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IVAN IVANOVICH

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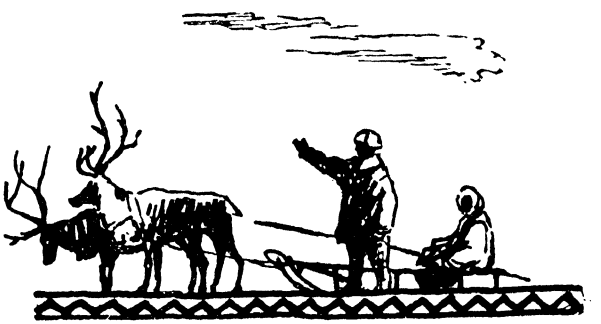


A. Kommerell

ANTONINA KOPTAYEVA

IVAN IVANOVICH

A novel in two parts



FOREIGN
LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
Moscow 1952

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN

BY MARGARET WETTLIN

DESIGNED

BY A. A. VASIN

Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

CONTENTS

	Page
AUTHOR'S PREFACE	9
PART ONE	15
PART TWO	291

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

I was born in a small mining settlement in the Soviet Far East on November 4, 1909. When I was only two years old, my father was killed by bandits, leaving my mother with three small children. My mother was a woman of little education. At the age of eight she was sent to work on a farm, and from that time on earned her own living. After my father's death she had great difficulty in supporting us. And so, while still a schoolgirl, I went with her to work by the day.

In 1916 we moved from the taiga to Zeya-Pristan, a small town located in the valley of a river of the same name. There I attended a seven-year school. The town was surrounded by lakes formed when the river changed its course, and beyond the lakes rose conical wooded hills. The proximity of the taiga influenced our whole lives. Often we went there in search of berries and mushrooms. Even the town park was a wild dense wood where we gathered brush for firewood. The brightest memories of my childhood are associated with these woods and forests. And indeed, one need not be a child to fall under the spell of the magnificent scenery of the Far East. The mighty, fast-flowing Zeya River; rocky cliffs; streams rushing through steep gorges which are the habitat of wild goats and rams; mountains covered with oaks and blue larches; meadows overgrown with lush grass and large flowers, so surfeited with sun and rain that they can only be gathered in armfuls, like wheat. In autumn the wooded hills become bright carpets, their red, violet, and orange tints prismed through the golden air. Then comes winter, with frosts that take one's breath away, with such blue, moonlit nights, such a creaking of sledge runners, such majestic snowfalls, that it seems winter has lavished all her strength and beauty on our Far East. Perhaps that is why, as a child, I loved to work out-of-doors, in field and garden. In the winter I preferred fetching

water and chopping wood to working in the house. Only a book could keep me indoors.

But I had little time to satisfy the passion for reading which I early developed. Especially was this true in the summer, when the garden had to be hoed, the geese to be tended, excursions made to the forest. In the spring I sold bouquets of lilies-of-the-valley and other wild flowers. No work was too hard for me—I was thin, but very strong and agile, with a round face, grey eyes, and a shock of straight, reddish hair. The children on our street called me the Red Cat, probably because of my rosy cheeks and my skill in climbing fences and defending myself with my fingernails.

I always received full marks at school.

When eight years old I suddenly began to write poetry, and suffered from this malady until I was twenty-two. My verses were printed in the wall newspaper at school and read at parties held in our club. My teachers prophesied a literary career for me and urged me to develop my bent.

In 1923 the newly opened gold-fields of Aldan became the talk of the day. Two years later my mother left us in the care of our grandmother and went to Aldan, where she got a job as charwoman in an office at the gold-fields.

I became the head of the family. In the winter I studied, in the summer I did farm work by the day. When sixteen I followed my mother's example by going on foot to the Aldan gold-fields in Yakutia. There I worked as a typist, as a shop-assistant, as a social worker among Russian and Yakut women. And all the while I continued writing verse.

No one who has lived in our Soviet northland can ever forget it. The exotic beauty of the scenery, now enhanced by evidences of the seething new life; the growth and development of small nationalities which were once doomed to extinction—these things fire the imagination and make one want to write. And I began to write.

The first time I came to Moscow I showed people my verse and asked for criticism and guidance. The comrades who read my verse told me it was bad. I had with me some pages from my diary, which I also showed. I was advised to write prose.

In 1932 I went to Kolyma River by way of the Sea of Okhotsk. What I saw overwhelmed me. Here, at the earth's end I found bits

of what might have been Moscow. I decided to try my hand at prose, and wrote a journalistic account called *Kolyma Gold.* It was accepted by the "Young Guard Publishers" and from that day to this I have devoted myself seriously to literary work.

Once more I went to Aldan and visited the places where I had lived as a girl. I found that wonderful changes had been wrought in the life of the taiga dwellers. Modern settlements had sprung up in the taiga. The primitive labour of early prospectors had been supplanted by big enterprises equipped with modern machinery. The easing of the work process had drawn many women into industry. Now many of the specialists were native Yakuts. Prospectors who had always worked alone, now were employed in large mines. Civilization had come to the taiga. I saw schools, clubs, electricity, modern houses. No longer was life difficult here. Vegetables were being raised, and the settled population was growing, for life in the taiga had become pleasant and easy.

Under the influence of these impressions, I wrote my first novel, called *Luck,* and compiled a book of articles for the "Glav-Zoloto Publishers." After that I took the entrance examinations to the Literary Institute in Moscow and was matriculated. There I combined study with work. I applied myself diligently to my studies, for I realized how important it was that a writer be armed with knowledge. While in my second year, I wrote the novel *Tovarishch Anna.*

At that time the editors of the magazine *October,* in which my first novel had been published, offered me invaluable literary criticism and advice. My second novel *Tovarishch Anna,* as well as *Ivan Ivanovich* which followed it, were likewise published in *October.*

My observations of Soviet women led me to the conclusion that only when a woman actively participates in work of social significance can she become truly attractive, the desired companion of her husband and children, sharing their thoughts, enriching their family life. A woman whose work is in every way equal to that of a man learns to be independent, becomes confident of her ability, develops strength and integrity of character, and this in its turn facilitates the development of her creative powers.

The innumerable women in the Soviet Union who are truly advanced in their ideas and outlook formed the prototype of Anna,

my heroine. Olga Arzhanova, a woman of an entirely different type, is also taken from life.

In *Tovarishch Anna* I sought to portray a wholesome Soviet family, to show the strength of character of a workingwoman who faced life unflinchingly and who found support in the collective—people to whom she was essential, and who were as essential to her as the air she breathed. I tried to show a truth which my observations of life have often brought home to me, namely, that the most seductive woman lacks the power to disrupt a family in which love and friendship form the basis of the relationship between husband and wife.

In *Ivan Ivanovich* I am concerned with quite a different problem: Why did Dr. Arzhanov's wife leave him? Why was he, a leading Soviet surgeon and public figure, unable to build a happy family with his wife Olga, a beautiful woman, a solicitous wife, and a loving mother? Why did Ivan Ivanovich, who loved his wife deeply, allow another to become her friend and advisor?

Olga is not an ideal Soviet woman, but it was the character of just such an average woman, consumed by the desire to find a place for herself in the world of broader interests, that I wished to reveal.

Olga is honest, sincere, and unspoiled, but she is weak-willed. She is not satisfied with a life limited to home and family. She is aware of the achievements of Soviet women in the field of science and culture, and of the respect in which Soviet workingwomen are held. Her daily contact with Ivan Ivanovich and the Khizhnyak family only makes her more keenly conscious of the joy of achievement which she herself never experiences.

She makes an effort to find a place for herself in society, but Ivan Ivanovich, absorbed in the big job he is doing, looks condescendingly upon these efforts, and treats her as if she were a child. This is his mistake, and it results in a bitter and disastrous conflict.

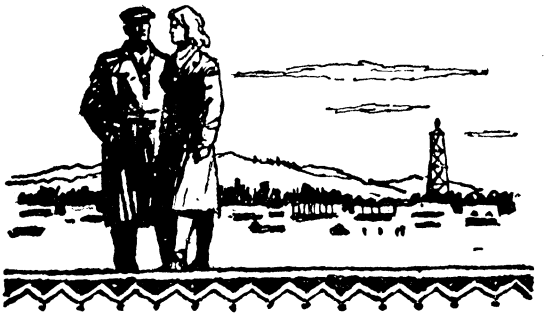
It is necessary that someone pay Olga serious attention and offer her support. And that someone is found in the person of Tavrov, a chance acquaintance who becomes her true friend.

I do not blame Olga for what she did. The love she felt for Tavrov was founded on friendship and mutual respect. On the con-

trary, I respect her for at last finding her life work, even if she was twenty-eight when she did so and might never have found it without Tavrov's aid. At least she did not follow in the footsteps of the commonplace Pava Romanovna.

At present I am writing the second book of the trilogy *Ivan Ivanovich.* It is to be called *Friendship,* and will show a group of Soviet doctors and nurses during the defence of Stalingrad. The reader will again meet Ivan Ivanovich and other characters whose acquaintance was made in the first book. I hope to finish *Friendship* in 1952.

A. Koptayeva



PART ONE



1

THE SHORE, receding, extended above the expanse of water in a vast ragged rim of mountains.

"Now it can be seen to advantage—spreading itself out in all its beauty at parting!" thought Olga, waving a glove, though the buildings of the port were already out of sight.

A little later the headlands, fringed with foam, also disappeared, as did the small hills in the foreground, so densely covered with green forest. It seemed as if the whole earth were gradually submerging in the yellowish waves of the ocean.

Now Olga turned to look ahead, and felt her cheeks nipped by a fresh salt breeze. For seven days she would sail this sea!

"I wonder if I'll get seasick," she thought with a little laugh. "I was once a good sailor, but that was eight years ago. Perhaps father and the girls had good reason to shed a tear over me when they saw me off—to the ends of the earth."

Olga loved to travel. She was strangely moved by new places and new people. This time the wealth of her impressions surpassed all expectations.

Now she was in the birthplace of the morning. She imagined the eight-hour journey of the dawn, relaying the sun from one end of her homeland to the other, and looked at her watch. Five o'clock in the morning. On the western borders, night had set in. And beyond those borders another war was raging. In May, Hitler's forces, having occupied Denmark, had entered Holland, while further south they had crossed Luxemburg and reached Belgium. Fierce battles were being waged in the air. It was hard for Olga to reconcile the conception of Dutch life conveyed by the paintings of great Flemish masters, with plunging planes and the din and smoke of battle. She called to mind the cheerless, industrial Belgium described in Verhaeren's poems.

"War!" said Olga aloud, as she gazed into the distance.

Now the thin shoreline had sunk completely into the sea, whose waves, freed of all fetters, mounted ever higher. Ah, to cross this sea quickly, as quickly as possible!

By noon the wind had risen. When Olga climbed to the upper deck she had difficulty making her way from the companionway to the saloon. At the door she ran into a young engineer named Tavrov. She had first seen him at the Trust's agency in Primorsk, then while boarding the boat. Now she gave him a friendly nod.

"We haven't really met as yet," said he, taking off his cap to reveal a shock of dark brown hair.

"Oh yes we have," retorted Olga, for some reason not carrying out her intention to brush past. But a doorway under violent attack by the wind is no place to linger, so she quickly held out her hand, saying: "Arzhanova—Olga Pavlovna."

Together they went over to a table by the window. The waves were very high now. From where she was sitting Olga could see the bow of the boat lift and plunge, and the sight was not comforting. Still unaccustomed to the roll, she got up and sat with her back to the window.

"Just a little precaution," said she, taking off her light coat and tossing it on the chair beside her.

"What a lot of sunshine you've brought with you!" exclaimed Tavrov involuntarily as he caught sight of her tawny arms, bare to the elbow.

"That isn't sunburn," replied Olga, adjusting the bracelet of her watch. "My grandfather was as swarthy and black-haired as a gypsy, my grandmother was blue-eyed, and had such flaxen hair that no one could tell when she turned grey. They produced a whole tribe of dark-complexioned, black-haired, blue-eyed children. I'm a sport among them, though I did keep the dark complexion."

"And what do the people of your tribe devote themselves to?" asked Tavrov, half jokingly.

"Whatever they have a gift for. There are teachers, musicians, and engineers among us. My father is a professor of chemistry. He adores his work. No one can lecture like he does; he can make even me, who has no feeling for chemistry, enjoy it. At home he's very kind, but absent-minded—touchingly so. My mother died many years ago and he never married again." A wistful expression supplanted the fond smile with which Olga had spoken of her father.

"And you?" asked Tavrov quietly. "What do you do?"

"Me?" Olga's brows contracted, but, noting the look of genuine interest on Tavrov's face, she said: "At present I don't do anything. That is—not because I don't want to, but because I've failed at everything I've tried." She felt vexed with herself, and ill at ease. Why should she be confiding in this man? She bit her lip, and yet an urge to finish what she had started to say, to justify herself, or perhaps even to seek advice, prompted her to go on. "I've tried many things," she said uncertainly. "I studied at the Machine-Building Institute, but didn't finish. I took a course in bookkeeping, and then, on my husband's advice, began to study medicine. But I soon dropped it. I couldn't stand anatomy. Later I took a course in English, but I didn't finish that either."

She stopped. Her wandering gaze came to rest on the heavy draperies which were blown away from the door one minute and sucked tight against the jamb the next.

"Perhaps you have simply not discovered your calling—the field you are most suited for," said Tavrov gently. "And that explains all the trials and errors. Two institutes, and those courses besides—all for nothing."

"Yes, all for nothing," repeated Olga, a note of hopelessness creeping into her voice. "I'm ashamed when people ask me what I do."

At that moment the plates and glasses suddenly slid to the edge of the table, almost falling into Olga's lap. She held them as she glanced quickly at the waiter who came running to her assistance, then at Tavrov.

"Are we in for a storm? Let's go look, Boris Andreyevich, I've never seen a storm at sea."

"Apparently you relish excitement," he laughed.

"Oh no, I'm really a dreadful coward. But I would like to see this."

The wind nearly knocked them down when they stepped out on deck. On every hand mountainous waves reared and clashed, their foamy crests plunging into watery craters. The wind snatched up clouds of spray and whisked them away, while the waves, accumulating force in movement, mounted, crashed, only to rise again in an incessant surge forward. The entire visible surface of the sea, white with foam, lifted writhing waters to a leaden sky.

"What a storm!" said Tavrov into Olga's very ear. "Probably there's been a typhoon somewhere and this is the result."

"Which is what the sailors call 'the ninth wave'?" asked Olga, freeing her elbow from Tavrov's hold and grasping the railing.

"The very highest," he replied, ignoring the obvious way in which she had disengaged her arm. "That one, I suppose," turning his face to avoid the spray as a great wave broke against the side of the boat. "Or no—this one!" as another led him to brush the water off his clothes. "Come along, or you'll get soaked."

"Oh, I don't mind. It's warm. It must be awful in the autumn though. Freezing. I'm just beginning to appreciate the work of fishermen. Once I saw some Volga fishing boats set out for the open sea. What tiny little boats they were!" Olga pushed back a lock of hair and went on in an energetic tone. "It was one of those hot blue days in late autumn. The sand dunes burned fiercely yellow in the sun. The whole village came out to see the men off. And I remember the peculiar, deep-seated anxiety that could be sensed in the crowd. I understand it now. Just look at those waves! A mad, blind force—and man pitting himself against it!"

"Yes—not an easy thing," assented Tavrov. "The sea demands rugged people!"

2

It must have been morning. Grey light came seeping through the half-open hatch, ran in a ribbon down the companionway, and faintly illuminated the double-decked bunks built roughly, but securely, into the walls. The steamer was tossing as much as ever.

Olga raised herself on one elbow and glanced about. No one appeared to be anxious to rise. Nor was she, so she settled back on her pillow. Most passengers had kept to their beds for the last three days, but Olga had forced herself to get up and move about, as a reward for which she had had the pleasure of hearing Tavrov compliment her on her fortitude. He slept in another part of the boat but, like Olga, took his meals in the saloon, which served as dining room on this freighter. He too had been in too much of a hurry to wait for the passenger boat.

"A pleasant sort," thought Olga, as she recalled his frank, open face. But her thoughts quickly turned to her husband, with whom she was so soon to be reunited. For two years he had been working as surgeon in the Chazhma gold-fields. She and her little daughter had remained with her father in Moscow, where she was taking a course in English. Her husband had come to Moscow during his holiday the preceding summer and had promised to return for good this year, but circumstances had prevented it.

"I wonder how he took the news," thought Olga. "We shouldn't have parted for so long a time; Lena and I should have come here with him." The memory of her little girl, lost forever, of the baby hands to which her breath could bring no warmth, made Olga's heart contract and her eyes fill with tears. "I'll never leave him again," she resolved, wiping her eyes. "If I am not to make anything of myself, at least I can devote my life to him and lighten his work."

Meanwhile, the usual morning stir had begun; people were coughing, talking in low voices, putting on their clothes. The boat kept on rocking. Whenever a particularly big wave hit it, it shuddered throughout its length. After each blow it seemed to sigh and slowly rise again, only to be struck down by the next impact. And each time Olga could hear the long rush of water over the decks.

"What if we should never arrive!" she thought, listening to the groans of her neighbour.

The thought chilled and depressed her. She rose, dressed quickly, and a few minutes later was climbing the companionway that kept slipping from under her feet. She must get out of that hold! She must reach the deck!

The sea was still white and churning.

"Here are the 'wild elements' for you!" thought Olga, clutching a cable and gazing fearfully at the waves and the tattered clouds racing past, almost grazing the funnels of the steamer.

Disconcerting was the sight of rows of wet horses standing in open stalls, and the soaked tarpaulins covering freight securely lashed to deck. The sea kept washing over the boat, yet the sailors went about their work unperturbed. One of them who passed was even whistling. Apparently for them, seasoned seamen, this storm held no terrors. Reassured, Olga made for the upper deck.

The wind struck her full in the face, snatching her breath away, but she grit her teeth and pressed forward. She was young and strong and not to be intimidated by the fury of the wind.

"Hold on, or you'll find yourself overboard! Here, let me help you!" called down a familiar voice as Olga seized the railing of the companion ladder.

She raised her head to see Tavrov.

"Don't bother, I'll manage. I'm not a feather, to be so easily blown away."

They went in for breakfast, and when the meal was over Tavrov said: "Do you play chess?"

"How could we play with the boat rocking so?" asked Olga, noting how the water splashed about in the carafe standing in a socket in the table.

"There's a special set for playing at sea—the chessmen have pegs that fit into holes."

Tavrov found difficulty in concentrating on the first game, and Olga won. That made him try harder the second time, but he lost anyway.

"Who taught you to play so well?" he asked in some surprise.

"My husband," she answered. "He says that to anticipate the course of a disease, to guess what turn it will take and make the proper decision in treating it, is as difficult as winning a game of chess from a strong partner. That intrigued me. I don't like surgery, or medicine on the whole; I can't bear the sight of blood. But I learned how to play a good game of chess so as to appreciate what it meant to solve an intricate problem."

3

"So your husband's a surgeon," said Tavrov musingly when they were sitting on deck two days later. "I seem to have heard of him. Arzhanov. Yes, of course. Surgery is the most effective field of medicine. A person who finds his calling there can do lots of good."

"Do you think one must have a calling to enter any particular field?" asked Olga.

Tavrov laughed.

"Indeed I do. Why did you leave the Machine-Building Institute? Because you found it boring, I suppose. A dry subject. But try to convince a born mechanical engineer of that! A person can learn to do most things, but there's little use in learning to do something you

aren't interested in. You can fool anyone, even yourself, but you can't fool your job. And you choose it not for an hour, or a day, but for a whole lifetime. Like the person you love," added Tavrov with unexpected fervour. "It's even more important than love. There aren't many great men who have sacrificed themselves to love, but all the world's finest people have given their lives to the work of their choice. Whatever made you go in for machine building?" he asked with amiable inquisitiveness.

A glance at him out of the corner of her eye quenched the flare of resentment his question had occasioned.

"I had to take up *something* when I finished secondary school, so I entered this Institute."

"Without even knowing what machine building was like? Without ever having set foot inside a plant? Without having talked it over with people who make machines?"

Olga shook her head.

"Think of that! And you say it was boring. How could it be otherwise? What could be more boring than to study higher mathematics, logarithms, formulas and equations without seeing the machines they stand for, machines which enter the life of the people like a new song, like a wonderful gift. In our country, to build a machine is to build socialism. And you say 'I had to take up something'!"

"I see you can be nasty," said Olga quietly.

"Why nasty? It's not your words I object to. I can understand making a mistake when you're young. You didn't think things over seriously, you didn't weigh them properly. But why the course in bookkeeping? What made you think that would be more interesting? A person could finish ten institutes at that rate, but what would be the good of it?" Tavrov glanced at Olga's troubled face and continued with winning earnestness. "Of course, I could pay you compliments; I could call you a remarkable person, and say it was just because you were so demand-

ing that the things ordinary people were taught didn't satisfy you. To have tried and rejected two institutes! I could turn your head with all sorts of praise. But I see you are a person with a mind of your own. The way you play chess proves that. And so I can be frank with you."

"Well, if it's a matter of being frank, I must confess that I left the Machine-Building Institute because of my private affairs," said Olga impetuously. "As for its being a dry subject—" for a moment she was glum and silent. "As for its being boring—I found that excuse later. Rationalizing, I suppose," she added defiantly. "But what about you—are you satisfied with your work?"

"Very. Not with myself as a metallurgist, of course, but with the work. I finished the Moscow Institute of Non-Ferrous Metals. Remember the building—near Kaluzhskaya Square?" Tavrov grew thoughtful, recalling his student days. "I love Moscow, and I still love that Institute. I find it isn't childhood, but one's student days that are the happiest time in a person's life—that is, if he's been lucky enough to go on with his education. I wouldn't change my profession for anything in the world, even if I'm not a genius at it. I've already told you this is my second trip to Chazhma. The first time I worked in Kholodnikan. Then I was called back to Moscow where I did office work for a year or so before I got permission to return to production."

"And you say you love Moscow," said Olga, still glum.

"I can love her from afar," said Tavrov. "My job takes me wherever there's gold—to the Urals, or Siberia. But the Far North has a peculiar charm. You can't forget it; it keeps luring you back."

"Perhaps *she* keeps luring you back," laughed Olga.

Tavrov blushed, but answered seriously:

"No, there's no one waiting for me there."

They went on talking, sitting on some logs that were fastened to the deck. Above them and below them were groups of people basking in the sun, like peasants resting at the edge of the village. The change in the weather had cheered people. Having nothing else to do, they played cards and even started a chorus (now they were holding a trial of voices, for which someone on the other side of the horse-stalls was playing an accompaniment on the accordion). The horses—dappled, and dun, and black—heightened the resemblance to a village scene. Beyond the railing gleamed the placid surface of the sea. White gulls flashed through the air, and white sails resembled the gulls. The ship passed some islands close at hand.

"And what about you—are you glad to be going to Chazhma?" asked Tavrov after a short pause.

"Oh, yes," replied Olga, brightening. "But it's not the North that's calling me; it's the man I love. If the North is all you say it is, it will hold a double charm for me." Olga smiled as she gazed at the dipping horizon. Was it the sky that was rising and falling, or the sea? They both seemed to be breathing, gently rocking the ship with each breath.

"I've spent more time in the south," Olga went on. "I was a spoiled child, the youngest in the family, and my sisters always saw to it that I had a pleasant summer. We had lots of relatives, all of them well off, and somehow they never found me in the way." Olga gave a low, delightful little laugh. "It's a good thing I didn't prove too susceptible—I certainly was given every opportunity to become an Oblomov."*

"And become one you did," Tavrov almost said as he glanced at her, imagining to himself how her family must

* *Oblomov*—An extremely lazy character from a novel by Goncharov.

have spoiled their darling. "Perhaps that's why she never learned to see things through," he thought.

Olga was pretty, but he felt that her charm lay not in her looks. When he was with her, it was as if he had always known her. She could make fun of people without giving offense. He liked to sit beside her and hear her guess who the passengers were.

"That old man's a bookkeeper just returning from his holiday. He's tight-fisted and a fearful crank," she said, following the meticulous gestures of a bald, thick-set man who was watching a game of bridge. He was wearing highly-polished boots and a worn but well-brushed suit with a knot of loud tie showing above his vest.

"Perhaps he's a supply-man."

"Oh, no. Those people are always much more easy-going and have better complexions."

"Weren't you afraid of spoiling your complexion when you took that course in bookkeeping?" asked Tavrov with good-natured sarcasm.

"Who do you think *he* is?" said Olga, her eyes on the bronzed face of a young man who moved with ease and self-confidence. "How strong he is! And those eyes—grey, slightly narrowed, with premature wrinkles at the corners—the eyes of an out-of-doors man."

"Possibly a geologist," said Tavrov.

"No, a geologist wouldn't stare at the sea as he does. I think he pilots a fishing vessel. Can't you imagine him gazing unswervingly into the oncoming waves?"

"I can," said Tavrov, as if he really had seen the young man at the wheel of a fishing smack.

"And that man in the mackintosh looks like a former priest," said Olga. "Note the unctuous expression; but his eyes bore through you like a drill."

"You're wrong. He's a teacher of literature. He and I boarded the boat together and we sleep in adjoining bunks."

"Then he's a hypocrite. You can see the meanness fairly oozing out of him; but I can imagine how touchingly he would read lectures on morality."

Tavrov laughed:

"You're probably right. I've already had a little tiff with him. He keeps praising the classics and belittling Soviet literature. It's only for the sake of the money he's come North."

. . . . . .

"Do you feel how cold it's become?" said Olga slowly. "Even though the sun's out. It seems to me the climate has changed, and so has the colour of the sea."

She got up and made her way past the people on deck to the railing. Tavrov followed her. They stood gazing down into the water.

Two sharks overtook the steamer, their sharp fins protruding above the surface, their slim bodies flashing past like torpedoes.

"Murderous fish, those," remarked Tavrov. "Some varieties of shark are viviparous. The minute the young are born they set out in search of prey."

"Did you hear the broadcast today?" asked Olga. "The British have surrounded the German forces in Narvik and are firing at them from battleships. The Germans are putting up stiff resistance. They don't hesitate to fight on other people's territory. The Norwegians would probably be only too glad to see their enemies and their defenders drown each other."

"Both of them are dead set on getting Norwegian iron ore," said Tavrov. "The only thing they're interested in is their own welfare—nothing else. Every man for himself. What talk of defence can there be?"

"Their own welfare," repeated Olga. "There was once a Norwegian who was only interested in his own welfare. Peer Gynt. But while thinking only of himself, he never *was* himself. Have you read Ibsen's play?"

"Which are you more interested in—literature or politics?" asked Tavrov.

Olga turned quickly, sensing that he was mocking her. For the first time he saw the colour rise to her cheeks.

"Everyone in our country is interested in politics," she said evasively. "Even children. Each of us knows that his little 'I' is bound up with the whole life of society. And society can't exist without politics."

"Quite right," smiled Tavrov. "But what about literature?"

"You and I are heading for a quarrel!" said Olga, this time really incensed. Boyishly thrusting her hands into her coat pockets, she turned away.

"Oh, no we're not," he said quickly. "There's no reason to be offended. I only wanted to find out what you had a bent for."

Olga gave an angry little snort.

"I haven't the slightest interest in literature—except as a reader. I've never even written poetry. I've no talent at all—not for music, or painting, or anything else. And why should you keep trying to find me a calling?"

"Because I think it's a pity you have wasted so many years of your life and seem to think there's nothing you can do. It's not enough to have been given the right to an education and to work. We've got to make *use* of this right. Why should you have dropped your studies because you married? Forgive me if I sound harsh, but I've known many girls who have kept right on studying after they were married, even after they had children."

"Oh, what's the use talking about it?" said Olga with a helpless shrug.

"Just see how you've thrown up your hands!" exclaimed Tavrov, as genuinely vexed as if Olga had been his younger sister. "How easily you women surrender to habits and customs of the past! You're as tied to your petty little household affairs as a miser to his gold, and you subordinate yourselves to a man without a murmur. The age-old tradition makes itself felt." The sight of Olga's distressed face warned Tavrov that he was being too vehement, but, incapable of calling a retreat, he concluded in the same vein: "Did you know that only in this very year of 1940 a law was passed prohibiting the wearing of the *paranja* by the women of Uzbekistan?"

"What's that got to do with me?"

"If the women of Uzbekistan hadn't started working beside the men, this law wouldn't have been passed for many years to come."

4

For the rest of the day Olga was angry with Tavrov and avoided meeting him, but the next morning she was the first to speak.

"I've thought it over and decided it's more profitable to hear the unpleasant truth than pleasant flattery," she said.

Before Tavrov had a chance to reply, their attention was distracted by a cry. Beyond the deck, piled high with logs and crates and barrels, out there where the blue horizon had been rhythmically rising and falling, gleamed a snowy expanse covered with black dots.

"Ice!" breathed Olga in a trembling voice. "Ice, and seals. I thought we'd had enough adventure!"

Soon they heard the first dull thud of the ice against the prow. The huge floes seemed purposely attacking them from right and left, cracking and splitting and rearing as they met with unexpected resistance.

"They too seem to be following a definite course," said Olga, watching them in dismay. "This will hold us up again."

"And for some time," replied Tavrov. "Can't be helped—that's what the sea is like up here. Almost all its northern waters are frozen all winter long. This is ice that has broken loose and been carried south by the current. During its journey it has melted—grown thinner and crushable, fortunately for us. Even so it will cause us trouble enough. We can't cut straight through it, and to detour—we're late as it is."

Having suffered slight damage, the steamer changed its course to northeast, but the ice kept bearing down on it from all sides, sometimes advancing in a solid field. Its dazzling whiteness under the low-hanging blue sky made the days seem brighter than ever; even the nights were light, and it seemed to Olga that she was entering a new world. She looked at the lumpish seals, nimble only in the open water, and imagined how Ivan Ivanovich's fingers would itch for his gun if he saw them. She did not realize that such big game was not tempting for a true sportsman. Olga's face became transformed when she thought of her husband. She was bringing him many presents, and of late she kept unpacking them, and, in her mind's eye, trying them on him, talking to him as she did so.

Tavrov missed her. In fact, when she did not appear he wandered about the boat not knowing what to do with himself. At first he attributed his state to enforced idleness. He tried to read, but neither a popular new novel nor the latest work on gold mining could hold his attention.

One morning, on waking late, he heard strange noises coming from the deck. Quickly he dressed and

climbed the companionway. He found some people sawing wood.

"The fuel's given out," he concluded. "That's only natural—we're already five days behind schedule."

Suddenly he caught sight of Olga among the labourers. With the sleeves of her sweater pushed up and her hair confined in a kerchief, she was operating a double-handled saw with the strong young man whose profession she had recently tried to guess. Each seemed pleased with the other. While obviously inexperienced, Olga gripped the saw firmly, and all her movements were strong and filled with buoyant energy.

"Come and help, lazybones!" she called out on catching sight of Tavrov.

Now she was standing with lowered saw, wiping her flushed face with a dainty handkerchief while waiting for the next log to be rolled up.

Ice floes, still dotted with seals, were all about them. The seals lay motionless, with outspread flaps.

"They look as if they were frozen fast," said Olga, glancing down at them. "Sometimes it seems to me they're the same floes and the same seals circling round and round us. Where could so many have come from? They probably like the hum of our sawing."

"I don't doubt it," said Tavrov with a smile.

"Why don't you help, instead of walking about with that smirk on your face, like a foreign tourist?" said Olga crossly, though everything about her showed how thoroughly she was enjoying the learning of this new and simple skill.

"I get more pleasure out of watching you," said Tavrov.

"Aha, thinks you, at last she's found her calling!" said Olga with a twinkle in her eye.

"A sharp tongue you have," said he, suddenly diffident.

Olga laughed.

"It would give anybody a sharp tongue to have the trip drag out like this—creeping along when you want to fly! How I should love to spread my wings and soar away! And here I am tied to this freighter and collaborating in an act of diversion! Instead of building a house with this wood, we're about to burn it up! By the way, my partner is neither a pilot nor a geologist. He's a prospector." Olga raised the saw and asked anxiously, with a glance at the new log: "What if we exhaust the wood supply too?"

"Then we'll have to wait for a ship to come from the nearest port and tow us."

5

One grey day, enormous white columns rose out of the misty distance like the funnels of waterspouts. But they did not move. And suddenly the tension caused by their appearance was broken by someone's shouting: "Land!"

The waterspouts proved to be the snow lying in fissures of steep, rocky mountains along the shore. Only now, on approaching land, did the passengers realize how slowly their ship was moving.

"That's all right, we've almost reached Glubokoye," consoled Tavrov, noticing Olga's nervous impatience. "Soon we'll enter the bay and anchor there. A radio message said the bay is still covered with ice, and so boats can't be sent out to meet us."

"Why didn't they tell us so before?"

"They hoped the bay would clear, but a cold spell set in. Come on, let's have a last game of chess. Tonight we'll have arrived."

"Thank goodness!" said Olga with a sigh of relief as she followed Tavrov up the steep hatchway.

It was quiet in the saloon. Everyone was out on deck gazing at the shore, and the voice of the radio announcer sounded particularly loud after four days of silence during which the radio had been out of order. The news was being broadcast.

"The Ninth French Army has been defeated on the Maginot Line."

"A fine trick!" muttered Tavrov, forgetting his chess.

"The main blow was directed at Amiens," continued the voice of the announcer. "Calais is surrounded.... The surrender of the Belgian Army, half a million strong, has made it possible for German divisions to advance on Dunkirk...."

"When you think of what's happening out there!" said Olga, staring at the radio. "Why should France accept one defeat after another when she has five million soldiers? To lose everything so quickly! What if the Germans have better weapons and are determined to win? Surely the French could at least put up a fight. I suspect that their leaders have sold them out."

"Looks like it. Hear that? 'Commander-in-Chief Weigand has not launched a strong counterattack.' But he could have—he has the forces." Tavrov again fell silent as he listened to the announcer, then, smiling suddenly, he said: "What literary associations does this bring to mind?"

The steamer was towed into the bay of Glubokoye late that night. It resembled a sick animal, and the cries of its horn echoed hoarsely among the mountains of the shore. The passengers, worn out with waiting, had fallen asleep. Many of them, like Olga, did not hear the horn. She was dreaming of her husband: he was struggling towards her over the ices floes, jets of crystal-clear water springing up behind him at every step.

"How tired I am!" he said as he took her in his arms.

His brown eyes glowed with happiness, and his dark hair bristled as stubbornly as ever. Yes, it was he, her husband! So joyfully did her heart leap in her breast that she woke up.

The ship was standing still.

"Is it possible that we are still out at sea?" she thought.

Hastily making herself presentable, she went up on deck. The sight she saw almost caused her to cry out. Myriad lights were shining at the edge of the bay, beyond the blue stretch of ice. Strange seemed their shine under that pale, starless sky. The town proper sprawled at some distance from the shore. Ah, to reach it quickly, to walk down a street, to enter a house and close a door behind her, knowing that the house stood on solid earth!

"We're here!" thought Olga happily as she gazed at the steep cliffs, almost black, rising abruptly at the entrance to the bay. Bare rock. Here and there an isolated tree, battered by storms. And hovering above it all the white northern night, disturbed by the sounds of civilization.

"So this is Glubokoye!" Olga remembered that she still had to travel into the taiga before reaching her husband, but now everything seemed simple.

"If the ship can't make it, we'll just walk to shore over the ice," she said aloud, going over to the railing and looking down.

The ice was full of holes through which seals poked their heads from time to time. In some places groups of them stuck up like stumps.

"We won't have to walk, an icebreaker is being sent out," came Tavrov's voice at her elbow.

"Oh, how you frightened me!" said Olga with a start. "You mustn't steal up on people like that."

"I didn't. I just walked over," answered Tavrov. "Well, here we are," he added musingly.

6

As soon as Olga had had a bath and found out when a car would be leaving for the taiga, she was called to the telephone. It was Tavrov.

"I thought you had left already," he said. "Things happen quickly here—almost like in Moscow. Let's go have a look at the sea. You're sick of it? But it looks different here at Glubokoye, seen from the land. We'll walk through the port."

It turned out that here, in this remote town, where seals still swam in the bay, there was not only a hotel with all conveniences, but autobus lines as well.

The town of Ukamchan, separated from the port by low hills, boasted a surprising number of stone buildings. Here were six-story houses, asphalt streets, crowded pavements. Very attractive indeed. How many such towns, astonishing the traveller with their factories, theatres, and gardens, had sprung up within the last few years! And here were mountains besides—of solid rock; and snow still blanketing the northern slopes at the end of May; and bare-branched larches with their tops lopped off and their boughs drooping to the ground. Olga was so busy taking it all in that she was late for her appointment. Tavrov had to wait for some time.

The sun shone brightly, but gave little warmth. After the moist warmth of the port, it seemed even cold, though a few birds were chirping in the bare trees.

"Strange," mused Olga, when she had seated herself in the bus next to the window. "Those larches remind me of a vision I used to have as a child—perhaps I dreamed it, or got it out of a fairy tale: a brown house made of wood, with sliding doors—the sort they have in train compartments—and trees all around, with jagged branches like black lightning against a grey sky. The people living in the house—perhaps I invented them

later—were very tall and handsome, with dark skins, almost yellow. I was always certain the house and the people really existed. Perhaps I'll find them here."

"What a dreamer you are, Olga Pavlovna!" said Tavrov, touched and impressed to see how seriously she took her fancies.

The bus started off with an easy jolt and sped down the smooth highway, past cottages and large stone buildings and the trees of a park. From the top of a hill they had a view of the bay.

"Like a bright valley among these gloomy mountains," observed Olga.

Beyond the field of ice with roads cut into it by two steamers (a second one had recently docked, and now both of them rose like black towers beside the grey piers)—beyond this field of ice, which had been driven to shore but not broken by the tide, gleamed the open sea. There in the distance the waves heaved and glowed and shimmered. Olga found the scenery beautiful, but cold and alien.

The tide was going out.

"Just see! The ocean has pulled the waves of the shore under the ice like a snail withdrawing its head!" she said.

Again Olga became so absorbed in her impressions that she almost forgot her companion. Broad-bowed fishing *kungasi* were pulled up on the shore, and the fishermen walked out over the swollen ice.

"Let's go join them. The tide won't be coming in very soon," suggested Olga, turning off the path and climbing down to the sand, where she stepped lightly in her little boots among the broken willow bushes and overturned boats.

"You should have a whip in your hand," said Tavrov, overtaking her with difficulty.

"Why? Do I look like an animal-tamer?" she asked.

"Rather," he answered, and both of them laughed.

The port, like the town of Ukamchan, seemed strikingly large and new. During the construction of the docks, an enormous cliff had been dynamited. At that time there was a belief among the Evenns, handed down from generation to generation, that the bay had not always existed, but had suddenly and miraculously appeared. When, in preparation for the dynamiting, the inhabitants were warned to protect their windowpanes by pasting strips of paper over the glass, they feared that they themselves would be blown to smithereens along with the cliff, and that the waters of the sea would roll over their remains. But their fears proved groundless—the blasting caused no one the slightest harm.

This was what Tavrov told Olga as he walked behind her, swinging his arms like a schoolboy playing truant.

"Not long ago some people living on the bay dragged home a big crooked log all overgrown with moss," he said in an animated tone. "But when they started to saw it up they discovered it was a bone. Fancy that! The huge bone of some prehistoric animal. But look here!" Out of the sand protruded a vertebra the size of a cart wheel. Tavrov bent down and turned it over with both hands. "This is a bone for you!"

"It certainly belonged to something big!" agreed Olga, squinting from the sun, which was reflected in little pools among the stones, where grew fantastic plants resembling animals, and animals resembling plants. Little boys scurried about collecting shells, crabs, and small fish, and searching for flounders which had buried themselves in the sand to wait for the incoming tide.

Tavrov kept walking toward the ice, and now Olga was following. Little hermit crabs stirred in their nests

in the wet sand; sea anemones blew bubbles from wide round mouths. Already the smooth and polished pebbles of the beach had dried in the wind. Sated sea gulls swooped low over the sea, giving a one-sided flap of their snowy wings; it was to the open water they were drawn, to lave their silken plumage.

Olga took a stick and dug in the sand, overturning dead fish, tearing away seaweed. She felt calm and serene.

"Along the shore you can sometimes see pink gulls and white otters," said Tavrov. Suddenly he wheeled about and, blushing painfully, said in a loud voice:

"Olga Pavlovna...."

"Well?" she said simply. Her tranquil gaze, resting on him for a moment, seemed to drain him of strength and rob him of speech. "The gulls *do* seem to be pink, but that's probably from the sun."

"Yes, from the sun," he repeated, gazing humbly into her face. "But these are just ordinary gulls; there's a special sort that are really pink."

Up some boards specially laid for that purpose they climbed to the ice. A wet fishing net which had just been drawn out of the water lay beside a hole in the ice. Off to one side glistened a pile of fish, still alive—bullheads, and blue dorses, and flounders so flat that both eyes were on the upper side.

"They say these fish change colour according to their surroundings," said Olga, turning over a flat creature with the toe of her boot. "It's been a long time since I've seen a live flounder. It's all white and smooth on the underside—looks like a medal minted in the waves. How many monstrous-looking fish there are—so odd and ugly. The sea seems to have a bad influence on its inhabitants. And that's not surprising," she added, glancing up at Tavrov. "For thousands of years the terrific weight of its waters has been squeezing and twisting them. But

how sleek and graceful river fish are—perch and bass and pike."

"No, it's not surprising," echoed Tavrov with a sigh. "But for some reason your words disturb me."

"Worried about my calling again?"

"Yes."

"How wonderful to look at you!" was the unspoken thought that flashed through his mind. "How wonderful to listen to you, you precious dreamer! And what a good thing you stopped me with a look when I was about to bemoan our parting!"

7

Back in her hotel room, Olga took off her boots and crossed the rug in stockinged feet to put some willow branches in water. She opened the window, and, shivering from the cold air that swept into the room, sat down on the sill. From this vantage point she could see beyond the buildings to the river and the highway on the opposite bank, which disappeared in a leafy gorge—in the taiga. Great chunks of ice, tossed aside by the rushing waters, still gleamed whitely on the banks, and in the wake of the cars speeding down the road rose faint clouds of grey dust. Winter was coming to an end here along the shore of the sea; the larches on the mountainsides were tinged with red and yellow, while the willows and poplars were golden. Back home spring flowers were already fading, and the woods were in full foliage. While here? It seemed as if here, at the ends of the earth, within the shadow of these gloomy cliffs, spring had hidden herself in a poplar grove, whose trees she had not yet clothed. A warm breeze came from the sea, luring her forth. Sharp and heady, it blew upon Olga's face from somewhere up above, stirring her hair, which gave off golden glints in the sun. She sat there, tired and motion-

less, and a soft shine came to her eyes, a smile to her lips, as she contemplated the meeting soon to take place in the taiga.

At that moment someone knocked at the door. Olga put on her slippers and went to open it.

In the hall stood a stocky, dark-complexioned man with a large head and handsome features. Beside him was a young woman in travelling suit and a hat turned sharply back from her face, like an infant's bonnet.

"Are you the wife of Dr. Arzhanov?" asked the man in a ringing baritone. Without waiting to be invited, he stepped into the room and held out a broad hand. "I'm Logunov, Platon Artyomovich, an engineer at the October Mines, and this," said he, turning to his companion, "is Pava Romanovna Pryakhina, wife of our head bookkeeper. We've come from Ivan Ivanovich. He only asked us to say he was waiting for you and feeling anxious, but we decided to take you under our wing."

"Oh, I'm so glad we found you!" exclaimed Pava Romanovna, also taking Olga's hand and swiftly running her eyes, black as sloes, over her entire figure.

She took off a silver-fox scarf, revealing a white throat, then removed her hat and shook back curly chestnut hair, as if anxious to initiate the newcomer to all her charms at once. There was no denying that she was pretty. Her rosy, round-cheeked, dimpled face and her lithe figure were singularly attractive. The only blemish was an incipient double chin, and—too much lipstick.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" she repeated with a flash of her eyes. "There are so few cultivated women here—simply no one to talk to, really and truly! Do you dance? But anybody can see that you do! How beautifully your hair is done! It's much nicer to wear it blond in the summertime, don't you think?"

"Mine is blond all year round," said Olga, glancing swiftly at Logunov.

He was sitting at the table toying with a willow branch that had not gone into the vase. Apparently he was not susceptible to feminine charms, and his companion's chatter bored him.

"So Ivan Ivanovich is expecting me?"

"Indeed he is. The poor man has become simply worn out lately. Nothing but work, work, work! I keep inviting him over for a little amusement, but he isn't very sociable. Awfully serious. You'll forgive me for saying so, but that must be hard on you, young as you are."

"Not very discreet," thought Olga. "Either she's not very bright, or she's been spoiled by too much attention." Aloud she said: "Strange that you should find him unsociable. He's very cheerful by nature, loves a good time, and simply can't live without people."

"I suppose he just felt shy at our house," agreed Pava Romanovna promptly.

"He's not unsociable in the least," said Logunov, addressing only Olga. "And he's got a heart of gold. People come flocking to him from all over—travel a thousand versts through the taiga to reach him." It was hard to tell whether his smile was prompted by thoughts of this doctor of whom he was so fond, or by the expression of gratitude that appeared on Olga's face. "We've come to invite you to go back with us," he announced. "We're leaving in two cars tomorrow at dawn. Would you like to join us? We'll get you there quicker than the bus would."

"Of course," replied Olga. "Only don't phone to Ivan Ivanovich. I want to surprise him."

8

Early the next morning Logunov knocked at the door. Two automobiles were waiting outside. On the back seat of one of them sat Pava Romanovna; up front, next to

the driver, sat her husband, as rosy as herself, tightly fitted into a brand new suit of military cut, without insignia, but equipped with a wide leather belt from which hung a field bag and flask. The belt and bag and flask were also brand new, and even his face, fleshy and clean-shaven, with a perky little moustache above full, clear-cut lips, seemed newly polished.

"The first time I've ever seen a bookkeeper who looked like that! He's decked himself out like a little boy playing soldier," thought Olga with amusement as he climbed out of the car and swaggered over to greet her.

"You're going in our car," announced Pava Romanovna, showing all her dimples. "We'll take your bags too. Or perhaps we'll put them in Skorobogatov's car and have Logunov come with us. What'll he do all by himself sitting there in the back? Nikanor Petrovich, you won't mind if Logunov comes with us, will you? Nikanor Petrovich is Secretary of the District Party Committee," explained Pava Romanovna pushing Olga towards the car in which he was sitting. "Here you are—meet the doctor's wife!"

Olga took the hand which Nikanor Petrovich thrust through the window of the car. The Secretary could not have been less than forty years old. His face was fleshy, and even a bit puffy. For some reason Olga felt uneasy under the calm, unwinking gaze of his round brown eyes, slightly inflamed.

"I wonder why he didn't even trouble to get out of the car?" thought Olga, as he turned to talk to the driver.

But she had no time to dwell on the incident. Pava Romanovna seized her arm and began seating everyone. After she had placed herself between Olga and Logunov, and her innumerable packages in every conceivable corner, she still kept fidgeting about, and suggested a rearrangement even after the car had started off.

"That's all right, Pava, we'll manage to make the trip seated as we are," said Pryakhin, weary of being ordered about; Olga caught a glimpse of his frowning face in the mirror.

"So we'll be home the day after tomorrow?" she said to Logunov.

"We ought to be. The road's as good as the Leningrad Highway. Things aren't what they were eight years ago. Then there was nothing but a footpath here. Mud and bogs. Only pack horses could get through, and the trip took almost a month."

"Can you believe it?" Pava Romanovna hastened to put in. "Just see what Soviet power has done for such backward regions! Such building! Such cultural development!" But in the next breath she was saying to her husband: "Oh dear! I forgot to buy Camilla that cape!"

"Why don't you go back and buy it?" he laughed.

"It's all well and good for you to laugh! A lot of thought you give your children!" she retorted sharply.

"And you only think of them when there's some extra money jingling inside that bag of yours," he said with irritation. "A cape! Who wears capes these days?" Pryakhin looked at Olga almost apologetically, and as if soliciting sympathy.

"Don't listen to the nonsense he talks," said Pava Romanovna, also to Olga. "What does a man know about how to dress children?"

Olga said nothing; she was thinking of her own little girl—of her soft braids tied with crisp bows, of her quickness at learning things in kindergarten, and of how all her learning had been brought to such a cruel end.

Once in the taiga, beyond the watershed, the air grew warmer, the trees green. But ice could still be glimpsed here and there. In places it extended in solid fields along the side of the road, in others it glistened among the trees in piles several metres high. Sometimes the fresh

green leaves of willows and poplars peeped out of icy crevices.

Soon the exhausted Pava Romanovna drowsed off, and so did Pryakhin, his head thrown back, his red lips pursed comically. Logunov, now without fear of being interrupted, told Olga about the severe winter frosts giving rise to ice cumuli called *taryni* in these parts. These stratified cumuli sometimes reached such a size that they raised and deflected the roadbed and uprooted trees, holding them clamped in ice throughout the spring and only releasing them when summer came.

"You'll see them when we reach the Big Ridge," he said, gently disengaging himself from the warm, limp form of the sleeping Pava Romanovna. "The foothills there are famous for them. They form every year. Whole mountains of ice. They're caused by subterranean springs forcing their way to the surface when their usual outlets are frozen over. A similar thing occurs on the rivers, but there, before the river becomes frozen solid, the water spreads far and wide over the surface ice. When floods like this occur, people here say 'the river is boiling over.' Last year Ivan Ivanovich got caught in one of these floods while travelling by reindeer to see a patient. Didn't he write you about it? He and his guide almost froze to death. It was bitterly cold."

"And the reindeer?"

"The reindeer managed to reach shore, but the sleds and luggage were lost. What's the matter? Now, now, if I'd known, I would never have told you!"

9

A slender, fair-skinned Yakut girl, looking very much like a bright poppy in her red blouse, leaped lightly over a ditch and came up to the fence.

"Here, Ivan Ivanovich," she cried, holding out a spade with a long handle, "I'll have my tea and come back to help."

"All right, Varya. Have your tea and then come back," replied a tall middle-aged man with a deep voice, who strode over to the fence and reached for the spade. "Thanks, Varya."

He was in worn working clothes. His well-shaped head was covered with dark hair which stood up like the bristles of a porcupine. Strong character was expressed in the set of this head on his broad shoulders and in the firm lines of his mouth, while his brown eyes, alert to everything about him, shone with benevolence and the inoffensive irony of a man who enjoys a good laugh. Spade in hand, he walked across an unworked plot of ground that had just been fenced in. Varvara, her braids flying, ran towards the houses in the settlement.

"Now we'll see who'll finish first! You'll have to dig hard to keep up with me, Denis Antonovich! It will take all the strength you've got, even if you are a feldsher* from an ex-cavalry brigade. I'll show you how to work the soil!" So saying, Ivan Ivanovich took up his stand at the edge of his plot and began cutting the sod with the spade. "You'll not be accusing me of eating up all your lettuce and radishes any more! I'll raise all that Olga Pavlovna and I can eat; that's how I'll stop your complaints that I eat you and those three harum-scarums of yours out of house and home."

The man he was speaking to laughed and shook the red tuft of hair sticking out from under his cap, and went right on with his work of cutting and removing clods of turf. He was a stocky, robust man of about forty-six,

* A medical worker with higher qualifications than a trained nurse, but lower than a doctor.

with a large mouth, a wide, uptilted nose, and eyes as blue and clear as a baby's.

"What are you laughing at?" went on Ivan Ivanovich. "Do you call that work? Why are you making a pile of those clods? Anybody might think you were Elena Denisovna piling the bread on the plate for dinner. The clods want to be smashed."

"All right, all right!" said Khizhnyak, chopping the lumps with the edge of his spade. "But it's only extra work. When it rains, they'll break up of themselves. And we've still got another plot to work. This damned taiga—if it wasn't for the hunting, I'd have left the place long ago. Call this soil? Call it a civilized climate? Can't raise a thing but potatoes and radishes here. Now where *I* come from, in the Kuban—*there's* gardens for you! And apple orchards! And flowers! I raised flowers at home and at the hospital too. Once I went in for peonies." His reminiscences led Denis Antonovich to rest on his spade for a moment, his eyes dreamy, a tender smile playing over his lips.

"Get to work there, get to work!" called out Ivan Ivanovich. "We're not interested in your tales about peonies. When I was pecking away with that blunt spade you found lots of good advice to give me, but now you seem to have lost the power of talking sense."

"What I'm saying is sensible enough," protested Denis Antonovich, plying his spade again. "Climate? A hell of a climate, this. And birds? We won't mention the nightingales—it's a big event just to see a *crow*. I saw one yesterday, and nearly turned a handspring. It's all Elena Denisovna's fault. Soon's we were married I said to her: let's go back to the Kuban. She wouldn't hear of it. It's Siberia for me, says she, with its mountains, and fish, and meat dumplings. As if there weren't mountains in the Kuban, or fish, and as for meat dumplings—what's to keep a person from making them there?" And Denis Anton-

ovich began such a vicious attack on the sod that he sent the earth flying.

"Why don't you go back there now?" asked Ivan Ivanovich with a wicked glint in his eye.

"Now? How can I go now when I'm up to my ears in this Siberia? Four kids, and a Siberian for a wife. That's the same as four chains binding me four times to a tree. How can I go now?"

"I'll tell Elena Denisovna what you said. You'll get it!"

"Go ahead and tell her. She knows what I'm like—a mean and stubborn Ukrainian. That's what she calls me—pigheaded. But pigheaded as I am, she's got me beat. And so I go on wasting my life in this place. But here's a funny thing: I took a trip to the Kuban three years ago. Went to see the folks during my holiday. And can you believe it?—I came home before my holiday was over. Couldn't wait. 'Home' to Siberia, fancy that! At that time Elena and I were working at the mines in Martaiga. My folks kept urging me to stay a bit longer. The apples would soon be ripe. And there was no end to the plums and cherries. But I only wanted one thing—to get home! 'In Siberia,' says I, 'we've got mountains this size, and fish like this!' " Denis Antonovich demonstrated, spade in hand. " 'And dumplings!' says I. 'Well,' says they, 'don't you think we've got mountains? And fish? and as for dumplings—come on, let's make some.' And make them we did. I even mixed the meat myself, to show them how. But do you think they could compare with Elena Denisovna's dumplings? 'No,' says I, 'the same, but different. The mountains are different, and the dumplings are different, and the best thing for me to do is to go back to Siberia.' And I went," concluded Khizhnyak with a little sigh. "And that was the end of a good Cossack!"

10

Varvara soon returned, but she had had time to change her clothes. She looked even younger and more attractive in her grey blouse with a wide suede belt, dark skirt, and plain boots.

"Take over while Ivan Ivanovich and I have a smoke, Varya," said Denis Antonovich. "How're things at home? What surprise is Elena Denisovna getting ready for us today?"

"Elena Denisovna has done more than is expected of her today," said Varvara softly, casting a furtive glance at Ivan Ivanovich.

Her pretty face, narrowing delicately to the chin, was flushed.

"Elena Denisovna finished getting the dinner, put the cake in the oven, and went back to the hospital. A difficult maternity case."

"Did they send for her?" said Denis Antonovich, taking out his tobacco pouch.

"Yes, they sent for her," repeated Varvara, once more glancing significantly at Ivan Ivanovich.

"And the cake's in the oven?"

"It is."

"Probably burnt to a cinder by this time."

"Oh no. That's the point. Elena Denisovna has a new cook."

"A new cook?"

"Yes. Delivered to her in an automobile. She set her right to work watching the milk on the stove, and the cake in the oven, and Natasha. It's your wife who has come, Ivan Ivanovich," concluded Varvara softly.

"Varya!" exclaimed Ivan Ivanovich, incredulous. He smiled, then blanched, spilled the tobacco out of the cigarette he was rolling, threw away the paper, jumped the fence, and set out for the settlement.

Denis Antonovich picked up his spade, but after a few desultory efforts, stopped and said:

"What's she like? Nice?"

"All right. I suppose Russians find her pretty. There aren't any like her among us Yakuts. Her hair's blond, like Natasha's, and she has green eyes."

"Green eyes. Humph. Are they pretty, green eyes?"

Varvara was evidently reluctant to answer, but after a moment's pause she said resolutely:

"If Ivan Ivanovich likes green eyes, they must be very pretty."

When Ivan Ivanovich pulled open the door, Olga had already reached it, and she almost fell into his arms. He picked her up, kissed her, and carried her into the room.

"Darling, darling!" He kept repeating the only word that came to mind as he held her face in both hands and gazed lovingly into her radiant eyes. "Olga darling. Is it really you, my darling?" And again he kissed her and she caressed his arms and shoulders, breathless with excitement. "What's this dirt on your cheek?" he asked in surprise, then coloured. "Oh, it's me that's covered with dirt! Forgive me, sweetheart, I forgot. Denis Antonovich and I are digging a garden. God, how happy I am! Happy as a little boy!" And once more Ivan Ivanovich embraced his wife and laughed his gay, infectious laugh.

Two-year-old Natasha crawled out of her nest—a clothesbasket containing her toys—and came over to stare at these big people laughing and kissing each other.

Olga caught sight of her wide, wondering eyes, and suddenly the corners of her own mouth quivered and she burst into tears, hiding her face on her husband's shoulder.

"Come, come, Olga, it can't be helped," said Ivan Ivanovich softly, instantly grieved. "Don't cry, my love. You're making Natasha cry too. Look, her lips are puckering. Ah, there she goes! I suppose I ought to cry too."

"What's this? Who is making my precious cry?" came the cheery voice of a large, pleasant-faced woman who had just appeared in the doorway.

Despite the chill of the spring day and the fact that she was wearing a light dress, the woman's face was flushed. She radiated good health, and it became impossible to weep in her presence. She fondled her daughter in passing and soothed Olga, even making her laugh by telling her what Natasha had said to Pava Romanovna:

"The child had never seen a fox scarf before—a whole fox with head and tail and everything. So she goes up to our fine lady and says: 'put it down on the floor.' She saw it had feet too and couldn't understand why it should go riding around on a person's shoulders. We had to scare her a bit—tell her it would bite."

"Why should you frighten the child?" said Ivan Ivanovich with a rueful smile.

"Don't worry, it's not easy to frighten *that* child! It's the kindergarten we've got to thank for 'developing' our infants so!" said Denis Antonovich's wife with amusing earnestness.

Pots and pans seemed to move about the kitchen of themselves, and everything flew under her deft fingers.

Without interrupting her work for a moment, she told them the news:

"A boy was born. A fine big fellow. Tortured his mother most to death, and nearly passed out himself towards the end. The midwife on duty was young and inexperienced and got frightened. I've been bringing babies into the world for twenty years and even I was scared—I was sure that boy would be stillborn. It cost me a lot of fussing to make him take his first breath. But the

minute it was in him he started yelling. 'Well,' thinks I, 'yell your head off now. I've got to be getting home. Things are happening there too.' "

"I take my meals there but I live in this side of the house," said Ivan Ivanovich, suitcase in hand, as he climbed the veranda. "Fine people, those Khizhnyaks, both Denis Antonovich and Elena Denisovna. I'm sure you'll make friends with them, Olga. And they have a young girl living with them—Varvara Gromova."

"A young girl?" asked Olga, placing her bundles and packages on the table of what was obviously the dining room. Again she embraced her husband, saying, as she pressed her face to his breast: "The one who ran to tell you I was here?"

"Yes. A former patient. I operated on her for a perforated appendix. She's studying in our school for feldshers and working in the hospital. She finished the seven-year school—lots of those schools in the taiga now—but at first she was terribly shy, couldn't get a word out of her. She's all right now though. And what a pretty little thing!"

"Sure you aren't in love with her?"

"What chance have I? All the boys are after her."

"Is that the only thing that stops you?" asked Olga in an injured tone, moving away.

"You know what stops me," he laughed, as he pulled her towards him.

11

The table was laid for dinner. Denis Antonovich, washed and combed and wearing an embroidered Ukrainian blouse, had gone out to the veranda at least five times to listen for the slam of the neighbour's door.

Having set all the runners, doilies, and curtains straight, Varvara was helping the two elder boys mend a volleyball. And still Ivan Ivanovich and his wife did not come.

"I'll go get them," said Denis Antonovich at last.

"Just the thing!" said his wife with mock seriousness. "You can be sure they'll be delighted to see you!"

"But it's late. The dinner will get cold."

"If it gets cold, we can heat it up. Make yourself a sandwich and have a glass of something to keep up your spirits. Poor dear! You're worn to a frazzle, aren't you?"

"Yes I am!" flared her husband, touchy as a small child. "The way we worked! From early morning, don't forget!"

"From early morning! But they've been waiting to see each other for a whole year! If Ivan Ivanovich is making us wait, you can be sure he has a good reason."

"I suppose you're right," agreed Denis Antonovich with a rueful smile. "Remember when I came back from the Kuban?"

"Tut, tut!" said Elena Denisovna as she gently combed the hair of the child on her knee, as round and rosy and blue-eyed as its mother.

"Here she is—the fruit of that return of yours!" She tossed Natasha fondly into the air and gave her a mild spanking as she came down; tossed her up again and kissed her this time, saying: "You adorable little kitten!"

She tied a ribbon to the flaxen curls that covered her daughter's head like wild-cherry bloom, then, straightening the ends of the bow, turned once more to her husband.

"You and I are such plain folk, father," she said with a little smile. "We couldn't even think up high-sounding names for our children. Just think of calling them the same old Natasha and Mikhail, Pavel and Boris. Respectable people give their children names like Alik or Milorik. Or take Pryakhin's wife—she's outdone every-

one! Called her youngsters Landeli and Camilla! Fancy that! Nice syrupy names, aren't they? She changed her own to Pava to make it sound foreign. And she wanted to change her last name, but her husband wouldn't hear of it."

"Hello!" came the voice of Platon Artyomovich Logunov, who appeared in the doorway with a large package in his hand. "How's life treating you, good folk?"

"Good folk always get good treatment," laughed Elena Denisovna. "Come in."

"First of all I have business in the kitchen," said Logunov, placing his package on the kitchen table.

Each of the four corners of the enormous room was designated for a special purpose. One was the kitchen, the corner where the coat rack stood was the hall, the third was the bedroom of the two elder boys, and the fourth, furnished with a long table covered with white oilcloth, was the dining room. One door led into the bedroom belonging to Denis Antonovich and Elena Denisovna, another into the little room where Varvara lived.

"I'd be only too glad to invite you into the drawing room, but we don't have one," said Elena Denisovna. "Never have had. I suppose I could partition up this room—there's lots of space—but I don't want to. I like to have everything in plain sight. What's that you've brought? Been squandering your money again? I won't take you on as a boarder anyway, so you may as well save your money. I have no time. I rush around like a lunatic as it is."

"Such a good-natured lunatic—" began Denis Antonovich, but Logunov shouldered him away and said coaxingly:

"Oh come now, maybe you'll change your mind?"

"No I won't, and that's that. You can go eat in a restaurant."

"But its so much nicer with the family," put in Denis Antonovich again, his turned-up nose and his red hair showing above Logunov's shoulder. "And can any restaurant compare with your cooking?"

"Get out, and stop blowing your wife's horn! Me with the family I have, and the job I have, and you ready to open up a restaurant in your own flat! No thank you! I'm thinking that *we* ought to take our meals out."

"Just look what he's brought—fish, and butter, and lemons—"

"Very kind of him I must say. But as for taking him on as a boarder—I just can't, Platon Artyomovich! Really I can't. Perhaps once in a while, on Sundays."

"I'd be grateful even for Sundays."

"If I'm not on duty at the hospital."

"That goes without saying. And on other days Varya will get the meals."

Elena Denisovna laughed amiably.

"Won't she though!"

"I'm not very good at that yet," said Varvara glancing fondly at Logunov as he came towards her. She had just finished mending a rip in the leather cover of the volleyball and was still holding a long needle in her fingers. Mechanically she knotted the end of the thread as she continued: "All of us here are merely assistants to the cook. A restaurant's all right, but home cooking is better. It's a good thing to know how...."

"Oh is it?" put in Elena Denisovna. "Once you learn how, your dear husband will have you broiling over that stove for the rest of your life."

"Mine won't," said Varvara, looking up into Elena Denisovna's face with sudden wistfulness, "for I'll never have one. But look—" She lifted the long needle, deliberately pricked her clenched fist with it, watched almost admiringly as a drop of bright blood sprang to the surface, then slowly raised it to her trembling lips. "It

doesn't hurt me!" Swiftly she wheeled round, so swiftly that her long braids struck the white-faced Logunov, and ran into her own room.

"The crazy child!" exclaimed Elena Denisovna anxiously. "What could have got into her?"

Being an excellent psychologist, Denis Antonovich's wife was aware of all the quirks in her family. She had accepted Varvara as a member of this family, loved her dearly, and so far had found nothing strange in her behaviour. At a loss for the first time, she now stood at the door of Varvara's room in a state of indecision. She wanted to enter, to ask the girl what was troubling her, but her woman's intuition told her it would be better to wait. So she quietly closed the door.

"Let her get over it," she said, with a knowing nod to Logunov. "She has a lot of work, and she's taken on all sorts of voluntary jobs besides. And lately she's been studying for the entrance exams to medical school. Too much of a strain on her nervous system."

12

"They're coming!" announced Denis Antonovich happily as he carried platters of food from the kitchen to the dining table. "Here they are! It's up to the chef to show her skill now!"

"Everybody here already?" said Ivan Ivanovich in some surprise as he followed Olga into the room. "Well, how's the gardening?"

"We've only begun so far. The boys are spading up the old garden—the soil's loose there. The seedlings should have been in the ground long ago, but it's still too cold." Denis Antonovich took his guests into the bedroom to show them his plants.

Little home-made paper cups containing seedlings stood on the window sills of the large room too, but

the bedroom boasted special varieties—pumpkins and cucumbers (already blossoming), nasturtiums, asters, and gillyflowers.

"Sometimes it's hot, sometimes it's cold out there in the kitchen, but here the temperature's even," said Denis Antonovich, lovingly tending his plants—turning back a reversed leaf, pinching off a dead one, rearranging the cups, feeling the soil. His face assumed an expression of great importance as he did so. "I aim to raise three-pood pumpkins," he declared.

"Perhaps three-*pound* pumpkins!" called Elena Denisovna teasingly from the stove. "But you won't get pumpkins to grow here at all, and there's no sense arguing about it and cluttering up the windows with those sticks of yours, shutting off all our light! Who ever heard of such a thing?" she complained good-naturedly to her guests as she sat them and her family at the table. "Radishes and onions and potatoes grow fine here, but they won't do for him—he's got to have pumpkins! Well, he won't get them!"

"Yes I will! I'll dig a deep hole, put a whole pailful of manure into it and cover it with another pailful of earth. I'll only leave two vines on each plant, and two flowers on each vine, and I'll water them with a manure solution—"

"Back to your manure again!" said Elena Denisovna with a glance at Olga. "Don't forget we're having dinner."

"The finest roses are grown in manure," objected Denis Antonovich. "Didn't some poet say that?"

"Some poet like yourself."

Olga laughed more than anyone else. She liked the clumsy, broad-shouldered Denis Antonovich, and his gay wife, and the boys—blue-eyed and red-headed like their father—to say nothing of Natasha; and she also liked this enormous room with its high windows filled with plants. She was happy here, and felt at home.

"But where's Varya?"

"She's not feeling well," said Logunov quietly.

"Oh yes she is. She's feeling perfectly all right," said Varvara, suddenly putting in an appearance.

She came up to the table and stood there smiling at Olga with a childlike shyness and nervousness. Perhaps the expression of childishness was conveyed by the fulness of her pretty lips, or perhaps by her glance, which, while being frank, was the least bit strained. Once more Olga was aware of her exotic beauty—the delicate flush on her cheeks, the winged brows above lustrous black almond-shaped eyes, whose impassioned shine remained untempered by the shadow of thick lashes or a habitual expression of youthful, unspoiled generosity. But the thing that made Varvara's face particularly engaging was a look of intelligence and spirituality reflecting a serious and profound attitude towards life. These things won Olga's sympathy, as they did anyone's who saw her.

"Meet my other daughter!" said Elena Denisovna, making a place for Varvara between herself and Logunov. "The oldest of my children."

She said this so convincingly that Olga believed her, though she knew Varvara's story. And Varvara's kinship with Elena Denisovna and with Natasha, now gazing at her so adoringly, was indisputable, even though she had been born on a reindeer hide in the taiga and raised in a *chum.**

"My second child, a son, is studying in an institute on the 'mainland,'"** added Elena Denisovna.

"What does Boris write?" asked Logunov.

Boris! Immediately the name conjured up before Olga's eyes the vast expanse of the sea; again she felt

* A nomad hut.

** The people here referred to the European part of Russia as 'the mainland,' as if Yakutia were an island.

the fresh breeze, and recalled her conversation with Boris Tavrov. She turned to look at Ivan Ivanovich. He was sitting next to her, gazing into the animated face of Denis Antonovich, laughing with his eyes and talking with his hands, as he ate. His hands were large and strong, wide at the palm, skilful and capable, hands that never dropped things or knocked them over.

"What a man he is!" thought Olga happily, and reached out to squeeze his fingers.

"What is it, Olga?" he asked, turning to her.

"Nothing," she said with a smile. "I just happened to remember a man I met on this trip who kept scolding me all the way. And not without cause. But when I looked at you just now I thought what a hard time he'd have finding anything to criticize in you."

"What did those people you met keep scolding you for?" asked Ivan Ivanovich late that night, after he had finished telling Olga about his life here.

"Not people—just one man—an engineer named Tavrov. I suppose he's one of those people who can't bear to see a person doing nothing. The things he told me!"

"What sort of things?"

Olga paused for a second, trying to remember.

"That I was a loafer. That a lot of money had been wasted on me, and that it was all my fault if I turned out to be a failure. He wasn't very considerate of my feelings. He even compared me with those backward oriental women who have only recently removed the *paranja* from their faces. But according to him, I am much worse than they, for my opportunities have been greater."

"My poor little wife!" said Ivan Ivanovich, tenderly stroking her fair hair. "You mustn't take it seriously; some people pass hasty judgment, and make no exception to the general rule."

"But I shouldn't like to be an exception," answered Olga impulsively, seizing Ivan Ivanovich's broad shoulders in both hands and gazing lovingly into his face. "And—here's a funny thing—when he scolded me, I felt strong and capable, but now when you feel sorry for me I feel like—like a little child."

"Then I won't feel sorry for you any more!" he said threateningly, but presently he picked her up and carried her about the room, gazing into her face as if afraid it might vanish. Olga rejoiced with him, and wept, and murmured the thousand foolish little things that only people in love murmur. How many days and nights she had longed for him, for him just as he was right now, here in this very room, holding her in his arms! If the time that had passed during their separation had left its mark on him, she accepted the change as natural and expedient. It was true that certain of his features were not just as she had imagined them, but she loved him, and therefore no matter how he changed, she would be able to pick him out of a thousand.

"How wonderful—to be together!" she breathed blissfully sometime later, as she drowsed off.

13

Early next morning, before she had even opened her eyes, she sensed that Ivan Ivanovich was no longer beside her. Could he have gone to work already? Olga listened. Not a sound was to be heard in the flat.

"I travelled over half the globe to reach him, and he couldn't even spend the first morning with me!" she thought, hurt and uncomprehending. "Couldn't he have taken a few days of his holiday to be with me now?"

As vividly as if she were in his presence, she imagined her husband in his white gown standing at the operating table, outwardly serene, inwardly all concen-

tration, and she gave a little laugh. He'd always been like that, from the very first day of their married life! How many picnics and family dinners had he failed to attend! How many theatre tickets had remained unused!

Olga sat up, and her eyes fell on the bed-table. A note lay on it.

