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THE RUSSIANS

THE RUSSIANS

by Stephan Strogoff

Translated by CONSTANTINE FITZGIBBON

Preface by JOSEPH KESSEL



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Preface

How can this book be described? It is both a taut and unified psychological study and also an adventure story set in the Soviet Far North, and it ends like some Elizabethan melodrama, in a welter of blood, storm and shipwreck. It is disturbing and enthralling, irritating and entrancing.

In a word it is like *Stephan Strogoff*, its author.

Lest I be misunderstood, let me state at once that this novel is in no sense autobiographical. The characters, events and even the backgrounds have no connection either with *Strogoff* or with his personal experiences. This book, from beginning to end and in all its details, is the purest fiction. But the changes of step in the actual writing, the broken nature of the

book's composition, and above all the difficulty of merging into a single, living current the various component parts of this work—all these reflect indeed both the author and his life.

And both of these are unusual in the highest degree.

Stephan Strogoff was born in Moscow, in 1929. He is thus a child of the new Russia. He was brought up, formed, taught and indoctrinated exactly as were all the other boys with whom he worked and played. The political system into which he grew up seemed to him as natural and inevitable as the air he breathed. His material circumstances left nothing to be desired. His father's profession insured an adequate income and a comfortable apartment for the family. He entered the Faculty of Letters. No one was more astonished than he by the admirable thirst for culture that is evident among the younger generations of Russians, and he was well aware of the government's generosity and anxiety to satisfy this thirst. He worked hard, and with success. He went to the theatre and the ballet. He flirted with the girls. He should have been happy . . . but he wasn't.

He became increasingly aware of a growing discomfort which at first he was unable to identify. Gradually he began to understand: what he was missing was liberty. Not the liberty to travel, but that of expression, of the spirit. He realized that he could not speak as he might wish about a book, an essay, an article, neither to his professors nor even to his fellow students. In conversation, too, he had to follow the party line. The student became aware that if Stalin

had issued a decree in the morning's papers, then he too *had* to express an exaggerated admiration for this edict when talking to his fellows, regardless of what his real feeling in the matter might be. He felt that he was caught in a vise.

To such impatience and pain there were added the attraction of an unknown and forbidden world and a taste for danger. He decided to make his way illegally to France. He knew that such a journey was well-nigh impossible. And he was aware that if he were captured he must be prepared for the most fearful punishment. Nevertheless he set off. He had confidence in his luck. And as it turned out, this was not misplaced.

As for his adventures at that time, Strogoff has described them in his own words.* But it was only after he had successfully reached France that the really interesting and important part of his story begins. Once the first rapture was over, Strogoff discovered that life in a Western capital was not all perfection.

"When you arrived in Paris," I asked him one day, "what struck you most? What seemed to you best, and worst?"

He replied:

"What was most beautiful of all were the windows of the newspaper kiosks . . . that huge display of free opinion, ranging from Communist newspapers to the most reactionary press. The worst, the incredible, the unthinkable—I had hitherto been unaware that anything of the sort could even exist—were the prostitutes in the streets."

* *Journal d'un jeune homme soviétique*, Gallimard

Since then Strogoff has never ceased to compare, to judge the two ways of life, the two worlds—that which he has left behind him, and the new one that he has found here.

He thinks that there are here abysses of poverty, monstrous wealth, dramas of man's exploitation by man, such as are impossible in Russia, where the State is the only employer of labor and cares for its citizens from the cradle to the grave. But he also knows the price that the State exacts for that care. And he observes the scales of his judgment tipping, now to this side, now to that.

Since justice is for him a necessity, since he is more preoccupied with human misfortunes than with his own fate, he has sought refuge in a theory: he would merge these two universes into one, taking from each that which is better, and thus creating a single, happy nation for all humanity. He attempts to preach this gospel of his: it has been shown only too easily that his is a mere daydream, at least in the world of today.

So he returns to his confrontations, evaluations, assessments of the virtues and failings of the top forms of government. He is incapable of preferring the one to the other, and as a result he is unable to achieve inner unity within himself.

None of these problems is faced nor even hinted at in this book, but the novel's development is abrupt, broken, violent, as is that of the author himself.

Nevertheless beneath this disequilibrium, this shapelessness there lies one undeniable fact. Though he has lived for years in the West, Strogoff is totally impreg-

nated with Russia, with *his* Russia. The city that is a cemetery, New Year's Eve among the ruins—where the novel begins—and the frozen shores of the White Sea—where it ends—what other country could have inspired such settings? Could any writer born elsewhere have invented and described them? By so doing, does not Strogoff offer to the Western reader the key to a land and a dream which have hitherto remained closed?

JOSEPH KESSEL

Paris, France

1959

PART ONE

WHAT'S TO DO?

1 SOLITUDE

Of course nowadays it's all quite simple, thought Anton Sviriagin. I'm trying to cut myself off, to get away from everyone. It's my only chance of survival. Keep out of sight, hide in the undergrowth, silent as a stone, that's what I must do from now on. It's that or death. All right. But I haven't always been compelled to live this way, avoiding all contacts, running for cover. All the same I'd been on my own for a long time, even when I had no reason to cut myself off, to live apart from my fellows. Solitude was my destiny, I guess. Not that I liked being alone, I didn't. But I was. I've never been able to make any friends. Was it because I was too rough? Unpleasant? Sneering? I don't believe it. What then? How strange it all is! I've lived all my life in a

sort of vacuum. On the outskirts of life, of men, of friendship, of love. Who created this emptiness that encircles me? Who would have any reason for doing so? Wasn't it really my own fault? But if that is the explanation, how did I come to make the original mistake? Maybe I'm antisocial by nature? Abnormal? Mad? Because all men have friends. Some have more than others, but nobody's got none. Friends who think about you, write to you, share your sorrows and your joys. They tell you their news, and ask you for yours. And send you pretty cards for the New Year.

And it occurred to Sviriagin that he had received, to all intents and purposes, no letters at all, ever—it was as if he didn't exist. Perhaps that was it? Perhaps, so far as the rest of the world was concerned, he just didn't exist?

All the same, everyone gets letters. Maybe it's only a question of waiting for the postman? Anton gave a bitter smile. Who would write to him? People only write to those they love. Was there a single human being on earth who loved him? So far as he could see, not one, nowadays. Though once upon a time he had loved and, he believed, had been loved in return. Presumably he had been mistaken. It was doubtless just an idea. Yes, just an idea he had thought up for himself, then and now. He had never had any friends, nor enemies. Nowadays it was different: he had enemies all right, and plenty of them. And, after all, maybe that was better than nothing. When you've got enemies, you've got something, haven't you? Once again Anton

gave a bitter smile, and asked himself if it were in order at least to win enemies that he had embarked upon that shameful warfare against his own people, against his neighbors, against his brother Vassilii and against Marina . . . Since he was incapable of finding a friend and since nobody, not even Marina, had ever loved him . . . Yes, that was probably the explanation . . . That was probably it . . .

There was no one in the street. Anton's loneliness was almost obsessive. This emptiness that surrounded him, he felt it as though it were tangible and consistent. There was nobody near him, yet this void that encircled him, which he could feel, was his perpetual companion. Even as a man can hear the voices of silence, so he was physically aware of the vacuum, could indeed almost touch it.

In reality this street was nothing save a long line of ruins, sinister relics of the war. Beneath a sky so clear and pure, these dirty, chaotic ruins were the very picture of desolation. All the same, here and there piles of brick that could still be put to use remained, indications that the bombs had not completely driven out humanity and life. There were also lights to be seen in an occasional window, usually without glass and blocked up with cardboard or an old, burst mattress. Smoke floated upward, not through the chimneys, but at least through pipes that ran where the panes of glass had once been. There were the shrill voices of children, the rattle of crockery, squeaking doors, the smothered notes of a twanged guitar. Yes, these relics of houses, often roof-

less, were yet inhabited. And the people inside them might even be spending a jolly evening, for this was New Year's Eve.

It was freezing, as it always does when the sky is too clear and the stars too bright. But everyone was hoping that it would snow tonight. There was not much left to hope for in this last year of the war that had exhausted everyone and everything. Just a little snow, with an extra bottle of vodka, a few herrings and some of that American *svinaia tuchonka*.*

As for him, Anton Sviriagin, he had nothing, neither vodka nor herrings nor American canned food. He hadn't any ration tickets. And now there wasn't even any snow. If the snow would fall, it would become warmer at once. Anton begged the sky to send down snow. It's so much prettier when the snow falls, particularly on New Year's Eve . . . But there was no snow . . .

Anton Sviriagin had nothing save his solitude, obsessive, absorbing, clinging, clutching, which he could feel as a man feels something that exists, that lives.

Somebody caught up with him, then passed by. Another lonely one, he thought. And then yet another. Can they be as lonely as I? Anton wondered. Both were carrying packages; from the pocket of one there emerged the red neck of a vodka bottle. So there you are. They were off to visit their relations or friends. It was quite plain that in this whole town, on this New Year's Eve, there existed no other man as lonely as he, as stripped of everything, as abandoned by everyone.

* *Spam*

For a few seconds his eyes rested on the red neck of the vodka bottle that protruded from the pocket of the first passer-by; what a pity that there was no bottle of vodka in his pocket . . . ! But drinking alone is as repulsive as living alone and dying alone. What he needed was a little warmth, not the sort that vodka gives but the kind that comes from the presence of human beings. Who could give it him, this human warmth? How strange to be so completely solitary. It was as though life and mankind had forgotten his very existence, or worse, had never been aware of him at all. Curious . . . Not life, of course: me. And it needed the war to make me understand. Without that . . . Yes indeed, without that . . . But no, even without the war I'd have been alone just the same, despite having Marina by my side. Perhaps I'd never have understood my loneliness. Would I have been happier? Who knows? Taken all in all, it's better this way, Anton concluded, without really knowing why it should be better this way. Nor did he attempt to find out.

Two gay and noisy couples appeared suddenly from out of a side street. They had probably not waited for midnight to draw the corks from the red necks of their vodka bottles. A burly sergeant, a thin civilian with an easily forgotten face and a timid smile, and two girls, both blondes, both with identical scarfs knotted about their heads, each held tight by one of the men. One of the girls gave a sudden, open, trilling laugh that scraped against Anton's nerves as though it were something very tangible indeed. Like the touch of a woman's hand. A little farther on the four of them

stopped, set off again, stopped, walked on, and finally came to a halt in front of a number that had remained miraculously suspended, whereas the house to which it belonged was three-quarters rubble. Then the sergeant pointed his Leica at his friends, posed rigidly beneath the number that dangled so precariously from the ruined house. Why had they chosen this particular spot? Had one of them lived in this house before the bombing? Or had the sergeant fought in it during some street battle (the town had changed hands more than once)? Anton wondered. He looked at the girls, at the thin civilian with the timid smile, and at the sergeant. The conqueror, he thought. The Leica was undoubtedly a trophy, his trophy. Perhaps he had killed a man to get this camera. But he had nothing to worry about. Nobody would do anything to him. If he had killed, his act of murder would not be a matter for reproach, since he was a Russian, a conqueror. Nobody would shoot or hang a Russian, a conqueror, because he had taken a Leica. But him, Anton Sviriagin, him they could and would hang. Because he had killed, just as had the sergeant. But he had killed Russians. And they would hang him. Because they didn't shoot people like him any more, they hanged them instead. Subtler. And maybe more symbolic as well. A man who has killed Russians dangles at the end of a rope! If the sergeant knew who he, Anton Sviriagin, was, he would draw his revolver and shoot him dead. But he didn't know, no more than did the girls, or the civilian with the easily forgotten face, or the *militzionnaire** just appearing in

* *Policeman*

outline far down the street. And if it should occur to this *militzionario* to ask him for his papers? Then he'd be for the high jump. Because Anton carried no papers at all, not even forged ones. His real papers, his own ones, were not the sort that it was advisable to carry any more . . .

Anton told himself that he was being very rash. But a man can't stay in hiding all the time, and particularly on New Year's Eve. It seemed to him that on this one evening the people, the *militzionario*, the sergeant were prepared to forget about those others, even about those who should be hanged. As this thought crossed his mind Anton screwed up sufficient courage actually to approach the group, prepared to offer the sergeant his services; surely he would enjoy being photographed beside his friends, between the two blonde girls as delectable as little cakes warm from the oven? But the group was moving away and Anton decided not to try and catch up with them. He walked on, alone. The *militzionario* passed close by him without so much as a glance. Perhaps he was off duty, in a hurry to get wherever he was going before midnight? He was expected somewhere, by his wife, or his sweetheart, his children or his friends . . . As for him, Anton, there was nobody waiting for him . . . Nobody. Nowhere. Nowhere. Nobody. And that was, in a way, horrifying.

How does a man become a solitary? Because his was surely not a unique case. This night, this New Year's Eve, there were others spending it alone, without friends, without anyone. He envisaged them, those solitary figures with their tired, sad faces, overwhelmed

by desperate solitude. They were wandering just as he was. Why did they wander? What were they looking for? For what did they hope? For nothing . . . Or perhaps for a miracle that would deliver them from their loneliness. Oh, this cursed race of solitary men! They are to be met with at every season of the year, in all lands, in every walk of life. In the crowds, in the fairs, in the dance halls. Even when all the world is drowned in gaiety and laughter, there remain these little islands of sadness and boredom, the solitary ones. Like the ones whose paths crossed that of Anton on this fine, clear New Year's Eve. Why are they alone, those figures? Are they, too, living beneath a threat? Do they, like he, fear lest they be hanged? Who can tell? But is it not more likely that they are simply those who know not how to link themselves to their surroundings and make friends? Solitaries of the most ordinary sort, just as he, Anton Sviragin, used to be, once upon a time, long ago, before the outline of the gallows arose upon his horizon.

Clouds were gathering, accumulating overhead, as if the twisted arms of the ruined houses raised against the sky were catching them and holding them above the town. First they hid the stars, then the moon. It had a strange softness, this winter's night of New Year's Eve. All that was lacking was the snow. And as if in reply to Anton's wish, far up in the sky fireworks burst and white sparks began to float very slowly downward as though regretting the heavens; for the sky is so pure, the earth so dirty and smashed . . . By the time midnight came a thin cloak of snow covered the ruins'

macabre beauty. From the buildings still habitable for those who might wish to live there, there were audible gusts of music, songs sung to a guitar and the dull thudding of the dancers' heels, and over it all the accordion. Already they were drinking vodka and Soviet champagne in there, drinking to the New Year, to victory, and, of course, "to friendship." Oh, how admirable is the Russian habit of vowing friendship with people who even yesterday were total strangers! Glasses are filled to the brim, arms are linked, and it is down in one! Then a kiss. On the lips, naturally. After which, friends forever! And from then on, the mode of address is *Ti*.*

Anton suddenly remembered that never in his life had he drunk "to friendship." Not even with the woman who was later to become his wife. That was surely very strange. No, not even with Marina had he drunk *na broudershaft*† . . . very strange indeed.

The snow was drawing the people from their ruins. A New Year's Eve without snow? No Russian could imagine such a state of affairs.

Out in the street the people went on singing. Their voices made up in strength what they lacked in tune. Song mingled with song. It was every man for himself and the most powerful lungs were the winner. Anton could hear them everywhere, in front, behind, and on either side. He almost joined in himself, with a joyous, catchy song. He would have liked to. But he did not yield to this desire.

He collected the snow from a bench that had re-

* *The intimate second person singular*

† *To friendship*

mained miraculously intact between the ruins of two houses. He pressed it into a ball. When it was hard as ice he bit into it, allowing it to melt in his mouth. On this New Year's Eve he had neither eaten nor drunk. But now he had this snow-turned-ice, and it gave him the illusion of both eating and drinking at one and the same time. Once again he collected a handful of snow. He was hungry and thirsty. So he ate the cold and tasteless snow.

The river was frozen hard, congealed between its icy banks, beneath the bridge that the shell bursts had perforated, its parapets smashed and its supports torn away, and over it all lay the glittering snow reflecting the light of the stars that shone so brightly in the cold night sky: the ice-bound river, the remnants of the bridge and the ruined houses formed the absurd and desolate image of a world given over to hatred. Sviriagin was well aware of his extreme rashness as he set off across the bridge. True enough, the gaps in the parapet and the gaping shell holes in the white covering of snow were visible from a long way off . . . But it was just these holes, so easily seen, patches of blackness in the newly fallen snow . . . And these parapets that were no longer there . . . So easy . . . So tempting . . . A single step would suffice. The weight of his body falling from the bridge would break the ice, and the water that still ran swiftly beneath its white armor would carry him far away from this place of enmity. Maybe all the way to the Black Sea. Even if someone were to see him fall, nobody could save him.

Instinctively Sviriagin edged away from the side of

the bridge, but this only brought him closer to the gaping shell holes. He felt extraordinarily attracted by these holes and by the nonexistent parapet. Precisely because it no longer existed. It was like an invitation powerful and insistent. A provocation. If it were to be repeated only for a few seconds, he knew that it would become impossible for him to refuse. He would accept the invitation . . .

So he began to run. He went on running even when the shell holes and the parapet were far behind him, as though a pack of hounds were baying at his heels. It was emptiness that pursued him, the emptiness of the gaping holes, of the missing parapet, of death . . .

At last he felt safe. He understood then that he did not wish to die. Why not? He could not have answered for sure. He just didn't wish to die, and that was all. And at that moment he felt very well, he felt fine. He smiled: this attachment to life was so strange, so inexplicable that he had to smile. A line of Essenin floated up from the depths of his memory: *Idiot heart, now cease to beat* . . . Yes, cease your beating.

A dog came out of the ruins and at the sight of Anton leaped aside, as though expecting a kick. Its furtive, weary eyes fixed on him, terrified of heaven knows what, the dog vanished among the ruins on the far side of the street. What was it up to in this place, that dog? Who could feed it in this ruined, starving town? Doubtless it shared with the humans what remained of the town: the ruins to which the humans, for no apparent reasons, clung more closely than to anything else on earth.

Anton was in no hurry to regain the shelter of the ruins, there to hide as the dog had done, as he himself had been doing for these past weeks. On this New Year's Eve he found pleasure in mixing with the crowd that made the streets alive even at this late hour. He was enjoying the illusion that he was a being similar to all those others, similar to those across whom the shadow of the gallows did not lie. What luck! How much pleasanter to be merged in this crowd of happy, drunken, excited people and to feel the contagion of their gaiety than to lurk in the blackness of hostile, icy ruins, as he had been doing each evening once the day had gone! This could scarcely go on for more than two or three hours. Then the men would be exhausted by the unaccustomed quantity of food that they had eaten, by the vodka and the champagne that they had drunk, by the joy of it all, and they would leave the streets deserted and empty, so that those streets would once again become hostile and dangerous to himself, to Anton Sviriagin. And then he would have to flee the solitude of the streets for the solitude of the ruined houses.

Amid all these ruins it was only a question of choosing. Yet he would go in search of his own particular one, and when he had found it he would behave as the dog had done. He would dive into it and hunt for the corner that offered the greatest protection from the wind, and there he would spend the rest of the night. It was "his house," and now Anton had found it. He slipped in through a gap in the section of wall, and down into the cellar where the little barred windows were blocked by

heaps of smashed brick. Anton lived alone in his "house" and no one was any the wiser. This had its advantages and its disadvantages. That part of his "house" which remained upright was in imminent danger of collapsing at any moment. It was even possible that it was still mined. But one result of this was that Anton was left in peace; no one bothered him, no one would think to look for him here. In a corner of the cellar he felt for, and found, a sack of straw lying on the bare ground. The sack was split in several places. He could feel the straw beneath his feet. He lowered himself onto the sack and turned up the collar of his overcoat in such a fashion as completely to cover his head. But he had a hard time getting to sleep. Now that he was no longer moving he began to freeze. He felt himself enveloped by the cold that was exuded by the ground beneath him and by the cement walls. The damp pierced him. He altered his position on the sack in which the straw continued its infernal whispering. What could the time be? Two, three, four o'clock in the morning? In any case it wouldn't be light for a long time yet. Anton hoped that his weariness would overcome his coldness. But no! He heard the squeaking of a bit of roofing that clung to one wall and swayed in the wind. "I must pull it off, the same music every night." It was as if it were cutting into his flesh, as if it were slicing open his heart with a blunt knife. He opened and closed his eyes, reopened and reclosed them. It made no difference: open or shut, the blackness remained the same. How long they are, these winter nights! The others have certainly got better things to do than struggle against the cold. It is even

conceivable that they're too warm. And that the nights seem to them too short . . .

For more than two months Anton hadn't touched a woman. And here he was thinking about that, in these circumstances. Strange . . . Truly strange . . . What can there be so magical about that little corner of skin with its tuft of hair? As if those few hairs, coarse and short, marked the entrance to paradise. To paradise . . . !

And that other piece of flesh, curved and swelling, darker at the summit? What was so extraordinary about those round, dark patches upon a white skin, silky and warm as milk? Extraordinary? Offering paradise?

Anton could find no answer to these questions that so suddenly confronted him at this late hour of the night on New Year's Eve. Nor did he feel much confidence in his ability to find an answer. Oh, this eternal masculine, hard and rigid, which since the world began has searched for that other eternal, the eternal feminine, soft and yielding . . . Why? Anton abandoned the attempt to understand. He felt, quite simply, his lack of a woman, and he felt it horribly. This lack was far worse even than the cold.

Sleep could bring him forgetfulness and, who knows, perhaps the phantom of that which he lacked. But sleep evaded him. So he got up. He waved his arms and rubbed his hands together for warmth. But the cold would not release its grip on him. He tried to walk in the darkness. He banged against girders, barked his shins against lengths of metal, was savaged by broken bricks that lay in wait for him at every step like the

teeth of some enormous jawbone. The wind whistled through walls without door or window. The snow had stopped falling; through ragged breaches the ever more intense cold reached in pitilessly to find the most obscure corner of "his house," of the place where he had sought refuge. And the endless squeaking of the loose piece of roofing hanging up above made his heart ache and his blood freeze. Anton felt his way toward the gap through which he had entered this cellar. He looked out at the street, faintly lit and beautified by the thick layer of snow that modestly clothed the frightful ruins. There was something solemn and unreal about it.

