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OLES HONCHAR

THE SHORE OF LOVE



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To seek and then to find—could there be a more natural way for art to go? How much has been said on this subject and said for the most part not in vain—because without findings, without discoveries, there truly cannot be any art and these findings and discoveries can only be the result of seeking.

“...The war overtook me in the library,” Oles Honchar recalls.

How loudly, how deafeningly did that word “war” resound in the silence of the reading room. Flinging down their books and notes, the students ran out into the crowded town square to discover that war’s flames had been licking at our land for a few hours already.

Thus began Oles Honchar’s life as a soldier, Oles Honchar’s life as a writer.

What had come before that?

A small village near Poltava where he spent his childhood with his grandfather and grandmother. According to documents he was born here, in the village of Sukhaya, on 3 April 1918. This event, however, must have taken place in the working class district of Ekaterinoslav (now Dnepropetrovsk) where his mother worked in a factory and where she shortly afterwards died still a young woman. Sashko was brought up by his grandmother, who was fated to play a great role in the future writer’s moral and aesthetic formation. In both the hardest and most joyful moments of his life, he will turn in his mind to that remarkable woman, an illiterate Ukrainian peasant woman, who first taught him about humanism, diligence, spiritual generosity, who taught him to believe in the poetic word.

He went to school and with joy discovered literature. It was his old teacher who first called the lad the name by which he is known to millions of readers in our country and abroad—Oles.

Later he moved to Kharkov, to the college of journalism, to a brief period of work on a newspaper and—at last!—to the Philological Faculty of Kharkov University.

And of course, there followed his first literary experiments—what young philologist has not passed through that stage! Between 1938 and the outbreak of the war, Honchar published several stories, a short novel, and poetry in the republic's newspapers and journals. A few things were noticed and one story was even awarded a prize in a locally organised competition. The author was invited to a seminar of young writers in Kiev.

Yet it was no slip when I said that Honchar's life as a writer began in the summer of '41. His books *The Standard-Bearers*, *Man and Arms*, *The Cyclone* and many other works could never have been written but for the war. There might perhaps be other books, also interesting—who knows?—but that is to enter the realm of conjecture. Things turned out the way they did. The lives of writer and soldier were combined into a single whole that was directly linked to the fates of his country. Having joined a student volunteer battalion in the first weeks of the war, the future writer first saw action, near Belaya Tserkov, on the far approaches to Kiev. He met victory somewhere in the middle of Europe, by then decorated with the soldier's Order of Glory and three "For Bravery" medals, medals whose value is known to all who went through the war.

The little pages of the soldier's notebook were filled with poetic lines, sincere and brave words, which struck a chord in his fellow-soldiers' hearts. It was no accident that the divisional newspaper so willingly printed the poems of the soldier from the mortar company.

Even then, however, the author regarded his writings as a sort of concentrate of his frontline impressions, "synopses of feelings", "marks on a map"—in brief as a preparation for a future, main book. Honchar never for a moment doubted that such a book was needed and that he would write it.

"It is your duty to tell of your comrades both dead and alive. For you on many occasions promised yourself: 'If I survive...'"

Oles Honchar did survive. He went back to university, but this time in Dnepropetrovsk.

Alps, the first part of his future trilogy, was published in

the journal *Fatherland* in the summer of 1946. The second and third books, *The Blue Danube* and *Golden Prague*, appeared in the next two years. The trilogy *The Standard-Bearers* had begun its triumphant march.

A triumphant march—there is no other way to put it. The book started on a charmed life. State prizes. Translations into dozens of languages. The trilogy was liked immediately, liked by all.

I think that one of the most important reasons for the trilogy's success is that Honchar was able to catch the inimitable spirit of that historic time, to catch the world perception that was common to millions of his fellowmen at that time, their joyful consciousness of having done their duty honourably, their boundless faith in their own strength, their pride in their people and their country, and, at last, their thirst for life, for peaceful work, for kindness, beauty, for everything that despite the pain of recent losses, despite the war's destruction and the shortages, determined the general mood at that difficult time.

"The frontier! We returned there and the guard stood on the same spot as he had on 22 June 1941. We had forgotten nothing and we had learnt a lot. We were alive, more mature, and the wiser for our experiences."

Without this book the artistic truth of our nation's feat would be as incomplete, as it would be without the books describing the terrible trials of the first months of the war.

The Standard-Bearers was so powerful a work that the reader remained for a long time under its influence. Honchar's other stories about the war were seen as continuations of the trilogy, as further branches of the story, as "satellites" of the novel. This line of descent was not so obvious in Honchar's writings about peacetime but it was nevertheless there. The love of life, philosophic bent of mind, and folk wisdom of the gardener Mikita Bratus, the hero of the story of the same name (1950); the affirmation of spiritual beauty and internal richness of the working man (*The Sunflowers*, 1950); the keen attention paid to moral problems (*Let the Flame Burn*, 1954); the penetrating lyricism (*The Skylark*, 1950) can all be traced back in one way or another to *The Standard-Bearers*. And the stories were treasured for that very reason.

The publication of Oles Honchar's diology about the southern Ukraine—*Tavria* (1952) and *Perekop* (1957)—came

as a complete surprise to many. After the writer's books about the present day and about the war that was just over to find 1914 and the Civil War as the subject matter of his new novel was indeed a surprise. Honchar was following up his romantic ardour and his subtly-coloured lyrical miniatures with a strictly documental work, with totally realistic characters and a thorough investigation of their socio-economic background.

The well-known Soviet literary critic Leonid Novichenko once pointed out that the "invaluable quality of being modern" which so typifies Honchar is present even in his works about the past. This observation is correct as it stands and I will only permit myself to add that another quality to be found in all the writer's works, including his books about modern times, is historicism of artistic thought.

In *The Standard-Bearers*, modern events that have barely come to a standstill take on the epic traits of living history being made before our eyes. The same dialectic duality reveals itself in yet another aspect in *Tavria* and *Perekop*: history is shown to us as the prehistory of the present day.

Tavria and *Perekop* testify to Honchar's desire to widen his sights by embracing strictly realistic artistic methods. Social and psychological motivations are thoroughly worked out and the whole complex of factors underlying the actions and behaviour of the characters are carefully examined in this novel.

Next, memories of the war come into their own, and the novel *Man and Arms* (1960) appears. Honchar could not but write such a book. Both because he sharply felt the need to "unburden" his soul and a duty to the tragic past, to the memory of the comrades who were killed, and also because time, historical experience, and his new artistic maturity powerfully called him behold the whole truth about the war.

The tense dramatism that is an outstanding trait of *Man and Arms* was undoubtedly largely due to the dramatism of the material itself, of the moment in history which Honchar describes. The bitterness of losses and failures could not but make itself felt in any description of the summer of 1941 and one is not surprised to find that the writer presents far more "severe" an aspect in this work than he did in his previous works about the war, works that dealt for the most part with its concluding period.

The novel's central theme, however, is not horror, not inhuman cruelty, not man's fatal doom, but on the contrary, faith in that man, in his spiritual resilience, in his ideological and moral superiority over fascism. The tragic circumstances described with naked veracity in the novel take on meaning and significance inasmuch as they bring out the tenacity and courage of the book's heroes, help one to answer the question put many years later, in another of Honchar's books (*The Cyclone*, 1970), to one of the novel's heroes, a former frontline soldier, by his young friend: "What did you hope for? What kept each of you alive in the midst of that universal chaos?"

The central theme of Honchar's works about the war, humanism, belief in man, in his high purpose on this earth, recurs as a leitmotiv in his novels *Man and Arms* and *The Cyclone*.

These novels develop further another of Honchar's major themes—that of history, the continuity of time. Honchar's man is always a historical man, a person profoundly conscious of being personally involved in mankind's history and in his people's heroic past.

The theme of the future—yet not just of the future but of the past, too—is to be found in Honchar's novel *Tronka* (1963). This "novel of the steppe" is one of Honchar's most modern books.

"There, can be no smell like that of our steppe..." In accordance with an old tradition of Ukrainian literature, the steppe and descriptions of it are to be found throughout Honchar's writings. Arid and swept by black storms in *Tavria*. In the turmoil of class struggles of unheard-of scope and sharpness in *Perekop*. Full of the poetry of socialist transformations in the stories of his cycle *The South*. Criss-crossed with trenches and scarred by the caterpillar tracks of enemy tanks, enshrouded in the black smoke and glinting with gigantic fires in *Man and Arms*.

And now in *Tronka* the steppe is peaceful and bountiful.

The present day is shown in this novel as a link in the uninterrupted chain of mankind's development, as a fleeting moment at the crossroads between past and future.

"You mustn't ever repeat yourself or still more others. For repetition will never give you artistic satisfaction."

Those words are the whole of Honchar. Every new work of his is both like and at the same time unlike not only *The Standard-Bearers*, which is so profoundly imprinted in his readers' memories, but also the book immediately preceding it. Each of his books brings us both pleasure at meeting an old friend and the joy of making a new one.

For there is perhaps no harder thing in art than to remain oneself while changing constantly. The constancy of the artist, his faithfulness to the path he once chose, to some vital, basic principles and therefore to himself, is certainly attractive. But does not the nature of art also require eternal seeking, change, and movement? This combination of integrity and dynamism, this dialectical unity between *semper idem* and *semper tiro* is a phenomenon that, in all honesty, is not often to be met.

Yu. Barabash

THE SHORE OF LOVE

In spring and in the blindingly bright days of early summer the girls from the local nurses' school did anti-aircraft defence exercises in the grounds of the fort. Carrying stretchers and sometimes wearing gas masks, heavy protective clothing, and Red Cross bags over their shoulders, the young nurses-to-be scattered over the grey wormwood-covered field laughingly make their way through the pretended radioactive zone, deal with pretended death, and all the time keep saving lives and more lives...

The territory between the ramparts was perfectly suited to such exercises, being all pits overgrown with weeds and dotted with hillocks. Every summer, archeologists also found work for themselves there: digging endlessly. On the hummocks near them, space-age goats nibbled at the grass. Built by the Romans or perhaps even earlier, the fort held no fear for anyone for a long time now. Birds nested in its loop-holes. Tourists, puffed up with their own historic importance, left their signatures and other graffiti on the towers. Only from the sea did the fortress still retain its impressiveness: from afar sailors catch sight of its silhouette on the heights above the estuary, over the white-walled, vine-enmeshed town. There is something mysterious about the towers—they hold some memory, echo some long-spent passions...

Where once Romans or Turks ground their teeth as they dragged their exhausted victim into the fortress, young girl students now skipped between the ramparts, looking at passers-by laughingly through the glass of their gas masks.

And in the breaks between the exercises, they would settle on the fortress' ramparts where the breeze played, from a distance looking like a gaggle of geese in their white coats, to treat themselves to ice-cream sold at the entrance to the castle by a fat woman who also wore a white coat. Although tired, the girls were merry, happy with what they had just experienced, as if they really had managed to save someone's

life. Chatting and laughing, they shot off a few ironic shafts in the direction of the archeologists working nearby in one of the pits. The knights of science, their bare backs shining with sweat, looked like Roman slaves in a quarry as they bashed and scraped away all day long, searching and searching.

"Well, what about those ancients?" the young nurses would ask. "Did they have love?"

"Did they have the cinema?"

"Why did they exile their poet to such distant parts?"

"The poet of love! Oh, the barbarians!"

Laughter on the ramparts. No reply from the archeologists.

It was as if they did not hear, engrossed as they were in their own work. They had to work in a pit filled with pure heat. Bent double with their cares, only rarely would one of them glance at the place where the girls, smiles flashing, had gathered, where shapely tanned legs were resting before the evening's dances.

Should it happen that Vera Konstantinovna, their favourite teacher, accompanied the girls on these exercises, the young nurses then devoted more attention to her than to anything else. She had been to some far-off southern country on a Red Cross mission and had only recently returned from there.

"It's so interesting. Do please tell us some more, Vera Konstantinovna. Tell us about golden Bengal where our cranes spend the winter."

For it is a country of poets, the country of eternal love, of eternal spring, of dark eyes, and blinding smiles, of women's arms like the necks of swans, arms that can enchant and bewitch even snakes. There it stands upright, a giant reptile, turning its head this way and that, following the dancer who is writhing like a snake herself before it, twisting her shoulders this way and that, playing with her body, and shaking all over as if she were a hot-blooded gypsy woman in wide skirts.

But Vera Konstantinovna for some reason did not want to talk today: her face was thoughtful and her eyes were sad. If she were to speak, it would not be a carefree dance that would rise up before her pupils but crowds of hungry children, emaciated mothers, from all around stretching out their bony, boil-covered arms, their inflamed eyes begging you to help. The Red Cross station worked day and night and was constantly besieged. The cries of those in pain never ceased, you gave

out medicines and food endlessly but the crowds of those seeking treatment and nourishment never slackened. You yourself are already rocking on your legs from these sleepless Bengal nights whose beauty you haven't even had time to notice.

The mythical and ever fruitful Eden where our forefathers lived! The sticky, stuffy night. People stricken with cholera groan outside the canvas of your tent and you, exhausted, mortally tired, have a nightmare in which some witch in a doctor's white coat approaches you. You force your eyes open: a monster, you don't even know its name, is cautiously sitting on the crates of food and medicine. A little Bengali reptile, looking like the field lizards of your childhood. *Perhaps it's a distant descendant of the snake that once tempted Eve?* It has frozen into immobility. The mysterious beast is looking at you and you ask yourself—will it or won't it strike? Is it or isn't it venomous?

And after that a helicopter carries you off into out of the way parts and the land below you is one great flood, the overflow of muddy tropical rivers. From time to time you catch sight of the crowns of trees still above the surface of the water. There is not a spot of dry ground on which to land and when at last you find a place, the same experiences as before await you there: damp tropical air, the multitude of outstretched hands, and the endless pleading in the pain-filled eyes of strangers.

"What did you really feel out there, Vera Konstantinovna?"

"I felt obligation, girls, that I had my duty to do. You know, that's our mission, as they say—to save."

Her voice was calm. To them it was already the voice of a frontline soldier, of the woman whose smiling photo as a quite different girl in a fur hat with ear flaps is to be seen on the Board of Honour back at their school. That is what she was like then, this woman whose hair is now speckled with silver, whose eyes have lost their former shine, whose face now clearly betrays her age. Can it really be that they, her pupils, will one day become like her?

Inna Yagnich, the pride of the school, graded excellent at everything and a poetess into the bargain (she has written the words to a song sung by the nurses' amateur choir), looked feelingly and sympathetically at her teacher's faded face and her voice took on a serious tone.

"They say, Vera Konstantinovna, that you leave a piece of your heart in every place you ever live."

"I think that's true."

"Oh, how dangerous," Svetlana Usik giggled archly as she examined her long eyelashes in her mirror. "A piece here, a piece there. Isn't there a risk of developing cardiac insufficiency?"

"A generous heart need not fear insufficiency," the teacher replied sharply. She was offended.

"I was only joking," Svetlana said contritely. "I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter. You'll understand one day."

Vera Konstantinovna fell silent, but it seemed that the girls guessed at her further thoughts: "I've told you before and I'm telling you now that you should never begrudge of giving your heart over to a good cause. It may be, girls, that one of you will soon be visiting those tropics yourself, and then you will see what the human heart can do. An Aeroflot plane carrying a cargo from the Red Cross will land somewhere amidst the muddy floodwaters. The concrete runway will be so short that the rubber tires of your plane will catch fire as it brakes and the flames will have to be beaten down with fire extinguishers... And you won't find any water that's not full of germs; there won't be any word more terrible than that little word 'epidemic'; and there will come a time when you will experience total despair before the scale of the grief, the chaos of dirt, the lack of sanitation, before the crowds of carriers of the most awful diseases. And nevertheless, having collected yourself, having got a grip on yourself, you will again go out to battle, risking your life at every step even though you will want to live, girls, no less than all us mortals, no less than you do now."

Somewhere epidemics were rampaging, storms were out to sunder ships, while there, on the rampart, silence, light, and blessed peace reigned. From time to time a Meteor hydrofoil of the coastal water-bus service would tear by or else a ship would appear over the horizon and grow larger and larger as it approached from the distance. A familiar barge tirelessly and imperturbably floated at a respectable distance from the shore—it was sucking black sand from the bottom of the sea for the new buildings being erected. Nearby, divers had been working for many days now trying to raise from the deep a merchantman which had been bombed and sunk in these

waters in 1941. She was carrying grain that summer and her holds were brimful with wheat. They said that it had kept underwater but that it had gone black. While looking for the ship, the divers accidentally came across the remains of an ancient city which in its time also sank beneath the waves. Those dry old sticks the archeologists were now interested in that, too.

All this was so usual, so natural to the little nurses that it bored them stiff. Only on rare occasions—in spring or in late summer—would the Orion, the sailing ship on which young sailors trained, appear. She would either be returning from or setting off on some voyage and would sail proudly and inaccessibly past these shores, floating in a state of complete weightlessness, looking totally unreal, something out of a fairy tale or rather, with her great sails outspread, like an apparition in sweet girlish dreams. She would pass by, sail off into the distant haze and suddenly be gone.

And it would be everyday life again. That mirage, the Orion, would be replaced by the familiar old barge with its black sand.

The girls had already received their postings, already knew where they would be working. One was glad at her appointment, another not very. One girl would come out from the posting commission with a smile plastered right across her face and another in tears, with her mascara making black rivulets down her face. It's a difficult day when a girl's fate is decided... Inna Yagnich's good luck did not fail her that day and she came out of the office with a happy sparkle in her eyes.

"I don't know where you lot are going but I'm going to Kurayevka!" That meant she had been lucky: she had got the place she wanted. Earlier, for safety's sake, a request for her had come from Kurayevka. The chairman of the collective farm requested that Inna Yagnich be sent to her native village and this without a doubt was also a drop—perhaps even the decisive one—on the posting commission's scales. After all, the voice was not just anyone's but that of the well-known Cherednichenko, a man the whole region knew: a former combine harvester operator, he was now the head of an exemplary farm famous all down the coast, a Hero of Socialist Labour, and an influential man. Just try to ignore such a voice.

Inna was truly pleased: she would be going home, to her family, she was going to deal with the illnesses of her fellow-villagers. She would soon be tearing along in one of the Meteors, leaving this fortress with its goats and grey bushes to others. Somewhere out there she would find another world: the open coastal steppe, flat as a football field, with its low, broken shoreline; while still at sea you catch sight of a red layer of clay and above it a neat and endless ribbon of black earth which, together with grass whose roots year after year held back the sea during the wild autumn storms.

"What with your marks, Inna, they could have offered you something better," said Klava Prikhodko who, although she and Yagnich were friends, nevertheless envied her a little. "Offered you a first-class sanatorium, for example, under the magnolias and the cypress trees. But no: Kurayevka."

"I asked for it myself."

"And you don't regret it?"

"No."

However, right now the first little worm of doubt gave its first little wiggle in her heart: did she really not regret it? Was this idea of working in Kurayevka going to prove a happy one? Maybe, girl, you'd live to rue the day, by which time it would, of course, be too late. She could imagine pretty clearly what awaited her in Kurayevka: the tractor drivers would come to her with bleeding cuts on their hands and she would wash the dust of the steppe from the fresh wounds. Work injuries were, alas, still far from rare there, especially during night shifts. Women would come to her, soldiers' widows, with their old and firmly entrenched illnesses. Capricious pensioners would try to extract a long life from her. And she would have to battle for every bed in the shared hospital, since the construction of their own collective farm hospital was still at the planning stage and the present, "enlarged" one did not have enough room. Patients sometimes even had to lie in the corridors. Yes, my dear, you're going to have enough to worry about. You won't get bored.

"That golden Bengal of yours, girls," said Vera Konstantinovna, "is a stretchable concept. I think that only the place where you are most wanted can be golden."

How timely that comment was! Inna silently and gratefully looked at her teacher: Kurayevka truly did want her. Her father, mother, relatives... Yes, and that person whose love-

lit eyes shone at you from afar, the person for whom at night your warm letters, your—for the most part never posted—songs were composed.

2

The song was called *The Shore of Love* and it was born during one of those nights when her heart was sunk in grief at being far from Kurayevka and some kind of anxious foreboding was torturing Inna, when it seemed to her that only this emotional outburst (a ball of pain, a burning confession and spell), only the magic power of feelings, heated to the point they broke into song, could help her retain within herself that which she was most afraid of losing. This was not a desire to earn glory nor a vain youthful game: from the very depths of her heart was her song born. Inna saw that the song belonged not to her alone; her friends had helped her to choose a melody and young teachers from the music school had helped write it down on music paper. This collective effort and the emotionality of the song could be felt on stage, in real life. Everyone understood the girl's modesty about having written it. And so Inna Yagnich began to be called a poetess although this of course could not happen without a few biting witticisms about the birth, the appearance on the stage, of a "newly-discovered Sappho", of a Marusya Churai* from Kurayevka.

This unexpected success did not turn Inna's head. She was as assiduous at her studies and applied herself as diligently during practical work because she believed that not the pen but the nurse's syringe was more important and more reliable than anything else. Songs were all very well but she had a permanent, long-term, and normal job ahead of her. She therefore trained for it with all her Kurayevka stubbornness and patience. Life loves patient people, she remembered her father's maxim and accepted it wholly. However, the unexpected burst of creativity did not pass without leaving a mark on Inna and she on several occasions caught herself wishing that the song should be picked up and carried far and wide, that it should in some strange way reach the heart and hearing of the young man she favoured, that he might perhaps also feel

* Marusya Churai was a semi-legendary girl poetess of the 18 century. A number of popular Ukrainian songs are attributed to her.

warmer on hearing it. She imagined how hard things must be for him now, how sickening it must be to be where he was, where he was redeeming his guilt. He had driven up and down the coast like a devil on his Jawa motorcycle until one day he had skidded into a group of children from the holiday camp... It had been an accident. He was going fast and had not been able to stop. But was that a justification? To make matters worse, he had been under the influence. She did not like him drunk and she would not put up with it. Both her mother and her neighbours criticised her: who do you think you're mixing with? An empty-headed hooligan, that's who, while you're the top of your nursing school, you're going to be a doctor... She used to listen and seemed to agree in her mind. All her resolutions, however, would be shattered when she remembered the caresses which she had first discovered on the day she had gone swimming with him on the spit in the animal sanctuary closed to the public (for him there were no forbidden places!), where waves as tall as man rolled like a shining wall towards you, where the sands were white and untrodden by others, by intruders—only the birds had drawn weird designs on the beach with their claws. How wonderful they had felt there together. They had swum and played in the water, splashing each other! It was there that he had put his arms round her for the first time and carefully carried her out of the sparkling foam. He had carried her so very gently, kissing her all over as he walked.... She could not forget those hands, those gentle, caressing and not at all hooliganish hands, because they were the hands of love. Before their strength and inebriating tenderness all other considerations faded and sober voices were unexpectedly at a loss and fell silent.

He did not write to her often from there. And on those rare occasions his letters only hinted at things, left a lot to be read between the lines. He would soon have done his time, though, and they would meet again in Kurayevka. What would he be like on his return? What would he have in his heart? The bitter pleasure of expiation, a hunger for pure human feelings, or coarse and already hardened habits, and a foul mouth?

This now worried her more and more. She would frequently succumb to these gloomy thoughts when she went clambering with the other girls on the fortress walls still warm after the heat of the day. She would probably often recall with a glowing sadness those evenings on the ancient stones polished

by the elbows of young couples in love until they shone. A light breeze came wafting in from the sea. Girlish laughter reigned there. No transistor radios caterwauled mindlessly. And you waited for that ineffable gift of nature, for the moment when from the darkness of the horizon, from somewhere in the dark, mysterious depths, the moon would rise and cast its moving and bright path of light on the sea.

The fortress was twenty or even more centuries old. Milenia had gone by since the time when Romans' armed galleys had first appeared by these shores. Augustus and his legions had turned into dust. The fortress' ruins had become the quarry of archeologists and a place for dancing. Inexorable time had changed everything to suit its fancy and perhaps the only thing that remained unchanged was that poetically shining path over the sea, that fairy-tale carpet for people in love and for poets. When the moon rises and admires herself in the mother-of-pearl mirror of the nighttime waters—a ghostly flickering—there comes a magic moment born of the darkness when the most rabid and ceaseless shouters fall silent, when the girls cling together. They look silently and thoughtfully at the hazy light, for this is truly the special moment coming into its own, an indescribable moment when it appears that nature herself is at the summit of her eternal mystery of creation. Light reigns. How vast the sea becomes on such clear moonlit nights, how breathtaking its reaches are!...

The lantern of the night would be born in silence and would rise from the horizon. And once again the hubbub would start up, someone would spread out a handful of mussels on the wall, bottles of beer would clink in a carrier-bag and the divers would now even more eagerly boast to the girls about their daytime feats.

"Some people like to sink things but our job is to get them up!..."

"I've lost count how many days you've been getting it up and it's still sitting on the bottom."

"Well, girls, that's because it's not a bag of potatoes!"

"All right, girls, taking out an appendix is not an easy matter but do you think it's any easier to go swimming under water? When on top of your own head with its two ears someone screws on yet another metal one and then you have to go into the deep—do you think that's as easy as going for

a walk? There on the bottom you see a monster covered with ooze and shells, as hairy as a mammoth, and you have to guess from what angle to tackle it. First you have to drive a tunnel under the ship with a water-jet, next position pontoons beneath it, and only then can you get on with pumping those pontoons full of air! Only before doing that you yourself have to make your way through that tunnel under the ship. And crawling beneath her when you know that not less than 2,000 tons of steel is balanced over your head—do you think that's simple?"

And the lad in his excitement is prepared to hurl his beer bottle somewhere down there into his beloved sea, the sea he dives beneath in the daytime.

"What do you think you are doing with that bottle: children bathe there in the daytime!"

"I beg your pardon! We are wild."

"Wildness is nothing to be proud of."

From somewhere down below comes the sound of splashing and laughter—there beneath the fortress walls the children of fishermen have invaded the water of the estuary: bathing in the moonlight, they romp, dive, and turn sommersaults like young dolphins.

The members of the expedition—the archeologists—approach and it turns out that they are not such dry old sticks after all. Dressed up in their best and freshly shaven (those who do not sport beards), they politely invite the girls to dance to the music produced by a jerky little old tape-recorder. Later, to satisfy female curiosity, they will get to talking about their work, about what they dug up that day.

"We hoped to find a centurion's sword but what we dug up was a rusty button about the size of a kopeck," they laugh at themselves. "Or perhaps it is our sword rusted down to the size of a button?"

"At least we found something," a plump archeologist-diver points out. "We brought up masses of pieces of broken amphora from the seabed. With a kind of resin, colophony, in them..."

"But most important of all," adds a long-legged student archeologist, "we found one more piece of white marble with an inscription on it."

"An inscription? What did it say?" the girls inquired.

"Rosavsky over there is our polyglot and he is decyphering it," said the archeologists pointing at a thin, bearded

young man who is evidently slightly embarrassed by his remarkably curly beard.

"It's already decyphered," he replied modestly.

"Tell us then, if it's not a secret," Svetlana Usik rushed on.

"I was born of an Athenean mother and my father was from Hermyon," said the young man with the beard in a clear voice, not taking his eyes off Inna Yagnich, "and my name is Theodora. I have seen many countries and have sailed up and down the coast of Pontus, for my father and my mother are seamen. Verily my days surrounded by love and the muses have been happy ones!... And when I, a young woman, gave birth to a daughter very like myself, I departed this sunny world of bright hopes and crossed the Styx into Hades."

"And after that?" asked Inna strangely moved.

"The letters are worn away on the marble after that."

Inna knew this young man, having been introduced to him one day at the district community centre. There was even something about him that attracted her (certainly not the beard!); his eyes were so trusting—a little naive—but sometimes inspiration flared up in them. This was when the lad began to talk about his towns buried beneath centuries of dust, about the solid gold breastplate, that poem of the ancient steppes, found thereabouts, or about other recent finds in the area. What to the others was simply a skull or a button were to him unique objects. One could get carried away when he went into the magic and sacred contents of the objects they dug up. He would see in some nondescript object an ancient amulet which was supposed to have protected a Scythian of the steppes from the evil eye, from being wounded in battle, and other misfortunes. Rosavsky was for some reason convinced that Inna's interest in archeology was not due to simple girlish curiosity but to something larger and he therefore lent her books about antiquity and albums of lovely colourful pictures of artefacts made by craftsmen in the times when man still felt his closeness to the birds and beasts, to plants and to grain, to the deities of the woods and waters. The girl was in fact excited by this world of stormy fantasies about the past, of poetic love and wild bacchanalias, a world in which the young archeologist felt self-assured and free. His memory could compete with that of a computer: he carried in his head whole poems by Ovid and other

writings of the authors of antiquity. On the day he met Inna, he declaimed to her a large piece from the works of the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates "On Airs, Waters, and Places" with the same passion as he had now recited Theodora's message, speaking firmly and without stumbling once. One could not tell whether he had only just decyphered or whether he had read it somewhere before. And why did he address this text, this strange voice from antiquity, above all to her, to Inna? It was all so long ago! Yet it was surprising how heart-rending was the warm confession of a young woman of long ago, a woman who must have had a poetic and subtle character. Had she and Inna met in real life they would probably have become friends. On the other hand, they had met—spanning a thousand years! As he recited, in some strange way the text took on a kind of extra, hidden meaning that the others did not see. And also the way in which he did not take his eyes off her. He was clearly singling her, Inna, out from the others, addressing to her the moving words about Theodora. Inna had felt this at once. But why her, Inna, and not someone else?

When a little later the archeologist was standing beside her on the ramparts and talking about the dig again, Inna this time, too, caught in his words that more profound and extra meaning that was destined only for her. She found it interesting to hear about the Scythians, about their courage and chivalrousness which Ovid himself mentioned. And the Scythian women, judging from their jewelry, had extraordinarily good taste. Real fashion-followers of the steppes!

"But all the same, why is that tower over there called Ovid's tower?" said Inna, nodding at the highest tower. "Surely Ovid can't have come here?"

"Why shouldn't he have?" responded the young man eagerly. "Researchers, of course, believe that he never came here. I myself, though, hold completely the opposite opinion. I am sure that his light Roman sandals trampled the dust here and left footprints in our snow. Has everything really been so thoroughly researched? Surely exciting discoveries like this can still be made. Ovid was exiled to Istria, the other side of the Danube from here, that's true, but who could have prevented him from exploring the whole of what in those days was considered the North, from visiting what now is home to us? Finally he could have gone absent without leave, like Shevchen-



ko when he went on an expedition to explore the Aral Sea despite the Tsar's interdiction. Of course, it was easiest to say that he was never here. Troy never existed either until Schliemann went and dug it up out of the dust of centuries. And all because he believed Homer's poems.

"Why shouldn't something like that have happened here? How is one to explain, for example, how the poet came by his considerable knowledge about the tribes of the steppes, the people who originally inhabited this coast? It has been incontestably proved that Ovid had real friends among the Getae and that he even tried to write songs in the language of his place of exile. No, science has yet its last word to say and comrade Ovid, I am sure, will be allocated a residence permit here, too!"

The young man's heat pleased Inna and she felt that he had thought about all he had said for a long time, that he had his own view of history and not a borrowed one, that he lived by his own mind and sought his own truths. And those ancient tribes lost in the mists of time were evidently far from a casual matter for him; he seemed truly to be seeking his genealogical roots in them and defending them warmly before someone.

"It's a shame that the people who built the barrows did not know how to write—although that, too, is still a bi-ig question!" he continued excitedly. "We'll find out in time whether they knew how to or not. But one thing that is clear is that they were people of noble spirit. And Ovid, in studying them, caught precisely that."

"You seem to have a thing about Ovid..."

"He deserves it! Listen, you do some Latin in order to understand prescriptions, so why don't you try to read his poems in the original? But everything hasn't been cleared up even about them. We don't even know why he was exiled, the reason for Augustus' savage fury... As you can see, there are still a large number of lacunae in our knowledge. Unopened boxes. Unsolved riddles".

When he spoke about the fury of the Roman ruler, one could feel that he himself became angry at such despotism. Say what you like, but the Caesars got their due from this young man: he had no mercy for them. He did not conceal the fact that his sympathy lay with those who so long ago had nursed their vines here, who had lived by honest toil, who had

ploughed the ancient field with a deer's antlers. Meanwhile, those Roman brigands had stretched out their greedy arms all the way to here: one bas-relief clearly depicted how they had massacred the local people with their short swords and taken prisoners. There they had knocked a bearded giant over and were manacling him: he would make another gladiator... They were not ashamed, the robbers, to boast of such things on their bas-reliefs! They had even erected a monument on the other side of the Danube to the slaughter they had perpetrated in the steppe. Everyone knows the fate that awaits robbers and their doubtful fame: centuries passed and the descendants of the gladiators, shepherds from the steppes, tore down all that white marble and took it away, made troughs out of it so that their cattle could drink from them! A huge block with the emperor Trojan depicted on it suffered precisely this fate: it was used in making a watering trough for sheep. Later, of course, our friends the archeologists collected all these, took them off to museums... Such things are always valuable to us but one can understand those who as if to revenge themselves used white imperial marble to water their sheep!..

The archeologist also fascinated Inna with his story about a recent find made by his colleagues on the other side of the Danube: they had found a bronze casting depicting a fantastic dragon, a nightmarish creature, the symbolism of which was still unclear and mysterious. It was an immense serpent, its body covered with scales, but with a lion's tail and the head of a sheep or a dog... Now wasn't that a puzzle?

"And most importantly, its forelock and ears are human! And there's something like a strange and only just perceptible smile on its face... How is one to understand it? Who can unravel the puzzle? Oh, there are still so many mysteries around! And aren't we even mysteries to ourselves?"

"Why do you believe that?"

"Is absolutely everything quite clear to you? If it is, then please tell me how come man came out of his caves to rise so steeply and rapidly, what steps he followed from those far-off ignorant times to his present heights? And did he always go up, never faltering or failing on the way? In what ways did he become better and richer and in what ways has he remained as he was then in prehistoric times? The thirst for knowledge, searching—perhaps that's the only

thing that has always been there. Deers' antlers have been replaced by tractors and galleys by spaceships but we are still just as restless: we long to solve the eternal mysteries. Has man ever satisfied that thirst?"

It was already late. The path of light shed by the moon had moved considerably, quietly disappearing in the distance. Perhaps that was the path by which Ovid once came to these shores... The weightless path by which he departed from them again, leaving his legend behind him. The young men and women were already wandering off, looking for more secluded places: couples who wanted to be alone together could just be glimpsed beneath the towers and along the ramparts. At such times, in the warmth of such moonlit nights—Inna did love them so—the very air in the fortress seemed to be infused with love. If you were to walk through the fortress, you would hear warm whispers and see couples kissing unembarrassed by your presence. Eyes shine gently at other eyes. The glint of a young tear and the quiet laugh of happiness, the oblivion of tenderness—all is in the open there, on the ramparts, beneath the all-seeing stars.

It was on precisely one such night that the song *The Shore of Love* had been born. Inna might perhaps have written something on the night in question had it not been for the archeologist. It was really high time for him to be off to sharpen his spade for his next day's digging but he hung on and on, staring and staring at the moonlit path as if he were trying to decipher it, to set about an archeological dig in its twinkling ribbon.

"I hear that you've already been given your posting?" he said, turning to Inna after a moment of silence.

"Yes. I'll soon be saying good-bye to the school."

"Off to Kurayevka? The shore of love calling you?"

"How did you know that?"

"I know a lot about you. You interest me. It's a shame, though, that you don't notice it."

"Oh, this is so unexpected."

"There's nothing unexpected about it. People hunt for treasures. But they don't always look in the right place. For all we know, it could be here, beneath these layers of words..."

"Speaking in riddles again."

"A treasure is always a riddle. It lies somewhere, gold and jewelry patiently sparkling in the darkness of a barrow..."

Waiting for its discoverer... You just look at the barrow and your breath catches in your throat: is it there or isn't it? It's still not discovered, still only a guess, but that treasure already excites you. But there's another kind of treasure, Inna, one that's more precious than gold. And it is called human sincerity, friendship, and devotion. It's also called sudden love, love which ... which right by you is ... so clumsily ... blurring out a confession ... seeking you!"

"I most certainly do not understand what you mean..."

"You want clarity, definite words? I truly don't know how one is supposed to express oneself on such occasions ... Once upon a time there was a formula that covered everything: I offer you my hand and my heart! You understand, Inna? That says everything. So take it, please," he said, holding his hand out to the girl.

"It's not nice to joke about such things," said Inna, although she could see he was not joking.

"This must all seem strange, unexpected, and savage to you... You don't know me very well and you find it difficult to decide... But decide, do! Don't be afraid of the bonds of marriage..." His voice changed and rang out almost sharply. "I promise you that you won't regret it. I'll do anything, absolutely anything, just to make you happy, just to see your talents flower!"

There was no choice but to believe in the sincerity of this unexpected declaration. And she believed it, rejoicing in her heart and feeling a secret pride that her modest person had aroused such feelings in the archeologist. Someone's proposing to you, my dear, that's what! That's how it happens, something that others at the dawn of their womanhood only dream about!... How was she to know if this was not the moment when, not knowing the true price of happiness, she was going somehow to miss her fate? You listen with a calm and condescending smile to words which would make any of your friends happy. Don't hurry, Inna, think, you proud girl, before refusing... Are you not taking that fateful step which will soon result in your shedding bitter tears? But it isn't really a matter of guesswork: you didn't invent the age-old saying that the heart accepts no one's bidding.

"I find it difficult to explain to you," he was carrying on meanwhile. "I'm amazed at this miracle myself. It's due to you! Something in you lights up the whole world for me!"

You probably don't know yourself yet. But I, the very first time I heard your *Shore*, I immediately said to myself: she's a poetess! A real one! Yes, yes, maybe really Sappho, maybe a second Marusya Churai, maybe the person who is fated to be the songstress of this land of ours before eternity... Not an epigone, not a blind thief of other's images, but a real creator, someone with a calling... The great Ovid, even he would have respected you!"

"You're too kind... Really too kind."

"Nothing's too much. The ties linking the centuries are far stronger and more indissoluble than we imagine them to be. Creativity's immortal bough is an absolute reality which no one and nothing can destroy. Not even time has any power over it!"

The girl's cheeks burned brightly at these words that excited a vanity she had not realised she possessed. She ought to reply but did not know what to say.

"You must be a kind and warm-hearted person," she said haltingly. "And thank you for your ... for all... I, too, would like you to be happy."

"You are my happiness."

"But... I'm not the only girl in the world... There are so many of us here."

"I'm not interested in any others. Only you, Inna, only you... I don't know what kind of magic it is, but it's there! And I beg you, beg you, implore you! What else should I do? Go down on my knees?"

It was clear that he was about to do just that. He made a move to do so—it was just like an old-fashioned play. The girl held him back—sharply, angrily.

"That's enough... This talk is leading us nowhere."

"Why?"

"Because... It shouldn't be difficult to guess."

And he guessed. He fell silent. Numb and heavy, he drooped by the wall, involuntarily squeezing in both hands one of the blocks laid there long, long ago.

"You want me to go?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You're not afraid of staying here alone?"

Only then could Inna smile with relief.

"I want to be alone with Ovid for a while."

A Fantasy on a Moonlit Night

It looked quite real to her: Naso himself walking on the sea towards the shore. Weightless, wearing his long Roman toga and sandals with their thongs wound round his legs, he walked unhurriedly down the moonlit path, stepping straight down its shining ribbon. A traveller. From the eternal city to eternal exile.

A grey, depressing emptiness and icy winds greeted him in what for the ancients was the end of the world. Everything was strange there: the boundlessness of the steppes, the wolflike howls of the snowstorms at night, and the wild appearance of the guard returning covered with snow and wrapped from head to toe in sheepskins and furs from duty on the fortress ramparts. Long-haired, bearded, and now with more than a smattering of local habits, the soldiers of the garrison did not look as if they were Roman recruits—each of them already bore the stamp of a barbarian. Even the centurion in command of the garrison, a harsh and courageous warrior, reminded one in his stinking furs not of a citizen of glorious Rome but rather of a bearlike barbarian. In time Ovid himself would put on such clothes—at least that is how they saw him, Rome's great poet, on the rare occasions he appeared on the ramparts to stand alone, gazing at the white, mysterious steppe.

So this is where you ended up, banished to the edge of the earth, so that neither your mighty gods nor your merry mistresses on the banks of the Tiber could reach you! Rome, which ruled the world, knew how to punish a poet who had fallen into disfavour: he did not need a cup of poisoned wine nor to be torn to pieces by African lions in the Colosseum. He was being punished with the most terrible of punishments: obscurity, loneliness, oblivion—that was what eternal banishment to a land of ice and snow meant, a land which neither had nor felt the spiritual need for poets.

It is as if you were alive but at the same time already dead. Abandoned to the merciless punishment of the wild winters there, you feel that you will rot and die in obscurity and that the wild winds will scatter the sweet lines of your poems of woven gold all over the deserted shore. Never will an evergreen laurel grow on these shores so that a crown can be made for you! No laurels but a sarcophagus would the Scy-

thian frosts carve for you from their own white Ferrara marble—ice.

Instead of the gods you sang and by whom you were so lightly abandoned at these hard times, you find new ones on these shores—the cruel gods of the North. Furious and merciless, they raise snowstorms of incredible, vicious violence, and the steppe for a long time drowns in the desperate raging of the elements. The local winds don't whistle like Roman ones, they howl; the guards on the ramparts are blinded by the snow. Even the outside world disappears, indifferent to your prayers, to your resonant poems filled with love. While still alive, you witness your own death. Your patrician youth knew all the delights of life, sweet friendship and praise, love and vices. Where have they all gone? Where is the fame? Where are the crowns of springy, aromatic leaves? Ungrateful, accursed Rome forgot everything, rudely rejected your songs. And now you are a condemned man, banished from the living, from time, and from mankind. Because mankind is Rome and you cannot imagine the world otherwise. It is somewhere out there, alluring and unattainable, it has renounced you with all its luxury, its gods and sacrifices, and its night-time bacchanalia. The city's mad Muses inspire it without you. Everything is going on without you—you retain only memories and their constant burning pain.

But perhaps your heart not so much regrets Rome as the fact that the past cannot be returned. Old age is coming on. It will not bring you either honour or fame but only the hollow pain of solitude. And yet you were once Fate's favourite, bathing at your ease in the cloying and tender embraces of Rome's hetaerae, in the inebriating perfume of laurels! Rivers of wine were poured in your honour, and you had all sorts of friends—sincere and insincere ones, faithful ones and double-faced ones, but now all that was left to you was the terrible fury of Octavian, a fury that no supplications would appease.

Augustus Octavian, princeps senatus, who liked to play ducks and drakes with the children of slaves, with little slave boys. Who would take other men's wives, high-born patrician women, straight from feasts to his profligate chamber. It is known that when going to visit his wife Livia, he would beforehand prepare notes of the lies he was going to tell her. Former friend, noble Augustus, I put my curse on

you from this place of exile although I may yet again perhaps implore you to grant me mercy, although I may yet again sing your praises, O golden one whose force is present now on these ramparts, whose sword had reached these wild shores and asserted Rome's eternal might here.

The people here are only half human. These primitive and perfidious men come from time to time from the depths of their steppe wearing frightening skins and fur hats that strike the Roman eye as strange. Yes, they are half people, elusive centaurs of the steppes because with them horse and rider are inseparable so that they are truly not people but centaurs. They have never seen the Eternal City, not many of them will even do so and those will be slaves in chains. If I were allowed to return to the banks of the Tiber, I would describe their whole fantastic wildness with my own hand on tablets, I would myself carve depictions of these mysterious beings with their bows and singing arrows on white marble. I would, in my own house surrounded by olive groves, set them up for all to see, and in particular to entertain your august eyes!

With what cruelty have you unleashed your fury upon me and how severely you have punished me. Here I live doomed to spend my life amidst beasts and half-beasts. There are cheetahs here, wild cats and antelopes of the steppes, as quick as lightning, and heavy aurochs that look threateningly at you, a stranger in Roman sandals, as they graze. The nomads themselves also have stubborn and wild characters, like their own aurochs. And it is to this place that I have been flung to be gnawed by loneliness. Your centurion is probably right when he says to me:

"You're soft, Ovid, too soft, and you'll die here. You will also be forgotten, for only the Caesars live forever."

I'll rot and die here. Not a trace of me will remain! This cold and limitless desert that knows nothing of the music of poetry will swallow everything. No one will bring even the remains of the poet Ovid to his beloved Rome. Only the garrison of the fortress will set a heavy and icy sarcophagus over him...

The centurion nevertheless is respectful to the exiled poet because the poetic fame of Publius Ovidius Naso once even brushed him with its wing. He has a secret hope that sooner or later you, Rome's poet, will be granted Octavian's

forgiveness and that you will then compose your poem of banishment, that you will remember them, the harsh, wild warriors who here, on the distant frontiers, face to face with the barbarians, are defending the Roman Empire. Remember, remember us in at least a single resonant word, O poet, because the sword is only an instrument of coarse power while the song is immortality.

Sometimes those half-people drive their cattle across the snowy steppe to the fortress in order to trade. On the ice of the estuary, ice so strong that even a rider galloping on his horse will not break it, excited trading begins. Although they are half-people, although they are bearded, they still know how to count denarii and have even learned to swear in real Latin. Sometimes they leave again peacefully and sometimes a fight starts up over some absurdity. Swords and whips are drawn, hot blood splashes onto the marble of the ice and one of the bearded men is soon pushed through a hole in it: from now on he will wander somewhere beneath the water. Ovid does not feel sympathy for him. He looks on calmly as they chain a young man from one of the steppes' wild tribes, who during the trading sought fairness, fought desperately, and used high Latin in order to swear.

Later, spring came, the clouds disappeared and the sky opened—a high and bright blue sky just like Italy's! At that time there was a lull in the fighting. The tribes ceased their hostilities and Naso was able without fear to walk deep into the steppes, struck by the beauty of this spring, by the sea of red flowers—flowers that a thousand years later botanists would still be calling “Scythian tulips”. His heart revived. From his Roman misfortune and from his dark despair he extracted heavy grains of wisdom, from the catastrophes in his life he at last created peace. He emerged from the terrible storm with an unbroken heart. The spaciousness of the steppe and the triumphant spring returned his strength to him. He felt invincible. Without weapons, he wandered about the steppes and talked with the riders and shepherds he met with. And they did not frighten him: it turned out that these people could be friendly, that they could joke and that they were in their own way wise. It was then he discovered that they were truly human. In the evening they laid their fires in the middle of the steppe and invited the Roman to share their grilled meat, sheep's milk cheese, and their honey. Afterwards they would

sing. Yes, yes, sing! They sang like Orpheus, like your ancient gods—no, better than them. On the banks of the Tiber you heard such singing in your careless youth only from your harp-playing mistresses in their mist-like gowns.

*Yours is the past, and ours the future,
From this old world we see another view...*

"Don't shed their blood any more," he said after this to the centurion. "Put away your sword and make peace, mighty one. They know how to sing so they are also people."

And even he, a hard man used to lopping off heads, understood Ovid this time and did his bidding—though for how long is not known.

One evening the poet set off together with him towards a campfire in the steppe, and once again under the clear stars, in the blue night, the nomads' simple food boiled in copper pots on tripods over fires and they enjoyed the steppe's hospitality. This steppe knew how to defend itself. But although their wonderfully forged weapons were always in evidence there were no bloody quarrels that evening, the tribes men's friendly laughter never ceased around the campfire, and the nomad women, who did not look a bit like she-wolves, calmly gave the breast to their fat little Romuluses and Remuses of the steppes.

There were as yet still no Polovtsi, and no merry Slavs. All these were still to be born to come in the future but the campfire was already warming the air for them. Their forefather—the fiery dance was already there, leaping and ringing, while his companion—song—was also there, born of the minds of men, of the silence and the stars. Ovid filled his lungs with the dry scented air. With wide eyes that had already seen so much he watched a young girl wearing a necklace of gold coins dance before him, her beauty eclipsing anything he had ever feasted his eyes upon during nights of revelling in Rome.

"I will call you Danae," he said to her after the dances. "I am giving you the name of a princess because you are at least that."

"It is not fitting for the daughter of the best silver-smith to bear someone else's name. I have my own."

"What is it?"

"I am called Kigitka, after a bird which you have never seen and never heard."

If only his youth had returned to him this evening! If only that young dancer and singer could have fallen in love with him, an elderly, dried-out exile forgotten by everyone.

But she did fall in love with him. Afraid of nothing, having passed calmly between the swords, she would appear on the ramparts by the tower that has ever since then been called Ovid's Tower. She brought him a healing potion of the steppes, a potion that could cure the very worst illnesses and even lift the yoke of years. The best nurse of her times, a sister of mercy of the steppes, she was moved by her pure feelings to work for the poet's rebirth for creativity and love.

"She fell in love with you," said the centurion, "because you are a Roman, because you live in a fortress, and because you hold a heavy sword in your hand."

"It was not for that reason," objected the girl.

"Then why?"

"You are a singer," she said, turning to the exile. "Your heart is full of light. Whatever your word touches is filled with beauty and my steppe bursts into flower. It is not difficult to fall in love for that."

"But I left my youth in the Eternal City and my mistresses in Rome have grown old. And you are so young. And no god has the power to make our ages equal. Here, look, grey hair. I am in the winter of my life and this is a ravine separating us."

"I don't want to hear about this. Because you are Ovid: your poems do not age. Your heart is always young and I love you!"

These words sounded like a wonderful song as they fell from her lips.

...From this old world we see another view.

The poet felt as if young blood was coursing in his veins.

Young healer, how can I thank you? I will describe you as you are in my poem about the Getae which will perhaps be the last I ever write. In it you will be eternally young, as eternally beautiful as this sky, as your flower-sprinkled steppe when it awakens in the spring. You will become a song and in my words, in my language that is strange to you, you will always have the brilliant beauty of spring. You will out-

live us both for our bodies are mortal and cannot escape chaos. You will live on and on and the centuries will not age you!

Naso was visibly changing, everyone in the fortress saw it: either the girl's potion was working miracles or else the song of love was returning the exile to life. His body grew stronger and his heart discovered a courage that it had not known when he was young. It was then, perhaps, that the poet's fearlessness was first born, then that he stood on the ramparts and shouted:

"Rome! And you Octavian Augustus! Your legions will crumble into dust but her song will still live on!"

3

After midnight everyone went home. The tape-recorders and transistor radios fell silent and only the steppe's tireless grass-hoppers continued to sing.

Leaning against the stone wall, Inna thoughtfully listened to the silence, to the song of the cicadas, to the night which so delicately and gently held over itself a star-filled sky. The open sea had grown darker, the moonlit path paler, and the moon itself was sinking in the west, fading in a red haze beyond the town and the hills where in the daytime one could see sprawling vineyards. Goodbye, hills, goodbye you heavy, golden bunches of grapes full of sunny juice! Inna had on several occasions gone with the girls to work there, on those vineyards, when the whole school went out to help the state farm during the autumn grape harvest. Those had been wonderful days, unusually poetic ones, for Inna. And who could not be filled with a feeling of true poetry on seeing a sunburnt and merry person holding up a bunch of sunny grapes in his hand?! Inna wondered whether vines had grown there in Ovid's time and whether there had been any settlement over there, below the fortress, where the lights of the town, a district centre, now burned like nighttime flowers. It was a typical Southern town: white-washed walls, and innumerable acacias. In the daytime the sun was absolutely blinding, and vines twined around the windows: here they knew the value of cool air kept in by shade. Over the years she had studied there, Inna had grown fond of the clean and pleasant little town with its antique (as it seemed to her) whiteness and its golden stones, and, now that the time for her to leave

was approaching, the girl would have liked to say some friendly parting words to it, to that town of grapes, in verse. And although a few things in the town not infrequently annoyed the girls—there was not, for example, enough water: its water-supply pipe had probably not been changed since antiquity (they were endlessly mending it and the streets were always dug up) a light sorrow nevertheless overtook Inna who was herself surprised that she should be so saddened at leaving the town, the school, and this sullen fortress. The girl suddenly felt sorry for these gloomy and quite unromantic towers on which the inevitable tourists were forever leaving their vandalous marks.

The stars became brighter and the open sea was now an area of total darkness. And although there was nothing there but this darkness, the girl seemed to be waiting for something to come from there, to approach down the path that the moon had lit that night. The stars reigned above the world and the midnight breeze blew in her face.