The usual note:

"My darling,

"How I'd love to stay home with you, but my work won't allow it. They just sent for me—I must perform an urgent and very serious operation at 10 o'clock."

"'Urgent and serious,'" murmured Olga contemplatively, pressing the note between her palms. "It's never anything else. He went away without even waking me up. And I was so tired after the trip I didn't hear a thing. He probably walked about on tiptoe."

Olga laughed softly as she imagined her husband going about on tiptoe, but suddenly she heard an unfamiliar step out in the hall.

"You still in bed?" came the voice of Pava Romanovna. "What a sleeper you are! Get up, for I'm coming in anyway."

And in she walked, a white angora shawl with long fringe thrown over her shoulders like a Caucasian cape.

"'Beloved of the sunrise, rosy maid,'" she declaimed, hastening to explain: "That's from a poem by Igor Korobitsyn, one of our mechanics. He doesn't write bad poetry, but he's a queer duck—always dreaming of some sort of hidden possibilities that keep him awake nights. He's very good at his job and they think a lot of him at the mill, but everybody can't invent the steam engine, can they? We'd be swamped with inventions if they did. Do you understand what I mean?"

"No I don't," answered Olga, reaching for her clothes.

"I mean ambition is just as much of a vice as, say, jealousy, isn't it?"

"It seems to me they're quite different," said Olga, unable to hide the superciliousness roused by her guest's feeble efforts to philosophize. Inwardly she commented, as she pulled on her clothes: "Why try to be clever if you weren't blessed with brains?"

"Don't be too hard on me if I talk nonsense," said Pava Romanovna with a winning smile. "Perhaps I'm not very bright," she added, with a display of mind reading that took Olga's breath away, "and not very educated. Sometimes I come out with things that make my poor Pryakhin want to sink through the earth! But it's only natural to want to show yourself off to advantage, don't you think?"

"Do you always give yourself away at the very start like this?" asked Olga, disarmed by Pava Romanovna's ingenuousness.

"I suppose I can't help myself," said Pava with a sigh, at which both women laughed wholeheartedly.

"I was very pretty before I got married," resumed Pava, unceremoniously watching Olga pull on her stockings. "But you know what having babies does to one's figure! Simply awful! And now that they've made abortions illegal—horribly unfair, don't you think?" She pounded the bed-table with a little fist as she said hotly: "And all the talking we do about a sound and beautiful body! How can a woman who's always having babies keep a beautiful body? Oh, of course I know that children are the most precious thing life has to offer—my Pryakhin's always telling me that." She interrupted herself for a moment to sniff Olga's scent bottles, then went on: "It's high time I was paying some attention to my looks. I don't want to find myself on the shelf at thirty. I couldn't bear to be old so soon." Once more she fell silent and sank into a chair—right on Olga's hat.

As Olga was arranging the pillows on her bed, she suddenly heard muffled sounds. Pava Romanovna was weeping. Overwhelmed by the unexpectedness of the situation, Olga dropped the pillow she was holding and sat down on the bed.

What new surprise had this amazing woman in store for her?

"Oh darling," said Pava Romanovna impulsively, reseating herself next to Olga. "I just *must* have an abortion. *Do* ask Ivan Ivanovich to do it for me. He loves you so, he'll do anything for you. I implore you to. I've already asked him and he refused. I told my husband I'd rather die. Pryakhin's a wonderful man, but I can hardly tell him—I can hardly admit that—that it's another man's child."

Pava Romanovna caught the flush of almost frightened surprise on Olga's face. Laughing uneasily, she rose and brushed out a wrinkle in the snowy counterpane.

Again Olga felt embarrassed.

"Such cynicism!" she thought. "And at the same time she's a gay, kindhearted creature. And so astonishingly frank!"

"I went specially to Glubokoye to see a surgeon I know," went on Pava Romanovna, pressing her point. "But he turned out to be seriously ill. Ivan Ivanovich is my last hope."

"How can he help you?" asked Olga. "He won't violate the law."

"Don't say such a thing!" said Pava, the tears springing to her eyes. "Sometimes you just have to get around the law. Can't you appreciate the state I'm in? I'm ready to do anything, to take the advice of any quack. And I have a family—a sick mother and two children. How can he refuse to help me? Perhaps someday he'll have need of Pryakhin—you never can tell. My husband has such wide connections, such influential friends."

Olga vacillated; Pava Romanovna's situation was certainly not to be envied.

"I'll speak to him," she said hesitantly. "But I'm sure it won't do any good."

14

The valley descended to the Kamenushka River in two broad terraces. Poplar groves and clusters of hardy bushes grew on the lower terrace, along the riverbank. This was the settlement park. A few grey huts surrounded by wattle fences stood out against the pale foliage of spring. On the upper terrace were spread the houses of the settlement proper, while higher up on the mountainside were gardens and stump-covered patches where timber had been hewed. Into the sky above the last fringe of forest rose bare grey peaks stained with moss and lichen—the domain of geologists and bears.

Olga stood at the open window and gazed out at this land where she was to spend at least two years. As she studied the naked rock, she realized that it was slowly but surely disintegrating, and some day would disappear altogether, like the enormous mammals that had once roamed the northland. The mountains resembled moribund trees whose crowns were already dead. The scene would have been melancholy indeed had it not been for the mining settlement.

How much effort it took to cultivate those gardens! People said that there had never been any farming in the gold-fields; the taiga was considered unfit for habitation. There was no denying it was a stern and rugged land. But fabulously rich. And where else could such mountains be found? And such larches—blue-green, with grey trunks, show through a veil of young needles. And such cedars, darkening the hollows in the mountains.

"Yes, it's lovely. Very," said Olga aloud, and once more she took up her duster and went from room to room, whisking invisible specks from chairs and window sills.

The flat fairly shone now. Even the simple furniture, rearranged according to the housewife's taste, had come to look inviting. A spotless cloth covered the dining-room table. On the sideboard stood a blue-and-gold vase with some evergreens in it—wild flowers had not yet appeared, and there were no cultivated flowers here. The curtains at the windows, made by Olga's mother, fell almost to the floor. When Olga had decided to set out for the ends of the earth, her father had handed over to her some of the things he so dearly cherished.

"When you are up there in that chill country, they will remind you of home, and of your childhood," he had said.

His tender solicitude had touched Olga deeply, and now she was filled with thoughts of her scholarly father, whose mind was so far above the little cares of life. Indeed the flat did seem transformed by the things she had brought.

Her mother's fingers had made their Moscow home a charming place to live in. She had been the good genius of their whole family, but especially of Olga's father. To this end had she lived. How often Olga regretted the fact that she had died when Olga was still so young!

Her father was exceptionally absent-minded. He had to be looked after like a small child. After her mother's death, an old aunt had undertaken to do this, and she had been followed by each of Olga's sisters in turn.

A woman rarely frets if she knows that her labours in the house are really necessary. As long as Olga had had a child to take care of, she did not feel discontent. But things were different now. Today, for instance—how

slowly the time passed! For want of something better to do, she decided to transfer her husband's study to their bedroom.

She went out to ask one of the charwomen from the hospital to help her move the furniture, but stopped on the veranda, lost in thought.

"I should never have left the Machine-Building Institute when my child was born," she thought bitterly. "Especially since I was making such good progress. It was cowardly of me—I was simply afraid to face the hardships of studying and raising a child at the same time. And Ivan was too ready to let me drop the Institute. Other girls with less means than ours kept right on with their studies after their children were born. We made a dreadful mistake."

Olga was further annoyed with herself for having promised Pava Romanovna to speak to Ivan Ivanovich. She knew he would never agree to do the abortion, and she would not want him to. Then why had she promised?

On leaving, Pava Romanovna had made Olga promise that she and Ivan Ivanovich would come to see them that evening. That meant Olga would have to speak to her husband as soon as he came home from work. But must she really?

"I won't speak to him and we won't go to see them," she decided, catching sight of Ivan Ivanovich and almost running to meet him.

He was striding swiftly down the walk lined with low bushes, and even from a distance Olga could see the smile on his lips. When they met, they stood silently gazing at each other for a moment.

"Who'll go first?" said Olga.

"You, of course. I don't want to take my eyes off of you."

"No, you go first and pull me along." Olga stepped aside and slipped her arm through his.

The going was awkward, but entertaining, and both of them laughed. Elena Denisovna, who came out on the veranda just at that moment, also laughed.

"My water-boys have run away, so I'm doing my own fetching," she called out.

"Here, let me go," said Olga, taking the empty pail out of her hand. "I never learned to cook—somebody always did the cooking for me. But I can help in all sorts of minor ways."

The house stood at the edge of the upper terrace. Olga and Ivan Ivanovich descended some steps cut into the stony earth to what had once been the bed of the river. The ground had been cut up by prospectors, and the river itself had been deflected through ditches, so that its waters could be used at the mines. A bridge had been flung from one sandy, pebbly bank to the other, where there was a tiny enclosed garden. Golden showers of leaves were thrown down by the willow boughs as Olga and Ivan Ivanovich passed under them. At the bottom of a log-lined well gleamed clear spring water, reflecting in its smooth surface a bit of blue sky framed by poplar branches. The air was filled with the fragrance of moist earth and of poplar leaves, still sticky and unfurled.

With a young and supple movement, Olga filled the pail.

"Now it's my turn," said Ivan Ivanovich, reaching for the handle.

"No it isn't," said Olga, refusing to release it. "You've worked quite enough for one day. Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Your wife returns to you after so long a separation and you go on working all day long without so much as running home for a minute!"

"I had a difficult operation," he said, made happy by the rebuke.

"And then?"

"And then a blood transfusion and another operation.

Our district is enormous; sometimes we have more work than we can manage. People come here from all over, even from neighbouring districts. My work now is mostly that of general surgeon. Well, and what have you been doing with yourself all day?"

"I put the flat in order—moved things around a bit. The only thing that looked the least bit homey was your desk."

They walked back along the well-worn path and over the bridge, bumping each other with the pail and spilling the water.

The entire Khizhnyak family was gathered on the veranda when they returned.

"How about a game of *gorodki,* Ivan Ivanovich. Spare the time?" asked Denis Antonovich. "The folks are already gathering at the grounds."

"I wouldn't mind. Only I haven't seen this wife of mine since early morning. I'll have to plan my leisure differently from now on."

"Why should you?" put in Olga. "I love to watch the game. In fact I'd even enjoy playing—not *gorodki,* of course, but tennis or volleyball. The only thing is—" her eyes clouded uneasily. "I promised Pryakhin's wife we'd drop in to see them tonight."

Ivan Ivanovich grimaced.

"She's a great one for dancing," said Elena Denisovna with a little laugh. "Everyone who goes to their parties brings his own food. She's the only one who doesn't contribute anything—except the fuss. She's a wonder at fussing. Always busy at something or other. You should see her act! There's not a play staged at the club but she's in it!"

"I don't want to go," said Olga, "but I suppose I must."

"Of course you must," said Elena Denisovna seriously. "After all, we have to live and work together."

15

"Can't you see how hard it will be for her?" asked Olga, studying her husband's face.

He was sitting at the table, his large hands in front of him, gazing silently out of the window. There was a frown on his face.

"The only thing I can see is that it's a loathsome business," he said at last. "And I won't have a hand in it. You needn't worry about having given away her secret. I knew it long ago. We all live in glass houses here. And don't think that Pava Romanovna is suffering tortures. Such people always take things lightly."

"Oh but she *is*," said Olga, recalling Pava's candour. "She's terribly sorry for what she's done. She said she wanted to die."

"That's hard to believe."

"And she cried," said Olga, eager to justify her intercession.

"The tears of a woman like her are just a conditioned reflex developed by years of simulating," said Ivan Ivanovich calmly. "Please don't get yourself involved in her affairs, darling. Gusev, one of my doctors, is a good friend of theirs. Let them go to him if they want help."

The Pryakhins lived in a little cottage with a low paling about it. A sandy driveway bearing tyre marks swept from the fence to the veranda, and the semicircle of earth it enclosed was covered with green grass and the remnants of last year's flower beds. A new garage standing at the back of the house could be glimpsed through the branches of young larches. The neatness of everything immediately reminded Olga of Pryakhin, himself so spankingly neat.

Olga and Ivan Ivanovich were met on the veranda by Pava.

"You simply can't imagine how glad I am!" she said

as she turned her pretty head with its bright chestnut curls first to one, then to the other. "And Pryakhin will be glad too—terribly glad—just terribly!" And she led the way into the house, a bright butterfly in flowered silk that seemed to have just emerged from the cocoon. Not a trace of tears, sorrow, or repentance, could be detected in her beaming face.

"Let me introduce you to the wife of our respected Ivan Ivanovich," she said to a group of men in the dining room, among whom Olga recognized Skorobogatov, Secretary of the District Party Committee, and Pryakhin himself, painfully stiff even in his own home.

All the men stood up and came over to meet Olga, and three of them, including the host, kissed her hand.

"My name is Igor Korobitsyn," said one of the three when he had straightened up.

Remembering that he had been called a good mechanic, Olga examined him with interest. Perhaps he had studied with her at the Institute. He looked very much like a spoiled child—thin, hollow-chested, pampered into a weakling. Gentle dark eyes and a small mouth were the most notable features of his pale face. He looked more like an unrecognized poet than a good mechanic.

"Come along and I'll show you my offspring," said Pava Romanovna, taking Olga by the arm and leading her into another room.

In the frothy bedroom with pink lamp shades, and pink bows on nickle bedsteads, heaped pillows, and lace counterpanes, she suddenly turned to Olga, her face white with excitement, and, seizing her by the arm, gasped:

"Well?"

"He said—" Olga gazed helplessly at Pava Romanovna's smooth brow.

"Don't torture me! In heaven's name, tell me what he said!"

"He said it was impossible."

Pava Romanovna's arms instantly went limp and tears streamed from her eyes. She raised one hand to her face as if warding off a blow, let it slip over her wet cheek, clutched and shook her soft curls, and dropped her head.

"What shall I do?" she whispered, making an effort to stifle her sobs.

"She really is suffering," thought Olga. "She looks like a beautiful little animal caught in a trap."

She wanted to say something comforting, but while she was thinking what it should be, Pava Romanovna ceased weeping. Snatching up a scarf, the unfortunate woman wiped away her tears along with her rueful expression. The next moment she was prinking in front of a large mirror.

When they returned to the dining room (without having seen the "offspring") Pava Romanovna called for music.

"I feel like dancing," she said, stepping into the middle of the floor. "Turn on the victrola, Igor. Let's have a *hopak*."

And she began to dance. She flew round in a circle, eyes flashing, lips parted in a smile, waving her hands and letting out happy little cries. Oblivious of everything else, she tapped out a figure Olga had never seen before, and everything about her danced—her shoulders, her flying curls, and the string of garnets about her neck.

"What a wild creature!" thought Olga, fascinated by the fury of the dance. "And with such a burden on her heart!"

Retiring to one side, she caught sight of a fat old woman in a dark dress with a black shawl about her shoulders standing behind the portieres of the doorway. Olga was struck by the likeness between this woman and Pava Romanovna. It was as though Pava herself, miraculously aged, was standing in the hall.

"Ah for shame, for very shame," the woman kept muttering, shaking her head and sighing hopelessly, though a roguish light danced in her own eyes.

"It looks as if you were not any too demure in your day either," thought Olga, as she turned back to the dancer. Then she glanced at Ivan Ivanovich.

He was sitting on the couch, his brows knit, watching the whirling skirts and looking very glum and ill at ease. Olga thought he must be thinking: "How can a woman with such a guilty conscience be so lighthearted?"

Skorobogatov was sitting next to him, also following the dance with round, attentive eyes, but his expression was a supercilious one, as of a person keenly conscious of his own superiority. His big face, elongated by baldness, seemed to say: "So you want to dance, do you? Go right ahead. It can't do any harm, though of course it can't do any good."

Skorobogatov didn't drink, didn't play cards, didn't court women, and therefore he had every right to consider himself a paragon of purity and to look upon the homage paid him by others as only his due. People in the district were well aware of the services rendered by Skorobogatov, for which he had been awarded the Order of the Red Banner, but this did not make them like him the more. Ivan Ivanovich did not like him either.

Olga sent her husband an inquiring look which said: "Are you bored?"

Ivan Ivanovich's brows gave a little jump and he turned away.

16

Olga made a point of getting up early every morning and hastening to the kitchen to prepare coffee. Sometimes she made fritters, or pancakes. Being unpractised in the culinary art, each achievement was an event.

Breakfast time was her happiest hour.

"How I hate to have you leave me!" she would say to Ivan Ivanovich when seeing him off.

"You must find a way of busying yourself," he once said.

"What can I find, if I don't know how to do anything?"

"What about teaching English?"

"I never finished the course. I need to be taught myself."

Ivan Ivanovich looked lovingly into her mournful face. He knew only too well why she had never finished the course.

"Well, don't do anything for awhile," he said tenderly. "Take a rest. I'm glad to be able to give you a holiday. If only you'd present me with a son or a daughter.... Of course it's no fun sitting home all by yourself day after day—so boring—"

"It's very *wrong*!" said Olga vehemently. "I feel more ashamed than bored! It's not so much your being busy all day long that depresses me as my being idle. Cleaning up the flat, peeling potatoes—is that a proper occupation for me? Just look at the difference between you and me! You tell me to take a rest. From what? What have I done that requires my taking a rest? I simply gasped when I arrived here and saw all you had built here—homes, and factories, and fine roads! A modern town! In the wilderness! Logunov told me all about it—but I could see for myself. Everything is new, and it makes me envious. Happy, but envious that it was all done without my participation. I want to do my share. Do help me. You must know how I could be useful." Olga halted on the pathway and grasped her husband's elbow with both hands.

The hospital was close by, and the anxious eyes of Ivan Ivanovich, surgeon and head of this large modern institution, were fastened on it, for there his thoughts

were centred. But a woman—his wife—was standing next to him, waiting for his answer. How could he give a serious answer in this sudden, offhand way? But because he loved her, he turned to her for a moment.

"You are always being carried away by some new enthusiasm, Olga," he said with a kindly smile. "You mustn't scatter your energies. Once you've begun that course in English, try to finish it, even if by correspondence. And if you want some practical work, I have a scientific article in English that I can't translate myself. Will you do it for me?"

Ivan Ivanovich was standing beside the bed of a little Yakut boy he had recently operated on.

The child's name was Yuri, and he was the son of a schoolteacher in the settlement. He was only five and a half years old, but he had such a serious gaze and made remarks so mature for his years, that the doctor sometimes called him Yuri Gavrilovich, as if he were a grownup.

"Well, how are you feeling, Yuri?" asked Ivan Ivanovich, picking up the child's limp, moist hand.

"Better," said the child slowly. He spoke good Russian. "I can move my toes already."

"Good for you!" Ivan Ivanovich sat down on a stool next to the bed and, with a questioning glance at Denis Antonovich, the feldsher on duty, threw back the covers. "Looks as if things were coming along fine, Yuri," he said as he gently straightened, crossed, and flexed the child's legs, which had been terribly twisted.

"Marked improvement," he said turning to Denis Antonovich. "And what about movement at the hip?"

"Very slight, but the joints are definitely loosening. As for the toes, he doesn't give them any rest. I told him to work them for all he was worth, and he does. He's a little brick, Yuri is!"

The smile that appeared behind the lashes fringing the feldsher's blue eyes seemed to flit away and settle in the slanting black eyes of the "little brick," transforming him instantly into a normal five-year-old.

"Soon we'll let you sit up," promised Ivan Ivanovich, gazing with sad tenderness at this child who suddenly reminded him of his own loss. To be sure, his daughter's illness had been quite different—serious complications following scarlet fever—but no doubt she had worn just such a serious look as she lay among the pillows. Children grow old very quickly when they are ill, and this little boy had been ill since he was three years old.

"Try to straighten your leg yourself," suggested Ivan Ivanovich, grimacing with sympathy as he watched the child obediently make the effort, despite the pain in his wasted muscles.

Tiny beads of perspiration appeared on Yuri's tight upper lip and high brow, and his eyes expressed strained attention, as if they were helping him move his legs.

"I told you he was a brick!" said Denis Antonovich, taking a deep breath of relief. He, as well as the neurologist Valerian Valentinovich who entered at this moment, was deeply interested in the results of this operation.

Valerian Valentinovich wore gold-framed spectacles, his nose was dotted with gold freckles, and gold strands of long hair offered a thin covering to his pate. He loved children, and they reciprocated, won by his kindliness.

"See what I can do now?" boasted the child, looking gratefully at the doctors, who shared with him his feeling of triumph.

"Today we'll prescribe gymnastics for you," said Ivan Ivanovich. "Denis Antonovich will show you how to do them. You'll jerk your feet like a frog. And then you'll begin to crawl."

"Will I?" said the child eagerly.

He was weary of lying in bed, and of being ill, and

was willing to do anything at all if only it meant he would soon begin to walk. For almost a year he had lain in a plaster cast, the whole lower part of his body motionless.

Surgeon Gusev, who had been in charge of the hospital until the arrival of Ivan Ivanovich, had diagnosed his case as tuberculosis of the spine, and had stubbornly defended this diagnosis. It was only when the child's state grew critical that he agreed to hold a consultation with the neurologist and Ivan Ivanovich, whose experience in the field of neurosurgery was by this time considerable.

After a month and a half of clinical observation, the little patient was put on the operating table, where Ivan Ivanovich removed a tumour pressing on the spinal cord. Not a single sign of tuberculosis was found.

"A wonderful little chap!" said the neurologist to Ivan Ivanovich as they left the ward. "Our efforts seem not to have been in vain. We can hope that in time he will be back on his feet."

17

"What you need is about five or six of your own," said Elena Denisovna as she watched Ivan Ivanovich playing with her little Natasha.

Sometimes Ivan Ivanovich would return from the hospital in an overwrought state, absent-minded and preoccupied. Then Olga and the Khizhnyaks would know that he had just performed a difficult operation, that he was still going over it in his mind and worrying about his patient. If the mood lasted, it meant that the danger was dragging out, and the surgeon was under great strain, moral and physical. But usually Ivan Ivanovich came home in a gay mood. He would joke with Olga and romp with the Khizhnyak children, "turning the house upside down," as Elena Denisovna said.

That was how it was today.

Natasha pummelled him with soft little fists and pulled his hair, but instantly took pity on him in the way of small children, laughing and squealing with fright when he threw her over his shoulder and let her slip around under his arm.

"Stop torturing the child," said Olga, who was gazing at him with moist and shining eyes. "You play with her like a cat with a mouse."

"But she likes it. Oh all right, I'll stop." He put Natasha down and said in all seriousness: "That's enough. Run along to your mother." But when she clung to him instead of running to her mother, he enjoyed his triumph. "See that? She won't go. She's a regular daredevil—probably grow up to pilot a plane."

Seeing the pleasure it gave him, Olga thought to herself: "Yes, we should have a child. That might help us forget our loss."

"It's a good half-dozen youngsters you need," repeated Elena Denisovna, as if reading Olga's thoughts. "What a fine family you'd make!"

Sometimes they played a hand of cards. Natasha always took up her position in her mother's lap, from where she glanced first at Ivan Ivanovich, then at the cards fanned out in her mother's hand, patiently waiting for a noisy argument. And it always came. Ivan Ivanovich enjoyed a "desperate" game of "Old Maid," but most of all he enjoyed a good laugh, and for that reason was always cheating, thereby calling down upon his head the righteous wrath of Elena Denisovna.

"There's no playing with you!" she would exclaim on discovering cards hidden under the oilcloth. "Won't you ever grow up?"

"Honest to goodness I didn't see them! How in the world did they ever get there?" he averred humbly, but the impish twinkle in his eye belied him, and his hand

involuntarily reached out to turn down the corner of a card being dealt.

If Denis Antonovich, his partner, were dealing, Ivan Ivanovich would indicate by a lifting of his brows or a movement of his finger who was to get the marked card, and accordingly Denis Antonovich would deal the cards one or two at a time.

"Over there, over there!" he once cried out, unable to contain himself. "Honesty at cards is just a bourgeois prejudice," he added in an aggrieved tone as he watched Elena Denisovna sweep up the cards with an energetic hand.

"You're a hopeless swindler!" she announced indignantly. "I've had enough of this! You'll make a nervous wreck out of me!"

Ivan Ivanovich only laughed the more.

"That's what cards are for—to do tricks with. Otherwise it's no fun!"

18

Every day, after seeing Ivan Ivanovich off to the hospital, Olga studied English. She read a great deal and worked with a dictionary over the article by the English surgeon Ivan Ivanovich had asked her to translate for him. But the silence in the flat wore on Olga's nerves. She missed people. Of late she had begun to suspect that her husband did not really need this article. Perhaps he had asked her to translate it merely to give her something to occupy her time.

"Doing me a favour!" she thought to herself, offended by the thought, and immediately losing interest in the work. And why, indeed, should she spend her time filling her head with a lot of needless terms?

One bright sunny day she took a long walk out past the mine. Her attention was attracted by the grind and clatter of a dredge, somewhat resembling a steamboat,

that was working in a large pit up ahead of her. With a flash of metal, the scoops emerged dripping from the cloudy water and were swallowed up in the belly of the machine. They revolved on an endless chain, and the gold-laden earth, sodden with water, splashed over the edge of the brimming scoops back again into the pit. Occasionally a bush which had been washed away, or a small tree uprooted by the crumbling walls of the ditch, were caught up by the scoops, but a workman with a long pole in his hand threw them back.

Olga, strangely excited, stopped to watch the work. At the other end of the valley, rocky peaks rose in grey masses against the sharp blue of the horizon. The soil of the higher altitudes yielded nothing but moss, lichen, and dwarf birches. Further down was the impenetrable taiga—a vast forest of larches, with a sprinkling of alders and cedars. Wild country. And suddenly this amazing machine, a floating factory! What a feat to even *bring* it to this hinterland!

"If I hadn't left the Machine-Building Institute, I would have made a good mechanical engineer," said Olga to herself as she stood admiring the dredge. "I think I'm as competent as Igor Korobitsyn. Now I'd be busy assembling dredges. I lost my profession, and lost my child. Goodness knows when I'll ever master English. And time flies so fast, so very fast!"

Olga went over to a plank thrown from the deck of the dredge to the side of the pit, and said to a girl in overalls whom she inspected with curiosity:

"Do show me what you're doing here. I'm terribly interested."

It was afternoon when Olga returned home, tired and thoughtful. She helped Elena Denisovna, who had just returned from work, prepare the dinner, she brought wood and water, and then went home.

"The end of another day!" she said to herself as she climbed the veranda, sucking a finger which had caught a splinter. She had strong arms and slender hands that were not afraid of rough work. "Another day," she repeated more emphatically, emptying the contents of a work-basket on to the table to search for a needle.

"Doing some fancywork?" asked Pava Romanovna who ran in just at that moment.

"No. I've got a splinter."

"First aid!" said Pava, gazing at the bright jumble on the table. "What lace! I've never seen anything like it!"

"You can have it if you like it so much."

"Not really! Won't you miss it?"

"Rather, but that doesn't matter. Take it." For a moment Olga was silent, then said with a touch of irritation: "Have you ever noticed how absorbed you get in all these women's trifles when you stay at home all the time?"

"I don't stay at home," said Pava good-naturedly, holding up a bit of the lace to her high bosom. "I'll make a little jabot of it here. It'll brighten up the frock I have to wear in 'Crazy Money.' I won't make a new one yet for awhile. Look how I'm beginning to bulge! And it's all the fault of that hardhearted Ivan Ivanovich of yours!"

Olga laughed.

"What has Ivan Ivanovich to do with it?"

"He might have done me that favour. He's not the scarey type, like Gusev." Pava Romanovna made another pirouette in front of the mirror. "I don't look so bad even when I'm pregnant, do I?" she said, admiringly. "I'm just sort of roundish. But of course I can't play the roles of innocent young girls any more. Too bad for our dramatic circle. If you would only take my place!"

"I've never gone in for dramatics."

"That doesn't matter," said Pava Romanovna. "The thing is to want to. But perhaps Ivan Ivanovich won't

allow it? Oh, by the way, what do you think of what happened today?" she asked, carefully folding the lace and putting it in her bag. "Goodness, haven't you heard? An awful thing happened!"

Olga's heart contracted.

"What was it?"

"A criminal offense. He operated on a woman for a tumour when the fact is she was four months pregnant."

"Oh no!" Olga almost cried out.

"Oh yes!" replied Pava Romanovna, unable to hide a certain malicious triumph. "He's too sure of himself, and so he sometimes doesn't make a thorough investigation. Gusev would never let himself be taken in like that."

19

Gusev was now Ivan Ivanovich's assistant. Olga had met him at the Pryakhin's on the second day after her arrival. For some reason he reminded her of Chekhov's *Man in the Muffler*. He was tall and stooped, with a large nose and thin, hooklike fingers. His eyes had a furtive look, and his narrow face wore an expression of supercilious distaste. On meeting a person, he seemed to sniff him.

"He and I don't get on very well," explained Ivan Ivanovich to Olga, after she had first made his acquaintance. "He's an experienced doctor, but too cautious—never takes a risk. A surgeon can't be like that. Not even an ordinary doctor can."

"But you ought to get on with your colleagues," said Olga reprovingly.

Ivan Ivanovich frowned.

"How can I make friends with a man who, instead of giving help and advice, is forever interfering? The minute we begin discussing a neurosurgical operation, he gets

an attack of colic, though the case has nothing to do with him at all."

This time Gusev was stunned. He said not a word; he just stood speechless beside the operating table. But he had a right to say anything he pleased, since he had not even assisted at this operation and was present quite by chance.

This was not true of Ivan Ivanovich. When he opened the abdomen in the usual manner and saw the enlarged uterus with the typical dilation of the blood vessels, he suddenly flushed as if he had received a slap in the face.

On the impulse of the moment he threw down his lancet and turned away. He did not even hiss and sputter, as he usually did in a fit of temper; he simply swore and walked away. But before he reached the door he recovered his self-control, returned to his gasping assistant, and began to close.

His hands, as well developed as the hands of a professional pianist, did their work with the usual deftness and sureness, but inside he was seething. He felt outraged, though he himself was at fault for having taken the word of the examining physician instead of making a careful examination himself.

When the last suture was made, he went into the side-room, snatched off his mask and cap and oilcloth apron, threw down his rubber gloves, and strode off down the corridor, his gown flying, oblivious of the convalescing patients who scurried into their rooms at the sight of his tall, erect figure. At the entrance he met a nurse carrying out a pail of refuse. The sight seemed to shock him into remembrance, and he stopped. At this moment the slightest violation of hospital rules was enough to set him off like a charge of gunpowder.

"Put down that pail!" he cried sharply. "Put it down, I tell you! We have attendants and charwomen for such work."

The mention of attendants reminded him of the attendant he had just operated on, and he frowned painfully and turned away.

The sunny brightness of this June day only increased the gnawing consciousness of his disgrace. He could not forgive himself for having been so gullible. The examining physician had made the diagnosis of tumour. The patient had absolutely refused to be examined by a gynaecologist. And she was such a dyed-in-the-wool old maid that no one, least of all Ivan Ivanovich, could have suspected her of being pregnant.

"Damn her!" he said as he climbed the two steps leading to the large wing housing the polyclinic. "To have pulled the wool over my eyes like that!"

Reaching his office, Ivan Ivanovich slammed-to the door (fortunately it was not receiving hours), knocked over a stool and gave it a good kick before he sat down at his desk.

"God damn her!" he repeated, in growing wrath. "Hunph! A virgin!"

He recalled the attendant's homely face and large hands. A timid, hard-working spinster she had been, and for that had won the approval of the entire medical staff. Her quickness and diligence had become fabled. Ivan Ivanovich entrusted her with the care of the most critical cases. He had removed a cataract from one of her eyes. He had believed utterly in her reliability—and now this stupid, humiliating incident!

"Loathsome creature! How dared she claim to have a tumour when she knew she was pregnant! And why? Was she afraid of what people would think of her? They'd have helped her. Why such a malicious trick? But it served you right!" said Ivan Ivanovich viciously, addressing himself. "You'll be more careful next time."

That afternoon he was summoned to the District Committee of the Party. Pulling on his coat and cap, he left the hospital. At the door he met Olga.

Obviously upset, she looked at him diffidently and tenderly.

"I've come to meet you. Are you going home?"

"No. To the District Committee," he said dully, avoiding her eyes.

"Shall I come along?" asked Olga, taking his elbow.

"All right, come on," replied Ivan Ivanovich, and she noticed the pathetic look that passed over his strong features.

"Don't worry, Ivan, it will pass," she said, squeezing his arm.

He sighed to the very depths of his soul.

"Of course it will pass. Only it was such an unforgivable mistake. And there's another thing that worries me: how could she—how *dared* she deceive me like that? To place herself so foolishly and brazenly under the knife! Everything in me is outraged!"

He did not know why he was being summoned to the District Committee at this particular time, on the heels of a blunder no surgeon could be forgiven. Possibly Skorobogatov had decided to have his say in the matter. Ivan Ivanovich did not know what to expect, and therefore entered the District Committee offices in a state of uncertainty.

Skorobogatov had, of course, already heard about the incident, but he greeted Ivan Ivanovich with unwonted cordiality.

"He's gloating that he has something to hold against me," thought the surgeon, meeting the Secretary's cordiality with drawn brows and a severely independent air.

"I wanted to speak to you about your feldsher course, Ivan Ivanovich," said Skorobogatov mildly, without changing the ingratiating manner that ill became a per-

son habitually domineering. "What's this policy you and Logunov have adopted? I must warn you it's a policy at variance with the general line taken by the District Committee."

"I don't understand," said Ivan Ivanovich, squirming under the Secretary's piercing glance. "What have you in mind?"

"The fact that you are holding lectures on political themes too, adapted not only to your specific audience, but to the general public. And you hold them in the club auditorium instead of your lecture rooms. And neither your topics, nor the time and place of holding the lectures have been approved by the District Committee."

"I thought that since Logunov was appointed by the District Committee to give these lectures, accordingly—" Ivan Ivanovich stumbled over the word—"accordingly," he repeated obstinately, conscious that it was superfluous, "you should know what he was lecturing about. His lectures are good. The students are more than pleased. It's true that we sometimes move into the club auditorium—otherwise we'd have to turn away the people who come to hear him. Our quarters are cramped. We can't crowd so many people into a small room."

"You shouldn't do things like that," said Skorobogatov, compressing his thin lips into a stern line. "Both of you are Party members, and you place me, as Secretary of the District Committee, in an unpleasant position. It turns out that while I myself am lecturing in the open-air theatre in the park, you are holding a lecture on the same subject in the club."

Ivan Ivanovich said nothing. And indeed there was nothing to say. Such a thing had really happened. It was only natural that Skorobogatov should be upset: people were attending Logunov's lectures instead of his. So there was nothing to say.

The doctor's silence somewhat appeased Skorobogatov. Once more his look softened, and he pulled a paper out from under the glass on his desk.

"And here's a complaint I received," he said. "It's from Beltova, a nurse in the surgical ward. She objects to having been dismissed."

Ivan Ivanovich straightened up, indignant.

"She can complain as much as she likes, but it won't do any good!"

"When the Secretary of the District Committee speaks to you, it may do some good. Would I undertake to defend a person who didn't deserve it? For one thing, she is in great need. I myself looked into her home conditions."

"If she is in great need, why does she treat her job so lightly?"

"She's a member of the Party, and a very active one."

"She has no Party card," objected Ivan Ivanovich quickly.

"Her papers were lost along with her luggage when the boat she was on capsized."

"Are you certain of that?"

Skorobogatov's florid face grew even more so.

"Since when have you been so distrustful? You seem to have trusted the doctor who examined that attendant of yours."

Ivan Ivanovich started up; the Secretary could not have said anything more wounding at this particular time.

"I made a mistake. I can't forgive myself for my carelessness, but I shan't seek excuses."

"I should think not! It was more than carelessness; it was a criminal offense."

"I don't deny it. But there's no reason for using that tone with me. Did we upset your plans by holding that lecture? Yes, we did. Was I right in getting rid of that

feather-brained nurse who neglected her work and had a bad influence on others? Yes, I was. And I always do what I think is right."

"So you're pitting yourself against the Party?" said Skorobogatov with a threatening glance.

"Not against the Party, but against your prejudiced opinion. You're only the Secretary of the District Committee—a tiny dot on an enormous surface."

"Me? A tiny dot?"

"Yes. In comparison with the entire Party, you are only a tiny dot."

20

"What did he say?" asked Olga, who had been waiting anxiously outside.

The sight of her husband's flushed face, flashing eyes, and trembling lips frightened her.

"What did he say?" she insisted, taking his arm and forcing him to slacken his pace. "Did you say something you shouldn't?" she asked uneasily.

"I'm afraid so," admitted Ivan Ivanovich with a sigh, halting on the pathway, a frown on his face. "I said—a number of things," he added cryptically, with a hard little laugh. "So now he's ranting and raging."

"In other words—it's not so awful—what happened at the hospital? In other words—you're not afraid?"

"Why should I be afraid? The only thing they can do is clap me in jail," he laughed, but there was a rueful ring to his mirth. "Don't be silly. It wasn't because I felt I was in the right that I had a tiff with the Secretary. I was entirely in the wrong. But it's insufferable when a person takes advantage of your mistake to intimidate you and force you to do what he wants."

"Did he try to do that?" said Olga, shocked.

"Yes, he did. But don't let it worry you, will you? Don't be upset, that's a good girl. I'm perfectly capable of stick-

ing to my guns. The fact that I made one mistake won't frighten me into making another."

"He's got spunk," thought Olga with a smile on her troubled face; then, aloud:

"Why did you ever have to come to this god-forsaken place!"

"Because it was the right thing to do. If I had my way, every specialist would have to spend a certain term working in some out-of-the-way place, not only when he was a greenhorn, but when he was at the height of his career. We get a world of experience practising in the provinces, and apply it in big cities. To be sure, it's the big cities that offer us opportunities for doing scientific research, but that is not being fair to the provinces. I'll work here awhile, and then with a free conscience I'll apply for a post in the Moscow Neurosurgical Institute."

"And then?"

"When I've finished my paper for a higher scientific degree, I'll select some field of research and try to do something in it."

"And when you've done it?"

"Then something else will turn up. Life keeps moving ahead. It wouldn't be strange if a medical institute were founded here in our town of Ukamchan within the next five years or so."

"And you'd return to work here then?"

"Certainly I would," said Ivan Ivanovich unhesitatingly. "Just wait until you've lived here in the North for a while; you'll see how it gets into your blood. Life is interesting no matter where you live. But the harder it is, the more interesting it becomes. Look at Denis Antonovich—he's even forced pumpkins to blossom here in the North! He's transplanted them already—expects to pick three-pood pumpkins. Won't hear of anything less. By the way, it's our turn to water them today," he recalled, now quite pacified. "I too am fond of gardening—feeling

the earth, dark and moist, seeping through your fingers, and seeing the little green sprouts springing up. There's a line of poetry somewhere that says: 'In silent explosions the peas come bursting to sun.' 'In silent explosions.' Nice, isn't it?" By way of illustration Ivan Ivanovich drew his five fingers together and then flung them wide. "Explosions. The earth is exploded and falls away in little mounds. 'In silent explosions the peas come bursting to sun.' Very well put." And Ivan Ivanovich smiled with satisfaction, as if he himself had invented the line.

"Darling!" whispered Olga. "You absurd darling," she added to herself, involuntarily infected by his gladness. "You've just got yourself into an awful mess, and here you are—on top of the world."

"Out for a stroll during work hours?" said Pryakhin with mock severity as he came up.

Ivan Ivanovich instantly sobered.

"Work hours are over. It's dinner time."

"Well, enjoy your meal. No dinner for us today—no time. We're expecting the head of the Trust. And the new director of the ore mill—a young engineer named Tavrov. Boris Andreyevich."

"That's news!" said Olga gaily. "It must be the same Tavrov who came here on the steamer with me, Ivan. Remember, I told you about him?"

When Pryakhin had gone she added: "How he criticized me! But I don't resent it. He was right."

"Once you admit your errors, there's hope you'll reform," laughed Ivan Ivanovich.

That evening the *gorodki* field was a noisy place. An interesting match had drawn onlookers from all the other sports fields. Denis Antonovich's team, of which Ivan Ivanovich was a member, was "wiping up" its opponents. Ivan Ivanovich, his coat off, his sleeves rolled up, was a sight worth seeing. He was earnest and honest

when he played *gorodki*, and threw himself heart and soul into the game.

With a short sweep of his arm he sent the heavy club straight to the target. It landed in the very centre of the pile of thick sticks called *gorodki,* and sent a number of them flying over the border line. This made Ivan Ivanovich's hair stick up more comically than ever. On seeing the sour faces of his opponents, he burst into loud laughter.

But Denis Antonovich's club suddenly stood on end as it reached the target and somersaulted over the pile in a cloud of dust. Ivan Ivanovich was wild.

"Call that playing? Phooh, you better take up dish-washing!" he shouted in his deep voice.

Olga, who was resting on a bench after a game of volleyball, was amused by the hurt and angry look on his face.

But his temper cooled as he jealously watched his opponents, who now took the field. It seemed to Olga that he would quite unconsciously put out his hand to stop their clubs when they threw. If such a thing happened he would die of shame.

"They've gone stark crazy," said Elena Denisovna, who came up at this moment. "They're no better than my youngsters, the way they yell and quarrel. If only I could play *gorodki*—wouldn't I get even with Ivan Ivanovich for the way he cheats at cards though!" she said as she picked up Natasha and sat down next to Olga. "The way he always gets my goat! If I could just get his for once! I'd love to pay him back now!"

"I'm afraid you'd have a hard time paying him back in this game," said Olga, gazing admiringly at Natasha and taking the child's chubby little hands in her own. "What an adorable infant! What a ducky!" she said. "I keep wanting to spank her all the time!"

"Don't I know?" said Elena Denisovna with rough tenderness. "This little ducky already has a beau. Oh, yes

she has! A little chap named Yuri in the hospital. See that?" winking at Natasha, who had suddenly pricked up her ears. "Her daddy does exercises with him, and talks a lot about him when he's at home. It's true, he's a fine little fellow. Wants so hard to get well, poor dear, that he does twice as much exercising as he's supposed to. Natasha heard so much about him that she gave us no peace—'I want to see Yuri!' and that's all there was to it. So we had to introduce them."

"How's that woman—the one Ivan—the one he operated on today?"

"Her?" Elena Denisovna bit her lip in vexation. "She's all right. Sewed her up again. She'll have her baby like anyone else. I dropped in to see her before leaving tonight. Wanted to give her a piece of my mind, but I didn't have the heart. I'll wait until she's feeling better. That's what comes of being one of your quiet creatures."

Olga said nothing. She too, was considered by some to be one of your quiet creatures. Suddenly she remembered that Boris Tavrov was to arrive the next day, and the thought roused vague alarms: "A strange coincidence. Why should he be coming to this particular mine, when there are so many others in the district?"

"She almost made an invalid of herself," went on Elena Denisovna, "and played such a mean trick on Ivan Ivanovich. Heaven knows I've had plenty of experience, but even I thought she had a tumour. We've known her for years, that attendant, and we all took her for an old maid. In a word, once a fool, always a fool!" said Elena Denisovna almost viciously. "Don't think I object to her getting pregnant; she's only human. But why try to fool people? Would a baby stand in her way? It'd be a joy, that's what! Once I knew a poor twisted creature—sagged on one side and had a crooked arm ever since she was born. And that's how she grew up, one-armed, and askew. And she was an orphan besides.

She worked in a shop run by cripples. Nobody wanted her for a wife. But one day she turns up in the maternity ward. And I helped her give birth to a daughter—a little girl something like my Natasha. The attendants stood round whispering: 'To think of the Lord sending her a blessing like that! What's she want with a baby?' But she held the baby tight to her breast and her eyes were all bright and glowing. A lump rose in my throat when I saw those eyes of hers—they were fairly afire with mother love." Elena Denisovna paused for a moment. "It's true her eyes were the only lovely thing about her. But in another five years she gave birth to a little boy. My curiosity got the better of me this time, and I went to pay her a visit. I went after work hours and took the boy a toy to cut his teeth on. And what did I see when I got there? The little girl was big by this time, and a lively, pretty little thing she was. She stood rocking her brother in his cradle, acting as nursemaid. There wasn't much furniture in the room, but everything was neat and clean, and the child had her dolls. I was surprised, and said to the woman: 'Weren't you afraid to get yourself these youngsters?' She just smiled at me, as if I was not very bright, and said: 'Can't you understand? I used to be just a cripple, and now I'm a mother of children. A woman like any other.' How do you like that? She's still got her job, and her children are in a nursery. You can't blame her for what she did, can you?"

21

The feldsher course had been opened a year and a half before, after Ivan Ivanovich and Ozerov (Skorobogatov's predecessor as Secretary of the District Committee) had made a trip to the most distant parts of the district. They found that in addition to treating the sick, it was necessary to carry on educational work in health and

hygiene. While Ivan Ivanovich saw patients, Ozerov spoke with the chairmen of cooperatives and Soviets, with local Communists and members of the Komsomol. The suggestion that young people be selected from among the Evenks and Yakuts and trained to be feldshers was enthusiastically received. Long before the project was formally approved by regional authorities, news of the opening of the course spread throughout the taiga, and each region was eager to have its own feldshers. Young folks who wished to be enrolled flocked to the mining settlement at Kamensk.

On arriving, these applicants with bronzed, weather-beaten faces, emanating cold and the scent of campfires, abandoned their sleds and reindeer wherever they happened to halt and came bursting into the doctor's house in their furs, searching for Ivan Ivanovich.

Ivan Ivanovich asked them to wait, to apply to Ozerov, to the rural Soviet, to go to the hostel prepared for them, but, after wandering about the settlement for a while, they returned to him. The Yakuts presented him with frozen milk curds, barley cakes, and raw reindeer liver; the Evenks pulled dried fish and reindeer meat out of their leather packs. Ivan Ivanovich was obliged to give up part of his flat to them, and spent whole evenings in their company, asking them questions, studying them, selecting the best to enroll in his course. Thirty were needed, but more than fifty had arrived. Some had brought expensive presents, thinking that this was expected of them. And they were offended when their presents were declined. Ozerov, an enthusiast of the course, found work in the mine for all who were rejected, and in the long run all of them were content. Lectures began. Among the students enrolled was Varvara Gromova.

Ivan Ivanovich had said more than once, on recalling Ozerov: "What a fine chap he was! He had the knack of

getting along with people. Of course he raised hell sometimes, but not like Skorobogatov. The only thing Skorobogatov knows how to do is threaten people."

In his lectures, Ivan Ivanovich strove to use simple, comprehensible words and make things clear by drawing diagrams in chalk on the board. The Evenks and Yakuts listened to him as if he were telling them a tale. What had so recently been dread and mysterious became understandable, and even within the range of their influence. The joy of new knowledge brought a shine to their impenetrable black eyes and a flush to their swarthy, high-cheekboned faces. Seeing their absorption, Ivan Ivanovich warmed to his subject and ceased thinking about his choice of words. But even so his speech was comprehensible, for his heart was in the work.

"I rest when I'm with you," he said to Varvara when she came up to ask if he wasn't tired. "Whenever I look at you I think: 'These young folks will help bring the fruits of civilization to their own people, and enable them to become part of the great new life on which the Russian people have launched.' There's no doubt but that you will turn out to be first-class feldshers, don't you agree with me, Varvara?"

"Certainly," she said earnestly. "We'll do our best. For your sake we'll do our best."

"Why for my sake?" asked Ivan Ivanovich, almost vexed. "You must do your best because you love your work."

"We want to be like you, if ever so little. You're an ideal doctor." Varvara thought for a moment, then said quickly: "Those two old Yakut women whose eyes you operated on—the ones who were blind from trachoma—they made up a song about you." Stretching out her hand, palm down, and raising her almond-shaped eyes

to the ceiling as if she were blind, she recited in a sing-song voice:

"Dark is the grass, and the trees are engulfed
in the darkness,
Their rustle I hear, and I scent their dark
fragrance,
When the black wind tears at my blacker dress
And my face is seared by the black coldness
of autumn.

And then follow some lines about you—such wonderful lines!"

"But why?" asked Ivan Ivanovich in embarrassment, though a flush of satisfaction spread over his cheeks. "I didn't do anything outstanding. It was a very ordinary operation."

"Oh don't say such a thing!" said Varvara hotly. "It seems ordinary to you because you know how. It was right of the women to make up that song. Now people will travel to see them in the taiga. They will see for themselves that the women are cured. And they will learn that song and take it back with them. Each will change it in some way, but it will bring joy to everyone, don't you see?"

"Hardly," said Ivan Ivanovich. "Oh yes, I see," he hastened to correct himself, noting Varvara's disappointment. "Of course it was right of them to make it up."

22

"Neurosurgery is solving problems that fifteen—even ten years ago seemed unsolvable," said Ivan Ivanovich, striding quickly to the other end of his study and turning about. His face wore an expression of absorption that made him oblivious of the fact that his wife took little interest in surgery. "Besides operating on the central

and peripheral nervous systems, we are beginning to make inroads into the vegetative nervous system, which influences the functioning of internal organs," he continued with growing enthusiasm. A smile played about his lips as he recalled one of his successful operations. "How many new things we're discovering! Take, for instance, spontaneous gangrene. Gangrene is like a fire in a peat bog—a swift, fierce disaster. If the toes on the foot have turned colour, the leg must be amputated to the hip. If it isn't, a second operation will have to be performed. How can neurosurgery help in such cases? I remove a bit of the sympathetic nerve lying along the spine and two lumbar ganglia, and before the patient is even removed from the operating table, life flows back into his leg. Sometimes on the very next day the patient's leg is a normal colour, the blueness disappears, and the disease may end with the falling off of the necrotized tissue like a scab off a wound. We perform similar operations in serious cases of hypertension and trophical ulcers which refuse to heal for years at a stretch. But of course there are lots of problems that haven't been solved. We have a great deal of work ahead of us. But when I think of the future of neurosurgery, I am appalled by the fact that I have done so little, and may never make any new contribution to the science. At such times I am haunted day and night by visions of the operating rooms of the Moscow Neurosurgical Institute, its well-equipped studies and laboratories, its eminent neurosurgeons and the scientific sessions held there."

"But you do a tremendous amount of work," Olga reminded him. "Doesn't that satisfy you?"

"A tremendous amount? Yes, but in another field. General surgery. Of course that too gives me a great deal of satisfaction; one can immediately see the results of one's efforts. Take any operation at all—appendicitis, gastric ulcer, or a serious injury. The patient recovers

before your very eyes. But everything is clear here—the ground has been thoroughly gone over and the approach to each individual case worked out. While the field I have chosen to specialize in demands the most painstaking study, placing the surgeon under great physical and mental strain. But he has the satisfaction of seeing a vast future opening up before him. Oh, of course there is plenty of work for a neurosurgeon in local practice. We have many patients suffering from nervous disorders. But I want to give myself up *wholely* to neurosurgery. I feel like a spring wound up to breaking point." Ivan Ivanovich, still excited, stopped in front of Olga and looked down into her uplifted face, which wore an expression of grave attention. "What are you thinking of, darling?"

"I once heard a woman with 'advanced' theories say that a person over forty was incapable of developing further intellectually."

"Her theories must have been about as 'advanced' as those of Pava Romanovna."

"Perhaps she was right in respect to people who have not accomplished anything until that age. But I was just looking at you and thinking that at thirty-six you are younger in spirit than I am at twenty-eight."

"That's because I have no time to mope, sweetheart. The surest guarantee against stagnation. A certain one. Work takes a lot out of you, but it gives no less than it takes. When I'm busy, I'm high-power, I'm really living. If I should ever be deprived of my work, I'd be deprived of the better half of my life. I would cease to be a human being. But now I'm happy—doubly happy: happy with you, happy with my work."

"I'm glad," said Olga. "But what about me? The future holds nothing at all for me."

"You're still only studying," objected Ivan Ivanovich, with a glance at the books and notebooks piled in a corner of the couch.

"Still studying," repeated Olga with a wry smile. "But this is the fourth time I've begun to study after I left my real studying—don't forget I was in the third year of the Institute! And I am not at all convinced that I'm on the right track now."

"You mean there's something else that has captured your fancy?" asked Ivan Ivanovich with an involuntary smile.

"Why should you speak to me as if I were a foolish child?" said Olga sharply, irritated by his tone. "After all, we're not talking about the choice of a toy, but of one's life work. You, for example, have been fortunate enough to choose a profession so congenial that it represents the better half of your life. I'm not as clever or as gifted as you, but within the bounds of my capabilities, I'd like to have even a small taste of such happiness."

"And who is preventing you?" asked Ivan Ivanovich, now serious.

"Nobody. But nobody is helping me, either. Why did I waste a year in Medical School? Why did I ever take up that course in bookkeeping? I simply threw myself at the first thing that came to hand. To be sure, a person can learn to do anything, but if he isn't interested, there's no point in his learning." Suddenly Olga was aware that she was quoting Tavrov, but, unable to stop herself, she carried it through. "There's no deceiving your job; your choice is for a lifetime."

"In other words, I'm to blame for not having helped you select a suitable profession?" asked Ivan Ivanovich, stabbed by her rebuke.

"Yes. Oh, I know you were terribly busy. That explains why you were so indifferent when I left the Institute after the baby was born. But why didn't you insist on my finishing Medical School?"

"You didn't want to."

"I know, but at that time I was only twenty years old. It seemed to me then that a whole eternity stretched before me and I had plenty of time to do whatever I wanted. You were older and more experienced, but you had neither the time nor the inclination to talk things over like a true friend—to counsel and advise me. If your younger sister had dropped her studies, do you mean to say you wouldn't have interfered? At work you help those who are lagging behind. Who is to help them at home?"

23

Olga put down her pencil and laid aside the notebook in which she had listed unknown terms from the English article. She was making progress with the translation, but not once had Ivan Ivanovich asked about it.

"If he only wanted to give me something to do, he should at least stimulate my interest by asking me how I am getting along from time to time," thought Olga. "To be sure, his own work suffers little from his ignorance of this article; the author is concerned mostly with blowing his own horn, as if there had been no such thing as neurosurgery until he put in his appearance. Too bad I know so little about medicine. But even so I can see there is something wrong here. What could it be?" She bit her lip in an effort to concentrate, but for some reason her mind was filled with the image of Platon Logunov, with his brown face and large hands, gesturing with such energy. Of late Olga had not missed a single one of the political discussions he held.

"Why should I be thinking of Logunov?" she said aloud, catching herself daydreaming. His image reminded her of her own activities in her student days, and of the haphazard studying she had done ever since. "But I did study seriously once upon a time, and I was considered very capable."

Once her teacher of mathematics had lightly tapped Olga's high forehead as she bent over her work and said: "I wonder what lies behind that Aristotelian brow?" "Nothing!" Olga had laughed, flattered and embarrassed.

"Nothing!" she now said bitterly. "But still I can see that this Englishman is not right. He looks upon the human brain not as a marvelously complex unit, not as matter capable of thought, but simply as nerve tissue in which he discovers various centres governing body functions. That is not the approach of Soviet scientists." Olga recalled what Ivan Ivanovich himself had said on this subject. "He has lost little by neglecting this article, but he shouldn't neglect me! In just such an offhand way he advised me to enter Medical School when our daughter grew a bit older. There was no other institute in that town, and neither of us stopped to consider whether I was fit for Medical School or not."

Olga became lost in thought.

What had kept her from learning a profession, from having work she enjoyed?

The accursed past, with its age-old tradition, had nurtured in women a fear of facing life independently, and had made them slaves of the narrow family circle. But millions of Soviet women had broken with this tradition. Why was she, Olga Arzhanova, so far behind the times?

Olga recalled her years of motherhood. Her first mistake had been that she left the Institute.

Her precious babe had put an end to that broader life upon which she had launched. But so captivated was she by the infant's charms that she was not at first conscious of her self-imposed estrangement from that world of wider interests in which her husband and their friends, and indeed the whole country, lived. Why had not Ivan Ivanovich, clever as he was, foreseen that the moment

would come when she, like any other Soviet woman, would long to participate in the creative work of the large collective, when she would feel cramped within the narrow shell of her own individual well-being?

Suddenly Olga felt ashamed. Why should she require a push from without? Did not most women solve this problem themselves?

But it was so hard for Olga to assume full responsibility for her present situation, that she grasped at one more excuse:

"What, then, is the good of a family? If I made a mistake, if I wandered off the path and fell behind, who should have been the first to see this, to tell me about it, and offer me advice?"

Olga removed her books from the table, replaced Ivan Ivanovich's typewriter, and put his papers in order.

"Perhaps he's right in wanting me to be his assistant," she said aloud. "That would be splendid, if only it answered my own leanings."

When her child was alive, she had never been so bitterly critical of the man she loved. The child had filled her life with interest. Olga recalled her daughter's illness and death. How many days and nights her heart had been anguished!

Olga left the house. Beyond the settlement, the grey road wound past verdant gardens, leading to the mountains. The air in the valley, transparent and rosy with sunset, softened the sharp contours of the peaks.

She ran down the well-worn path leading to the Khizhnyaks'. Their enormous room was also flooded with rosy light. The windows, free of the seedlings which had been transplanted to the garden, were wide open. Elena Denisovna had just come home and was plucking a duck on the table where, judging by the ink stains, her little boys usually did their lessons. Her colourful apron and her white arms, bare to the elbow, were covered with

down, and little white wisps of feather clung to her forehead and chin.

"Why didn't you send for me?" said Olga reproachfully.

Taking her apron off the hook, she sat down at the table, chose the largest duck, and began plucking its grey plumage.

"How's that for booty?" asked Ivan Ivanovich jovially as he entered the room with Denis Antonovich. (At dawn the two men had gone to a nearby lake to hunt the drakes that flew singly now, at the beginning of summer.)

"Fine birds. Fat as domestic ones," said Elena Denisovna, weighing a large one in her hand.

"And here's a little one," said Olga to her husband, who seemed pleased with the day's work.

"That's a teal," he explained.

He crossed the room and caught sight of some cards Elena Denisovna had laid out for fortunetelling.

"Who am I, Elena Denisovna?" he asked.

"An angel," she replied, reaching for a saucepan.

"No, I mean who in the deck of cards?"

"The King of clubs."

"Of clubs? Think of that! And the King! Wouldn't you like to ask a favour of a King?"

"I don't know of any," she said gravely, "unless to fetch a pail of water."

24

Ivan Ivanovich and Olga went to the well together, as they had that first day of her arrival.

Bracing herself against the low log framework, Olga leaned over the well. A lock of hair slipped over her shoulder and curled softly about her face. She scooped up the water, catching a glimpse of the stone well-bot-

tom, and quickly straightened up, but so abrupt was her movement that the wet handle slipped out of her hand.

"What's that, Olga?" said Ivan Ivanovich, turning at the splash.

"I've dropped the pail," said Olga, laughing and shaking off the water.

She sat down on the edge of the well and began fishing for the pail with a long hook.

Reflections of green boughs encircling pink sky were tossed about on the turbulent surface of the water, while closer to the log wall trembled shattered images of a white dress, and fair hair, and a bare arm holding a hook.

"I remember fishing like this in a puddle when I was a little girl," said Olga, smiling contemplatively. "It was warm, like today, and the air smelled of moist earth and green leaves. And it was raining, and I had run out of the house barefoot. What fun it was to splash through the puddles! But then I got a spanking—the first in my life. And I cried as if my heart would break, not because it hurt, but because the fun was spoiled. Silly, wasn't it?"

Olga fell silent and sat with radiant face listening to the murmur of the declining day.

"How wonderful to be young and strong, and to be loved!" was the joyous cry that rang within her. "And how many wonderful days are ahead!"

The very fact that there was no reason to hurry and nothing to worry about right now, filled her with a feeling of happiness and gratitude.

"Have you caught the pail?" asked Ivan Ivanovich. "Hadn't I better help?"

"No, I want to do it myself." But she did not stir, held spellbound by her mood.

"I'm dreadfully in love with you," she said at last, turning limpid eyes to her husband. "When we have an-

other child—Oh, I'm willing to have half a dozen of them!—we'll be so utterly, utterly happy then!"

Touched by her sincerity, Ivan Ivanovich sat down next to her. He gazed into her face as if he had never before seen these delicate, harmonious features, now splashed with well-water, and seeming the more lovely for it.

"My adorable wife!" he said impulsively. "If I roamed the world over, I'd never find another to compare with you!"

"Of course not!" laughed Olga disparagingly, slightly withdrawing, for someone was coming down the walk beyond the willow bushes.

With one lucky movement she caught the pail, pulled it up, seized it with her free hand, and straightened up.

"Aren't we clever?" joked Ivan Ivanovich, helping her lift the pail over the edge of the well.

They turned about, and caught sight of a man who slowed down on discovering them.

"Hello," said Olga. "This is Boris Tavrov, Ivan."

"Good evening. Glad to meet you. I've heard a lot about you," said Ivan Ivanovich.

"Really? Good evening," replied Tavrov, scarcely glancing at Olga. "Surprisingly beautiful country you have here." He extended his hand to Ivan Ivanovich and smiled, colouring at the same time. "I heard a lot about you too when I worked in the adjoining district, and your wife told me a great deal more on the way here." He turned to Olga, but for some reason his manner was distant.

Ivan Ivanovich watched him with growing goodwill.

"We're having roast duck tonight," said he, "and I suppose we can dig up a bottle of cognac somewhere. Won't you join us? We live the simple, friendly life here. That is, our crowd does."

Olga decided to go in for housework seriously.

"I'm going to get the meals myself," she announced to her husband. "It's disgraceful for us to impose on Elena Denisovna the way we do, with all the work she has. There's nothing so very complicated about making soup and frying chops."

"Hadn't we better take our meals in a restaurant?" said Ivan Ivanovich hesitantly. "I'm afraid you'll begin casting it up to me."

"Oh, stop it," said Olga testily.

Pava Romanovna, who ran in for a second the next morning, found Olga in a fury of enterprise. The kitchen was spotless and shining, a fire was roaring in the stove, the table was piled high with saucepans, and Olga, in a white apron, her face flushed, her hair tucked under a bandanna, was sitting poring over a cook book.

"What's the meaning of this?" asked Pava Romanovna, looking about her as if she had suddenly landed in a laboratory. "Are you expecting guests?"

"No. I'm going to do my own work from now on," said Olga.

Her tone and air of triumph made Pava Romanovna laugh.

"Forget it, darling," she said gaily. "If you had seven children there might be some excuse for spending all your time over the stove. You're not being very modern."

"I don't intend spending all my time over it," replied Olga, marking her place with a bit of paper. "I just want to make use of my leisure. I happened to remember that Ivan Ivanovich was fond of macaroons. Why shouldn't I give him a little treat?"

"Do you know how to make them?" asked Pava Romanovna, adding weightily: "The less you pamper men, the better."

Olga was too busy calculating to answer. "Sugar, flour, butter. . . ."

The soup was ready and the meat was roasting in the oven. Elena Denisovna's lessons had not gone unheeded.

Olga undertook her task with such enthusiasm that Pava Romanovna began to help her shell the almonds.

"I just can't wait to try your macaroons—if you'll let me."

The days went spinning by. At the end of the week Olga said:

"I seem to have passed my test as a cook. Sometimes I put too much salt in the soup, and sometimes I burn the meat, but on the whole I'm not doing so badly."

"Perhaps it's Ivan Ivanovich who has passed the test," joked Logunov, who dropped in with Tavrov one evening after work.

"That sounds like a bid to dinner," said Olga, slightly perturbed. "Well, I'm not afraid," she added boldly.

Her hair, gathered into a simple knot at the back of her head, was drawn back off her ears and her neck, which was smooth and beautifully modelled. Her every movement seemed to say: "Look at me; is it my fault that I was born so lovely?"

Logunov watched her with gay approval, Ivan Ivanovich tenderly, Tavrov morosely. The men sat at the table arguing about working efficiency and discipline, until Olga reminded them of the time.

"So you've decided to consecrate yourself to hearth and home?" asked Logunov as he watched her arrange silver and dishes on the snowy tablecloth.

"Partly. I wanted to make housework a side issue, but it has turned out the other way round. The kitchen takes up so much of my time that I scarcely manage to crowd in a little studying. And strange as it may seem, I'm

quite enjoying myself. I find shopping, for instance, fascinating."

"The husbands are the roots of this evil," thought Logunov, glancing disapprovingly at Ivan Ivanovich, but immediately realizing how happy he himself would be to have Varvara display such touching solicitude for his own welfare. "We like to be waited on, and for the sake of our selfish comfort, we sometimes ruin the lives of the women we love."

"I told Olga not to waste her time in the kitchen," said Ivan Ivanovich gravely, as if in reply to Logunov's thoughts. "But she won't listen to me. But on Sunday I simply won't hear of her fussing at home."

"What's it to be then, a fast day?" asked Logunov with a twinkle in his eye.

"No, we'll go to a restaurant, or simply warm up something."

"That's what I've come for—to drag you out of the kitchen," said Logunov to Olga. "Drop this business. No one really appreciates the drudgery women sentence themselves to of their own free will. We've formed some circles for studying foreign languages. The people are all grown-up and serious-minded, and some of them are not even beginners. Sergutov has agreed to teach German—he has a thorough knowledge of it.—But we haven't anyone to teach English. The English teacher in the school here refuses—she isn't very well, and besides, we don't pay anything. Perhaps you'd agree to do it? Social work. It would be a means of keeping you in practice. It's so easy to forget languages, you know."

Olga glanced at Ivan Ivanovich; could he have suggested this to Logunov after their recent conversation?

"Very well," she said. "I suppose I have no right to refuse. What do you think, Boris Andreyevich?"

Tavrov, who so far had said nothing, gave a half-hearted smile.

"I've told you my opinion more than once. I can repeat it if you wish, but I don't think it will please you."

"'My opinion!' 'If you wish!' 'It won't please you!'" mocked Logunov. "What kind of help is that when I'm out to enlist a volunteer?"

"You're all against me, even Pava Romanovna!" said Olga mournfully. "You're all so much cleverer than I am!"

26

The first meeting of the circle was, as they say, "the first pancake"—that is, a failure. For some time after Olga returned home, she was disconsolate.

"I'll do everything differently next time," she said to herself as she lighted the stove. She loved to see the flames engulf the logs in one swift outburst, and she stood for a moment, holding out her hands and taking pleasure in the warmth before it became too hot.

Children and old people love to sit by the fire. If only there were no dreadful diseases in the world, like scarlet fever! In a few days Lena would have been seven years old.

Olga recalled her as a baby. A wee little thing, helpless and mindless, yet how much love and solicitude had been expended on her! Before her birth, Olga had tried in vain to imagine what it would be like to be a mother. Afterwards, wherever she went, whatever she did, her thoughts were drawn homeward. She suffered a constant sense of disquietude, and of being bound.

"But what a joy it was!" she murmured, recalling how once, when rocking her baby to sleep, the little one had opened her eyes, taken her nippel out of her mouth and offered it to her young mother, as if to say: "You go to sleep too!"

The stove was hot by this time. The dinner must be warmed up and the kettle put on. Then began a wait

which stretched from minutes into hours, and still there was neither sight nor sound of her husband. Olga phoned, and was told he was busy. She kept moving the saucepans off and on the stove; she looked into her notebooks, began to read, and again phoned the hospital.

At last, her patience exhausted, she threw something over her shoulders, and with a final glance about the kitchen, set out for the hospital.

She was given a doctor's white cap and gown.

"Quite a fitting uniform for the kitchen," she thought as she put them on in front of the mirror. "A real cook!" With her quick, firm step, she walked down the corridor.

The hospital would have done honour to any regional centre. This was not the first time Olga had been here; she had already seen its baths for taking water cures, and its X-ray rooms. There was talk of installing mud baths. Ivan Ivanovich knew where he was coming when he came here!

Olga went straight to his office, then to the doctors' room, and the operating room. He was nowhere to be found.

"He hasn't had time to go home," said Denis Antonovich. "We had a little accident today. Yuri fell off his bed and broke his leg. His bones are abnormally fragile. So Ivan Ivanovich has been busy putting him in a cast. He and the boy are badly upset—and so are all of us. I suppose the two of them are sitting holding each other's hands now."

He led Olga to the ward, stuck his head through the crack of the door, then turned and beckoned to her. She tiptoed over and glanced inside. The broad back of Ivan Ivanovich, who was sitting next to a bed near the door, cut off a view of the child. Only a high little voice could be heard weakly replying to the man's deep tones.

"How could you have broken your leg before you've even learned to walk, sonny?"

"I just—I just—moved—and moved. . . ."

"In bed?"

"Yes, in bed."

"Well, and then?"

Leaning forward, Olga managed to get a glimpse of the face on the pillow—broad and snub-nosed, and now for some reason blushing furiously.

"And then—I just moved, and moved, and- broke my leg."

"Oh, what a little diplomat you are!" said Ivan Ivanovich with a quiet, approving laugh. "I'm afraid someone helped you fall. Well, all right. We won't insist. If you don't want to tell us, we won't make you."

For a second both of them were silent.

"And will I have to lie still for a long time again?" asked the child.

"For two or three weeks."

"That's awfully long."

"Don't worry, your sick days are numbered now. Just suppose that you were coming home from far, far away, and you walked a whole year to get there, and at last the house came in sight, and then you reached the very yard, and you were in such a hurry that you fell down and hurt yourself. But here you are—home! The door's almost within reach, but you can't get up and enter it."

"It's true I was in a hurry."

Olga cautiously withdrew. An odd feeling resembling jealousy stirred in her breast. "This is his real home," she thought. "He finds time to father somebody else's child, but he's forgotten all about his wife. Let her fuss with her pans in the kitchen. Let her wait. He didn't so much as phone. And last night they sent for him because one of the postoperatives was in a bad state, and there was no talking to him all morning."

"We pulled him through," came the voice of Denis Antonovich, who was following her down the hall. "Three days ago we removed a brain tumour from a miner who came here. Everything seemed all right, and then suddenly his temperature shot up and his general condition became critical. Ivan Ivanovich is always saying to the nurses and attendants: 'Take special care of the bad cases, folks! My business,' says he, 'is to operate; yours is to pull them through afterwards.' Well, we do our best. He worries about us and our patients as well. Take that miner, when things took a bad turn. The surgeon answers for everything, especially in cases like this, that are new to us. All sorts of thoughts go through his head: did I do it right? Did I forget something? Leave something out?"

"But Denis Antonovich!" said Olga, whirling round to confront him. "Who's going to look after *him*? Lectures, consultations! He didn't even come home to dinner today! He can't go on like this!"

"I know. But today was an emergency. Here, I'll call him. We have one attendant—pure gold she is—but she's busy in the postoperative ward right now. The patients there have to be looked after like newborn babes."

27

"It looks crooked to me," said Tavrov, glancing over Olga's shoulder at the design for stage settings Pava Romanovna had asked her to draw.

"It's the best I can do," replied Olga with restraint.

"Didn't they teach you draughting in the Machine-Building Institute?"

Olga flashed him a vindictive look, but the expression of his tanned face and the shining smile of his blue eyes were so innocent that she sighed and turned back to her work without a word of protest.

"She could easily become a draughtsman if she wanted to," said Pava Romanovna, sitting down on the arm of Olga's chair.

"If she wanted to," repeated Olga softly, rubbing out a crooked line. "To do precise lettering when you have an abominable hand is a form of coercion," she added, tossing back a wisp of hair and looking up at Pava Romanovna.

"You're a restless soul. You don't know what you want," replied Pava, giving Olga a hug and at the same time smiling seductively at Tavrov.

She was very fond of this young engineer. To be sure he did not know how to pay compliments, and he always blushed when she extended her hand for him to kiss, but he was well-read, he argued well, and spoke with conviction when the matter concerned his work or his principles. And Pava Romanovna liked to surround herself with people who were not commonplace.