A gust of cold wind seized him. He shivered, but remained frozen to his breach, his hole in the wall, through which the wind rushed with a stubborn and insane violence. His body was going numb, his limbs rigid. He wondered what could be the limit of his sufferings. Was he at this moment closer to death or to life? Halfway between the two, perhaps . . . What was he doing in the ruins of this house, crushed by the cold and by all those people, his enemies, who wished only for his death? He asked himself these questions with a sort of indifference, as if he were attempting to recover a memory hardened by long forgetfulness. Why am I alive? Why am I still alive? Why are people compelled to live? What compels me to go on living? Is it necessity? A duty? Simple curiosity? Sporting interest? Stubbornness? Or is it that force of inertia, that habit of living, which they call the instinct of self-preservation? If it is none of those, then what is it? Maybe being alive

is simply the lesser evil? A solution of convenience . . .
But the poet has said:

*In this world it is not hard to die
Much harder is it to live.*

Thus did Anton stand, rigid by his breach, his hole in the wall, exposed to the icy wind. There was nothing for him to see save the snow, and he closed his eyes. His teeth were clenched. He could no longer feel his toes. Indeed he could no longer feel anything save the shivers that passed up and down his spine. They were his only assurance that he was still alive. As for his toes, maybe they were already dead. He leaned out, through his breach, and picked up great handfuls of snow. He took off his boots and began to rub his numbed feet which were already turning mauve. Bit by bit his blood, unfrozen by the contact with the snow, began once again to circulate through his poor toes. He could not help smiling. To think that only a little while ago, when he was standing there rigid by the hole in the wall, he had been quite ready to die! And now he was filled with joy at the return of life. His poor toes, bony and filthy, he could feel them beginning to live again. He stuffed his hands, which were now freezing in their turn, deep into his pockets and his slight body heat slowly warmed them too.

"Devil take it," he murmured, "it's not so easy to get shut of yourself. Too used to living, that's all it is." He said this to himself almost in the tone of a man making an excuse. As if he felt guilty for the fact that he was still alive.

2 HOW TO DIE?

How to die? How to live?

Anton was well aware that this could not go on forever. That was certain. The ruins would one day be razed. They had begun doing this, even before the war was over. Already piles of bricks that could still be used were stacked in long rows in front of the houses from which they had come. New houses would be built in the place of these heaps of concrete, of smashed plaster, of torn and twisted iron. New avenues would be laid out across the ruins; trees would be planted to replace those that had burned in the fires or the bombings. The soldiers would return from the front, like the sergeant with his Leica. All those whom death had spared would come back. Where would he go then, he, Anton Sviria-

gin? Where would he hide? How would he escape the gallows that had already awaited him for months? For how long could he remain on the run, for how long might he save his skin and his liberty? These questions, to which there could be no reply, obsessed him to the point of stupefaction. How to live? How to die? How . . . All the same a man must try to live, if he refuses to die.

The will to live was being reborn within him, together with a nostalgia for this world, and it was therefore necessary that he find a solution. A solution that meant salvation because, despite everything and without really knowing why, he had decided to live.

This decision was a difficult one to put into practice. Nevertheless one day he could and did pride himself on having found the answer.

"Life after death," such was the single plank of his salvation.

Having decided that he must live, it became possible that he might in fact do so. This thought did not fill him with joy. Rather did it resemble a surprise, an unexpected present, perhaps, but one not intended for him: it was a present addressed to another person who would doubtless be delighted to receive it.

It was an idea that had come to him by chance, but that had vanquished him at once.

It came to him in "his house," the day that the tramp broke in. The tramp pretended to be a painter, and called himself Valerii. Anton's first reaction was to kill, thinking that the tramp had followed him in order to hand him over. He was ready to club him with a

length of iron pipe when he realized that this man could not be his enemy. But it was the uncompleted gesture with the iron pipe that gave him the idea for his salvation.

Who was this Valerii? All that Anton knew of him was what the man himself recounted of his own free will. He had asked no questions lest he himself should have to answer any. It appeared that Valerii was a refugee from Leningrad. All his relations were dead, either from starvation or from the bombing when the Germans divided the city into squares, like a chess-board. They had systematically flattened one square after another with their heavy artillery. Valerii had only managed to escape by taking the risk of crossing the immense Lake Ladoga, frozen hard but spared neither bombs nor shells. From time to time huge holes blown in the ice made the crossing more difficult, and even where the lake was still frozen the tepid sun was beginning to melt the ice which threatened to give way beneath his feet. Nevertheless this was the only escape route from the encircled city. A man who took it successfully might save his life.

The Leningrad painter had succeeded. He had become a tramp, without shelter. At least he was no longer threatened by bombs. It was thus that Valerii, painter and tramp, had survived all his relations now dead in the city of Pjotr* and of Lenin. He had saved his life, but Anton had the impression that he was no longer in full possession of his faculties. Perhaps he was wrong; in any case that was a matter of no impor-

* *Peter the Great*

tance—at least so far as Anton was concerned. What was important to him were certain physical resemblances between the two men. These were not facial—Valerii's hair was red, while Anton's was rather fair—but applied to their bodies: both had long, strong arms, both had slightly bowed backs, as though borne down by the weight of past suffering, and both had the same slow and weary gait. It was this resemblance—even more than the blow with the iron pipe that he had almost dealt the tramp—which gave Anton the solution to his problem and the key to his own salvation.

3 LIFE AFTER DEATH

This man Valerii suited Anton's purpose to perfection. He had exactly Anton's height and build. He was completely alone; apart from an aunt who lived he knew not where, he had nobody in the world. His possessions were more or less nil. Finally he had a weakness: he was always ready to drink, even to excess. These were all trump cards in Anton's hand.

The loss, he told himself, would not be enormous. Nobody would notice his disappearance, nor would there be anyone to mourn the tramp. It was not that Anton wanted any excuse for the deed that he intended to carry out in the near future, but all the same he tried, timidly and without much conviction, to still his conscience.

Valerii, who coughed, wore only a short jacket against the cold of these early spring days. Anton offered him his overcoat and the painter seemed exceedingly surprised by this kind gesture. For a long time he refused the offer, out of politeness it would seem, but at last he accepted with joy.

"Now mind you don't sell it for drink," Anton said with a laugh.

"You're a real friend," Valerii replied, obviously touched.

It fits him like a glove, that overcoat of mine, Anton thought. So much the better . . .

"Only a real pal could make so great a sacrifice," Valerii went on, in his attempt to express the full measure of his thanks.

It was all very well for Anton to tell himself that one corpse more or less would hardly make much difference; he felt, nevertheless, a sensation akin to nausea as he calmly set about his preparations to murder a man who had no mistrust and was overflowing with gratitude.

He was disgusted by this murder, so coldly and minutely calculated down to the smallest detail. And the way that Valerii kept repeating, over and over again, as though he had a foreboding: "I'm your friend . . ." There you are, thought Anton: I've got a friend at last, and I intend to kill him . . . During such moments of weakness he would seek encouragement by telling himself: He must die instead of me, so that I may live.

Then he wondered whether he would in fact be able to carry out the plan he had thought up. Could

he go on living after the death of Valerii, since this would be his own pseudodeath? In killing the other man would he not also kill himself? He, who had so many other deaths upon his conscience, now embarked upon a protracted debate with that conscience of his: and what was at stake was poor Valerii's life . . .

He was ready to curse the moment when the idea of murdering Valerii had come to him as his sole chance of salvation.

To still his doubts, he told himself that Valerii might himself become a murderer, or a sex-maniac who raped little girls—you can expect anything of an alcoholic—and thus that he, Anton, by killing him was in fact saving the maniac's future victims. It was only a small consolation; it isn't so easy to kill a man, particularly when he places such emphasis upon being your friend. If Valerii were just another traitor, like me, I'd be quite right to kill him, for it would be a simple act of justice. And another thing, what is life? One's own life, or that of others? Why should it be respected? Who says so? And why? Yes, and why? Above all, why . . . ?

This went on for two days. On the third they set off together for the city's outskirts—which were some miles away according to Anton. Valerii had agreed to go with him. There was a family living out there whom Anton knew and who might give them shelter. Valerii had accepted, to his own detriment. He still wore Anton's overcoat. He had not been drinking.

Sometimes they walked at great speed, as though Anton hoped to shake off and leave behind the thoughts that obsessed him: at others they went slowly, with a

sort of hesitancy, stopping from time to time, and it was then that these same thoughts returned to attack him with redoubled fury.

Once they had left the town they walked through the forest. As though deliberately, it was a wonderful day; warm and sunny days were still a rarity, and this one was a marvel.

They made their way along a beautiful forest path. The sun poured its full store of molten gold upon the black and fragile branches; thence it slid down, as though beneath its own weight, to fall in scattered pools upon the yellowish grass and the sandy track. Despite his thoughts none of this escaped Anton's attention. Valerii was perhaps even more conscious of it all. What a day . . .

It was as if nature, too, had decided to take a hand in this struggle of which Anton had been the object for these last few days.

"Now we take the next path to the right. And then . . ."

They set off along this path, which rose steeply. It seemed endless.

"Much farther to go?" Valerii asked, thus interrupting Anton's gloomy and confused thoughts. Apparently he had asked this question solely in order to break the silence: his voice betrayed no sort of anxiety, but then why should he be anxious, after all?

Before Anton had time to reply, Valerii added: "Not that I care, you needn't worry about me . . ."

He was touching, this poor painter who was going to provide Anton Sviriagin with a corpse in order that

Anton might survive. Anton thought: I'll point to one side and ask him if he sees the pavilion over there. He'll turn his head to the right and look for the pavilion that doesn't exist and at that moment death will strike him down. The death that has followed close behind him for these past three days will not fail to catch him now. Then all I'll have to do will be to burn his head in the fire I shall light, and stuff my papers in the pockets of my overcoat, which he's already got on. It'll be an accident. And as for me, I'll be dead once and for all.

But Anton also said to himself: Is it possible to do such a deed when the sun is shining, amid the soft enchantment of the forest that has lost none of its charms despite the last, lingering remnants of winter? It sometimes seemed to him that the trees were murmuring into his ear, sometimes that the still pale sun was reproachfully trying to look into his eyes.

They stopped and lit a campfire. They collected dry branches which flamed up in a frenzy. Onto them they tossed logs. Anton found a knotted, heavy stick, almost a cudgel, which he grasped.

"There, over to the right . . ." he said in a voice inaudible to himself.

Valerii turned his head in the direction Anton had indicated, then immediately turned back to face the other man. His expression revealed an indescribable joy: he wasn't a painter for nothing. He was anxious to share his joy with Anton. The opportunity had been missed.

"What beauty! Oh, if I were rich I would live

where there was nothing but nature, nothing else, no men . . .”

He appeared transfigured.

“Men defile nature,” he concluded in melancholy tones, and his eyes went back to bask in the marvelous world that was the forest, quite unsuspecting that by so doing he was risking a mortal blow at any moment.

“. . . If there were no more men at all . . . Only then would it be possible really to work miracles,” he said after a while, in a slightly dreamlike voice. And perhaps he was in fact dreaming, of some private ideal far away and out of reach, at the very moment when death stood close beside him.

This weakness which had caused him to miss the perfect opportunity gave Anton successively a sensation of rage and a brief feeling of relief. There’s no need to rush it, he said to himself by way of consolation for his failure. His thoughts were ponderous, confused and obsessive. He continued to plod about among them, without much hope of finding a way out, while Valerii went on uttering his enthusiastic cries.

He spoke of painting with a sort of sadness which indicated either that he was a true artist, or at least a man of sensibility despite his seedy decay. In him, the tramp had not killed the painter.

“Classical painting is dead. Now, our bosses—because you know with us they boss even art—want us to paint picture post cards. But what’s the point of that, I ask you, since there are cameras that can make picture post cards, even colored ones? It’s like ordering a locksmith to build a motor car when they’re coming

off the assembly lines one every five minutes. Technology has killed picture post card art. But that's the only sort of art our bosses know, and they don't want to know any other; for them all the rest is decadence and degeneracy . . . Can you believe it? They don't understand that since Gutenberg it has become impossible to copy books by hand . . . We've got to find new forms in painting. As in music and poetry . . ."

Anton was only listening with half his mind to this man whom he had condemned to death. It struck him as strange to hear him talk about painting when he was about to die. In his head certain phrases of Valerii's continued to reverberate:

" . . . No more men at all . . . Men defile nature . . ."

But Valerii was still talking.

"It isn't to Rome, that Mecca of the old painters, that a man should go today, but to the islands of the Pacific, to the uttermost ends of a savage and uninhabited Siberia, to some forgotten oasis in the Sahara unknown even to the nomads. There it would be possible to create. Not picture post cards, masterpieces. What does it matter if nobody understands them, if nobody ever sees them except you, their creator, and that other Creator, if one exists, up in heaven . . . ?"

Anton poked at the fire with his club, which he continued to grasp in his hand. What Valerii was saying was to him a matter of more or less indifference. His mind was on something altogether different. Nevertheless he did pay attention when the painter began to say: "We're a strange people, we Russians. You might

say, a people apart. We cling to our Russia as though we were her slaves. The galley slaves of this enormous galley that is called *Rossia*. A galley that is moored fast and does not move. And we no more think of leaving it than we would were we chained to our benches. Yet the world is wide . . . Why do we stay here, nailed to our patch of earth? Is it so different from the earth elsewhere? Earth is always earth. What are we doing here?"

Valerii went on talking, and his phrases reëchoed inside Anton's head. The world is wide. Why are we nailed to our patch of earth? Me, for example, Anton Sviriagin, what holds me here? I have nothing. I haven't even got the right any more to work this earth that I love so much. My only right is to the gallows.

He listened to Valerii without looking at him. He let fall his knotted club and drew one half-burned branch from the fire in order to stir the others into flame, poking their unburned ends into the fire's center. Smoke poured upward into their eyes, and Valerii took a few steps backward.

The world is wide. What compulsion forces me to stay in Russia? There are other places, where people also live. It is pure chance that I should have been born in Russia. But why does the rest of the world not exist for a Russian? And pursuing his train of thought without now listening to Valerii, Anton felt suddenly free, completely free, and . . . relieved. It was a strange relief. Perhaps because he now knew that he would not kill Valerii, that poor painter, that great painter? Who knows?

The fire was burning well, but Anton kept poking at it, turning the branches over and over. The sparks that leaped up with an evil crackle stung his hands, but he went on fiddling with the fire.

The Sahara . . . Tahiti . . . No, there was no need for him to go as far as all that. He was no painter, he had no need to create masterpieces. He was an agriculturist; what he needed was earth, good earth, wherever it might be . . .

Suddenly he straightened up and threw the branch he was holding into the fire. He then began to stamp out the burning wood with his boots. The flames had soon gone, but the smoke was redoubled.

"Why do you do that?" Valerii asked with surprise.

"We're going," Anton replied, and his tone was that of a command.

"Already?" Valerii sounded disappointed.

"We're going back to the town . . ."

"Not to your friends'?"

"Some other time."

Anton was utterly delighted by his new solution. The thought of leaving Russia did not appeal to him greatly, but at least this would spare him the necessity for committing a deed which he himself regarded as an abomination. He was almost grateful to Valerii.

They turned back, leaving behind them the fire which, though it had gone out, continued to smoke. Soon they left the path and were back on the high road.

The sun was brighter now even than it had been on the way out, and it gave a heat that was quite unex-

pected at this season of the year. It was as though it were celebrating its victory.

Back in town, they entered the first public house, a very simple place where they sold only beer and vodka. The only luxuries the place had to offer were warmth and a noisy, cheerful atmosphere.

They sat down at a table in the corner. Anton ordered vodka and beer. At the sight of the alcohol that he loved so much, Valerii's eyes began to glow strangely. They drank down the first few glasses quickly, as though their time were limited, toasting one another. Then Anton felt a sudden urge to talk to his friend. Not about painting, but about himself, his life. Anton wondered if this were a peculiarly Russian characteristic, this periodic and irresistible need to "empty one's soul" as the striking Russian phrase has it. When a Russian feels this need, the first comer will do as the recipient for his confidences. The soul-emptier expects neither consolation, nor interest, nor above all pity; all he asks of the person to whom he talks is that he should be an ear into which he can pour the contents of his overfull soul. The Russians call the soul "the shadows," and from time to time it is essential that they be illuminated. That is why they delight in uncovering their souls to others, in order that they may themselves see into them the more clearly. The years of terror and of mutual suspicion, the fear of denunciation, had been for the Russians the greatest of torments. But no more than any other torture, this one had not altered the Russian soul. Anton's had long been brimming over, nor had he had any opportunity of emptying it. And

now here was this poor Valerii, seated beside him. He would soon be drunk. Perhaps he would not understand it all. No matter; Anton was going to "empty" his soul, and Valerii would be the only man in whom he ever would confide its contents.

So Anton came to tell, circumspectly at first, the long story of his life, while discreetly noting the effect that his words were having on Valerii. Was he at least listening?

4 THE STORY OF ANTON SVIRIAGIN

"I had become so used to being alone that usually I was not even aware of it. But that night, that New Year's Eve . . . Perhaps because that's the time when people meet their friends. And I, who had studied in this very town, I had not a single friend, I had nobody with whom I might spend New Year's Eve. There was not one person, anywhere, who might have expected a visit from me. It was a sad thought. Deadly sad. It was a fact though, painful but nevertheless a fact. So I began to cross-question myself, in the hope of learning to understand a bit better the causes of my loneliness. How does a man come to be alone? Everybody has friends, of one sort or another. Everybody except me. I couldn't remember ever having had any.

Any real friends, I mean. I had always been more or less alone. I realized this with something like terror. As though I had suddenly awakened to find myself inside a tomb.

"In the old days I had been preoccupied with other matters, first my studies, then my work and my family, and I had not had time to speculate about myself, nor about my strange solitude. Then that stupid war came, the war that turned me against every man: against my own people, my brother, my family, the Russians, the Germans. And I still have no time to worry about myself, to think about my loneliness, about the emptiness that surrounded me, that has always surrounded me, in the midst of which I have had to live.

"But now, without work, torn from my own people, without a home, without a war that I must fight, I felt as though my loneliness had literally clutched me by the throat. It had seized the whole of my being, as if to destroy me, as if to obliterate the last and smallest trace of Anton Sviriagin. Until nothing but emptiness was left. Nothing but emptiness! Absolute emptiness.

"Perhaps I am not like other men? Perhaps I am a special sort of being, a more complicated one? Am I antisocial? Peculiar? Misunderstood? Is my loneliness deliberate, because I am self-sufficient unto myself? Yet I love human company, though I am never drawn to the people who make it. I have been able to take part in conversations, often very passionate ones, about the hero of some book or of a new play, but I never go all the way. I never reveal myself completely. There is always a residue of thoughts that I keep to myself,

for myself would be more accurate, that I never express. I have always been somewhat reticent and reserved. Not snobbishly so, not because I feel myself to be superior, no, not at all; rather is it a fear of being misunderstood.

"Maybe the roots of my loneliness reach back to my childhood. I have wondered about this. What was exceptional about my childhood? Nothing at all. My parents were simple peasants, absolutely ordinary people. A bit withdrawn, it's true. My father was rather a silent man. And in my parents' home we avoided our neighbors, though I don't know why. When I went to school I was already aware of my loneliness. Less so then than later on, or now. But I was a solitary child even then, and at times this pleased me. I have thought, quite casually, about the incomparable goodness that is solitude. No one fingers your being, no one interferes with your thoughts, no one asks you questions to which you have to find an answer. There is no need to talk to anybody, to reply to anything, and instead there is complete freedom to pursue one's own thoughts, dreams, maybe follies! Freedom to laugh at one's own ideas, if one wishes, because they are odd or absurd, and no need to explain or to justify, no need to share one's sufferings or joys with anybody whatsoever. I never succeeded in forming a friendship, doubtless because that would have ravaged my private universe by opening or half opening its doors to others . . ."

Valerii, listening to Anton Sviriagin, was completely motionless, as though bewitched by his words. And bewitched he was. Or in any event stupefied to discover

that this newly made friend, whom he had believed to be a tramp, a piece of human refuse like himself, was a person as interesting as this, as profound, as sensitive and as touching. Already the offer of the overcoat, made with such spontaneity and such generosity from a man at least as poor as himself, had overwhelmed him.

Anton had paused, dreaming and obviously moved by his recollections of childhood, and Valerii took this opportunity to say:

"You're an individualist. And you're not the only one. Maybe I'm just such another. And in this collectivist world it's very hard to be an individualist, and an artist. Perhaps it's because of being an artist that I'm an individualist . . ."

"You say 'perhaps.' Don't you know?" Anton asked with a smile that was slightly relaxed.

"I know, but I'm not certain. Look here, I feel very good that I belong to the collective. I grew up in the collective. I have, by the very nature of things, grown accustomed to the collective. But I act as an individualist. In my opinion, if he would be true, an artist can only be an individualist."

"I haven't your excuse," Anton replied. And his smile now was one of melancholy.

"There's no need to be an artist. Think about individualists! Here in Russia they're a vanishing race. Soon they'll be as rare as buffaloes in America or yaks in Asia. But collectivism still produces them, these damned individualists. You're the living proof. Because like me you've emerged from the collective in which

you were born and brought up and become a man. It's a reaction against the collective. Or rather, a reply . . ."

Anton Sviriagin did not answer Valerii's final words. He had scarcely heard them—at least such was the impression he gave, for his eyes were far away, remote, lost perhaps in the past.

