THAW

downwards on her bed and cried. 'Was I very stupid? I must have been. But you have to think about the future! Usually the man is practical. But he's a boy, so it's I who have to talk about these things. Can't he understand I hate to do it! He doesn't understand a thing, but I can't do without him.'

Was she as coldly logical as her father and Savchenko thought, or did she only try to look as if she were, believing that anything else had to be written off as 'nonsense', 'idealism', 'Quixotic foolishness'? She loved literature but she studied engineering—her father could not make it out. She told him: 'It's more useful. It will make it easier for me to get an interesting job.' Once she had started on her course, she became genuinely keen on electro-technics, but she went on saying: 'This is what is called for nowadays.' She liked poetry, particularly Bloch and Lermontov, but she told her father: 'If there is any room for poetry at all, it can only be for Mayakovsky's.' She helped her mother with her housework—she felt sorry for her; she was far more competent than Nadejda, she always managed to get to the counter in a shop, however big the crowd, and knew how to stir up the manager of their block of flats. When her mother worried about her father's doing too much, she said: 'He has to have an interest. It keeps him going.' And listening to her father's stories about Misha's progress or Senya's

THE THAW

chemistry, she thought: 'How old I am compared to him!'

When she congratulated him on his birthday, Andrey smiled: 'What is there to rejoice about? I've lived long and done little.' Sonya laughed: 'You seem very young to me.'

Guests arrived for the birthday dinner; they were Volodya's friends, the artist Saburov and his wife, and an actress from the local theatre, Orlova, who was generally known as Tanechka. Nadejda had naturally asked Savchenko but he said that he was speaking at the club and would drop in afterwards.

At dinner, Volodya gently pulled Saburov's leg; Saburov tried to hold his own, but he mumbled so that nobody could understand a word he said.

Volodya and Saburov had been friends at school but life had parted them. Volodya dreamed of fame, of money, he always knew which were the 'shock' themes, what artists had been rewarded and who had been told off. All this time Saburov diligently painted landscapes which were never shown. He seemed to care for nothing except his painting and his wife, Glasha, who was delicate and a cripple. Glasha was a proof-reader and they lived mainly on her very small earnings; needless to say they lived badly. Judging from the way Saburov swallowed chunks of pasty which Nadejda kept piling on his plate, he didn't often eat his fill.

THE THAW

Glasha looked at him with adoring eyes. Since his marriage, he painted, in addition to his landscapes, portraits of his wife; he made her ugly but gave her ugliness a charm. Volodya often told his parents that Saburov was talented—perhaps more talented than the rest of them—but that he had a screw loose: ‘Simply hasn’t an idea of what is wanted at the present time. He’ll never get anywhere.’

He was making fun of Saburov now:

‘Still trying to win over our epoch?’

Saburov mumbled heatedly about Raphael, colour sense, composition, until Nadejda said: ‘Do eat, your pasty will get cold.’

She had kept the champagne until the last, waiting for Savchenko. When he came in she stole a glance at Sonya who was arguing about some play with Tanechka and did not so much as look up.

Pukhov asked how the meeting had gone off.

‘I was surprised at Koroteyev,’ said Savchenko. ‘I’ve always thought he was intelligent and sensitive. Yet he spoke according to the book of rules. Have you read the novel?’

‘I haven’t,’ sighed Pukhov. ‘Haven’t got round to it. They say it’s good.’

‘I don’t know if it’s good or bad, but it stimulates you. There’s an unhappy love affair, that’s what Koroteyev couldn’t stomach. It seems that private tragedy won’t do in novels—“Why delve into emotions?” and so on. If it had been Brainin now,

THE THAW

it wouldn't have surprised me, but I wouldn't have expected it of Koroteyev.'

Volodya grinned:

'He's clever. Why should he say what he really thinks?'

Andrey could not contain himself:

'Not everybody thinks the way you do. Koroteyev is an honest man, that doesn't seem to have occurred to you.'

There was a moment of embarrassed silence—Andrey had spoken with unusual sharpness; then Savchenko began again:

'I was sorry the speech I made at the meeting came before Koroteyev's, but there was a girl who answered him; she was very good. I think you are mistaken, Vladimir Andreyevich, everybody spoke quite openly. Perhaps you haven't been to these discussions recently, things have changed a good deal . . . This novel touches on a raw spot—so often people do one thing in their private life but say something quite different. The public is longing for such books.'

'It's the same with plays,' Tanechka exclaimed. 'Think of it, three new plays we've had, and every one a flop . . . There simply isn't a play worth acting . . . Art . . .'

'You are right,' broke in Saburov. 'It's high time we remembered there is such a thing as art. Say what you like, Volodya, I can't argue with

THE THAW

you. But Raphael isn't colour photography.'

Volodya answered lightly:

'Raphael wouldn't be admitted to the Artists' Union. We can't all be like you, painting masterpieces for the year two thousand. Not that I'd bet on your masterpieces arousing much interest in the year two thousand.'

'Don't say that, Vladimir Andreyevich,' murmured Glasha. 'If you saw his latest landscape—it's quite extraordinary.'

'All the same,' insisted Savchenko, 'I can't make Koroteyev out. I've been working with him close on a year. He's a real live person, you can feel it in his every word. Why did he attack Zubtzov?'

'I've read the novel,' said Sonya, 'and I quite agree with Koroteyev. It's not enough for a Soviet man to control Nature, he has to control his own feelings as well. Zubtzov's love is somehow blind. A novel has to educate, not to confuse the reader . . .'

Savchenko overturned a glass in his excitement:

'It isn't blind, it's big. And you can't put everything neatly into pigeonholes . . .'

Nadejda thought: 'He's in love with her all right. How cold she is. Who does she take after? Not after Andrey or me . . .'

It may have been the wine—everybody suddenly talked at once, shouting one another down. Saburov was yelling something about 'the force

THE THAW

of colour', Tanechka had leapt up and was repeating: 'Love is love, say what you like,' Volodya, mimicking her, wrung his hands.

Andrey was standing by the window; looking out at the snow flooded with a white acid light, he thought: 'I can't make Sonya out. Did she say it only to tease Savchenko? No, she talks like that when he isn't there. She must be right in her own way. Who am I to judge? I am too old.'

Sonya, taking advantage of the noise, slipped away unnoticed to her room. She sat down on the bed without putting on the light. She felt she had to be alone, if only for a moment. She thought: 'I've really lost my head. It's enough for him to look at me and I become unnatural, I can neither talk nor think. It's frightful! I must control myself, I must behave towards him as I do to all the others, or he'll despise me. He insulted me again tonight, telling me you can't put everything into pigeon-holes. How stupid! If that's what he thinks of me he doesn't understand me in the least. I feel as much as other people do—I even feel too much. But I hate emotionalism, I really hate it.'

Savchenko walked into the room. He could not see her but stretching out his hand he touched her shoulder. He took her in his arms and kissed her.

'You're mad. People might come in.'

'When will you stop being so logical? If you love me . . .'

THE THAW

She got up, switched on the light and looked at him furiously:

‘Well, this shows I don’t. And I’ll tell you what, don’t let’s talk about it any more.’

‘Wait. I’ll tell you . . .’

‘You’ve told me quite enough. Now we must go back or they will notice . . . Father will be hurt—it’s his day.’

Soon the party broke up. Sonya did not look at Savchenko once and never said a word to him as he was leaving.

Savchenko walked home morosely, plastered with snow, remembering how he had hurried from the club to the Pukhovs, dreaming like a fool of happiness. ‘I’m twenty-five, my youth is finished. Koroteyev says I’m a romantic, I exaggerate, I let myself be swept away. He’s right. It isn’t possible to live like that. Perhaps he’s altogether right? Why should love be so important? I’ve got an interesting job. Koroteyev trusts me. Ahead of me there will be many tests, we live in an extraordinary time. Just imagine a young man like me, sighing over his unhappy love in the spring of ’forty-one! And a little later defending Stalingrad! But perhaps the one doesn’t exclude the other? I remember Uncle Lenya coming on leave. I followed him about asking him how to work a mortar and build pontoons; he showed me a girl’s photo and said: “Grisha, I’ve found my happiness.” And six months

THE THAW

later he was killed. How complicated it is to live . . . Here am I, thinking all the time of Sonya; it's because of her that I remembered Uncle Lenya. And now I can't even go and see her. Can she be in love with someone else? She'd never say she was in love, she's much too proud. I'm not, I'm ready to admit to anyone—I found my happiness and now I've lost it.'

Sonya told her mother the champagne had given her a headache. She would get up early and tidy the place, but now she must go to bed.

She lay down without undressing and thought about Savchenko. 'Clearly, I've lost my head. He has, too, I think . . . But why is it we always end by quarrelling? Our characters are too different. Love alone is not enough. How can you share your life with somebody who doesn't understand you? I mustn't think about him. He's good, straight, honest. That isn't the point, either, I love him. But one has to subjugate one's feelings. He's right in one thing, worst of all is to say one thing and do another. It would be best if they sent me far away—to the Urals or to Siberia. Then the problem will vanish, I'm sure of it. But this is weakness, let them keep me here and I'll still manage. This is like another examination—to see if I can dominate myself. Of course I can. But how wretched it makes you feel.'

Volodya said to Tanechka he would see her home.

THE THAW

She lived far away and they had missed the last bus. Volodya longed to take a taxi but she said that she had drunk too much, she needed some fresh air. Volodya was annoyed—a pleasant pastime, walking in a snowstorm! Tanechka talked incessantly. She had liked Volodya's father, he was kind and handsome—she wasn't being funny, she meant handsome—distinguished. She hadn't understood a word Saburov said but she liked him, too. It was a bad idea to drink too much, afterwards you felt sad. She felt unhappy, that was clear as two and two, but she wouldn't think about it, it wasn't worth it.

Tanechka had kept a child's directness, though she was thirty-two and had spent nine years working in theatres in the provinces, among people who shyed at nothing so violently as ingenuousness and sincerity. She worked conscientiously, she was considered gifted and had gradually made her way; now she often played leading parts. But deep in her heart she was unhappy.

As a child she had thought of acting as a life of tragedy and splendour. You would expect what followed to have sobered her. She came to realize that she had no talent and that indeed talent was not often met with. Other people were content with craftsmanship. She saw intrigues, cliques, ham actors, little rooms in dirty hotels, light affairs and a weight of misery. Tanechka had grown sad, her face was covered in little wrinkles (it's the

THE THAW

greasepaint, she comforted herself); outwardly she was resigned, but at the bottom of her heart there survived a dream: somewhere there must exist a bigger, better life, and Tanechka had simply lost her way.

Long ago—some seven years—she had decided to take poison when the actor Gromov, whom she adored, told her: 'We ought to part, we're getting on each other's nerves.' Gromov was her first real love, she looked upon him as her husband. Afterwards there had been others—Kolesnikov, Borodin, Petya. She learnt to give herself without illusions and to part without much grief. Volodya she had accepted out of loneliness, without asking herself if she loved him. Besides, he had been so insistent, he had argued, pleaded.

He was nice to her, he teased her only moderately, and often cheered her up—he had a lightness that she lacked. When she complained she had no talent, there were no decent parts and she was sick of everything, he distracted her with funny or malicious stories of famous actors he had known in Moscow. Sometimes his views on life annoyed her, but at others they made her laugh. He said that everybody was a pot-boiler, that that was nothing to be surprised at; and that turnips were more necessary than art; but nobody ever thought of spelling turnip with a capital T and nobody made a drama out of forwarding the cause of turnips, they just

THE THAW

planted them and served them up. You had to live as best you could. And life contained a few good things—a ragged piece of sky seen through a window or a ship's siren heard at night.

They were used to one another. If Volodya stayed away Tanechka became upset; and Volodya told himself in surprise: 'There's nothing to her, and yet I like her.'

It was a long walk. The storm roared, Volodya raged, and Tanechka talked on.

'Tell me, what are Saburov's pictures like?'

'One house and two trees. Or two houses and one tree. He doesn't believe in any other kind.'

'Why?'

'He says that's painting.'

'And what do you say?'

'I say he's a schizophrenic. Nobody has ever bought a single sketch of his.'

'I'll tell you why you say that. It's because your own pictures are pot-boilers. Oh yes, they are. He's not a schizophrenic, he's an artist, you can tell at once. I want to see his pictures. A house and two trees, that isn't at all funny, stop being so pretentious. And don't tell me I'm drunk. Of course I've had a lot to drink, but I'll say just the same tomorrow. You do paint pot-boilers. What d'you want with such a lot of money? Now Saburov . . .'

'Are you in love with him?'

THE THAW

'Don't be disgusting. But I envy Saburov's wife. He loves her.'

'No, he paints her and she loves him, that's their division of labour. He must have somebody to praise him and he's found Glasha. She gazes at his masterpieces and squeaks: "It's quite extraordinary."'

'That isn't a bit funny. It's touching. And it's a good thing she's ugly and lame . . . Now you could never love me . . .'

'Ah! Now we come to the point. Psycho-analysis and fortunes in the teacups at three a.m. By way of tea leaves, snow. The hero is an ageing producer of pot-boilers. The heroine is an honest actress a little tattered by life.'

Tanechka stopped and frowned at him: 'You know, I'm sick of your affectation. If you can't talk like a human being, you'd better not talk at all.'

They remained silent until they reached her house. Volodya wanted to come in but she banged the door.

She sat in her fur jacket without taking off her headscarf. The snowflakes melted and ran down her face together with her tears. 'That's the champagne,' she told herself. 'Saburov is a remarkable man. He must look down on me. I tell Volodya he does pot-boilers and what do I do? Tripe! Only Volodya has even less excuse. I'm just an average actress, what they call a cog in the wheel, but he's

THE THAW

somebody they discuss, they write about, they take seriously. Nobody knows he's empty, he has nothing inside his heart. That's why he laughs at everything. It wouldn't be a bit surprising if he hanged himself. And I can't help him—I'm empty, too. Glasha loves Saburov, but do I love Volodya? That's not love. We've just made a deal because it's too frightening to be alone. He doesn't love me either. How badly everything has turned out. When I was at the drama school I used to walk along the street and think, just there, just round the corner, there is happiness . . . Time to go to sleep, there's a rehearsal early . . . They say drink makes you sleepy, with me it does the opposite. How can you sleep when you start thinking about everything . . . Try counting up to a thousand . . . All the same, Saburov is right, there is such a thing as art.'

Volodya sat gloomily in his taxi. 'When Tanechka drinks, she's insufferable. All the same I like her, that's a fact. She must have known I didn't want to be alone tonight, that's why she didn't let me in. Beastly evening. Beastly arguments about art. Saburov is talented all right, but only a schizophrenic can paint and put away his paintings in a cupboard. Who's he painting for? Perhaps his cripple? Everybody's shouting about art and nobody cares a fig for it really, that's the sign of our time. No wonder Tanechka was impressed, in her heart she dreams of art with a big A. Nice if she

THE THAW

could fall in love with someone solid—a chemist or an agronomist—she needs desperately to be happy. Why did she have to go for me like that? I do pot-boilers, so does everybody else, though they don't all admit it. She thinks I'm fond of money. Well, you have to live, that's a fact. Those were terrible days in Moscow before I left . . . It's funny, if you have money you get invited out and entertained, and during that time nobody so much as looked at me. I was lucky to scramble out so soon. But was that a crime? Did I hurt anybody? If it were up to me, I'd show Saburov's things at once; he's very talented, but that's not the point, there isn't any justice, and I bet he also wants to live. Why did I say he was a schizophrenic, he's just an ordinary man, only as stubborn as a mule. Comic when Savchenko drank two glasses of champagne and fell on Saburov's neck. Savchenko is a blockhead, what can Sonya see in him? She isn't a fool. It's all right when Father talks about ideas—that's his right, he grew up in that sort of time—revolution, romanticism. But Savchenko is an ordinary engineer, his business is with machines, not with ideas. Why should he get up on a soap box? Idiot. Everybody trims his sails, manoeuvres, lies, only some are smarter at it, some less smart. I'm sure Savchenko must envy me—I don't clock in, I can get up when I feel like it and when I sell a picture I make four times as much as he does in a month.

THE THAW

He probably thinks I'm happy, but he's much happier than I am because he's much more stupid. I'm sick of everything. Incidentally, must get up on time—Juravliov's last sitting. He's got a face like dirty cotton wool. I've made him a fine figure, though—leader of Soviet industry, chin up and a glance expressing an iron will. If the Museum really takes it, as Maslov said, that's twenty thousand. Shall I buy a "Victory"? Nice to speed on the road, everything flickers past, you haven't time to notice anything. Not worth it, perhaps, better give half to Mother, she doesn't say she's short, Father keeps giving everything away. Juravliov has a handsome wife, I see her painted by Tintoretto—red hair, pale skin, green eyes. But what's she really like? Probably swears when she goes to market and babbles rapturously to her friends: "The Commission Stores have shoes from Paris." Nuisance, Saburov finished off the vodka, I could do with a drink now. At the hanging committee in Moscow Kriukov cursed the painters for being pessimistic and shouted: "We must have optimism" and then took to drink and was taken off to hospital . . . Why is there such a lot of snow? It makes you feel so wretched you don't want to go on living . . .

Andrey Pukhov sat in his armchair, his eyes closed. He remembered Volodya's words with horror. 'It's some kind of double talk! Addresses activists, demands significance in art, paints workers,

THE THAW

and then calmly tells you everybody is a liar. No, I mustn't think about it. What a joy that Sonya is honest. Of course, I find it easier to understand Savchenko . . . But she is honest, that's what matters. One mustn't expect everybody to be the same—why should Sonya be like Savchenko? That's what I wish for sometimes, but that's bad, that's grouching at youth. I'm in a bad mood. Birthdays are nice when you're a child, now they frighten you. And then this wretched heart . . .'

He had told his wife he felt in splendid form, it had been a fine idea of hers to celebrate his birthday, the party had been wonderful . . . Now he must lie down.

Recently he had become afraid of night time as of a journey to a distant, enigmatic country. He felt worse when he lay down—he was troubled with palpitations, pains in his left arm, dizziness. He couldn't make himself comfortable and didn't like to turn for fear of waking up his wife.

Pity to have lived to endure this, he thought. 'It isn't death that's frightening, only this. And you forget, you want to do something and you find you can't.' He was invaded by depression; it arose not from his mind but from his body, he felt like yawning loudly or crying out. Nadejda was asleep and her even breathing made him feel still more afraid. There was a moment when he felt: 'I'm dying, I mustn't make a noise, Nadya is asleep.'

THE THAW

He forced himself to think of easy, simple things. Tomorrow he must see Serioja's mother. No wonder she was having a hard time; as a typist she would earn less than six hundred roubles a month. But Serioja was exceptionally gifted in mathematics, he must not leave school. Andrey had spoken to Nadejda, they would try to help a little.

For some reason, the image of his wife as a young girl came into his mind. Her hair was like Serioja's, even to the top-knot. She wore a soldier's coat. 'Nadya was brave. When we were surrounded at Rostov, she begged for a rifle. How long ago was that? It's terrible how long a life can be, you look back on it and you can't believe it. And, after all, you remain unchanged, and you forget that your age is different. Nadya is still brave. She's only afraid for me. And I for her. How will she manage by herself? All our life we've been together.'

Now the sound of Nadejda's breathing roused a quiet and sad tenderness in him. It occurred to him that he would like to live a little longer, even though he was ill and weak. The pain in his heart eased, it became the normal tedious pain to which he was accustomed. He realized with relief that he would probably soon fall asleep. Suddenly the world was cosy and drowsing off he thought: 'I'm glad it isn't for tonight. It seems you always want to live. Right to the very last.'

IV

LENA didn't fall asleep until the early morning and woke up late; it was Sunday. She thought at once: 'I must tell him everything today. There mustn't be any concealment, it isn't honest.' But when she went into the study, she found Volodya finishing the portrait. Ivan insisted on her seeing it.

'It's a good likeness. I'm stouter really. But the expression is exactly right, no doubt about it.'

Pukhov smiled condescendingly:

'Your husband's features are not sharp, he's difficult to paint. But I have tried to convey the inner content.'

Lena said nothing and left the room. 'Why did he say "inner content",' she wondered, 'with that little smile? . . . Strange that Andrey Ivanovich should have such a son. Can there really be a lot of people in the world who lie continually? Like me . . .

'I'll go and buy some honey, Shura loves it. I must get some air, my head feels heavy, I can't concentrate. And it's so fine, incredible after such a night. When I come back the painter will be gone . . . I'll say: "I must tell you everything."'

THE THAW

It was clear and frosty, with a pink sun like in a picture-book and snowdrifts, so dazzling that it hurt your eyes. At other times such weather made her happy, but now it weighed her down. There was snow everywhere. 'How far away the spring is,' she thought; 'endless! And what will have become of me by the time it comes?'

She did not manage to see Ivan alone; Khitrov came and they announced that though it was a little late they would go out shooting. Snorting gaily, Ivan said: 'Perhaps I'll bring a hare for dinner.' She felt relieved: 'He'll come home late, I'll have to put it off until tomorrow . . . After all, I haven't yet decided anything, I don't know what I'll say . . .'

The following day there was a long committee meeting and she again put off the conversation.

Each morning, as soon as she woke up and heard her husband's little cough, she remembered everything and thought: 'I must make up my mind. I can't continue in this state.' Then she went to school, urged Misha Lebedkin to learn his lessons, argued with the education officer, read Nekrassov's poetry to her pupils trying to convey the melancholy resonance of his words and was herself carried away by it. After the last break there was usually a parents' meeting, or a seminar in Marxism-Leninism, or a meeting of the amateur theatrical group. So the days went by.

Ivan frowned: 'Lena has no sense of measure.'

THE THAW

Is it possible to overload oneself to this extent?' At breakfast and in the evening he attempted to distract her.—Brainin, famous for his absent-mindedness, had come that morning to the office wearing his wife's sweater and was terribly upset thinking he had lost a lot of weight: the sweater was much too big; then his wife rushed in; they nearly died of laughing . . . Ivan laughed loudly and without humour. Lena tried to smile.

'I am acting dishonestly,' she told herself on the way home from school. 'How can I go on living with a man whom I have ceased to love or even to respect? I should have told him long ago. But he'll never consent to give up Shura. There will be endless scenes. The child will suffer; I have not the right to spoil her life. Then, what am I to do?'

In January there were more snowstorms; the snowdrifts grew and as she picked her way between them she felt: 'I can't bear this weight, I think another day of this and my heart won't stand it.'

As soon as she came home she would go to Shura's room. If Shura were asleep or playing with her father, she would wander listlessly about the flat. The rooms felt strange, as though she hadn't lived in them. She looked round her in astonishment at the curtains she had sewn with so much care, at the knick-knacks she had collected, the armchair placed under the lamp, all this comfort which she had created and which now seemed hostile.

THE THAW

She assured herself that none of this had anything to do with Dmitry, she wasn't thinking of him; they had stopped seeing one another—what of that? In reality she was thinking of him ceaselessly. 'That was the chair in which he sat as he was telling me how, in Breslau, they occupied the top floor of a house while the Germans were still below; that was when Lieutenant Babushkin was killed, he had been a pianist. Then we talked of music.' Suddenly Dmitry had stood up and said in a low voice: 'You are too young, Elena Borissovna, it is difficult for you to understand . . . There are times when the heart is frozen, and all at once something stirs . . .'

Why did it all have to end so badly? It was her fault, it was she who had brought something frightening and irreparable into their friendship. He had stopped her just in time. But now she would never see him. And yet so little would be enough to save her: let him drop in for half an hour—let him talk of what he liked, say that it was cold outside or that there were no good novels—that would be enough so long as she could feel his presence . . . No, this was stupid and degrading. This was the way heroines in novels behaved in the old days, they had nothing else to do. She was a Soviet woman, she had a sense of dignity, she didn't need his charity. The problem was not Dmitry. If they met by accident in the street or at the club, she would smile and say a friendly word or two so

THE THAW

that he shouldn't think she was offended. Her problem was her husband.

She refused to see any connection between her feeling for Koroteyev and what she felt about her married life. Had she not met him long after she had ceased to love Ivan? In reality Ivan's nearness had become unbearable to her after that evening at the club when she realized that she loved Dmitry. Last summer she had looked on Dmitry as her friend, now she felt she had no friends and knew that if she left her husband nobody would understand or comfort her. And yet it was precisely now—since she had lost Dmitry—that she thought insistently of breaking with Ivan, telling herself that only making a clean breast of it to him would cleanse her of something dark and shameful. But every time she reached this point she thought of Shura and put it off. If only there were somebody with whom to talk it over!

She laughed angrily at herself. She was thirty and she could not make up her own mind, she wanted others to decide for her. 'It's shameful. If somebody had told me on the day I joined the Comsomol that I would come to this, I would have been the first to say: "Throw me out at once."' And still she longed for somebody to confide in, somebody to ask whether she had the right to dispose of Shura's fate.

The idea did occur to her of writing to her

THE THAW

mother, she had thought of it as early as last autumn. But she decided not to, not even to say anything if she went to see her parents. 'Mother is wiser than I am, she knows people better, but she would never understand a thing like this. She would only be distressed at having such a daughter.'