"What draws them together?" thought Tavrov as he watched Pava Romanovna cuddle up to Olga like a pet kitten. "One is an empty-headed, preposterous creature, and the other is—ah, what is the other? I find her clever, and a striking personality. Why are they such friends?"

"Chess? Again chess!" wailed Pava Romanovna, catching sight of the chessboard in Tavrov's hands. "I swear to goodness I'll throw the thing out of the window!"

"Oh, do let's have a game," said Olga, ignoring Pava Romanovna's protests.

But she did not play that day.

"I'm in a bad mood for some reason," she said, wiping the pencil marks off her fingers with a piece of paper. "I don't feel like doing a thing, and I'm going home."

Tavrov watched her go down the steps and the walk and thrust open the gate with an impatient gesture. She never permitted him to see her home.

"I must be going too," he said presently. "Logunov is expecting me at the mine."

Olga's bad mood was due to the fact that Ivan Ivanovich, engrossed in his own worries, had hurt her deeply.

Gradually the incident with the attendant was forgotten. The hospital received additional equipment, including a diathermy machine and an electric pump—equipment which Ivan Ivanovich had expended much energy to acquire. But he especially rejoiced over the arrival of a new and experienced eye specialist.

"Such a specialist is indispensable for diagnosing cases of brain disease and injury," he said to Olga as he introduced her to a stocky, middle-aged man with a mop of hair brushed back off his forehead. "Ivan Nefyodovich Shirokov. As you see, we have the same first name, but the most important thing is that we have the same views on medicine."

"Oh yes, the two of us comprise a whole neurosurgical staff, so to speak," said Ivan Nefyodovich jocularly as he took Olga's hand. "Nerve disorders, as Nikolai Nilovich Burdenko* proved in his practical work, demand many-sided study and treatment. In other words, all kinds of specialists are required. And what about you? Are you with us or against us?"

"She is neither," said Ivan Ivanovich, with a disparaging gesture, glad of the opportunity to talk with a specialist just come from the capital. "She studied at Medical School for a while, but ran away the first chance she got."

"I didn't run away; I simply left because it didn't suit me."

* *Burdenko, Nikolai Nilovich* (1878-1946)—eminent Soviet surgeon, member of the Academy of Sciences, Hero of Socialist Labour and Stalin Prize winner, was one of the founders of the science of neurosurgery.

"Why shouldn't it suit you?" asked Ivan Nefyodovich, who was jealously devoted to his profession. "Medicine is such a broad field that almost anyone can find a place for himself in it. If you have courage and will power, a keen eye, and deft, obedient fingers, become a surgeon. If you have a knack for making painstaking observations and for drawing conclusions based on the most minute details of behaviour, go in for psychiatry or neuropathy. Perhaps you have an esthetic bent, are interested in developing sound and beautiful bodies—then take up corrective physical culture, or teach trainers of sports champions. If none of these things suit you, you can become a child specialist, a field in which a doctor can display the most humane feelings, if he has them. And what about being a general practitioner—a brilliant diagnostician, having an exhaustive knowledge of the whole human machine? Always on the go, always performing the feats of heroism demanded by serving your fellow man, wherever you happen to be! I could go on and on. And I haven't said a word about scientific research work."

"Or about your own speciality."

"My own? The poet is yet to be born to sing our profession! We all know that the eye is the window of the soul. But do you know just what the pupil of the eye is? That impenetrable black dot that palpitates as if breathing? Do you know that, with the aid of a special apparatus, I can look through it, as through a keyhole?"

"And what can you see?"

"On the eye ground I can see a smooth red field with a pale ring in the middle—the papilla of the optic nerve, where it connects with the eyeball. This is the only point in the nervous system that can be viewed without an operation. The construction of the optic nerve, with its various membranes, is similar to the brain, and therefore the eye ground sometimes reveals to us disturbances in the brain. This is especially true in cases of high intra-

cranial pressure, causing congestion of the optic nerve with loss of its distinct contours."

"A congested papilla," said Olga uncertainly, her interest roused despite her husband's rebuff.

"Yes," said Ivan Nefyodovich, cheerfully. "This is the point at which I make contact with the neurosurgeon. And you said your wife knew nothing about our business!"—turning to Ivan Ivanovich, who was listening with an indulgent smile on his lips. "She understands very well!"

28

The typist at the mine administration, a frail, middle-aged woman, had been suffering from headaches since spring. Of late her sight had failed and her behaviour become erratic.

"I came home from school and asked her for money for the bread, but she didn't understand me. She forgot what the market bag was, and she just sat and sat, looking at nothing at all," said her ten-year-old daughter Lyuba, weeping, as she sat in the doctor's office at the clinic. "'Why do you act like that, mama?' I said. 'Are you just teasing me?' But she didn't even know who I was, and said words all upside down, and I couldn't understand her. Then she began to see and hear things. 'What nice music that is!' she said, but the radio was turned off. And then she jumped up and said: 'What's that dog doing under the table?'"

The woman was put in the hospital, and after prolonged observation and testing, it was decided she had a large tumour in the left frontal lobe.

In preparing for this difficult operation, Ivan Ivanovich weighed and reweighed the data of the diagnosis, recalled all that the doctors had said about the patient's state, reread the results of the analyses, and spent much time considering the technique of the operation.

As he approached the operating table, he was thinking of the woman's small daughter Lyuba, and her old mother who lived in the Urals. On his skill as a surgeon depended their fate. The fact that Gusev was acting as first assistant annoyed him. But here before him lay the patient. The operation area—the closely shaved skin of the head—was painted with iodine and surrounded by sterile gauze and towels. Ivan Ivanovich touched it lightly with sensitive fingers encased in yellow rubber gloves, then held out his hand to the nurse, Varvara, who gave him a syringe of novocain. The operation had begun, and all other thoughts were dismissed from the surgeon's mind. All his faculties were concentrated on the task in hand, and would be until the operation was over, whether that be in three, four, or seven hours. He operated standing up and worked with both hands, the left helping the right, the right helping the left. Both hands made incisions, injections, and tied sutures with equal facility. This was the result of long and intense training. Brain technique was quite different from that of opening a belly, removing an appendix, or dissecting the thorax. There one did indeed have an "area" to work in, and a few centimetres more or less in the length of an incision played no great role. Here, though the surgeon could make a sizable horseshoe opening in the skull, once he reached the brain, he must make his way through so narrow a passage that it required supreme skill to wield even the finest instrument. Deep inside, the lamp whose light was reflected by a bent spatula might reveal a tumour several times the size of this passage, and it must be removed painstakingly, bit by bit.

Here, now, was the dura, but not a sign of a tumour on its surface.

"Just as we thought; it's intracerebral," thought Ivan Ivanovich. "If only it isn't malignant!"

With one sure movement he slit the cortex and

entered the brain itself. His fingers possessed a flexibility remarkable in a man of his size. They appeared to move independently of his immobile body, as if they were unrelated, rational beings. Sometimes there would be a slight turn of his head and a slight movement of his lips, as he gave directions, but his eyes remained fixed on the incision.

With what dexterity the tiny silver clips were clamped on blood vessels! Millimetre by millimetre the surgeon's knife advanced. Already the operation had been in process for over two hours. Suddenly, due to a slip on the part of assistant Gusev, who was operating the electric pump, something went wrong. Thin streams of blood squirted out of the wound, staining the faces of doctors and nurses and flooding the operation area.

Gusev instantly dropped his hands.

"I told you we couldn't perform an operation like this under these conditions," he hissed angrily.

"Go away!" said Ivan Ivanovich tersely. With the aid of Varvara and Sergutov he stopped the hemorrhage.

After a few tense moments the surgeons found and clamped the bleeding vessel. With tampons and the electric pump they dried the operation area and then resumed their task. Ever deeper went the knife, searching, feeling, like something sentient—feeling, and finding.

"Here it is!" said Ivan Ivanovich, seeing at last the purplish mass of the deep-seated tumour. For the first time he straightened his shoulders in relief. "But I'm afraid it's malignant," he added anxiously in a scarcely audible whisper as he looked closer. "I'm afraid it is."

With a deft movement he removed a few pieces of the tumour and handed them to Varvara, saying briskly:

"Have them analyzed at once," then, to his young assistant Sergutov: "See what large vessels feed the

growth? It's simply covered with them. That's why so much blood. Ugh, here it comes again!"

Once more the wound, lighted from within by an adjustable lamp, began to bleed profusely, flooding the operation area.

"The electric pump! The pump! Light! What's the matter?"

"There's no current," replied Nikita Burtsev, one of the Yakuts studying in the feldsher course. "The lights have gone out."

"What do you mean—gone out?" Ivan Ivanovich glanced at the floodlight, and gave his head a shake, but the reflector on his forehead offered no help. "Damn it all! Send for the electrician! I can't go on!"

"A tampon with peroxide," he barked to Varvara, as he did whatever he was able.

"Well?" he said to the attendant who entered accompanied by the breathless Shirokov.

"A short circuit," they said in one breath. "In five minutes it will be remedied."

The surgeon gave vent to his impatience in a wrathful explosion:

"Five minutes! Five centuries!" Lowering his voice at the thought of the patient lying beside him on the table, he said: "Anything may happen in that time."

An expression of fright crossed Sergutov's face.

"The brain is growing taut. Seems to be swelling," he said.

"I see it," replied Ivan Ivanovich. "Where's the current?"

At that moment the light flashed on. The electric pump gurgled to action. But the patient was in the grip of an epileptic fit that lasted two minutes.

"Mercusal! Give her an intravenous of a hundred gramms of glucose solution!" said Ivan Ivanovich to Nikita Burtsev, who, together with Shirokov, was watching the

patient's general condition. "We must stop the hemorrhage immediately!"

They managed to dry the operation area, but the passage leading to the tumour had so contracted as a result of the swelling of the brain that it could no longer be entered.

"Blood pressure?"

"Two hundred. Unconscious."

"Close! Remove the bone flap. Perhaps we can still save her life."

Ivan Ivanovich's hands worked with furious speed. But he had scarcely taken a few stitches in the skin when the patient had another fit. When it passed, the blood pressure fell to fifty, there was almost no pulse, and breathing became sporadic.

"Camphor! Carbon dioxide! Oxygen! You tie the sutures," he said to Sergutov. "I myself will take care of the patient." His heart icy with dread, he crossed to the other side of the table. He bent down to test the blood pressure, and then, as though suddenly losing all interest in the patient, tore off his gloves and walked uncertainly out of the operating room, followed by the sympathetic glances of his assistants.

29

"She would have died soon anyhow," said Gusev in the internees' room as he glanced at the analysis of the tumour made during the operation. "A malignant tumour, rapidly growing."

This time Gusev did not feel any too sure of himself and avoided a direct clash with Ivan Ivanovich.

But Skorobogatov resolved to assert his authority decisively. Denis Antonovich, Chairman of the Local Trade Union Committee, disagreed with him, but of what significance was the opinion of feldsher Khizhnyak?

"We forbid your undertaking such operations in the future," he announced when the surgeon, at his summons, arrived in his office at the District Committee. "Gusev is right; this is no place for experimenting."

Ivan Ivanovich had difficulty controlling himself.

"I cannot agree with such a decision," he replied firmly. "In my practice of neurosurgery I have had a negligible percentage of fatalities; this particular case was complicated by the swelling of the brain. If you interfere with our work we will write an appeal to the Regional Committee of the Party."

"Who is 'we'?" asked Skorobogatov.

"Sergutov; Shirokov, the eye specialist; our neurologist; Khizhnyak, Chairman of the Local Trade Union Committee and I. In case you don't know it, I can inform you that we have statistics as to the results of our operations, showing the number of people we have cured."

Ivan Ivanovich spent that evening studying articles on neurosurgery in the latest medical journals, and reread everything he could find about brain swelling. In a fever of anxiety he verified his work, to see that he had left no possibility untried. He called to mind his practice in the Moscow Neurosurgical Clinic, and asked himself what Nikolai Nilovich Burdenko would have done in similar circumstances.

It was Burdenko who had once said: "The man who learns to combat brain swelling will be the acknowledged king of neurosurgery." Undoubtedly it was the most vital problem today. But there had been a time, and a long time, when surgeons had been baffled by the problem of bleeding. And the problem of anaesthesia? And the battle with infection, the discovery of microbes and sterilization?

In the end, Ivan Ivanovich was convinced that he had neglected nothing, but that an accident—a stupid, accursed accident, had played a fatal role in this case.

"Perhaps you *should* be more cautious," said Olga, who was also distressed by the incident.

Ivan Ivanovich, who had been pacing the floor in long strides, stopped abruptly, as if he had struck up against a sudden obstacle, and for a second stood glaring at the shrinking Olga.

"You too! What do you know about it?" he said with suppressed rage. "You and your Pava Romanovna had better attend to your dishwashing and not interfere in matters you know nothing about."

"Have I nothing but dishwashing to attend to?" asked Olga, fighting down her tears.

"What else? Saucepans and frying pans! A weighty occupation!"

This was too much for her, and she broke down. The tears gushed from her eyes in an abundant stream, as if to wash away Ivan Ivanovich's ugly outburst.

For a moment he was dumb-struck, then filled with shame.

"Forgive me, darling. You must. That isn't what I think of you at all. I'm just upset and miserable, and you happened to be the one I took it out on...."

It was the memory of this incident that haunted her day and night.

"He kicked me like a puppy," she thought as she left the Pryakhins' house. "And it's true—what am I compared to him?"

The day was not rainy, but it was windy, and the sky was hidden by clouds. Their tattered shadows fled swiftly over the road, and over the massed boulders with clumps of high grass growing between. Taking a short cut over

the hill to the well, Tavrov suddenly caught sight of Olga. She was standing half-turned to him, holding her wind-blown skirts and her hair, gazing into the distance at the houses of the settlement, and at the valley, which she was viewing from this angle for the first time.

Hearing steps approaching, she slowly turned her head. No change came over her face as she recognized Tavrov.

"How's the sea today?" he joked.

"Not so calm on the surface, and very stormy in the depths."

"Why, what's happened?"

"Nothing in particular," said Olga with a little laugh. "A storm in a teacup. Really it's nothing," she resumed when she had taken a seat on a stone, but her lowered eyes remained fixed in a contemplative gaze.

Tavrov waited patiently.

"Sit down," she said, as if just noticing him. "Do sit down. Let's suppose you're my guest. Or no, that I'm your guest. These mountains are your domain. I've already climbed all over our domain—the mountains on the other side, where the hospital is. I find it enchanting here—can't keep away in fact. Every time I have a moment to spare I come to drink in this beauty. I like especially to climb the mountains, to find myself between heaven and earth, thrilled with the sense of being young and strong and capable of taking any hill without an effort. I can't seem to get enough of this wonderful air. But sometimes it's a bit frightening."

"When you see a bear in the bushes," said Tavrov softly.

"Oh, I've had such scares. A couple of times it was sheer imagination, but once I saw a real bear. Fortunately it was far away and had no inclination to chase me. But that isn't the thing that spoils my walks."

"What is?"

Olga paused, battling some secret doubt or distrust.

"It's very unpleasant to realize that—that you haven't earned your holiday."

"Why should you think you haven't earned it? Very soon I understand you are to receive a diploma as an expert cook."

Every drop of blood in Olga's veins seemed to rush to her face. Her lashes trembled, and she turned away. Tavrov could not know how painful she found his innocent thrust.

"It's an empty sort of an occupation, I know that," she said, with the air of one addressing a third person standing between them. "If you only knew how I regret not having a real profession. Now I feel with particular keenness what a dreadful mistake I made in the past. I could have become a doctor, or a geologist, or a mechanical engineer—anything at all. And I turned out to be nothing."

"You speak as if your life were over," said Tavrov. "But how much you could do right now if you only wanted to! You love to visit new places, you have fine powers of observation and a delightful way of describing things, and you see into their true significance. How many times have you charmed me with your flights of fancy! What else do you need? There is some hidden force seething within you, giving you no rest, making you contemptuous of the laurels of an expert housekeeper. You try one thing after another, carrying nothing through to the end, and never once experiencing the joy of being independent. Why shouldn't you write for the newspapers? Try doing a few short articles."

"Become a reporter?" asked Olga guardedly.

"Why not?" said Tavrov, who seemed to detect contempt in her tone. "Unless you prefer novel-writing," he added with a touch of irony.

"I have never thought of such a thing! It's true that

when I arrived here and saw this scenery, and all that was going on, I wondered—it even seemed a shame that no one had ever described it. But as for *my* doing it—the very idea is terrifying!"

"I'm not suggesting that you write a book," said Tavrov earnestly. "But you could become a first-rate reporter if you wanted to. It is important, serious work; the newspapers serve millions of people. Go ahead with your study of English, teach your circle and cook your dinners, but first of all write for the newspapers. That will bring you in contact with people and give you purposeful work."

"You must be joking," said Olga, but the frown of concentration did not leave her face.

"Why joking? I think I know what is worrying you. You're afraid you may be a failure, and people will find out. Don't write for the local paper; write for the regional one. And under a different name at first. If you like, I can suggest a subject for your first article. When I was in Ukamchan I had a talk with the editor. They're interested in the new methods being used in the mines. Write about our miners."

"But I don't know their methods."

"Come along with me to the mines; Logunov is expecting me today. He and I have our own business to attend to, and you can say you just came out of curiosity."

30

They did not find Logunov in the mine offices. Having "killed an hour" waiting for Tavrov, as the shift foreman put it, Logunov had gone off to a construction site to the right of the mine.

"We're doing some additional hewing there—for ventilation and an exit to the surface," the foreman, a black-bearded, heavy-browed, middle-aged man, told

Tavrov. "We want to connect the two sections, so that we can deliver all the ore up one shaft. That's what you're to discuss with Platon Artyomovich. Since we supply your mill with ore, we have to come to a definite agreement as to how much we can give and how much you can take."

"I understand," said Tavrov, who was listening with interest. "We certainly can't work two mines at once. How long do you expect the approaches to be?"

"Five hundred metres each."

The foreman's name was Pyotr Martemianov. He was also the Party Secretary at the mine. The younger workers had nicknamed him "Grandpop" because of his beard. Martemianov did not object to this respected, but none too flattering name—if they saw in him a grandpop, let them call him a grandpop. But occasionally his sly sarcasm left them with a feeling that "grandpop" was indeed a misnomer, so youthful was the expression in his eye at such moments. The foreman seemed to be always speaking with someone on some subject—how to improve the working efficiency of the brigade; how to make the best use of hard alloys in drilling; why Ghandi opposed the demands presented to England by the Indian National Congress; what were the provisions of the armistice signed by Hitler and the French delegation in the Compiegne Woods. They also consulted him about intimate family affairs. Now, as Martemianov sat talking with Tavrov in his office, which served as the dispatching point as well, at least five different people came to speak to him on various questions. His manner with people was always serious and unaffected, he made decisions on the spot, and never detained anyone needlessly. This won Olga's sympathy at once, and she looked at Tavrov gratefully when he said:

"Wouldn't you like to show Olga Pavlovna through the mine and let her meet the workers? She's never been

down a shaft in her life and she'd like to know how gold's mined. I'd be very grateful to you for doing this favour while I run off to find Logunov."

"We won it this year," said Martemianov to Olga proudly, pointing to the Red Banner. "Right now there's a movement on foot for working several machines simultaneously. That means one man works three or four machines. But besides that, there's a doubling up on jobs—one man drills as well as blasts, and so forth."

"And what becomes of the workers who are released as a result of these new methods?" asked Olga, pulling tight the belt of her coveralls as they left the office. She felt as much at home in this canvas work-suit pulled on over her dress as if she donned it every day.

Martemianov raised his brows in surprise on hearing her question.

"What becomes of them? They stay on in the mine. We're joining two drifts. Need men for that. And we're making new crosscuts."

"Are there many people working in this mine?" asked Olga as they waited at the shaft for the cage.

"A good number. And the authorities are a bit stingy with funds. Keep throwing us back on our own resources. Comrade Skorobogatov is especially good at this." Martemianov stopped short and looked into Olga's face, brightly lighted from below by his lantern, from above by the light of the landing. "That's right, of course. We ought to depend on our own resources whenever we can but there are certain things—well, installing showers and drying rooms for one thing." He bent down a finger to emphasize each item. "For another—the reconstruction of our drainage system. We have four levels, each with its own drainage, whereas we ought to have one central system to take care of everything. And the third is, that we ought to replace our old drills with new ones of improved design."

Olga nodded. She liked the serious, matter-of-fact way in which Martemianov had responded to Tavrov's request to show her the mine, and the confidence he seemed to place in her. She had no idea what was meant by a drift, or a crosscut, or a level, or a central drainage system, or improved drills, but she was impressed by the foreman's earnestness.

"Well, let's go," he said, stepping ahead of her into the cage which now appeared at the head of the shaft.

Olga followed, and immediately they dropped through the damp darkness with a speed that was felt in her ears.

"Afraid?" asked Martemianov cheerily, relighting the candle in his open lantern which the swift movement had extinguished. He seemed uneasy about keeping his companion in the dark, but the candle refused to be lighted. "It doesn't matter, we'll arrive in a second." Scarcely were the words spoken when the cage clanked to a halt at the brightly lighted landing of the lowest level.

Here on this landing, which resembled the one on the surface, Olga too was given a lantern.

"Why must we have them?" she asked.

"Not all the galleries are lighted by electricity," explained Martemianov. "And we can use candles here because there are no gases in gold mines. They aren't like coal mines, where there is danger of explosions. But we're introducing carbide lamps this year; they're more convenient."

He led her down a passage where drills were hammering away noisily, and he introduced her to miners covered with white dust, like millers. The drillers were making burrowlike holes in the rock for blasting. While Olga looked about her, Martemianov examined the pneumatic drills and the hoses supplying compressed air, and he asked the miners if the pressure was high enough. He congratulated one of the men who had recently moved

into a new flat, and promised another to enroll him in a technical course.

"It must have been hard enough to wield even one of those drills," thought Olga as she watched the taut muscles of one of the men. "But here he is operating three and four at once. What made him think he could do it in the first place? He didn't grow additional arms. He merely improved his technique—grew more deft and daring. In other words, he himself changed. I suppose there has already been an article about him in the papers. What shall I write?" she thought anxiously, remembering Tavrov's advice. "What in the world shall I write?"

31

Having left Olga with Martemianov, Tavrov set out to find Logunov. He discovered him with the mine surveyor near a pile driver. They were sitting on a stone like schoolboys taking a surreptitious smoke, talking energetically as they studied one version of the plan submitted by Logunov.

"Our production meeting is almost over," said Logunov with good-natured sarcasm, giving Tavrov a sidelong glance of his twinkling black eyes. "How long did you expect us to wait for you?"

"I was held up a bit," said Tavrov, and the memory of what had detained him brought a happy smile to his lips.

He too sat down on the stone and forced himself to listen to the changes and improvements suggested by the surveyor, but all the while he was conscious of a warm glow in his heart. Thoughts of the task in hand were constantly being pushed out of his mind by the vision of Olga, of her wary, almost frightened glance, and the movement of her hand as she thrust the roll of paper into the pocket of her dress. His mind would not stick to what was being said, but kept wandering away,

leaving him in a trancelike state of bliss, in love with Olga, and with life, and with his own innocence.

"What's wrong with you today?" he heard Logunov say to him. "You seem to be daydreaming."

"Do I?" said Tavrov, glad for this intrusion into his private affairs, though he felt ashamed of his preoccupation when a question of such great importance to himself and others was being discussed.

"Here's where we'll start working the forward drift," said Logunov, getting up and cleaving the air with his palm to indicate the direction.

Tavrov noted the suppressed energy in the gesture, and remembered that Olga had said Logunov's kindness and generosity were linked with firmness of character.

"She's right, he *is* firm, despite his geniality," thought Tavrov, more conscious of his comrade's resounding voice than of what he was saying. "If he knew my feelings right now, I wonder whether he'd censor or sympathize."

Logunov's gesture reminded Tavrov that by this time Olga must be wandering through subterranean tunnels. Never before had she been deep down under the surface of the earth. A fine escort he was! To bring a woman to the brink of a shaft dropping some three hundred metres into the earth and let her descend it with a man she had never seen before! Perhaps she was trembling with terror. And here was he, basking in sunlight and complacently assuming that he had done her a favour.

He felt ashamed and alarmed.

"Let's go down the mine," he said.

Olga slipped her hand uncertainly into the pocket of her work-suit, where she had put the paper and pencil given her by Tavrov. She wanted to write down at least the name of the youth who was attacking the face-rock with such businesslike efficiency and militant boldness.

But she lacked the courage to take notes. She dared only shout questions to Martemianov above the machine-gun clatter of the drills when things became too incomprehensible. She had all she could do to keep up with him as he strode through this labyrinth smelling of earth and dampness and timber, at times rotting timber, at times fresh-felled logs with their fine odour of resin. Occasionally she stumbled over planks laid on the floor, or bumped her head against ceiling props, or clambered up perpendicular ladders to crosscuts. She had no time to wonder whether Martemianov was testing her, with the delight many old hands take in testing greenhorns, or whether he was simply so in love with his job and so absorbed in thoughts of it that he forgot she was inexperienced. Probably the latter was true, for when they came to a halt at some interesting point, he entered into detailed explanations for her benefit. Olga looked exceedingly young, and it never entered his mind that she could tire more quickly than he. In his desire to scrutinize everything, he led her into new passages, like trenches, not yet propped, and into remote corners where a fine rain kept falling, and streams of water, black in the darkness, flowed underfoot.

Only when the excursion was over, and he led Olga out on to the shaft landing, did the sight of her dirt-stained clothes and flushed face beaded with perspiration, make him guiltily aware of what he had done.

"I certainly have given you a workout. Forgive me," he said. "I could have shown you one or two drifts and called it a day."

"Oh, no, you couldn't!" exclaimed Olga, excited by what she had seen and filled with admiration for the boldness of the miners. "I want to write—that is, I want to try writing an article for the newspapers."

Martemianov's white teeth flashed through his black beard in a broad grin.

"Go ahead and write it! Our fellows deserve a little publicity. Good as gold they are. Only please leave me out of it."

"Why should I?" asked Olga.

"Oh, just because," said Martemianov with a shrug of his shoulders as if someone had suddenly poured sand down his back. "They say such idiotic things sometimes. A fellow once wrote an article about me when I was still running a drill. Made me out a redhead who thought up this method and that—and even said I had blue eyes. The fellows kidded me for months afterwards. You can see for yourself I'm no redhead."

"But you don't mind if I write such things about the other miners?"

Martemianov coloured.

"Yes I do. But I don't think you will. You'll make a better job of it, living right here among us. I just said that because—well, I can't stand reading stuff about myself. And don't write what I said about a central drainage system either. There are two sides to that question."

When Tavrov, accompanied by Logunov and the mine surveyor, reached the shaft landing, he scarcely recognized Olga in her coveralls and miner's cap.

"We've been on your trail," he said, relieved to find her looking fresh and bright, "but we couldn't catch up with you."

"We've been everywhere," she said simply, nodding to Logunov. "I had no idea it was so interesting in the mines."

"So you enjoyed it?" asked Logunov, highly pleased that she should appreciate his chosen field, which, if a bit gloomy, had its fascination.

"Tremendously. At first it's like finding yourself in some exotic fairyland, with gateways hewn into the solid

rock and long log palisades. You hurry along all bent over, with a lantern in your hand, and then all of a sudden the blackness opens up, and there's a sky of deep, deep blue dotted with huge stars, like in a fairy tale. And suddenly you realize it's not a sky over your head at all, but hundreds of metres of solid rock, and you are deep down in the earth, in a gold mine. And then you come out into the light of a broad passageway with cars filled with ore running up and down—everything so industrious and businesslike. And the closer you come to where the miners are hewing, the faster your heart beats, as if you were approaching a battlefield. The machinery chatters like machine guns, and explosions are heard in the distance. And it makes little shivers run up and down your spine when you think there really *is* a battle being waged here—a battle to make life more beautiful."

"That's true," said Logunov, fired by Olga's enthusiasm. "The gold we produce is a very sizable contribution to the building of the new life."

"And what wonderful people the miners are!" continued Olga. "So energetic! As if each carried a bit of sun inside his breast. I suppose that's necessary when you work underground all the time, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," acquiesced Tavrov, and the light glowing within his own breast suddenly burst forth into greater radiance.

"I am not mistaken in her—she'll make something of herself yet. She expresses herself well and feels things deeply."

32

On reaching home, Olga changed her dress, combed her hair, and sat down at her desk.

Ivan Ivanovich had been home: the lids on the thermos containers in the kitchen had been disturbed, and a pile of dirty dishes stood on the stove. Evidently he

had had his supper and left to lecture to his students. For the first time in her life she was glad to find him gone. She wanted to collect her thoughts and try to write down her impressions. Least of all was she concerned about whether her efforts would result in a story, a magazine article, or a short newspaper item. The only thing she thought about was trying to convey her own sensations. She remembered the compositions she had written in school on given themes. No one had ever prophesied a literary career for her at that time. And many years had passed since then. For a second Olga's enthusiasm was shadowed by doubt, but it revived on recalling Martemianov's words: "You'll make a better job of it." And as a matter of fact, why shouldn't she? She lived among these people; surely she could write a simple account of how they worked. With great determination she dipped her pen in the inkwell, but it dried several times before she wrote her first line.

They say it is dark and fearsome in the mines. Yes, it *is* dark in places, and there are low, wet spots (Olga involuntarily lifted her hand to the brow she had bumped), but she had not been afraid. Perhaps if one were alone and became lost in this subterranean labyrinth, it would be frightening. But with Martemianov beside her, and the miners, she had to concentrate on what she saw and heard if she wanted to catch the deep meaning underlying these activities.

These thoughts passed vaguely through Olga's mind; much more vivid was the picture of what she had seen: the electric lights in the drifts, the opalescent grey ore riding past to the dumps at the elevator shafts, the machines vibrating with the fierce intensity of their effort, the drills eating into the hard rock of the mine-face. And that driller who was at the same time a blaster, lighting the fuse to set off the charge lodged in the holes.

"Man explodes his way into the heart of mountains,

dislodging what has lain undisturbed since the beginning of time," wrote Olga. "But he takes this gold not for his own aggrandizement, and not for the aggrandizement of his employer, but that here, and everywhere throughout the land, gardens may bloom, roads be laid, people have food, and clothes and pleasure. The driller who handles four machines at once clearly sees that he is accelerating our march into the future. Surely this thought gladdens his heart when he lifts his torch to light the fuse.

"Now he is standing at a safe distance down the passageway, wiping the sweat from his brow and counting:

" 'One—two—three—four—'

"With a great noise his charge explodes. The ore is lifted into the air in chunks and splinters and pale dust. The explosion resounds in the earth like a gun salute to his labour; echoes fly to the most distant corners of the mine, and rebound along all the drifts and galleries.

" 'One—two—three—'

"A miner in a different section has set off his charge.

"And so it goes on, day and night, in four shifts. Miners work only six hours a day. After all, they must be given a chance to live *on* the earth whose bowels they explode."

Olga was just finishing her ingenuous account when she heard someone enter the room and felt Ivan Ivanovich's arm on her shoulder. She started up in surprise, and for a second sat looking at her husband with shining eyes. She had the look of one roused from happy revery. Ivan Ivanovich had not seen his wife in such a mood since she had nursed her baby.

"What are you doing?" he asked when he had kissed her. "I came home to find no one waiting for me. Who are you writing to?"

When he made a movement as if to read the papers strewn over her desk, she shyly covered them with both

hands, but on seeing his chagrin, quickly uncovered them.

"You'll never believe it," she whispered excitedly as she threw her arms about his shoulders and looked into his eyes, "But I'm writing for the papers—I want to become a reporter."

Ivan Ivanovich lifted his brows in astonishment.

"The latest enthusiasm! And what's this?" he asked, gently touching the bruise on her forehead. "Who hit you?"

"I did it myself."

"Just look at that, you've taken a clubbing before you've even finished your first article," he said with teasing affection, kissing the bruise. "Do you think it's an easy thing to write for the papers?"

"Why does he always talk to me as if I were a child?" thought Olga, offended. Aloud she said: "I'm not looking for an easy job."

"In addition to talent, writing requires a tremendous capacity for hard work," went on Ivan Ivanovich as if he had not heard her remark. "Otherwise it leads to a Bohemian way of life. There are still plenty of outmoded people and ideas in our day. Take Gusev for instance—he refused to sign that letter to the Regional Committee. Said it made things look as if we had formed a clique in opposition to the District Committee."

"Now he'll switch the talk to his own affairs," thought Olga in vexation.

"I don't expect to become a writer," she said, "but I must have *some* profession, and I'd gladly work day and night if only I felt I had found the right one."

"That's the whole point—to feel it's the right one," said Ivan Ivanovich. "If a man makes the wrong choice of an ordinary profession, it doesn't take him long to discover it, but in the field of art, and especially of literature, how many people without the slightest talent go bungling

along all their lives! It's easy to fool yourself and others in this field. Don't be angry with me for being so frank with you, Olga. I'm only saying it for your own good. Well now, let's hear what you've written."

Ivan Ivanovich sat down next to her and leaned his elbows on the desk, ready to listen. In spite of his scepticism, he was interested. It wasn't easy for her to submit her first work to criticism after such a discouraging introduction, but Olga's pride had been outraged, and she accepted his challenge with an eagerness which, though she was unaware of it, is always roused in those who write, by the prospect of having their work heard and criticized.

"I haven't quite finished it," she said hesitantly, "and I still have to copy it." But she began to read.

Ivan Ivanovich listened attentively; the further she read, the darker grew his face.

He did not immediately express his opinion. Olga waited with lowered eyes, anxiously twisting a bit of paper in her fingers. She had not imagined that she would be so disturbed by the necessity of hearing an appraisal. Ivan Ivanovich procrastinated, reluctant to hurt her feelings. Perhaps Olga's disquietude was conveyed to him, or perhaps he was stayed by the remembrance that she was seeking so desperately to find an occupation for herself. Whatever it was, he could not bring himself to condemn what she had done.

"Not bad," he said at last, with forced brightness, averting his eyes. "You'll get into the swing of it if you keep on practising."

"Oh no, tell me the truth," said Olga. "I don't want compliments."

And once more an accursed cowardliness tied his tongue.

"It's not bad, Olga," he repeated.

A strained silence ensued.

"Not bad at all," he muttered. "In fact, there's really something in that account of yours," he said cheerily, glad to have found such a noncommittal way of putting it, but on seeing the misery in her eyes he blushed to the roots of his hair.

Impulsively he went over to his wife and put his arms about her.

"Don't be angry with me, Olga, but I don't like it. You're too discursive. Take that: 'Man explodes his way into the heart of the mountains.' People don't talk like that. Or 'a gun salute to his labour.' Too rhetorical. I wouldn't advise you to attempt this sort of thing."

33

Next morning Olga woke up with a heavy heart. The utter self-oblivion she had experienced while writing her first, and probably last, literary work had long since passed, but remembrance and regret remained. They increased the pain her husband's frankness had caused her, and her sense of shame that she had told Martemianov she meant to write about the mine.

"Well, I wrote about it," she thought bitterly, turning to the wall and closing her eyes, though she had no hope of falling asleep again. Ivan Ivanovich was already moving about the room, getting ready to go to work. She did not get up to see him off, and even pretended to be asleep when he bent over and kissed her goodbye.

All morning Olga was downcast, and when dinner time came, she resolved to go out. The very thought of yesterday's conversation with her husband filled her with bitterness. She must have time to get over it. It was easy for him, of course; he had so many other things to think of. And if he should raise the subject again, and even try to turn it into a joke....

"Oh no. I couldn't stand it," said Olga to herself as she laid the table. "Let him dine alone, if that's how he feels about it."

She left a note at Ivan Ivanovich's place telling him not to wait for her, pulled on her storm boots and made for the door. But she paused on reaching it, quickly returned, picked up her ill-fated article and stuffed it into the pocket of her jacket.

"I'll read it once more and then tear it up," she resolved as she clambered up cliffs covered with larches, moss, and low-lying cedar bushes.

Softly the wind rocked the cedar boughs, and their dark needles responded with a drowsy murmur. The day was hot. Sultry. Up in the sky she saw what seemed to be a soundless cannonade, marked by white puffs of cloud which went floating away in the blue depths.

"Apparently a thunderstorm is gathering," thought Olga, stopping for breath. "The sky looks like a field before battle. But I've never seen a thunderstorm here. However menacing the sky, there's never anything but rain."

Easily she climbed from one level to another. Now she was at the very top. How lonely it was, and how wild! On every hand stretched the bare, lifeless peaks, merging at the horizon with undulating blue mists. A thin grey trail worn by wild beasts wound drearily in the hot sun among boulders and clumps of mountain cranberry. One could cover hundreds of kilometres along this trail.

Olga sat down on a flat piece of laminated shale and remained motionless for a minute or two. The wind had died down, and a hush hung over the taiga down below, beyond the scattered boulders.

"I suppose I didn't know how," said Olga, breaking the stillness. "It's true that I'm too discursive. But he didn't tell me how to improve my work."

She took the roll of papers out of her pocket and began to read aloud what she had written, and again her eyes shone with excitement. Perhaps this disappointment would help her write more vividly.

Absent-mindedly she crumpled the papers in her hand, and the sound caused her to start. Here they lay, like the broken wings of a dove. What did it matter that this attempt had turned out to be a failure? It was only her first. She must slave away until her efforts were successful. She would return to the mine for a second inspection and write an entirely different article.

Fondly Olga smoothed out the papers on her knee, rolled them up and put them in her pocket; then she got up. Her eyes reflected the sky, and the golden glints of sunlight, but they also reflected her determination.

She had almost reached the Pryakhins' house when the rain descended. Again there was no thunderstorm; piles of grey clouds just crawled over the mountains, veiled the entire sky, and suddenly emptied themselves in whitish streaks of heavy rain. The entire countryside was filled with its splash and murmur. Passers-by ran for shelter, as did Olga, pursued by the rain, which lashed her shoulders and uncovered head.

For a few minutes she stood on the Pryakhins' veranda shaking off the water and watching the downpour bombard the road, the roofs of the houses, the bushes and grasses, washed to an emerald sheen.

Presently she heard someone push the window open and Pava Romanovna said:

"What air! Pure ozone, even if it wasn't a thunderstorm—just a cloudburst. We rarely have thunderstorms here, thank goodness. I'm terrified of lightning. Are you?"

"No," answered Tavrov. "I'm only afraid of its injuring the power supply at the mill."

"Oh, you practical people!" said Pava Romanovna with a sigh.

"Would you like to see me curtain the doors and windows and sit in the dark like you do? What good would come of that?"

"At least it would give you a chance to sit in pleasant company while the storm raged," said Pava Romanovna coyly.

"Oh what a temptress!" thought Olga with a laugh, and prepared to leave.

"I'm not one to seek out dark corners," said Tavrov.

"Not a very chivalrous reply," remarked Pava Romanovna lightly, at the same instant glancing through the window and catching sight of Olga on the veranda. "Why, how did you ever get here? Won't you come in?"

It was the thought of her trip to the mine with Tavrov and of what he had said to her that made Olga accept the invitation. He mustn't think she had done nothing.

"I wrote that article," she announced as soon as she had said hello. "I was terribly impressed, but the article is no good, despite my efforts."

"What makes you think it isn't?" he asked, gazing at her intently.

"Because. . . ." She did not like to tell him it was Ivan Ivanovich's opinion. "It just seems so to me."

"Who did you write to, and what about?" asked the inquisitive Pava.

"I wanted to write for the papers, but so far I haven't been very successful," said Olga dolefully, casting anxious glances in the direction of Tavrov, who had withdrawn to read her article.

"How I envy writers—and anyone who works in the field of art," chirped Pava Romanovna. "They can work whenever they feel like it. And the fame they get! And they can take any name they like."

Olga coloured with shame and annoyance, as if she had suddenly seen an ugly caricature of herself.

"Why did I ever come here?" she thought irritably.

"Come on over," called Pava Romanovna, who had picked up a box of chocolates and settled herself on a couch piled high with bright pillows. "Look at that view from the window. Charming, isn't it? I want to hang one of those bead curtains over the door. They're so pretty, don't you think? Of course you can see right through them, but they give the place such an air. Coloured beads, strung into a design. When you come up close you seem to be up against a wall of plants and flowers, but you keep right on going, and before you know it you've passed right through it, leaving the flowers swinging and glistening in your wake."

"Yes," replied Olga absent-mindedly. Suddenly her hands felt cold and she began rubbing them with a nervous gesture. "It's the sun that's just come out," she added, unaware of what Pava Romanovna had said. "The sun—and it's been raining—that's what makes everything glisten."

"But this isn't bad at all!" exclaimed Tavrov.

Both women instantly turned round, one with eager interest, the other with deep concern.

"You can trust him," said Pava Romanovna assuringly, interpreting Olga's anxiety in her own way. "He's not at all inclined to pay the ladies compliments. He doesn't care a fig for the impression he makes."

"Come now, that all depends," protested Tavrov, blushing furiously.

"See that?" cried Pava Romanovna. "Didn't I tell you so? He's just like your Ivan Ivanovich. Once he's said a thing, wild horses couldn't make him change his mind."

"Why should I? I haven't said anything you could object to," said Tavrov, subtly conscious of the shadow that crossed Olga's face at Pava Romanovna's last words. "I said I liked the article, though it's too full of the author's comments. A newspaper article should be more matter-of-fact."

"Matter-of-fact," repeated Olga. "Then what do you like about it?"

"You have a fresh style, sometimes even moving. But what you said there at the mines was better. Really it was. Simpler, and more heartfelt. Why don't you write as you speak? Then it will carry over to those who have never been down a mine, as you hadn't until this trip. That's a very good first try, but you had better write it over again."

"How?" asked Olga.

"Put in more facts. Not little, dry, chance facts, but the most significant ones. And write about them with the same warm feeling with which you described your own sensations."

"Throw my whole soul into it?" said Olga, smiling.

"Of course. Pay another visit to Martemianov—and perhaps even a third. Get him to give you the necessary figures and the names of the miners. That nameless hero of yours, for instance—I've already guessed who he is—has an interesting biography. He was born in Azerbaijan, but has come to feel quite at home up here in the North; month after month he breaks the records set by Siberians, and his family too has become acclimated. A fine large family. You should go see them. When you know him personally it will be easier for you to write about him as a miner."

34

Yakov Firsov, who had gone prospecting on his own, was brought to the hospital by some Yakuts in a very bad state. His body, swollen and inert, was covered with livid blotches. Blood vessels were bursting in skin and muscles, and ever new spots appeared on his powerful arms, on his face, and on a chest so massive that the hospital shirt scarcely spanned it.

"What a Hercules he was!" thought Ivan Ivanovich, sitting down beside the bed and reaching for the man's wrist in a habitual gesture. The body of those stricken with scurvy becomes moist and soft, like clay, and it was with grave apprehension that Ivan Ivanovich observed the marks left by his fingers on the man's puffy wrist.

Scurvy—the black scourge! Ivan Ivanovich recalled the tales recounted about the group of prospectors who made their way from Chazhma in 1920, during a famine in the gold-fields. Not one of them escaped the scurvy in that year, and those who were fortunate enough to survive the winter in cold, dark shelters, at last emerged almost on hands and knees. Spring came early, but fitfully. Over bare mountain peaks, across frozen marshes where the wind lashed the stiff grasses, crawled the stricken men. They gnawed last year's bilberries right off the bushes, like mountain bears, as they moved ahead in search of the first green shoots.

"At that time there were no roads or machines or gardens," reflected Ivan Ivanovich. "Chazhma was always considered a 'scurvy country.' But today? Today we have fresh vegetables in autumn, and even in winter. The diet has been greatly improved, yet even now there are many cases of scurvy in the spring. Especially among people living at distant mines."

The doctor sat lost in his reflections, gazing into the puffy face of his patient without seeing his eyes, or his swollen, blood-flecked lips—conscious only of the man's pain and loneliness and fearful resignation to death. And a great protest rose in the breast of Ivan Ivanovich against this resignation, and this pain that nothing could relieve. He could not let this man pass into the great unknown without doing battle for him.

On the bed-table stood a tray containing highly nutritious food for the patient: porridge with an extra portion of butter, grated vegetables, milk.

"That's all well enough, but when a patient is in this state, when the slightest movement of his tongue makes his teeth wobble and the blood flow from his gums—" Ivan Ivanovich frowned as he recalled the piece of white bread with the patient's strong front teeth lying on it—fallen out at his first attempt to eat. "They pop out like beans out of a pod. This won't do. We must think of some emergency measure. We can't go on in the old way. Once the disease exists, it must have its remedy."

Ivan Ivanovich rose, drew the cover over Firsov's arms, which were twisted in a painful convulsion, and walked silently to the door. Behind him came doctors, nurses, and student-feldshers, like a string of white geese.

"No reply to the letter we sent to the Regional Committee?" asked Shirokov, the eye doctor, who met Ivan Ivanovich in the hall.

"Not yet," replied the surgeon.

"Don't let it worry you. We're in the right."

"But you should see the letter the hospital Trade Union Committee received today!" put in Denis Antonovich. "From Petrov, a student of the Ukamchan Mining Technicum. He writes that he has entered his last year and is getting excellent marks."

"Is he the fellow we operated on for tumour in the temporal region?" asked Ivan Ivanovich, rousing from his preoccupation. "So he's studying, is he?"

"He asked the Committee to give his best regards and his thanks to Dr. Arzhanov," continued Denis Antonovich jubilantly. "Remember the state he was in when he came here? He had lost the power to read and write."

"I remember. I never forget a patient, even ten years after an operation," said Ivan Ivanovich. "I recognize them the minute I see them, but sometimes I forget their names."

"There's no denying that Ivan Ivanovich has an enviable memory," said Sergutov, the young internee, "but this is the second time he's forgotten the theatre tickets lying on the desk in his office. Again they weren't used."

"As if I had time or thought for the theatre!" replied Ivan Ivanovich. Once more his face lengthened as he recalled Skorobogatov's dourness, and the fact that the Secretary scarcely spoke to him these days.

"Keep your chin up!" said Shirokov, testily straightening the white hospital cap that kept sliding off his thick coarse hair. "Give me the letter from that student, Denis Antonovich. I'll telegraph him to pay a visit to the Regional Party Committee and the Regional Health Department, and to take some more of our patients with him. Visual aids are very effective."

"Let's hope they will be in this case," said Sergutov half jokingly, but his full lips drooped in a rueful grimace. "Gusev is sticking his fingers into everything these days. Rumour has it he's to be made head of the hospital again. If he is, that'll be the end for us beginners. He won't give us a chance."

Ivan Ivanovich resumed his musings as he went from ward to ward on his rounds. In addition to his latest disagreement with Skorobogatov, he was troubled by two other problems: scurvy and—Olga.

Who had given her the idea of writing for the papers? When, on the next day after hearing her article, he had jokingly called her a "pen-pusher," she had flared up. She had accused him of being an egoist and said various unpleasant things. Now she had taken a heap of books from the public library, was reading and writing articles, and visiting all sorts of places in her spare time. Ivan Ivanovich had heard she had been down the mine with Martemianov. And had gone to see him a second time. She no longer told her husband where she went, though

it was not in her nature to be secretive. A few days ago she announced that she had already sent four articles to the regional newspaper.

"If only she were serious about it, but it's probably just another one of her passing fancies," thought Ivan Ivanovich unhappily. And that's what he had said to Olga. He was cut to the quick by the distrust she showed him. "As if I kept her from developing her abilities! Let her write! Children have to amuse themselves somehow. But why make a family drama of it? Tomorrow she may become just as enthusiastic about astronomy. And me with this scurvy on my mind!"

"Broke the rules?" said he to a prospector who had been in the hospital for two weeks with a serious scull injury.

"Just the tiniest bit." The rough woodsman blushed like a girl as he marked off on the end of his finger the "tiniest bit" he had taken.

"You only injure yourself," said Ivan Ivanovich, displeased, as he looked at that coarsened finger. "Do you suppose we don't know when you take a sip on the sly? It isn't enough for us to have taken you off the operating table alive. Surely it isn't enough for you either. Don't you want to get back on your feet again? To be as well as ever?"

Ivan Ivanovich left this recalcitrant patient and stopped beside the bed of a miner who had recently been operated on and whose head was encased in white bandages, like a helmet.

While the surgeon was speaking to him, Denis Antonovich whispered something to Valerian Valentinovich.

"Quite sufficient," said the neurologist into the slightly protruding ear of Denis Antonovich, smiling at the same time in a self-satisfied way.

"Thanks!" replied Denis Antonovich, squeezing the neurologist's hand so hard that the latter gave a grunt.

"Thanks a lot, on behalf of the whole Committee. Now we have enough money to send Lyuba to her granny in the Urals."

"What local remedies against scurvy are used here in the taiga?" Ivan Ivanovich asked his students.

"What medicines were formerly used by mine workers?" he inquired of the miners.

"Raw deer liver helps," said the Evenks and the Yakuts.

"What you need is garlic and sourkraut," advised the prospectors.

"Alcohol's best of all," asserted old woodsmen who had more than once come to grips with the scurvy.

"Ain't nothing so good as a poultice of cedar needles," said the old women from the prospectors' cooperative. "Or berries."

Ivan Ivanovich grew thoughtful, recalling cases of scurvy he had heard of occurring during polar expeditions, in jails, on long sea voyages, in towns ravaged by war.

To be sure, this disease was not directly connected with his work as a surgeon, but he was of the opinion that every field of medicine had some connection with his specialization. And so he took an interest in everything. The fact that people in the North suffered from scurvy was for him a personal matter, one which touched him deeply.

What was the significance of the phrase "scurvy country"? Would inhabitants of Volga regions suffer from scurvy? On the Volga, scurvy occurred only during famine; here it attacked people who had plenty to eat.

Ivan Ivanovich recalled the past—his childhood spent in the smoke and soot of a large railway centre. Vitamins? An ironic smile touched his lips. In his mind's

eye he saw a ragged, grimy-footed lad with bristling hair making his way down the railway ties, picking up cigarette butts and crusts of bread. Suddenly the youngster darted out of the clutch of a railway guard and hurled himself into a boyish fray: "Help! They're licking our fellows!" On reaching home his mother did not meet him with kisses and buttered buns. The only thing her work-roughened hands distributed lavishly were cuffings. But little Ivan took no offense—he was hardened. The family boasted a whole ladder of offspring—up and down, older and younger. And all of them hungry. But none of them ever suffered from scurvy, though they had never even heard of vitamins. When Vanya and his elder brother had to be outfitted to be sent to school, the whole family literally starved for a month. The elder brother never did get an education, but Ivan insisted on his right to study. His father, a stevedore, had simple, brutal methods of dealing with his children, but so struck was he by Ivan's obstinacy that he supported his demands. However, it was only with the coming of the revolution that the boy was sent first to a Workers' School, then to the University in Saratov. He supplemented his student stipend by working, so that he could send money to his father, who was struggling to support so large a family. It was a hard time for him, with no thought of vitamins, but still he did not suffer from scurvy. Why should the disease be so common here? He must find out.

35

On arriving home earlier than usual one afternoon, Ivan Ivanovich again found Olga at her desk. There were no papers in front of her this time (she now kept all her notes locked up in the cupboard). She was simply sitting with her head in her hands, and she did not even turn when Ivan Ivanovich crossed the room. Only by a

slight movement of her shoulders did he guess that she had heard him enter.

"Something has upset her," he thought as he tenderly passed his hand over her brow and fluffy hair.

Olga raised her head, and he saw that her eyes were brimming.

"What's the trouble, Olga?" he asked gently, and at that the tears overflowed on to her long lashes and rolled down her cheeks.

"Has anything happened?" he asked, now alarmed.

"They didn't print it," said Olga through her tears. "Only one... about the drillers, and even so they cut everything I wrote myself... nothing but facts... only a couple of lines were left... out of such a long article."

"What did I tell you?" said Ivan Ivanovich, touched by the bitterness of her disappointment. "You can only go in for a thing like this as a side line. I too write for the papers—about my feldsher course, and affairs at the hospital. I've even written whole pamphlets on scientific subjects. But I don't aspire to become a professional writer. Everybody writes something some time or other, even if it's only an article for the wall newspaper."

Olga's tears immediately ceased flowing. She sat up as straight as a die, listening without a word until Ivan Ivanovich was arrested by her hostile expression.

"Offended again!" he said miserably.

"There's nothing to be offended about if you just won't understand," she said with an offhandedness screening deep indignation. "*You* write for the papers—*everyone* writes for the papers.—But you forget that you write about work you love, about things that matter to you and touch you deeply. That is why writing is just a side line for you. But for me? How could writing be a side line for me? What else have I? Nothing. And I'm crying because I too want to take my stand in life. That's why it's so hard for me to reconcile myself to failure.

And I won't! Let them reject my things once. Let them reject them ten times. Twenty times. I'll keep on writing just the same."

"That's only natural," said Tavrov to Olga in Pava Romanovna's hospitable home. "But you're right—the only way to achieve your purpose is to keep on working harder than ever."

Pava Romanovna was ready to "cross her heart" that Tavrov was in love with Olga; it's a pretty sure sign when a man goes from red to white at the very mention of a woman's name! But no matter how she tried, she could never catch them at incriminating intimacies. They read Olga's articles, which sent Pava Romanovna into the same ecstacies that Igor Korobitsyn's poems did. She even suggested submitting them to a wider audience, dreaming of setting up a sort of literary salon in her home. Olga and Tavrov discussed music, the theatre, politics, and played chess together. Sometimes Pava even envied a relationship which she found incomprehensible, considering their ages. It was much more exciting than a simple flirtation, but demanded more of a woman than archness and the ability to keep up a flow of smart talk. How was it possible to hold off a man who was in love with you, to keep him within the bounds of a friendship as serious and innocent as the adoration of youth?

Today, for example, when Olga had arrived in such a perturbed state, he consoled her like an elder comrade.

"Nothing but envious fools and bounders everywhere!" Pava Romanovna had declared on learning of Olga's rejection slips. "Don't you pay any attention to them, darling! If I could write like you, I'd do it just for my own pleasure."

On hearing this, Olga glanced almost guiltily at Tavrov, but he was condescendingly tolerant of Pava's inanities.

"No sense in laying it to fools and bounders," said he, absent-mindedly stroking Pava's pet cat which had snuggled up to him and was now purring, its nose nestled in his pocket. "It's just that newspapermen are sometimes wary of things that sound a bit different. And Olga Pavlovna hasn't yet learned to write. Do you know what I advise you to do?" he asked, turning to Olga.

She was sitting close to him, and looked so directly into his eyes that for a moment he was thrown off his balance. But her frank gaze expressed nothing but trust and anxiety. Tavrov frowned in the effort to recapture his losts, and sought to hide his feelings by reaching for the cat, curled so soft and warm beside him.

"That's the thing—write more, and spend as much time as possible at the mine and the mill."

"For my own pleasure?" said Olga with a little laugh. "It's true I'm not very patient. I want recognition before I've hardly begun. But this time I won't give in so easily. It takes five years of specialized study to become a mechanical engineer, and newspaper work is just as difficult. So I must just buckle down."

"If you do, you're sure to learn," said Tavrov cheerfully. "Write an article about the women of the North who have entered industry during the last few years. If it doesn't turn out the first time, rewrite it until you are satisfied, then show it to me. And you might write something about Chazhma too."

36

"Come, come, you mustn't cry," said Ivan Ivanovich in an unsteady voice, taking the child's frail little hand in his own.

She was the daughter of the woman who had died on the operating table. Now she was dressed for a journey, in a rather worn brown dress with a crisp white collar

encircling her slender neck, and with her hair done in two short braids. The tears were still streaming down her flushed cheeks, but she wiped them with the underside of a fist which clutched the strap of a handbag. Turning up her brown eyes framed in wet lashes to the towering doctor, she said:

"I've come to thank you for the money, and—everything...."

"That's all right, ducky," said Ivan Ivanovich, stoically facing the orphan's mournful gaze. "It's Denis Antonovich you want to thank. But you don't have to thank anybody. It's our duty to help you."

"Oh no it isn't. It's not your fault that—that it happened." Once more Lyuba's eyes filled with tears. "Mama suffered so from headache. How she suffered! She simply didn't know what to do with her head! She bit her lips until they bled to keep from crying out. What kind of a life would it have been for her?" said the child with genuine grief, though the words had probably been borrowed from grownups.

The preceding year her father had drowned in the Chazhma River, so now she was alone.

"What a life, a surgeon's!" said Denis Antonovich, as he went through his neat files in the office of the hospital's Trade Union Committee. "You suffer all the pains of your patients, and then the relatives of these patients come along. They aren't to be ignored either."

"How lucky you found someone who was travelling to her very town!" said Elena Denisovna, who had dropped in to see her Chairman of the Trade Union Committee for a second. "She's a fine child. I would have been only too glad to have adopted her."

Denis Antonovich started up.

"Then why didn't you say so before?" he asked.

"Why didn't *you*?" she said, looking fondly at her husband. "I did speak to her about it. And so did Olga

Pavlovna. It would have been just the thing for the Arzhanovs to have adopted her, having no children of their own."

"Well, and what came of it?"

"She refused. Wanted to go to her granny."

Denis Antonovich's blue eyes clouded.

"Poor little thing. But she'll be taken care of, and she'll receive a government pension. But how many children are being left orphans these days—in England for instance, and Germany.... Damn the fine gentlemen who make wars!"

"Lyuba looks a bit like our Lena," said Olga as she walked beside Ivan Ivanovich. "Only she's ten already, and much too serious for her years. How trouble ages a person!"

She stole a covert glance at her husband, biting her lip at the remembrance of how they had quarrelled. But there was no denying it—he took terrific risks of his own free will.

Ivan Ivanovich did not hear Olga's last words, for his attention was distracted by the appearance of Igor Korobitsyn, mechanic at the mines.

Igor was wearing very short and very wide checked trousers, crepe-soled shoes, and a white Ukrainian blouse with embroidery and a pink ribbon at the neck.

Ivan Ivanovich could not restrain a smile at sight of the ribbon.

"What a day! What a superb day!" exclaimed Igor, whose face looked more pinched than ever under the enormous visor of an ultrasmart new cap. "Ivan Ivanovich! Olga Pavlovna! What do you say to holding a picnic in the mountains? We'll invite some others and go tomorrow. Pava Romanovna will come, I'm sure."

Ivan Ivanovich was about to refuse, but on glancing at Olga he said jocularly:

"Shall we go, Olga?"

"If you like."

"Of course we'll go," said Ivan Ivanovich, but as he watched Igor's retreating figure he added ironically: "Never wanted to do anything so badly in my life! What a getup! He's serious enough on the job, but to look at him you'd think he was a circus clown. I almost laughed in his face when I saw that ribbon. Like the fellow who came to see Levin—remember, in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*? What was his name? Levin threw him out."

"Vasenka Veslovsky," prompted Olga. "But he wasn't at all like Igor. Vasenka was a fat little pig, and his ribbons were on his hat."

"No they weren't," insisted Ivan Ivanovich. "But the likeness lies not in the ribbons, but in the fact that one of these days I'm going to throw Igor out too. He's paying you too much attention," he concluded unexpectedly.

"Korobitsyn is like that with everybody," said Olga. "Don't be so hard on him."

37

"Everyone's to go on foot," ordered Pava Romanovna. "No bicycles. You can't climb mountains on bicycles. Oh, of course, if anybody wants to be selfish enough to get there first by going along the highway!"

"On foot! Only on foot!" cried Igor Korobitsyn. "Dismount, ye selfish ones!" And he set the example by being the first to wheel his bicycle up the path to the shed.

"Lots of people back home think there are nothing but bears and prospectors in baggy pants here in the goldfields," said Tavrov. "But the fact is that we have paved highways and bicycles. And neurosurgeons," he added in all seriousness.

"True enough, but we also have scurvy," said Ivan Ivanovich in the same tone, glancing at his wife, who

was clearly disappointed by Pava Romanovna's injunction.

To his mind came the memory of the first time he had ever seen Olga. He had been returning home from work. The trees along the boulevard were freshly green. It had just rained, and the feet of the children playing under the trees left distinct imprints on the moist sand. Ivan Ivanovich crossed the boulevard, filling his lungs with the scent of young leaves and grass. The bell of a bicycle made him turn round. A young girl came riding swiftly down the street. Her sunburnt hands grasped the handles firmly; her legs were well-shaped and as brown as her hands. As she passed, she glanced calmly about her, turning her head so that one moment her fair hair flew out in the wind, the next fell back on her shoulders, which were encased in a tight-fitting white sports shirt.

A smile of pride and pleasure came to Ivan Ivanovich's lips at the remembrance.

"Come on," he said to Tavrov, and the whole group set out, some with knapsacks on their backs, others with baskets of food in their hands.

"Why didn't you invite Varvara?" asked Ivan Ivanovich as he caught a glimpse of Varvara walking down the street with Logunov. "Platon Artyomovich! Varya! Come along with us!"

"I can't today. It's quite impossible," said Logunov regretfully.

"Is it really?" said Varvara. "I turned down the invitation last night. I was so busy all week I left a number of things to do today. But now I feel like taking a rest. It's such a wonderful day!" Her eyes turned appealingly to Logunov. "What do you say, Platon?"

"I can't, Varya." With a furtive glance at Tavrov, he added under his breath. "You're not being very consistent: you had decided to do some studying and then play tennis with me after dinner."

Varvara merely tossed back her braids and said, as she joined the picnickers:

"One can't always be consistent. These last few days have worn me out, and I need a clear head for studying. It's glorious up in the mountains now—the wind has driven away all the mosquitoes and those nasty midges. The bears, and all the wild goats and the stags have left the valley for the mountains."

Later, as she jumped lightly over a large stone, she said to Ivan Ivanovich: "Too bad he didn't come with us. He's so nice, my Platon Logunov, don't you think so?"

"Indeed I do. But why do you call him *your* Platon? Do you intend to marry him?"

"I haven't decided yet. I suppose I won't. But he loves me, and that makes me very happy."

Ivan Ivanovich gave a hearty laugh.

"That means you must love him too."

"Don't laugh," begged Varvara. "You may think it's funny, but for me—for me it is not funny at all. It is very serious," she added quickly, breaking off a cedar branch and biting into the young needles.

"You're like a little goat," said Ivan Ivanovich. "There's not a bush you don't try. Varvara takes a bite out of all the trees along the way," he said to Olga, who was walking along the other side of the path. "She's always chewing grass or sucking at a birch wand."

Varvara was abashed, but she said:

"Do as I do, and you'll never fall ill of the scurvy."

"Never fall ill of the scurvy," repeated Ivan Ivanovich, picking up a branch she had just discarded. "What amazing life force!" he said, observing how the needles righted themselves after being trampled underfoot. "There are no pines or spruces here, but the cedars have taken a foothold, though they've degenerated into mere bushes. How is it I haven't paid any particular attention to them before? Look how lovely they are, Olga! And they grow

on bare rocky peaks, as well as along the banks of the river. Make themselves at home everywhere." He also bit into the resinous needles. "And the taste is quite pleasant. Try it."

"I'm not Varvara," replied Olga coldly.

"But just look," he went on enthusiastically, unaware of her rebuff. "Those bushes are like shaggy fur coats. They are indeed. It's said that cedar poultices relieve rheumatism and scurvy. There's a lot of cedar in these parts. Why should there be so much of it in the very region where scurvy is so common?"

Olga was familiar with her husband's tendency to become absorbed in some "side line," and with his persistence in finding out what he wanted to know.

"Try to solve that riddle," she said.

"The cedars have proved more than a match for this severe climate," continued Ivan Ivanovich. "During the winter, with the thermometer down to sixty below, the bushes drowse under the snow, alive and green."

"There's a level place ahead," interrupted Olga. "Come along, let's be the first to get there!"

"*I'll* be the first," cried Varvara.

"We'll see!" replied Ivan Ivanovich, taking Olga by the elbow.

The three of them reached the spot, flat as a table, at almost the same time. Out of the stony soil, covered with patches of lichen, grew thick cedar bushes, with the wind whistling through their needles.

"How many nuts there will be here in the autumn!" said Varvara.

"If only we could transfer all these bushes, or rather, this whole spot, to the mining settlement!" said Olga musingly, narrowing her eyes against the brilliant sunlight. "Wouldn't it make a charming park? How nice to stroll among such bushes! They suggest a southern landscape."

"We'll call a halt here," ordered Pava Romanovna, breathing quickly through half-open lips.

Her face was flushed, but she walked easily, with a slight swing, though her figure was noticeably filling out.

"Simply glorious, isn't it?" she said when she had stopped for breath, wiping the perspiration off her face with a soft little hand. "It's very good for your health, exercise like this. Especially for one in my condition."

Ivan Ivanovich gave her a swift glance. He couldn't help admiring the blooming appearance of this expectant mother, but he thought to himself: "You better get to work, young lady, to use up some of the fat that's accumulating."

"Isn't it simply too glorious for anything?" repeated Pava Romanovna while the others made things ready for the picnic.

"What's your husband doing?" she said to Olga, pointing to Ivan Ivanovich, who had taken out his pocketknife and was cutting off young cedar shoots.

"He's decided to try using cedar needles to treat his patients."

38

"Are you working?" asked Tavrov.

"Yes," replied Olga. "I go about seeing things every day and take lots of notes, and then sit down at my desk and struggle with them. It's so upsetting. I don't like what I write at all, not at all, but I keep on writing. I keep searching for words that haven't been used. I'm burning up with the desire to say things, but I just can't." She grew thoughtful for a moment. "And still I think I'm doing better; I'm beginning to find focal points, and not going off on so many tangents. It's hard, but I love it."

Tavrov looked at her with fond sympathy. He was sincerely happy that he had been able to point out an occupation that really interested her.

"Listen to this!" came Igor Korobitsyn's loud voice from somewhere nearby. "What wonderful lines!

"The girl of my dreams, one evening,
Came to be loved by me,
She was dark and quiet as autumn,
But our hearts did not agree.
And her eyes, of midnight darkness,
Burned with a quiet grief—"

"Like Varya!" concluded Igor. "Varya, you're 'the girl of my dreams.' "

"She isn't like that," objected Pava Romanovna briskly. "There's nothing quiet about Varya—she's a bundle of energy. The lady of your dreams was a dull sort. No wonder you couldn't agree."

Everyone laughed.

Once more they set out along the narrow trail worn by the hoofs of mountain goats and rams and the paws of wild bears. The trail passed along the very crest of the mountain, now climbing steeply, now levelling out into hollows overgrown with moss. It was easy and pleasant to walk here. The picnickers called to each other gaily, intoxicated with sun and air and light and the illimitable space. They squatted and slid down the slippery white moss of the slopes; they sang songs and threw stones off the cliffs. Only Gusev, who had unexpectedly joined them, remained as reserved as ever. The schoolboy behaviour of these grownups evidently annoyed him, and with exaggerated concern he kept patting down his faultlessly neat suit.

"Why did he have to come?" Varvara said to Olga with a shrug of her slender shoulders. "Why didn't he stay home and play bridge? He trails us like a thunder cloud."

Olga had caught the holiday mood. She too threw stones off the cliffs, and chased the little striped ground squirrels that teased the intruders by whistling at them.

"Shake him off!" she said to Tavrov when a squirrel she was pursuing took refuge in the top of a young larch.

Together they shook the tree. Bits of bark and dry leaves fell down on their upturned faces, on Olga's tawny arms and fair hair. Never before had Tavrov been so close to her laughing mouth. Their hands touched as if by chance, and Olga was suddenly transformed. Instantly she withdrew and grew sullen.

"There's a lesson for you!" thought Tavrov, stunned by her immediate hostility. "What she wants from you is friendly help and sympathy, and here you are trying to make love to her!" So hurt was he by the incident that he had to speak to her.

"Don't be angry," he said quickly. "Forgive me. My only offense is that I love you. More than anything else on earth!"

"You mustn't say such things!" said Olga. "I'm grateful to you, and look upon you as my best friend, but I don't want—I mustn't lose the right to face Ivan Ivanovich with a clear conscience."

Tavrov walked away; he stumbled over a stone and nearly fell, but caught himself and went on.

"It's easier to tear the branch off an oak than to tear her away from that man," thought he, as he turned round and saw her in the distance, standing next to her husband on the top of a hill.

39

"Are you bored?" asked Olga, taking Ivan Ivanovich by the arm and pressing her shoulder against his.

"Oh no; on the contrary I'm awfully glad we took this trip to the mountains," he replied buoyantly, glad to see Olga in such a gay mood and grateful for the restrained

affection she showed him. "If only I could learn how to make a medicine of this cedar!"

"So you believe what Varvara said?"

"She gave me an idea. The remedies used by simple folk often lead to important discoveries. When at last we discover an effective cure for cancer and tuberculosis, we'll probably gasp to see how simple it is. But what is it you wanted to say to me?" he asked, catching an expression of absent-mindedness on her face.

"I wanted...." Olga looked about helplessly. She was clinging to him like a frightened child.

They were standing on the edge of a precipice amid yellow and red crags. Here and there grew clumps of cedar bushes, looking like dark tents on the steep slopes beneath them, while further down extended a green alder grove.

"Just look—what strange cliffs! How remarkable that—"

"That what, Olga?"

"That those rocks should have crumbled so. Whole mountains reduced to rubble!... But that isn't what I brought you here for. I just wanted to be alone with you, and so I drew you away."

"And I wanted the same thing," said Ivan Ivanovich happily. "You've been so distant with me of late!"

"Where could he have gone?" asked Pava Romanovna irritably. "It wasn't very polite of him to go off like that—making us wait and worry about him. We came here to have a good time. When you're in a party, you mustn't think only of yourself. That's the height of selfishness."

"Oh, don't be so hard on him," interrupted Ivan Ivanovich impatiently. "Let the poor fellow enjoy himself."

"He was ashamed, and so he ran away," thought Olga, distressed that the friendship with Tavrov which she prized so highly, had come to such a bad end.

She was sensitive enough to have guessed his feeling for her long ago, but so absorbed was she in the work he had suggested, and so appreciative of his aid and solicitude, that she chose to believe—and had made herself believe—in the disinterestedness of their relationship.

"Why couldn't it have gone on like that?" she thought with genuine disappointment, almost with fear. "Perhaps he just wanted to flatter me and reveal himself in a better light."

"Hear that? A shot!" cried Varvara. "And another."

"From over there, it seems," said Ivan Ivanovich. "He must be hunting. He'll catch up to us if we let him know somehow which way we've gone."

"The girl of my dreams—all alone? Allow me to take you under my wing," said Igor, turning to Varvara.

"*I* won't allow you," interrupted Pava Romanovna. "Who'll be *my* beau then? Varvara's a child of the great out-of-doors and can manage very well without your wing."

Igor smiled. He was very fond of Pava Romanovna and of Olga and of all the other attractive women with whom he was acquainted. He was fond of all of them, but had not settled his choice on any. At thirty he found this troublesome. He longed for true love, to suffer and pine.

"Suffering would inspire me to write great poetry," he said. "Oscar Wilde once said that when a poet's heart is broken, it breaks into song."

But the heart of Igor refused to break into song. Often he would sit the whole night over his notebook, only to tear up his feeble efforts and throw himself on the bed with a groan.

"You have black circles under your eyes," observed Pava Romanovna. "Been sitting up writing poetry all night again? Why in the world do you torture yourself so?"

"I want to live a life of beauty and creative work," replied Igor.

"What you want is to get married!" said Pava brusquely. "Then you'll have plenty to keep your mind occupied."

"Ah, yes," said Igor plaintively. "A spouse and children, gruel and diapers. Oh no, that is not for me! Either a great love, or nothing. A poet must not be fettered by the petty things of life!"

"But you're not a poet; you're a mechanic."