After a pause which lasted so long that it seemed as though Anton had decided not to go on with his confession, he suddenly began again. It was as if he were replying to his own thoughts.

"I joined in my schoolmates' games. The people at the University even thought I was one of the best players in the school volley-ball team. The other members of the team were my comrades. Later on, when like so many other schoolboys I began to write verses and to frequent the school poetry circle, I found new comrades there. Only comrades, though others who went to the circle were linked not only by their love of poetry but also by friendship. Not me. At the University I was one of the best students, and it was the same story. I loved my studies, I wanted to do well, I busied myself in work to the extent that I forgot everything else. But it was the same story with my fellow students at the University as it had been with my schoolmates: I never got beyond the stage of simple comradeship. This took the form of working together, of daily meetings before lectures, or in the lab, or at the canteen where we ate together—more rarely at college jamborees or on the playing fields. It wasn't that my comrades didn't care for me. I don't believe

that they ever felt any dislike for me. At worst they may have found me a bit on the unsociable side. No, if it was anyone's fault, it was mine. It was I who made no effort to draw closer to them, to add depth to our acquaintance, to create bonds that might have developed into friendship. The truth is that I never attempted this, never wanted to try, and I have never understood exactly why not. To keep my independence intact? Friendship demands sacrifices on occasion. But why should I set such store by my independence? Perhaps something deep down in my subconscious was urging me to withdraw from the collective, to avoid all friendship. Perhaps I was already an individualist, even then?"

Once more Anton fell silent. But not for long; he began again almost at once, as though there were still questions of his own to which he must reply. He seemed hardly to bother about his friend Valerii, as if he were there only that he might speak his thoughts aloud instead of thinking them silently to himself.

"Later girls entered this private circle in which I lived my curious, solitary life. The first was a young married woman, then there were others. Oh, not many. One after the other they showed me what love was, with its subtleties and its pleasures, above all its pleasures—but not friendship. Anyhow, the only thing I looked for with them was love. As for friendship, I expected it even less from them than I did from the young men about me. Nothing but love. Friendship? I could easily do without it. My work and my studies on the one hand, love on the other—that was quite enough for me. But could I have hoped to find friend-

ship with the girls I loved? Pure hypocrisy! In any event that wasn't what I wanted. What I wanted with them was love. How about you? Do you believe a man can find friendship with girls?"

Valerii appeared embarrassed. "Me? To tell the truth, I'm not interested in girls."

"Oh, I see . . ." Anton was sorry he had asked the question. He hesitated and glanced at his new friend with slightly more curiosity, then he added: "Fundamentally it's all quite unimportant. Quite unimportant . . ." And he went on.

"I don't know if they all loved me. As for me . . . they gave me pleasure. And I loved them because that was what they wanted. That gave them pleasure. All the same on one occasion I thought that I had found something other than love, something more. But could this be called friendship? I'm not sure . . ."

Once again he stopped. What he said next had at first sight no connection with what had gone before. Perhaps he was making a lengthy detour toward an earlier, brief reference. Valerii did not inquire.

"Other men find earth disgusting. I love it. I always have. Other men find it horrifying. The life of those who work the earth seems to them idiotic and uninteresting. They prefer to live in cities. For them earth is only to be trodden underfoot. That's why they like it best when it's covered with asphalt, or tarred. For me, ever since my childhood, earth has been a living thing; it has a scent, a savor, even a beauty. I have never thought of it as something dead, only good to be walked over after having first been clothed in macadam.

For me it lives, it breathes, it has its sorrows and its joys. I have always preferred to see it decked with flowers, or even simply with green grass, rather than with asphalt. Cities have had little attraction for me. Their lights, the stones of their houses, their avenues, the endless movement of their crowds, their street noises have never meant much to me. Nor their vices. Vice, that treason toward nature, has never appealed to me, at all. Such matters do not even excite my curiosity."

"I congratulate you," Valerii interrupted. "It makes me happy to learn that men such as you exist. I myself am stuffed with vices . . ."

He said this with a sort of bravado. He appeared to regard it as a boast that he should be possessed by so many vices.

Anton did not reply to this. Instead, he went on.

"All the same I had to go to the city in order to continue my studies, for I wished to become a farm manager, an agronomist. It was with a heavy heart that I left behind me the fields of my village which I loved so much. But I might hope to see them again one day, since I was to attend a course at the School of Agriculture. After having finished their secondary studies the others, and particularly those who had no fixed ambition, usually tended toward the technical schools, in order to become scientific workers, or to do research or be engineers. It's the fashion nowadays, and besides, a man is better paid in those careers than in any other, better paid than the doctors, teachers or agronomists. Our young girls dream about engineers the way American girls dream of millionaires. As there aren't any

millionaires in Russia, you can't blame our girls . . . But so far as I was concerned there was never any question of becoming an engineer. I wanted to be an agronomist. You might have described me as tied to the soil."

He fell silent and seemed to dream. At first Valerii wished to take advantage of this in order to put in a few words of his own, but finally he thought better of it. The expression in his eyes, which were fixed on Anton's face, announced clearly enough his astonishment that any man could be so attached to the soil. What could he find in it that would interest him to this extent?

"After finishing my studies, I returned to my village. I was to practice as an agronomist there and in one or two other villages nearby. This was a piece of luck I could scarcely have expected. I might just as easily have been sent to Kazakstan, or the Urals, or to Siberia. Yes, it was a stroke of luck. I can't deny it . . ."

Anton had now forgotten Valerii as he immersed himself once again in the past. But he went on quickly.

"Yes . . . Who knows how it might have all turned out if I hadn't been sent back to the village of my birth? But it was there I went, as luck would have it. Or was it bad luck? Bad luck, really. But at the time this bad luck struck me as the height of good fortune. My comrades, the other young agronomists, envied me my extraordinarily unusual destination. It just happened that there was a shortage of agronomists in our district. So as soon as I had become one it was there that I was sent, as a reinforcement."

Anton stopped again, and wondered why he was saying all this to the painter. It might be a matter of supreme indifference to Valerii, who was only listening at all out of politeness. He glanced at him. Valerii appeared to be, if anything, absorbed by his story. So, obeying a necessity of which he was not altogether aware, Anton continued to "empty his soul."

"That took place just three years before the war. I came home in June, and the war broke out three years later, also in June. There was a schoolteacher in our village; she wasn't a local girl; her parents lived in Smolensk. After taking a two-year teacher's course, she'd been sent to us, just one year before I came back, to look after our village children. We were the only intellectuals, if I may use the word, in our little hamlet lost in the wide countryside. I wasn't bored. My work, which I loved, absorbed me. But I had time left over, after work was done. So there is nothing very surprising about the fact that we were drawn together. She was young and beautiful, a simple beauty, nothing flashy or vulgar. She pleased me. I had never before considered getting married. My studies had made such an idea appear very remote, though I had said to myself 'it will come in time.' And now it had come. She began by lending me books. I went to call on her. She lived next to the school. I loved her truly and deeply. It seemed to me that this was the first time I had really loved, with my heart. Later . . . But to cut a long story short, we got married."

Valerii had to wait for a long time before Anton was

ready to go on with his tale. It was as though this were becoming more and more painful to him.

"I said that there were two intellectuals in our village. There was, however, a third, my elder brother, Vassilii. He had then not quite finished his studies. He was a member of the Party and had been sent to our district, the most backward in the entire region and one with a bad reputation. He became president of the *Red Star* Kolkhoze and thanks to him conditions on that Kolkhoze changed. He, and he alone, put it on its feet. He was a good organizer, an obstinate and energetic man who would stop at nothing to achieve what he wanted. Once he was there, our district soared upward. He soon held one of the leading positions in the whole region and was even mentioned by name in the Red Tablet of Honor. My parents, who belonged to the *Red Star* Kolkhoze, were proud of their son Vassilii. They were later to be proud of their younger son as well, for in his capacity of agronomist he too played a not insignificant part in raising the standard of the Kolkhozes in our district.

"My brother and I were totally unlike. He was of the same build as myself, but his eyes were piercing and as black as his hair. Can you imagine me with a mustache? He had an enormous one, a 'Joseph Stalin.' Indeed like so many of our Communist half-wits he did his best to resemble Stalin as closely as possible, even to the extent of maiming our fine Russian language in imitation of Stalin's Georgian accent. Vassilii was a propagandist and a very keen Communist but, in my opinion, a self-seeker like all the others. And that

is why I secretly despised him. No doubt he felt the same way about me, though for different reasons. I laughed at the Party and at the personal advantages that his Party membership undoubtedly earned him. I was interested in nothing except my work as an agronomist. And that doubtless annoyed my brother, who asked me on more than one occasion why I did not join the Party."

Once again there was silence, and this went on for so long that Valerii began to wonder whether Anton was going to continue his story. At last he made up his mind to do so.

"I was not the only one who found Marina—for such was the schoolteacher's name—attractive. It's always that way. If you find a girl pleasing you may be certain that there will be others who do so too. Among those who were attracted to Marina was my brother—or so I thought, even though I had no proof. He was married, the father of a baby boy . . .

"On the occasion of our marriage I said to Marina: 'If you are unfaithful to me, I shall kill you.' I said this quite calmly, and my tone was not even a solemn one; indeed I made myself smile. But I was determined that she should understand me exactly: I wished her to know beyond doubt that I should have no hesitation in carrying out my threat, should the necessity arise.

"After I had said this, she laughed as much as I did, if not more. She loved me, of that I am sure. What could have induced her to marry me, other than love? It isn't that I am trying to persuade myself of this fact now, by way of consolation. No, I'm quite sure she

loved me: her love had that ring of truth to it which cannot ever be misunderstood. There is no need to tell you that I loved her in return, and that I wanted her to be happy. We were happy. We loved one another . . . we even loved each other very well, despite our lack of experience. Nature alone was our guide. Yes, we were happy, both of us . . . And it was in order that we might be happy forever that I said what I did say, when first we were married, at a time when it is customary to speak altogether different words. But what else could I do? It happens frequently enough. A married couple are living very happily together when some swine of either sex appears upon the scene, and good-bye happiness! I was sure of myself. Had I any reason to distrust Marina? Not the slightest. But I was so determined that our happiness should last a long time, that it should go on for all our lives . . . the mere thought that it might be smashed was enough to drive me mad with grief. And I knew how it could be broken. This was why I said that to her, when we were about to start on our honeymoon . . .”

Anton seemed lost in his thoughts, as though he had forgotten his surroundings and Valerii too. Ever since he had begun to talk, for that matter, he had appeared to be telling his life story less to Valerii than to himself. Above all to himself. All the same his tale was of real interest to Valerii, who was listening with the closest attention. This girl, the schoolteacher, what was she called? Oh, yes: Marina. She must have been of prime importance in his life. Why else should he seem so upset, why should he hesitate after each sentence? And

that business—if you're unfaithful to me, I'll kill you—that's not the sort of thing a man says on his wedding day . . .

Anton glanced sharply at Valerii, and as if reassured by the other man's evident interest in what he had to say, began again.

"One day I ran into her, quite accidentally, in the fields. She was taking a walk with my brother and the tall wheat hid them almost completely. There was no trace of surprise on their faces. We walked on, the three of us, through the tall wheat. In silence at first; then we exchanged a few unimportant remarks. Trivialities. On my part, in order to conceal as best as I could my worries, for I must admit that I was worried. As for them . . . I don't know . . . I noticed an ear of wheat on Marina's dress. It had caught onto her dress, and I could see nothing save this single ear. This tiny object tormented me, and I was unable to dismiss it from my thoughts. It could have caught on Marina's dress as she brushed through the tall, standing wheat. This was quite possible. But my peace of mind, my internal harmony on which I set so great a price, were shaken for the first time since our marriage."

Anton stopped. Valerii glanced at him and thought: How much pain all this must be causing him, his memories and the retelling of them. Then Anton began immediately to talk, as though he had divined what was passing through Valerii's mind and wished to offer him proof of his courage.

"There was basically nothing astonishing if the little girl who was my wife should have happened to fall in

love with the glorious president of the *Red Star* Kolkhoze, my brother Vassilii. He was several years older than myself, with authority and a commanding manner, just the type to appeal to girls looking either for a real emotion or for simple entertainment. Such conquests must have come easily to him, with his jovial and attractive manner which contrasted so favorably with my silent and reserved nature. But was he really interested in adventures of this sort? I still wonder. He was deeply and sincerely in love with his wife, Galia, who was always so gay, and he also loved his baby son, Nikisha. For the rest he was totally preoccupied with his work. I knew how ambitious he was, and he was determined that the Kolkhozes of our village should be a shining light, a credit to the whole region. This took all his energy and all his time.

"All the same I was convinced that there was something between Marina, my wife, and Vassilii, my brother. I had no actual proof, apart from this chance meeting in the wheatfield. I never again surprised them together. But perhaps this was because they had a hiding place where they met in secret? If she were being unfaithful to me, I thought, then I must kill her as I had threatened to do on our wedding day. True enough, I'd smiled at the time. She might even have imagined I was joking. Perhaps she was one of those emancipated women who have got rid of the bourgeois prejudice whereby a woman is a mere 'thing' which belongs to her husband, a sort of private property in the man's possession. That was doubtless why she had laughed so heartily when I had threatened to kill her.

She hadn't taken me seriously. But I had been entirely serious. No, I hadn't been joking. I might be old-fashioned, the victim of prejudices already out of date in our society. It made no difference: as things were, I had to kill her. Or ignore the fact that she was deceiving me with my own brother. I took every precaution to make her believe that I was completely ignorant of what I knew, or rather of what I believed I knew. A man has to be very much in love in order to be capable of such behavior. It is the supreme sacrifice that a man can make for the sake of his love. To do it, he needs not only an immense love but an extraordinary strength of will. I had the will power and I loved my Marina like a madman. I couldn't kill her. I loved her . . ."

Anton said this as though he were looking for an excuse.

"All the same I knew that my pretense of ignorance could only encourage Marina and Vassilii. So I found myself once again face to face with the same dilemma. Should I kill her? Should I kill them both? Should I not kill at all? The worst part of it was that I never knew for sure whether there was anything between them or not. It was an utterly private drama, for myself alone. I hid it away in the very deepest recesses of my soul. Marina was happy, and in her eyes so was I since I seemed to suspect nothing, to know nothing. But was there in fact anything to know? I never discovered for sure. Never!"

He shouted these last words, and Valerii felt vaguely that he had to force himself in order thus to uncover his grief. But this was only a supposition.

"I was loved, I loved, and therefore I could have been happy," Anton went on, more calmly now. "As for my brother, he was a decent man and he must have given in to Marina's advances, if my fears were indeed based on fact. Marina was not one of those girls they describe as 'lacking down below.' On the contrary, hers was an extremely passionate nature. On the frigid side to begin with, but capable of warming up very quickly. Perhaps they had been friends, had been linked by friendship, before ever I had met her. I never inquired about this, neither of her nor of my brother. Because I was afraid of making them suspicious.

"So I went on with my game, this double game which I played for Marina, so that I needn't kill her, so that I might keep her love . . . I was convinced that she loved me. All the same I sometimes wearied of this game of mine and was prepared to kill her, quite simply, in order to be rid of her, to eliminate her from my life, to snuff her out . . . To kill or not to kill? Why are we poor mortals reduced to such a choice? I do not know how long this might have gone on, nor what the end of my story would have been. I cannot tell whether I would not have killed her at last—if war hadn't broken out . . ."

Anton stopped for breath, and downed a glass with Valerii. Then he began again, in the same confessional tone, but calmer now, much calmer.

"I wasn't a Communist, I didn't give a tinker's curse for Stalin, but when my country was attacked by the *inosem'tzi*,* when they were trampling our Russian soil

* *Foreigners*

under foot, this was for me a terrible blow. I was a sub-lieutenant in the reserve, as are all men who have completed their advanced education, and as soon as I received my papers I set off to join my unit on active service. Death meant nothing to me. I say this without boasting, because I know men who have stopped at nothing in order to avoid doing their military service. Not me. Perhaps because I was unconsciously hoping for death as the solution to my personal problem. Be that as it may, I had no wish to die for Stalin. Why should I die for Stalin? This seemed to me quite senseless. Even at the time of the Revolution and the Civil War, it wasn't for Lenin that our fathers died but for the power of the Soviets. And now they were asking us to die for Stalin . . . In my case, as in the case of so many others, it was of my fatherland that I thought as I set off, ready to die if need be . . . But I hadn't the luck to die for my country, or even just to die . . ."

It was as though he were making an excuse . . .

"The town where I was supposed to join my regiment which was on its way to the front had already been overrun by the Germans, its railway station smashed by their bombs. I had no choice but to turn back. Imagine my surprise when, on regaining my own village, I saw German motorcyclists driving down our road. Our district had already been invaded by their leading troops . . . on the fourth day of the war. You remember the shattering momentum of their advance when the fighting first began?"

"Yes, I remember!" said Valerii. "Leningrad bombed on the very first day . . . And the confusion!"

"The village Communists, led by my brother, had fled to the nearby forests where the first recruits for what were later to be the partisans had already begun to collect. The Communists, the militiamen and the members of the N.K.V.D. had every reason to fear the Germans. But me, I was no Communist, and the soil needed me. I couldn't desert it. I was an agronomist, and therefore indispensable with the harvest approaching. So I went back to my village. The crops were fine that year, both the barley and the wheat, the stalks tall, the ears full, the grain hard and firm. I was filled with joy as I walked across the vast fields of our Kolkhoze that stretched away to the horizon. I was proud and encouraged by the outcome of all my work. I already envisaged dozens of reapers scything down this good wheat which would fill our granaries to the roof. It was with such joy in my heart that I reëntered my house. And it was then that I found myself face to face with the drama that had been lying in wait for me, with my personal, private drama. Marina was no longer there. A little later I learned that she had gone off with Vassilii and the partisans, and was somewhere in the wild country that abounds in our district, where there are so many forests. Now there was no longer any room for doubt. I might kill her! But how . . . ? I did not have to wait long for an answer. Next day the Germans visited me; since I was the only able-bodied man left in our village, and an agronomist to boot, they appointed me *starosta*.* With furious energy I set about the work entrusted to me by my country's enemies. I

* Village mayor

wanted to find forgetfulness in it. Everything and everybody disgusted me. I transformed myself, I became a changed man, cruel and pitiless. It may be that the war, with its panoply of horrors, contributed to this."

Anton glanced briefly at Valerii, as if to gauge his reaction. Valerii was listening to him without stirring, without speaking, his eyes very wide open. And Anton continued, after having first swallowed a glass and invited Valerii to do likewise.

"I did more than the Germans asked of me. I became disgusted with myself. At that time it was their policy to preserve the Kolkhozes; but I myself broke up *Red Star*. My parents cursed me, even though they had been forced into the Kolkhoze against their will at the time of the collectivization, when they had been compelled to give up their own land, their tools and their horses. Yes, they cursed me. But I had become quite unfeeling. Completely insensitive. It broke my heart to feel myself becoming pitiless, even toward my own people, even toward those who were nearest and dearest to me.

"On one occasion Galia, Vassilii's wife, came to see me. She was half out of her mind. She was expecting a baby, and in her arms she carried Nikisha, my little nephew, who was scarcely breathing. She told me that the Germans who lived in her house had given Nikisha soap to eat, pretending it was chocolate. In my capacity of *starosta* I went with her to her house. We entered, to be greeted by the laughter of the Germans. I don't know what came over Galia, but she suddenly began to shout '*Gad! Oubiitza!*'* at the fat greasy corporal

* *Murderer*

who had given little Nikisha the soap. Then she spat in his face. Straight in his face . . . The other Germans laughed all the harder. But not the corporal . . . Crimson with fury he drew his revolver and shot down poor Galia, who was expecting a baby . . . He aimed at her stomach . . . At the unborn baby . . . I did nothing. Maybe there was nothing I could have done . . . I sank lower and lower. Since I knew German I acted as interpreter when they were interrogating our soldiers and our officers whom they had taken prisoner. I did not take part in the torturings, but I watched. That is something I'll never forget . . . It was horrible. Perhaps because they were Russians, who spoke Russian and had names like mine . . . Yes, they were Russians."

Anton was conscious of beads of perspiration upon his brow and back. He noted the expression of horror on Valerii's face, but went on, like a horse that has taken the bit between its teeth.

"One day the Germans, being satisfied with my work and learning that I was a sub-lieutenant in the reserve, suggested to me that I take part in an antipartisan action. The partisans were everywhere by now, and were growing bolder and bolder. As you can guess, I agreed. Not with delight, certainly not. Rather with a sort of brutishness, a sense of debasement. I was ceasing to be a man, and coming more and more to resemble a wild beast. I also hoped to find Marina, to prove to her that I had not forgotten her, nor my promise, and to show her that it hadn't been a joke . . . But though

I took part in several operations against the partisans, in the course of which dozens of them were killed or taken prisoner, I never came across Marina or Vassilii, or even anybody from our village whom I had known. Perhaps they had been killed or had died long ago, or perhaps they had fled to other forests far away. I still don't know.

"When the German defeats began, I was faced with the alternative of going away with them or of waiting where I was . . . Waiting! What had I to wait for, except the death that I had thoroughly deserved and which had so far been spared me, though for what merits of mine I cannot say?

"I decided to stay. It was all the same to me. Death as such did not frighten me. There was no longer any room for me on this earth that I had defiled, into which I had spilled my brothers' blood, and which I had nevertheless loved so deeply . . ."

Anton's confession appeared to be drawing to a close. Valerii knew not what to do, nor what to say to this formidable man who had confided such a story to him. Should he console him, calm him, offer him reassurance, or blame, or curses . . . ? Within his head his ideas were slowly moving, and with difficulty, as though they were plodding across a heavy, gluey countryside. And Anton continued to fill his glass with the vodka that he lacked the strength to refuse. He felt himself invaded by drowsiness, by exhaustion, and—to his surprise—by disgust. By disgust, like Anton . . . What on earth could he say to him?