The days of fortune-tellers and witches are over and we do not believe in premonitions. But sometimes... Here is what happened—make of it what you will: when Inna was on the point of leaving there appeared, far out at sea, in the midst of impenetrable darkness, a sailing ship pinpointed on the very horizon by the beams of the frontier-guards' spotlights. There for all who were not asleep to see was the brilliantly lit Orion moving tiredly, under full sail, along the horizon, coming back from a long voyage.

4

She looked rather the worse for wear on her return but the girl on the ramparts could not see the fresh damage done during the cruise. Only later would the teams of craftsmen from the ship-repair yards list all these wounds, make a faultless diagnosis, and help the injured vessel. Only after having done what was necessary, having cured her wounds, would they let their beloved ship out on a new and perhaps an even more difficult voyage.

It was not the first time that the Orion had been battered by a storm but trouble like this...

They were near Malta when a sudden and violent storm,

not at all to be expected there at that time of year, hit them... The young sailors were already on their second sleepless night, time and time again they rushed from their quarters into the squally darkness in order to relieve their utterly exhausted comrades. The sailing ship appeared to be in deep trouble. She was being tossed about like a dinghy as masses of water weighing thousands of tons ceaselessly crashed down on her out of the darkness. Compared to them the sailing ship seemed very fragile and to new-comers it seemed a miracle that these terrible waves, these mountains of water had still not crushed their little ship with the proud name Orion, that despite everything she held firm, climbing again and again to the foamy peaks of the waves. On nights like those it is with a special shudder that one senses the terrible depths, the watery abyss, the murky darkness beneath one. Not only the captain knew the full measure of the danger but even every unfledged trainee realised that the same sails which had so merrily and easily carried the Orion on a fine day could now be the cause of her destruction. Every member of the Orion's crew listened anxiously to how the stretched sails whistled, throbbed, flapped in the squalling wind aloft. Yes, this was it: their greatest test of courage and endurance. Yes, this was it: the cruel night for their emergency routine when trainees with knives stood guard by every mast and piece of rigging ready at the first word of command to drop the sails, to clip the Orion's wings if that was the only way to reduce their now fateful power.

It was on that night that Yagnich was hurt. A wave swept him across the deck into a stanchion, nearly throwing him overboard. When the young sailors came running up to him, he was unable to stand without their help. Putting his arms over their shoulders, they carried him below, to the sick-bay, but nothing seemed to help. He groaned protractedly—a sound that no one had ever heard Yagnich produce before. It was a bad sign. In the night of their hardest trial their most reliable craftsman, their only and in fact irreplaceable expert at everything to do with sailing, had been put out of action. The man who taught all the young sailors during the voyage, the man without whom they would be simply helpless. Drenched to the skin, he writhed with pain, clawing at his stomach and swearing desperately. Yagnich was dying. Their craftsman was dying! Whether it was a burst appendix or something else

wrong with him, the old man was in such a bad way that some of the trainees quite lost heart: the old man was done for. The death of someone is always frightening, but this was terrible, for death was stealing up upon Yagnich, who to these young seamen was both a commander and a father, stability personified and their main spiritual support. If he were to die, the Orion would so to speak be deprived of its soul. Yes, and in their moment of danger, too, on such a ferocious night!

But Yagnich, their wise teacher, was a psychologist, and even while in pain he thought about what was going on in their young and as yet untoughened hearts, what would happen to them if he were stupidly to up and die all of a sudden. No, old man, you can't, you don't have the right to go off duty now, you can't leave the lads to the vagaries of fate!

So when the ship's doctor suggested an urgent operation, Yagnich did not hesitate.

"Yes, yes, I agree! Cut me up if you want."

Yagnich, that same Yagnich who had always considered medicine to be one great fraud, was now willingly consenting to go under the knife. The young doctor gave instructions that the patient be strapped to the bunk and that he too be roped to it so that the storm should not interfere with the operation. There were groans, there was frightful swearing, and there was an animal-like howl. With his whole being, with all his innards, Yagnich was rebelling against being turned inside out. On any other occasion he would, of course, never have agreed to so unceremonious an interference inside his mighty body. But now he lay as meek as a lamb beneath the knife, without resisting at all—because it was a matter of life and death. And not just his...

"Cut! Ow! No, don't cut!" Yagnich muttered, his strength failing him. These barely comprehensible mumblings were perhaps addressed not only to the doctor. The political instructor who was present at the operation understood these unclear groans as the old man's farewell orders, his invocation that up aloft they should not cut the cables, that they should hold out to the end.

The squall blew itself out towards morning and the now calm sea shone in the sunlight. The captain sighed with relief: the crew was alive and the ship still afloat although she looked rather sad after the thrashing she had taken. The

trainees, when the doctor at last allowed them to visit Yagnich, found the old man worn out but in a calm and sure state of mind.

"I'll survive all right now," he said.

Themselves exhausted, bashed and bruised after their battle with the elements, the lads nevertheless tried to joke. Teasing Yagnich, they asked him who the "Aunty Motya" was that he had been shouting about under the knife. The old man took offence. That was rot, there was no "Aunty Motya", and anyway he did not want to talk about it. He had other worries.

"How are things aloft? How's the mizzen-mast? The main-mast? The fore-mast? Nothing broken?"

"Everything's all right. But down here. What a lot of noise you made," the lads chafed him mercilessly. "We thought our Neptune had had it, but look how things have turned out. Back from a trip to the other world. What a man! That's why we love you. Congratulations!"

"Was it will-power," they tried to find out, "or was it your anger? What brought you victory? Where does your organism get its phenomenal vitality?"

Yagnich, it seemed, was himself at a loss to explain this.

"My heart was evidently too alive. I felt, lads, that my time was up, that I really was dying, but somehow I just couldn't die."

Yagnich made this confession in an embarrassed voice and with a guilty smile as if he felt awkward about having created such havoc, having frightened the crew, having so worried the sailors and the captain—and that horse doctor with his knife. Strong hearts were all very well but there really had been something else! But he was not going to admit that it was perhaps only due to these lads that he had pulled through, that he could not leave those kids who were still wet behind the ears at such a difficult moment. As for his heart, well it... It knew when it had to be unstoppable.

Meanwhile, the voyage continued. The sailing ship faced about and made straight for her home shores. There was one incident on the way: they picked up some Greek fishermen from a raft. After they had been fed and had changed into dry clothes—the trainees' track suits—they were still dazed and hardly able to believe or explain clearly how they had managed to cling to a tiny raft after their ship had sunk.

The doctor gave the necessary first aid to those who were hurt so that now Yagnich had company in the sick-bay listening to how the young curly-haired Greek in the next bunk mumbled in his own tongue as he waited for an injection and only said "Ow!" comprehensibly as the needle penetrated—"Ow!" evidently is the same in all languages, just as tears are. The Greeks were to be put ashore in Piraeus, and it was suggested Yagnich might also be left there to recuperate in hospital but he rejected this option in no uncertain manner. That they had even thought of such a thing made him seriously angry.

"If Yagnich has become a burden to you," he said gloomily to the captain, "you can throw me overboard. All I ask is that you should do it a little closer to home. After all, Yagnich also has his Kurayevka."

The captain reassured him: if he didn't want to be put ashore, he wouldn't be. No one was going to make him do anything against his will.

"And Kurayevka... Now that's a place."

After this exchange, Yagnich for a while remained suspicious, in particular of the "horse doctor" and his tricks. He might slip him some powders, put him to sleep—and then he would wake up in some foreign port.

It was not Piraeus that frightened him—but being left alone. He had visited that Piraeus any number of times. The people there were just people although of a different tribe. It had actually so happened that Yagnich's first ever voyage was to Piraeus. That was when he had still been a beardless Komsomol who had added a few years to his age (this was later officialised in his passport) to be able, with thousands of other broad-shouldered steppe lads, to answer the Komsomol's call and join the navy. And, as luck and life so often will have it—he had barely set foot on deck when they were suddenly sent off on an urgent mission for the Comintern! Their job was to go to Piraeus as fast as possible and there, without the knowledge of the port authorities, to take on board under cover of night some Bulgarian revolutionaries who had at all costs to be saved from reprisals after their rebellion had failed. So he had gone there, risked a great deal, and taken them on board secretly. And now they wanted to kick him off the ship in that same Piraeus?! But they seemed to have changed their minds, thank God.

He had nothing against Piraeus as such, but his Kurayev-

ka was not to be laughed at either. Because every man must have his shore, a place to which his heart is pulled his whole life long, a place which he can picture to himself when he is thousands of miles away on any longitude and latitude. It is not for nothing that seamen have noticed that ships sail faster when they are on their way home. They simply fly!

Resting in the sick-bay under the doctor's watchful eye, Yagnich gradually recovered, obedient to all the "horse doctor's" instructions although these evidently irked on him. He wanted to know what their heading was all the time, how things were going up aloft, and what the wind was like. He also wanted to know what kind of picture the Orion presented after the storm, after that hellish, wailing night. Did she still look herself or was she unrecognisable? He wanted to know what ship it was that had hooted a greeting to the Orion in passing? But how was anyone not to greet such a beauty? Sailing ships were now a rarity on the seas and anywhere in the world captains recognised the winged training ship for what she was. And whether he was Danish, French, or Norwegian, he would, on drawing level with the Orion, without fail give a hoot in salute—that was the ancient custom of sailors. People were free to think what they like but Yagnich approved of the custom.

One day, the captain came to visit him. He sat down beside the bunk, asked Yagnich how he was feeling, and praised the doctor who had had the courage to undertake such a risky operation (it would appear that the "horse doctor" and the captain were friends).

"Good man, he did very well," the captain sang his praises. "Although it was the first time he performed so difficult an operation."

"That's evident. Before me, I should imagine all he ever cut up was frogs at his medical school. Then at last he got himself a real live subject. It must have made him truly happy."

"Come on! He's a fine doctor."

"But your fine doctor took a long time to find the right piece of gut. He kept getting hold of the wrong pieces."

"Wait: I'm serious. He truly is a fine doctor. With the ship rolling and everything flying all over the place, he didn't lose his nerve but instantly came up with the right diagnosis and almost without anesthetic."

"And with a blunt knife into the bargain..."

"They don't have any blunt knives, Yagnich. The lad didn't get a degree with honours for nothing."

"He may have an honours degree but he still got hold of the wrong piece of gut," Yagnich stuck stubbornly to his guns. "It's good things ended as they did. They could have been a lot worse."

And on this he buried himself in his thoughts again.

He had seen all sorts of both captains and doctors in his time. And of the captain who was now before him, this Yanchenko, the old man had the highest opinion: he showed one respect, valued one's experience and work, and, although he was young, he himself already enjoyed considerable prestige for his intelligence and tact. He was also one of Yagnich's former pupils; he, too, had once been a trainee on the Orion, had like the others clambered about the rigging, stood stiffly before the teacher with a sextant in his hand, carefully measuring the altitude of the sun as an exercise. How many young people had been trained on the Orion, how many had been tempered beneath its great sails! One contingent followed another, former pupils whom you had worked to a point near collapse, whom you had taught, praised, or put to shame, were now themselves sailing about the world as navigation officers, first mates, or captains and only he, Yagnich, remained on the Orion's deck as if he had taken root once and for all in it. He was a permanent fixture here. He did all the cutting and sewing of the sails which were made of a strong cloth specially boiled in linseed oil. For sailcloth was a material and only became a sail after it had passed through your hands, been worked on by you! And to all the new people who came to him to train as sailors Yagnich taught his simple secrets—how to tie this or that knot, how best to moor the ship. None of the trainees who had undergone Yagnich's severe school on the Orion ever forgot to ask, even in the ministry or on meeting a fellow-trainee somewhere in the distant port: "Well how's our Yagnich doing, how's our immortal tier of knots?"

"We've just had a radiogramme asking about you from the port," the captain told him. "They were worried about your health."

The old man gave a barely noticeable grin. So they thought that I'd already gone to feed the sharks? Nuts to you, I'm

still alive and kicking. He wasn't going to be leaving them just yet. The time had not yet come for removing his name from the ship's roster. He looked at his captain through half-closed eyes that had softened a little. All the same it was nice to look at a man when he was so young, in full flower. A sailor was a sailor however you looked at him. He did not hide even from others that he was in love with his Orion. His young wife (they had recently married) once asked him with a touch of jealousy "When are you at long last going to fall out of love with the Orion?" "Never, I should imagine," he had replied with a smile. A captain's answer. It was with almost totally unrestrained pride that Yanchenko wore his captain's rank, a rank that he was not yet quite used to. Not everyone had the honour of becoming a captain at his age; that was perhaps why he tried hard and glowed all over at work, standing with a brilliant and happy smile when his ringing command "up sails!" was being carried out and those sails were already spreading and filling out in the sky like wings!.. This triumphant moment was a happy one for the whole crew, but it was doubly so for him, the captain, because he and no one else would take his light-winged and eternally young ship out to meet still weather and storms. He would stand on the bridge, calm as ever, yet alert, so that anyone who saw him would say: "The captain's all right, anyone would be happy to sail around the world with him."

Both in public and when he and Yagnich were alone together, the captain unfailingly showed respect for his ship's craftsman. Not so long ago, when the captain was married, Yagnich was invited to be master of ceremonies at the wedding feast. And now, too, Yanchenko was talking to Yagnich about this and that, discussing all sorts of things to do with the ship—because the Orion had really been pretty badly bruised by the storm. She might even have to go in for repairs.

"And what's going on in my store-room?" Yagnich asked about his sail-making shop. "Who's in charge in my absence?"

"The trainees, of course."

Well, they would make a pretty mess of things! With Yagnich every object had its place, the spare sheets lay neatly rolled up on shelves like cloth in a shop, each roll of sail-cloth with a neatly printed label, so that Yagnich could find anything he wanted, even a needle or his hard-working thimble in the dark. The sea likes tidiness and a workshop must be

managed by the person rightfully in charge and not by just anyone. Without him they would make such a mess that it would be weeks before he got it in order again!..

Incidentally, Yagnich was at the moment more displeased with himself than anything else. The devil take that stanchion which had caught him just below the ribs so that his appendix had burst. Let that be another lesson to watch out! Yagnich even felt a little awkward in front of the captain: he'd got himself into a mess! That had never happened to him, a veteran, before. Had he lost his surefootedness or what?

"I thought I am good for many years yet," said Yagnich as if to justify himself. "I am not as agile as I used to be, of course. I've got all my teeth though and have never once even had them ache..."

"These things happen," said the captain, for some reason looking aside as if he were embarrassed: "You are not the first. It could happen to anyone. And in any case everything will be okay! And when we reach home we'll get you a subsidised holiday."

"What the hell should I want that for?" said Yagnich suspiciously. "I've never lazed my time away in the resorts."

"That, Yagnich, will be up to the doctor." The captain once again looked away.

What was the matter with him? He had previously always been on the level with Yagnich, had looked him in the eye, but now...

"No, no," said Yagnich. "Don't even think of it. If I managed to hold out under the knife, you can be sure that I'll be all right now."

The captain, too, seemed to have been reassured. He stood up in a happier mood and prepared to leave.

"We're going nicely," he said, making for the door. "There's a fine wind and we've got all the sails out."

He wished Yagnich everything one usually wishes in such cases and took his leave. Yagnich brooded suspiciously: "Why had a holiday been mentioned? Surely they did not want to get rid of him? Did they think that he was worn out at last? Of course, the years had taken their toll. How many squalls and hurricanes had he been through in his long life at sea! Had he been a little younger, he could have stood a great deal more. Now, however, he had barely survived. In fact, he really had very nearly given up the ghost. A radiogramme would have

gone to Kurayevka and he would have been sewn up in a sail-cloth bag and together with some ballast tipped overboard into the waves. On this occasion he'd won a victory over himself. He had not succumbed, for to succumb in such cases was the same as to retreat in battle. He had not let himself down but how would things be in the future? Surely they weren't going to keep him on as living ballast? No, they ought to consider his record: he was a veteran, everyone knew where he had lost his health! Not in drinking bouts and fights on shore leave but on active service. Nothing to do with this stupid appendicitis! He had never made a lot of noise about his services to his country but now, if they forced him to, he'd go with all his medals tinkling and say: And what are these? A war veteran and you are putting him ashore ahead of time?

He spent the whole of the next night at war, sailing in the Arctic. They were a convoy in the Arctic waters carrying lend-lease military supplies from the United States. That had been a hard crossing! Although they had been accompanied by a warship, although the merchant ships were painted the colour of icebergs, the Nazi aviation discovered these suspicious "icebergs" nevertheless and he, Yagnich, had then looked from close up into the eyes of what had seemed to be unavoidable death. Bombs came pouring down from the dive bombers. One bomb fell in to the hold containing smoke pots and the ship was immediately wrapped in smoke. A fire started on the deck and barrels full of some shiny liquid, mercury maybe, began to explode... The poisonous mess ran all over the deck. The holds were full to overflowing with inflammable materials and could blow up at any moment. Yet everyone was fighting bravely and he—was he any worse than the others? Taking over from a wounded comrade he worked at the anti-aircraft machine-gun and kept up his fire until the Nazi planes were driven away. After that he worked to put out the fires and still later, clutching a hose in his hands, he waded ankle-deep in the poisonous liquid that had spilled all over the deck and carefully washed it all overboard. Many of his comrades died in hospital back on shore shortly afterwards, poisoned by that damned mercury or whatever it was, but Yagnich, although he had taken a dose that was considered mortal only temporarily went deaf and blind. He waited this out in a hospital in Igarka, coughing out the dose he had taken, and went back to life, back to his difficult duties. He knew how to be tough

with himself, went where he was told, even to almost certain death, without hesitation! Shouldn't somebody remember this?

Only after the war did he learn that while he was carrying lend-lease supplies, he had lost in one day, in one brief moment, that which was dearest to him: his wife and young children. The ship struggling to take the families of sailors to the shores of the Caucasus was sunk by enemy bombs. Only much later, a captain of his acquaintance told him how it all happened. The bombing was done in broad daylight. The bandits had already sent a ship carrying grain to the bottom with their first round and next attacked the transport of evacuees and wounded. That it had a clearly visible red cross on it made no difference. The captain who told him this had then been in command of the next ship in line and had seen with his own eyes the tragedy of these defenceless people. Although he had tried to help them he had been unable to do much since he was under attack himself. So Yagnich's wife and his children were killed that day. There is nothing more terrible or frightening than to picture young children drowning! Yagnich could still see his wife quite clearly in his mind's eye, could still hear her voice but he only remembered his little children very vaguely. Only sometimes would he with painful clarity see in a flash their tiny faces distorted by terror and shrieking dumbly at the sky, see with horrifying realism how, clinging to each other with their little hands, they together sank beneath the waves. Sometimes he would in his half-sleep dive down to grab and save them. But his hands for some reason grabbed, embraced only water, only eternally slippery water and it alone.

5

Yagnich left his bed quite unexpectedly and made an appearance on the deck. It was already evening but one as bright as day: clear and with a full moon. A path of light glinted on the sea. Someone was strumming on a guitar on the quarter-deck. "Hey, lads, look who's here!" said the young people cheering up at the sight of Yagnich.

"Three cheers for our Neptune! Hip, hip, hurrah!..."

The breeze was very gentle and the sails made a barely audible singing sound.

Yagnich sat down on a coil of ropes out of the way. The trainees, polite lads, also left him alone and did not pester him with jokes. Yagnich liked it when the sea was as clear and transparent as this. Not like on a dark night when the water is itself blacker than the night, when you feel with every nerve that you are sailing over a bottomless deep... The old man sat calmly on the ropes, his bald head shining in the moonlight. He raised a questioning glance up between the rigging, between the stars.

The political instructor, the captain's friend and his eternal opponent at chess, was walking by and stopped in his tracks in front of Yagnich.

"You? Congratulations on your resurrection, Yagnich! Under the knife yesterday, out and about today! Well done! So we'll be sailing the seas with you for a while yet, won't we?"

"We'll sail them."

"So long as it's not too fast and the waves aren't too big—isn't that right?" said the political instructor smiling at his own joke before growing serious again. "The speed of ships is increasing, so the planet, Yagnich, is clearly growing smaller. It's become small already, like Hellas."

"What's that?"

"That's what today's Greece once used to be called. A midget, a mere district by today's scale, but how many people did it bring light to! Hellas must have felt itself to be a tiny place surrounded by unknown lands and oceans. The unexplored continents were endless, populated by fantastic monsters, amazons and centaurs. Greek fantasy saw them as half-animal half-human from where they were. And now our planet seems just as small as Hellas once did if we compare it to the Universe, to the endless reaches of outer space." The political instructor's glance was also turned upwards, above the masts. "It would be nice to know if there is anyone at least a little like us alive out there. What if there isn't? What, Yagnich, if we are alone? All on our own? Now that ought to force us to be friendlier, to sow less discord and to take more care of all that we have—of every dewdrop and of every blade of grass for a million years to come."

"Golden words," agreed Yagnich.

The political instructor ended up by once again encouraging the craftsman: "We'll sail the blue highways of our planet together for a while yet and have some fun."

"I'd be happy to shed a few of my years," the words involuntarily escaped Yagnich. "I'm the old man out amongst you youngsters."

"That's just what we need: a mixture of wisdom and youth."

He had comforted Yagnich and the old man was grateful for that.

Once again Yagnich was alone. He sat on, listening to something—perhaps to the tense throb of the sails aloft, perhaps to himself, perhaps to the sounds coming from somewhere down below. They were looking for someone, someone was lost.

The doctor dashed up onto the deck, his glasses flashing angrily.

"Where is that runaway? Why have I got to catch him?"

The guitar fell silent. "We'll do the catching, but whom should we catch?" a quiet voice responded.

"Yagnich!"

"What's the matter with him?"

"He's run away!"

The trainees burst into happy laughter.

"He's not gone far. There he is sitting on those ropes over there. As moody as Taras Shevchenko in his exile."

The doctor ran up to the runaway.

"You should be ashamed of yourself! To leave the sick-bay without permission! Your stitches aren't out yet! I'll report this to the captain!"

Yagnich said nothing. He just sat like a statue.

The doctor went on about the stitches: they would burst and then who would be responsible?

"Go back to bed!" he said in commanding tones. "At once!"

"All right, all right, no need to shout," Yagnich growled. "You're too young to be shouting at me."

"But the stitches..."

"Oh, shove your stitches!"

The deck shook with laughter.

"And if they burst?"

"What kind of stitches are they if they are going to burst? You should make them so that they won't."

The clash came to an end when the captain interfered and asked Yagnich not to be stubborn. They led the old man back down to bed.

After that, no one saw him on deck again until they reached home. It was as if he had been put in chains down below.

The lads brought food on the sly down from the galley for him. He had always had a large appetite. Having worked hard and fast in his workshop, he would eat a big bowl of borshch and would sometimes even ask for more. And now he was being given semolina pudding as if he were a little baby. Once he asked for a bowl of borshch and a hot red pepper, but the doctor nearly had a fit.

"What the devil do you mean—pepper? You're on a strict diet!.."

"If you won't allow me pepper, then at least bring a triple portion of stewed fruit. And see to it that there's lots of dried apricots and black pears in it." Yagnich for some reason believed that pepper, apricots and wrinkled black pears gave man strength and were conducive to a long life.

He wanted to be long-lived.

He was constantly getting angry with the doctor. He refused to admit that the doctor had saved his life. The man seemed to think that having a degree gave him the right to boss anyone around! Look at him grabbing at his cheek. Toothache. What kind of a doctor was he if he couldn't even keep his own teeth in order? In this respect Yagnich was totally his superior, since his, Yagnich's, teeth had never ached in his life. Both his front ones and his molars: they were all his own; not one of them was from a dentist. Nor was his eyesight letting him down: he could still thread a needle without any of your glasses.

One night Yagnich was for a long time unable to get to sleep. He lay with his eyes open in the dark and listened to a conversation that wafted in through the porthole. Some night-birds were chatting in the passage. He recognised one voice as the doctor's and the other seemed to belong to one of the instructors who took it in turns to go on the voyages in order to carry on teaching even during the practical part of the course. Yes, he was right: it was that talkative teacher, the one with the bull neck and hairy arms of a weightlifter. He was in the habit of telling everyone on board what to do and of sticking his nose in where it didn't belong. Yagnich had once put him out, simply thrown him out of his workshop. Told him to beat it, he had urgent work to do on the sails. The teachers were all in all educated people, knowledgeable people, but Yagnich

had never really discovered what this particular one taught to his trainees. He clearly hadn't the faintest idea about either sailing or handling a ship. They said that he was a philosopher—now wasn't that just what the Orion had always needed! He slept all day so now he was chatting the night away. Bla, bla, bla. They were going to talk all night long as likely as not.

Yagnich raised himself up and placed an ear against the porthole. The very next moment, he was sucking in his breath in surprise: they were talking about none other but Yagnich himself.

"He's such a patient man, that Yagnich," he heard the doctor's voice say. "It's the first time I've seen anyone like him. A rock of a man."

"Perhaps it's just the dulling effect of pain?" This was from the "philosopher".

"Windbag!" Yagnich said to himself.

"I don't think so. He's simply one of those people who know how to grit their teeth and stick anything out if necessary."

"I don't envy him. When I watch him pottering about in that sail shop of his, I can't help thinking that there goes the last Mohican of sails, a living anachronism. A man from a time that has gone and will never come back."

"Isn't that a hasty conclusion? History after all does present quite a few cases of things which seemed doomed to disappearance suddenly flowering again. Perhaps we'll yet see modern liners with sails, ultramodern supertankers..."

"There won't be any tankers."

"What will there be?"

"I don't know what there will be but I do know what there won't."

"That sounds too clever. Twisted like a sailor's knot."

"Let's forget about knots, too. And about all those tiers of knots."

"A respectable profession, and a rare one."

"But essentially primitive."

"Have you ever in your life tied a good strong knot, you windbag?" His whole being rebelled. "All you can do is tie empty knots of words with that long tongue of yours."

"It seems to me that you're taking a prejudiced view of things," the doctor's voice insisted. "You think that he's

the last... For one, that's quite unlikely. And even if one agrees that the age of the sailing fleet is over, you still must give that hard-working old craftsman his due. Look at how Yagnich is devoted to his work, how in love with it he is, how he's an artist in his rare trade! He's found his calling in it. Take him away from his needle and his sailcloth and there won't be any Yagnich."

"What did the operation show? Quite worn out, I should imagine?"

"On the contrary. His internal organs are like a young man's."

"Impossible!"

"But I operated on him and saw. I tell you—like a young man's."

"Strange. Are you sure you didn't mistake one of the Greeks we rescued for him?"

"That's not funny."

"All right. Let's say that he is as fit as 'a young man'. Nevertheless, he's wholly in the past. In other words—a pithecanthropus. A living anachronism."

"I'd put it differently: he ties the knots of life, he is a poet of sails."

It came as a total surprise to Yagnich to hear such things about himself from the doctor. That "horse doctor", that fusspot, could actually understand things. The other one, the windbag, could prophesy what he liked but the doctor... Well, time would show what would come out on top.

Yagnich sighed with relief when the night-birds at last left. He was not going to die; his innards had not rotted. What a thing to hear: "like a young man's"! Support had come to him from quite unexpected quarters. He'd like to know what those words "pithecanthropus" and "anachronism" meant. He'd have to ask one of the trainees.

They would soon, very soon now, reach port. Everyone would be met, everyone except for Yagnich, unless you counted a wink from his old friend the stone lighthouse which rose up whitely on a little island at the entrance to the harbour.

Yagnich did have a friend, an engineer, in port but it was very unlikely that he would come out to the pier. This engineer was frequently ill. They had been friends ever since the days of the convoys. The engineer was a native of Murmansk and it was Yagnich himself who had encouraged him to



move to the south. "How long are you going to go on freezing up there and breathing icy fogs, Nikolai?" And Nikolai had responded to the invitation—sailors aren't so firmly attached to any one place—and had come and set up house not far from the port. A housing estate on Arctic Street. It was a comfortable place, the verandas all overgrown with vines, the metal gates neatly painted, gardens and flowerbeds everywhere. Each tenant had fixed some decoration on his gate: here an anchor, there a seagull cut from a piece of tin, or again a sail cut from a piece of stainless steel. Arctic Street was mostly inhabited by deserving Arctic workers, people of the north who had been drawn to the generous southern sun after all the icy storms they had known. They led an unhurried life, warming their wind-whipped bodies, their frozen bones, in the warm shade of their vines, playing dominoes of an evening and learning, after the eternal ice and the wailing snowstorms, to grow delicate sun-loving flowers which they had never seen before. Getting together on holidays, they would reminisce about their hardest voyages on which ice had caught their ships and sometimes even crushed them—without crushing the men, though. This engineer friend often urged Yagnich to join him on Arctic Street. They'd find a place to build a wine press for the two of them. Yagnich was for the time being not tempted by the wine press. He had his own plans. He had been on twenty-four voyages on the Orion: why should he not go on a twenty-fifth?

They were getting ever closer to home. Wives, children, mothers would be waiting for them on the pier. The trainees' fiancées would be waiting. With bunches of flowers, they would stand for hours waiting for their tall snow-white beauty of a ship to appear on the horizon! It was best of all to sail in when the sun was high, on a clear day, when the wind-filled sails shone with a white brilliance. That really gave the people something to look at. They certainly ought to send news cameramen to film it! This time, however, they had just been through a storm and were moving at a snail's pace: they arrived late at night—or rather early in the morning when the first light of dawn was touching the sky and a fresh breeze was blowing.

But even at so early an hour there were people waiting for them on the pier. Even Yagnich's engineer friend was there. He had not forgotten or overslept.

Yagnich sat in the vine arbour, playing dominoes with his friend. They played silently and seriously, concentrating on the game.

"If you lose, Yagnich," said the engineer friend after the thirtieth game, "you must come and live on Arctic Street. The wine press is waiting for you."

Yagnich made no response; his own private thoughts were swirling about his head. He had had a woman friend in port (though she was not called Auntie Motya but Auntie Klava or more simply Klava the Sailorwoman) but she had been driven into an early grave by her alcoholic daughter and son-in-law. The widow of a sailor killed in the war (a petty officer on a guard boat), and herself a sailor of long standing, Klava had little by little and with every passing year come to occupy an ever more prominent place in the world of Yagnich's thoughts. He had twice been on voyages with her: once in the Mediterranean and the second time around Africa—Klava the Sailorwoman had worked in the galley. She never begrudged Yagnich his black pears! It would happen sometimes that Yagnich would come out of his workshop after a good day's work (he would stop work without looking at his watch always absolutely on time, to the second, so that the trainees laughed: "One can set one's watch by Yagnich") and make straight for the galley. Sometimes they would exchange a word or two but at others not even that because Klava was usually busy. On those occasions Yagnich would sit on a little stool at the entrance to the galley and would watch her work, sometimes spending quite a long time there. This of course was noticed and there were jokes. Nothing special had happened between them for all the silly talk there had been. Purely comradely feelings drew them towards each other. A need for mutual support and for someone to rely on not infrequently unites lonely people in their declining years by ties that are perhaps even stronger than the ones that bind others in their youth.

But now Klava the Sailorwoman was no more. Yet another good soul had gone. And his number, as they say, would soon be up too.

The ship went in for repairs. While she was in the dock being stripped and turned inside out, Yagnich, too, was given an overhaul—he was dragged from one medical commission to

another. First they found one thing, the next commission another, and it all started because of the damned holiday the captain had promised him: for certain illogical reasons, it appeared as if he, Yagnich, was applying for it and furthermore was nearly malingering to get it. And the fuss over the holiday had led to another subject being brought up—was the old man fit to work in general? Let's give him a thorough check-up, they said. Piles of paper had been produced, they had described his liver and his spleen; some horsey girls seemed to enjoy making Yagnich open and close his eyes, breathe in and out, sit down, stand up... They hit his knees with hammers! That was in the "nerve doctor's" office and at this point Yagnich rebelled, thinking that they truly were making fun of him.

Other girls took it in turns to look at his teeth, ooh-ed and aah-ed and then looked again even more carefully, like a gypsy buying an old mare at the market. They exchanged amazed glances, refusing to believe that absolutely all his teeth were healthy and that they were all his own and not dentures.

"Now there's genes for you," said one member of the commission and sat down to write some more.

How much paper, how much fuss—and for what? For yet another piece of paper, for that subsidised holiday that he had not asked for and decidedly did not want. I'm not begging you for it, give it to whomsoever you want, to your mother-in-law even. I'm not the kind to scabble after cheap holidays. They couldn't believe that anyone should not want such privilege. He just could not shake off that subsidised holiday although, on the other hand, the holiday was also a long time in coming.

All this fuss put him so out of sorts that the patience of the fleet's most patient man had at last snapped.

"You know what you can do with your subsidised holiday?"

The severe members of the commission did not stop to wonder what they could do with it and took the explosion as a sign of senile irascibility.

Meanwhile there was no news from the ship. Yagnich had of course been there to see. The noise was more than he could bear. Riveting, hammering, sawing metal, welding, electrodes sparkling and sizzling. Everything was upside down. A lot of the workers were unknown to him. It was only rarely that he caught sight of the lads from the crew and even they were in

a rush and just moved him away. It was enough to make him think that he was bothering everyone there, that he was not wanted.

No, it was better not to go there.

He could go on a visit to Kurayevka. Indeed, he felt like it but kept putting it off from day to day, having decided to wait until he could find out when the Orion was next due to go to sea. The captain, however, either himself did not know or else pretended he didn't. This evasiveness offended Yagnich more than anything else. All in all, now was not the time to go away anywhere. He had first to find out all about the next voyage and then he could go to Kurayevka, make an appearance there, a "courtesy call" as they say.

And so he "dropped anchor" on Arctic Street while all this was going on. His host advised him not to run to the Orion every day and not to pester people and get in their way while the re-fitting was being done.

"Your Orion won't run away from you! Where are they going to find another workhorse like you? You are on post-operative leave so stay put and enjoy the scenery. If they need you, someone will come from the Orion; they know your coordinates if they want to get hold of you."

These arguments seemed perfectly logical to Yagnich. Why indeed hang about there at the height of the re-fitting? After all the shipyard workers knew their work better than he did. They'd make a nice job of it... And so Yagnich lazed his time away on Arctic Street, hiding from the heat beneath the vine. A forced holiday. Sometimes he played dominoes and sometimes he read the newspaper. In the evening there was television, two programmes to choose from. It ought to have been heaven but for some reason Yagnich was not totally satisfied with this pensioners' paradise. His friend, for example, wasn't one of those pensioners who are always pestering their doctors and social workers. The engineer had offered his services to the port authorities and he was now employed as a teacher on some kind of course. Even though it was an easy job, the man was still working, did not feel as if he had been thrown overboard, did not feel as if he were not being allowed to do anything.

One day Yagnich was slicing bread on the table when suddenly the knife broke.

"You'll live a hundred years if even knives break in

your hands," said his host merrily. Yagnich frowned and put down the broken knife. He himself saw it as a bad sign. Feeling vaguely anxious Yagnich immediately put on his cap and set off for the Orion without even telling his friend where he was going.

There was less muddle on board this time and it was not so noisy. No hammering or welding. Yagnich headed straight for his workshop. He needed to have at least a quick look at how things were there. After all it was his nest, his home: to him this place was as a mountain shelter is to a shepherd.

The workshop was for some reason open. Yagnich put his head round the door and whoops!—there was a face as big as a pumpkin! Who was this occupant, where had he come from? The bastard grinned and giggled all friendly like! And also philosophised.

"You see, Yagnich, nothing under the moon is eternal: you're retired and I've got me a promotion. Some get to fight on while others hobble home!.."

It seemed to Yagnich that they had met somewhere—in port, probably, by the cashier's office. But what was that smell coming from him? The arrival of this character had instantly changed the very air of the workshop. Previously there had reigned in it a special smell peculiar to that room alone, a smell which Yagnich found delightful—the thick and heavy smell of tar, ropes, wax, and sails boiled in linseed oil. It was also subtly added to by the smell of the bay leaves which he had always kept, dried out, in the corner. All this, spiced by the salt sea wind, went to make up the unique smell of the air which Yagnich had breathed for many years, air to which he was addicted and which animated him.

Now the whole workshop stank like a railway station, had the sour air of a bazaar—had it been brought in by this pig, this unwashed ape, bearing his crooked fangs at Yagnich? What a find he was! He had probably been kicked off every ship in port. In fact, he was probably a great drunkard or maybe even a thief and now he was being taken onto the Orion! All this thoroughly shook Yagnich, numbed him, cut him to the quick. What hurt him most was that it had all been got over and done with on the sly, behind his, Yagnich's, back, although this sour-smelling character was assuring him that they were at this very moment looking for Yagnich in Arctic Street,

that they had sent a messenger for him. But he was evidently lying, the skunk; one only needed to look at his shifty eyes and the pleasure in them! Of course! From now on he would be sole master in that room, from now on that fat, drunken ape was going to be in charge of Yagnich's holy of holies, was going to run it! Yagnich ran a jealous eye over his workshop. The new king of the sails had already made a few changes: he had positioned the rolls of sailcloth differently—it didn't matter that it was worse, so long as it was different! The newcomer, this tramp from the port's gutters, aroused both anger and contempt in Yagnich. Who had taken him on and how could he have been allowed to set foot in here when by his mere presence he defiled the Orion's sail shop?

Yagnich was perhaps exaggerating a little but now was not the moment to try to be reasonable; his hurt feelings swirled inside him and so swept him up that he wanted hit back as hard as possible and instantly at this ignorant upstart, to express to him the height of his contempt and disgust. Only Yagnich did not know how to do this. Then an idea struck him.

"Give me the gardaman!"

"What? What do you want?" The new man's mouth dropped open.

It turned out that he really had no idea what a gardaman was!

"Never heard of a gardaman, you oaf?" Now Yagnich's contempt was master of the situation! He asked the character with a triumphant and devastating laugh: "And how are you going to sew? Where's your thimble for sewing sails?"

"You should have said so," replied the newcomer, at last understanding what the talk was about. "The thimble's in that drawer over there."

"Give it here!"

"But it belongs to the ship. It's state property."

"It is most certainly not!" Yagnich exclaimed. "It's a souvenir of my father! Everyone on the ship knows that. Go and ask the captain if."

He was at the drawer in a single leap and immediately found his treasure. He picked it up and put it in his breast pocket.

"What am I going to use?"

"Use your teeth, for all I care! It's none of my business."

Yagnich said goodbye to his workshop on that day. He collected his few belongings and tied them up in a single bundle. The lads from the crew helped him to carry it to Arctic Street. For the time being, however, he left his sea chest in the cabin of the first lieutenant who was a fellow-villager of his. It was a minor but deliberate piece of cunning that gave him a small excuse to look in once more. They might have second thoughts by then, might still change their minds!

Through that same first lieutenant Yagnich tried to discover how far this had all gone, hoping to hear from his fellow-villager something that would encourage him. The lad's sympathetic openness, however, dispelled his last remaining illusions.

"I'm afraid it's permanent shore leave for you now, Yagnich. We'd only be too happy, but... What on earth did you get up to at those commissions?"

"It's they who did things, not me."

"Well you were thoroughly rude to someone. They don't even want to hear about one more trip for you. Operation, cardiac insufficiency, nerves at breaking point, write him off and that's all!"

"And... And... that's final?"

"I am not going to beat about the bush with you. You want the whole truth? It's been decided, once and for all. You've had your swan song, Yagnich."

Yagnich did not pass out, did not die, but things went dark before his eyes: had his swan song? You've heard the last of me, in other words? But you... But I... I nearly died for you!

Yagnich stood up like a storm cloud.

"Where's the captain? The political instructor? Where are they all? Are they hiding from me?"

His voice was harsh and threatening. The first lieutenant even pulled himself to attention and explained in a frightened rush of words.

"They've both been called to the shipping offices. There's a commission on its way from the Ministry and you can see the hectic time we're having! We ought to be going out for sea trials but the shipyard won't release the ship, and how can they when there's still so much to make good. And not all the new trainees' papers are ready yet. You can see..."

Yagnich was as though in a daze.

"And who's that alchemist who's replacing me?"

"He's just temporary, you know, while we look for someone. We can see that he's not the right type but just you try and find another Yagnich."

The first lieutenant was called to the telephone which, as always when they were in port, was connected to the shore and linked the Orion with the town and the shipyard. Yagnich did not leave but waited for his young fellow-villager to return. He came back looking even more anxious and careworn. He'd obviously been given a thorough dressing down.

"The captain's already at the shipyard. Perhaps you can catch him there?"

Yagnich had no choice but to leave.

He had to walk round the whole steel forest of the shipyard, to search every corner with angry eyes before he at last caught sight of the two of them—the political instructor and the captain—in one of the workshops. They were just coming out of the crashing hell and talking heatedly about something. On seeing Yagnich, they stopped, fell silent, and involuntarily stiffened. When Yagnich drew up in front of the captain, the latter suddenly blushed so hard that even his ears went red.

"So you've found a replacement for me?" Yagnich asked. "Found yourselves a better man?"

"It's not that he's better... We know that some people are irreplaceable. It's medicine, Yagnich, medicine," and the captain shrugged helplessly.

"He's telling the truth. We would have preferred to keep you, but..." the political instructor added with sadness in his voice. "But not everything depends on us. So don't judge us too harshly. Please understand that we're not gods."

Yagnich had no reason to wish these great lads any evil, did not intend to write complaints, but all the same he wanted at that moment to say something to them, to say something quietly, heart to heart, something like: "I understand you, my friends, but you must try to understand me too. After all, you know very well where my sons are and what you mean to me. You and the lads on the Orion are all, all I have left! The Orion is my whole life! Aah, you... You and your 'mixture of wisdom and youth!'"

A great farewell party was given for Yagnich. Those who were remaining on the Orion understood clearly what they were losing.

Yagnich had perhaps not done all he could to remain on the sailing ship. Former pupils of his were to be found both in the port and in the ministry and they had power and influence. He could turn to them. But he did not pester them, did not go and knock at doors. Because although those people had power, they too, were powerless against the advancing years that he was being torpedoed with. Nor could they defend him against the devilish mountain of papers that had been written about him! What were they, his former pupils, against those healthy and educated girls who had spouted their Latin, pretending that they were concerned about Yagnich but in fact probably thinking all the time about husbands they had failed to catch. They wrote and wrote although they probably never read any of it themselves—they just drowned the patients in paper. That was how far that epidemic of bureaucratism had reached... Anyone could see that they were thinking of themselves above all, covering themselves, afraid that they'd have to answer for it should anything happen to Yagnich on the next voyage... Yet perhaps they had not kicked up all that fuss for nothing? Because it was true that he had an ache here, a piercing pain there, and an odd feeling again here—the burden of the years told. Now more than ever. He could find someone to defend him from bureaucratic fuss if he really tried but who could defend him from the old age which was ineluctably advancing, who could protect him from the icy, cutting autumn winds?

He could still count on the support of the Orion's doctor. He had Latin to use against their Latin, but on the day they had reached home, he'd got a telegram from Ovidiopolis saying that his mother was at death's door in hospital. He had dropped everything, asked for leave, and rushed off. And he still was not back. He had got stuck in Ovidiopolis.

And so they were giving Yagnich a send-off.

Everyone was gathered on deck, the order was read, and the veteran was given a generous golden handshake. The representative of the port authorities expressed public gratitude and this was followed by a speech on behalf of the naval college—delivered by that old friend the "philosopher" with the bull neck, eyes like those of a jellyfish, and thick

hairy arms. He was wearing a sleeveless pullover (most out-of-place at such a ceremony). In declamatory tones, he ground on about beating the elements, about trade winds and monsoons, about the adventure of the sea and such like. But what else was to be expected of such a windbag: Yagnich let all the verbiage flow right over him... After this the political instructor said a few heartfelt words. He recalled their hardest voyages and explained to the youngsters what it meant to be a master sailmaker and how important a personage he was on board ship. A seaman of Yagnich's caliber, a real Orion man, in his declining years and with the grey already showing in his hair, he would still rise above the years and the ills and pains they brought, even death held no fears for him, because seamanship, the wisdom of an expert's golden hands multiplied by the sacred feeling of fraternity at sea do not know of old age!

Both the captain and the young crew were visibly touched as they listened to Zhuravsky, the political instructor. Perhaps not one of them thought that he, too, would one day have a farewell parade held for him, that to him too, rosy-cheeked today, there would come insidious years with their oppressive weight.

A word was also said from the trainees. This was delivered by an olive-skinned youngster who looked a little like a Tatar and who had been on the last voyage. He did not take up too much time and simply thanked Yagnich for all he had taught them, his valuable advice and his wisdom and ended with a joke.

"Dear Neptune, please, as you go off to rest, don't take the winds with you!"

Yagnich heard out all the speeches with a stony face. By not so much as a single flicker of a muscle did that rough, nut-brown face betray the storm, the pain, and the turmoil in his heart. He stood surrounded by the fine young men in their dress uniforms, stood imperturbably amidst these smart lads in his antediluvian pea jacket, fully buttoned despite the heat, and gave the appearance that the whole procedure touched him least of all: it does not befit a seaman to make a show of his feelings, to display to others the hurts that have been torturing him for many days and nights and that will go on giving pain to the end of his days. He'd done his sailing. From now on his deck would be the wormwood scented steppe beneath a sail of floating dust. So, man, take

what's owed you, drink your bitter cup calmly and with dignity because there is no one here to blame for your predicament, because what is happening to you will happen sooner or later to each of them: no one is guaranteed eternal youth.

The ceremony concluded with the award of a diploma of honour, the expression of yet official gratitude, and the reading before the ship's company of an order stating that he, Yagnich, sailmaker, was to be inscribed for life as an honorary member of the crew. This was read by the captain himself with heartfelt sincerity and warmth. He was clearly a man troubled by his conscience: had he done all he could for Yagnich these last few days? When the matter of giving the veteran a souvenir gift—which would be handed over later because they had not been able to decide what Yagnich would prefer—when this matter was raised, the jokers chimed in: it would be nice to give Yagnich a fridge, a colour television, a washing machine. The sailors laughed. The captain, however, remained serious.

"Andron Gurievich, we truly would like to know your wishes concerning a souvenir present," he said to Yagnich politely.

The old man said nothing for a moment.

"Give me a needle," he at last said in hollow tones.

What he had in mind was a needle for sewing sails.

Although his wish could be seen as trifling and even funny, no one laughed.

The captain instantly ordered the first lieutenant to accompany Yagnich to the sailmaking shop and to let him choose any needles he wanted there or even to take a whole set.

Yagnich, however, appeared reluctant to go there. After a moment's hesitations, he took the captain by the elbow and, having drawn him aside, spoke to him.

"I can give you a release," he said confidentially.

"What release?"

"That neither you nor the doctors nor any commission will be to blame should anything happen to me while on board ship. I'm not asking for much: just one more trip. One last trip! I've already written the release." He took a crumpled sheet of paper out of his cap.

"My dear Yagnich!" The captain was embarrassed. "It's no use! Please don't make things any harder. You've done

your duty. You've done enough for ten. The Orion will probably never see another man such as you on board."

The ceremony was soon over. Work awaited the men and time was precious. A whole set of needles, not plain ones but the specially hardened steel ones with the triangular cross-section were promptly handed over by the zealous first lieutenant, put into Yagnich's hands in front of everyone (so that they could be legally written off should there be a check). Yagnich's sea chest, that faithful companion of his which had been with him on nearly all his voyages, was now at the sailmaker's feet. It stood there full of secrets, covered with brass rivets, encircled by strips of metal, with a cunning Chinese lock the secret of which was known to Yagnich alone. The little chest had suddenly appeared out of nowhere and there was only one thing left for its owner to do: to bend down and pick it up. Yagnich was about to do so when several trainees thoughtfully dashed up to offer their services: you've just undergone an operation...

Yagnich, however, refused curtly.

"Thank you. I'll manage myself. It's hardly anything."

He picked up the little chest in one hand and in the other held the rolled diploma which he had almost forgotten. The captain had handed it to Yagnich a second time with another warm handshake. He was touched.

Followed by the sad eyes of the crew, the sailmaker walked down the gangplank to the shore.

He walked unhurriedly, swaying like a seaman. He was leaving his ship for good.

The captain leant against the handrail and watched Yagnich's departure. His heart ached and he felt both guilty and sad. Would he ever see that slightly bent and stocky figure which had been so in place, so necessary and natural, on board ship? His very presence had made everyone feel surer of themselves, more comfortable and at home. When the old man had fussed about on deck amidst the tackle, one felt that everything would be all right. He was really a sort of talisman for the Orion. Perhaps they had escaped all the hurricanes and squalls unharmed only because among them was this man wholly devoted to the ship, a man who loved so strongly that he could work the magic to turn away all dangers? And today they were parting with him! He was walking down the gangplank into his own old age,

as if into non-existence, leaving for that unexplored land—Loneliness. There was something painfully touching, defenceless and almost childish in that pea jacket, in the bent figure carrying the angular chest with its shining brass fixtures. But there was something else in that figure and in that slow farewell tread—there was the iron endurance of a man tempered by life, a silent dignity and absence of fear in the face of what he would find out there, off the deck of his beloved Orion. Indeed, no one is guaranteed eternal youth! And that's how a sailor lives—fighting the elements from his youth until he is grey and then, when he is worn out, has done all the work he ever will, when he has honestly stood an immensely long watch, he quietly walks down on eternal shore leave without a backward glance.

Followed by the eyes of the crew, Yagnich stepped down into the pier, onto its unbreakable stones, and set down his little chest at his feet. On board the Orion they thought that he would now turn and look back. All he did, however, was take a packet of cheap Shipka cigarettes out of his pocket (for some reason they were his favourite brand) and unhurriedly light one. He was looking away to one side, towards the warehouses. From there, the person who always appeared in the hardest moments of his life—his friend the ship's engineer—was already hurrying, his limp barely perceptible, to meet him. Like Yagnich he was stocky. He walked right up to him and they exchanged a few brief words.

On board the Orion they were all still leaning over the side watching Yagnich, who stood immovably on the pier as if planted there. At last the old man tossed the butt of his cigarette into the water and spat in the same direction onto the sodden orange peel bobbing on the ripples. On shore he could allow himself such a liberty: it was not as if he were on board ship—to spit into the sea there would have been a sacrilege.

The engineer picked up the sea chest and led Yagnich away. The sailmaker was left holding only the rolled-up diploma that had been painstakingly painted by the ship's own amateur artists: should he ever decide to open it, he would see touching vignettes and scrawls and in the middle of this cascade of colours bearded Neptune, the god of the seas, holding his trident in a menacing stance...

And so he left without a single backward glance. As if

the Orion were already no longer Yagnich's business, as if he had not given her the best years of his life, years of hard work, years with never a slack moment: making sails, sewing and then fitting eyes all along their edges was truly an arduous job. The sailmaker, on beginning work, has to drag out a roll of sailcloth weighing about two hundred pounds and spread it all over the deck to dry. Then he has to examine every yard and every inch of it, to rub it in his hands in order to feel with his fingertips for any flaws in the cloth—had it been gnawed by a rat, had a defect in the weave escaped the mill's attention? And only when he was sure that the sailcloth was strong and reliable could he begin to cut it—and sew it with his triangular needles. Yagnich did not know how to do many things—he had never learned; for example to read sailing directions—but what he did know how to do he could do properly, that is to say like a proper craftsman. It is not a matter of just sewing sails—you must strengthen every sail, sewing steel cables around its edges and also fixing all the necessary eyes so that your work will withstand the fiercest storm. This requires more than ability: this is where craftsmanship and artistry come in! And if among the young people gathered on deck there are now some who know how to cut, sew and fit out a sail, that is because Yagnich the sailmaker was with them, because he taught them the craft!

Yagnich could not complain that he was not sufficiently respected on board the Orion. Even before his illness Yagnich was excused drill but he every time nevertheless reported voluntarily—he did this out of a feeling of duty, heeding the call of his conscience: he would stand in his pea jacket in the rain or squalling wind, his hands freezing and his fingers barely able to move. He would stand there and follow with an attentive and critical eye a trainee working in the rigging or handling a rope and should Yagnich notice that the lad was not doing the job properly, he would walk over and take the young man's place, doing everything amazingly fast and dexterously. And when it was done, he would say: "That's the way it should be done, son."

And he would go away again, his shoulders hunched, and stand to one side to observe a newcomer out of the corner of his all-seeing eye beneath its heavy brow.

The crew of the Orion delayed setting about their busi-

ness: officers, men, and others without any rank at all hung about the deck and did not take their eyes off the old man. By then he and his friend were standing by the red box of a vending machine which for a kopeck gave you a glass of soda water. They both went through their pockets for a long time. At last Yagnich found the necessary coins, obtained a drink for the engineer first and then filled his own glass. The glass flashed like crystal in his hand and the light splintered into rays that lit Yagnich's nut-brown face. From the Orion, the crew waved and called out final messages to him. Even the captain forgot about his position and with almost childish enthusiasm exclaimed:

"The Orion will not forget you!"