"How little you understand! Even a mechanic may become a poet if his thoughts take wing and give birth to new visions. Nothing could be more boring than to just grind away at the job."

Pava Romanovna reflected for a moment.

"Look at me," she said. "I don't work at all, but I'm never bored."

"You're different."

"Different?" Her handsome eyes grew enormous, and she gave her curls a shake, though she was not offended in the least. "All right, I may be different, but take Ivan Ivanovich—Ivan Ivanovich, are you bored?"

"Me? I should say not. I don't think I know what it means to be bored, everything's so interesting."

"What, for instance? You're always surrounded by the sick, by people who are moaning and dying."

"Not so many who are dying. And it's my job to turn the sick and the moaning into the well and the happy. By the time I'm an old man I shall have rescued tens of thousands of people from various ailments. A whole army of able-bodied workers. Isn't that enough to justify one man's life?"

"In other words, you're content with your life?"

"If I were content, I wouldn't make progress. Then I'd be sure to be bored. But a person engaged in work he loves can never be content—he's always trying to grow and advance. And I love my work. Right now I'd like to gather a bunch of these cedar boughs to take home," he said to Olga merrily.

"There's no hurry."

„I mean it. Tomorrow evening I'll call off my lecture, put on your apron, and set to work in the kitchen making cedar tea, willow wine, and a nice salad of chopped evergreen needles. I'll invent all sorts of new dishes. I'll search—"

"Do you really think we ought to search for him?" asked Pava Romanovna, who had caught only the last words.

Ivan Ivanovich turned to the noisy group of people who were following him.

"For whom? Tavrov? Oh, I suppose he's home already. I was talking about something quite different."

"That's the way a person should love his work," thought Olga, glancing up at her husband.

She remembered how he had sought new methods eight years before. His ardour was combined with an almost inhuman doggedness. When, already an experienced surgeon, he had entered the neurosurgical clinic, he had begun with the very rudiments, and three years later had written a brilliant treatise on the subject. Finding it necessary to learn German in order to have access to supplementary material, he had mastered the language without interrupting his regular work. Olga recalled his almost childlike admiration for the great men in his chosen field. Neurosurgery! He even uttered the word with reverence.

"How I respect him, and how proud I am of him!" reflected Olga. "But the trouble is that we live without any real contact. I have fallen behind and spend my time trying to catch up, while he, if he looks back at all, only gives me a smile, unaware of how hard it is for me to keep running in his wake."

"Remember the time we went crabbing to Yelovoye Lake?" Ivan Ivanovich was saying. "I had a fight with your brother over a rotten fish. He stole it away from me

and snatched up a whole basketful of crabs besides, the rapscallion!" He laughed at the remembrance, but Olga's thoughts were far away. Only from her husband's tone and his laughter did she guess that he was in soaring spirits.

40

In the morning Olga was awakened by the wailing of the mill siren. Blinking sleepily, she listened in alarm, then glanced at her husband. The sound had wakened him too, and he was lying with wide-open eyes.

"What could it be, a fire?"

Shots were heard in the distance.

Olga jumped out of bed and ran to the window, barefoot, in only her nightgown. When she threw it open the room was filled with the cold dampness of a foggy morning. The rain which had pattered on the roof all night had stopped, but a white haze hung motionless over the settlement. Neither houses nor mountains were visible.

"What could have happened?" asked Ivan Ivanovich again.

Olga did not answer, but, on catching sight of Elena Denisovna coming down the street with Natasha on her arm, she leaned out of the window.

"Why the siren and the shooting?" she called.

Elena Denisovna shifted the well-bundled Natasha to her other arm and pressed her to her breast as she turned to Olga.

"Tavrov has disappeared. He didn't return last night. When I took Natasha to the nursery this morning I heard the whistle. 'A fire!' I thought. And I turned home with Natasha. On the way I met the driver from the hospital. 'Tavrov's lost in the mountains,' he said. 'They've gone to search for him. That's why they're shooting.'"

"What is it?" asked Ivan Ivanovich as he hurriedly tied his shoelaces.

"Tavrov's lost," said Olga in a loud voice, watching Elena Denisovna's sturdy figure retreat down the street. "He didn't come home last night. That's why they're shooting."

"That's a fine thing!" said Ivan Ivanovich, deeply concerned. "He's a newcomer here—doesn't know the mountains. What ever made him go off by himself like that?"

Olga did not immediately reply. She felt guilty and distressed. At last she said hesitantly: "Oh, I suppose he'll find his way home after he's wandered about a bit."

"It's not so simple, wandering about the taiga," objected Ivan Ivanovich, disapproving of Olga's indifference."If it was that poet of yours who was lost, you and your precious Pava would probably go running around like a hen searching for her chicks."

"Oh wouldn't we though!" retorted Olga.

All day long she sat at her desk, but she was unable to work. She took the pile of library books off her shelf —books on gold-mining, as well as travel books on Siberia and the Far East—but she could no more concentrate on reading than on writing. Often, holding her place with one finger, she would sit gazing through the rain-washed window. The sound of the siren roused dreary thoughts.

Olga was relieved when Ivan Ivanovich, worried but hopeful, returned from work. After supper she washed up the dishes, relighted the kitchen stove and heated water for the evening's entertainment— the sight of Ivan Ivanovich fussing about with basins and saucepans.

All night long the siren wailed. As soon as she got up, Olga ran to the window.

"How's the weather?" asked Ivan Ivanovich as he began to dress.

Olga gave a hopeless little wave of her hand.

"Just the same," she said.

When Ivan Ivanovich had gone to work, Pava Romanovna dropped in to see Olga.

"I've brought you good news," she said, fumbling for something in the pocket of her raincoat. "You can't imagine how glad I am for you!"

With some misgivings Olga watched Pava's puffy hands fumbling until she produced a newspaper.

"Your article about those prospectors was printed after all. Last week. And we missed it," said the beaming Pava. "My Pryakhin says that sometimes rejected material is printed if it falls into the hands of somebody important. Perhaps the editor himself read it. Too bad you didn't sign your name in full."

Olga, oblivious of Pava Romanovna's chatter, scanned the paper. Her hands were trembling. Yes, here was her article—one of the many that had been returned to her. Even her title was preserved. The chill she had first experienced was substituted by a hot flush.

Just think—having an article which she herself had written published in the paper!

Still clutching it, Olga sank down upon a chair. She was trembling as if with the ague.

"Take a drink," said Pava in panic. "It's this horrible weather. My tonsils are troubling me too. The minute I get in a draught they make themselves felt. Do take a drink, you must!"

"It's nothing," said Olga.

All her thoughts were now of Tavrov. Where was he wandering? Or perhaps he wasn't. The taiga was full of wild beasts and other perils. How he would have rejoiced in Olga's first little triumph! She did not phone to Ivan Ivanovich: for him an article in the newspaper was just a "side line," but for her it was a tremendous event.

Later she received notice of a money order.

She dressed and went to the post office. The people she passed seemed to greet her more cordially than usual,

as if they knew that the article in the regional paper signed O. A. had been written by her, Olga Arzhanova.

The money was in her name, and had been sent by the editorial office. Never before in her life had Olga earned a kopek. Once more her hands trembled as she took the money from the cashier, a woman she knew. The cashier, too, seemed struck by this extraordinary event. Olga's lips were about to part in a smile of almost childlike delight, when again the sound of the siren rose above the settlement.

She gave a sigh, carefully folded the crisp notes and put them in her bag. Once outside, she reopened her bag to see that they were still there. Suddenly she was gripped by the fear that her readers might not like the article.

For some five minutes Olga remained standing on the porch of the post office gazing in the direction in which Tavrov had disappeared. Even the nearest mountains, rising directly out of the valley, were invisible. Even the hill where Olga had met Tavrov before entering the mine was veiled in fog through which could be seen the faint contours of corners and roofs of houses.

Hunters, prospectors, workers from the mines, were searching the mountains. Warmly dressed and amply supplied with food, they were combing the dripping forest, shouting and shooting into the air. It was not easy to find a person lost in this dense fog, covering tens, perhaps even hundreds of kilometres of wild taiga.

41

When Tavrov left the merry group, he was haunted by shame and longing. His feelings found outlet in the brutality with which he shot a red-crested woodpecker at work on the trunk of a tree. Without so much as glancing at the dead bird, he began to wander through the woods, trampling down the lush grass. Before he was aware of

it, evening had set in. Suddenly it began to rain. A white haze unrolled in the valleys and crawled up the crevices to the very peaks of the mountains.

Tavrov climbed a steep summit, but could see nothing; everything was obliterated by fog. When no response to his shouts and shots was forthcoming, he lay down on a sheltered spot among the rocks and bushes and fell asleep, mentally and physically exhausted. He was awakened by cold and dampness. A fine rain was falling. For the first time in his life Tavrov regretted that he was not a smoker. Had he had matches, he would have built a roaring fire between these rocks! The idea of warmth filled him with such a yearning for hearth and home that he could no longer remain huddling there. He rose and set out.

A pale dawn was breaking over the mountains, its light barely penetrating the banked clouds. The rain had stopped. Wet bushes and trees emerged in endless succession out of the fog, only to be swallowed up again.

A whole day passed.

The longing for human contact intensified his longing for Olga. Tavrov recalled how they had played chess together on shipboard. Once she had dropped a chessman under the table. He had jumped up and leaned down to pick it up, but the round figure rolled away from him, and in reaching for it his cheek came into momentary contact with Olga's dress. The memory of it now was more than he could bear.

Worn almost to a state of prostration, he began to follow a little mountain stream, wading through the shallow water when the brush along the banks became impassable. Perhaps this would lead him more quickly to the Kamenushka River, or to Chazhma itself.

While climbing over a tangle of bushes and windfelled trees, he slipped and fell. For a long time he lay motionless on the wet, rounded snags.

"What am I lying here for? This is no time to rest!" he thought, attempting to rise, but he was pierced by so sharp a pain, that everything went black before his eyes.

"A fine thing! I must have broken my leg," he concluded when, having regained his faculties, he tried to analyze his sensations. "The last straw! Am I to die here, like a wounded beast? Nobody will ever find me in this place. They would walk right past without seeing me."

He could not have explained how he crawled out of the brush and reached an opening in the woods. He moved as in a delirium. But he extricated himself and crawled away, even dragging his gun with him, until he reached a clearing where he could be seen from the mountain slopes, still veiled in fog. He could do no more. He lay and waited, from time to time falling unconscious, only to open his eyes again on the hopeless blackness of the night sky, feeling the fine rain, alternating with snow, fall on his body, and on his swollen lips, parched with fever.

In a moment of consciousness he saw a phantom in spectacles peer at him with guarded hostility. Tavrov stirred and distinctly saw a large animal beat a clumsy retreat. Perhaps it was only a wolverine, but the prospect of its returning was not cheering. With a supreme effort, Tavrov turned over on his side, then on his stomach, and shot in the direction in which the creature had disappeared.

42

"I must see him!" said Olga to Pava Romanovna, who had just come running with the news that some Evenn hunters had found Tavrov in the taiga some fifty kilometres from Kamenushka.

His leg was broken, and he had been brought to the hospital in a very serious condition.

"Is it possible that he will die?" said Olga with tears in her voice. "Such a fine person!"

"Why should he die? Why should you even *think* of such a thing?" said Pava Romanovna, who had already obtained all available information. "He's safe enough, now that he's in Ivan Ivanovich's hands. But you mustn't go see him yet, really you mustn't. First of all, he's unconscious; he caught cold and has a high fever. Just think, there was a snowfall in the mountains the day after our picnic! And in the second place, you mustn't put yourself in a false position. People would imagine all sorts of things. As soon as the operation's over—of course they have to operate," she said in reply to Olga's frightened look. "His leg is broken just below the knee, but they say it will heal. A little later, I'll go to see him with you. Then nobody can say a word."

"Are you feeling better?" asked Varvara as she put a glass of water on the bed-table and fluffed up the pillows under Tavrov's head. "You spilled water on the pillowcase," she said, wiping his unshaved chin and neck with a towel. "Back to babyhood—we've been feeding you with a spoon!" she laughed, sitting down next to the bed like a visitor, and folding hands which objected to idleness.

"I'm better, but my leg hurts." Tavrov turned still hazy eyes to Varvara. "Do you think it will heal all right?"

"Indeed I do. Fortunately it was not an open fracture. We've done everything we could. Ivan Ivanovi h says you won't even limp."

"Really?"

"Word of honour. Don't you go thinking things. Yours is a strong constitution, so you'll get well quickly. There's a little boy here in the hospital—Yuri's his name.

A Yakut. He's been sick ever so long—had a very serious operation, and then fell out of bed and broke his leg. I just cried when I heard of it. Why should a child have to suffer so? It turned out that another little boy, older than he, dared him to get up without permission; he even helped him while the nurse was out, and both of them fell. But Yuri wouldn't admit it for anything. He was afraid to get the other boy into trouble"

"Good for him!" said Tavrov with a faint smile.

"Nothing of the sort!" protested Varvara hotly. "Children should always tell the truth!"

"And grownups?"

Varvara suddenly blushed, but she said convincingly: "Grownups too."

"And what if it's impossible? You yourself are still just a child, Varvara. People should live truthfully, but sometimes it isn't necessary, and would even be cruel to tell a person the truth to his face. I'm speaking of little everyday truths, of course."

"It doesn't matter," insisted Varvara. "You must have a higher opinion of people; then you can't be cruel. Oh, I know—sometimes the truth is hard to hear. Once there was a woman who sent her daughter to watch the charwoman scrub the floor. 'What are you here for, child?' asked the charwoman. 'Mama sent me to see you didn't steal anything,' said the girl. The charwoman cried, and the little girl was punished. Whose fault was it? Certainly not the child's, who told the truth. It seems to me if you don't trust a person, you shouldn't admit him to your house."

"I know—that little girl was Olga Pavlovna," said Tavrov, his eyes suddenly brightening. "I heard her tell you that story. Only you made one mistake, Varya—it wasn't her mother, but her aunt that sent her. Her mother was a wonderful woman; she died very early."

"I just gave it as an example, and so it doesn't matter if I made part of it up," said the abashed Varvara.

"Woman's logic," murmured Tavrov. "Yuri and I—we're men, so we're much more consistent. Here in this drawer are some cakes and sweets my friends brought me. Take them to Yuri as a mark of my respect."

Holding the pile of packages with hands and chin, Varvara went into the children's ward.

"Who ever got so many presents?" Yuri asked her in Yakut, without interrupting the corrective exercises he was doing under the observation of Denis Antonovich.

"They were sent to you, but I want to divide them up among all the children."

"Go ahead," consented Yuri, adding in Russian: "Give Denis Antonovich a treat too."

"Just see all the attention I get, Varya! He's trying to worm himself into my good graces, so that I'll give him more exercises," said Denis Antonovich with a broad smile. "Go ahead and enjoy your treats; I'll manage without them somehow. But for showing me such kind attention, I'll bring you a glass of cedar water."

"Is it sweet?"

"Why should it be sweet? It's medicine. To keep you from getting the scurvy, and to make your bones stronger."

"Oh all right, I suppose I'll have to drink it if it's medicine."

"Are you giving it to everyone, Denis Antonovich?" asked Varvara brightly as she sailed between the beds, delivering the packages Tavrov had entrusted to her.

"Everyone it's prescribed for."

"Remember my telling you about that prospector named Firsov?" Ivan Ivanovich asked Olga. "But you saw yourself that he was dying of the scurvy. And in only

one week—or rather, eight days...! But I want you to see for yourself. I tried out all my potions on him: willow, larch, currant, and cedar. The cedar gave the best results. I could hardly believe my own eyes. He's sitting up already."

"Who? Tavrov?" asked Olga, who had been dreaming as she mended her husband's suit.

"Tavrov? There's nothing remarkable about his sitting up. But Yakov Firsov! That's a real triumph. You can be sure I shall use that cedar brew on a large scale now!"

Ivan Ivanovich picked up a branch from the table and stood admiring it. The flat was filled with cedar boughs, and the unpainted kitchen floor was so stained from the green needles that the house superintendent had promised Olga to send the painters.

"First we'll have to putty up the cracks in the floors," he said. "We'll need fifty kilograms of drying oil."

Somewhat irrelevantly, Olga now reminded her husband of the superintendent's promise.

"Let him go ahead and paint them," said he, but suddenly he flared up: "Fifty kilograms of oil? For three rooms? What does he want to do, give us a bath in it? Last year when they were painting the hospital I showed him how floors were to be painted. It didn't take him long to forget." After a moment's silence, Ivan Ivanovich gave a shy smile and ruffled his already bristling hair as he said: "It's a grand thing to know you've discovered something that will help people. I feel as happy as if I were celebrating my birthday."

As he was leaving, he kissed Olga and said:

"Are you coming to see the scurvy patients? The famous author O. A. might even deign to write an article about them," he added with good-natured irony.

"No, you'll write the article yourself," replied Olga drily. "But I'll be sure to come."

43

Pava Romanovna convinced Olga that she must not go to see Tavrov without her, and then, having done too much running about the settlement, Pava came down with a case of tonsillitis. In spite of her impatience, Olga could not make up her mind to go to the hospital alone. A sudden diffidence restrained her; no longer could she feel at ease in Tavrov's company. Ever since he had been brought to the hospital she had been in a state of feverish excitement, though an obliviousness to her surroundings made her seem calm, even morose.

"Why are you so down in the dumps?" asked Ivan Ivanovich one day. "What's wrong with you?" he asked impatiently, eager to be off to the hospital.

"Nothing," replied Olga, responding to his displeasure with a show of spirit. "Must I only leap and laugh in your presence?"

Ivan Ivanovich gave an impatient wave of his hand, and this gesture, prompted by his annoyance and his desire to avoid a quarrel, only served to increase Olga's irritation.

"He never has paid me any attention. I was always the last of his considerations. Like a stick of furniture in his home," she thought, forgetting all her husband's solicitude.

Olga felt for her thimble and mechanically picked up her needle.

"What I need is sympathy and understanding, and not condescension. Why is it that I have so much more confidence in a complete stranger?" So suddenly did her heart contract at this thought that she put down her needle.

"What an absurd idea!" she whispered nervously.

Out on the veranda she was met by a warm breeze that might have been waiting for her. Holding her flying

skirts, she ran down the steps and looked about. Once more the world looked fair. Especially enticing was a patch of blue sky surrounded by grey wind-torn clouds. It seemed to Olga that she had never before seen a blue so bright and festive. She walked on, no longer conscious of her surroundings, lost in thoughts that found reflection now in an uneasy frown, now in a happy smile.

Despite Skorobogatov's prohibition, and despite the fact that no reply had yet been received from the Regional Committee, the day was appointed for performing a neurosurgical operation on Ivan Ivanovich's gangrene patient.

"We have to think first of our patient, and then about papers," said Ivan Ivanovich in reply to Gusev's usual attempt to "get permission," "clear the matter up," and "consider the situation."

It is doubtful that Gusev could ever have seriously influenced Ivan Ivanovich, but he was not a bad doctor, and had he been less of a bore, he might at least have infected Ivan Ivanovich with a measure of his caution. But there was something so annoying in his manner, that even when his remarks were sound, they went unheeded.

Ivan Ivanovich felt quite different toward the young surgeon Sergutov. He was only too glad to help him, giving him the opportunity to work independently, advising him and worrying with him over difficult cases. He himself always performed the most serious operations.

"I can't have the blame for an unsuccessful operation laid to the inexperience of the surgeon," he once asserted.

"Operations such as the one we are about to perform today are not common," said Ivan Ivanovich to his assistants as he crossed the operating room, holding high his

arms, bare to the elbow, and still wet from the scrubbing. "For that reason I must ask you to be extremely attentive."

In the white oilcloth apron which reached to his toes, and with the reflector flashing on his forehead, he seemed taller and broader than ever, even in the vastness of this modernly-equipped operating room.

"Spontaneous gangrene, like any other form of the disease, is a result of the interruption of the blood supply. In other words, it is a disease of the blood vessels, of the arteries, from which it takes its name of endoarteritis," he explained in lowered tones as, with Varvara's aid, he donned a wrinkled sterile gown. "Formerly it was considered a disease of old age, but we have discovered that very young people are also subject to it."

"But is it worth amputating the sympathetic ganglia if the tissues are already dead?" asked Varvara, helping the doctor pull on his rubber gloves.

"Yes it is. The operation sets limits to the necrotizing process. The live tissue is sure to assume a healthy colour. Instead of amputating to the hip, we can, without risk to the patient's life, amputate only to the knee, or to the ankle, or remove only the toes. If the process has set in in the hands, the same results are achieved by removing the sympathetic ganglia of the thorax. Such operations are new to surgery, but it has already been established that they are in no way detrimental to the organism as a whole. And a person has to live and enjoy life, doesn't he, Alexei?"

The person he addressed was a youth of about twenty-three, worn and haggard from pain. At the moment he was climbing hurriedly on to the operating table.

When the doctor at the regional hospital had said he must have his leg amputated, the boy had been horrified; better to die at once! But at the end of seven months of ceaseless torture, he began to waver. Night after night

he would sit on his bed, hugging his affected foot and rocking it as if it were a baby.

It was simple enough to cut it off. But the initial symptoms were beginning to show themselves in his other foot as well: sudden weariness; lameness caused by pain which shifted from his calf to his arch; a coldness in his toes. Alexei already knew what would follow: his foot would swell up, the toes turn black. In other words, within a few months it would be necessary to amputate the other leg too. And he was only twenty-three years old!

"At first it was cold; now it's like fire. It used to hurt only when I walked; now it hurts even when I'm in bed," complained Alexei to his roommates during long sleepless nights as he sat rocking his foot. He had scarcely been aware of its existence until this disease set in; now it had become the bane of his life. At last he said in desperation:

"Oh, cut the damn thing off!"

But just at that time he learned that in the Chazhma gold-fields there was a surgeon named Arzhanov who had a new treatment for gangrene.

44

"Well, Alexei, how do you feel?" asked Ivan Ivanovich as he watched his assistants place the patient on his left side and fasten his leg to the operating table.

"So-so."

"Why only so-so?"

"He's afraid," said Nikita Burtsev, who was responsible to look after the patient's general state during the operation, and was at this moment fastening the lead plate of the diathermy apparatus to Alexei's arm.

"You mustn't be afraid. We'll make a good job of it," promised Ivan Ivanovich as he glanced admiringly at

the neat little box, much resembling a small radio set, which was his electric knife.

"We're going to prick you a bit now—so that you won't feel anything. If it hurts later on, tell us, and we'll give you some more injections," went on Ivan Ivanovich, standing quietly by, waiting for assistant Sergutov to finish washing the operation area with alcohol and iodine.

Ivan Ivanovich himself drew a green line on the patient's iodine-painted back and marked out the spots where the gauze and towels were to be made fast. Then he took the hypodermic syringe filled with novocain which Varvara handed him.

Sergutov in his turn began working with his syringe from the other end of the green line, and continued until the whitish ridges rising from under the two needles met. Then injections were made with longer needles. In five minutes it was possible to begin operating.

Without looking up, Ivan Ivanovich held out his hand, and Varvara placed a scalpel in it. During an operation she would know what he wanted by the expression on his face or the movement of his hands or lips. Her entire slight figure, gowned in white and with a white mask over her face, bespoke profound concentration; the surgeon and the doctors could talk and joke as much as they liked, but Varvara was not to be distracted for an instant.

With one swift movement Ivan Ivanovich made the primary incision from the spinal column toward the centre of the abdomen.

"Out of the way!" he said to an assistant who began pushing forward a swab.

Varvara handed him clamps with blunt, beaklike ends. They clicked as the surgeon fastened them.

"Current!"

Nikita Burtsev, also in white and wearing a mask, turned on the apparatus.

The surgeon touched the severed blood vessels with closed forcep-tips and contacted them with the diathermy apparatus. With a crackling sound the vessels were sealed —"welded"—instead of being tied with silk. One clamp was removed, then another, until the entire operation area was free of incumbering metal. Then another incision.

An assistant drew back the edges of the wound with hooks.

"Retractor!"

Varvara handed him a nipperlike toothed instrument.

Another incision. Clamps, current....

The edges of the wound were lined with sterile gauze, and again the wound was retracted.

"Now it's going to be a bit unpleasant, Alexei," said Ivan Ivanovich, glancing under the framework screening the patient's face. "Nothing to do but grin and bear it. It hurts everyone alike."

He inserted a wide, blunt hook from the other side and entrusted it to Sergutov.

"Hold it just as I gave it to you. Don't move and don't put any pressure on it. A swab," he said, and Varvara supplied him with a long clamp holding a swab soaked in a two per-cent solution of novocain.

In the depths of the wound, at the very spine, could be seen the white trunk of the sympathetic nerve. It was this the surgeon was intent on reaching.

"Patience, Alexei, patience, my boy. I'll be as careful as possible. It's the most important thing for us," he kept saying to the moaning boy as he separated the nerve and injected it with novocain. "Pulse?" he asked Nikita.

"Sixty."

"Camphor injection," snapped Ivan Ivanovich; then, to Varvara: "A hook."

With this he picked up the nerve.

"Thread!"

The thread was slipped under the nerve. Ivan Ivanovich pulled the ends of the thread to the surface with forceps and, fastening them with clamps, tossed them to one side.

Another hook and another thread inserted. Now the nerve could be lifted from its bed.

"Novocain. A fine needle. Holding well? Test it. Seem to have made a good job of the anesthesia," he added, giving the hyperdermic syringe back to Varvara. "A swab. A clamp for the nerve. No good. A straight one. Scissors. There we are!" said Ivan Ivanovich triumphantly as he lifted forceps holding a bloody bit of white nerve showing the bulging of the ganglia. "Save this," he said to Varvara. "A swab of peroxide. Quick! Take the roll out from under him. A retractor. See that everything's dry. Close!"

The curved needle is already threaded. The needle holders click, and for a second Varvara's soft hand is poised in mid-air in a gesture of calm expectation.

"The inner sutures are to be of heavy silk—important muscles lie there," said Ivan Ivanovich to Sergutov. "Tie them loosely—no need to make the second knot tight." He tied one himself to show his assistant how. "See? It's loose. We'll make the third row of sutures in the subcutaneous fatty tissue. With the finest of thread, and far apart. Only bringing the edges together; fatty tissue heals quickly, but it also festers easily, and the silk of the inner sutures remains inside for good."

The nurse who supplied the sterile dressings began to argue softly with Nikita.

"Leave the poor fellow alone. He's the only man among you," said Ivan Ivanovich, who could not bear talk during an operation.

"I don't mind," said Nikita cheerfully, interrupting his note-taking for a moment, but keeping his eye on the

apparatus registering blood pressure. "And would you call me a man? A nurse-man. It's true I shave, but mostly out of habit."

"How are you feeling, Alexei?" asked Ivan Ivanovich as he put in the last sutures.

"My foot seems to be warmer. As if the blood had begun to circulate. And it doesn't hurt any more."

"I told you so. And it wasn't so dreadful, was it?" For a minute Ivan Ivanovich was silent as he counted his patient's pulse. His face wore the happy expression induced by the consciousness of a task well done, but presently it was crossed by a shadow of concern. "When are we going to operate on the other leg?" he asked, anticipating the further development of the disease. "Get back on your feet, have a rest, and in a month or so we'll do it. You won't be afraid next time, will you?"

Alexei smiled timidly.

"The other foot doesn't really hurt yet. Maybe I only imagined it went cold and ached. Let's wait six months or so and see what'll happen."

"The same thing will happen," said Ivan Ivanovich with a kind, but knowing look. "It's for your own good I advise you not to put it off."

45

At the hospital entrance Olga was met by the odour of medicines. She was very tense and serious as she pulled open the heavy, soundless door. A carpet ran down the length of the white corridor. The window sills were set with plants whose washed leaves had a glazed-pottery look. High doorways lined the opposite wall.

A long-drawn groan coming from a distance made Olga more tense than ever. Then someone moaned close-by, and she heard lowered voices, a sigh, and the heavy,

careful steps of people who seemed to be carrying something fragile and cumbersome.

"Are you looking for Ivan Ivanovich?" asked Varvara, who issued from a nearby door. "He just finished an operation and left for the polyclinic; they sent for him for a consultation. You'll have to wait. If you wish, I'll take you to the recreation room."

She opened a door and went ahead of Olga down another corridor, as light as the first, but shorter.

As Olga followed her, she noted her long braids, wound in a huge knot beneath her nurse's cap during work hours, and the slender hand with which she adjusted the belt and the collar of her gown. In her other hand Varvara was carrying a tray containing vials and an empty hypodermic syringe. There was calm self-assurance in Varvara's every movement.

"Here we are," she said, and was about to step aside to let Olga pass, but the sight of someone in the room made her enter.

In a wheel chair beside a table, half-facing the door, sat Tavrov. He was writing in a notebook held on his well knee. His other leg, in a cast to the very toes, was stretched stiffly out in front of him.

Opposite him sat a man of athletic build whose coarse hands, protruding awkwardly from his sleeves, kept pulling uneasily at the inadequate white hospital gown which he had donned over his street clothes. Evidently he was a worker from the ore mill.

Varvara spoke to Tavrov. He stopped writing to listen, and at first frowned. But suddenly a blush flooded his neck and cheeks, and he quickly turned to confront Olga.

"Hello," she said, coming closer. "What a lot of worry you caused us! Now did you ever happen to get lost?"

"Just walked off and got lost," he said, gazing at her happily, despite his embarrassment. "I never thought I

could get lost in the mountains, but I discovered it was very easy. Especially during a fog."

Varvara remained standing there, looking approvingly at Olga and Tavrov.

"You can't imagine what an impossible patient he is!" she said to Olga. "He ought to be tied to the bedstead. The minute he began to feel better he started working, summoning his people here and holding conferences. He doesn't listen to us when we say it's bad for him."

"Oh yes I do. I take good care of myself, Varya. See, I've learned to handle this roller coaster of mine and go running about as if it were a motor car."

"But you shouldn't. You defy doctor's orders. I intend reporting you to Ivan Ivanovich. Perhaps he'll permit you to receive visitors in the ward."

Varvara fell silent for a moment and then, as if recalling pressing duties, hastened away. The red-faced workman got up and touched Olga lightly on the elbow, indicating his chair. After exchanging a few last words with Tavrov, he left the room, trying hard to walk lightly. Varvara's warning seemed to have impressed him.

"See how they tyrannize us here?" laughed Tavrov, turning to Olga. "And what about you—what have you been doing?"

"Working," replied Olga. "One of my articles about prospectors was published. And today I received another paper. Haven't you read it yet?"

"You must be pleased, aren't you?" asked Tavrov.

Patients in pajamas and bathrobes stood about the table and walked up and down the veranda outside the French windows, but these two seemed to be utterly alone; nor had they need of words to understand one another.

Olga told him of the doubts that troubled her, of her plans, and the joy she took in her work.

"I thought I should die the first time I saw one of my articles in print. What a terrible responsibility it is!"

Now she felt completely happy. For the first time since Tavrov had been lost, she breathed easily. And this first meeting was free of the rebukes and strain she had dreaded.

After a moment's reflection, she raised eyes that were shining softly. He looked at her. For only the briefest instant their glances met, but Olga almost cried out with the poignancy of the contact. "Why should it be so!" was her despairing protest. It was as if she had revealed to Tavrov a secret hidden even from herself. She wished to get up, but her legs would not hold her.

"I thought of you all the while I was out there," he said in a scarcely audible voice.

46

"You here already? Varya told me," said Ivan Ivanovich as he walked toward Olga down the blue carpet of the wide corridor. "Been here long?" Without waiting for an answer, he took her arm and led her to the ward where his scurvy patients were lying, saying exultantly: "Just wait till you see them! Oh, people have already been saying that cedar is an old remedy, that it's been used for years, but my answer is that we sometimes don't pay enough attention to cures used by the simple folk. And it's not enough to know the medicine; you have to know how to use it as well."

Olga listened to her husband, but comprehended nothing. Of what stunning significance for both of them was the process taking place in her heart!

In the large room into which Ivan Ivanovich now led her, a number of people in hospital garb were walking about, but they all made for their beds the minute Ivan Ivanovich appeared.

"A week ago they couldn't walk," said Ivan Ivanovich, going towards a huge man who was sitting on the side of his bed, grasping the edge with enormous hands.

"Well, Firsov, feeling stronger?"

"A bit, Ivan Ivanovich," said the man with a grin that seemed somehow pathetic.

"Stand up," said Ivan Ivanovich, immediately solicitous.

With obvious difficulty the man struggled to his feet and made his way on crutches between the beds. The jerky movements of his body, not yet under control, undoubtedly gave him pleasure.

"Good for you!" encouraged Ivan Ivanovich. "Raise your arm—the right one. Swing it back. Once again."

"Firsov's a real hero!" came the voice of Firsov's neighbour in the bed behind Olga. "He stepped right out of his coffin. The only thing is his teeth—"

"True enough," said Firsov, losing his smile. "Fine teeth they were, but the scurvy got them. If we're called up to fight, I don't suppose they'll take me now."

"Of course they won't—a toothless old man like you!" laughed his neighbour.

Olga took a better look at Firsov and realized why his young face had such a strange expression: his cheeks were hollow, his lower lip was sucked in like an old man's and this was what made his smile so pathetic.

"Show me what's left," said Ivan Ivanovich, taking Firsov's head in his hands and gazing into his wide-open mouth.

Olga was so deeply moved that the tears came to her eyes. She felt ashamed. Could there, indeed, be anything more gratifying than the knowledge that your work was important and needed? Never had medicine appealed to her as a profession. But here was the result of its appli-

cation—a man restored to life! Could she, Olga Arzhanova, remain indifferent to the fate of these people? Indeed she could not. Which meant that she could not remain indifferent to the fate of her doctor-husband either.

"We'll get you some new teeth," Ivan Ivanovich assured Firsov. "Gold ones, or white ones, just as you like. They'll make them for you right here in the hospital."

Firsov sank heavily down upon the edge of the bed. Other patients hobbled up on crutches.

"Try walking without your stick," said Ivan Ivanovich to one who seemed more nearly cured than the others.

Putting it down, the man began walking cautiously, but with obvious satisfaction, about the ward.

"And you too are managing without props?" said the doctor to another. "And what was your state when you arrived here?" He himself remembered only too well what the man's state had been, but he wanted Olga to hear.

"They brought me in on a stretcher. I couldn't move hand or foot. At home they kept rubbing me down and giving me steam baths, but the disease was all inside."

"He's one of those of little faith," explained Ivan Ivanovich. "At first he didn't want to drink the cedar brew —much too simple, he thought."

Olga recalled having heard Pava Romanovna say, on the basis of rumour, that cedar was bad for the heart and kidneys.

"But isn't scurvy even worse?" she thought. "It destroys the entire body. And idle gossip is capable of undermining faith in any innovation." Once again Olga was unpleasantly struck by the fact that she was trying to defend her husband's efforts, instead of simply rejoicing with him.

"I can't stand it here any longer, Platon Artyomovich!" said Ivan Ivanovich to Logunov all of a sudden.

The two men were sitting in the hall of the District Party Committee having a smoke after having just been raked over the coals by Skorobogatov. Logunov had been rebuked for having suggested installing a central drainage system at the mine, and for what Skorobogatov considered inadequate exploitation of mining machinery. Ivan Ivanovich had been lectured long and dully for having published an "attack" in the newspaper. The "attack" was against local ailments, among them scurvy. It seems Arzhanov was sowing panic among the population, thus playing into the hands of the enemies of the people, by spreading vicious and unfounded rumours.

"My only intention in writing the article was to popularize prophylactics, that is, methods of preventing disease," Ivan Ivanovich had said dully. "Glossing over facts never did anybody any good." At this point he fell silent, stopped by his own private thoughts. Some vague alarm connected with Olga crossed his mind, but while he was seeking to lay his finger on it, Skorobogatov took up a firm position.

"You are a Communist, and as such are obliged to respect local leadership, Dr. Arzhanov," he said with a glitter of his unwinking eyes. "You wish to become the people's hero," he went on bitingly, hinting at the doctor's popularity among the Yakuts and Evenns. "But heroes are born of their deeds." Skorobogatov compressed his thin lips; his bald pate, lengthening his large sunburnt face, grew red with annoyance, and his voice rose to a falsetto: "As Secretary of the District Party Committee, I warn you that your behaviour will at last be revealed in its true light, and proper measures will be taken."

"But I am working," said Ivan Ivanovich indignantly. "Working as hard and as conscientiously as I know how."

"We all work conscientiously," interrupted Skorobogatov. "That's nothing to boast of—it's our duty. Everyone does the best he's able. We forgive you certain things," said he, obviously referring to the unfortunate operation. "In fact we forgive you many things, inasmuch as you are an outstanding specialist. But if, disregarding our leniency, you attempt to create an aureole about your person, it will have very regrettable consequences. Particularly regrettable for you yourself. In the first place—"

"What in the world does he want of me?" thought Ivan Ivanovich as he left Skorobogatov's office.

In the receiving room he met Platon Logunov. He felt an urge to confide in this man, whom he liked immensely.

When Logunov emerged from the office an hour later, he was surprised to find Ivan Ivanovich sitting on a couch in the hall.

"You still here?"

"Yes, waiting for you. Well, did he give you a going over?"

"That he did, but to no purpose," replied Logunov, who had not yet cooled off after his clash with Skorobogatov. "Somebody's been telling tales, but he himself doesn't know a thing about the technique of production."

"Why should he know?" remarked Ivan Ivanovich sarcastically. "That's what he has experts for. His job is just to bawl them out."

"He really does seem to think that is what the Secretary is for," said Logunov with a dreary smile. "To give people a ripping and a ragging and show them up. I dropped in to see him the other day and the air was so thick with smoke you could cut it with a knife. 'What

are you sitting in this fog for?' I asked. 'Oh, if you'd ever seen what a battle we just had here!' he said. 'A regular bull fight!' "

"He's a bull, all right," grunted Ivan Ivanovich. "And a half-breed bull at that!"

"Why a half-breed?" asked Logunov.

The two men looked at each other, each of them imagining the horsy red face of Skorobogatov with its unwinking round eyes, and suddenly they both burst into such uncontrollable laughter that the office doors along the hall flew open and out popped the heads of amazed and frightened clerks.

"Well I'll be!" roared Ivan Ivanovich, as he and Logunov squeezed through the exit door, hurrying away like schoolboys caught in mischief.

48

Olga crossed out what she had written and began all over again. She wanted the short account to be above average. Not simply a dry explanation of the competition held between prospectors and miners, nor a superficial record of events for readers to run a hasty eye over. The reader must be made to stop and think. How could she achieve this?

"Olga, could you bring me a glass of tea?" came Ivan Ivanovich's voice from his study.

"Just a minute," she answered without getting up.

"I might give some character sketches of the workers. That would add interest, but it would take me outside the bounds of newspaper reports."

"Don't bother if you're busy," she heard her husband say.

Of course he could easily go for the tea himself, but the pleasure of the drink was heightened by receiving it from her hands.

"I'll get it myself," he repeated; the note of chagrin was involuntary.

"But why should you?" cried Olga irritably. "I told you I'd bring it in a minute."

Quickly she got up and went into the kitchen. The kettle was cold. She put it on the hot plate and again became lost in thought.

"I could throw out what I've written about the life and work of prospectors in the taiga—everybody here knows all about that—and add a few lines describing the thrilling moment when gold is discovered. And the figures? How shall I introduce the figures?"

"Remember where I put that folder containing a copy of our letter to the Regional Committee? A blue folder. I can't seem to find it," said Ivan Ivanovich from the next room.

"I put it in your desk. In the right-hand drawer," said Olga as she entered the room.

She found the folder for him, brought him his tea, and moved away, watching with an air of detachment while her husband—this big, strong man with the bristling hair and the bright eyes—energetically leafed through his papers.

Olga had heard about the letter to the Regional Committee not from him, but from Elena Denisovna, who knew everything that went on at the hospital, and was waiting anxiously for the reply which she was sure would put Skorobogatov in his place. She was sure that Gusev would not be made head of the hospital again. Being an optimist, she believed in the triumph of justice.

"Everything we do is for the best," she said. "And everyone is sure to get what he deserves." But she could not stand red tape; delay caused her actual suffering.

"Of course a thorough investigation must be made," she reasoned, trying to be patient. "Such a vast field and

so many other matters to attend to! It's no joke, running a region this size."

"And not a word about it from my husband," thought Olga bitterly. "He even shouted at me that time. Oh, I understand that he is doing big things, while my work is inconsequential. But if you would only ask me about it once in a while," she beseeched him silently, distraught by the knowledge that her heart was hardening against him. "Show just the tiniest bit of interest in what I am doing, and I'll willingly bring you ten glasses of tea, find you anything you want, keep all your papers in order! It isn't much you ask me to do for you." A sudden impulse, an urgency to recapture lost happiness, impelled her towards her husband, and she threw her arms about his shoulders.

"Well, what is it, my little writer?" he said, turning his face to her and kissing the smoothness in the crook of her arm. "Lonely? Ah, if you only knew what a trouncing Skorobogatov gave me today because of *my* literary efforts! Enough to make a person never want to write another word in his life. I'm going over to speak with Logunov. I need his advice."

Ivan Ivanovich's air of detachment returned, and once more Olga's heart was chilled.

49

The joint meeting of Party and non-Party people held at the District Committee to discuss the Stakhanov movement suddenly took a turn unfavourable to Logunov. He was accused of superficial leadership, of squandering money, almost of embezzlement. Skorobogatov was particularly virulent.

"We are allotted large sums for capital construction and rationalizing the production process, but these sums must be used intelligently; don't forget, it's the people's

money you're spending," he said sharply, casting an unwinking eye over the gathering. "Why should Logunov have discarded four perfectly good drainage pumps and half the drills, substituting them by new ones? The fact that the old ones have less production capacity could be more than compensated by an increased proficiency of labour on the part of the drillers. Fifty new drills! Think of the cost! Logunov is making very poor use of internal resources; he is only interested in appearances. Such an attitude hinders the development of new and improved methods."

"Try to prove anything to him!" thought Logunov indignantly as he listened to the discussion. "We use our internal resources to the limit—repair, make things over, rack our brains as to how to use tools and equipment until they're worn to a shred, till they're only fit for the junk heap or to be smelted down. I wonder what our head bookkeeper will have to say—he's our financier."

But head bookkeeper Pryakin, obviously avoiding a quarrel with the District Secretary, took a neutral stand.

The floor was then given to Pyotr Martemianov, shift foreman and Party Secretary at the mine. He rose and stood there between the benches, his bushy black beard looking forbidding against his massive chest.

"I haven't much to say, comrades," he began in a resounding voice, pausing to toy with the ends of his Caucasian belt before continuing. "We're growing by the day, by the hour, ruthlessly tossing aside whatever stunts our growth or holds us back. Isn't that true?" he asked, darting a quick glance at his hearers. "Just look how everything is changing. Technical equipment, methods of work, and even leadership. Time was when we would put a man we could trust at the head of an enterprise even if he didn't know the business, just to get rid of the trained specialists who were our enemies. But soon we began to demand that our heads be specialists too—"

"Come to the point," interrupted Skorobogatov, turning to Martemianov. His red face now looked tranquil, even pleased.

"I've reached the point," replied Martemianov meekly. "It's business that's the point with me, and I can prove it. For the past six months our mine has headed the list in every branch of our work—and not only in our mining district, mind you. We fulfilled our plan ahead of time. We lowered the cost of each ton of ore by eight per cent. All our drillers have begun to operate several machines. If I'm not mistaken, you can't get such results by just wanting to. Under the circumstances it certainly sounds strange to hear you accusing the chief of the mine of what amounts almost to sabotage."

"It's just these successes that have turned your head. That's why you resent the general opinion," said Skorobogatov.

"We don't know what the general opinion is yet. I'm only expressing my own. You're used to dictating to everyone, Nikanor Petrovich. That's no way to handle people. It makes us feel cramped and squeezed, because we're growing—by the day, by the hour."

"I must ask non-Party people to leave the meeting," said Skorobogatov peremptorily, leaning upon the table to raise his bulky form. "All right, continue," he said to Martemianov when the noise of those retiring, the shuffling and restrained coughing, had subsided. "What else of importance have you to bring to our attention?" said he, adopting an exaggeratingly official tone.

"I want to call your attention to the following matter: in order to properly manage so large an enterprise and inspire all our work, from top to bottom, with the Party spirit, it's the duty of the First Secretary of the District Party Committee to know the technique of production. So that he'll understand why certain measures are taken and be able to give a sound opinion, instead

of one that causes experienced workers to blush for him."

"Who have you in mind?" asked the purple-faced Skorobogatov, amid a tense silence.

"You, Nikanor Petrovich. As First Secretary of the District Party Committee, you interfere in everything; you've squeezed out the Secretary in charge of industry, though you yourself have no idea of our work. Take, for instance, the matter of the drainage system." Martemianov twisted the ends of his beard as he stopped to consider. "If it's a question of economy, then we can say for certain that one new central drainage system would be more economical than four that are worn out. For one thing it would serve all the levels; for another it wouldn't require expenditures for repairs; and for a third it would save electricity. The old pumps could be used in other places—in some of the districts, or by prospectors' cooperatives. In an enterprise the size of ours we can find use for everything. Only you have to know how. These days only people who have a knowledge of the industries in their districts are elected to District Committees: specialists in agriculture to kolkhoz districts; specialists in mining to mining districts. If you're here, Nikanor Petrovich, you better learn our business."

When the meeting was over and Logunov was leaving the District Party Committee building, he said to Denis Antonovich enthusiastically:

"That was a speech for you! Plucky fellow, that Martemianov."

In actual fact, there was nothing to be enthusiastic about. Martemianov, who was supported by only a minority (among them Logunov, Ivan Ivanovich and Denis Antonovich, who had made a speech criticizing the First Secretary for interfering in the work of the hospital) was given an official reprimand for discrediting the Party leadership. Logunov's project for working the new section

of the mine was condemned as wasteful, though already it had been sent to the Trust for approval. Logunov himself was lectured for spending more than the sum designated for equipment. Skorobogatov even threatened to "bring the question before the Party Bureau." But in spite of everything, Logunov was in high spirits. The stenographic minutes of the meeting would be sent to the Regional Committee, and serve as the second blow at Skorobogatov's authority.

"A fellow like him takes everything to extremes," said Logunov, as he walked beside Denis Antonovich down one of the streets of the settlement. "He calls it 'a straight-line course.' He follows it, all right, full speed ahead until he bangs up against a brick wall. Once the order's been given to make use of internal resources —a very wise and necessary order—Skorobogatov decides no other resources are to be considered. In other words, use up your tools and equipment till they fall apart. Then stop production while you try to find something to replace them. But why? A man can't live on his old reputation forever. If he's behind the times, he's got to do something about it. If he doesn't, he must relinquish his place to someone else. And there's no reason why a person should pat himself on the back because he doesn't drink or run after the women; that's not a virtue of a Communist; it's only what's expected of any decent person."

50

"Why don't you ask me how I'm getting along with the translation of that scientific article you gave me?" asked Olga.

"What's that?" asked Ivan Ivanovich absent-mindedly.

"Do you need it or not?" she asked, trying to hide her vexation.

They were sitting in the hot sun under an enormous poplar. All the tree's shade was cast on the other side of their bench.

"Here's how it is," said Ivan Ivanovich complacently. "Soon after this work was recommended to me, I received a Russian translation of a different article. According to the reviews, it's much better, so I forgot all about the one you're working on. But let me see what you've done."

"Why didn't you tell me?" asked Olga testily.

"Why didn't you ask?" replied Ivan Ivanovich in surprise. "I thought it would be good practice for you. And then, later, when I didn't need the article any more, I simply forgot all about it."

"And the way I laboured over it!" murmured Olga with trembling lips. "I finally finished it, but I gained nothing from the effort. Too technical and full of special terms."

"Poor little wife!" said Ivan Ivanovich guiltily, taking her hand. "Why didn't you mention it sooner?"

"I wanted to find out how you regarded my work," replied Olga, removing her hand and edging away. "Now I know you don't care at all how I spend my time—my life, in fact. You only want to retain the appearances of a happy family. The only thing you care about is your own happiness."

"Olga! You should be ashamed to say such a thing!" he said, deeply wounded. "Do you really mean to say I live only for my own happiness?"

"You're only interested in your own work, and you expect everyone else to be. Why should you be so supercilious about my writing? 'The pen-pusher,' 'The famous author,'" taunted Olga vindictively. "You've always tried to bend my interests to yours. Remember how you talked me into entering Medical School? 'Why should you return to the Machine-Building Institute?' you said. 'When you finish you'll just be sent off to work in some other

section of the country.' And so I go traipsing after you. Why shouldn't you go traipsing after me?"

"But you yourself told me you didn't like the Institute—that the subject was too dry."

"That's what I said after I'd left. I had to explain my dropping it somehow."

"But why bring up the matter now?" asked Ivan Ivanovich, who was also growing annoyed. "If now you've made up your mind to become a reporter, why regret the past?"

"Simply to remind you that it made no more difference to you how I felt then, than now." Olga was silent for a moment, but, unable to restrain her bitterness, she added: "I've already spoken to you about it so many times—if you were the least bit interested in seeing me get ahead, you'd insist that *I* write the article about your scurvy patients instead of you."

"Why didn't you begin with that, instead of beating round the bush?"

"I'll never begin with anything again; it only leads to hard feelings."

The summer passed. Ivan Ivanovich, engrossed in his work, had no thought of taking a vacation. Olga did not remind him of it. She was struggling with her own problems, and building her own, independent life.

"You've become a past-master of the culinary art," said Ivan Ivanovich one day as he tasted some cloudberry jam she had made. "I never expected you to take it up so thoroughly."

She could not make out whether he was mocking or serious.

"My work with the English circle is coming along nicely too." Her tone was pointedly offhand.

Afraid of broaching the subject of her literary efforts

to her husband again, Olga made no mention of what was constantly on her mind, even when engaged in household tasks like peeling potatoes and going to the shop. She spoke only about trifles. He too stopped confiding in her, and so the breach between them widened. But he loved her nonetheless—loved her as she was, immersed in a thousand little feminine duties, busy with her buying, or discussing housework with the woman who came in by the day to help her. And especially was he pleased with her modest public activities, among which he included her writing for the papers.

But, being a sensitive person, he quickly grew aware that something was wrong between them. At first he felt it like a faint chill, but it grew into a coldness that was actual estrangement.

He was shocked and grieved.

"What do you want of me?" he asked Olga after one of the quarrels he found so incongruous.

"Not much, merely a little consideration," she replied, turning pale.

This paleness told him more eloquently than words how serious the situation had grown, but he was vexed and resentful that she should make such groundless accusations.

"I wonder what demands you'd make of a person if you worked as hard as I do," he could not refrain from saying.

"If my life were as interesting as yours, I'd not only make demands, I'd share my experience."

"Don't the interests of my life enrich yours?"

Olga remained silent until the strain became unbearable for both of them. Then she said, quickly and nervously:

"No, they don't."

For three days thereafter they did not speak to each other.

Slipping a pencil and pad into her pocket, Olga left the house. She stopped on the veranda to glance up at the grey peaks of the familiar mountains. Already autumn gold was gleaming in the woods down below; the willows and poplars were turning yellow, the larches red.

"Ah, to be in the mountains!"

But some necessity made her turn in another direction. Lightly she descended the hill above the river and walked along a stretch of street until she reached the path following the old bed of the river, now dotted with heaps of washed sand. It was her curiosity about the life and work of the people in the gold-fields that brought her here. No longer ashamed to take out pad and pencil, she made notes of everything worthy of attention. She climbed down into the prospectors' excavations, stepped into the cabin of the mechanic who ran the hydraulic engine, tasted the vegetables raised on a Yakut State Farm, offered her advice to a Yakut dressmaker who was choosing a style for a broad-faced, ruddy-cheeked garden-brigade leader with braids as black as a crow's wing. She was kind and sociable, and everyone she met was only too willing to talk to her.

"I'll warm up yesterday's dinner today," thought Olga as she crossed the plank over a drainage canal filled with murky water. "Thank goodness Ivan isn't fussy. But why shouldn't he take my work seriously? We're growing apart. Already we have nothing to talk about when we're alone. I have to read all my things to Pava; she doesn't understand, but at least she listens."

Prospectors from a new cooperative which Olga had already visited were digging a smaller drainage canal next to the old one. They planned to divert part of the water to their own grounds. Olga greeted them in passing.

"The wife of Dr. Arzhanov," she heard an old man whisper behind her back.

"A writer," added a younger one. "She writes for the papers."

Olga felt embarrassed, though the words were pronounced with respect.

"I'm not a writer," she said, turning to the workmen. "People who write for newspapers are called reporters or journalists."

She reflected on this as she continued on her way. There *were* people who were writers. But she had no such lofty aspirations; to be a writer required special talent. "I'll be happy if I just become a first-class reporter," she thought to herself.

Glancing off to where the tall grey buildings of the ore mill crested a hill, she was reminded of her meeting with Tavrov in the hospital, and a warm wave of gratitude welled up within her.

After that first meeting she had visited him once again with Pava Romanovna. Then he had been sent home with an attendant to take care of him, and Olga had not seen him since. But he was still living and working here. Pava Romanovna, aided by some other volunteer social workers from among the wives in the settlement, visited him regularly, seeing that he was properly fed, and giving his flat "a homey touch." She brought Olga news of his health. For some reason Olga had not the courage to go to his bachelor apartment.

"How I'd like to ask his advice about this article, to show him my drafts and talk over my plans with him! I'd read him what I had written and he would just sit and listen." The very thought filled Olga with joy.

Evening had already set in when she returned home. The cool, pure air was impregnated with the pungent

odour of withering leaves and grass. Olga walked along quickly, drinking in deep breaths of air, happy in the knowledge that she was a useful member of this community. She had accomplished much today, and was anxious to reach home before her husband.

What interesting people she had spoken to! Now she understood why they were so serious and so cheerful; it had cost them much labour to dig their roots into this none-too-hospitable northern earth, but they had done it. Take those young Komsomol members, for example, or that old taiga dweller from the prospectors' mine. Late in life he had taken up vegetable-raising, and in a few years had presented the cooperative with a large number of hotbeds. Olga's talk with him had left her in buoyant spirits.

Her boots and the tailored suit she wore on her walks were mud-stained, and her hair was dishevelled. As she approached the centre of the large settlement, she took a tiny mirror out of her breast pocket so as to put her hair and collar in order. Suddenly she heard Tavrov's voice close by.

She leaped across a ditch to the side of the highway, which was lined with willows and sweetbriar, and looked down. Along an old path laid by the first prospectors in Chazhma, among moss-grown rocks where willow herbs raised dry stalks wrapped in silver down, came Tavrov accompanied by a plain, middle-aged woman.

"Now let me try walking without the crutches," he said in an excited voice. "Hold them, nurse."

Olga pushed away a branch impeding her vision and watched Tavrov's first steps with bated breath. He walked haltingly, apparently afraid to put his weight on his leg, only recently out of the cast. Perhaps he was intimidated by the vastness of the evening sky, glowing so joyously above his head, or by the prospect of walking alone, with-

out any support—a prospect fraught with peril for him now.

Olga saw his face, smiling faintly and wonderingly, like the face of a child learning to walk. The resemblance was heightened by the white-gowned nurse who followed at his heels, holding his crutches, never taking her eyes off him, ready to rush to his aid if needed.

But his steps grew firmer and he scarcely limped. The smile softened his wasted features. He did not notice Olga, who was hidden in the bushes. The nurse had eyes only for him, and Olga dared not distract them from so serious a task; indeed, she had no breath for speech. Presently she slipped away. For some time the branch she had been clutching waved its golden leaves above the red berries of the motionless sweetbrier.

52

"I'm a plain-spoken man," Skorobogatov was fond of saying.

His self-assurance, the tyrannical gaze of his bloodshot eyes, and his fleshy face, which became darkly flushed whenever he was crossed, were enough to intimidate even those who were not naturally shy.

Igor Korobitsyn was afraid of Skorobogatov. Yet when, a few days earlier, Skorobogatov had asserted that the new method of fuelling the power plant was not economical, Igor had vehemently defended his innovation. Skorobogatov was unable to combat technical calculations, but he said, unperturbed:

"My job is to test you out. In that respect I'm like a professor pulling a student's research study to pieces. Your job is to defend your work and to convince me that you're right. My job does not concern mechanisms; it concerns the people who work these mechanisms. It's up

to me to penetrate into the very essence of a person's soul."

Engineer Korobitsyn, having triumphed from the technical point of view, cringed before this penetration into his essence, and once more was filled with awe for the First Secretary of the District Committee.

In such a mood he entered the imposingly appointed office of Skorobogatov, having first searched his mind for possible transgressions of which he might be accused.

Skorobogatov was talking over the telephone:

"Secretary of the District Committee talking—high time you recognized my voice," he said, casting Igor a sidelong glance.

Gradually his voice rose.

Igor painstakingly removed a thread from his Sunday suit and tiptoed over to the farthest window.

"If you don't fulfil your plan, I'll take your Party card away from you—and don't forget you haven't got a second one!" he said threateningly. After a moment's pause he added: "Well, you *ought* to understand. Watch your step! You're going against the Party!"

Igor was not a Party member, but his heart sank and he nervously fingered his tie. He was in no hurry to have the telephone conversation come to an end. But just at this moment the line was cut off, and after much vigorous shaking and blowing into the receiver, Skorobogatov angrily pushed the instrument away.

"Here. You can't even keep this thing in repair!" he said, fixing Igor with an unwinking eye. "Engineers! Mechanics! For two days my phone has been out of order!"

"I'll send a repairman, Nikanor Petrovich."

"One's been here already." Skorobogatov gave a helpless wave of his hand, pulled out his handkerchief, and began to wipe his face and head.

For a minute he gazed intently at Igor, who was gingerly approaching, then compressed his thin lips, pointed with his clean-shaven chin towards an armchair, and said:

"What's going on over there?"

Igor started.

"Over where?"

"Over there—where you live. It seems you're all trailing that wife of Arzhanov," said the Secretary bluntly, inwardly cursing Korobitsyn's thickness. "You intellectuals! What you want is to stick to the society of the working class! Such goings on!"

"What goings on? What's he getting at?" thought Igor.

"But don't think I'll stand for such tomfoolery!" continued Skorobogatov.

"I beg your pardon," interrupted the indignant Igor, "but what have I done?"

"What's that? Are you seriously trying to make me believe you haven't done anything?"

"Of course! That is—er—the fact is—" Igor was dumbfounded. "The fact is, to be sure, I have the greatest respect for Olga Pavlovna."

"Humph!" grunted Skorobogatov. "A pretty young woman and you lonely young bachelors! Can't I see how Arzhanov is wilting—yes, wilting, physically and morally—as a result of your 'respect' for his wife? But we'll speak about him later. I'll see that he's put in his place too. Right now we're speaking about *your* behaviour."

"About *my* behaviour?" repeated Igor, infuriated by this unceremonious probing of his most intimate feelings.

"You better think this over seriously! You're violating standards of ethics!" Skorobogatov thundered on "Oh, you intellectuals!"

"I won't go! I never heard of such a thing!" cried Olga. "What standards have I violated?"

"But he asked you to."

"Do you expect me to go there and have him read me a lecture on how to behave?" asked Olga challengingly.

Igor said nothing. He did indeed respect Olga. It was only in a place like this, where everyone knew everyone else, that people could gossip about her estrangement from her husband, though even here it was hard to understand what had started the gossip. Certainly Olga had done nothing to set wicked tongues wagging.

"Why was I so meek with Skorobogatov?" thought Igor miserably, avoiding Olga's eyes. He started when she said:

"Why are you so anxious to have me explain things to him?"

He made no reply, but he thought to himself: "Because I lost my nerve and didn't defend you. Because I remembered how friendly you were with Tavrov and wasn't sure just how matters stood, so I decided to give you a chance to clear your name if my suspicions were groundless."

With a glance at the crestfallen Igor, Olga said quietly: "Very well, I'll go speak to him."

"Ah," uttered Skorobogatov, raising himself slightly out of his armchair and extending his hand. "How are you, Olga Pavlovna?"

Olga did not answer, and while she was gathering her thoughts Skorobogatov had a chance to take a good look at her. Rumours of her relationship with Tavrov had reached him, and he had decided to put his foot down. To be sure, he did not expect immediate repentance, but

he did think she would confess and show some shame, and at least agree to preserve outward appearances.

But Olga's face expressed nothing but a proud and wary animosity.

Skorobogatov was going over all his rights and duties in his mind as he stared at her. He looked upon the case in point as a possible violation of social ethics, and he determined to bring the offenders to account, regardless of their sex. Olga's appearance somewhat disconcerted him, and he said in a voice which sounded harsher than he intended:

"What's going on over at your place?"

"Nothing out of the way, so far as I know," said Olga, gazing boldly at him from under her heavy lashes.

Skorobogatov flushed darkly.

"Don't pretend innocence."

"I'm not. But what right have you to use such a tone with me? You seem to have forgotten who you are. You happen to be the Secretary of the District Committee."

"Don't worry, I haven't forgotten," retorted Skorobogatov. "And I don't like your attitude."

"I certainly don't like yours!" replied Olga in a firm voice, though her heart was beating furiously. "What have you in mind?"

"What have *you* in mind?" said Skorobogatov heatedly. "In our country people are free to marry whoever they like. You knew who you were choosing. And once you chose, there should be love, honesty, and mutual respect. But what do we have? You are compromising your husband, a man holding a responsible position, and thereby lowering his working capacity. You too have something of a position—write notices for the papers, or something like that. Aren't you ashamed to hold rendezvous in a private home? And even in the hospital! That's going a little too far! Can't you see that by upsetting your husband you are hurting the entire collective? But I'll have

a private talk with him! Now we're concerned only with *your*—er—*your* goings on. Can't you see how cheap you're making yourself? Cheap, I tell you," repeated Skorobogatov, accenting the word with a grimace of disgust. "Especially if it's only a passing flirtation. Today it's Tavrov, tomorrow Korobitsyn. Once—"

"Enough!" said Olga quietly, but her face and voice were so full of wrath that even Skorobogatov was taken aback. "Cheapness consists in sullying even the most ideal relationship. I don't deny my friendship with another man. But that man helped me solve the most important problem of my life—the finding of work I was fit for. Now I have a great purpose, and it is very wrong of you—especially of *you* to cast up such a thing to me!"

"Why in the world did he summon her?" asked the astonished Logunov on hearing the story Igor had come to tell him. Logunov's brows were drawn into a straight line. "He's honest enough, and a hard worker," thought he of Skorobogatov, "but he works like the persistent bear in Krylov's fable who, in attempting to bend the shaft bow, bent it until it broke."

"On the one hand, I understand that the welfare of the family is a social matter and one we should all be concerned about," he continued reluctantly, looking at Igor with his glowing, coal-black eyes. "But if it's a serious attachment, how can anyone dare to interfere? Especially since no children are involved—only serious-minded grown people. I can't see that he has any right to make a fuss. Ivan Ivanovich is quite capable of speaking to Olga Pavlovna himself if he considers it necessary."

"It's my opinion that he's a hypocrite," said Igor flatly.

"Who?"

"Skorobogatov."

"That's a little strong," protested Logunov with a frown. "I think he really means what he says—"

"Then why doesn't he say something about Pava Romanovna—?" began Igor earnestly, but he caught himself as if tripped up by his own words. "Don't think I have anything against Pava Romanovna," he quickly apologized. "After all, that's a personal matter, and each one answers for himself. Don't you agree?" he said, arrested by Logunov's sudden movement.

"No I don't. It's a personal matter only so long as it remains outside the bounds of social behaviour, but as soon as it crosses these bounds, society must interfere."

"In other words, you side with Skorobogatov?" asked Igor, unable to hide his chagrin.

"No," said Logunov. "I am very much against his manner of interfering."

The two men were standing on the shaft landing near some running engines. The evening shift had already descended, the bustle of people going and coming had subsided, and it was comparatively quiet, except for the clatter of the uninterrupted stream of cars loaded with ore.

"That's no way to deal with people," repeated Logunov. "Skorobogatov has none of the tact and delicacy which is the first requisite of a man holding his position. If anything should have been done, Ivan Ivanovich or Tavrov, both of them Party members, should have been summoned and talked to like comrades, and not shouted at. Especially since there's nothing to shout about. If a man takes the arm of another man's wife, Skorobogatov goes off into a tantrum."

"He really does," agreed Igor Korobitsyn. "When I saw Olga Pavlovna after her interview with Skorobogatov, she was all atremble. She didn't cry, she wasn't angry,

she just looked crushed. He must have been very rude to her too. The people who need to be brought to task are the ones who lead loose lives, even if they hide it from others; the ones who are a real sore on society."

"Did you tell Skorobogatov that?"

"No. He took the wind out of me from the very start. You know his manner."

"But he didn't take the wind out of you when it was a matter of fuelling the power plant," Logunov reminded him.

"I know. But that's my field, while in these matters I'm innocent as a babe."

"A complicated situation," thought Logunov to himself as he left the mine. "Some folks imagine that we Soviet people, especially Party members, are as dry as bones, without a single human feeling in our breasts. Or else they look upon our lives as a perpetual act of self-denial, a constant sacrificing of ourselves to the common good. We do, of course, live strenuously, but our lives are full and interesting; we love and rejoice as intensely as humans can, with no inhibitions except the welfare of our fellows."

54

"Good-bye, Yuri Gavrilovich!" said the smiling Ivan Ivanovich as he lifted up the child, gave him a little shaking, and patted his head. "You're looking fit—you've put a little flesh on those bones of yours. Don't jump or climb up on high places until you're more steady on your legs. But Denis Antonovich will tell your mother how you're to behave."

"I know myself," said the boy, and suddenly he threw his little arms round Ivan Ivanovich's sturdy neck and hugged him tight.

"What's that? Afraid I'll drop you?"

"No." The boy drew his lips close to Ivan Ivanovich's face and his bright eyes seemed to be searching the doctor's very soul. "May I? Just once."

Ivan Ivanovich nodded and hid his feelings by closing his eyes, laughing to feel the soft swift brush of the child's lips against his cheek.

"You're so strong!" said the boy with a sigh, stroking the shoulder of his benefactor. "And so ... prickly!"

"I haven't had time to shave today," thought Ivan Ivanovich to himself when he was alone. "That's a bad sign for a married man. I feel sort of—sort of in the dumps, but I don't know what's wrong. I spend only a few days or weeks with the patients here, and even so it's like tearing out a bit of your own flesh when they leave. Take Yuri for instance—the little rascal. I got so used to him. And he came to feel at home with us, too. 'Just once.' It's not easy to forget a thing like that. But she and I have been living side by side for eight whole years!"

"A letter! Ivan Ivanovich, a letter!" said the eye specialist, panting with haste and excitement as he entered the office.

"From whom, Ivan Nefyodovich?"

"The Regional Committee. In reply to ours."

Ivan Ivanovich blanched and his eyes grew as black as wells.

"Where is it?"

"Denis Antonovich is bringing it. Where the devil is he?"

Ivan Nefyodovich rushed back into the hall and waved impatiently.

"I'm coming," said Denis Antonovich, and at almost the same instant his beaming face and red hair appeared in the doorway.

"What is it? A good answer?" asked Ivan Ivanovich.

"I don't know. Didn't look. It's addressed to you."

"Then what are you so happy about?" said Ivan Ivanovich curtly, holding out his hand.

"I don't think it could be bad. One of the men from the Regional Committee brought it. Two of them have come here. There's to be a special district conference called, and such things aren't done without good cause."

"A district conference?" repeated Ivan Ivanovich, hesitating to open the envelope as if afraid to read its contents.

"For God's sake, don't keep us waiting," begged the eye doctor, who, despite his corpulence, had a weak nervous system.

"Well, what do they write?" asked the neurologist Valerian Valentinovich, who appeared in the doorway wiping his glasses in their shining gold rims.

Behind him came Sergutov, cheeks flushed, eyes shining. Over his shoulder appeared the excited face of Elena Denisovna. Varvara and Nikita Burtsev also arrived.

Perhaps they should not have come. Perhaps the letter contained unpleasant news, news that would be humiliating to their head surgeon. But the part they had all taken in sending the appeal to the Regional Party Committee had not been a mere formality; each of them had suffered agonies of suspense while waiting for the reply, which would support or condemn a cause to which each had contributed whatever he was able. For that reason it never entered their minds that their gathering here at this moment might be tactless. A negative reply would have been as much of a blow to them as to Ivan Ivanovich.

With bated breath they watched the head surgeon's fingers, unrecognizably slow and clumsy. He even dropped the empty envelope, which fluttered down and slipped with a little rustle across the floor.

At first Ivan Ivanovich ran his eyes silently down the page, then his face brightened, the tenseness in his jaw relaxed, and they heard his familiar, though almost forgotten:

"Well I'll be!" accompanied by a deep, restrained, but joyous laugh.

"They've given us a free hand to do whatever we think necessary—on our own responsibility, of course," he said.

55

"What I want to say with all my heart is that we live well and we work fine," said Terenti Pyativolos at the special district conference. Pyativolos was a comparatively young hewer at the mine, but already his reputation as a Stakhanovite had spread beyond the limits of the region. "But we could work a lot better. What's holding us back? In his opening report, Comrade Skorobogatov mentioned the fact that there was a misunderstanding between him and our mine. It's just that misunderstanding that held us back. Don't let him try to shut me up like he did Martemianov and Logunov at the meeting of the District Committee! We're not to be gagged with penalties; there's no keeping mum when you see the work's suffering. Let the comrades from the Regional Committee get an earful. Our mine's holding first place in the Trust on all counts, isn't it? Yes, it is. But if we hadn't had a spoke put in our wheels, we could have fulfilled our plan for the first half of the year even sooner!"

"Be more concrete," said Skorobogatov in his usual manner, though without his usual aplomb: he was obviously wilting.

This time his eyes blinked as he guardedly glanced first at the representatives from the Regional Committee, then at the delegates from Party organizations of industries, collective farms, state farms, and fishing coopera-

tives. Each of the speakers aired some grudge against him. Skorobogatov was genuinely astonished: where had they come from, all these dissatisfied people? Formerly only rare individuals had dared to speak against him—people like that Logunov. But now—and at this conference—with prominent representatives of district Party organizations present.... There were moments when Skorobogatov wanted to jump up as he so often did in his office at the District Committee, pound on the table and shout: "You're going against the Party!" But here it looked as if the Party was going against him!

He recalled the words of Dr. Arzhanov which had once so infuriated him. "You're only a dot, compared to the whole Party."

"Only a dot," thought Skorobogatov meekly, running his eyes over the people gathered in the hall. All their faces were accusing or contemptuous. Skorobogatov was frightened by their accusations, indignant at their contempt. He could count off on his fingers the failings of those who were now daring to pass judgment on him.

"That Martemianov takes a glass now and then. We know his kind! Today a glass, tomorrow a glass, and before you know it, he's a sot. Logunov doesn't drink, doesn't even smoke, but he's a daydreamer; finance is not his strong point. Pryakhin's a card player and a bootlicker. He's even afraid to meet my eyes now, but there was a time when he would go through fire and water for me. Now I can see why his wife's such a butterfly. Too bad I didn't realize it before. That delegate from the state farm—he doesn't know much about politics. The fellow next to him runs after the women. And as for this one—his social origin can hardly be called working-class."

Skorobogatov's wandering gaze met the hostile, almond-shaped eyes of the chairman of the Evenn hunting cooperative.

"He too thinks I'm done for already," thought Skorobogatov, trying to recall facts from the biography of that delegate. "He was mixed up in some money business—embezzlement or an overexpenditure of some sort. . . ."