Lena's mother, Antonina Pavlovna Kalashnikova, was the Chairman of the 'Red Way' Kolhoz. She was intelligent and masterful. She had married early; her husband was a gentle, dreamy man who adored nannying the children and spent his evenings carving little wooden beasts. 'What's that, a pig?' Antonina asked. He smiled shyly: 'An elephant. For Lena . . .'. He was always apologetic—if he carved toys, it was only for the children. And when Lena and her brother Serioja grew up he tamed a flock of other children to whom he gave his beasts. Lena treated him as an equal and pestered the life out of him; when she was too naughty he whispered: 'Don't, darling, I'll tell Mummy.' From her early childhood she was accustomed to regard her mother as the real head of the family. She loved her passionately and jealously (she believed Serioja to be her favourite), but was a little frightened of her.

Lena was quick at lessons and read voraciously; she would recite 'The Demon'³ to her father and tell him: 'When I'm grown up I'm going to write

THE THAW

books.' Her mother's brother worked in a town and after finishing the seven-year school she was sent to him.

This was shortly before the war. Lena's father was called up at once; Serioja went in 'forty-two. Antonina was left alone. She was elected chairman of the Kolhoz. The times were hard—nothing but women and old people. There were no potatoes—the crop had failed, some of it was frozen, some never sown. Antonina now revealed her gifts—she was excellent at managing, good at planning profitably, at encouraging and, if need arose, at scolding people. She started bee-keeping in the Kolhoz and, on the advice of an evacuee from Lithuania, induced the farmers to grow early vegetables for the town market long before the papers began urging it. The 'Red Way' paid off its overdraft and became one of the best kolhozes in the district. Antonina was mentioned in the newspapers. She was indifferent to fame and when she read the article about her she said: 'What's interesting in that? . . . They'd do much better to write about our boys out there.'

Great trials were in store for her. In the summer of 'forty-four Serioja was killed near Minsk. Her husband was shellshocked and came home an invalid with shaking hands and head. He asked timidly: 'Tonya, will you take me back like this?' She threw her arms round him and broke into loud sobs.

THE THAW

The only joy left to her was Lena; she was proud of her daughter and there was nobody who did not know that she had finished high-school with distinction and gone on to college. The moment she came home on holiday, her mother would bake cheese-cakes, ask the neighbours in and make her tell in detail about her studies, her fellow students, the plays she had been to see. Lena joked and laughed and yet remained vaguely frightened of her mother.

After getting her degree she came to tell her parents about Ivan, but hesitated for two days—her mother might be angry; in the end she told her father. Antonina threw up her hands: 'Lena darling, what a joy! Now I shall see my grandchildren. But why didn't you tell your mother?' It was decided that next winter she would spend a fortnight with the newly-married couple.

Antonina did not take to Jaravliov. Naturally she didn't say a word of this but Lena noticed from the way her mouth was narrowed to a thread. Ivan was on the contrary delighted with Antonina. 'Your mother has a statesman's brain,' he said to Lena, 'no doubt about it.' When she said good-bye her mother kissed Ivan but Lena felt that she did not approve her choice.

In fact, she stayed away at the time of Shura's birth and waited until Lena brought the child to see her two years later. By then Lena was beginning

THE THAW

to be disillusioned in her husband and admitted it to Antonina: 'I imagined he was different. Perhaps I always find things more attractive from a distance.' Antonina shouted at her: 'You put that nonsense straight out of your head. I've lived a lifetime with your father and I've never had such thoughts. Take hold of yourself. You've got a job—Shura. What else do you want?' Lena was furious with herself; what had possessed her to tell her mother? Her mother was a remarkable woman, if there were more like her Communism would come very soon, but feelings she neither could nor wished to understand. She might be right—this was not the time for them . . .

Now Lena sighed: 'It must be nice to have a mother you can confide in. Sonya Pukhov must tell hers everything. But how could I write to Mother, I want to get divorced? She'd say she brought me up to be a decent woman, not a cuckoo. As for Dmitry, I'd sooner die than tell her that.'

One particularly troubled evening she finally decided to speak to Juravliov. She even had her opening sentence—'Please hear me out calmly'—but she had no time to bring it out. Ivan's desk was heaped with files, he took a notebook out from under one of them and said smiling: 'Look, that's Shura's portrait of a cat.' Lena ran out of the room; she was afraid of bursting into tears.

THE THAW

Too wretched to sit at home she decided to go to Vera Sherer's. She would tell her everything; Vera, who had been through such a lot, would help her.

V

IT was rare for Vera to have visitors. Occasionally Chief-Designer Sokolovsky would come to see her and sit shyly, with long silences between his words. Vera gave him tea with jam, then a patient would call her out or Sokolovsky would get up in mid-sentence and say: 'Forgive me, I must have tired you . . .'. Every time after he left she asked herself: 'Why ever does he come?' She considered him interesting and honest and at times surprised herself by thinking: 'His ideas are just the same as mine;' but it troubled her that perhaps he came out of curiosity, just because she was unsociable, to observe 'the hermit crab', as Yegorov called her. Or did he pity her because she was so much alone? That would be absurd; she was not a child. Or was he simply bored at home? She couldn't make it out. It was now three years since he had started calling, and the nurse who lived next door, talking to Nurse Barykhina, never spoke of him as anything but 'the *fiancé*'; yet it never entered Vera's head that he could be in love with her . . .

Vera was forty-three and her blue-black hair was turning grey, but Sokolovsky was not alone in

THE THAW

finding her attractive. She had the charm that years of hidden suffering give a woman who is no longer young; a faint, hardly noticeable smile softened the strain of her expression.

She was considered a good doctor, she understood her patients and knew how to comfort and put heart into them. Last winter, when two of the patients at the hospital had made a scene, shouting that doctors, particularly such as Vera, should not be trusted, Engineer Yegorov came and held her hand and said repeatedly: 'Oh, oh, oh, what a disgraceful business. Don't you let it get you down, everybody loves you.' About that time she was sent a small pot of cyclamen with a note pinned to it: 'From a group of workers.'

Yet, although she had been practising at the factory for seven years and everyone respected her, she had made no friends and, apart from Sokolovsky, only Lena ever came to see her.

Lena thought that her reserve must come from having lost the man she loved. It was true that before the war Vera had been constantly surrounded by people, and although this was due chiefly to her husband's character she herself had not then shunned the world and had even allowed herself at times to be infected by his high spirits. Yet even he would sometimes wonder: 'What makes you silent all the time?' She said, confused: 'I don't know. I wish I weren't. Sometimes I think I was born a

THE THAW

monster, like somebody with four fingers.' He laughed and kissed her: 'You a monster! Be as silent as you like, I don't need your words to understand you.'

She had been reserved since childhood. Her father, a small-town dreamer, a buffoon, who had spent his life at his shoemaker's last singing an absurd song about 'Mariette' and her 'beads of jet', said about his daughter that an angel had sealed her lips with sealing wax. She suffered from her timidity and repeatedly promised herself to change, to make a friend in whom she would confide; but Katya or Fenya or Maroussia whom she tried to hero-worship would turn out to be an ordinary little girl and she would enter in her diary: 'There is too much lying everywhere. Or do I only think so because I am a moral cripple? It is all my fault, I have no right to be alive.'

She left her native town to become a student. Those were years of change, of heart searching, of turmoil, of lofty flights as well as tumbles into muddy depths. Other girls of her own age, early matured, married and divorced with equal ease. Vera was known as 'touch me not', her friends made fun of her. She was dreaming of a great love. There was already a strain, a bitterness in her expression and at moments a look of anger came into her dark eyes.

Vassya, a fellow student, was attracted to her

THE THAW

(only Vera called him Vassya, everybody else said: 'That old Vassya'). He had a round face, freckled even in mid-winter, and a jolly, ringing voice. He would wait for her by the entrance to the University and come to see her at the hostel. To Vera, his insistent, tender words sounded like an accusation; she told herself: 'I must be a monster. I can't go on being an exception, I must live like other people.' She gave in to him, not because she fell in love but because she had resolved to force herself into acceptance. Perhaps in time they would have grown attached to one another, but Vassya was young and ignorant emotionally, he ruined everything by his childish words spoken at a moment when Vera, lying with her head buried in her pillow, did not yet dare face what she had done. Straightening his parting before the looking-glass, Vassya said gaily: 'Now let's go and eat ice cream.' Vera went through months of torment and resolved never to give herself again.

She broke her resolution four years later. At the age of twenty-seven she fell in love with Yastrebtzev, a geologist. They could not have been more different, it was hard to understand how they could live together. Yastrebtzev was noisy, talkative, expansive, quick to show his feelings, swearing roundly and bringing home a crowd of friends with whom he argued half through the night. Everything about him was astonishing to Vera, and every-

THE THAW

thing delighted her. She told him: 'I never thought such happiness could exist.'

They were separated by the war; on the fourth day Yastrebtzev went to Kiev, Vera remained working in an evacuee hospital in Moscow. Later she was sent to Krasnodar which was at that time far behind the lines, and when the rear became the front she found herself in a medical battalion. An officer she met told her that he had seen Yastrebtzev on the First Belorussian Front. Six months later she got further news he had been killed at Darnitza. She went on hoping—there could have been a mistake. Not until V-Day, rejoicing with the crowd that the sorrows of the war were over, did she finally understand that they would never meet again. The black sky streamed with crimson and yellow fires. Her tearless face expressed such torment that a doctor who was standing next to her said: 'Go to bed. I'll give you a good sleeping draught.' She spoke to no one about her grief. Nor did she talk about her mother or her younger sister whom the Germans had killed at Orsha. She worked calmly and was thought to be imperturbable. Nobody could guess that Army-Doctor Sherer, when she was alone, asked herself in desperation: 'What have I survived for?'

Suffering did not make her callous. Long ago, while she was still a student, she had asked the head surgeon if nothing could be done to help a patient

THE THAW

who was in pain and was told that medicine wasn't magic she must get the better of her nerves or she would never make a doctor. Many years had passed since then and Vera had learned self-mastery. The army hospital had been a cruel school: she had seen torn bodies, burnt faces, the blind and those who had been driven mad; every day people were dying on her hands. Yet even now she was tormented every time she saw that she was powerless. Examining Yegorov's wife and realizing that this kindly, cheerful soul would soon be faced with pain and death, knowing that Kudryavtzev's boy was doomed, and that nothing could save Pukhov, she felt hemmed in, crowded, stifled by other people's sufferings.

The day Lena decided to confide in her she came back from hospital after seeing the accountant, Fedoseyev, die. He had had pneumonia, had been given penicillin and was off the danger list—he had told his wife she could expect him home the following week—when he was suddenly killed by an embolism.

Vera was moving restlessly about her room when the doorbell rang. She thought it must be Sokolovsky. Usually she was both annoyed and glad to see him, but now she thought with irritation: 'Today of all days.'

Lena came in.

Vera forced herself to be welcoming, she knew

THE THAW

that Lena was as easily embarrassed as a child and that it was easy to hurt her feelings.

'How lovely, Lena. It's ages since I've seen you. Tell me your news.'

Lena began telling her at once that the headmaster had no sense, the literature programme was badly planned, a lot of it was above the children's heads, the seventh grade was very difficult, naturally there were loafers but that was not the point. Pukhov had had an individual approach to every child, she was no good at it and the headmaster applied the same yardstick to everyone. She spoke too fast, on a single note, as if reciting something she had learned by heart, and suddenly broke off.

Watching her, Vera felt disturbed—she looked ill, her eyes were brilliant, her cheeks flushed.

'You haven't caught a chill, Lena? There's a lot of 'flu about.'

Lena got up and hurried to the door. 'No, no, I'm quite all right. Forgive me—it quite slipped my mind, we've got a meeting . . . As it happens, about the seventh grade. I'm so sorry, please don't be annoyed, I really must have lost my head . . .'

She was already in the entrance lobby, her voice was tearful.

Vera shouted: 'Lena darling, wait!'

Barykhina called from the landing: 'It's no good. She's gone.'

'How could I have let her go,' Vera reproached

THE THAW

herself. 'All this time there has been something wrong with her. Has she quarrelled with her husband? She's very honest, she takes things to heart—like that time last winter when I got to know her. And Juravliov is a real bureaucrat. She doesn't ever talk about him but it can't be easy. Or perhaps she's having difficulties at her school. The headmaster made a bad impression on me too, he's a Chekhov character—the man in the glass case. Poor girl . . . There I go, criticizing others when it looks as if I'm in a shell myself—I seem to have turned to stone. How is it I couldn't make her talk, I didn't comfort her? I should never have let her go in such a state.'

She picked up a medical journal, read a page and realized she hadn't understood a word. It had not been a good day.

In her pale face, her dark eyes under the overhanging brows looked darker and the lines at either side of her fine-drawn mouth which gave her an austere expression stood out more sharply.

The doorbell rang again, this time it was Sokolovsky.

VI

WHEN Juravliov was appointed Director, his predecessor, Tarassevich, who was shifted to the Ministry, said as he described his staff: 'Sokolovsky has a head on his shoulders, he's a good worker. He's got a sharp tongue as well, but don't take any notice of it. He is original.' Juravliov often recalled these words. He could not see anything original in Sokolovsky—he thought him merely impudent. He complained to Lena: 'Sokolovsky comes and asks me to keep on Krapiva, says his wife is ill, she's got some sort of functional disorder. I tell him Krapiva has been late four times, and it's no good being Quixotic. You know what he said? "Ivan Vassilievich, have you really read *Don Quixote*? I'd never have believed it." Just like that. In front of everybody. He's insolent enough, no doubt about it.' He would have got rid of Sokolovsky long ago but he knew that at the Ministry he was considered a good designer—somebody was sure to take his side, and Juravliov detested trouble.

Sokolovsky's colleagues, like his former chief, thought him an eccentric. Even his looks were odd. He was tall almost to excess, with grey, close-

THE THAW

cropped hair, blue eyes in a copper-coloured face which, even in winter, looked as if he were just back from the South, and a scar across one cheek; a short pipe, its stem half bitten through, was always stuck between his teeth, though he smoked little and only when he was at home. He worked in silence. Listening to Brainin arguing with Yegorov as to whether the Americans would succeed in taming Churchill, he said nothing. He drank vodka and he still said nothing. It is true that nobody tried particularly hard to make him talk—his crotchiness was well known.

People who had worked with him for years knew hardly anything about his background. It was thought that he was from the North; his father was a fisherman; he had got his scar in the Civil War. He seemed to be fond of music and of astronomy. He had a family but his wife had been unable to stand his character and had run away; he kept a small and nasty-tempered dog; he was to have received a prize but his invention was pirated. Only one thing was known for certain—his last job had been in the Urals; there he had quarrelled with his chief who had then blackened his name; there had even been a newspaper article headed 'A Falcon without the Plumage'⁴ which described him as an ignoramus making himself out to be a sage. The affair had taken a long time to get sorted out in Moscow and at the end of it he had been transferred.

THE THAW

Among his oddities—and he had many—perhaps the strangest was his habit of occasionally drinking vodka with Volodya and even condescending to make conversation with him. There was nothing strange in Volodya's valuing Sokolovsky's company: he believed that, after Moscow, he had got into a jungle where hardly anybody else had an enlightened outlook. Sokolovsky's mocking comments delighted him and he thought that he looked down on everything, as he did himself. But Sokolovsky saw not only what was bad around him, sometimes he was pleased and even filled with admiration; at such moments he blinked his bright blue eyes and puffed fiercely at his unlit pipe; but of such things he said nothing in the belief that the good was seen by everyone, while in regard to what was bad there was almost a conspiracy of blindness. And how much rottenness there still was! That was why he liked to 'have a dig at it' and it was this that so endeared him to Volodya. But how could Sokolovsky like Volodya, when even Tanechka in her ingenuousness had seen through him?

Volodya was unlike himself in Sokolovsky's presence. When he was talking to his father, he denied ideals, with Tanechka he mocked at love, with Saburov he made fun of art. But neither his parents nor Tanechka nor his Moscow friends had ever seen him in that mood of diffidence and meekness which came over him with Sokolovsky who

THE THAW

was moved by his inward restlessness and discontent. When Sokolovsky asked to see his paintings, Volodya answered in confusion: 'I wouldn't show them to you for anything—they're hack work. Perhaps one day I may yet succeed in doing something real.' Only once did Sokolovsky lose his temper with him; it was when Volodya asked: 'Is Juravliov any worse than Brainin or Yegorov?' Sokolovsky shouted at him: 'You're not twenty, Vladimir Andreyevich. Is it your ambition to be a cynic? I'll tell you straight, that's a filthy way to be. In ancient times the cynics looked down on worldly goods and wandered from place to place telling people unwelcome truths. But I'm afraid it isn't worldly goods that you despise but, on the contrary, the people who are willing to do without them.' Volodya blushed, thought a little, and then admitted that he sometimes talked a lot of nonsense for the sake of being clever—it was true that Brainin and Yegorov were honest men. Sokolovsky grunted: 'All right, drink your vodka.'

Pukhov had every chance of testing the truth of Sokolovsky's rumoured eccentricities. The mongrel, Fomka, was indeed revolting; not only did it tear a hole in Pukhov's new trousers but it bit him painfully so that he limped for a whole week. Sokolovsky grinned: 'He tried it twice on me.' Volodya ventured: 'That's a curious character, your little dog. They don't usually turn against their own

THE THAW

folk.' Sokolovsky said that he had found Fomka in the street and did not know what sort of life he had had before: 'Must have been rotten to turn him into such a fool. He's a good chap really, he's devoted to me, a splendid watchdog. Only now and then he gets a black-out—doesn't know whom he is protecting against whom. That happens to human beings, too—quite often. People mean to help, and turn against their own . . .'

It was also true that Sokolovsky cared for music. One evening, when Volodya called, he found him sitting by the radio set, too engrossed even to greet him; he was listening to Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony; when the broadcast ended he remained silent. Finally he said: 'Fine piece—mathematical, limitless,' and said no other word that evening.

Volodya found the most unexpected books lying on his table—a fat astronomical atlas, a history of India, *Problems of Crystallography*, Petrarch's poems. 'When does he have time to read all that?' he wondered; 'and why does he? Must be bored. Like me . . .' What finally staggered him was that Sokolovsky was learning English: 'At my school German was the foreign language. Feel like reading a few things in the original . . .'

Brainin, who never missed an article on international affairs and who adored arguing about diplomacy, once came up to Sokolovsky (he could see nobody more suitable in the clubroom at that

THE THAW

moment): 'Do you think these Franco-American differences have any real foundation, so to speak?' Sokolovsky smiled: 'You know best, you're the specialist on international affairs. The French have a saying: "If youth but knew, if age but could." It seems to me the Americans could but won't and the French would but can't.' Brainin could make nothing of it but, to be on the safe side, he laughed.

There were times when Sokolovsky spoke out first, not waiting to be asked; that was when he boiled with indignation at botched work, disorder or a heartless attitude to people, and then he didn't care who heard him—Brainin, young Pukhov, Juravliov, the workmen. Then he cursed the Union Organizer—why hadn't he raised the question of the canteen, it was in a disgusting state; or Juravliov—the tenements would tumble down at any moment; or Dobjinsky, the club manager—why was there never a concert or a decent lecture, whenever you dropped in it was either Brainin making a report and everybody snoring, or three wretched couples dancing to a squeaking record; or Lopushkin—why did he turn out such a mass of rejects, it made you blush to see them, and afterwards people blamed it wrongly on the design; or the journalists—what did they mean by writing up the factory as if it were a paradise? Juravliov would soon grow little wings. Such were the remarks

THE THAW

that made most people a little frightened of him.

Lately for some reason his attacks had grown more rare, and Juravliov reflected with satisfaction: 'Sokolovsky's ageing, he's cooling down.' As he read his newspaper Sokolovsky now quite often said: 'That's right.' Only recently Yegorov had complained to him of the Director: 'I told him Vassiliev was indispensable and that I wouldn't give up Namulyan: we need another staff unit now we're turning out conveyor belts—he knows that perfectly but would he admit it? Said he wouldn't dream of putting in for it, we must reduce our staff, not blow it out. What can you do with him?' Sokolovsky smiled: 'My idea is he'll soon be sacked.' Yegorov brightened up: 'You've heard something?' Sokolovsky shook his head: 'No, I haven't heard anything. But I feel it coming. I've read the last two resolutions twice—it's absolutely right, what they say about the footwear, the pots and pans. They mean people to live properly.' Yegorov looked bewildered: 'What's the connection?'—'The one follows from the other,' answered Sokolovsky and wouldn't add anything.

On the wall of Sokolovsky's room there hung the photograph of a pretty girl. Volodya was intrigued by it but never dared to question Sokolovsky. In fact, only Clava, who cleaned his room, had been told by Sokolovsky: 'That's my daughter. Twenty-two years I haven't seen her.'

THE THAW

Sokolovsky married in 1928 a pretty blonde called Maya who was a student at the faculty of literature. He had been captivated by her melancholy looks and her pensive shyness. Was she really as he believed her to be or had he embellished her in his imagination? He was working at a Moscow factory, the times were hard, he had no leisure. It escaped his notice that the timid dreamer had turned into a vain, shrill woman. 'Bored?' he repeated after her in astonishment. 'Why don't you work?' Maya sobbed in answer. They had a daughter, Masha, and Sokolovsky thought their life would right itself, but Maya didn't change. Every night he listened to the same grievances—his friends were each more boring than the last and he was himself as dry as a stick; she had seen real life only once, in an American film given at a VOKS⁶ party; she must leave the baby with its grandmother and go South, if not, her doctor said she would have a nervous breakdown. Back from Kislovodsk, she announced that, firstly, she was not yet well, though she had taken mud baths—she had been through a dreadful tragedy; secondly, they must be divorced at once or she would die or lose her reason; thirdly, she had met a most attractive man, at present he was in trade, he was buying furs, but he had been to college, he was a lawyer; he was not, of course, a Communist, but he was a sympathizer; he had a Belgian passport and lived in Brussels but was a

THE THAW

Russian; so, he had made enquiries and she could get an exit visa and was leaving with him in a week; Masha they would, of course, take with them, he adored children, the little girl would get a proper education; in general, it had turned out for the best for Maya, and for Masha, and for Sokolovsky. Sokolovsky asked her only to give him news of Masha. His wife was touched and kissed him, leaving two red streaks on his unshaven chin.

After she had left he realized that he had never loved her. He stopped remembering her but he often thought of Masha. At first Maya regularly sent him picture postcards of Gothic castles and churches informing him that the child was well. The last postcard came shortly before the War. Maya wrote that Masha was devoted to her stepfather, that she still knew Russian, that they called her Mary—it was prettier than Marie, that she was doing well at school, and that she could not add a postscript because she had gone to the cinema with her governess. Sokolovsky said aloud, 'Mary', and himself shuddered at the sadness in his voice.

For many years he received no more news and had no idea whether his wife and daughter were alive or dead. Then, three years ago, an engineer who had been to Belgium with a delegation brought a letter; it was from Mary. She wrote that her mother had died long ago, before the war was over; that it had been terrible in Belgium, the Russians

THE THAW

had saved everybody and she was proud to be a Russian; that she had taken courses at the university but given them up for plastic dancing; everybody said that she was gifted, this form of dancing combined modern rhythm with the plastic beauty of ancient Greece; she hoped some day to come to Russia and show people her dances; the future was with the Soviet Union, she never missed a Russian film or a report on Russian life; she enclosed two photographs, one taken at the university and the other, a snapshot of her dressed in a Greek tunic at the dancing school. Sokolovsky crossly hid the dancer inside his desk, then long and tenderly puzzled over the other photograph; afterwards he hung it on his wall and every time he looked at it was amazed: how extraordinary that this sweet-faced girl should be his daughter, that she should be called Mary, and that they should have nothing at all in common. He wrote back; a year later she sent him a hurried note: she was just rushing off to Paris, everything was wonderful; with that the correspondence ended.

After his unhappy marriage Sokolovsky lost all confidence in himself and whenever he was attracted to a woman he stopped seeing her. Growing more and more attached to solitude, he no longer dreamt of love or friendship. Thus he lived till he was more than fifty, when, at an evening at the factory club, he met a woman who disturbed his

THE THAW

heart. He could not remember afterwards what he and Vera talked about that first time, it might have been of music, perhaps of Bach. A little later he met her in the street and asked her if he might call. So he started seeing her, the need growing in him ever sharper to watch the smile that softened her austere expression, to listen to her quiet voice, to feel her presence.

He slept badly—he would drop off at once, then he would awake in the early hours, unable either to go to sleep again or to get up. At such times he recalled his every meeting with her—their grateful, astonished joy at finding that so many of their tastes, judgments, inclinations were alike; their misunderstandings, her withdrawals, her coldness, her angry brows and gentle eyes, warm, enigmatic, like a stormy night at the end of summer. It took him a long time to realize how deeply he was attracted to her; then, one morning, waking before dawn, he told himself: 'She is my love, my only love, come to me so late. All my life I have been dreaming of her, waiting for her. I'll never tell her that. I'll see her—tomorrow or in a week—and I'll sit silently, or talk of Juravliov, or people on Mars, or Churchill, or the devil, of anything but that. My joy, my evening love, Vera, as I will dare to call you in my heart, how glad I am that I have lived to know you!'

He would not let himself see her often, he was afraid of boring her, and every time it was as if he

THE THAW

inwardly prepared himself with joy and anguish, feeling that no burden was heavier than unspoken words. So he would come in and sit down, and then Vera would be called away to see a patient, and even if she was not he would soon get up—it was time to go and there would be more weeks of anguish, fever, waiting.

This time he saw at once that he had come at the wrong moment. Vera was distressed, he would never know the reason for it, he was powerless to comfort her.