Anton spared him the embarrassment.

"Why does a man have to go on living, even when he has no wish to do so?"

But these words of Anton's meant nothing to Valerii, who was stupefied by the vodka. He found at last the phrase he had been looking for, a phrase that he could utter.

"I don't go in for politics . . ." he muttered thickly.

"No more do I. Nobody in our country goes in for politics. That's all taken care of for us . . ." Anton replied, with deliberate irony.

"Me, I'm a painter, an artist. Understand? An *artist!*" Valerii was trying hard to make his thickened speech comprehensible.

"Yes, you're an artist. Maybe a great artist, whom nobody knows about."

Anton smiled as he looked at Valerii, who was forcing himself to keep his eyes wide open. Their pupils were expanding and contracting so weirdly that Anton almost burst out laughing.

He poured beer into the glass that was still half filled with vodka, and held the mixture out to Valerii. This will finish him off, he thought.

At the sight of the glass, Valerii woke up. He even attempted to rise. And at last, after considerable difficulty, he managed to do so. He did this because a curious idea had come to him: he would drink "to friendship" with this strange man seated opposite him and who was called, if he remembered correctly, Anton. The two men linked arms, and thus did they down the final glass. Afterward they embraced. Now they were

friends. They need no longer be formal, and might address one another in the second person singular.

But there was nothing more that Valerii could say, either in the singular or in the plural. The mixture of beer and vodka had effectively finished him off. As for Anton, he had been too absorbed in what he was saying, and had therefore not drunk very much. If he was drunk, it was with the story of his own life, recounted primarily for his own benefit. His soul was "emptied" and therefore relieved. He could go on, leaving his friend Valerii, whom he would never see again, asleep with his head upon the table.

There could be no doubt about it, he was not cut out for friendship.

5 THE ROAD TO EXILE

As Anton moved westward his journey showed him a picture of ever greater devastation. Both German and Russian planes had pitted the earth with bomb craters. The towns, the villages and, above all, the railway stations were for the most part smashed, pulverized, in cinders. As he neared Kursk he crossed an area where four thousand tanks—four thousand, not counting the guns and the planes!—had met head on in a battle without precedent. At least one in three of these tanks now rotted on a soil that reeked of powder and of rust. Each dead tank represented a single unit of suffering, of personal agony. Some had been gutted or flattened, others burned out, others again lay upside down, having been blown over by exploding mines;

there were even tanks that appeared to be intact, save for the fact that their tracks were broken. But all of them gripped the earth with their broken limbs, as if this had been their final living spasm before they became forever motionless. Airplanes bearing a red star or a swastika were also scattered upon the earth among the tanks. Once they spat death, now they were dead themselves. There had not yet been time to clear the earth of these steel and aluminum corpses. And all these ruins, rusting above ground, were an insult to the earth itself. As for the men who had died, they at least had been interred beneath a thin layer of that same earth, as though to hide their shame for such mutual massacre. For what purpose . . . ?

Strange, Anton remarked to himself, such countless shell holes and scarcely a trench to be seen . . . As if the men in their haste for death had hurled themselves into its arms, had not even taken the time to dig the foxholes that would have protected and perhaps saved their lives.

Now they might rot in peace beneath the soil that they had burned with their shells, crushed beneath their tank tracks, smashed with the bombs that their planes had dropped, and finally watered with their blood.

He, Anton Sviriagin, might easily have been one of those men . . . the dead, the heroes. How many had passed this way, harassed, hurried, weighed down by weariness or by their thoughts, obsessed by fear or indifferent to everything, even to their own destiny? Destiny had decided that Anton should become a traitor, fit for nothing save a shameful gallows. Today

he envied not only the survivors of those terrible battles but also those whom death had failed to spare, those who had been torn apart by the shells, pulverized by mines, machine-gunned or pierced by bayonets in pitiless hand-to-hand fighting, and who now rotted beneath so thin a covering of earth. He would even have preferred—and this he made no attempt to understand—the fate of the dead to the glory of the living. Perhaps because death means peace, quiet, the end of all torment and, at the same time, the expiation of all guilt.

It was with an ever growing feeling of almost peaceful contemplation that Anton made his way across the immense battlefield where here and there a flower, a tuft of foolish grass, a pair of poppies, stirred in the wind beneath the rusty steel belly of a tank. In order that those who had not died might learn to hope again, life was about to be reborn from this soil that men-at-arms had burned, blackened and raped. A single tree still stood among this clutter of iron. It too had died of its wounds, and no longer responded to the summons of spring. This tree, solitary and naked when it should have been clothed in fresh green, had an unreal quality of fantasy. Later Anton came upon an entire forest that had been set ablaze by bombs. It was a countryside of hideous stumps, tens of thousands of them. How long must it be before a new forest would here give shade to man, shelter to animals and be a nesting place for birds? And Anton now realized that on this already warm day of early spring there was not one bird's song to be heard. Why should they come here? What was there for them? The fields were bare,

the woods were burned, the villages smashed. Where could they perch? What could they eat? For whom might they sing?

And the black soil, that good, black Russian soil now tortured and screaming in its agony, was for Anton Sviriagin, too, a cause to suffer. Black soil . . . which would now be red had all the spilt blood remained upon it. How long was it since Anton had last bothered about this earth that he loved so deeply? He felt a longing for it, a nostalgia for good and useful work. But the right to kill had replaced the right to work.

Sad without truly knowing why, Anton made his way ever westward, far from his village, from his fields, from his home, from the town where he had studied. He felt an immense shame, mingled with a deep disgust and an infinite weariness. The shame of having left his land gripped him tightly by the throat. That is why he would have preferred death, yes death itself, to this shameful flight against the crowds of refugees returning to their homes. Yes, death. He had no fear of it whatsoever. But an ignoble and dramatic end on the gallows seemed to him horrible indeed.

And how about living . . . ? A fine adventure, life. No, there was nothing amusing about that.

Deserted villages, crucified upon bomb patterns, lined the roadside. He stopped at a little river. This river, scarcely more than a stream, trickled between burned-out, ruined villages. It eddied about the columns of a broken bridge, destroyed who knows by what. A German plane, pinned forever to the earth, dipped its single wing in the river's limpid water. Gay and gurgling, it

seemed happy to be the only living thing in the middle of this dead countryside; it had preserved not only its life but also its cheerfulness. If only that broken-backed bridge did not pierce its waters like a splinter . . .

By clambering over what remained of the bridge, Anton crossed the joyful river. Here, on this soil mutilated by war but which he yet loved so much, there was nothing for him but to die. What purpose was there in going further, ever further from this mutilated land which was yet his land, Anton Sviriagin's, the land of his birth? Would he find elsewhere the strength to live, to work, to exist?

He was tempted to turn about. What use was it all? Why not go home, even if it were merely to die? If his could but be a dignified death. That he deserved to die, he never doubted. He must expiate his crimes, and even all those crimes he had not committed but which would surely be imputed to him. He was ready to die. If only he could do so as a man, not as a traitor. But that would not be granted him. On his own earth he could only die a traitor's death. By hanging. Who would understand him, in this general degradation born of war?

He felt profoundly attached to his native land. What else could he be? It was quite natural, for it was Russia, his Russia. She deserved his love. And as for him, he loved her desperately, as "a man might love his bride, or his sweet and treasured mother." He had even tried to serve her, he thought, in his fashion. General Vlasov* had also served her . . . But they would surely

* A Soviet general who fought against Stalin

hang that general even as they would hang him, Anton Sviriagin. And he walked on, down the long road to exile, far from his village, far from the town where he had studied, from the forest where he had hunted partisans before he had himself become the hunted one. What hurt him most was the feeling that he was leaving his own country. His was not at all the attitude of the emigrant, setting off for foreign shores to make his fortune. He had no hope; as for making a fortune, the thought never crossed his mind. He was a Russian going abroad as a man goes to his death. As a beast is driven (or drives itself) toward the slaughterhouse. Yet this was the only way that he could save his life. Life . . . Why do we feel this compulsion to go on living? What a troublesome habit! No, life for him was not a necessity, but only a habit. A bad habit.

And Anton Sviriagin walked on along the road to exile, cursing the war that had overturned all his life, his plans, his future. The people all about him, who had so closely escaped death, must also be cursing the war; it had doubtless overturned their lives, too, and their plans for the future. But they at least were heading toward their own fields, their own homes, their dear ones whom they hoped to find again and fold into their arms, toward the lives that they planned to take up once again, with all the worries and the daily tasks that they had almost forgotten. For the tattered figures whom he met upon the road this road meant hope and life, while for him it was only the road to exile and despair. Both their destiny and their destination were the opposite of his, for they were going the other way.

This was not without danger for Anton. As he walked westward, he had to try and persuade those others that he, like they, was a refugee from death—oh yes, death had been close behind him—that he, like they, was returning to his own village, to his own home, maybe even to his family . . .

He must at all costs avoid the suspicion that he was fleeing the country. This was a matter of life or death. And even worse than death. Were he recognized, it must mean the gallows, and this time there would be no escape. That was why he took the greatest possible care and was constantly on the alert lest anyone find out, lest anyone even suspect that he was Anton Sviragin, fleeing his country to avoid the gallows. He did not know that in all this mass of humanity which passed him on the road, with whom he rubbed shoulders in the railway stations and at the rest centers, there was not a single soul who had the slightest interest in him, since all were far too preoccupied with their own affairs, their own problems, their own anxieties. Perhaps in this human flood there floated others like himself, murderers, looters, traitors, half submerged, hoping like he to pass unobserved and to escape their just rewards.

So far all had gone well. Only yesterday at the rest center, when he had been trying to pass himself off as a forced laborer returning from Germany, he had thought to see doubtful looks, enough so at least as to arouse his suspicions. Perhaps it was only his imagination, but he had decided that he would prefer to spend the night in the open, far from the rest center, and he had therefore sacrificed his bowl of good, hot soup and

a more or less comfortable bed. It was the soup that he regretted most of all. What would happen to him next? It was an agonizing question. He was still in Russia, still mingling with the mass of people, people of all sorts and conditions, who crowded the roads. But what would he find when he came closer to the frontiers? The war might have forced them open a little, but even then . . . that would be the decisive moment. Anton was worried, and knew not what to do. Yet he had no choice.

No other choice than exile. So he dismissed his worries, his anguish, his fears, and surrendered totally into the hands of fate. Fatalism, that typical characteristic of Russians, freed him from his worries and his anguish. It was the same fatalism which makes the Russian so fine a soldier, prepared to endure anything, to face anything, even death itself. Is it not a saying of the Russians: "Two deaths a man cannot have, one he cannot avoid"? So why make a fuss? What's the point? What indeed?

It won't all turn out as you hope, that's fairly certain, but still it'll all end one way or the other. Everything will happen as it's supposed to, as it inevitably will, in that way and in no other. So why fuss? And it was only this fatalism, so natural to a Russian, that gave Anton back his peace of mind and even a certain serenity of spirit.

6 THE MEETING

Anton had already crossed the greater part of the Ukraine. He was nearing Poland. He was waiting for a train, at a little station miraculously undamaged in the middle of this atrociously lacerated countryside. He was waiting like all those others crowded close about him who hoped for a train as a beggar hopes for alms. But whereas they awaited a train that would carry them eastward, he, and apparently he alone, was hoping for one headed the other way, for one of those empty goods trains that passed through this little station from time to time and which came back, a few days later, filled with machinery from the dismantled German factories. He hoped to slip aboard one of those long lines of empty cars moving west. But he pretended

to be waiting, like all the others, for a train already crammed to the roof and going east.

He stepped out of the station and now something happened which was not merely unexpected but unimaginable. The cataclysm of war had so many surprises in store for its victims! Outside the station Anton met Marina. His wife Marina! At the very first sight of her he felt his destiny shiver and fall asunder. It was her, without a doubt. She was greatly altered, her face had aged, her whole being was tired, as though worn out, but he recognized her easily. His first reflex was to flee. All the more so since there was a man with her, a cripple, leaning on a heavy stick. Who could he be, this cripple? But was this of the slightest importance? Marina was there . . . Marina . . . The chaotic past that was the war years seemed to have sundered them forever. There was now no bond left to hold them together. What had he to hope for from such a meeting? He trusted that she had not recognized him in the crowd. For the rest, was he still recognizable as Anton Sviriagin?

But suddenly he heard her calling his name.

"Anton! Anton! Anton!"

Only her voice, it seemed, had not changed. He pretended not to have heard, and walked on. But now she had caught up with him, was walking close beside him, so close that he could feel her presence. When at last she stood in front of him, there was nothing for it but to take her in his arms; and as for her, she hesitated to embrace him. As though she were conscious of some guilt and awaited his reproaches. While it was for fear

lest she reproach him that Anton had wished to avoid her.

No, there was no reproach in Marina's eyes, as tender as they had always been (and Anton noticed that her eyes had changed as little as had her voice). His feeling was one of deliverance, so that he was enabled to surrender completely to his joy at seeing her, at having close to him the only being whom he had ever loved.

At this moment he knew that he could never leave her again, no matter what might happen. Marina alone was capable of drawing him back into life, of giving to that life both a meaning and a point.

Once his first emotions had subsided, Anton began to wonder why Marina appeared so embarrassed, as if looking for excuses. What had happened during the long years of their separation? It was nothing to do with the man who had been near her when he first had seen her. He was an obviously unsuccessful suitor who would vanish and leave no trace behind. No, it was not on his account, but then so many things might have happened since they had parted, on the second day of the war . . .

Yes, Marina had fled to the forests, to join the partisans. It was true. But it was not true that she had gone with Vassilii. She had done it because she had believed that she could be of use, as a nurse. At that time everyone was involved in the fighting. How could she keep out of it? Hadn't Anton himself been with the army? Didn't that prove her point?

Anton realized that she knew nothing of all that had happened in the village since she had gone to the

forest. How could she have known? Her partisan group had been weak and ill-organized, had soon been defeated and encircled by the Germans, and had been decimated. Some had been killed, others taken prisoner. Vassilii, severely wounded by a burst of machine-gun fire, had been captured; Marina too. Before the Germans took him away, Vassilii said that they had been betrayed by someone who knew their hiding place. Then they had taken him away and Marina had never seen him again. He had doubtless died of his wounds. As for her, they had sent Marina to Germany.

From this point in her story Marina stopped more and more often, to shed violent, bitter tears.

Afterward she had served . . . No, not the ordinary soldiers . . . Only officers . . . That was understandable. She was a schoolteacher, educated, maybe they found her beautiful . . . It disgusted her, naturally. But so many girls were jealous of her! How many, there was no telling. The girls in the concentration camps, or dying a slow death in the armament factories, or being made to do work beyond their strength on the farms, or even the girls who had to do it with the common soldiers . . . As for her . . . It was foul, certainly . . . But in the end we become resigned to anything. "I never imagined I would come out alive from the soft hell that was my life . . . Who could have guessed that such a thing would ever happen to me?" Marina cried, in a last and desperate attempt to excuse herself, not to Anton her husband but above all to herself.

Anton felt neither as shocked nor as upset as he would have expected. It was painful for him, listening

to her story, but less so than he would have thought. He listened to her as though he were under an anesthetic. Perhaps because he might so well have been listening to her reproaches, instead of her expectations of blame from him. And how much she had to blame him for!

"Since each officer made a point of giving me a little present, I haven't come back empty-handed," Marina went on, showing him the contents of her handbag, the little personal hoard that she had brought back with her from Germany. It was a considerable fortune, but Anton scarcely so much as glanced at it. At the sight of all those jewels stuffed pellmell into his wife's bag, he felt a shame of which she was apparently no longer capable.

When at last she ended her appalling story she was wrung out, finished, and appeared less a human being than an animal in human shape. She stared Anton straight in the eyes . . . Anton, that man whom only she loved and whom she had perhaps never betrayed, and she asked him if he still wanted her. Her eyes implored him to accept her as she was, while her tormented face expressed her anguish lest he should refuse. Would he perhaps kill her now, as he had promised on their wedding day?

Anton took his wife's head between his hands and kissed her. Marina was not crying. She had no more tears to shed, nor words to speak. To think that I once wanted to kill you on account of Vassilii, and now I'm ready to forget a whole army of German officers, Anton said to himself.

But if the German officers scarcely bothered him at

all, the thought of Vassilii reopened wounds that had long been closed.

What of it? he thought at last. Even if it were true . . . if she loved him . . . Since she loved him. As for himself, Anton Sviriagin, whom everyone hated, he too was loved, as he had perhaps always been. And that was enough to make him forget everything, to forgive it all.

Since she loved him . . . Since she loved him . . .

What did it matter, when today it was he whom she loved. Him and him alone. His Marina. He was almost happy.

It was easy for him, now, to tell the most likely-sounding tale about himself. Yes, he too had been taken prisoner on the Southwest Front, at the beginning of the war, and spent most of the years between in a camp, or later as a farm laborer in Bavaria. And now he was on his way home, liberated. Yes, now he was on his way home: and this was the only true statement in the story that he had made up for Marina. (Could he tell her the truth? For him that would have been worse, would have been more shameful, than the gallows themselves. So . . .)

Thus did his westward journey into exile end, in this meeting with his wife. Now he could only turn about and return to his own country, from which he had proved unable to break away; if death by the hangman's rope awaited him there, so much the worse. There was more at stake now: to desert Marina . . . But this never even occurred to him. For this rediscovered love, which made him into a human being once

again, he was ready to risk the gallows, if such should be his fate. At least before dying he would have learned to know anew what is perhaps the most wonderful thing on earth: a woman's love.

7 PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

Marina's sole wish was to forget everything about the war years; as for Anton, a break with the past was for him a matter of life or death.

It was while they were making their way back through the Ukraine, leaving the Polish frontier behind them, that Anton Sviriagin outlined to his wife a plan which, in the near future, could insure their salvation once and for all.

"For so long men have been Communists, monarchists, Catholics, Hindus, capitalists, Russians, Americans, republicans, Negroes, Chinese, heaven knows what else. Isn't it high time that they simply became men again?" He spoke with a sort of solemnity. Since Marina's expression showed something like astonishment, he added

with a smile: "That may not sound very Marxist . . . But you know that Marx was never my strong point. I only just managed to pass my exams in *istmat* and *diamat** . . . and I only took them because they were compulsory for becoming an agronomist . . ."

He went on.

"The world is wide. Russia herself is a very, very big country. One-sixth of the globe is a lot of land . . . So to find a spot where a man can be simply a man . . ."

He spoke with a determination that to her was irresistible.

"A spot where there's nobody . . . Because wherever men settle they bring with them their ideas, their enmities, their loves, their hates, their struggles . . . No, nothing but nature . . . nature, no matter how wild and raw."

"Men defile nature . . ." He suddenly recalled Valerii's words. What has happened to Valerii, since I left him asleep on the table, stupefied by alcohol and even more so by my tale? When he awoke he must surely have imagined that he had dreamed my whole story—a true story all the same, the story of my life . . .

Anton smiled, and Marina wondered why he should suddenly have done so. Was it his idea that men defile nature which had amused him? It was the truth, all the same.

"So why don't we go far away, very, very far? To land that man has never trampled underfoot? To virgin soil that we must clear with our own hands?"

Nothing now, he explained to Marina, bound them

* *Historical materialism and dialectical materialism*

to the village where once they had lived and worked. The Germans had destroyed the greater part of it during their retreat. Marina's parents had died early in the war, at the time of the bitter battles for Smolensk. Why not try their luck somewhere else and start an altogether new life?

"Without other men. Without neighbors. Just the two of us, alone!"

"You always were a sort of a bear," Marina replied, "but the war has made you into a real one, fleeing from mankind, not even wanting to see other people." Anton's plans did not have any enormous appeal for her, but neither did she find them displeasing. She too was disgusted with mankind: after the torments through which she had lived, all she desired now was calm, peace, the companionship of the man she loved.

"Exactly. So why not go to the part of the world where the real bears live? They're often far less nasty than men." Anton's tone seemed to be half sweet, half bitter. But he spoke with complete seriousness, for he felt drawn precisely to the vast spaces of the far north, still only partially and inadequately explored. There he would find a real and safe hiding place.

"It won't be an easy life. Up there men are few and far between, and nature is harsh and unsmiling," he went on. He was insisting, because he wished to be quite sure of Marina's reactions.

"There'll be very few people? All the better. Nobody will envy us our happiness," Marina replied with joy.

She believed in it so deeply, this future happiness of theirs, that Anton dared not say anything more that

might give a truer insight into the real facts. How could he disillusion her concerning what might, after all, be pure fantasy?

Nevertheless he added: "You won't be frightened, all alone with me in a wild countryside?"

"I'd never be frightened with you. I won't be worried by solitude any more than I will be by the wildness of nature. We'll have to work without pause, won't we? There'll be no time for boredom."

"It will be a hard life for you, little one, particularly to begin with. You must be ready to face the worst . . ."

"I'm ready to face anything, with you. Destiny decided to link my fate to yours. I don't know if we should perhaps accuse destiny of acting thoughtlessly, but since a new life begins for us today I confidently expect that whatever it'll bring me will be pleasant or unexpected."

In this extremely hazardous undertaking Anton had no doubt that an iron strength of will would be essential to him. Marina's high courage was to him a reinforcement for which he had not dared to hope.

"To begin with we'll have to live like the Swiss Family Robinson, but it'll all be easier once we've built ourselves a little house. Then there'll be the children, lots of them, because I want a big family . . . It's really a pity that we can't have a hundred . . . You see, a fine crop of babies . . ."

"As healthy and strong as their father," Marina added with a nod.

"As good and as beautiful as you . . ."

"Healthy and strong because they'll be free, like young animals . . ."

Anton was already envisaging his new life, surrounded by his noisy, numerous offspring . . .