It seemed to Skorobogatov that everyone in the room was in some way inferior to himself, and this encouraged him. He was blissfully unaware of the fact that he was always inclined to exaggerate his comrades' faults just because he exaggerated his own merits. Since he looked down upon them, he never noticed the good in them. And yet it was they who had transformed the life of this entire district. It was they who had laid roads through mountains and swamps, built towns, rooted up the taiga, and sown this cold earth, reaping harvests of grain and vegetables which had never been dreamed of in these parts. The fulfilment of their plans for producing gold, furs, and fish was of vital importance to them; in fulfilling them they drew thousands of people into creative work, and these people grew in stature along with the figures on their production charts. It was they whom the Central Committee of the Communist Party had entrusted with the task of developing the North.

"So he doesn't like me either," thought Skorobogatov with bitter sarcasm as he listened to the speech of a district agronomist with whom he had had more than one tiff during the six months they had worked together. "Everyone wants to be patted on the back. Heaven knows I'm taking my roasting patiently enough."

"He would not let us show initiative," said a Yakut with a strong accent who was director of a state cattle farm. "We were afraid to go to the District Committee. That is not good. Comrade Skorobogatov came to our farm. He looked round and ordered us to sow grain in the valley. We said it was not good. He would not listen. We ploughed some of our meadowland. In the summer, the ground thawed. The 'black waters' came down. Our

river rose. All our grain was lost. The farm suffered a loss. And now we have not enough hay."

"The only person who never makes a mistake is the one who never does anything," thought Skorobogatov, jotting down a note to be included in his closing word.

But his closing word was delivered almost mechanically. He was at last convinced that nothing he said would reach these people, and therefore he limited himself to explaining certain of the "attacks" made against him.

The speech of the representative from the Regional Committee was the last straw. When he rose from his place, the sight of his energetic features crowned by a shock of fluffy grey hair filled Skorobogatov with vague hope. Skorobogatov was attracted by the man's strong physique, the unhurried movements of his large white hands, his sure stride, and his frank, somewhat weary glance.

"One of us working folk!" thought Skorobogatov, in a wave of sympathy, depressed though he was by the unexpected discovery of his isolation.

But his momentary illusion only made the final blow the more cruel. The representative, who had indeed once been a simple worker, after briefly summarizing some of the speeches, directly accused Skorobogatov of being a dictator:

"Such methods of leadership are in direct opposition to the Party's relationship to the masses," said he. "What have Comrades Lenin and Stalin taught us? That this relationship is based on mutual trust; that the Party, after listening carefully to the opinion of the masses, is not to order them about, but to convince them of the rightness of a measure. Skorobogatov adopted his own style of work: threats, shouts, insults—assuming that the Secretary of the District Committee had unlimited rights. He demanded the recognition of his authority, without

attempting to earn it. Such leadership cannot last. The present instance proves it. The political alertness of all Party members, the growing awareness of the working class and professional people, the new psychology and status of the peasants, make it expedient for those of us who are Party members to adopt new methods of leadership. Skorobogatov has become criminally self-satisfied; he has such an inflated opinion of himself that he has lost all contact with the masses, Party and non-Party people alike. And this has forced the Regional Committee to take the necessary measures."

After such a speech it was difficult for Skorobogatov to address the gathering, and so his "closing word" consisted of only a few generalities. All his pompousness had vanished: his shoulders sagged, and his eyes had lost their cold fixity.

"Wilted!" whispered Martemianov to Logunov, who gazed without malice at Skorobogatov's drooping figure.

Martemianov was elated. He felt that Skorobogatov's days as Secretary of the District Committee were numbered. And so they were. Matters were settled in the true Party spirit.

56

Logunov climbed out of the car and looked about him; in a wooded valley flecked with the golden tints of autumn lay the scattered buildings of a Yakut settlement. Here and there, especially along the riverbank, stood round grey yurts with darkening haystacks about them.

"Come along," said Logunov to his companions. Taking his briefcase and a package out of the car, he led the way down the narrow path. This devoted mining engineer was still in the state of bewilderment into which his unexpected appointment to the Secretaryship of the District Committee had thrown him. He had been entrust-

ed with a vast and complicated task which he could not grasp all at once. Fortunately, while working as engineer, his interests had always extended beyond those of the mine. The mine was the centre of his professional activities, but other enterprises, such as agriculture, hunting and fishing, had interested him because he always linked up his own work with the life of the whole community. He had met people from these fields at meetings, Party conferences, and sessions of the District Executive Committee, and he took to heart all their successes and failures.

"That high-and-mighty Kuprienko has let all the best men go," he had once said indignantly about the former director of a Yakut state farm. "We better get rid of him before it's too late. I would suggest that the agronomist Amosov be appointed in his place."

And Logunov had been right. Amosov, the young Yakut who was sent to take over the farm, brilliantly rehabilitated its tottering affairs.

Indeed, this was not the only occasion on which Logunov had raised his voice in matters of concern to the whole district. But now this district was his immediate responsibility.

"I'm too inexperienced," he thought to himself as he strode down the hard-packed path. "How shall I find out what the most pressing tasks are?"

Catching hold of a bush to steady himself down a steep descent, he pricked his hand, and only then did he become aware of the thick growth of sweetbriar covering the mountainside. Against its delicate golden leaves gleamed a mass of scarlet berries, transparent in the sunlight.

"What quantities of them!" he muttered as he plucked and tasted some of the ripe fruit.

"And the riverbank is black with currants. We ought to make vitamin concentrates out of them. They'd be more

pleasant than that cedar stuff, especially for children. I must speak to Ivan Ivanovich and the Chairman of the District Soviet about it. We could set up a laboratory right here in the settlement." Logunov tried to recall the face of the Chairman of the Rural Soviet, and was unable to; nor did he know the Chairman of the collective farm. This vexed him.

"Skorobogatov knew all the workers in the district, at least by their faults!" he thought to himself. He turned to get information about these people from the district agronomist, also a Party member, who was walking behind him, and from the secretary in charge of agriculture.

The agronomist gave him a general account of the collective farm, but could say little about its Chairman. And neither of his companions knew anything about the Chairman of the Rural Soviet.

"That's a fine thing!" said Logunov with undisguised annoyance. "Why, they even have a Party Bureau in this settlement, which means the organization must be a good-sized one. Who stands at the head of it?"

"I don't remember," replied the secretary in some discomfiture.

"Now I see why this collective farm has been going downhill of late," said Logunov thoughtfully, slowing his steps. "It's a great mistake to lose contact with primary Party organizations. When I worked at the mines, I knew all the people I worked with. That's the only thing to do. We travel about the district to see how things are going, and to set the general trend, but actual measures must be carried out by local Party people. They are the ones who work directly with the masses and inspire them to accomplish the task set. So our first duty is to know who these Party people are." Logunov smiled, suddenly realizing that his own weakness lay in the fact that he did not yet know the people with whom he had to work.

After inspecting a large dairy, they went out to the fields and gardens. Two tractors from the machine-and-tractor station turned off the highway and, avoiding the muddy winter road, cut an irregular path through unploughed field, leaving saplings and uprooted bushes bristling in their wake.

"Here's where we want to lay the road branching off from the highway," said Logunov to the Chairman of the Rural Soviet. "The tractor driver made the right choice."

They visited the school, the shop, the bathhouse, and the place where they intended building warm pigsties. They spoke about fodder, and the importance of planting vegetable gardens as a side line. The Yakut farmers knew very little about pig-breeding.

"Won't pigs freeze in our climate?" asked a dandified accountant. "They say pigs are very fat and haven't any fur at all."

Logunov explained the advantages of raising pigs, and announced that the collective farm was soon to have electricity. He himself asked many questions, and at last, finding a capable interpreter, called a general meeting at which he made a report. His audience listened with rapt attention. "My next task," he said to himself, making a note in his memo-book, "is to learn the Yakut language. Varvara will help me."

"Our people liked your report," the village teacher said to him as they left the yurt housing the management of the farm. The teacher was the mother of Yuri, whom Varvara had asked Logunov to be sure to visit. Her face was young and attractive, with high cheekbones and an aquiline nose; she was well dressed and spoke Russian beautifully.

"My pupils are eager to learn Russian," she said, noting the pleasure with which Logunov listened to her speech.

When they reached a clay yurt with a tall, white-

washed chimney protruding out of the flat roof, she stopped and opened the door in the sloping wall.

They were met by a neat old woman with a white kerchief on her head, wearing a satine dress and fur-lined, colourfully embroidered slippers.

"This is my mother," said the teacher. "She is seventy years old. Unfortunately she speaks very little Russian—she used to live with my brother in a distant *ulus*. You'd be interested in hearing some of the wonderful tales and stories she has such a store of. Yuri listens to them all day long."

At this moment Logunov caught sight of Yuri. The child was sitting on a low stool next to a cot, gazing warily at the newcomer from under his brows. He immediately recognized Logunov; and his face broke into a smile, his eyes shining.

He got up and, clutching the fur blanket covering the cot, took several steps towards him. Walking was apparently difficult; his crooked legs did not obey him, but he struggled on determinedly. The smile now gone from his face, he took two more steps, but he would have fallen if Logunov, who had been watching his efforts with deep sympathy, had not caught him up in his arms.

"He's beginning to walk," said his mother with tears of joy in her eyes. "It seems too good to be true!"

57

On their way home from the production meeting, Olga and Ivan Ivanovich almost quarrelled again. Only the appearance of Logunov prevented this. He called to the doctor from the bridge over the dried-up river bed.

"How are you?" he asked Olga, who had sat down on a bench to wait for him.

"All right," she said with a sigh, adding ironically: "Wonderful."

"They're after you," he said, turning to Ivan Ivanovich.

"What do you mean?"

"Some Yakuts have arrived from Uchakhan. They're asking the local authorities to let them have Doctor Ivan if only for two weeks. They brought fifty wild horses with them—a whole herd! Has the doctor ever before been paid such a price for a single visit? And they brought deer besides."

"Are they crazy?" said Ivan Ivanovich, still piqued, though his doctor's heart was flattered by the generosity and originality of the gift.

Olga preserved a detached silence.

"Your fame is spreading," went on Logunov, sitting down on the bench. "Remember those women you cured—the blind ones—trachoma patients? When they returned to the taiga, the population began making pilgrimages to them. People wanted to hear with their own ears and see with their own eyes what you had done. At Uchakhan a large number of people gathered from all over the taiga. They decided to send a delegation to Kamenushka to ask you to come treat them."

"Where is Uchakhan?"

"Six hundred kilometres from here. At present it's being built up into the district centre. They even have a power plant."

"Six hundred kilometres!" repeated Ivan Ivanovich. "How would I ever get there?"

"Somehow or other."

"Humph!" said Ivan Ivanovich with a smile, recalling the rapturous tale Varvara had told him about how the women whose sight had been restored had written a song in his honour. "A power plant. That's good. I'm used to working with electrical equipment. Makes it easier for patient and surgeon alike. Are there any medical workers there? Who would assist at operations?"

"Last spring there was a feldsher. Later a group of doctors from Ukamchan spent some time there and left a trained nurse behind. They're planning to open a hospital in Uchakhan."

"A good idea," said Ivan Ivanovich contemplatively. "But can't we put off my trip until winter? Travelling will be faster and easier then."

"All right. We'll tentatively set the time for the first snowfall, or a bit later—whenever you like," said Logunov with relief, though never for a minute had he expected the doctor to refuse to go. "Today we'll tell the delegation our decision. They'll be so delighted they won't mind waiting. As for the horses and deer—the October management will see that the men are properly paid for them."

"Well, I'm signed up," said Ivan Ivanovich with pride in his tone as he and Olga entered the Khizhnyaks' flat.

"I know. We heard about it this morning. I was sure you'd go," said Denis Antonovich from a far corner of the room where he was sitting on the floor playing dolls with Natasha. Elena Denisovna was busy at the kitchen table. "I know," he repeated, still holding in his arm a rubber dog swathed in his daughter's dress. "In honour of the event, Elena Denisovna is making 'witches,' or what we plain folk call meat dumplings."

"But I'm not going that soon."

"It doesn't matter. When you do go, we'll make some more."

"Who? You and Natasha?" muttered Khizhnyak's wife. "You've wasted quite enough of my flour! What a trial you are!"

"May none of your trials be worse," said Denis Antonovich, rubbing a leg that had gone to sleep while he was sitting on the floor. "Well, how did they take to your cedar water on the coast? Did it make a hit?" he said, coming over to Ivan Ivanovich.

"It did," replied Ivan Ivanovich, his eyes on Olga.

He saw her take off the kerchief on her head and retie it with her hair tucked up underneath, making her face look more youthful than ever; then she put on Elena Denisovna's apron, which was very becoming, and began helping her mould the tiny dumplings. The older woman displayed amazing virtuosity.

"Something distant and alien has crept into her," thought Ivan Ivanovich, hurt by this alienation. "She's here in body, but not in mind. Why? All that talk about wanting a profession—somehow it doesn't ring true. Why did she never speak of it before?"

"The cedar's doing a fine job," he said aloud. "And here's an interesting thing. Today I received a letter from the coast. They say they've found an old book there called *Descriptions of Kamchatka,* published two hundred years ago. In that book it states that cedar is the best medicine for scurvy, and that sailors on expeditions to the North made *kvass* of it and drank it instead of tea."

"Why, that means . . ." began Denis Antonovich.

"That they knew about cedar two hundred years ago," said Ivan Ivanovich, slightly abashed. "Cedar is doing its work, but at the same time we're making every effort to supply the population with other vitamins. Individual garden plots will be almost tripled next year. New vegetable, poultry, and cattle farms are being started, and fishing cooperatives formed. Enormous sums of money have been allocated to machine-and-tractor stations and to the working of virgin land in the taiga. Right now Platon Artyomovich is intent on starting the production of vitamin concentrates from sweetbriar."

"Good! Excellent!" said Denis Antonovich, giving an approving nod at the mention of each new undertaking. "To tell the truth, I never expected Logunov to take to agriculture as he has. After all, he's a miner and an industrialist by nature. They say he hated to leave the mine. But since the work of the Party demands a knowledge

of agriculture, he's shown himself up to it. You can't feed the people nothing but sugar, macaroni, and tinned goods in this scurvy country. It's greens we need, greens and milk products."

"Yes, greens," murmured Ivan Ivanovich, a sombre look crossing his face as he glanced at his wife. At the same moment he noticed Natasha.

The child was sitting on the floor watching the grown-ups. The turn of her head and her lifted hand with a toy in it seemed to say that she was patiently waiting for someone to play with her. At any other time Ivan Ivanovich could not have resisted her appeal, but at present he was too downcast; his playing would have been mere pretense.

"I've heard that in Ukamchan they're already referring to 'Arzhanov's method of treating scurvy,'" said Denis Antonovich, his eyes shining as if it were *his* method they were talking about. "What do we care what they did two hundred years ago?" he went on, noticing the shadow on Ivan Ivanovich's face. "We don't know what results they got then, but we do know that we've put our patients back on their feet. Ukamchan is full of scurvy patients this spring—local people and those brought here from the taiga. We don't know what to do with them all."

"Ah, yes," said the doctor absent-mindedly, gazing at his wife.

"...Cut the potatoes into as many pieces as there are sprouts, and plant them twenty to a hole.... Individual plots.... Teach people the use of sprouts.... Save the tops...." Denis Antonovich's words came to him in disconnected fragments against a clatter of plates and forks. "Time to organize things properly.... Bring in new ones, send away old ones ... foolish nonsense...."

"What's he saying?" thought Ivan Ivanovich, pulling himself together and turning round to see Denis Antonovich's broad back disappearing behind the spotless cur-

tain hanging over the shelves of dishes. The feldsher was making a great commotion as he rummaged for something.

"For goodness sake, Denis, you'll smash all the dishes!" cried Elena Denisovna.

"*She* never gets sulky," observed Ivan Ivanovich, snatching at the disconnected thoughts passing through his mind. "Bring in new ones, send away old ones—he meant the workers.... Once when we were talking about the cedar cure, Olga said: 'Have you begun to apply it already?' But we had been speaking about it for days—and always in her presence.... I suppose she listened to us as I listened to Denis Antonovich just now—without hearing a word. Because her mind was on something else. And still is. And it isn't just her writing. What could it be?" thought Ivan Ivanovich, and a look of such misery came into the eyes that met Denis Antonovich's, who just at that moment dived out from under the curtain, that the latter was left speechless and almost dropped the ladle in his hand.

"Are you ill?" he asked, coming up to Ivan Ivanovich with a professional air.

"It's nothing," replied the doctor, taking himself in hand. "I had a stitch in the side—or in the back—can't tell which. But it's gone now," he added quickly, seeing the feldsher's readiness to take measures.

"Come along, I'm going to examine you," said Denis Antonovich determinedly, forcing him to the door of his room. "What do you mean 'nothing'? If you could see your face! Everybody knows the old saying: a cobbler without shoes, and a dentist without teeth. Thank the Lord I know a thing or two about medicine," and he fairly pulled off Ivan Ivanovich's coat and made him take off his shirt.

"That's right," he said as he applied the stethoscope. "A deep breath. Once more. Call these lungs? Bellows,

that's what they are!" Again he listened, pounded, turned the doctor this way and that, while Ivan Ivanovich meekly obeyed, his hands crossed on his naked chest. "While I'm at it, I may as well listen to your heart.... What a heart! A regular steam hammer. And your whole body's like a forge. A handsome fellow, there's no denying it!" he exclaimed, gazing in admiration at Ivan Ivanovich's smooth torso, the powerful knots of muscle playing under his satiny skin, and his scowling face.

"Handsome!" snorted Ivan Ivanovich. "First time I ever heard that."

"I mean it—not just paying compliments. But I can't for the life of me think what could have caused that stitch. I suppose you're just worn out. Have a glass of vodka as a—as a disinfectant, and everything will be all right."

58

As he accepted that glass of vodka from Denis Antonovich's hand, Ivan Ivanovich gazed thoughtfully at the dinner table, with its steaming platter of witch-dumplings, surrounded by other appetizing dishes.

"Clean and pure as a lady's tears!" said Denis Antonovich, squinting at his glass.

"Why a lady's?" objected Ivan Ivanovich. "Vodka's a man's drink. Let it be a man's."

"Just as you like. It's diluted, but even so it's strong. Last week a woman entered the shop, stood at the liquor counter, and collapsed right there on the floor."

Elena Denisovna shook her head:

"Drunk from the mere smell of it."

"The fact is, it was something else made her collapse. Something in your line. But besides that, she's been having trouble with her legs. In Primorsk they treated her for radiculitis. She couldn't walk at all after the incident in the shop."

"Oh, you mean the daughter of Martemianov. I've already examined her," said Elena Denisovna. "I spoke to you about her, Ivan Ivanovich. The one we'll have to perform a Caesarean on. Both legs are almost completely paralyzed, and so are the muscles of her abdomen, and this is her first pregnancy. She can't possibly give birth."

"How many months?"

"Eight, she says. But I think she's mistaken. Looks to me as if her time had almost come."

"Has the neurologist seen her?"

"Today," answered Denis Antonovich for his wife.

"I'll take a look at her myself tomorrow," decided Ivan Ivanovich. "I don't like the symptoms."

"Remember that case we had last year? The wife of the geologist from Kholodnikan?" said Elena Denisovna.

"I certainly do. Valerian Valentinovich and I found she had a tumour in the right frontal lobe, and I operated." Ivan Ivanovich, enlivened by his recollections, looked about at the people seated there. "I took the thing out clean, a tumour the size of my fist. It's a wonderful feeling to know you've rooted out the whole business."

"On the fourth of May we put her on the operating table, and on the sixteenth of June she gave birth," Elena Denisovna added enthusiastically. "By that time she was quite normal; she began to take interest in her own condition and to ask about her family. And what a bouncing boy she gave birth to!" Elena Denisovna was interrupted by a knock at the door. Igor Korobitsyn entered.

Everyone looked up in surprise, for Igor was a rare guest at the Khizhnyaks'.

"Pava Romanovna is having a little party on Saturday evening," he said, addressing himself mostly to Olga. "She asked me to tell you. Would you like to come? Everyone contributing to the pot as usual."

There was something almost insulting in the expression of his little mouth and black eyes as he looked at Olga.

"Could *he* be the one?" thought Ivan Ivanovich, glancing at his wife. Gone was her expression of aloofness; she was all eager attention. "Good Lord, he must be!" he gasped to himself, stunned by the realization.

"Would you?" repeated Korobitsyn, turning to the doctor.

"No," Ivan Ivanovich answered dully, struggling with the desire to say something rude.

"Too bad. It will be very jolly."

"No, I'm busy. I have some work. If Olga Pavlovna cares to, that's her business."

Perhaps Olga too should have said she was busy, but the only thought that entered her mind was that Tavrov was now well, and that he would be sure to be at the Pryakhins' on Saturday.

"Tell Pava Romanovna that I'll be glad to come," she said to Korobitsyn.

59

"To think of Olga's being drawn to that vulgar woman!" thought Ivan Ivanovich in a daze as he stared unseeingly at the frightened face of the young woman lying on the hospital bed in front of him.

A heavy coil of fair hair was resting on her shoulders, she had blue eyes, and fair skin, and everything about her was very soft and feminine.

"What is your name?" asked Ivan Ivanovich with sudden gentleness, pulling himself out of his preoccupation.

"Maria—Maria Petrovna."

"Well, Maria Petrovna, what's your trouble?"

"My legs—"

"Have gone out of commission, have they?" joked the doctor, beginning his examination of the patient.

"Move your toes. Try again. Lift your right leg, bending the knee. Can't do it? What about the left? Can't lift that either? Then we'll help you. Now try to straighten it without our help. Nothing comes of it, eh? So both your legs and your abdomen have gone to sleep. When did this begin, Maria Petrovna?"

Valerian Valentinovich, the neurologist, was standing beside the surgeon, a look of tense concentration on his freckled face. He was verifying, this time as an onlooker, his preliminary diagnosis.

"Looks to me as if something was wrong with her spinal cord," said Ivan Ivanovich at last, after a thorough examination and questioning of the patient.

"I'm of the same opinion," replied Valerian Valentinovich. "Initial symptoms and the clinical course of the disease indicate that we have to deal with a tumour in the dorsal part of the spinal cord."

Ivan Ivanovich nodded approvingly. He had already heard the neurologist's diagnosis. Valerian Valentinovich approached his patients with great sympathy and earnestness, and this enabled him to draw conclusions on the basis of trifling details which would escape a less attentive doctor. Sometimes the surgeon and the neurologist had serious arguments over a diagnosis, but this did not prevent their working together amiably. At present their opinions coincided.

They spoke in the presence of Maria Petrovna, hiding nothing from her. In such cases patients were asked to sign a paper giving their consent to the operation and stating that they had been informed of its character. But Ivan Ivanovich resorted to Latin when expressing his regret that, in view of the woman's pregnancy, the disease had not been treated in proper time.

"At the first signs of weakness and pain in her feet, the seriousness of the disease should have been foreseen and treated."

"She was treated for bilateral radiculitis," said Valerian Valentinovich.

Ivan Ivanovich grunted. "It began with pain in her instep and paralysis of the toes of her left foot, which spread until her entire left leg and her abdomen were affected. Then the same thing happened to her right leg. Does that sound like radiculitis? Take her for an X-ray," he said to the doctor on duty. "We'll have her X-rayed, and make an analysis of her spinal fluid; then the picture will be clear."

On returning to his office, he took a few turns up and down before seating himself at his desk and picking up the glass of hot tea the nurse always had waiting for him. But he set it down without touching it and once more began to pace the floor.

"Olga went to Pava Romanovna's again. She was like a perfect stranger when she returned." A hard glint showed in Ivan Ivanovich's brown eyes. "Well, there's nothing I can do about it."

"The X-ray shows a deformation of the bone tissue in the region of the sixth dorsal vertebra," said Sergutov with a glance at Gusev, who was sitting in a deep armchair looking very much ruffled. "Here, look at this," and he held up two large roentgenograms to the light.

"There's no doubt about it now," said Ivan Ivanovich as he studied the vague outlines of the bones against the dark background. "The diagnosis is clear: a tumour of the sixth dorsal vertebra, pressing upon the spinal cord. The patient must be made ready for an operation."

"I would advise postponing the operation until she has given birth," said Gusev. "Let her get that over with."

"But she can't," said Ivan Ivanovich. "We would have to perform a Caesarean operation."

"And why shouldn't we? We mustn't expose her to such a risk. What if labour pains should begin while she was on the operating table? Do you want another fatality to your credit?"

"We'll have an obstetrician assist."

Gusev's big nose reddened with indignation, and he began to work his fingers nervously.

"I know you are an innovator and a neurosurgeon," said he, "but I have had wide experience as a general surgeon. And I warn you against this. You want the woman to give birth immediately after undergoing one of the most complicated of operations—an operation on the spinal cord. Think of the danger, after exposing the spine, and putting in fresh sutures!"

"That isn't where the danger lies," replied Ivan Ivanovich. "By the way, don't forget that I too have had wide experience as a general surgeon. And I contend that it will be easier for the patient to undergo an operation and then have her child by natural birth, than to undergo two serious operations in succession. In a word, I am for operating immediately, keeping in mind, of course, all the things you have warned us of."

"Why does he take such pleasure in giving warnings?" thought Ivan Ivanovich as he left the hospital. "What a mind he has! So neat and orderly. A regular filing system, with everything properly pigeonholed. The hospital premises measure up to his standard of neatness and order, thank God, but when it comes to other things—after all, you can't sort illnesses and pigeonhole them!" Suddenly remembering his last disagreement with Olga, Ivan Ivanovich grew even more incensed. "A writer, that's what Gusev should be!" he thought with a spiteful snort. "All his characters would be meek and modest, his expressions smooth and harmless, his stories without any conflicts. And his books would be so boring nobody would read them."

These reflections led the doctor off his course; instead of going home immediately, he went to the library. Ivan Ivanovich spent most of his leisure time reading, especially modern novels; it was a matter of pride with him to be "up on" the latest books.

At present he had the intention of taking out one of the literary magazines brought by the latest post and leafing through it to discover the most recent trends in the literary world; so that he might bring a new viewpoint to his appraisal of Olga's "side line."

From behind the stage scenery occupying half the entrance hall, temporarily turned into a workshop, he heard Pava Romanovna's ringing voice.

"Oh, I could handle it all right, don't worry about that!" she was saying. "To be sure, I've never held a job in my life, but managing a club is right in my line. I'd make it so cozy people would just flock to it!"

"Wouldn't you though!" thought Ivan Ivanovich scathingly as he passed through. "Like Gusev, you'd reduce everything to soft couches and fluttering curtains. Oh, what a fine opinion you have of yourself! Of course you could find a job if you wanted to. And because the job's easy to find, you think it's easy to fulfil."

60

Olga, in a dark summer coat of heavy silk, was sitting at one of the tables in the reading room taking notes. Cramped, uneven letters flowed swiftly from under the tip of a pencil she clutched with the intensity of a schoolgirl. Ivan Ivanovich often made fun of Olga's penmanship, but he loved it just the same. How much joy had he received during the past two years from her letters, written in the hand of a fourth-form pupil, but full of deep feeling and unrest.

He read her articles recently published in the regional paper, but it seemed to him that Olga exaggerated her little triumphs, and already looked upon herself as a genius unappreciated by her husband. Did not this lie at the root of their frequent disagreements?

Now as he caught sight of his wife working so industriously at the table piled high with books, he suddenly felt a sharp pang of sympathy. It was true that once her interest was excited, she spared no time or effort to achieve what she wanted.

He went over to her and placed his hand on her shoulder, as he had done the first time he found her at work at her desk. She started up, but the eyes she turned to him did not light up with affection, nor did she gather up her papers with the modest impulse of a woman who feared to appear ridiculous in the eyes of the man she loved. Olga was no longer self-conscious in her husband's presence; on the contrary, she seemed indifferent to his opinion, and this, while hurting him deeply, only made him more sceptical of her gifts

"Scribbling away?" he asked with light sarcasm.

"Making notes," she replied firmly, though a shade of annoyance crossed her face.

"Good for you; go right ahead," he said with a sigh, and, turning away, went over to the librarian's desk where a little old lady in glasses, and wearing a warm sleeveless vest, sat lost in the perusal of a recent novel.

"What trifles are capable of coming between people—of spoiling a person's whole life!" he thought bitterly as he leafed through the books recently returned, but not yet placed back on their shelves. "What have I done? How have I stood in her way?"

None of the new magazines were in the library; they had all been taken out.

"Oh no, I'm afraid that's too big for me to digest," said he, glancing dubiously at a fat volume by a contem-

porary American author which the old lady offered him.

Having no time to judge the merits of unknown authors, and grudging a single lost minute, he preferred reading books that had already won the approval of the public.

When his choice was made, he again stopped beside Olga. She was hastily copying out an excerpt from a ponderous work on Yakutia. Pausing for a moment, she nodded to an empty chair nearby, and Ivan Ivanovich reluctantly, though meekly, took it, obeying an irrisistible longing to talk to her. He sat there gazing into his wife's face, finding new charm in its expression of thoughtful concentration, and this only made him more acutely aware of the fact that she had left him severely alone of late. Here he was now, returning home from work, tired and hungry, but she remained sitting there calmly, evidencing not the slightest solicitude for him.

"Haven't you had supper yet?" she asked, as though reading his thoughts.

"No," he said, almost ashamed.

"Then don't wait for me. Supper's in the oven; I don't suppose it's cold yet. And there's hot coffee in the thermos bottle. I'm anxious to look through all this material before the library closes," she explained, noting her husband's impatient movement and the look of displeasure on his face.

"Is this to go on indefinitely?" he asked with restraint. "This detachment—this indifference?"

"As long as you continue to remain indifferent to my work," replied Olga haughtily.

"As yet I am not aware of any work," said Ivan Ivanovich testily as he got up.

"That isn't surprising," said Olga. "I could hardly expect you to say anything else."

Long after the firm steps of Ivan Ivanovich had died away, she sat there motionless, her heart chilled, forgetting that she must hurry to finish before the library closed. At last she decided to return home, and even gathered up her books, but on second thought she sat down again. No matter how she tried to collect her thoughts, she could not recover facility in grasping what she read, and in drawing conclusions.

In such a state, it was foolish to go on working. Olga sighed, turned in her books, and slowly walked out of the library.

Her dejected look seemed to say: "Oh, very well; if your peace of mind demands it, I will give up my work." But just as she reached the street door, it was thrown violently open, and there stood Tavrov, looking like one pursued. Unable to stop herself, Olga rushed to him. It seemed to Pava Romanovna, who was inspecting the new scenery, that Tavrov and Olga were about to throw themselves into each other's arms.

There was not a soul in the hall but these three. A single lamp, large and round as the moon, was shining high up against the unpainted ceiling. The enormous building was filled with expectant silence, suddenly broken by a carpenter's hammer, behind the stage.

The ecstatic Pava felt almost cheated when she saw these two, face to face in such emptiness, suddenly stop, as if paralyzed.

"The idiots!" she thought in exasperation. "Why do they torture themselves so? I feel like jumping out and pushing them at each other. But I suppose they'd only bump their heads." And she was completely dumbfounded when, without even a hand clasp, they walked over and sat down on a bench in the middle of the hall.

"Upon my word, they probably think they're in a summer house in some shady grove," she thought, withdrawing behind some scenery. "They look like a couple of turtledoves on a house top."

"Did you send for me?" Tavrov asked Olga.

"No, though I wanted dreadfully to see you," said Olga with unaffected candour.

The emotions she had so recently experienced instantly faded and were forgotten, and her face, after the first flush of surprise and even fear, shone with gladness.

Every glance that she turned to Tavrov expressed her feeling.

"Why do you walk so fast? You must be more careful," she said in tender rebuke, noticing the beads of perspiration on his forehead.

"I was afraid I would miss you. They phoned and told me you had been here for some time and were expecting me. That is, Pava Romanovna did," he explained, as Olga made a nervous little movement. Taking out a white handkerchief, he screwed it up in the manner of a little boy and wiped his forehead and clean-cut chin. "Don't think I came such a distance without any support," he added, with a blush as he glanced at Olga from under his brows. "I galloped over on crutches. They're out there, on the porch. I still use them when I'm in a hurry."

"I watched you learning to walk," said Olga softly. "You kept smiling and staring at the ground. It was such a lovely evening. A nurse walked behind you."

"Why didn't you speak to me?"

"I didn't want to embarrass you."

"I meant to call you up several times—innumerable times. But for some reason I was afraid. I suppose that's how a dog sits in its kennel with a broken paw—longing to bark and start a fight, but not daring to—with a paw like that."

Both of them laughed.

"Well, how is your work progressing?" asked Tavrov, once more adopting an easy, friendly tone. "Where's the story you promised to write about Chazhma?"

"Still in my desk," replied Olga eagerly. "I've started it about twenty times. All the paper I've wasted! But it doesn't turn out to suit me. Either it's too pompous and flowery, or too dull and superficial. But I keep sending things to the paper and they print them. Not everything, of course, but at least half. That's not bad, is it? After all, I haven't really learned my craft yet."

"Bad? It's wonderful!" exclaimed Tavrov. "I once knew a famous journalist—he had hundreds of articles returned before his first one was printed. And that's no exaggeration. He sent something like three hundred articles into editorial wastepaper baskets. You have made the right start by not scorning simple little newspaper accounts. Your longer articles are still rather feeble, too stiff, or too wordy. Don't invent things; take them from life, after first making a thorough study of it."

"I try to," said Olga. "But here's a strange thing: I start in a very matter-of-fact way, searching for what is most interesting and important, but often I find myself getting too emotional. Not sentimental, but high-strung, carried away with enthusiasm. And this makes me go off-key."

"That's nothing to worry about. Enthusiasm is a good fault," said Tavrov encouragingly, but without condescension. He too was feeling emotional. "That's what you want to write about—the things that move you, that touch you deeply." Once more he took his handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his face, giving a deep sigh as he did so. It was clear that he was still weak from his illness. "As for that article about Chazhma, you should—"

"I think I understand what I should do," interrupted Olga. "It's difficult to write a general article about the whole region, with its gold-fields, and fisheries, and state

farms, and scenery requiring special description. I tried to put in everything, and it proved to be too much for me. I must limit myself somehow."

"Find an interesting person, and prism everything through him," suggested Tavrov.

Olga considered.

"I visited an Evenn collective farm. They go in for all sorts of things—gardening, dairying, reindeer-breeding. The people there are Evenns. At first I mixed them up with Evenks, but it seems they are quite a different people. Formerly the Evenks were called Tungus—nomads roaming Eastern Siberia from the Yenisei to the Okhotsk coast. The Evenns are Lamuts. In their tongue the Sea of Okhotsk is called the Lamut Sea. Well, if I should take that farm and show how it is connected with industry. . . ."

"Try to get an interview with the Chairman of our District Executive Committee; in describing him and his work, you can show everything. If you begin with the collective farm, you'll have difficulty getting rid of it, and by the time you reach industry, you'll again be swamped by the amount of material."

"Perhaps you're right," said Olga, deliberating.

"Just wait till you meet that Chairman!" said Tavrov eagerly. "He's one of those people they make up songs about in the native villages. He took an active part in organizing that collective farm you mentioned."

"Dear me, I seem to have interrupted a learned conversation! If my ears don't deceive me, you were talking about geography," said Pava Romanovna, who suddenly appeared from behind the scenery.

She came round the bench and stood in front of Olga and Tavrov, looking like a doll in her knee-length full skirts, with a light coat worn on top (she called it a *trois-quart*) to hide the fullness of her form. Flounces at the top of her sleeves broadened her shoulders, spiked

heels gave her a wobbly walk. A hat resembling an overturned pail was perched on top of her fluffy curls. This was the latest style, and Pava would have died rather than be out of style.

"You'd try the patience of a saint," she said amicably. "My feet are simply killing me. After all, I'm in the family way. And what was the good of my crouching in that crack between the birch forest and the pirate's cave? Enough of this martyrdom! I gave you your chance and you didn't take it."

62

When Ivan Ivanovich entered the operating room, the patient had already been placed on the table, under the glare of the floodlights.

She immediately stiffened on hearing the steps and the voice of the surgeon. Her whole being was tense with apprehension. Not for a moment had she hesitated to sign her consent to the operation. Indeed, she had no alternative. But it was her pregnancy, rather than the operation, that worried her. She ardently desired a child, and loved it before it was yet born. The stirrings within her womb filled her with joy. Whenever she felt them, she would imagine that the infant was seeking a more comfortable position, poking her now with an elbow, now with a tiny foot. As she lay on the operating table, she kept up her usual conversation with her child, begging it to lie quiet, dreading any sudden movement. Both of them must be patient.

Dr. Sergutov, the anesthetist, had already finished his task; a ridge of swelling raised by the novocain injections extended along the patient's spine. Ivan Ivanovich glanced over Sergutov's shoulder, verifying the operation area as compared with the X-ray picture, now fastened to the windowpane.

Varvara's black eyes, set off by the whiteness of the

mask covering the lower part of her face, gazed above the sterile sheet she was holding up.

"Don't forget—we shall need hexonal," said Ivan Ivanovich.

"I have it ready," replied Varvara briefly, arranging the sheet so that the opening exposed the operation area.

From the other side of the table Elena Denisovna caught one edge of the sheet and clipped it to the frame over the patient's head. Nikita took Maria's blood pressure.

Everyone was at his post, everything was ready, yet from time to time Ivan Ivanovich's heart sank as he prepared himself for the operation. He was well aware that he must answer for the risk he was taking, but it was not of himself he was thinking at present; he was worried about the state of his patient and anxious to avoid complications.

"I'm cold," said Maria softly. She was acutely aware of the movement about her, of every touch upon her body, and of the faint signs of life coming from her child, who seemed to lie against her very heart. Perhaps she had really succeeded in urging it to be still. The moment was fearsome enough without the child.

"Give her an adrenalin injection," said Ivan Ivanovich in response to a look from Elena Denisovna. "Don't worry, my dear," he said to the patient, "we'll be gentle and get it over as quickly as possible."

He took his seat on a revolving stool, and Varvara handed him a scalpel and a wide, blunt hook. Sergutov stood ready beside him, a hook in one hand and the metal tube of the electric suction pump in the other. Nikita Burtsev, acting as assistant responsible to watch the patient's condition, switched on the current. Nikita a surgical assistant! Sometimes he was afraid even to blink during an operation, but his movements were always quick and exact. Varvara was always jealous when, on

her day off, Nikita handed Ivan Ivanovich the instruments....

A straight incision along the ridge following the spine, the edges of the wound immediately distended by hooks.

"Current!" ordered Ivan Ivanovich tersely.

"A multitude of veins here," he said to Sergutov as he carefully plied his scalpel. "Just look how they're branched out. A greatly enlarged network. That means a vascular tumour—a hemangioma. We'll have trouble with bleeding."

To the operation table came the neurologist, his hands made ready in case his aid should be called for, and the eye specialist Ivan Nefyodovich, both of them in masks. The presence of the eye doctor was not obligatory, but, as an enthusiast of neurosurgery, he rarely missed an operation. His white brows were drawn on his broad, benign, fleshy face, as he watched the surgeon make short incisions inside the wound with the electric knife, coagulate the bleeding points, insert retractors, grasp the tissue with a large hook, and divide the layers to right and left of the spinal cord with a large spatula. Already the bone was exposed.

"It hurts," murmured Maria Petrovna.

"Novocain!" snapped Ivan Ivanovich to Varvara; then, gently: "In just a minute it won't hurt, Maria Petrovna. You tell us as soon as you feel anything. There's no need to endure it. A hundred years ago, before we had anesthetics, patients used to be tied to the table while they were cut up. Then there was nothing to do but grin and bear it, and surgeons were as dreaded as executioners." As Ivan Ivanovich talked, he took the syringe from Varvara and made two injections, one to the right, the other to the left of the spinal column.

"A hundred years ago no one would have undertaken such an operation," put in the neurologist.

"Not even twenty years ago," muttered Ivan Ivanovich, wholely absorbed in a task as delicate and painstaking as a jeweller's.

The operation advanced quickly, for the surgeon's every movement, however slight, was exact.

Another incision made by the electric knife. A stir on the other side of the table. Elena Denisovna, outwardly calm, was inwardly alarmed. The patient was vomiting. But the operation went on

"Wax! Scissors! Current!"

63

Martemianov's was a friendly family. Besides his daughter Maria, he had four adolescent sons and a good-natured wife with large eyes and large hands, and a zest for work and play.

"She's from Bodaibo," he said of her proudly. "Born and bred in the gold-fields."

He too had been born and bred in Bodaibo and had taken an active part in the Lena Mines strike, though at that time he had been only fourteen years old, plus three years tacked on to make it possible for him to descend the mines; the very young, like the very old, were rejected. His strength, and the breadth of his shoulders, made it easy for him to pass for seventeen. But after the shooting of the strikers, when the body of his father, a hewer, was dragged out of the general melee, he wept with the abandon of his fourteen years, and instantly leaped to full maturity. From that moment on an undying spark of hate glowed within his breast. For that reason he joined the Communist Party on the very threshold of a youth he was deprived of.

Maria was the favourite in the family, but this did not mean she was spoiled; she was a level-headed girl. That was why, after she had finished the seven-year school,

her parents did not hesitate to let her go to Primorsk to continue her education. She returned with the diploma of an economist, already married and expecting a child. But her illness cast a shadow over the joy of her return.

"To think of it!" said the unhappy Martemianov to Logunov as he sat in his office at the District Committee. "A tumour! And a spinal one at that! My wife's nearly gone crazy these last few days; she's always trailing the heels of the doctor. I keep telling her she shouldn't, though I can hardly bring myself to say a word, seeing what she's going through. She's a woman, and one who's had children herself; of course it's hard for her to imagine what will happen after such an operation. Stitches, and all that." Martemianov made a painful grimace, but he forced himself to go on. "If Maria could pull through that operation, I suppose she'll manage to have her baby. Ivan Ivanovich knows his business."

On Thursday, the day after the operation, Maria moaned with the pain in her back; on Friday it had subsided and her general condition had greatly improved. Everyone rejoiced to discover that she had regained the use of her paralyzed legs. Even Gusev was unable to disguise a certain mortified satisfaction at seeing the freedom with which she moved her feet and toes. She could straighten out her knee like any normal person; bending it was more difficult, but there could be no doubt that the operation had been a success.

"We'll see how matters develop further," he said.

"She'll give birth," said Ivan Ivanovich.

"You're not quite sure of it, are you?" asked Gusev softly, noting the concern on the surgeon's face.

"I don't deny the danger," he replied. "But once Maria Petrovna wants a baby, she shall have it. Her abdominal muscles are working normally now."

"With all my heart I hope you're right," said Gusev,

adding in an undertone: "but it would be better to do a Caesarean."

On Saturday labour pains set in. At four o'clock in the morning, Elena Denisovna, who had slept in the isolation ward so as not to leave the patient for a moment, wrote in the case history: "Moderate pains every ten or fifteen minutes."

Elena Denisovna had grown pale during these days of anxious waiting. She knew that now the main responsibility lay on her shoulders. And she must not be disgraced by having anything go wrong.

"Come, move your feet," she said to her patient, suddenly obsessed by a doubt that Maria Petrovna had really recovered the use of her legs.

Maria obediently moved her feet, but her pretty, slightly swollen face was suddenly distorted by a new wave of labour pains.

Contrary to his custom, Ivan Ivanovich began his rounds with the maternity ward that morning.

"Don't worry," he said in his deep bass voice, reading alarm in Elena Denisovna's face. "Maria Petrovna is coming along nicely. Her range of movement is growing all the time."

But he was unable to stay with his patient; even his rounds had to be curtailed in order to attend to a case of perforated appendix demanding immediate operation.

Elena Denisovna was left alone with the pregnant woman. She bustled about the obstetrical table on which Maria Petrovna was lying, but there were no strong muscular contractions, and the midwife feared there would be none. At twelve o'clock she made another entry: "Labour pains every five or eight minutes."

"Her husband's asking how she feels," said the nurse on duty, appearing like a ghost in the doorway.

"Tell him we're giving birth already," answered Elena Denisovna tersely.

At 16 o'clock another brief entry: "Labour pains every six minutes." Once again Ivan Ivanovich came—and went. He was having a difficult day: another emergency case had been brought in. Once more Maria's mother and husband made inquiries.

"Giving birth," said Elena Denisovna, more curt than ever.

"Do you think I'll really be able to have my baby?" asked Maria, when the latest siege of pain was over.

"Of course, honey," replied Elena Denisovna, avoiding the young woman's clear gaze, purified, it seemed, by the sufferings attending motherhood. "Everything will turn out all right. Here, it's beginning again."

At 19 o'clock, the entry read: "Labour pains every three or four minutes. Slight contractions."

When they began, those contractions—the mother's efforts, in spite of her pain, to aid the movements of her babe—tears of joy sprang to Elena Denisovna's eyes. It wasn't that she now felt freed of responsibility, but she no longer had a sense of helplessness; a weapon had been put into her hands.

The contractions were weak and of short duration, but they hastened the culmination. They were followed by periods of passivity.

Much against her will, Elena Denisovna sent for Ivan Ivanovich. He arrived strangely quiet and downcast. After examining the patient and listening to the infant's heartbeats, he said:

"I'm afraid we'll have to help the mother a bit. Give me the forceps."

He skilfully inserted them, and at 21 o'clock, according to the case history, a strong and healthy daughter was born to Maria Petrovna.

"Pretty as a picture! All made of velvet," Elena Denisovna informed the mother exultantly from the side

table where she and an attendant were washing the newborn babe.

Ivan Ivanovich also washed his hands, wearily thinking the while about the hard but gratifying day that was past, about the operations he had performed, and about the floodlight that had gone out of commission the preceding day, when the young surgeon Sergutov was operating.

"We ought to take it out of his salary," he muttered, filled with tardy indignation. "Out of his and the nurse's. They should have tested it first. Varya would never have allowed such a thing to happen. It makes you sick—such expensive equipment, and so hard to get! They ought to be ashamed!"

He went to his office, lighted a cigarette, and, still indignant, remembered that Olga had gone to the party at Pava Romanovna's. Gradually his annoyance was superseded by a feeling of loneliness and neglect, and even of old age. Thirty-six years old. Almost forty. Five whole years had passed since he had publicly defended his thesis for a higher degree. He recalled the day. Olga, radiant in a white frock. Summer. Flowers. The enthusiastic praise of the senior doctors. His work had been called an event in the medical world. But what had he accomplished since then?

In his early practice as a general surgeon, his pride had suffered greatly on finding himself unable to cope with a case. Usually he had sent such patients to Burdenko, at the Moscow Institute of Neurosurgery. But it was a bitter thing for him to realize his own lack of knowledge. And so he had decided to study neurosurgery. Now he himself was a neurosurgeon, his heart's desire. Yet here he was, weary, wilting, depressed. Could it be because of Olga? But what about his work? Ah, there was so much that remained unsolved and undefined in his work. Ivan Ivanovich frowned. All his life he had strained

forward, had run ahead without stopping for breath. Well, he had got what he wanted....

"What next?" he asked, staring straight ahead of him. "What if I do receive further scientific degrees? Much will remain as obscure as ever. You cut a person open, take a look, and sew him up. Cancer, for instance, or bad cases of aneurism...."

He rose and quietly left his office. As he walked down the hall he heard voices: Elena Denisovna attacking, the doctor on duty defending.

"No one has any more right to enter our ward without a mask than to enter the operating room," Elena Denisovna was saying. "But people seem to think they can barge in on us any old time, right from the street."

"But he's her husband—and such a serious case. Think what he's been through," protested the doctor.

"That's just why, because it's such a serious case. They'll bring us the flu and all sorts of things."

Following some vague but irresistible impulse, Ivan Ivanovich turned in the direction of the voices. He passed the women, who immediately fell silent, and entered the maternity ward.

Maria was now lying in bed, her head twisted awkwardly on the flat pillow to gaze into the rosy face of her infant. Her long, trembling lashes had a golden glint, and her face, to which childbirth had brought a more mature expression, was lighted by a smile. She was nursing her daughter for the first time. Touchingly, amusingly solicitous, she was utterly absorbed in the experience, and for that reason she merely gave the man who appeared beside her bed a passing glance, immediately returning to the greedy lips and tiny nose sucking and snuffling at her breast.

She did not even bother to pull up the sheet, not because this man had already seen her naked (that very morning she had pulled the sheet up to her very chin the

moment the doctor had finished his examination). Nor had weakness made her indifferent to modesty. At present Maria was so filled with the maternal feeling that there was no room for any other. She had not died, she had become a mother, and she was nursing her child. Everything else was eclipsed by this miracle.

Ivan Ivanovich, overjoyed by the sight, turned to Elena Denisovna and said in an undertone: "Why did you permit her to feed her child so soon?"

Suddenly it was all warm and balmy in his soul, as if a ray from the mother's smile had penetrated its gloomy depths. He experienced the happiness of an artist who views his work from a distance and finds it good. And for the minute all his own personal unhappiness receded into the background.

64

The last meeting between Olga and Tavrov had confirmed the relationship between them, though not a word of love had been spoken. Now Tavrov was sure he could convince her they were committing a crime by violating their finest feelings and ruining their lives. Yet that third person stood between them. Despite his jealousy, Tavrov could not help respecting Ivan Ivanovich. But that did not cool his feeling for Olga; it only made him more keenly aware of his great responsibility, and added an element of fear.

Olga!

That short word was like a sigh, the last sound he breathed on falling asleep, the first on waking.

Only when busy at the ore mill was she temporarily out of his mind. The ore moved on an endless belt from machine to machine, growing smaller and smaller as it advanced. Large stones were turned into a mass resembling seed, then flour. Here was the first mill, where, with an uninterrupted roar, the stones were cracked like nuts

between steel jaws. From there they proceeded in a steady stream to two machines giving off a vibrant hum; they broke it down into lumps of middle size. The next section was devoted to fine milling, achieved by three ball mills —three roaring beauties. Here the chance uttering of a beloved name would be immediately swallowed up in the general din. Each machine had its own workman, its own engine and belt. At present the mine where Platon Logunov had worked until so recently had difficulty keeping the mill supplied with sufficient ore, but plans were being made to increase its output to such an extent that Tavrov was compelled to raise the production capacity of the mill as well.

It was quite possible to allow overloading, but if this exceeded ten per cent the quality of the work would suffer. For that reason the mill was being reconstructed.

"The main problem right now is to finish all the preparatory work before the cold sets in," thought Tavrov anxiously, visualizing in his mind's eye the deep foundations already dug into the permanently frozen ground next to the main building. These foundations were being made ready with all possible speed. "I must tell the carpenters to have the framework ready in good time; it won't take long to set it up. We'll install the machines during the winter. Another pair of cylinders—it would be better, of course, if we could get hold of a conic crusher—and one more ball mill. . . ."

Tavrov stopped next to the end mill and listened with the ear of an expert to the roar of the revolving balls pulverizing the ore. He remembered that a delay in supplying the mill with steel balls had caused an overexpenditure of electricity that month, cutting down efficiency indexes and raising the cost of each gram of gold. Now he was insisting that supplies be delivered on time.

Tavrov entered the department where flotation machinery was at work. There were ten units, each of which

contained a seething pulp—one part ore and twenty parts water. To this pulp was added an oily substance. Blades set in a vertical axis like tiny propellers aerated the pulp, forming oily bubbles which brought the gold to the surface. Revolving hackles scooped the foam into inclined chutes, carrying it to vats where the metal settled. Eventually it was removed in the form of a thick concentrate and sent to be smelted. The mill turned out a concentrate of gold ore, rather than pure gold.

A red-cheeked, blue-eyed girl with her hair piled high on top of her head, handed Tavrov a laboratory report. Every day a control analysis was made to see that the concentrate was free of minerals such as copper, antimony, or arsenic, which would spoil the smelting. Tavrov studied the figures. There was nothing feminine about the girl's bold handwriting. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed her white and shapely hand. She was an attractive girl, and eligible, but he took no interest in her. As he gazed after her receding figure, he seemed to see Olga in a light dress, her arms bare to the shoulder, her feet in summer sandals. There was a gnawing ache in his heart as he imagined the whole of her, with her fair hair, so bright and soft and thick, and her charming manner, so earnest and unaffected. It was such a one—only that one —he desired.

"The percentage of gold in the concentrate has gone down again," he said to the foreman, the tenderness still in his eyes. "At this rate we'll be having a reprimand from Platon Artyomovich. I've followed through the whole process. What if we make a change in the method of enriching the ore—cut down the number of units in the second flotation, and increase them in the first? What's more, the material fed to the ball mills is rather coarse; we'll step up the number of revolutions to twenty-seven a minute."

"Where are you bound?" asked Logunov of the doctor, whom he met leaving the hospital.

"Me?" Ivan Ivanovich remembered that Olga was at the Pryakhins', that the working day had long been over, and he was faced with spending the evening alone at his desk. His face betrayed his mood. "Home," he said with a sigh. "I have some work to do."

"You know how to work, but you don't know how to play," said Logunov seriously. "I never seem to see you taking time off. That's going to the other extreme."

"I play *gorodki*, don't I?"

"But in the wintertime?"

"I go hunting."

"Not very often. You want to find a means of diversion your wife can share with you."

"She finds her own means," said Ivan Ivanovich bitterly, almost making a flat attempt at humour, but stopping in shame and falling silent.

"Why should you leave her to herself when you're not busy?" said Logunov quietly and sincerely. "Married folks should spend their free time together."

"And unmarried folks?"

"It goes without saying that an unmarried man tries to spend every free moment with the girl of his choice."

"I've heard another version," said Ivan Ivanovich dryly, repulsing Logunov's obvious effort to win his confidence. "A husband and wife should find their amusement separately, so as not to get sick of each other."

"And how do you intend amusing yourself tonight?"

"I've already told you I was going to work. I'll go home and try to make some generalizations on the basis of the day's experiences."

"Have you started your thesis?"

"No, not yet. It's possible, of course, to do research by means of the statistical method, the only one available under these conditions, but it requires the accumulation of a mass of material. Otherwise the conclusions are not valid. Why is it that in appraising clinical observations and trying to develop theories from them, conflicting opinions arise? Because I, let us say, base my conclusions on ten cases, while you base yours on twenty, a fact which is sure to make our conclusions differ. That's why I want to write my thesis in Moscow, where clinical observations are carried on simultaneously with laboratory experimentation, a thing which is as inaccessible to us here in Kamenushka as that star up there."

"And what do you plan to do after you finish your thesis? Lecture at the University?"

"Perhaps. But the thing that interests me most is clinical research. In defending a thesis, a person must prove his ability to pose and solve a problem, treating it broadly and profoundly. If I am granted a scientific degree as a result of my work, I must be an expert on my particular problem, and tirelessly seek new and better means of solving it; otherwise I am just another of the many who never make any important contribution to science. Do you understand me? Take any field of medicine—diseases of the eye for instance. In every country there are hundreds of specialists dealing with these diseases. They give lectures and treat patients, on and on, day after day. And then suddenly, of all the hundreds, one man suddenly makes a discovery that brings about a revolution in this field. Vladimir Petrovich Filatov, our Soviet scientist, is such a one. He restores sight by substituting fresh, transparent corneas for opaque ones through a process of transplantation."

"I've heard about him," said Logunov with interest.

"Just see, even you, a layman, have heard about him. He's one of our greatest men. A great man in the world

of science! Can you imagine the value of such a person? He did endless experimenting until he found a method of preserving the material for transplanting. As for perfecting the technique of the operation—at least half his life was spent on it."

"Do you hope to make discoveries in the field of neurosurgery?"

"I would like to," said Ivan Ivanovich sincerely. "But I must scale many heights and do a vast amount of work before I can hope to...."

"What made you choose that particular field?"

"The fact that it was a new one, with vast possibilities for development. And of great practical importance. Take operations on the peripheral and sympathetic nervous systems, for example. Little work has yet been done in this line, but it will play an important role in the coming war. It will be a brutal war."

"I'm afraid it will," acquiesced Logunov contemplatively. "If they've thrown themselves at each other so fiercely—the radio said the Germans brought down 147 English planes yesterday—it will be a death struggle when they spring at us. Your neurosurgery's a very young science, isn't it?"

"We've only been practising it for about fifteen years. Very young, as you see."

"Who's so very young?" came a girlish voice from out of the dusk.

"Platon Artyomovich and I were talking about neurosurgery," said Ivan Ivanovich, turning fondly toward the approaching Varvara.

"Did you think we were talking about a girl?" laughed Logunov, and even in the gloom his strong face could be seen to soften and brighten

"I didn't think anything at all," said Varvara in short breaths, as if she had been running. "I simply came up and—heard you talking. I've just come from a

meeting of the Komsomol Bureau. I was invited to a dance tonight, but I was busy."

"Who invited you?"

"Pava Romanovna."

"Why don't you go now? The ball must be at its height," said Ivan Ivanovich with the old touch of bitterness.

"Oh, it's simply—simply—no, it's not simple at all. I don't like her," said Varvara impetuously. "I often see her at the club—she helps us a lot with club work—but I don't like her. She's only interested in her own pleasure. 'A child of the great-out-of-doors!'" mocked Varvara. "I don't want to be looked upon as a curiosity. 'To think of a Yakut girl reading Flaubert!' As if there was anything extraordinary about that! Is it our fault if we were oppressed for so many years under the tsars?" asked Varvara, coming to a halt in the middle of the street. "Do you know why all our students and patients are so fond of you, Ivan Ivanovich?" She clenched the fingers of her locked hands and looked up into the face of the doctor as she went on impulsively: "Because you don't do things for your own sake, and not even for the sake of science, but for the sake of people, regardless of whether their eyes are slanted or not."

"It's a very bad habit to praise your chief to his face," rebuked Ivan Ivanovich. "Think how I must feel. We all work alike. Science is promoted by the people and for the people, and if Pava Romanovna takes a different view of things, that's only natural; she only idles her time away."

66

"I still have to drop in to speak to the students about a Komsomol meeting," said Varvara to Logunov when the two of them were alone.

"Let me see you to the hostel," he said.

"Oh no, it's not far," she gently refused. "And one of the Yakut boys will see me home if it's late when we finish."

"Aren't you showing nationalistic tendencies, Comrade Varvara?" teased Logunov. "What's your meeting to be about?" He continued walking beside her, gazing down into her pale face with its dark eyes, sharp little chin, and childishly pursed lips.

"She's still just a child," he thought, but into his mind came a memory of the woman's look she had given Ivan Ivanovich—the look of a woman in love. Logunov knew that Pava Romanovna liked the girl in her way. Surely she had never done anything to rouse the girl's violent hostility, which must be Varvara's retribution for the grudge Pava bore Ivan Ivanovich; "... and thy foes, my foes," was vividly expressed in Varvara's attitude.

"Could she be in love with him?" thought Logunov. "I suppose it's only natural. Youth, romanticism, a sense of gratitude and adoration.... She, like most of the other students, sees in him her ideal."

"Good night, Platon. Platon Artyomovich."

"Good night." He squeezed the hand she held out to him and did not relinquish it. "You used to be less formal with me."

"Did I?" she asked with a kindly glance. "But you hold such an important position now...."

"Varvara," he said, but he was too moved to go on. "Tell me, don't you ever feel lonely?"

"I'm hardly ever alone. I love to be among people."

"But surely there's one person you think more of than all others...."

"Perhaps," said Varvara after a moment's pause, and her face noticeably brightened.

"Who is that lucky person?"

"What does it matter?" she said almost challengingly. "It doesn't make him any happier that I think of him," she said with painful candour.

Logunov squeezed her hand again, as if he wanted to hurt her for having hurt him. But the girl did not wince, and Logunov remembered the day she had purposely pricked herself with a needle.

He relaxed his grip and Varvara's hand lay in his palm like a wounded bird, so small and warm. He felt ashamed. Quickly he bent down and kissed the fingers still glued by his grip.

For a long time he stood staring at the door through which Varvara disappeared. On his lips lingered the delicate warmth of her hand. Never before had Logunov kissed a woman's hand, nor had he understood why others did so. A sudden impulse of his heart had revealed to him the thrill of what he had always looked upon as an outworn rite. With the sensation of the kiss on his lips, he set out to wander along the roads of the settlement. If only Varvara were beside him, what words would he not say to her!—words never spoken before, but now rushing impetuously to his lips!

"Foolish to let yourself go like this, Platon!" he murmured unhappily. "It's true your new position places great responsibility on you. You have to think for others now. What are you to her if she loves Arzhanov? 'Foolish nonsense,'" he said, remembering Denis Antonovich's favourite expression.

The thought of the red-headed, blue-eyed feldsher made him want to visit the family. He felt particularly at home in this house where Varvara lived.

"I don't suppose they're asleep yet," he thought, holding his wrist watch to his very nose.

August was already on the wane. The white nights were over, and the earth was shrouded in darkness. But it was the anticipation of some glory ahead, rather than regret for a summer gone by, that one sensed in the soft, warm air.

"The same old story," he thought sadly, standing there alone beneath the pale glow of the autumn sky. "The twinkle of the stars, the sighs of spinsters and rejected lovers. Soon the moon will come up and the dogs will bark at it. The sledge dogs here are like wolves." Logunov gave a wry smile; but there was a hurt in the depths of his stubborn heart; knowing now that it could never be helped, he bowed to the inevitable, and this made his smile more pathetic than ever.

As he approached the Khizhnyaks' house he saw Ivan Ivanovich at the window, and slowed his steps until he realized that his rival was in his own half of the house.

The doctor was standing leaning on the window sill gazing, as Logunov had just gazed, into the low-hanging sky shot through with a deep blue glow. So utterly removed from all his surroundings did he seem that Logunov, hidden by the bushes, could not get himself to call out to him. For a minute or two he stood there looking at him with mixed feelings of envy and goodwill.

"Oh God. Oh God!" said Ivan Ivanovich suddenly, and there was such a depth of misery in his hushed voice that Logunov shuddered and withdrew.

"So I didn't just imagine it," he thought, making a wide detour of the house. "There really is something wrong."

67

Denis Antonovich was sitting at the table in his shirt sleeves, a pair of slippers on his bare feet. He was reading the paper; Elena Denisovna was mending.

"Varvara's not home," said Denis Antonovich simply, looking up from his paper.

"I know she isn't," replied Logunov. He took in the familiar scene at a glance. How many pleasant hours he had spent here!

The boys were already asleep, and the sound of their even breathing came from the far corner. A cozy warmth was still given off by the extinguished stove. The air was filled with a faint odour of cookies and something that was a cross between strawberries and melons. But stronger than these was the spicy fragrance of gillyflowers, which came through the open window. These flowers, dug out of the garden in anticipation of the first frosts, were planted in a window box, along with purple, red, and white asters.

"How are your three-pood pumpkins coming along?" asked Logunov, sitting down at the table.

"Oh, all right—still growing," said Denis Antonovich with a quick glance at his wife.

"Still growing. Of course they're still growing," said she, reddening with mirth. "It's a long time till Christmas. Maybe they'll be ready by then. But you better cover them with fur coats instead of bast mats. Oh Denis, Denis! Why, there's nothing that even smells like a pumpkin out there!"

"Just you wait, there will be!"

"When? We've taken out the flowers already, but he still goes on hoping."

"Another family conflict," thought Logunov as he listened to their banter.

"I simply didn't plant them right. Perhaps I shouldn't have put the manure in the hole, as the book said, but piled it round them. They ought to have grown."

"There's no convincing you," said Elena Denisovna with a sigh as she gathered up her sewing. "Let's have tea and some of that new jam. A young thing in our ward got the blues today. Her husband's away on a business trip, and she has no relatives here. 'Everybody else has people come to see them and bring them presents,' she said, 'but nobody brings me anything.' So when my work was over I made some blueberry jam and baked

some cookies. I told her some girls from the mine where she works had brought them to her."

"Why didn't you tell her they were from you?"

"It's more fun this way. She sees me every day."

"Are you fond of them—your patients?" asked Logunov, remembering what Varvara had told Ivan Ivanovich.

"Indeed I am. How can I help being fond of them? They're mothers."

"And are they fond of you?" Logunov was impressed by the efficiency with which Elena Denisovna went about her business, working and talking at the same time, the one in no way interfering with the other.

"They? Fond of me?" Elena Denisovna stopped for a moment, her knife suspended above a loaf of bread. "Perhaps they are, but they soon forget. They're only too glad when everything's safely over with and they can go home. That's only natural. When they're suffering, they have no thoughts for us, and when it's all over, the only thing they think about is the baby." Elena Denisovna said this with such matter-of-fact amiability that Logunov was taken aback.

"Then what satisfaction do you get from your work?"

"Plenty," snapped Elena Denisovna. "But what's got into you today, Platon Artyomovich?... Here, let me start drilling *you* like this."

"Go ahead," said he with a smile, amused by her show of temper. "I just wanted to know if you were satisfied with your work."

"Quite satisfied, thank you. My work's all my life to me, and I don't expect any thanks from the people I serve."

"And at home?"

"At home too. If I'm able to help a person, I try not to remind him of it. People don't like to feel under obligations. A proud and honest person will hurry to thank you

so's to get rid of this feeling. Another will only accept it as his due if you make him a present of a gold mine. And a good-for-nothing will count you his enemy for your pains."

"The way you talk, one would think all people were enemies," observed Logunov seriously.

"Don't jump at conclusions," objected Elena Denisovna. "A person doing my job can't have a bad opinion of people. I'm not saying people are bad. But it's my belief that gratitude's a feeling that comes when there's no equality among people. The more justice and equality we build into our life, the less we'll feel under obligation to each other."

"And to Ivan Ivanovich?" Logunov ventured to say.

"Ivan Ivanovich—that doesn't apply to him," put in Denis Antonovich, carefully folding up his paper. "What he does for people is enormous. Being a Soviet doctor, of course he isn't satisfied with just being a top-notch surgeon. It's not enough for him to perform a successful operation. He's interested in what happens to his patient after the operation—in his getting back his working capacity, in seeing that his relatives take good care of him, and that he doesn't have to go through life deformed or disfigured. There's an expression he's fond of using: 'an interesting case.' How can a case of illness be interesting?"

"Interesting from the point of view of science."

"Exactly. He's all aglow when he has an interesting operation. And we understand why. So do his patients." Denis Antonovich wrinkled up his already tilted nose and narrowed his eyes significantly. "They feel as if they have made a contribution to science too. They even boast of it. If the occasion arises, any one of them will be only too glad to tell you all about his operation, and he'll have nothing but praise for Dr. Arzhanov. But when it comes to the little things of everyday life, Elena's right about

gratitude. I agree with her," and Denis Antonovich cast an admiring glance at his wife.

What Denis Antonovich said had only confirmed Varvara's youthful ecstasies. An interesting case! Interesting, of course, for clinical observation, in order to make scientific deductions. Logunov had the greatest respect for Dr. Arzhanov's human qualities.

"But I disagree with the rest of what you say," he interposed, giving voice to his train of thought. "It's a feeling of dependence, rather than of gratitude, that oppresses people. In our society, gratitude should be looked upon as a virtue no less than honesty, or loyalty. Why? Because we're all toilers, and therefore the help offered one man by another cannot possibly be an act of charity. A person who works and respects the work of others will surely feel grateful for friendly aid in time of need, or for labour-saving devices in the factory shop, or for the creation of a work of art. The higher the level of perfection we achieve in society, the nobler our sense of gratitude, for the greater the time and attention we can devote to our fellow men. And such a relationship will not place the individual under obligations, but will evoke in him feelings of friendship, devotion, and the desire to become strong so that he in his turn can lend a helping hand to a weaker comrade and encourage his growth. That is what is meant by the working collective."

"That's right," said Denis Antonovich enthusiastically. "It's so damn easy to go to extremes. When I was young I was a fool for trusting people. All the money I lost that way! Elena Denisovna can tell you that. If I had the money, I was ashamed to refuse anybody a loan. And just as ashamed to remind him he owed it to me afterwards. And so I lost one friend after another. That's what brought me to such a conclusion. On the basis of experience, it looks right enough, but at heart it's wrong."

68

Pava Romanovna's guests always felt perfectly at home, possibly because the hostess never made the slightest effort to amuse them.

"It's my business to see that the house is clean and cozy and that there's plenty of food on the table. When that's done, I'm out for a good time," she would say to her friends. "Let everyone amuse himself as best he can."

She never urged people to try this or that at the supper table, solicitous only that she herself missed none of the dishes. Seeing that they were left to their own resources, her guests helped themselves, and the food was gone in a wink.

"Bohemians!" said Elena Denisovna superciliously after once attending a party at the Pryakhins'. "Everybody dancing and singing and talking at once, and nobody listening. You'd never think you were in a respectable home. Easy to see it was one of those club-together parties."

It was at one such party, where everyone did indeed talk at once, each listening to the one he chose, and where music was supplied uninterruptedly by gramophone, radio, or piano, that Olga found herself. She was sitting next to Tavrov, her head thrown back, her eyes narrowed, listening attentively to what he was saying. He had just finished reading her manuscript—the latest version of the article on Chazhma—and now, oblivious of the noise about them, was giving her his opinion.

"It's an interesting article," he said in lowered tones. "You succeeded in drawing a convincing portrait of a man doing a big job. We see him. Take that incident when the old Evenk woman came to thank him for being sent to a sanatorium. A trifling incident on the face of it, but it gives an insight into the new life these people are enjoying, and the care the Soviet government takes of them.

It also shows that we have our own first-class sanatoriums here for treating rheumatism. . . ."

"Aren't you sick of talking shop?" said Pryakhin with a laugh, bending over Olga's shoulder, and inviting her to dance.

She glanced at the whirling couples and turned inquiringly to Tavrov. He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. Olga got up. After that she was invited to dance again and again. Reluctantly she was borne away, and eagerly she returned. Her cheeks were flushed and her neck and arms, bare to the elbow, gleamed tawny against the velvet of her evening dress.

"You're simply blooming tonight," said Pryakhin, unable to tear his eyes away.

"Am I?" said Olga gaily, turning back to her place.

"They don't give us a chance to talk," she said to Tavrov as, all out of breath, she sank into the chair beside him. The hem of her dress covered his foot in soft, heavy folds. Warily he withdrew it, remembering the compliment Pryakhin had just paid her.

"Natasha from Tolstoy's *War and Peace*?" said Pava Romanovna, repeating someone's question. "What if her happiness did depend on the colour of the stains on her children's diapers? There are plenty of women like her today. And we're beginning to admire them."

"There may be plenty of women like her today, but we certainly don't admire them," said Igor Korobitsyn, who was sitting opposite. "Why should a woman give herself up wholely to dirty diapers? I'm dead set against it. I think it's insulting to any woman."

"You would. You're a poet, an aesthete," said Pava Romanovna bitingly.

"I feel the same way about it," said Tavrov to Olga. "I don't see how any self-respecting woman could be satisfied to do nothing but housework. It's very regrettable if she is. The fact that a woman holds an independent po-

sition in society makes her more attractive. When all women realize that their strength lies in their work, age inequality will disappear."

"What do you mean by 'age inequality'?"

"Just this: if Pava Romanovna, say, should become a well-known journalist, or a Stakhanov worker, or the chairman of a collective farm, and someone asked, 'How old is she?', the answer would be, 'Oh, she's still very young—not yet thirty'—or even forty. But take her as she is, and the answer would be—and rightly so—'Why, she's almost thirty!' We men don't grow younger with the years either—we get wrinkled and bald and grey, and wheezy from putting on flesh, but for generations it's been the accepted theory that men stay young longer than women. As a matter of fact, they don't keep their looks or their freshness any longer, and as for longevity—the women often outlive us."

"That's a fine thing! And what about the home? What about the children?" called out Pava Romanovna indignantly from the other end of the table.

"There'd have to be an awful lot of children to justify a woman's staying home," insisted Igor Korobitsyn. "I'm willing to accept Natasha as she is only if she's mother to a whole tribe of children...."

"Have you heard about the new weapon they're using against London?" came a husky male voice.

"And the Labourites—what do you think of them?..."

"Just between the two of us, you'll never find a more died-in-the-wool bureaucrat than a stupid woman...."