She told him about Fedoseyev's death, about Kudryavtzev's little boy who today seemed better—his mother was so pleased—but who wouldn't live. Of course, many new discoveries had been made in these last few years and yet . . . People believed in medicine, looked at you with hope, waiting to be saved; it was terrible to feel so helpless!

Sokolovsky said that men were only just beginning to learn to think. The splitting of the atom seemed a miracle, but to our children it would be as old and obvious as the fire-flint or the wheel. There was a steady forward movement, so there must be hope.

'That's true,' said Vera, 'but it's too abstract. I have to deal with living people. It's these people I want to save and can't. You told me last time you came that you were interested in astronomy; I thought afterwards, it must be comforting. Prob-

THE THAW

ably you'll take a look at us one of these days from Mars or Venus.' She smiled. 'That should give you peace of mind.'

'How can you? It's just the opposite. If you think about infinity, or, if you like, about the greatest of all concepts as we were taught at school, does that shorten or impoverish the present moment? To me, it seems to make it infinitely more significant—both that it will pass and that beyond it there is an infinity of other moments, epochs, worlds, lives.'

Vera listened, but his words fell short of her. She remembered Lena's restless eyes. 'How could I have let her go? How difficult it is to understand another human being, much more difficult than to see the oceans on a distant planet. There's Sokolovsky feeling he must help me. As though I were Lena . . . How depressing and unnecessary!'

'What a frost we're having,' she said for no reason.

He nodded.

'According to the weather forecast, thirty-five degrees later tonight.'

They both fell silent. Sokolovsky sat looking at Vera, he couldn't take his eyes away from her, he felt that there was something he must tell her and knew he wouldn't. His gaze troubled her and her expression grew still more bleak.

He was almost on his feet to go when he began suddenly:

THE THAW

'The other day at the Botanical Gardens in Moscow I saw a plant, an aloe—you know the kind, people have them in their rooms, there's one at the club. I've read somewhere that they can be used medically . . . Well, anyway, they told me it was a Pioneer⁷ who had brought it to them . . . When he found it he took it home and put it in a pot too small for it; he hadn't any other flowers and he didn't know how to look after them. He got a book which said the aloe grows in desert places, so you must hardly ever water it, and you must only give it very poor soil. Well, he liked his aloe and it annoyed him that he couldn't lavish care on it; so he threw away the book, transplanted the aloe, watered it, fertilized the soil—he treated it just as if it were an orchid. And what do you think happened?—a miracle, the aloe grew, it grew to such a size that he couldn't keep it in his room, he had to take it to the Gardens, and they put it in the hot-house. I can't think why it came into my mind just now . . . Please don't be annoyed, I've bored you with all my talk . . . I very much wanted to see you . . .'

Vera turned away and said tonelessly:

'I don't believe it . . . about the plant, I mean. If it was used to the desert, such a change would kill it. Though actually I don't know anything about botany . . . Forgive me, I'm very tired. I've got a headache . . .'

THE THAW

He left hastily. Outside it was the kind of moonlit cold when your breath seems to turn to ice at once, and birds, frozen in their flight, fall to the ground like stones. In deep sadness Sokolovsky paced the empty street flooded with useless light; his lips moved, puffing little clouds of steam. Was he saying anything, or did he only move his lips, quietly and sadly, without dreams or words?

VII

AFTER the last lesson Lena found Andrey Pukhov in the staff common-room. Almost for the first time that month, she smiled with pleasure. Needless to say, she told him of her anxieties: the children in the seventh grade who lagged behind; Burkov, Chijikov with whom she could do nothing—he cut school, he smoked and had fallen in with hooligans.

Pukhov comforted her, he advised her to see Misha's mother and said he would speak to Chijikov himself: 'I remember him from the Third, a provoking child, but not bad.'

They left together; Lena said she would see him home; she wanted to stay with him and she wasn't in any hurry. She was always looking for excuses nowadays to be out till Juravliov had had his dinner.

Many days had passed since she had realized that she must leave her husband, yet nothing in her life had changed, she could decide on nothing. In despair she cursed herself for being a wet rag, a good-for-nothing. 'And so I will be all my life. Shura will despise me more than anyone when she grows up.'

THE THAW

Pukhov was telling her:

'I've got wonderful news. You remember Kostya, you taught him, he left last summer—not Punin, another Kostya, Chernishev, he was a red-head, a desperate character never out of trouble, but he's a good boy, very gifted, reads a lot and thinks. His background is terrible—father killed in the War, mother took up with some scoundrel of a storekeeper who drinks. Kostya made an application to the Institute—though there wasn't any doubt they'd let him in, he's a medallist. Well, imagine, they turned him down—said they hadn't enough vacancies, he would have to wait until the entrance exam. The boy was in despair, and to add to everything the storekeeper threw him out. A real tragedy. I told him to work as though he'd been admitted, then I went to the Director—but you know him, he listens, says yes to everything and does nothing. I called on the Town Committee, they said it wasn't possible to do anything in the middle of the academic year. Why not? I said. Kostya has been following the course by correspondence, he won't need to catch up in anything. They said that in exceptional circumstances the Ministry can decide. The Ministry wrote back that they saw no objection but the decision lay with the Director. I go back to him, he looks at the letter, nods, says yes, it's a shame to see the boy go down the drain, but as the Ministry hasn't given any instructions,

THE THAW

he has no right . . . Well, then, I got down to it and wrote straight to the Minister, told him I'd taught this boy, he was enormously gifted, it was an injustice that he hadn't been admitted, told him about the background . . . That was last year. And now, today, my wife brings me a letter—it's from the Deputy Minister to say they've given the instructions for Kostya to be admitted. Just imagine, Lena! Think what an achievement!

Lena looked at him and smiled: he was an amazing person. She knew that he was very ill, Vera had told her there was nothing that could be done for him; he might last out until next year if he kept strictly to his régime—only he wouldn't. She said his illness caused him pain but he never said anything, he wanted nobody to know. And now he was completely happy because Kostya had been admitted to the Institute. 'Now I understand the people who made the Revolution,' thought Lena. 'If only I could learn from him. Only to walk next to him makes you feel a better person.'

'I'm off to Kostya's now to tell him,' said Pukhov. 'A friend of his took him in, Sannikov, another of my old pupils. They've got a room in Lenin Street.'

Lena was troubled. 'It's a long way. Should you walk so far? Why not let me get him and bring him to you?'

'Why should you? I'll get there splendidly; might as well look in on Sannikov at the same time. Don't

THE THAW

you look on me as an invalid, I'll creak along! When I got that letter this morning I felt ten years younger, honestly. To tell you the truth, I didn't have much hope, I thought they'd just forward my letter to the Institute. That often happens. But you see, they've sorted it all out themselves. It's a tremendous achievement!

He stepped cautiously as though first feeling the ground with his feet, although his eyes were good. Now and then he stopped in front of a shop window and pretended to be looking at a dummy ham⁸ or an ancient poster. 'He finds it difficult to walk,' Lena thought fearfully. She took his arm.

He laughed. 'I tell you I'm young again—like Faust, walking arm-in-arm with a young woman.'

He was in splendid spirits, laughing and making jokes, and his face did indeed look younger.

Going home after she left Pukhov, Lena went on thinking of him. Ordinarily as she neared her house, she began to fidget, glancing at her watch and wondering whether Juravliov had yet gone out. Now she quite forgot that it was early and he would be in.

Juravliov was sitting in his armchair, the lamp-light on his newspaper; he nodded:

'Nice that you've come in. I was just thinking I'd have to dine alone again.'

She stood stock-still, as if turned to stone, neither answering nor going through into the kitchen. He asked her in surprise:

THE THAW

‘What’s the matter?’

She sat down in a chair opposite to him and said calmly:

‘Nothing . . . That is to say, I have to talk to you. It’s a good thing I found you in. I have been meaning to say this for a long time, but I kept putting it off . . . We are no use to one another any more. Don’t be angry . . . I am sure you feel the same. I have been hesitating for a long time—because of Shura—but I see I mustn’t any longer. Do you understand?’

Her voice broke but she mastered herself at once and went on quietly as before:

‘This is terribly painful, you must believe me, but I have thought it all out, I can’t go on. It would not be honest.’

Juravliov thought at first that Lena did not mean it. He considered her unbalanced and occasionally told himself she was hysterical. He tried to shout her down, but she said there was no sense in having a scene, they must understand each other, they should part as friends.

They dined in silence; Juravliov said he would not go to his office, he would work at home on Brainin’s project. Lena left him. He sat thinking over what had happened. The reason for it must be that Lena was in love with someone else. For weeks now she had hardly been at home. ‘Must have found somebody. Could it be young Pukhov? He has a familiar

THE THAW

manner with her. A man like that in Moscow must have had a hundred tarts, no doubt about it. I'm too decent, I trust everybody. Just imagine how she must have been laughing at me.'

Lena came home late. Ivan had waited up for her and met her with a probing glance; she turned away. 'Must have come straight from him,' he thought. He felt like calling her some filthy name, but he held himself in check. She was right in one thing, it would be stupid to make a scene. He said calmly, gently even:

'Lena, are you perhaps in love with someone else?'

She turned on him furiously:

'What's that got to do with you? It has no connection . . . I've told you honestly I can't stay with you. I've tried to and I can't . . . Not because of anybody else . . . It's with *you* that I can't go on, do you understand?'

'Don't get excited. This is a serious matter. We'll talk it over tomorrow, otherwise we'll both start shouting and no good will come of that.'

Once again he spread his papers on the table and bending over them tried to think what he would have to do. He no longer doubted that Lena had a lover. 'She's turned out to be a worthless flirt, there's no doubt about it. Still, I chose her myself, so nobody's to blame. Actually, there isn't even anything to be surprised about—people are brought

THE THAW

up badly, without firm principles. And then they find it's dull—the town is a long way off, and there aren't many amusements even there. Khitrov's wife manages all right, she's busy with her house and children, but then she is a responsible woman, not an empty-headed flirt. I've been unlucky . . . All the same, it would be silly to divorce. I have a daughter. How can I leave her fatherless? I simply can't conceive of such a misfortune . . .'

He got up and went into the room where Shura was asleep. There he stood a long time looking at her, wiping with his sleeve the perspiration off his baggy cheeks and breathing loudly, plaintively. 'They'll not take my daughter.'

He lay awake all night and in the morning he said to Lena:

'Live as you like, I won't say anything. But we can't divorce, we must think of Shura.'

Lena said she thought of Shura all the time; Juravliov could come and see her, or she could bring her to him; Lena would keep her job at school, she wouldn't leave the factory settlement, she would try to find a room nearby.

Juravliov said nothing. He went to work, but all day long he could think of nothing but Lena's words. 'She really must be off her head, she's frightened of being parted from *him*. The scandal of it! The Director's wife moves into her lover's flat. I'd be laughed out of town. And then they

don't like things like that up in Moscow, not at all.'

He tried to reason with her. 'When I was a boy people rushed into the Registry as easily as to the Post Office—married one day, divorced the next. Now it's different. The law has changed. Nowadays that sort of thing is frowned on, people might say: How can such a person be a schoolteacher? Not to speak of myself and what I have to lose—I'm a Party member, I'm in charge of a big concern. Feelings or no feelings, you have to think of that as well.'

Lena was silent.

She did not refer to it the following day. A week went by. Juravliov calmed down a little: 'Looks as if she's going to be reasonable, she's seen that there are certain standards . . .' He behaved considerately, asked no questions and burdened her as little by his presence as he could. 'Who knows, we might still get by. After all, nothing terrible has happened. I've got my job, and I am trusted, no doubt about that. On the whole, I am not very interested in love affairs. I'm fond of Shura, and the child won't change towards me. It's a good thing that there will be no scandal. There must be many families where the same disgusting things go on and they don't wash their dirty linen in front of everyone. Koroteyev was quite right in attacking novelists—we are living in historical times, decent people have no time for intrigues . . . Sensible of him to be a

THE THAW

bachelor, these things can't happen to him. He's a sensible fellow altogether, his comments on Brainin's project were very much to the point, they took account of production specifications—though, of course, the whole thing will have to go to Moscow—let them do as they think best up there . . .'

Just as Juravliov had quite recovered his peace of mind, Lena announced:

'I've found a room—it's only temporary, till the summer—at Fedorenko's; he is being sent on a further training course. On Sunday I'll tidy everything and then I'll go.'

Juravliov realized that she would not be moved from her decision. It would be silly to quarrel, things were hard enough without, better not make complications . . . He said quietly:

'Do as you think best.'

Lena moved on Monday. That evening, when he came in, the house felt uninhabited, although everything was tidily in its place. He walked from room to room peering nervously at the familiar knick-knacks: 'Strange, she's taken nothing. She was very fond of that wooden box, I brought it to her from Moscow, yet she hasn't taken it . . .' In the dining-room he came suddenly upon Shura's broken doll. Had they forgotten it? Or had Lena thrown it out?

He picked up the doll and he felt quite suddenly

THE THAW

that he couldn't stand it, another moment and he would cry. 'It's bad, it's very bad the way it has worked out. And I thought Lena loved me. Last New Year, I said to Brainin: "Let's drink to Lena, she's a wonderful wife." You can never see into another heart, no doubt about it. But how dull the house is, and Shura isn't there. I'd like to go out somewhere and have a drink.'

Grusha, the charwoman, brought in a tray with tea, salami, bread and cheese. He quickly hid the doll. 'Have to take myself in hand. Worse things can happen. Yegorov has lost his wife, but he's got his work. My life is in the factory. Sokolovsky can snarl, the fact remains, it's me that Moscow trusts, not him. Anyway, his reputation is a little mouldy . . . Zaitzev said last autumn there was talk of transferring me to Moscow. Well, that wouldn't be so bad. After all, the factory is one of many units, while at the Head Office my experience could be used on an all-Union scale. That is, of course, if Zaitzev didn't invent it. But why should he? . . . I wonder what the Ministry will say of Brainin's project?'

His thoughts steadied and when Grusha asked if she should clear the table he told her to leave the tea. 'I'll be working late, I might get thirsty.'

Lena settled down in her new room, she went to bed early and yet was almost late for school the following day. Hurrying into her clothes, she

THE THAW

thought: 'It was eleven when I went to sleep, now it's eight, and I am still sleepy.' She felt immeasurably tired, as though she had chopped wood all day or walked thirty miles.

'How did it happen? I can't understand. It dragged on and on and then suddenly out it comes. Left school with Pukhov, looked with him for Kostya's room, went home and never even thought of saying anything . . . How extraordinary!'

She walked fast, hurrying to be on time, all at once she smiled: she remembered how Koroteyev had said: 'You're very young, it's hard for you to understand.' She had aged since then and she had lost her happiness but she had not surrendered, she had acted as her conscience told her to. She thought: 'He doesn't love me, he may despise me even, he thinks I tried to foist my feelings on him. Well, let him. All the same, it was he who helped me, he lifted that heavy burden from me. The moment I think of him I feel better.'

'Lena!'

Vera was waiting for her outside the school.

'I kept on worrying how you were, I came over twice but you were out. Well, you look more cheerful; I saw you walking along smiling. You must be feeling better!'

'I've got a new address, Vera Grigorievna, I've moved to Fedorenko's, Block G. I think you know them; his wife said she was your patient.'

THE THAW

Vera understood at once; her severe expression softened, became gentle almost to the point of helplessness. She pressed Lena to stay with her until she found a permanent room.

'You'll be much more comfortable. It's a big room, we can divide it up, and it's near the school. I know Fedorenko's wife, you'll never be happy leaving Shura with her; she'll only have agreed because she wants the money. I've got a nice old woman next door to me, Nastya, Dr. Gorokhov's assistant, we'll arrange it with her, she'll look after Shura when you are out. I insist on it, we'll move you in tonight.'

It was a cold February day but the sun was already a little warm, and as she came into the classroom, noisy like a poultry-yard, and saw the blackboard grey with chalk and the sunlight dancing on it, Lena thought: 'It will soon be spring.'

VIII

AFTER his excitement old Pukhov had to stay in bed. He had had a heart attack in the night; he concealed it from Nadejda, merely telling her that he was tired and would like to rest for a day or two. She called in Vera Sherer, then Gorokhov, urged her husband to take the drops the homoeopathist had prescribed, smothered him in blankets, and at intervals sighed loudly; Pukhov blamed himself, he should have made an effort and got up.

Volodya came and brought the news: Juravliov's wife had left him; he told it laughing—well, wasn't it a funny story! Pukhov was so delighted that he missed Volodya's comments.

'That's a good thing,' he told his wife. 'I never did understand how she could live with him. I know her, I've worked with her for two years, she has a conscience, she puts her heart into what she does, and the children like her. I've often heard my little boys say: "Elena Borissovna helped me." As for Juravliov—he's a typical bureaucrat. Bitter tears are shed because of men like him, but what do they care? If ever one of them gets stamped out a dozen new ones spring up, just like mushrooms after

rain . . . It's very odd, I saw Lena recently, the day the letter about Kostya came, and she didn't tell me anything . . . You can't think how glad I am . . .'

Volodya went into Sonya's room; he asked her: 'Do you know the wife of Juravliov?'

'No. That is to say, she's been here several times to see Father, but I've never spoken to her. Do you?'

'A little. You know I painted him. I've seen the likes of her in Moscow. It's funny how Father idealizes everybody. I expect he still remembers girls who went among the people or plunged into the Revolution—anyway, to hard labour; now they go and marry cinema producers, or generals; or a factory manager like this one. Father is in raptures because she's left him.'

'Where did you get hold of that?'

'It's a fact—the very latest local sensation. I should think there's not much to choose between them. Wouldn't you agree?'

'I tell you I don't know her. I hardly know him either. Opinions are divided about him; Savchenko, for instance, says he lacks initiative. Anyway, I'd take Father's word.'

'So you are pleased?'

'Oh, stop pestering me. I've told you I don't know either of them. But if Father has a good opinion of her, so far as I'm concerned that means a lot. Only it's disgusting when people get divorced—talk, gossip, newspaper announcements, court

THE THAW

decisions. In the old days it was probably natural; now it's shameful, somehow. After all, people aren't children when they get married, they can choose, they can think it over.'

Volodya burst out laughing. 'And have analyses made, and consult experts?'

'What's so funny in that? How did you find Father?'

'Better, I think. When I told him about the Juravliovs he positively leapt.'

'That's just what is so bad. He's killing himself. It turns out he walked three days running to Lenin Street—some first year students' get-together, he went to talk to them. Isn't it awful! I know I used to tell Mother his nervous energy keeps him going, but now I see how right she was. We simply must get him to be sensible whatever the cost.'

Volodya stopped smiling.

'I don't agree with you. Father is not like other people. Besides, he belongs to a different generation. Nowadays, a man overworks a little and before you know where you are he's had a stroke. Those old people are cut out of a different pattern. I often ask myself where they get their strength . . . Of course, it's frightening, I'm worried about Father, too. I laugh, so perhaps you think I'm not afraid. The trouble is you can't do anything—he's lived in his own way and he'll die in his own way, too.'

THE THAW

Volodya went out. His mother dropped off to sleep (she had stayed awake all night worrying); Sonya looked in on her father; she found him reading. She decided to have a talk with him.

She had been getting ready for this conversation; she believed her mother was unable to persuade him because her only argument was his health; he only joked or said nothing, and an hour later he was off again to see his '*protégés*.' It was sheer childishness. He was spending his remaining strength on a dozen schoolboys. He had twice been asked to write an article on his experiences as a teacher. He could have written it in bed or if that tired him he could dictate to Sonya. Honestly, that was more important than dragging himself to Lenin Street to chat with adolescents.

All of this Sonya, her voice shaking a little with nervousness, now told her father.

Pukhov listened attentively; there was a moment when she thought that he agreed with her; in reality, his whole being was filled with indignation; it was with an effort that he forced himself to listen to the end.

'What a stranger she is,' he thought. 'Chernishev, Sannikov, Savchenko, all of them understand me, so it can't be just a question of age. Nadya urges me to stay at home, too, but never would she say that it's absurd of me to go and see my boys, she knows it's necessary; after all, we've spent our life to-

THE THAW

gether. She hasn't any arguments, she's just frightened, and I, too, am frightened—for her, thinking of how alone she'll be. But Sonya's different, to her what I do seems childish, that's what she said: "Childishness"; she talks to me as if she were older than I am. I can't make it out.'

'I can't understand you, Sonya,' he said at last. 'You say one thing is more important than another. How do you weigh them up? Perhaps I ought to write an article, I often think of it, I've even made some notes. But does that mean I should neglect my boys? Try and understand it, they have no father, Chernishev virtually hasn't got a mother either. You stand firmly on your own feet today, but don't you remember how you used to run to me for advice? Don't you see, these are living people, tomorrow they will go on building what we began. And you suggest that I should abandon them?'

'I'm not denying it's a serious problem. But what can you do alone? These are questions that should be solved on a State-wide scale; if not, it becomes amateurish. Say you help Chernishev to-day, tomorrow you won't be there and he'll fall under the influence of some bandit. I mentioned the article because that's really necessary. You told me, for instance, that you have some arguments against segregation.⁹ I've read about it in *Litgazeta*, there's a discussion going on. If you state your point of view,

THE THAW

that can lead to something practical, and not just for a dozen boys—for a dozen millions. And instead of that you put your remaining strength into arguing with Serioja's mother, or discussing physics with Misha. Honestly, it's senseless.'

'No, Sonya, it does make sense. The community is made up of living people, you won't get anywhere with just arithmetic. It isn't enough to think out wise measures, they have to be applied and for that everyone is answerable. You can't reduce everything to a committee formula—"This has been approved, that has been resolved." It's on the way you live and work, on your relations with other people that the whole future of society depends. Why do you say ironically: what can a man do alone? I can't make you out. Years ago, six or seven years before the Revolution, I remember I used to go and see a student, a friend of mine; there was a group of us who read Lenin, Plekhanov. I told my father. He was a quiet, almost timid man—he worked in an office, he was used to reprimands—he asked me: "How many are you? Eight? You're crazy! What can you possibly do with eight people?" That was an old man, in him it was forgivable; and the times were different. But you're young, you're in the Comsomol, you should be daring, not evading things. I know you have a great spirit, why do you put chains on it?'

He looked at her and broke off: her eyes were

THE THAW

shining feverishly, her lips moved—she wanted to reply but could find no words—there was such confusion in her that he forgot about the argument and took her in his arms.

‘You aren’t a bit like that really.’

She left him troubled; he had not convinced, only disturbed her; she felt his words carried a remote, even enigmatic power.

‘How difficult it is to live, how very difficult!’

She picked up a book and forced herself to read. Gradually the light faded, everything in the room was grey; she went over to the window. The snow looked purple. She thought:

‘Father thinks I’m so sure of myself. He said: “You stand firmly on your own feet today.” In reality I keep on stumbling. I see nothing, it’s like this twilight, neither night nor day. Everything is puzzling. It must be nice if you can laugh things off, like Volodya. Though I don’t envy him, I think he feels lost . . . Juravliov’s wife has an attractive face. Why has she left her husband? In the old days it was understandable, people were married off against their will, or they married for convenience. Now it’s all quite different and yet people still divorce . . . It’s frightening that you can never read another person’s mind. You walk in darkness, you think happiness is in front of you, and yet one more step and there’s a precipice. What a terrifying game! Like with Savchenko and myself . . . That’s

THE THAW

another thing Father doesn't understand; he always takes Savchenko's part. It's natural in a way, their characters are alike. But when Father gets excited and exaggerates, you can't help feeling a respect for him; after all, he's proved by his whole life that what he says isn't just empty words. But when Savchenko does it, it's comical—he hasn't lived yet. I haven't either, I don't understand a thing. Father seems to be convinced I love Savchenko; the other day he said: "When the two of you have settled things." Of course I love him, I expect it shows however much I hide it. But we'll never settle anything, I'm convinced of it. I think of him too often. It's silly and pointless . . .'

She switched on the light and finished reading the article she had begun on the latest generators for Quibishev (real giants!). The bell rang. She remembered her mother was asleep and went to open the door. It was Savchenko, the last person she had been expecting.

They hadn't seen each other since her father's birthday. The first few days Sonya had waited for him, every evening she had listened for the bell. Of course, he had been very rude to her and their friendship would never come to anything; all the same, it was absurd to end it in a quarrel . . . But Savchenko had stayed away.

He stuck to it for a month, though he found it difficult. Every evening he started out to the Puk-

THE THAW

hows' and turned back when he reached the chemist at the corner. For some reason it was always outside the chemist's that he invariably asked himself: 'What am I going for? She told me plainly she doesn't care for me, she doesn't even want to talk about it. And a simple friendship, that I can't accept even if I wanted to, better not try . . .'

He would go home or to the club, or he dropped in on Koroteyev, who was his neighbour.

At the beginning, when Savchenko was sent over from his Institute, Koroteyev took him under his wing, showing him his work and generally putting heart into him. 'It's always difficult at first, theory is one thing and the potentialities of a factory are another.' One evening he asked Savchenko to his room. 'Let's sit up a little while over Brainin's project, he's altered it.' When they finished working, Koroteyev told Savchenko about the factory in Leningrad where he had done his practical training. They sat up almost until dawn and as Savchenko took his leave Koroteyev said: 'Drop in again. I never go to bed early. We might talk of other things besides machines.' After he had gone, Koroteyev smiled: 'That's a good boy. I was older at his age. Then there was the War . . . Now it's different. He still looks unfledged.'