"Yes, like young animals . . . They'll grow up in ignorance of the vices that flourish in cities, of lying, of hatred and of revenge, and without any trace of prejudice. They'll be neither good nor evil, as they grow without losing the freshness of youth, incapable of cowardice, of baseness, of vile deeds."

Thus did they continue to interrupt one another.

"Yes, they shall be heroes, *sans peur et sans reproche*, exactly like their father . . ."

There was a trace of irony in Marina's tone as she said this, but Anton did not return her smile.

"What do you mean?" he asked her.

"Don't you want them to be like you?"

"No, I don't. I'd rather . . ."

"I know how modest you are, but all the same . . . You see, there are too few men of your sort. I don't know much of the world, but I'm quite sure I'd have to look for a long, long time before I found another like you. Maybe you're unique, and that's why I love you so."

For a crazy moment Anton was tempted to burst out laughing. I can just imagine what the world would be like if it were entirely peopled by men like myself. But if Marina has formed so unexpected an image of me, it doesn't matter. In fact it's all to the good. It'll help her to put up with our future life together which, to begin with at least, is likely to be extremely uncomfortable.

Why disillusion, why discourage her? She seemed so firmly anchored to her certainty.

"Yes, they'll be free and healthy. They'll in no way resemble the rotten world. A new sprig of the human race will grow from new soil," Anton continued, carried away by his dreams.

Absorbed in this game of make-believe, nothing now seemed to him impossible. As for Marina, she appeared to have remained with her feet somewhat more firmly on the ground.

"How good it is to dream with you, my darling dreamer, even if it should all come to nothing in the end . . . Don't be cross with me," she added, and smiled ironically. It was as though she had to make an effort in order to convince herself that Anton was being serious. She was like a grown person who would take part in a child's game.

"With me words very quickly become deeds. It's always been that way and it always will be," Anton said gravely—but he too might almost have been joking.

All the same, in Marina's eyes those last words were yet a further reason to love and admire him.

"You mustn't think I doubt you, or your plans, my darling," she said, humbly.

As for Anton, absorbed in his bold dreams, life was once again revealed in a thousand enchanting hues. But for how long?

They were walking along a river bank, happily together, their arms about one another's waists as in the

old days, neither seeing nor wishing to see the people and objects that surrounded them.

Suddenly, as she pulled Anton's head down toward her own, Marina cried out: "Look! You've got white hairs already!"

Yes, white hairs at his age were unusual . . .

Without having really lived, it seemed to Anton as though he had survived his own death . . . And much else as well. More than his own death . . .

And now he would go on living, even though his would be a strange life.

PART TWO

ANTON SVIRIAGIN'S JOURNAL

1 . . . AND PASTURES NEW

Our preparations were almost completed. The great day when we should set off was near. We had to go by boat to the distant land where we had chosen to live.

At last the day we had looked forward to so keenly dawned, the day of liberation. Henceforth all would be changed.

We went aboard a little ship, broad and solidly built, which sails the Lapterykh and Barents seas for the four summer months and once every two years pushes as far north as Cape Chelyvskin, to unload a cargo of fuel and provisions for the men who keep the light there, the only inhabitants of that place far removed from all human habitation.

It was there that we were to land, together with the freight destined for the lighthouse keepers. The price we had paid the captain was not enough for him to take us any further.

As soon as we had cast off, the sea had turned to gray, the same gray as that of the sky, which seemed to lack the strength to differ from the ocean, so that where they met at the horizon the one melted into the other. This remained so throughout our journey.

At last, on the twenty-second day of a trip that seemed endless, land lay suddenly and unexpectedly before us, in the form of a granite barrier, sad and dead. The gloomy and unwelcome aspect of the coast fully confirmed my choice: this was certainly where I wished to be. "Men defile nature," the poor painter (who had nearly paid for my freedom with his life) had once remarked. Was it true?

Marina had appeared gay throughout the whole journey; her joy redoubled when the ship reached the wild and rocky shore on which we were to disembark.

Yet I wondered how it were possible to feel anything save sorrow and tedium in a land such as this, a land as naked as it must have been on the first day of the creation. Either Marina's soul was that of an explorer, or else she must be lacking in imagination, while her love for me served to hide the reality from her. I was inclined to the second explanation, which I found in any case fully satisfactory.

Patiently and cautiously—for the approaches to this coast are dangerous in the extreme—our ship picked her way between the submerged reefs and rocks that

here abound. It was not easy, and the crew were sweating blood and water. Between the underwater menaces the sea was the color of lead. To tie up in such conditions seemed to me a miracle, but one which our aged captain was fortunately able to perform. The tide was out, and the smallest miscalculation would have resulted in a mishap with incalculable consequences.

Finally, after an interminable series of maneuvers which seemed incomprehensible to me, our ship was inserted neatly and tightly between two rocks, so that it could move neither forward nor back.

A small boat was now launched into which we transferred our baggage. There was not much of this, but it was awkward nonetheless and the whole operation was both difficult and protracted. But it was done.

At last, after further complicated maneuverings, the ship that had brought us here was ready to set sail again on the long journey home. As if to wish us farewell, a long blast was blown on the ship's whistle. It set off, so slowly that it scarcely seemed to move, as though it were feeling its way between the rocks. And us? We were left alone on this forgotten shore where no man chose to live . . .

2 THE NEW LAND

I felt no inclination to spend any great time gazing about me; there was nothing on which the eye could fix. Instead I watched my poor Marina and noted the various expressions that crossed her face. She did not appear particularly delighted by what she saw, but no more did she seem disappointed or afraid. It was as though she were simultaneously preoccupied and alert. She said, over and over again: "Well, here we are!" Poor girl! She was certainly a most admirable woman.

The ship had vanished. We became suddenly aware of our utter solitude. The lighthouse that was supposed to be somewhere along this coast was out of sight. I had been told that it could be reached by a fairly lengthy journey overland or by sea, which necessitated

much turning and twisting between the rocks. I knew that it stood upon a hillock, difficult of access and even that only after a long climb.

All of a sudden the lighthouse keeper was there, in a boat that had arrived quite silently. He stepped ashore and loaded his provisions onto his back, using ropes and tackle for this purpose. Throughout all this operation he spoke not a single word; he had not even greeted us when first he stepped ashore. He had soon finished, and walked away, bowed beneath his burden. Even as he had not greeted us on arrival, so he spoke no single word as he left. A silent man, indeed. Probably half crazy. Or perhaps he was dumb, or even deaf and dumb? But then, if he had not opened his lips, no more had I, either by way of greeting or to say good-bye.

Once he had gone the solitude became total once again. We worked, and then began to look for our future home. But not at the foot of the lighthouse. Farther away, much, much farther. We attached the harness to our sleds, onto which we loaded our awkward baggage, and without further ado we hastened into the belt of the forest that we must cross. I intended to set up our home on the far side of the cape. We were soon deep in the forest, and I lost sight not only of the aged lighthouse keeper and his boat but also of the boulder-studded bay where our ship had cast anchor.

We made good speed, and after several hours we were once again face to face with the gray ocean. It was here that we stopped. We had crossed the whole

width of the cape. Here, where the forest almost reached down to the sea, we would build our hearth.

I shall not describe all the difficulties that we had to overcome at the beginning; even a mediocre imagination is enough to envisage them. We slept in a simple hiker's tent, and thus we spent one whole month in this countryside that knows no summer. All this time I worked like a maniac and after overcoming a thousand obstacles I succeeded at last in building a more suitable home. It was essential that this be habitable before the cruel onset of winter. Despite the courage and endurance shown by Marina, I had no right to expect her to run the risks inherent in spending the winter under canvas.

To tell the truth, my back-breaking labors brought me a certain joy. This was the life I had chosen, quite deliberately. My blood was teeming once again through my veins, giving renewed strength to my muscles. At last I felt truly creative, and my happiness derived from this. The walls of our home rose rapidly, trees and rocks gave way to future fields, and I watched my homestead growing from day to day. Marina, my faithful companion, showed no trace of discouragement; on the contrary she appeared to derive pleasure from the work, even though this was beyond her strength. If she were able to endure such a strain, it could only be explained as a case of endosmosis: my enthusiasm supported her; if I was happy, she was delighted; if I was courageous, she was stoical, and so on. This proves that certain humans are capable of being filled with the happiness of others.

Finally, I had a definite and defined aim. I was, quite literally, building my family home, the tribal center, and I was marking out the fields that would give us our daily bread. I was living a real life, a life that made no demands which were neither good nor necessary.

So what purpose was there in lengthy speculations, in arguments, in weakening doubts, in hopeless investigations and attempts to solve the eternal problems of life, of death, of creation and of other such luxuries? There were plenty of men back there, where we had come from, to worry about such matters! As for us, we had something better to do in this simple countryside where such subtleties would have seemed singularly out of place. We needed a house to live in, a shelter from the cold and the raging blizzard, and we needed good, solid food: those were my proper worries. We spent whole days without noticing the passage of time, only breaking off from work in order to eat a quick meal. When evening came we were overwhelmed with tiredness, and fell asleep at once in our comfortless tent where nowadays we were becoming unpleasantly aware of the cold. But we would not have to wait much longer for our house. Soon we might leave our canvas shelter, though we had grown thoroughly accustomed to it—a further proof that man can get used to anything.

As soon as spring came I should have to start the sowing, and this was an undertaking for which success was by no means guaranteed. I had taken care to bring with me a fair variety of seed, but I could not know what this soil's yield would be. Fortunately the forests

abounded with game, while the sea was filled with fish, so that no matter what happened we could be sure of not starving to death. Everything would turn out for the best—I had not given up my dream—next year, when we would no longer be two but three or maybe four. Who knows, perhaps we would have quintuplets? It is easy to see the degree of mental debility to which I had been reduced by excessive optimism! Though I never stopped working, my mind was forever wandering far away. It seemed to me that the pinnacle of happiness lay in the possession of a large family. I almost wished that Marina could breed like a rabbit, producing litter after litter of children with whom to found a new race that would people this empty land. For example I calculated that were it only possible for us to have fifty children in ten years, this place that was now a desert would soon become a garden, humming with life, filled with strong, well-built people, insensitive to the cold and hard as steel . . . When I dreamed such dreams I smiled stupidly. Marina would notice my smile and be worried: was I perhaps laughing at her and her heavy, swelling belly? I then had to promise her it was not so, and find causes to justify my happiness, for I could not tell her about my dreams, which would only have made me appear ridiculous in her eyes. So I put my arms about her, kissed her face that was salty with the sea spray, and this was enough answer to all her questions.

From time to time we would stop working briefly, in order to plan for the future. To begin with we would have a son. Or a daughter—this, as may be imagined,

was a source of very intense speculation and discussion. I should have preferred a daughter, who could help Marina later on in her future childbeds. On the other hand I should have been proud to be the father of a son. After mulling over this problem for a long time and pursuing very long trains of thought, we usually agreed that a daughter would be best, though secretly I should really have preferred a son . . . But I hid this preference from Marina, to spare her any disappointment since her only desire was the fulfillment of my wishes. She was extremely sensible and fully aware of the important part she had to play in the creation of what I was already calling "the city of the future."

"If we have a girl this time, then the next one will be a boy." Such was the customary ending to our discussions on the subject, while each of us secretly hoped for a twin birth, in order that the other might also be happy. But to tell the truth I was prepared to love all the children whom Marina might give me, whether they be boys or girls, beautiful or ugly.

3 THE SON

Five weeks after our arrival on this desert shore we moved into our new home. There was still a great deal to be done in order to make it comfortable, but the worst was over. There was furniture to be made, and kennels for the dogs, and much else as well, all of which was more or less urgent. Nevertheless what really counted was already accomplished: we had a solid roof over our heads, our own roof beneath which we could safely await the terrible arctic winter . . . And here we could also await, though without fear, the arrival of the new member of our family.

As we had guessed would happen, Marina felt her first pains at the same time as the first frosts. Three days later she gave birth to a son. How good she was!

In this, too, she had fulfilled my most secret wishes. My joy was beyond measure, and Marina shared in it, despite the fatigue she felt when first she got up, for her childbed had not been a comfortable one, as can easily be imagined. A son! He who has never had one cannot hope to understand the state that I was in: I possessed a tiny being who owed everything to me . . . I felt that I had become eternal, that I had taken the first step into future centuries. But this was only the beginning of a transformation by which my vast dream should become reality: it would have required an army, a crowd of children to satisfy my desires. In my folly I saw no limit to my progeny. Uterine incontinence seemed to me the greatest good; I feared no complications: I really thought that the breeding of children was neither more nor less difficult than the growing of potatoes.

Carried away by such delirious thoughts, I was completely unaware of the morbid nature of my new passion. I wished for a multitude of girls and boys. I saw myself as God the Father on the sixth day of the creation.

And I had been the only witness of my son's birth! I was both father and midwife. I really felt that I had myself created this sticky, crying baby, the cause of so much pain and so much joy (and the joy was easier to understand than the pain). Unfortunately I proved less competent as midwife than as father; it is easier to inseminate a baby than to draw it forth into the world. Marina, the victim of my clumsiness, did not believe that she had the right to complain. She even did her

best to feign gaiety, though she could not manage a smile. It could hardly be described as a painless birth. Study as I might the handbook we had brought with us, the transition from theory to practice proved difficult indeed. Nevertheless it all took place with relative ease, and being reassured by this first childbirth I had no longer any fears about my ability to preside over future ones. My only worry was that the child seemed to be permanently asleep beside his mother. Marina laughed at me gently, and explained that that was completely natural: all new-born babies go on sleeping, because they haven't noticed the transition from life in darkness into light.

I was often beside Marina's bed, sponging her forehead which was a little damp, and she gave us both, the baby and me, the same glance of proud affection. I felt no temptation to search for my own likeness in the scarcely defined features of the infant, though most fathers look for this proof of paternity. I had no need for proof; my paternity was beyond any possibility of doubt. I knew for sure that this was my child, my son.

4 EARLY JOYS

We awaited anxiously the results of our first spring labors. A feeble sun was gradually stripping the coverlet of snow to reveal a black and sticky soil which no man had hitherto either violated or rendered fecund. It was now six months since I had sown my seed in this earth, yet there was not the smallest trace of verdure to be seen.

I walked more and more often in my fields, searching for the tiniest green shoot. I examined the harsh dark soil as though I would cross-question it in the hope of an answer to a question which now obsessed me: could we or could we not live here normally, as did the people on the mainland? Would we have bread? And I awaited patiently the answer upon which so

much must depend. Would my projects be realized, or must we abandon everything and return to a world that was to me so utterly abhorrent? Would this soil accept or reject us? That was the whole question. But if the soil were to accept us, then it must first feed us.

The answer was not long in coming. As soon as the sun had warmed the earth a little, and the spring rains had watered it, we saw the first, delicate green shoots which seemed to thrust upward in search of the spring's caress. Needless to say, this was not the end of our worries; we had to fight hard in order to preserve their fragile lives. We did not know if our weak resources of strength would be adequate in the struggles yet to come. But the essential proof was there: we knew now that this soil on which we had chosen to live was not barren. Half of my anxiety vanished once this fact was established; our destiny was henceforth settled; we could indulge in hope. Had not this virgin soil decided to reward us for having tended it and made it fertile—at a cost in courage that approached the dimensions of heroism?

How could we fail to rejoice when we saw its promises for the future and, all about us, the achievements of our hands? At last we possessed the unparalleled joy of the free man, whose work derives from the sole just cause, namely the preservation of his own life.

As it happened we were rewarded and handsomely so: all our hopes were realized, all our undertakings crowned with success . . .

By midsummer those little fields which had cost us so much work, which we had nourished with seed and

enriched with fertilizers, were covered with a harvest that was a joy to the eye. This abundance of crops bore with it the hope for generations yet unborn, for a race of men who would first see the light of day upon the soil that humanity had hitherto rejected.

At this moment I loved the soil as I had never done before. I saluted it. I wrote poems to it. I should have liked to embrace it, to thank it for having thus fulfilled my hopes. At the same time, I was proud of myself, for it was I who had fertilized it, had made it fecund.

This land belonged to no man. But these fields, turned by my hands and with the sweat of my brow, belonged indubitably to me. I understood the repugnance of the peasants at being integrated into the anonymous work on the Kolkhozes. For I now felt exactly the joy and pride that a peasant knows when he works land that belongs *to* him, and flourishes *for* him.

However I could not count on my loyal companion to help get in the harvest; she was expecting another of those little guests who come from nowhere and are so eagerly desired . . . But I was quite happy to work like a galley slave; the more my back ached, the greater my happiness. I harvested the fields and I helped Marina with her work about the house.

It was not the twins for which I had inexplicably hoped, but another son, an addition not to be scorned. His birth filled me with delight, a delight that I had some difficulty in explaining to Marina. I was sincerely happy at the prospect of soon having two sturdy helpers at my side. There would be plenty of time for daughters later on. Marina did not seem to doubt my

feelings; she showed only unmixed happiness. All the same, deep down within myself there was a residue of something like bitterness . . . Why? I could not explain it. Was it the past that thus returned to plague and persecute me? Or the natural counterpart of excessive weariness? Never before had I been closer to real happiness, and with some effort I managed to expel from my mind those morose and corrosive ideas that crept in from time to time. I no longer sought the answer to the multitude of questions which had tormented me for so long. I had given up any attempt to uncover the ins and outs of life, and this I had done without any internal debate but merely by means of the power inherent in my creative work. Work on the one hand, the worries of daily life on the other, had combined to make me give up all philosophical speculations concerning matters which have not ceased to exacerbate the universe, probably since the day of its creation.

I was happy, with a happiness that may have been somewhat narrow, but which was no less real for all that. I was reverting quite gently to a quiet and animal-like existence, as does a beast that has recovered to a point at which it can forget past hunger and cold. This return to an animal existence, latent in every man, was in my case due to my flight from the world of civilization with its suffocating conventions.

The simple life, no more asking of eternal, useless and unanswerable questions, no more wondering why nor how, no more harping on the vanity of this world . . . Why not, after all?

When all is said and done, what purpose is served

by constant self-questioning, self-torment, worry? Why should man be forever grappling with his conscience?

I was fully determined to flee the artificial aspects of life. All I wished to see within myself was the animal.

At last I felt reconciled with everything, with life as with death. Yes, even death no longer revolted me. I was ready to say, in the words of the great Sergei Essenin:

All in this world is mortal . . .

The beech trees gently shed their bronzen leaves.

Eternal blessing on the law that makes us

Flower and disappear . . .

Flower and disappear!

Why not?

5 BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

It was doubtless then that it began. Yes, then: with the utterly unexpected encounter in the forest.

Armed with my gun, and with my two dogs at my heels, I was forcing a way through the virgin forest, a difficult feat. Hunting had a great appeal for me; I liked the sporting aspect, though unfortunately I was lacking in skill, having never had occasion to go hunting in the past. But the forest that lay so close at hand could not fail to attract me, and since our first arrival here I had gone hunting in it with an intense keenness that brought me an indescribable pleasure. This wild, mysterious forest, filled with the sighing of the wind among the branches and other strange noises, brought

me closer than ever to nature, and revealed all sorts of emotions within myself of which I had hitherto been unaware.

I was walking through deep snow, listening to the silence or the voices of the trees. (It seemed to me on such occasions that the forest was confiding in me, in me, the only two-legged being hereabouts . . .) The skillful and well-fed dogs were running on ahead, and the weight of my gun in my hand or on my shoulder was pleasing to me. I derived a childish pleasure from hunting. I would come home gay and happy, filled with a delicious weariness. Needless to say hunting was for me a vital necessity as well; as good luck would have it, I never returned home empty-handed.

Marina would come out to meet me, always with the same expression on her face, a mixture of anxiety and of joy.

And this is what would have happened on that particular day, if it had not been for this meeting with . . . But I must recount the events in the order in which they occurred . . .

I was carrying the game I had shot, plowing as usual through the snow that so far as I know never melts entirely in the forest; the game I had shot made walking even more difficult than usual. Suddenly I heard a noise, and simultaneously the dogs began to bark. I raised my gun to my shoulder, expecting to find myself face to face with some wild beast. It seemed to me as though I were glimpsing its head and its backside alternately. My astonishment was unbounded when, from behind a tree trunk, there arose a man; what I had

mistaken for some animal's head was in fact his fur cap . . .

I lowered my gun. I was disappointed, not at having missed the chance for a fine shot but at having come across another human being in this place that I had believed utterly deserted. I should have preferred to meet any wild beast, no matter how savage, rather than a man. But what could I do? We drew closer, the one to the other, and I recognized the lighthouse keeper whose store of provisions had been brought to him on board our ship.

It was a brief encounter. He seemed as displeased as was I at meeting another man in this place where, like myself, he had always hitherto imagined that he was entirely alone. All the same I believed that he was aware of our reason for coming here and of our intention to remain. He made no effort whatsoever to conceal his annoyance, while I feigned complete indifference.

The outcome was that he snatched up the game he had shot and set off in the direction of the lighthouse, and so quickly that I had not even time to see his whole face. I was not affected by his unfriendly attitude, but I did preserve from this rapid encounter the memory of a morose, solitary and savage being. The ship which so rarely touched at our shore never brought him any letters, nor did he seem ever to send any.

After some time had passed, I met him again, and again it was in the forest.

This time we were going in the same direction, and we walked along together. A life of solitude at the ends of the earth seemed to have deprived him of the habit

of speech. All the same we exchanged a few words, enough to confirm my belief that he was in fact the keeper of the light.

When we parted I felt that I had no choice but to say: "Come and see us sometime . . . It would give us great pleasure." I should gladly have skipped this polite formula. But a new face, even that of a weird, old, silent man, might amuse Marina. In the desert one can't be too choosy about neighbors.

The old man did not reply to my invitation; after a pause he asked me instead: "You're alone here?"

"Alone with my wife."

"So you have a homestead?"

"Yes."

After another and even longer pause he inquired: "Are you staying here for long?"