It was only then that Yagnich's face suddenly dissolved—but whether it was into a smile or into a twitching grimace of pain as he tried with all his might not to burst into tears no one could have said from there, from the deck, because a smile and a bitter grimace of pain are in some ways similar: they are like sisters whose characters differ but slightly.

Yagnich's farewell glance embraced the Orion and the people on deck. So that was what a farewell was like. It was not the ceremonial, the speeches that had moved him, nor the fact that the crew had been drawn up in dress uniform. But that they were hanging over the handrail and would not disperse. There it was—his family, his Orion—and perhaps he was seeing both for the last time. The lads had in a way been orphaned and the Orion herself, not yet having been fully refitted, looked bare and rather bedraggled, even a little pathetic. Without her sails, she always looked smaller. Now, though, she looked as if she had been squashed and it hurt him to see her squeezed in between the heavy ocean giants. It was difficult to believe that the plain little boat clinging to the pier was that same Orion, that eagle of the seas, which was admired at all latitudes as she flew gracefully over the waves, her sails filled with wind, all throbbing and humming, the whole from bow to stern in a sheen of spray! But instead of this beauty there was now a little boat without either masts or sails, a quiet and slightly dejected orphan stripped bare for repairs, yet she was even dearer to Yagnich in such a state. It was only in the dock that she could be seen bared down to the very bones, only her outline retaining her

original shape, the lines made for flight, lines curving to make her body as smooth and streamlined as that of a dolphin.

Yagnich felt a weight on his chest as if he were not getting enough air. Look your fill, brother, look for the last time at your Orion because from now on you are going to live where there is no wind, no waves, and no singing sails above you.

They were still seeing him off. They had not left the deck. The captain rested his chest against the handrail and even raised his binoculars to his eyes in order to see Yagnich better, in order to see how he looked down there, on shore, near the soda water fountain. The others, crowded against each other at the rails, continued to wave and shout farewells to Yagnich. He ought to wave back to them but he was afraid that it would look awkward: in his years of hard work at sea he had not learnt to wave farewell so beautifully. Yet he should have: a sailor's whole life is made up of farewells and meetings.

He listened carefully, wanting to know what they were shouting to him from the Orion. Perhaps they were calling him back? The political instructor seemed to be making some signs. Could they have changed their minds at the last minute? No. More likely they were offering words of advice to Yagnich on how to steer his new course on dry land.

There was no returning to the Orion.

His engineer friend reminded him yet again that it was time to be moving on and again picked up Yagnich's chest. At last they moved unhurriedly away from the vending machine and soon disappeared round the corner of one of the warehouses. There Yagnich once again stopped and became lost in thought. He wiped the pearling sweat from his brow. That was that. It was over. Now he could go back to Kurayevka. He wondered how best to get there—by land or by sea (since there was the choice). No, he wouldn't go by sea: this was one passenger who was clearly angry with the sea that day.

A little while later the port workers would see the downcast Yagnich slowly winding his way with his chest in the direction of the bus stop.

8

Inna was woken in the middle of the very night of her arrival home.

"There's been an accident out on the threshing-floor. Someone's hurt, love. They want you! Get up quick!"

Her mother was standing over her.

As she quickly climbed into her clothes, the girl heard through the half-open door the driver who had come rushing from the field for her describing the accident to her mother: "The first one was driving to the elevator and this other one away from it but you know how it's all a great cloud of dust—you have to drive blind through it. Well, right by the threshing machine, the two trucks had a head-on crash which sent the glass from their headlights flying."

Inna pictured to herself the terrible sight of twisted metal and mangled bodies... Containing her anxiety, she turned to the driver.

"Anyone killed?" she asked.

"No, nothing like that. They must have been born lucky. But that depends on how you look at things, too. You'll see for yourself when we get there."

"Should I take anything with me?" Inna turned in confusion to her mother.

"There's a first aid kit on the spot," the driver told her. "Bandages, iodine, everything. All that's needed is a nurse. Are you ready?"

The girl tossed her hair back.

"Let's go."

They roared off into the night, into the rolling cloud of dust.

It was not in fact Inna's duty to go that day: her predecessor at the aidpost, Varvara Filipovna, the chairman's wife, was still supposed to be in charge since she was not yet officially retired but only preparing to do so. The girl had not yet been officially taken on in her place but not much attention was paid to such things in Kurayevka. In an emergency, there she was, fresh out of nursing school to do the work. Without asking questions or arguing. Because Varvara Filipovna reckoned that she had done all she was going to do, and had recently herself taken to her bed (her heart had been giving her trouble for a long time and the year before

last she had even had a coronary). How was she to refuse in such a situation? Formalities were beside the point: she was a trained nurse, she knew the Hippocratic oath—so she might just as well get used to things, to rushing at top speed through the night on an urgent call, to being ready to get up and go at any moment. She wasn't going to be a bureaucrat and formalist!

Inna was on good terms with Varvara Filipovna. They had known previously that the day would come when one would hand over and the other take over the aidpost. They simply could not know that events would go as fast as this. Varvara Filipovna's pains and illnesses had recently forced her to take to her bed with increasing frequency, and that evidently was why Cherednichenko had gone to the nursing school with his plea, with his request for her... In fact, Varvara Filipovna and Cherednichenko himself had sent Inna to the nursing school: it looked as if they had thought in good time about training a replacement.

It was quite a way to the threshing-floor. There was only one now, whereas before there had been several, scattered about the steppe, each team having one. Then it had been decided to have a single central one that would be better equipped, cemented in, and on which all the machinery would be concentrated. As they drove towards it, the talkative driver considered this subject aloud, weighing the pluses and minuses of the innovation. Inna listened to him curiously although whether there was one thresher or ten was hardly any concern of hers.

Despite the late hour, the steppe was not asleep. The combine harvesters were working, moving to and fro across the fields, headlights aureoled by a cloud of dust. A hare, looking like quicksilver in their headlights, jumped out of nowhere to dash across the road. Inna's heart went bump! One accident at a time was enough! They were drawing closer to the thresher. It was brightly lit and she could make out the outlines of people shovelling by the piles of grain near the frightening bulks of some strange structures Inna had never seen before. These looked as if they belonged in a factory but Inna would later find out that they were new winnowing machines and were being used for the first time during this harvest.

The wounded man was lying on a sheet of canvas besides



the threshing-floor. A small, very plain little soldier—an Uzbek, Turkmen or something. Every summer at harvest time the nearby military camp would send some of its men over to help cart grain. He was one of these. He was alive all right, just groaning softly. Inna knelt down beside him, took his pulse, examined him from head to toe, rapidly but thoroughly: he seemed not to have any serious injuries. His face was bruised as if from a fight and he had a few bruises on his body. All in all he'd had a lucky escape. He had been bashed though, and he was still in a semi-shocked state but one didn't die of that. A few other people had been involved in the crash but these had even less wrong with them. They were also there, though, worried about their comrade. They were all from the same parts, from the Eastern republics. Perhaps they were even fellow-villagers. They kept up a constant anxious chatter amongst themselves. Perhaps they were talking about her, asking themselves why this person looking like a schoolgirl had been sent to the spot instead of respectable and experienced doctor.

"Pick him up. But carefully, please," said Inna to the injured man's friends. "Follow me!"

For the duration of the harvest a first-aid post had been set up at the threshing-floor. It was housed in one of the waggons that the harvester operators slept in and it stood alongside them. Cherednichenko had personally seen to it that Varvara Filipovna's request was complied with. It was to this temporary first-aid post that the injured man was carried.

Once in the cabin, the girl put on a white coat and felt more sure of herself. She boiled up a syringe with a great long needle (she had been unable to find a shorter one in the cabin) and gave her first patient an injection against shock, a generous dose of sedative, then took his pulse again. He was all right now. Let the young Uzbek sleep till morning and then she'd see. If necessary, he could then be sent to hospital.

In any case, it was good that she was there. Her help had been very necessary. After the patient dropped off to sleep, Inna left the cabin and sat down on the cabin's steps to watch the girls and women, wrapped up to their eyes in scarves, neatly manage their spades by the piles of wheat, hurling more and more cleaned grain into the buckets of the loading escalator. Not one of them was recognisable. Some

wore goggles to protect their eyes from the dust and the awn. Their skirts were tucked up high and she could see calves flashing. The threshing area was a sea of light: at harvest time Cherednichenko did not spare electricity and demanded that it be as light as day.

The boss himself turned up a little later. He came on a truck, climbed out of the cabin, a massive heavy man the size of Taras Bulba. He stopped, examined his kingdom, and was instantly approached at a run by Uncle Kirill, the man in charge of the threshing machine. He always ran, did not know how to do otherwise. They held a conversation. They were evidently talking about the crash because Uncle Kirill was explaining something with a guilty look. He wanted to be clean in the eyes of the boss. Although never rude, although there was no reason to fear him, all people for some reason drew themselves up respectfully in Cherednichenko's presence. Kurayevka was proud of its chairman and that was quite understandable: a war hero who had commanded a naval assault force, Cherednichenko had excelled in peaceful work too—he was made a Hero of Socialist Labour while still a rank-and-file combine harvester operator. Cherednichenko was a respected man in the district, too. He was not the kind one was rude to if one didn't want trouble. The collective farm which he had taken on in hard times, had now made good. People today came to Kurayevka to learn from that farm's experience. As an honoured man Cherednichenko was frequently invited to various conferences in the region and even in the capital, sent to congresses, and for many years now he had been elected to the bureau of the district Party committee. Except for Varvara Filipovna, his wife, all went in some awe of Cherednichenko, and at district and regional conferences his speeches were awaited with delighted impatience by some and trembling apprehension by others. Especially if it was an election meeting or a Party conference at which a vote was to be taken. When Cherednichenko climbed onto the rostrum, he didn't drink the water from the decanter in vain but used his right to speak to good effect.

Inna had known Cherednichenko ever since she was a child. He had frequently visited them in their cottage and sat at one table with Inna's father—sometimes over a drink but more often than not without. They were both combine harvester operators (Cherednichenko still prided himself on his

ability to handle those machines) and there's always something for two drivers to talk about when they meet. How, for example, to squeeze extra spares from the Selkhoztekhnika supply organisation, how to get one's battered and exhausted SPC (self-powered combine) replaced by the newer and better model which had just begun coming off the production line... Varvara Filipovna said that her Cherednichenko also had a bad heart, that sometimes after a meeting he would get up several times during the night to take validol, that on a few occasions he had had really quite nasty turns. In public, however, he strove to hide his illness. He was always babbling with energy and he smiled more often than he frowned, and if ever he did press his hand to his chest, it was only on the most exceptional occasions and then with his face to a wall so that no one should see. He was tough all right. From his appearance—a man in the flower of life, full of good cheer—no one would be of thought that he also knew what suffering was. Ailing or not, Cherednichenko looked the perfect model for a poster to illustrate the phrase “mens sana in corpore sano”. He did not know how to do nothing for long. Up and about at dawn, his weatherbeaten face breathed the freshness of the steppe. He looked like a giant who would never wear out!

He himself happily supported such opinions about himself. It was his habit to make fun of his own stoutness, one of his favourite stories was to describe his embarrassment two years earlier when he had been a member of a delegation visiting Poland. He and a friend (also a collective farm chairman—from the neighbouring farm of Ivanovka) had gone out for a walk after a good lunch. They were admiring the royal castle on the Wawel (they were in Cracow) and it was there that the misadventure took place. A friendly little old man standing beside some shiny white street scales invited Cherednichenko with a polite gesture to weigh himself. Evidently, he was curious to see how much that Taras Bulba of a man weighed. Krutiporokh, Cherednichenko's friend, got on first but made no great impression since he weighed ninety odd kilos. But when Cherednichenko stepped onto the ribbed metal plate the unfortunate scales went crunch! And broke, unable to take the strain of his weight. Now wasn't that an embarrassment! On the other hand, however, it was the start of a firm

friendship with the little old man and they gave him all the souvenirs they had brought with them.

Cherednichenko used to visit the Yagniches most frequently when Inna's maternal uncle, Andron Yagnich, an honoured sailmaker and Cherednichenko's long-time comrade, came home on leave. The girls at the college once asked their friend to explain how it could be that she, her mother and father, and her maternal uncle all had the same surname—Yagnich. It was, Inna replied, because her mother and father had had the same surnames before they got married. Her mother, though, was from one family of Yagniches and her father from another. From different branches of a single Yagnich tribe, with perhaps some distant ancestor in common, some great-great-grand-Yagnich. Now half Kurayevka was made up of Yagniches. There was a long column of Yagniches on the obelisk to the war dead, as long a column as they had formed in real life. On Victory Day, only the widows and mothers knew which name belonged to whom.

Cherednichenko and Andron Yagnich had been friends for ages and Inna knew that Cherednichenko would drop in on them without fail whenever he was home on leave. Then Cherednichenko's bass voice would boom until late at night, to the accompaniment of mighty roars of laughter. Hidden somewhere nearby, the girl would listen to all sorts of stories—funny ones and half-funny ones, sometimes not funny at all. It was impossible not to marvel at the vitality of the friendship between these two middle-aged men, at how it united them again and again beneath Kurayevka's stars after separation of any length. Incidentally, Inna, who had overheard their talks on a great many occasions, had not once ever heard either one or the other of them admit to or swear to friendship with the other. Not even when the old friends had had a few was such a thing to be heard. Why make a noise about it? Their friendship was so firm and time-tested that it required no sweet verbal props. On the contrary, one was more likely to hear instead of friendly outpourings biting comments and mocking remarks about, say, Yagnich-made sails that hung lifelessly if there wasn't an east wind to fill them, sails that looked like old rags as they waited for a wind as for manna from heaven, while to Cherednichenko, to Kurayevka, winds were simply a curse, especially those dry

eastern ones which were the bane of the kolkhoz chairman and the reason for his farm being burnt-up and empty!

As a young man Cherednichenko had taken part in amateur theatricals and had been the heart and soul of the Kurayevka stage: was it from those times that he retained a liking for all sorts of tricks? He liked, for example, to pretend that he was a thoroughly hen-pecked husband, that he was the unfortunate victim of marital inequality, of a dictatorship over his home and family, of some kind of new matriarchate in which his role was of a man eternally terrified of the rolling-pin. In fact, Varvara Filipovna was the very last person to wield rolling-pin. She was a kind soul who was always concerned about others, a wife deeply in love with her husband, a friendly and quiet person to whose tactful advice Kurayevka's Zeus did in fact pay careful attention. To Inna it seemed preposterously funny to hear him claim he was "a trampled victim of tyranny", eternally under his wife's thumb! For some reason he liked this pretence, this role he had chosen for himself. For some reason this was the face which Cherednichenko wanted to present to the world. A joker! Inna smiled as she recalled these quirks of the chairman's.

Now, having finished his talk with the threshing-floor manager, Cherednichenko was walking towards the first-aid post cabin. He walked firmly, his flushed massive face reflecting annoyance or perhaps even contained anger.

"Where is the poor man?" he asked as he drew closer, speaking to Inna as if she had been working there for a year although this was the first time he had seen the girl since her return.

Inna was still sitting on the cabin steps and now stood up (slowly because she wanted it to look dignified).

"He's asleep after an injection."

"Not too badly hurt?"

"I found no serious injuries."

"Should he go to a hospital? Should I have a specialist come and see him?"

"I see no need for it," said Inna, a little offended. "It'll be easier to decide in the morning. He may perhaps not require hospitalisation."

"How on earth could such a thing have happened? It has to be because he was new to the job. Those who have already

helped us with the harvest would have known better than to... You've got to look sharp and keep on your toes!"

"But it was dark, and the clouds of dust."

"We live our whole lives in the dust, and we're alive and unhurt."

"Yet there's plenty who fall ill or get injured."

"That's what you're here for, miss Medicine! What else did you go to school for? You're not going to be left to twiddle your thumbs here, you know! Incidentally, congratulations on your return, Inna Fyodorovna," he said belatedly "Inna Fyodorovna" was of course ironic since she had always been and was still plain Inna to him. "Sit down." Cherednichenko said to her, nodding at the steps, and himself sat down first after which there was no room left for her at all.

"I'll stand," said Inna, "my legs don't hurt and I am not cursed with a weight problem."

"A dig at me, is it? Wait until you're my age and then we'll see."

Cherednichenko was wearing the same suit as last year: it was tailor made, the jacket and trousers of lightweight grey linen that was probably nice and cool to wear. On his feet he wore sandals and his head was protected by a stiff and dusty cap of the kind commissars used to favour, worn low on his forehead.

There he sat, ponderous, morose, and tired, on the steps and for a moment it even looked as if he were dozing.

"See what's going on here?" Cherednichenko said, suddenly raising his head and nodding towards the threshers which was brightly lit by spotlights. "That's all that's left to us after the dry winds. We were hit by a cruel drought!"

The day before, when she was still on her way by land and sea to Kurayevka, Inna had kept hearing that unpleasant word "drought" from everyone. On the pier and by the elevator where she had waited for a lift to Kurayevka, everywhere she had kept hearing the word "drought". Back home, her mother had talked about it and her father, when she had gone to say hello to him out by his combine, had said "I've seen dry periods and droughts before, but this!" instead of greeting her or asking her about how she had done at school. "We expected a bumper crop but see what's happened in just three days to the grain! These are bitter tears and

not grain!" Her father showed her a handful of freshly winnowed wheat: it was a reddish colour and looked still hot, the grains tiny, unhealthy, wrinkled, and not at all like what grew in a good year.

"The breath of the drought did this in three days. Just when we were expecting a record crop!" Profound pain could be heard in Cherednichenko's voice. "We sowed well, and the winter was just what we would have asked for—rains and a bit of snow—and we sprayed all the fields from a plane into the bargain. We thought we'd take in a great crop, that we'd have mountains of wheat by the thresher! We couldn't have wished for anything better! The May rains came and the wheat shot up. Wonderful wheat, too! It stood like on the State Emblem, full and rich. A glad sight. A return for our labours, we thought, for our pains. Although, of course, we know our enemy, we know how crafty he is: that damned scorcher never blows when the wheat is still in its mother's bosom. It always comes when the wheat is just ripening in the fields... And that's what happened this time. It began to blow just after we had made all our calculations and plans and had informed the centre that we were going to bring in forty double centners per hectare—for sure! I can't think how many times those tricky dry winds have taught us a lesson about being cautious in our calculations, but this time, believe me, we didn't have a doubt. The fields were rich and ripe in front of us, rolling like the sea. Our wheat was doing fine and looked beautiful—packed solidly, every ear heavier than the next. It seemed as if it had nothing to fear now. But one should never speak too soon, or else... When it came, it was like hot air blowing from an oven, say, or from the turbines of a jet plane!.. I can't tell you what it was like. It was hell! We've been hit by dry winds before but this was something else. It whistled day and night. You see the wooded strips protecting the fields? Well, they went yellow in a day, as if a flamethrower had been pointed at them! The wheat, however, held out heroically. And it might perhaps have made it because it was ripe and there was enough moisture in the earth. But what could we do against that fire-breathing dragon? It was so hot, you see, Inna, that the moisture could not rise from the roots to the ear: it evaporated before it had time to reach the ear which was dying of thirst. An unequal battle. So tell me: isn't that a blow,

a tragedy? Our record crop was done for. And this is what we have instead of it," Cherednichenko concluded with a heavy sigh, nodding at the piles of wheat by the thresher, piles that from his point of view were very small.

"But we still brought in some?"

"Yes. I'm not saying that we lost all the wheat. We'll still bring in twenty double centners per hectare and more in some places. In the past, when we used to reckon on seven, a crop like this would have been grand. Yet what does the past matter when by today's standards this isn't a crop for us, Inna, but a misfortune, a defeat." Anger swelled his voice. "No, I can't resign myself to this!"

In order to reduce the nervous tension, Inna changed the subject.

"How is Varvara Filipovna feeling these days?"

"I'm afraid that she had exhausted herself. To take care of this first-aid post is quite beyond her now. So you can take over the full responsibility. Go ahead and take charge!"

"I haven't yet been officially appointed."

"We'll see to it. You work and I'll phone district about the appointment."

"No, no," the girl objected and began to assure the chairman that she would have to go personally to district because that was the way such things were done.

"Get this lad back on his feet and then we'll see. If you have to go, of course I'll let you."

He said nothing for a few moments. It was obvious that the robber-drought, this misfortune unprecedented in scale, was still on his mind. "A real tragedy of the steppe," Inna said to herself with a sigh.

"Nature, that's who needs treatment," Cherednichenko spoke up after his silence. "She's been feverish recently. I wonder where it came from—Kara-Kum or Afghanistan? This is the umpteenth time the whole South has been on fire. The Kuban, the Don district, and us. Fight it, yes. But how? When an ocean of hot air is rolling towards you. Even if you could make yourself into three people, you still couldn't stop it, couldn't shield the fields. You can block an embrasure with your body but the steppe, Inna, is not an embrasure, you can't shield it with your chest!"

9

Inna's first patient was taken away from her the next morning. The sun was only just rising, its first low rays falling on the piles of wheat, when the unit commander himself arrived with several soldiers in faded army panamas and without more ado they picked her "little Uzbek" (as Inna called her charge to herself) up by the arms. "Home, Gafur, come on. You've had your rest in this girl's sick bay." The injured soldier gave Inna a pained and somehow guilty smile in farewell and his comrades carried him off somewhere to their camp. When coming to help with the harvest, the soldiers set up their camps like gypsies—stopping sometimes in one place, sometimes in another. It was easy for them to move because their whole detachment was motorised. That summer they had made their camp and set up their radio equipment by the salt marsh beyond Kurayevka, near dairy farm and the fresh milk. The army lads were always keen to help with the harvest because it was only then, they said, that they were able to drink their full of fresh milk. That they had to spend all day eating dust and working their hands raw did not frighten them.

Having handed over her patient, Inna was left alone in her aidpoint. She tidied the cabin and hung a poster with advice for young mothers in a prominent place. Varvara Filipovna had painstakingly painted the poster and it showed everything: how to put on nappies, how to look after baby, when to put him to sleep, when was the best time to give him the breast. During their rest periods the sunburnt and merry women would come from the piles of grain and ask Inna if she had anything in her medical supplies to prevent their lips from cracking. Meanwhile, the men, both the soldiers and their own Kurayevka lads would shout in jest from the cabins of their trucks as they drove back from the elevator:

"Hey, little doctor! Have you got anything to soothe an aching heart?"

And all the time she kept waiting and hoping that another lad would come roaring in on one of these trucks, would jump out of the cabin straight into a pile of wheat and come running to her. This would be Victor Veremeyenko, the young man who had taken so firm a hold of her young girl's heart, about whom Inna had spoken with only her very closest friends

at nursing school. Although he was already back no one had yet seen Victor in Kurayevka, except perhaps for his parents. They were old teachers, now retired, although Panas Emelyanovich (Veremeyenko senior) was still unable to get used to a pensioner's enforced idleness and had found himself a voluntary job—organising a museum in Kurayevka's Palace of Culture. The new Palace was yet another point of pride with Cherednichenko; this architectural beauty was rising up right in the very centre of Kurayevka. It outshone anything in even the district centre. Now, of course, the palace was deserted. There was no time for it with everyone out harvesting. Panas Emelyanovich had bumped into Inna on the street the day before: he walked all hunched up and looked very small. A pitiful sight. Old age... What it does to a man! It did not seem long ago that he had taken them out into the steppe in spring, for a botany lesson, telling them enthusiastically about Kurayevka's modest plant world (it was from him that Inna first heard about those "Scythian tulips") and now... He seemed only a shadow of what he had once been. Small and dried out, he walked with an old man's unsure gait. Just puff at him and he'd fall over it seemed. Evidently, the family tragedy had broken him—to have lived to see his only son in the dock. No one really knew how Victor had got like that. At school he had shown no bad tendencies. Perhaps he had been a little more mischievous than some, but who could hold that against a teenager? He decided to go to a naval college after the eighth class. And he got in, passing all his exams, but was back in Kurayevka that same autumn with the news that he had been requested to leave.

"Requested to leave or simply expelled?" Cherednichenko had asked him at the time.

"It's called 'asked to leave' there," Victor replied with a sour smile. "Let's say that there was a character clash."

"Your problem is not character but the lack of it," the chairman had concluded. "Everyone is following a straight path and you alone keep swerving to the curb. And why? You wanted adventure, glory by the bucketful, a sailor's hat, and a rolling gait to look smart. But I've heard they have a saying there: to acquire a rolling gait you must go to sea—not to vodka. Storms and heavy seas make a man!"

But for Victor the very words 'naval college' had become hateful and he did not want to think about the place. Because

it had not accepted him, had flung him out, so that now he was a stray dog beneath Kurayevka's sails of dust. Inna believed that Victor's inferiority complex dated from precisely that time. She had hoped she would be able to heal him, heal him above all by her love. She had fallen deeply in love with him. Not just because he was a handsome lad—something that many girls like—but also because he had that “something special”, a vital spark, a desperate courage, a sort of daredevilry. He did not impose himself for long on his parents but went off to the canal and was seen there operating a scraper. After that he was again drawn back to his native shores and joined Kurayevka's fishing co-op. And so things had gone until the unfortunate accident that led to his doing time. Now he had served his sentence, atoned for his crime, and returned. Only he had not stayed in Kurayevka but had found himself a place to live in the district centre—Inna found this out from Panas Emelyanovich who was still shaken by all that had happened to his son. One night, he told her, their son had made a painful confession to his mother: ‘My life’, he said, ‘has gone all wrong.’”

“Those were his actual words?” Inna asked anxiously.

“Yes, lass. All wrong, he said. And there were tears in his eyes.”

What can this mean? I think a person is not entirely lost if he is still able to be his own judge. I think that the son in him was speaking, that his conscience awoke in him when face to face with his mother, with his grieving father and that is why he never said a word about his parents having sold his Jawa motorcycle for a song so as no longer to have to look at it in the yard.

“And why didn't he stay in Kurayevka?” Inna asked Panas Emelyanovich even though she was frightened of what the reply might be.

“I can't stay’, he said. ‘I'm too ashamed. I'll stay away at least long enough to grow my hair again.’”

Inna recognised her chosen instantly in that rather sad joke.

Truck after truck returned from the elevator but not one of them carried Victor back to her. She looked at the sea—there, too, was no one, no young man walking up the beach from the waves! It was said that he had got himself a job with a road-building, that he was growing himself a new

head of hair as he worked away at levelling the hot asphalt with a heavy steam roller. And wasn't Inna above all thinking about meeting him when she assured Cherednichenko that she would have to go to the district centre in person?

The girl was still not used to her new position. She was now standing guard over the empty aidpoint. She could have nipped off but was not sure if that was all right without Cherednichenko's permission.

It was time for breakfast and Inna was called to the table together with some combine harvester operators who had arrived from Ternopol in the middle of the night and whose battered suitcases and bundles now lay tossed into a pile near Inna's cabin. Every summer helpers came from the Western districts in order to help the Kurayevka men to bring in the wheat from the farm's endless fields. These helpers were always sought after, but not this year. And so the men from Ternopol were waiting to see what was going to be done with them—were they to stay or to be sent home? At least they hadn't been forgotten to the extent of not being called for breakfast.

Inna was hoping to see her family "Yagnich team"—such a thing existed—over breakfast. Photographs of the team had appeared on several occasions in the district and regional papers. The Yagnich husband-and-wife team. Inna's father was an experienced operator of all sorts of machinery and was forever in the fields. At harvest time his wife, Inna's mother, joined him there. The year before, however, Inna's mother had for the first time failed to take her place at the steering wheel of a combine harvester: for health reasons she had been transferred to the kindergarten to work as a teacher. This, though, did not put an end to the Yagnich family team because Inna's brother Petro had taken his mother's place. He had just passed into the top form at school and it had long been said of him that he would make a fine sailor of the steppes. Their father liked to boast of both his son and daughter in public!

Inna did not get to see them that day, however. The combine operators, it turned out, had their food brought straight to them on the fields they worked because in harvest time every minute is precious, the ripe wheat does not wait, and in that matter the saying that one day feeds a year was definitely true.

Around midday Varvara Filipovna, still pale after her illness, arrived at the threshing-floor but she brightened up on meeting Inna.

"Well, how are things, my dear? Managing all right?" she asked in a tender and motherly voice. "I felt a little better so I thought I might go and stand in for her. The girl, after all, needs to go to the district centre."

She looked understandingly at Inna as if to say "I know why you really want to go there." Women are great psychologists, much better than men, that is for sure.

Inna went to the district centre that very day.

She first went to the district committee of the Komsomol and had herself put on the register there and next went on to her immediate superiors in the district department of public health. It was a good thing, too, that she did look in because as it turned out they were planning to send her to another village, Khlebodarovka, deep in the steppe, which also had a nursing station. The nurse they had sent there had for some reason not got on with the villagers. These were now writing complaints about her saying that she was rude, that she did not know much about medicine, that she gave them the wrong pills. "If you don't change her," they said, "we'll simply run her out of the village!" So that was what Khlebodarovka was like: its villagers knew better than its nurse what pills to take. That was why the district authorities had developed the idea of dropping their new graduate onto the volcanic village in the hopes that it would put an end to the endless flow of complaints. Kurayevka, in their opinion, could for the time being be left in Varvara Filipovna's care. She would manage, they felt, knowing how she was: one moment she was completely spent and the next she was back on her feet again, working away. In a word, they had their own plans for the young nurse but here she showed some character: you appointed me to Kurayevka so stick by your decision!

"Only Kurayevka and nowhere else!"

The district authorities had to give way. Inna left the building with a victory, albeit a small one.

Her next visit was to the bookshop where she bought an anthology of French poetry—two volumes in translation. Inna had heard about the book at college but had been unable to find it anywhere. But here the two volumes had been

gathering dust on the shelves. Now at last she'd have something to read while she was on duty.

Wherever she found herself, however, she was constantly pursued by a single idea: Victor, Victor... He ought to be somewhere here because one of her friends in Kurayevka had seen him levelling hot, smoking asphalt with a steam roller in the square, by the Board of Honour.

"You probably think it's wrong of me to take part in this suppression of flora?" he had supposedly said to this girl. "Do you think I'm not sorry myself? I weep internally, sob to myself, but I've got to; in the name of progress I've got to crush your forget-me-nots with this heavy and blind steam roller. Tell Kurayevka that I won't come riding home on a white horse but on a great black steam roller."

The whole district centre had now been asphalted and there was a smooth, recently rolled and still grainy area in front of the Board of Honour. Inna wandered patiently down the side streets until she at last found what she was looking for: a heavy angular monster stood in the road but there was no one in the driver's seat. It was a cosy street with lots of greenery in the yards. And there in the shade right in front of the little house that was in fact the procurator's office, the road builders were having lunch beneath some acacias: they flickered like fires in their Dayglo orange waistcoats as they ate their sandwiches and washed them down with beer. Inna instantly caught sight of Victor and their eyes—as if they had only been waiting for this moment—met. The poor lad looked as if he could hardly believe his. He craned his neck and froze, absolutely flabbergasted... Then in a single headlong catlike leap he was on his feet and, for some reason pulling off his orange waistcoat, hurling it aside, he ran up to the girl.

"You?"

"Yes."

She wanted to cry: he looked so... It was him but at the same time not him! Something cold and rough, something alien to him had appeared in his face. She had never seen him like this before. Thin as a rake, shaven-headed, and even a little confused. He had grown even taller and looked a mile high. His silly shaved head, without its usual luxuriant growth, made him look like ... like anyone else but not like his former self. His head had been shaved with what must

have been deliberately careless scissors—perhaps for a joke—and tufts of hairs streaked his skull. The absence of hair made his head look strange, disproportionately long, while his ears stuck out unnaturally. He stood dumbfounded in front of Inna. At last he pulled himself together, shouted "I'll be back soon!" to his comrades, and, without concealing his delight, he grabbed Inna by the arm and squeezed it till it hurt.

"Let's get moving!"

And instantly it all returned to them: the sea, the sand, and the blinding waves as tall as a man came rolling to them over the black asphalt. They didn't know where to find a quiet corner where they could be alone, just the two of them together.

At last they found a bench under a pussy-willow yellowed by the heat in the little square by the pier. They sat there without knowing what to say to each other or how to begin. His eyes were moist and his smile was gone. Biting his cracked lower lip, he looked at Inna unblinkingly, almost severely, striving to see into her very heart, painfully trying to make out how she had felt in his absence. Had she missed him? What was going on inside her now?

"How did you find me?"

"By compass."

"So! You managed to get hold of a compass?"

"Every girl has a compass right here," Inna placed a hand on her breast.

"And I thought: Inna doesn't seem to be about. She's worried about damaging her reputation."

"You don't know me very well then."

"You're probably right."

He hung his head, looked subdued, and slowly stirred the sand with the point of his broken shoe, moving it seemingly aimlessly but a sort of cryptic pattern, however, started to appear in the sand.

"What are you drawing?"

"I want to record this day."

"Why?"

"So as never to forget it."

And only then did he ask her about her affairs and about Kurayevka.

"Have they changed its name yet?" he suddenly smiled

"What for?"

"I believe that some people are already playing with the idea. 'Kura' means dust, 'Kurai' is a weed, so Kurayevka. And in any case, why not do things the modern way? Why not go ahead and slap some merry little name on the place, eh?"

"What, for instance? Suggest something."

"Shchastlivoye [Joyful], for instance. Or Urozhainoye [Abundant]. Or Svetozarnoye [Bright]... They often give villages names like that nowadays..."

"If it does need a new name, I'd call it Khlebodarovka [Bread Giver]. But there is one already."

"I've heard that that other one may soon be liquidated."
"No!"

"It's very likely! They're going to move them elsewhere to make one large village. The inhabitants will be moved and houses pulled down on the quiet if it's decided somewhere that Khlebodarovka is 'not promising'. So don't be too surprised if one fine day the only thing left of Khlebodarovka is the name."

They fell silent again, following with their eyes one of the water buses as it pulled away from the pier, its iridescent wake a sharp curve behind it.

"I saw Panas Emelyanovich yesterday," Inna said in order to remind Victor of his father. "He's aged so much."

"The old man's eyesight is failing. He says that everything seems to swim before him now."

"The sooner you go back to live with him the better."

"I want to grow some hair first." He ran his hand over the stubble on his head.

"If they have to shave your heads, they could at least do it neatly."

"This was by special request. So that it should be obviously crude. So that it should immediately be clear that here is a man who has suffered."

"Making a martyr of yourself?"

"That's right. Well, a new, free head of hair will soon grow. I'll wait for that here because no one will recognise me like this in Kurayevka. It's true, isn't it, that people might fail to recognise me?"

"Those who want to will recognise you."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

She tried to ask him about what he had been through *there* but Victor would not be drawn or else cleverly changed the subject, striving in every way to avoid it. And if he did mention it, then it was with a painful frown or with a joke at his own expense, accompanied by a bitter smile. There was nothing of any great interest there, he said. He'd done his time and that was all. Jungle life. A zek, to put it in a single word.

"Sometimes it seems to me as if there isn't anything left for judges to do, and then..."

"There's still people who need their head shaved," Victor replied with a bitter smile. "One man inside used to say: isn't it a disgrace that so many unshaven people are walking the planet?"

These prison witticisms shook Inna. She had wanted to hear something else from him: how in his heart he had re-lived his tragedy, how profoundly he had repented, how his conscience had tortured him as he lived that jungle life, how he had thirsted to cleanse it in order, renewed, to return home. Perhaps something of the kind had happened to him, perhaps it was going on now. Why else would there be that sad and thoughtful look on his face, why else would he seem so withdrawn? Bitter lines lay around his mouth and his hands were hard and callused.

"Was it hard?"

"It's never easy there, Inna. They mean business, as everyone knows. They don't give you medals there but your Victor nevertheless on several occasions experienced the benevolent favours of the camp administration." His irony was again spiced with a dose of bitterness. "I was not put in the punishment block and I worked without faking. In a word, I did everything I could to rejoin unshorn mankind as fast as possible."

"And you made it. Congratulations. And I hope you would want to steer clear of the place in future."

"God help me from ever landing there again. Although, of course, your Victor did not leave any very poor memories of himself behind him. I was full of nothing but useful suggestions," he said half-jokingly and with a grin.

"What suggestions?"

"All sorts. You wouldn't be interested."

"I'm interested in everything that concerns you. Tell me..."

"All right. Listen: heeding Victor Veremeyenko's advice an extractor fan was fitted in the woodwork shop. A complaint concerning the failure to issue a mattress to a neighbour was attended to. Superfluous equipment was removed from the workshop." Victor said all this with a hard and unpleasant smile and in a nervous tone of voice. That also was new in Victor. "And if I'm really to re-open old wounds, then..."

"That's enough. Don't tell me," Inna interrupted him with pain in her voice. And she took his hand, his large, flat and callused hand, took it and held it tightly between her two tiny palms.

They said nothing for a long time. There was something touching and almost childish in this silence, in their dumb hand-holding. That is how they felt best of all. And Inna didn't give a damn that her patent leather sandals looked peculiarly ridiculous next to his wrecked shoes and that her shapely young legs that the sun had burned to the golden colour of ripe wheat, legs springy with vital energy, stood out provocatively beside his coarse canvas trousers.

"I hear that you've been writing songs?" Victor asked after a pause, staring hard at the sand and, it seemed to Inna, concealing an amused smile.

"So what? Have you got anything against it?"

"Why should I? You could do worse. 'The Shore of Love' was played on the local radio here the other day."

"And what did you think of it?"

"Not bad. Heart-rending." Turning to face her, Victor unexpectedly gave her an odd, even vulgar as she thought, wink.

Inna instantly let go of his hand. He had never behaved like that before.

"Why did you wink at me?" she asked, her good mood fading.

"I'm sorry. It's an acquisition[^] called a nervous tick."

"Don't let it happen again."

"Yes, sir!"

They joined hands again and the warmth of their closeness flowed straight into their hearts. Even the sparrows bathing funnily and unafraid in the dust at their very feet gladdened them.

Yet Inna yearned to know how Victor saw the near future,

what he had decided to do in his new situation, whether he was going to allow his life to go "all wrong" once again.

"When are you going to come home, my shaven-headed man? Or are you stuck here for long?"

"I doubt I'll stay here for long. At present the bosses and I aren't getting on too well. And in any case the lads are asking me to join them in Selkhoztekhnika."

"But what about Kurayevka?"

It seemed she had touched a raw spot. His face grew dark.

"I'm a road-builder, Inna. I should imagine that plenty of water will flow under the bridge before I drive my heavy steam roller over the green sward all the way to my native Kurayevka..."

A profound sadness was now truly to be heard in his voice.

"Come back," the girl exclaimed warmly.

He put an arm round her shoulders and, turning her sharply towards him, stared intently into her eyes. These filled with great dark tears.

"I'll come back," he said firmly.

He could have added: "I'll come back for your sake. To constant torment. To mock, taunt and envy you. To question you cynically. To pick you up and drop you again, to be jealous without reason. I'll come back to love you!"

10

Towards evening a passing truck gave Inna a lift from where she was standing by the elevator. She found herself among harvest hands in army panama hats. They had stopped, helped her up, and, when she had sat down, had not bothered her. They were polite lads and had probably instantly seen the state she was in: her cheeks were red with emotion, her eyes burning, and her thoughts still out where she had just been.

Inna was in fact moved by the meeting, overflowing with it. She had walked Victor back to his steam roller, to his "black hippo" standing waiting for its master on the fresh asphalt. "You know that I'm the clinging type," she said merrily to Victor, putting her arm through his. She also noticed that he liked her "clingingness" and that something

approaching confidence appeared in him. His step became more lively and he strutted proudly next to Inna under the attentive gaze of his whole team. He glanced proudly and with a superior air at his fellow road-builders, as if to say, see what a wonderful girl in a miniskirt is tap-tapping her high-heel shoes beside me, her arm through your Victor's! Lightly, as if he were some fiery cossack, he leapt into the iron saddle and drove off his awkward one-hundred-ton machine in front of which the other members of the team had already flung spadefuls of hot grainy asphalt. From there, from the saddle, he looked round and flashed what was no longer a dry and pained smile but a lively, mischievous and school-boyish parting grin at Inna.

"Say hello to Kurayevka for me!"

One meeting was all it had needed for the lad to come alive again, for his spirits to be lifted!

A wide road cut across the steppe to Kurayevka. The trucks tore to and fro, raising clouds of dust that never had had time to settle. The steppe laboured, work going on at a spanking pace everywhere. Here combines were still out harvesting while there freshly ploughed black furrow cut through fields of stubble. Neither did the watering installations know any rest: they spouted their fountains which, on meeting the sun, burst into seven-coloured rainbows over the market gardens and over the green maize. But the real centre of attention was the threshing floor: there golden mounds of grain glowed, trucks drove up and came away, and people worked non-stop. Although everything seemed to be going in an unhurried and measured rhythm, the men and women of the steppe were in fact hurrying, hurrying to get everything done before the rains, so as not to lose a single grain. They all knew that fields bear fruit only once a year!

The dust spread far from the roads, hanging over the threshing floor and over the combine harvesters—the whole ocean of the skyway was hazy because of the harvest. From horizon to horizon the sky looked dull, murky, lacklustre and it was going to stay that way, no one would see it bright, until the harvest was over. That was how it always was: the dust came into its own from the moment the first sheaf was taken in with celebrations, lifting its stuffy sails over the steppe from one end to the other and staying like that day and night. There weren't any winds just then but an innocent

outsider might easily think that dust storms were raging over the South.

And you, Inna, are going to live in that dust! For this is to be your golden Bengal—wrapped in a warm coat of Kurayevka dust. They say that even a handful of one's own earth is dear. No man is afraid if he is not alone on this sinful earth, if he has friends, if he is surrounded with respect, or if, better still, he is loved. Then even the hardest labour becomes a joy. And again, it is nice for one, to complete one's happiness, to have that "family team", when for their whole life, right to the grave, people are united both at work and in love. It's your land, Inna. She loved that steppe—and not only when it was in flower, dotted with Scythian tulips over which quick-winged swallows flitted and heavenly-voiced larks sang. She also loved it as it was now, at the height of the harvest, in clouds of dust raised by hard work. Her reliable, true, and eternally beloved steppe. It would never go "all wrong".

...They were a quiet lot, these soldiers in their panama hats. All she had managed to find out about them was they were Turkmens. Their commanders were evidently thorough disciplinarians and had taught them properly—not to be pushing, not to annoy a strange girl with their attentions. Perhaps they were even a little too restrained, self-contained. Inna, however, was not in the slightest bit offended or put out by their Oriental inscrutability. On the contrary, she even liked their evidently innate modesty and tact. Vera Konstantinovna used to say that in India, too, people were benevolent, thoughtful, and tactful. One of the Turkmen soldiers looked very like her patient of the day before: with his almost African suntan and his dark eyebrows, he might have been carved out of ebony. But he wasn't the one she had treated... He was lost in thought and had a dreamy look in his eye: had he perhaps left some beloved dark-eyed girl back at home? The lads brightened up when, with Kurayevka's fields already on either side of them, they caught sight of the flashing white wings of those eternal adjuncts of the sea, seagulls, through the dust. The soldiers in the back of the truck even jumped up:

"Seagulls! Seagulls!"

They gazed and gazed at these white objects whirling about in the dusty air, unable to take their eyes off them:

were they perhaps seeing unwritten and unsent letters from their girlfriends floating above the steppe?

Something unusual awaited Inna on getting back home: there was a whole crowd gathered under the pear tree in the yard! Andron Gurievich was back on leave! Without warning them or sending a telegram, as always. He was seated at the head of the table, wearing a striped sailor's vest, broadshouldered and bald. A merry family bustle, excitement. The girls were wearing new imported scarves. The young children came running to Inna to show her some strange seashells he had brought them. Inna's mother appeared carrying a tray although there was masses of food already on the table. Her mother smiled happily at her daughter as if to say: what a day, daughter, we've got the whole Yagnich tribe sitting down together at the table! Her mother was also wearing a new scarf—with apples printed on it—and she had tied it round her head in a young girl's style which made her look very pretty.

Andron Gurievich who had appeared thoughtful or even sad grew brighter the instant he caught sight of his medical niece. He stood up to greet her.

"How you've blossomed in these two years! Why, Ganna, she's simply a beauty, our girl is. You'd expect to see a beauty like that walking down the main street in Calcutta."

The girl looked blushinglly at him, her eyes like deep dark brown pools.

When they kissed, her uncle pressed his prickly cheek hard against hers and held her like that for a moment in a burst of emotion. Inna's heart contracted and he, stepping back already, whispered in her ear.

"I've brought back a little something for you. You'll get it later."

And he sat down again. He did not, however, touch the food.

Inna, even though she was staring into her plate, felt his sad and gloomy gaze on her. The old man stared unceasingly at his lovely niece as if he were looking at his own or someone else's youth, wondering where he had once seen similar brown dewy eyes.

Inna's father was also at the table. He had torn himself away from the fields for the occasion, leaving his "navigator" who now could drive no worse than his dad, at the wheel.



The lad was in fact simply longing to be left in charge in order to demonstrate what he could do. Her mother was absolutely blooming amidst the guests, never sitting down as she was bustling about. To be sure, it was a great event! There was not much room at the table and it was hot, too. Practically the whole tribe had gathered: next to the host's weather-beaten face there shone the bronzed ones of cousins and second cousins—also nearly all of them agricultural machinery operators. Female relatives, close and not so close, chattered merrily. Even young men and girls she hardly knew had come running in from various parts of the farm—they were distant relatives, too, they were Yagniches! Inna's father, as always when he'd had a drink, was overaffectionate towards her and sat her down by him. He even put an arm round her shoulders, though not for long, before once more turning to his other neighbour—a machinery operator from the animal farm.

"You understand, now I'm one hundred per cent sure, sure all the way to here about my navigator! He's discovered a talent, I tell you, a real talent! When we were tuning the motor, he never left my side, the boy followed me like a shadow, and we stripped the whole thing down together—screw by screw, every knotty piece."

At the word "knot" Yagnich the sailor (Inna noticed) started visibly, as if waking from a dream, and livened up for a moment before again becoming lost in thought.

"And if you're not too lazy to tune the motor in advance, things will go like greased lightning when the time comes," her father continued. "Come over from your farm, Timofei, and see: where the wheat's cut clean and evenly, that's our signature and you can tell it at a glance. Where the work's excellent—anyone will tell you that the Yagnich team, the father and son team, was here!.."

"That's the main thing," agreed the operator. "How you are towards the wheat, so, too, will people be towards you."

"Only that office in the sky did us a bad turn with the weather, damn it!" said Inna's father feelingly, beginning the eternal farmer's talk about droughts, crop failures, centners lost...

"That's quite enough about your centners," the mistress of the house shouted at them as she passed by with still more dishes of food. "It's been a good year out in the

virgin lands, they say. They're bringing in a good harvest so we won't be left without bread."

"And Kurayevka will hold its own, too! Stop making things out to be worse than they are!" Auntie Nelya chimed in. A sharp-nosed, and tough woman, she had taken one of the most prominent places right beside the guest of honour. "The grain may be undersized but we'll still be able to bake a great loaf for someone's wedding feast!" She glanced significantly at Inna.

"You could at least let our guest get a word in edgeways," the mistress of the house recollected herself. "Let him tell us something about foreign lands. We don't see him often: he stays for a short while and then he's off sailing in the salt breeze again. I bet those breezes have salted him through and through by now. Over to you, Andron!"

The request caught their guest unawares and he was evidently not in the mood for talking. His glass was filled to the brim and stood apparently untouched in front of him. Inna wondered anxiously if he had fallen ill. There was something weighing down on the old man, some bitter thought was tormenting him. It was evidently something far removed from all that was going on round the table. He smoked and smoked, his high forehead wrinkled in a frown in addition to the furrows made in it by the years. Looking at him, Inna was filled with sympathy. What did countries and worlds matter if a man bore a world within himself, a world that was unknown, perturbed, and incomprehensible to others. And this was the same Uncle Andron who had once—when Inna was very small—come to Kurayevka all lively, merry, and excited, who had made Inna laugh a lot, on whose back she had often ridden, whom she had followed after like a puppy, begging him for jokes and teasing him with a funny song she had learnt from the grown-ups:

*Hey you weaver, tie your knots,
Meanwhile, I'm a queen!*

Years do not spare a man and a life is soon lived! There is a boiling of springs and a garland of summers, but these are soon followed by the inevitable chilly autumn mists. A mere decade separated Yagnich-senior from his sister (she was the youngest child in her family and the only sister to

remain alive) but today she looked wonderful, today she was simply blooming, while he... Andron Yagnich's hands lay weakly on the table. The long voyages and heavy work had produced great knotty veins on them, veins perhaps like those of his distant ancestors the galley slaves who were shackled with iron chains to their oars.

"Sing a song, then, someone!" the mischievous Nelya piped up again. "Surely we're not going to sit here without singing any songs?"

"What's suddenly made you want to sing?" smiled one of the milkmaids. "Andron Gurievich didn't bring you that fur coat."

"What the hell do I want with a fur coat! I may not have a fur coat myself, but my cottage will get a fresh coat of paint! Won't it, Andron?" Nelya suddenly flung her arms round the sailor's neck. "The fashion for fur coats is over. You'd do better to bring me a sheepskin coat, isn't that right, Uncle? And if you don't, then my son will: he's preparing to enter naval college this summer. I'm trying to get him to join the commercial school but he keeps saying no, he wants to go to naval college! And it's you, Andron, who stuffed his head full of ideas."

"The gates to that naval college are narrow," the darkly suntanned Auntie Vasilina, the widow of a Yagnich second cousin, mumbled gloomily. "And those who do get in for some reason fly out pretty fast..."

This was a direct reference to Victor Veremeyenko and a very tactless one at that. Inna felt the blood rushing to her face.

"If mine gets in, he certainly won't come flying out," said Auntie Nelya proudly. "He's ahead of all the others in the school's production team and as you all know, he was last year's ploughing champion in the regional competition. That's in the steppe, so you can imagine how straight a furrow he'll plough in the sea! Isn't that right, Andron?" And she playfully gave the old sailor an even tighter hug. "And you, dear uncle, know all about it, so please help him!"

The former member of the Orion's crew said nothing. He ought to warn her, to tell that brisk matron that her lad should not expect to have an easy time of it at sea. At the naval college, as on the Orion, he would be met not by a honey-voiced mama but by a loud ship's bell which from where

it hung in the middle of the college's yard would regularly clang out the watches so as not to leave the lads any time at all for twiddling their thumbs! It would make the lads run like hares, its merciless brass would ring in their ears all the time, would see that the trainees' every minute was spent in useful activity. Having barely finished their morning exercises, it would be off to lessons, to classes, where tables, screens, sailing directions, and all sorts of complex equipment awaited them. Their life would be timetabled down to the last second: from early morning to late at night, from reveille to lights-out, they would be kept permanently on their toes, up until the time they were allowed to take "quarters", or in normal language, to move into a common-or-garden hostel where equally common-or-garden rooms were for some reason called cabins.

"But perhaps he should not be in such a rush to go there?" Nelya went on with her questions. "Perhaps he ought to try for the fishing college? Although they say that it's full of Blacks nowadays because they, you see, don't have to join the queue for it. And then they lure our girls off to their Africa. People say that black babies are being born in town! I heard of a married couple—he was blond and she golden-haired—and they had a black baby."

"Bazaar talk, idle chatter!" Inna was unable to restrain herself. "And even if it was a little black boy, so what? Pushkin also had African blood! So what?"

"It may well be just idle chatter spread by the bazaar radio," Auntie Nelya quickly agreed and turned to the old sailor again. "Well, Andron, you'll put a good word in for my boy, won't you now? Or shall I tell him to drop the idea and not to worry himself for nothing?"

"Send him to me and I'll talk to him myself," grumbled the sailor.

Brakes screeched outside the house: Cherednichenko had arrived. The men instantly rose as if to some unheard command. The master of the house, Fyodor Yagnich, stood at their head, facing the front gate, ready, it seemed, to take the blame for everyone. Sweat pearly on him as thickly as when he was driving his combine and the collar of his shirt was suddenly too tight for him even though the top button was undone.

"So this is where they're breaking records," thundered the

chairman with exaggerated severity. "What are you up to, lads? It's the height of the harvest and you're holding banquets?"

"But we, but we..." The master of the house grinned guiltily and stumbled over his opening words. "You haven't... I mean, you see who's here."

"I see, I see," Cherednichenko directed a piercing eye at the sailor. "So it's you, you old saboteur, who's decided to wreck our harvest? You couldn't choose another time to come back on leave?.. Oh well, there's nothing to be done about it now." Thawing at once, he walked in and moved towards the guest. "Welcome home!" They hugged and kissed each other.