"Take those scoop cylinders put out by the plant in Irkutsk...."

"And what about the imported ones?..."

"Trimmed with silver fox. Gorgeous! Simply a dream!" lisped a woman's voice.

"One of the most important questions is how to get supplies on time...."

"You men are a fine lot too!"

"They've already fulfilled their metal quota...."

"We'd have fulfilled ours too if we had a steady supply of labour...."

"It's the alloys you want to pay attention to—the alloys!" said Pryakhin, cornering a man the size of a small elephant. "You supply-men never have a true picture...."

"I suggest a toast to the women!" cried Pava Romanovna. "I'm sick of this talk about quotas and labour!"

The toast was drunk, though with varying degrees of enthusiasm: Olga barely touched the glass with her lips, and Tavrov, completely sober, followed her example.

"What I most admire in women is independence of thought and feeling," he said, resuming the old topic.

"Of thought?" exclaimed Pava Romanovna, who had caught his words during a silence broken only by the clinking of knives and forks. "Who ever heard of a woman having her own thoughts? Thank God if she's able to crib from others. Great people—men, of course—have always said women couldn't think logically. I don't even pretend to! But as for independent feelings—that's a different thing! When it comes to feelings, a woman is in her element."

"Your ideas are behind the times," said Tavrov mildly.

"The thing I like best of all is pastry," said Pava Romanovna, chewing on a gummy sweet. "It's not very aesthetic to have a sweet tooth, is it? Always chewing something. But I can't help it; I'm simply ill if there's nothing sweet in the house, I am indeed."

"I believe it," said Tavrov with the smile of an adult to a child as he watched her place another sweet in her mouth, taking pains not to spoil her lipstick; her plump-cheeked face with its delicate but fleshy chin was glowing with enjoyment.

At the devastated table, strewn with dirty dishes and

empty bottles, sat tipsy guests making a gallant effort to sing. Most of the voices broke on the high notes, and there was not a suggestion of unison. The fat supply-man whom Pryakhin had accused of paying too little attention to alloys, was sitting with his fists on the edge of the table as if he intended getting up; with closed eyes and lax lips, he was roaring in a deep bass voice, quite independent of the choiring about him.

"What's he bellowing about?" laughed Pava Romanovna. "Well, I like that!" she suddenly expostulated as the supply-man, interrupting his song without opening his eyes, stuck the butt of his cigarette into one of the cakes.

"God's own truth!" he muttered, lifting his brows and pulling his lips together with a great effort. "Supplies—that's a big job—a b-i-g job! Fuelling the human body—that's what! The human or-r-ganism—as which it has inspired and shown great initiative." This little outburst seemed to exhaust the supply-man's store of eloquence, and he fell silent, a look of hopelessness and exhaustion on his face.

"You can't tell what he'll be doing next!" said Pava Romanovna indignantly, removing the cake. "Please see that Penkin is taken home," she called to her husband, who was just entering his study with the intention of playing a game of cards.

So Penkin was dispatched.

Tavrov wandered from room to room observing the scene. Several women invited him to dance, but he refused with a smile.

"I'm not too steady on my feet yet," he said.

At moments he looked sombre, but the minute Olga approached, so radiantly happy, his face would brighten.

Here, amidst these gay noises—the tapping and shuffling of the dancers, the outbursts of laughter, music, and song, the bright voices of the women—Tavrov and Olga felt calm and at ease in each other's presence. As he

led her through the noisy crowd, solicitously holding her arm, he behaved like a youth who fears that some imprudent gesture on his part may frighten the lady who has just deigned to show him her favour.

69

The people streaming out of the house immediately dispersed in various directions. After the stuffiness of the smoke-filled rooms, the coolness of the evening air was particularly refreshing.

"How nice!" said Olga, taking a deep breath and placing her arm in Tavrov's.

The blue night sky also seemed to be breathing, animated as it was by the flight of feathery clouds, through which the stars could be glimpsed. There was a scent of dying leaves and grass, and of the bark on the willow wands woven into fences. An autumn scent. And silence. It was as if the large mining settlement had dissolved in this warm dusk. As if the silence.... But one did not wish to break this silence, and so the two people walked without a word down the faintly gleaming sandy path.

Last night had been the same—autumn, and the scent of grasses and willow wands, and the smoke curling from chimneys, and the pale sand on the pathway. But tonight everything was surcharged with feeling, making it all inexpressibly lovely.

Bushes and trees receded darkly on either hand. Above them glittered the stars.... Ah, to go on like this till morning! But here was Olga's house. Someone was waiting for her. Once at home, she must put Tavrov out of mind. Everything associated with him must be left at the threshold. Tavrov slowed his steps, his whole being protesting at the thought of parting. Olga seemed to sense his thoughts, and without a word they turned back along the road circling down to the riverbank. Again the

transparent blue sky with its multitudinous stars, and again the sand crunching under their feet. A soft branch brushed Olga's face, causing her to start, and Tavrov also started, for Olga's every movement was registered in his heart.

This time the road seemed to lead them back even quicker than before. They halted. They were almost the same height. In her long black evening dress, Olga even seemed the taller. A waning moon rose, its uncertain light reflected in Olga's eyes. Impulsively Tavrov grasped the hand that was held out to him and gazed into the features of the beloved face. They were calm and sad.

"I must go," she whispered.

"Olga!" he said. "But you love me, and no one in the world is as dear to me as you. Stay with me! You want us to be together, don't you?"

"Yes, but I can't do it all of a sudden like this," replied Olga, withdrawing. She took a step away from him, but turned to say, almost with a sob: "I can't—all of a sudden!..."

Ivan Ivanovich pushed back his typewriter and read the letter he had just written to the Primorsk Soviet. It was about finding suitable work for a man on whom he had performed a neurosurgical operation a year and a half before. Convinced that suitable and interesting work was an effective curative measure, Ivan Ivanovich spent much of his leisure considering what jobs would be most beneficial for his patients. Since he was keenly interested in their lives and the state of their health after leaving the hospital, he always answered their letters without delay, looking upon this as a normal part of his work.

Now, as he looked back over the path he had trod and gazed into the future, he was filled with a sense of satisfaction. No, he had not slid over the surface of life;

he had dug deeply, like a plough through virgin soil. It was gratifying, this sense of giving all that was in you, of living life to the full!

"Good for you, Ivan Ivanovich!" he said aloud.

His thoughts turned to Alexei Zonov. It was high time to perform the second operation; this would prevent the development of gangrene in the left foot and make certain the results of the first operation. But Alexei resisted. To be sure, there were scarcely any symptoms in the left foot, so Ivan Ivanovich was not too insistent. But former experience told him this was risky. Another question that occupied his thoughts was that of lesions of the peripheral nerves, resulting in a stiffening of the limbs, paralysis, trophic ulcers remaining unhealed for years and sometimes leading to gangrene. What was the best means of joining the ends of injured, severed nerves? What should be used for grafting where a segment of nerve was missing? Various things had been tried: the spinal cord of a cat or a rabbit, the sciatic nerve of a calf. It would be better, of course, to manage without transplants. Ivan Ivanovich scowled as he pondered these questions, and his fingers, the deft fingers of a surgeon, also pondered....

He reached out for the glass of tea which had grown cold. The coldness reminded him that it must be late. He was hungry. He glanced at his watch and smiled, then made for the bedroom, but on the way he remembered that Olga was not home. For a moment he stood gazing at the untouched pillows lying like piles of snow at the head of the bed. A chilling breath seemed to rise from them.

He went into the kitchen, lighted the kerosene stove, cut himself a piece of sausage, put it in the frying pan, added a spoonful of butter, and placed the pan, spoon and all, on the fire. He himself sat on a stool beside it. The sight of the newly-painted floor brought thoughts of his

work with cedar extract. This suggested the hospital and, naturally enough, the operation he had performed on Maria Petrovna.

"Good heavens, what's happening? The house is full of smoke, and you sitting here!" Olga's voice came all of a sudden from behind his back, and her arm, a gold bracelet on the wrist, flashed past him as she reached out to extinguish the stove.

Ivan Ivanovich suddenly came to and saw a column of black smoke rising from the frying pan. He laughed, catching at his wife's arm, but it slipped through his fingers. He stood up.

"A fine cook you are!" she said, picking up the frying pan and carrying it away.

"Why did you put out the stove?" asked Ivan Ivanovich, taking a step through the smoke.

"I'll attend to everything in just a second," replied Olga from the other room. "As soon as I change my clothes. First let the smoke out of the house."

"What a good thing I didn't have to look into his eyes and speak to him as soon as I returned," she thought later, when she was already in bed. "I must think of a means of telling him. But first I must prepare him."

Now that she was lying here in the darkness, beside her husband, but not touching him, the starry sky seemed to be hanging just above her head. She was completely filled with the love and tenderness for Tavrov associated with that shining canopy.

Sighing in his sleep, Ivan Ivanovich threw his arm across her shoulders. She stiffened. He did not wake up, and Olga remembered that he often laughed and scolded in his sleep. The day was too short for him.

She lifted his limp hand and removed it. Again she pitied him, and she trembled at the thought of the enormous thing that had happened to her and Tavrov. Her happiness struggled with her fear and her pity, but the

happiness triumphed, and rose in her like a song. Eventually all emotions dissolved in quiet tears. But Olga knew that her problem had yet to be solved.

70

She lay awake until morning, now rejoicing, now despairing at the thought of what lay ahead. She was tortured by doubt. And by thoughts of the man sleeping so trustingly beside her. Was he in any way to blame? Had he really treated her badly? But her efforts to justify him only proved more eloquently than anything else that a great gulf now lay between them. When, earlier, she had grown angry and offended, she had done so out of love, instinctively forcing him to pay her attention. She had no need of this now. She had no need of him, and as she withdrew from him, she wished (perhaps for her own peace of mind) that he too could be happy.

"I may be selfish and weak-willed and a thousand times worse than he is, but that is only the more reason why it would be wrong for me to remain with him when I love another," she thought.

And everything became lucid until new thoughts and feelings rose to torment her. How would he take her confession? What would happen when he came face to face with Tavrov? Beads of cold sweat broke out on her forehead, the neck of her nightgown choked her, and the pillow seemed to be on fire.

She tossed from side to side, put one hand under her cheek, both hands, fluffed up her pillow. She even resented the fact that Ivan Ivanovich went on sleeping and she could not talk to him at once.

The clock struck four.

Olga recalled the night, not long before, when the rain murmured against the pane, the siren wailed, and Tavrov was lost. Now he was found. She felt an urge to jump

out of bed and run across the bridge, past the dark poplars and sleeping houses.... Perhaps he too was not sleeping. Perhaps he was pacing the floor of his empty room, or had gone to the mountains, or to the mill. What if he were standing here beneath her window? She was about to get up and look out....

"Are you crazy?" she said to herself, passing a hand over her burning cheeks.

Why hadn't she kissed him as they stood on the path where the quartz sand gleamed, and the air was filled with the scent of fading grass and leaves? Here and there among the bushes and trees could be seen the pale fences of tiny garden plots, from which came an odour of dill and saffron. And the stars high above the crowns of the poplars....

Fife o'clock... six o'clock.... Dawn did not hurry in September. But the sky was brightening. The gold of the stars dulled and came falling about her with a clink of coins—or was it the clock striking?

When Olga woke up, Ivan Ivanovich had already gone to work. She rose, dressed with care, and tidied up the room. It seemed strange to be occupied with all these trifles when such a momentous change had taken place in her life. She had breakfast in the kitchen as usual. Waves of heat came from the glowing coil of the hot plate, and she was warmed by the cup of coffee, which she grasped in both hands.

The sky beyond the window threatened rain, and a sudden wind raised clouds of dust. Olga gazed absentmindedly at the grey sky and the pinks wilting in a pot on the window sill, and thought of Tavrov, of her unfinished article, and of the talk she must have with her husband.

"First I shall finish the article, and then talk to him," she decided. "If I become upset, I shall never finish it."

She took some clean sheets of paper and the notebook

containing her article, with Tavrov's comments in the margin, and went to her desk.

On hearing the phone ring, she remembered that she must have things out with her husband. Reluctantly she picked up the receiver. But as soon as she had placed it to her ear, her face was transformed; her lips parted in a smile, and a blush dyed her cheeks.

"Yes," she said in a particularly ringing voice. "It's me. I'm listening to you."

The person at the other end of the line could have interpreted her words to mean:

"I love you. I'm thinking of you."

Tavrov did interpret them so, and for that reason he joyfully imparted his joyless news.

"We had a meeting today...." His voice was clear and he seemed to be smiling. "A telegram has come—I'm being called away—oh no, not for good!" he hastened to put in, as if he had seen the frightened look on Olga's face. "Six of us have to attend a conference in Ukamchan about the fulfilment of the program for the fourth quarter. That holds good for all mines. We're leaving right away...." Tavrov's voice fell as he said this. "For five days."

"For five days," repeated Olga, as despairingly as if he had said "years" instead of "days."

"I'm ready," he said, overjoyed by the grief in her voice. "The car is waiting."

"Waiting...." she repeated, still unable to collect her thoughts.

"Olga!" he said, and fell silent—the telephone operators at the mines were fond of listening in.

"Yes," replied Olga, catching the hesitation in his voice. "I don't regret a thing. I feel exactly as I did last night."

On putting down the receiver, she was terrified by the thought that she would not see him today, nor tomor-

row. She was desperately in need of his support right now, and here he was, going away for a week! She had a sudden impulse to rush to his flat—perhaps she could still catch him. But he had said the car was waiting. Would he have said so if there had been the slightest chance of seeing her before he left? No, there had been a meeting, they had dispensed with their business, and stepped right from the meeting into the car. Olga's face brightened somewhat, but the ache in her heart was unabating. At last she fully realized what Tavrov meant to her. Not so long ago she had been torn between the two men. Now he alone drew her, drew her wholely and completely. Her feeling for him had begun with gratitude for having opened to her a new world of vast interest, for having helped her find a congenial profession, so long desired. This feeling had turned into friendship, then into love. Now she must join her life with his. But in order to do this she must sever what had once been living ties with a man who, in his own way, also loved her deeply.

"I can't deceive him and violate my own feelings," she thought.

Suddenly she heard her husband's firm, familiar steps, coming down the path, then mounting the veranda. As if in a gust of wind, the papers and notebooks were swept off Olga's desk.

Ivan Ivanovich found her in the bedroom taking some shoes out of the wardrobe. For a moment he stood in the doorway studying her inclined face. He had been hurt by her reserve of yesterday, and now today she showed him no affection, or even cordiality. She had to find those shoes....

"Why didn't you call me up?" he asked.

"I don't ask you why you didn't call *me* up," she responded coldly.

"I was very busy."

Olga said nothing. She respected her husband's work,

but she too had not been idle. But since he had not the slightest interest in what she did, he considered that she was the one who should be attentive.

"Been having a good time?" he said bitingly, without waiting for her answer.

Olga, shoes in hand, jumped up.

"Yes, I've been having a good time!" she said with bold recklessness.

Her aggressive tone and look had a strange effect on Ivan Ivanovich; obviously she was challenging him to a quarrel, but he retreated, stunned by her open hostility.

"Ask me! I'll tell you everything!" said Olga's face, so alien as to be almost unrecognizable.

"I can't. It's not true! You do love me!" pleaded a bewildered voice in the depths of his heart. "I can't believe anything else. I won't admit that anything or anybody could come between us."

The tension relaxed.

"What are you so angry about, Olga?" Ivan Ivanovich asked in mild rebuke.

"Me? I'm not angry at all," she said.

71

Three days passed. Five days passed. During that time Olga finished her article and typed it herself according to all the rules: one side of the paper, double spaced, large margins for the red pencil. When she had typed the address of one of the big newspapers on the envelope, and made ready to take it to the post office, her face shone with happy excitement. She paused a minute, gazing at the packet, unable to believe her own eyes. The important thing was not whether they would print it. The important thing was that she had written it. Here were the results of prolonged, intense effort. And that in itself was happiness.

She had been morose of late, had kept to the house and neglected her appearance. The time came for Tavrov to return. And he did return. This she learned from Elena Denisovna, who, noting Olga's strange behaviour, was concerned about her health. A week had passed since that memorable evening at Pava Romanovna's. A new week had begun. The telephone rang. Olga did not answer it, but her fingers trembled as she listened to its plaintive call. With uncombed hair and lacklustre eyes she wandered from room to room or crouched in a corner of the sofa, pulling a warm bathrobe about her shoulders. The weather was afflicted with autumn. Rain had set in. From morning to night tears streamed down the windowpanes.

"What's wrong with you, Olga?" asked Ivan Ivanovich, who was also in low spirits.

"Nothing special," she replied.

One day Ivan Ivanovich brought Valerian Valentinovich, the neurologist, home with him. Olga refused to submit to an examination.

"I just have a fit of the blues. It will pass," she said, with a hostile glance at the neurologist, and at her husband too.

"I'll prescribe you some drops anyway," said Valerian Valentinovich genially, ignoring a brusqueness which was not at all typical of Olga. "Give yourself a rubdown with tepid water every morning. And be in the fresh air as much as possible."

"Don't forget—a tepid rubdown and fresh air. That'll cure the blues in a jiffy," he repeated on leaving.

"I don't need his drops," said Olga to Ivan Ivanovich, as she studied her thin hands.

The ring she had been toying with slipped off her finger, struck the floor with a little clink, and rolled under the sofa. She made no effort to recover it, but the tears coursed down her pinched cheeks.

"I don't need anything," she whispered.

The cause of her misery suddenly dawned on Ivan Ivanovich: "Another rejection slip," he decided, almost jubilant at the thought.

"Olga," he said impulsively, sitting down beside her and taking her in his arms. "Come—do tell me what's gnawing at your heart. After all, I'm your best friend. Have the newspapers turned down another article?"

Olga shook her head and gently but insistently freed herself from her husband's embrace.

"Don't ask me a thing," she said softly. "Let me fight it out myself."

Several more days passed. Olga still did not leave the house. One day she went to her desk and took out the notebooks containing her latest entries. Her face brightened as she read them. They contained much unused material which the papers would surely find fresh and important. She could go on with her work without leaving the house. And so she began to write. This time she worked painstakingly, lovingly choosing every word, weighing every thought and sentence. She did not hurry. She spent a whole day over a description of not more than a dozen lines, and still she was not satisfied with it. The work absorbed her and distracted her thoughts.

Again and again the silence of the flat would be rent by the ringing of the telephone bell. Without getting up, Olga would listen. When the ringing kept up for a particularly long time, she would go to the phone, but never did she pick up the receiver. At such moments her face seemed to freeze.

Pava Romanovna, who once dropped in to see her, was struck by a severity that was almost harshness.

"This is no way to act—really it isn't," exclaimed Pava. "Just look at yourself! You look more like some fanatic of a nun than a pretty woman. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. It's not stylish to have the blues these days—ours is an optimistic generation!"

When she began to speak about Tavrov, Olga interrupted her.

"Please don't mention him to me," she said with a coldness that took Pava's breath away and left her more perplexed than ever.

"They're crazy—both of them," she said to herself.

"And you—are you happy now?" asked Olga, noting Pava Romanovna's ripe figure.

"I? What's there to be happy about? I'm simply reconciled to my fate," she replied carelessly. "Another baby more or less won't make much difference. If only it was over with. It spoils my looks so. It *is* ugly, isn't it?" Getting up unhurriedly, Pava Romanovna went to the glass and pirouetted, murmuring under her breath: "I look like a kangaroo. Just exactly. And I'll look even worse before it's over."

"But don't you find that children give you something to live for? And bind you to your husband?" asked Olga with obvious effort.

"Bind me? Oh, in the sense of a family—of course," said Pava hesitantly, but, impressed by Olga's seriousness, she adopted a weighty expression that was soon chased by a laugh. "You do get the most righteous ideas! Oh, of course children are an anchor. They hold you down. But as for feeling obliged to my husband for them.... But why should you ask me? You had a child yourself," she said irritably, sensing a catch.

"Yes, I did...."

"And did you love Ivan Ivanovich more then?"

"Yes," said Olga with a deep sigh.

"Then it's time for you to have another," said Pava Romanovna. "Then peace and contentment will reign in your little nest."

Olga felt relieved when this gay chatterbox was gone. Gathering up and putting away her papers, she took a book and lay down on the couch in the bedroom, cover-

ing herself with a plaid which had belonged to her mother. Her mother had sat in an armchair with this rug over her knees when she was ill. Little Olga had loved to lay her cheek against its bright squares while her mother's hand fondled her fluffy hair. Her mother had given birth many times, and had died in childbirth....

Suddenly the book, still unopened, slipped down on to the floor. Olga started from the noise, but did not pick it up. She had no wish to read. She kept going over in her mind that last evening spent with Tavrov, seeing again the path gleaming palely in the light of the stars. Insistently her thoughts turned to the man she loved. She longed for him, and while she had firmly decided that she must not—that she had no right ever to see him again—she could not stop the ache in her heart. She wanted to die. But she realized that she must live. Even though she would never forget Tavrov... even though she would never again love her husband in the old way....

"It is not given to everyone to be happy in this world," she said to herself. "I shall go on living for the sake of my work—and of my child."

72

Tavrov left the mill and came to a halt on a little rise in the road leading down to the mine. Fog hung upon the mountains. Grey clouds, white about their ragged edges, climbed in disorder to the heights. Every once in a while, as if breaking through some barrier, rain descended, felling the yellow grass and beating against the stones, until it stopped as suddenly as it had begun.

Tavrov went down into the mining settlement and stopped to look about him at the dark houses and the dirty shreds of smoke waving above the wet roofs. It was a disheartening sight. He imagined the desolation of his

empty flat. No, he could not endure being alone tonight. He was hopelessly depressed.

He could not understand Olga's behaviour, but he dared not send her a note. And she did not answer the telephone. There were moments when he wanted to call on her unannounced and demand an explanation, and he would have done so had he not loved her so deeply. As it was, he patiently endured the suspense, fearing to injure her good name. Late at night he would walk past her windows in the hope of catching sight of her shadow on the curtain, but the half of the house which she and Ivan Ivanovich occupied seemed oddly empty. At last Tavrov had developed an antipathy for Arzhanov, this husband who was able to see her constantly, to be in her presence.... Today, for instance, was Sunday, and they were home ... together....

Tavrov turned sharply and went back to the mill. But when he was only halfway up the path, he changed his mind and made for the rocks where in the summertime he had talked Olga into going to the mine with him. Here was the stone on which she had sat, her hands in her lap, her eyes lowered, a pensive expression on her face. Tavrov sat down on the stone and touched it. It was cold and damp. He recalled the warmth of Olga's hands, and the walk they had taken together under the stars. The memory was a torment to him. If only that night could be repeated!

"If only it could!" he sighed aloud, and for a moment sat without stirring.

The sound of steps and of familiar women's voices roused him from his lethargy. He strained forward, electrified by the possibility of a meeting so desperately desired. During the endless two weeks that had just passed, he had almost forgotten what it meant to be glad. He got up and, restraining an impulse to dash forward, took a few measured steps. From behind a cliff appeared Var-

vara, Elena Denisovna, and two hospital attendants. Tavrov's eyes still searched, his heart still waited....

"Come along, we're going berrying," cried Varvara, catching sight of him and smiling from under the worn shawl thrown over her head.

She, like the other women, was wearing a padded jacket and working pants thrust into the tops of leather boots. Over one shoulder was slung a knapsack holding an empty pail. But even in such a prosaic outfit she was vividly attractive.

"Do come," urged Elena Denisovna. "We don't intend going far, but even so it's scarey without a man along. What if we meet a bear?"

"Right now the bears are fat and well fed and haven't a thought in their heads except where to lie down and sleep for the winter," said Varvara, approaching Tavrov. "Come along, Boris Andreyevich. We'll show you a place where the berries are as thick as snowflakes. We'll fill our pails and then make a fire and roast potatoes. I can make a campfire in any sort of weather. Doesn't that tempt you—roasting potatoes round a campfire on such a day?"

Again there came a patter of cold rain. The clouds on the summits were writhing, while the bushes on the earth shivered, scattering drops of water and tiny yellow leaves on the glazed bilberry plants with their heavy clusters of red berries.

Tavrov gathered them in a can which he emptied first into Varvara's pail, then into Elena Denisovna's. Both of these women lived in the same house in which Olga lived, both of them were in daily contact with her, and for that reason he felt drawn to them. His hands grew cold. He glanced at the others and saw from their faces that they too were cold. Suddenly he realized that he had come here in the hope of hearing news of Olga. The scatterbrained Pava Romanovna was unable to tell him anything intelligible. His heart contracted at the thought of the des-

perateness of his situation. Surely he would not be driven to eavesdropping under her window! He tightened his fist in a convulsive gesture, and the juice of crushed berries squirted over his leather coat, on which the recent rain still glistened.

"That's enough!" said Varvara, straightening up with a smile.

Her pail, filled to the top, looked as if it were covered with a red kerchief. The other women were still picking berries, making low bows to the mountainside.

"Come, we must fetch firewood," said Varvara, rushing ahead down the slope to a charred cedar tree with bent and twisted branches.

A Yakut hunting knife appeared as if by magic in her hands. Taking a few dry sticks out of her knapsack, she whittled them down, set fire to the shavings, added tiny twigs, then larger ones, until a huge fire was blazing.

"Aren't you feeling well?" she asked Tavrov, tossing him potatoes to bury in the earth under the glowing coals. "You've been so depressed of late. Perhaps your leg aches in this weather?" She dragged some underbrush to the fire and threw it on, then squinted at him through the smoke.

Without replying, he picked up a stick and struck one of the burning logs to watch the sparks spurt up in a golden shower which was instantly extinguished in the raw air.

"No, it's something else, Varvara," he said at last. "Tell me this: if you loved and were loved, and some cruel circumstance thwarted your happiness—cruel because uncomprehensible," he hastened to add, remembering that he was not the one who suffered most.

Varvara listened sympathetically, waiting for him to go on and thinking that his hesitation was due to his fear of saying too much. Ah, if only she were beloved by the man of her choice!

"I wouldn't allow any misunderstanding," she said. "If two people love each other, their lives belong to each other and they have everything in common."

"But if there's a third person standing between them?" said Tavrov quietly, spurred on by the longing to share at least a small part of his misery with another.

"A third?" repeated Varvara, glancing at him warily and drawing her black brows together. She was not thinking of the third person who stood between Tavrov and his happiness; she was thinking of her own relationship to Ivan Ivanovich and Olga.

What if Ivan Ivanovich loved her? But it was impossible to conceive such a thing. He had a family—a wife—to whom he was devoted. Varvara had no advice to offer Tavrov.

But he could no longer remain silent.

"He has no business coming between us. It's me she loves, and not him. She told me so herself.... And then...."

"And then?" repeated Varvara, with never a suspicion of who the people were.

"First tell me this: have we a right to love each other and want to be together when she is married?"

Varvara lowered her eyes, but presently she looked up, and her gaze was clear and thoughtful.

"I'm a very simple person. I was raised in the taiga. But it seems to me... Soviet power has given us many rights, but not the right to deceive ourselves or others. And we have no need to stoop to deception; ours is a new law. If I were married and my husband fell in love with another woman..." Varvara's face expressed genuine suffering, as if she had actually lived through what she was saying. "It would be hard, dreadfully hard. I would do everything in my power to get back his love, but if I could not, I would say to him: Go to her; I do not want you to be unhappy." Varvara reflected for a moment and

then added: "But it's difficult to say what you should do. I suppose everyone's case is different; people themselves are so different. But our life is the same. All of us want to do what is right."

"The potatoes! They're burned to a cinder!" cried Elena Denisovna, rushing up and raking the charred remains out of the fire. "Cooks shouldn't philosophize."

73

Olga paid little attention to the steps of Ivan Ivanovich, though he was not alone; she recognized the voice of Denis Antonovich. The hour was late, and the night was dark with the darkness of autumn. The men were returning from a meeting. They didn't need her. The two of them could sit there alone; perhaps they would have a bottle of wine....

But suddenly she heard other steps, and a voice that pierced her heart like a knife. There could be no question about it: it was Tavrov's voice, though it sounded dull, hollow, listless, the voice of a sick man. He was asking about her.

"She's not feeling well," replied Ivan Ivanovich. "Make yourselves at home. You take charge of things, Denis Antonovich, while I go and see how Olga Pavlovna is."

"Asleep, Olga?" he asked softly, entering the room and gently laying his hand on her forehead. "How are you feeling?"

"All right," she answered without opening her eyes.

"Wouldn't you like to come out and sit with us a while? Boris Andreyevich and Denis Antonovich are here. We bought you some fruit, and a bottle of 'Saami'—I remembered you were fond of it."

Olga would have refused, but she was unable to utter a word.

Ivan Ivanovich remained standing beside her.

"Very well. I'll come," she said.

"How must Boris feel?" she thought, realizing for the first time what he must be suffering. "Why has his voice changed so?"

Now she felt impelled to get up. When she was dressed, she glanced at herself in the mirror. An old woman looked back at her. Cold with shock, Olga took a step nearer. Her face looked almost grey. Her cheeks were sunken. There were dark circles under her eyes. Two mournful lines ran from her nostrils to the corners of her mouth, and there were wrinkles between her brows. As she stared at herself her lips began to tremble. How she had aged! With a convulsive sigh she took herself in hand and, still staring at that changed, unfamiliar face, she listened to the talk coming from the other room. She could not make out what Tavrov was saying, though his voice had now recovered some of its liveliness. He was waiting for her to come. Very well, let him see her as she was, no longer attractive. Perhaps that would cure him. She took a decisive step towards the door, but on reaching the threshold she vacillated again. How could she face him in front of her husband?

Fighting down her momentary weakness, she pushed open the door and, almost fainting, stepped into the other room.

Ivan Ivanovich was placing some apples and some honey-coloured melon on a platter, while Denis Antonovich, talking volubly, was slicing ham. Olga entered so quietly that neither of them immediately turned round. Tavrov, evidently at a loss what to do with himself, was fumbling with an ivory trinket he had picked up off the *étagère*. When Olga went over to him, he remained standing motionless, but his fingers trembled so that only the blind could have failed to notice it. The sight of his extremity gave Olga courage. With an air that was almost

carefree, she spoke to her husband, joked with Denis Antonovich, and fussed about the table, focussing everyone's attention on herself. But when the table was set and the wine glasses filled, she was again put out of countenance by Tavrov's reckless gaze. How could she warn him, how convince him that things could not go on this way?

"Valerian Valentinovich said I must be sure to take walks," she said, turning to Denis Antonovich, "and I haven't been out of the house for three weeks. I suppose that's why I can't get rid of my headaches. So I've decided to take a walk tomorrow—in the mountains, where I usually go."

74

The day was cold. And desolate was the distant grey sky that seemed to have been swept clean by the wind. Dead weeds shook mournfully by the side of the path. On every hand stretched the drab yellow of the woods, like some fantastic harvest of grain, standing immobile in expectation of the white scythe of the northern reaper. Often the snow comes before the falling of the leaves in these parts, but it melts quickly, forming a slush mixed with evergreen needles and sodden leaves, and then the taiga is particularly unprepossessing. Better the frost, better the blizzard, than this chill, penetrating dampness.

Olga scrambled up the mountainside, slipping on the steep ascents and catching hold of bushes to keep herself from falling. Gusts of wind struck her between the shoulders and tore at the kerchief she had tied beneath her chin. When she reached the summit, her arms and knees were trembling. Perhaps this was because she was out of training, or perhaps it was because she dreaded meeting Tavrov. They had not arranged to meet here, but Olga knew he would come.

She was not surprised when she saw him among the cliffs cutting off sight of the pathway. She merely quickened her steps, while he nearly ran to catch up with her.

On leaving the house, Olga had thought over in her mind just what she must say. But before she had time to open her mouth she found herself in his arms. For a few moments they stood speechless, while a vicious wind pelted them. Then they walked on slowly, side by side.

Olga was not the first to become aware of reality. Perhaps she would have prolonged her state, like one loth to awaken, had she not been roused by Tavrov's words:

"Let me speak to Ivan Ivanovich," he said, fondling her frozen hands.

Her head drooped. A lock of fair hair fell from under her kerchief and was blown now into her own face, now into the face of Tavrov, so close to her.

They had come to a halt in a small clearing dotted with cedar bushes. The lurking clouds suddenly grew animate, swooping down and streaming over the mountains. Now and then a linnet with ruffled plumage would flutter up from some crag, calling piteously to its kind, above the rustle of the dark forest. Everything was woeful, and so were these two people, as if affected by the spell of their surroundings.

"Why don't you answer?" asked Tavrov in deep concern. "Surely you won't go back and lock yourself within four walls again. That's no way out, Olga."

"We mustn't meet again," she forced herself to murmur. "I—I'm pregnant." And as if felled by the words, she collapsed on a stone and covered her face with her hands.

"Olga!" cried Tavrov. "Darling!" He sat down beside her, trying to gaze into her eyes, pulling her hands away and kissing her fingers, wet with tears. "What of it? Even if it is his baby. I'll love it anyway."

"No," said Olga dully. "My heart is broken, but I can't do it." She rummaged in her pockets. There was no handkerchief. Pulling the kerchief off her head, she wiped her eyes and cheeks. "We must part," she repeated.

"No, no. We mustn't," said Tavrov determinedly. He took the kerchief out of Olga's hands and clumsily tied it under her chin. "You love me, don't you? I feel it. I *know* it."

"Ah yes!" said Olga softly. "But we cannot be together. It is impossible. You must leave me."

She repulsed him with the coldness of her tone and her glance. Tavrov got up and, as in the spring, slowly descended the mountainside

Olga watched him go, her lips compressed, her eyes dark and sunken. Her eyes called him back. Sensing this Tavrov turned round.

"Olga!" he uttered in the same ghastly voice she had heard the night before.

Love and compassion were written on her face. But she conquered her feelings, and when he flung himself at her feet, she said firmly:

"Don't torture yourself—and me. It's no use."

And again he went away. He went away without once looking back, quickening his steps, as if the weight of his grief were pulling him down.

Olga sat on in a stupor. When she came to, a drizzling rain which soon turned into snow had set in. A flock of wild geese, late for their flight south, appeared from behind a cloud and alighted on the shore of a nearby lake. For a long time their distressed cries echoed in the silence of the taiga. The mountains and the valleys were mantled in yellow, patterned with the grey of dead wood. There was much dead wood in these northeastern regions of the taiga. The fierceness of the frosts killed the trees.



PART TWO



I

SNOW WAS FALLING. Slowly, heavily, insistently it came down. It was late in covering these rocky mountains and this valley, whose larches now stood shivering in wintry nakedness. How late it was! The turbulent rivers, clamped by ice, flashed back fiery reflections of the sunset. The wind came tearing down the gorges, ripping stones and dry branches off the cliffs and sweeping them over the ice with a hiss of blown sand. Through the cracks in the ice gleamed dark, sullen water. Dull patches of low-lying cedar and dry bilberry bushes mottled the high riverbanks.

It was inhospitable, this northern land, with its searing arctic blasts.

But now a grey hush had settled down upon everything. The frost-sharp air softened, and snow descended....

A tiny white star settled on the sleeve of Ivan Ivanovich's fur coat. He smiled as he gazed at it, so fragile and precise was its design. A second came to rest alongside of it, then a third, and a fourth, until his entire sleeve seemed overgrown with a kind of fluffy white moss whose ornate separate crystals could no longer be detected. Everything about him became robed in white, softening the contours of the jagged mountain peaks, and the broken crags stepping down to the river's edge, and the branches of the trees which seemed gripped by convulsions. Winter had subdued autumn's harshness.

And to Ivan Ivanovich, who had suffered so much that autumn, the fluttering fall of the snowflakes brought peace. Only now did he realize that he was losing the love of Olga, a love which had filled his life with joy and warmth. And it was as one who has matured in the premonition of disaster that he now contemplated nature. He saw the wind snatch the last leaves from the willows and poplars and hurl them down the valley. On the storm-blackened boughs huddled the knobs from which new buds would spring, yet the trees moaned, yearning for their lost leaves. They scratched at each other with brittle branches, and in the fleeting crimson of the sunset, bits of ice frozen to the taut bark glittered like drops of blood.

Ivan Ivanovich heard the wind whistle disconsolately through the trees as he passed through the park of the mining settlement and descended to the river, where the ice had turned from cloudy yellow to transparent blue. He loved these lonely evening walks, which now were his only recreation. His shotgun hung idly over his shoulder. As he wandered along the frozen Kamenushka he thought

of his wife, living beside him with her secret thoughts and feelings. She had greatly changed of late; in fact, little remained of his former loving and sociable Olga. Every effort on the part of Ivan Ivanovich to get her to confide in him was met either by apathy or aloofness. She had shut herself up and allowed no one a glimpse of her inner world. He did not know whom she met or where she went on leaving the house. Nor did he know with what she busied herself in the evenings, or during the day while he was at work. But now and then he would catch her sitting and gazing fixedly into space, her hands resting limply in her lap.

Ivan Ivanovich was tortured by her aloofness. He had taken to going off on lonely walks, driven away by the silence reigning in their flat. Olga did not share her husband's passion for walking. She ceased, in fact, to go out with him altogether. Ivan Ivanovich noticed this, but ignored it, hoping for the best. He even tried to deceive himself. Olga had been his first love, and he feared that she would be his last.

One day, on returning from the hospital earlier than usual, he found Olga asleep. Near her on the divan lay some bits of lace and batiste and some tiny garments. Ivan Ivanovich looked closer and stretched out his hand. The first thing he touched was an infant's shirt. Beside it lay a tiny cap and a doll-sized flannel jacket. Reverently he touched all these things, moved to the depth of his soul.

"Is it possible?" he thought in joyful bewilderment. "But why should she hide it from me? Why is she so depressed? And how can she sit indoors all day long if she is in such a state?"

"I am making these things for Pava Romanovna," said Olga with a blush on waking up.

In view of the request Pava had made of him, these words struck him like a blow.

Olga watched him with wary curiosity. After all, how much longer could she keep her secret? She was on the verge of telling him, but on imagining Ivan Ivanovich's joy, a joy she did not share, she again remained silent, thinking cheerlessly:

"Perhaps in time it will make me happy too."

2

Slowly Ivan Ivanovich walked down the river. The sharp-toothed ice bordering the cracks in the surface crunched under his feet, but this was the only sound violating the solid silence of winter.

Partridges rose in flocks from the bushes along the bank, shaking down a bright snowfall, and, themselves like snowballs, soaring among the glistening, falling flakes.

Ivan Ivanovich idly watched their banked flight. They came to rest not far away in a black and white forest animated by the sighs and rustles of the wind, which again was crossing the valley, blowing the snow off the branches.

At the foot of the mountain there was a clearing filled with stumps higher than a man's head, sticking up in awkward nakedness, with caps of snow perched on the sides of their heads. Ivan Ivanovich looked at them and was amazed. "Who could have chopped them at such a level?" He walked over, pushing his fur boots through the bushes of bilberry and pungent marsh-tea which thrust rust-coloured twigs through the fluffy blanket of snow. It seemed that giant woodcutters must have been at work here.

"Hm!"muttered Ivan Ivanovich as he gazed at them, a sparkle of amusement in his eye. "That's woodcutting for you!" Suddenly it dawned on him that the trees had been felled in the winter, when the ground had been cov-

ered by two metres of snow, so that the woodcutters had walked high above the surface of the earth.

"Maybe that's how I walk through life," thought Ivan Ivanovich, when he was back at the river. "I don't notice it myself, but others find it strange."

He heard voices coming from the direction of the mine, and suddenly two people in ski togs whisked round a sharp bend. One of them was Varvara, the other Olga.

Flushed with exercise and looking very broad-shouldered in her shaggy sweater, Olga made for her husband as if to tell him something, but her ski slipped, she ran into him, and both of them fell down.

"I haven't hurt you, have I?" asked Ivan Ivanovich in fright.

Olga silently shook her head. She sat there looking at her husband in wide-eyed incredulity.

"I'm all right," she said. She tried to get up, digging her heel into the dark ice glistening beneath the snow and suddenly made a grimace of pain.

"Now, you see!" exclaimed Ivan Ivanovich miserably as he sprang to his feet.

He took Olga under the arms to lift her up, placing his cheek against her cold face.

She started as if pricked by a needle, and freed herself.

"I'm all right now," she said impatiently, with a flick of her eyelashes, which were white and fuzzy with hoar. Pulling off one glove, she placed a warm palm over her eyes. "Frozen," she said with a forced, mirthless smile.

"Perhaps we should go home," said Ivan Ivanovich, guessing that she was hiding her pain.

"Oh no, we'll go on. We set out with a special purpose—to teach Varvara how to ski on our kind of skis. She's from the taiga and doesn't know how to manage them."

"I keep falling all the time," said Varvara in some vexation. "At home we have only snow-shoes—short and very wide, and you shuffle along on them as in big slippers."

Her jacket and pants and yellow woollen scarf were powdered with snow. She stood leaning on her ski-sticks, rosy-cheeked, biting her bright lips and gazing at Ivan Ivanovich.

The snow had stopped falling, but occasional flakes came floating down like feathers. The cold increased. The three people advanced separately across the spotless expanses of fresh snow. Varvara still kept falling down, but with every step she gained confidence. Her supple young body was no longer rigid with strain, but gracefully relaxed. Her little feet, flashing like chipmunks in her striped deerskin leggings, began to move more quickly. It was ever more simple to slide along on the narrow runners carrying her down the ribbon of river shining so white between its steep, dark banks. Perhaps with a running start she could take one mighty leap that would carry her above the river, above the cliffs, above the forests and mountains upon which the grey clouds were pressing so heavily. She would soar like one of the spirits who, according to the tale trachoma-blind Granny Anna told around the smoky fire in the yurt, threw their golden lassoes about the reindeer roaming the heavens. Who could say for sure that those lassoes were simply falling stars? From where and to where were they falling?

She would soar away, but only to return to the dear earth, to her cozy little room, and to the people who surrounded her with such care and attention. She could no longer imagine herself anywhere but in the surroundings where Ivan Ivanovich lived and worked and laughed and scolded.

Varvara turned sharply, fell down once more, rose, and started back. Suddenly she saw the other two stand-

ing in embrace on the tracks she had just laid. She was inclined to turn away, but some strange urge made her keep on going. As she came closer she made a point of wielding her sticks noisily, but the other two paid not the slightest attention.

Then Varvara noticed that Olga's shoulders were shaking with sobs and that Ivan Ivanovich was looking at her in anguish and holding her as if afraid she would fall.

Varvara wished to slip past unnoticed, but Ivan Ivanovich stopped her.

"Olga Pavlovna is not well," he said in a voice that made Varvara's heart stand still. "Hurry home and ask them to send a horse or a reindeer sledge."

Before he had finished speaking, Varvara gave a great push with her sticks and set out for the mine. She could not bear to see Ivan Ivanovich so upset. Olga was weeping, and he too seemed about to. She was in such a hurry to bring help that she ceased falling, skiing like an expert without realizing it. Her flaming cheeks seemed dusted with sugar and a little white moustache appeared on her upper lip. She breathed with open mouth, so that her scarf too, and raised collar, became covered with hoar.

3

Ivan Ivanovich took off his shaggy dogskin jacket and spread it on the snow for Olga to sit on.

"You'll catch cold," murmured Olga.

"No, nothing will happen to me," he said bitterly.

She sat beside him obediently—silent, motionless, all huddled over. Never before had he felt their estrangement so keenly, and never before had he loved her so intensely.

He recalled the day he had brought her back from the maternity hospital. She had sat on the edge of the bed

in a pale dressing-gown with her braids wound above her broad forehead, nursing their tiny daughter whose rosy face glanced out of the blanket. Anxiously she had watched the infant's efforts to suck a nipple still as flat as a virgin's. A certain tenderness towards Ivan Ivanovich himself was expressed in her maternal solicitude, and in the softness of her young face and her hands, so carefully clasping the warm bundle. As he watched her, he was conscious only of his happiness, of his heart-bursting with love for her and for this still unthinking creature that bound their lives into one wonderful whole.

And now that child, that dark-haired little girl, was no more. Did that account for the fact that Olga had ceased to love him? But why had she hidden from him the fact that she was pregnant? And why now, when this awful thing had happened, did she remain so indifferent? To be sure, she had wept, but her tears were tears of fear and self-pity. Ivan Ivanovich could no longer deceive himself. He began to shiver, but not from cold. He was seized by a nervous chill.

"You are catching cold," said Olga once more, half rising.

She forced him to put on his coat. As he pulled it on, groping for the sleeve which was turned inside out, he glanced at his wife. She was on her knees in her skiing suit, and beside her on the snow slowly grew a spot that looked black in the half-light.

"Oh my darling!" breathed the shocked Ivan Ivanovich.

He picked her up in his arms and felt her body grow limp and heavy as he walked back over the fresh ski tracks. All other thoughts were driven out of his mind by his love and concern for his wife.

"Why should this happen? Why?" was the thought that kept tantalizing him."

A horse, magnified to huge proportions by the vapours of its breathing, bore down upon him. Ivan Ivanovich scarcely managed to step aside with his burden. The settlement was close at hand, but as soon as he had placed Olga on the wide sledge, he realized that his arms had grown numb. He sat down next her and embraced her.

"Perhaps she finds my attentions unpleasant," he thought suddenly, and moved away. "But she is ill. This is no time for scruples." And again Ivan Ivanovich said to himself, as he glanced at the approaching lights, glowing like wolve's eyes through the white tracery of the bushes lining the riverbank: "Let it be as she wants it. I cannot of my own accord give her up."

They immediately placed Olga in the hospital, without even taking her home.

While Dr. Gusev was scrubbing his hands, Ivan Ivanovich nervously paced the floor and gazed with fear and hope at his colleague's stooped shoulders in the white gown.

"Maybe you'll do it yourself?" said Gusev.

"Oh no!" cried the frightened Ivan Ivanovich. "You know how hard it is to operate on your own folks."

This operation was one which experienced surgeons usually refused to perform, considering it too elementary. Indeed, even Elena Denisovna could have performed it if circumstances required. But now Ivan Ivanovich found it desperately serious. He could hardly make himself enter the room where Olga was lying. He was haunted by a vision of her white face and lifeless hands with the blue fingernails. How she had changed!

She was suffering the convulsive hiccups of the dying when they placed her on the operating table. Even after a blood transfusion she did not revive. It seemed to him that she was accusing him of something, and he left the operating room, unable to bear it.

Out in the corridor he could hear only the cold click of instruments. Then a soft groan and a cry, followed by complete silence.

He sank down on to a bench covered with white oilcloth, his head hanging between drooping shoulders. People walked past him, he heard talking, the closing of a door....

"Well, it's all over," said Gusev.

Ivan Ivanovich turned a white face to him, fearing to ask questions.

"Everything's all right," continued Gusev, unfastening his gown. "It's a good thing we were so quick in finding someone with her blood group. Hers is the first."

"Will she live?" asked Ivan Ivanovich.

"Of course," replied Gusev, unable to comprehend the panic of this experienced surgeon. "Women come through a thing like this remarkably...." The sight of Ivan Ivanovich's trembling lips caused him to break off his sentence unfinished. "What's wrong with you? In two hours she'll be fit as a fiddle!"

"Thanks," said Ivan Ivanovich with quiet seriousness.

He got up and cautiously entered the operating room. Olga, covered with a fresh sheet, was still lying on the table. Her head was turned and her eyes tightly closed. Ivan Ivanovich placed his cheek against the damp hair at her temple.

She remained motionless, not even fluttering her long black lashes.

4

It was with an enormous empty feeling that Olga woke up next morning in the hospital. She lay flat on her back without a pillow under her head; as in a dream she recalled the falling snow, the ice gleaming darkly under the fluffy white snow, and then the pain girdling her body. She had not particularly wanted to become a mother this

time, but since things had turned out that way, motherhood became essential to her in order to fill the void in her life. There was, in addition, a subconscious desire to restore the old relationship between her and her husband. After all, she didn't hate or despise him. She respected him as much as ever, but he had become a stranger to her.

And now she had nothing. Nothing. Olga moved her hands beneath the blanket and wearily closed her eyes. She lay there cold and weak and somehow empty: not a thought, not a wish, not a feeling.

Approaching steps brought her out of her trance.

Ivan Ivanovich entered the ward. She saw that his face was now wearing the authoritative expression with which he usually heard the report of the doctor on duty. Turning her head, Olga noticed a middle-aged woman sitting up quietly in bed, gazing at him with almost maternal affection. Her face glowed when he asked her how she felt. Olga herself avoided meeting his eyes, but she noticed that everyone else was only too anxious to be noticed by their doctor. These people loved him. They eagerly awaited his coming. Overcoming her feelings, Olga turned to him again. Ivan Ivanovich was standing near her. The authoritative expression gave way to one of timid happiness. This large, broad-shouldered man, powerful as an oak in vast open spaces, became especially attractive when he smiled. Olga looked at him, and did her best to revive even a spark of the old feeling. She saw that he was handsome, she knew that he was good, but this no longer touched her. It was not pride, but sadness and regret he evoked in her and she closed her eyes with an involuntary sigh.

Ivan Ivanovich sat down next to her, took her hand, and felt her pulse. His touch was that of a stranger.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, and she detected rebuke in his voice.

"All right," she answered, not knowing that in his concern for her, her husband had spent the entire night in the hospital, several times coming to her bedside.

"You can't imagine how I suffered," he said, raising Olga's limp hand to his cheek.

Olga's pity for him struggled with her sense of estrangement, and she responded to his gesture with a faint pressure of her fingers. But immediately she felt ashamed of such deception.

That evening Ivan Ivanovich again visited her, bringing her candy and cakes and fruit. He tried to talk about trifles, but Olga was silent. Later she gave the food he had brought her to the other patients, having no heart to partake of it herself. How little she had foreseen that things would come to such a pass when, young, earnest, adoring, she had joined her fate to that of Ivan Arzhanov! Then it had seemed that her happiness was enough to last a lifetime. And where was it now?

During the night Olga painstakingly turned on her side and gazed at the window, whose panes were frost-embossed and flooded with moonlight. Apparently winter had set in for good; already the ground was covered with snow, above which wandered a lonely moon, throwing a silvery veil from the window to Olga's bed. She had only to reach out her hand to touch it. But the moonbeams slipped through her fingers in skeins of ghostly light. Olga absent-mindedly tried to catch them, moving her fingers like a child at play as she surrendered her mind to harassing thoughts. Two women were talking in the far corner of the ward; above the beds hovered a rustle of voices: other patients were also unable to sleep. Indeed many of the occupants of that huge building with the large, frosty windows were spending a sleepless night, battling all sorts of pain.

"You're looking simply marvellous," said Pava Romanovna, placing various bags and packages on the table. "Here's some cake and chocolate, and this glazed fruit is from Igor. I sent the driver on a special trip to Ukamchan for sweets for the kiddies today. They're growing so fast, they need sweets. And it's so nice not to have to deprive them of anything! You're a child only once, you know! Happy days!" sighed Pava Romanovna as she fell to dreaming about her own very ordinary childhood. "Landeli gobbled up almost a whole kilogram of chocolate at one sitting! I had to give him a physic. In general he's a strange child—always smashing and breaking things. But he's got a mind of his own, I'll have you know! Can't make him do a thing he doesn't want to! As for Camilla, you never saw such a little flirt in your life! She stands for hours fussing in front of the mirror. But she breaks things too. Why do you suppose they're always smashing things? Perhaps it's just to show their contempt for private property." Pava Romanovna seemed satisfied with this explanation of her children's vandalism.

"Perhaps," assented Olga, who was becoming irritated by her friend's prattle.

"They say the Germans are expected to invade England any day now," went on Pava, suddenly remembering the international situation. "They've got everything ready along the shores of the English Canal—"

"Channel," corrected Olga.

"Channel. The Germans have made three thousand rafts that they're going to hitch together in sixes. Then they'll lay metal plates across them to make a bridge. Tanks and infantry will cross to England over this bridge, with thousands of airplanes up in the air. That ought to be a pretty sight, don't you think? They're only waiting for suitable weather—a calm sea and a fog. Oh dear, how I'd love to go to the seaside! To Sochi! My beloved Sochi! The roses are still blooming there! Oh yes, I

forgot—here are some almonds for you, and here—here is the most important of all!" From under the hospital gown thrown over her shoulders, Pava Romanovna pulled an elaborate handbag with a fancy clasp.

"People usually speak about the most important things first and leave trifles to the last, but I always do things upside down," she rattled on. "Somehow I always seem to forget serious matters. But I suppose that's natural too: the lighter things swim to the surface first." She cast Olga a merry glance as she continued rummaging in the depths of the bag.

It took her so long to find what she wanted, that Olga was tempted to help her. What could be the big surprise this chatterbox had brought?

"You forbade me to speak to you about a certain person," said Pava, giving Olga a meaningful look, but presently her dimples were twinkling again as she added: "Today I agreed to risk doing this favour for him because it has nothing to do with your private affairs. He asked me to congratulate you...."

"On what?"

"On your latest success in the field of literature. He didn't tell me just exactly what it was," explained Pava Romanovna gaily as she at last pulled a letter out of her bag. "Here. It contains a clipping from a Moscow paper." Having blurted out the secret, she carefully followed the expression on Olga's face. "Just think, you've been printed in Moscow! In other words, your name is known throughout the country!"

"Oh, come!" said Olga, genuinely annoyed, and even frightened. "Don't talk nonsense!"

Frowning from weakness and excitement, she took the letter and placed it under her pillow, pressing it down as if afraid it would vanish.

When Pava Romanovna had left, Olga took it out and opened it, her heart pounding.

"I am happy to be able to tell you some pleasant news," wrote Tavrov. "The newspaper to which you sent your story has printed it. Don't be upset if they have cut it and made some slight changes. Your first efforts have been crowned with success. I see you are wasting none of the time saved by avoiding certain of your superfluous acquaintances. Here's wishing you the best of luck.

"Yours,

Boris Tavrov"

"Mine—Boris Tavrov," whispered Olga.

She hid the small sheet of paper under the blanket, and gave a fluttering sigh—perhaps because of the paper's rough caress, and perhaps because of the tenderness she had read between the lines. She unfolded the newspaper clipping.

Once more her heart pounded on seeing her name printed in large letters at the end of five columns of close type. She waited for the first wave of excitement to subside before reading it. Changes had indeed been made, but they did not upset her.

"Could I really have written so well?" she thought in surprise, dropping her tired arms. It even seemed to her that the story read better in this abridged form. She was filled with gratitude to the editors who had understood what she had tried to say.

Now Olga found pleasure even in the crispness of the sheet beneath the fluffy yellow blanket.

"What lovely blankets they have here!" she thought, for the first time looking with appreciative eyes at this large, light room furnished with two rows of beds on which women were sitting or lying.

From somewhere down the corridor came the groans of a woman in confinement. On the other side of the wall, hungry infants were wailing impatiently, while nurses

hurried past the door with one and even two tight little human bundles in their arms; it was feeding time.

Olga smiled and listened to the subdued voices in the ward. The women were talking about the war.

"How many peaceful citizens were killed!" a middle-aged mother of many children was saying. "In just one night. They drop bombs weighing 1,800 kilograms! A bomb like that would wipe out a whole street! Leave nothing but dust. And ruins. With people buried alive under them."

Olga listened. Slowly the smile faded from her lips. The conflagration raging so far, far away, filled even her soul with alarm.

5

The odour of ether still lingered in the room where Ivan Ivanovich had just finished a gastric ulcer operation. Hesitantly, a middle-aged Yakut stepped inside, sniffing at the strange odour and glancing shyly about him. He was as strong and sturdy as an oak stump and looked just as brown in his white hospital shirt. Accompanied by Nikita Burtsev, he approached the operating table and stopped, tugging at his loose shirt.

"Take off your shirt," said Nikita, reaching for the patient's left arm, which hung limp in an unwrinkled sleeve.

He helped the Yakut undress and glanced at the door leading into the next room. Ivan Ivanovich had said he would perform the second operation without any intermission, but Nikita did not hear him making himself ready.

"We'll give him a morphine injection when he's already on the table," said assistant Sergutov. "It'll take Ivan Ivanovich more than ten minutes to scrub his hands."

The Yakut lay down, his large head thrown back, his powerful ribs standing out like hoops above the dark hollow of his stomach. Fear made his breathing raucous and uneven.

"Don't worry," said Varvara in Yakut. "There's nothing to be afraid of. Ivan Ivanovich will do it quickly and well. A bear injured his arm," she explained to Sergutov, who was feeling the blue scars just below the hunter's elbow. "For five months it has hung useless. Where did it happen, Amosov?"

"At Ulbeia," answered Amosov breathlessly, one eye on the glistening object resembling a huge silver bullet with a long needle at the top which Nikita Burtsev was aiming at him as if he meant to shoot him.

"At Ulbeia," repeated Varvara with a smile as she looked at the hunter, trembling more from fear than pain. "Shame on you—not afraid of a bear, and shivering like this at the sight of a needle! He killed the bear with a knife when it attacked him," she informed Sergutov. "The wounded beast crushed his arm, but died before it could do anything more serious." Varvara turned expectantly to the door of the adjoining room.

Ivan Ivanovich still did not appear.

"What could have happened to him?" thought Varvara in surprise and alarm, and quickly went over to the office of the head surgeon.

Ivan Ivanovich was sitting with his arms on the desk and his shoulders strangely hunched. Next to him stood an untouched glass of cold tea. His cigarette had burned out, leaving a stick of ashes on the tray.

"Ivan Ivanovich," said Varvara hesitantly.

He did not move. She went closer.

"The patient is already in the operating room," she said.

Ivan Ivanovich started and raised his head.

Now it was Varvara's turn to start as she met his lustreless eyes. She was shocked by the unwonted apathy of his face and figure, which seemed to be in the grip of some benumbing force.

She too remained motionless, under the spell of his

torpor. Still he said nothing. Then the sure instinct of a woman in love told her what she must do.

"The patient has been made ready for the operation," she said firmly, stressing the urgency of the situation.

Scarcely realizing it, Ivan Ivanovich obeyed her imperious tone.

All his life and all his aspirations appeared to him now in an entirely different light. In retrospect, the bright hours he had spent with his wife stood out against the background of his work like the sunny clearings in a forest. Yet, like an impassioned hunter, or explorer, or pathfinder, he had always left the warmth and cheer of Olga's presence to plunge back into the forest. Why had they not gone on together, he and Olga, hand in hand? Whose fault was it that things had turned out this way? Olga too yearned for activity. Why had she fallen so far behind him?

He remembered how disconsolate Olga had looked sitting on the bench under the poplars.

"If only I had never given her that damned article to translate!" he thought as he followed Varvara into the operating room.

Mechanically he scrubbed his hands, donned the operating gown which Varvara helped him fasten over his white oilcloth apron, and pulled on his rubber gloves. Scarcely listening to Sergutov's explanations, he went over to the patient. He was familiar with the case history and had made a careful study of the Yakut's arm. Despite the interest he had taken in this operation, at present he felt indifferent. The patient was lying on his back, and a sheet had been hung up to screen his arm, which lay on a small platform fastened firmly to the operating table. From fingers to elbow it had been painted with iodine. Numerous scars indicated where the beast had sunk its fangs into the flesh. The fingers were curled: obviously the median nerve had been injured.

"We're giving you an injection," warned Ivan Ivanovich.

He picked up the syringe containing a solution of novocaine, and made a double row of injections, first superficially, then deeper. A longish swelling appeared under the skin.

"Does it hurt?" asked Ivan Ivanovich.

"Not much," replied Amosov.

Ivan Ivanovich made a long incision with a scalpel, beginning from the fang marks and proceeding below them.

A white scar showed inside the wound, where the lacerated tissue had grown together irregularly.

"A probe!"

From among her glittering array of instruments, Varvara quickly selected one ending in a long, narrow, grooved beak.

Taking it out of her hands, Ivan Ivanovich gave the probe an additional bend and inserted it, with obvious effort, under the scarred tissue.

"Do you feel anything?"

"No."

Ivan Ivanovich dissected the resistant tissue, the probe serving to protect the underlying nerve from accidental injury; he made an additional incision with scissors, stopped the bleeding with electric current and proceeded to cut the scarred tissue with a scalpel.

"What a tangle!" he muttered through his teeth. "Look at this tendon, normally so white and silky—a mass of knots!"

At last he had penetrated the tissue above the nerve.

"You might cut away that bit, to get it out of the way," advised Sergutov.

"You can cut anything away," observed Ivan Ivanovich dryly. "Sewing it back is more difficult."

He paused briefly before continuing his painstaking efforts. Now the pale, round nerve, about the width of a pencil, lay exposed at the bottom of the incision.

"Everything's clear—no need of electrical stimulation to test the conductibility of this nerve," murmured Ivan Ivanovich.

Everything was indeed clear. A distance of almost a centimetre and a half separated the ends of the severed nerve.

"We'll trim the ends and then suture them."

"Stretching the nerve?"

"Yes, we can stretch it in this case."

Picking up the trimmed nerve ends in forceps, Ivan Ivanovich slowly and carefully stretched them until they met, then stitched the membrane enveloping them.

"Finer silk! This is too coarse! What the hell do I want with silk like this!" he said to Varvara impatiently.

She blushed to the very tips of her tiny, well-shaped ears. But she threaded a new needle without a word, understanding, and submitting.

When the subcutaneous tissue had been sutured, Ivan Ivanovich said, with the same impatience:

"Now for the skin! Needle holders! Needle holders!"

They seemed to fall into his fingers of themselves, but Ivan Ivanovich's frown did not disappear. Varvara's face, however, was now perfectly calm. She was standing ready beside her table, watching what was being done. She understood everything: the patient's state, the surgeon's mood, and each step in the operation.

"Tie your sutures as soon as the edges of the skin come together, without causing any folds," said Ivan Ivanovich to Sergutov as he adjusted the sutures with forceps. "Then there won't be an ugly scar."

Already his thoughts were far away. He spoke and acted by force of habit. The nerve ends had been joined. The line was mended, though as yet no current passed

along it. The devitalized nerve ends must first sprout new neurites. This growth would begin at the point of contact and extend down the length of the nerve and along all of its branches, until it reached each of the threadlike tentacles giving sensitivity to the skin. The neurites grow slowly—only one millimetre in twenty-four hours—and the withered arm would be just as slow in reviving.

Assistant Sergutov applied the dressing, and Varvara gathered up the instruments. She cast a sidelong glance at Ivan Ivanovich. The operation was over, but he remained standing beside the operating table, lost in thought.

The patient turned his head, pushed away the sheet with his sound hand, and looked at Ivan Ivanovich long and penetratingly.

"Thanks, doctor," he said hoarsely.

His words were so full of gratitude and confidence in recovery, that Ivan Ivanovich felt ashamed of his indifference.

"Do you think you can use your arm already?" he said with a sad smile. "You still have a long wait ahead of you, my friend. Four months—at least four months until strength flows back into your muscles." Ivan Ivanovich touched the hunter's cold fingers. "You'll have to wait."

"I can. I wait," the Yakut assured him with a smile. "To wait for something good—that is easy; to wait for something bad—that is hard."

7

"To wait for something bad—that is hard."

A murky twilight gathered beyond the windows, with black poplar boughs intertwining in the dusk. The snow kept slipping off the smooth bark of the young trees huddling out there in the cold. It was Denis Antonovich who had transplanted these poplars from the bank of the river to the elevation on which the hospital stood. With all the

obstinacy of his rugged nature, he had pitted his strength against that of this northern climate, but in vain. The three-pood pumpkins of which he had dreamed never materialized, and the poplars, too, showed little inclination to flourish on the open hillside. They drooped and pined and shed their leaves until a hedge of young larches, interspersed with alder bushes, grew up and protected them. How he longed for firs! Unwilling to take the word of local inhabitants, he himself combed the valley and nearby hills, but not a fir or pine was to be found—nothing but deciduous trees in winter, the low-lying cedars being buried under a weight of snow.

Ivan Ivanovich stood at the window gazing at the delicate filigree of branches against the grey sky, and so oppressive was the grief gnawing at his heart that he would gladly have given vent to his feelings by howling like a wolf.

Olga's face was constantly before him. Her lovely, aloof face, tawny against the white pillow. "Go away," was what she seemed to say. "Go away," said the movement of her hand, which, after slightly responding to his pressure, had been quickly withdrawn under the blanket.

"I don't feel well," she had murmured, pulling the covers up to her very chin, to her very lips. But there had been an angry glint in her eye, and every feature expressed impatient irritation.

He had left the ward and was now standing at the window of his office, unable to move a step. Where was he to go? The hospital was his second home; indeed, it had been his only one ever since he first sensed Olga's indifference. Here he sought refuge from his doubts. Here he drowned his sorrow in work. But now even here he was met on every hand by that watchful glance saying "Go away."

Ivan Ivanovich walked back and forth, imagining the emptiness of his flat, the interminable night stretching out

hour after hour, the winter dawn creeping through the window. Everything within him rose in protest.

"Why? What have I done?" He looked at his powerful hands. "How much benefit they had brought people! And surely he could not be called old. Or ugly. Or indifferent."

He came to a halt in front of a long mirror and studied his reflection.

"Am I really so much worse than that asinine Korobitsyn? What is it—pity, or curiosity, or simply caprice?"

Suddenly a dreadful idea occurred to him.

"That's why she hid it from me—refused to tell me she was pregnant!"

With a sigh that was more like a groan, Ivan Ivanovich sank down upon the nearest chair and sat there for a long time clutching his head and rocking as if he had a toothache.

At last he got up with flushed cheeks and tousled hair and walked resolutely out of the room. He could endure this uncertainty no longer. He must know the truth.

At almost the same time Tavrov, who had been pacing up and down in the snow outside the hospital, came to a decision that made him climb the hospital steps. The snow crunched under his feet, and the door gave a slight screech as he opened it.

He left his fur jacket in the entrance and hesitated a moment, standing there wiping the hoar frost off his brows and lashes.

He met Varvara in the hall.

"Who have you come to see? It's much too late," she said.

"Late?"

"Our patients are sleeping already."

"Just for a minute, Varya. Are you on duty tonight?"

"Yes. We have a patient in a critical state. A postoperative."

"Take me to Olga—Olga Pavlovna. I want to give

her something," he said excitedly. "I saw you through the window and that's why I came in."

"Why didn't you come in the daytime, with Pava Romanovna?" asked Varvara, suspicious of this late visit. "Come tomorrow."

Disarmed by her earnest tone, Tavrov almost wavered, but—Olga was so near!

"Just for one minute," he said determinedly, pushing Varvara aside.

Scarcely had he disappeared in the ward where Olga was lying when other footsteps sounded in the hall, and Varvara turned to see Ivan Ivanovich.

He was walking with eyes downcast and an expression of despair on his frowning face.

"A third." These words, spoken by Tavrov that autumn when they had been berrying in the forest, suddenly came to Varvara's mind. "So that's what he meant!" she thought in horror, only now realizing what was happening. So that explained the state Ivan Ivanovich and Olga were in, and the glances they exchanged, and their restraint with each other, and Tavrov's agitation, and the way he had rushed into the ward! "You dunce! You little dunce!" she cried to herself, stunned by the realization. "A third! That means she doesn't love *him. He's* the one who's in the way! And he'll see that now with his own eyes! What will become of him then?"

Varvara was not capable of intrigue, but the situation demanded urgent intervention.

"Ivan Ivanovich!" she said, stepping in front of him.

With a little start, he came to a halt.

She looked him straight in the eye, taut as a string.

"What is it, Varya?" asked Ivan Ivanovich as though awakened from sleep.

"I have something very important to tell you. It can't wait," she said, overwhelmed by fear and anxiety. "Come here."

Without looking back, she moved in the opposite direction from that taken by Tavrov.

Ivan Ivanovich followed her. He had been struck by the words "something very important." Important? Could it be about Olga?

Varvara made Ivan Ivanovich enter his office ahead of her, and then stood barring the door, her face flaming, unable to say a word as she stood fumbling with the strings of her gown.

"Well, what is it, Varya?" said Ivan Ivanovich in a voice hoarse with emotion, his head lowered as if in expectation of a blow.

Varvara realized he knew what was coming and how merciless the blow would be. Had she the courage to deal it?

Her candid eyes dropped.

"I wanted to speak about our course," she said with an awkward smile.

"Your course? Ah, Varya! As if I had any thoughts for that just now!" The words came like a stifled cry as Ivan Ivanovich made for the door.

"Wait! Just a minute!" she pleaded, remaining firmly in her place. One thought dominated her mind: she must give Tavrov time to leave. "Just a minute!" she repeated.

Ivan Ivanovich was immediately on the alert.

"Why are you keeping me here?" he asked, blanching. "Why did you bring me here?"

"I wanted to tell you . . ." whispered Varvara distractedly, lowering her black lashes. "Oh, if you only knew how I love you!" she cried in an impassioned outburst, wringing her little hands. "You need only say 'Die!' and I will gladly die for you. I would do anything for you!"

Ivan Ivanovich was overwhelmed.

"But I don't want you to die. How could you say such a thing, child? You know how much I think of you!"

"Yes, I know," said Varvara, raising tight fists to her temples and lowering her head as she battled an irresistible desire to cry.

8

Olga was deeply upset by Tavrov's visit. She had been expecting Ivan Ivanovich. Surely he would not leave the hospital without saying good-bye. He was certain to come, and she kept listening for his steps in the hall, eager to be relieved of this wearing expectation.

And suddenly Tavrov appeared instead. Alone. At night. When most of the patients were already asleep. Holding the collar of her nightgown to her throat, Olga raised herself on one elbow and looked at him with startled eyes. The expression of suffering on his face was mingled with shy eagerness, evoking in Olga an upsurge of tenderness. Perhaps this was reflected in her eyes, or perhaps his lover's instinct made him aware of her feeling. He moved toward her and sank down softly on the chair beside her bed.

"I cannot live without you any longer," he said in a scarcely audible whisper. "I have honestly tried to conquer my feeling, but I only succeed in torturing myself. I am worn out and seem to have aged a hundred years."

Olga glanced at the other beds, and at the door through which Ivan Ivanovich might appear at any moment.

"If you feel the same way, why should we suffer so?" he pleaded earnestly. "Who gains by it? Do you think it makes it any easier for him?"

"We'll talk about it later," said Olga.

"Why later?" asked Tavrov.

"I'm afraid he will come," admitted Olga, ashamed of such an admission, but unable to hide her nervousness. "He's still here."

Tavrov kept gazing at her silently, as if he had not even heard what she had said.

"Olga!" he said softly. "I see everything now. I am to blame for not having acted more resolutely. As soon as you are well I shall carry you off to my house," he exclaimed impulsively.

"You will?" said Olga, slightly piqued. Both of these men seemed to regard her as an inanimate object which they could dispose of as they saw fit. But the soft shine in his eyes spoke only of utter devotion, and submission to her will.

"Do you expect to be here long?" he asked, gazing ardently into her face.

"Do you know everything?" she asked instead of replying.

He lowered his head in affirmation. A nervous spasm made it impossible for him to speak, and he kissed her hand in silence.

He seemed to have forgotten that he was in a hospital ward, surrounded by five pairs of other eyes and ears. The women were all asleep, or pretended to be. But if even one of them opened her eyes, there was not the slightest possibility of her mistaking Tavrov for Ivan Ivanovich.

"We'll discuss it later," repeated Olga. "Trust me. But now you must leave. I beg you to."

The alarm in her face made Tavrov realize what he was doing.

"I will go," he said, and got up abruptly, as though tearing himself away.

"How strange things have turned out!" thought Ivan Ivanovich bitterly, once more striding down the hall.

But he was stopped by the thought that presently he would have a heart-to-heart talk with Olga and everything would become clear and preposterously wrong. He could not face it; he must think of some escape.

In the hospital lounge he found patients listening to the radio.

"Time to be in bed, time to be in bed," he muttered mechanically, lingering in the doorway.