"Forever," I replied, trying as I did so to read the effect of my words upon his face. But it was in vain. His expression remained frozen as if I had left his question unanswered. All the same he was not the sort of man to ask a question if he had no interest in the reply.

Our conversation petered out at this point, nor did I make any attempt to revive it, for I felt that to do so would not be at all to my companion's taste. Shortly after this we parted.

When I returned home I told Marina about this unexpected encounter, but she showed only scant interest in what I had to say. In that case, I thought to myself, she must find my society all that she needs. And so much the better.

But perhaps her lack of interest should have been accounted for by the fact that she was expecting another child, and she was entirely preoccupied awaiting its birth.

"If only it would come more quickly. Our life together will be more fun for both of us," she said when I had finished telling her about my adventures in the forest.

The old man did not visit us: wild men of his type are in no hurry to observe social civilities. But I was to meet him again, in the forest as before, and this time in circumstances that for me were of a somewhat dramatic nature.

It was not him that I met first, but a bear, just as I was beginning my hunt. An enormous bear. From various signs that I had observed I had long suspected that there were bears in the forest, but had never before seen any. And now I'd stumbled upon one, and in what circumstances! As soon as he saw me the huge beast, reckoning that he was the stronger of us two, had bravely set about attacking me. This, however, was unwise on his part. For his estimate of our relative strengths contained one serious omission: I had an excellent gun, which I immediately raised to my shoulder. But my surprise doubtless deflected my aim, or else the bear was exceptionally tough, for I only succeeded in wounding him slightly. To tell the truth my cartridges were not meant for game as big as this. In any event, his wound put him into a ferocious rage which augured me no good whatsoever.

I did not know what to do: should I reload my gun,

or should I attack the bear with my hunting knife? The second choice contained an element of risk that might prove fatal for me. I placed all my faith in my gun, which I hastened to reload.

But already the bear was almost upon me. His wound might have weakened him, but his rage against the intruder was terrible to behold. He roared, and his vast mouth might well have intimidated the bravest of men. While reloading my gun, which I could no longer hope to do within the time at my disposal, I saw the bear, now very close to me, rear up on his hind legs, ready to hurl himself forward in the final settlement with me. It was at this moment that a man leaped upon his back.

It was, as the reader will have guessed, the lighthouse keeper. In his hand there glittered an axe, which he brought down more than once upon the animal's head. This was enough to finish the beast off. Clumsily thrusting its feet upward, as though to ward off this unexpected enemy, the bear crashed to the ground. I fired another shot into it, and now it was no longer capable of harming anyone ever again.

"How is it that you were there? Without you I should have been lost," I said to the old man when I had regained my breath after this perilous fight.

"I was collecting wood for fuel. Unfortunately I'd come out today without my gun, which normally I always bring with me when I go into the forest. I had no other weapon except my axe. Hearing your gun go off—a rare sound in these parts—I ran toward you. I'd seen the spoor of the beast . . ."

"Thank you. You have saved my life. But what are we going to do with the bear?"

"It's yours. You shot it."

"Mine? If it hadn't been for you it would have killed me."

The old man was more communicative than usual.

"It's quite a time since I saw you last," he said, and though this was not a question, his tone was almost as if it were.

"I've been busy at home. The population of our cape has increased by one."

"A son?"

"Yes . . ."

"He'll be able to help you. I too have a son, though he's already grown up. He is just fifteen."

He gave a mysterious and almost imperceptible smile.

"And your wife?" I ventured to ask. It was an indiscreet question, I knew, but I was curious.

"I have no wife," he replied with difficulty, as if he hated to say this. And his smile vanished as quickly as it had come.

A strange creature, I thought. Why should he have sought refuge in a desert like this, what attraction does such solitude hold for him? It was true that he might well be asking himself the same question about me. So he has a son, or at least he says so. But is it really a son? How could one ever find out? His life must have been a very complicated one. What can have brought him here?

He had fallen silent since I had asked my clumsy question. After all, perhaps his life had not been so

extraordinary. It might be one of the most obvious and ordinary simplicity. There are clerks who spend their entire life pushing a squeaky pen across pieces of paper; why shouldn't there also be lighthouse keepers on the edge of a deserted ocean? Of course theirs is a different fate . . .

Silently we gazed upon the huge carcass of the bear. What should we do with it?

We arranged that its pelt should be mine—the old man insisted on this. As for its flesh, which makes delicious eating, each of us would carry away as much of this as he could.

6 A HELLISH CHASE

After this third encounter it was some time before I met the old man again. He never reappeared in the forest, nor did he pay us a visit, though he knew now where we lived. Neither did I go to the lighthouse, for this would have been a lengthy expedition. It would have necessitated retracing our steps over the countryside that we had crossed on the day of our arrival, back to the bay, and then following the coastline by boat all the way across the cape until arriving at last at the rock upon which the lighthouse was built. The broken coastline, the sandbanks that just rose above sea level at low tide, and the great breakers that lashed the shore when the tide was high, all combined to make this a most unattractive journey.

All the same the day arrived when I had to undertake it, in a crisis of the most extreme urgency. Our elder son, Danil—at this time we already had another, Martin—had fallen seriously ill. From being a strong and cheerful lad, he had begun to grow weak, his complexion turning pale and transparent, his gums bleeding and painful so that he was frequently in tears. It was easy to diagnose the cause: this was the terrible illness that is the scourge of such places, namely scurvy. I had hoped to prevent this by means of the vegetables that I had planted: but the climate had not allowed them to flourish as they should. For lack of a few onions and heads of garlic our boy was in mortal peril.

His illness deprived us of our greatest joy. He was just beginning to stammer a few words, and he already knew how to walk, while the younger one had not yet reached this stage. Danil was a funny little fellow whose gay tricks amused us so that we had not the heart to punish him, even when he thoroughly deserved a spanking. The way he pronounced his first words, the questions that he asked us to which we could not always find an answer, made us laugh until we cried. He had just reached that most enchanting stage of childhood, when children are a delight to all about them. Yet now his illness had so changed him that we could scarcely recognize the Danil who only recently had been so full of vitality and fun.

This had had a terrible effect on me, but for Marina it was even worse. It was for her painful even to see him; I had never before known her to be in such a state; never had her eyes expressed such exhaustion, such

emptiness when confronted with the evil intentions of fate. Was she already the victim of macabre forebodings?

It was now that I decided I must visit the lighthouse, in the hope of finding there some form of Vitamin C that might save our son's life.

It was with tears in my eyes that I left our home, after saying good-bye to Danil, whose little strength was nearly exhausted, and to Marina, who was suffering as much as he.

I loaded the boat onto the sleigh, and with this unusual cargo set off into the forest which I must cross in order to reach the bay. From there I intended to reach the lighthouse by water.

When I had arrived at the bay I carried the boat to the rocky seashore and launched it upon the sea. Luckily it was calm today and I reached the base of the lighthouse without too much trouble.

When I had reached it, however, I had considerable difficulty in making my presence known. I shouted at the top of my voice, but there was no answer from the tower, which indeed appeared uninhabited. My shouts were doubtless drowned by the roaring of the waves and blown far away by the wind. Time passed, and I was becoming desperate. How could I climb up, I asked myself, deafened by the crashing of the waves which a rising wind was now hurling in ever greater turbulence against the rocks? At last a head appeared at the very top of the tower; from down below I could not say for sure whether it was the old

man's or that of his son. So far as I could judge, my cries remained inaudible to whoever it was, but my presence seemed to have been observed. Doubtless it was the son, for as soon as he had vanished a second head appeared in his place, and this I could recognize to be the light-keeper's, whose voice I now faintly heard. He immediately began to lower a sort of swing which must have been used in the original building of the lighthouse; with the help of the swing I succeeded in reaching the first floor of the tower. I could not, even now, describe the interior, so obsessed was I with the worries that had brought me there; my only recollection is that it seemed gloomy and dark, but solidly and indeed massively built—the lighthouse was constructed of large, roughly hewn stone blocks.

They too had no garlic. The ship had brought them a concentrate of Vitamin C, but they had mislaid it several months before, and at last found it in the bottom of a gasoline can where it had accidentally been dropped; half dissolved, it was quite useless. It was the old man who explained this to me, and I was sure he must be telling the truth, for despite his rough manner he was the type of man who would share his last crust with a friend in need. But he possessed neither garlic nor concentrate of Vitamin C; there was nothing he could do for me. He himself, he said, was anxiously awaiting the ship's arrival which was to bring him a fresh supply of this priceless vitamin. But that could not be for a long time.

Crushed by exhaustion, overwhelmed by this new

ill fortune, I collapsed upon a stool. How could I now return home, what could I say to Marina to console her?

The old man saw my anguish, a real man's anguish, and despite his rough nature he felt for me. Hard men though they be, the inhabitants of the Far North, lost amid a hostile nature, feel close to one another. That is why the old lighthouse keeper really wished to help me solve a problem which seemed, on the face of it, insoluble.

"My son will go with you. It isn't an easy journey, but I know that at this moment nothing will seem impossible to you. It's thirty-five miles beyond the forest that the Evenks* live . . ." he said after a heavy silence that had lasted for several minutes.

I had been sunk in despair, but with this revival of hope I leaped up from my stool and felt filled with fresh energy. So all was not yet lost! The old man went on: "There you will surely find garlic. But you mustn't expect those people to give it to you. They'll make you pay—and a stiff price."

I almost flung my arms about the old man's neck, though this would clearly have displeased him. His son had already begun to make the necessary arrangements for our long journey; as soon as these were completed we made our way down the lighthouse stairs and took the boat to the spot where I had left the sleigh. The dogs, well rested and well fed, set off with us at a good speed and the forest soon swallowed us up.

* A nomadic tribe of the Far North, living from hunting and fishing. There are approximately 50,000 Evenks in the Soviet Union.

The dogs kept a spanking pace, as if they had sensed my impatience. We had to hurry, for it was now more than eight hours since I had left my home. What had happened while I was gone? Had Danil's condition changed for the worse? And what might Marina be thinking, all alone there?

These thoughts tormented me and I whipped the dogs pitilessly whenever they slowed down. We had to cover twenty miles of very difficult ground, for we had decided to take a short cut and not to go by way of my homestead, thus saving ten miles. Every minute gained might make the difference between life and death, and I whipped the dogs and whipped them again, quite impervious to the cold and to the low branches which in turn were whipping across my face. I had no thought save for little Danil: his salvation was the sole purpose of my existence.

Consumed by worry, I forced the dogs to give of their all in this mad chase. It was growing darker and darker beneath the branches that still bore a heavy load of snow which left the daylight no chance to slip through between them. When we reached a great open space in the middle of the forest, we were literally dazzled and half blinded by the last rays of the setting sun reflected in the snow. On the other hand the forest all about us seemed even darker and more menacing, as if it were already filled with night and ready to swallow us up. But now we were able to make good speed and it was easier traveling: Georgii, the lighthouse keeper's son, knew the route perfectly. Soon the great open space lay far behind us.

Although the dogs were tired now, they had plunged into the darkened forest with renewed energy. Their eagerness pleased me, and I no longer had to whip them.

However Georgii was less optimistic than I.

"Wolves . . ." he murmured at last, in a tone so low that I could scarcely hear him, as though he feared lest he frighten me.

"Where?" I asked him. I was amazed that I had not thought of this before. I glanced over my shoulder but could see nothing.

"The dogs have smelt them. That's why they're going at such a pace. They never make a mistake," Georgii explained.

Our hellish chase went on. I stopped peering about me, and let my body sway with the motion of the sleigh. It was clear that this could not go on for long; the wolves were following our track, and would not now let us go. We were their prey, to be taken as and when they chose. The distance between them and us was decreasing; the growing nervousness of the dogs showed this.

Now the wolves were close on our heels and growing bolder. I could see their lolling tongues that seemed to reach out for us helpless men and dogs. I thought to smell their hot breath—they too must be tired. But could we hope that they would let us go, or that fear would be spur enough to our poor dogs to keep a distance between them and us, and if so for how long? No. Hunger would never let the wolves give up what they now regarded as their prey. The decisive moment would

strike, and we were unarmed—for in our haste we had forgotten to bring guns.

The choice was simple; either to confront the pack or to continue our flight having first thrown them a sop that would cause them to break off their pursuit for a while and maybe to disperse. Victory belongs to the brave; we must not leave the initiative entirely to the wolves. Their boldness would soon become apparent: perhaps they had already sensed that we were unarmed? Were we to let them eat us without putting up any resistance?

I favored a fight. I handed the reins to Georgii. I wished to test our enemies' strength and measure their hunger. I struck a few match flares which I threw at them, but without noticeable effect; my supply of these was soon exhausted, and I had to look elsewhere. We stopped and rapidly lit a fire of dead branches, then a second and a third, and we huddled behind this barrier with our dog team. The wolves had stopped too, keeping at a respectful distance from our fires but clearly still with no intention of leaving us. However, we could no longer hear their breathing, nor did their eyes glitter as terrifyingly as before. We were besieged, and our camp was not such a one as to withstand a siege for long. The enemy forces seemed to have increased in number; whether this were so or not, the wolves well outnumbered our dogs.

All the same I found a certain reassurance in their fear. They would surely not attack us so long as our fires remained alight. But we could not stay here forever; Danil's life was at stake. Should we await the

dawn? This would involve a very great risk, here in these northern latitudes where the dawn is long delayed.

No, we couldn't wait. While Georgii, not without difficulty, was harnessing up the dogs, I collected as many smoldering branches as I could, and these I loaded onto the sleigh. Then we set off again in silence, with the wolves still close behind us. It seemed as if nothing we could do would ever shake them off.

The wind soon set the smoldering branches aflame once more, and the smoke stung our eyes. I took branch after branch and threw it at the wolves' heads. Those following closest behind us leaped aside to avoid my missiles. My teeth were clenched and I was quite unconscious of the fire burning my fingers. Rage and smoke filled my eyes with tears. I never ceased hurling my flaming branches toward the wolves, who stopped each time to leap aside. But the pack quickly re-formed and the chase went on, as furiously as before. My store of ammunition was running low; I saw that soon I should have nothing left to throw. As a soldier saves his ammunition, so I now let the enemy draw really close before I let fly with another branch. My last few actually hit the wolves, who once again drew back, but my burned fingers were now beginning to be atrociously painful and I was bathed in sweat despite the cruel cold that grew more bitter as the night advanced.

"Is it still far? Should we stop again and light another fire?" I asked, almost at the end of my strength.

"It would be a terrible mistake to stop. What a night!

I don't know how we shall get out of this," Georgii replied, making no attempt to hide his anguish. It was then that I discovered I possessed neither wood nor matches. But we were saved all the same. Ahead of us we could see the outline of the Evenks' tents.

"We're there!" we both shouted together.

Dawn began to break and exactly at this moment the wolves gave up the chase.

We found that we were close to the entrance to the village, which consisted of a few huts and wooden buildings resembling nomads' caravans. Our dogs were steaming heavily. They had to be fed—but it was also essential that we procure some garlic and set off on the return journey at once. Poor dogs! We hurried toward the Evenks' cabins, where life was already astir. Georgii knew the few indispensable words of their language; so he opened negotiations, with me standing by, a silent witness to the bargaining which threatened to become lengthy. Despite Georgii's beseeching manner and our desperate demeanor, they refused our request more than once; besides, it might be that not all the Evenks possessed a supply of garlic, and that in these latitudes the precious antiscorbutic was as rare as sunshine.

Nevertheless after protracted negotiations in one of their huts, we found at last what we were looking for. All that remained to be done was to come to an arrangement with its owner, regardless of the price! The Evenk looked me up and down, from head to foot, in silence. Then he began to finger my clothes. His face broke into a broad smile when he came upon my watch.

All expression, however, soon vanished from his face and his manner became as noncommittal as before. It was obvious that he was making ready to embark upon a lengthy rigmarole of offers and counteroffers; since I had neither the choice of alternatives to offer him nor the time for argument, I drew forth my watch, which I gave him in exchange for a few heads of garlic. Georgii was annoyed by such commercial folly on my part.

We set off on the return journey at once. The dogs had rapidly been harnessed up, and had not really had time for a proper rest; nevertheless they set off like arrows, with the wind behind us now, as though they understood the urgency of it all. By the time we reached my homestead the poor creatures were ready to drop.

While Georgii saw to the dogs, I hurried into the house, supported by a force that helped me surmount the mortal fatigue brought on by such a series of events.

Marina was seated beside Danil's bed. Her expression told me all that needed to be said concerning her sufferings during my absence. Danil was dying, and she was impatient to snatch him from the jaws of death, he who was flesh of her flesh. Were he not now to live, the first link in the immense human chain of which I had dreamed would be snapped . . .

Alas, despite the haste with which we thrust the remedy upon him, Danil's breathing grew weaker and weaker, and he died in the arms of his despairing mother.

Why did he have to die? Who had demanded the sacrifice of this innocent little boy? Was he paying for the crimes of others? For mine? He was guiltless. But us? Are we without guilt? Such questions are futile, fruitless.

Marina found in her cries of sadness an outlet for grief that was denied to me. The cruel blows of fate are not of the sort that can be avoided, so why rebel? I had always been a fatalist, but Marina was different. I told her over and over again that we must not give in, that we must not surrender to morbid agony; my words did nothing to reconcile her with this sudden death, which for her was a well-nigh mortal shock. I seemed to see reproaches in her eyes, as though I were somehow responsible. Her eyes burned through me until I was ready to believe that I was in fact the cause of Danil's death. Had it not been my idea in the first place that we come here?

After countless efforts to pull ourselves together, we had at last to undertake an atrocious task, the most atrocious that had ever come my way in a life that already seemed unspeakably long. We had to bury poor little Danil, who was lying on our bed like a dead bird.

Carrying the burden we had loved so deeply, we set off into the forest. We had wrapped him in a sheet: we had sewn this together . . . I wished his grave to be as far as possible from our homestead, for I feared that if it were nearby the sight of it would be a constant cause for tears to Marina, at a time when she needed all her strength and all her courage.

Life is inseparable from death; wherever there are houses, the graveyard is not far away. We too were now to have our own little private cemetery.

This was the first really terrible blow that destiny had seen fit to inflict upon us. It was our first profound grief since we had withdrawn entirely from the world and come to live up here. I then recalled the saying that sorrows never come singly, and already I was wondering what the next threat might be. Automatically I found myself touching wood and searching in my memory for the old formulas designed to ward off ill fortune that I had learned long ago at my grandmother's knee. Could they stop the wheel of sorrow, now that it had begun to turn?

7 THE OPERATION

It was the beginning of the arctic spring, a time when little happens; the sun is still a fugitive, only rarely visible, while the melting, softening snow turns black beneath a man's boots, and the icicles drip, though it is hard to see why, for the wind remains bitterly cold.

Ill fortune had struck us, and I was trying to dismiss it from my mind or at least not to think about it. Sometimes I succeeded, thanks to the intensity of my daily work. Marina, however, was less successful in this; she could not resign herself to what had happened, and she went on suffering, although several months had passed since little Danil's death. Others, of a less deeply sensitive nature, might by now have recovered from their

sorrow; for Marina neither resignation nor peace of mind was possible.

On the day in question I came back from hunting with a broad smile upon my face. The smile was not only due to the fact that this was the first sunny day, the first lovely day of the spring which we had awaited through so many harsh winter months. The smile was deliberate, assumed for Marina's benefit. I had to give her courage, all the more so as she was pregnant once again.

So I entered our house, or to be more exact, I stumbled indoors, for I was heavily wrapped in my winter furs besides being laden down with game.

"It's spring!"

"Yes, spring at last . . ."

I kissed my wife. I knew not what to do in order to help her forget the unforgettable.

"Spring, yes, but it's already time we started thinking about next winter," I said, gaily. "Here's a fur wrap for the new baby."

And I threw on the floor the squirrels that had hung from my shoulder.

It was at this moment that I heard footsteps outside, followed almost immediately by a knock on the door. Who could it be? In all the time we had lived here we had never before had a visitor.

I opened the door. In front of me stood the old lighthouse keeper. He appeared both bewildered and filled with a rancor directed at the whole wide world. To tell the truth he had always made this impression on me—one of displeasure—on the previous occasions

when we had met. Doubtless he had a score to settle with the world, for otherwise he would surely never have withdrawn to so remote a spot as this. But in addition to his normal manner, there was now quite obviously something that weighed heavily on his mind. So without waiting for him to speak, I asked: "What's the matter?"

"Georgii is very ill. He can't get up. It's happened twice before, and each time he's got over it, but today it's much worse. You or your wife might be able to do something for him . . . at least help him to die. He's in such pain that I can hardly bear to be with him . . ."

Marina did not keep him waiting. Despite her condition, she rapidly made ready to leave, picked up our little portable pharmacopoeia, and set off with the old man in the direction of the lighthouse. Would her very elementary training as a nurse be enough to save poor Georgii?

The expedition, in truth, was hardly to my taste, and it was with a very heavy heart that I watched her leave. The trip was neither a short one nor easy, particularly for a pregnant woman. But what else could we do? A human life was at stake.

I remained alone at home with Martin, who had been my younger and was now my only son. I tried to tell myself that this trip and the feeling that she was doing useful work would be good for Marina, would make her forget her sorrow, would give her back her taste for living and perhaps some of her former energy as well. I settled down to await her return.

All that follows is based on what she told me when

she came back, for I was not of course myself a witness to what took place.

When, after two hours' traveling, they reached the lighthouse, Marina found the sick youth almost unconscious. She recognized at once that his condition was caused by appendicitis, and that this was the crisis. It was the third attack, and he had been in pain now for three days.

"He's going to die," the old man said when Marina had finished her examination.

His statement concealed a faint remnant of hope. It was as though the old man had asked: "Is he going to die?"

"Your son has appendicitis. He must be operated on. Otherwise . . . otherwise it'll be peritonitis, and there's nothing can be done about that."