The men did not have to be told what to do next: without saying goodbye or wasting words, they tumbled one after the other out of the house so that a minute later all that could be heard was the revving of motorcycles carrying their owners off in various directions. Soon the number of women grew less, too. The only outsiders left were Nelya and the newly-married neighbour, and they had both migrated to the veranda where they were whispering with the mistress of the house. Then they, too, left.

Evening was falling. The pear tree was wrapped in shadows. Inna's mother switched on the veranda light so that they should be able to see each other. Reunions between lifelong friends didn't happen every day.

Soon only two people were left at the table—Andron Yagnich and Cherednichenko. The clever Inna found a spot for herself and her chair behind the pear tree, but not so far away as not to be able to listen to these two faithful sworn-brothers (as she called them to herself).

"Well, how are things with you? Still frisky, you old mule?" Cherednichenko asked his friend with real warmth in his voice.

"It looks like I've done my hopping, skipping and jumping." The sailor lit a cigarette and lowered his head.

"The wrong winds blew or something else happened to make you sad, eh, sailorman? Don't tell me you've been demoted? Went on a spree? Or did you get into a fight with other sailors over some French girls in Marseilles?" Without waiting for a reaction to this joke, he asked seriously: "Planning a long stay here with us?"

"A long stay," Yagnich said hollowly. "Until I draw my last breath, I should imagine."

"Now what's all this?" Cherednichenko even jerked away from him. "What are you saying? I thought you were home on leave. You don't mean to say they've retired you?"

"That's what it looks like. Here, they said, take this diploma, granddad and—have a nice time." He stared glumly down at the table. "Kura, brother, kura."

This last word burst from him in tones of such anguish and pain—of despair—that Inna was horrified.

No outsiders could really understand what "kura" meant. Yagnich had addressed this old shepherd's word to his friend as a codeword comprehensible only to the initiated. An old shepherd called Lebed who had once lived in Kurayevka and been its wise man had apparently invented the word. Returning from the steppe in bad weather one autumn, with his staff and wearing a wet sheepskin coat, he used to reply "Kura, brothers, kura" to anyone who asked him how his life was going and how he was feeling. There were all sorts of interpretations of what this "kura" meant: one person thought this meant that cruelly cutting winds had blown in the steppe, another that his legs were weak, that he was too tired to sleep, that Lebed's times as a shepherd were over, that he was ineluctably drawing near the final boundary... Inna had heard about this mysterious "kura" a few times and the word was used sometimes in jest and sometimes with a gentle sadness. This was the first time, however, that she had heard it used in the manner that Yagnich had... Furthermore, the word had needed no explanations: the old shepherd's mysterious formula seemed to take on all the meanings that no other word could communicate and in some amazing way to unite the two men at that moment, a bitter password from some grimoire that only they knew.

Cherednichenko in fact immediately and fully understood Yagnich's sad password, understood its searing, aching implications.

"It's early days yet for us to be thinking about 'kura'," he said after a pause. "We, Andron, have got to stick at it out. We're not at the end of the road yet."

"My wheel's rolling to a halt."

"A creaking wheel travels furthest."

They both fell silent again. Inna sat expressionlessly, as

if she were afraid of frightening off the old men's whirling thoughts. Her mother evidently sensed that something was wrong out there beneath the pear tree. She walked over and sat down with the two men. Her brother had not said anything about himself on his arrival—he either had not found the opportunity or had deliberately concealed whatever it was in order not to cast a shadow on their reunion as soon as he was inside the door. So his sister and everyone had rejoiced, thinking that he was home on leave, when he, it turned out, had been retired, told to remain on dry land.

"Don't grieve," Cherednichenko said to his comrade with assumed good cheer. "This is precisely the time when a man shouldn't lose his head! Kurayevka will take you in, will not leave you at the mercy of fate. We'll find something for you."

"What use can I be?" Yagnich sighed as he ground out his cigarette. "Tying knots? It doesn't look like you need any tying."

"And there's no sails either," Cherednichenko sighed, too. "Kurayevka's fleet has melted away. It used once to be that they hoisted up some rag or an old skirt over a dinghy and off they flew with their watermelons to the bazaar in the regional centre. Remember how granddad Shvachka got driven by a storm all the way to Turkey with his old woman? Got back on foot two months later—no boat, no watermelons, and just his old lady on his arm. Now watermelons are put into containers and carried off right from the fields." He addressed himself directly to Yagnich again. "We can't put you to driving a combine. You could be given a scythe to tidy the edges of the fields, but we only do that once a year for the harvest festival. Then there's the watering installation which makes our rain for us, but it doesn't need turning. It does that all by itself."

"So it seems that all I'm good for is to be a scarecrow in the pea patch."

Cherednichenko was by now also sitting with sadly slumped shoulders. Yagnich's problem was a problem for him, too.

"I told you before, Andron: don't get mixed up with that Orion..."

"Leave the Orion out of this, Savva," Yagnich cut in severely. From the tone in which he spoke Cherednichenko

realised that this was a subject best left alone—or else he might get burnt.

"How about working as a watchman at the field camp?" he suggested cautiously. "Please don't get angry. We're all friends here, and a watchman, brother, is a figure of some importance and not just a scarecrow."

"I can see that my brother would prefer something to do with the sea," the mistress of the house put in.

"What's that you said? That's an idea! We do have our sea, after all!" Cherednichenko burst out, animatedly. "We've got our own Kurayevka fishing co-op and it hasn't lost all its nets yet. It's true that there's more fish to be found in ponds and rivers than in the Black Sea nowadays. There's only hatlike jellyfish floating about."

"He's probably going to miss the jellyfish, too," Inna's mother remarked with subtle female intuition.

"We won't let him miss anything. And he's not that kind of person anyway. I know you pretty well, Andron. All in all, they tied a nice one for you, didn't they? And when? As a souvenir in your declining years! They could at least have waited, have refrained from hurrying matters: you're still a pretty fit Cossack to look at."

"It was the doctors who retired me."

"A bad business, then," frowned Cherednichenko. "You can't argue with doctors. It's beginning to look like a real 'kura'." He paused for a moment. "So what next? A rifle over your shoulders and stand guard? Of robbers, there's neither sight nor sound but we still need a watchman, at least for appearance's sake. It'll be just the job for you: spend the day dozing in the shade, take a rest after all your stretches on duty on board the Orion, and at night look up into space and count the stars!"

They both looked up and gazed for a little while through the branches of the pear tree at the stars above.

"I'll think about it," said Yagnich after a pause. "Perhaps I'll have to. Perhaps I really will count Kurayevka's stars, count every last one of them."

11

And that was how the old sailor came to drop anchor.

When the talk came round to where he was to spend the night, Inna offered him her own clean little girlish room.

Their guest, however, refused this in no uncertain manner. In fact he refused to sleep in the cottage altogether although there was plenty of room—the combine operators were out in the steppe and besides their beds there was also a sprung sofa. He didn't want the sofa either, saying that he smoked a lot and often got up at night. He asked for a camp bed and set it up beneath the pear tree, claiming that he would like that best. "That's all very well in summer, but what about when autumn comes?" his sister wanted to ask but held herself back in time, afraid of causing her brother extra pain.

Yagnich's sister was greatly saddened by the unhappy news. She had grown used to having her brother only for a guest in her house: he would visit for a day or two, rest up, and then goodbye. She had thought that this would go on for ever but now look what had happened... Of course she would be glad to take him in—blood was thicker than water and hers was a close-knit family: they'd make a man feel welcome. But how was their guest going to feel here? The old cottage had been replaced by a new one which they had built without him. The plot, true, had come down from their father and the pear tree, too. Her brother had a right to at least half the pear tree. But would that comfort him? With his proud nature?! He'd get it into his head that he was a burden on them, that he was making extra trouble, that his mere presence was upsetting the usual measured course of their life.

Having got things to his liking beneath the pear tree, the guest immediately lay down and, exhausted by his journey, seemed quickly to fall asleep on his camp bed. However, when Inna, who was clearing the table, walked past the pear tree for the last time, she heard the retired sailor calling.

"Inna!"

"Yes, ah..." she broke off, not knowing what would be the best thing to call him. Uncle Andron already sounded too childish. She therefore called him by his name and patronymic, the same as she addressed her teachers at school.

"What do you want, Andron Gurievich?"

"I'd like to ask you something."

"Ask away." She was a little nervous: what could he be wanting to know?

The guest was silent for a moment, as if he were wondering at the last moment over whether to ask his question or not. At last he made up his mind.

"What is ... what is a pithecanthrope?"

Inna very nearly burst out laughing. It was so unexpected and such a funny word! Pithecanthrope!

"If I'm not mistaken, it's the name of a prehistoric man or even half-man. Why do you want to know?"

"Just curiosity."

"No but really? You must have a reason for wanting to know."

"No, no. It's just curiosity. It so happens that I don't have a reason. I was just wondering." With a wave of his hand he dismissed her. Go on, now, his gesture said.

She moved away several paces and then suddenly went back.

"Don't be sad."

"What are you on about?"

"It's just... Relax, get a good night's sleep and you'll feel stronger."

"For what?"

"What do you mean for what? For life, of course!"

"And is an old wreck like me wanted in life?"

"Now that I did not expect of you!" Inna was angry. "How can you speak like that? A man, if he is a real one, is precious at any age... Do I really have to tell you that? You were and are for us young people a symbol of something real and fine. A man who bears the Orion within him! And you—am I needed?... Let's have no more of that. Go to sleep!"

She turned on her heel and left.

Words, as everyone knows, can kill and they can heal. The right thing can be said at a wrong moment, but this was just what Yagnich had needed! "A man who bears the Orion within him..." With unusual clarity he realised that he truly did have some significance, that he was not superfluous here, that for this family at least he was of some value, and that perhaps they even wanted him. That was already no small thing. It seemed that it was enough to be needed by a single human heart for one's presence on earth to be justified.

He made this little discovery for himself and it pleased him. He even smiled: ah, what a niece! A young girl and she taught him, a bald-headed old man, a good lesson. What a girl, that Inna!



The next morning he gave her a scarf like her mother's—Japanese, brightly coloured, but even gayer, with red flowers dotted over a golden orange background. The old man had chosen just right! His niece was delighted and pranced about like a young goat. Her uncle's gift even seemed symbolic to her—it had immediately reminded her of the orange waist-coat Victor had been wearing when they had met the day before.

"It's a lovely souvenir, thank you."

She put the scarf on her head before the mirror, then lowered it to her shoulders, moving them this way and that, twisting and turning... Yagnich looked admiringly at her: she could have been a young gipsy girl in some Calcutta or other. Kurayevka's olive-skinned beauty—where on earth did it come from? What roots produced these beauties? Her eyes were clear and when she laughed, which was not frequently, her laughter, too, was clear and not troubled by anything. Her tan was not that of one summer. Her cheeks and neck had a natural apricot warmth with a rich, gentle glow in them. Her movements were smooth and unhurried and all she did was filled with a maidenly dignity, a pride that offended no one, of which she was perhaps not aware herself. She was a princess and more! But it was her gaze that the old sailor had particularly noticed the night before, her profound, penetrating, and secretly sympathetic gaze.

"Thank you, uncle Andron," Inna said again to him and gave the scarf which had so pleased her to her mother. "Please look after it, mother. I'll wear it in winter."

But now she did not need a scarf and furthermore had to hurry to work. She ran to the gate with her hair hanging loose, pitch-black and curly behind her. Curls like a rippling sea shone in the sunlight on the girl's shoulders.

"Our doctor and healer," his sister said to Yagnich with a smile when they were left alone to finish their breakfast on the veranda. "She'll cure them all because she has a kind heart. Now she's dashed off, all in a hurry, lest God forbid someone steals her first-aid post. Ah, youth: it thinks of everything except itself. She's hardly out of college and the chairman's wife has already got the girl harnessed on the job."

"Is it true, what I've heard, that Varvara's often ill?" Yagnich asked.

"If she stops work, that'll be the end of her. That's why she's afraid of giving up her job. She may be finding it hard, but she still won't give in... It's well known that it's only work that keeps us up: man dries up and shrivels in idleness. I can see it in myself," she smiled, "the more I work, the healthier I am."

Yagnich had not failed to notice that his sister who had bloomed briefly the day before when there were guests was now visibly paler and looked downcast. But there she was boasting that work made her healthier... Today the marks left on her by the years were more visible. There were crow's feet about her eyes and the eyes lacked their previous lustre... Her hair was speckled with grey and only her eyebrows were still black. She once had had beauty but now it was gone, like the song said. The best that could be said was that at least it hadn't just gone but had removed itself to her daughter.

"You're a lucky woman to have such children."

"That's true. There can be no greater happiness for a mother."

"The next thing is to find the right man for Inna. Or has she already done that herself?"

"More or less. Didn't you notice yesterday how she blushed when Vasilina mentioned the teacher's son? Inna's in love with him. She has been for a long time, ever since school, in fact. Her first love, as they say. Oh, I'm so afraid of that love of theirs! How on earth did he manage to turn her head! She's madly in love with him and he's a no-good... But you know Victor, don't you?"

"Veremeyenko?"

"Who else? There's only one such good-for-nothing. He didn't learn to drive a tractor like the others, he landed in the dock instead. His mother cried her eyes out and still won't go out for shame. And although he's served his sentence now, he hasn't shown his face in Kurayevka as yet. He's clearly afraid of showing his face to his fellow-villagers: he's stopped somewhere in the district, probably crawling from bar to bar with his pals. In a word, he's a wrong one, but our little girl, I see, is pining for him..."

"We can't be judges in the matter," remarked Yagnich. "You know yourself that the heart can't be told who to love."

"That's a fact. But to think I'm going to have such a

good-for-nothing for a son-in-law ... about him sitting down to eat with us... She's far too good for him. She was graded excellent on finishing her medical school—top marks in every subject—and she's good at all sorts of things. Why, besides being a trained nurse, she also writes poetry. She's even written the words to a song!..”

“A song? Inna?”

“That's right! Our radio's already played it twice: lyrics by Inna Yagnich, music by... Actually, I think she wrote the music, too! Some people say: who needs these new songs when no one even sings the old ones any more... Because nowadays most people get their music ready-made, on records! The people today don't understand the pleasure to be had from singing a live song yourself. In Kurayevka, for a girl to write a song is considered odd. But in my opinion, if a girl wants to write one, let her. Why should it bother anyone? Sometimes you feel things that you can only express in song. Our mother, for example, remember how many songs she knew?—some for every day, others for holidays... Oh Lord, what am I doing sitting here chatting with you when all my little children are waiting for me!” she suddenly remembered the kindergarten. “The woman who works with me is going to be furious, I bet.”

“Difficult work?” asked Yagnich.

“Yes, it keeps you on your toes, but still it's easier than driving a combine harvester! Now that's work! It was all right when I was younger. I was even flattered to hear people talking about me, saying: see, that's Yagnich's wife. She and her husband both drive combines... But later I began to feel that it was getting a bit much for me, that I wasn't a young girl any more... And although I didn't complain, Cherednichenko himself noticed it: well done, Ganna, he said, for your work on the combines, but by bringing up a worthy successor, a son to navigate these ships of the steppe, you have shown abilities in another direction so I'm transferring you from now on to the kindergarten. Bring up these little midges. So now I'm working there. Well, I've got to run. I'm sorry, brother, but you're going to have to guard the pear tree by yourself.”

“I'll guard it,” the old sailor replied in a hollow voice.

As soon as his sister had left the yard, however, he began preparing to go somewhere: he dressed smartly, examined

himself before the mirror, and smoothed his moustache with his palm.

Yagnich walked through Kurayevka. It was rather empty at the harvest time and only a child might dash out of one of the yards into the street. Here children had once been as numerous as sparrows as they played in the dusty streets but now it wasn't so often that he met some toddler wandering about. When he did, though, the old sailor did not ignore the child.

"Whose are you?"

"Yakov's."

"Which Yakov is that?"

"Well, you know, Yakov Yagnich."

And for a long time afterwards the old sailor would try to work out which Yagnich was the father of this particular little fellow. It might turn out that they weren't even relations. And all the same he'd be sorry that he hadn't kept a little toy in his pocket as a present for the child... By no means all adults aroused friendly feelings in Yagnich. One sometimes came across empty or hypocritical people, even across revolting, creepy characters who were vile reptiles rather than people. But children were always nice, one always felt happy near them, and Yagnich liked them everywhere, whether in his own or in foreign ports. There was one tiny little being over there, up a cherry tree and stealing bright glances at him through the branches. Another was tearing down the street on a bicycle. Looking at him, one couldn't help asking oneself how he'd grow up. What would his Kurayevka look like in his day? Who would he remember in it? It had grown, there were lots of new houses, all of them with slate roofs—there were only a few thatched cottages left. And as for the shepherds' adobe huts—the young probably didn't even now know what such a thing was, didn't know how to build huts out of it. Nor would they recognise the throb of a spinning wheel or have heard how millet was pounded in a mortar so that the whole hut shook. And there had once been people in Kurayevka who didn't even own a cottage: they made themselves hovels out of clay or even dug-outs and these would be their mansions. No one would believe today that his generation had once lived in huts made of seaweed, but in fact Andron's childhood had been spent in just such a palace. They should have left at least

one miserable adobe hut standing so as to be able to compare the past with the present. They'd built themselves a Palace of Culture to seat six hundred, they had a department store with windows no worse than in a city, and Kurayevka itself was growing, would one day become Kurayevgrad, a seaside town. It looked very much like it.

Finding himself in the middle of the village, the first thing Yagnich did was to go to the obelisk. This he did without fail whenever he returned to Kurayevka. Slowly—though it was far from the first time!—he read the sad list of names carved in the stone and gilded, the list of Dikopavlenkos, Ryabikhs, Chernikhs, Cherednichenkos, Shchadenkos, and Yagniches, the Yagniches being right at the bottom, near the ground, due to the first letter of their name. The eternal flame's blue tongue flickered—they changed the bottle of gas from time to time. There were a lot of flowers all around, roses of every possible colour, and the only thing wrong was that they were all thickly coated with dust; furthermore, sonchus, spurge, and goose-foot infested the flowerbeds and rose up between the prickly roses. Yet the village Soviet was across the road, the young secretary with nothing much to do could see this from her window and could have gone out to do some weeding.

Yagnich went on right to the other end of the village, to the old cemetery. Between the sunken and now barely visible unmarked mounds that were graves, he sought out the resting place of his mother and father. There was a fence around it, a fence that he himself had put up on his last visit home. Yagnich stood there lost in thought for a while. He had a good view of the sea, free, blue, and alluring. There it was, boundless, full of bright space. It blinded him and he felt a painful twinge in his chest. That's how it was, Yagnich: now he'd be looking at his sea from amidst the tall weeds, from the dry land on which wormwood grew would he look sadly at the blue and eternally attractive expanses... If only he could make one more trip! Just one. It was not to be. Evidently the only trip left for him to make was the one to Kurayevka's grey little wormwood covered cemetery. They'd dig him, Yagnich, his last shelter here, amidst the wormwood and the wild thyme, a shelter over which some kind soul might plant a little poplar. Now out on the Orion, Yagnich felt that he would never have died! The Orion at this moment

was on a new trip with new trainees somewhere in the Aegean, that bluest of seas. In a steady wind, amidst the sparkling and breathtakingly open space, young lads, instantly matured, would be guiding their ship, someone's exciting youth would be looking calmly around, and the supple wind would caress the ship and her sails would throb tautly above her! Perhaps the Orion was at this instant coursing over those waters where the dolphins liked to greet her. Happy and curious, they swam alongside the ship, accompanying her for a long time. It's well known that dolphins feel some strange attraction for man; perhaps these creatures of the deep whom we don't understand seek kindness in man, hoping to find in him their truest friend, something close to perfection? To swim alongside the Orion, to dive, to display their agility and youthful vitality to the young sailors was a delightful entertainment for the dolphins. Supple and shining, curling into circles, they leapt from the water, playing like children and apparently even laughing, flashing their dolphin smiles to the crew through the silver foam. Yagnich would sometimes fancy that these were perhaps his little children who had drowned after the bombing of their ship, that there, under the water, they had undergone a change and turned into these merry and daring young dolphins...

When on his way back Yagnich passed by Kurayevka's bakery, Nelya seemed suddenly to spring up in the doorway.

"Good morning, Uncle Andron! Have you been out for a walk?"

The delicious smell of hot, freshly baked bread wafted from the doorway. Nelya was wearing a nice white coat as a baker should and stood decoratively in the doorway, flushed and hot from the ovens.

"I've just taken the loaves out. Would you like a taste?"

"No, thank you kindly."

"Well, at least have a roll."

"No, thank you."

"Come on, Uncle, you shouldn't be like that..."

And without a pause she started up about her son again. She hadn't slept all night, worrying about whether the lad should or shouldn't go to train as a sailor. Would he cope, would he perhaps cover himself with shame, would he perhaps be expelled?

"It's well known that the training school isn't heaven,"

Yagnich said in a restrained way. "To see the young trainees marching at a parade, in their sailor's hats and ribbons, is one thing. And when he, the lad, is barely keeping his hold on deck in a storm, it's another... More important, too. Then his hands are all cut up and covered with blood."

"Oh dear, oh dear!"

"Why didn't you send him to see me?"

"He's embarrassed! He's a shy one, my boy. If I get in, he says, then I'll go and see him. Otherwise, they may think I'm sucking up, that I'm some weak little ninny who's come to pull strings! No, I think I'll talk him into something easier-commercial school. He seems willing too."

"If that's what he wants, then he should go there. I only hope that he doesn't short-change people later, when he becomes director of a department store."

Yagnich was just getting ready to move off when the lively woman held him back.

"Wait a second!"

She dashed into the bakery and reappeared in the doorway with a big loaf in her arms.

"Look at it: all hot and steaming!"

It was a long time since Yagnich had seen such a tall and lovely loaf. He smiled: there was Nelya for you! It took skill to bake such a mountain; it needed talent, too.

"Please, Gurievich, accept this for yourself!"

"What a wonderful loaf! Placed on a white, embroidered towel it would more than do for someone's wedding and here you. No, no," Yagnich refused, although he was touched. "We've plenty of bread to put on the table."

"I know. But let this be your very own next to theirs. Your very own."

Yagnich took offence.

"We haven't reached the stage of disputing property yet. No one has reproached me for my bread. And perhaps they won't ever," he mumbled, seemingly to himself, and walked on.

The doors to the Palace of Culture past which he walked were now open. Yagnich decided to take a look inside and crossed the porch. There was not a soul in sight in the spacious and bright hall. It was quiet, too; he could hear no footsteps. The walls were hung with large paintings, specially commissioned ones. Cherednichenko commissioned them in town, from the art workshops, and paid well for them, consi-

dering it a sin to be mean with funds in such matters. The largest painting depicted the chicken farm; white chickens or geese were scattered about the background while in the foreground there stood a merry farmgirl in a white coat. Next to this was a canvas of a pond and a poisonous green pussy-willow branch. Just beneath the ceiling was a painting of a lad smiling bravely in the seat of a tractor. The painter had been generous with his oils and had spread them on in thick layers so that the visitor who looked at the canvas felt that the multicoloured mass might at any moment melt and start running. In the far corner of the hall, behind plate glass, some greenery glowed and there was a twinkle as if there were some water there. Perhaps it was an aquarium? Yagnich headed that way and was disappointed: there wasn't any water. The palms with their pointed leaves looked like sedge and beneath them, surrounded by artificial bushes and some stones was a real surprise! Yagnich, still not believing his eyes, looked down at some old acquaintances—the birds he had stuffed for the Kurayevka lads when he was on his sea trips. Now that was a meeting. He leant his head against the glass and froze, touched and amazed, in that position: he had never thought this would happen. He stood there, his forehead against the thick, unbreakable glass and looked at the exhibits. Had anyone walked into the Palace then, he would have seen a rare sight: of all the pictures in the hall, the one with Yagnich in it had to be the most striking and sad. On one side of the glass, the old craftsman, and on the other, behind the glass—in a great glass cage—a collection of the dry stuffed birds he had brought back from nearly every part of the world. Large and small representatives of the feathered world, sea birds and song birds, ones familiar to these shores and rare ones, without names, from the crane, ruff, and canary families, to the foreign cormorant and tropical parrots with their bright plumage... The birds all had shiny bead eyes through which they looked alertly at their creator. They were so dried out as to be brittle and even though they were under glass, they had acquired a thick coating of dust. They would never leave here, never fly away... They had been alive but now they were a collection in a glass and seemingly airless cage...

Yagnich turned sharply and walked away, what he had seen weighing heavy on his heart.

He nevertheless glanced into the auditorium. The doors were not locked so he opened one and stepped solemnly inside. The spacious auditorium was dark and even cool. Not an auditorium at all but an ocean-going liner. Streamers of red cloth hung everywhere. At the back of the stage stood some props that had not been cleared away after the last performance. A backdrop showed a little white hut with flowering hollyhocks beneath the window and a wattle fence with pots and jugs on each stake. Nearby stood a girl in an embroidered dress. She looked very real and her stance was very like Inna's. Perhaps someone had used her as a model? The seats weren't seats but armchairs fit for kings. Their backs shone with black varnish and they were covered with sky-blue velvet. They seemed to invite one to sit in them. Yagnich did so and let out a relieved breath. He could rest a little. But somewhere in the far corner, the dark persistent devil of loneliness had hidden, too. Baring his teeth mockingly. Sit, Yagnich, sit. You've made it. Isn't it lovely? All by yourself in a room with seats for six hundred!

12

From the first floor of the Palace, on the left hand side, there came the sound of steps. Someone was there. The wide staircase leading up there invited him: "Please!" Mounting the imitation marble steps, Yagnich saw a little sign saying: "Museum of the Local History of Kurayevka".

He entered. In the meek little figure in the far corner dusting the collection of spinning wheels and other strange outdated objects, Yagnich recognised with difficulty Panas Veremeyenko. How the man had changed! There wasn't any sun but he nevertheless wore dark glasses and a hat on his head... On hearing Yagnich's footsteps, Panas Emelyanovich instantly put down the reel (a genuine prehistorical reel with thread wound on it) and jerked up his head.

"Who's there?" he asked in an almost frightened voice.

Yagnich drew close to him and stopped without saying anything; perhaps he'd yet be recognised despite the dark glasses.

"Who are you?" the teacher asked anxiously. "Is that you, Victor?"

Yagnich was actually staggered. A chill crept down his

back. A man his own age was standing face to face with him and imagining that he was seeing someone else.

"It's Yagnich. Andron."

"Andron? The ruler of the seas? I'm sorry..." The curator's face brightened and relaxed. "I'd heard that you were in Kurayevka. Come in, please, come in." Panas Emelyanovich immediately began with a complaint: "I'm going blind, Andron, it's a catastrophe how fast my eyesight is deteriorating."

"You should go to Odessa, to the Eye Institute."

"I went there. At first my sight got a bit better, but now it's failing again. Flecks of white flash before my eyes. Everything goes out of focus and I see you now as if I were looking through a thickness of water. I can really only see a shadowed outline. It's as if you were standing in water."

Yagnich began to feel sad again: "To him I've become some variety of seaweed."

"I still treasure our past, Andron... For some the past is dead, but for you and me its every last cell is still alive. I got hold of this reel just the other day. Old Korshak dug it up. It's almost the find of the century, a really interesting exhibit. Korshak also has a hand mill but he won't part with it yet, the old miser. What does he need it for? Eh? Well, let's start our look around."

Panas Emelyanovich began to show Yagnich the museum. The exhibits included old fishing equipment, home-woven rugs, a carved yoke, and an unbelievable machine that stood by the window—a complete weaving loom all ready for work, all sorts of plants under glass on tables—white-haired feathergrass, stramonium, wild thyme, and even the stalk of an ordinary bitter wormwood plant... Herbaria of Kurayevka flora. The walls were hung with photographic enlargements, taken in all likelihood from identity papers, blurred and misty either because they had been incompetently enlarged or because they were so old. How many worthy people Kurayevka had given the country, people who had won fame by their labour and gallantry at the front! Half of one wall was covered entirely with sailors! And what sailors! Fedot Yagnich had died a hero's death in an attack of torpedo-boats. The middle Chernobayenko had reached the rank of Vice-Admiral and had only recently died in Vladivostok. Pick anyone at random: that was Savva Cherednichenko—he had defended Odessa. He had held the Caucasus and had later distinguished himself in the Kerch



landing party. Belokon there earned his Hero of the Soviet Union title for Sevastopol. Petro Shafran had worked on the lendlease scheme and to this day was sailing the Atlantic somewhere on seiners. Yagnich caught sight of a picture of himself on display, though he found himself hardly recognisable in a festively white sailor's jacket: it was an enlargement from a very old photograph belonging to his sister and showed a broad-shouldered and vigorous-looking young sailor, a smile in his eyes, and a sailor's hat with ribbons sitting on top of his young face with high forehead. "The Senior Sailing Craftsman on the Training Vessel Orion" read the sign beneath this "exhibit". It was all true, but why senior?

On another photograph, this time a group one, of Kurayevka's first Komsomol members, Yagnich found himself again and also a wide-eyed and then thin Cherednichenko (he was wearing some kind of boots and lay in front of them all right in the grass). Next to Yagnich stood Zhenka Ivanilov who had commanded a tank battalion during the war and had been killed somewhere near Königsberg. It was not without an effort that Yagnich also managed to find Panas Emelyanovich, then Kurayevka's young schoolteacher, in that group photograph: he was presenting a profile to the camera and there was even then a slightly frightened look about him. A truly precious exhibit. It was their cell's farewell photo before the lads set out each on his own path. They had all got together one anniversary of the October revolution and had themselves photographed—for the first and last time... Many, many of them were already dead. Only a handful remained. Including the two of them as they stood sadly in front of the displays.

"And do you recognise this one?" Panas Emelyanovich led Yagnich with a mysterious air to another display.

A blurred photo of a young, round-faced girl in a pilot's uniform looked at them. Sanya Khutornaya! She was looking down at them and smiling slyly: so what do you old men think, eh? They had all been madly in love with her then, but not one of them had managed to find the key to her heart. She'd happily join them in a sing-song or go for a walk to see the moon shining on the sea, but to show a preference for any one, to open her window for someone. Nothing doing, I'm sorry, lads! One night Sanya disappeared so mysteriously that they wondered if perhaps she had drowned. Worried

Kurayevka even informed the police so that they should search for her. Sanya reappeared not so very far away a little later—in the Northern Caucasus, in a pilots school. At first it seemed as if she had taken a job as a waitress, serving stewed fruit to the trainees, but later, she turned the head of one of the commanders and soon after married him. Not so much for love, they said, as out of a desire to become a pilot at any cost—her husband had solemnly promised that he would help her in this. And she got her way, the stubborn lass! She learnt to fly, became a brilliant pilot, was one of the members of a female crew that set a long-distance flight record by flying from the Crimea to somewhere out in the tundra. It had been a very great record. Basking in her fame, Khutornaya flew to Kurayevka and landed just outside the village in a field, bringing her grey-haired husband to introduce him to her parents. He was an air force pilot and by that time already quite elevated in rank. Ah, Sanya, Sanya, you restless soul! From the day the war broke out, she sought out danger and performed desperate sorties. She lost her husband but was somehow spared herself although she on several occasions returned to her airfield with her cockpit riddled with holes. She took off into the sky again and again. It seemed as if she spent more time on them, more time up in the sky, on day and night flights, than on the ground.

Fate permitted her the joy of seeing the advance begin and it was then that Sanya Khutornaya was killed in an air battle somewhere over Taman. A she-eagle in battle, her heart was defenceless and shortly before her death she experienced a brief and burning frontline love affair. She was on her last flight with a young pilot whom she met at various frontline airfields between battles. She fell head over heels in love with him at their first meeting. She flew with him afterwards and they were shot down on the same day, at the same instant, and, as legend had it, hit the ground in each other's arms. The official version stated that, being on fire, they did not have a chance of saving themselves, but some people in Kurayevka to this day insisted that Sanya must have arranged it on purpose, either out of jealousy or for fear of losing this her first love, a love discovered in a sky in flames...

It seemed as if they stood for longer at this stand than at any other. Two men grown old, standing and each thinking about that eternally young girl with her eagles' wings.

"Old age will never catch up with our Sanya, now "

"No, it won't," agreed the teacher. "The poet once said: 'It's good to die young'. And I think it's true. Although they also say that the years bring us certain advantages—they enlighten the soul and endow man with wisdom."

"You need a blend in life, a two-in-one blend—of youth and maturity," said Yagnich and began asking Panas Emelyanovich about his son: where was he? What was he doing? What was he planning to do with his life?

"If only I knew," sighed Veremeyenko.

"You should give him a good shake, Panas, and make him pull his socks up!" Yagnich advised severely. "If he doesn't value his honour, he should at least value the girl's. You know about him and Inna, don't you? He'd better not let her down, otherwise he'll have me to deal with."

"Oh, Andron, Andron, you're rubbing salt in my raw wound... But what can I do? I'd voluntarily go to my grave if only he could become something other than what he is."

"His conscience—that's what needs awakening in him!"

"If he has one at all."

Panas Emelyanovich stood weakly and sadly in front of his exhibits. Once so bright and restless, where had all his liveliness gone? He had become dry and wrinkled; he wasn't a half or even a quarter of the man he had once been.

"We can hope all the same, Panas..."

"Yes. Let's hope... What else is there to do?"

Outside Kurayevka bathed in a sea of sunlight.

By the collective farm's offices a group of bored young people stood waiting. Were they local or strangers? The young men were all in T-shirts and with them was a girl who seemed for some reason to be sulking as she sat hunched over with an Aeroflot bag slung across her shoulder. She was on one bench while the young men sat opposite her on another. They were all in careless postures and seemed somehow grey with boredom. They evidently took Yagnich for the office watchman because as soon as he drew close they spoke up: "Oh well, let's ask granddad here." In an imperious tone that did not permit of any objections, they asked him where the chairman was, when he would be back, and if he was out in the fields, then how were they to find him, which field would he be in? Yagnich heard them out in silence and in silence, without word, walked past them.

thus letting them know that they had not chosen the right tone in which to talk to this granddad. "He must be deaf," he heard one of them say indifferently and without anger. "And for all I know he may be dumb, too."

Yagnich next crossed the little garden grey with dust that was another of Cherednichenko's ideas for the village. The pussy-willows, silvery like olive trees, let their branches hang right down to the surface of the water. The pond was turbid, patched with oil, and littered with sunflower seed husks. A lonely swan, tame and so well fed that it looked like a gorged goose, swam in it. The little kids on the banks called it—"Mishko! Mishko!"—and it swam towards their voices in expectation of bits of bun they'd feed it by hand.

Yagnich was still not quite over the offence done him outside the collective farm's offices, done him evidently without malice aforethought but casually, from having nothing to do. The contemptuous tone, the rude manner of talking. They didn't even bother to stand up when addressing their elders and evidently did not think it necessary. They didn't even realise that there was nothing humiliating in doing so and that it would on the contrary actually arouse only respect for them. Who had brought them up? It looked as if Kurayevka held no attractions for them; a source of thoughts for others, in them it was only capable of inducing boredom and more boredom. Meanwhile for Yagnich the place was filled to the brim, inhabited and overcrowded with living images of all the people he had known since he was a boy, who existed for Yagnich to this day in all their human uniqueness. Those who had fallen on the battlefield, who had passed away in Kurayevka from wounds and illness, who had been lost without trace and were now forgotten by many—they all passed before Yagnich in lively, noisy crowds, walked about the gardens, unaffected by time, made merry or were sad in Kurayevka's yards and streets, quarrelled or made love, by some magic acquiring voices that Yagnich could clearly hear, distinguish and himself reply to from his present lonely years. Kurayevka was for him full, full of people both visible and invisible—from ancient shepherds in home-woven robes to today's broad-shouldered combine harvester operator and his lovely daughter!

Wandering through Kurayevka, Yagnich did not notice how he came to be outside the kindergarten where he was suddenly

met by the tinkling voices of the children there. Hearing these bell-like voices was no less pleasant to him than hearing the heavy brass bell on board his ship. He hesitated for a moment and then screwed up his courage and decided to go in. His sister caught sight of him from afar and encouraged him with a nod that said come in, sailor, come in and admire our treasures. The children happened at the moment to be on their way back indoors as it was time for their afternoon rest. The guest was instantly introduced to the tots.

"This, children, is a sailor from the Orion, a sailing ship that has travelled all over the world... Does he look like an old sea-dog?"

Two by two, the apple-cheeked and neatly dressed little boys and girls paraded past him regarding him curiously and waving their hands to greet the former member of the Orion's crew. It would seem that someone had had time to tell them jokingly in advance that this man was a sea-dog because they stared wide-eyed and curious at the stranger but without the least of fear. This dog was not at all frightening... The courtyard was soon empty. Only toys remained under the awning, tossed hither and thither in multicoloured piles. Yagnich examined them: this doll was crying, that one complaining. A horse stood on its little wheels, prancing with its fine chest puffed out, but one leg-wheel was missing. The wooden cottage stood askew and seemed about to fall down and that was a shame; it was a fine thing and really did look as if it were straight out of a fairy tale. He ought to get his tools together, come here, and put everything in order. He certainly would do that. Mending toys—what better thing was there for him to do in his situation? It was a nice, kind thing to do whichever way you looked at it...

"Come to work here, granddad, and you can stand in for the senior nanny," a young teacher suggested merrily to him as she dashed across the yard. It was as if she's read his thoughts. She had evidently nipped across to the department store: there was a parcel under her arm and pleasure written on her face. She must've bought something nice. "There's a lot of demand for granddads nowadays!" she added. "Whenever there are little children, grannies and granddads are at a premium! There's a shortage of you people!"

"And I've got nothing against being a nanny," Yagnich continued the joke.

Left to himself again, he sat down on a swing, rocked himself once or twice, and wriggled his moustache with a smile: here's your deck, granddad, here's your Orion... However much it rocked, he wouldn't fall overboard and drown... They were inviting him to join them there, and why indeed not? He could tell the little ones stories. But—what stories? What story nestled in the most secure nook of his memory?

He rocked himself some more, thought, and sifted through his mind.

Perhaps this one. There was such a famine here, children, after the Civil War, such a terrible famine that it was as if a plague had come to these shores! People became swollen, they ate goose-foot, acacia flowers, and sorrel. And then Lenin and the International Red Cross saw to it that soup kitchens for starving children were set up all along the coast. There, children, we were given sweet cocoa to drink and also a thin slice of bread each through a window which some of us found hard to reach up to because some of us were tiny little tots just like you are now. They'd give us the bread and tell us to eat it right there, on the spot. We were not to take it home because it was for us, only for us. But it sometimes happened that a boy would drink up his cocoa and then, glancing around to see if anybody was watching, he'd whip his bread under his shirt and dash home because there he had a mother and a baby sister in her cradle. The mother would refuse, not wanting to take her son's crust of bread. Eat, she'd say, you've got to grow, you've got to store up enough health for a whole life! And the eyes of the boy's mother would shine with joy through her tears: her little son had not forgotten her or his sister, he had saved up his rations, brought back his meagre crust from that Red Cross... And that, children, is a true story for you. That's how we first learnt to understand life.

It was calm and quiet under the awning. A plastic crocodile grinned from the pile of toys but frightened no one. A swallow dived under the awning: it had built its nest here and kept flying in and out with food for its young in its little beak.

When the children had fallen silent, Yagnich tiptoed up to their dormitory window. The sun was shining right into the room and caressed everything with its rays; the green tree, reflected in the window pane, rocked gently; he could also

see the sea shimmering in the distance. Inside the room the little children lay in rows on their snow-white cots, just like the crew's quarters on a ship. Yagnich stood and observed how sleep gradually overtook, enveloped the tots. Here one child's eyelids drooped, there another yawned, a third was already asleep, while a fourth with cunningly half-closed eyes secretly watched what was going on: who was this granddad, this Neptune; who was looking in at the window? Bright smiles would light the little faces. Another child's eyes closed and then at last so too did those of the wakeful one. Sleep, like honey, shrouded their eyes sweetly.

They were all so lovely and clean, so freshly-scrubbed, so carefree. Some light and weightless wave of a sunbeam would pass over a little face, crinkling it into a fleeting smile—was the boy dreaming about something, perhaps about that red-breasted wooden horse? The boy relaxed and stretched: he was a growing person. The little tot, so fragile, still had no cares or sorrows, no evil or intolerance towards others. He was all kindness and trust beneath his tightly closed eyes. Yagnich could happily have stood guard over this pure living treasure. The sleepy smiles of the children had something of what the old sailor had seen in the dolphins' smiles. An identical trustfulness, openness, defencelessness and at the same time a similar touch of mystery filled these subtle smiles, a mystery that grown-ups could perhaps not reach the bottom of. Honestly, the dolphins had smiled just like that, in just that same childish way, at Yagnich when, out in the open sea, they had splashed about alongside, happy and carefree, playfully leaping out of the water towards the sun.

13

Things had become quiet on the threshing-floor. The grain cleaning machines no longer thundered, the tension of harvest-time had relaxed, the last grain was being swept up. Of the great mounds of wheat (pitted like the Moon's surface) there remained only a small and tidy pile of forage-grain.

Cherednichenko, with the air of a military leader, looked about with a tired but happy face. They had won the battle. Yet another: not without losses, that was true, but what could one do against the elements? All in all the chairman had every right to be pleased: true, they had harvested less

than they had set out in their undertakings, but they had fulfilled the plan in full and furthermore done so ahead of schedule. Fodder-grain, regrettably, was going to be in somewhat short supply since they did have an awful lot of animals on the farm. Well, they'd have to think of something. It wouldn't be the first time. Furthermore, the farmer always has a good supply of hope—hope that the next year will be a better one. They were already now laying the foundations for their happiness next year: they had sown the winter crops in good time and now they were only waiting for rain.

There were less people now in the steppe. The soldiers who had helped harvest the wheat had all said goodbye and left: perhaps a girl or two were sorry that the field radio's aerial and the tents behind the dairy farm were gone but there was *nothing to be done about that*. They had disappeared overnight, without a trace, and there would be no more quiet and friendly Turkmens in panama hats until next summer.

Before leaving, Inna's first patient had dashed in for a second and had shyly handed her a record.

"This is our song. About a girl... It's a song for you."

And he ran off, blushing all over his face.

Inna was also packing up her first-aid post, getting her medicines together, packing her ampoules and her syringes. The medical service, too, had nothing more to do here on the threshing-floor and was moving back to the village.

Cherednichenko, like all those who worked on the harvest, felt quite drained. Now that things were calmer, Savva Danilovich climbed onto the scales to check his weight. Twelve kilos had dropped off him! That's what a harvest does to one! Now he knew why he felt as if a load had been taken off him.

The women sweeping the threshing-floor kept looking at Cherednichenko. They wanted something of him. At last one old woman put down her broom and straightened her back.

"When are we going to hold the harvest festival, Comrade Chairman?"

The chairman paused to think. He scratched the back of his large head, rubbed his thick neck around which on several occasions enormous garlands of Kurayevka's prickly laurels had been hung. Glory is a tempting thing: last year's garlands were still to be seen in Cherednichenko's office, kept in a prominent place as a souvenir and also to delight and surprise visitors.

"There won't be any festival," the chairman said at last.

"It's not the right year for one, Katrya. We'll skip a year and you'll see that everything will be the merrier for it..."

The women murmured. What was all this about missing a year: they might all die three times over before then! What kind of a harvest was it if it wasn't followed by a festival? What if some people wanted to dance?

"This is no time for dancing," the chairman stood his ground. "Blame the drought—it's stolen your festival. We'll dance enough for two years, next time around."

The women fell silent, offended. Previous experience told them that there was no making Cherednichenko change his mind. He was a rock that couldn't be budged.

Inna, who had been on the threshing-floor all those days, had been observing Kurayevka's Zeus. The young poetess wanted to understand him better, to comprehend his purposefulness and will-power. And she had discovered a lot that was new to her, things about which she had previously had only the most superficial ideas. This Cherednichenko was by no means as simple as he sometimes appeared! Some people saw in him only the most obvious things—that he was a good manager, a great moving force, and a talented organiser, as they liked to say at meetings. If necessary he could raise everyone's spirits, inspire people, carry them, and even make them obey. A man like that wouldn't run his farm onto a shoal, he would always lead Kurayevka out of even the hardest of situations. At the district centre they knew that they could rely on Cherednichenko, that he did not need extra help—whatever the weather was like. That was all true and there could be no two opinions about Cherednichenko in this respect. But Inna was a sharp-eyed observer (she would have been embarrassed if anyone had said creative) and she gradually discovered another and she thought more important person in him. Besides the stubborn exacting and diabolic energy which this already middle-aged man constantly displayed, there was something else without which Savva Danilovich would not have been himself: behind his imperious voice, behind his firm, sometimes sharp and even a little rude words, the girl had noticed an intrinsic respect for people, something which she called in her mind "unindifference". Despite his Hero's Star and his fame, Cherednichenko never placed himself above his fellow collective farmers and he thought of the years he had spent as a simple smith in the forge and as a rank-

and-file combine harvester operator as his best. "A born leader! A made risen from the very people" was how Inna summed him up to herself.

On the threshing-floor she had been able to observe on several occasions how this thunderer managed to demand work in a voice that did not allow contradiction but at the same time without humiliating subordinates, without offending even a touchy teenager. He was never tyrannical. For all the importance he laid on tons and centners, Cherednichenko never forgot the main thing: through the dust of the harvest, he never lost sight of the people on whom everything depended. Now Inna understood why, despite all the storms of life, Cherednichenko had kept his position for so long, standing unshakeably at the helm, why people respected him so, why he was so strong, sure, great. She had seen for herself that Cherednichenko's democratism was not a pretence, that it came naturally to this popular leader who had what might be called an organic feeling for his fellow men. This was a quality he was born with or which perhaps he had acquired at the war front, had developed back in the days when those he loved best were falling and dying at his side.

She had noticed, too, that others also were aware of these qualities in him, understood him, even if only intuitively, and forgave his occasional outbursts of temper because what was more important to them was that at the critical moment Cherednichenko would not abandon them, would not suddenly armour himself with indifference, whatever his mood was. When you stepped through the door into his office, he immediately came forward to greet you: well, how are you, Pelageya? Tell me frankly what's on your mind, we'll soon sort things out. Even though people sometimes brought him things that were way outside his duties, things he could quite justifiably have delegated, that he could pass on to others. In fact, people took all sorts of problems to him: one needed a reference, another transport, a third help in getting hold of some rare medicine or in arranging a consultation in the capital for a relative. And to whom did they all go? To the chairman, of course. Should a newly-married couple start quarrelling—"storms follow the sunshine"—or someone have a bone to pick with his neighbour—they, too, would go to Savva Danilovich because you couldn't go running to the court in the district centre every time.

The day before, finding a convenient moment, Inna had asked the chairman:

"Savva Danilovich, may I put a personal question to you: how is it that despite your unlimited powers as chairman, despite your, shall I say omnipotence, you have nevertheless managed not to lose..."

"Not to lose my conscience—isn't that what you want to say?" he asked with a laugh. "How is it that I haven't become an outright bureaucrat, a stony-hearted official?"

"That's precisely what I meant."

"I sin in that direction too, my dear, so don't idealise. It does happen that in the heat of the moment I come down on someone like a ton of bricks. Then I suffer agonies all night: what's the matter with you, I say. Have you become thick-skinned? Are you forgetting who you were, whose trust you enjoy? No, my friend, if you go on like that you'll soon be unfit for the leader's chair; you should sign on to do some portering for the fishing co-op!"

"Your situation, Savva Danilovich, your position as Kurayevka's Zeus, really is one in which you could have grown hard... But you haven't, despite large doses of respect and fame, your heart has not lost its sensitivity. I would like as a medical person to know: how come?"

Cherednichenko frowned and did not reply at once.

"If I haven't grown hard, Inna, if my heart hasn't turned into a piece of gristle, it's the work of... Can you guess? Of a lot of people many of whom aren't around any more. Who one night before a battle accepted Savva Cherednichenko into the Party, who lifted their hands—every last one of them—to vote him in one night just before a landing party."

"Yes, I can understand that but what else..."

"Aren't you a one for questions!" the chairman smiled. "And also it's due to my Varvara Filipovna," he added with unexpected tenderness in his voice. "Even if I did want to settle like an eel in the mud of indifference, she'd not let me—she'd instantly give me a healthy dose of criticism or rather a taste of her cuffs and her sobering rolling-pin!"

Once again he was on about that mythical rolling-pin which they'd even heard about from him in public, from the platform.

The threshing-machine had done its work. Clouds of dust did not hang above it day and night any more. The machinery

was being brought in from the fields, the carriages that had been temporary shelters for the harvesters were being hauled back. The combine harvesters of various makes—old ones dating back to the days of the machine-and-tractor stations, and the well-liked Koloses and Nivas were arranged in rows, resting. Quiet now, they somehow even looked smaller, as if they, too, had lost weight during their round-the-clock voyages over the sealike steppe. Their rest, however, was not to be a long one. They'd stand there for a day or two, be inspected, and then move off, to the Volga, to distant Kazakhstan, to help the farmers of the virgin lands.

The Yagnich family team was there too, standing next to their Kolos. Inna saw her brother Petro, the helmsman, climb out from beneath the harvester all covered with dust and diesel oil (not to wash was evidently the trendy thing among combine harvester operators), went up to their father, and said something to him in a serious and independent tone. His father's equal, he shared with him everything that the harvest demanded of them. They had been working there together since dawn that morning. That no force could have torn her father away was understandable but that his "assistant" should have remained so steadfastly beside the Kolos was more surprising. And now he had just climbed under the harvester, looked it over underneath, climbed out, walked around it, reported to his father, and was now waiting for further instructions. For all that he was just a teenager, he now had every reason to feel proud: he had worked throughout the harvest side by side with his father. Inna sometimes felt something like jealousy in herself when her father began to sing his son's praises in front of guests, telling them with a joyful mist in his eyes how he had put his son behind the wheel of the combine harvester for the first time. The lad had worked so hard, put so much effort into it, that no sooner had he stepped off the harvester that evening, than he dropped right into a heap of straw and fell asleep. "Hang on," I said, "don't go to sleep, Petro: they'll be bringing supper in a minute!"—"All right," he said, "I won't go to sleep." Supper arrived in less than no time. "Up with you, driver, let's stoke up." But my helmsman was already past hearing: he'd rolled up in the straw and you could have fired a cannon right by his ear without waking him... Later I heard him rustling in the straw in his sleep, and I saw him pulling at the straw,

tugging it out: it's my helmsman still at work, dreaming that the "chamber's blocked"...

Well, Petro had grown since then, become habituated to his work, matured. His father was going to take him to Kazakhstan that summer. After all, he was his assistant, his right-hand man.

Since the combine harvester operators would soon be off, Cherednichenko had given instructions for a farewell dinner. Everyone at or near the threshing-floor was to come. Although there wasn't going to be any music, something really did have to be done for the drivers before their departure.

Inna forced her helmsman brother to wash before sitting down at table. She herself poured the water over his hands and neck.

"Don't be such an unhygienic specimen! Look, you've got buckwheat growing from your ears! Wash, I tell you, wash properly!" she ordered him.

"All right, go on—pour," he agreed reluctantly. "I'll wash off the sweat of my labours since people might fail to see my inner beauty for the dirt outside."

The water treatment transformed the lad. Towelling himself dry in front of a little mirror cleverly fixed to a pillar, he made a funny face as he smoothed his sun-bleached hair down with his hand. Satisfied with himself, he turned to his sister.

"Well, what do you think of my honoured countenance?"

He smiled a careful smile, not too wide. Someone's future boyfriend knew his faults and he smiled in such a way as not to uncover his protruding front teeth.

Inna sat down at table with the family team.

"A wonderful family," Cherednichenko commented, looking at this idyll. "But you have too few of them, Fyodor. I myself was the seventh child in our family and by the end twelve of us sat down to meals every day. It's true that more than half of us died in childhood, there being no medical care for the likes of us in those days and no help forthcoming during various epidemics... But they sowed thickly! Who nowadays can boast of having twelve children?"

"So why don't you set us an example, Savva Danilovich," one of the younger women remarked insinuatingly.