When Savchenko came again, he told him about the War, about the battle on the Don in which a

THE THAW

poet lost his life—he was a boy affectionately known as Pushkin who had recited verses starting with the line: ‘When I remember you in my old age’; about a small museum in a devastated German town where among the antlers, the stuffed birds, the Nazi banners, he had seen a remarkable portrait of a young woman by an unknown master of the sixteenth century; and about his own youth. Sometimes they discussed the news, Mossadeq’s trial, the strikes in France, the Conference of the Foreign Ministers, or some recently published book. Savchenko listened to his friend entranced, forgetting his unhappy love. He was easily entranced. When he laughed he threw back his head and showed big white teeth sparkling in his swarthy face. He looked rather like a gypsy, and said laughingly: ‘Granny must have visited the gipsy camp; she was full of mischief, Grandfather used to say.’

Last night they had talked of literature. Savchenko had asked suddenly: ‘Why did you make such an attack on Zubtzov that time at the club?’ Koro-
teyev grinned and didn’t answer. Later, he took down a book. ‘Do you like poetry?’ Savchenko’s face lit up: ‘Better than anything, I think.’ Koro-
teyev read aloud:

They parted in proud and silent sorrow
And saw the image of their love only in dreams.
Then death came, and beyond it, the encounter,
And in that world, each turned unrecognized away.

THE THAW

Savchenko was delighted, then all at once his face dimmed as though a candle had been put out, and his smile vanished: he thought of Sonya. 'We meet and talk, but she treats me as a stranger . . . And yet, that day we were in the woods, I thought she loved me; she kissed me and looked at me in such a way that even now, when I remember it, I want to run to her and say: "It's me, Sonya, it's me; don't you know me?"'

He looked up at Koroteyev who was sitting motionless, his book lying on the floor. There was a long silence. Then Savchenko plucked up his courage:

'Dmitry Sergeyevich, do you think that if a man feels that he loves a woman, he ought to struggle for his happiness? It seems humiliating . . .'

Koroteyev smiled almost imperceptibly:

'He has to struggle . . . There are times when you have to tear right through the fog.'

Savchenko smiled again.

That was how he came to visit Sonya; he meant to tell her everything, to tear his way out of the fog, to find his happiness.

'Let's go for a walk, Sonya. I want to talk to you about a lot of things, I don't feel like being in here.'

'It's cold outside. But if you want to, all right.'

It was freezing hard again, the wind was from the North. People walked rapidly, only Sonya and

THE THAW

Savchenko dawdled; there was nowhere for them to hurry. From a distance they looked like a happy couple, but they were arguing the whole time. Savchenko spoke of Koroteyev, of the automatic drive, of the Berlin Conference, of an Italian film they had both seen at the Club, and whatever he chanced to mention, Sonya contradicted him (only about the machines she made no comment).

'It's a wonderful film! When the little boy lost his temper with his father I nearly cried.'

'It's sentimental. Parts of it are good but there is no solution. I never did find out what that unemployed man would do in the end—would he join the Communists or remain politically unenlightened?'

They walked a hundred yards. Savchenko was enthusiastic about France:

'The French will never agree to the ratification.'

'Who are you talking about? The Communists or the Chamber of Deputies? You have to consider who holds the real power. You always let yourself get carried away.'

'What I am talking about is a real power. Haven't you learnt that when ideas reach the consciousness of millions, they become a material force?'

'That's in the future. We are talking about what exists today.'

They walked another hundred yards.

'Today Juravliov cursed a machine operator for

THE THAW

no reason, he said he was ham-handed. He's a real scoundrel.'

'You're always exaggerating. Father says he's just an ordinary man, a bureaucrat.'

'Koroteyev thinks so too. But in my opinion he is a scoundrel. Now, since his wife has left him, he's gone completely off the rails. Have you heard about it?'

'I've heard, though I don't like gossip. I'm not interested in his private life.'

'I am. I'd like to understand—what sort of a woman could have been in love with him. I asked Koroteyev today what he thought of Juravliov's wife, he used to see quite a lot of them; but he didn't answer, he was in a hurry. I am convinced she is better than he is and that it's a good thing she left him.'

'I don't see anything good in it.'

'Even if he's a scoundrel?'

'She might have thought of that before.'

'Didn't your brother do a portrait of Juravliov?'

'I believe so. I haven't seen it.'

'What made him paint such a scoundrel?'

'I don't know. I suppose he was commissioned. You'd better ask him.'

'No, I won't ask him. I liked what Saburov said about art. I find your brother's opinions very strange. Do you think he meant it or was he putting it on?'

THE THAW

'I don't know. He is like you. You both live only by your impressions, only he sees everything in black and you in pink.'

'And you?'

'I wasn't talking about myself. I see things as they are.'

They had walked many times past the chemist's shop and back. Now Savchenko was talking about a book he had read lately and hadn't liked.

'It isn't realism at all. It's just degrading man.'

Sonya had herself disliked the book, but she was cross.

'I don't find it so. I consider it an interesting novel which raises an important problem. But don't you think this literary discussion might be put off? It's too cold. I believe you meant to tell me something. If you don't, let's go home and have tea.'

Savchenko was silent. They were near the red brick house. He told himself: 'It's now or never. How idiotic to have lost the power of speech, just as though I'd lost it in the snow.'

'I'll tell you, Sonya . . . Don't laugh at me, but there it is, without you I can't . . . Come fog, come snow, anything, I don't care . . .'

Sonya said nothing. He took her hand and touched her cold mouth with his lips. She whispered sadly:

'It's no good . . . There is an abyss between us. Such an abyss that it makes you giddy.'

THE THAW

In another second, she said in her normal voice:

'I've told you our characters were too different. Let's leave it . . . Are you coming in to tea with the family? Well, why don't you say anything? You don't want to?'

Savchenko said angrily:

'You haven't told me yet that two and two make four, and that money should be kept in a savings bank.'

Later, Sonya's mother called her:

'Sonya, come and have your supper. Your father said Savchenko was here; why didn't you keep him?'

'He had a meeting. I walked along with him a little way. I've got a headache, Mother, I won't have any supper.'

She locked herself in her room. She felt bitter—hadn't she just rejected happiness? If she told her father he would say: 'You must be mad, you love one another, why torture yourselves?' 'I can't explain it to him but I am certain that we can't live together. It isn't just this quarrel. How stupid he was about the savings bank; for that alone I ought to hate him. He's a schoolboy; by now he may be sorry he lost his temper. I see it very clearly—we could make it up tomorrow or next month, but nothing could ever come of it. How can two people live together if they don't agree on anything? He

THE THAW

thinks I am too practical, that I only believe in the multiplication table. That isn't true, but I do live on the earth, I don't know how to soar. The only thing that puzzles me is why we are so drawn to one another. He couldn't keep away this time; and I can't do without him either. He has just insulted me, yet if he came, would I have the strength to drive him out? What is this? When he kissed me outside the gate, I thought I'd cry or throw myself into his arms. Father says I've chained my heart; how I'd like to go to him and say: "You were right, I should not have spoken as I did. And you were right about me, too . . . Such dreadful chains, they stop my heart from beating, it's destroying me . . ."

IX

VOLODYA had been in a bad mood all these weeks. He kept away from Sokolovsky and, meeting Tanechka in the street, told her frankly: 'Don't imagine that you've hurt my feelings, that's all nonsense, but I'm in a bad way, I don't feel like seeing anyone, not even you . . .'

'I wouldn't do you any good,' she answered. 'I feel bad myself. Our first night was a flop again, I've had a row with the producer, and I've got toothache, I ought to go to the poly-clinic. So altogether I'm not exactly cheerful.' Tanechka always suspected Volodya of 'affectation', but he had really meant to go and see her, only each time he had changed his mind: he knew she was depressed and needing to be comforted, and in his present mood he felt he could do nothing but infect her with his own misery.

'Why on earth have I gone to pieces?' he asked himself. Sometimes he thought it was because he was far from Moscow, sometimes because he was short of money, and at times he merely sighed: 'I'm getting old.'

It was true that he had money difficulties. Juravliov's portrait pleased no one except Juravliov

THE THAW

himself. A small hack job had turned up just in time—decorative panels for an agricultural exhibition featuring pedigree cows and hens. The cows were easy—he was supplied with good photographs, but the poultry gave him endless trouble—they were white and altogether different from the local breeds. Volodya was offered the chance to go to a State farm and paint from nature. He lost his temper: was he to travel fifty miles for some wretched hens? In the end he obtained magazine illustrations of the correct sort, finished the panels and was paid four thousand seven hundred roubles.

But he still felt low and this confused him altogether; evidently it could not be money after all. It was nice that he could give three thousand roubles to his mother, but he still felt miserable. Something horrible was happening to him. He hadn't been in such a state even when he lost his studio in Moscow—not even when Liola sprang on him the news of her engagement to Shaposhnikov. He had felt hurt: he had believed himself to be attracted to her; but that same evening he had gone with Misha to the Artists' Union¹⁰; there he had met Schwartz's wife and at once started to flirt with her—he did not allow his depression to get the better of him. Now it was as if he had been knocked on the head—and yet nothing had really happened. Tanechka wasn't even cross with him, if he called on her she would welcome him as in the past;

THE THAW

she had said: 'When you're out of your dumps come and see me;' but he didn't feel like going. He had told Sonya he was bored in this godforsaken hole, but if the truth were told, he wasn't pining after Moscow either. There you had to suck up to other artists, watch who was on the up-and-up and who was slipping, calculate and fight ceaselessly for your piece of cake. He had done all that, he hadn't done it badly, but he didn't feel like going on at present; it was too early at thirty-four to feel too old, but he must have aged considerably. Here, nobody did him any harm; locally he was the foremost artist; he had an intelligent companion—Sokolovsky; and there was Tanechka. His father was better, that was a good thing. He hadn't realized how greatly he was attached to him. It must be admitted that he had teased him wilfully, that was silly. The old man's views were out of date, of course, but he was a remarkable old man, an exception, one shouldn't hurt him . . . What, finally, was the reason for Volodya's dejection? Perhaps it was due to thinking. In Moscow he hadn't time, there he turned round and round like a mouse in a treadmill. Here, he had a lot of time, and so, willy-nilly, he had started thinking. It had always seemed to him that only madmen could just think—not of anything in particular but of things in general—and now he was doing it himself. It was a revolting occupation.

THE THAW

Volodya made fewer jokes and his glance lost the provocative sparkle which had so exasperated his schoolteachers and only recently reduced Tanechka to tears. Now he spoke with a polite indifference. Once he found himself on a bus next to Savchenko; they talked together and Savchenko told him about Sokolovsky's new machines. Volodya didn't like machines but he noted that Savchenko wasn't such a fool as he had thought him. That evening he told his sister: 'I ran into Savchenko, he was very interesting . . . Altogether, he seems intelligent.' Sonya gave him a surprised look, then scowled: 'I don't see why you have to report this to me.'

On that cold night when Sonya and Savchenko were walking up and down the street, Volodya left the house without a notion of how to spend the evening. Catching sight of them he grinned and crossed to the other side—no point in startling the young people. Where should he go? 'Sokolovsky's sick of me. Last time I was there he wouldn't talk at all, just screwed up his face as if he'd swallowed a mouthful of vinegar. I wonder what he does, sitting all alone with Fomka. Probably they growl at one another . . . All the same, where am I to go? At the Volga Restaurant people on official missions will be sadly chewing cutlets and the drunks roaring and knocking back vodka laced with madeira. Not very interesting. And outside it's beastly cold.'

Suddenly he remembered Saburov. Why not go

THE THAW

to see him? He hadn't been there since his leave from Moscow in 'fifty-one, three years ago. 'Might look at his masterpieces. Poor devil, probably lives disgustingly. Better get some food. Crazy he is, but he likes a drink and a snack, judging from the way he fell on Mother's pasties.'

Volodya went into a shop, bought masses of food, vodka for Saburov and wine for Saburov's wife, and took a taxi to the other end of the town. The little street straggling down to the river was impassable. He got out and with difficulty found the small, crooked, pink house; it had once belonged to a merchant and was now shared by four families including the Saburovs.

Coming into the squalid little room, Volodya made a face—what the devil! He had known they could not be comfortable, but this was beyond anything he had imagined. At one time Saburov had had a room in the art-school building, but he had been turned out of it. Just before that, he had got married and a room was given to Glasha—the house was allocated to the publishers. Two bunks, a stove with a saucepan on it, about a hundred canvases—all so tightly crowded that you couldn't turn round.

The visitor was offered the armchair which had lost its stuffing and from which Glasha swept a pile of cardboard, rags, newspapers and chipped crockery. Saburov was as delighted as a child.

THE THAW

'Thanks, Volodya, for coming. It's a joy to both of us. Just imagine what a coincidence, it's the anniversary of our wedding—two years already. I'd hoped to make it an occasion. I said to Glasha: "Let's invite Pukhov," but it didn't work out that way . . . It's the end of the month. To tell you the truth, I don't seem to bring off anything. They said the theatre might take me on, but that was only talk. Well, anyway, all that isn't important . . . It's wonderful to see you. We'll have tea, Glasha has some jam . . . Just think, Glasha, he and I were at school together for ten years. And now he's come. It really is a piece of luck.'

Volodya was smiling.

'Congratulations. We ought to celebrate. I've brought a little wine, let's drink to your happiness.'

Glasha was flustered, there wasn't any bread; it was the only thing Volodya hadn't thought of bringing. She said she would run out for it—the State stores would still be open. After she had gone, Volodya said:

'You remember the time the Camerny Theatre came and I had had a row with Father; I didn't have a penny and I wanted to take Mira to it, so you lent me twenty roubles?'

Saburov laughed.

'You said there was enough left for a lemonade for Mira, you couldn't have one yourself. Pretty girl, she was. Do you know what happened to her?'

THE THAW

'Wait a bit, I meant to say something else. Now, you haven't any money, that's a fact. Here's a thousand, it's all I have at the moment, but I have absolutely no use for it. You'll pay me back when they've made you an Academician. I'm in no hurry. Take it, I tell you . . . Listen, if you don't look on me as a friend I'll feel insulted.'

Glasha came back. Saburov suggested they should eat at once, but Volodya asked to see his paintings. Saburov protested:

'What's the point? You probably won't like them. Let's drink instead, and talk about old times.'

Volodya insisted. It was not so much that he was keen to see the pictures as that he thought Saburov was being modest and would secretly be hurt if he didn't see and praise them. Glasha backed him up:

'Indeed he must show them to you, Vladimir Andreyevich. His latest landscapes and the portrait of me—the one in the green blouse—they're simply marvellous.'

Volodya loved painting though he admitted it to no one, and though whenever conversation turned on art he was either silent or played the fool. A few years ago he had spent a week in Leningrad; every morning he hurried to the Hermitage to look his fill at the old masters. As soon as he came out of the museum he dropped back at once into his customary life—wondering where to rustle up a commission, how to get into the good graces of Blandov of the

THE THAW

Art Department and what present to buy for Liola.

He gazed silently at Saburov's landscapes, his expression neither mocking nor approving ; Glasha looked in vain for some sign of what he felt about her husband's work; all he said was an occasional curt: 'Wait, don't take that away,' or, 'There's a reflection on it,' or 'Show me some more.' Had Saburov come on a lot in these last three years, or was Volodya in an unusually receptive mood? He felt crushed. He forgot everything else and it was useless for Saburov to protest: 'That's enough, let's have supper.'

Looking at great paintings in picture galleries, Volodya had the sense of joy and lightness he experienced when gazing lovingly at a tree in leaf or at the beauty of a woman's face. In his opinion art had once existed but had long since vanished. No wonder that in a museum there was always something a little dead—the cleanliness and the faint cold and the whispering of the visitors. He was profoundly shaken by Saburov's work: this, after all, was his contemporary, his schoolfellow; and what was so difficult to grasp, he had done that landscape in this slummy room, sitting with his cripple, looking out of that small window. How simple it all was and how far beyond his understanding—the full tones, the depths of the dove-grey and blue sky, the clayey heaviness of the soil! Saburov showed him his latest portrait of his wife

THE THAW

and again Volodya was overwhelmed. Glasha asked him if it was like her; he didn't answer. He only saw the painting—the ochre of the highlights in the hair, the olive-shadowed face, the green blouse. And gradually, just as in the landscape nature had revealed itself in its poverty and splendour—the melting snow, the blackness of the naked branches and the light blueness of the sky—the miracle of the northern spring—so now he saw a woman in her ugliness and her beauty; a whole lifetime would not be too much to deserve her timid, plain, unnoticeable smile.

Silently he sat down to table, silently he drank a glass of vodka, and only then remembered that he must say something. He rose and with a solemnity which sat oddly on him, proposed:

‘To your happiness! To your happiness, Glafira Antonovna! I have seen you in his portrait of you. I have seen your works, Saburov. To your happiness. That is all.’

He emptied his glass. A little later Glasha asked him: ‘Vladimir Andreyevich, tell me frankly, do you really like it?’

Again he answered nothing, but after thinking a little, said to Saburov: ‘You know, envy is a rotten feeling, but I envy you.’

He drank another glass, and looked again at one of Saburov's landscapes. The earth was of the colour of bright rust, there were rowan trees, a small grey

THE THAW

house and a very high and empty sky. Volodya looked at it a long time, then he said with a sad smile:

'It's wonderfully painted. That's a fact.'

Saburov protested.

'The trees aren't right. They are and they aren't. I painted it one day in autumn, the weather was extraordinary—the clay was a special sort of colour. I remember seeing it another time, in 'forty-one, somewhere near Kaluga. We were retreating. Stepanov was with me, he was a remarkable man, an agronomist. I kept meaning to paint him . . . You can imagine what we were feeling like. All at once I looked—there was a cottage and a little stream with a steep bank, and the earth was that same rust colour. I said to Stepanov: "Look." He couldn't think what I meant at first, then he saw. Suddenly he roared: "We'll drive them out to hell." He was killed near Maloyaroslavtz.'

For a long time he talked about Stepanov. Volodya wasn't listening; he might have been looking at the landscape, or he might have been sitting in a daze. Finally he got up:

'I'll go. I don't feel like it a bit, but I'd better go.'

After he had gone Glasha tidied up the room. Saburov was sitting on the bed, his hands over his face. She thought that he was dozing and walked about on tiptoe. He called softly to her. She came and put her arms round him.

THE THAW

'You see, Pukhov also says it's wonderful. You must go to Saratov. They'll see it, too, they won't be able to help it. They must arrange an exhibition.'

Saburov shook his head.

'Those trees are no good at all. Volodya can say what he likes, I know. It's right and it isn't. And that top right-hand corner is unfinished. No, I must work some more on it.'

He saw Glasha's sad expression and broke off:

'Glasha darling, don't be upset. Rodinov said I'd get something at the theatre after the first of March—work from other people's sketches. Then we'll be all right.'

'I don't want you to be taken away from your own painting. Why should you think of such a thing? That wasn't what I meant. What I want is that everybody should see your landscapes. Don't worry about the money, that'll come, and if it doesn't, we'll do without. I'm so happy tonight. I know Pukhov is a bad painter himself, but he understands painting, you can tell that at once.'

'And do you think he doesn't know how to paint? Nothing of the sort. In 'fifty, when he arrived from Moscow and came to see me, I was stuck over a flower piece—some nasturtiums—couldn't do a thing with it. And he painted it—just like that. And if you'd seen it! I couldn't take my eyes away; a dark jug, and big, bright flowers. Very restless, like himself. I can't think what is the matter with

THE THAW

him. He's particularly frightening when he makes jokes. I've behaved badly to him—never went to see him since that evening when they invited us. I thought I bored him. And you see, he didn't want to leave . . . I don't know what he needs . . . Perhaps if he met somebody like you.'

Glasha was confused and her plain face, lit up by a faint, hardly noticeable smile, became beautiful as in Saburov's portraits of her.

Towards morning, climbing up the slippery street with a wicked wind pushing him, he thought: 'Must have sounded silly . . . Saburov lives abominably—at a pinch you might put up with that, but nobody even knows his work; he said I was the first painter who's been to see him. At the Union they think he is abnormal. He is, of course—you have to be a schizophrenic to work as he does, not to compromise, to do exactly what you feel . . . Yes, it does sound silly, all the same it's fact, I do envy him. I can go to Moscow and sweat a little and suck up a little, and they'll arrange a show for me and I'll get a prize and everybody will say Oh! and Ah!—and I'll still be envious of that madman. Tanechka was quite right, it's a good thing he's married his cripple—a portrait like that you can't do to order, and skill is not enough, you have to feel it. There I go again, thinking about nothing, it's enough to drive you crazy. But if I did go crazy I would still not paint like Saburov, I haven't enough

THE THAW

talent and the talent I have had I've thrown away. I'd sit in a mental hospital and I'd paint pedigree hens as per instructions . . . Is that what you wanted, Vladimir Andreyevich? You did? Well then, you've got it.'

Next morning his mother came into his room.

'There's a piece about you in the paper. I'll read it to you . . . Here it is: "It is impossible not to single out the deeply realistic pictures by the painter Pukhov, carried out with his characteristic skill. Next to them should be noted . . ." No, that's about the carpet . . . Aren't you pleased?'

He wanted to curse but remembered his mother would be offended; he nodded, then said:

'It's good that Father is feeling better, I was worried.'

His mother was touched and kissed him. Her husband was unfair to him, Volodya had a good heart, he was only reticent.

Volodya stood by the window: there was nothing to be seen but snow. The room was warm but he felt so cold somewhere inside him that he went and got his overcoat out of the hall and put it on. Even then he couldn't get warm.

X

DINNER was over, the dining-room was almost empty; only Koroteyev remained sitting with a cooling glass of tea before him, absorbed in a long article on the Berlin Conference. Savchenko sat down next to him.

'Juravliov wants to sack Semionov. Gave him a prize a month ago and now says he's a waster. Semionov is an excellent milling-machine operator. I was watching him the other day, he was teaching some of the young ones how to set the lathe. It's just that he is independent and Juravliov can't stand that. Though I don't suppose it's even that—he's just working off his rage . . .'

His mind still on the article, Koroteyev asked without interest:

'And why is Juravliov in a rage?'

'Haven't you heard? His wife has left him. That's why he is so furious.'

For all his habit of self-discipline, Koroteyev paled and turned away.

'Why can't they put up some shades? That lamp is 300 watts, hurts your eyes.'

Savchenko noticed nothing. 'Tell me,' he asked, 'you know her, how did she stand him all this time?'

THE THAW

Koroteyev got up glancing at his watch. 'Yegorov is waiting for me. I lost count of time reading that article. Interesting session yesterday—in the end Bideau had nothing to say. A silly situation for him. After all, he is a Frenchman. Yegorov is worried, the boiler brackets won't fit. Have to check up.'

He quickly pulled himself together, and for three hours talked boilers, brackets, welding, warping, with Yegorov. At the end of it Yegorov said: 'You aren't looking well. You should get out more. Gorokhov told me—at least two hours' walk a day. I don't manage that, but I've taken to walking home.'

Koroteyev walked home thinking of Lena. He told himself that there was nothing to think about, it had nothing to do with him. He must live his life and forget what he had long ago stigmatized as nonsense.

But why had Lena left Juravliov? After all, she had lived with him for over five years. It must have been a difficult decision for her to take . . . 'I'm out of my mind,' he snapped at himself. 'What is so surprising about it? The surprising thing is that she stood it for so long. I often wondered last summer what they could find to talk about. It isn't that Juravliov is a scoundrel as Savchenko says, he's just an ordinary man, a rubber stamp. Savchenko is a young romantic, and after all, everything is new

to him; I've seen plenty of Juravliovs. But perhaps he's better in his private life. Perhaps she was touched by his feeling for her. Or perhaps their little girl drew them together. Whatever it was, it was a weak link and now it's snapped; it's not my business. Naturally, if this had been last summer I would have run round to see her at once, I'd have tried to cheer her up, see if she needed help. Then it was so easy to be natural. Now, even if I met her accidentally, I wouldn't dare to talk to her—I'm too frightened of giving myself away. It's quite hard enough for her as it is; why upset her with my unwanted sentiments? I'm not Savchenko, at my age you have to know exactly what you're doing, you have to be as meticulous as a line drawing.'

He stayed up late and by the time he went to sleep he thought that he had brought himself to his senses—there would be no more such absurd and wretched nights. But his first thought on waking was of Lena. Where was she? Even if he made up his mind to see her, he wouldn't know where to find her. She might have moved to another town, or to the country, to her parents . . . No, she would not have left her job in mid-term. But he couldn't go to the school. If only he could meet her by accident, go up to her, look at her without saying anything.

How long had this been going on? He had begun tormenting himself when he returned from leave—

six months ago. The nonsense had proved stronger than his will. But he could not give in to it, he simply must pull himself together.

‘But why *has* she left Juravliov? After all, I don’t know anything. Suppose she is going through all this herself? No, that’s rubbish, I would have felt it. She doesn’t know how to pretend. That’s the sort of thing that happens in novels—she misunderstands, he doesn’t guess—the novelist tangles it all up to make it interesting. Real life is much simpler. That kind of misunderstanding might happen to somebody very young—like Savchenko—no wonder he has to ask what he is to do. I’m past that age. It’s absurd to comfort myself with illusions; and it isn’t even decent.’