"He's going to die," the old man repeated. "I know it. This time he's going to die."

His tone was no longer questioning. This was a statement of fact, resignation to the inevitable. The old man drew close to his son's bed, as if to make sure that he did not miss the terrible moment when the boy must pass from life to death. His expression was grim, closed, revealing nothing. There was no telling how he would react to the tragedy, whether he would rebel or accept the ineluctable decision of fate that would compel him to live alone now in his lighthouse until death would deliver him in his turn.

He turned slowly in reply to Marina's next words and without haste moved away from the sickbed.

"I shall try to save him," Marina had said.

The old man's lusterless eyes suddenly lit up. So his calmness had been but a façade; he alone knew what was happening deep down within his soul, he alone could say what his own mysterious nature really was.

For a moment his eyes questioned Marina, then the light that had briefly illuminated them was extinguished once again.

"He'll die if he's left like this. Peritonitis only ends one way. I could try to operate. By myself . . ."

The old man listened but did not speak. He clearly had no hope that the boy could still be saved. He was withdrawing into himself, as though preparing for the still greater solitude that must be his after his son had died.

"I'll undertake the operation, but I can't promise what the result will be. You understand, in these conditions . . ."

"He'll die in any case," the old man murmured, with a wave of his hand.

This might pass as approval, even though made in despair.

All the better, Marina thought: If I'm successful it'll be an unexpected joy for him.

Now in this narrow room, transformed into an operating theater, preparations were begun. The old man blew up the stove so that it became hot enough to boil the instruments, which consisted of a hunting knife usually employed in the dismemberment of game and a kitchen knife, a slightly more delicate instrument which Marina thought might come in useful.

The old man set about the unusual tasks now entrusted to him with mingled energy and indifference, as if saying to himself, What's the use? From time to time he would cast a rapid, sidelong glance at his son, or at Marina, who was busy by his bedside. When no sound came from the sick boy, he assumed that it was all over; whenever he heard a groan, a faint spark of hope revived within him. Georgii was in fact dangerously ill, and from one minute to the next there was no telling what the outcome might be.

Once all the necessary preparations were made, that is to say all such as were possible in these circumstances, Marina carefully washed her hands, disinfected them, and told the old man to do the same, for he was to act as her assistant. Then she began the operation, on the bed itself since there was no operating table available.

"The instrument!" she demanded, in a voice vibrant with emotion.

The old man held out the sharpened, slightly curved hunting knife.

Later Marina was to tell me all the details of this operation performed in such unusual conditions, using all the customary scientific terms. Since my knowledge of medicine is slight, I shall not attempt to reproduce them here.

All I grasped was that she had managed to deal with an extraordinarily difficult case. Quite apart from the absence of proper instruments, she herself was only a nurse and as such had never of course performed an operation. But to Marina's everlasting credit, not only

did she do it, but it was successful! Georgii, who had almost slipped out of life, was dragged back from the very brink of death!

"He must have a constitution of iron," Marina said to me later. "I don't know of anyone who could have survived an operation in his condition, and what an operation, performed by a surgeon as unskilled as I am!"

I had awaited her return in a state of anxiety that increased with every passing hour. As soon as she was back I understood it all, even before she had opened her lips. Her face was lit with a smile of triumph. Later she told me all about it. I was happy, not only for Georgii whose life she had saved, but even more so for herself. It was such a long time since last I had seen her as vivacious as this, almost excited! The will to live which had left her seemed suddenly to have returned.

I kissed her tenderly, to congratulate her on a success that deserved to be recorded in the annals of medicine. Happiness and life seemed to smile upon us once again. Marina had regained her level spirits, the loss of which had caused me so much pain.

Now, I thought, all will be as it was in the old days. We shall live again as we used to do, before the loss of our first-born, our Danil . . .

Life was to show me how mistaken were my hopes and prospects, how false the glowing vision that I had formed of our future together . . .

8 A DANGEROUS FISHING EXPEDITION

A month had passed since Marina had performed her fantastic operation. The old lighthouse keeper now came to see us fairly often, to thank her and to ask for her advice: he told us that his son would soon be as healthy and fit as ever he had been.

One day, on returning home from fishing, I found Georgii in the house. Although pale and thin, he had completely recovered.

I do not know exactly why it was, but the sight of him in my house astonished me. Yet what was there surprising about a visit which was surely prompted by politeness? As it happens, I never did succeed in unraveling the reasons for my astonishment. Perhaps because I was reluctant to admit them, even to myself.

Because it was all so absurd! Marina told me that Georgii had arrived shortly before my return. He had seemed embarrassed.

"Well, well! My patient! How are you getting on?" Marina had asked him, holding out a hand that he had decided not to shake.

"Very well . . . I've come to thank you."

"If that's the only reason, you shouldn't have taxed your strength."

"But you saved my life!"

"In that case, if you really want to thank me, hold the baby's hands while I soap his head."

Georgii had done as she wished, taking in his enormous hands little Martin's tiny ones.

Meanwhile Marina finished washing him, to the baby's great disgust, who howled at the top of his lungs.

That was the moment at which I walked in, to find this touching domestic scene in progress . . .

"This is my patient," Marina said to me with a laugh, obviously proud of her skill as a part-time doctor.

"I'm glad to see you've acquired a mother's help . . ."

"A help on which there's not much reliance. He's still weak from his operation. Look, he's all skin and bone . . ."

"Weak? We'll soon see about that," I replied. "Would you like to come with me, the next time I go fishing, Georgii? The fish are running well just now."

"I'd love to," he said with evident enthusiasm.

"You see how weak he is?"

He soon said good-bye and left us alone together.

A few days later, when I was on my way back from hunting in the forest and had almost reached the house, I heard the murmur of conversation. It could not be Marina talking to Martin, for one of the voices was deep. So Georgii was at the house again; I was once again astonished, without knowing why.

I stopped for a moment, then flung open the door and hurried in.

So that was it. Marina and Georgii were seated close beside little Martin's cradle. The baby was breathing quietly. On the table I saw an open book, a Russian primer that I had brought with me for the instruction of my future children. This had been Marina's wish.

They had both been so deep in their reading that neither of them had noticed my return. Yet Marina was always so alert that normally she was aware of my homecoming before even she could hear my foot-steps or see me on the threshold. I had declared over and over again: "Books will bring us no good. The children must grow up without ever having seen a book." And now here was the reality, justifying my intuitive fears . . .

Marina was commenting on the story, explaining such passages as were incomprehensible to Georgii when they referred to objects he had never seen. He was listening as if bewitched. Before his eyes were unfurling visions of great cities, of houses many stories high, of broad streets, glistening motor cars, trains, bridges like steel threads, underground railways, airplanes . . .

"And all that really exists?" he asked. "I feel as though I were hearing a fairy tale."

"A fairy tale," Marina replied dreamily. "Yes, a fairy tale. I'm beginning to feel, myself, as though that is all it is. It's part of a past that happened so long ago, I almost wonder if it really exists . . ."

When at last she spoke to me her voice sounded different, deeper than before; it struck me that she was hiding something from me. But doubtless that was only an impression. My imagination was in a turmoil . . .

I walked across to Georgii, laid my hand on his shoulder, and asked: "How are you getting on?"

My tone was not in any way unfriendly, yet I felt, as before, a certain indefinable irritation.

"Yes, I'm pleased with my progress," Georgii replied. "When are we going fishing?"

"In two or three days, if you like."

"I'd love it. I should very much like to be of use to you, somehow."

As it turned out, the day we had chosen to go fishing was not a very favorable one. The wind had risen and the sea was roaring dangerously. Georgii arrived at the hour we had arranged. I was reluctant to put him off or to show that the stormy weather frightened me. In any case the ocean was always calmer farther out. Besides, I had frequently been out in rough seas, and had always come safely home.

So we set off in the sailboat and by tacking and using the boathook, we made our way through the breakers. The tide was low and we were heavily loaded. All would be well once we reached the open sea, where

the waves were small though choppy. We hoisted sail and were soon speeding like an arrow toward the fishing grounds; but the wind was rising and the waves growing larger.

Soon our boat began to pitch, rising high on its stern to climb a wave, or plunging into dark troughs whose liquid walls reflected a greenish light.

When we had reached the fishing grounds I decided to lower the sail, in order to acquire more stability; so I told Georgii to make ready our lines, while I set about clewing . . .

Now, with my pen in my hand, I still cannot understand exactly what happened next, try though I may . . . Had I made a terrible mistake in ever hoisting the sail instead of keeping it furled? Or would the fearful gust of wind have blown our little boat over, sail or no sail? I don't know, but I do know that it all took place in the twinkling of an eye; we were hurled overboard, and I tried with all my strength to swim to Georgii, who was caught up in the fishing lines. When I reached him I tried to free him, but the more I pulled the tighter the lines knotted about the unfortunate youth. Within seconds Georgii, as though tied into a strait jacket, had gone under, nor was there anything I could do to help. Furthermore my own limbs were beginning to freeze and I felt an oncoming cramp which could have spelled the end for me too.

Without a backward glance, I swam for the shore. Frozen and utterly exhausted, I collapsed upon the rocks, whence I tried to see what was happening out at sea.

I thought to glimpse Georgii. He had surfaced, and

had managed to get a grip on the boat which was still afloat, though upside down. But I soon lost sight of him again.

As soon as I had recovered my strength, I set off homeward, leaping from rock to rock until I reached the forest's edge. After one last glance at the scene of the tragedy I decided to go on home.

The rocks soon hid the sea, whose roaring grew more and more muffled by distance. Suddenly Marina stood before me; her intuition, alert as ever, had warned her of the drama which had just taken place and of the danger which had threatened me. Her face betrayed her horror and fear.

"My darling, I told you . . . You shouldn't have gone . . . Where is Georgii?"

Without a word I gestured toward the ocean.

"What! You left him there to die?"

"I . . . There was nothing I could do."

"But perhaps he can't swim! How can you have done such a thing?"

Disgust had distorted her features and changed her voice. From her violent, incoherent words I grasped that she was reproaching me for having thought only of myself and for not having continued a struggle which was useless. For I was convinced that had I not swam for the shore, the sea would have had two corpses to wash up instead of only one.

A few moments later Marina was running toward the little flat-bottomed boat which was pulled up above high-water mark; already she had untied it and was pushing it with all her strength toward the sea.

"What are you doing?" I shouted. "In your condition . . . Can't you see how rough it is . . . ?"

The ocean was now raging more furiously than ever, huge gray waves capped with yellow foam from which the spindrift was flying. But I had never seen Marina display more determination and energy. It was plain that nobody could restrain her from her crazy enterprise.

"I can swim!" she shouted at me.

"I won't allow you to go out onto such a sea as this."

"Then come too . . ."

Her voice had become steely. It was she who was giving the orders. She would surely have set off alone had I hesitated to follow her. So I leaped into the little boat which was already afloat. I was trembling from head to foot and felt completely exhausted. Nevertheless I had no choice but to go with this madwoman. Could I leave her at a moment such as this?

The sea was still howling, the sky sinking lower and lower, and where the accident had happened the waves were now several yards high.

We rowed in a sort of fury, without speaking a word. The sea was making enough noise, and its shouts and roars could be interpreted howsoever one chose. For Marina they were words of encouragement in her crazy effort, while for me they spoke of the absurdity and uselessness of it all.

After countless difficulties we at last reached the spot where the tragedy had taken place. There we found a miracle. Georgii had succeeded in freeing himself from the entangling fish lines. With his remaining strength he was clinging to the overturned boat. He was visibly

at his last gasp, and his grip must loosen soon; only the instinct of self-preservation still gave him a spasmodic strength that was growing more and more precarious.

I was able to reach out my hand to him and haul him aboard our boat. I was amazed and confounded by his vitality. Now he was lying in the bottom of the boat like a drowned man, incapable of any movement whatsoever, whereas a few moments ago he had been displaying superhuman strength.

The only danger left was that he suffocate with all the water he must have swallowed, and this was a matter for urgent treatment. Marina gave it him, just as soon as we reached dry land. Georgii was sturdy and with plenty of strength in reserve, as his operation had proved. We put him into our bed and Marina made him swallow a strong cordial which we kept in our portable pharmacopoeia. Then she gave him an injection, and massaged him with the small amount of alcohol that we kept in reserve against emergencies. I tried to rehabilitate myself in her eyes by making myself as useful to her as I could.

It was not without a certain astonishment that I now observed Marina in the performance of what she called her duties. No doubt this was all quite normal, and yet . . . For her nothing and nobody seemed to exist save her patient; I was but the recipient of her tense and precise orders. I did not feel any annoyance at this, for my conscience was troubling me. But when she spoke sharply to little Martin, because he had run between her legs, I began to study her reactions with greater care. Not only did she no longer seem to have any time for our son, but she had slapped him on

more than one occasion. This filled me with a rage that I had a hard time concealing. She had hitherto never shown Martin anything but tenderness; neither of us had ever laid a finger on him.

The poor child did not know which saint to pray to, and great, bitter tears were rolling down his cheeks. This was his first introduction to injustice, and it was scarcely surprising that he felt indignant. All this served to make the atmosphere in my house intolerable. I could not refrain from commenting on this to Marina, but the only reply she gave me was a single, quick glance.

It was all the harder for me to understand when, a few moments later, she suddenly tore herself away from Georgii's bedside, picked up Martin, and covered his face with kisses. He seemed as bewildered by his mother's behavior as was I. But his childish pride must have been satisfied. A relative quiet descended on the room where each of us pursued his or her activities. But not for long, alas . . .

"Martin must not be made to suffer because of disorders in his life for which he is not to blame," I said. I was beginning to grow extremely irritated; this business with Georgii had been going on for too long.

Once again Marina threw me a glance which was intended to be full of meaning. I thought she was about to speak to me, but at this moment Georgii needed her, and she returned to his bedside. He was gazing at us both with his beautiful blue eyes, attempting, it would seem, to understand the true nature of

his own emotions. His look was absolutely free of resentment so far as I was concerned, but rather contained an element of gratitude which I knew I did not deserve. He surely thought that I alone was responsible for having saved his life, for he had lost consciousness almost immediately after we had hauled him aboard the flat-bottomed boat.

Georgii soon felt much better, but Marina decreed that there could be no question of his returning home in his enfeebled condition. I had no choice but to agree that Georgii should continue to occupy our bed while I waited patiently for the day when he should be fully recovered.

Marina and I slept on furs spread before the fire, though Marina spent the greater part of each night at Georgii's bedside. It seemed that he needed constant attention. Whenever my wife had to go out, it was I who silently assumed the role of sickroom orderly.

I was convinced that something had changed in our relationship, that something had been broken beyond hope of repair. Was it possible that a boy of fifteen or sixteen could absorb for such a very long time the attention of a woman who should, in sober fact, devote every moment of her life to me? I asked myself this question again and again, as I mulled over recent events. What had happened exactly, what was it that had gone wrong and could not be put right? I did not succeed in working this out.

One day, at about noon, Georgii announced that he now felt recovered again, and that he was going to

return to the lighthouse. During the previous night, shortly before the break of day, I had overheard a fragmentary conversation.

"That's better," Marina had said. "You've been sleeping like a log."

Her tone had been that of a mother half in love with a son who has just recovered from a severe illness.

"I feel absolutely all right. It's as if I'd had a dream in which drowning and huge cities with lighted theaters and airplanes and the rest of it were all mixed up together . . ."

"You're no longer a child," Marina had replied. "You're sixteen, and what I told you was no fairy tale. It all exists, there's nothing extraordinary about it."

"I won't believe it till I've seen it with my own eyes."

"Maybe you're right. Even I, sometimes, think it was all just a dream . . ."

"Oh, if only I could somehow see it all! There'll be a ship here, as soon as the ice has gone and it can enter the bay . . . in early spring . . ." Georgii's voice had faded away.

It seemed to me that Marina was listening too attentively to those words which must, for her, awaken a powerful echo. But perhaps I was mistaken . . .

At this moment Martin awoke. I calmed him and he began to play with his fingers. Though I strained my ears, I heard no more.

Next day Georgii went back to the lighthouse. He had completely recovered from the cold bath that had almost cost him his life.

9 "IT'S SPRING AGAIN"

And spring had returned, a chilly, arctic spring, ungenerous with its sunshine, but the snow was melting, dripping drop by drop from the branches which it had enveloped as with a rind throughout the long winter.

"It's spring again . . ."

I made this formal, traditional remark to Marina, who had come out into the yard to watch me at my work.

"Yes, spring again . . ." she echoed, with a note of ill-concealed sadness.

It was painful for me to hear her as melancholy as this, but these were the last days of her new pregnancy and I thought that her condition was the sole reason for her sorrow. She would have her baby and then

all would be changed; she would become once again as she had been before. Or so I told myself by way of consolation.

I awaited this birth with impatience, for Marina's state of mind during these past few weeks had depressed me greatly, though I had taken care not to let her see this. On the contrary I tried to appear even more cheerful than usual, hoping that such gaiety would prove infectious. But this was of scant use, perhaps because she sensed that my mood was feigned, and guessed why.

At long last the day came when she was to be delivered of a child. For the third time in my life I played the part of midwife. It was a little girl, which did not disappoint me at all. As for Marina, it had been very difficult for some time to divine what her feelings were. However she was now certainly lacking in what had hitherto filled me with such delight: that mixture of maternal pride and of satisfaction at having made me happier, for she knew how I longed for a large family. On this occasion there was none of that. Or else I did not feel it, though she continued to fulfill her duties as a mother and her many responsibilities as my wife.

It was not a troublesome birth, and Marina had very soon recovered again. But she was weak, and I therefore did not urge her to leave her bed. But the day came when she was once again up and about, busy with her daily tasks of mother, teacher for her child, mistress of her house, and support for her husband, all of which she did so far as her strength would allow.

For some time now neither the lighthouse keeper nor his son had visited our house, at least not while I was at home. The old man obviously had no interest in doing so. But Georgii? This young boy who had grown up in the loneliness of a lighthouse lost on the edge of an icy sea, and who so loved stories—I am referring to his reading lessons with Marina—did he not come to the house from time to time—to read, of course, only in order to learn how to read?

I did not know if my assumption were correct, for I never saw him at my house. But I believed that it was so, since Marina's mood varied from day to day when I came home from hunting or fishing or working in the fields. I began to vary the time of my departure and return, to change my normal working system, to come back unexpectedly on the pretext that I had "forgotten" some indispensable tool—but these pitiful tricks proved unavailing.

It's all a matter of chance, I thought. Either they're being extraordinarily cunning. Or else . . . there's nothing. Oh, if only that is true! Why shouldn't it be? But how can I have proof? How can it be proved that there's nothing between them?

I was subject to such crises. They caused me much pain, even though, as I repeat, I had absolutely no certainty. Perhaps it was all only due to my morbid suspicions, the effect of my bad nerves? But my condition grew steadily worse until sleep itself eluded me: yet even now I could not have explained what exactly was the cause of this.

I frequently attempted to drag the truth out of Marina by asking her, accidentally as it were: "Has Georgii been here?"

"No," she would reply, dryly. And instead of dispelling my doubts, her answer served only to increase my suspicions.

When, for the third time, I asked her this same question, I added: "Why doesn't he come here any more? Do you know?"

And on this occasion she replied: "He's probably frightened of you . . ."

I thought to see a strange, quick smile flit across her lips. It was a long time since last I had seen her smile, but I did not believe that I had ever observed her do so in this fashion.

Frightened of me . . . I murmured to myself, as though these words had given me cause for deep thought. "What about you, aren't you frightened of me?" I went on, seizing Marina's arm and holding it rather too tightly. My question was doubtless as surprising for her as it was unexpected by me.

She did not reply. Instead she gazed straight into my eyes, as she tried to free her arm from my grip, and said in a low voice: "You're hurting me . . ."

I let go of her and spoke no more that evening.

"You're hurting me." Her words reëchoed in my mind, causing me a dumb, desperate and incomprehensible pain.

Our frugal meal that evening was both begun and finished in silence. Something had vanished from our home and hearth, something that would now never

return, and which indeed was growing ever more and more remote. What was it . . . ? I searched for the word. I found it. But I would not admit it even to myself.

That night I had a heavy heart. How was I to bring back the past? Had it gone forever, without hope of return?

10 THE CONFESSION

Perhaps I should have a straightforward, honest conversation with Marina, telling her my thoughts and showing her my doubts and fears? But was this in fact the best course to pursue? A ridiculous false pride paralyzed me; above all I was now painfully aware that Marina and I no longer constituted a single whole, unique and indivisible, as had been the case in days gone by. There was a lack of trust, both on her part and on mine. Each of us had withdrawn within ourselves, had closed up like an oyster shell. I had done this reluctantly, compelled to it by Marina's attitude. It might be that she for her part was prompted by precisely the same reasons; I did not know; I did not think that I was still capable of piercing her most secret

thoughts as I had once believed, rightly or wrongly, that I could do.

To go on in this fashion seemed to me intolerable. The situation could not continue, all the more so since it might well be based upon nothing whatsoever. In the hope of cutting this hideous knot—and who knows it might well be an entirely imaginary one?—the day came when I decided I would talk it all over with Marina.

"You've changed so, I hardly recognize you any more these days," I began. I had decided to be quite direct and open, confident that such a conversation would be successful if it were undertaken with a frankness that I hoped she too might gradually adopt.

"I've never known you the way you've been lately," I went on in a gentle voice. I awaited her reply. What turn would she give to the conversation that I had thus begun?

"You've changed too. I wouldn't recognize you either," she said. Her voice was cold and flat.

Her tone was a blow to me. My attempt seemed doomed to failure. There was little hope of a conversation begun in this fashion—that is to say with mutual accusations and reproach—ending successfully.

"I've changed?"

"Maybe you haven't. Maybe it's my fault, for not having seen in the old days what you were really like."