"Ah, touché! Of course you're right," the chairman agreed. "If it hadn't been for the war though, my wife and I might

well have shown Kurayevka what we could do. But as it is, we're a modest family. We only managed two, and even they aren't often to be seen at home nowadays. As you know, both our sons have brought honour to their names and both have found their callings in life, one is a teacher at the agricultural institute at which he studied and the other serves in the army in the GDR after completing military college. They're both married, not that they asked for my advice about that... Anyway, they're married, my daughters-in-law are no worse than any other, they're living all right, but where, I ask them are the grandchildren? I try to shame my daughters-in-law, call them lazybones. What do you think you're doing, I ask? They just laugh and say: all in good time. We're still young and at our age we want to have some fun. That's their philosophy.. You, Inna, when you marry," Cherednichenko suddenly turned to the nurse, "had better not be like that! I want to see a mass of babies from you!"

Inna bent over her plate, her cheeks burning, but Cherednichenko paid not the slightest attention to this.

"In Kazakhstan, where our grenadiers are going, and in fact all over Central Asia, they have as many children per family as there are poppy seeds in a poppy-head. One can't help envying them. We're behindhand here in the Ukraine. Is that right, I ask you?" It was easy to tell that Savva Danilovich had thought a lot about this and was quite serious despite his bantering tone.

"There's a shortage not only of children but of grandparents," responded the cook, who until then had remained silent, standing aside with her hands folded beneath her apron. "There's no one to look after the home when you go out and there's hardly a grey beard to be seen in the village."

"One wandering ancient has hove to here but he doesn't wear a beard," Slavka the driver joked in his familiar way. "He probably pawned his beard back on board the Orion..."

Inna started as at an electric shock. What a familiar and disrespectful tone! All the others were clearly also embarrassed by it.

"Brains are not in the beard but in the head," said Cherednichenko with a sharp glance at the unfortunate joker. "Such as you, lad, will never even dream of half the things

that this man has seen in real life. He who hasn't been to sea, he grief has never seen—that's what they used to say and it's the truth. So my advice to you, young man, is think before you make your witty remarks. You still consider yourself to be under age but when he was your age he was already carrying out responsible commissions for the Comintern."

"But what did I say wrong?" the youth truly did not understand what he had done wrong. "Is the word 'ancient' an insult, then?"

"Ancient," Inna's father mumbled angrily at his plate, "ought to imply respect, but in your mouth it sounded more like mockery."

The lad looked round the table for support amongst the others present but it was clear that no one had appreciated his coarse joke.

"What we all need is more people like old Yagnich."

"And it wasn't nylons and suchlike that he brought back from the Orion but a clean conscience..."

"But you, too, Savva Danilovich," the young man persisted, "like to joke about the Orion."

"How dare you compare yourself to me, you snout-nosed whelp!" Cherednichenko was suddenly angry. "I can make as many jokes as I like about the Orion and about this member of her crew and he can do the same about me. It's something we allow each other! By right of old friendship, and also because we lived through difficult years together. So we can make jokes at each other's expense, and pretty rough ones, too. By right of age, by right of friendship—is that clear? And you for the time being have neither one nor the other..."

And, to make it understood that the subject was closed, Cherednichenko began talking to the harvester operators about practical matters, asking if everything was ready for their departure, if they were all well, and if any of their wives had put her foot down out of jealousy for the beauties of the East.

It turned out that nothing was wrong and that they were all in a state of complete readiness.

"It's not our first time, after all!"

"We know the way."

The old harvester operators had been to the virgin lands on many occasions and this journey did not mean anything

special to them. It was all in a day's work. But the young helmsman going for the first time, even though he himself had volunteered to go, was greatly excited. It was also something that he was unable to hide from his sharp-eyed sister. Sitting next to her, Petro kept nervously hunching his back and drawing his head down into his shoulders. But when the chairman addressed him directly, inquiring how the young driver felt, whether he was nervous now that he was about to set off on this long journey, whether he would get lost in the endless expanses of the virgin lands on his Kolos without sailing directions, the young man, to Inna's amazement, did not mumble a reply but spoke out clearly, with calm dignity.

"We'll do our bit," he looked steadily across the table at Kurayevka's Zeus. "We'll take our place in the row and from Fort Shevchenko to Baikonur we'll mow down the virgin land's wheat!"

"Spoken like a man," Cherednichenko said in praise. "So what shall I say to you lads in my parting speech?.. Take our brothers in the virgin lands greetings from Kurayevka and come back victorious and laden with honours!.."

As they were leaving the table and Cherednichenko was preparing to climb into his car, Inna made bold to detain him.

"Savva Danilovich!"

"Yes. I'm Savva Danilovich," his reply sounded a little short-tempered. "What's the matter now? Don't you know how to move your traps back to the village? Don't worry: your first-aid post will be back in Kurayevka today."

"It wasn't about that. I'm sorry for bothering you..."

"That's all right. It's only the firemen from district and they can wait. When there was a field on fire, they were nowhere to be seen, but when they've got papers to be signed. So what is it you want?"

"Tell me, is it true that they're going to pull down the whole village of Khlebodarovka?" For some reason Khlebodarovka had been troubling her ever since she'd first heard about it.

"Ah, so that's it. And who have you got there, in Khlebodarovka? Another admirer?"

"No, you've guessed wrong."

"So why this concern? Have you ever even been there?"

"Never. They say it's a remarkably picturesque village."

Cherednichenko changed all at once: his tanned face which

until then had looked frozen and uninterested brightened instantly, lighting up from within and growing warmer.

"It's a village, Inna, like in a song! I don't think I've ever seen a more beautiful place."

"Can they really be intending to pull it down? It's a crime!"

"I'm sorry to say that there are people who like to hold forth about so called unpromising villages. However, we're not going to let those bunglers have everything their own way. You should really visit Khlebodarovka, my girl, it's only fifty or so kilometres and that's no distance at all nowadays. Perhaps you'll write another song afterwards. But go in spring, or better still, in early summer when the wheat is just forming ears. I once happened to get there at just that time of year. It's a small village but so picturesque, the countryside is so lovely. Our Kurayevka is a far cry from it. When you're drawing close to it, it looks like there's no road leading here: Khlebodarovka is entirely surrounded by wheatfields, here's wheat growing right up to the white-washed walls of the cottages, growing right beneath their windows, the ears reaching almost to their roofs! I got out of my car and stood speechless: I had found heaven. An earthly heaven! There was nothing superfluous, just what was necessary: human habitations and wheat. Plus the primeval silence and a single bee buzzing somewhere in the distance, in the wise silence. That's Khlebodarovka for you, all white and swimming in a sea of wheat. As quiet as quiet can be. Not a soul in sight. The sky was bright. The fields were ripening silently. A skylark twittered like a far-off silver bell. It was invisible it was flying so high, right near the sun. And the wheat stood high, was the same height as you: the ears would have tickled your cheek. Ah, Inna, Inna, if only I had been born a poet!.."

"You are one," Inna said with complete sincerity.

"No, Inna, I'm no poet. I'm an organiser, a land-tiller, and that's all. Your uncle, the sailor, now he's a poet! You should listen to him sometime when he's in the mood."

"You're both poets to me, real ones and not bookish ones, invented ones. Poets of life."

"Why, thank you kindly." With a gentle smile to the girl, Sherednichenko went up to his bashed and battered Volga that had travelled many miles over earth roads and muddy tracks.

14

Yagnich the knot-tier sat sorting things out in his mind, "splicing" the ropes of his distant and recent memories, linking the past and the present.

Wearing a striped T-shirt, he was smoking on the veranda while in front of him, in the middle of the yard, there stood the old pear tree. An iron tree that bent before no winds. It had thorns like rooster's claws, and nowadays there were few young pear-thieves prepared to make a closer acquaintance with them. Once upon a time, though, kids had climbed it. He too had known how to climb to the very crown but the kids weren't interested in it any more. The pear tree had grown wild. Its fruit was now small and bitter and no one even bothered to gather the windfalls: the pears in the collective farm's orchards were sweeter. Once upon a time though, when he was a child, the tree's fruit had been a treat. Noble pedigree pears, big and luscious, were something only to be tasted when a Tatar with the face pitted by smallpox came to Kurayevka to trade.

"A bucket of pears for a bucket of wheat!"

His bullock cart would creak down the street, and the whole of Kurayevka would hear his throaty voice calling the villagers to come and trade—bucket for bucket. The children would run and pester their parents to make the exchange, but far from all of them, however, could afford such a luxury.

The Yagniches' pear tree had witnessed a lot in its long life. It was in fact practically the last vestige of the family's past and this made it all the dearer to the sailor. A few days earlier, something new had appeared under the pear tree—a bench of green wood, still not painted but certainly very solid: he'd now be able to sit there, either alone or with one of his friends. He had made it himself and was pleased with his handiwork. There, beneath the pear tree, was also Yagnich's night-time nest. It wasn't bad there. He could see the stars through the foliage. Sometimes a pear would fall and hit him on the forehead. Towards morning, when the dawn breeze arose, the pear tree's green sails would rustle.

As soon as it was day, the old sailor would look for an occupation for himself. The day before, he had taken a mattock and gone to weed the flowerbeds around the obelisk. Today he was sitting on the veranda. As soon as the sun rose above the horizon, the children would come running to him from all

over Kurayevka. Both Yagniches and others. Ali, a bright little lad with hair as dark as a gipsy's, would sometimes come from as far away as the frontier post. A lone frontier watch-tower had for a long time now loomed over the distant outskirts of Kurayevka, looking out over the sea. A Kurayevka girl had married the senior officer there, an Azerbaijanian, and now their descendant, too, had learnt the way to old man Yagnich's house. The children would gather, chattering like a flock of sparrows, not the slightest bit shy. They were used to the old sailor.

"Granddad sailor, what else have you got in your chest?"

He'd bring out—for the umpteenth time!—his mysterious box, put it down in front of him on the steps, and, opening it just a crack, he'd begin to rummage about inside it, looking for some wonder to show the kids. But he had already run out of marvelously strange sea shells and stiff scaly pine cones that to Kurayevka's boys were exotic objects! They had never seen them before although in some parts of the world these pine cones lay in piles among the wild stones of the seashore, where the children of the Adriatic, the children of the Mediterranean's fishermen, would gather them for their games.

This time the old sailor showed them his diploma with Neptune on it, the trident sticking up in a warlike manner over the foamy breakers. The children bent their chestnut, fair, and dark heads low over the picture. They all smelt of sun. Head to head over the diploma, the children in silence examined the work of the trainees, the old sailor's treasure. Then the diploma was rolled up again and put away to be replaced by a piece of grey sailcloth with a bright metal object stuck through it.

"Now this, children, is my most treasured possession."

The sharp piece of metal glinted in the sailor's hand.

"What is it?"

"A needle!.. A sailmaker's needle for making sails. I've got a whole set of them and they're all numbered. Because for a ship's sails—they're made of very thick cloth, you know—you have to have a special needle. It's three-edged, you see, like a bayonet!" He showed them but would not let them touch it. "And look at its size—much bigger than the ones your mums use to sew buttons on your trousers."

Brown and black, grey and blue eyes lit up and with irrepressible curiosity examined the tools of the sailor's trade.

Before they had had their fill, the needles were already gone—the sailor had hidden his treasure again.

“And what else do you have right at the bottom?”

“So you want to know that as well?” smiled the sea-dog.

“Yes, please.”

“Well, you’ll have to be patient. Don’t be in a hurry, young man. You’ve got to have patience in life. If you know too much, you’ll get old quickly. And old age is no fun, let me tell you.”

The chest of secrets snapped shut right in front of the little boy sniffing about nearest the chest. It was on purpose that he did not show them everything all at once, so that they should come running back to him the next day...

“Granddad sailor, have you ever seen a shark?”

“Or a flying fish?”

“I have, I’ve seen all sorts of fish.”

The old sailor frowned. He fancied he himself was like one of those flying fish that fly so beautifully, flash in the air, and fall—slap-bang!—on the deck at someone’s feet. He’s fallen here, on this piece of dry land.

“Teach us how to tie knots.”

That he’d do willingly. A length of synthetic fibre rope appeared in his stubby-fingered iron-strong hands. They began to move. And immediately these great bear’s paws became nimble and agile! There was nothing still about his fingers’ movements: they did things to the rope so neatly, cunningly and smoothly that it was like watching a conjurer.

“That, children, is how you make a reef knot...”

They gazed attentively, no one so much as moved. They seemed even to hold their breath.

“And this, if you please, is a half-hitch...”

His hands moved again and a sheepshank appeared.

“And this now will be a Kalmyk’s knot...”

It all seemed extraordinarily clever. You could never tie a knot with just one hand...

“And this is a slip-knot...”

And more of “this” and “now this”: he could produce fifty different knots because you have to know a lot of knots if you are a sailor and each of them has its own job to do... At last—triumphantly:

“Do you know what a sailing ship is, children? It’s the wind and the skill of man’s hands. Remember that.”

The children's eyes sparkled with delight. To know how to do so many things!

On those occasions when Inna was present at these shows, her dark-brown eyes lit up with happy surprise too: the master knot-tier, a man of rare ability, he appeared to her to be a reliable knot surely tied by life itself. Tied in such a way that it won't easily be undone.

Inna considered it to be her duty as a nurse to watch after the old sailor's health, to nurture his strength and at all costs to heal Andron Gurievich's spiritual wounds. Tactfully but persistently she strove to discern all his "symptoms", to discover what was worrying him. The knot-tier would wave her away: he felt no pains, nothing was worrying him.

"But you don't sleep well, do you?"

"It depends."

To help him sleep she prescribed valerian extract in tablet form, little yellow lentils costing seven kopecks for a small bottle with a cotton wool stopper. A few days later, she asked him how they were working. Yagnich assured her that they helped. And although she soon came across the bottle tucked into a corner behind the ottoman with its contents untouched beneath the cotton wool, Andron Gurievich nevertheless was really sleeping better, something her mother noticed as well.

"You ought to get hold of some golden root for him as well," her mother advised. "Perhaps through the district pharmacy? The apothecary woman from Oleshkovo used once to sell that root in the market..."

"Kindness—that is his golden root," the nurse replied authoritatively. "There's no other medicine for loneliness."

Their visitor seemed to have abandoned any ideas he might have had about working. At first he had shown some interest in the fishing co-op. He had been there to look things over but had come back displeased.

"It's not for me. They hang around doing nothing before the day's half over, in such a daze that they trip over their own empty bottles."

This "fishing setup" was not for him. Perhaps something else would come up.

"We're not driving you out of the house, so why hurry?" asked his sister. "My harvester drivers have gone, so you'll be the master here for a while... Rest, build up strength."

And keep away from the fishing setup, because where there's fish, there too is crookedness: they say the procurator already has his eye on them."

The kindergarten was becoming more and more attractive to the old sailor. He'd go there, sit under the awning, and begin laying out the long, even straws he had soaked in water. The kids would surround their "admiral" and watch his preparations. Then the thick, knotty fingers would with incredible agility pick up a golden straw, carefully bend it, make a knot in it, and perform some other magic. Curiosity would fire the children.

"What's it going to be? A hat?"

The craftsman would be in no hurry to reply. They'd see when he had finished.

And from beneath his fingers there gradually appeared ... a little boat! Well, perhaps it wasn't quite a boat yet, but it was certainly very like one. In time a hull would appear and then a deck. And this straw here, children, will make the mast...

"The mizzen-mast is what it's called..."

Having spoken, he put his work down, sat and looked in the direction where there was a lot of blue, where the sea was. He looked quite unaffected, as if he were not thinking about anything, but had he spoken aloud as he followed his thoughts through, this is what he would have said:

Over there, children, where the sea is blue, two little children once drowned, two little tots like you or even a bit smaller. They never had time to see anything of life—their whole world was ended by black bombs, that flew down whining horribly from the sky. The bombs hit the deck of the boat sailing to the Caucasus. Their eyes widened with terror, their mouths opened to scream. And it was on this scream that they choked as they sank to the bottom, deep down where the sun's rays can't reach. Or perhaps they clutched to their mother's hands, asking for help. Or perhaps they clung until nightfall to a floating spar, waiting for help, horrifyingly alone in the endless expanse of water? What were their faces like? No matter how hard he tried nowadays, he couldn't remember. They flickered before his misty, tear-filled gaze, as if through a wash of sea water. There children, where the sea is blue, is where your "admiral" would like to be. There death would hold no terrors for him.



After a while, he pulled himself together and resumed work. The straw boat grew and grew. He arranged its fragile little masts and hoisted its stiff sails which were also made of straw and flashed a golden colour as if they had preserved the flicker of a ray of sunlight inside them.

Without being told, the children guessed right.

"The Orion. It's the Orion!"

And dark-eyed Ali from the frontier post heatedly asserted that the boat was exactly like the one he once saw with his father through binoculars from the top of the observation tower.

At the next session, the boat grew some more, figures made of ears of wheat appearing on the masts.

"These are the trainees," the old sailor explains with a smile. "The crew!"

The wheaten crew was a fine one: every member knew what to do and by which sail to stand on duty. A wonderful boat! All the other toys had lost their shine compared to this one. It had eclipsed them all. Now where should they put this miniature Orion? What's the best place for it? The craftsman thought this over together with the children. At last they decided to fix it high up on a wall, right under the eaves, so that it should be able to see the sea. And no one would break it there as only the swallows would be able to visit it but they would be careful. Attached to the façade, the boat looked even better. It was even visible from the street and passers-by could see it bathing in the golden sun-waves, shining like a coat of arms on the invisible battle banner of this young Kurayevka regiment.

One evening, when Yagnich was setting up his faithful camp-bed under the pear-tree, Cherednichenko unexpectedly walked into the yard. He seemed out of sorts, sullen, and walked as if he had a hundred pounds weighing down on him. Or perhaps he was feeling poorly—was his heart playing up again? He sank heavily onto the bench and after a moment's silence, spoke sadly.

"Do you remember how we used sometimes to go down to the sea after the performances of our amateur theatrical company? Boys and girls—all healthy and young. The moonlit night, the quiet sky, no jet planes roaring above. And so what if we were badly dressed, if some of us even went barefoot; we knew that future was ours, the joy of comradeship was ours, the fire

of youth gave us strength. We'd stand facing the moon and how we'd sing. 'The pussy willow is so smart'. Or that other one: 'Under the white birch, the Cossacks lay dead'..."

Yagnich understood that on this occasion their roles would be reversed: now he would have to lead his comrade out of his depression, whether the misfortune that had befallen him was great or small.

"Has anything happened, Savva?"

"Yes. Something has. They just 'phoned to say that Krutipolokh, the chairman at Ivanovo, has just had a heart attack. It happened right on the threshing-floor and it's such a bad one that he's not expected to live. A frontline comrade, a faithful friend! Near Odessa, we frequently went scouting at night together right up to the very estuary. And we saved each other's lives time and again. If it weren't for him, the willows would long have been growing up above Cherednichenko. Ah, even the best get taken, pulled up roots and all."

He fell silent.

"It happens to all of us sooner or later, Savva."

"That's true. We sometimes forget that. Some people seem to spend their whole lives in hesitation, as if they were writing a rough copy of their life which sometime in the future they will be able to rewrite, making a fresh start of their lives. I was asked on the threshing-floor the other day how it was that I had remained the same despite being what I am: you've been chairman for so many years, they said, but you still haven't lost your humanity, still haven't turned into a walking piece of concrete. If it weren't for my memory, I said, I might have done just that. Because it's one's memory that is always correcting one: don't forget, Savva, the people who once stood by your side. This one died in your arms, that one was hit two steps away from you by a bullet that sent his cap and his brains flying, another perhaps stopped a dum-dum bullet that was heading for you. So if you think of it, your life is a gift from him! The bullet did not pause to ask where it was flying or for whom it was intended. You yourself could now be dust. Are you any better than those with whom you went scouting or on attacks? It's thanks to them that you're alive. Don't forget that. Remember it—and not just at anniversary meetings but at every step down life's highway. If you have been fated to live, then live but don't forget that life is given to us so that we should do good with it. Burn brightly and clearly; don't

smoke up the sky. That kind of smoking may suit some people but as far as I'm concerned I'd rather catch it at one full swoop, have my heart suddenly give way under the pressure! And that's what's happened to my friend. Ah, poor Kruti-polokh!"

"But he may still recover. Man has a great reserves of strength. He can sometimes survive things that seem utterly impossible."

"Yes. That's true. I myself sometimes feel a sharp pain here... But a moment later I take a deep breath and get back to work! Damn it, I do so want to be around to see some grandchildren."

Then, pulling himself together, Cherednichenko changed the subject.

"Well, and how are you?"

"Still fighting to keep the ship afloat," the sailor replied quietly.

"I'm asking what you're doing about a job. Have you decided on anything yet?"

"Not yet. The kindergarten keeps asking me to work there as a senior nanny."

"And why not? Agree to it!" Cherednichenko said gaily. "Looking after children is a sacred duty."

Yagnich lit a cigarette, moved to the edge of the bench, and sat immobile, immersed in gloomy thoughts.

"No, Savva. Give me some other job. Find me something ... something tricky."

"Oh, then you should become chairman!" Cherednichenko retorted lustily. "Now that's a job won't give you a moment's peace! That'll have you working your guts out, working till they burst! And you don't even have the right to squeak. Just grin and bear it, brother." Cherednichenko grew serious again. "I only really felt alive when I was a rank-and-file combine harvester operator, looking out on the world from the bridge of my ship of the steppes. Say the word and I'd go back to the helm of one of those this very day. To watch the sun rise and dusk fall from the bridge of a combine harvester—now that's life! One needs nerves tougher than steel cables for the job I hold now, Andron. By the end of the day you can hardly stand. You stumble after work into the park and sit down by the pond. Yashko or whatever his name is—Mishko—swims up to ask for some crumbs. You cosset him instead of

your grandchildren, at least the creature's there to bring warmth to your soul. I confess to you, my friend, that the longer you live, the more you want accord with nature, or harmony, or whatever... But you can't always achieve it. We take no pity on nature and it pays us back in kind. A heatwave like that, all of a sudden..."

"And it's still as hot as at the equator."

"Too true. I was looking at the sunflowers today, and it was enough to make one's heart bleed: a foot high, thin little stalks, with flowers like ox-eye daisies. And that's after we put so much time and trouble into them! They ought to be rising like great golden crowns over the sea but in fact they're barely alive."

"They say that this year's been one of increased sunspot activity," Yagnich remarked, remembering one of the trainees on the Orion. "There have been terrible storms up there on the Sun."

"Yes, something's gone wrong with nature. Take us, we're longing for some rain but not all rains are welcome nowadays: you want to test them first. I read the other day that scientists have discovered that some rainfalls have an acid content. God knows how these acids got there but after that kind of shower the planet's forests grow more slowly."

"It's due to air and water pollution."

"Scientific and technological progress is of course a good thing. It's clear to everyone that it's historically necessary and inevitable. But we men, the masters of the earth, must not forget that it's a double-edged weapon. Take land improvement, for example, our irrigation of the steppes. We've made canals: wonderful! They make a branch for our farm: better still. Right? For us here water is our strength and our fortune. So let's build irrigation systems, let's have water. So we say: welcome to the scientific and technological revolution! But you have to think before you do all this! If, for example, you scrimped, if you didn't do things just right, didn't listen to the advice of clever people, what kind of a master are you then? These land improvers were actually told to line their main canal, to cover its bottom with plastic or concrete. They didn't pay any mind to those sober voices. It was expensive, they said. They'd save a penny here and there. Well, you know the proverb about spoiling the ship for a ha'p'orth of tar. So now we've got filtration. Khlebodarovka is swamped, in Ivanovka their

cellars are flooded. And here too, out on the third team's section, the subsoil is being flooded and salt is being driven to the surface by the water. You must have seen from the road how there's great empty patches in the cornfields."

"Yes. I saw them."

"Two hundred hectares of our best land has been spoilt for us. They've made a salt marsh of them for us and it may be a hundred years or more before we can use them again! Now there's no question of us sowing maize when not even thistles want to grow there! At the last meeting of Party activists, a few people had to be given a dressing down: how could they have let it happen? Where were you looking, you sobs? Do you intend to go on turning the Ukraine's black earth into barren lands?! They shrugged, made helpless gestures, and looked for scapegoats so that they themselves could stay clean..."

"They're good at that: they scuttle like rats to take shelter behind bits of paper."

"And if you are afraid to take on responsibilities, if you haven't thought everything over in good time, if you haven't defended the people's interests properly in your rush for rewards, then what kind of a Communist are you?" Cherednichenko was growing more and more heated. "He has justifications for everything: you see, he's just had his budget cut, he was being pressed for quick results, there wasn't time to consider everything. So he stormed ahead and things were shoddily done. He does some shoddy work and leaves and what happens afterwards is not his concern. So there's no one to take to account, and who's going to compensate us, who's going to compensate our state for these immeasurable losses, who's going to make those salty lands healthy again?"

"Those careless bastards should be punished more severely."

"There's no punishing them. Just you try and prove that he caused you this loss intentionally. Didn't you see for yourself how hard he tried, how much work he put in, how very much he wanted to make things better for you. And quite a few of these people are able men, experienced, with diplomas... But that's the way it turned out: they turned your land into a salt marsh for you. Yet ask them to de-salt it: all you'll get are helpless looks. They'll promise, it's true, to drain the land and wash the soil clean, but they themselves don't really know if it'll do any good, whether anything at all will

come of it. It turned out to be easy to wreck things, harder to make good."

Cherednichenko had become so worked up he even had to rub his chest with his hand.

"Would you like some valerian?" Yagnich suggested, noticing his involuntary movement. "I've got some in tablets."

"And what does losing a fertile hectare mean in our terms?" Cherednichenko went on thinking out loud, paying no attention to Yagnich's suggestion. "Black earth like that isn't to be found just anywhere, you know. It's the real pot of gold at the foot of the rainbow. Even if we manage to de-salt it, when will that be? In the third millenium? And how many hectares have been written off like that already? Now the authors of these projects are all in a lather but where, I ask, where were all these specialists before? Okay, so they didn't listen to us, the grass roots, but science, too, warned them! They shrugged it off and ignored all warnings. We demanded of one of them at the activists' meeting that he should explain. He went on and on for an hour or more, repeating endlessly, drank a decanter of water, and didn't really make anything clearer at all. No, no," Cherednichenko stood up and threw back his shoulders, "if you're going to build, then do so properly and don't shilly-shally. You can rub things out on your drawing paper, but in real life you can't... When you're working the earth, you have to do everything right the first time, without any rough copies! So don't measure seven times, measure a thousand times, before you cut the cloth!"

15

Where was the horizon? It was not visible: the endless brightness of the sea blended smoothly with the equally endless brightness of the firmament. The brilliance of the day is born of the brilliance, of the harmonic blending, of the elements overflowing with light.

The sun was at its zenith.

The Orion was out in the open sea. She hardly moved. There was no wind. The sails hung slack.

Dolphins watched her. The ship stood out white in front of these flocks of children of the sea, looking like some wondrous palace gliding on the water as smooth as a lake. There was not a single ship in sight, not a single tanker on the horizon.

Only the Orion. All by herself on the mirror-like surface of the sea, all alone on the smooth expanse. She looked unusually tall with all her sails out. A white cloud! (From crow's nest to base, her mast measured 47 metres.)

The trainees were languishing with heat on deck. The newcomers among them were unused to such an abundance of light: it came from all around them and quite blinded them. It is something not to be seen anywhere other than in the Mediterranean at midday. Their eyes stung. Space seemed truly endless. So much light and no wind.

"Old Yagnich has gone and taken the wind with him."
The captain inspected the ship. His nearly boyish face reflected a far from boyish anxiety. He kept looking at the little board beneath the alarm siren: "The alarm signal is a continuous hoot lasting thirty seconds." There was no reason, however, to be expecting an alarm. But nevertheless the young captain felt uneasy. Why?

An auditorium back at naval college. A display of seaman's skills. Examples of knots: a reef knot ... a half-hitch ... a sheepshank...

The hardest thing to splice is a steel cable. To do so means to work literally until your hands are raw and bloody. And Yagnich the craftsman is standing over you.

The chart house. A map is laid out on the table.

A compass.

A protractor.

A rubber...

Two or three trainees were leaning over it: drawing a course. There were two radar screens in the same room. Sails and radars—the Orion had both! The captain saw a symbol in this, he derived pride from it.

This was the third day that they were becalmed. "He's gone and taken the wind with him." Why had they made that joke? First-year trainees, they had never even set eyes on Yagnich! It was you who had sailed with him as a first-year trainee, on your longest voyage to date. They had almost entered the tropics (the zone of the north-east trade winds), in order to have a fair wind; further north they would have a head wind. The Orion used that, too, on the return journey.

What a wonderful and instructive voyage it had been!

It was the first such journey the Orion had made. The trainees seemed to have been almost hand-picked, fine young

men every last one of them, from three naval colleges. The voyage turned out to be a difficult one—they met with storms several times—but astonishingly happy. No one was injured, no one fell sick, and nothing untoward happened.

"It's because we have Yagnich here," they had joked. "It's thanks to him."

What had he been like?

Once again he happened to overhear some talk by young people who had never seen the real Yagnich coming from the radio shack. They were busy composing, creating another Yagnich, their own picture of him.

He had existed, truly existed! He had spent his whole life beneath these sails. No family, no one, nothing. He had lived here for ever, tying knots and polishing the ship's bell. He had been strict with the trainees. A master craftsman.

He'd lead you to a piece of rigging and point at it:

"Name?"

You'd not know.

A length of rope would caress your back. It wouldn't hurt because it was only what you deserved. But if you did know, if you had answered right, he'd shake your hand.

What on earth were these fertile imaginations inventing? Nothing of the kind had ever happened on board the Orion. Yagnich had never had recourse to extreme measures!

But fantasies were hard at work.

No one knew how old Yagnich was. The trainees might inquire from time to time.

"Comrade craftsman, how old are you?"

"Forty."

And that without the shadow of a smile. Next year there would be new lads on board and they would also ask.

"How old are you?"

The reply would remain the same.

"Forty."

The master craftsman had come to a standstill, stopped the clock at forty. Perhaps he found that number particularly memorable since he never claimed to be either older or younger than that. He always said he was forty. Perhaps that number had some secret meaning for Yagnich? What was amazing, though, was that forty was what Yagnich looked and he never seemed to grow any older! A constitution of extraordinary strength, an iron constitution. And a heart... Oh, what a

kindly, noble heart! He sang songs, he knew hundreds of them, especially old ones, old seafarers' songs (the captain had never heard Yagnich singing, that is, excluding his infrequent habit of humming something quietly to himself).

The new trainees nevertheless preferred the craftsman they had invented for themselves.

One day the Orion got caught up in a terrible hurricane, was picked up and buffeted by the wind. Night, the wind howled, the black elements were running wild. Waves washed over the Orion's deck. Squall followed squall. Their list went to forty degrees and more. They thought that they had had it. But even in these conditions trainees were sent up the rigging! And again—more amazing still!—no one was hurled overboard.

They said that this was because Yagnich (who had been severely injured that night) continued to live, because his heart was still beating on board the Orion. Tied down to the operating table with ropes he had himself tightened, he was under the knife in the sick bay down in the bowels of the ship. It was impossible to operate, the listing of the ship rocked the patient to and fro, but there was nothing else to be done and the craftsman himself said: "Go ahead!" His heart was taken out of his chest and it kept beating and beating. The blood vessels were sutured with coarse thread and a sailmaker's triangular needle. Yagnich survived!

Sheer fantasy! The already crammed teaching programme of the naval college contained the following course: "The Vitality of the Ship". But they were speaking of something else: the Orion taught them a precious and unusual lesson about the rare vitality of a man. The lads, it seemed, considered that Yagnich's mighty and undying spirit, his indomitable will, had decided the fate of the crew, of the Orion, that night, that it was this will which communicated itself to the whole crew and helped the ship to withstand all the squalls and come out unharmed from the hurricane's grip.

"Why are they inventing all this?" the captain frowned in incomprehension and shrugged: he simply could not see the reason for all this myth-making. Everything had happened differently on board the Orion. It had all been standard, severe, businesslike. Whence then came these fables, these conjectures, this burst of fantasy on the part of the trainees? What spiritual need was driving these young people to make a completely real and in general quite lawfully and honourably retired man

into someone else, into some half-magical human amulet for themselves? Somewhere in the ship's nooks and crannies, in the cabins or in the shade of the sails, they were weaving and jointly creating a mythical picture of a man who had "gone and taken the wind with him". How many different kinds of people had trained on the Orion, how many of these had been half or completely forgotten, so why was this man—a good one, true, but nevertheless not so very different from others, quite ordinary and plain—so firing the newcomers' imaginations? And why was he just now, when they were becalmed in the midst of this boundless brightness, on their lips and in their hearts?

Could it really be that these clever young men who knew all about radar and had all kinds of modern electronic equipment to hand still needed an invented, mythical, fairy-tale Yagnich, a master craftsman who never grew older than forty, a legend of a man?

16

As soon as it was so dark, a brief bandit-like whistle pierced the air near the Yagniches' yard.

Their mother was inside, but the door was open and she heard it. Lord, could it be that criminal back again? The days were long gone now since whistles like that were used to call girls out into the street. One really only heard it any more from the stage, in old-fashioned plays. And now it seemed as if she was to be shown just such a scene, and not in the club but in real life, right in front of her house. They couldn't sing at all, but just look at how well they could whistle! They probably got their practice at the stadium, during football matches.

The person the whistle was calling was not, however, at home. Kurayevka's nurse did not work fixed hours. She had just been preparing to go to the cinema when someone had come running from the Cherednichenkos—the chairman needed her attentions.

Zeus had been brought down. The harvest being over, he had gone to the beach and straight away, while still in a sweat, had dashed into his Black, jelly-fish-filled, Sea: he had caught a cold and this was now suspected of having turned into pneumonia. When in midwinter he had had to wade

through icy water near Kerch, making his way from Taman to the peninsula on a scouting mission, then, of course, nothing had happened, he hadn't even caught a sniffle or at least not one that he could remember today. Their greatcoats would sometimes freeze stiff in the frost, clanging like bells whenever they moved, so that they had to keep soaking them in water to prevent them from making a noise and waking up the enemy's guards. And now all he had to do was look at the sea and he was already sneezing and developing a temperature. The most radical treatment, the only one Savva Danilovich recognised for such illnesses, was cupping. He would tamely present his back for Varvara Filipovna to place her glass globes on. But this time his wife, too, was ill and he had had to call for the young nurse. Let her get some practice.

After Inna had run off, her mother was suddenly struck by a doubt, a suspicion that Varvara might have deliberately called for the young nurse in order to check that she at least knew how to use cups properly.

She had gone off, and now the whistler was whistling. It was not the first time that the devil had brought him to their yard. There he was whistling again—this time with a trill a little like a nightingale's.

"Tell him that she isn't here and that in any case she has better things to do than go out for a walk," Mother Yagnich shouted out into the yard, hoping that there was someone there to pass the message on. In fact, there wasn't anyone in the yard. Just the pear tree, looking like a cloud, but perhaps it liked to hear the lad whistling in the dark. The woman went out onto the veranda. So that was it: the bench beneath the pear tree was unoccupied. There was no watchman on duty. The old sailor had gone to the neighbours to watch television together with all the little children. They had an immense television set (the size of one of the old village trunks girls used to keep their dowries in). It stood in the garden right underneath a walnut tree and she could see its blue screen from here, from the veranda, and a multitude of heads—both of children and of adults. The old sailor's bald patch shone amongst them. The Yagniches also had a television, perhaps even a better one, on the side-table in the corner but its screen had not been lit once throughout the whole harvest. The sailor could have tuned it and watched television at home but no, he was drawn to the neighbours, to the

children. Obviously he found them good company. Now they had jumped up and waved, shouting: "Goal! Goal!"

Another quiet whistle came from the street. What a persistent one he was!

The mistress of the house walked down the veranda steps and headed for the gate. Something moved beneath the cherry trees (in Kurayevka the cherry trees had moved from the yards out into the streets since now no one had to worry about thieves), someone was hiding, holding his breath, in the shadows. It simply had to be the owner of that superb whistle...

"Is that you, Victor?"

"Yes."

"Haven't you done enough whistling? Come into the yard."

She was obliged to make him welcome because, like it or not, this night-time whistler might possibly become her son-in-law.

"I was calling Inna. Is she home?"

"She'll be back soon. Come in, come in. I want to have a talk with you."

She seated her daughter's boyfriend down on the veranda but did not go to fetch a snack or a drink for him. He wasn't going to get that treatment—being an uninvited guest, he could make do without it. She turned on the light (in order to have a better look at Inna's chosen one) and then sat down at the table herself. The young man sat immobile on his chair, having moved it as far back down the veranda as he could. She examined him critically. So here was the Veremeyenko's little treasure. Was he really destined to become her son-in-law? He hadn't changed very much, although he'd been far away since she had last seen him. She'd heard that his head was shaved but that was hardly noticeable. He waited, polite and attentive, for her to address him, lanky, smooth-faced after shaving, a modest and timid half-smile flickering on his lips. He had his mother's nose, her eyebrows—narrow but somehow daring, wild, and exciting. Not every girl would withstand the attraction of such a face. All in all he was a handsome lad with his oval face and olive complexion, and when he sat there quietly with his hands pressed between his knees, looking meekly at the ceiling, at the light-bulb around which moths were flying, you would never say that here was a good-for-nothing, a lazybones, and a hooligan.

"Will she be back soon?" he asked quietly.

"She didn't say, dear. She's at work. She'll come, of course: our children stay at home, not like some I might mention."

"If that's a barb intended for me, then let me explain? I also hope to be moving back in with my family. It looks like I'll be getting work near here soon."

"At the holiday home, I suppose?" The construction of holiday home where miners could build up their strength by the sea had been going on for two years now. "As an accordion player to entertain the men from the mines?"

"It's a secret for the time being," he mumbled with a smile, evading the issue.

"Oh, Victor, Victor, what do you think you're doing?" Inna's mother said with a sigh of sad sympathy. "How long are you going to go on doing nothing? Look at the other lads your age. They're all busy: this one's studying, that one's in the army, a third is never off his tractor. They're real sons, they don't shame their names in any way and they bring only joy to their parents. Just take our Petro,"—her eyes lit up at the thought of her helmsman—"he's still a child compared to you but look how hard-working and bright he is. His father can entrust a combine harvester to him without a second thought. He's signed on to go to Kazakhstan, a long journey, on equal terms with the adults. But what about you?"

At home Victor would have answered such a speech with a careless "Don't preach me, Ma, I'm fed up right to the teeth with your preaching", would have got up and turned his back on her, but here he wouldn't dare, the cunning youngster pretended that listening to this advice from a well-wisher was a pure delight for him, that he was absorbing popular wisdom like a sponge.

"Or perhaps I'm wasting my time saying all this, Victor? Why don't you say something? A dog barks and the wind carries the noise away—is that what my words are to you?"

"I'm listening. I'm paying attention, Ganna Guriyevna."

That encouraged her: who would not feel better after being addressed so respectfully. As if invigorated by this, she sang him another paean of praise about her son, then remembered Yagnich's nephew Anatoly who somewhere in the GDR had saved a little German boy from a fire—the commander of the regiment in which the hero was serving had sent news of this to Kurayevka. Using this potent example, the woman went on "working over" the good-for-nothing sitting so meekly

and politely in front of her, so meek one could have painted an icon of him! He was staring at the ceiling, intent, it seemed, not so much on what she said as on the moths flying around the light-bulb.

"If you've no pity for yourself, you might at least feel sorry for your parents," she went on admonishing him. "Your father is quite run down with grief and doesn't look himself any more. And all because of who? And your mother doesn't find things any easier, shame and grief make her afraid to show herself in public. You're their only son, their only hope, and they spoilt you terribly. You wanted an accordion or a Jawa motorbike: they never refused you anything. And how did you show your gratitude? You poisoned their lives and wrecked your own—all through stupidity! Don't seek to put the blame on anyone else but yourself. You understand that, at least?"

"I understand, Gurievna, and how," he said again the meek monastic mien on his handsome face even sadder. "I'm trying to change radically. I promise you that soon you won't be able to recognise me. My spiritual rebirth, Aunt Ganna, my resurrection begun in the prison camp, has not finished yet. It is continuing inside me, here," he said, laying his hand in a dramatic gesture over his heart.

A weight was lifted from the woman's heart. You only had to have a heart to heart talk with someone to discover encouraging things about him. He wasn't made of stone after all! At home, she was prepared to vouch, they simply didn't know how to show the right way to their lad, despite both being teachers. It was easier with strangers, but they hadn't been able to find the key to their son's heart. And although she, Ganna, was not a teacher, although she was only a kindergarten nurse, just look at how she had instantly awakened this lazybones' conscience. Now she set about singing Inna's praises to him. How she had graduated from nursing school with a gold medal (this medal was an imprompt invention there on the veranda), what good jobs she had been offered, how she had been lured to the capital, to work at the central Red Cross, which sent medicine and food to India and to all sorts of other far-off places whenever there was an epidemic or an earthquake... But nothing had tempted Inna because she was longing with all her heart to go home—Kurayevka was dearer to her than any other place on earth, and being by her mother was what she treasured most.

"Varvara just now asked her to go and cup the chairman. You manage it better than I do, Inna, she said. Consider it yourself: do you think the chairman would allow just anyone to place the cups on his important state back. But he's quite happy about her treating him, since she was graded excellent at the school."

Thus panegyrics were sung to her daughter with a mother's inspiration, with the Yagnich family's imagination.

"And that's the kind of girl as waited for you, a wastrel, although there, at the school, she was proposed to three times, offered their hand and heart by three young men, pilots and divers," the mistress of the house continued extemporising. "Another, you know, would not have let such chances go, would instantly have grabbed herself a smart lieutenant or a qualified doctor, or a young combine harvester operator with a Hero of Socialist Labour's Gold Star! No, Mummy, she said, I'll wait for the man fate has given me but temporarily taken away. He's suffering there, doesn't know what to do, and the only thing that's holding him together is that he trusts me. To turn away when someone's in trouble is a mean thing to do. No, I won't go back on my word, she said, I'll wait since my heart has chosen Victor. Just you treasure that!"

"I do." His voice filled with true in feigned warmth. "I've never known anyone to equal Inna. Inna's everything to me, if you want to know. Not a day went by that I didn't think of her. I'll bend over backwards for her sake because I know that she'll not stand for my failings and in any case I myself am sick of my own uselessness and slackness. I'm going to put an end to it. But try to see things from where I stand. I've been thoroughly shaken by life, Ganna Gurievna, shaken so hard that I'm still staggering... The first hard blow was when I was thrown out of naval college. They could have punished me in some other way, not so severe... All I'd done was go AWOL..."

"What's that—AWOL?"

"Absent without leave. I ran away for two days. And the discipline there, let me tell you..."

"What kind of a naval college would it be without discipline? A real person should not be frightened of a properly ordered life. Look how long my brother sailed on the Orion, he's given half his life to the sea, but he's not complaining. On the contrary, he misses the sea, despite all its severities.

And now he's teaching the little children his science about why boats stay afloat!"

It was with a smirk and sometimes with a barely restrained yawn that Victor heard out the praises for the old sailor. The young man had his own ideas about the man, considering him a tough nut of a granddad, proud and hard, a better kept well away from. If the old sailor caught sight of him, he'd really make a feast of preaching at you, Victor.

"If you had been an excellent student at the naval college, you might now be sailing with other trainees under the Orion's sails somewhere. Just think what an honour that would have been! Long ago, we kids used to love it when my uncle's windmill swept its wings, so just think what it is to have missed sailing on the Orion!..."

Once she had started about the Orion, Auntie Ganna was not able to stop and ploughed on and on as if the wind had caught her own sails, as if she herself were a sailor, talking in a singsong voice about how they only accepted the best, what a wonderful training they got, and so on and so forth non-stop. Meanwhile Victor concealed his boredom as best he could, stretched his stork-like neck again, and put in an attentive air. All he heard, however, was the melody of his future mother-in-law's speech, a sound like the distant, monotonous burbling of a brook. The young man turned his attention to his own inner voice. This voice was saying that you may very well be right, my dear mum-in-law, but that doesn't make it any easier for me to swallow. Your Victor feels pretty bitter. Have you ever known that feeling when you simply don't want to live even though there's no clear reason for your depression. Do you know what grey indifference is, grey and dull, when nothing interests you, when everything seems old hat and you believe that everything has already happened to you and therefore know what you're going to be like tomorrow, what the menu on the dirty, sticky table in the canteen's going to say, what flies are going to buzz over your greasy bowl of borsch? No, the mistress of this house didn't know it. Now if Inna... No one had ever shown him as much patience and tolerance as she. She wanted to see and did see him as better than he was in fact; her loving heart garbed him in the clothes of her generous dream, placed the bravest of hopes in him, and, strange to tell, sometimes he felt that these hopes were in fact making him better, cleaner, more worthy. Inna was that great prize that

life had offered him, offered him, gambling perhaps too much, in advance! It was for her sake that he was sitting here and had for the last hour or more been listening to this woman's boring preachings, supporting in his future mother-in-law the illusion that her speeches alone had been able to bring about a complete volte-face in his heart.

When at last Aunt Ganna attempted to discover how strong the lad's feelings were for her daughter, Victor was suddenly careless with his words.

"My happiness lies in her hands, and that's the truth! Only her and none of the fancy Annies from the sanatorium!"

He could have bitten his tongue off as soon as he had spoken because the mistress of the house immediately grew suspicious and narrowed her eyes.

"And who might I ask are these fancy Annies? Who are you calling that?"

"Well, fancy Annies, that what we all call them..."

"Who all? Your underworld friends, your mates from prison camp! But that's not all. A decent fellow would not call a girl or a woman by some mocking name, even behind her back. Fancy Anna, just think of it." She was really quite upset. "And what are you making fun of. Of a name, that's what. My own grandmother was called Anne. Do you really think that's funny? No one in Kurayevka laughed at her because my grandmother Anne gave birth to nine children and brought them all up. And no one of them was a bad lot like you are!"

She maintained an ominous silence for a moment (becoming much more like her brother when she was severe), her face round and even puffy. She now evidently felt bitter and ashamed for this "bad lot" who was sitting there not the slightest bit put out by her comments or sharp words although one could feel that he was on guard internally.

"Victor," Ganna Gurievna said in a rather solemn voice after her pause, "I want to ask you to do me a favour... May I?"

"Please."

"As the mother of my family in a kind, maternal way, I beg you: leave my daughter alone. Go away! You won't bring her happiness."

He went pale.

"How can you tell whether I will or won't?"

"I can feel it in my bones."

"Bones are not a reliable source of information."

"It depends whose. A mother's bones are more reliable than anything. I have never so humbled myself before anyone before, son. You're handsome, it won't be hard for you to find someone else, all you need do is crook a finger at one of the smart painted girls from the sanatorium and she'll come running. But Inna... Inna has her own road to travel and it's not the same one as yours. Have pity on the girl, pay her back for her faithful love at least by that! Because love like hers is all too rare nowadays. So go away! I'm asking you as if you were my son!"

He sat white as sheet with his eyes closed and his chin on his chest.

"You're asking for the impossible," he said in a whisper.

This only spurred her on.

"Be strong, Victor, and don't shadow her life! It often happens that way: two people love one another for a year or two but then they marry other people. And are there so few pretty girls here? Look, they say Musya Osnachevskaya's pining for you. She's a lovely girl and an only daughter. Perhaps it's her you're fated to make happy."

He said nothing, did not even lift his head. Ganna interpreted his silence as vacillation: evidently the lad was fighting with himself, weighing things in the balance. Accordingly, she should not retreat but press on and on with her line. He'd make up his mind. He'd agree. Suddenly, she had an idea.

"Vitya, please accord me my maternal request and for that I'll... I'll give you a Lada car!"

"A Lada?" He blinked in surprise.

The temptation should have been enough for anyone but especially for Victor, whose passion for rapid travel was famous throughout Kurayevka. Ganna's calculations were correct because the lad brightened up: he raised his narrow eyebrows in unconcealed curiosity.

"You have a Lada?"

"We'll have one soon!" she exclaimed excitedly. "Last year—didn't you hear?—the two best combine harvester operators in the district were given cars as bonuses. One got a Zaporozhets and the other a Lada. The secretary of the regional committee himself gave them the keys: in the stadium, in front of a large crowd."

"But they have those keys, not you," Victor smirked.

"Consider them as good as ours! The 'Yagnich family team' is also among the ten best, didn't you see the photo in the papers! Last year they got a TV set as a bonus, and this summer, if the wheat hadn't got scorched, there'd have been a brand-new, bright red Lada on new tyres under the window. So next year there will be one, and that's a fact!"

Veremeyenko stood up and put on a severe look.

"And so you want to pay a Lada for your daughter! And why not a Volga? Eh?" Unexpectedly for the mistress of the house, he burst out laughing. Then he became serious again and looked down at the shamefaced woman. He clearly had the upper hand now.

"I blush for you, Aunty Ganna. Did you seriously believe that Victor would give way to that temptation of yours? Accept a payoff for leaving Inna alone? It's disgusting... You yourself were young once, can you have forgotten or did you never know what love is?"

"If only you knew! I knew it and still do," Ganna overcame her shame and stood up. "It's not for a wastrel like you to preach to me. And what I said about a car, let's have that totally forgotten, all right?"

"Of course."

It was at that moment that Inna came running up onto the veranda.

One glance at the two of them was enough for her to sense that something had gone wrong and she looked worried.

"What opinions have you failed to share?"

"It wasn't opinions but you that we failed to share," the young man was tempted to say but he only allowed himself a milder joke.

"We were talking about matters at the UN."

"And how's our chairman?" Ganna put in quickly in order to get off the subject. "Or did they call you for something unimportant? A little boil or something?"

"Not at all. He's got a bad cold and is running a temperature," Inna said. "It doesn't look like pneumonia though, I think it's just a bad cold." She cast another loving and concerned glance at Victor. "Why are you so pale?"

"I've a nervous constitution."

It flashed through her mind that he might be drunk but she immediately suppressed the suspicion: no. Earlier, after one

such occasion, she had demanded that he should never show himself in front of her in a drunken state and Victor had so far never broken his promise.

"Goal! Goal!" came some cries from the neighbours' garden.

Victor walked up to the girl and in front of her mother, as if specially to disappoint her, took her hand with a sure gesture.

"Let's go down to the beach, treasure. Walk along the moonlight path..."

By the way she responded eagerly to his joking invitation, by the way they forgot everything and pressed close as they set off across the yard to the gate, Ganna Gurievna understood that there was no way she could stop her daughter now because there were some things in life in the face of which all one's cunning was useless, and she herself knew that one of those things was love.

17

Inna had stopped writing songs. Since returning to Kurayevka she had not put a single line down on paper although some vague and misty ideas had flitted through her head. She had done more reading and had again become entranced by the classics: the Palace of Culture had over the last few years collected quite a large library. Cherednichenko himself had seen to this, had made sure that its stock grew as it should: the more Kurayevka read, the less it would drink vodka.

The district newspaper from time to time printed poems and once it even carried a whole literary page entitled "The Writings of the Young". Inna read and reread the poems line by line. There were such metaphors as the "music of the fields", the "ships of the steppe", there were excerpts from long poems (in all likelihood, as yet unwritten), verses dedicated to combine harvester operators, to their selfless work, to their sleepless nights. They sang of the "brothers of the sun"—the sunflowers, whose golden crowns were reflected in the sea (could this refer to those same flowers which stood shrivelled and half dead because of the drought just outside Kurayevka, clinging to life with their last strength). The poems seemed to be all right on the one hand but somehow still did not ring true. They sang of the poetry of the farmer's toil, but somehow their

poetic wings made it all seem rather too easy and pretty. Where was the pain, the grim look in the eyes of the sower when he sees a drought eating the fruit of his heavy toil, when he has to stand impotent, his work-hardened hands useless, in the face of the relentless elements? The modest district muse was silent about all this. The page was ruled by lyrical outpourings from the inspired pens of boys and girls, Inna's unknown peers who, baring their hearts, avowed their love to the silent steppe and the sea. When Inna was still at the nursing school she had attended a literary circle organised by the local newspaper and called *The Sun Cluster*. She had almost never taken part in the young authors' competitions or in the lively discussions that followed the literary readings: she had felt insufficiently prepared and had furthermore been held back by her shyness. She had on occasion heard good verse that reflected sincere love for people, for the steppe, but most of it was logorrhea, imitative and derivative writings notable for their immodest tones, their loud poetic egocentricity. At least, that's what it seemed to her. She imagined to herself how they would react to such poetry at home, in her family, what a sour face her helmsman-brother would make on hearing poems like those. And whenever she herself wanted to shine with some stunning rhyme, to indulge in verbal firework displays, the amused face of her brother who, despite his easy-going nature, could also be quite caustic, would rise before her. No, Inna didn't want to fall victim to his ironic tongue! Furthermore, she always remembered another piece of advice—this from Andron Gurievich who, on one of his visits home, had said apparently carelessly that it wasn't reputation but actuality that was important. This had struck a chord deep inside the girl. You couldn't know, she thought, if you would make the reading humanity happy with your poems but it was well known that masterpieces that brought true delight to you as well had been written long before you were even born. Therefore read, girl, read hard and learn—there'll be time to write later. In the medical centre she always had on her clean desk together with the registration book a volume of good poetry with a prescription blank marking her page. It would always be by one of those poets whose works you can drink⁴ and drink like spring water on a hot day, and never want to stop. It was amazing how these could express a whole world in one singing line, could with the magic spell of

his words reach into your very heart! She sometimes felt that she would never learn to do this herself. But nevertheless she constantly nursed a secret and passionate desire to become a true creative writer, it was a hope that lived in her. Observing people on the threshing-floor, how they worked, how they were eternally surrounded by cares, she wondered how to express her thoughts about them worthily. They would not appreciate idle poetic nonsense. These people were like the truth itself. And her words had to be intrinsically true. She waited, listening to her inner voice: had the time come? Perhaps she should quickly pick up her pen? But no, wait a while, Inna: the rich and bursting ears of wheat produced by other masters were not forthcoming yet. Her fields were still lost in a mist, her wheat not ripe, its ears not full.