During the midday break Juravliov asked him to his room to talk about the brackets; he was seriously worried. Koroteyev told him of his conversation with Yegorov; the welding system must be altered. Then Juravliov suggested they should lunch together. They talked about the German question, the elections and the chess tournament. Koroteyev made an effort to be friendly. He had reminded himself that morning that Juravliov must be unhappy—and who could understand it better than he could himself? Perhaps, after all, he had misjudged him altogether. A lot of people thought well of him, and Koroteyev knew he was conscientious, hard-working and devoted to the

THE THAW

factory. You had only to remember how well he had behaved when the fire had broken out. Everybody had his weaknesses; it was difficult to keep a check on oneself; could he be sure that he had not been less than fair to Juravliov through jealousy? In any case, he would be friendly to him now.

Juravliov was touched by Koroteyev's manner. He thought: 'I always knew he was a first-rate worker; he is a good comrade as well; he isn't an intriguer, he doesn't try to undermine me, like Sokolovsky. I wonder if somebody has told him about Lena, people love to talk. He knows her. He was rather attracted to her, but he knows what she is like—"yes" today and "good-bye" tomorrow, "you needn't come again".'

When they got up he said: 'I'd like to have a serious talk with you. Only not here. Would you perhaps come and have dinner with me on Sunday? Then we wouldn't be disturbed.' He smiled unexpectedly: 'I'm like you now. I am also a bachelor these days.'

Thinking over this sentence afterwards, Koroteyev told himself: 'Obviously he is suffering, he wanted to show me he is keeping himself under control. I always knew he had a strong will, but he must be fonder of her than I thought . . . What can he want to talk about? Surely not Lena? It can't be; I'm so crazy myself, I begin to think other people are out of their minds, too. Must be about some

THE THAW

directive from Head Office, to do with Brainin's project . . . But why didn't he want to talk in the canteen, or in his office? Anyhow, it doesn't matter . . . I wonder what Lena is thinking about.'

He worked through the afternoon. Afterwards he again tried to control his thoughts, but his heart rebelled. As he was going home he suddenly thought he saw Lena ahead of him; he hurried on; it was an elderly woman with a bundle. And yet repeatedly in the bluish mist he seemed to catch a glimpse of Lena.

It made no sense. But where could she be?

That night he went to the club—Brainin was to read a paper on world affairs; it would be interesting to know what he had to say on France. He hid from himself the thought, 'Suppose Lena comes?'—she occasionally came to lectures. He arrived late and when he entered the long, darkened hall, Brainin had done with Europe and was talking about Asia: 'India is, so to speak, disturbed by the existence of American bases in Pakistan.' Soon the light came on; Lena wasn't in the audience.

The following evening he went again, though this time he had no excuse; the show was an old film he had seen twice already.

The third night there was an amateur programme—some guitarists, a couple doing a Bulgarian dance, and a poem on the struggle for peace recited by Katya Stolyarova. Koroteyev sat motionless, un-

THE THAW

able through embarrassment to look around him, knowing that he would not see Lena and that the 'nonsense' had got the better of him.

All the week he searched for her. He would go and stand outside the school, as though in contemplation of the snowdrifts, his ear cocked for the creaking of the garden gate. Knowing that she sometimes called on the Pukhovs, he discovered their address and waited for two solid hours outside their house in the biting cold.

Finally he realized that he could no longer endure such exhaustion and such anguish and promised himself to give up. That was on Saturday. After the factory he went home and started reading Chekhov. Savchenko came in.

'Dmitry Andreyevich, what luck to find you in! Come to the theatre, it's the first night of *Hamlet*, I've got two tickets. You said you liked Shakespeare.'

He had had the tickets for a week; in the meantime there had been the scene with Sonya and the extra ticket was now useless. Noticing the light in Koroteyev's window, he thought of asking him, though without much hope, so that he was almost startled when Koroteyev said:

'Why not . . . I haven't seen *Hamlet* since my student days.'

It was not, of course, of *Hamlet* that he was thinking. Lena had told him that last season she had

THE THAW

not missed one first night. 'Though she has other things to think of now . . . All the same, you can't tell, everything is possible . . . Anyway, it isn't fatuous to accept such an invitation, it's not like hanging about outside people's gates.'

Savchenko was entranced by *Hamlet*, by the décor, by Koroteyev's company. Koroteyev seemed to follow the play with interest; in the first interval he refused to leave his place and sat on, without even glancing at the audience, his eyes fixed on his programme. At his tenth reading of the words, 'Produced by Meritorious Artist . . .', he told himself with shame: 'I'm as bad as Savchenko. In fact, he's got more sense.'

In the next interval he made up his mind to go out with Savchenko and smoke a cigarette; on his way down he passed Lena on the stairs. He was not thinking of her at that moment; he was so startled that he passed her without speaking. She was with some woman, whom he thought was Dr. Sherer. He turned sharply and ran after her:

'Elena Borissovna!'

She stopped and said quietly:

'Good evening, Dmitry Sergeyevich. I thought you didn't recognize me.'

He turned to say good evening to Vera, but she had vanished. He stood wordlessly. Lena, too, was silent. At last he said with difficulty:

'I wanted to come and see you but I didn't know

THE THAW

where you were... I never thought I'd meet you here.'

She laughed. 'Why not? I told you I was a theatre fan. Now, more than ever—I am feeling so well. I'm so relieved. I told you I was having trouble with the seventh grade; well, now they're making tremendous progress. Pukhov has helped me a great deal. Altogether things are working out beautifully. I am living at Vera Sherer's. I've been promised a room but not until the autumn. Anyway, Shura adores Vera and hates the thought of leaving her. You won't know her, she has grown so much. Today I bought her some coloured pencils. Please don't think I feel depressed; on the contrary, I've never been so cheerful. Of course, I shall be very glad if you drop in some time, but don't think I have to be visited, I have lots of friends. Last night I was at a students' party, and I even danced. I have a lot of work, and I've been made an agitator¹⁰ as well, I'm in charge of three blocks. I wasn't even sure I would have time to come tonight. I don't like the acting, Ophelia is affected and Izumrudov has made Hamlet a neurotic, I think Hamlet is a strong character. Do you agree with me?'

She spoke unusually fast as though afraid of stopping, and without waiting for Koroteyev's view of Hamlet, she held out her hand:

'Good-bye, Dmitry Sergeyevich, Vera must be looking for me.'

He kept her hand a moment longer.

THE THAW

‘Elena Borissovna, I have been thinking so much about you . . .’

She felt that in another moment she would start to cry, but pulling herself together, she said in the same hurried way:

‘Thank you, but don’t worry about me, I’ve told you, I’m all right, quite all right.’

She fled.

Koroteyev saw the last act and walked home silently with Savchenko. Savchenko was shaken by the play, its poetry was still ringing in his ears. Koroteyev thought wryly: ‘Now, everything has more or less been said. I needn’t stand in front of Pukhov’s gate and dream of happiness. It’s strange—how ever did I live before I met her? I don’t understand it now. And yet I lived, I studied, worked. I must live again as though she didn’t exist. Life has to be simple, bare. Happiness is for the young, for people like Savchenko. Now—my room, the desk-light, the designs, and no one with me, I am not just going home, I am returning to myself, to my own life. I’ll try not to be a fool, not to dream.’

Lena talked all night to Vera Sherer. She had come home animated and talked about the play and even entertained Vera with an imitation of Ophelia—Tanechka had been no good at all in the part. Suddenly she burst out crying. Vera was alarmed, she gave her drops of some kind and

THE THAW

sitting down beside her, took her into her arms. Then Lena told her everything.

'I know it's madness. He warned me that he didn't love me—he could not even imagine such a thing—he said I was an empty-headed flirt and that we hadn't anything in common. It isn't my fault I'm in love with him, but I wouldn't dream of thrusting myself on him. And I don't want his pity. Naturally, he has made up his mind that I have left my husband because of him; he said he'd come and see me. I won't let him in . . . You must think I'm behaving like a schoolgirl, but I assure you this is something very serious, it has never happened to me before, it's the first time . . . But I don't want people to be sorry for me. I know you'll understand me, you've been through so much . . . It's so terrible . . .'

When she had calmed down a little, Vera said: 'Lena, why are you so sure he doesn't care for you?'

'Oh, I know that for certain. That's why he made that speech at the club . . . Now he's sorry for me, he wants to cheer me up. I can't bear people to be sorry for me. And I love him, I know that only too well. Tonight, when we were going up the stairs and all at once I saw him, everything went spinning round me, I almost fell down . . .'

Vera, for some reason, thought of Sokolovsky's story about the desert plant. 'How happy you must be if you can love and suffer and weep like this . . .'

XI

JURAVLIOV tried not to think of Lena; it upset him and he was afraid, as he put it to himself, that his production chart would be upset. Last Sunday she had brought their daughter to the flat; he took Shura for a walk, then played hide-and-seek, hiding in the attic while Shura shouted: 'Daddy, I know where you are, you're under the bed.' When Lena came to fetch her, he examined her intently; she looked extremely fit. What did she care! Probably she already had her eye on someone else. He would have liked to ask her if she wanted to go through with the divorce; in that case they would need to talk things over and settle on the official reason. But he decided: 'It isn't worth it. She'll tell me if it comes to that; I can't talk to her, it's too upsetting.'

He believed that he was quietly recovering from the destruction of his home, but his experience had left a deep impression on him. Until recently, when he thought about his life, he pictured it as a straight wide road. It was true that he had had his troubles, at one time he had even been afraid for his career, but afterwards he had reproached himself with giving way to moods; he had got by, it couldn't

THE THAW

have worked out otherwise for him. So in this situation, too, he told himself: 'Why get upset? I can live without her.' And indeed he did not often think of her: it had been, it was no longer, he would get used to it. He began, however, to be unsure, things were somehow blurred, people seemed hostile. He lost something of his calm, spoke with too much heat, and at such moments said too much. He had been proud of his capacity to see the brighter side, now he was suspicious and on the look-out for slanders and conspiracies.

On Monday Lena had been gone a fortnight. On Tuesday there was a Party meeting. In his opening speech, Sibirtzev, the Chairman of the Factory Committee, referred to housing: it was high time that the new houses were put up. Juravliov nodded, he even said: 'No doubt about it.' He knew Sibirtzev had to raise this question at every opportunity, since it was he who, a dozen times a day, listened to the workmen's grievances. The hovels really were disgusting, any moment they might fall to bits. But now, everything was in order, the plans had been definitely approved and the work on the foundations would begin in the second quarter. Juravliov would have let it pass if Sokolovsky hadn't butted in, unexpectedly siding with Sibirtzev to point out that the building of the three new blocks of flats should have been started in 1952. At that Juravliov boiled over: the foundry had been

THE THAW

recognized as a priority, it concerned the country as a whole; Sokolovsky knew the position perfectly, and for him to raise the issue at a Party meeting was 'demagoguery of the first order.' Sokolovsky answered quietly: 'Comrade Juravliov seems to be unaware of the functions of the Party organization.' After that the discussion switched to offices for the election campaign and ended peacefully.

Juravliov went home and brooded. 'It's not for nothing that Sokolovsky brought up housing. He must be working something up. The houses aren't the point. When I told him the new model had to be delayed, he flew into a rage: "So you're going to put the brake on the brakes!" That isn't a bit witty, it's just downright insolent. Something tells me he's up to no good. He's always been a busybody, in the Urals he tried to sink Sapunov—he failed to pull that off and they slung him out—now he wants to take it out on me. The best thing would be to forestall him, but what the devil can he have in mind exactly?'

He had a moment's hesitation—could he be exaggerating? Sokolovsky had a filthy character, he needled everybody, and how often had he cheeked Juravliov himself! But all the same, they had worked together for six years. He pulled himself up—it was not the same this time. 'He must have smelt out something; a fellow like that has a nose

THE THAW

like a retriever. Why should he have brought up the housing matter, which was not his business anyway, if he didn't mean to do me in?'

'The factory is everything to me,' thought Juravliov, 'especially now that Lena's gone. And will that trouble-maker really squeeze me out? I've never been a careerist but I do appreciate the trust they showed by putting me in charge of such a factory. And when you think of it, that's all that's left to me.'

For the past fortnight, Juravliov had indeed worked longer hours than ever, almost frantically, visiting both shifts, inspecting every workshop and talking to the workmen.

When on Saturday he reminded Koroteyev that he expected him on Sunday, Dmitry thought that it must be to do with Brainin's project: Juravliov had talked about it ceaselessly, he must want to go right through it once again.

Juravliov received him warmly. At dinner the conversation ran at first on the day-to-day events at the factory, then Juravliov recalled the War and Koroteyev in his turn told a story about the fighting on the Vistula. They began to feel that closeness which exists between two front-line veterans whose experiences were unshared by others.

After they got up from the table, Juravliov said: 'You have only been with us two years but I feel you are really one of us, you have the interests of

THE THAW

the factory at heart. For me now, it is my whole life.'

His voice faltered: Koroteyev felt embarrassed. 'How fond he must be of Lena! Still, it's understandable.' Juravliov went on:

'You know how it is, a factory is a big family, everybody has to pull together. On the whole we are a friendly lot. There is only one thing wrong. I assure you, it isn't a question of prestige with me. I am a plain man come of a peasant stock, I don't care for discipline except at work. The way I look at it, once you're outside the gate, go ahead and say what you like. But you can't work in an atmosphere of suspicion. I admit, Sokolovsky has considerable experience, but his attitude is such that it is quite impossible for me to work with him. I've tried, I've closed my eyes to all sorts of things; but now it's reached the breaking point . . .'

'He's a difficult man but he's a good worker,' Koroteyev said soothingly. 'I really shouldn't put much weight on what he says. I don't know him very well—we don't meet outside the office—but Yegorov says his tongue is a bit sharp. Honestly, Ivan Vassilievich, I shouldn't pay too much attention.'

'It isn't a question of his tongue. Take this, for instance—why is he always snooping about the workshops? He's hardly ever in his room. He's suspicious somehow—of everybody—of Yegorov, of yourself.'

THE THAW

'Surely not! A designer can't do his work shut up in an office—he's got to take account of practical snags. I often ask him myself to check up outside. If it weren't for his annoying character, you would never think of such a thing.'

'Well, how can you assess him without taking his character into consideration? Do you know what happened in his last job? I'll tell you. The Director was Sapunov, a young man, clever and energetic, who put the factory on its feet. Sokolovsky got it into his head that a project he put up was deliberately shelved, so he started undermining Sapunov. This was in war time. You and I were freezing in the trenches, and he was looking after his career and trying to destroy an honest man. He was shown up, there was even an article in the local paper, but he managed to get by, he pulled some strings.'

'It's hard to believe somehow . . . He doesn't look like a trouble-maker.'

'You're too trusting, Dmitry Sergeyevich. There are other things in Sokolovsky's past . . . I believe Voronin was still with us when you came. An excellent fellow; he was ill a long time, had something wrong with his liver and neglected it. But what really finished him off was the trouble with the spindle bearings—you remember? And whose fault was that? Sokolovsky's. Voronin got the blame, but the error was in the project, no doubt about it.'

THE THAW

'I never knew Voronin; when I came he was in hospital. It's difficult to imagine Sokolovsky passing such an error, though, of course, everybody makes mistakes. Anyway, he is a brilliant designer.'

So far Juravliov had spoken calmly, almost with complacency, but now suddenly he lost his temper and jumped up, his puffy, greenish-tinted cheeks flushed and shaking.

'Let me tell you, he is a brilliant trouble-maker, there's no doubt about it. Pity you weren't at the Party meeting, that was an instructive sight. Why do you think he raised the housing question? Do you think he cares how the workers live? He doesn't give a damn. Sibirtzev—he cares. And do you think I don't? Every time I look at those wretched huts it hurts me. I'm terribly relieved that we'll soon be able to house the men like human beings. It's my responsibility as the Director, not his. And when I tell him that politely, he starts instructing me in Party organization. What right has he got to talk to me like that, will you tell me?'

Koroteyev tried to pacify him:

'I don't think Sokolovsky meant to be insulting. After all, he is an old Party member . . .'

By now Juravliov was beside himself; hardly conscious of what he was saying, he shouted breathlessly:

'An old Party member! . . . Well, you know! . . . His record is a bit off-colour . . . His family is

THE THAW

abroad. In Belgium. You think it's gossip? Nothing of the kind. You have only to look up his files . . . I've never mentioned it, I stick to my work, I'm not a trouble-maker . . . I've even stood up for him—why drag out the past? If they've given him the chance to work, let him work . . . But don't tell me he's so Simon Pure that he has the right to tell me off . . . At best he's only fifty per cent trustworthy, no doubt about it . . .'

Koroteyev was silent; he thought: 'How strangely people are made. A patchwork, all mixed up. When Juravliov was telling me about Rjev I felt quite close to him. He spoke with real affection of the men who fought with him; that wasn't oratory, I'm sure he was quite genuine. But that was an hour ago . . . And now he's insinuating, slandering. What did he want me for? To drag me into it? I'll never believe that story about Voronin. Sokolovsky is honest; and there isn't anyone to touch him as a designer. Not that I would like to live in the same room with him, everybody says he likes to needle people. And what does he have to do that for?—As if life hadn't sharp enough teeth. Perhaps because he's been bitten himself? Anyway, he couldn't be more honest. I teased Savchenko and told him he was a romantic, but Savchenko was right; Juravliov is worthless. I don't know how I came to have a friendly talk with him and drink his vodka. Why should I listen to his filth?'

THE THAW

He got up:

'I have to go and work.' At the door he stopped. 'I don't agree with you about Sokolovsky. Bear that in mind.'

For a long time Juravliov could not get over his mistake. What a fool he had been! Koroteyev was obviously hand-in-glove with Sokolovsky. Scoundrels, the pair of them . . . 'Could it really have been to talk philosophy that he used to visit Lena? I'm much too trusting, all round. Look at Lena. Could I ever have suspected her? And yet she's turned out to be no good . . .

'All the same, it was more cheerful with her in the house. If Shura were here now I could go and play with her. And the house feels empty, somehow . . .

'Koroteyev is right about the boiler brackets—it's a question of welding. Tomorrow I'll have to see Yegorov, it can still be put right . . .

'Sokolovsky must have a pull in Moscow, no doubt about it. Will he really manage to get me out? Father used to say: "Mind, Vanya, never stick your fingers into anybody's mouth." A lot of things have changed since—factories have gone up; I used to look after geese, now I'm a Director—but it's still true, you should never stick out your neck. Otherwise what happens? I trusted Lena and she's deceived me, I trusted Koroteyev and he's turned out to be a scoundrel . . . Nice mood I am in! Can't

THE THAW

remember ever feeling worse . . . And yet, when you come to think of it, nothing has really happened . . .

Khitrov came in unexpectedly and Juravliov brightened: 'There's a real friend, must have sensed what I was feeling like.'

Juravliov let himself go—Sokolovsky was torn apart, flogged, flayed. Khitrov broke in now and then: 'You don't mean it!' 'I never knew that!' 'It's unbelievable!' 'Can you imagine such a swine!' Thus encouraged, by the time he came to Sokolovsky's past, Juravliov was shouting in a frenzy:

'Sent away his family, think of it! He's a Benelux, not a Communist.'

Koroteyev also took a long time to recover from his conversation with Ivan. He was disgusted. Fortunately Sokolovsky was known at Head Office; and the times had changed, Juravliov could no longer rub him out. 'All the same, it's horrible. Why didn't I tell him so? Must have got into the habit of keeping my mouth shut—used to seeing too much dirt. That's what is so bad. In the beginning, what could you expect?—You start building a house and there's bound to be a lot of trash left lying about; but now it's time we were getting tidier—the house is being lived in, after all. Now, a Juravliov sticks out like a sore thumb.

'And yet Savchenko isn't really right. You can't say Juravliov is altogether worthless—he's devoted

THE THAW

to his job and he seems to have been a good soldier. How can all these different things exist together in the same man? Lena has left him now, but there was a time when he attracted her, there must have been something in him that made her love him. He isn't a scoundrel—he's unfinished, incomplete, a reject of a man.

'It's easy to sort out a machine and replace the defective parts. But what do you do with a man? A year ago I would have said that Juravliov was a useful worker—though, even then, I saw his seamy side, I tried not to think about it; but as a human being he's a mess. I feel as if I'd climbed out of a cesspool.

'A different sort of man is needed—people like Savchenko—romantics. The ascent is too steep, the air is too rarefied for people with rotten lungs. Age doesn't come into it. There are some contemporaries of Savchenko who could even outspit Juravliov. And look what Lena says about old Pukhov, yet here's a man who was brought up in the darkest time. There were always good and bad people. If a man is honourable he won't get lost; he'll come out on the right path. But what about the others? Knowledge doesn't get you far, it's feelings that must be trained. Take America—they've any amount of education there, I can tell from their scientific journals. And the marvellous laboratories they put up! But just read what they do to Negroes

THE THAW

and see how it depresses you—sheer savagery.

‘But how can feelings be trained? It’s difficult. It isn’t difficult to grow grapes in the Crimea—that’s like making a Savchenko grow up as an honest man. But take a wild vine—that’s the young Juravliov, and graft a conscience on to him—that’s like cultivating grapes in the Far North. Difficult, but possible—all you need is fervour, sensitiveness, determination. Our people have achieved unheard of deeds, they’re rightly called a heroic people. It’s essential that each separate individual should be like that. Didn’t Juravliov take part in that universal upsurge, wasn’t he caught up in it at Rjev? And again, here, when the fire broke out? We have taken a lot of trouble over one half of the human being, but the other half is neglected. The result is that one half of the house is a slum. I remember that article of Gorky’s I read long ago, while I was still at school; he said we needed our own Soviet humanism. The word has been forgotten, the task is still to be done. In those days it was only a presentiment, now it’s time we tackled it.

‘And what about myself? I swear at Juravliov, but do I tidy up my own house? I, too, keep a partition between the way I reason and the way I live. Why did I condemn that unfortunate agronomist, Zubtzov? He’d have every right to say I am two-faced. How often do I say: “That’s all right in books but not in life,” or : “Principles are one thing,

THE THAW

experience is another." That's hypocrisy. And yet it isn't that I mean to be dishonest. Why does it happen like that? It must be because we change, we grow so fast. Sometimes it's the mind that can't keep up, at other times it's the heart. Savchenko is much more whole; he hasn't been through the 'thirties or through the War. He demands more—that's his right. It looks as if we're getting near to what we once only vaguely dreamt of . . .

Did Koroteyev fall asleep or did he only close his eyes and drift with the rapid flow of thoughts, feelings, images? He remembered Zakhariev, killed at Stary Oskol, who said as he was dying: 'All will be well.' Then he heard Lissishkin, the welder, muttering crossly: 'Silly giving me the prize. I didn't discover it by myself—we all thought of it together.' And Savchenko saying: 'They can't frighten us with bombs—we have ideas on our side, and we have our word, our honour.' He was seeing wonderful people—warm, loving, harsh yet gentle—his own century's enormous tribe, and a kindly smile came across his face. Then he remembered Lena and, for the first time, the thought of her merged with his stubborn, virile dream of the future of mankind.

XII

JURAVLIOV's story made a deep impression on Khitrov. He told his wife and his eldest son that Sokolovsky had been found out to be a double-dealer, a deliberate saboteur who had settled his family in Belgium.

'Juravliov wouldn't have spoken carelessly; he's a cautious fellow, weighs his every word. Sokolovsky must have been unmasked up there,' he raised his hand significantly.

He passed on the tale of Sokolovsky's exposure to the Engineer Prokhorov, and to Dobjinsky, the club manager, adding in each case: 'Naturally, it's between ourselves.' Prokhorov took the view that the whole thing was Khitrov's tittle-tattle, the story wasn't worth a rotten egg. Dobjinsky, however, liked it; he was annoyed with Sokolovsky, who on some occasion had made fun of the club's activities, and he enjoyed startling people with sensational news. He garnished the dish and served it up to whoever cared to listen to him.

Khitrov's wife had a job in the bank and she naturally told her colleagues; and his son who was in the tenth grade informed his schoolmates during break that Sokolovsky had been caught; he was a

THE THAW

Belgian and there was going to be a trial soon.

Three days later, hundreds of people knew that something bad had happened to Sokolovsky. The only one who knew nothing was Sokolovsky himself; he continued working on the conveyor belt and in the evenings read a book on ancient Arabic manuscripts, telling himself gloomily: 'No good calling on Vera for another fortnight—she'd say I come too often and a fortnight is a very long time.'

He had a talk with Juravliov and told him he accepted his remarks about the signalling system and would make certain alterations in his project. He spoke calmly and Juravliov thought: 'Perhaps I overdid it. He certainly is a busybody, but that's chronic with him. He's agreed with most of the corrections, says he is absorbed in work and hasn't made a single wisecrack. Looks as if I needn't have upset myself. We'll get by all right . . .'

Gradually he regained his peace of mind and on the following Sunday went fishing with Khitrov. The water, where the ice was broken through, misted and bubbled merrily and Juravliov kept saying: 'Now we'll see what kind of fish there is.' On the way home Khitrov asked him: 'How are things with Sokolovsky?' and he replied just as though a week ago he hadn't cursed the chief designer: 'He's busy altering his project. He's a nasty fellow but he knows his business.'

Another week went by. Juravliov had long

THE THAW

forgotten that bleak Sunday when in his depression he had turned on Sokolovsky. Now the story of his exposure reached the schoolmaster Pukhov in his turn. He said at dinner:

'Never would I have believed Juravliov to be capable of this. What a mercy Lena's broken with him! He's invented the story that Sokolovsky sent his family away to Belgium. If I were the Public Prosecutor I'd have him up for slander.'