The news broadcast was on. He entered and sat down on a divan in the corner like one in a trance.

The world was at war. The Japanese were on a rampage in the east; the roar of planes was ceaseless in the west. The British had bombed Berlin, the Germans were bombing London. The occupants of Buckingham Palace were hiding in bomb shelters. The King and Queen had gone away: the palace had been bombed four times already.

"Once upon a time there lived a King and a Queen," murmured Ivan Ivanovich. "Hm-m... once upon a time...."

A bomb had struck a large apartment house, killing many people. But of course the King remained intact however severe the bombing. And the precious lords and ladies had safe shelters. What was etiquette in a situation like that? thought Ivan Ivanovich, with a touch of his old humour.

The Coventry plants produced high-quality steel for munitions. Thousands of steel workers lived there. With their families. Once upon a time... hm....

Ivan Ivanovich glanced around. He was alone in the room. He had not noticed that the patients had left, frightened away by his appearance. And Olga? And his conversation with her? Like the blast of an explosion the thought lifted Ivan Ivanovich to his feet and carried him down the hall.

When Ivan Ivanovich entered the ward everyone was asleep but Olga, who lay with wide-open eyes, oblivious of her husband's entrance. He stopped with bated breath, watching her pensive, flushed face. Softly he approached. Olga started.

"You!" she breathed softly, the colour flaming brighter in her cheeks. "Why are you still here?"

"Where else should I be?"

Her face revealed her agitation. Recalling his recent conversation with Varvara, he said awkwardly:

"I was detained."

Could it be that he considered himself guilty? He would have become indignant, had not his attention been distracted by the hotness of Olga's hand. Only now did he notice his wife's feverish condition.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked, taking a thermometer out of the drawer of the bed-table and shaking it down. "You have a high fever. Have you left your bed? Been walking about the room?"

The thick whorls of his brows drew anxiously together at the bridge of his nose. The fear of possible complications drove every other thought out of his head. It was impossible to speak now of his own suffering.

9

"Just where I was when I set out," thought Ivan Ivanovich as he descended the hospital porch.

Because of his concern for Olga's health, a feeling of compassion had supplanted his suspicions, softening the pricks of jealousy he had been suffering. Far from being all-forgiving, he was one who would never turn the other cheek. But Olga was very dear to him.

The snow creaked beneath his boots; the frost nipped his cheeks and made breathing difficult, but Ivan Ivanovich walked on and on until he found himself on the familiar road down by the river. Here he stopped to consider what he should do. He could not contemplate returning to the empty flat. He must wear himself out, so that on reaching home he would immediately fall asleep.

His fur cap was covered with rime, as were his eye-

brows and lashes. Looking up at the veiled sky, Ivan Ivanovich caught a glimpse of stars shining through the haze. They winked dully, trembling in the rare air. He seemed to hear their murmur. Vaguely they twinkled and seemed to rustle. Could Varvara's legend have been true? Or was it only the air, rustling as he breathed?

The remembrance of Varvara sent his thoughts flying off at a tangent. Could any other woman take the place of Olga for him? Everything within him protested against such a thing. He remembered his life at Kamenushka during the two years before his wife joined him. Had he not been subjected to many temptations in that time? He had come into contact with many women, both at work and during leisure hours. But whenever he had felt too lonely, he had gone off on a hunting trip, or he had gone skiing, or had chopped wood until he dropped from exhaustion. As he recalled Pava Romanovna's painted lips, and her sly, seductive eyes, he spat viciously.

He wanted only Olga—Olga as he had first known her, eight years before, and as he had loved her all these years.

"For me she was always pure and brave, just and devoted," he thought. "But now she is neither just nor pure nor devoted.... Something is troubling her, and she is afraid to tell me what it is.... Why is it that I keep on loving her so? Simply because she is pretty? But Varvara is prettier, and younger...."

Ivan Ivanovich recalled the impassioned avowal of love Varvara had made to him, standing there in her white gown, her little fists pressed to her face. There was a person pure, unspoiled, devoted to her work, and eager to take part in all creative effort! No wonder so many young men were in love with her! Logunov too. Ivan Ivanovich was fond of Platon Logunov. The thought of him led the surgeon to turn his steps towards the mining settlement: he felt in need of friendly sympathy.

But he never reached Logunov's house. All his intentions were left hanging in the air that night. Beyond the bridge over the very brook where he and Olga had come for water that summer, he met Tavrov. Apparently he, like Ivan Ivanovich, had been out for a stroll.

"Good evening," said the doctor.

Of late he had seen little of Tavrov, whom he liked as much as ever.

"Good?" answered Tavrov quickly. "Succumb to the charms of a night like this, and before you're aware of it, she'll nip off an ear or a nose."

"Yes, it is cold," agreed Ivan Ivanovich, less conscious of Tavrov's words than of his tone, which sounded strangely forced and bold. "Are you taking a walk?"

"Trying to drown my troubles," said Tavrov with unexpected candour. "I've just come from a rendezvous, and it seems I've been given the cold shoulder." In spite of the challenge in his voice, it broke on the high notes.

It is difficult to say what further confidences he would have exchanged with the astonished doctor, had not they become aware of someone running down the hill at that moment. They turned to see the hoar-white figure of Denis Antonovich bearing down upon them like a steam engine.

"At last!" he panted, grabbing Ivan Ivanovich by the arm. "I've searched the settlement for you! There's been an accident, and you nowhere to be found!"

"Olga?" gasped the two men in one breath. So simultaneous were their cries, that one person might have spoken the name. Ivan Ivanovich did not notice the coincidence, and Denis Antonovich was not alert to such subtleties.

"No," he replied impatiently, at which two simultaneous sighs of relief were breathed. "They've brought in a woman who's been stabbed. In the heart. Of course Gusev refuses to operate."

These last words were shouted at the doctor, who had already turned on his heel and was striding swiftly towards the hospital.

10

The woman, small and slender as a child, was lying on a couch in the receiving room, her head awkwardly thrown back. She had lain thus, oblivious of everything about her, since they had brought her in. Hurriedly, but with characteristic thoroughness, Ivan Ivanovich washed his hands, his eyes on the woman, calculating her chances to live, noting symptoms of little import to a layman. Extreme pallor. Shortness of breath. Half-closed eyes. A weakness preventing her from flicking an eyelid.

Khizhnyak opened her slit blouse and undervest. They were drenched in blood, which stuck to his fingers. On the woman's left breast, just above the nipple, was a small, clean-edged wound. At the sight, Ivan Ivanovich forgot everything else and began a careful examination of the patient.

Her pulse was faint and rapid. The dullness of the heart was increasing every minute: a haemorrhage in the pericardium. Straining every nerve, Ivan Ivanovich managed to catch strange gurgling sounds.

"Well?" he queried, turning to Gusev.

"The heart," said Gusev, with a hopeless shrug.

"Yes, a wound in the heart," repeated Ivan Ivanovich. "We must operate. And at once. Take her to the operating room," he ordered Denis Antonovich. "And immediately begin an intravenous infusion of saline."

Gusev turned away with a shrug of his shoulders. He had no desire to see this woman die on *his* operating table. Let her die without any fuss here in the waiting room within the next few minutes. If Ivan Arzhanov had no objection to increasing the number of fatalities on his list, that was his business.

Ivan Ivanovich prepared himself for the operation Varvara, Nikita Burtsev, and Sergutov were already working over the patient. The operation had to be performed under general anesthesia. No X-ray was taken: there was no time, and it would not have shown anything anyway. Nor was a blood transfusion made, being contraindicated in such cases.

Ivan Ivanovich took his place beside the table.

Sheets covered the woman's entire body, except for a small square with the tiny wound in the centre. Gusev administered the anesthetic. With concentrated attention Ivan Ivanovich studied the iodine-painted square, calculating where the incision should be made. Once more counting the ribs, beginning from the collarbone, he took up the scalpel.

"Is she asleep?" he asked.

Nikita Burtsev nodded.

With one sure movement, Ivan Ivanovich cut the skin. A few more such swift, exact movements, each with its own instrument, whose shine was immediately dulled by blood, and the surgeon had penetrated the chest cavity.

Only the woman's hoarse breathing could be heard in the operating room. The beating of her heart could plainly be seen beneath its thin envelope. Ivan Ivanovich felt for this envelope, lifted it with the forceps, and dissected it with a knife. Dark blood instantly gushed through the incision. The surgeons absorbed it with gauze. Now the surface of the heart itself could be seen, appearing and disappearing in a thin wash of blood. Warily Ivan Ivanovich slipped his left hand through the incision he had made in the heart envelope. His face was strained and intent. With the subtlest of movements he turned his palm upwards and brought the heart to the surface, where it lay pulsating with a lacquered shine. A small triangular wound was visible in the upper surface.

"Sutures!" whispered Ivan Ivanovich quickly.

Varvara placed the needle holder in his outstretched hand, while she held a second threaded needle in reserve. Without taking his eyes off the heart lying in his left hand, Ivan Ivanovich put in the stitches. Assistant Sergutov tied them, pulling them tight with the utmost caution. The bleeding stopped. Ivan Ivanovich raised the heart slightly, swabbed the blood from the pericardium, and replaced it in its bed. He was just about to suture the pericardium when the heart, so recently lying on his palm, impeding his stitching with its contractions, suddenly stopped beating. The patient's face immediately turned blue and Nikita Burtsev could feel no pulse.

"Ivan Ivanovich!" he whispered in fright.

Cold sweat beaded Ivan Ivanovich's brow, but he said in a controlled voice:

"I see."

"What did I tell you!" cried Gusev loudly, a hectic flush rising to his face.

Ivan Ivanovich glanced at him swiftly and then said to Nikita:

"An adrenalin injection! Quick!"

Once more he inserted his hand and began slowly massaging the heart. When the injection had been made, utter silence reigned in the operating room; even the breathing of the people gathered about the dead body on the operating table was audible.

Suddenly there was a slight movement of the heart. It contracted with tiny jolts and began to flutter like a frozen bird warmed in the palm of the surgeon's hand. Its beating grew ever stronger, starting the blood circulating. The patient's face grew pink, and her pulse became regular. Nikita grinned broadly.

Everyone drew a breath of relief.

"Wipe my face," said Ivan Ivanovich to one of the attendants, turning to her a brow as wet as if he had been labouring in a July sun.

Calmly he stitched the incision in the pericardium and closed the opening in the chest cavity.

The operation was over. The patient was breathing. The heart was beating. Ivan Ivanovich stood beside the operating table, white with strain. He took the woman's pulse. How relentlessly he would have dispatched anyone who now dared make an attempt on this life, saved with such difficulty.

11

"Will she live?" asked Olga.

"Of course."

"Who could have done such a thing? And why?"

"Oh, just a brawl," said Ivan Ivanovich with a frown. "Some lout. "

"A beast," murmured Olga.

"A fine sort of beast! A real beast would have finished off the job," mused Ivan Ivanovich, heedless of Olga's sudden pallor. "The way he did it shows he was a coward. Missed the first time—his hand shook so. The second time he struck in a fit of fury, but he lacked the courage to pull out the knife. Denis Antonovich pulled it out, at the hospital."

"And you—could you kill a person?"

"What nonsense!" said Ivan Ivanovich brusquely. "All my time is spent saving life, grudging each drop of blood. Some people think a surgeon is a butcher, without any feelings. Only a cynic could think that. Often a surgeon looks upon patients whose lives he has saved as if they were his own children. A true surgeon, rough or gentle though his manner may be, is always humane, though it may not sound very modest to say so."

"But if you had just cause?" insisted Olga. "You never can tell—things happen—"

"It depends on what." Ivan Ivanovich shrugged his massive shoulders. "Oh, if I ever caught a person commit-

ting an act of diversion, I wouldn't have any scruples about finishing him off. But ordinarily a person should control his emotions. If I should ever come home and find you with—another man—" He turned to Olga and looked at her for a moment, his face blanching.

"What would you do?" she asked, unflinching under his gaze.

"I wouldn't kill him. But I'd throw him out. Perhaps I'd give him a beating. I probably would. It's hard to say—after all, it wouldn't be a mere argument; it would affect my whole life."

"And are questions affecting one's whole life settled by violence?" asked Olga with a touch of irony.

"Listen, Olga, is there anything seriously wrong?" He gazed at her sullenly, angered by her tone. "You can't keep on trying my patience—torturing me like this—if it's just a passing caprice."

"I understand."

"Have you stopped loving me?" he asked with the desperation of a man jumping off a cliff.

"I don't know," said Olga, her indecisiveness prompted by a sudden wave of pity for him.

"You're afraid to be frank with me. What do you mean by 'I dont know'?" he protested weakly, afraid to force a confession; then, after a painful pause: "Tomorrow you can go home. Perhaps I better make that trip to Uchakhan—to the Yakuts. Perhaps when I am gone you will see things more clearly."

12

The frosty air stung Olga's face. Before her lay the vast sweep of the gold-fields, wrapped in snow and smoke. She walked down the path and climbed the veranda of the Khizhnyaks' house, hurriedly slamming the door behind her to keep out the cold. Pushing the shawl off her forehead, she looked about.

Elena Denisovna was sitting at the dining-room table holding Natasha in her lap and leaning over the child's fair head to read an article on obstetrics in the last issue of *Soviet Medicine.*

"Looks like there's no going against nature," she said with a sigh, turning to Olga. "They keep on writing about painless birth, and try all sorts of things, but none of them are much good. Perhaps they'll find something some day, but at present the most we medical workers can do is help nature take its course. We can only interfere with nature when she plays bad tricks on us. In normal cases we can't seem to do without the moans and the pain. But we ought to. Women shouldn't have to pay so dearly for their children. It's enough to give anyone a bellyache to see how some of the women suffer."

With nimble fingers Elena Denisovna adjusted Natasha's dress and put her on the floor. Closing the magazine, she said solicitously:

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm almost well," answered Olga, looking at Elena Denisovna affectionately, almost enviously.

When she came to think of it, why had she spent so much time with the frivolous Pava Romanovna?

No one would ever have guessed that Elena Khizhnyak was nearly forty, that she had four children, and was busy at her job from morning to night. The saying: "Forty years old—her tale is told" could not possibly be applied to this woman, so full of vigour and love of life.

Now she raised her arms to adjust her hair, laughing down at her daughter, and one had to laugh with her, so sincere and hearty was the sound, so fresh and rosy were her unpainted lips.

"I may be well again, but I can't laugh like that," thought Olga.

"And you even find time to read the newspaper," she said aloud, turning over the pages of *The Medical Worker.*

"Yes indeed. One doesn't dare lag behind in our field," answered Elena Denisovna. "And I don't miss any of your articles either." Suddenly she lowered her voice and asked: "Is there anything wrong with Ivan Ivanovich? He's grown so thin of late, and looks wretched."

Before Olga had a chance to take herself in hand, the door was flung open and Varvara stood there, shaking the snow from her collar and braids.

"Hello," she said to Olga with a constraint that was almost coolness. Then she turned to Elena Denisovna, and her face broke into a warm smile as she announced, unbuttoning her coat: "We received such heaps of books! For the feldsher course and the club library, and various individuals who sent in orders. You can't imagine how many!"

When she had taken off her things, she walked up and down for a minute, slender and graceful in her tailored woollen dress, then sat down next to Natasha on the brown bearskin rug on the floor. She played with the blocks and the doll, amusing the child, while Olga watched in admiration, for the first time seeing in Varvara not only a pretty girl, but a real personality, efficient at work and charming at home.

"Now I have the works of Gogol, Turgenev and Chekhov," said Varvara happily, addressing both women. "I've already ordered a bookshelf at the carpenter shop." Suddenly she burst into uncontrolled laughter. "Can you imagine? One of the fellows there proposed to me today. He's very young, but he has such funny hair—like a plucked goose: the feathers are gone but the down remains. He said to me: 'I'll take such good care of you! You won't have to do a thing. I have a victrola and lots of jazz records. I'll dress you up and you can listen to music all day long!' Can you imagine that?" Varvara jumped up, overcome with laughter, and cried: "Can you imagine? He'll dress me up and sit me there like a doll to do noth-

ing but play records all day long! I told him I'd wait until his collection of jazz records was complete. I told him I couldn't be expected to listen to the same thing day after day. I also told him I was very demanding, and that by the time I was ready to choose myself a husband he would be completely bald. No, of course, I didn't say that. It's not his fault he was born with such funny hair. I simply said he'd get tired of waiting. Don't you *love* it?" asked Varvara turning first to Elena Denisovna, then to Olga. "'I'll dress you up and you can listen to music all day long!' All day long! I'd go mad. He'd have to keep me on a leash, or hang me up by my braids, like a squirrel by the tail." Varvara went to her own room, but turned at the door to say to Olga. "Did you ever know that if you catch a chipmunk by the tail, the skin comes off? I saw it myself. Once some little boys caught a chipmunk on the wall of our yurt at home. Do you know how our yurts are built? The logs are not laid lengthwise like in Russian houses, but are stood on end, meeting at the top, so that the roof is smaller than the floor. Well, one summer the boys caught a chipmunk climbing up the wall and held it by squeezing its tail with a stick. It cried. Really it did," said the girl frightenedly. "It had beautiful black eyes the size of peas, and its tears, too, were the size of peas. I couldn't believe it. I still can't get over it—such a tiny creature and such big, genuine tears! And the skin came off its tail, leaving nothing but a bare little bone. Then I began to cry too, and beat the boys with anything I could lay my hands on."

13

"I have forgotten nothing, beloved Ivan Ivanovich," whispered Varvara as she placed a large basin on a stool in the middle of the room. Much as she loved him, she would gladly die for him. But how much better to live for him, to become like him—wise and learned and needed!

Varvara plunged her hands into the water, and, resting her palms on the bottom of the basin, wiggled her fingers. Despite the chillness of the room, she did setting-up exercises and washed herself in cold water every morning. Submerged, her hands looked like live flowers. Now they leaped out to clutch a bar of soap, and once more dived under the surface.

"Rondo" was the trade mark she read on the soap as she ran her finger tips over the indentations of the letters. "Why should it have such a strange name? 'Rondo.' Not a Russian name, but the soap was Russian. And there were pens called 'Rondo' too. 'Rondo' soap, 'Rondo' pens. What nonsense was she thinking!"

Varvara sudded her arms to the very shoulders, rubbed the bar of soap over her cheek, sniffed it, and laughed like a child. How delightful it was to wash!

Her hair was wound about her head turbanwise, elongating her face. She poured water out of a jug over her neck and shoulders. Its coldness made her laugh and give little squeals of delight. It ran off her firm little breasts and splashed into the basin.

"Glorious!" she murmured, rubbing herself with a turkish towel.

Quickly she dressed and began to tidy her room. She was proud of the things she had bought with her own earnings, and took good care of them. She was especially fond of china.

Once she had said to Elena Denisovna:

"In the settlement where I was raised, they used to freeze milk curds in moulds made of cow dung. For the sake of cleanliness, they would line them with snow and pour water over them to make a thin coating of ice."

Often she recalled her former life, and the contrast with the present filled her with happiness.

It was in such a mood that she appeared at the hospital that dull winter morning. The minute she entered

she sensed that Ivan Ivanovich was already there, though she had seen or heard nothing to indicate it. Glancing into his office, she found evidence that he not only had been there, but had spent the whole night there. Why? Were any of the patients in a critical state? Varvara stood in the middle of the room searching her memory. She could name by heart all the patients in the surgical department, knew the case history of each, the state he was in, and the treatment assigned by the doctors. She had a remarkable memory. This was one night when Ivan Ivanovich could have slept peacefully at home. But he had spent the night here. An ash-tray on the window sill was filled with cigarette stubs: he was the only one who smoked cigarettes down to the very holder like that. It would take a whole night to smoke so many cigarettes. And on the window-pane were patterns, still unerased by rime, which he had drawn with his fingernail.

Only recently had glass panes been introduced into the yurts of the settlement in far Yagonussk where Varvara had been born. Formerly ice had served as glass.

Two deliberate lines, one intersecting the other to form a cross. And another cross. A question mark, and another cross. Varvara studied them intently, feeling no shame at her effort to unravel another's secret. If the secret concerned someone so very near and dear to her, had she not a right to know it? If he were suffering, if some great grief and misfortune had come to him, wasn't it only natural that she should wish to share it?

"What meaning do Russians attach to a cross—outside of the religious meaning?" Varvara asked Elena Denisovna when they were working together later in the day.

"What kind of a cross?" asked Elena, stopping with a medicine glass and bottle in her hands.

"Two diagonal lines crossed in the middle."

"I'm sure I don't know. What you've drawn might be a crosspiece instead of a cross."

"A crosspiece? What's that?"

"Something built out of wood to hold the leg of a table, or a Christmas tree."

"A Christmas tree? Oh no, It couldn't be that!"

14

"I'm leaving the day after tomorrow, Varya," said Ivan Ivanovich.

The words came so suddenly that everything went black before Varvara's eyes and she almost dropped the tray of instruments she was carrying.

"Where are you going?"

"Into the taiga to help the hunters."

"What about our course?"

"Gusev will carry on for the present."

"Only for the present?" Varvara almost jumped for joy; the forceps, scalpels and scissors clattered on the tray and something fell to the floor with a bang.

The operation was over and the patient had already been taken back to the ward. Varya was only straightening up the operating room, but at all times the instruments must be handled with care. With what severity Ivan Ivanovich would have looked up from under his heavy brows had this happened during an operation! Even now the blood rushed to Varvara's cheeks, and after silently putting away the other instruments, she stooped to pick up the one she had dropped. It was Ivan Ivanovich's favourite scalpel.

"Oh dear!" said Varvara in dismay, forcing herself to glance up at the doctor.

But he looked at her unaware of her offense and her embarrassment; everything about him expressed sad bewilderment. He was going away on an important mission,

but his leaving was also prompted by the fact that there was no longer any place for him at home. He was unwanted, was being squeezed out. He was suffering, and she was unable to help him. Suddenly she felt like the chipmunk the boys had caught by the tail, and tears the size of peas sprang to her eyes. She stooped down as if searching for something else on the floor. When she straightened up, still clutching the scalpel, she asked timidly:

"Will you be coming back?"

"Yes," answered Ivan Ivanovich dully.

"Who is going with you? You can't go alone."

"I'm taking Nikita Burtsev."

"Take me!" cried Varvara impulsively. "Why is Nikita better? I'll assist at operations and cook for you. Elena Denisovna has taught me. Please do!" she pleaded earnestly, not taking her eyes off Ivan Ivanovich.

"No, Varya, I've already told Nikita I am taking him. He comes from those regions. He knows the roads and can act as guide and *kayur.** He's a fine, able chap. I intend studying with him during the trip so that he won't fall behind. He'll come back from the taiga a first-class feldsher."

"I too can act as *kayur,*" insisted Varvara stubbornly. "I can drive the most unmanageable reindeer—even when they're first harnessed in the autumn. They're wild then, after roaming the pastures all summer. And as for acting as guide—after all, you'll be taking local *kayurs* with you. No one will let you and Nikita go alone. You'll have so much to do—pitch camp, collect firewood, harness the reindeer in the morning—"

"We're travelling in relays."

"Just as I thought! Do take me with you! If you get lonely I'll sing to you and play on the *khomus.*"**

"Ah, Varya, what a child you are!" said Ivan Ivano-

* Driver of a dog or reindeer team.

** A Yakut musical instrument.

vich, smiling for the first time that day. "Don't you know what people would say about us?"

"Let them!" she burst out.

"No, I can't," he replied gently. "I—that is, I have—" his face twitched and he gave a wry smile. "I am a married man," he explained with obvious effort.

"Ah," said Varvara, mechanically drawing on the white table with the scalpel—crisscross, crisscross—two crosses.

Her lashes cast a faint shadow on her flushed cheeks. Crisscross—another cross. To this objection she could give a clear, convincing, though heartless retort. But, unable to be heartless with him, she held her tongue.

"So that's how it is, Varya," said Ivan Ivanovich after a pause. "And there's no point in spoiling the scalpel, or the table either. We'll still have use for them."

15

Igor Korobitsyn wiped his hands on a linen handkerchief, thrust it into the pocket of his overall, and stood listening to the test run of the new ore-crusher. With a silky rustle the great drum revolved, working flawlessly. When the ore poured in, the roar of its breaking was added to the hum of the many machines. New equipment was being installed in the ore mill. Igor nodded approvingly to the mechanics, and began to whistle a new dance tune under his breath, his ear still cocked to the operation of the machine.

"I'm satisfied," said Tavrov, on a tour of inspection. "When the mine steps up its output, it won't find us lagging behind."

"We can handle a hell of a lot now," observed Igor. There was a cold look in his large eyes, so melting when women were about. "We've done it, so to speak," he added glumly.

"And it wasn't so hard!" Tavrov was enthusiastic. "That's because everybody was solid behind our plan for reconstructing the mill."

"Why shouldn't they be? The advantage is clear enough—increased percentage of plan fulfilment. Everybody's interested in that."

"You too?"

"Me too. I'm responsible for all the machines in our mill. But you don't know what that costs me! I have to spend every minute of my time here if I don't want to slip up on something. And I'd like to be doing other things —working on my own inventions."

"And on your own poetry," added Tavrov, not without a touch of sarcasm.

"I don't deny it."

"And spending your evenings with Pava Romanovna."

"Oh, come on!" replied Igor irritably. "I can't live without any fun, can I? Got to have rest and recreation, so to speak. By the way, did you know that Arzhanov was leaving for the taiga?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes . . . I heard."

"What's the meaning of it?"

"Nothing special. He was supposed to have made that trip long ago. He kept putting it off."

Igor looked searchingly at his chief: an unmistakable note of joy had sounded in Tavrov's voice. As the two men left the shop, Igor gave him another sidelong glance. Tavrov seemed preoccupied.

Evidently he was undergoing some crisis in his life. His glance was keener. His face had become drawn and pale, its features sharper and more resolute, giving him an air of distinction. Igor's fondest dream was to be a distinguished-looking man with a charming personality; the insignificance of his appearance caused him endless pain. To be sure, he had handsome eyes. But they did him

little good. Pava took him as a joke, Varvara never even noticed him, and Olga was indifferent. The only thing Olga ever talked to him about was his work.

Igor recalled how gay and lighthearted Olga had been that spring day they had gone on a picnic to the mountains, and the hurt she had caused him turned into resentment against Tavrov.

They walked through the mill, past various machines, including the new crusher whose steel jaws were noisily crunching stones. A fine, strong machine, the first to begin the crushing process. On a wide belt the ore came sweeping toward the engineers, the size of the lumps diminishing the further the ore travelled from the bunker. Belts and motors hummed, and whirling wheels were blurred discs. The mill was working at top speed.

Igor cast an expert glance over all this, and saw in his mind's eye the rest of the machines entrusted to his care—the machines in the powerhouse and in the mine, the hydraulic rams used in outdoor work in the summertime. The clatter and roar of forces obeying the slightest wish of their masters. Perhaps the reports he made about them were more interesting than his poetic flights.

"Better to be a good mechanic than a bad poet," thought Igor to himself, and the acknowledgment brought relief, as though he had suddenly got rid of a great burden.

16

Platon Logunov, like Igor Korobitsyn, was a mama's boy. But Logunov's mother had had eleven daughters besides this son. His father, a foreman in one of the Ural metallurgical works, had loved his wife dearly. To this very day she was a handsome woman, despite her years. The energetic wife of Khizhnyak resembled her both in appearance and character. His sisters were given good Russian names—Manya, Katya, Sonya, Lyuba, Lena, Ol-

ga, Tatiana, Natasha, Svetlana, and plain Dunya, with the last-born called May, in honour of the workers' holiday.

His sisters. Logunov smiled. How he loved the sound of their gay girlish voices! Thoughts of his sisters made him resent the satiric stories, once so popular, about marriageable girls from poor families. He was incensed by the mockery aimed at dowerless maids in search of husbands, and at their unfortunate parents. His sisters owned no doweries, and had no need to. They studied in elementary and secondary schools, and then in higher institutions if they so desired. His was a friendly family, whose members helped and advised each other until, one by one, they took an independent stand in life. The girls had no fear of growing too old to marry; eighteen was for them not a fatal age marking them as "old maids" if single, but an age finding them engrossed in serious study. During holiday visits home, the little nest fairly burst with the noise and excitement raised by fledglings preparing themselves to fly away for good.

Often it had been difficult to feed such a family, and especially to clothe it. Their mother reconciled herself to being shabby for the sake of her children, and even so it seemed almost impossible to garb them fittingly for the beginning of each new school year. Sicknesses and quarrels occurred in the family, but the mother piloted her children through them without casualties. She found all of her happiness and her full reward in seeing them succeed in life. Two of them were now doctors, one an agronomist, another a teacher. Four of the girls, as well as Platon, had already received college educations, three were still attending school, one had chosen to enter a factory as a turner, and three little ones were still at home. The whole enormous family was forging ahead, each member finding his place in life. The mother did not worry about how to marry off her daughters; her only concern was to see that they did not fly too far away.

Their native land was vast, and the work to be done lured them to its farthermost reaches.

Platon Logunov had first worked in the Urals, from where he had been sent to the Far East. He had gone willingly, and had remained there for a long time. But he had kept in touch with his family, frequently writing and sending money to his mother and treasuring the laboriously-written letters she sent him.

Accustomed as he was to confiding his deepest secrets to her, he had written about Varvara, so like and yet so unlike his own sisters. His sisters had stepped to education from the working class; Varvara—straight from a tribal community. Yet she had taken strong, deep root in the new soil.

The romantic old story of the European and the native girl who was capable only of loving and dying, was out of date so far as Soviet "natives" were concerned.

Of late Logunov had spent day and night at the mines, where they had been joining two drifts, so he had had no opportunity to visit the Khizhnyaks. The work was progressing slowly because the ground proved to be particularly resistant in this place. The hewers themselves and Martemianov and the new chief, and Logunov, who remained a mine-enthusiast even after taking over his new job, were impatient to see the rich new deposit worked. Maria had returned home with an infant daughter, and the bewhiskered Martemianov no longer smiled sarcastically on being called "Grandpop." His smile was a happy one now.

It was morning—an early, grey dawn—and so cold that the mist clung like dirty cotton to the valley where the gold-fields lay. Only the snowy roofs of the houses and occasional treetops could be glimpsed through this earth-bound fog, which blotted out the peaks of the mountains.

Logunov was used to the cold. The snow crunched under his feet, and it seemed that the very air rang as he

strode along. The road lay between drifts formed by snow swept off the mountainside. Suddenly the mine entrance yawned black through a veil of campfire smoke, which mingled with vapour issuing from the mine and clung in thick tendrils about the entranceway. Logunov caught sight of Ivan Ivanovich among the workmen warming themselves at the fire. He was standing with his feet planted wide apart, looking enormous in his dogskin coat, striped fur boots, and fur cap with ear flaps. A rifle looking almost like a toy was slung over one powerful shoulder. Seeing the doctor at his former domain, Logunov quickened his steps.

"What are you doing here?" he asked anxiously, forgetting to say hello.

"What am I doing here?" repeated Ivan Ivanovich, as if startled out of a dream. "Ah, yes. A doctor's presence is alarming. But I just stopped in passing. Lured by the smell of the smoke."

"Out hunting?" asked Logunov with a sigh of relief. "How can you hunt in this fog?"

"Yes, hunting—that is, taking a walk," replied Ivan Ivanovich in a husky voice. He tried to give a bold little laugh, but it was not much of a success. "I've never seen the mines," he added in a tone of appeal, as if afraid to be left alone under that dirty-grey sky. "Too bad to go away without knowing how gold is mined."

"Come along," said Logunov, glancing into the doctor's face. "I can show you the whole process. I come here often—can't get out of the habit. The mine keeps pulling me back. And right now we have a big job on our hands."

They put on some overalls, climbed into the cage, descended to one of the levels, where they supplied themselves with carbide lamps resembling small searchlights, and set out along little passageways, now light and full of people, now as dark and narrow as a molehole. It was along these very passageways Olga had walked with Mar-

temianov. Logunov took the doctor to all the interesting spots and introduced him to the miners, each of whom he knew by first and last name, though he often called them by their nicknames—Petya, Lukasha. Ivan Ivanovich watched these people, many of whom seemed familiar, and listened to Logunov's explanations. But he understood nothing at all.

17

Obediently he followed at the heels of his guide through this subterranean labyrinth, vaguely conscious of the geniality of the people here and of the showers that made them pull up their collars as they passed through damp sections of the mine. It seemed to him that all his life had been spent in such endless wandering. His joyless childhood. Study. Work. Then work and study together. As the years passed, things grew harder, but more interesting. Now, however, the interest was gone and life had become flat, colourless, a burden. Why was he a doctor? What kind of a doctor was he if he could not cure his own ailment? He had lost all appetite. Food stuck in his throat. He could not sleep or relax. He could not even think coherently. His heart was oppressed by a restlessness that drove him from place to place. Not a moment's respite. He must wrench himself out of this depression. The worst thing was that there was no one in whom he could confide. Had it happened earlier, he would have told Logunov everything, but after Varvara's confession, he felt guilty. It was as though he had unwittingly stolen this man's dearest possession.

"Another stupid complication!" thought Ivan Ivanovich as he gazed at the wall with unseeing eyes.

"Is it clear?" asked Logunov. "That's why the mine won first place."

"I see," muttered Ivan Ivanovich, seeing nothing.

"But here I am wasting my time—I haven't done a thing all morning."

For some time Logunov had been wanting to speak to the doctor about his private affairs, but he remembered how Ivan Ivanovich had evaded such a conversation in the autumn, and therefore made no effort to approach the subject a second time.

"Why not? Why aren't you at work?" he asked him guardedly.

"I'm leaving for Uchakhan. You knew that, didn't you? Today I'll perform my last operation, and set out the day after tomorrow. For a month or two," he ended up.

"Is everything ready?"

Ivan Ivanovich nodded. He recalled the sunny day when he and Olga had quarrelled on that bench under the poplar. It was then that Logunov had told him about the invitation to take this journey into the taiga. And only a few days ago he and Logunov had again talked about it.

At present they were crawling, all bent over, through a low, narrow tunnel. The light of their lamps swept up and down the props and the logs of the ceiling. Everything smelled of earth and rotting wood.

"She's glad I'm going," said Ivan Ivanovich in an unexpectedly loud voice. "She treats me like an unwelcome guest."

Logunov slowed down, but said nothing, knowing that now he would be told all.

"For a long time we've been living together like strangers," continued the strained voice behind him. "The awful thing is that I see and understand everything, but haven't the strength to break away of my own accord." Logunov hunched his shoulders against the wave of misery coming from his companion. Ivan Ivanovich stumbled, and grew silent.

"Perhaps it's better that you are leaving," said Logu-

nov thoughtfully, though he had not wanted the doctor to go away. His conversation with Igor Korobitsyn had revealed what was happening, and since then he had made his own observations. But he was so certain of the surgeon's advantages over Tavrov that all cause for alarm seemed absurd. "Are you sure you aren't making a mistake?" he asked gently. "It seems to me that Olga Pavlovna longs for that sense of independence every individual is entitled to. And you must help her attain it. You've tried and failed? Then you must have made the wrong approach. You'll get a better view of things from a distance."

"Who knows?" breathed Ivan Ivanovich.

"Where are you going now?" asked Logunov, feeling as dispirited as his companion. They had reached the cage at the brightly lighted landing.

"I'm going—I can scarcely say 'home.' I have to pack. At four o'clock I'll perform this last operation. Usually I operate in the morning, but today everything's upside down. Thanks for suffering me, Platon Artyomovich."

"At least you've seen how gold is mined," said Logunov in a flat effort to be cheerful.

18

"Here, let me hold him for a minute. Heavens, what a helpless little mite he is!" Olga carefully placed her hands under the infant's back and head and lifted it up gazing at it fondly and sniffing its milkyness. "Hello, precious! You can't even see anything yet—your eyes don't focus. Too much to focus on, I suppose—keeps you in a constant state of astonishment, doesn't it?"

"It's high time you were raising your own babies, and not admiring other people's," said the fat grandmother with good-natured gruffness.

"I know," said Olga wistfully.

"Oh, you've got plenty of time yet," put in Pava Romanovna. She was sitting on the edge of the bed in a short skirt that left her round knees exposed, unbuttoning her blouse: it was feeding time. "First put the affairs of your heart in shape."

"What a funny one you are!" said Olga half in reproach, half in annoyance.

Pava Romanovna shrugged her plump shoulders as she accepted the fluffy bundle of baby from her mother's hands.

"Perhaps. But I have an eye for things. You can't hide anything from me, can you, son?" she said, tenderly kissing the infant's pink cheek. "He's a marvel, isn't he? The very image of his father."

"He really does look like Pryakhin," said Olga softly.

"Who else should he look like?" asked Pava Romanovna in surprise.

"But you yourself said—"

"I've said lots of crazy things in my life. I had to find some means of moving Ivan Ivanovich, so I pretended I was afraid of having my husband catch me red-handed. I simply didn't want another child. But Ivan Ivanovich is too hardhearted. And now I'm glad. Such a precious little thing!" Once more she kissed the baby, and there was no telling which version of her story was the true one.

"Life must be easy for you. You're satisfied no matter how things turn out," observed Olga.

Pava Romanovna considered for a moment, drawing her brows together in unwonted effort.

"It's just that I don't like to complain and make other people miserable," she said at last. "Perhaps there're lots of things I'm dissatisfied with. Perhaps I find I've frittered my life away. I might have become a famous actress, or at least a good manager of a restaurant. There's where I'd have made a name for myself! Just my

element!" A rather foolish expression of vaingloriousness passed over Pava Romanovna's face as she imagined herself a famous *chef de cuisine,* bossing the underlings about.

Olga smiled, recalling with what wild abandon she had danced.

"Of course it's too late for me to do anything now," continued Pava with her old complacency. "I'm in a rut. We have plenty of money, and Pryakhin spoils me. He's always getting a raise or a bonus of some sort. Look at this panne-velvet he just made me a present of! But of course I have plenty of responsibilities. Say what you like, but the running of the house all falls to the woman. And the bringing up of the children—three of them, mind you! That's no joke! You ought to have some too, but of course it's different with you. How's your work coming? Are you still writing?" she asked, removing a speck from the cheek of the sleeping infant.

"Yes I am," replied Olga. "So much that is new and interesting is being done here. It makes me want to write about everything—all at once." Her grey eyes suddenly grew wide and serious. "My work is the only thing I think about these days."

19

The meeting of the Party Bureau ended late.

"It'd take a giant to run this District Committee the way it ought to be run—to grasp everything and make the right decisions," thought Logunov to himself as he strode down the street. "It's a good thing I have reliable people to help me. I ought to be more demanding, I suppose. No resting on laurels! But the people here are a fine lot, and politically sound."

During the past few months Logunov had lost weight in his effort to "grasp everything and make the right decisions."

"We have a whole army of responsible workers here," he mused, "and each of them must be made to feel he is in just the right place. Otherwise he won't be able to make the best use of the people under him, and to see that they are content. Of course it's not the business of the District Committee to appoint people and tell them what to do. That's the job of government and administrative organizations. The Committee only gives general directions and recommendations. But you've got to know people like your own five fingers to do that. And it's better to give timely aid and advice, and even a few good trimmings, than to find yourself facing the fact that someone can't handle his job. In other words, no time for napping."

His thoughts turned to a report just made to the Bureau by the director of a state farm: "We pointed out the shortcomings in his work and told him to pay more attention to political study, and here am I having to get down to study also—the books the agronomist promised to bring me tomorrow. I've been at this job for over six months now. At first there seemed to be no tangible results in either agriculture or industry, no matter how much I worked. But after the first quarter passed, and then the second, it became clear we were forging ahead. All our interests—the interests of the whole district—are in common."

Logunov glanced at the deep blue sky sparkling with cold starlight. The solemn, preoccupied expression of his face softened. What could be more lovely than the fragile silence of a frosty night? Suddenly the cracking of the ice on the river rent the air like a gunshot. Again the silence. The boughs gave off the blue glitter of crystal, while porcelain sledge tracks, clean and smooth, swept down the road to the river. How he would like to go sledding on that road, as in childhood! But with Varvara clinging to him, instead of his little sisters. Tearing along in the face of the wind, raising a cloud of snow dust in

the wake of the sled, landing in a drift with a girlish laugh sounding in his ears as he kissed the adorable face, all powdered with snow!

He went to the Khizhnyaks' and gave a strong pull at the door which Denis Antonovich, a past-master at most homely tasks, had stoutly padded against the cold.

Varvara was sitting on a low stool by the stove playing on her *khomus*. She silently nodded to Logunov, a smile curving the bright lips pressed to the instrument. With the knuckle of her finger she struck the edge of a metal plate held by a frame resembling a door key. As she breathed and blew on the plate, the air was filled with little sounds which trembled and quavered like faint complaints. She was playing musical improvisations comprehensible only to the initiated.

"Dreaming, Varya?" said Logunov as he took off his fur coat and shook hands with Elena Denisovna and Denis Antonovich.

"Haven't you learned to understand what she's singing about?" asked Denis Antonovich, wondering at the change which came over Logunov's face. He attributed it to the difficulties the Secretary was encountering in his work, but Elena Denisovna, with a woman's intuition, felt that it was caused by an affection of the heart; she succeeded in convincing her husband that she was right.

"I'm beginning to understand," answered Logunov quietly.

"Really?" asked Varvara eagerly, pausing for a moment. "This, for instance. . . ."

Logunov leaned toward her as he listened to a musical rustle like soft laughter, but the more he listened, the more sombre grew his expression.

"Enough," said Varvara, darting him a glance from under her drooping lashes. "Enough, Platon Artyomovich, or you'll be guessing all my secrets. I want to keep at least a few of them to myself."

"That's selfish of you," he murmured.

"Do you think you could play an honest-to-goodness song on that *khomus* of yours, Varya?" asked Denis Antonovich, dragging his stool over to join the circle. "That one, for example, that you were singing not long ago?"

"The one about the cuckoo? No, I can't play that. There are some things you can't play on a *khomus*. It's an instrument for the maidens. How eager I was to learn to play it when I was a child! I always envied my older sisters when they confided their secrets to each other on the *khomus*."

"Which did you envy more—the playing, or the secrets?" asked Elena Denisovna affectionately, also drawing up her chair and taking up some handiwork.

"One as much as the other," answered Varvara, wrapping up her tiny instrument in a handkerchief and putting it in her breast pocket. "Now I'm learning to sing Russian songs. I've grown to love Russian music. I'll always look on *khomus* music as a sort of beloved cradle song. Whenever I play it I remember our valley and the yurts and the herds of wild horses in the mountains where the yellow grass waves above the snow. Some six hundred years ago we Yakuts came from far, far away. Our legends speak of lions and eagles and the sea. We made our way to the north as nomads, bringing herds of cows and horses with us. Life was hard and full of deprivations until the coming of Soviet power. But now? What is happening in the north now? Who should know better than we do? So let's sing a song—the one Denis Antonovich taught us last evening."

Denis Antonovich threw another shovelful of coal on the fire and returned to his stool. With his eyes on the flames, he began to sing in a pleasant tenor:

The harbour at night, was silent and calm....

Elena Denisovna and Logunov joined in, and a little later, as if she had been tuning her ear to the song, Varvara added her rich voice to the little chorus:

Farewell beloved city!
At dawn we are departing....
And there on the strand,
My darling will stand,
Smiling and waving her hand.

20

"Perhaps we too will be departing," mused Denis Antonovich. "The fighting seems to be growing fiercer every day. Today's paper says the United States government intends asking Congress to abolish the neutrality law. How do you like that? American businessmen are itching to warm their hands over the fire Hitler has kindled. They've put out a new type of plane called the Flying Fortress and are asking permission to supply Britain with armaments."

"Well, after all, the English are more or less related to the Americans—like sisters," said Elena Denisovna.

"Those sisters once pulled each other's hair in dead earnest," put in Denis Antonovich. "The capitalists would skin their own fathers if it brought them anything. In a word, the time for neutrality is coming to an end. Has come, in fact. Once America is involved, world war is inevitable. Before Hitler finishes with England, he will attack us. He's like a mad dog; he'll throw himself at one person after another until somebody knocks him out. I'm afraid we'll have to do some fighting."

"Looks like it," said Logunov. "My generation was still holding on to its mother's apron strings when you were fighting in the Civil War. We've grown up under Soviet power, and now it's our turn to defend it."

"Will you go to the front, Platon?" asked Varvara with characteristic impulsiveness.

"Naturally. Won't you?"

"I'm a nurse and a Komsomol member," she replied proudly.

"I was a feldsher in a cavalry brigade," said Denis Antonovich.

"In other words, only the children and I will be left. There'll be plenty to keep us busy here too," said Elena Denisovna gravely.

Logunov got up, and he and Varvara went towards the door.

"What's that song about the cuckoo?" he asked.

He had no desire to leave, and unconsciously sought reasons to linger.

"It's a Yakut song about spring," said Varvara, halting with the dainty grace of a mountain goat: the slightest rustle and it would be off like an arrow!

"I'll sing it to you another time," she promised, turning to Logunov. "The words say: my lovely grey bird sings that a bountiful summer has come, that the grass is weaving velvety green patterns in the sparkling sunlight. And many other things. It's a lovely song, but sad. Very sad."

When absorbed in what she was saying, Varvara had a habit of taking the hand or the arm of the person she was speaking to. If her companion was a woman, she would even embrace her. Only with Ivan Ivanovich was she constrained.

Logunov knew all her little ways.

"You've been looking unhappy of late," he said all of a sudden.

This unexpected advance caused Varvara to start back and remove her hand from the sleeve of his coat.

"It's late," she said. "I must get up early in the morning."

She even attempted a nonchalant yawn, but, irritated by such pretense, said simply:

"It's time for you to be going, Platon Artyomovich."

•

"It's not time, and I don't want to go home," said Logunov to himself when he was out in the cold, but no one heard his protest.

He remained standing near the house, gazing at the windows encrusted with frostflowers. Dark shadows moved across the frozen panes and strips of yellow light fell on the snow. Logunov was sad, but did not feel cold or lonely.

"A serious case—very serious, but not hopeless." He remembered these words spoken by Ivan Ivanovich about one of his patients.

"I wonder how he himself is feeling," thought Logunov, glancing up at the windows of the doctor's house.

Only the end window, the window of Ivan Ivanovich's study, was lighted. The other three were blind white eyes staring into the darkness. There was something inexpressibly dreary about the house. It seemed abandoned. Recalling his conversation with Ivan Ivanovich at the mine, he resolutely climbed the steps of the snowy veranda and knocked. After a minute's wait, he knocked a second time. Slowly the door was opened. The face of Ivan Ivanovich shone pale in the doorway.

"Come in," he said softly, not recognizing Logunov.

Logunov closed the door and followed the surgeon down the unlighted hall. Only now did he realize that he had shown little tact in coming here. Perhaps the doctor already regretted the moment of weakness in which he had confided in Logunov.

"Ah, so it's you," said Ivan Ivanovich, glancing into the face of his visitor when they reached the study. "I thought it was someone asking me to go out on a call.

Glad to see you. Very glad," he repeated, though his face, freshly shaved, did not brighten noticeably. "I'm working, you see."

Ivan Ivanovich nodded toward the manuscript on his desk. A sheet of paper was in the typewriter lighted by a parchment-shaded table lamp.

"Am I in the way?" asked Logunov, taking a seat.

"Not at all. I work too much as it is. Trying to catch up. In a day or two I'm setting out. I've put off this journey long enough." At this point Logunov became aware of the doctor's personal possessions piled in one corner of the room, and the bed made up on the sofa.

"Olga Pavlovna isn't well," began Ivan Ivanovich, seeing Logunov's eye fall on his lonely bed; but on remembering that Platon Artyomovich knew everything, he waved his hand and said bitterly: "I'm at the end of my rope. It's pretty bad, Platon Artyomovich, when you have nowhere to go. I used to think a person should act resolutely in a situation like this—tear himself away, and make an end of it. But now that it's my turn, I'm even afraid to know the truth—keep laying it to Olga's illness, or to some feminine caprice. I suppose it's easy to tear yourself away if you have something else in reserve, or if you no longer care. But when you're still in love—ah, what's the use of talking? Have a cup of tea."

Logunov had had tea at the Khizhnyaks, but a glance at his friend's drawn face made him accept the invitation.

"She's asleep. I suppose she really is ill," said Ivan Ivanovich dully, removing the saucer serving as ash tray. "She goes riding round the district in this beastly cold—sometimes on reindeer sledges, sometimes in lorries."

Logunov made a better study of the room when the doctor had gone into the kitchen. There were still signs of a woman's hand, but the hand of a woman who was a stranger—one who came in the morning, dusted and

tidied up, and left until the next day. The room looked like an office where someone spent the night.

"So he's going away," thought Logunov. "Can it be that Olga Pavlovna will take advantage of his absence to leave him? But I can't advise him to stay home, not only because we've given our word to send a doctor to those people, but also because it's impossible for the two of them to go on living together like this. His leaving will help them to see where they are. It would be foolish to try to talk them into making up: they haven't quarrelled. Some deep-seated canker is gnawing at their happiness. What a pity! They could be such a splendid couple!"

"Here you are," said Ivan Ivanovich, appearing in the doorway, teapot in hand. "The stoves are kept going until late at night these days. And I have some food here too," he added, moving easily from cupboard to window sill as he brought butter and cheese and some tins and a half-empty bottle of cognac.

He put the typewriter on the sofa, gathered up his papers, and arranged supper on the desk. Apparently he was used to managing without a woman's help.

"Well, here's to friendship," he said to Logunov as they sat down. "Thanks for dropping in. I sat down to work as soon as I came home from the hospital. After all, work is the best means of steadying the nerves." He sighed and became lost in thought, sitting for some time oblivious of Logunov. At last he shook himself out of his revery and said:

"Let's drink to love. Are you surprised? After all, the world of fine human feelings hasn't changed just because one queer duck has had a jolt. And the jolt hasn't turned him into a sceptic or a pessimist."

"That couldn't happen to you or me," assented Logunov, thinking of his unhappy affair with Varvara. His ideas and views on life so closely resembled those of Ivan Ivanovich that there was nothing to argue about.

"Only a sheer individualist could turn into a disillusioned sceptic in our day and age; only a person who felt that the universe was created for his personal benefit. When such a person is cheated or disappointed, he turns against the whole world. But how rich and interesting life is!"

"'Life and the Beautiful are one,'" quoted Ivan Ivanovich sadly. "Which means that the most beautiful of all is the people, for they alone are immortal. Your miserable little sceptics are constantly being blotted out. I want to feel myself a part of the whole people, and I believe in the Beautiful." Logunov was struck by the expression of elevated suffering on the doctor's face. "They say that love is blind," he continued, almost inspired. "But it seems to me that Love has a thousand eyes. She selects one from among the millions; and the one she selects is not the best, but the one she cannot do without."

"How good you are! And how intelligent!" thought Logunov, deeply moved, as he gazed at Ivan Ivanovich. "But how could you have allowed another to step between you and your wife? Things would have gone hard with Skorobogatov if it had been Ivan Ivanovich he had insulted, instead of Korobitsyn and Olga Pavlovna. The doctor would have made short work of him. But as a matter of fact, from the Party point of view, Ivan Ivanovich should subject himself to self-criticism, should see if he is not in some measure to blame for what has happened."

"Then why should people become disillusioned?" he asked aloud.

"Because of a wrong choice. In their haste, they take what is not meant for them," answered Ivan Ivanovich, with conviction, a nervous spasm passing over his face. "There's no hurrying with such things. They affect a person's whole life. My dear Platon Artyomovich," he added in a sudden outburst, "don't get married until you can't

live without the object of your choice! Unfortunately, in such a state it's difficult to determine whether the other person can live without you," he ended, remembering that Logunov had already made his choice, also unhappily. He dropped his head, and for the first time Logunov noticed a streak of grey in his thick hair.

"Here's to your journey!" said Platon, again aware of mixed feelings of sympathy and jealousy. "I wish you luck. You'll meet many difficulties, but many fine people too. Trips through the North are remembered a lifetime."

"There's no chance of my ever forgetting this trip," said Ivan Ivanovich with a bitter laugh, but presently Logunov caught the familiar gleam in his eyes. "I'll open a small hospital there in the taiga, and if I run into any particularly interesting cases I'll bring them back with me, make a thorough clinical study of them and write up their histories. I had an interesting case not long ago—" and Ivan Ivanovich launched into an enthusiastic account of a patient with a strange growth affecting the sympathetic nervous system. "I cut the thing out. Enormous! This size!" he said, indicating a lump the size of a bean, a size engineer Logunov could scarcely reconcile with the adjective "enormous." Absorbed in his own thoughts, Logunov caught only separate phrases of what the surgeon was telling him: "I pushed aside the carotid... went very deep.... At first I couldn't even reach it.... When the patient came to, the pain in his arm had already disappeared."

"Rheumatism?" asked Logunov.

Ivan Ivanovich looked at him in astonishment.

"Rheumatism? An injury to the brachial plexus as a result of an automobile accident! The first operation was performed in Ukamchan. Rheumatism! You *would* say something like that!" Ivan Ivanovich laughed quietly but wholeheartedly. "I suppose I was just as obtuse when you were explaining the mine to me."

21

Olga, who had caught cold, was sitting in the dining room with an angora shawl thrown over her shoulders, reading what she had just written. Being alone in the house, she was taking advantage of the opportunity to read aloud her latest article. Recently the local radio had broadcast her story on a famous pathfinder who was a member of one of the Evenn hunting collectives. She had become almost ill as she listened, so saccharine did her writing seem, and so given to repetition.

"More like a lady's fancywork than newspaper writing," she said to herself harshly, blushing with mortification. "Why fill the papers with verbal garbage? The little space they allot you in their columns should be like bright windows giving a glimpse into the places you describe. There's no reason for smearing the panes with elaborate designs that nobody can see through. The hardest thing of all is to write clearly and simply."

"I seem to have done it this time," she decided, running her eyes over the article again.

"The taiga is grimly white, but the lights of a new collective-farm settlement gleam merrily against the snowy background."

Olga took up her pencil and made some corrections.

"The taiga is grim in its winter whiteness, but the lights of a collective-farm settlement gleam merrily among the snowdrifts."

Once more she crossed out the first line. "Grim winter has come to the taiga, but the lights of the new settlement gleam cheerfully among the snowdrifts."

"It's clear from what follows that I'm writing about a collective farm. Probably I'll make just as many new changes when I read it tomorrow. But if I keep on changing it, I'll come to hate it. One has to draw the line some-

where. For newspaper work, the most important thing is to grasp essential facts, although of course the reader wants a fuller idea than mere facts can give. I can't limit myself to bare statements, like· 'The Evenn collective farmers have moved into new houses.' Twenty years ago these people didn't even know what houses and stoves and dresses and bed linen were."

Olga recalled what she had seen in these houses. One day when the weather was fifty degrees below zero, she had watched an old Evenn woman throw off her fur jacket and begin bathing her infant grandson in a bathtub placed on the table to bring it closer to warmth and light. The child beat the water with its hands and stared with wide, slanting eyes at the bright bubble which was an electric light bulb. The older children climbed up on the table and sat there laughing, pushing each other, getting in their grandmother's way as they watched their delighted little brother.

"Welcome to your new home, citizens! Welcome to the good new life! What words could she find to describe all this?"

The door slammed.... Ivan Ivanovich had gone to work for the last time before leaving on his trip, and it was still too early for him to return. If it were Pava, she would have begun cursing the cold the minute she entered, and marvel that nature should go to such extremes. Elena Denisovna would have shut the door quietly and wiped her feet on the hall mat. Varvara would have run in as swiftly and soundlessly as a doe. Could it be Tavrov? Olga had not yet recovered from the shock of this possibility when she heard the voice of Logunov saying:

"Anybody alive in this house?"

"Come in," replied Olga quickly.

She had liked Logunov from their first meeting. With him, as with the Khizhnyaks and Ivan Nefyodovich Shirokov, the elderly eye specialist, her relationship was as

simple and friendly as if they had known each other all their lives.

As soon as they had exchanged greetings, Olga recalled a recent conversation she had had with Elena Denisovna, as well as yesterday's meeting with Ivan Nefyodovich. Perhaps that was because all these people felt the same toward her and her husband. She easily guessed the purpose of Logunov's visit.

"My dear Olga Pavlovna," Ivan Nefyodovich had said yesterday, his broad, wrinkled face in its frame of wiry hair lighted by a kind, almost paternal expression. "Why don't you go along with Ivan Ivanovich on this trip into the taiga? You'd find plenty of things to interest you there."

"I can't," Olga had replied. "I haven't even considered it."

"Do consider it," insisted the latter gently but firmly. "Just imagine how your presence would help him to carry out his difficult mission."

"On the contrary, I would only make it harder for him."

"How can you say such a thing? Just see how unhappy he has become of late. Forgive me, but I can't help feeling as I do. Such a splendid man! And I swear it's all on account of some trifle."

"No, not a trifle," Olga had answered seriously, without surprise or offense. "But let's not talk about it."

Elena Denisovna had spoken more bluntly. "Have you quarrelled?" she had asked. "No? Then for goodness' sake, show him a little affection to cheer him up! You know how he loves you! Why, there's no recognizing him any more—he goes on working and trying to be cheerful, but his eyes are like two black wells."

"Can Platon Artyomovich really have come to speak to me on the same subject?" thought Olga. "Everyone is worried about Ivan Ivanovich. I too can see how he is suffering. But so am I. I appreciate all his good qualities and what great work he is doing, but can I help what has happened?"

"Each of us has his own worries," she said to Logunov joylessly. "Here I sit racking my brains all day long —I suppose you think it's all the same whether I write the sentence this way or that. But it isn't. My work is precious and essential to me, while you look upon it as a mere side line."

"Why should you think such a thing?" protested Logunov in a deep voice, as rich in meaning as in overtones. "Yours is a very important field of work, Olga Pavlovna, the printed word should be the living word, which means a word full of thought and feeling. There's much that is splendid and remarkable in our life if we just take the pains to observe it. As for the form, the means of expression—that's for you to labour over. Journalists...."

It had been a long time since anyone had spoken to Olga in such a way, and she brightened as she told him what she was doing and her plans for the future. Logunov could not help admiring her enthusiasm.

"Olga Pavlovna," he said at last. "There's something I'd like to speak to you about—not as Secretary of the District Party Committee, but simply as a friend. I haven't had much experience of married life—not any, in fact. All the more reason why I'd like to find out what has come between you and Ivan Ivanovich."

For a moment Olga was silent.

"I don't know myself," she answered at last. "Nothing seems to have come between us. We've just grown apart. Ivan Ivanovich is very kindhearted, but for some reason his attitude towards me is offhand, or even condescend-

ing. I feel as if, through my own carelessness, I had fallen into a well... and he saw it and made no effort to help me... and I myself was incapable of climbing out."

22

Varvara stood at the stove waiting for the griddle to heat. On a plate beside her stood a whole pile of pancakes she had already fried.

"Whoever invented cakes that were so hard to make?" she said. "One slip of the knife, and they go to pieces like wet paper. But at last I seem to have mastered the art of flapping them."

Elena Denisovna, busy expelling a shaggy dog that had followed her home from the shop, did not immediately answer.

"Shooh! Get out! This place is overrun with stray dogs! This one's after the fish in my bag." Elena Denisovna drove the dog out on to the veranda and slammed the door. "After dinner we'll make dumplings for Ivan Ivanovich," she said as she unwound her rime-white shawl. "We'll make about six hundred of them and freeze them hard as stone. There's nothing like a supply of frozen dumplings when you're travelling in these parts."

"I'll help," said Varvara with a sigh.

For another ten minutes she silently plied her pancakes. Her sleeves were rolled up, baring arms rosy with heat, and a white kerchief was bound tightly over her hair.

When she had removed the last pancake, she turned to her chef and, with a flourish of her knife, cried in a voice of despair:

"Why doesn't he take me with him? I can do anything! I'd be such a help to him, and nobody can take care of him as I would!"

"You're crazy, Varvara!" replied the amazed Elena Denisovna. "How could a young girl like you go off alone with those men?"

"Why not? Our girls—and Evenk girls too—are right at home on the trail. We know how to pitch tents, and harness reindeer, and drive them off to the herd. I was hired to do this back in our settlement. I know how to slaughter deer too. It probably sounds horrible to you, but it's just a simple job to me. I've done it lots of times."

"Goodness gracious!" interrupted Elena Denisovna. "Why should such a pretty little thing go in for butchering?"

"There's nothing shameful about it! It's people we must spare, not animals. Don't you believe I could do it? Do you think I'm just boasting?" Varvara rushed to the door. "Here, watch me knife this dog!"

"Varvara! Are you crazy? What would Ivan Ivanovich think of you? A little cannibal, that's what he'd call you!" Elena Denisovna glowered at the slim figure crouching next to the dog, knife in hand.

Varvara, in her turn, glowered at the large Eskimo dog which stood before her, its massive paws planted wide apart, its tail wagging, a friendly look in its amber eyes. Such animals were bred by forest huntsmen, who found them excellent aids. They were simple work-dogs, used for hauling sledges, but it was considered brutal to kill them. What, indeed, would Ivan Ivanovich say? Varvara glanced down at her hands, and all of a sudden, without relinquishing the knife, she flung her arms about the dog's shaggy neck, buried her face in its cold fur, and burst into tears.

"Ah, Varya," murmured Elena Denisovna, realizing for the first time what was going on in Varvara's breast. "My poor little ducky! Such a silly little ducky!"

"Is Olga Pavlovna coming?" asked Varvara, glancing at the table laid for dinner.

"No, she isn't feeling well."

"And is Ivan Ivanovich leaving anyway?" Varvara's voice expressed timid hope.

"Yes, he is. She'll get well quicker when he's gone," answered Elena Denisovna tersely as she filled some small saucepans.

"Here, I'll take their dinner to them," said Varvara, reaching quickly for the saucepans.

"Throw a shawl over your head." A shade of doubt passed through Elena Denisovna's mind as she watched the girl's impulsive movements and the colour coming and going in her face. "She may do something rash," thought the older woman uneasily. "Now then, she's gone off without the shawl after all!"

Varvara slipped past the window, looking particularly red-cheeked and black-haired against the gleaming snow. Holding her pans at a safe distance, she swiftly mounted the neighbouring steps.

"I've brought you some dinner!" she called breathlessly from the hall.

Her heart first stopped beating, then pounded madly. She did not expect to see Ivan Ivanovich. He was still at work. But Olga, his wife, the woman to whom he was devoted.... How had she won this devotion? As Olga came to meet her, Varvara devoured her with her eyes. Was that pale hair really more attractive than Varvara's black braids? And those white cheeks? Olga's enormous eyes, deeply shadowed, were shining restively. And how tall she looked, wrapped in that fluffy striped stuff that must be very warm.

"Why have you bothered?" said Olga gently. "I'm not feeling that bad. I could have prepared something myself."

"It doesn't matter," replied Varvara gloomily. "It's all the same, getting dinner for six or for eight."

Olga took the saucepans into the kitchen, leaving

Varvara alone to study her surroundings. There were books, papers, and notebooks on the desk. Varvara had read Olga's newspaper articles. They weren't bad. So this was where she worked! That was all very well, but why had she become estranged from Ivan Ivanovich?

"I am sorry for you," said Varvara in a voice that rang like a taut string.

Perhaps it was her agitation, or perhaps it was something else that made the remark sound like a challenge.

Olga, who had just entered the room with the empty pans in her hand, started at the unexpectedness of the words. Her eyes grew even larger. For a moment the two women stood looking at each other without speaking.

Varvara wanted to add:

"Why should you torture Ivan Ivanovich so? You only make yourself unhappy in hurting him." But she lacked the courage; indeed, she could hardly breathe. "Only a person like that foolish fellow who had proposed to her and promised that once they were married she would do nothing but sit home all day and play the phonograph—only such a person could be refused. Ivan Ivanovich was so different! He rejoiced to see the girls in his feldsher course making progress, and he did everything in his power to advance young doctors, entrusting to them responsible tasks during his operations. How good it was to hear him laugh, and how dreadful to hear him scold! But of late he mostly scolded, or remained silent."

"Why do you feel sorry for me?" asked Olga.

Varvara did not answer at once, nor did she notice the empty saucepans Olga was holding out to her.

"They're clean. I washed them," said Olga softly, passing her fingers over the bottoms.

Varvara could no longer restrain herself.

"I feel sorry for both of you," she said. "How can you let him go off on such a long trip feeling as he does? He doesn't deserve such treatment. He isn't that sort."

"What sort?" asked Olga, gazing sadly at Varvara.

"He's—he's—too good," murmured Varvara tenderly.

"Are you fond of him?"

"Terribly!" burst from Varvara with simple candour. How well she knew his goodness!

Olga instantly became alert. For a moment something like jealousy stirred within her, but quickly died away.

"Yes, you're right. He *is* good," she said with constraint. "It's just that neither of us understands the other. And so we clash."

23

"I was born in Olekma, in the year of the Revolution. My family moved here after the Civil War. At that time my sisters and I were only so big," said Varvara, indicating the little girls who had come to see Natasha.

The children were sitting on fur rugs, fitting scraps of material to Natasha's dolls and chattering away in hushed voices.

"She wears all of us out in the course of an evening when she's alone, but together they play contentedly, without bothering anyone," said Elena Denisovna, glancing down at her daughter. "They're taught the collective spirit at the nursery school. Social habits." She laughed as she picked up the rolling pin again and sent little discs of dough flying into the hands of her helpmates.

The grownups were sitting about a table piled high with flour and dough. The ready dumplings were carried on tin trays to the shed, to be frozen.

Pava Romanovna, who had dropped in to see Olga for a minute, came to the Khizhnyaks' with her to help with the preparations. She sat there powdered all over with flour, her tongue working harder than her hands.

"I wouldn't put my children in a nursery for anything," she said gaily. "They have plenty of time to ac-

quire social habits! Let them remember their childhood as a happy-go-lucky time, free of worries. To be sure, it's their granny who has most of the care of them—she's even taken over the infant now. Home's so much more cozy!"

"My childhood was very hard; we were so poor," continued Varvara, for some reason very talkative and excited. "My father only had six cows in Olekma."

"Six cows!" exclaimed Elena Denisovna.

"That's very little for a cattle breeder," said Varvara as she pressed together the edges of the dumplings with deft fingers. "Our cows gave no more than two litres of milk a day, and the only food poor Yakuts used to have was milk products and noodles made of sapwood. And all the babies in our family were girls—five of us, one right after the other. That, too, was hard for my father. When a boy was born, the family got a grant of land, but girls received nothing. Nothing, that is, but beatings. The Yakuts used to say a woman must be taught. How? By being beaten. In childhood she was beaten by her parents, later by her husband whenever he was irritated by his poverty, or the loss of cattle, or some insult inflicted by his superiors. And here's a funny thing: the Yakuts were nomads where they used to live, but here in the North, their cattle breeding forced them to settle down. The winter lasts eight months, the thermometer goes down to sixty degrees below zero. The horses became woolly and learned to pasture in the open all year round, growing wild and fat. But the cows had to be kept indoors and fed hay. For the Yakuts, summertime was an endless haymaking. The rich cattle breeders—they were called *tayons*—took possession of the best land. Often dreadful feuds were fought over pastures."

"The class struggle," put in Pava Romanovna sententiously.

"Once my father had a fight with a *tayon* during a council meeting, and he was forced to flee the settlement," continued Varvara. "We made our way to Indigirka. There were no artels or collective farms at that time. My father watched the herds for some Evenk deer breeders and perished in the tundra. My sisters and I hired ourselves out to herdsmen until a school with a hostel was opened. My poor mother died of consumption. She never grew used to the new place, pining for Olekma until the day of her death." Varvara's voice broke, but she continued speaking with deep feeling: "Olekma! There never was a lovelier place! It's a joy just to remember it! There are mountains in Olekma, as there are here, but they are covered with evergreens—pines and firs. We lived near the forest. Even on dull days the sun seemed to be shining, so golden were the tree trunks! And what flowers! We had no toys, so we played with flowers. During the winter we had to remain indoors all day long. The door separating our living quarters from the cattle shed was kept open for warmth; steam would rise from the bodies of the animals, and the calves would wander about our yurt. It was dark. And we were hungry. Is it strange that there was so much consumption and trachoma?" Varvara dropped her hands into her lap, covered by a snow-white apron, and her eyes clouded with cheerless memories. "It was a dreadful life! Just think, in such a rich country! The cold doesn't matter. You can get used to the cold. And we are an industrious people, eager for anything new."

"You should be thankful to have got out of that filthy yurt of yours and landed among educated people! You're a lucky girl, there's no doubt about that!" said Pava Romanovna patronizingly.

"It's not because *I* got out, but because all my people have wrenched themselves loose from filth and poverty that I'm thankful," retorted Varvara vehemently. "In the old days, only a handful of rich people had contact

with Russians and could enjoy the fruits of culture. And even so, narrow-minded nationalists accused them of going Russian, of disgracing their people by adopting Russian customs. How I hate nationalists!" said Varvara, bringing her little fist down on the table, her eyes narrowing angrily. "I *hate* them! What have they to offer the people? Formerly one third of our population suffered from tuberculosis, and more than half our babies died. And they would like to restore the old order! It makes me weep to think that the revolution might really have been put down at the very beginning!"

The women had stopped their work and sat silently gazing at Varvara, carried away by her ardour. But now a smile relieved the tension on the girl's brow as she said, more calmly, and with a certain relief:

"But we'll not retreat a single step. You can't take away from us what we've won. You can't take life itself away from the whole people."

24

"Well, I'm going, it's hard to leave with such a weight on my heart—beastly hard. But I can't remain here. Olga has to be given a chance to think things over and to analyze her feelings. Maybe she'll miss me." This last thought made Ivan Ivanovich blush with shame. "You fool! She's doing everything in her power to get rid of you. Every line of her face says: 'Get away as soon as possible,'—and you thinking she may miss you! I'm afraid to have it out with her, damn it all! Me, who's never been afraid of anything! I can't bear to give up my last hope."

In his nervousness, Ivan Ivanovich broke the carved ivory paper cutter he was holding. Mechanically he fitted the pieces together.

"That's workmanship for you!" he muttered, unexpectedly taking an interest in the design so skilfully cut

into the flat handle. "A yurt with smoke coming through the hole. Reindeer. The northern landscape given in a few expressive lines—the contour of the mountains, the sun, and the bare trees. Marvellous workmanship." He sighed as he laid the two halves on the desk. "But however you try to fit them together, they've come apart for good."

He walked over to the window, scraped a peephole into the frozen pane, and looked out. White smoke billowed above the roofs of the houses, spreading out to fill the valley from end to end, to the very horizon where the sky was a murky yellow—the glow of the sunset penetrating the frozen gloom. He heard the voices of the Yakuts who were tying his baggage to the sledges in front of the house. Glancing in that direction, he saw a tangle of reindeer antlers, like a small forest, above which hovered a cloud of vapour.

"It's cold all right. And at night it will grow still colder. Already sixty degrees below."

To his belt Ivan Ivanovich fastened the straps of his high leggings, made of smooth warm deerskin. There is no wearing out such leggings, made with the fur outside, and worn over rabbitskin stockings with the fur inside. Light, comfortable footgear.

The leggings, a deerskin coat trimmed with wolverine, and a squirrel cap with ear flaps, had been brought by the Yakuts to keep the doctor warm during the trip. They had been specially sewn to his size. The songs sung about him in the taiga asserted that he was as tall as a mighty larch.

"How thoughtful they are!" thought Ivan Ivanovich sadly. Hearing women's voices outside, he turned back to the peephole.

Elena Denisovna was bringing a sack of frozen dumplings, holding it in front of her with both hands. Her face wore an expression of great concern. Behind her came Olga, also carrying a bag stuffed with packages.