It was assuming the form of "painful explanations"—the sort of explanations which usually end badly, or so my intuition told me. Nor was my intuition in such matters usually mistaken. After this interchange of

skillfully disguised threats, I changed my tactics, substituting gentleness for bitterness, both in word and in manner.

"That's quite right, you didn't know me. Or at least you didn't know the whole of me."

I said this twice.

"What do you mean?" she asked calmly enough, though she could not hide the fact that she was intrigued by my remark.

"Exactly what I say, neither more nor less. You don't know me. That's all."

For some reason which I did not understand she appeared bewildered. I felt my lips curling in a disagreeable, mocking smile, which must appear frightening to her or at least unpleasant, since it was surely incomprehensible. This smile was not intended to reassure her, but rather to exacerbate her curiosity which was becoming obvious.

In the old days, when no shadow lay between us, I had been tempted more than once to tell her the whole truth about myself, to reveal all those secrets about my past which I had hitherto kept from her and of which she therefore had no inkling. I do not know why I had not done so. And now I felt the same temptation, a longing to tell her everything, regardless of what her reactions might be and of the consequences that such a confession might entail. It was not for nothing that ever since our conversation began I had sensed, from her tone as much as from mine, that its outcome must be a bad one.

No, my intuition had not misled me. I had lost control of the reins. Whether this be the wrong time, indeed folly, the wheels were turning and it would be difficult if not impossible for me to stop them, even should I wish to do so. But I did not even try. I made no effort, either to stop myself from talking or to leave the house in an effort to break off a conversation that must henceforth be so terribly dangerous. And, in the end, I told her everything, the whole truth about myself and my past. I did this in a cold voice, one that seemed to me almost detached in its objectivity. My story took a long time to tell, and it was evening before I had finished. But . . . she refused to believe me. She thought I was joking, that I wished to test her. It was obviously hard for her to admit that the man whom she had idolized, whom she had regarded as a paragon, almost a hero, was in reality nothing more than a traitor to his country and the murderer of his compatriots, no matter what he might say to explain or alleviate his crimes.

I was still left with one way out. I could agree that it was all only a joke. She asked for nothing better than to believe this, as her bloodshot eyes and her expression of loss clearly told me. "It's not true, is it?" her whole being implored me. But I repeated coldly that everything I had just told her was the unadulterated truth. There was only one detail that I hid from her: namely that she herself was the origin of it all. Yes, this I kept to myself. And I walked out into the white and frozen night, leaving her, I thought, in no sort of doubt. She did not follow me. She remained alone in the house.

Now she would interpret the incident with Georgii in her own fashion. She would find the explanation that seemed to her correct. "Let her think what she will, let happen what may, it is all the same to me." But although I heard my own voice speak those words, I did not mean what I said. No, none of this was "all the same to me." Yet what was I to do? What could I do, now?

If Marina were to go on trusting me, to see in me if not her ideal—that was henceforth out of the question—at least a man worthy of a certain respect, life together remained a possibility. Were this however not so, then this marked the end of the brief fairy tale I had told myself, of my grandiose plans, perhaps of my life itself. But, I said to myself rebelliously, aren't there plenty of women in this world who despise prejudice and who are quite capable of loving a brigand with all their heart? Was Marina such a woman? I decided that, alas, she was not.

The victim of such cheerless thoughts, I wandered through the icy night, circling my home beneath a pale sky studded with almost invisible stars.

For how long did I do so? I cannot say, but when at last I reëntered the house Marina was already asleep. So I had been walking for a long time. In order not to make any noise I did without my evening meal, and lay down beside her.

Is she really asleep? I asked myself. Or is she only pretending? If she's awake, what thoughts are passing through her mind? Does it matter any more?

I should have liked to kiss her, as I always did before

I fell asleep, but tonight I dared not. If I were to awaken her . . . It was strange: she frightened me now.

Our little daughter made a noise in her sleep, which sounded like a sigh.

Marina did not stir. She had heard nothing, so she was really asleep. As for me, it was with my eyes wide open that I saw the break of day.

11 THE SHIP ARRIVES TODAY

This wall that now separates me from Marina, will it remain forever unscaleable? I have asked myself this question with a distress that grows with every passing day.

I was awaiting her reproaches, her accusations, but she said nothing, and her silence was harder to bear than any reproaches, than any accusations, no matter how bitter.

At times I long to hurl at her the cry that lies buried in my breast: "Speak to me! Speak to me at last! Tell me whatever you wish, whatever you may be thinking, but speak! Insult me if you believe I deserve to be insulted, only do not keep silent like this, for I cannot bear it."

But I have never loosed this cry: I have summoned all my strength in order to keep silent. For how long? Marina remained dumb, almost sphinxlike; apart from this her behavior was completely unchanged. And yet it was plain that she herself had changed since she had heard my story. And I, who thought to know her so well, was now incapable of deciphering the thoughts that were tormenting her.

Tomorrow our bay would be welcoming the ship come to provision the lighthouse; perhaps it would be the same one that had brought us to this shore all those years ago.

I was not the only one to know this; Marina too must be aware of its coming. So I decided that on the day the boat was due I should go hunting, in order not to be about the house.

I would go hunting as early as possible, just after dawn, at any rate before the arrival of the ship. I would remain in the forest for a long time, wandering among the trees, and would not return home until very late, much later than my usual time. Thus Marina would be free to act as she thought best.

I would not interfere; I had no wish to keep her a prisoner at my side.

And were she to choose the solution which, hitherto, had never even crossed my mind, but which now seemed the most likely one, then this would be the end, the end of everything. Absolutely everything.

Once again I was filled with sorrow. I felt alone, as I once had been. More alone even than I had been

then, for now Marina was with me. She was still with me . . .

Although the lamp was not lit, it was almost light in our room, for the full moon poured into it.

The new day had already begun. An extraordinary day: the day on which the ship was to arrive in our bay. What would it bring with it, this newborn day? How much I would have given to be twenty-four hours older, in order that I might know what this day would mean to me, what Marina would do, and what the outcome of it all would be.

I had no wish to sleep. I lay on my back with my eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling. But I saw nothing; the ceiling no more existed for me than did the walls of my house. It was not the ceiling that I saw but the sky, the star-studded sky in all its immensity that covers the whole world and all the men who live upon it.

Oh, those tiny human beings, those women and those men so busy fashioning their little lives that are frequently useless and empty, but which they yet regard as important and significant, heaven knows why . . .

Why are they born, why do they live, and why die? With what object do they attempt to ameliorate the circumstances that surround them? Why do they alter nature and worship God? Why? What use is it all?

What is the meaning of glory, honor, beauty, ambition, national pride, different religions, conflicts between states, wars, revolutions, all the changeless truths? But are they really unchanging?

To Him who observes, studies and examines us—

even as we in our turn examine the atoms, the protons and the neutrons—how petty and insignificant must appear all human passions whether great or small, all the sufferings and joys of mankind, love and hatred, accounts that must be settled, happiness lost, happiness found, happiness regained. Life is like a plaything. It is given, and it can as easily be taken away. Without even a question as to whether it is wanted or not. Why must you be born, why must you live? Why? With what object? Why are we given this present, life?

Leaving unsolved the problems of humanity, I became sunk once again in my own personal worries; man is so made that the great abstract questions, no matter what his answer to them may be, will never suffice to make him forget his little day-to-day problems on which are built his life, his ills, his sufferings and his joys.

The ship arrives today. I shall go hunting, as arranged.

I cannot know what will happen later: we shall see.

"We shall see," said the blind man . . . Confronted by the future, are we not all blind men, even those of us who are gifted with second sight?

Oh, this tomorrow, so near and yet so far! This tomorrow that must decide my fate. For all the years of my life that are left to me . . .

And once again there returns that so familiar thought which brings me both pain and forgetfulness: why should it matter what course my life will take, whether it be good or evil? What importance is it? Whether it goes on or stops depends solely on me. I am almost as indifferent as if it were none of my business, as if it

were no concern of mine. But today this thought brings me neither forgetfulness nor peace. I know that I shall not set off for the hunt with a light heart, but with one weighed down by a huge burden of sorrow.

When sleep came at last, I met Marina.

"It isn't true. I don't believe it," she said to me in a voice that was once again soft and tender. "At any moment you will come to me and you will tell me that it was a joke. The way you always joke after . . ."

She was so good. She drew close to me and her eyes searched for mine. Her presence filled me with a feeling of well-being. I was aware of a calm such as I had known in bygone days enveloping me.

"It wasn't true, was it?" she said again, and her voice was so gentle that I could not resist my desire to please her.

"No, it wasn't true," I replied in a voice so hesitant that my words were scarcely intelligible.

That was a sweet dream.

PART THREE

CONCLUSION

1 GEORGII'S STORY

The old man's weary eyes were fixed on Georgii, who now began his somewhat disconnected tale.

"I went there the day before the ship was due. I found Marina alone and in tears, I don't know why. This was the first time I had seen her cry. My efforts to calm her were unsuccessful, nor did I succeed in discovering what she was weeping about. Even now, I don't know. And I never shall. I suppose it was the fact that the ship was due so soon which made her terribly sad.

" 'You too are thinking of the big cities?' I asked her. 'If you like, I'll try and persuade the captain to take us both with him. I think I can. We'll go to the big city which is so like a fairy tale . . . '

"I smiled happily, to cheer her up, to change her mood, to encourage her, to break whatever dark train of thought had made her cry.

"And indeed while I talked a slight smile did play about her lips. She was smiling at me, through her tears, and the smile was in her eyes. What could be the meaning of this silent smile: gratitude, acceptance, or the refusal of an offer as dangerous as this? Since I could not decipher it, I was free to interpret it as my heart wished. I thought that I must make my preparations, so that I would be ready to leave as soon as possible.

"I therefore hurried back to the lighthouse, there to await impatiently the next day and the arrival of the ship. And the next day the ship arrived.

"From our store I selected several silver foxes, the best pelts we had, and set out for the bay. Before I got there I met a group of men, three in all; these could only be from the boat. I asked the men where I might find the captain. They told me, pleasantly enough, and asked me in exchange where they could find the people who had settled here a few years ago. This could only be Anton and Marina, and suspecting nothing nor even wondering why they should be looking for that house, I gave them detailed instructions how to get there.

"I went on my way, looking for the captain where they had told me that he would be, while the three men made for Anton's house.

"I was delighted with what the captain said to me. He had been far easier to persuade than I had hoped.

I had only to show him the furs for him to promise not to sail until I returned.

"I went back to the lighthouse, to collect those personal possessions that I would need on the journey, and then I set off for Marina's house, to tell her the good news. As soon as I had reached the house and opened the door I was paralyzed by the horror that met my eyes. Even before arriving there I came upon the carcass of a murdered dog, which had not failed to astonish me. But what I now saw in the house froze the blood in my veins.

"On the floor, swimming in blood, lay the corpses of Marina and her two children—a boy and the tiny girl—in the most horrible, twisted postures. For a moment the sight deprived me of the ability to move. When I had slightly recovered from the initial shock I walked across to Marina, hoping that it might not be too late to save her. Alas, there was nothing to be done. I could not say for sure how long I remained there, uselessly. A sound aroused me from my stupor. I turned toward the door, and there stood Anton upon the threshold. He had just returned from hunting, as I could easily tell, for his gun was slung across his back.

" 'Murderer!'

"Who had shouted this word? I believe that it was I, but perhaps it was Anton who had shouted it at me. I was in such a state that I could not say for sure which of us it was. But I am sure that one of us shouted it.

"Anton aimed his gun at me. I felt that death was very close; another moment and I should have lain stretched out beside Marina and her two children.

"A shot rang out. I heard it quite clearly. Yet although Anton's gun was pointed at me, it was not I who now fell dead, but he. As if the bullet he had intended for me had been shot out of the breech and not out of the muzzle. Anton collapsed onto the floor, a hole drilled through his head, and lay not far from Marina. Indeed his clenched fist touched her.

"I still do not know where this bullet came from. I can't understand what can have happened. Any more than I can understand why Anton should have wished to kill me . . ."

When the boy reached this point in his story, the old lighthouse keeper gave an enigmatic smile. This smile was expressive simultaneously of satisfaction and of a certain regret, but more of satisfaction than regret.

"So you didn't guess that the bullet which saved your life was fired by me?" he asked Georgii. "When I began to be worried by your absence and set off in search of you, I was extremely surprised to meet three strangers on the path that runs from Anton's house to the bay. It was then that I decided to visit him, hoping to find you there. I hurried and, as you know, only just arrived in time . . ."

After a brief pause, he added in a very low voice: "Had I not killed him, he would have killed you, my son . . ."

He seemed to be seeking an excuse for an action which had doubtless taken him aback himself.

An absolute silence now reigned in the lighthouse, unbroken by either man. In this silence the sounds of the ocean were more plainly to be heard even than

usual, the rumble of the pebbles rolled by the waves and the shrill whistling of the wind.

It was once again the old man, usually so sparing with his words, who broke the silence.

"There is every reason to believe that the three whom you met, as did I, were friends—or former friends—of Anton's. What I cannot understand is why they should have killed the children and Marina. And how did they know that Anton and Marina were here?"

If Georgii was far from knowing the reasons behind the massacre, at least he could guess how the executioners had learned that their victims had sought refuge in this remotest of places . . .

But that was a story he would not tell, even to his father. What purpose could it serve, now that they were all dead? And so Georgii said nothing about the letter that Marina had written to the mainland, and which had been carried thither on the occasion of the ship's last visit to this shore, just one year ago . . .

2 FACING THE OCEAN

No, Georgii would not tell his father about the letter. He set off for the bay. The old man followed him. Georgii knew that the ship had long sailed away, that the captain had not waited for him, but he went nevertheless to the spot where the vessel had cast anchor. There, sunk in cheerless thought, he sat on a rock by the seashore, the better to observe the ocean. Normally he loved it deeply, that gray, severe and icy sea, but today he detested it. Perhaps because it had borne away the ship that was to have carried him too toward the great cities, with their houses of many stories, their wide streets where the motor cars passed and repassed at inconceivable speeds, toward all the sights that he had never seen . . .

The old man stood beside him, but he did not gaze out to sea. The ocean held no novelties for him, save perhaps a little flotsam floating far away. But the old lighthouse keeper was not watching the ocean, nor did he see the flotsam. His eyes rested upon his son, as if he were trying to divine what might be passing through the mind of his sad and silent Georgii. After a while the old man, usually so taciturn and reserved, began to speak. He spoke as if he were addressing no one—but before him, seated on a rock and plunged in thoughts that were plainly gloomy, was the son who, since the day of his birth, had shared his father's life in this sad place, cut off from all the world.

"You are thinking that our solitude will henceforth be more complete than ever. Those undesirable visitors, who came from the city and who brought with them their laws, which are the laws of the city, have overwhelmed your imagination. It was not without reason that I was displeased when I saw Anton and his wife set up their home here. Such contacts as we would be unable to avoid foreboded no good for us, of that I was certain. What is there disagreeable about our life here, on the ocean's edge, amid a virgin nature, far from the filth of man? What is better than this simple communion with nature which is ours? Do you imagine by any chance that life in the big cities is somehow preferable to this?"

As he asked this question, the old man was aware that his words no longer sounded as convincing in Georgii's ears as they had done . . . before the arrival of Anton and of Marina . . .

"The big cities . . . You would go away, and leave me alone, in order to see the big cities. That is why you took our best silver fox pelts aboard the ship? That is why I had to search for you everywhere, fearful lest some misfortune had befallen you? But I found you, just in time . . ."

The shadow of a smile seemed to light up his tired face.

"How could I have borne such sorrow, my son, as would have been mine had I arrived one second later?"

Now he was speaking directly to his son. But Georgii did not answer him. He remained seated on his rock, gazing ceaselessly at the gray and silky ocean. He was still deeply affected by the recent past, by the horrors and sorrows he had witnessed. He continued silent, absorbed in his thoughts. He did not reply to his father. Perhaps this silence, this withdrawal within himself, would henceforth be a marked characteristic of his, even as it was of his father. But perhaps also curiosity, the attraction which would have drawn him across the sea to those strange cities where life is like a fairy tale, would one day conquer the other. In which case he would patiently and resignedly await the arrival of the next ship or else would embark upon some other unforeseen adventure.

"The city, the big city," the old man went on . . . Once again he did not seem to be talking to anyone. It was as though he were speaking to himself, while his words were intended for Georgii. "You wanted to go and see it, the big city. But instead the big city came to us, with its people. You've seen them: you have

learned for yourself that what they have to bring us is no good."

He added nothing to these last words, which he doubtless regarded as convincing enough. But Georgii's stubborn silence could hardly confirm him in this. Nevertheless the old man said no more, for he did not wish to destroy the effect of his last remarks. His unaccustomed eloquence had dried up as suddenly as it had gushed forth.

The wind was rising, blowing across the ocean. It was turning cold. The waves almost reached up to the spot where Georgii was seated, with his father standing beside him.

They were alone here on this deserted shore, alone in what seemed an infinity of space.

Turning his back on the ocean, the old man laid a hand on Georgii's shoulder. The boy got slowly to his feet and followed his father in silence to the canoe. It would carry them across the bay to the rocks on which rose their home, the lighthouse.

They reached the lighthouse, still in silence.

And then the old man spoke. To Georgii? To himself? To nobody?

"It is time to light the lamp . . ."

Its rays poured out over the water.

And in its light, far away, it was now possible to see patches of oil and grease and the flotsam that the old lighthouse keeper had not noticed, a little time ago.

3 THE END OF THE SHIP

It was only then that the lighthouse keeper understood the tragedy that had occurred only a few cable-lengths from the rock on which his lighthouse was built. He remembered that on returning from Anton's house he and his son had not reached the lighthouse before the whole coastline was blotted out by fog. He should have lit his lamp long before this:

There was no ship to be seen in the bay. The captain had apparently not waited for Georgii to come back before setting sail. But the sea here hid countless reefs. Without the lighthouse to guide him, the ship had doubtless foundered on one of these while making full speed ahead . . .

When a ship is ripped open in this manner it requires

only a few moments for water to fill her hull, so that she sinks to the bottom leaving upon the indifferent surface of the sea nothing save a little flotsam and a few large patches of oil.

It was these oily patches, glistening faintly in the rays cast by the lighthouse, which showed the spot at which she had sunk, carrying with her to the bottom the three men who had come here to perform their act of vengeance. The old man observed the oil from the top of the tower. Now he understood the tragedy. But he appeared to feel no remorse . . .

4 THE NOTE

Two days later the lighthouse keeper and his son revisited Anton's house. The dogs had to be fed and the corpses buried. It was then that they found, on Marina's body, the following note:

All baseness must be paid for. You thought to escape the vengeance of a people you had betrayed. Have you forgotten what the people were saying in the days when you, yes you, were working with and for its enemies? "Not an eye for an eye, but for one eye both eyes. Not a tooth for a tooth, but for one tooth the whole jawbone." The hour when you must expiate the crimes you committed against your own people has come.

Marina did not wish to leave. She forgives you. Perhaps she still loves you, despite everything. And this, for me,

is her unforgivable crime. You are lucky. The boat cannot wait. This has saved your life. But who knows whether you will not henceforth be more dead than the dead.

If the old man had known how to read, he would thus easily have found the answer to the questions which puzzled him: why had they murdered Marina and her children?

But he did not know how to read. And Georgii, despite the progress he had made under Marina's tuition, still scarcely knew his letters, above all when they were written by hand. Nevertheless he took the note back to the lighthouse with him, as well as the Russian primers and Anton's journal which he had discovered beneath the mattress of the bed. In a few months, or a few years, perhaps he would have taught himself enough to understand a little more about this tragedy that had taken place on the ocean's edge and in which, without suspecting it, he himself had had a part to play. The old man would then say to him, with a satisfied smile: "You see, I delivered poor Anton from an atrocious condition, life . . ."

You thought I was an opportunist, like all the others. You were wrong. I am above all else a Communist. A real one. For me communism is life itself. For that cause, and its victory, I would give all my blood, to the very last drop.

You thought to escape your punishment. But it is I who determined that you should not, I, who was your brother. But you are no longer my brother. You are now only my despicable enemy. And as such all you deserve is death.

For a Communist, to carry out your execution can only

be an honor. And this honor has been bestowed upon me, who was once your brother.

You have caused the death of so many of our people that death itself is too good for you. Nothing can expiate your crimes. Not even your death. Henceforth life alone can be bad enough for you . . .

When Georgii had at last learned to read these words, scribbled on the back of the note, the old lighthouse keeper would know that one of the three men he had seen long ago, the one with Anton's build and the heavy, graying mustache, was another Sviriagin, Vassilii.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Writing of Stephan Strogoff, Joseph Kessel tells us that he "was born in Moscow, in 1929. . . . He was brought up, formed, taught and indoctrinated exactly as were all the other boys with whom he worked and played. The political system into which he grew up seemed to him as natural and inevitable as the air he breathed. His material circumstances left nothing to be desired. . . . He entered the Faculty of Letters. . . . He worked hard, and with success. . . . He should have been happy . . . but he wasn't.

". . . Gradually he began to understand: what he was missing was liberty . . . that of expression, of the spirit. He realized that he could not speak as he might wish about a book, an essay, an article, neither to his professor nor even to his fellow students. . . . He decided to make his way illegally to France. . . . He was aware that if he were captured he must be prepared for the most fearful punishment.

"Since then Strogoff has never ceased to compare . . . the two worlds—that which he has left behind him, and the new one that he has found here [in Paris].

"He thinks that there are here abysses of poverty, monstrous wealth, dramas of man's exploitation by man, such as are impossible in Russia, where the State is the only employer of labor and cares for its citizens from the cradle to the grave. But he also knows the price that the State exacts for that care. . . . He would merge these two universes into one, taking from each that which is better, and thus creating a single, happy nation for all humanity."

His first novel, *The Russians*, was written in French and appeared in Paris in 1959. *The Idealists*, his second novel, is now in preparation.