Volodya frowned: 'What a nasty business! Father is an innocent—it isn't Juravliov who'll get it in the neck, it's Sokolovsky. Haven't been to see him for ages, he probably thinks I am avoiding him. How silly . . .'

That same evening he called on Sokolovsky and found him working. The big table was spread with drawings; Sokolovsky was sitting at it in his fur-lined jacket. Volodya thought that he had aged and was looking wretched. Pushing over to him an album of construction photographs, Sokolovsky muttered:

'Have a look at that, I won't be long.'

Volodya wasn't interested in construction but he pondered the inscription: 'To Evgeny Vladimirovich Sokolovsky from his fellow-workers, in memory of the firing of the first blast furnace, 1931.' In 'thirty-one Volodya was eleven, he was still keeping pigeons and showing off his Pioneer tie. He thought: 'Actually Sokolovsky is an old man.

THE THAW

What have I got in common with him? Really, nothing. I thought at first he was a sceptic. I thought it refreshing to meet a man who believed in nothing. But what kind of a sceptic is he?—Loves his work, reads and re-reads regulations about cattle-breeding—just a normal Soviet man, only a bit more intelligent than most. That may be why Juravliov has picked on him. Nobody will take his part. With us, once you're down, you're not popular, it's the lucky ones who are trusted—like Juravliov. I can imagine what Sokolovsky must be feeling. Lucky they haven't booted him out of his job yet. Though why lucky? They'll boot him out tomorrow.

'How cold it is,' Sokolovsky said without looking up.

'It's very hot in here and you have your jacket on,' said Volodya.

'Must have caught a cold,' grunted Sokolovsky.

An hour later, putting away his work, he said morosely:

'Haven't seen you for a long time. What have you been doing? Working?'

'A little . . . I didn't want to bother you.'

He was silent for a while, then he forced himself to say:

'I heard you'd had some trouble at your office, Evgeny Vladimirovich?'

'Nothing much . . . Got to revise the project . . .

THE THAW

Objections were quite reasonable.'

Sokolovsky was annoyed at having a visitor, he was feeling ill, he wanted to lie down. He sat brooding silently. Volodya stayed.

'Well, did you like the photos?' asked Solokovsky.

Volodya answered mechanically:

'Very much.'

He thought: 'Evidently he knows nothing. Perhaps it's just as well . . . Sits and works . . . Only if I leave him to it, Juravliov will take him by surprise. I've got to warn him, he must have his answers ready.' And Volodya said:

'I asked you about your job because I understand Juravliov intends to ruin you.'

'Does he indeed . . . Is that in connection with the new model?'

Volodya got up and drew closer to Sokolovsky:

'He says you've sent your family abroad.'

At that moment an absurd incident distracted both of them. You would think Fomka might have got accustomed to Pukhov, who was for ever bribing him with bits of sugar and slices of salami, but he hated anybody to be near his master and he now leapt from under the sofa and sank his teeth into Volodya's trousers. Sokolovsky grabbed him only just in time.

'Fool! He goes for everybody,' he muttered crossly.

THE THAW

Volodya wasn't sure whether these words applied to Fomka or to Juravliov. He waited for Sokolovsky to deny the rumour Juravliov had started, but Sokolovsky remained silent; he lay down on the sofa and mumbled with an air of surprise: 'Is it really hot in here? My teeth are chattering.'

Only then did Volodya notice that he was looking physically ill, he must really have caught a cold.

'Would you like me to make some tea?' he offered. 'I could run out and get some brandy.'

'I don't want anything. Just tell me, why didn't Leonardo da Vinci get his colours right? I read about it once but I couldn't understand. Were the pigments wrong or didn't he mix them properly?'

'I don't know. In general, Evgeny Vladimirovich, I'm pretty ignorant.'

They both fell silent. Volodya asked:

'Would you like to go to sleep? I'll go . . .'

'Stay, as you are here. You don't bother me. Tell me, do you like Leonardo's paintings?'

'I have only seen them at the Hermitage. It's difficult to judge.'

'I like his mind. The things he was interested in! People used to be more many-sided. Did you know that Michael Angelo wrote poetry? Now, could Einstein write poetry? Give me my coat, it's hanging over there.'

Volodya thought: 'He's trying not to show he is upset. He must think it's too degrading to deny

THE THAW

Juravliov's slanders. Perhaps he's right. I shouldn't have told him, it was the last straw. He was working quietly when I arrived, now he's lying down and talking gibberish. He's surely got a temperature. I ought to get a doctor; I can't leave him in this state.'

Sokolovsky began again:

'I once read in some romantic story that the agave only blossoms once, after that it dies. All rubbish. There's one at the Botanical Gardens—it's blossomed and it's doing fine. It's just that while it's flowering it needs extra care.'

Volodya became alarmed, Sokolovsky seemed to be delirious.

'I'll get a doctor, Evgeny Vladimirovich.'

'Forget it! What's the date?'

'The nineteenth.'

'How stupid. I thought it was the twenty-first. Don't take any notice of me, I'm talking rubbish. My head's splitting.'

'I'll go and get a doctor. I'm sure you've got a temperature.'

'What do I want a doctor for? I told you I've caught a chill.'

Volodya stayed for another hour. Sokolovsky suddenly complained:

'My head is simply bursting. It's silly . . .'

Volodya got up:

'I'll fetch a doctor at once.'

THE THAW

'Vladimir Andreyevich, wait a bit! . . . Mind you don't get Sherer. If you must call in somebody, call Gorokhov. But I'd much sooner not have anyone.'

Gorokhov came and said it looked like 'flu, but could be pneumonia, and the heart wasn't very strong . . . He would send Barykhina at once to give Sokolovsky injections of camphor and penicillin, and he would call again next morning.

Volodya stayed the night. Sokolovsky seemed to be asleep.

He was not asleep. It annoyed him that the fever prevented him from concentrating; his thoughts were chasing one another, running together, appearing and vanishing. It bothered him, he wanted to think over what Pukhov had told him. So that piece of ancient history was to be dragged out again! How many times had he explained it! In the end they always understood; they said: 'Now it's clear.' And then out crept a Sapunov or a Polishchuk or a Juravliov and it all began again—'How, what, why?' 'In a month or two, when I am so done in that no amount of sleeping pills do me any good, Juravliov will stroke his flabby cheeks and proclaim charitably: "Now it's clear." The funny part of it is that it isn't at all clear to me. Never shall I understand how my daughter, the grand-daughter of an old bearded White Sea fisherman, comes to be called Mary. "I drink to Mary." Pushkin is beside the point. This is from the pen of Maya

THE THAW

Balabanova, poor foolish woman who dreamt of tennis parties under Californian skies and died in the bleak suburb of Beaurivage to the sound of S.S. boots . . . What fools young people make of themselves!—Perhaps not only young people.—I can't imagine how Masha can dress herself in that absurd tunic. She wrote she was a "sympathizer." But can you sympathize with a people's deeds, sacrifices, labours? Either you lay the bricks yourself or you don't say anything . . . Evidently Juravliov is determined to get rid of me. Nuisance—the new model has to be finished. The signalling will be all right, I'll cope with that . . . Perhaps tomorrow there will be a feature-article, as there was in the Urals. What will the reporter think up now? "Falcon proves to be a Belgian Sparrow!" No, not now; now they wouldn't get away with it. There are a lot of things Juravliov hasn't yet grasped . . . Why has he started this? Must have been annoyed because I spoke against him at the Party meeting. But how could I keep quiet? People work on marvellous machines and live in broken-down outhouses with leaking roofs. Where should it be talked about if not at a Party meeting? In Archangelsk there was a Nikita Cherny—an old Bolshevik, knew Lenin, worked with Innokenty—he used to say: "The Party—that's our conscience." Juravliov will say: "I'm a Party member, too . . ." Why do I keep thinking about Juravliov? He isn't

THE THAW

worth it. After all, the forms that you fill in aren't the most important thing in life. I'll write it all down again. Or, if I die first I won't have to write it. Everything is written down already. What's the matter with my head? Never felt anything like it . . . I was sure today was the twenty-first; now it turns out it's the nineteenth. Mustn't go to Vera's earlier than the twenty-fifth. Six days. That's a long time . . . And suppose I'm really very ill? How long will it last? Vera was annoyed with me the other day. Shouldn't have told her about the aloe . . . Why is it that when we meet we so often seem to have so little to say to one another? It's as though our hearts were frozen through . . . It was very cold today, that's how I got chilled . . . Ought to drink a pepper brandy and sweat it out. Doctors always make things complicated. So does Vera . . . Gorokhov said "infection". You can't infect anybody with love. Neither Leonardo nor Pushkin managed that. I remember on the platform of the Kazan station, a soldier telling a girl who was seeing him off: "They say Mayakovsky has shot himself;" she didn't know who Mayakovsky was, she grabbed his hand: "Vanya, why must you go?" My head is literally splitting. I believe Pukhov has set fire to the house, that would be like him, he's always dropping cigarette ends. A huge fire! Suppose Pukhov gets burnt up? He says he's never painted anything. Ought to save the drawings . . .

THE THAW

Why doesn't Pukhov know what pigments Leonardo used? Leonardo had a long beard, he was in love with Liza. There is a pond near Semionov monastery where Liza drowned herself. That was another Liza. And the pond is no longer there—there's a Palace of Culture. It's a good plant but why do they still make those old-fashioned furnaces? They are too heavy and they gobble up a shameful amount of fuel. I believe the fire is spreading. There's a tap on the landing . . .'

Sokolovsky shouted:

'Put it out before it's too late.'

Volodya shaded the lamp with a piece of cardboard. Sokolovsky was again quiet. Then he started muttering: Volodya caught isolated words: 'Mary,' 'aloe,' 'succulents.'

'Seems to be fond of botany,' Volodya thought. Talked about agaves. The things he wants to know! What difference does it make what paints Leonardo used? Saburov uses the same paints as I do, only the result is not the same . . . Wonder who Mary is. Must be an old love. Funny to think Sokolovsky used to fall in love. It's a foreign name. Perhaps he's really been to Belgium. I shouldn't have told him; it was after that, he lay down and started raving. It's all my fault . . .'

Although Volodya realized that pneumonia could not be due to an emotional upset, he now felt that Sokolovsky had been struck down by the

THE THAW

piece of dirty gossip he had repeated to him.

Gorokhov called again the following morning. He frowned and said:

'I'd like another opinion. I'll get Professor Baikov.'

The professor arrived from town. He explained something to Gorokhov at great length. Volodya could make nothing of the technical terms but he could tell the doctors were worried. Gorokhov asked if it would be better for the patient to go to hospital. Baikov shook his head:

'Better not to move him. Can you get a nurse?'

Barykhina stayed with Sokolovsky. Towards the evening Volodya went home. Sonya noticed his exhausted look:

'What's happened?'

He went to his room without answering.

Sokolovsky was unconscious for two days. On the third morning he opened his eyes. He thought he had overslept and would be late for work; he stretched his hand to his bedside table where he normally kept his watch and knocked over a medicine bottle. Then he remembered: 'I'm ill, Gorokhov came . . .' He closed his eyes and tried painfully to remember more. 'Pukhov came, I was feverish, then there was a fire . . . No, I must have dreamt that . . .' Everything was jumbled up inside his head, for some reason only one thing stood out clearly: he had asked Pukhov what colours

THE THAW

Leonardo used and he didn't know.

Gradually things came back to him. Volodya had told him about Juravliov . . . Sokolovsky screwed up his face. His mouth was dry and there was an odd taste in it, as though he had been sucking rust . . . 'I'm sick of that Belgian business . . . I'll get up at once and go and see Vera. There are moments when you can't be by yourself . . . Can't understand what time it is. It's light. That means she won't be in. I don't believe I'm well yet, my eyes hurt and my head feels as if it wasn't mine, I can't lift it . . .'

He moaned. Barykhina came over to him but he didn't see her: he was swallowed up again in the hot, dark whirlpool of unconsciousness.

When he again opened his eyes it was evening and Vera was bending over him. She was looking at him; never had he seen such an expression in her eyes. He tried to tell her something, found he couldn't and only spoke her name. She said severely: 'You mustn't talk.'

She moved away and whispered to Barykhina: 'He recognized me.'

Sokolovsky lay with his eyes closed and asked himself dimly: 'Did I see Vera or did I dream it? Must find out, it's most important . . . I forgot she was a doctor. I must be ill . . . Can't work anything out . . . What's the matter with my head? Everything gets muddled . . .'

THE THAW

Barykhina came over to him:

'He's gone off again . . . Vera Grigorievna, what's the matter with you?'

She handed Vera a glass of water; but Vera quickly pulled herself together and said quietly:

'Will you make a camphor injection? I'll ring up Professor Baikov.'

XIII

SIBIRTZEV had said as early as last November that people were needed urgently in the farms. He said it with conflicting feelings: he knew that the farms were asking for real workers, not loafers, and he also knew that Juravliov would never let such people go. Indeed, how could he? The plant was manufacturing conveyor belts for two tractor factories and tools for 'Selmash',¹¹ it was doing essential work for agriculture. 'The right thing,' thought Sibirtzev, 'would be not to urge anybody; but Juravliov insists on a campaign.'

Lashakov agreed to go to a Machine Tractor Station. Juravliov threw up his hands: '*He can't go whatever happens.*' Sibirtzev mumbled: 'Then what are we to do, Ivan Vassilievich?' Juravliov said they must recruit among the newcomers ('Among those who haven't got down to production yet, those who get under your feet'). He thought a little and added: 'Have a talk with Chijov; incidentally he used to be a tractor driver.' A year before, Chijov had been a Stakhanovite, but he took to drink (his father was also an alcoholic). Juravliov meant to sack him but kept putting it off: 'Gave him another chance, he's promised not to touch a drop.'

THE THAW

At the end of January the local newspaper photographer took a picture of Chijov and three young boys signing declarations of their willingness to work on farms.

Sibirtzev had said frankly to Chijov: 'My advice to you is, go. You're so fogged by drink, you don't know where you are from one moment to the next. Juravliov has been threatening for ages to sack you and he's right.' Chijov swore, thought a little, swore again, then said limply: 'So what? I'll go to my old folk. It's a good Kolhoz.'

That autumn Belkin, too, went back to the 'Red Way' Kolhoz. Since the war he had been kept at timber work in Lithuania. He was a reliable man, a scowling giant who, whatever he was told to do, said: 'Wonder what they'll think up next,' and then did it perfectly. The news that he was back cheered Antonina Pavlovna. She often sighed that the Kolhoz was short of hands. Only think of it—nine thousand hectares, almost three thousand head of cattle, a poultry farm, an orchard, and a big apiary, and only one hundred and sixty-three working members all told. After Belkin came her hopes soared: other people might come as well.

Shortly after this, Radionov said to her: 'My nephew Sasha writes from Moscow that he wants to come to us. I don't rightly know . . .' 'Tell him to come,' said Antonina Pavlovna. 'We're really short of people, that's our main trouble.'

THE THAW

Sasha, when he came, said he had been a tally clerk to a small cooperative; his health was poor, the doctor said he needed more fresh air; the premises were in a semi-basement—it stank of leather; he had no room of his own at all—he had to rent a corner in a chastnik's¹² room somewhere else. In a word, he had decided to transfer.

Sasha liked swanking. Within three days everybody knew that, in the neighbourhood of Dresden where his battalion had been stationed, a ewe had given birth to six lambs which ran after it like chicks after a hen; that in Moscow the foreman of the gang gave him a Chinese duck's egg, this egg was a hundred years old, a bit alarming but intriguing and he'd eaten it up; that he'd been filmed while putting a bunch of flowers on Pushkin's tomb—he had to do it twice as the first time was no good, but on the screen the picture came out exceptionally well; that in a bus he'd got into conversation with Lysenko, who said the winter was very mild; Sasha asked him what the harvest would be like and Lysenko said he couldn't tell exactly but hoped that it would be exceptional.

Antonina began to worry: 'Says his health is poor and he's a chatterbox as well. What can you do with such a fellow?' But when Sasha ran out of stories he settled down to work. He mended a table in the Kolhoz board-room and cleaned a cowshed; it turned out that he had served as a medical orderly,

was good at carpentry and could drive a lorry. Antonina said to Radionov: 'Thanks for Sasha. He's a good addition to our Kolhoz.'

But when she heard Chijov was back she lost her temper: 'The papers say the very best people are going on the land and we get Chijov; such a drunk I've never seen. Almost set fire to the club last summer. We don't want his sort here.'

Chijov arrived, sad and sober. His father, glad of a chance to celebrate, brought out two half litres. Young Chijov immediately brightened up and started cursing Juravliov. 'That may be the reason I took to drink, he rouses such unutterable loathing in me. He's a damned pipsqueak, not a Director. No wonder his own wife spat in his face.' Chijov's mother threw up her hands: 'That's our Lena!' Chijov nodded joyfully: 'That's the one. I remember her when she was small; Uncle Pasha gave us both a hiding for stealing apples. Her father once made me a little beast, a pig with a snout like that—the spit and image of Juravliov. It's the luxury that tempted Lena—being a Director's wife and all that. But in the end she couldn't stick it, and she moved out. It's the truth I'm telling you.'

(Lena often told herself: 'I ought to write to Mother,' but always put it off, knowing that it would upset her. She had written recently, saying everything was all right, she was busy, Shura was good at drawing; she had promised another letter

THE THAW

soon, but of the big changes in her life she had said nothing.)

Chijov's mother called on Antonina early the next morning and reported with a sugary smile: 'Our Genya is back.'

She had never cared much for Antonina. 'Bullies everybody, gives out orders like a general. Who says I know less than she does? And even if she is the Chairman, who gave her the right to ask why my husband's rolling drunk? That's my misfortune, not for her to enlarge upon. Her own husband hasn't even the brains to bring the cattle home—last summer we had to search all one night for Sobachnikova's cow. She'd much better keep quiet.'

Still with the same smile she asked if Antonina had any news of Lena. Antonina said that she had had a short letter recently:

'She's busy, works two shifts, and she's been made an agitator for the elections.'

'Our Genya's told us she's getting a divorce—said she's left her husband. I meant to ask you how she's getting on, poor thing. Must be hard for her all by herself, with her little girl.'

Antonina proved her power of self-control: she said nothing, but only asked Chijova what Genya's plans were; was he on a visit or did he mean to work in the Kolhoz?

She did not say anything to her husband. All that night she lay awake, worrying about Lena. Chijov

was a good-for-nothing drunkard; all the same, he wouldn't dare invent a thing like that . . . Antonina remembered that Lena had told her she was disappointed in her husband. 'Must be true, she's left him. But fancy not writing to her mother.' She cried a little, quietly, then decided to go and see her daughter. 'I'll bring Shura back with me; how can Lena manage by herself?'

When she arrived at Vera's, Lena had gone to the library and Vera to see a patient; the door was opened by Gorokhov's servant Nastya. Antonina pursed her lips and asked severely: 'Does Lena lodge here?'

Shura didn't recognize her; when her grandmother called her she hid shyly behind Nastya. At last Lena came in.

Antonina cried and kept repeating: 'Not a word to me, your own mother.'

Then she calmed down and said:

'I'll take Shura with me. Anyway, till the autumn, till you've got fixed up. Father will be pleased. He's poorly, but he still plays with the kids. Still carves his little beasts . . . You'll come to us for the holidays . . . Fancy not writing to your mother! Imagine, I had to find it out by chance, from Chijova. Their Genya is staying with them. As though old Chijov wasn't enough for us—you remember him, he used to frighten you, telling you you'd be a dwarf. He's still the same, works for a

THE THAW

day and drinks for a month. Now Genya has joined him—he's his father's labour reserve. So Chijova comes to me and says: "Your Lena is getting divorced." I only just managed not to howl in front of her.'

'Do you blame me?' asked Lena.

'Don't talk nonsense. I'm just hurt that you didn't tell me, your own mother . . . Who am I to be your judge? . . . It's difficult to be on one's own, and with a child as well . . . Does her father come and see her?'

'He made it a condition that I should take her to see him every Sunday. The first time I went. The following Sunday he sent a message that he was busy. Two days ago I rang up to ask when I was to bring her over and he said he had too much work, he'd send her some chocolates—probably went fishing with Khitrov. And I thought he was so fond of her, that was what made me so miserable, trying to decide.'

'You thought!' Antonina said crossly. 'You thought a lot of things. You thought he was a wonderful worker, and that he was understanding and that he had a soul. Don't I remember how you used to talk about him!'

Lena's eyes filled with tears; Antonina was at once remorseful.

'Don't you take on . . . You were just mistaken in him, it happens to grown-ups as well. I'm not

reproaching you. But he isn't a good person, I've always felt it. I don't know your secrets, I'm not speaking about that . . . But when I stayed with you I took a good look at him . . . He's rough with people, he doesn't put himself in their place. I remember I asked him one day why the factory stores were so short of goods, people had to go to town to do their shopping, three hours there and back. You'd think he could have done something. He said he had his hands full running the factory and began swanking about his machines. Lied about the stores, too, said they had enough of everything, that they even had sugar. Another time I was there when a man came to ask him if his wife could get a lift on a lorry to the maternity clinic; he said: "That's not what the lorries are there for." Afterwards I said, wasn't he sorry for the woman—he laughed: "She'll slip the driver five roubles, why should I worry!" Those are the kind that make the people suffer—anything you tell them, they just brush it aside . . . When Chijova told me, I couldn't sleep all night—it hurt me that I had to hear about it from a stranger—but I was glad for you—nobody could live with such a block of wood.'

'Then why did you scold me when I told you I liked him less?'

'I didn't take it in properly. I thought—you've got a daughter, you'll settle down. It isn't easy to be a mother, you'll see for yourself when Shura's

THE THAW

older; sometimes you daren't give advice . . . Anyway, you've managed all right without it . . . The only thing I still don't see is, why you had to hide it from your own mother.'

A fortnight had gone by since Lena's meeting with Koroteyev at the first night of *Hamlet*, but she was still thinking of her conversation with him. 'Why was he sorry for me? He has a good heart, but that only makes it harder for me. If it weren't for Shura, I don't think I could stand it. Never did I believe such a thing could happen. The girls at College used to say they were in love; their boys took them to the cinema, and they all laughed about it. And I, too, thought I was in love with Ivan. How childish it all was . . . This is like a wound, I feel it constantly and it doesn't heal, it hurts more than ever now . . . Vera is a remarkable person, she has really helped me. She couldn't cure me of course, there is no medicine for that, but at least I've stopped feeling ashamed; she has made me see there's nothing shameful in it, nothing wrong . . .'

Lena was afraid her mother would notice her state of mind but she told herself: 'How could anybody notice? It isn't written on my face that I can't live without him . . . If I don't tell her she won't know; besides, she isn't interested in that sort of thing . . . But it will be hard to part with Shura now. I'm more attached to her than ever. . . I can't imagine waking up and not seeing her in her

THE THAW

cot, wriggling her toes and saying with that sly smile: "I see you, Mummy, you aren't asleep." "

Antonina had a long talk with her daughter; they recalled her childhood and together they cried a little over Serioja. Then Antonina said she must go home the following day.

'I'll take Shura along.'

'I don't know, Mother. It's particularly hard for me to do without her now.'

Her mother looked at her and said nothing.

They talked about her father; Antonina smiled:

'He carved a rhinoceros the other day, a very good likeness, just like in the book . . . Let me take the child along, Lena darling, at least until the spring holidays. Your father will be happy, he's often poorly these days, he keeps saying: "Pity little Shura isn't here." "

'All right,' Lena agreed sadly. 'But I'll come for her in a month. Why are you in such a hurry, Mother? Couldn't you stay another day?'

'I can't, Lena dear. The spring is coming, we have a lot of work. We can do the sowing, I'm not afraid of that; but I'm worried about the vegetables—we're so short-handed. It's a mercy Belkin is back, he's a big help; and Radionov's nephew asked to come; he's a terrible swanker but he works all right. The one who is a real nuisance is young Chijov. That's Juravliov's present to us. Do you know what disgusts me most in Juravliov? Suppose

THE THAW

I were to go to him and say: "Why did you send us Chijov?"—he wouldn't bat an eyelid; he'd say Chijov was a hero of labour. You show him a pig-stye he'll say it's a house, it's habitable. Or tell him a road isn't fit for driving, he'll grin and say: "Isn't it a main road?" People are sick to death of that kind of man, how sick they are! You remember Dasha Kargin? Her Misha used to gather nuts for you—remember? He was killed in the War. She's a clever woman, Dasha, I often ask her advice. Well, when the papers published the report of the Plenary Session¹³ she walked into the board-room and said: "It says here, the country is short of cattle. Mark my words, that means there will soon be plenty. They are trusting people now—that's the main thing." When you come to us you'll see, Lena. Everybody is in better heart.'

Early next morning Lena took her mother and Shura to the station. In the taxi Shura fell asleep at once. Lena was thoughtful. Suddenly Antonina said:

'What are you hiding from me, Lena?'

Lena was startled. Was it really written on her face? 'Shall I tell her?—No, that's a thing she'll never understand. Her mind works differently. Anyway, I couldn't bring myself to, I'd die of shame.'

'I am not hiding anything. I'm just sorry you are going.'

THE THAW

Her mother left it at that and Lena hoped she had set her mind at rest. But as they were taking leave of one another, Antonina whispered:

‘Again your mother will be the last to know. It doesn’t matter, so long as you’re all right; and you have your own mind, you don’t need anybody else’s.’