"Going through a creative crisis?" Victor had asked ironically during his last visit on noticing her thoughtfulness. He now made frequent trips to Kurayevka: he had gone to work for the Selkhoztekhnika agricultural machinery organisation, had exchanged his steam-roller for a jeep, although he had only been taken on temporarily, for a trial period. "Isn't that what you people call it, a creative crisis?"

She had not said anything in reply. Perhaps it truly was a crisis? Perhaps after "The Shore of Love", she was never again going to write anything? There existed plenty of cases when a person remained the author of only one song.

"Don't fret yourself, little gipsy," Victor had comforted her. "So what if you have got a writing block? Just think how many people there are whose lives are wasted away completely. They know only one care: making white money for a black day. I went through something like that myself, but now, when we are together, you and I, I feel filled with meaning, you know. And Kurayevka becomes like, well, like the Canary Islands for me."

It gave the girl pleasure to see Victor changing for the better, becoming more attentive towards her, developing new ideas and interests. He had even asked for her *Anthology of French Poetry*! In some ways though, he was still the same—impetuous like the wind: he'd come tearing down to the village, they'd go to the pictures together, and he'd drive back the same night (because he had to go to work the next morning). And she would again be assailed by doubts, would he once more get himself into some trouble or other. But perhaps she

was being needlessly anxious? After all, there was no visible reason for this? Perhaps she simply did not know how to take pleasure as others did, that she was too severe over petty matters? She ought to be pleased that he had come that evening, taken her hand, led her away...

...Leaving Ganna Gurievna on the veranda, they went out into the street. Victor's jeep stood not far off—parked sideways by the neighbour's fence.

"Get in," he suggested to the girl, "I'll give you a real ride. You'll see what my hard-working little brute can do! Now you'll feel the poetry of speed!"

She agreed and climbed in, but he would never again lure her into a car with him. Poetry was the last word to describe it, when you kept wailing "Slow down! Slow down!" in a panic while seeking desperately for a hold, when you could see people blinded by the headlights and jumping nervously out of the way to flatten themselves against the garden fences. Recklessness, however, might also be a talent in a person? Perhaps recklessness and bravery went side by side? Victor said that he only really felt alive when he was driving at over 100 kph, when the wind whistled and everything sped by, when he felt that he had torn himself out of his usual condition and entered another in which mere speed made him feel drunk. Perhaps that was so. The divers had told her that diving, too, could make one drunk, though that was something else again—an aesthetic intoxication at the beauty of the underwater kingdom. But nevertheless recklessness, impulsiveness, longing to achieve something special—was a person to be condemned for these? Was it not from such stresses and strains that great passions were born in man and great feats performed? A few days earlier Inna had seen in the Kurayevka museum an enlarged photo of Sanya Khutornaya, the legendary pilot who had won glory on the war fronts and who, when she and her lover were later shot down, had left this life in a last embrace with him. In the old days songs would have been composed about her. Inna could understand the power of such a love and she would have liked to glorify it. She would also have liked to have something of that power herself. Perhaps she had it, too, and it just lay concealed, unawakened, awaiting its hour? Khutornaya must have started with small things as well and moved on. She had been an ordinary girl, to be seen every summer on the reaper in Kurayevka's fields, with nothing to

distinguish her from the others. Meanwhile, however, her invisible wings had slowly been sprouting, growing stronger. Perhaps she had even felt them vaguely herself. Some lofty thirst had probably left her no peace, some irresistible longing which one summer night had overtaken the girl and carried her away, chasing after her eagle's dream.

"How'd you like that, Inna?" Victor asked, pulling the jeep up sharply a few metres from the edge of the cliff after their headlong dash from Kurayevka to the sea. "Did it inspire you?"

Jumping out of the car Inna stood at the top of the cliff and silently set about restoring her hairdo.

"What's the matter? Are you angry? It wasn't the right kind of inspiration?"

"Jangling one's nerves prickles is not inspiration. Do you think it's clever or funny to frighten people, to drive them along like rabbits?"

"I didn't mean... Forgive me, I'm stupid." He drew closer to her and, putting his arm gingerly around her shoulders, also looked out to sea. "It truly is develyshly beautiful, isn't it."

"Have you only just noticed?"

"Well, you know I'm stupid and I haven't been noticing beauty recently. But you, Inna, are somehow not of this world."

"Old-fashioned, un-modern—is that what you mean to say?"

"On you I sense the stamp of an age that's been and gone..."

"Reciting poetry? What next!"

"It seems to me you're really from the nineteenth century. Or even from sometime in antiquity. Then girls were born of the foaming waves, of the luminescent surf—and that's how I saw you from afar. Come on, smile. Your eternal concentration, your unbending seriousness. I just can't get used to it. I might believe it was an act, if I did not know you so well. You live in some unreal world above the clouds. But I like you because of that."

The lunar path stretched out before them, still not bright, just glinting gently. Innumerable flashes of light, like white piano keys, glittered here and there on the dark surface of the water.

"What are you thinking about? Ovid again?"

"About him too."

"And about who else?"

He was sure she was going to say "And about you."

"And about Sanya Khutornaya."

"Sanya and Ovid. Now there's a combination, there's a pair for you!"

"That's not funny."

"I'm sorry," he whispered gently right by her ear.

He might think it was funny but to Inna this was not trivial. What did the years or millenia separating them matter if the shades of the past, the shades of a country's great sons and daughters stood before you as if they were still alive, as if they entered your heart and warmed you by their example and their love? Inna did not know and could not have known war, she had never flown with Red Cross supplies to where an epidemic was raging, had never yet in fact risked her life, but nevertheless in her secret thoughts she frequently imagined herself facing a supreme test, wondering how she would measure up to it. Was she capable of giving love when it was not returned, of great commiseration, of the unspectacular but lengthy feat of a sister of mercy? She often wondered. And Victor could make as many ironic remarks as he liked, she still felt she had reserves of spiritual strength, that she would be able to bear a journey to the starving and diseased tropics, that she, like Vera Konstantinovna, was ready to fly there to help people. At home they sometimes said that Inna resembled her sailor uncle in her persistence and stubbornness. But even if that was so, what was wrong with it? Inna really did take the old sailor in many ways as an example. She wanted to resemble him in his stubborn hold on life, his invincible loyalty to the person who was his first and last love. Everyone had to have his Orion in life, his memories of close things and far ones, of all that had been bequeathed by the preceding generations. And she must have been bequeathed Ovid, the legendary Kurayevka pilot-girl, and that shimmering lunar path which, becoming brighter now, stretched out before her and seemed to call her by name, inviting her to travel up it. She must also have been bequeathed the vague feeling of unease which she bore in herself and without which, it seemed, no song could be born.

Victor had always taken a rather skeptical attitude to what he called Inka's "loftiness". We couldn't all be geniuses with our heads in the clouds, he said. She could, he said, excite her fantasy and call on the ghosts of her ancestors as much as she liked, but he—he was an earthy person, he was of today.

He saw what he saw and "knew only that he knew nothing". Life had shown him little mercy, had cruelly shaken him, and he did not want it to remain like that: he would get his own back, he would tear off a piece of so-called happiness! His one and only, true firebird, caught in mid-flight, was now trembling in his hand. But would he be able to keep it? It was terrifying to think that he might let it go, that he might do something wrong and end up clutching at thin air. "You won't bring her happiness," he had been told today. Did that mean that someone else would? Would someone else appear one fine day on Kurayevka's grey horizon? And would his Inna find that someone more desirable and *more interesting*?

The conversation on the veranda had been more or less game, set, and match to Victor, but something still worried him, a breath of danger sent cold shivers down his spine. To be so close to her, to feel her scented hair against his cheek, and then to lose her, lose her forever? Now, at this instant, everything seemed to be going as it should, as he wanted it to. But that was now, today. What about tomorrow? And the day after? To be quite frank with himself, he was hardly worthy of her, his was a beggarly spirit beside hers, he did not know how to think at all profoundly about life, he just slid up and down its slopes. But how—how was he to manage without her? Without her he would be in an awful vacuum. He was even frightened to think of it. Waves of warmth came from her, she was the only fire by which he could warm his heart. Was he worthy, had he earned her? Victor felt like a person who had by accident and not quite legally found some rare treasure, something far bigger than he was entitled to. But having got a treasure like this, he'd hang on tight to it! For that reason he was now particularly gentle and thoughtful with Inna, trying to entertain her, to do things that would please her, to oblige her in every way.

"Let's go for a swim," he suddenly suggested.

Now that was something she really liked! Especially at night, by the light of the moon.

"I didn't bring my bathing things."

"You don't need them. No one will see in the dark, except perhaps for the moon. But it won't tell anybody."

She did not get undressed, did not go into the sea but she already felt the water's embrace, felt it tickling and

caressing her skin. As if the rays of moonlight were stroking her, running over her bare and open body, liberated from everything. She wanted to play in the water, to splash about. It was a shame that they were not alone in that lunar kingdom.

"No. I'll feel embarrassed when the searchlight tracks across the beach. Now if we were out on the spit."

"Well, what are we waiting for? Let's go there!"

"Don't be silly."

"Or would you like to go dancing, maybe?"

Inna looked round: the sanatorium was brightly lit and the amplified music was actually audible from where they were standing. The night's merrymaking was at its height. The Pioneer camps located nearby had from the very first day come into conflict with the sanatorium's electric jazz which prevented the children from going to sleep after their lights-out. A battle was being fought for silence, for nights without a constant racket. This war did not look like coming to a rapid end: the jazz continued as before to roar like a wild animal for all the coast to hear since the sanatorium's guests stood solidly in favour of it and refused to hear of any compromises. If you couldn't make merry by the sea, then where could you? On the one hand the frontier guards prevented them from bathing at night and now were they also being asked to go to sleep at the same time as the children? And so the hoarse and throaty monster roared louder still, at the top of its electromagnetic voice.

Inna did not want to go dancing, did not feel drawn to that place.

"It's nicer here. There's a special kind of music in this silence."

"You really are not of this world," Victor said with a smile. "A kind of recluse. But you've nevertheless bewitched a modern chap."

They sat down on the yellowed and dry grass growing on the slope, letting their legs hang over the edge as they used to when they were schoolkids. Here reigned the silence of the darkened, cicada-filled steppe, of the wordless sea so generously lit by the moon. The previous summer Inna had come here alone and the loneliness of the summer evenings had weighed heavily on her, but now they were together again and he was giving her of his gentleness and her blood pulsed more warmly from their closeness. These were not hardly

recognised and half-childish bursts of feeling, now her blood boiled inside her every time he touched her.

"Little gipsy, can I ask you a question?" Victor suddenly said. "Why did you never tell me about the divers who chased after you when you were at the nursing school?"

"Have you been listening to my mother's inventions?" Inna laughed. "She's back at her usual tricks."

"She also says that you get letters? From whom, may I ask?"

"From my girlfriends, of course. And also from Vera Konstantinovna."

"That's the truth?"

"What's the matter with you?" She turned sharply towards him. "Have you decided to have a jealousy scene?"

"Who feels no love, feels no jealousy: you know the saying..."

His jealousy, in fact, made Inna feel happier. It flattered her young woman's vanity.

"So now he's an Othello as well."

"And you thought that I wouldn't feel such things?" Victor looked closely at her smiling face lit by the moon. "Why, I'm even jealous of your Ovid, if you must know!" he uttered in a burst of boyish frankness.

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

After this he hugged her tighter still and the girl seared him with an even hotter kiss.

18

"And how's our Nelka getting along?" the old sailor wondered one day. "Is she ever going to bring her miscreant to me?"

He always called Nelka's son a miscreant. He'd changed his mind at the last moment, the little brute: he wasn't going to naval college, he preferred his commercial school. His mother had managed to talk him out of it. He's given way to her pressure: Nelka would now have her own shop manager who would provide his mother with fur-coats from under the counter. He was evidently a law-abiding young scoundrel but he could not help but be his mother's darling and he would take care of her first.

Yagnich decided to visit his relative during the lunch hour. Instead of the battered sailor's cap pickled by the salty winds

which he had worn on arriving in Kurayevka, he put on a new civilian hat (acquired the day before at the department store). He set off at an unhurried pace, pondering his far from merry thoughts under his new hat. The war had turned him into a lonely man, but Nelka had suffered enough blows of fate even without the war: widowed early, her husband who had worked in the collective farm's accounts section, had been devoured when still a young man by carnivorous cancer, that curse of the century. In character Mitya the accountant was the absolute opposite of his Nelka: she was fiery and he was quiet and peaceable, did everything without a word or a squeak. It was enough to amaze one how fate somehow managed to bring together such seemingly different and incompatible people.

Nelka's house was in the central part of the village, near the offices. Her cottage was like a toy: a newly-tiled roof and large windows. And in a "fur-coat", too. It was one of the nicest cottages in Kurayevka. To wrap one's cottage in a "fur-coat" was now the fashion: after the brick walls were laid, for beauty and protection, able hands would cover them with a special mixture that was splashed on (the old sailor wondered what the constituents of this mixture could be). Once this had dried and hardened, you had a house, garbed in what looked like a grey Astrakhan coat, walls that presented a mass of little bobbles. That was what Nelka had had done: it was a nice colour, battleship grey, and the work had been done nicely, too. The platbands over the windows were decorated in pretty patterns of white and red over the grey background (the work of visiting craftsmen from Bukovina). Yagnich involuntarily admired Nelka's cottage: peeking through the foliage of the trees in the front garden, it looked like some villa in Marseilles! Now there was a widow for you! Nelka had not allowed loneliness to depress her—and that was also an achievement!

The mistress of the house was at home, dressed in a white gown as she fussed about in her summer kitchen, making apricot preserves. She was delighted at the arrival of her visitor: thank you for not forgetting your relatives, uncle, blood is thicker than water, isn't it? (But what was all this about "blood" since she wasn't a Yagnich but an Osnachevskaya anyway?!) b *

She brought out a chair and seated the old sailor down in the shade of the walnut tree, so that the sun should not

burn the dear guest's bald patch (he had taken his hat off). She then brought a saucer full of still hot jam for him to taste. She also offered him borshch but this the visitor declined, saying that the borshch would have to wait till next time since he'd already had lunch.

"Have you heard anything from your 'anarchist'?" Yagnich inquired about his miscreant.

"Why, he's already back! I was so glad to see you that I quite forgot to mention it!" The widow seemed suddenly to blossom. "He got in! He even earned more marks than was necessary to get in! No one pulled strings, no one put in a good word for him: he managed all by himself, the scoundrel!"

"So now you're going to have your very own shop manager."

"What do you mean, shop manager?" Nelka laughed. "He knows how to twist his mother around his little finger, doesn't he just, the young rogue! He had hardly crossed the doorway when I saw that something was wrong. 'Got in?' I asked. 'Yes, I got in,' he replied, looking down at the floor and stealing a smile. 'Into naval college?' I asked. 'Yes... Naval college. I sort of changed my mind, you know. But how did you guess, mother?' 'I could see it in your face,' I said, 'you miscreant, you, you disobedient son of mine!'"

And she laughed again, overflowing with joy for her son.

Neither was Yagnich able to restrain a smile.

"Well, they'll soon straighten out there, to the sound of a ship's bell." Then, after a brief pause, he added: "The sea is above all hard work, Nelka. You have to work like a horse."

"You won't frighten him with that."

"And he'll need to be strong in his friendship with his comrades: that's the beginning of the science of a ship's vitality, that's what makes one unsinkable."

"My son won't let anyone down in such matters either. He'll stand by a friend. And do you know which naval college he got allocated to? He didn't quite make it into yours, so he's being taken on by the college in Batumi as a correspondence course student, the wicked lad. But it's all the nicer for me, since he'll be here by my side."

"And what's he going to do here? Twiddle his thumbs?"

"By no means, Uncle! He evidently takes after his father: he can't bear not working! Even before leaving to take the entrance exams, he got himself a job on the holiday home building site. I'll go to the miners, he said, they're using new

machinery there. And as for his title—that's 'working class'. It'll get him a better old-age pension," and she again burst into loud laughter.

"Sailors grow old at sea, Nelya. If, of course, his intentions about naval college are serious?"

"I think they are. He got down to his studies right away. He's barely been enrolled, and already he came home with a work aid. I went into his room and noticed a great big watermelon in his kit bag. He must have brought it from a melon patch as a present for his mother. But it turned out to be a star globe!"

"What, what?" Yagnich asked in surprise. "They give new boys mops to start with and not globes."

"I was also surprised and even a little frightened. No, mother, he said, everything's as it should be: I got this from an assistant at the college. The globe was listed as old stock for disposal. Whether he got it as a gift or swapped it for a bottle of brandy—you know how things are done nowadays."

Sashko himself came in soon afterwards. He rode into the yard on a bicycle and stopped with a wild skid, like a real cyclist. Straight from work to his mother's borshch (it was their lunch hour). He had grown like a beanstalk but his face was still that of a boy. He kept smoothing down the wild lock on his head with his hand; he evidently felt shy in front of this guest.

"Hello, sailor, hello," the old sailor greeted the lad like an adult—with a firm handshake—and congratulated him on having earned more than the minimum marks necessary. The old man was truly pleased: at least this Yagnich would continue the family naval tradition.

"Show your uncle your star globe, Sashko," his mother prompted.

"It's not a star globe," he corrected her quietly, "but a celestial globe, mother..."

"Oh, so you're going to teach me, are you, you wicked lad!" she gave him a merry shove in the back. "Bring it out here!"

The young man brought the object from the cottage and set it on the table in front of the old sailor. Here it was, the student's visual aid. Round, dark blue, and all covered with stars and constellations.

Yagnich gently touched the globe, ran his finger over the stars, and said nothing.

It turned out that Yagnich did not have to look for a job: the job came looking for him.

The miners' holiday home, or as it was coming to be called "the complex", came to hear of the old sailor.

The head of the construction or whatever his official title was drove into Kurayevka in person and, pulling up by a group of playing children, asked:

"Where can I find the Yagnich who used to sail on the Orion?"

The old sailor, who was sitting under the pear tree, heard the mention of his name and pricked up his ears.

The diplomatic negotiations were not too long-drawn-out. The ambassador from the construction—hoary with age but a wiry and still energetic man—after a few brief questions wasted no more time:

"Climb in and let's go. We'll discuss the rest on the spot. We need you very badly indeed."

"Are you sure you aren't making a mistake?" Yagnich asked just in case although he was already crowing in his heart. "I'm a sailor and I've never been down a mine."

"Neither have I," the newcomer laughed briefly. "I've worked on the Aswan high dam, I've worked in Afghanistan, but I've never been down a mine. But in any case we're not building a mine but a holiday home."

"Well, this sea-dog has never been a builder either," Yagnich remarked, perhaps fishing for a compliment a little.

"Yes, yes, of course. But you're still the very person we need."

Such speeches were balm to Yagnich although he truly could not imagine how he could help in the building work. "Perhaps they can't make ends meet so they've called for me to teach them how to knot things together," he joked to himself. He laughed privately, walking behind the new arrival.

The car was battered, worn out by the rutted roads of many building sites. It still ran, though, it would not give in. The engineer, who had introduced himself as Nikolai Ivanovich, took the wheel while Yagnich occupied the back seat since that seemed grander to him. The seat was deep in dust and the springing stuck out like ribs. When they moved off, everything inside the car shook and creaked and dust rose in clouds through some hole in the floor. But who was complaining:

this was a work car and not one for jaunts, for looking smart in.

"Quite a scorcher we're having today, eh?" the engineer said as they reached the outskirts of Kurayevka.

"It'll rain tonight," Yagnich replied.

"You heard a weather forecast?"

"I have a direct communication line with the sky: if I say it'll rain, it will."

"Pain in the joints?"

"Something like that. This is the second night running I haven't been able to sleep because of it."

On the way the engineer said nothing about what Yagnich particularly wanted to hear. He simply described his problems: how he was being hurried, how there were masses of things to be made good, how you couldn't change a schedule, how the project had to be finished by the spring even if it killed him since the first batch of miners was due in the second quarter of the year.

"But why on earth do you need me?" Yagnich asked again.

"Well, you see, we've had this little idea..." the engineer said evasively. "And we can't manage it without someone who knows what he's about. So they advised us to go and see you."

Then he began talking about his work again. They were a good team, they had won the banner for good work for a second year running, the hard core of workers was quite stable. The builders' nucleus now contained quite a few people from Kurayevka, they were part of the family now. It was true that a few doubtful elements had infiltrated as well, some ex-convicts, but they had to have jobs, too, and there was a labour shortage as it was. After a little pause, he asked Yagnich about the Orion: how long the ship was going to continue sailing, was it true that no more sailing ships were going to be built, that they'd let those that already existed live out their lives and leave it at that? It would be the end of an era.

"Nonsense!" Yagnich exploded. He spoke firmly as if he knew every last detail of the Navy's plans on this subject. "Where will young people get a proper sailor's training then? Where will they get better practice than working on a sailing ship? Agility, skills, courage... Have you ever seen how they climb the rigging at the word of command?"

"No, I can't say I have."

"Oh, that's a sight, I can tell you. Especially the moment,"

Yagnich bounced so excitedly on his seat that the springs groaned pitifully beneath him, "when the command to unfull the sails comes." He shouted it out himself in a youthful voice. "Unfull the topsails, the topgallants, and the royals! And they fill out with wind. Like swans, they look so white, spread out against the sky!"

After this outburst, Yagnich leant back in his seat and enjoyed a feeling of well-being, as if he were not sitting on jutting springs but on Cherednichenko's blue velvet upholstered chairs. He felt inordinately important: he was from the Orion, damn it, and had not become devalued: see how they'd come looking for him, begging him, driving him about in a car.

From Kurayevka to the construction site was an easy walk but they'd decided to do it grandly, in this jalopy that creaked like an old bullock cart and sucked dust in through metal gills. They drove onto the site, and the car stopped in front of the carriages (this had to be the main office). The engineer asked him to wait a minute and disappeared inside, while Yagnich began wandering up and down with the important air in front of the modern equivalent of a nomad's tent. The carriages here were just like those put out in the fields at harvest-time only here there were lots of them, arranged in a long string all the way to the sea. Carriages on iron wheels were the modern replacement for the old shepherd's hooded carts. So migrate from place to place: it was said that abroad they now lugged whole apartments on wheels up and down the highways; people didn't want to stay in one spot any more. A gentle breeze blew between the carriages and the old sailor, a child of the winds that he was, turned to face the air current in order to estimate the strength of this Kurayevka trade wind: it was blowing evenly and would have filled the Orion's sails nicely.

There it was, his shore. A short while before it was steppe, and now they were spreading road metal, making asphalt paths. "Doing it the big way," Yagnich thought as he cast a calculating look around the site. The boxes of two large blocks were almost ready and a third was being erected. The building materials were delivered to it by a crane as tall as the ones he had seen in ports. Its red beak cut across the sky. In the days of old, these skies had been inhabited only by feathered cranes and bustards. The steppe of Yagnich's childhood had once glinted white with salt and been fiery hot and iron hard. Only hardy thistles—the delight of camels—would grow there.

Now, in order to bring this desert to life, they were bringing in black earth by the truckloads from some distant place, preparing beds for flowers and future trees. Some of these had already been planted: the trees were sad-looking, barely alive. They needed watering. Perhaps they would entrust this task to Yagnich? In fact, that was a job he would like. The bulldozers roared, the panel-carriers shuddered like tanks. In addition to the living quarters, they were also putting up a squat building of a strange design. Through its windows he could see painters in their folded newspaper hats and white-wash-splattered plasterer-girls, smiling at someone. Now they shouted something merrily to one of the bulldozer drivers who was working not far off but how could the young man possibly hear them above the iron din? All around there was a roaring chaos, a building babel as the project kept grew. The shore would become green and the white building of the miners' health resort would rise above the lawns.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked the engineer of Yagnich as he climbed down the steps and also glanced at the disturbed ants' heap. "It's no too pretty a picture for the time being: we're still building and we're not beautiful. When we get the last roof on, though, and set about tidying up, making good as we call it, then... Follow me, please, Andron Gurievich."

They went in the direction of the sea, passing with difficulty through mountains of building materials piled any old how on the ground: here was a pile of baths and lavatory seats, there some other goods waited for their time to come. Some stuff had already been brought, and more was arriving and being dumped wherever there was room and it was convenient... Some worried-looking people in overalls were digging a trench while an electric welder hissed just over their heads. They kept having to use little wooden bridges to cross deep, freshly-dug ditches in which pipes wrapped in insulating material were waiting to be buried—these were the water supply and drainage pipes. The owner of the celestial globe was here, too! He had probably hoped to be given charge of some machinery right away but instead they'd put him into a ditch and he was mucking about with the pipes. But the lad wasn't allowing this to dampen his spirits.

"Here I am, Uncle Andron!" He pushed his hard-hat back on his head and shouted from the trench as Yagnich crossed

over him on a narrow and wobbly plank. "My Orion is starting from here! But it'll win through in the end!.."

In other parts of the building site as well Yagnich was greeted by other Kurayevka men. There were obviously quite a few of his fellow-villagers here.

At last they came to the shore and the blue sea. While on his way to the complex the old sailor had secretly hoped that he would be used for something to do with seamanship, that he would be given a job involving the motor boats or set to looking after the sailing boats but instead... What was this—some kind of joke? A large old half-rotten lugger was lying in a little inlet and seemed just to be waiting for Yagnich, its side leaning against the remains of an old and rusty jetty! (There had once been plans to build a port here and the inlet was to this day called Iron Jetty Inlet by the people of Kurayevka.) The lugger was good only to be scrapped, to be broken up: its gunwales were all twisted and the hull looked like it would gape open at any minute. Quite an Orion.

"Closer, come closer, please," the engineer invited him.

Looking more carefully at the lugger, Yagnich discovered that somebody had already done some work on it, that they had, in fact, done quite a bit: they had moved the lugger closer to the shore and had piled sand around its hull to hold it upright. They must have had dredge down here specially for the job. The sand was firmly pressed down—the old tub looked rooted there: it was eternally moored and would never float again. To make it even more secure, steel tubes had been driven like piles into the ground around it and concrete had been poured here and there. The poor lugger wouldn't move an inch in any wind or storm. It would just stand there on its dead anchors. Yagnich gave a long, sullen look at the hulk as if to say: "So they've written you off as well."

"Well, how do you like our beauty?" he heard a cheerful and self-assured voice reminiscent of Cherednichenko's ask from behind him.

Towards him, trailing a whole troupe of followers, came the man who was evidently the real head of the construction. He was still relatively young, a broad-shouldered giant with high cheekbones and a merry, weatherbeaten face. This time Yagnich had made no mistake: this was the chief, as Nikolai Ivanovich called him, actually effacing himself, moving into the shade at his chief's approach. One felt that the head of the

construction was a man with a wilful character, sure of himself, that the site's chaos did not worry him, that he was in control of the apparent disorganisation in front of him.

"What do you think; will the miners like it?" he asked Yagnich, nodding at the lugger. "Will it perform in its new role?"

It was only then that Yagnich at last was told what was wanted: the old lugger needed to be completely gutted and totally refitted inside to serve its new purpose. It was to be a café! A summer café for the miners. They'd be able to enjoy a sea view and listen to calm, relaxing music.

"We'll provide you with all the best materials and you can have a whole teams of assistants, if you want," the construction head smiled encouragingly at Yagnich. "Your role will be that of expert, of consultant, of senior adviser and what you say will go. We won't bother you over petty details, we'll give you scope so you can let your fantasy roam free! The foundations, so to speak, have already been layed, but the superstructure is entirely up to you."

"It's a working tub. Her sailing days are over."

"Yes, but we didn't take her for sailing in," the construction head remarked indulgently. "She'll be for relaxing in, for complementing the sea view, if you like. Of course, as far as external appearance is concerned, at the moment ... she's not very attractive. But then think of the economy—both of time and of money! I realise that everything's got to be changed round, moved. It's not going to be an easy job—breathing new life into this lugger, but that's why we came to you in the first place: work vanishes before a good craftsman, isn't that right?"

"Yes, indeed."

"Now we builders are the kind of people who want to be set clear-cut tasks: we'll produce a beauty out of nothing if we are. One will fair gasp!"

Although the group of builders did not take part in this conversation, they had listened patiently and seemed fully to share the management's ideas.

"Has anyone got a rule?" Yagnich suddenly asked them.

A folding steel rule was readily produced. Opening it out, the old sailor went silently and busily up to the lugger and placed the measure against its hull.

"Look here," he said to the construction head. "Is the whole of this rule touching the hull?"

"It looks like it, yes. Why?"

"Well, it shouldn't. Where are the ship's flowing lines, the curve of the hull? A real ship has flowing lines, easy curves, like the breast of a crane or the body of a dolphin! Hold a ruler in one spot like this and move it how you like, you will never get its whole length to touch a hull. Its ends will stand off, even if by a hair's breadth. Because a hull is streamlined like a fish or a bird. And this?" Yagnich looked reproachfully at construction site head across whose face there flitted the shadow of a guilty smile.

"You're clearly right. But the boat, I repeat, is not for sailing in. It now has a quite different and strictly utilitarian purpose. In the district centre they've that place called 'The Float' and on the southern coast they've got their 'Schooner' so we want to have something similar."

"I just can't think of how to set about it."

"We're relying wholly on you and your experience. One hundred per cent similarity is not being demanded of you but, of course, we do need the illusion, we do want people to feel that this is a boat, a child of the seas and not some corn chandler's shop or a common-or-garden cafeteria. I want real naval mats everywhere, you know the ones you make by knotting rope. Old-fashioned lanterns, like those used by fishermen at night. The menu will consist entirely of sea foods, there'll only be local dry wines and no strong liquor of any kind. And if someone sneaks some in and has a little too much in his corner, then it'll be nice and easy to toss him overboard into an ever-ready sobering-up station." The construction head laughed and, supported by the friendly chuckling of his subordinates, looked entirely carefree, although he kept a keen eye on Yagnich and still waited for a reply.

Yagnich returned the rule to the builder who had lent it to him and became lost in thought. It looked like the plans for the lugger did not suit him at all. The old man was frowning hard.

"Well, what do you say? Do you want to be taken on as a senior consultant?" the construction head asked in a voice that actually tried to sound ingratiating.

Yagnich's gloomy and almost angry silence was taken by the onlookers to mean that you couldn't make deals that easily

with this Neptune, that he was not to be won over easily. He was a renowned craftsman and had been glowingly recommended but he was capricious and evidently rather stubborn. Or was he playing hard to get? The pleading was not working with him. It looked like he was going to shrug off the job offer and leave.

"We'll see to it that conditions are ideal. Don't refuse, Andron Gurievich."

The craftsman was not refusing either. He turned to the construction head.

"I'll have assistants, you say?"

The chief nodded delightedly towards his men.

"Oksen, come out here so we can see you!"

Politely but in no way hurriedly, a lean and smart young man with a dark moustache and a copper-coloured, sunburned and ruddy face stepped out of the group of builders.

"This young man will be your main assistant," the construction head said. "And I can recommend him. He's got good hands that can do anything: in fact, he's a highly-qualified cabinet-maker and he also produces lovely wooden carvings—he immortalises all sorts of wild boars and Carpathian bears."

"He also made himself a bandore," added Nikolai Ivanovich, the engineer.

"But he hasn't got any strings for it yet, so he's temporarily blowing on a penny whistle," joked a fat foreman lost in a giant pair of gumboots. "He's charmed all our lovely plasterers away with his pipe!"

Yagnich carefully examined the young man, who was blushing to his very ears at this storm of joking praise. Whom you were offered as chief assistant was an important matter. He had a bright and willing look and the open face of an honest and innocent youth. Even his moustache failed to irritate Yagnich as sometimes happened when he came across impudent young louts sporting moustaches and asking for cigarettes in the alleys of seaside parks.

"Tell me," Yagnich addressed himself to Oksen, "have you ever set a foot on a deck in your life? Have you even been on a real ship?"

"I can't say that I have, but I've seen plenty of them."

"What do you mean—'seen'?"

"When your Orion sailed across the horizon like a white cloud. And one of my brothers is serving in the Pacific Fleet."

It appeared that the young man had moved Yagnich's prickly heart a little.

The scales were obviously tipping in favour of the construction head.

"All right, if that's the case, we'll start work tomorrow," Yagnich pronounced at last, and those present sighed with relief.

The builders saw him that evening. The old sailor was standing alone on the shore staring at the eternally moored lugger. He was either examining it or thinking about it. Written off, she was laid up, at eternal anchor. If she could be lifted off the earth, placed on a raised pedestal, she would immediately acquire form. Because whatever else you might say about her, she had had a long working life and the energy of those former voyages somehow still resided in her, one could still feel an unquenched thirst for seascapes in her.

20

It poured with rain that night. Just what Cherednichenko and all the people of Kurayevka needed so badly. Yagnich had stayed to spend the night at the building site. He sent a message home through Nelka's son so that they wouldn't worry and himself sat down with Oksen in his waggon to discuss various ideas for the future café. They spent a long time over it, exchanging opinions, picturing things to themselves, and, when all the main lines had been decided, Yagnich said that now at last he saw things more clearly and that he'd perhaps go to the construction head for a concrete talk the next day. The waggon in which they were sitting made a very comfortable dwelling: it was not cramped, in fact it was cosy, and the floor beneath their feet felt a bit like a deck. This little house on wheels was inhabited by Oksen and his two comrades who were at that moment down at the station unloading building materials. From his place at the table, Yagnich looked round and was dazzled by the number of strange brightly coloured objects on display: the waggon was like a trunkful of objets d'art from the Carpathians! All sorts of drawings and carvings hung on the walls, together with embroidered hand-towels, appliqué work. Behind glass, in the dresser, there glittered a festive Guzul national costume (for Oksen's performances with the amateur dance group), a mountaineer's hat with

a feather in it, a little hatchet, and the bandore with inlay-work which Oksen was said to have made with his own hands.

"Did you really make that yourself?" Yagnich asked in sincere surprise as he examined the instrument.

"I had to because there aren't too many of them about. More and more folk groups are starting up and it's got so you can't even buy a lousy guitar for love or money. Things reached the point that the newspapers were asking: where can one buy a balalaika, a good zhaleika, or a zurna? The lads from the frontier post also asked me to come and help them get their music together. I couldn't very well refuse, could I? So we sat down and tried to make something ourselves but you can't always find everything you need at hand. All the materials have to be made by mother nature. Musical instruments don't like plastics: everything synthetic deadens sound, kills the music in it. So we had to find all sorts of ways out."

"It's obviously very fine work. All done by hand, too."

"There are, of course, musical instrument factories but they can't keep up with demand, and then the quality isn't too high in any case. A lot of us young people who are good with our hands would happily make them ourselves. But the problem then is to find the materials. Just you try and buy precisely the type of strings you need in the local department store. They don't have them today, they won't have them in a month's time, and if want music, go play it on horse hairs! Back home in the Carpathians the local craftsmen use telephone cables. They unravel them and use the steel threads for strings!"

This was all a bit over Yagnich's head but he liked the lad himself—one could feel the keenness of a real craftsman in him.

"How did you learn all this?" Yagnich asked. "Was it your father taught you or what?"

"My father was killed by bandits. He was the head of the village Soviet." The lad frowned and, after a pause, began talking about his hobby again. "I must have learned it from various people. When I was small, a blind bandore player used to go round the villages and we would sometimes invite him to play in the reading room of our village. And every time my mother would dress me in the Guzul national costume and say: 'Now, Oksen, you'll show the old man the way to the stage. When you reach the middle of the stage, you must

place his chair quickly for him and touch him lightly on the knee so that he knows to sit down.' I did just that. He would sit down and immediately begin picking at the strings with wide, smooth movements. After his performance, he would, blind though he was, show us his instrument and tell us about it: here, he'd say, is the octave—the twelve main strings—and these other strings vibrate sympathetically... It's a fine instrument, lads, and you'll learn to play it too when you're bigger. And I remembered that. After I finished school I went to the furniture factory as an apprentice in the souvenir workshop, and there I decided I'd make one myself! After that I signed on with some comrades to go to the virgin lands. At first we lived in tents, great big ones which the steppe wind flapped about like sails, jerking at the pegs, working them loose, until you thought it was about to blow the tent completely away. In the middle of the tent there would stand a red-hot barrel, our sun, what kept us warm. It would cook our faces while our backs froze. But all in all it was fine. I soon learnt to drive a tractor but I also continued with my hobby. Whenever I found a suitable piece of wood, I'd carve something to please the heart and eye. And I probably would have stayed in the virgin lands if I hadn't got frostbitten. It was my turn one day to undertake a long journey and a real storm blew up half way! Not very extraordinary, out in the steppe. My tractor stalled: it turned out later that it had been filled with summer-weight oil and of course this got too thick. I needed to light a fire under the sump to warm the oil but—worse luck—I didn't have any matches! The steppe, night, a snowstorm, and not a light in sight. Can you imagine it?"

"Yes, of course."

"But I must have been born lucky: after a while I found a box of matches in an old jacket! Finding them was one thing, though, and lighting them another. By then my fingers were so cold I couldn't move them. Frostbite. Now my hands swell whenever they get really cold. 'Move, lad, down to the South, to the sun,' the doctors said when they discharged me from hospital. 'And hurry up about it if you don't want to be a semi-invalid for the rest of your life!' And that's how I came to be here. No regrets. When I take my holidays, I go back home to the Carpathians. There's a lot of good wood for making instruments there: if you're not lazy, you can make yourself anything you want. Each kind of wood has its own music.

Whether you need white maple, beech, or Carpathian deal—you'll find them all in our forests. And Carpathian deal, you know, is called the 'resonant wood'. They say Stradivarius himself used it..."

Yagnich wanted to ask who Stradivarius was, but this became clear as Oksen went on with his story.

"He took the wood for his violins from the mountain tops, wood that had withstood a lot, wood that had heard the singing of the winds. And that's why the violins he made were the most tuneful in the world. Only wood that has been tuned and cured by the wind makes good music, only that kind of wood can reach the heights of bel canto. To be quite frank with you, Gurievich, I want to try my hand at a violin myself. I want to make at least one violin out of 'resonant wood'. Do you think I should try?"

"Whether it works or not, you should try. No attempt earns contempt."

"That's what I think. As soon as I get my leave, I'm off into the mountains to look out for Carpathian deal. I'll bring back some of that resonant wood and let it season here. Because wood must be seasoned: before using it you must let it dry under a layer of straw for two years. And whatever else Kurayevka may lack, it's certainly not straw," the lad laughed.

They stayed up talking until late, not noticing how time was passing. Meanwhile outside it poured and poured, the rain trickled down the window panes in black rivulets. At last Yagnich made ready to leave.

"Hey, where do you think you're going, Uncle?" the young man said worriedly. "It's raining cats and dogs, and just listen to the thunder. You'd better stay here. There's free beds as you can see. The others won't be back until the day after tomorrow!"

Yagnich, however, smiled and showed him a key.

"What's that?"

It was the key to one of the completed living blocks. He had been told to pick himself any "cabin" he fancied in it. The construction head had himself handed the key to the old sailor, commenting jokingly as he did so that Yagnich would be the first resident in block number two. They were still laying the parquet in the other one but here everything was ready. So how could Yagnich refuse such an honour?

Realising that the old man could not be persuaded to change

his mind, Oksen draped his own waterproof over the sailor's shoulders and led the way down the steps into the darkness.

"I'll show you the way."

The sound of waves breaking came from close by and the night hissed evenly in the rain. This must be a real blessing for Kurayevka's fields, for Cherednichenko's winter crops, Yagnich thought. The rain wasn't cold and he didn't mind getting wet in it. The cloud-filled sky rumbled menacingly, and the darkness kept being broken by great blue flashes of lightning which for a brief instant lit everything clearly: the sky, the sea, and the shore. Yagnich remembered that he hadn't heard the sound of thunder all summer. Somehow the Orion had failed to cross the path of Ilya the Prophet's fiery celestial chariot. Some people were afraid of thunder but to Yagnich it had always—from his earliest childhood onwards—been music to his ears. He had been in many places and experienced many storms—observed from close up how the electric charge in the air grew so strong that all the metal parts of his ship glowed and sparkled—but he had never heard thunder as majestic as his Kurayevka's! Especially in his childhood, at the dawn of his life. A storm would overtake you sometimes out in the steppe and you would run to the nearest shepherd's hut to stand and listen entranced as the heavenly orchestra roared and the rain poured and poured onto the thirsty fields. The thunder on the short summer nights had a special sound, and the air would instantly fill with freshness, become saturated with some magic force so that afterwards the wheat, they said, grew a lot faster (at least, that was what Cherednichenko said, claiming the support of various scientists as he did so). But the thunderstorms did not always sound the same. Now, for instance, after a wearing heatwave and drought, the thunder sounded metallic, dry, and harsh.

They dived into the darkness and went to look for the block allocated to Yagnich. A few lamps twinkled here and there like lighthouses but because of the thick curtains of rain their light hardly reached Yagnich and his guide as they made their way slowly through the wet darkness, slipping in the mud and stumbling into boggy ditches. Oksen had promised to lead Yagnich straight there and in the daytime that might have been the best way. Now however, the lad from the Carpathians was evidently regretting his offer to lead the craftsman through the slippery night-time labyrinths. In the total darkness every-

thing seemed to have changed position, to have got mixed up. In the flashes of lightning, the familiar looked unfamiliar and somehow even frightening. The deep zigzagging ditches, the piles of bricks, the ferro-concrete blocks, the shiny, slick puddles in which length of pipe and coils of steel cable lay any old how. And the mud, the sticky mud. Things were for some reason always like that on building sites: not so bad when the weather was dry but really awful when it rained.

"Well, well, well! Gosh, isn't it dark!" Oksen commented cheerfully, walking ahead of Yagnich. "Back home we say: like under a barrel in a cellar."

Clods of earth and ditches—there was no way to avoid stumbling over or into them. There'd been a crossing here in the daytime, something like a gangplank had been slung over this pit, but just you try and find it now. Someone might have knocked it down inadvertently. But there was no getting past without it—the pit was so wide that not even a champion could have jumped across it. Then, when the travellers were just stepping cautiously through a slippery puddle on their way to a rickety little bridge, something white peeped out of the ditch and floated like a boat, rolling gently, away from them.

"Shh!..." Oksen grabbed Yagnich's arm. "They're pinching a bath!"

They stared into the darkness. Two men really were carrying a bath down the ditch, one of the baths Yagnich had seen that afternoon: they had been lying in a careless pile in the shadow of one of the buildings. And now some volunteers had come to tidy things up. The bastards hadn't had a bad idea either: to follow the ditch out of the building site into the steppe. And once there, you wouldn't find them in a month of Sundays.

"Where are you off to?" Yagnich shouted in a loud voice. "Into the steppe with a personal bath?"

The thieves squatted down, hiding in the ditch with their haul. There was silence. They had frozen still, hardly breathing.

"But your kind of dirt doesn't wash off in a bath, you crooks," Yagnich continued, vainly looking for at least some kind of path through the sticky, sodden ground. "Come on out then, whoever you are!"

"Shh!" Oksen warned him in a whisper. "Keep out of trouble, forget them!"

The thieves had by then dropped their bath and were making off noisily in different directions—one flying east and the other flying west. Catch us now, uncle! Just you try and guess who we are.

Only then did Yagnich look at Oksen.

"Keep out of trouble, you say? So that's the kind of man you are... Even though you don't look the sort that's easily frightened."

"It's not worth it," the young man replied calmly. "You can get killed for nothing, a switchblade in your guts. These are some characters! They'll actually play cards for a man's life."

"In your book that means that we shouldn't touch them, that we should let them be," Yagnich said while he continued to look for the bridge. "They're evidently not as tough as all that, look how they turned tail and ran. Scoundrels simply take advantage of the fact that we put up with them, that we don't want to dirty our hands on them. But that's not our way," Yagnich concluded harshly. "If you want to work as my assistant, you're going to have to screw up your courage."

"I will, Uncle." Oksen spoke lightly, but one could sense that Yagnich's remark had cut him to the quick.

At last they reached block number two. The wet wall panels glinted greyly. A wide iron staircase led up to somewhere from one of its corners. To the first floor, it turned out. It was just what they needed. They climbed up it. Yagnich inserted his key in the lock and opened the door. He felt blindly along the wall and found the light switch. What a ship this was! A great long corridor and down both sides of it—cabins and more cabins. He walked past one, a second, a third. He walked past the thirtieth too. The doors were all identical but for some reason he stopped outside one particular door—with the number 40 on it: it wasn't even locked. When they went in, Yagnich first of all examined the beds. They had already been made up for the miners. He could choose which ever one he wanted.

"This is where I'll spend the night. It looks just like the crew's quarters back on board my ship."

He returned the dripping waterproof to Oksen, thanked him, and the young man went away. Left to himself, Yagnich slowly inspected the room, tested the bed (he did not like spring mattresses), and carefully examined the face-towel folded into a triangle, lying on the pillow. No one had ever used it but it was

already grey and old-looking. The idea of putting it to his face was upsetting. And this was for miners! Shame!

The smell of putty and fresh paint still hung in the room. It wouldn't do. Yagnich walked to the balcony door and opened it wide: let the wind blow in, let drops of water from the heavens fly into your cabin... The thunder was still crashing but now it was in the distance and there was hardly any lightning. He turned out the light and lay down. The whole of the empty ferro-concrete block, as vast as an ocean liner on which he was now the only passenger, swam away beneath him carrying him away on the tide of dreams. It had been a wearying day, and he fell straight away into deep slumber. He dreamt of young dolphins again: they seemed to be sleeping in white enamel baths like in cradles and they smiled to him in their sleep.

Yagnich was woken by a burst of wild laughter: the horsey neighing of a drunken party came to him through the open balcony door from somewhere down on the ground floor. "Queen of trumps, beat that!" "Well, pick up your money, Victor!" The thieves were playing cards, Yagnich guessed. All of a sudden an unexplainable sweat, a terrible fear came over Yagnich. He had never felt anything of the kind before on any of his voyages! Perhaps they were playing for him down there, playing for his life with their dirty, battered cards? They were going to kill him or perhaps suffocate him with a pillow! They'd throw him in a ditch and bulldoze some earth on top of him. No one would ever find any traces of him. There was no police station near. The management had all gone home (they were housed in the district centre). Nelka's Sashko was asleep at home. Oksen was back in his carriage. Now the crooks who had just been laughing like devils in hell had suddenly fallen silent: were they perhaps discussing at that very moment how best and most quickly to take their revenge on him? That bath was maybe going to cost him dear! Your end has come, Yagnich, he thought, you're going to be done in for a pinch of snuff! He lay as if chained to his bed and was unable to free himself from that horrible state, he didn't even have the strength to wriggle his toes. Holding his breath, he feverishly tried to think where he could best hide, which hole he could crawl into, what he'd do if they suddenly climbed over his balcony wall, drunk, coming to knife him in the heart. He jumped up, terrified out of his wits, and tip-toed up to the

balcony. He closed the door, froze, and waited tensely, not so much as breathing. A strip of light fell from the ground floor window right beneath him. Piles of lime loomed greyly in the light and bits of broken glass and lengths of twisted pipe covered with tar glinted on the ground. Suddenly the light down below went out and this alarmed Yagnich even more. A flock of bulldozers and scrapers grinned in the dark from where they had been driven after work to rest until the next morning. Some of these monsters even seemed to be stirring: it looked like the whole flock of machines with flashing teeth and hooves was preparing creakingly to rev up and charge down upon him. The sky was still cloudy. The sea roared. Everything was wrapped in darkness, the pitch blackness of eternity. Thunder rumbled again in the sky and once again the crash sounded alien and metallic—as if someone was rolling metal barrels to and fro or tossing empty water tanks about. Suddenly he saw a beam of blue light, coming not from a flash of lightning but from the frontier guards' searchlight as it swept across the darkness of the sea. The Azerbaijanian was not asleep! He was slowly sweeping the area, poking the beam at the very horizon, vigilantly checking the night. All at once everything began to seem real again, to return to its proper place. The weight of Yagnich's hallucinations gradually lifted itself from him.

He went and opened the balcony door wide, let the fresh air blow in his face, driving the gloom from his eyes and heart, dispelling the unaccountable terrors which had assailed him in the damned night. What could it have been? It was really too bad! Yagnich had calmed down now, certainly, but he was nevertheless unable to close his eyes until daylight. Later he would on many occasions feel ashamed for his strange fears, for the unexpected terror that had paralysed his will and misted his brain when he—like the sole passenger of a ship—had spent his first night in cabin 40 of an empty block that no human spirit had yet warmed.

The rain stopped towards morning and the clouds cleared from the sky. Only the puddles on the ground remained to remind of the thunderstorm. Yagnich immersed himself in everyday

business: it was wonderful to find himself in the company of others again, to be a full and equal member of a team. Not that he got off to a very good start: the management had forgotten to allocate the promised team to him, the construction head had gone off about some other urgent business, and would only be back in the evening. In order not to waste the day, Yagnich went to Kurayevka to settle some matters of his own—even if they were not as grandiose as some people's. He had to go on foot this time: you're only carried by car when you still have to be wooed over.

Inna was alone at home when he arrived. Her dark brown eyes lit up gladly and she immediately let loose a shower of questions: who, where, how, and what had they asked him to do at the construction.

He brushed these off with jokes and mysterious hints and half-utterances: it was to do with the sea, he said, he was to be a senior adviser. His mood was visibly better and the constant oppression that he had been unable to conceal from people and which ages a person more than anything had vanished.

"You look years younger," Inna said to him.

For many days previously Yagnich had felt that he was full to overflowing with pain and nothing but pain. Everything he thought about, everything he remembered or longed for, all took place against a background of pain which it seemed he would never be rid of, which he would carry with him until he died. For some reason this pain grew far worse at night, under the pear tree. It came in endless waves and took various forms. It would hurt here, twinge there, and ache dully here. (He had never felt anything like it on the Orion.) When he was a little boy he had heard complaints of his elders about how their own bodies tortured them at night but he had not been able then to comprehend the pain of others—not because he was heartless but because he was healthy. And now that he himself had entered that age now in Kurayevka, he didn't complain to anyone because it seemed to him that even people like Inna, who was sensitive and warm-hearted, would not understand his feelings: they, the young, experienced life quite differently, such cares and woes would only come to them much later, with the passage of years. Or perhaps they wouldn't come at all, perhaps people would live without pains and sorrows in the future?

Of course, it was nice to hear that he had grown younger.

Perhaps it was true because he himself felt as if he had acquired fresh vitality from somewhere.

He carried his little trunk out onto the veranda and began weaving his spells around it again. The object at the very bottom of it, the object that aroused the boys' avid curiosity proved to be ... a pack of old bonds. He pulled them out, examined them, and held the whole packet out to the girl.

"Give these to your mother from me."

Inna was at a loss and tried to refuse them.

"Why, you don't need to, and in any case, they're old..."

"Take them, take them," insisted the old sailor and added meaningfully. "What if one of their numbers is drawn, eh?"

Another object lying at the bottom of his trunk was a small shiny strip of metal, a piece of tin that was once part of a ring put on a bird.

"We took it off a swallow when it crashed onto our deck one night," he said to Inna, showing her the ring. "It was a very memorable night for me."

"Tell me about it."

"You must use your imagination, my girl: think of bad weather, no visibility whatsoever, we are sailing through fog. We're worried about a collision and keep hooting on our foghorn. Suddenly things start falling onto the deck, like heavy rain. Birds! Exhausted and wet birds! The boat just happened to be passing beneath their migration route. In the dark some of them hit the mast or the rigging."

"And that's one of your most vivid memories?" Inna asked as she returned the ring.

"No, not just that. This is what happened next. I went back to my workshop (I had not intended to stay away long and had left the light on) and I found the place—it had to be seen to be believed!—full of swallows! They had made for the light. And having come in from the rain like that, they were so meek and tame. When things get hard for them, birds turn to man, completely entrust their fate to him."

"Birds can evidently also sense human kindness."

"And how! But we aren't always kind with birds. There are such as sweep exhausted and wounded birds off the deck into the sea without a second thought. We never had anyone like that on board the Orion, though. Still there's no small number of cruel people in the world. The Orion, as I said, was always happy to provide shelter and rest for birds. They'd sometimes

crowd even the captain's cabin and my workshop. You'd stand amongst these poor little things, soaked to the bone, and they'd surround you, sit on your head, shoulders, and chirrup so touchingly."

Inna vividly pictured to herself the low-ceilinged cabin filled with swallows which had trustingly flown into the warm and light human nest, saw the lonely figure in his wet clothes, afraid to move so as not to frighten the birds, saw that smiling and childishly happy Yagnich the knot-tier. It was as if she could really hear the weak chirruping of the birds and the terrible roaring of the elements in the night around the ship.

"Well, what happened to them afterwards?"

"I left the light on all night so that they shouldn't be frightened. And I made room for them on the shelves, on the rolls of sailcloth, on various piles of rope—I wanted them to be comfortable. And they spent the night like that. I let them out the next morning."

"Is that all?"

"That's all."

How simple and easy but how much it told the girl about the man.

In his trunk the old sailor also had a set of little knives, an awl, and even a pair of compasses, a little bigger than a school one. All these the craftsman set aside to take to his new job. And of course, his giant thimble and set of sail needles. He took one of these out, fingered it thoughtfully, and handed it to the girl.

"Read what's on it."

On one of the three facets, Inna saw an inscription, "Made in England."

"So they're English needles?"

"Don't imagine their steel's any better than ours. It was ours, after all, that cracked the nazis' heads. But in all things to do with sails, the English are past masters. Have you ever read anything about Robert Steel?"

"No, I can't say I have."

"Well, look for something. The tea clippers which he and his brother built were true wonders. No other boats could equal them in lightness, speed, or beauty of line and form. That was back in the days when they still organised yearly races from Shanghai to England to see which tea clipper could bring in a cargo of the new teacrop first. And how passions were fired!

The whole of England lived only for that race. Bets were placed on the clippers as if they were racehorses. The great question was which one would overtake all the others. Once captain is even said to have shot himself on his bridge when he saw that he had been overtaken and would not arrive first."

Inna listened to the old sailor, surprised that his memory should have retained even these long-forgotten tea clipper races. The girl twiddled the three-sided needle with its large eye between her fingers and, not knowing what next to do with it, held it out to her uncle. He was sitting on a chair, his trunk was locked again and moved back into its corner.

"Here's your needle."

The old sailor refused, brushing off the offer with a quick gesture.

"Keep it, keep it, Inna." Turning away from her, he added hollowly to no one in particular. "Let it be a souvenir of your relative. Keep it safe and treasure it when this old man is dead and gone."

The girl caught something profoundly moving and touching in his voice. It was nothing whatsoever to do with the needle! With this simple object he had given her something far more valuable, a part of his life perhaps, a part of what he had experienced, of what he had undergone, of what was still dear to him. He was now saying good-bye to something, he was cutting some precious threads with his past, he was giving her a particle of himself together with this modest amulet, something to remember him by and perhaps to bring her luck. And although the two of them were at different stages of life, although the world which the old sailor bore within him was distant and incomprehensible to her, still the girl felt her links with this unknown world, her spiritual kinship with it. This world seemed in accordance with her mood and her perception of what was around her, it was vitally necessary for her internal maturing process, and perhaps for the development of those poetic shoots which were growing in her. Inna was discovering something profoundly poetical not just in Andron Gurievich's sailmaker's profession but in his very nature. Earlier still, when asking the old sailor about life on board his sailing ship, Inna had each time been amazed by his absolute loyalty to the Orion and she wanted to gain a fuller understanding of this life. Until now, however, the old man had been unwilling to open his heart to strangers, had

not hurried, as some did, to turn himself inside out. He evidently believed that his personal sorrows had to run their course inside him, unseen by other eyes. And only now, when they had, as custom required, sat down on the veranda before a journey (even though not a long one), did the old sailor for the first time feel a powerful need to confide his sorrows to his niece. This made him very unlike the former, severe and reticent Yagnich. Quietly and somehow even guiltily he confessed that he was still drawn to the sea, that it still pulled at him with some strange and invincible force, and that, most importantly of all, he could not forget what he ought to forget, forget those things to which he would never return. What was this? Habit? Surely not just habit. He was consumed by some burning and relentless longing for something whose name he did not even know. Perhaps it was a longing for his lost youth? For those summers when as a young man he had held his breath and listened to the song of the wind in the sails, for the days when every lad felt he was a Magellan? He had sometimes had to work at heights that made him giddy. For hours you'd hang above squalls, lugging the crosstrees with your chest. But after that you fly, fly, fly on the waves knowing that the sails above you can be relied upon, that you checked and sewed them yourself, that you yourself are master of your flight.

"Listening to you, Uncle Andron, I can't help thinking that the Orion was crewed by nothing but exceptional people and heroes."

"The sea, my girl, does not accept the lily-livered. And the Orion is a special ship because she is like a bearer of good news, like a tireless messenger between people. Bright, open, and full of kindness, she travelled every longitude and latitude and was welcomed everywhere for those qualities. I can tell you that it was an honour, something to be proud of, to be a member of her crew. Storms, the elements, hurricanes at night—it wasn't all milk and honey. But when you had come out of these with flying colours, when you hadn't been crushed or swallowed up, then, Inna, you experienced a joy like no other. I've heard that you write songs, Inna. Now I can tell you where there's a song! We're sailing with a favourable wind, all the space in the world is around, everything's going right, the trainees are on the deck with sextants in their hands, measuring the angle of the sun. Suddenly the wind grows more lively,

and then we put out all our canvas, 'down to the last shirt', we say, and with every sail filled, how we tear along! Your beautiful ship flies like a bird—up a wave, down the other side, and again swooping upwards—what a sight it is! She's tearing along in a shower of spray, all foamy, the water around her boiling. The whole ship is enveloped in a cloud of brilliant spray, a shining cloud. Sails and space—whoever tastes these once will love the sea for all eternity. And that's the truth, Inna."

22

The earth began to be garbed in grey in the mornings. The fields were covered with a light frost. The asters and dahlias were in full flower in Kurayevka's front-gardens, looking brighter than ever, autumn-like.

The steppe became more spacious. With the arriving of the cooler air, the horizons receded. The air over the ocean became crystal clear.

The birds gathered. They came here, to the coast, from all over the country (some of them seemed to winter here—the climate was changing).

The combine harvester operators returned from Kazakhstan. Both Yagniches—father and son—had brought back *chapans* they had been given (this is the kazakh national dress, given only to highly respected people). In their rucksacks they also had dried apricots and raisins. Sorting through these presents, Inna's mother left some over for the old sailor: he loved stewed fruit. The helmsman, surrounded by a crowd of kids, was walking about in an embroidered skull-cap and a striped Oriental gown. Sitting down slowly under the pear tree in the manner of an Oriental wise man, he began telling his comrades, who had come running, all about his unbelievable adventures. Yes, he had harvested wheat right by Baikonur and one marvellous day a silver rocket had risen from the wheat right before his eyes and flown off into the sky in a cloud of smoke and flames. The steppe had trembled to its roar, and it rose slowly, very slowly, so that he was able to see every detail of it. As it flew up, someone had looked out of one of the fireproof portholes and had even waved at the Yagniches on their combine harvester. He let his imagination roam free, and it was therefore not surprising that Petro the helmsman acquired an audience greater than that around the



neighbour's television. The lad next dragged their Electron TV set out onto the veranda in order to compete with the neighbours as to whose set had the clearest picture and the loudest sound. Then, not satisfied with the results, he carried it over to the pear tree (intending to fix the aerial to the top of the hundred-year-old tree).

"Mother," the helmsman called a little later from the top of the tree, "is it true that if you break something by accident, it's a lucky sign?"

"That's what people say."

"Well then, I've got good news for you: I've just broken the television."

In the evenings, Ganna would sometimes hear tinkling girlish laughter by the garden gate, and a restrained boy's voice—her son the helmsman would be entertaining the girls from his class who had acquired the habit of walking their hero home. Ganna would catch a few words here and there: he told them about the virgin lands or, drawing on with popular humour, talked about hell, saying that it was nothing for modern man to be too frightened about because nowadays there would inevitably be sudden shortages of firewood or pitch there. Sometimes her son would call one of the girls "kyz", a word that sounded somehow mysterious and intimate when he used it, although she later discovered that it simply meant "girl" in Kazakh.

Inna went every day to her medical centre and was frequently to be seen in the library. On her way home she would sometimes drop into the little museum to say a few words to Panas Emelyanovich. The old man was in a very bad way and nothing could raise his spirits. He would sit surrounded by spinning-wheels, herbaria, and wheatsheaves, curled up into a ball. He had only one thing on his mind—Victor. Oh, Victor, Victor... He was evidently going astray again, and his visits to Kurayevka were becoming rarer and rarer. Autumn, he said, was a good time for weddings; first one then another of his friends invited him—how could he refuse? It was true in a way but that was no consolation to his father. Today his son's affairs were more or less under control, but you could never tell what he might get up to tomorrow, what kind of tricks he might pull.

When Inna visited him, the teacher would liven up a bit. But his thoughts, of course, were only about his son.

"What's destroying him?" Panas Emelyanovich would ask while the girl sat in her usual place by the loom "Egoism Boundless, all-devouring, cynical egoism Nothing's sacred to him! Do you understand he holds nothing sacred That's what worries me most of all You're young and perhaps you haven't come across anyone like that yet I have, though, and I know what it can do to a man If someone doesn't hold anything sacred, if he has no feelings of duty, no memory, and no honour, then he cannot feel compassion or real love That kind of person, Inna, is capable of anything, even the most horrendous actions Soullessness is not what some people think it is—a neutral state—by any means Soulless people are capable of action and this action is sometimes destructive Yes, egoism is a terrible vice, and even worse so when it's combined with cocksureness, conviction that one is always right "

"Don't exaggerate, Panas Emelyanovich" Inna tried to console the teacher "Victor's working after all, and there haven't been any complaints about him And furthermore parents don't always know what's going on in their children's hearts "

"And if we do know, what good does that do? If all your advice and counsel just comes up against a wall of spiritual deafness My wife and I have entered a bitter stretch in our life I don't understand why we have been sent such a trial," Panas Emelyanovich addressed himself to somewhere in space "Others have children who bring them joy, who do them proud And our son could have been like that! What hopes we had of him, we gave him all our love And there's the result You know that terrible business in Zagradovka they brought the lad back to his mother and father so that they could bury him in his home village So much grief but I—will you believe me?—I'm sometimes jealous of them "

Inna had heard about the Zagradovka drama, about how they had buried with full honours a young sailor who had died in a fire on board his ship The electricity had to be turned off and the sailor threw himself through the smoke to the master-switch, pushing a comrade aside and even managing to shout "You've got children" He broke the connection but was himself burned to death His sailor friends brought him back to Zagradovka, there was a funeral procession with a band, and they lowered him into his grave on towels

His parents were stricken with grief but Panas Emelyanovich envied them even in their despair—that was the state to which suffering had reduced him.

“Panas Emelyanovich, you shouldn’t judge Victor so harshly,” the girl said earnestly. “He has changed and, you must surely agree, the change’s been for the better. Our duty is to help him. Of course he’s still wild sometimes, reticent and incomprehensible, but he does notice good things, too, and if he gets hot and angry over hypocrisy...”

“Thank you, Inna, for defending him. Perhaps it is your generosity of heart and your love that will be his cure. Perhaps I’ve got left behind somehow. I’ve lived a long life and yet so many puzzles remain... I, Inna, have given Kurayevka my whole conscious life, devoted all my energies to the school and to all of you, so that you should become decent people—and you did. With one single and for me the most painful exception. Why? It really is an irony of fate, isn’t it? To bring up so many and to ... fail with one’s nearest and dearest. But even this defeat holds a bitter lesson for me, a lesson that I need above all in order to be able to pass it on to you: no matter that you, the young ones, are different, that you consider yourselves more intellectual and subtle than us. Even if that’s so, you must not, while respecting yourselves, neglect those who under the weight of their years will stand by you to the last and who insofar as their strength allows them raise the flowers of humanity for others. Don’t let them be trampled upon...”

Panas Emelyanovich stood leaning against the loom, his wizened hand nervously fiddling with the stretched warp (they had brought in an old woman from a neighbouring village to set it up properly). The days of home weaving, of cloth warmed by someone’s tears and songs, were gone for ever. But was what life now wove for people—a cloth of new joys and sorrows—any more perfect? Who would be able to tell Inna the answer?

“I’ve just remembered,” she said, “how in school you used to point out to us the perfection of a flower, of an ear of wheat. For some reason, now, years later, I want to think more about such things.”

“A lot, Inna, is disclosed to one only from the summit of years. You, too, will yet discover a lot. How happy I would be if you and Victor should find your happiness

together! He does in fact have some good qualities. With you, he might become a different person. Love can work miracles, can sometimes cause a person to be reborn. So don't give in, my wife and I beg you. Get married and make your own futures. And be happy."

She heard the same thing on several occasions from Victor. After one of the weddings he had been invited to in the district centre, he became particularly insistent.

"Come on. Let's get spliced too. What's the point of dragging things out? What if there's a cataclism tomorrow? We should hurry, dear, hurry, and grab happiness with both hands!"

But these were his thoughts and not hers. And she was most definitely not in a hurry. There were things that held her back. Recently he had on several occasions stood her up on dates. One evening she noticed that Victor was not sober, that he had broken the condition she had made, that he had not kept his own word. This wounded her profoundly: how could he break his promise to her? Could it really be that nothing was sacred to him? As they stood by the gate, Victor suddenly grabbed at her in a violent and unexpectedly rough hug, twisting her arms behind her back and using words that demeaned her. His former gentleness and tenderness were quite gone. The girl was simply forced to push him away. Tearing herself angrily from his arms, she ran away, bearing hurt and sorrow in her heart.

They had met less frequently thereafter. To her former girlish feelings were added a coolness composed of distrust and caution.

She did not, of course, tell Panas Emelyanovich about this but on the contrary tried to comfort him, saying that it would all pass, that Victor might be coming to the village that very day even. There was to be a big party at the club and he had promised to come.

Kurayevka's Palace of Culture came to life with the arrival of autumn. Besides the young people of the village, workers from the construction site and the frontier guards, privates and sergeants (there was a tradition of friendship between the frontier guards and the villagers) were all drawn there. Kurayevka's well-known choir grew in numbers. Cheredni-chenko ordered luxurious costumes for all its members; the regional competition was coming up and he wanted them

to win. A young teacher of music and singing was in charge of the choir. He had himself tried his hand at composing and had filled several exercise books of lined music paper. Amongst amateur composers, he was considered one of the hopefuls.

Besides the choir, the Palace was soon to be enriched by another collective. Oksen the cabinet-maker was putting a folk instrument group together. He had managed to get a lot of people interested: even Guliyev, the commander of the frontier post, had agreed to join the group.

After talking with Panas Emelyanovich, Inna did not go home but remained in the Palace for that evening's amateur concert. Soloists sang songs, ancient and modern. The choir also performed and so did a duet of milkmaids. Of the soloists two people particularly distinguished themselves: tractor driver Valeri Yagnich and the Azerbaijanian officer commanding the frontier post for whom Kurayevka always reserved a greeting worthy of a baritone from the capital. Since the folk instrument group had not yet had time to prepare a repertoire, its leader, the tireless Oksen, went on stage alone, looking very nice and modest with his far from modest ditties. To conclude the evening, the choir performed—for the first time in Kurayevka—*The Shore of Love*. The song was received triumphantly and Ganna Gurievna, who was sitting next to Inna, told the girl, who was blushing with pleasure and embarrassment, to stand up and bow to thank the audience for clapping.

When they left the Palace, happy and excited, at the end of the show, Inna involuntarily glanced up the road leading out of Kurayevka in the grey dusk: Victor should have come along it that day. She found herself wishing he was with her. It was several days now since he had made an appearance and he had firmly promised to be present at the concert. And although he always made fun of everything, he might perhaps have found a few things to like in it.

Veremeyenko Senior was also evidently watching and waiting for his son. Crossing the road in front of the Palace, trap-tapping with his stick, the old man walked along beneath the trees and stopped by the roadside at the very edge of the village, waiting for headlights in the distance, for a jeep to come tearing along, dispelling the autumn evening with its beam of light. A father is a father, however much he may

have been hurt by his son, however much he may be suffering at his son's waywardness. A father does not drive his son from his heart—that is a parent's fate. It was not rare nowadays for the villagers to see the old teacher standing on the outskirts of the village, standing by the roadside, patiently waiting for his only son, the son who was supposed to be his comfort and support in old age and who instead had become the cause of sorrow and shame that never for a moment ceased to pain him. The father waited while the son at that moment was perhaps engaged in a drunken *débauche* in some beer parlour, was perhaps drinking away his respectability, sullyng his and his father's name.

At home, when the family had all gone to bed, Inna sat down on the veranda to make some last notes in her diary (she had decided that beginning that autumn, she would keep a diary). She hadn't written a whole page when there came a hue and a cry from the street,

"Inna, come to the medical centre quickly! Victor's run his father over!"

She flew, her heart in her mouth.

Cherednichenko, the Party organiser, and some other unfamiliar faces were already at the medical centre. Panas Emelyanovich was lying on the examination table. Not stopping to put on her white coat, Inna ran up, squatted beside him, and began nervously feeling for his pulse. Could she ever have thought back at school that she would one day find herself sitting over her teacher of botany in the role of nurse? Without glasses, Panas Emelyanovich's face looked even smaller. It was a greyish-white colour and beside his ear a bruise was already darkening. The grey hair on the back of his head was matted with blood. The teacher was unconscious. Inna held the dry old man's wrist, searching for the life in it. Under the eyes of the subdued, anxiously silent people, the girl, with fright and pain, with despair, counted the barely perceptible and gradually fading heartbeats.

Veremeyenko Senior died in her arms without recovering consciousness.

This was the first death she had ever witnessed and it took place in her medical centre. Inna was stricken with grief. She wanted to shake the light, breathless body to bring it back to life, to return it from non-existence. She had never before felt such despair. Conscious of her own impotence

and containing her tears, she jumped up and tore out of the room. All she wanted was to get out as fast as possible, to be alone and free to cry! She had just reached the door when Victor appeared. He came in, rocking on his feet. His face was as white as a sheet. Was it really him? She met his sleepwalker's eyes, and saw a face grey with horror, saw a person who gasped pathetically, trying to speak but unable to do so. And those turbid, fish-like eyes! Still like a sleepwalker, he moved towards Inna, hesitantly and blindly stretching his hand out to her.

"Get out! Killer!" She jumped away from him. "I hate you!"

And she blindly ran out the door.

They made Victor sign an undertaking that he would not attempt to leave the village. The investigation began. Victor's mother became unusually active. Since her husband and his father could not be resurrected, she tried to save her son. She ran all over Kurayevka looking for witnesses who would confirm her version of the events: that her son was not guilty, that Panas Emelyanovich had simply stumbled and fallen in the car's way, because he was blind.

Kurayevka provided no such witnesses: the village could not only be kind but also harsh. In any other case, it might have stretched a point, in any other case but not this one.

The circle closed. Victor's friends, the people who were with him in the car at the time, as if by agreement turned away from him or, as he himself gloomily phrased it, "sold him out". Faced by the investigator they stated, one and all, in a rehearsed manner, that although they had had a few drinks, they had nevertheless tried to restrain Victor, begged him not to drive so fast. But he had put his foot on the gas like a madman and not far from the Palace of Culture had pushed the car even harder. Well, suddenly there was a man standing in the middle of the road ... stretching his hands out, shouting something. Perhaps he wanted to stop the car. They just had time to shout "It's your father!" to Victor and he allegedly replied over his shoulder: "Never mind, we'll break through!" At the last moment he attempted to swerve to one side but it was already too late.

Veremeyenko Junior was allowed to remain free for the

time being. It was not real freedom for him however. Despite all his mother's efforts, she failed to find any witnesses prepared to perjure themselves, and there was no way of clearing him. This Victor himself now understood perfectly well. He had run his father over, and Kurayevka was united in its boundless disgust, in its condemnation, in its severe collective sentence—passed before the official trial, before the district procurator's speech.

Perhaps it was only then that the whole horror of what he had done struck the lad. He spent half a day standing grey-faced over his father's freshly dug grave in the village cemetery. After that he never showed his face anywhere on the village.

They saw him wandering alone by the seaside, his back bent like an old man's. One evening he turned up at the beach belonging to the Young Pioneer camp—this was where he had driven into a crowd of children on his motorcycle. The beach was empty, the children had all gone back to school, and only a flock of local boys was kicking a ball about. They said later that the patricide had wandered about like a ghost, like a sleepwalker. He had stopped and watched the rollers come in, covering the beach with foam. He had told the children: "I'm going to take a swim." They had been surprised because none of the villagers would dream of bathing at that time of year. But he... He didn't even get undressed. Still wearing his clothes, he walked into the sea: deeper and deeper, up to his waist, up to his chest, up to his neck. Then he swam (he was a strong swimmer and would sometimes swim out right to the horizon). And now he swam and swam until he was invisible for the waves. The children decided that he was playing a trick on them: that he had gone into the sea here and would come out somewhere else. He did—three days later. He was washed ashore by the cottage of old Korshak, the fishing coop's watchman. Korshak was the first to see him. Afterwards he said that he had thought it was a child's ball bouncing on the waves. He went on thinking that until the "ball" came closer to the shore. It was Veremeyenko Junior. The old fishermen who had seen many sights in their day have never seen the likes of this before, had never seen a drowned man in so strange a pose: he stood up right in the water, fully

dressed, stood like one was supposed to stand on the earth, absolutely vertically. That was why his head on the surface had looked like a ball.

23

Yagnich took charge of the boat, of the mysterious lugger. The management cooperated with him in every way: did he need welders? Here you are. Painters? Please. Materials? We'll issue them, so long as things are moving.

The old sailor now slept on board the lugger. After that first night he did not want to sleep in the empty block again. Let the goblins roam free in the building, he'd rather be on board his ship. Things were more familiar there. He spent whole days working on the lugger, which in his hands was to be turned from an ugly duckling into a snow-white swan.

The girls from the building site could not wait to see what he was doing there, this old sailor, what he was secretly fixing and laying out. A flock of curious plasterers in splattered overalls would flit over: "May we have an excursion, please!" But Yagnich did not allow anyone in, keeping his work a secret. Even the foreman, the sharp-eyed fat man in the large gumboots, was not told much about the work on the lugger: he might be an expert at his side, but in this he was like a bear trying to be an astrologer. Only his closest aides spent whole days together with Yagnich: Oksen and a few other enthusiasts given to the old sailor as assistants. At his orders they mercilessly gutted the lugger, threw out its innards because everything would have a different role to play, everything would be "elevated to the level of fantasy", as Oksen said.

A sureness, solidity and authority gradually returned to the old sailor. And how could it have been otherwise! After having apparently been written off, he was now a senior consultant, a person with practically a high security clearance. He behaved as if no project on the building site was more important than his lugger. They sometimes saw him in the blocks, looking and sniffing at everything, pestering people with questions, and sometimes even muttering a few words of criticism. People's controller, if you please! When the construction head was away (and this was not an infrequent occurrence because there were innumerable matters to see to and meetings to attend) Yagnich had to deal with comrade

Balabushny, the foreman. This wise old hand liked to keep people on their toes and kept reminding him: come on, old man, step on it. Give us less clever ideas, we've got a deadline coming on. To this the old sailor responded with Olympian calm.

"There's no need to hurry us. You'd do better making sure that there aren't any interruptions in the supplies. We'll do our part on time; we don't make idle promises."

"I'm not hurrying you, you must understand me rightly," Balabushny would say, in a one hundred and eighty degree volte-face. "You have our complete trust, Andron Guriievich. And I'll see to it about the materials. The plastic has already been dispatched, they say. It's East German, snow-white, an absolute miracle, even though a bit expensive."

"We shouldn't begrudge good materials for the miners," said Yagnich and, taking a piece of paper out of his pocket, he would begin unhurriedly to read out how much of what materials he still needed.

A dead calm would come over the building site during the lunch hour. The machinery would fall silent, the working people would hurry into the shade, to eat, to read the newspaper.

So no one noticed when one day an important person, whom they ought to have greeted with due respect, appeared on the site. Not finding anyone in the headquarters waggon, the visitor strode up to Yagnich who was at that time, as was his habit, standing guard beside his lugger. The "high guest" probably took the old sailor for a watchman because, without saying hello, he addressed the elderly man quite sternly.

"Where's the management?"

"Gone to lunch. The management doesn't live on enthusiasm, you know."

"Well, who's the person in charge here then?"

"I am."

The visitor glanced at the old man with obvious doubt and a grimace of displeasure flickered across his face. One felt that he had the right to make such grimaces—this was, evidently, an important bird. A heavy man, his face, shaded by a hat, was the colour of clay and rather puffy. He still hadn't been on holiday and hadn't seen any real sun.

"Are you really the senior man here?"

"I just said so. And you, who may you be?" Yagnich in his turn inquired.

"From the ministry," the visitor uttered carelessly, not considering it necessary to specify which: that of the client or that of the builders. This in fact did not make much difference to Yagnich either. What was important was that he at last had someone to talk to, someone with whom he could discuss certain things that he could not with the foreman.

"It so happens that I need you."

"Me? You?" The earthen face crinkled in an ironic smile.

"Just listen to me carefully if you care about this project. Was it you who decided the positioning of the blocks? In what direction does block one face? The reading room and half the rooms—where do they face?"

"Well, where?" the important comrade was beginning to be interested.

"They face the steppe, from which the north winds come! In the morning the miner will get up and not see how the sun is rising. He came to the seaside to enjoy its beauty and you've lodged him with his back to the sea, facing the wrong way."

"But the rooms on the side facing the sea, on the sunny side, will be as hot as greenhouses. And in any case, if you stop to think about it, your miner, forgive the expression, does not give a damn about the sea. Above all he wants to rest after his labours. A high calory diet, dominoes and billiards, that's what he wants. Not sunrises. Comfort must be the first thing we provide."

"And a lot you've done about that! The canteen has been designed to work in two shifts, the diners will have to queue on their feet, hanging about in a long line. And in the dwelling blocks? There's only one toilet per floor, and that at the very end of the corridor! Real comfort, that is! I can just picture that nightly dash in one's underwear down the corridor."

The visitor sniffed offensively at such naturalism.

"You may be right about there being a few design faults."

"And who's going to make them good? Isn't it your job?"

The visitor suddenly bristled.

"And who are you to be asking me to account? Who gave you the right to talk to me like that? Who are you, in fact?"

"I'm the working class, that's who." Yagnich frowned so that only his small, prickly eyes glinted beneath his brows. "And it'll soon be forty years since I've held that rank and title on the seas!"

At that moment the foreman came running up from somewhere, panting and frightened. He went into a spin in the ministerial presence, and began apologising, and took him on a tour of the building site. The construction chief chose that moment to come driving up. The first talk they had actually concerned Yagnich.

"Who is that old man of yours?" The visitor nodded in the old sailor's direction. "That poisonous old granddad?!"

"He's *our* granddad," the construction head said with an apologetic smile. "And he's not such a granddad really. I'd rather say that he is a senior citizen, a master craftsman."

"He's full of criticism. He's the kind that writes anonymous denunciations and pesters various offices."

"Ours wouldn't do a thing like that. But that he speaks the truth to anyone's face, well, that's his nature."

"You should let him go and take a well-earned rest. At his own request, eh?"

"We could. But the problem is that we just can't do without him, Stepan Petrovich. We need him badly."

"It's up to you. You know what you're doing. Just don't come crying to me when he writes a complaint to the *Pravda* about your complex. Details all your failings."

The construction head assured him that things would never reach that pass.

Yagnich meanwhile was standing with his back to them, facing the sea and looking at his lugger.

After work it was his habit to walk along the shore, looking at the objects washed up by the sea. It worked tirelessly. Sometimes it'd toss him a clump of dark slimy seaweed, sometimes a jellyfish, sometimes a pile of mussel shells, sometimes a piece of someone's salt-eaten jersey. White gulls glided over the shore, over Yagnich. Distant events would sometimes flash through his mind. The surf sparkling at his feet. Pebbles grey with salt. And him on them, a young man sitting with his arm around someone. Can this really all have gone, would those times never return? Would he never see that reality, those birds and those days, those starry Kurayevka nights again?

Yagnich's walk would sometimes take him as far as Korshak's cottage. It stood alone, on a rise amidst the sand dunes, near the fishing coop's pier. Rabbits ran about there, while ducks and geese looked like white snow in the rough grass. The fisherman's nets were hung out to dry on lines. Near his cottage, old Korshak himself would be mending something, repairing a net, or else simply sitting and thinking, resting.

"Hello there, granddad. How's the spy-catching?"

"No spies and no fish either."

He was connected with the frontier post and even had a medal "For Defending the State Frontiers". Old Korshak had to be nearly a hundred; Yagnich was just a kid when he was walking about Kurayevka in a pointed Budyonny cap, sharing out the land and terrifying world capital with his whiskers. He had long ago become an old man, and he now lived alone and worked, as he had done all his life. Yagnich was struck by how he had changed: he'd shrunk, his hair's grown, his grey locks were tied across his forehead with a length of cord so they wouldn't fall in his eyes. Sometimes he'd be overcome by generosity. He'd go unhurriedly into the house and take down a few dried fish from where they hung beneath the ceiling strung on a piece of catgut and bring them to him.

"Here, Andron, you'll like these."

"Don't you miss people here, Ivanich?"

"Sometimes yes, sometimes no. At night, as the breakers roll in, you know how it is—one gets all sorts of ideas. There are so many people nowadays, machines roaring everywhere. Once in the steppe it used to be one shepherd under one sky and another shepherd under another. You had to walk half a day from one shelter to another. But now you keep bumping into people. And now they've ploughed everything, really spread about the coast."

"There's enough land for good people."

"That's true in its way. It's just that mixed in with the good people are beasts of prey on two legs—God rot'em. Last year some people turned up who drowned dolphins in their nets. They brought them out onto the spit at night." Yagnich gave a jerk, as if from pain, but Korshak didn't notice. "They could not but know that if a dolphin gets tangled up in a net underwater, that's the end of him. He can't

live for long without air. In fact, he's really half-human. They say that when you drag a dolphin out onto dry land in a net, it cries just like a child. What kind of people are they who can do such things?"

"I thought that there'd be no such cruel people after the war. They know no hardship and yet they're cruel. Why?"

They'd chat or sometimes simply sit silently together, then Yagnich would walk off along the shore back to the construction site. Half way there, he'd make a stop by the black and seemingly burnt log which had been tossed out onto the smooth sand by the sea. Perhaps it was from some Caucasian wood. The old sailor would have a rest there. Someone had dragged the log up to the top of a sand dune. In the evenings he'd listen to the sea which splashed at his feet, the rollers hissing like electric welders. If you had at such a moment looked into the old sailor's eyes, into his small razor-blade-sharp eyes, you would have seen in them no joy or sadness. His thoughts would be invisibly frozen in them as he stared into the distant blue. But even in those long-drawn-out minutes, when time seemed almost to stop, to cease advancing, man still thinks of something—we cannot but think. But about what?

One day, as Yagnich was sitting in the early evening on that knotty old log, for some reason he suddenly remembered with unusual clarity a bullfight he had seen as a young man. Once had been enough, it was not what he considered an entertainment. He had been wholeheartedly on the side of the animal raised in the darkness of his stall. On the side of the black brute which flew out into the ring, blinded by the sun, and was evidently seeking someone to fight with. He obviously did not know the meaning of fear, courage alone boiled within him. Everything swam in his eyes—the crowds and the banderilleros, and although everyone, absolutely everyone and everything was against him, he had no intention of retreating, this noble knight of the *corrida*. He was ready to fight one and all, ready for an uneven battle, ready, it seemed, to gore the very sun!

A gull brought Yagnich out of his reverie with its shrill cry. He looked around: someone was coming from the construction site, stepping youthfully, a light figure in a red jersey and the inevitable trousers which everyone, irrespective of sex, now wore. There was therefore no way of telling

instantly if it was a man or a girl. Closer now, walking along the escarpment where the path was out of reach of the waves. It was Inna!

She didn't even smile. A contained and pained glance. In the dim light of dusk there were ash-grey shadows beneath her eyes.

"How did you know where to find me?"

"They told me at the complex. Go that way, they said, that's your Yagnich over there, sitting on the sand dune."

It pained him to look at his niece. She had grown thin and pinched. Her eyes which only recently had shone with happiness and merriness were dull with grief. The girl did not talk about what she had been through, however.

"I've brought you some stewed fruit," she said, placing a battered thermos on the sand. "Made of dried apricots."

"Thanks. Sit down, girl."

She sat down next to him, on the end of the log, and twiddled a wormwood twig idly between her fingers. Yagnich could understand what she was feeling, could understand how a person pined from grief and loneliness, could feel her incurable pain overflowing into his own heart. He did not try to comfort her, however, although he might perhaps have asked her whether it was really worth grieving so much over someone who had—let it be involuntarily—killed his own father and whose own conscience had then condemned him, led him to kill himself. How could he comfort her? There weren't on this earth any curative words that could be placed like a poultice on a spiritual wound, that could relieve a girl's pain over a lost first love. He noticed the tears shining in his niece's eyes and laid a hand gently on her shoulder.

"Don't cry, girl," he said quietly.

"I'm not crying. It's just that I don't understand why this should have happened to me."

"Everyone, Inna, can become an orphan, can suddenly be left alone. But nevertheless we don't have the right to let our spirits fall when this happens. Loneliness, you know, sometimes even gives one strength."

They both fell silent again, tasting the astringent smell of the sea and breathing the dry steppe air. They followed a gull with their eyes, watching it fly in circles above them, sending its plaintive cry out into the dusk. Darkness was descending over the sea.

Suddenly and with no apparent logical link, Yagnich began telling the girl about Stromboli. Stromboli is an active volcano which sailors call the "lighthouse of the Mediterranean". No matter how dark it is, the volcano glowed red in the clouds, the sky pulsating above it. It was a sure landmark. Years might pass, ships might change shape, but Stromboli still glowed there. Perhaps at this moment the Orion was sailing in sight of Stromboli's glow.

"But I'm just rambling on along my own grief. Forgive me. And don't give way, my girl, to grief and sadness; you're young, you'll still find your destiny. Well, I think it's time we were moving."

They stood up and walked out onto the path that wound over the escarpment. Ahead the construction site was already twinkling as the first lights were turned on. They walked in silence, each lost in his own thoughts, away from the blackened log on which they had just been sitting. Now it had melted into the darkness, and now so too had the sand dune, one of Kurayevka's hillocks overgrown with wormwood.

24

The "Asian flu" hit Kurayevka that winter.

The influenza epidemic was widespread. The radio brought worrying news: in Rome, in London, in Paris the hospitals were overflowing, schools were being closed, thousands of people were dying.

Inna was in despair: there was no serum effective against the "Asian flu". Laboratories all over the world kept finding more and more varieties of the virus. Pathogenes which had not existed yesterday, today spread like lightning. Virologists in many countries were delving into the secret of this evil, whole institutes were doing research, however no radical means of defence had yet been evolved. They had to make do with familiar advice, the simplest of treatments which even if they did bring relief did not actually kill the virus off. So it would swim around in the sufferer's blood until his body overcame it on its own. Inna ran from house to house, saw whole families of her fellow-villagers stricken at once, treated babies who were burning hot. She was particularly sorry for the little ones; they suffered more from the disease than did adults. She gave injections and distributed pills

while at the same time warning people not to abuse chemicals and to stick to folk medicines: guelderrose, raspberries, and plenty to drink, sweetened with limeflower honey. The virus meanwhile grinned nastily and went on with its work.

Inna had a further problem with her Kurayevka patients: they absolutely refused to obey her orders, especially the broad-shouldered tractor drivers. They did not consider flu to be a serious illness: colds, they said, are nothing new. Having just been tossing in a fever, they would be off to their workshops with a cigarette between their teeth the moment their temperatures dropped a little. This was just what the Asian flu liked: it would attack the hero again, who would catch it even worse the second time around. There were cases of serious complications.

One day Cherednichenko appeared in the medical centre (he had been one of the first to fall victim to the flu, having caught it at some meeting: people sneezed all over the place at meetings). He wanted to discover from his nurse how many people were ill in Kurayevka and when he could expect this thrice-accursed epidemic to come to an end. In the middle of their talk, Savva Danilovich suddenly stood up and went up to Inna.

"You look awfully red in the face, little nurse, and I don't like the look of your eyes." He put his palm against her forehead. "Ouch, you're burning hot yourself! You tell others not to, but you're trying to go through it on your feet? We don't want heroics like that."

And that very same day Inna was replaced by Varvara Filipovna (who had had her flu at the same time as her husband, synchronously, as he put it). Inna was given strict instructions to remain in bed.

She was in bed with a fever when the postwoman brought her a letter. The archeologist was writing from ... Chittagong! That, girl, was in golden Bengal! Having been called up for his military service, he had found himself in the Navy and was now in the Bay of Bengal, clearing a channel that was blocked by sunken boats. The sailors' task was to open up the port. So look where his experience as a diver had come in handy! He was having to work in the unbelievably difficult conditions of the tropics, in terrible heat in murky water which presented practically nil visibility: the rivers brought down a lot of mud. So that's how he was living, forging

world-wide solidarity. As for what he had said to Inna once, by the walls of the fortress, that remained true and he wanted her to know it. He loved her then and he loved her now. He wasn't hiding it and shouted it out from beneath his mask through the murky waters of the tropics!

This voice came to Inna from another, unreal world. It was as if Ovid's fortress had remained on the other side of some steep mountains, along with a shining lunar path on the sea and this archeologist with his warm, youthful confession. Here it was snowing slush or raining snow, while he was being given a hard time by the heat in his tropics, crawling like some prehistoric monster in his diving suit through the murky water where unfamiliar ships loomed weirdly. All this was another world that swam illusorily, floated before her eyes, in a grey fog filled with sticky yellow patches induced by the fever. She felt sinking into the heavy, marshy, engulfing waters of the tropics. At other times, when the sick girl was dozing, she would half-dream, half-imagine a strange little reptile like a lizard, its whole body semi-transparent so that even its inner workings were visible. A miniature brontosaurus. This strange creature sat alertly on her dressing table where there was a pile of old magazines. From there it watched her in the throes of her fever. Like the mysterious snake that had watched over Vera Konstantinovna in the Red Cross tent. She didn't know if it was poisonous or not or what it would do in the very next second. Later she was herself in the place from which the translucent crawly creature had appeared, from which the unexpected letter had arrived. In the raging heat, she was giving out Red Cross blankets and sweetened condensed milk and at the same time preparing some mixture or other for the little Bengali children. Clouds of mosquitoes hung over her head and it was so hot that Inna was suffocating, trying to tear the mosquito net from her face. It was stuffy and smelly, the light was yellow, and a voice barely reached her through the hot, shivering, sucking mire. During the part of her illness in which she was in a semi-delirium, Inna on several occasions fancied—for all that entirely real rain mixed with snow was falling outside her window in Kurayevka—she was in tropical Chittagong, she saw the masts of sunken ships sticking out of the water, a misty human figure, far-off and faithful, who spent hours exploring in his diving suit on the bottom of

the bay, amidst sharks and octopuses, feeling his way about, examining the sunken ships already covered with slime, shells, and seaweed that snaked about like adders.

The epidemic increased Cherednichenko's worries. The people might be off sick but work doesn't wait. Although it was winter, they nevertheless kept a permanent watch over the fields. The chairman went out there himself nearly every day, insisting that the agronomists and field team leaders went too to inspect the winter wheat. They made various measurements, took samples, diagnosed, and carefully worked out which areas were in need of extra fertiliser. Kurayevka greedily listened to the radio weather forecasts. When the meteorologists promised cloud, wind and slush, the farmers would take it as a gift, the accounts department would liven up, and Cherednichenko would laugh in his office, as delighted as a young child.

"What some may call slush, we call manna from heaven, ha-ha-ha!" he'd roar with laughter all over the offices.

The unknown radio announcer could not, of course, hear this laughter and could not therefore know that the "rain with snow" or "snow with rain" that he had promised was making someone so happy. Had he known it, he would not have put a gloomy and even slightly apologetic note into his voice when making this forecast. This was done most frequently by the women announcers who were very sensitive and gentle creatures. One of the speakers when making such forecasts would try especially hard to say "rain and snow" as fast as possible, with exaggerated and obviously false jollity, predicting overcast weather in a tone more suited to a lovely, sunny day. The efforts of this announcer amused Cherednichenko.

"What an artist that one is, embellishing reality to the best of his ability!" he would say.

Besides his other cares, Cherednichenko had one idea that would not give him any peace: he was fired by a plan to erect a monument to the plough in Kurayevka. To that old, Poor Peasants' Committee plough which once upon a time cut the first collective furrow across Kurayevka's fields. Since there was no longer a plough of that type to be found in Kurayevka, the chairman had given orders that one should be looked for. Neighbours were to be questioned, search was to be instituted but he wanted one found at any price.

"We'll erect a pedestal in a prominent place. Perhaps over there on that Scythian barrow and raise it there, raise our first, our single-bladed plough, up to a fitting height," he held forth, firing himself and those who thought like him. "There are tanks on pedestals, and machine gun carts, and 'Katyushas'. Now that's all very well, but surely the plough deserves that honour, too."

And so, my friends, come to Kurayevka one of these days and you'll see a monument to a plough—probably the first in the world.

Winter is winter: every stalk and blade of grass in the steppe was lying low and showing no signs of life above ground. But below, in the darkness of black earth, were masses of intertwined roots, young ones and old ones. Only they—the roots—were alive: clumps and knots of secret life. Cherednichenko would have liked to have an X-ray machine that could look into the layers of black earth and show him the silent and wise interwinings with which everything begins, everything—both flowers and ears of wheat.

He was pleased with the fields. The winter crops were in a good condition. The plants on all the fields were alive; nowhere had they been flooded or had their roots damaged by frost. There quite simply hadn't been any frosts to do this latter. Meanwhile the radio kept on day after day promising just what was needed: snow and rain or rain and snow! The black earth greedily absorbed, drank the generous moisture and even then, at that time of year, the wheat which had taken firm root was shooting up nicely and going green under the wet snow. Cherednichenko would go out to the fields and bend down to admire how on even a frosty morning a green shoot bravely poked its way out through the dryish snow. What a miracle it was! The green spike poked its way out, smiled, forming a tiny little water hole around itself. The little stem was alive, warmed by some invisible heat, the cold of the snow withdrew from it, the little shoot seemingly making its own microclimate. It was incredible that it was able to punch its way through winter's heavy armour, punch its way out of nonexistence. Yes, and life itself was glowing green, as more and more shoots rose up through the snow, and before long, when the sun reached its zenith, licking the fields and their coverings of slushy snow with its hot tongue-rays, the field would begin to steam, telling all living

things to grow! Spring would be coming and the sun would peep out from behind the clouds, more and more frequently, warming the fields for an hour or even two. From up there, from the sun itself it seemed, a sweet and lovely voice would pour down over the earth—the voice of the brave skylark which had risked staying in its native steppe instead of flying off to Zambia and was now the first to greet the blue spring.

“Come on, come on, louder!” Cherednichenko would cry to the invisible songsters, squinting at the sun. “You’re just what we need to make everything perfect!”

The days would be growing longer, the sky lighter, and at last there would come the time when Kurayevka’s skies were open from horizon to horizon, when to the sowers’ great joy it turned out that nothing had been flooded or frozen that year, that they would not have to re-sow any parts of the farm, that the fields were green and growing, and that merry red flames were blazing in the protected steppe—that the immortal Scythian tulips were in flower—all the way to the sea!

25

Tasya the plasterer (another Yagnich relative but a distant one) pictured the miners who were soon due to arrive as almost mythical creatures. Giants. Mountainous men. The work they did was probably the hardest in the whole world. Somewhere far beneath the earth, in its dark depths, their tunnels and underground highways stretched for kilometres. It was another world, a world of courage and daily battles. To be able to bear it there, one had to have a special character, like ... well, like Andron Gurievich Yagnich’s.

And when the first miner arrived with the spring to the not quite completed holiday home, arrived for a stay subsidised by his trade union, Tasya was struck by the fact that he really was in some ways similar to Yagnich the old sailor: the same restraint, the same unhurried walk, the same solid, seemingly compressed strength, supplies of which had evidently not been totally exhausted. One could feel this strength in his stocky, thickset body.

“So you’re ... from there?” the girl asked, pointing at the ground and curiously examining the new arrival, his face

furrowed by deep wrinkles that the coal-dust had eaten into. "Aren't you frightened at being so far underground?"

"We get used to it, girl. Man can get used to anything. And someone's got to dig out the coal. We do it for a year, for ten, for twenty years. While above us on the steppe the feather-grass waves and the tulips flower. And herds of horses run about because it so happens that there is a stud-farm on the fields over our tunnels. The foals gambol..."

"Can you hear the sound of their hoofs?"

"The horses, the sun, and the flowers are a long way away, my girl. It's like the sky to you. Close up, above our heads, is just the roof and it sometimes cracks."

"How awful!"

The miner smiled. The building girls surrounding the miner wanted to know what he thought of the job they had done, perhaps he had found some faults. The guest, however, was not inclined to look for faults: he was evidently of the easy-going kind who does not "direct criticism". On the contrary, he praised the girls: they'd worked hard, he said, to put up such light and tall buildings in so empty a place. Looking round, he saw a mosaic by the entrance to block one; it depicted a crowd of miners' children greeting some young coalface workers in their working clothes with flowers. He said that it was true to life.

"There'll also be a swimming pool for you, a café with music, modern dancing..."

"Dances are just what I need," laughed the old miner. "It's a long time since I last did some dancing."

More groups of miners began arriving over the next few days. They included not only elderly miners with their long-time silicoses but also young ones who, given a cue to hold, would forget about lunch and everything else and would spend the whole day knocking balls about a billiard table. When asked by their wives when they got back what the sea was like, they'd discover they hadn't seen it: all they'd seen were their billiard cues, and balls and pockets flashing before their eyes.

Yagnich became quite friendly with the first arrival. Being both working people, they understood each other, needing no interpreter because for people like them with their experience, life itself is the interpreter. The miner was interested in the lugger. In fact, little was left now of the old lugger.

The boat had grown, straightened its shoulder-bulwarks, seemingly pulling itself together to acquire new and smoother lines, a streamlined shape. It now presented a most unusual sight. Not so long ago it had been almost scrap metal, but now it had been reborn, like a phoenix from ashes! It was all panelled with mahogany (or imitation mahogany) and fitted with a touch of rigging, which although not real was at least done in Orion style. There was a helm on deck together with cannons bravely pointing in all directions and loops of anchor-chain painted black. It was quite a sight. The soul of the ship was the figurehead, a mythical nymph, her face turned to the sea and winds, which had been carved out of white sycamore by Oksen. This figurehead of a mermaid flinging herself headlong forward was somehow reminiscent of a swallow—one got the impression that she was flying at the ship's prow, that she was just for this instant frozen in flight before tearing on. And the lugger itself seemed somehow to contain motion, irrepressible energy: it looked as if it were at any moment about to move off together with its anchors and mermaid and glide over the invisible breakers. No, the fishing coop's management would not recognise the unit they had written off for scrap—it was now so changed, garbed in the wonderfully festive clothes of Yagnich's fantasy.

The old sailor's new friend, the miner, whose tunnel was somewhere down beneath the steppe, beneath a stud-farm, although he did not consider himself an authority in marine matters, appreciated the amount of work that had gone into this lugger, the amount of inventive energy it had taken, beginning practically from scratch, to give the ship a new lease of life. To tell the truth, not many of the builders had had any idea of what the old lugger would look like after its refitting. In fact, everyone had had his own picture: the construction head saw it one way, the foreman another, and Yagnich saw in his future creation something personal and sacred to him, something that only his fantasy could produce. He visualised it both as a whole and how the details would be, but how others would take it, whether it would excite delight or perhaps laughter and criticism—just try and guess in advance! And it was only now that his precious handiwork was being disclosed to people. Even if it wasn't that marvelous, it still decorated the shore. The masts and rigging rose into the sky. Rope ladders led up to the

mast-heads. Black wrought-iron lanterns of an old-fashioned design, such as might have been used in the old days when caravellas set out into the ocean on wild stormy nights, decorated the prow and stern. A gangplank with lengths of thick white Manila rope to hold on to down each side led up to the boat—this was another of Yagnich's ideas.

Yagnich was still not letting outsiders in (the final touches were being put inside) but he made an exception for the old miner. With a sailor's hospitality, he invited him to step on board although he warned him that not everything would be tidy, that they hadn't yet made everything ship-shape.

"And yes, be careful," he warned the miner, "not to say anything about illness while you're on board! It's an unwritten sailor's law that all talk about illness is left on shore."

"We miners also have quite a few superstitions like that. Where there's danger you always find superstitions."

Their tour brought Yagnich embarrassment: in a corner on a knotted mat made by the craftsman himself out of pieces of rope there lay a pile of leftovers! Salami skin, scraps of paper, an old tin can with some sprats still in it. The miner, it was true, said nothing, being a polite man, but he had certainly noticed it and that was enough for Yagnich to be almost consumed with shame.

"Kandybenko! Let's have you here!" he shouted furiously into the bowels of the ship.

A young man in overalls, fit and smart-looking, with an artless face that was perhaps slightly mocking, appeared.

"Aye-aye, sir!" He said raising his hand to his forehead where it hovered vaguely in an attempted salute.

"Your leftovers?"

"Those sprats? What do you say we should eat? I couldn't get any sturgeon, let alone caviar, that food of the gods, that *délicatessen* for the chosen few!"

"Clear this up and stop gabbling," Yagnich growled, containing his fury. "Every last crumb! To make a mess like that on a ship. I was right when I thought of getting rid of you three days ago."

The lad shifted from one foot to another and did not hurry to begin clearing up the mess. He evidently hoped that the storm would pass but under the old man's relentless and demanding eye he nevertheless set about unwillingly collecting the leftovers of his feast in a piece of old newspaper.

"Now what?" he asked mockingly, nodding at the rubbish. This made Yagnich angrier still.

"You dare ask? Take it away! And yourself with it! I don't want to see you again! You're not to put a foot on board again!"

The lad wandered off with his bundle. Although he had obeyed, the craftsman's mood had been thoroughly spoilt. The old man was excited and breathing hard, so hard that he inhaled with a strange wheeze and the miner actually had to calm him.

"Don't take on so. You can't afford getting so worked up..."

"Did you hear that? He doesn't get enough caviar!" Yagnich would not relent. "And why not? Because of people like it, and not..." Whenever Yagnich used the neutral "it", that expressed his highest degree of contempt. "One leaves a pile of rubbish on a ship and another, exactly the same kind of person, dumps filth in the sea."

"Or throws a cloud of dolomite dust down on a village so that it stings the inhabitants' eyes," the miner added in a restrained voice. "Then it turns out that in the area that this dust settles, the soil becomes infertile. And you can't clean the filthy stuff off the window panes, so every year thousand of square metres of that have to be changed."

Yagnich was not going to regain his calm for a long time. This Kandybenko was going to be under his skin for a while yet. To a fool like that lad, he was just a joke, a bore with his old-fashioned seaman's quirks. And he was to teach people like that? He was to make so much effort for someone like that?

The miner, though, really knew how to appreciate the result of his labours, of the several months of work he had put in! Inside was all wood, copper and brass, everything original, unique and for the most part hand-made by the craftsman. The inspecting miner could only gasp and smack his lips with surprise as he looked at the knotted mats, the strong oak tables and the stools made of solid oak logs (you could count all the yearly rings on them). In the corners stood barrels, again oaken (you were free to imagine they contained rum), their sides decorated with carved bunches of grapes and carved lions' heads with bared fangs. The portholes were glazed with multicoloured glass so that the

lighting was unusual and fantastic—it was as if one were in a castle—while for the night-time old-fashioned black wrought-iron lanterns hung from the ceiling. However, Yagnich's pride and joy was the ship's bell, an absolutely genuine one. Everything was in the right place, every last detail perfect, but, most important of all, one felt it had all been done with love, with dedication. They went all over the refitted boat, leaving nothing out, until at last, they found themselves on deck, at the helm.