XIV

ON the evening of that night which he was never to forget, Juravliov was full of cheerful confidence. Yegorov had been afraid that Sokolovsky's illness might hold things up, but now even Koroteyev, who was always one to think of difficulties, agreed that the new model would be ready by the first of May. On that day it would be released. That was an event of country-wide importance; it would be publicized in the newspapers and would probably be reported on the radio.

Juravliov had dinner at home and by himself. He ate with appetite, spreading butter thickly on chunks of bread and topping them with cutlets. Grusha was a good cook . . . Suddenly he smiled. He remembered the year he was appointed to the factory. What a difference between the conveyor belt and the machines which were in production then.—It was like comparing a 'Ziem' to an old pre-war crock. Each new model seemed to him to be a phase in his own life and he told himself: 'We're growing, no doubt about it, it's wonderful how we're growing.' It occurred to him, this was a fine evening to take off. He picked up the *Ogoniok* and read a short story about a store manager who

wished to marry a college girl, but nothing ever came of it because they both changed their minds. 'Why do they have to write about such things?' thought Juravliov. 'It isn't in the least amusing. It would be nice to know what that manager was like at work; must have been a nincompoop—never had a thing in stock . . . At that rate, it looks as if our Borissenko must be in love; Khitrov said he had seen Dutch herrings on sale in town and we have still only got crab . . . I suppose I'll have to marry again—a director of a factory can't go in for love affairs.' He laughed a little, thinking of himself arranging rendezvous and giving flowers like Pukhov, the artist. Smiling, he thought: 'I'll take my time. They say that for a woman to be sensible she must be ugly, but that's all nonsense. Khitrov's wife must have been most effective when she was young. Lena is extremely irresponsible, I can't imagine how she can be good at teaching children. For a time she got me right out of step. It might have caused grave damage to the State. Lucky I'm not a weakling, I came to just in time.'

It was ten-fifty. Juravliov turned on the radio. He listened with half an ear. Miners in Czechoslovakia had undertaken a new Socialist obligation, in Bolivia the output of precious metals had declined sharply, the Egyptian press was in favour of closer trade links with all foreign countries. This was followed by the weather report. Normally

THE THAW

Juravliov heard the weather report every Saturday, although he disbelieved the forecast and would tell Khitrov: 'They said, clear and dry; that means you and I will get soaked to the skin;' but this was Monday and he wasn't interested in the weather. '*In the next twenty-four hours fine weather, with moderate frost and strong gales, is expected in the Middle and Lower Volga districts.*'—'Lies again. It's cold, no doubt about it, but when I was coming from the factory there was no wind at all.' He listened to some songs by Soviet composers and was pleased with one of them, even humming the refrain:

'Boldly forward we go

Despondency we do not know.'

Then he yawned loudly, hung his coat over a chair and began slowly to untie his shoelaces.

The gale rose one hour before dawn and was unusually severe. It tore down a big silver birch in front of Juravliov's house and the tree fell on a watchman's lodge. Juravliov leapt out of bed; fresh from sleep, he couldn't understand the noise and thought that somebody was breaking in his door. He dressed hastily and ran out into the street. The night was clear and cold. He started for the factory, but the wind impeded him, almost knocking him off his feet. Near the hospital he saw Yegorov, hatless and with a frightened face, shouting inaudibly. At last Juravliov heard: the third hutment had blown down. The storm grew in violence.

THE THAW

There seemed to be a blind, angry, hopeless passion in it; it pulled up trees, tossed aside posts, boards, struts, tore off roofs and sent unfortunate people spinning—just as if they weren't people at all but chips of wood, sweeping up the dry, sharp, bitter snow and flinging it in one's eyes with a mocking whistle.

Afterwards people said: 'That certainly was a storm . . . Never has there been a storm like that.' Old Yershov protested he had seen one even worse on his wedding day in 1908. Ever after, at the memory of that fearful night Juravliov shrank into himself superstitiously. Never could he quite believe that the gale had swept impartially over a number of districts, causing damage everywhere, and that there was nothing supernatural about it—it had even been foretold by the weather bureau. It seemed to him that the forces of nature, in conspiracy with mean and envious men, had advanced upon him, resolved to fell him, to uproot him, like the old birch tree outside his house.

The moment he came out he knew—this meant disaster. He trembled for the unfinished frame of the assembly shop. As soon as he set eyes upon Yegorov, he thought: 'This will all be blamed on me. Now they'll say: "Where are the three new blocks, why were they delayed?" The victim will be Juravliov.'

All that day he worked as one possessed. Nine

THE THAW

families and two single men from hutment 'B' had to be rehoused. Juravliov called on Ushakov, the secretary of the Town Committee, and asked for billets. 'What were you thinking of before?' shouted Ushakov. Juravliov made no attempt to justify himself: 'We've put some of the people in the assembly shop. Please help us, Stepan Alexeyevich.' The gale had torn the roofs off six small houses. Furniture, trunks, bundles were loaded on to lorries. A woman was loudly sobbing. Semionov, the machine minder, said nastily: 'Satisfied?' Juravliov let it pass. He put up the foreman, Vinogradov, with his wife, children and old mother-in-law in his own house. He went to see the Chairman of the Town Executive: 'Let us have three tons of corrugated iron, we'll patch up the roofs.' He telephoned, got hold of slates, comforted the women, did all he could. But whether he was talking to the chairman, or reassuring Vinogradov's mother-in-law, or reckoning with Sibirtzev how many families could be put up in the hostel for single workmen, his mind only held one thought: 'I'm finished. They're counting up how many people have been left homeless, how many have suffered damage, how much wood and iron will be required, and I, Ivan Juravliov, statistically a unit, I, an honest Soviet man who has given all his life to the service of the State, I am wrecked, the storm has wrecked me, and no one cares.'

Six days went by in an agony of waiting. On the seventh, the secretary of the Town Committee telephoned: 'There's a message for you from the Central Committee, you are asked to report in person.' Juravliov had been preparing for the worst, but was so taken aback that he dropped the receiver; it dangled on its cord buzzing plaintively, but he heard nothing. 'Why didn't Ushakov ring up himself? He doesn't want to talk to me. It's catastrophic. I expected a query from the Ministry, but "report to the Central Committee"! "Report." What is there to report? There was a storm, you'd think everybody knew that. I'm finished, that's what it is. But where's the justice of it? Do I control the weather? Without the precision-casting foundry we could never have fulfilled the quota. And look at what we've saved the State. . . . First they pass the building plan, then they congratulate me twice on exceeding the quota, now they sink me. And why? Just because there was a storm. If there hadn't been a storm they'd have wired to congratulate me on the First of May. There's no logic in it. I am not a child, I shall soon be thirty-eight, and what am I being ruined by? The weather!'

He made many guesses as to who had sent a report to Moscow on the delay in building. 'The most likely is Sokolovsky. Pity, after all, I didn't do him in. At the right moment and with such a trump card as his family in Belgium, I could easily

have tidied him away. It's always a mistake to be too fastidious. Now he's got his own back. Perhaps it wasn't him—Yegorov says he's still in bed. Then, who can it be? Not Sibirtzev, he wouldn't have the nerve. Must be Ushakov, he's been pestering me about those houses. What business is it of his? I'm responsible for the factory. But no, he has to show his zeal, he's aiming at promotion . . . I haven't yet heard from the Ministry.¹⁴ Of course, it must be Ushakov. And Sokolovsky put him up to it. It's quite possible to be in bed and still invent a slander and ring up the Town Committee . . . After all, who cares which of them it is—whichever it is, the one who is being ruined is myself.'

Travelling to Moscow, he sat brooding in his compartment, not even looking at the view or replying to the conductor who asked if he would like some tea. Normally he liked trains.—He immediately put on striped pyjamas, played draughts or dominoes with his fellow-passengers, smacked his lips over the carcass of a chicken, sucked in glass after glass of tea, listened to the radio, talked about his successes in output and laughed aloud as he read the *Crocodile* ('they've given so-and-so a good drubbing'). Briefly, he enjoyed life. Now, he was nauseated by all he saw. The railway engineer who shared his carriage was a chattering fool; the radio broadcast idiotic songs which made his head ache; the dilapidated stations, the little houses peeping

out of snowdrifts—all of it was sickening; and there wasn't even enough snow, the harvest would be bad; in the restaurant the cutlets were underdone and the tea smelt of herrings; in the compartment it was intolerably hot and a draught blew from the window.

At night, while the railway engineer gave occasional little cosy snores, Juravliov lay in his upper berth and thought and thought, trying hard to understand what had occurred. The window blind let in a thin blue light, the engineer coughed, turned and lit a cigarette—Juravliov still went on thinking; suddenly he understood: 'It all began with Lena. That unfortunate woman stuffed her head full of silly novels and jolted to its foundations the life of an honest Soviet man. What will become of the factory! We have promised the new model for the First of May—what will happen now! It is true that Sokolovsky isn't bad as a designer and Koroteyev is satisfied now he has completely altered Sokolovsky's signalling.—Criticism is a great thing!—All very well, but the factory will have no unifying principle. Yegorov is an experienced engineer, he has had a lot of practice, but he is weak, and ever since his wife died, he has been going down-hill. All the slackers will let themselves go. Koroteyev has a future, no doubt about it, but he's much too young. I simply can't conceive the factory without me! It's unheard of—to think that chit of

THE THAW

a girl has pulled all this down. Koroteyev was three-hundred per cent right in that speech he made at the club—the moment you pull out one brick the whole house falls down. What can you expect?—People are badly brought up, silly books are published—nobody knows why—now they've started talking about feelings—and this is the result . . . What you need is a firm line. Nobody can accuse me of having lived for myself, I lived for the factory. And now there is nothing, absolutely nothing left, just scattered beams and broken glass and litter, that's the life of Juravliov.'

The engineer unwrapped a parcel and offered Juravliov a pasty:

'Home-made. My wife baked them.'

Juravliov refused, he couldn't swallow anything. He thought maliciously: 'What are you so pleased about, I'd like to know. Today she bakes you pasties, tomorrow she'll find some agronomist and you'll be out. Sits there smirking, says he's summoned by his Ministry, must be counting on promotion. And suppose there is a railway accident—one-two-three and out you go, no nonsense about that. Nobody can be trusted.'

Before he left, Juravliov had told Yegorov he was going only for a day or two—this was not the time to be away, with the new model having to be ready by the First of May. But a week went by and Juravliov was still not back. Then Yegorov was

THE THAW

rung up from Head Office; they said a new Director, Golovanov, had been appointed; he would be there by the second week of April.

Yegorov told Brainin; Brainin was delighted:

'I know Golovanov, I worked with him in Sverdlovsk. A sensible man and knows his job.'

'That's good . . . I don't see why we shouldn't finish the new model by the First of May.'

'Of course we shall.'

Brainin suddenly remembered:

'And what about Juravliov?'

'Clearly, he's been sacked. I've been told they meant to sack him long ago, they were looking for another fellow . . . It's an odd thing—Sokolovsky told me last winter that Juravliov was going to be sacked. I thought then that he was joking—you know Sokolovsky, he likes to have his fun . . .'

Brainin laughed and unfolded his *Pravda*.

There was still no government majority in France; that, so to speak, was symptomatic.

It occurred to Yegorov that Sokolovsky had said long ago that Juravliov would be removed. Must have known something . . . Then he gave no more thought to Juravliov.

Khitrov's wife said to him:

'It's a nuisance for you; you were used to Juravliov.'

Khitrov thought it over and said:

'Not at all. Nasty piece of goods, Juravliov,

THE THAW

wanted everybody to agree with him. I couldn't stick him. I don't mind the change at all. Of course, we'll have to wait and see what sort of a bird this Golovanov is. Anyway, he can't be worse.'

All the talk was of Golovanov and nobody so much as mentioned Juravliov. Only Grusha, his charwoman, kept asking, when would Juravliov collect his luggage—all the rooms were cluttered up and she needed to turn out the flat; the New One was expected soon.

As before, the siren hooted, the lathes chirped, people went on working, joking, arguing, and nobody felt the lack of Juravliov. Those who had been made homeless by the storm cursed him briefly and then forgot him.

They watched happily the foundations of the first of the three new blocks being dug in Frunze Street. Vinogradov's wife said: 'Two rooms, bath and kitchen—there's a new life for you. Let them only get on with it.'

Where was Juravliov? What had become of him? Not a living soul remembers. A storm comes, gives a lot of trouble and passes over; who remembers it once it has stopped roaring?

Those were the last days of winter. One side of the street was still frozen (twelve degrees below zero) but already, along the other, the icicles dripped loud drops.

For the first time since his illness, Sokolovsky got

THE THAW

out of bed, crossed to the cloudy, unwashed window, looked out at the soft grey snow and thought: 'Spring is only a step away.'

XV

SONYA had often thought about her future, pictured to herself the factory where she would have to work and wondered if she would be successful, but those had only been vague thoughts and daydreams. Now, when she learned that she was being sent to Penza, she was suddenly faced with the realization that her youth was over. Student friendships, exams, lectures, quarrels with Savchenko, all that was in the past. Before her lay the unknown city, the plant and her immense responsibility. True, her work had been praised at college, but what had she ever done other than school exercises? What would she amount to when it came to practice? How easily you could lose your head and make mistakes. Her practical course last year had shown her the enormous difficulties.

She told her father: 'I'm afraid I won't know how to cope.' He tried to reassure her, it was always like that, you felt you'd never manage, then you got into it. He recalled the year he had spent in Penza a quarter of a century before—a nice town, plenty of gardens, great traditions; Saltykov-Shchedrin had lived in Penza and, outside it, there was Tarkhany, Lermontov country. Sonya smiled

THE THAW

and felt still more frightened. 'What do I care where Lermontov lived? It is true his poetry moves you, although nowadays we experience things differently. But does Father think I'll sit day-dreaming in the town park? The factory is what interests me, and how I'll prove myself at work.'

She was still living with her parents and still wondering if Savchenko would come and see her (he didn't even know where she was being sent); she was still in her familiar world but all her thoughts had already fled from it to that remote, enigmatic Penza.

She was to leave at the end of February; then her departure was put off as there was some talk of Borrissov being sent instead of her and of herself getting a job at the Farming Machinery Trust. Now she was told to go to Penza after all. Her father said:

'We ought to celebrate.'

She refused: 'Not now. It will be time enough when I've done some work and come on leave. That will be different.'

Her mother sighed over Sonya's leaving. 'How will she get on out there? She doesn't really feel like going. I am convinced she is not indifferent to Savchenko, she is only hiding it, and he's a good boy; I wish they'd marry; instead of that, she is going off—and she's so young; and he is staying here—he's young, too, his head could easily be turned. I wish they'd come

THE THAW

to an understanding, I should feel less worried.'

A few days before Sonya was to leave, her mother could hold out no longer:

'Sonya, why doesn't Savchenko ever come to see you? You haven't had a quarrel, have you?'

'Why should I quarrel with him? He's just busy.'

'Does he know you are going?'

'Of course he does. I met him in the street the other day. He said he wanted to drop in on Father but he had an awful lot of work.'

Sonya blushed: how well she had learned to lie! 'To think I haven't seen him since that night . . . He hasn't even bothered to find out where I am going. He cares nothing for me. I just imagined it . . . But not for anything will I tell Mother . . . Besides, it's not her business.' And Sonya added:

'Why do you keep asking about him? I agree with you that he is nice, but he is not my ideal man. It is unpleasant to receive attentions from a man you're not attracted to.'

Andrey Pukhov had a bad night, worse than any he had ever had before. He felt that he was dying and mentally took leave of all his dear ones; sitting up in bed and peering at the blurred stain of the window, he wondered with a pity he could hardly bear: 'Poor Nadya! Now that Sonya will be gone, how will she stand it on her own?'

He took care not to wake her up and said nothing to her in the morning, only stayed in bed until

midday; then he struggled to his feet, but found he must lie down again; so that he never went to see Serioja, though he had promised that he would go.

Andrey suddenly had a look at himself from outside and became thoughtful. 'Perhaps Sonya really has some grounds for making fun of me? It does seem funny—straining myself desperately to go and see Serioja. It does seem a tiny world . . . But what can you do, you have to fight, you can't live if you don't. When I was young I fought shoulder to shoulder with all the others. That was not only during the Revolution—long before. And also later—I struggled in my work. And with myself—nobody knows that. After all, there have been heavy blows, sorrows, failures, doubts, I had to fight to keep my faith in men. And I am still fighting—even when I'm talking to Serioja, trying to pass on to him a little of my experience, feelings, thoughts. I'm fighting death. It encircles me, it lies in wait for me. At night, in the dark and quiet, it tries to get the better of me and I struggle as best I can. In his old age a man dries up and shrinks, his mind sees further but his world gets narrower, tighter. I try to think of the lives of others, to break out of this room where every night I have to struggle all alone with death. But even there, I'm doing what I have done throughout my life. It's too soon for Sonya to understand that, and to explain it would be useless.'

In the last few weeks his attitude towards Volodya had changed. He used to get indignant with him, but now, looking into his mocking eyes, he thought: 'Poor Volodya. He has brains, gifts, he isn't a bad boy, but there is something lacking in him, he slouches through life like a grown-up waif.' He knew he couldn't influence his views and he no longer argued with him nor took notice of his cheerless jokes, only trying now and then by some chance word, or without words, to convey to him his tenderness. Volodya felt this, and was careful not to show that he was moved.

With Sonya, Andrey had one more long conversation after she confessed to him her diffidence about her job. During this talk there were again moments when they ceased to understand each other. Sonya suddenly broke in: 'Why do you keep talking about people? People don't frighten me. Even if my chief turned out to be some kind of Juravliov, it wouldn't be all that frightening . . . It's the change from text books to machines—how will I manage that? That's the trouble.' Pukhov felt lost. But immediately there arose again between them that inward contact which they both welcomed. What made it easier perhaps was their awareness that in a few days they would part (each of them thought with sadness: shall we ever meet again?).

That conversation convinced Pukhov that Sonya's business-like dryness of manner was put

on and hid a young, proud, passionate and timid heart.

On the eve of her departure, Sonya was sitting in her room; it was tidy and it looked empty; she had burnt her schoolgirl diaries, letters from her college friends and from Savchenko, and had thrown away a mass of trifles which by their connection with events in her past life had until recently been dear to her. The house was quiet—Nadejda Yegorovna had gone out shopping. Volodya hardly ever stayed at home—he had been commissioned to decorate the foyer of the caterers' club. Sonya strained her ears: who was it with her father? Gorokhov? No, it was a different voice . . .

'Andrey Ivanovich,' said the unknown voice, 'can you understand it? When she told me, I felt so afraid, I thought I couldn't go on living. Later on I laughed it off, I had other interests, everything returned to normal—I simply thought that there had been a myth and now the myth had vanished. And now, suddenly, it has all come back again of itself, for no reason that I know . . .'

'That has happened to me more than once.' (This was her father.) 'They say a human being is forgetful. It isn't true. A man forgets when he wants to forget, but what is real stays with him till the end—I can say it now, until he dies . . .'

Sonya, her curiosity aroused, looked through the half-open door. She saw an adolescent, freckled and

red-haired, wearing large spectacles. Pukhov noticed her.

'Is that you, Sonya? Come in and be introduced. My young friend, Serioja. My daughter, a mechanical engineer.'

Sonya went to her room. 'How strange he is. He was talking to that boy as to an adult. What an absurd scene . . . I don't believe he has ever spoken like that to me. I felt sure it was some old friend of his.' Then she grew thoughtful. 'Perhaps he's right. That boy was gazing at him positively with adoration. That time we had an argument, Father said he wanted to pass on something of himself to others. He could hardly do that with Volodya. And I always pretend I don't need teaching, I have my own point of view. So he has trained these boys . . . I often used to ask him how I should behave. But I couldn't ask him what to do about Savchenko! To begin with, it would be humiliating. And, then, nobody can give advice on a thing like that. Anyway, none of that is relevant now—I'm leaving and Savchenko is not in love with me. The problem is liquidated. I have even burnt that photo of us together. I want to start a new life—without any rubbish trailing after me.'

The day she left, her mother and Volodya took her to the station. Her father remained at home—Sonya said firmly it was too far for him and much too cold, and it would only be upsetting. As she

was afraid of being late, they arrived an hour in advance.

Sonya was now feeling briskly cheerful—she thought, she must have invented many of her difficulties; she had her training and her character; she would do all right.

In the stuffy waiting-room a baby was howling. Volodya made depressing jokes. His mother, to conceal her nervousness, chattered about home-made cakes. She had meant to bake some for Sonya's journey, but owing to some misfortune, the pastry had failed to rise.

'The departure is announced of train 176, for Rtishchevo, Kirsanov and Tambov. Passengers should take their seats.'

'Rtishchevo—that's mine.'

Halfway up the platform Sonya stopped; her face had a look of fear. Her mother exclaimed delightedly:

'You've come to see her off. How very nice!' Savchenko joined them.

Sonya said nothing. Volodya took his mother's arm.

'Come, Mother, let's go and look at the train.' They moved away.

'How did you find out when I was going?'

'Your brother told me.'

'I see. Why didn't you come to see me?'

'I thought you didn't want me to. Did you?'

THE THAW

'That wasn't what I said. It wasn't nice of you not to come.'

'You spoke that time in such a way . . . I thought you didn't want me to.'

'And did you want to?'

'Why do you ask? When we stood by the gate . . .'

'Don't let's quarrel at the last moment. I thought you understood. Why didn't you come in when I asked you to that time?'

'You asked me in to tea with all the others.'

'And you suppose I always mean what I say?'

'Sonya, when will you come on leave?'

'You must be mad! How can I take leave? I'm only just starting work.'

'Do you know, I didn't take my leave last year. I'll come to Penza.'

'On no account . . . When do you want to take your leave?'

'Soon. So you forbid me to come?'

'What would you do all day? You'd be terribly bored. Penza is not the Caucasus.'

'I'd come to see you, not just the town.'

Volodya and his mother now came back from looking at the train; Nadejda said it was a very long train, and suggested, after a glance at Sonya, that they should walk a little more, it was too cold to stand.

Savchenko asked diffidently:

THE THAW

'Sonya, you won't forget me?'

'One forgets what has no importance. The important things remain.'

'And you consider this important?'

'How am I to know? I haven't tested it, I may forget!'

'But what do you think at this moment?'

Sonya looked at him; her eyes darkened. She was grateful that there was a crowd, otherwise she might have kissed him.

Volodya said: 'Didn't you hear? The conductor says you must get in.'

She kissed her mother, then Volodya. Savchenko waited for her to say something. She held out her hand, her eyes shining:

'I'll write . . . Can you hear me, Mother? The moment I arrive . . . Kiss Father for me.'

Now Savchenko was on the bus going to the factory. He felt bewildered. Sonya had told him nothing. He didn't even know if they had quarrelled in the end or made it up. At one moment she had seemed to say that she would write to him, but apparently she had meant her mother. 'Obviously she doesn't want me. When I said I would come to Penza, she said: "On no account."' And yet she looked at me in such a way that I could hardly keep from kissing her. I can't stop thinking of her nowadays. It's all romanticism, as Koroteyev says. But then, it's easy for him to talk, he is an old man—

THE THAW

well, not old exactly, elderly, he must be close on forty—at his age one doesn't think about such things. I can't keep my mind away from her. And the extraordinary thing is this: as it never comes to anything between us, I ought to be feeling miserable, and instead of that I'm happy. Even just seeing off a friend should make you sad—and yet at this moment I feel gay. And yet I am quite sure I love her. Then why should I be feeling gay? Of course, there are many reasons. Koroteyev said I'd make good. That's most important. Our factory is wonderful. I like seeing it all as in a picture-book; first our conveyor belt—that's easy, I see that every day; then another factory where our machines are making tractors, then huge tractors rushing out into the steppe, then corn, lots and lots of corn, and the country growing richer, stronger, and then Communism . . . Anybody would feel happy in such a factory. And there are other things: there's *Hamlet*. And it's the end of winter, soon it will be spring—everybody's gay in spring. And there is Sonya. Does she love me? I don't know. But she exists and I've just been talking to her, that's marvellous in itself . . . Will she write to me? If she does, I'll go to Penza; if not, I won't—not for anything; I won't take my leave at all . . . Now I have to go and tell Koroteyev that the welding system is all right—there won't be any more surprises—we were checking on it all yesterday. Only

THE THAW

I'd better tidy up or he'll notice something.'

Outside Koroteyev's door he took out a comb, looked in the mirror and slicked down his bristling hair. His eyes looked strange, staring. 'That's from thinking about Sonya. Now I'll think of welding and my eyes will get back into their sockets.'

Sonya remained standing in the corridor. She was still living in the world she had just left. 'He said he'd come . . . Well, if he really means it, let him . . . Father was right—you forget what you need to forget. Perhaps he'll forget me in a month. I must write to him that if he really means to come he mustn't until the summer. But if I write he'll come. Better not decide anything—let it decide itself . . . The snow is grey—so it should be, it will soon be April . . . I think everything will be all right in Penza.'

She went into her compartment. A stout man in a rust-coloured jacket was saying to an army doctor: 'We have a wonderful system of ventilation in our workshops.'

Sonya thought: 'Perhaps he comes from the factory I'm going to. That would be lucky, I'd hear about it now. I wonder what machines they have . . . No, it's a watch factory, not mine . . . What awful cigarettes he smokes . . . All the same it was nice that Savchenko came . . . Funny, it's only three o'clock and I feel quite sleepy, didn't get much

THE THAW

sleep last night, it was the excitement . . . Have to change at Rtishchevo, but Rtishchevo won't be for some time . . .'