"Try it, if you like," Yagnich suggested to the miner. "It's also real, from a ship. There's no fakery here."

The wheel had evidently been acquainted with a lot of hands since it shone all over, polished by the workworn hands of unknown people.

"Whether it's real or not is beside the point," said the miner, laying his heavy hand on the helm and standing immobile, lost in thought. "The main thing is that a man should hold something dear. Hold something sacred, as they say."

Both men were silent after this and both involuntarily turned to the sea where one saw in his mind's eye the springtime feather-grass waving over the mounds of waste while the other visualised the white cloud that was in fact a tall ship with filled sails.

26

It was not only Yagnich who needed the Orion: on board the ship, his absence was felt quite acutely. His spirit kept making itself felt, and this wizard of the sails and reliable teacher who was now gone for ever, who had disappeared in the hot seas of Kurayevka's dusty fields, was remembered still.

What was he doing there, the wise old magician, what was he up to at the close of his days? Had he become a shepherd, wandering the steppe with his crook? It was a useful job but... Had he perhaps fallen ill, had his retirement perhaps knocked him out? We all know what loneliness and the lack of an occupation can do to a man. Not everyone has the strength to bear such a weight for long. Set down on the steppe, in the face of different winds, what kind of knots was he tying now?

People kept recalling him on board the Orion, which had just sailed out for her spring trials. For the time being, they were still almost at home, since they were doing manoeuvres by the home shores. Ahead of them lay a responsible voyage which would last several months, a so-called prestige voyage. They would go a long way, the Orion would carry high the red colour of their homeland, the proud flag of the motherland! The trainees for this voyage were being picked from several naval colleges and only those who met high requirements could hope to be selected. The Orion wanted strong and fit young men, lads who would everywhere impress people by their smart appearance, their cultivation, and their courteousness. (To be sure, there would be some in the foreign ports visited who attempted to sow distrust by spreading rumours that these were not trainees at all but professional naval sailors dressed as trainees, every one of them either a sergeant or a midshipman.)

For the new contingent of trainees who stepped onto the Orion's sail-shaded deck, Yagnich would of course also exist, though more as an abstraction than anything else because they would find on the Orion only the legend woven around him, only the echo of his long service. The immensely strong sea-dog, the jealous preserver of tradition, he would be an almost fairy-tale character to them, a figure associated not only with heroic but also with weird situations. In a word, he had become a half-mythical being. After all the sea has at all times, beneath the sails of every age, known such people. By nature cranky, harsh and proud, he was, however, needed by the crew and would continue to exist on the Orion as a sort of symbol, as an indestructible and stable force that firmly bound the human heart to the sea, to its life so full of danger and magic.

And those who had known Yagnich in real life, who had sailed with him over the years, also kept recalling him, kept picturing him in all his day-to-day reality.

"It'll be Yagnich's birthday soon," the captain one day reminded his friend the political instructor. "It would be a nice idea to send him congratulations from the crew."

"Certainly. But you remember how we tried to get in touch with him by radio and what happened? We had no more luck than those people who try to pick up radio signals from other civilisations."

This referred to how they had sent Yagnich a radiogramme with New Year greetings and had got no reply whatsoever.

"The old man's feelings are hurt," said the political instructor. "And in fact, we really didn't serve him well. Our eternal Yagnich, our hard-working teacher, 'the father of the flying fish', and suddenly he's excluded from the Orion! And the Orion is without him. It's hard to get used to it."

It was food for thought. After all, they would each and every one of them have one day to drop anchor somewhere, would have to look for their Kurayevkas, to face other winds, that replaced those of their youth. A few of them might take such changes in their stride, might fit into the world of fences and gardens without much moral damage, but their Yagnich.... It was difficult, even unthinkable, to imagine him selling his carrots and parsley together with a crowd of women at the market. Because although his was a simple life he lived deeply, bore within himself the restlessness of a craftsman and a sailor's healthy self-respect. But perhaps such things faded away, too? Perhaps the old man had abandoned his ambition, had come to terms with his hurt feelings and had finally wiped the Orion from his mind? It would have been the logical thing to do.

That there are no irreplaceable people is a belief held by many, so why then was Yagnich's absence still felt as a void on board the Orion? And probably not just because he had taken away with him his unique experience and practical knowledge, or had "taken the wind", as the trainees fancied. He had left a void that could not be filled. They evidently also missed his quirks, his perpetual grumbling, and even his strange terminology derived in all likelihood from the language of Kurayevka's fishing boats and dinghies. Sometimes when he was in a friendly mood he'd call his sails, lovingly and almost intimately "canvas" or even "sheets". The jib he'd call the "jibby"... And instead of "hoisting sails" he "unfolded the wind-traps"! The lads liked all this and while some of them laughed at him, others happily imitated his ways: come on, lads, isn't it about time we unfolded the wind-traps?

To the captain and the political instructor Yagnich's colourful figure seemed to grow in importance as days passed, to show its most essential facet; now they recalled the old craftsman not just by chance, at the occasional reminder of him, but by some internal call, especially at difficult moments.

"A human amulet, someone said of him," the political instructor pondered aloud. "It's only now that I understand how much Orion and he complemented each other. I do wonder where he is now."

The stubborn old man kept silent and gave no sign of life. His spiritual wound healed, he might finally have calmed down, have found new concerns, and have turned his back to the sea, to his once beloved Orion. After all, that craftsman's passion, that nearly blind love for flying sails, could, like everything on this earth, have become worn, have slowly but irreversibly faded.

Once during exercises, when the Orion's course took it past the Kurayevka coast, the whole crew, as if at a word of command, came pouring onto the deck: Kurayevka! Yagnich's home village! Somewhere in the steppe out there the old craftsman was ending his days, watching the fire of life burn down. Even without binoculars they could see that Kurayevka stretching along the shore, peeping out of orchards. The village was mentioned on charts—its lights included among the landmarks for that area. The frontier watchtower rose to the left of the village, like a stork's nest on a pole, while to the right of Yagnich's capital loomed the silhouettes of some new buildings. But what was that in front of them, right by the white line of the surf, an object looking very much like a boat? From its tall and elegant mast was stretched a bright white wing-like sail. Made of plastic or of steel painted white, flashes of light were reflected on it as if the boat were conversing with the sea in some strange and as yet undecyphered code.

The captain was the first to guess and he smiled at the solution that had occurred to him:

"The Orion's sister ship."

It sometimes happens that a wounded bird lies on the shore, its wings weakly outstretched. A flock of birds flies by, leaving this one, a white patch on the beach.

Like a double, like an echo of the distant, genuine Orion, did Yagnich's strange sailing ship grow up out of the remains of the old lugger. Its silhouette, particularly beautiful from a distance, and its lonely white sail invariably attracted the

attention of the ships that sailed by in sight of the shore. Its shape somehow also touched the hearts of the landmen who saw it if they were in the least bit sensitive. It could be said that the *Orion's* sister ship had something to say to everyone, that it aroused in everyone both a gentle sadness and thoughts about life, about travels, about distant lands.

In Kurayevka at least, Yagnich's creation received recognition. Inna and her friends went specially to have a look at it. She went up on deck and stood at the helm, she examined the dummy cannons and the painted anchor chains as if the art objects, but she spent longest of all by the mermaid figurehead; smiling, lithe, her young breasts to the wind, in a pose that was remarkably graceful she strained out to the sea.

Was she a half-girl, a half-fish, or a half-dolphin?

A mysterious being, her purpose was, as her maker planned, to protect sailors against all sorts of misfortunes, like her sisters did before her in ancient times. The nymph and the whole sailing boat with its rigging told Inna a lot about the craftsman, told her perhaps more than to anyone else. In some strange way reality and fantasy were interwoven on this ship; everyday life and special days, shy youthful longing for open spaces and the inexorable laws of life, the fragility of the wing—all were present here in a fascinating mixture, embodying, as it were, the poet's phrase "and joy did sadness thus embrace". The craftsman himself did not say much about his work beyond remarking that its lines had not come out too badly and that it would be visible from afar—another landmark for sailors. Inna understood this restraint. The creation of his fantasy and hands was going to please some, make others laugh, and leave yet others indifferent. To the girl, though, this strange, weird, and perhaps naively garbed sailing ship was Yagnich himself, with his simple and stubborn life, with his loyalty to his sailor comrades of all times, and also with a heart-rending openness that most unexpectedly bared his dreams and his love. The sailing ship with the smiling mermaid—was it perhaps a model of his youth, of his first love, a depiction of a powerful and forceful emotion he had experienced? Yes, he was a poet, a master craftsman, and in this he had expressed himself as best he could! Artisans make their mark each in his own way, the potter in his pottery,

the glass-blower in the objets d'art he makes out of glass. Yagnich the sailor had expressed his creative nature in this boat! And whatever anyone else might think, Inna was convinced that he had that special gift of the gods, talent. And it had expressed itself in this dream made real, in this symbol-ship that represented the courage of seafarers, the rough poetry of voyages, and the touching memory of comrades—and in all this Inna recognised Yagnich himself, his character, his whole life, a life beautiful because it was whole.

The girl congratulated the craftsman and this appeared to be of no little significance to him.

Because Yagnich truly had put his whole heart into this work. In rebuilding the ship, he had not only been the chief consultant but had himself also undertaken to carry out the plans. His skills as a ship's carpenter and his detailed knowledge of sail, of all the fine points of rigging, had helped him in this. His ability to tie all sorts of knots had come in handy, too. The only things that he had not found a use for were his sailmaker's needles and thimble. He had himself taken care of the mast and spars, had given Oksen the idea of the mermaid and described in detail what she should look like. He had himself fixed the ship's bell and the helm, had attended to all the finishing touches, and had jealously worked to make the ship true to life, to make everything "real" or at least as close as possible to that ideal. And however often he was reminded of the fact that it was not real, that this was after all to be a café and nothing more, the utilitarian side of things seemed unimportant to Yagnich: true to himself, he has firmly decided to build precisely what he had in mind. The foreman, it was true, not infrequently found Yagnich's "fantasies" to be on the expensive side and on several occasions he complained to the management that the sailor was getting carried away, that he was wasting materials. For instance ignoring the estimate, he had decided to decorate the café's interior with models of ships through the ages, even Egyptian and Phoenician ones. Concerning materials, Yagnich was given a severe warning; he paid note to them but nevertheless stuck to his previous plans and continued building his poem in sail.

At last everything was finished, the commission accepted the project, grading it excellent, and Yagnich signed the act turning it over to its users, painstakingly scratching the loops and

twirls of his autograph into the thick paper. One last question, however, came up: what was the café-ship to be called?

"The Orion?" someone suggested.

Yagnich took this as an unfortunate and even offensive joke.

"A second Orion? There can't be a second one."

"Your Orion can't last for ever, though," commented the foreman. "They'll write it off, too, one day."

"If they do, another will appear, but then again she'll be the one and only. The seas know only one Orion."

Everyone agreed with Yagnich.

Names such as "The Float" and "The Dunes" were suggested and for various reasons rejected. They decided to leave the question open for a while. In time the miners themselves might suggest something better.

Yagnich was now free. They would not, of course, turn him out of his carriage (he now lived in a carriage, having moved into it from the lugger). Nevertheless, it was a good shelter, but it had wheels and any moment they could come up to it with a cable, couple it to a truck, and tow his home off to some other building site. It was therefore time to begin thinking about some other and more secure port. Yagnich considered moving to the nature reserve along the shore—offers had come from there: they wanted him to make stuffed animals. Taxidermists were rare... And of course, he'd ring birds. They ringed them there every year and then released the birds with their passport badges. They flew far away from their native shores and came back again: that summer they'd found a plain grey sparrow in Kurayevka that had actually been ringed in Capetown.

Not that the management of the complex had thrown the master out to suffer the vagaries of fate. The newly appointed director of the holiday home had announced that Yagnich was henceforth employed a senior beach inspector. "In other words, a watchman," Yagnich said to himself even though he did not refuse the nomination.

The café-ship began work. The miners—and not only the miners—happily gathered round the tables on the deck. The visitors curiously examined the wood carvings and straw articles, the models of ancient ships and also the nice pictures of dolphins, Carpathian bears, and exotic fish

painted by Oksen and his friends everywhere there was room for them.

Yagnich the craftsman was also in the habit of spending an evening there—sometimes in the company of the Azerbaijani frontier guard, sometimes with Oksen, and sometimes alone. He'd sit in a corner and, hunched up like a brown owl, he'd watch the young waiters from beneath his beetling brows as they awkwardly balanced their trays and served their customers fried bullhead, other sea foods, and a special cocktail with the frightening name of "pirate's blood". A whole team of these youngsters had been got together to serve at the café and they were all dressed as pirates, each with an ear-ring in his ear, a decorative knife at his side, in tight breeches and red sash belts... They quickly got into their parts, so much so, in fact, that there really was something piratical and robberlike in their movements and facial expressions. Yagnich did not like this pirate farce or the idiotic ear-rings in their ears. He kept getting into arguments with the waiters about this.

"Instead of dressing up as if for a pantomime, you'd do better to learn serving people faster and breaking less crockery, you miserable pirates. Ah, dressed like parrots and about as much use as..."

"We'll learn, granddad! We're learning from our mistakes", the pirates responded.

Everything about their behaviour irritated Yagnich. He'd have a go at one of them, then get into conflict with another: they didn't know how to run, they were slow, they were awkward, did they think he'd ever take a person like that onto a real boat? Could a laggard like that run up a foresail or a mizzensail in a fierce squall as his trainees could? He kept setting them as an example, those who wore no ear-rings but leapt like lightning out of their quarters whenever there was an emergency.

"We've already heard all that," the "pirates" would say without anger. "But that's one thing and this is another. This is a different boat and the emergencies are different here. That's not a sail over us but some kind of awning... And spin the helm as much as you like, we won't move an inch, sitting as we are on solid cement. Don't imagine this here barge will ever float..."

They knew, the cheeky beasts, where to direct their barbs.

That blow caught Yagnich below the belt. And he couldn't counter it. After all, those comedians had good reason to make fun of his creation. Incidentally, these costumed lads only annoyed him, Yagnich; the other customers of the café even liked their dress. The piratical look aroused smiles, entertaining the public and encouraging them to make merry. It was theatre, free operetta, it was fun!

In the evenings a jazz group composed of wild-looking young men like the "pirates" played in the café. These long-haired young men would play their electric guitars and wail and whine into their amplifiers fit to burst everyone's eardrums. Yagnich as a sign of protest would then leave the deck altogether.

"Noah's gone," the most awkward of the "pirates" would note with relief.

Yagnich meanwhile would go down to the sea in the gathering dusk to listen to a very different music—to an eternal music of which he would never grown bored. Without hurrying, he would walk along the strip of wet sand right to the very end of the empty beaches, covered with day's rubbish. Sometimes he'd meet Korshak's two geese who also liked to walk about there in the evening. Once, in the immeasurably far-off days of his youth, Yagnich had himself tended geese out there. They would sometimes wander out into the wheat fields and begin to chatter with each other in rapid, hissing bursts of speech. He had understood them then but now he no longer did. Now they were waddling along the shore like a married couple, looking strangely white in the darkness. The goose was an ancient bird which had been tamed ages ago. For all he knew the two were descendants of the geese which, if one was to believe the legend, had saved Rome, by waking up the sleeping guards at the gate to the Eternal City.

Early in the morning, as soon as there was light enough to see, Yagnich would already be at work: harnessing himself to a ramshackle old rake that had once been drawn by a horse (he had obtained it from Cherednichenko who had written it off for scrap), he used this simple machine which, before the days of the combine harvester had gleaned the remaining ears from the fields, unhurriedly to rake the beach, combing the sand clean in his struggle for cleanliness on Kurayevka's beaches. He had taken on this job as a volun-

teer. He did not have to do it. And this rake was his idea, too. They were promising, it was true, to mechanise his labour. But who knew when that would be, so meanwhile he did it as he did: harness yourself, old man, and off you go, pull that machine, smooth out the beaches, and see to it that no litter spoils the shore, that each new day begins like a holiday for people.

"I'm not going to let outsiders onto the beach any more," he'd grumble whenever a miner taking an early bathe said good morning to him. "To leave such piles of rubbish... Are they people? They're pithecanthropes, not humans."

"Mesozoids!" The smiling miner would agree. "They're a thousand years of development away from culture!"

Yagnich would cover the beach with his metal rake, cleaning and sweeping away all the previous day's rubbish so that not a trace was left of the use made of the beach. And only if he comes across a building put up of sand by children the previous day—a miniature medieval castle with painstakingly erected towers, walls, and protective moats or a sand-boat shaped by childish hands, a toy Orion with a tiny shell for sail—would he stop for a moment and carefully examine the work of these unknown pre-school-age craftsmen before carefully going round them, so as not to damage the children's creations. Bending forward like a rickshaw man he'd drag his heavy rake on.

His interest in the café-ship had visibly declined and the craftsman now only rarely glanced in its direction. He understood the imperfection of his creation better than other people. Yet let them not think that he, Yagnich, had lacked imagination. He'd had plenty and more to spare but what kind of sailing ship was it if it rested on one spot? A sailing ship is built for movement, for flight, for an eagle's life, that was the point. Yagnich had given it a helm, given it a ship's bell, but what about wings? Where were the singing sails? After all, they were what gave a ship wings. Plastic was plastic and could not replace living sailcloth. But here real sailcloth were out of place, he couldn't hoist them into the sky, those woven wonders which make a unique sound in the wind, which throb on high, no—not throb—sing! He could have got hold of some sailcloth, could have cut and sewn some sails, could have made all the necessary rigging, but he could not have hoisted them—the first gust of wind would have

torn them away and taken the mast up by its roots as well. Sails were a danger to tubs that sat on one spot. Hand-made sails, taut and singing, existed only for real, live ships, for ships that moved, that flew over open spaces, like his Orion!

Bent over almost double, the craftsman dragged his new tool up and down the shore. After him the only other thing that might pass was a surprise wave from the sea which could rush up the beach and at a single blow wipe away the fruits of a child's fantasy—a knight's castle or a tiny frigate. By sunrise the whole beach would be clean, everything would have been tidied up, washed, and swept, as if it had always been like that.

28

Yagnich did not expect anyone anywhere to remember his birthday, but such people existed it appeared: the first to come early in the morning was his friend the mechanic from Arctic Street. The old sailor was profoundly touched by his arrival. He had searched Yagnich out, making his way by land and sea, to shake Yagnich by the shoulder and say: "So what did you think? That I had written you off! No, friends don't write each other off!"

The old sailor proudly showed his friend around the holiday home (so that everybody should see that a friend was visiting Yagnich). He introduced the mechanic to the management as a war hero, a man who had done a very great deal for his country. It was he who had once sailed a war-prize cruiser from a far-off German port to the North Sea. The usual number of sailors needed for such a voyage would have been fifteen hundred or so, but their prize crew had consisted of only sixty. Furthermore, as they had discovered out at sea, the cruiser had had explosives planted in it—some nazis working undercover had done this at the last moment. The cruiser was sailing along, and the time mechanism connected to the mines was ticking away. Had the crew been made up of gawks, there would have been an explosion and curtains for them, but the lads had proved themselves smart and this mechanic in particular had been first to notice something was wrong. In Libava, where they took the cruiser, the admiral himself had pinned a medal to his chest for his services. The mechanic had listened in silence, without objecting; the events had been more or less as described.

Only his old sailor friend was overgenerously praising his modest comrade in public. When they were alone again, the mechanic kept making vague hints that there might be another pleasant surprise ahead for the hero of the day.

Two quite unexpected guests arrived after lunch—two trainees from the Orion, carrying parcels in their arms! They showered Yagnich with greetings and congratulations—from the college, from the crew, from the port. They warmly assured the old man that he was looking fine, that he didn't look a day over forty, and that when he put on the dress uniform which was the Orion's present to him, then he'd... And they set about unpacking it right there in the carriage, brand new sailor's uniform, so grand it could have been an admiral's. The delegation was composed of first-year trainee Shablienکو who came from a neighbouring village, a short, silent, and strong lad (Yagnich had never met him before) and another who was, one might say, a friend of Yagnich's—Oleg Zabolotny, a bright, well-read lad with whom he had been on a voyage. He and Yagnich had spent many an evening talking beneath the Orion's great sails. At first it had seemed strange to Yagnich that this lad, the son of a diplomat who had grown up in an embassy, knew three languages and could enter the diplomatic world if he so liked, should have suddenly discovered a desire to become a sailor, should have gone to seek knowledge in the classes of a naval college. There was no guessing why a person chose one road for himself and not another.

The lads shouldn't have brought a cake and the college cook needn't have covered it with monograms—a treat like that was more suitable for the kids in the kindergarten. They'd have appreciated it more. But this sailor's uniform, this definitely did not leave Yagnich indifferent. Having put it on, he examined himself in the mirror, wearing his peaked hat “with a crab”, admiring the shining buttons on the jacket and although he was basically an unsmiling man, he was unable to restrain a smile. It all fitted like a glove: they hadn't forgotten how tall he was, what his figure was like. He did not take off his naval dress uniform for the rest of the day.

Oksen arrived soon afterwards. He congratulated Yagnich, gave him a hatchet with inlay work on it, and at the same time apologised for arriving a little late, for not having been the

first to congratulate him. His reason, though, was sound enough: no one at the complex had known about this important date.

"If it hadn't been for them," Yagnich nodded in the direction of his mechanic friend and the envoys from the naval college, "I probably wouldn't have remembered it myself. And what's so special about it anyway? It's a day like any other and the only difference is that you are suddenly a year older."

Meanwhile everyone who wanted to find out was discovering that it was Yagnich's birthday. That evening, all his friends and relations gathered in the café-ship. The building girls came with bunches of flowers, the manager of the holiday-home dropped in briefly, and of course there were guests—the trainees from the Orion and the mechanic friend—all the people who Yagnich held near and dear.

The old sailor relaxed his grip on himself that evening, let his hair down, so to speak. No one had ever seen this Yagnich before.

"All right, lads, over here please. Serve champagne and all the rest that you've got down in the hold," he shouted to the "pirates". "And if you've got some caviar squirrelled away down there, then let's have it too because look at the party we're having up here!"

Yagnich did not get into a conflict with the waiters that evening, and neither did they thwart him. He was the host that day, it was up to him to call the tune! You want champagne—here's champagne, "pirate's blood"—please, help yourself. And glasses of Kurayevka's strong black cocktail, the secret recipe for which not even Cherednichenko had been able to ferret out, appeared on the tables. This hellish drink was to remain an industrial secret. Congratulations, wishes, toasts came from all around. The foreman tried to read his own little speech from notes but he was heckled in a friendly way, interrupted by laughter and jokes, so that in the end he gave in and sweeping his arm through the air, cried:

"All right! Bottoms up!"

The mechanic friend even became lyrical. He began talking about apple trees, about how different they were in their orchards: one would be literally groaning under the weight of its fruit while another nearby stood sadly bare...

"And before us now we have that apple tree which has produced a rich crop and will do so again," he nodded at the hero of the day. "Honour and glory to such a tree!"

Yagnich was sitting with his jacket unbuttoned. He felt hot and drunk, not so much from wine as from the honour done him. He was with friends. He straightened his shoulders and his eyes were again alight, sparkling and full of life. Inna, whom the old sailor had placed opposite him, found her uncle simply unrecognisable: it was as if he were ten years younger. He was immeasurably happy to see near him the two trainees from the naval college (he had placed them, like sons, on both sides of him), his Kurayevka relatives, the plasterer girls, the strong miners with their open looks who had come out onto the deck with their own champagne.

"Friendship," the old man glanced around his guests with a moved look, "friendship is the most important thing for us sea people. You could have forgotten me, written me off while I was still alive. It could have happened but it didn't. And so I ask: to what do I owe this honour? I'm just one of many in the rank-and-file. A shipboard worker. Now if I had cut coal underground, or earned fame as a combine harvester operator, or discovered a vitamin against flu, it might be a different matter. But life tossed me a strange occupation—tie knots, run a sail between your fingers, hoist it up to catch the wind. Yes, and I also learnt how to stuff animals. And I swallowed some lend-lease mercury. But there's nothing heroic about all that, is there? It was just work and more work. Sometimes I even think..."

"You shouldn't," Oksen interrupted him with a merry protest, which was against the custom. "It's embarrassing to compliment a man to his face but, since we will soon be going our different ways, I'll permit myself to tell you publicly, Andron Gurievich, what all we youngsters think of you: you are a Man with a capital letter! Yes, yes! And don't belittle yourself, please!" He even stood up in order to express his special respect for the hero of the day, in order for the whole company to hear the warm speech that the wine had let loose. "And about myself personally, I'll say that your wisdom will stay with me always: thanks to you, I've come to understand many things in life. You may not perhaps have noticed it, Andron Gurievich, but Oksen has become a lot wiser since he met you. The way I see it is this: there's

work and there's drudgery—which is only an appearance of work, there is the habit of tugging along and there is inspired artistic work. That's when a man is a master! Now you have been able to light in us the torch of your love for work, your restless creative energy. You inspired us youngsters when you refitted this lugger as your fantasy prompted you. There's no getting bored and the moss is not likely to grow on you when you are next to such an ubiquitous and carping teacher, such a crotchety perfectionist..."

"What a testimonial, do you really call that last bit praise?" Yagnich said with mock offence although everyone could see that that outpouring of Carpathian honey was balsam to his soul. "Thank you."

Seizing their moment, the trainees joined in the chorus: to this day, they said, their training ship missed Yagnich the master craftsman.

"It can even be funny sometimes," said Zabolotny with a glance at Inna. "Whenever the smallest thing goes wrong on the Orion, there's always someone to say that this is due solely to the veteran's absence. Such things did not happen in Yagnich's time. If we are stranded in a dead calm, someone will inevitably moan: Yagnich tied all our winds up in his bundle and took them back to Kurayevka. Or else the sailcloth turns out to be of the wrong quality, or something else. There was a spirit and now it's gone—some even get quite mystical about it all. Let's cut out the mysticism, the political instructor says to the lads, and look for concrete reasons. Perhaps what's missing is the demanding Yagnich eye on everything? Sometimes one would even like him to shout so that, when a storm is raging at night, we could feel the presence beside us of that living talisman. I think that you, Andron Gurievich, will not be offended at being called that."

"You can call me a pithecanthrope if you like!"

For Yagnich such speeches, especially from the trainees, were the highest reward he could have. For he had been ready to consider himself human scrap, dumped overboard by fate, to feed the sharks in his lonely old age. He thought that they had erased him from their memories, and look how it was! It turned out that they had not forgotten him, that he was remembered on board the Orion. He would like to give his all, to pour his whole self, his whole heart, into

these young people, so that all that was him should remain beneath the Orion's sails and only his shell should be left to be buried!

"Well lads, where are the fried bullheads?" Yagnich reminded the "pirates". "Where's the speciality of the house?"

The bullheads arrived. Yagnich was served first but he passed the plate to his mechanic friend.

"Here you are, you old fisherman. You see the fine chap who brought this?" The table was being served by the same Kandybenko whom Yagnich had angrily promised to throw off the boat for leaving rubbish and leftover food about on it. "One of my trainees, too. Notice how that pirate's ring in his ear suits him!"

The party on the ship became merrier and merrier. The frontier guard arrived with his accordion and he was very welcome with his music instead of the wild jazzmen and their noise, rattle, and booms (Yagnich was in luck: it was their day off).

"Play us something about the open sea!" The old sailor asked the musician from the frontier post.

Nelka, rosy-cheeked and generous with her smiles, was sitting with some miners and now jumped up, holding out a glass of foaming champagne over their heads to the accordionist.

"Here, Djafar, down this and then give us something fiery... I feel like dancing! With a bit of luck a dance will give me the chance to lure myself a miner husband."

As soon as the music began, Nelka gathered to herself the manager of the holiday-home, a solid, bespectacled man, and whirled him off. When he had recovered slightly, Nelka began whispering something in his ear. She was probably talking about her son, what a fine young man he has grown into, how he had passed his exams for the naval college with flying colours, how he had first brought back a starry globe and now had found an atlas of the moon's surface somewhere.

Nelka's son had shown this atlas only recently to Yagnich, who had been quite surprised.

"What do you want with that desert, boy. All those lifeless craters."

"For contrast. So as to love our planet more!"

Everything was going fine at the party, and everyone was

happy to be together. Pairs formed of themselves, more and more couples went out to dance. Yagnich's spirits soared: it was a joy pure and simple for an old man to watch, for example, how Oleg Zabolotny invited Inna to dance, how he led her politely, a tall and well-built young man, to the waves of an old waltz. They were a fine couple, they could have been made for each other. They looked each other brightly and frankly in the eye even though they didn't speak. What was there for them to say when youth itself spoke for them.

It had been worth it, truly worth putting so much work into the ship whose main passenger that day was merriment! The night time steppe rocked it with its own dark waves, life boiled around the old sailor, the young "pirates" wove their way with trays between the tables, smiles on their faces. And Oksen's weird fish 'swimming so smoothly on the pannelling seemed also to smile at Yagnich.

Everyone was in motion: some rose and left, without making a fuss over goodbyes; others, even vague acquaintances, went up to him with congratulations; the slightly tipsy Oksen kept bursting into song, his favourite ditties which, though a little frivolous were very funny. Unfortunately, the others weren't very good at joining in, and besides Tasya the plasterer no one even knew all the words to "Chervona Ruta."

The crowd was milling noisily and the deck throbbed with pounding feet when Cherednichenko's stentorian voice came from below: the chairman had been delayed at one of his innumerable conferences but had come down anyway, claiming that his intuition had told him that something that should not be missed was taking place on board the ship. As he climbed the gangplank, Cherednichenko was already joking with the waiters and the girls, inquiring merrily where the famous sea dog whom Kurayevka had given the world was holding court.

"Get this clear and remember it, you rogues: Yagnich is our living legend!" he told someone. "When he dies, we'll never have another like him!"

Reaching the deck, Cherednichenko wrapped his arms around the hero of the day.

"Well, brother, is it good or isn't it good?"

He waved away the glass of "pirate's blood" that was offered him on the grounds that he did not know what this

anathematical potion contained, what its formula was, and also because his "motor" was playing up (pointing to his chest). He wasn't a young man any more and couldn't do as he did then: out on Grafskaya Street in Sevastopol, he'd down a glass of vodka, wipe his mouth with his sleeve, and be off to have some fun.

Cherednichenko was soon settled at a table and talking with the mechanic from Arctic Street. They were discussing the climate which, in both their opinions, had changed noticeably on the planet (one asserted that it had become hotter, the other that it had become colder). Next they got onto the question of maintaining the ecological balance and Cherednichenko told an amazing story about how a plague of mice had invaded one of his best wheatfields once.

"Wheat, you know, was tall and thick, and these mice worked in groups, first gnawing away at the stalk and when they've felled it and got the ear on the ground, they eat the young grain. What were we to do against them? Who was going to advise us? It was then that the eagles came. It was a hundred years since anyone had seen an eagle, and we all thought that they had become extinct in the steppe. Now, though, a whole squadron of them flew in—hundreds, thousands of them! They swooped over the fields, dived, and struck and struck again. They destroyed the mice and, having done their job, disappeared into the sky, flew off somewhere. Not one couple was left. They built no nests in our woods. Isn't that a puzzle? Isn't that proof of nature's wisdom?"

"Wise. Everything in nature is wise," agreed the mechanic. "What we need to do is to make less stupid mistakes in our dealings with her."

"Surplus mice, eagles required," joked one of the miners.

The air was pleasantly cool after the heat of the day. A light breeze was blowing in from the sea, cooling the heated faces. The warm night enveloped the ship on board which everyone was feeling so good, on board which Yagnich in boundless generosity kept crying to the waiters, "Come on, boys, let's have more of everything! Let's all make merry!"

There were songs, laughter, and jokes a-plenty ahead. The merry racket would continue until late at night, to that zenith of the southern night when the whole firmament appears to hang grandiosely over the sea and the steppe,

sparkling from edge to edge like a giant page from a trainee's celestial atlas. All one need do was look at it and read it.

...A couple was walking down the beach. What did it matter where they were going? It was empty and the night was starry. The steppe was melting into the sea's embrace. The Milky Way stretched over them, a bright path in the night-time sky that seemed to burn for only them two; to them alone did everything all around, did all eternity and the mysteries of the world, belong.

When you are sailing across the ocean at night, you begin to feel that you are travelling through the universe, through the reaches of eternal matter, eternal existence. On a voyage as nowhere else do you feel so strongly your belonging to all that is real and eternal! Even if you are only a trainee fresh out of naval college, stuffed with knowledge about maps, constellations, and currents, you think less about them and more about who you are, why you exist, and what you should do on this precious voyage, this only voyage, your life.

"His experience, of course, was important for us, his virtuosity with the sailmaker's needle," Zabolotny said to Inna as they walked slowly along, "but his simple and wise humanity was of far greater significance to us: as a man he was a rock, the man who secured the knots of life."

"Just my own opinion," the girl said to herself, smiling involuntarily. Outloud she asked: "Was he demanding and stern? Did he drive you all very hard?"

"No, I wouldn't say that. In fact, he impressed me with his tact, the inborn subtlety of his nature, so to speak. One day he noticed that I was in a sour mood—there was a time on the Orion when I for some reason felt very low and let myself go in a way that makes me blush to remember now... I was exhausted by the incomprehensible crises and the routine of the ship—it's pretty stiff you know, the work's back-breaking, and the new arrival sometimes regrets that he ever decided to go out on the big blue sea, or emerald sea, or whatever colour it is. And it was as if Yagnich read my heart. He called me over one day: you, my boy, come over here. I thought he was going to give me some job or other, tell me to scrub the deck or polish something. But he took me to the far end of the deck, sat me down next to him;

it was the same night as today, starry and peaceful. Well, he said, tell me about it. What's eating you? Tell me about yourself. What could I say? That I had up to recently lived such a comfortable and protected life? That I had grown up in my father's shadow, never known any hardships, had everything smooth and easy. As the son of a diplomat, raised on mango juice, I didn't have the slightest idea till I was fifteen or so on what tree one's daily bread grew. Not at all like my friend Shablienکو. He spent his childhood on a farm, was toughened by that life. For him, of course, naval college held no difficulties."

"But no one forced you to go to naval college, did they?"

"No. And that's the point. I decided on it myself. I'd read plenty of books and a comrade of my father's—a naval attaché—had excited my imagination with stories about life at sea. So I thought: come on, I'll go to naval college. My ideas about what it would be like were naive in the extreme: a white ship, blue seas, a rosy life. During the first month, when all we trainees went to a state farm to help pick tomatoes, everything was bearable, but later... The real trial for a trainee begins later, when he has his first taste of the salty sea, when his every nerve and muscle tells him what a hard profession he has chosen. It's as hard as it's attractive. Especially nowadays, when the scientific and technological revolution is coming to affect naval matters more and more. A radio operator on a ship, say, never leaves his cabin, spends all his time with his equipment: this leads to the 'solitude problem'. Western statistics show that young people almost everywhere are now less attracted to the naval professions. They have also discerned a mysterious phenomenon called the 'drift to the shore'."

"So while some are drifting to the shore, you've decided to go in the opposite direction, against the winds of time?" the girl asked with a smile.

"Yes. That's about how it came out, and it's perhaps precisely that which saved me. I could have slid down, down to the bottom—figuratively speaking of course. Because, as Yagnich says, people don't usually drown in the sea, they're more frequently shipwrecked in puddles. Something strange was happening. I didn't even notice it myself because it was so gradual but a cynic was taking up residence inside me, my heart was being hardened by a sort of careless thoughtless-

ness. It was making me lose little by little the ability to feel joy and pain, most particularly the pain of others, of course. And by others I don't mean strangers: even in my attitude to my own parents there appeared a sort of wild blackmail, a roughness, falsity..."

"It doesn't sound at all like you," Inna said quietly.

"But it happened, you know, it happened," He smiled. "Having begun my confession, I suppose I'd better go on to the end. Although I do apologise for inflicting it on you. In a word, the lad that I was then was turning nasty, to use another Yagnich expression. I was living and not noticing how all the bright and pure things that we learn perhaps from our mother's whispers as we lie in our cradles, were evaporating from my heart. And I might have gone badly wrong before I knew what was happening to me if I had not met that wise and clairvoyant man called Yagnich at the hardest time of my life. It's still a mystery to me how he sniffed out the course I was on, discovered that I was going through a spiritual crisis, that I was just waiting for a suitable moment to drop out of naval college and go the devil knew where! And he sensed this with nary a mistake, by some iron intuition, and stopped me in time, encouraged me, supported me, did not let me take that fateful step towards the abyss. To this day I don't know why I opened my heart to him as fully as I am now opening it to you. It was from him that I received an amazingly simple word of advice that at the same time was a discovery for me: he spoke about the complexity of life, the significance of trials for man, and about the concept of honour. And he somehow made it in so unmoralistic a manner, so unobtrusively and with such conviction that it aroused no protest. Thanks to him I saw parents, the naval college, myself, and my future in a new light. Yes, he helped me to develop a backbone, so to speak. It even seems funny now: one session of his psychotherapy and... I don't know what you think about medicine."

"I'm a trained nurse myself."

"Is that so?! Then this will interest you. Some naval doctors assert that after a few months at sea certain noticeable physiological changes take place in the human organism. And they say that one's mentality also changes. With me I think that this started with a change in the structure of

my character, a very sharp change. And all this thanks to him, thanks to our Yagnich."

"Do you know what a blow his parting with the Orion was to him?"

"I can imagine it! So many of the best years of his life given to her. To spend so long beneath her sails and then suddenly..."

"Is it true that soon there'll be no more sailing ships?"

"Baseless rumour. At least, that's what I think. Of course, the age of sail—that was, so to speak mankind's poetic youth. But creative thought does not sleep. I can assure you, it is stubbornly and bravely designing gigantic sailing ships of the future. And why indeed should such ships not be built? Sails of unbelievable strength and size will be hoisted, immense cargoes will be carried on the oceans, continents will be linked. After all, if there's one thing there's no shortage of on this planet, that's winds. Why not use wind power since we are now experiencing what is called an energy crisis? And after that, well who knows?! It may be that the solar wind which blows from the corona of our eternal luminary will in some future age fill the sails of cosmic Columbuses! These are not empty dreams, Inna. Thoughts like these are conceived by ardent minds of certain eccentrics, one of whom, I must confess, is this strange trainee Zabolotny. Sails, the boundlessness and purity of the open spaces—these can truly capture man, they cast a spell, possess a magic, work wonders. It's true." He laughed.

"You must mean not so much magic as the poetry of sailing."

"I think that's better put. The eternal desire to travel where no one has been. That's something that's been human nature since the creation and will ever remain."

"I can understand our Yagnich, why he still hasn't achieved peace of mind."

"We were all sorry to see him go, you know. On the Orion, it's believed that he brought the ship luck. Furthermore, I'll tell you a secret: Shabliencko and I have been given the task of taking a closer look at our old man to see if he might be equal to another voyage, perhaps the most important we've ever made. And I'm also grateful to him for giving me a chance to meet you, Inna, on this shore. *It might never have happened, our life paths could easily*

never have crossed. Tell me," he stopped unexpectedly, looking at her shyly and guiltily, "will you allow me... at least a radiogram... allow me write to you from time to time?"

The girl stood in silent thought, happy and excited.

"Will you let me, Inna?"

She nodded yes, without looking at him and felt how a hot blush flooded her face in the darkness.

They walked on down the gentle shore and they wanted it never to come to an end, wanted the sea to sing quietly and tunelessly like today for ever, wanted the dunes, hillock after hillock, to keep rising out of the darkness because it was that kind of night, so warm and starry, because it was a night full of secrets and of an as yet barely audible but endless music foretelling something beautiful.

29

Even for those fruitful parts the harvest that year was exceptionally plentiful. The best wheats—Aurora and Caucasus—grew like a sea of gold between the trees planted as wind barriers. The wheat had not been frozen in winter, droughts had not come as it ripened, and winds had not laid it low. It was going to be a wonderful harvest! And the ears—not even the grandfathers could remember having seen anything like them.

"We've got masses of grain," Cherednichenko phoned the district centre. "The threshers are going to burst and the elevators will overflow!.."

Kurayevka's main threshing-floor was cleanly swept and ready although not a single grain had yet been delivered to it. The lads from the military camp had arrived again with their trucks, but not the same ones as last year. They had set up their camp in the same place, though, right by the dairy farm. They were on red alert to begin harvesting. The sky shone bright blue over the steppe, the dust cloud of harvesting, that would hang for many days and nights over the steppe, not risen yet.

Everyone was waiting, waiting.

It began with music and songs. The whole of Kurayevka poured out into the steppe for the Feast of the First Sheaf. Everyone was in their best clothes, joy shining on their suntanned faces: the time had come! The wheat a red gold

now, with top-heavy ears—it smelt of hot sun, of the very spirit of life. A female choir in bright ribbons stood on a platform facing the field and singing a hymn to the harvest, a hymn in praise of the hard-working farmer. Inna Yagnich had composed this song, her “Ballad of the Steppe” for Kurayevka’s choir. No one had commissioned it. It had come to her of itself, it had simply flowed onto the paper from her heart, its call, its apotheosis. Everything that the girl had gone through together with her people, everything she had pondered on her own during those difficult months, everything that had worried her, everything she had waited for, had suddenly ripened and boiled over in her soul to become this song for people. “On a cārter’s rutted road, in the hot, hot winds.” As Yagnich the old sailor listened to Kurayevka’s new ballad, his whole life seemed to float by before his eyes—his poor and hungry childhood, his rebellious youth when he went to Piraeus on a Comintern assignment, the terrible calamity of the war when not golden grain but black bombs and death were sown in the steppes. But they had been resurrected, these steppes, had come alive again under peaceful and secure skies. Now the fields rustled with the rich crop of wheat and his beautiful Orion was somewhere out there preparing for a new voyage.

Yes, soon they were to leave their home port, soon the lads would be hoisting sails up without him. Standing here, surrounded by wheat Yagnich could clearly see the dock and his beloved sailing ship being prepared for a long trip in the open waters of the Atlantic. She looked almost weightless, as light as a violin, and how bravely she was going to fight the furious gales and the immense waves rolling towards her. Now the trainees from the naval college in their handsome sailors’ uniform—the ribbons of their sailors’ hats streaming behind them—were stepping across the dock towards the Orion. Youthful faces—some carefree, some thoughtful and concentrated. They had as yet not experienced storms, the elements had still not shaken them. They walked in groups, in twos and threes, carrying small suitcases and bags. One had a guitar slung over his shoulder, another a pile of books—which he would have no time to read—tucked under his arm. Clean and smart, they had not yet seen what they were due to see but they were ready to take on all with the easy courage and bravery of youth. Yagnich was in his mind walking into

his sailmaker's shop, putting his thimble down in its usual place, examining the heavy rolls of sailcloth boiled in oil, and inhaling the smell of tar, iodine, and ropes. This unique smell, this smell which is a compound of all the smells of the sea, made him giddy. And now added to it was the hot, dry and sweet smell of ripe wheat.

Inna, his niece, was standing next to him in her white smock which looked very smart on her, belted at the waist (she had come out with her first-aid kit). She listened tremblingly to how her song was being sung, listened to the praises of grain and of the people who grew it, of the clear sky, of generous nature, of the working man and his eternal inexhaustible love for his native land.

The girl's eyes shone as if sprinkled with morning dew.

The combine harvester operators in their overalls stood in a line beside their machines at the edge of the field. They looked like tank drivers before a battle, solemn, and some even a little too severe. They would smile, flash their white teeth only when the girls began putting rich garlands of fresh ears of wheat around their necks. That was the tradition here at the Feast of the First Sheaf. Smiling beside his father amidst the combine harvester operators was Inna's brother Petro; when the garland was put round his neck he, in order to hide his shyness, twisted his head this way and that as if to say that for all it was an honour, it was prickly. Meanwhile the song flowed on and on, becoming louder and louder, more and more powerful. The girls of the choir were singing like the birds of the sky, as if they were singing not for these earthly people but for someone a long way away, up there in the firmament.

At a predetermined moment a rider came plunging out of the deep sea of wheat (it was difficult to recognise him as the son of the agronomist, a senior schoolboy). He rode fast up to the people, holding a handful of ears high above his head while the song of praise grew louder still. The lad then jumped off his horse, catching his foot in a stirrup and, nearly tripping, nearly making a fool of himself at so important a ceremony but luckily just pulling through. Pale with excitement, he ran up to Chairman Cherednichenko. Standing before him, tense and conscious of the significance of the moment, he came to attention in his navy blue wide trousers and wide red belt:

"The sample has been taken!"

And he handed the chairman the ears. Cherednichenko today had smartened himself up too, pinning on his Hero's Golden Star and looking as solemn as the moment required. Wherever he was, he always stood out, his mighty steppe-dweller's figure rising over the people around him. The chairman was celebrating double event that day: here the time had come to reap the field's fruit and somewhere in the GDR a grandson had at last been born to him. The farmers' ceremony was meanwhile coming to an end and, although it had all seemed to happen of itself, that was by no means so. Cherednichenko had minutely followed it all. The ears had been distributed to the agronomists, field team leaders, the whiskered veterans of the collective farm, and each of them had already unhurriedly husked a few grains on the palms of their hands, tested one between their teeth, and nodded to the chairman: yes, they were saying, the time has come. Nowadays this was more a ritual, a popular custom, than a necessary and practical matter because those whose job it was kept the wheatfields under constant observation. They had done this just yesterday and even this morning, verifying that it was truly ripe. Ritual, however, is ritual and everyone behaved with suitable seriousness. Cherednichenko as the main judge, standing next to the choir on the raised plank platform, waited for what the other judges, his aides, would say. Then, having collected all their evaluations, he, so to speak, bound them into a single sheaf by his final decision. Then, and only then, did he pronounce the ceremonial words:

"Good folk, the wheat is ripe! Let the harvest begin! To whom shall we accord the honour of reaping the first sheaf?"

He ran a severe eye over the faces of those waiting perhaps to be called, all respected and solid figures, and at last stopped on the stocky, wiry figure of Yagnich the old sailor.

"Perhaps we should entrust the job to our Neptune of the seas? How about it, Gurievich? You haven't forgotten how to swing one of these things?"

Everyone murmured approvingly, encouraging the old man with jokes ("Let him have a go", "They say that sailors are great hands with a scythe!") while the youngsters clapped and the choir conducted by the director of the Palace of Culture met the choice with a new wave of song.

Yagnich was already being handed a scythe, a museum piece, its blade sharpened and polished to a bright shine.

"Come on, brother, don't let us down!" Cherednichenko called invitingly to him.

He continued to look encouragingly at his childhood comrade, following his every movement, with an approving eye. Yagnich was touchingly painstaking over the task: it was no joke when one's native Kurayevka accorded one such an honour!

With a dry rustle the scythe's blade cut into the thick wall of wheat. Being so long unaccustomed to work in the fields, Yagnich felt awkward and heavy-handed, but he nevertheless scythed neatly, laying the wheat down ear to ear. With every sweep he found both in his hands and inside himself a new sureness and he worked more steadily. He was once again feeling himself to be a master of this land and it shared with him its endless strength.

*Oh, out there, by the ravine
The mower's scything down the wheat...*

"He's good with the scythe, good," came voices from everywhere. "He hasn't forgotten! Look at how evenly he's laying the row!"

And the hands of the binder, a plump young woman, also dressed in her best, already flashed near him as she gathered up the top-heavy stalks of wheat, as lovingly and carefully as if she were about to swaddle a child. She twisted the bind with a neat movement, pressed the sheaf with her knee, tied it, and there it was, the first gold-topped sheaf, bound and ready, the ears spreading nicely as it stood before Cherednichenko, a representation of his golden dream!

"Thank you, good folk! Congratulations on the first sheaf, my friends!" Cherednichenko exclaimed in moved tones before speaking even louder for his next command: "Drivers—to your machines!"

The warriors of the steppe burst into action, running to the new and sparkling Nivas and Koloses, taking off their garlands as they ran and, becoming their usual businesslike selves, they quickly climbed onto their machines and grabbed their steering wheels. They were off! The first entered the field followed by a second, a third. The steppe was entering a new stage of its life cycle.

Inna followed with a thoughtful gaze her father, standing on the bridge and next to him at the helm her flaxen-headed brother, his lithe figure frozen in hard concentration. The combine harvesters swam further and further off in the sea of red-gold wheat, the first grain—the colour of dawn!—flowed into the bunkers and immediately—as if this were a battlefield—the first dust rose and spread above the steppe: for the time being it was a light semi-transparent mist, but tomorrow it would already be a cloud, would cover the whole sky, and cast a pall over the earth.

The holiday was over and the working days had begun: they would be long, and hard, round the clock. Aware of the importance of the day which had begun, the people dispersed rapidly: the truck carrying the collective farm's choir tore off, the girls' ribbons flying like streamers behind it. The platform was dismantled, the newsreel cameraman packed away his equipment. Meanwhile down the road from Kurayevka, Nelka's Sashko was speeding like the wind in the saddle of someone's hastily borrowed motorcycle and, skidding to a stop, he turned straight to Yagnich.

"A radiogram for you!"

And with an official gesture he handed the old sailor a folded form.

Yagnich took the form with unaccustomed nervousness, held it for a brief moment in his hand, and, as if not believing what he had read, handed it to Inna.

"Here, read this..."

The radiogram invited Yagnich to take part in the prestige voyage.

Later there will again be moonlit nights without the summer's heat, the first storms of autumn will again buffer at the shore, an unknown force that seemed to come from the far reaches of the universe driving foaming mountains of water onto this shore open to all the winds, where on a sandy rise, on a seaside dune, one can just make out the lonely figure of a girl.

The girl stands there in a thoughtful pose while the sea roars ("plays" as the folk song says), and there is something

magical and incomprehensible for us in its eternal unrest, in the endless waves glinting in the transparent moonlight.

On such nights, when the whole shore is sunk in dreams, rocked by the rhythmic and boundless music of the surf, and when the solitary moon burns amazingly brightly in the sky while sparse white clouds scattered over the sea shine like silver and appear to have a light source of their own within them, then two common-or-garden geese—Ovid's maybe or Korshak's—come out to meet the surf, to meet the thunder of the waves and the glinting light. They spend their days quietly sitting somewhere but at night... The sea needs only to start playing, and they are already out on the shore. What attracts them there, what force drives these domestic birds from their cosy goosy shelter to the thundering noise of the waves onto this deserted and autumnally harsh shore? Are they guarding something or are they disturbed? Or is it perhaps an ancient instinct that prevents them from sleeping, a vague memory of the times when they could fly, when they, too, knew the tense rhythm of the flying wing, the delight and ecstasy of flight? There is no telling what is it in the thundering surf, the clouds shining over the sea, and all the bright magic of the night that enchants those birds which were raised amidst the tall reeds.

The geese walk side by side along the shore. They stand on the spot where Yagnich's ark looms over the sea—the "pirates'" tavern, silent at this time of year, and empty except for the old-fashioned lanterns which burn quietly on its deck: dim lights like these once winked in the winding alleys of the medieval port-towns which gave shelter to the sailing fleets. The mermaid in the moonlight excites one's imagination even more strongly. She truly does look like a smiling bird flying from the prow of the ship, straining forward with all her heart to the bright and movement-filled expanses.

Herds and droves of waves roll along in the moonlight, endlessly renewed, where in the summertime Ovid's lunar path shone serenely.

The white birds waddle slowly along the shore, leaving the weird prints of their webbed feet in the sand. People will see them in the morning. From time to time the geese gabble a few words to each other in their own language, comprehensible to them alone.

They reach the place and stop—two balls of snow stand

out white before the dune. As if asking, on seeing the human figure:

“And who might you be?”

They stand, gabble some more, and move off. There is something mysterious, something unnerving in their nightly outings from their cosy habitat amidst the reeds of the wind-swept shore, to the roar of the surf. What unknown force sends this wise pair of birds here? Who do they protect the whole night long? Why do they listen so alertly to in the unencompassable expanses of eternity?

There is thunder all around and the light is bright. In front of every dune one fancies he hears the question:

“And who might you be?”

Meanwhile, over the hills and far away, the Orion sails in the blinding tropics on the wings of the winds, all sails hoisted, heading back to its native, its beloved shores.

Kiev, 1975.

REQUEST TO READERS

Progress Publishers would be glad to have your opinion of this book, its translation and design and any suggestions you may have for future publications. Please send all your comments to 17, Zubovsky Boulevard, Moscow, USSR.