Sonya slept, her head inclined a little to one side, her face was peaceful, happy. The man in the rusty jacket was saying they had intended to have shower-baths but hadn't put them in because the budget was cut down, when suddenly he stopped and became absorbed in looking at her.

The long train puffed slowly and busily among the limitless fields blanketed with soft spring snow.

XVI

SOKOLOVSKY looked at his watch. Four o'clock . . . too early to get up.

It was a week since he had returned to work. But since his illness his nerves had gone to pieces, he slept less well than ever and no drugs did him any good.

While he was still running a temperature, all the details of Volodya's story about Juravliov came back to him. He felt neither astonished nor indignant; he thought: 'Here it comes again,' and yawned anxiously. He was himself puzzled by his calm—after all, Juravliov had behaved outrageously. After six years of work together . . . 'And what difference does that make? I'm past being surprised; as Vera would say, I've developed an immunity.'

When Volodya told him of Juravliov's removal, he merely said: 'I see . . . well, it was to be expected.' Volodya did not ask him why, he had realized that, for all his apparent cynicism, Sokolovsky was naïve, just like his father; they both believed in justice.

Sokolovsky had stayed in bed a fortnight. During that time, Vera came to see him every morning. By the evening he was tensely awaiting her return; but she had told him early on: 'You mustn't talk,' and he had never ventured since that day to

speak to her of what was in his heart. Volodya dropped in now and then to cheer him up and talked of trifles. One day Sokolovsky started a conversation about the Spanish school of painting. Volodya grinned: 'My last commission was for pedigree hens. Now I am portraying a young citizeness, full of the joy of life, holding in her hand a box of mixed chocolates, naturally of the most expensive kind. It is most important that each variety of sweet should be exactly represented. And you want me to think of Goya.'

The days were long—no work, no sleep, no people—and Sokolovsky thought of many things: of his youth, of the signalling system, of his friends fallen in the War, of Mary, of new welding methods, of Juravliov, of life on other planets, of Filatov's operations, of the awakening of Asia, of the struggle for peace. But whatever he was thinking of his mind ceaselessly returned to Vera. He remembered how, in a conscious moment between bouts of fever, he had seen her eyes. Their look had been extraordinary and nothing that Vera could say now would ever sober him completely. At times he asked himself: 'Did I imagine it?—I had a frightful fever—did I really see her then, or only later when I could plainly hear and understand her ordinary voice and workaday expression? I don't believe it, I am sure it was her eyes I saw and that tenderness was theirs.'

THE THAW

Half-past four. Sokolovsky began to feel a rising tenseness. Today, for the first time since he had been ill, he would go and see her. He would thank her for looking after him. She would ask him how he felt and would try to keep her rôle of doctor a little longer. After that she would be silent, and he, too, would have nothing more to say. 'No, that won't do, silence is worse than anything, I must constantly fill the room with words. Anything. I'll tell her about Fomka tearing Pukhov's trousers. And about Pukhov painting mixed chocolates. And in this connection—or in no connection—I'll start talking about Chinese sculpture of the Tang period. Then perhaps Vera will also tell me something . . . She said she had Juravliov's former wife staying with her—Elena Yegorovna, or was it Elena Borisovna?—she may be there; that will make it all much simpler—ordinary tea-time talk. Then Vera will be called away; and if she isn't I shall get up and say good-bye. There won't be anything to wait for . . . But why did I see her looking at me with that expression? Nothing will ever efface that. And after all, do we really need words, explanations, scenes between us? In the evening all the brilliant colours vanish, everything seems muted, almost dulled. But what depth—stillness—it makes your head spin . . .'

At five he got up. Fomka stretched himself and crept forward on his stomach, offering his morning

THE THAW

greeting. Unlike any ordinary decent dog he never fawned or leapt, barking cheerfully, or wagged his tail, he only pressed himself to Sokolovsky's feet and looked up at him with eyes full of love, pain and fear.

'What is it, poor one?' Sokolovsky asked. 'Did you have a nightmare? Did they beat you in your dream?'

Fomka stared at him unwaveringly, his eyes were as sad as a human being's. 'Poor devil, wants to tell me something, it's a shame he hasn't got words. I expect they gave him a good hiding. The idiot isn't any wiser since I've had him—still watchful to the point of madness; a good thing I grabbed him in time when he leapt at Barykhina. Pukhov says I must get rid of him or I'll get into trouble. But who would have him? They'd shoot him out of hand. You can see he trusts me, the way he looks at me; I understand it's his life that's twisted him, but not everybody would.'

By six Sokolovsky had finished shaving and taken Fomka out. Coming in, he stopped to see if the paper had been delivered; instead of it a long, narrow envelope fell out of the box—a letter from Mary.

Dear Father,

Congratulate me, there have been big changes in my personal life. In Paris I had no luck, there are too many new things, it is difficult to find a public; I tried to give a performance, got into debt,

THE THAW

and in the fall went back to Brussels. Here a performance was arranged for me. My husband Felix Vanderwelde, an art critic, wrote about my dancing in an evening paper. That was how we met; he proposed and I accepted him. Naturally he can't live only by his writing, he has to spend all day working in a bank, but he is a sensitive person and we understand one another perfectly. Recently he told me that an important newspaper might send him as a correspondent to Moscow, to write about the Moscow theatre and to report on the possibilities of trade relations between East and West. Of course, this is still far from certain, but now I dream of going with him, it would give me a chance to see you and to show my dances to the Moscow public. Felix is far from being a Communist, but he is a man of crystal-clear integrity; he listens to what I tell him, and I never forget that I was born in Russia. I don't suppose my views are the same as yours, but on the whole I am a sympathizer. I don't altogether understand how you live out there, but if I come with Felix I will understand at once; after all, I know the language, that's the most important thing. And so, if there are no new diplomatic conflicts and if the paper doesn't change its mind, we may see one another soon.

Your daughter,

MARY VANDERWELDE.

THE THAW

Sokolovsky turned the sheet of lilac paper over and over in his fingers and gazed in wonder at Mary's photograph. There was something of her mother in her . . .

Six-thirty. Too early to go to work. He opened a book, the life of Benvenuto Cellini. Then he shut it again, and surprised himself by sitting down and writing:

Dear Mary,

I congratulate you. If you come to Moscow I will try to see you. I can't imagine what you are like. In the old snapshot of you as a student I recognize something, but the other one, in the Greek tunic, I don't understand at all. Nor do I understand your letter. You speak too lightly of big things. I understand that you wish to see Moscow. I doubt if anything will come of your plan to dance; we have a good ballet, you must surely have heard of it. Of course, both you and your husband, if he is an honest man, will find it interesting to see a different world. But don't think that because you were born in Moscow you will find it easy to understand. I remember you as a little girl playing in the sandheap on the Gogol Boulevard; there were other children playing with you. Those children know how we live and why: they have grown up here, worked here, they have been through many sorrows, joys and hopes. It is not your fault that your

mother took you away to Belgium, but you must look at this thing sensibly, you must realize that in our country you will feel a tourist, a foreigner. You say yourself that you don't understand how we live. Even if you spent some time here, if you looked at how I work and how my comrades work, and saw what makes us happy or indignant, you would still understand nothing. It is a different world, it is altogether different! Why did it all begin here, and not, let us say, in Brussels? Probably because we had less bread and more heart. It's all very complicated, it's part of a long, hard life. Think about it some time. There are times when I forget your tunic and your letters and think simply, 'My daughter', and call you little Masha. Miracles do happen, perhaps under the shell is hidden . . .

Sokolovsky put down his pen and stared astonished at the long, closely-written sheet. 'I've lost my mind . . . who am I writing to, and why? . . . How could I explain anything to her? And as if she needed my instruction. Let her live peacefully with her Felix, if he really is an honest man and if he sits in his bank because he has to and not because he's playing the market . . . I'll send her a wire—just congratulations, that's enough.'

He tore the unfinished letter into small pieces.

An hour later he was discussing Brainin's project with him. He had stopped thinking of Mary and

of the abyss which separated their two worlds. In front of him stood the model lathe constructed according to Brainin's design. Some of it was good, but there were certain weaknesses. Brainin lacked imagination; that useless valve there, was a legacy from an older model . . . In his absorption with his favourite work Sokolovsky forgot everything.

At eight that evening he went to Vera's. He had been afraid that Elena Borissovna (or was it Elena Yegorovna ?) would be there, but she was out. He thought Vera looked annoyed with him for coming and greeted him coldly.

'Perhaps you are busy?'

'No.'

What was he to talk about? There simply was no subject and he knew it was too late to think of one. It would almost have been better if Lena had been there. 'All the same, we did talk in the old days, sometimes there was a silence, but we talked, and now—nothing. Something has changed. Vera feels it, too. How long can you sit in silence?'

He tried to start a conversation:

'Pukhov the painter used to come and see me when I was ill. Last time, we were talking about Goya. There are two pictures of his, "Youth" and "Age"; Death, like a porter sweeping out a yard, sweeps out with a broom those who have stayed too long . . . Well, so then Pukhov told me he had to paint a picture of mixed chocolates. He's

THE THAW

in a complete muddle, Pukhov. He hasn't grown up. Sorry, that wasn't what I was talking about... What I meant to say was that I asked him about Leonardo . . .'

He stopped half through the sentence. After all, it was not so very interesting, what pigments Leonardo used. Vera would be annoyed, she'd say she was tired. Better say nothing.

Vera straightened the cover on the table, shifted the lamp, pulled the blind down and snapped it up again. She must make an effort to entertain her guest.

'Today I went to see old Pukhov. He had a pupil of his with him, an interesting boy, fond of anatomy, wants to be a doctor . . . You're not tired, Evgeny Vladimirovich? You shouldn't do too much after your illness . . .'

He said nothing. A clock struck in the next room; nine. Suddenly he got up and said tonelessly, almost inaudibly:

'Vera Grigorievna, last time I was here, you didn't understand what I told you about the aloe . . . When I was ill . . .'

She broke in hastily:

'Don't! You mustn't!'

Again there was a silence. Vera had turned away, Sokolovsky could not see her face. He was thinking of how she looked at him when he was ill.

She dragged out almost voicelessly:

THE THAW

'Evgeny Vladimirovich, we are not children. Why talk about it?'

The bell rang: Vera was needed at the Kudryavtzevs'.

Vera hurriedly put on her coat and tied a scarf over her head. He knew that they were parting for many days. He said listlessly: 'Good-bye, Vera Grigorievna.'

She shook her head, embarrassed:

'No, Evgeny Vladimirovich, wait for me. I'll be back soon.'

She smiled. Now her face looked young and lost. If Lena had seen her then she would have thought: 'She's younger than I am.' But Lena wasn't there. In the dark entrance hall Sokolovsky could see neither Vera's smile nor the expression of her eyes. But it seemed to him that she was looking at him exactly as she looked that night he caught the glimpse of her when he was ill.

He waited for her patiently, standing by the window.

And outside the window there was a disturbance, an excitement. At last, winter was on the run.

Along the pavement, the snow had melted and turned into a stream, only over there, in the front garden, a little was still left. The casement was open but you couldn't feel it. Pity the window was still sealed so that you couldn't open it. Through the casement came the sound of voices.

THE THAW

Everything was all at once alive and resonant.

‘Funny thing, now Vera will come in, and I’m not even thinking of what I’ll say to her. I won’t say anything. Or I’ll say: “Vera, the thaw has come.”’

XVII

THE last person Tanechka expected to see was Volodya. He had not been near her since January. Twice she had run across him in the street: he told her he was mouldering away; he might drop in one day but really it was better for them not to meet, they only upset each other. Tanechka understood that he wanted to break it off and cried a little, then agreed that he was right—better a clean break than to drag it out.

And now, there he was again out of the blue. She felt annoyed.

‘You needn’t expect me to be moved to tears. You said we had to break it off and I agreed with you completely. It’s silly to go back to what isn’t there any more.’

Volodya smiled wryly:

‘I won’t try to persuade you. It’s only that I am in a wretched mood, and it’s spring outside. I was going past your door and I thought, perhaps you were bored as well and would come for a walk with me. We might go to the town park.’

Volodya had guessed the truth; Tanechka was depressed; she had little in her life to make her cheerful. When she had stopped seeing him, the

actor, Griftzov, had become attentive to her. She didn't like him. He had no talent, he was eaten up with envy and he had sweaty hands; she told him straight out that he was not to count on her. On her free evenings she stayed alone, sewing, reading Dickens, or lying on her bed, crying into her pillow. On the stage she had had nothing but flops recently. Ophelia was a disaster; though the audience clapped, she knew that she could hardly have been worse. Then she acted in a Soviet play the part of a laboratory assistant unmasking the professor for subservience to things foreign. It was terrible, not a live word in it; when she made her speech flaying the professor the audience laughed and she longed to cry: why did she have to grimace and shout these imbecilities? Soon it would be summer. Kashintzeva would spend her leave in the country with her mother and Danilova in Yalta—she was having an affair with some geologist. Tanechka thought of her own summer with misery.—Touring in July and her leave in August.—She would apply to go to Zelenino, that suited her purse. But she could see it all in advance: conversation at lunch on the benefits of steamed cutlets for those who were taking the cure; picking worm-eaten mushrooms in the afternoon; somebody getting drunk at dinner and making a scene which everybody else would go on chewing over, then the crossword from the *Ogoniok*, with twenty people torturing them—

THE THAW

selves over a mineral of six letters starting with B.

'All right, let's go . . . What do you think, shall I put on a coat or a rainproof cape?'

'Cape. It suits you better, and it's quite warm. Haven't you been out today?'

'I have, but I don't remember, I didn't pay any attention.'

The street was gay and shining with its wet pavements; at the kiosk, there were still some old paper bouquets, but small bunches of violets, freshly sprayed, sparkled among them. Tanechka, however, walked along dejectedly. She felt as if Volodya had invited her only to hurt her feelings. 'All he wants is to show that he need only beckon and I'll forget everything. Well, he's wrong. Perhaps I did once have some sort of feeling for him, but that's quite gone.'

She felt like being nasty:

'You're quite a stranger. Have you been keeping well? Or rather, to speak your own language, have you been earning well?'

'Not very. I was unlucky. I did a portrait of Juravliov, the Leader of Industry, and he was sacked. They say he is now in charge of a unit manufacturing office seals. The portrait won't fetch ten roubles.'

'Are you very sorry?'

'On the whole, no. It was good that he was sacked.'

THE THAW

'All the same, what are you doing?'

'I have done a panel for the caterers' club, and I hope soon to be commissioned to do something else on the same lines.'

'That means you are pot-boiling as before . . . And what is Saburov doing?'

'Painting. I was there the night before last. Apparently they came to him from the Union and chose two pictures for the Exhibition. He says they chose the two worst, but all the same, it's a good sign. I'm pleased for him.'

'How strange. You used to try and prove to me he was a schizophrenic.'

Volodya said nothing. Walking ahead of them were a couple whose very backs showed that they were in love and engaged in a stormy conversation. Volodya grinned:

'You and I are like a couple who have celebrated their golden wedding.'

'I don't see that. Personally I have nothing special to remember.'

'I have . . . But it doesn't matter. Saburov has done another picture of his cripple, this time in a pink blouse.'

'You didn't like it?'

'On the contrary, I liked it a lot. But it is not the kind they'll take for the Exhibition.'

'And what do you conclude from that?'

'Nothing whatever. Or if you like, I conclude

THE THAW

that I am a boiler of pots, but that's nothing new.'

'You used to tell me everybody was. Why the minor key?'

'I don't know.'

'Odd that you haven't made a single wisecrack. I hardly know you!'

'I often hardly know myself. Father used to tell me I was going in the wrong direction. I thought so myself. Now it turns out that I'm not going anywhere at all. However, that's not an interesting subject for discussion, especially on a fine day. . . I heard you played Ophelia.'

'Yes, abominably.'

'Savchenko was in raptures; he said you were very moving and he had always imagined Ophelia just like that.'

'Well, he must be easy to please, because I really did act abominably; it happens sometimes, I simply couldn't get inside the part . . . In the old days you used to laugh and tell me none of that mattered. Have you changed your mind about that, too? Is there such a thing as art, after all?'

'I haven't thought about it. What I have been thinking about chiefly is that *I* do not exist in art; that, regrettably, is a fact. Either I have never had a copeck's worth of talent, or else I had five copecks' worth and I gambled it away at the first street corner. But why talk about it? . . . Look at our pair of lovers. They've had a quarrel, she ran away

from him across the street, he followed her and now they are back again on our side.'

'You mean he won?'

'No, but this side is sunny. Sonya and Savchenko used to quarrel all the time and make it up like that.'

'Are they getting married?'

'No. She's gone to Penza. They'll quarrel and make it up by post. Father misses her badly.'

'How is he?'

'A little better these last two days, but the doctors aren't hopeful. I believe he only keeps alive through sheer strength of will, fights it out day by day.'

'Your father is a very remarkable man, do you know that?'

'I know everything, Tanechka. Even things I'll never tell.'

His voice was so melancholy that Tanechka felt ashamed. 'I shouldn't tease him all the time. He's not himself—no airs, no aphorisms. He must be feeling very low. Like me . . .'

'Don't lose heart, Volodya. I often do myself. But then, I think suddenly everything might change. Don't laugh, I am really sure that it can happen. Do you believe in miracles?'

'What do you mean by a miracle?'

'Well, for instance, you are feeling terrible, and then suddenly you are all right, everything is changed; I mean everything is the same—the town

THE THAW

and people and things—and everything is different. Do you understand?’

‘Anything can change a mood. Any nonsense. I saw Sokolovsky yesterday. Do you remember I used to tell you about him. A gloomier cove I’ve never met. Well, yesterday I arrive and there he is, laughing, joking, talking. I even asked him what had happened to him. He said: “Nothing. It’s the spring.” He must be close on sixty. How many times has he seen the spring? If that’s what you call a miracle, then I believe in miracles.’

‘No, I’m not talking about the weather, It can go much deeper than that. You’ll meet somebody, and you’ll really fall in love. Or you’ll begin to work and find that you’re absorbed in it. Like Saburov. Didn’t you say yourself that he was happy? Perhaps Sokolovsky has done something that pleased him in his work; you used to tell me he was devoted to it.’

‘He’s capable of being devoted to the astronomer’s discovery of the existence of life on Venus, that’s all he needs in life. Look, Tanechka, our lovers are going to the park, too.’

‘Naturally. It’s always full of lovers. They’ll sit and kiss. And what shall we be doing? Cursing or snivelling?’

‘Neither. We’ll wish them happiness. Pity we can’t see their faces, but we’ll assume that they are very, very charming.’

In summer the park is hot, there is music, the

THE THAW

trees stifle in the dust and soot and there are people on all the benches reading newspapers and talking over their mundane affairs. But at that time of the year it was almost empty, there were only lovers and eccentrics—there was too much slush for anybody else. Here and there the snow still lay in sweaty patches and in the shadows the puddles glimmered with ice, but in the sun you could already see the bright sprouting grass. A wide lawn in the distance was black all over, only one corner was beginning to be faintly green. The old pussy willow had fat silver buds on it. The birds were fussing, shouting, searching—presumably for food or lodging, but it seemed that they had started a most interesting conversation.

‘Look, Tanechka, there is your complete assortment of miracles.’

‘I don’t know what you are talking about.’

‘Winter is over—that’s one miracle. Please don’t contradict me, I see you are too hot even in your cape and you meant to put on a coat. The pussy willow is coming out—that’s two. The grass—three. And here you have the chief miracle of all, just look! That small fellow . . . As white as white . . . He’s literally burst through the icy crust.’

Volodya picked the snowdrop. Tanechka held it cautiously in her hand and laughed:

‘It’s quite true. A snowdrop.’

The lovers who, all this time, had kept ahead of

THE THAW

them, now sat down. Volodya smiled: 'It's nice that he thought of spreading out his raincoat, the bench is very wet. You see, I was right—they really are very sweet. He must be a student in his first year, and she is probably still at school. The school-leaving exams are near. But at the moment she is not thinking of that. At the moment she is sitting for another kind of exam, perhaps the hardest of all . . . I like it that they're so happy.'

'It's nice that you dragged me out, Volodya. It was so dark and sad in my room, I was sitting, snivelling all to myself . . . And here it's lovely.'

'Wonderful! I've never been so happy to see the spring as I am now. You know, when I was a boy I had a passion for breaking the ice on puddles. Once I fell in up to the knees, got into a row at home. It's a delightful occupation. I now propose to commit a nuisance: Vladimir Pukhov, aged 34, member of the Artists' Union and flatteringly reviewed in the now defunct *Soviet Art*, is about to conduct himself like a schoolboy in a public place.'

Volodya ran up to the big puddle covered with sparkling ice and kicked the crust. Getting more and more excited, he kicked it harder and harder. Tanechka sat watching him and laughing. And from high up in the spring sky, the sun warmed Tanechka and Volodya, and the lovers on their wet park bench, and the black lawn, and the whole winter-chilled world.

XVIII

LENA, walking along the street, saw neither the sparrows bathing in the puddles, nor the patches of blue sky, nor the new cheerfulness in people's faces. She was herself astonished at her state. 'Look at Vera,' she thought, 'she is transfigured. And I am like a mole that can't wake up. I must have turned to stone.'

Her past doubts, hurt feelings, pride, now seemed absurd. What had happened to her was what she had read about in books: she had come to love Dmitry with a love which cut across the whole of life, and he did not love her. There was nothing to be done in such a case.

The sun, the laughter, the noise breaking in on the winter silence frightened her. She walked along, isolated by her grief.

'And what happened then?' she asked herself afterwards. She could find no answer. Everything was transfigured and resolved by a single word, a word she had heard all her life.

It was at the corner of Soviet Street, near the bus stop, that Koroteyev saw her. He shouted at the top of his voice:

'Lena!'

THE THAW

It was the first time that he called her by her name and not her patronymic, and it was this that settled everything.

Had you told him a moment ago that he would shout and run across the street, he wouldn't have believed you: he was a man who knew how to control himself, his whole life showed him to be that. He had had no thought of meeting Lena; when he glanced round distractedly he was saying to himself: 'It was last spring I got to know her, so it was a year ago. Now I know it's useless to count the months or the years. Whatever happens, I can't forget her. Life has become cramped and empty. And yet what happiness it is that she exists! She has made me over, she has changed me altogether. Now I find it strange to think of how, last winter, I could come forward at the readers' meeting, with those absurd opinions! Everything has proved to be so much more complex. But I will never see Lena again . . .'

Now they were walking side by side, confused, hurrying, speaking without thinking.

'I was walking along, suddenly I saw you by the bus stop.'

'It's strange, I knew your voice at once . . . I don't know why I happened to go out . . . I sit at home all day . . .'

'You are not in a hurry?'

'No. Are you?'

THE THAW

‘I?’

Koroteyev raised his eyebrows and peered with a surprised expression: yes, it really was Lena.

A woman was standing on a window-sill, washing the window panes and the glass shone, reflecting the blue light. A little boy was eating an ice cream. A girl carried a bunch of pussy willows. That tree they passed—Lena remembered it, she had seen it being planted one autumn evening, with the people crowding round to watch. It was still quite bare; but if you screwed up your eyes, you could just see a little covering of green down. ‘What date is it? I can’t remember anything. I don’t understand, what has happened? Where are we going?’

‘Where are we going?’ she asked herself aloud.

They came to a brown house with four storeys and a tower; it was the house where Koroteyev lived. They walked in quickly. The hall was still cold, winter had not yet left it. How dark it was! One could hardly see the stairs. Neither Lena nor Koroteyev felt the cold. Lena raised her head and her green eyes shone in the half light. Koroteyev kissed her. From the street came children’s voices, the hooting of traffic and all the noises of a day in spring.

NOTES TO TEXT

1. *Page* 23. 'Re-insurer' is a common Soviet term for a person who 'plays safe'.
2. *Page* 28. The announcement in *Pravda* of the arrest of a group of doctors accused of conspiring to poison several Soviet leaders.
3. *Page* 62. Poem by Lermontov.
4. *Page* 76. This is a play on Sokolovsky's name: *Sokol* means falcon.
5. *Page* 81. Sokolovsky is referring to the Central Committee's decree of October 23rd, 1953, on the 'increase in consumer goods production and an improvement in quality'. This together with other decrees published in September and October, 1953, promised a rise in living standards.
6. *Page* 82. VOKS : The All Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries.
7. *Page* 88. Pioneers: Communist Youth Organisation for children between the ages of 11 and 16.
8. *Page* 93. In Russia, for reasons of hygiene, only imitation foodstuffs are displayed in shop windows.
9. *Page* 106. Co-education has recently been re-introduced in Soviet schools after much discussion in the press.
10. *Page* 139. This word has not the connotation which it has in English. In the Soviet Union the rôle of an 'agitator' is to explain to the population official policies and points of view in short-term matters (such as elections) as distinct from the rôle of the propagandist who deals with general principles and long-term matters.

Notes to Text—continued

11. Page 169. 'Selmash': Farm Machinery Trust.
12. Page 171. 'Chastnik': a term used for the few individuals in the Soviet Union who engage in any form of private business.
13. Page 179. This is a reference to the Central Committee's decree of September 26th, 1953, on 'measures to develop the raising of livestock and lower the compulsory delivery of animal produce to the State'.
14. Page 187. Ushakov is a Party official, and since Juravliov has heard nothing from the Ministry he assumes that a report on the delay in building has gone through Party, and not the Government, channels concerned with his industry.