Ivan Ivanovich's heart contracted. During these last few minutes before leaving he was especially conscious of his love for her. All day long she had been bustling about, making him ready for the trip. Was it to avoid being alone with him that she had kept herself so busy—always at the shops or the Khizhnyaks'. Suddenly she would remember the salve for frostbite, and rush off to the chemist's though Elena Denisovna had packed away a supply of goose fat for that purpose. Anything but remain at home!

"The knapsack! You've forgotten the knapsack!" cried Varvara from the Khizhnyaks' porch. "I'll bring it!"

Ivan Ivanovich recalled Varvara's plea to be taken with him, and her confession of love. If only Olga were so devoted!

Logunov and Khizhnyak entered the room without knocking. They were followed by Ivan Nefyodovich, Valerian Valentinovich, Sergutov, and the rest of the doctors. Gradually the flat became filled with people and steam. A group of women arrived, Pava Romanovna among them, flashing her bright eyes, showing her white teeth in a sly, seductive smile.

They had a glass of wine in parting, and sat waiting for Ivan Ivanovich to put on his things. Then they followed him out to the veranda.

"Well, you've got what you wanted," thought Ivan Ivanovich wretchedly as he looked at Olga.

Varvara pushed forward, but could find not a word to say. Ivan Ivanovich was touched. And here were the Khizhnyaks, husband and wife, both of them looking upset. Vapour rose above the people and the reindeer, which were already standing harnessed in the road, team after team. The powerful, carefully-selected beasts stood as motionless as statues, ready to rush off into the night and the cold. No time must be lost.

"Well, Olga, don't think too hard of me," said Ivan Ivanovich with a bitterness that made her shudder.

"It's all right," he murmured. He took off a squirrel mitten, stroked his wife's cheek and lifted her face, kissing her blindly in a surge of emotion. Then he turned to the others and said hoarsely:

"Good luck to you!"

Enormous in his fur outfit, Ivan Ivanovich walked over to his sledge, sat down, and made a sign to the waiting Yakuts.

The antlers of the reindeer jerked up, the runners of the sledges let out a screech, the Yakuts whipped up the beasts and ran beside them until they were under way, then threw themselves face down on the sledges. The party was off down the valley. Turning his face out of the wind, Ivan Ivanovich caught a last glimpse of his home with the people crowded on the veranda. It was as if they had just carried a coffin out of the house.

25

A grey dusk. White clouds of mist rolled down the frozen river between deserted banks where bare trees flashed by like fence palings. The silence resounded with a clicking of reindeer hoofs, a crunching of snow, a creaking of sledge runners.

Quickly flew the teams over the road laid by winter. Each sledge was driven by two deer hitched together by a broad strap; if one ran ahead of the other, the lagging one was struck below the knee by the curved dashboard of the sledge; this made the animals keep abreast. Four men were travelling with these teams: Nikita Burtsev, Ivan Ivanovich, and two guides. The baggage had been sorted and distributed among the sledges. Medicines, bandages, linen for operations, surgical instruments, and electrical equipment, had been placed with the doctor on

the sledge driven by Nikita Burtsev, now acting as *kayur* The deer raced ahead. Ivan Ivanovich sat firmly astride the light sledge. His body was warm, but his heart was cold and empty. No thoughts, no desires, no feelings. Nothing. The man on the sledge was only half alive.

Nikita led the party. His face was swathed in a scarf, out of the folds of which his sharp eyes darted from side to side. Sometimes he would warm himself by leaping off his sledge and running beside it, holding the rope reins tied to the antlers of the leader. After running awhile, he would jump back on to the sledge like a panther.

Once their path was crossed by the clover-leaf footprints of a rabbit. The rabbit hops along with its front paws together, pushing off with its long hind ones. Along the riverbank they saw sturdier footprints connected by the marks of a dragged tail: a fox had passed over the fresh snow, circling through the frozen woods, now poking its nose into a mousehole, now, with a light spring and a bristling of fur, setting out after a flock of partridges, now stealthily stalking a grouse whose even little steps zigzagged along the trail. Little squirrels' feet had left dainty impressions. Squirrels were scarce this year—a bad harvest of nuts in the cedar groves had sent them south to the fir woods. A sable's tiny tracks followed in the wake of the squirrel, its prey. The sable hunts mice too. Through the windstripped taiga its thin, flexible arched body slips stealthily, a fluffy brown creature whose coat shines with a silken sheen at the slightest movement, giving glimpses of the beige tints under the surface and the rich sepia down the back. The most beautiful, most durable, most expensive fur in the world.

In his short life Nikita Burtsev had caught twenty sables, most of them in traps placed near storm-felled trees straddling forest streams.

Nikita Burtsev had never owned cattle. His grandfather had lived in extreme poverty; his father had sold

his labour to the *tayons* until he took up hunting. And Nikita would have spent his entire life on forest trails with a gun over his shoulder, had not the disturbing thoughts sown by the Party propagandist from Verkhoyansk taken root in his head, under its mop of tousled black hair. In the Verkhoyansk valley, centre of mountainous North Yakutia, the thermometer falls to seventy degrees below zero. It would seem impossible to live at such a temperature. But the propagandists who came from there to Nikita's settlement were cheerful, clever, enthusiastic young fellows, and they spoke words to the hunters and herdsmen which sank deep into their hearts. They did things to people, these words—set the young men to thinking and shook the old men out of their lassitude, as though they had partaken of strong drink. People laughed and swore and gripped each other's hands. It was then that the hunters' cooperative was organized in Nikita's settlement, soon followed by a collective farm, a Culture Centre, and a seven-year school with a hostel for those who came from afar.

Nikita's family joined the hunters' cooperative, and at the age of thirteen he himself went to school for the first time. He was the star pupil. Many boys and girls his own age sat on the bench beside him, but there were other children only half his size and age. It would have been disgraceful for him, almost a grown man, to be surpassed by those youngsters. Nikita studied and hunted, but his restlessness grew with the years. It was as if only one half of him were really living, the other half waiting impatiently, tortured by surplus energy.

"We must find a wife for the boy," said the old folks.

"No, I must go and have a look at the 'Mainland'," decided Nikita, now a Komsomol. "I will find a wife later. First I must see what life is like beyond the taiga. The taiga is not the whole world."

When a course to train feldshers was opened in the gold-fields, Nikita, who had just graduated from the seven-year school, decided to attend it.

Now he was going on for twenty-two. He was honest, impetuous, openhearted, industrious, and he gave himself up completely to his medical studies, hoping some day to be of real service to his people.

"First I'll become a feldsher, and then I'll send for books and study medicine by correspondence. I'm determined to be a doctor," he told Varvara, who gave him full encouragement, knowing how persistent he was. Yet, just before they started out for Uchakhan, she had begged him to feign illness.

"How could I?" asked the shocked and injured Nikita.

He would have been sharp with anyone else for making such a suggestion. Guessing the cause, Nikita forgave Varvara. But his sympathy (surprising in view of his own innocence of the tender passion), had not allowed him to violate his conscience.

He was proud to have been taken along by the doctor, and now he kept glancing back to where Ivan Ivanovich sat jouncing along over the bumps.

This was Chazhma—a white and frozen plain stretching far and wide beyond the mouth of the Kamenushka River. The wind tore across it, searing one's face, cutting off one's breath. It seemed that the heart must burst, unable to stand such cold. But after a deep breath or two, one felt better, and the world looked more cheerful. On sped the sledge, racing after the wind. Distant stars floated overhead. The cold grew fiercer. Grim and lovely, these winter nights in the far north!

"Listen, Burtsev, have the head *kayur* make me up a team of three sledges. I want to learn to drive. Something to do," said Ivan Ivanovich during a short halt, rubbing his cheeks and chin as he spoke, for, unlike the

Yakuts, he travelled with uncovered face. His clothes were white with rime, and so were his brows and lashes, setting off his dark eyes.

The team was made up, and again four white clouds moved swiftly down the frozen river to the accompaniment of the swishing of sledge runners and the clicking of reindeer hoofs.

Ivan Ivanovich became completely absorbed in the task of driving. He pulled on the rope, flourished the whip, and cursed when the deer kicked out of the traces. Whenever this happened, he would turn the leader off the path and adjust the harness without dropping the reins. Then the deer, beautifully matched in size and strength and not the least exhausted by the journey, would break into a wild run, so that Ivan Ivanovich had to be quick in throwing himself back on to the sledge.

26

The night was far advanced in its slow revolution about the polar star. High above the frozen forest hung a late moon.

The teams turned into a gorge through which a small stream flowed. The runners knocked against ice packs formed by the turbulent waters in autumn, then struck up the bank, bumping over stones and snow-blanketed, storm-felled trees.

The moon and stars flooded the landscape with light, causing the black branches of the trees to stand out in delicate filigree against the snow. All unexpectedly the travellers saw plumes of smoke spangled with golden sparks rising from tents a short distance ahead.

A forest dweller threw back the flap of one of the tents and stood in the opening, his figure sharply silhouetted against the light from within.

"Ivan?" he cried.

"Ivan," answered one of the guides.

"From Kamenushka?"

"From Kamenushka."

The Yakut ran out to meet them. Women's voices chattered and smoke poured more thickly from the iron chimneys.

On entering, Ivan Ivanovich grasped the canvas of the tent flap with his bare hand and gave a start: the coarse material seared his flesh like hot iron. It became clear why the firewood rang so sharply under the axe: everything was fiercely frozen. During the winter, live trees were turned into bronze statues, and ice was as sharp-edged as glass.

"We'll spend the night here," announced Nikita.

"Very well," agreed Ivan Ivanovich. "How much ground have we covered?"

"Thirty kilometres. Tomorrow we'll change the deer so as to make better time."

The large tent, which seemed hot after the intense cold, was decorated as for a celebration. The guests were met by two pretty young girls decked out in all their finery.

"Tell us the news," said the bolder of the two to Nikita.

"You tell us," he answered as he helped Ivan Ivanovich pull off his furs.

A prolonged account ensued, for there was indeed much to tell.

After dinner Ivan Ivanovich lay down on the bed which had been prepared for him, stretched out, and seemed to fall asleep under the new fur blanket he had been supplied with. After the girls had washed the dishes, they went into another tent, where their relatives and the *kayurs* slept. The doctor and Nikita remained alone with an old Yakut who, wrapped in deerskin, kept vigil beside the fire. The flames roared in the stove, the sides glowed, little red devils danced in the apertures round the door,

and bright reflections leaped about the walls of the tent, dazzling the eyes. Ah, to sleep! The reindeer, which had been unharnessed near the tents, ran off to feed. Only the snapping of the frost in the forest could be heard, and then a report like a pistol shot denoting the cracking of the river ice.

Ivan Ivanovich lay straining his ears and thinking his bitter thoughts until he was ready to run away in desperation. Why had he left home, like some fabulous hero? People were probably laughing at him now, and justly so. He had not even insisted on having a serious talk with his wife. Afraid to learn the truth. And now someone else was with her. Perhaps Igor Korobitsyn. . . .

Ivan Ivanovich rose quietly, put on his clothes, and stood for a moment considering whether he should wake Burtsev. But he cursed himself for the thought and made for the door. He would take a little walk to clear his head. He did his best to make no noise, but the old man heard him and immediately jumped up.

"Lie down! Sleep!" whispered the doctor, patting him on the shoulder. "I will walk a bit. Good. *Uchugei!*" he added, remembering the Yakut word.

Reassured, the watchman lay down again.

The night had grown even brighter. The starry sky was as blue as the motionless waters of a lake. Beyond the black silhouettes of the trees rose the white mountain peaks. Ivan Ivanovich glanced about—yes, the reindeer had gone in search of food. Only the loaded sledges stood grey upon the snow. The harness had been removed and taken in. The wind was blowing down by the river, but it was deathly quiet in this forest retreat. Cold. Excruciatingly cold. From the distance came the intermittent barking of a fox, which turned into a piercing wail. Even the foxes were cold. Ivan Ivanovich was gripped by despair. He thought of waking up the *kayurs,* harnessing the deer, and returning to Kamenushka. But it would take two or

three hours to make ready for a return trip. How could he find relief from the torture of his thoughts? Fifteen kilometres separated him from the camp on the river where they had made their last halt. Reindeer could be obtained there. If he were to set out now, in a little while the old man would wake up Nikita, they would overtake him, and he would demand that they take him back. He would be home by morning.

Ivan Ivanovich did not stop to think why he wished to reach Kamenushka that night, nor did he come to any real decision. But his feet carried him back over the familiar road, between the trees lining the stream, over boulders and ice packs. At last he came to the stone portals opening out on to the wide expanse of the Chazhma River.

The anguish he was suffering completely possessed him, robbing him of his sense of dignity, reducing him to a straw blown about in a vast, relentless world. A knife-edged wind came tearing down the river, lacerating his face; it seemed that the whole heaven was bearing down upon his shoulders, making him bend and droop as he measured the kilometres in long strides.

"What limitless, empty expanses! Who would ever populate them? Whoever they would be, each would know his share of misery. But will each know his share of happiness?" mused this lonely man as he stubbornly battled the wind. "We are doing everything in our power to make people happy, but how can we succeed when people create such pain for themselves? Why should there be such suffering, such inexpressible heartache?"

His steps slowed down. He had difficulty in breathing. With his whole body he resisted the onslaughts of wind, which fell upon him like the freezing waters of a river, tearing at his clothes and forcing him back.

On catching sight of the bend in the river which was his destination, Ivan Ivanovich tried to quicken his

steps. But when he reached the place where so recently the camp had been pitched, he found it deserted. Their duty fulfilled, the forest dwellers had gone home. Only the remains of the camp were to be seen: packed snow, ashes, beds of boughs, and the frames of tents, like gallows raised on tripods.

Ivan Ivanovich considered what to do. He fully realized how strange his unexpected return to the gold-fields would look, but he kept on going, unable to stay his steps. On a wind-swept stretch he slipped and fell. For a moment he remained there, struggling for breath. Through the ice, framed by clean-licked show banks, gleamed the water. How peaceful seemed its flow! Or perhaps it was not flowing, but was frozen to the very river bed. As Ivan Ivanovich sat gazing, he recalled the day at the beginning of winter when he had met Olga skiing on the Kamenushka; once more he saw her slip and fall, saw the astonishment in her eyes, and the deep impression of her body in the white snow with the dark ice gleaming underneath.

Something seemed to snap inside him at this recollection.

"It's all over," he muttered huskily, and stretched out, face-down, on the snow.

He did not know how long he lay thus before he became aware of the cold creeping into him, crawling up his sleeves, edging with tiny pinpricks inside his collar. A little more and he would freeze to death. Or perhaps someone would come and find him half-alive, with frozen hands and feet. And then Gusev would put him on the operating table and do the amputating. He would be sure to cut off his limbs as high as possible, preferring to turn him into a mere stump than to take any risk.

"Damn it all, a fine ending that would be!" said Ivan Ivanovich, sitting up. He adjusted his cap, rubbed his freezing cheeks, and looked about.

A purplish dawn that might have been blue with cold, was attempting to break through the grey sky. The earth, too, looked grey and empty and dreary. It was sunrise.

The doctor got up and made his way back to the Yakut camp where he had been so hospitably received on the preceding night. He caught sight of reindeer coming toward him, their branched horns tossing in a cloud of white steam. The alarmed Nikita Burtsev had taken two teams and set out to trace the familiar footsteps in the snow. He was followed by the *kayurs* with a tent and a stove, in case of emergency.

27

Olga washed herself in cold water, lighted the stove, and set about tidying up the flat. Her heart was heavy, but she was relieved. This was the third day she had been living alone.

She heated a bit of tin and pressed it to the frozen windowpane, dreamily watching the water trickle down the frost patterns. She placed first one warm palm, then the other against the clearing on the glass, breathed on it, and looked out. Snow was falling, circling slowly in large flakes. Hurriedly she changed her clothes and went out. Yes, the snow was falling heavily, once more wrapping everything in a soft blanket. The air had become much warmer, and the frozen earth seemed glad to be relieved of the strain of such cold.

Olga ran down the steps and set out along the hilly path forming the streets of the settlement. She seemed to see the world anew. She was young, healthy, and she abandoned herself wholeheartedly to the joy of her freedom. At least for today nothing hampered or oppressed her. She watched the people in their snowy clothes, she caught with her lips at the fluffy flakes that blew into her

face, and felt like a schoolgirl returning from the last lesson before the holidays.

Quite unexpectedly she came to the path along which she and Tavrov had walked that warm autumn evening. As soon as she found herself on it, she glanced about anxiously. Now the path was buried in deep snow, with fresh snow falling from above. The weighted bushes reminded one of extravagant white plumes, or fluffy fox tails. There was no trace of the benches, except in one place, where a mound, like a huge white log, hunched out of the drifts.

Everything had changed but her feeling, now more pure and intense than ever.

"Here's the turn leading to our house. This is where we parted," she thought. "Why is it that we have scarcely seen each other since? So rarely; only from a distance."

The edges of some newspapers stuck out of the letter box on the door. Olga pulled them out and discovered a blue envelope addressed to her. She sat down by the stove and read the letter—read it once, then over and over again, afraid to believe her own eyes: it was an offer of a position as staff reporter for the regional newspaper. It also contained an invitation to a newspaper conference in Ukamchan.

The road resembled a wide trench running between towering snowdrifts, out of which protruded the crowns of trees. Winter is a time of ceaseless labour for roadmen in the North. They cart away whole mountains of snow to be dumped in the valleys. The wind blows unceasingly from the frozen hinterland, out to the sea, driving the snow before it and sweeping clean the tundra at the foot of bare mountains. But there is no halt in the traffic along the Ukamchan-Chazhma Highway. Cars move in a steady string from the coast to the taiga and back again.

Olga went by bus until, near the Big Ridge, the

lorry became stuck in a drift, and the rest of the journey had to be made by lorry.

People wrapped themselves in furs and blankets. The wind whipped at their faces, billowed out their coverings like sails, and powdered them with fine snow.

Olga, in her comparatively light apparel, would have suffered from the cold, had not a large loquacious woman invited her to share her enormous fur wrap and patchwork quilt.

"Jump inside," she said, generously holding open the wrap. "You'll warm up in a jiffy. Must be frozen."

Olga gratefully moved over. The woman threw the quilt on top of the wrap, holding it fast with an encircling arm.

"That's fine," she said good-naturedly in Olga's ear. "I could see you were shivering. Why in the world did you ever set out like that?"

"I was summoned here to the newspaper office," explained Olga, assuming that the woman was remarking on her lack of luggage.

"I didn't come just for the joy ride either," said her new acquaintance. "I've come to a conference of Stakhanovites. I'm head of a team of prospectors. Been prospecting all my life. Yegorovna's my name. Went digging along with my husband for fifteen years, but now I'm a widow. Lots of women in our artel. It's hard work, digging, but now it's easier, with the machines."

Olga glanced up respectfully at the woman's face, strong-lined, no longer young, weather-beaten like a man's.

"Sometimes they call me The Queen," went on Yegorovna, without the slightest boasting. "That's because I'm such a strong one. Can lift a five-pood sack like a toy balloon. Happened I'd find my man drunk—he was fond of the drink in his youth—I'd scoop him up and bring him home. Sober, he was no match for me—a strong fellow.

But just a child when he was drunk." Saddened by her memories, Yegorovna fell silent; and indeed, conversation was difficult now, for the lorry was tossing over a stretch of uncleared road.

Olga did not recognize Ukamchan in winter aspect. The houses, with their white windows, jutted out like boulders from the mountainous snow drifts. Everywhere there was a constant bustle and stir, characterizing the town as the centre of this vast region: cars, lorries, horses, reindeer, oxen, and dog sleds in the streets, with a steady stream of fur-clad people hastening along the trenchlike pavements.

The town was no less attractive in winter. There was less smoke here than in any of the mining settlements: buildings were steam-heated.

"A bit of Moscow!" thought Olga as she climbed out of the lorry at the bus stop. "Those large stone buildings must look particularly effective at night, all lighted up on these white streets."

"Where you bound?" asked Yegorovna, coming over to Olga with an enormous suitcase in her hand (both the fur wrap and the quilt were inside).

Olga looked up to see a handsome, broad-shouldered woman wearing a tailored coat with a sable collar and a sable cap with ear flaps. Her round face radiated good humour, joviality, and intelligence.

"For the hotel," said Olga hesitantly.

"Forget it! Won't be any rooms. The town's full of Stakhanovites. Come along with me. I've got a sister living here. Plenty of room in her flat."

28

"Very glad to make your acquaintance," said the editor of the regional paper as he rose to meet the anxious Olga.

Usually she was extremely self-possessed, but having come here with a longing to work, she began to doubt her ability, and the expectation of hearing her efforts appraised made her nervous.

"Your articles immediately roused our interest." He spoke with the heartiness of a man in an important position who knows that he has found the person he needs. "There was some difference of opinion about a few of your things, but that's only natural. Newspaper work isn't so simple. So far as the printed word is concerned, 'Come what may, it's there to stay,' as the saying goes. But I think you and I understand one another, don't we?"

Olga, still disturbed, merely nodded.

"I'm glad," he said, gazing at her with simple candour. "If you keep up the good work, we shall do everything possible to make things easy for you. We are offering you a position as correspondent in the gold-fields. You will receive a salary, in addition to separate payment for every printed story or article. As for a flat—are you in need of one? Where would you like to live? It seems you are—"

"I should like to have a separate room at the October Mines," said Olga firmly, without giving him a chance to finish.

An expression of surprise, or even disappointment, crossed the editor's face, who evidently knew she was married. But he replied, with his former heartiness:

"Very well. We shall arrange that. The room will be ready when you return. My assistant will tell you what is expected of a staff correspondent." The editor glanced at his watch and hastened to explain: "I'm leaving to attend a conference of Stakhanovites. If you step into the next office you will meet the members of our staff, your future colleagues. But here, let me introduce you myself. This evening you will be expected to attend a meeting here."

"I shall be glad to," said Olga with a happy smile.

She left the office on wings.

After a hasty dinner in a restaurant, she once more found herself outside with six hours at her disposal—one fourth of a whole day!

For the first time since she had arrived, she thought of Ivan Ivanovich. Now he could no longer say she wrote articles just "as a side line."

Suddenly seized with a desire to visit the port, she took a bus. The dazzling road climbed over familiar ground. The wind had died down, and the trees of the park thrust their mutilated branches motionless into the sky. The wind did not care whether the trees were wild or cultivated: it damaged anything that stood in its path.

Now the sea—a wide frozen expanse—stretched before her. Jumping out of the bus as it stopped at a turning, she made her way to the harbour. The tiny houses dotting the slopes of the old settlement were buried in snow to the roofs, while their smoking chimneys were almost on a level with the path extending along the top of the drifts. Deep passageways had been dug around the houses, so that from the distance they looked like so many piles of snow separated by ditches. A dog team swept past, driven by a *kayur*. A woman bundled in furs carried a salted salmon swinging from a stick which had been thrust through its gills. The weather was cold, but it was one of those bright blue days typical of February, with the sun glittering on the icy path up which the housewives carried water from a mountain spring.

Olga walked along observing everything, her heart pounding in her breast.

Snow was gleaming in the gorges and on the slopes of the mountains. A caravan of three-ton lorries was crossing to the far shore of the harbour, while a tractor dragged a pair of heavily loaded sledges up a hill. Above the harbour an airplane circled and landed on the ice, bump-

ing over the ruts as it made its way to the left shore, where the airport was located in summer. Olga mounted the massed ice of the bay along plank walks built by the fishermen. Wrapped in her angora scarf, her cheeks rosy with cold, she looked like a very young girl. Here, where she and Tavrov had wandered in the spring, where the outgoing tide had tugged at the wet seaweed, now lay—or rather hung—a vast field of ice. Again it was low tide.... Would time wipe out her remembrances as the waves had washed away their footprints in the sand?

"No!" thought Olga, almost crying out. "My love will last as long as I live!"

29

That evening she attended the meeting in the spacious office of the editor. There were many people present. Among other matters, they discussed an article containing incorrect data which the paper had printed. The guilty reporter made profuse apologies and promises for the future. Little consideration for each other's feelings was shown here. Olga's articles were also subjected to criticism.

She listened, only too happy to have any attention at all paid her modest efforts.

"I'll try to make a first-class reporter," she thought as she studied these people with whom she was to work. "And I shall see to it that they never have cause to complain of me as they did of that young man."

"Keep close to what's happening," said the editor. "Don't depend too much on the telephone. Profit by this reporter's mistake, which was that he was too lazy to make a trip to the spot and got his information by hanging on the phone day and night. He was bound to get things mixed up, and now we're having to answer for it. After all, one must be proud of being a newspaper-

man. One must love and respect one's work, and have a sound knowledge of it. Only then will work become a joy. And that's what we live for, isn't it?"

"Yes," thought Olga excitedly. "Now I know what it means to love one's work!"

"So you're leaving tomorrow?" asked Yegorovna as she made up her bed on a couch in the dining room, piling pillows at the head. "I'm used to sleeping with my head sticking up like a chimney," she explained, throwing her fur wrap on top of all the other covers. "And I like to be warm. Not so young any more."

Olga slept beside her on a folding cot. She had not yet undressed, and was sitting on the edge of the sagging cot with Yegorovna's patchwork quilt over her knees.

It was quiet in the room. Yegorovna's sister had gone to bed. A cat lay on some woollen mittens put to dry on the radiator, its head tucked under so that it seemed to be clasping its ears with its paws.

"It smells a cold spell," remarked Yegorovna. "See how it's huddled up? What a fine idea these radiators are!" she exclaimed as she put her woollen stockings next to the cat. "They've always heated twenty-four hours a day in the gold-fields. What a waste of wood! In Glubokoye too. But here—one furnace for all these flats—a whole settlement in one house! And they don't burn trees, but coal and peat. See how life's moving ahead? Give us time, and we'll have steam heat out at the mine. Why should we turn the taiga into a treeless wilderness? As it is, we have to cut down thousands of cubic metres of timber to make props for the mines. Thousands? Millions!"

The woman ran a rough hand over the radiator and patted the cat as well. Then, with a mighty yawn, she

crawled under the fur wrap. But before she had closed her eyes for the last time, she said to Olga:

"Seen the House of Culture here? Parquet floors and an orchestra, and so much light! Our club in Kholodnikan is almost as big. But the show here was a treat! Thought I'd split my sides! Singing and dancing—what do you call a show like that?"

"An operetta," said Olga, who had seen the bills.

"That's it. An operetta," repeated the woman, then, after a pause: "Our folks overfulfilled last year's plan of gold production by forty per cent. We'll do even better this year. But we've got to step lively to keep up in the entertaining line. Work's work, and play's play. We have some mighty fine voices out there in the taiga!"

Olga smiled appreciatively as she undressed, put out the light, and got into bed. The entire room was now bathed in blue moonlight coming through the frozen windowpanes. Olga remembered that night in the hospital. How little she had thought, on leaving Moscow, that she and Ivan Ivanovich would ever separate! Only here, in the far north, had she come to appreciate the vast importance of a surgeon's work. Why was it that, when she had been only a faithful wife, or rather, a domestic companion, dull and docile, she had been unable to perceive the full significance of his daily labour? Now, perhaps because she saw him from a distance, or perhaps because her own understanding had grown, she was aware of the greatness of Doctor Arzhanov. Yet his image was shadowed by another, more dear, more beloved. Was Tavrov as outstanding in his field as Arzhanov?

"If he isn't, I shall help him to become so," resolved Olga, thrilling at the thought.

Her thoughts turned to Yegorovna and the people from the newspaper office. Never before had she met them, yet she was enjoying the hospitality of the one, and was tied

by a working agreement to the others. The mere fact of her spending the night in this strange flat, on this strange bed, filled her with a sense of gratitude toward the people about her. She recalled Martemianov, the Party Secretary at the mine, the hewers there, the women from the state farms, the mining prospectors, and once more she experienced the sensation she had felt when first stepping on shore after her long voyage. Now the ground was firm beneath her feet! These people had become as essential to her as the air she breathed! Could she become, in some small degree, essential to them?

30

Tossed out of the cup, the water dropped on to the snow like grapeshot, frozen in its fall.

"Cold!" exclaimed Nikita Burtsev as he let down the tent flap.

"Isn't it?" replied Ivan Ivanovich, who was having a smoke beside the fire. "My hands are frozen, even sitting here next to these logs, that are still burning."

"Well, in two days we'll be living in a yurt."

They tied up their things, put on their coats, and went out. A herd of reindeer strapped into a ring stood shifting and shuffling near the tent. The end of the strap was held by a mounted *kayur,* who skilfully kept his seat in a flat saddle placed almost on the shoulders of his mount. The reindeer had a light-brown mane hanging from the underside of its throat, very large hoofs, and thin pasterns.

"Sturdy hoofs," observed Ivan Ivanovich. "Made to dig out food from under the snow."

Two of the animals were already hitched to sledges, and kept throwing back their enormous antlers, stretching their necks, and impatiently dilating their hairy nostrils. Two others, as white as polar bears, were taken out of the ring and hitched to the doctor's sledge.

Ivan Ivanovich began to help Nikita take down the tent. He joined in any work which did not require baring his hands, his profession demanding that he protect them carefully.

Nikita screwed up his eyes as he carried out the stove and shook the embers out of it. Ivan Ivanovich removed the tent pole, and then he and Nikita folded up the canvas. Only a deep hole in the snow lined with boughs, like a ravaged nest, marked the site where they had spent the night. In one corner yawned a deeper hole with two logs placed across it. Here the stove had stood, melting the snow to the very ground, and giving glimpses of dry yellow grass at the bottom.

On the preceding day the party had not been able to reach the camp where they had planned to spend the night, and therefore had been forced to pitch their tents for the first time. The delay was due to the fact that the river water had risen through cracks in the ice and frozen on the surface, forming a mirrorlike expanse on which the reindeer kept slipping and falling.

"I'm afraid it will be hard going today too, what do you think, Nikita?" said Ivan Ivanovich as he fastened the strap to one side of the sledge and tossed it to the other.

"Most likely. The river's 'boiling over,' " said Nikita, pulling the ropes tighter about the baggage. "If only we don't take a swim ourselves," he added as he placed a broad strap across the shoulders and under the breast of the right-hand reindeer, fastening the other end, which was looped about the dashboard of the sledge, to the animal on the left. Now the team was ready.

"A fine pair of whites," said Ivan Ivanovich, squinting into the wind.

Rocky cliffs rose on either side of the river. The wind blew the snow off the slopes, leaving only white fissures gleaming among the grey, lichen-scarred rock. An inexpressible coldness swept down from the heights. The

gorge of ice and stone through which the river flowed seemed specially designed to funnel the winds.

Again the reindeer began slipping. First one, then another would fall and be dragged across the ice until it found foothold and struggled to its feet. The tortured animals tried to turn back, halting and huddling together. At last the *kayurs* were forced to throw the rope reins over their own shoulders and haul the teams. Nikita and Ivan Ivanovich followed their example.

The snow blown off the mountainsides went swishing across the ice. In the distance, where the sunrise spanned the peaks with a bridge of fire, the surface of the river sent back flaming reflections. Ivan Ivanovich remembered seeing such glowing skies back at the gold-fields, and again his heart was cold and empty. Slowly he strode ahead in his fur boots, pulling along his resisting "whites" (two more teams came plodding behind them) and thinking of himself and Olga and the strange diffidence that kept him from having things out with her.

Every once in a while he would rub a mitten over his cheek or his nose, conscious of a slight numbness. He obstinately refused to cover his face, yet not once had he suffered from frostbite, while the Yakuts, swathed to the eyes, kept freezing the bridges of their noses.

The cold was excruciating, and now some subtle change in the scenery took place: the red glow at the head of the river faded and died away, while the nearer ice grew more intensely blue....

Ivan Ivanovich became conscious of what was happening only when he found himself wading through water. It flowed over the ice in a thin bright stream wreathed in vapour. This presented a serious difficulty, yet it brought animation to the lifeless surroundings.

"Another three kilometres!" shouted Nikita, relaying the instructions of the guide. "Then we can cross to the bank."

Now even the deer stopped resisting. Splashed water froze on the men's clothes, their high boots became glazed, the runners of the sledges were thickly coated with ice. The water was still flowing, but the minute it ceased to spurt through the cracks, it would form a frozen mush which, jamming against the front of the sledges, would hold them there, immobile, until spring.

The guide swerved towards the riverbank, but the surface ice suddenly swayed beneath the weight of the sledges. Nikita and Ivan Ivanovich detoured round the dangerous spot without stopping. All essential equipment—the surgical instruments, electrical apparatus, surgical dressings, and medicines—were on Nikita's sledge. Ivan Ivanovich caught a glimpse of the guide, almost up to his waist in water, rushing from sledge to sledge to cut the harness from one team after another. The freed deer ran to catch up with the train, but the tent, iron stove, food supplies, and fur sleeping bags, were lost in the river.

Ivan Ivanovich was in a fever of excitement. He sought out the sledges loaded with instruments and medicines, and did not take his eyes off them, fearful lest they too become swamped. And indeed the water did begin splashing over them and the baggage. They seemed to be afloat, and at that very moment Ivan Ivanovich felt the ice sink under his own feet. Biting his lip with vexation, he abandoned his reindeer and hurried to the aid of Nikita, his knees hitting against chunks of floating ice. He thrust his arms into the water and felt for the framework of the sledge carrying his equipment, took firm hold of it, lifted it slightly, took a deep breath, and with the strength born in an emergency, raised the whole thing to his shoulders and strode ahead, grunting with strain. Tatters of fog streamed across the river, settling in thick rime, making breathing difficult. Out of the mist rushed

the two white reindeer, sluicing water on Ivan Ivanovich. Behind them the whole grey herd came crowding close to the shore. The animals reared and leaped, striking each other with their antlers. Ivan Ivanovich dragged his rescued sledge across the ice. Furiously he stamped his feet and waved his arms and shouted, urging on the people carrying the precious supplies.

He helped them reach the riverbank. Immediately they built an enormous red-gold fire whose smoke swept low over the ground, though there was no wind. Steam rose from the frozen garments. Ivan Ivanovich kept looking at the ice-coated sledges and the canvas bags rescued by Nikita and the *kayurs*, and feeling in his own breast pockets to make sure they contained the cotton-packed ampules of serum used for matching blood groups. All the medical equipment was intact. Ivan Ivanovich's arms and legs were trembling from exertion, but his mind was easy. He would have considered it a disgrace to return to the gold-fields with his mission unaccomplished.

31

"Here are the dumplings. But they're all frozen together," said Nikita, holding up a formless mass. "The *kayurs* saved them quite by chance."

"That's all right, we'll have good use for them yet," said Ivan Ivanovich. "We'll melt them a bit to tear the paper off, and then chop them up and stew them."

Nikita laughed.

"If Varvara could only hear you! She gave me detailed directions as to how to boil the dumplings!"

"But she didn't foresee that they would take a swim in the river," said Ivan Ivanovich, the thought of Varvara bringing a smile to his lips.

"The medicines are safe and sound," continued Nikita. "That was a fine idea of Denis Antonovich's—to pack

everything in tins and tarpaulin sacks. We didn't give them much chance to soak."

"Did you see how I lifted that sledge out of the water?" boasted Ivan Ivanovich.

"I hardly had time to cut the traces," replied Nikita. "You picked it up like a bear snatches a salmon out of the river. Have you ever watched a bear fish at spawning time?"

"I have. It's a lucky thing we took our ducking *after* we came through the gorge."

They were in one of the log cabins of a taiga settlement to which they had been brought by Yakuts sent to meet them as soon as the local Soviet learned that the river was again "boiling over." Beyond the log walls raged a blizzard which had swooped down at nightfall. The air was full of scratchings and rustlings and a plaintive wail, growing at times into a furious roar. At such moments the people in the room, including those who had come from neighbouring yurts to get a glimpse of the doctor, lifted faces lighted by the oil lamp, and listened silently. The old women in their voluminous clothes drew harder on their pipes, interrupting their kneading of pelts, while the young people laughed softly. Even the fire in the clay fireplace now waned, now died, now leaped upward with a furious crackle as though standing on tiptoe to get a glimpse of what was happening outside.

Ivan Ivanovich knew only too well what was happening. He recalled the floodwaters with a shudder. It was indeed a catastrophe to get caught in the clutches of that relentless beast, an arctic storm.

Reindeer meat was stewing in the large pot swinging over the fire. A Yakut woman in a flowing dress with coloured beads about her neck hung up a second pot for boiling dumplings.

"Marfa Antonova is telling a story. She has a great store of them and makes up her own," explained Nikita,

indicating one of the women sitting at the long table piled high with bits of fur from deer, and fox paws, and the dark-grey pelts of Yakut black-tailed squirrels.

Marfa Antonova, a middle-aged woman with a weather-beaten face who had also come to meet the doctor, was Chairman of the District Soviet.

The women were making footwear and mittens for the winter. The ruddy-cheeked girls took turns drawing on the pipe that circulated among them.

"A very bad habit," said Ivan Ivanovich to Nikita. "I suppose some of these girls are Komsomol members. Tell them that smoking is very harmful for children and young girls, and that they mustn't all use the same pipe under any circumstances. But wait a bit—I'll give them a lecture on the subject after supper."

"There are many Komsomol members in this settlement," replied Nikita. "And they could live better if they chose—theirs is a thriving cooperative. Each could have his own dishes and towels." He rose from the bench, a sharp-eyed youth of rigorous morals, and glanced about the yurt, the corners of which were lost in shadow; wherever he looked, the walls were hung with fine furs which had just been brought in. "A rich cooperative!" repeated Nikita proudly.

During their halts, Ivan Ivanovich would teach Nikita medicine. The boy's thirst for knowledge was a source of joy and inspiration to him; he well understood the tremendous amount of work awaiting his protégé. And how many other Yakuts were being trained in Kamenushka! At times Ivan Ivanovich regretted having entrusted his pupils to Gusev. But at such moments he sighed and endeavoured to think of nothing but his journey, and of the patients awaiting him at the *ulus* of Uchakhan.

Nikita's words led Ivan Ivanovich to look about him. The sleeping bunks lining all four walls gave the large,

clean yurt the look of a dormitory. Some of the beds were hung with bright curtains ornamented with jingling bangles and bits of fur serving as tassels. The bunks were separated by posts supporting the roof, and on these posts hung clothes and weapons and bunches of skins. Everywhere could be seen the white undersides of hides being stretched on wooden frames.

Inferior stuff! The sable and marten season was over. According to Nikita, it lasted from October to December. In January the sables began to mate. Now the hunters were bringing in mostly squirrels, otters, lynxes and wolverines.

"People here seem to be thriving," thought Ivan Ivanovich. "Here too, records are being made and workers are distinguishing themselves."

After supper and a lecture on hygiene and the harm of smoking, Ivan Ivanovich sat down on a block of wood by the fire.

Once more the girls formed a circle and resumed their sewing, and once more Marfa Antonova, Chairman of the District Soviet, moved her shrivelled lips and clutched the cold bowl of her pipe in strong fingers as she told a story. She refrained from smoking, still under the influence of the lecture, but obviously this cost her great effort.

"What is the story about?" asked Ivan Ivanovich, whose curiosity was roused by the loud approbations of the audience.

"She is telling a sad love story," answered Nikita.

"Translate it for me," said Ivan Ivanovich.

32

"It happened in Olekma. Long ago—some forty years or more. In that place lived a rich Yakut contractor. He made contracts with the gold-fields—sent supplies there

by horse team and traded in hay. His wife was named Dunya. He had bought her for her beauty, from poor relatives. Even after she was married she remained beautiful in face and figure, like a tall tree, though she bore her husband five sons. She had grown up an orphan and was illiterate, but people respected her and even felt shy in her presence. She always wore severe dark clothes; her hands were whiter than milk, the flush of her cheeks more delicate than the wild rose, and when she laughed her eyes were like two lively little birds. Whenever she entered a yurt and said *kapse* in her silvery voice, everyone fell silent. She was as dignified as a beaver, and it seemed to people that she did not think as they did. They respected her the more for this. And Yakuts rarely respected women, though they feared women who were shamans.

"While still a mere child, Dunya's eldest son won fame at the horse races held during the spring festival. She taught her children to be fearless. From the age of nine she allowed them to ride wild horses. Suddenly, when her eldest son was only thirteen years old, she ran away to Yakutsk with a simple *kayur*.

"The event was like thunder out of a clear sky. Such things were not done among Yakuts in the old days. It was considered a disgrace to leave one's husband. But Dunya abandoned her husband and her children. She must have found it unbearable to live with a man to whom she had been sold without loving him.

"I met her in Yakutsk," continued Marfa after a slight pause, during which she drew pensively on her empty pipe. "Then she was not pale, but transparently white. When her cheeks flushed it was like blood on snow. She was fading away. Something was gnawing at her heart. And all alone. People no longer respected her or felt awed in her presence. They scorned her. But I pitied her, for I too rebelled against old customs. We be-

came friends, and one day Dunya confided her trouble to me.

"She had asked her husband for at least her youngest son. She went specially to Olekma to ask him. He refused. Dunya suffered less from the loss of people's respect than from the loss of her children, and the fact that she had been deceived. The man she ran away with never really loved her, and his passion soon died out. He turned out to be a dissolute creature. Dunya reproached him and he began to beat her. She concluded that the only way out for her was death.

"And soon after that she died," ended the old woman. "She didn't poison herself or hang herself. She simply pined away."

"If I'd been her I'd have gone to court and made him give me back my children," said a young listener wearing the elaborate apparel of a maid. "I could bring up a child all by myself."

"Ah, you little braggart," said Marfa affectionately, tapping the girl's swarthy forehead with her pipestem. "First finish school and then take some lessons in dressmaking. When your clever fingers have learned how to think for themselves, we'll put you in charge of a tailor shop. If you had been Dunya, you wouldn't have found a way out either. There was no way out for women in those days. But today? Today women are driving tractors on collective farms along the Lena and the Amga. When I went to Yakutsk to attend the last session of the Supreme Soviet, I saw ambulance planes taking off for the taiga, and they were piloted by Yakut girls. Tears of happiness filled my eyes as I watched them. That's what Soviet power has done for us!" said Marfa Antonova, proudly touching the badge on her breast which indicated that she was a member of the Yakut government.

That night Ivan Ivanovich dreamed of Olga, who seemed to him to be the heroine of Marfa's tale. He was

driving her off on a sledge, and she kept struggling and protesting in a weak, heart-rending voice. Suddenly the sledge plunged into the river and Ivan Ivanovich woke up....

The wind was still blowing, whirling the snow about, and a dark night glanced through the ice-coated windows. Red reflections of the hearth fire danced upon the ceiling and slanting walls of the yurt. The supporting poles, converging at the ceiling, were separated by grooves of shadow, making the yurt seem striped, like a tent in some oriental fairy tale.

All of Ivan Ivanovich's thoughts yearned toward Olga. Why had she withdrawn from him? He remembered her as she was when she first came to Kamenushka. What had she said to him then? He could remember only the touch of her hand and the warmth of her velvety skin, and his whole being craved this lost warmth.

"Could it be that nothing but this united us?" he thought with fear and shame. "Was there nothing between us but this? Were we no better than our forebears? But our forebears had laws and customs forcing people to live together against their will." Ivan Ivanovich recalled Maria's tale about Dunya, the Yakut girl. "She had perished because she abandoned her family. And she had done this not because she was profligate, but in search of true love. What bonds united him to Olga? What claim had he on her if love was gone? And it was gone. Ah, yes, it was gone! She had taken leave of him as of a stranger!"

A burst of wind shook the yurt to its foundations; the fire leaped up on the hearth, and one word leaped up in the tortured mind of Ivan Ivanovich: *a stranger*!

He got out of bed, pulled on his fur leggings, noiselessly crossed to the hearth, and sat down on the same block of wood, steeping himself in mournful thoughts as he watched the grey smoke stream up the wide chimney.

He still toyed with the idea of returning to the mine to discover Olga with her lover, and punish them both for the misery they were causing him.

"But that would be living like my forebears!" he muttered miserably, "and I have always aspired to something better. Never have I objected to Olga's desire to be independent. How well Marfa Antonova concluded her story: 'The ambulance planes took off for the taiga, and they were piloted by Yakut girls.' She had no reason to feel ashamed of her tears."

33

"This is the Uchakhan school. A ten-year school," said Marfa Antonova as she caught up with Ivan Ivanovich's team and brought her own spirited reindeer to a halt with a strong, masculine movement.

Clad in a flowing gown that hung below her coat and over her fancy fur boots, she led the way up the path to the school. The large building stood on the side of a hill, its substantial grey walls peeking out from among the snowdrifts. At sight of the visitors, out rushed a crowd of boys—black-haired, close-cropped, in soft boots bordered with coloured fur, in fur robes and jackets and riding coats hastily thrown over their shoulders.

"The boys' dormitory is here," explained Marfa as she greeted the small, the middle-sized, the almost full-grown boys.

She said a few words to them, and they ran to help Nikita with the sledges.

"The girls live in another building," resumed Marfa, pointing with her beaded fur mitten off to the distance where some buildings with white smoke rising from their chimneys were clustered on low hills rising from the tree-dotted plain. "There you see our shops, power-house, the yurt of the District Soviet, the fur-trading

centre, the radio centre, and the prospecting office. Soon we shall have mines. Do pay us a visit. It's not far away. But I shall come to you here in the morning with the *ulus* feldsher. We will help you open your hospital. Let the feldsher remain here to work for the present. He can learn from you. We need a good doctor here. The population of the *ulus* keeps growing all the time. Formerly the Yakuts lived far apart. They avoided having neighbours. There were almost no real villages. But now we are adopting the Russian way of living. Life is more cheerful in villages. Do you like it here?"

"Yes," said Ivan Ivanovich sincerely, glancing up at the mountains that receded to merge with the Big Ridge. Vast valleys, cliffs, jagged peaks. It was indeed lovely.

This northern scene affected him like great and solemn music. There was something in its very austerity which served as a balm to his heartache.

"Here even the sky seems made of ice—pale, transparent, with those white wisps of cloud strung across it," he said to Marfa. "Yesterday the weather was clear, but the air was filled with a kind of bright dust."

"That is how the snow falls in our district from December to February," answered Marfa. "If we have a real snowfall, it means spring is at hand. Over there are our gardens," she said with a broad gesture. "And there are our pastures. Our collective farms own large herds of cows and bulls. We use bulls as draught animals. The horses work less—only to haul loads over a great distance. They run wild in the taiga all year round. But now we have begun to use them for field work." It was evident that Marfa was eager to tell the doctor about the achievements of her district, the development of which absorbed her whole life. His coming was for her one more of these achievements.

"Have a rest, see your patients, and then I shall show you the fisheries. And our sable reservation. Hunting has

been temporarily prohibited. We'll count the game there now, and see if it is time to lift the ban. And we'll go look at the droves of horses. I'll show you everything," added Marfa enthusiastically as she pushed open the heavy door for her long-awaited guest.

The school building was large and light. Tables and benches took the place of desks. The high windows were covered with frost in spite of the fact that the stoves were red-hot. They were real stoves, not the open hearths that heated the yurts.

"Your mine administration helped us build this school. They've become our patron," she said, examining the stove with a woman's care to detail. "Once somebody closed the draught too soon and we all nearly choked to death. But they've learned now; they're used to the stove already."

Two corner classrooms and one entire wing which had served as a dormitory were placed at the doctor's disposal for his hospital.

"Does it suit you?" asked Marfa, glancing with jealous solicitude about one of the large rooms. "You could put the sick people here after operations. See, we have already brought beds. And this is where you will live. That room over there is for receiving patients. That other one the operating room. But if you want to arrange it some other way, of course you may. The feldsher said it would be wrong to carry the patients through your room and the receiving room after operations. So we cut that door in the wall. This is such a fine light room."

"It couldn't be better! It even has plugs for our electric apparatus."

"We made things ready for you. What else do you need? Our feldsher will assist at operations. We had a trained nurse as well, but just before you came she took a leave. Her mother in Ukamchan is seriously ill." Marfa

followed at the doctor's heels as she talked. Both of them were still wearing their steaming furs, both were quite ready to begin work.

In the room designated as the doctor's stood a bed covered with a white foxskin throw. On the wall hung a rug which some skilful artist had designed from bits of fur. Lifelike reindeer were racing about the border, while in the centre crouched a lynx whose very whiskers seemed to twitch. Another fur rug in a black and white chequered design was spread on the floor, and on this rug lay a pile of foxskins.

"The chairmen of our hunters' cooperatives and collective farms decided to present you with—to give you a little pleasure," said Marfa with a sigh, avoiding the eyes of Ivan Ivanovich. She picked up one of the skins, stroked it lovingly with her brown hand, and blew on it, admiring its silky tones. "They sent special people to our northern hunters to trade reindeer for these furs. They said there was one big official who used to live in Chukotka. The Chukchi hang furs on the walls of their yurts. So this big chief decided to line his walls with silver foxes. Our chairmen decided to please you too—to make your room warm and beautiful. They thought you might stay here for all time if they did that."

"What extravagance!" said Ivan Ivanovich indignantly, instantly guessing why Marfa sighed, and why the rich furs brought from such a distance had not yet been converted into wallpaper. "I wouldn't set foot in such a room!" After duly admiring the furs, he said to Marfa Antonova: "Give them back to the collective farmers; they belong to them."

The old woman's face brightened, and while she tried to assume an air of indifference, she could not resist exclaiming: "That big official could not be called a true Soviet man!"

34

After dinner, Ivan Ivanovich asked to see his patients.

"Very well," said Marfa eagerly. "There's a crowd like at the Great Fair. They've come from far away. I am not from these parts. I come from a settlement along the Lena River. I don't remember my father—he died long ago. Then my mother married a man from a different settlement. But our settlement refused to let her take me and my two brothers away. According to ancient custom, we had to remain there. We became the children of the settlement. They made us clothes of calfskin and we ran barefoot from yurt to yurt for our food. Now I live as if the whole of Uchakhan was my home. Then I was a sort of stray dog; now I am a human being. All the people about me are my kin, and everything belongs to us. Now you have come here, Ivan Ivanovich, and everything belongs to you too, even if you are a newcomer. It hurts me to see the people's wealth squandered, and it hurts you too. That means you feel that it is yours, don't you?"

"I do," said Ivan Ivanovich getting up and looking about for his fur cap.

"Look," cried Marfa, pulling him by the sleeve. "See those hills—along the bank on the other side of the river? There is coal in them. Right on top—just pick it up and burn it. And over there they have found iron and tin. It is a good thing when coal and iron are found together. It makes production easy. A big city will grow up at Uchakhan. In a year or two you will not know the place. The Yakuts are very skilful at iron founding. There used to be famous smiths in Yakutia. But of course they were only handicraftsmen. The young people will be only too glad to enter foundries."

"Feldshers will come here in the spring," said Nikita Burtsev, who was walking up ahead.

He was happy to be back among his native mountains, and his square face with its resolute chin and narrow eyes was beaming with suppressed joy. It seemed as if he must have difficulty viewing the world through those narrow slits of eyes, yet so sharp was their dark glance that not the slightest detail escaped him.

"This summer we shall build a hospital for thirty patients," answered Marfa. "We shall gladly welcome those feldshers of yours."

"It's hard to get used to the idea that I'll really be a feldsher," said Nikita with a glance at Ivan Ivanovich. "I can't wait to start doctoring people—travelling around the countryside. Ours is a peculiar country. In the north is the tundra with white polar bears and seals and northern lights during the polar night. Yet it is warmer than here. That's because the mountain range cuts inner Yakutia off from sea winds. Our Verkhoyansk lowlands are surrounded by mountains on all sides, and it is very cold there. The coldest place in the world. In the winter the night lasts for a month and a half. Not much snow falls, but the thermometer goes down to seventy degrees below zero. Here at Uchakhan it is no warmer."

"But we have a hot summer," said Marfa.

35

Clouds of smoke stood motionless above the valley dotted with islands of hoary woods. Nomad huts and tents were scattered over the landscape. Through the fog glanced a low-hanging sun ringed with a multicoloured nimbus. A Yakut on snowshoes emerged from the frozen forest. His stocky figure in pointed cap and bulky *sonn* (a warm, loose robe with puffed sleeves) stood out in sharp silhouette against the snow. The Yakut called to his reindeer, his low voice echoing down the rocky mountain passes.

The frozen river was wearing a frail and fluffy coat of rime. Through veils of vapour hovering above openings in the ice could be vaguely glimpsed the dark waters beneath. Ivan Ivanovich climbed the opposite bank and looked about him. Could all of these people have come to seek his aid?

Many of them had travelled long distances, lured by his fame, which had spread through the taiga in songs and tales. He could make the blind see, and he had restored to a hunter the use of his arm, which had hung limp as a rope for months—ever since it had been mangled by a wild beast. And his doctoring was free of charge. People were willing to believe in the miracle of cures—the new life was full of miracles—but they scarcely believed it could be accomplished without pay. And so they brought with them gifts of horses and reindeer and furs—some brought silver foxes, others fine sables.

Now they were standing in the presence of this man whose name was known in the farthermost settlements. The very sight of his massive figure filled them with awe and hope. A three-year-old boy in a fur suit, but with bare belly (a fur flap was unfastened and hung down like a fox's tail), was standing in front, boldly looking about him with bright black eyes. From his belt swung a Yakut daggerlike knife.

"What's this for?" asked Ivan Ivanovich with a laugh as he tried the blade on his finger.

"For eating meat," explained Marfa.

In merry mood they all crowded into the hut.

"Well, *dagor*,* what's wrong with you?"

With these words Ivan Ivanovich made his way to a broad-shouldered Yakut sitting near the hearth with his legs crossed in oriental fashion. The smoke curled trans-

* Friend.

parently from the cheerful fire to the hole at the convergence of the wall poles. Bright reflections from the fire gilded the high-cheekboned face of the Yakut, who sat as motionless as a Buddhist statue.

"Nikita, ask him what his complaint is," said Ivan Ivanovich, closely studying the taiga dweller's face.

"You ought to know without asking," answered the Yakut, at which the crowd in the doorway began to murmur disapprovingly.

"I'm not a shaman and don't boast of knowing everything," replied Ivan Ivanovich calmly. "I know only one thing—you are unwell. The shaman has probably explained to you that some evil spirit has crept into your right ear. What hurts?" asked Ivan Ivanovich again, with one swift gesture bringing his hand toward the right side of the Yakut's face, repeating the gesture on the left. The Yakut drew back. "How is your eyesight? Do you ever have fits? Or faint?"

"You ought to know without asking," repeated the patient with dull indifference when Nikita had translated. His face remained as impassive as ever.

"That's bad. He no longer cares about his own state," thought Ivan Ivanovich, turning to ask Zakhar, the patient's brother, some further questions.

Yes, it was true that Stepan had withdrawn to the other world several times, and his long periods of absence had frightened his family. But Zakhar too refused to give any information.

"The devil with you!" exploded Ivan Ivanovich, irritated by the obstinacy of this man, who on the whole gave the appearance of being bold and intelligent. "You don't seem to take his illness seriously." Ivan Ivanovich turned away angrily.

"Wait a minute!" cried Zakhar, catching him by his fur coat. "Perhaps the sickness is something trifling after all. It's true Stepan complained of headaches. And his

sight began to fail. And there was a ringing in his ears. He had to give up hunting, and he has a big family. You mustn't take much money from him. . . ."

"What's he saying?" asked Ivan Ivanovich, keenly interested.

"He's asking you not to charge too much," translated Nikita with a smile.

"Why do you let them talk such nonsense—and even find it amusing!" flared up Ivan Ivanovich again. "Tell them our salary is paid by the mines—by the Soviet Government. Where do they get such crazy ideas?"

"We're still under the influence of the shamans," explained Marfa guiltily. "They keep on spreading their ideas, even though they do it secretly."

36

On that day two important events took place at the October Mines: they joined the new drifts in record time and fulfilled their February program of gold extraction ahead of time. Logunov, guest of honour at the celebration, was in high spirits.

He implanted a rugged kiss on the grimy face of Terenti Pyativolos, the finest hewer in the mine, a workman whose name was known throughout the region. Pyativolos was entrusted with the most difficult hewing in the new section, and the last blow had been his, so that he had been the first to put his foot through the opening connecting the two drifts.

Logunov, his arm on Pyativolos' shoulder, addressed the people gathered there—miners, foremen, guests:

"Our preliminary work, too, has been finished ahead of time, so that on every count our mine is in the lead. There is no reason for being unduly modest: we have good reason to be proud. But we mustn't relax. Let each of us look upon his field of labour as a battlefield. A job

well done warms the heart. Anyone who has succeeded in his work knows this."

"Indeed we do!" affirmed Pyativolos, glancing at Martemianov and Olga, who was present as a reporter. "We ourselves are growing as we build Socialism. Our lives are rich. Even in the literal sense of the word. I, for example, never earn less than six thousand a month." A smile lighted his broad face, revealing a gap in his strong teeth. "I can buy myself whatever I want."

"Why don't you buy yourself some false teeth?" joked an electrician who was standing nearby with a lamp in his hand and a coil of electric wire over his shoulder.

"That can wait; it's not teeth that count," replied Pyativolos impressively. "It's the big scale we're working on. The other day I went to Ukamchan to a Stakhanovite conference. We went straight to the hotel. A room was waiting for us, but the sheets on the bed weren't ironed. I called the chambermaid and demanded other sheets. 'There are no others,' she said. I was sore: 'Why should I be treated like this?' I said. 'I'm one of the best miners!' 'It wouldn't make any difference if you was one of the best *majors*,' says she; 'there aren't any other sheets!' How do you like that?" He waited a minute for the laughter to subside. "I found it funny too then. Not because that skirt took me down so smart, but because I saw all of a sudden what things I was demanding for myself. After all, I never slept on sheets in my life until I came to Kamenushka. And my father, one of a long line of coal miners, never even wore underclothes—not until after the Revolution. That's what's happening to our standard of living! All because we've emancipated labour! I suppose we haven't got *all* the comforts and conveniences yet, but you've got to remember that it's not one million people, but all our two hundred million that's pulling themselves up to the good new life! But perhaps I'm talking out of turn," said Pyativolos, glanc-

ing at Logunov, who was listening to him with an encouraging smile on his face.

Neither Logunov nor Martemianov wanted this meeting to be a dry, formal affair. Each speaker spoke as he was able, and so there were jokes and laughter and unveiled reproaches in the workers' criticism. Logunov was quick to reassure Pyativolos:

"Nothing that comes from the bottom of your heart can be out of turn."

"What a fellow, that Pyativolos!" said Martemianov as he saw Olga to the shaft; the vexation he feigned could not hide a note of almost paternal pride. "He knows his job to perfection. He'll never let you down, no matter what assignment you give him—I know that, as foreman of the shift. And that's what makes him so good. But there's no getting him out of the habit of teasing and poking fun at people. He seemed to get more serious after he joined the Party, but look what he pulled today! Guests here, and all the rest, and him making a speech like that! I thought he'd make a *good* one!"

"But it *was* a good one," said Olga gravely. "He put over his idea very well by recounting that amusing incident. Anyone can see he's a person who would never let you down."

"And the others won't either," said Martemianov confidently. "Fine fellows we've got here!"

Olga shaded her eyes as she emerged from the mine, so dazzling was the blue sky above the glistening earth. Once more fierce cold had set in after a series of heavy snowfalls, and again the sun was ringed with rainbow hues. Olga almost ran down the path, protecting her face first with one, then the other fur mitten. Only on reaching the ore mill did she slacken her steps. She had business there, but for several days she had been putting it off, intimidated by the fact that it would mean meeting Tavrov.

Her feeling for him had not changed since their talk in the hospital, but she had avoided meeting him. Something within her seemed to demand time to mature; it was as if she were putting herself to the final test before taking a decisive step.

Tavrov was in his office surrounded by people from the mine administration.

"We should have met at home first, or at least have spoken over the phone," thought Olga, as she moved from the door to his desk, like one in a trance.

Tavrov remained sitting when she entered, too overwhelmed even to rise to meet her. The face he turned to her went white and became sharply attentive.

"I have been sent here by the local newspaper," said Olga. She glanced at the other people, nodded to them, and turned back to Tavrov. "They asked me to write about how you have increased the productive capacity of the factory to cope with the increased output of ore. I should like to see—to be told about—any changes you've made—any new equipment you've installed."

"Very well," replied Tavrov, though it was hard to guess from the expression on his face whether he had comprehended Olga's words or not. "If you'll wait just a second we shall finish what we were discussing and then I'll show you through the mill." He had taken himself in hand, and spoke politely, but without a smile.

Olga sat down on a bench at the window and, taking out her notebook, seemed to become lost in thought. But actually, she took in every detail of her surroundings, every movement Tavrov made. There was nothing deliberate in this—it was a natural expression of a new, insistent yearning to see the man she loved in every aspect, especially at work. He had always uttered such fine sentiments about labour, that now she hoped to see his actions corroborate his words. In spite of the partiality born of her feeling for him, Olga would have no-

ticed any discrepancy, and have felt it all the more keenly because of her love.

She knew that the factory was making a good showing, that Tavrov was considered a capable engineer, and that everyone respected him, but she had never seen him on the job. So now she watched and listened with strained attention, eager to find out what he was like among his colleagues.

She was immediately struck by the simplicity and absence of all formality in his relations. She was even made happy by the fact that he seemed to forget her presence, absorbed in some discussion of the work. His face grew particularly animated as he hotly, but reasonably, defended his point of view. They were speaking about something Olga little understood, but she could see that he was winning his point. The engineers from the administration were beginning to agree with him. But however reluctantly they gave in, no bad feelings resulted. Obviously they were as fond of him as Martemianov was of the incorrigible Pyativolos. Evidently it was pleasant to work with him.

"Well, that's all," said Tavrov, flushed and smiling, as he at last came up to Olga. "We can go now. Forgive me for keeping you waiting."

He made no effort to hide his joy, and while Olga felt that he had already forgotten all about his business and about the argument which had just absorbed all his attention, she not only forgave him this, but rejoiced in it. This too was a new and natural psychological reaction.

Together they went from his office into the mill itself.

Tavrov was about to step ahead, but suddenly he stopped and, taking Olga's arm, leaned down and said in a voice pitched above the roar of machines:

"Did you come to see me personally as well?"

"Yes," she replied simply.

Logunov glanced up as the door was opened, and then rose to his feet. Varvara ran into the room, her arms loaded with packages which she dumped on the table, and began rubbing her hands without taking off her hat or coat.

"It's so cold!" she complained. "It doesn't help at all to be a native!"

"Here, put your hands in cold water," said Elena Denisovna, reaching for the dipper.

"Oh no, it'll pass," exclaimed Varvara, rubbing her red finger tips and breathing on them as she went over to Logunov. "Hello, Platon Artyomovich!"

"Good evening," he replied with a smile.

"Everyone doesn't find it good!" said Varvara. "Oh, I think it's a dreadful shame!"

"What is?" asked Logunov, searching her face.

"Why, haven't you heard? She has moved."

"Who?... Oh, has she really?"

"Yes she has. Olga Pavlovna's gone to live with Tavrov!"

"What are you saying, Varya!" said Elena Denisovna frightenedly as she swung round. A bowl she had placed on the edge of the table fell on the floor and rolled noisily under the stove. "Is it possible?"

"The newspaper office offered her a room of her own, but Tavrov talked her into going to live with him. She couldn't have deceived anybody with that room anyway. You only have to see them together to know that!" An involuntary note of envy sounded in Varvara's voice. "I just saw a horse carting Olga's suitcases away," she ended, annoyed with herself for the vague feeling of satisfaction she could not suppress.

"Where was it carting them?" asked Denis Antonovich naively.

"Where? To Land's-End Fair!" flared up Elena Denisovna, adding in a milder tone: "Poor Ivan Ivanovich! He'll take it hard."

Varvara was distraught.

"How will he ever go on working? And he's on such an important mission!"

"I'm going right over to speak to her," said Denis Antonovich getting up.

"Are you crazy?" exclaimed Elena Denisovna. "A fine diplomat, you! Ivan Ivanovich probably knew what he was doing when he decided to go away. For the last few months they've both been looking like ghosts."

"You're right—he purposely went away," said Logunov gravely. "He was prepared for this, though he couldn't understand why it should have to happen."

"And why *should* it?" asked Varvara quickly. "Can you find any excuse for her doing what she's done?"

"I regret it. And my reason tells me she shouldn't have done it. But I can't get myself to throw the first stone. After all, it's a very delicate matter."

"Come along, Elena Denisovna, let's go take a look at the flat," said Varvara, nervously toying with Ivan Ivanovich's door key.

The Khizhnyak boys had cleared a path to the doctor's house as usual, but the wind kept driving snow on to the steps. With beating heart, Varvara opened the door. The rooms had an unoccupied air, even though the scent of Olga's perfume still lingered in the bedroom. Everything in its old place—and the house empty! And darker than usual. Varvara glanced at the windows; the glass was coated with rime. She ran a hand over the cold quilt and the damp pillows.

"Poor Ivan Ivanovich!"

Yet in the depths of her soul, Varvara was not deeply distressed by what Olga had done. She recalled the conversation they had had in these rooms. At that time she had sincerely pitied Olga.

"Hasn't she punished herself enough by substituting that insignificant Tavrov for a man like Ivan Ivanovich?" thought Varvara. "Whose fault is it if she is so blind?"

Elena Denisovna rattled some saucepans in the kitchen, and the sound was intensified by the emptiness in the flat.

"I'll come and heat the stove every day," announced Varvara, adding, as she blew plumes of vapour out of her mouth: "It will be dreadful if everything is so chilled when Ivan Ivanovich returns. The flat is cheerless enough as it is."

Quickly Varvara ran to the woodpile and brought back an armful of logs with which she made a fire in the kitchen range. Then she lighted the stove in the bedroom, and began pacing the floor, stamping heavily in her soft boots to break the silence.

She touched some papers lying on the desk in the doctor's study. A pile of newspapers. Books. In the most conspicuous place lay a blue envelope with "I. I. Arzhanov" written in a swift, uneven hand. A line was drawn under it, and below the line Varvara read: "From Olga Pavlovna."

Varvara turned the envelope over and over, and even sniffed it. It had no scent, and she put it down. As the roaring, crackling fire in the range made itself felt, the furry rime on the windowpanes darkened and melted. Varvara heard the drops splashing off the window sill on to the floor as she examined the books on the shelves near the sofa. But her eyes kept wandering back to the letter, which drew her like a magnet.

"I. I. Arzhanov." Varvara would have written "Ivan Ivanovich," or even "Dear Ivan Ivanovich." And if she

had her way, she would never leave him, not for a minute, either at home or at work. That "I. I. Arzhanov" incensed, and even insulted Varvara. She wanted to throw Olga's letter into the stove. Gritting her teeth, she began leafing through the first book that fell into her hand. It was a volume of Pushkin. Yakut children are taught his verse in school. Varvara, too, had been taught it, and she even had her own volume of Pushkin at home. Once more she turned the pages at random.

The tidings of my fame will spread throughout
the land,
And every native race will speak my name
with pride,
The Slav, the Tungus of the nomad band,
The Finn, beside the sounding tide.

Varvara glanced at the cover, then at the familiar portrait of Pushkin. The poet, great-eyed, curly-haired, gazed at her contemplatively.

"The Tungus do not live on that side of the Urals," she told him. "Were you ever in Siberia?" She tried to recall the names of political exiles who had lived in Yakutia. Pushkin's was not among them, though she knew that the tsars had not spared him; he too had been banished to some spot.

The exiles whose great and grievous path had led them northward, had brought with them their noble ideas, their culture, and the truth for which they sacrificed themselves.

"Such fine people as the Decembrists,* Chernyshev-

* *The Decembrists*—Russian noblemen with progressive ideas who were members of a secret political society. This society staged an uprising against the tsarist autocracy in December 1825; hence the name "Decembrists."

sky,* and Sergo Orjonikidze** lived among us and taught us," she said to the portrait. "And the nomad Tungus go to school these days; they are no longer nomads, and they know all about you."

Varvara turned over the pages until she came to *Eugene Onegin.* She had first read this novel in verse when she was in the seventh form. She had almost forgotten it, and had never understood all of it. Now, quite unexpectedly, it touched her so intimately that it seemed as if she herself had lived in a Russian village and experienced all Tatiana's suffering. To be sure, Varvara was not given to daydreaming, but she too loved to watch the stars fade at dawn, and to read, and to listen to the tales told by old women as they sat about the hearth in the yurt; and she too was suffering from unrequited love.

Closing her eyes, Varvara memorized certain lines:

Another? Ah, no, one other e'er shall claim
This heart of mine!

"How true!" thought Varvara. "But why should Onegin have refused such an exceptional girl? He was not married!"

Varvara settled more comfortably on the sofa, placing the book on her knees and propping her head on her fist.

So deeply did she feel Tatiana's suffering that she began to hope Onegin would repent. Perhaps he would yet do some noble deed and fall in love with Tatiana.

When Onegin killed Lensky, Varvara's eyes grew

* *Chernyshevsky, Nikolai Gavrilovich* (1828-1889)—A Russian writer and thinker of the materialist school; a revolutionary democrat in politics.

** *Orjonikidze, Grigori Konstantinovich* (1886-1937)—Outstanding leader of the Bolshevik Party and the Soviet State, comrade-in-arms of Lenin and Stalin.

dim and a few large tears dropped on the book. Carefully she wiped them off with the tip of a finger. There were words here that took her breath away:

Motionless he lay; and strange
The peace that lay upon his brow.

Idleness had turned the hero into a murderer. Possibly Pushkin himself had lain thus at a later date; he too had been shot in a duel; his own heart had stopped beating before its time.

Now, like an abandoned house,
All was silent, all was dark,
All forever still and stark,
But for the rustle of a mouse.
The shutters closed. The owner fled.
But where? No trace of him was left.

Varvara gazed at the window next to Ivan Ivanovich's desk. It was blank, frozen from top to bottom.

But where? No trace of him was left.

She read on. Tatiana was already married. A marriage of convenience. Varvara was deeply touched when Tatiana again met Onegin. To be sure his frivolity had earned him his fate, but somehow she felt sorry for him. And even more sorry for Tatiana. "How painful to have to admit the worthlessness of the man you loved! That was why Tatiana had refused him. The object of her choice was not a hero."

"But mine?" Varvara asked herself, taking a critical view of Ivan Ivanovich for the first time. Hers was a hero indeed. "A thousand times better than Onegin!" she thought with pride.

Most of the people who gathered at Uchakhan suffered from ordinary illnesses, presenting no difficulties to an experienced surgeon. But Ivan Ivanovich felt that he was here as propagandist as well, and this made him particularly anxious about the outcome of each operation.

The patients tiptoed into the receiving room, threw their fur wraps on the bench for that purpose (only caps were hung up on nails), and, patting down their hair and their clothes, peered fearfully into the operating room, the doorway of which was hung with a tarpaulin curtain and spotless sheet on the inside. If an operation was under way, the more curious ones would stand gazing through a crack in the door. The sight of the tall doctor, all in white, inspired them with awe. The instruments he wielded were tiny and glittering. Ah, to hold such a knife in one's hand! But as the doctor slit the skin of the person lying on the table, then cut deeper and deeper, snapping clamps on to blood-spurting veins, these born huntsmen closed their eyes and turned away. Human blood was a dreadful sight! A sight associated with death. What if the patient should suddenly die? None could tell where his homeless soul would seek refuge. Better keep a safe distance!

But one had to be cured! Why die before one's time? The shaman had his way of treating the sick; Ivan of Kamenushka had his. Ivan repaired the body like old clothes, cutting off a piece here, placing a patch of live skin there. Sometimes he slit a belly wide open. Such a wound received while hunting in the taiga would mean instant death. But the doctor just cut out the sore spot and sewed up the gash with needle and thread, like an expert tailor.

Nikita and old Vasili, the local feldsher, were also all in white; they assisted. Ivan's face would be calm

and impressive as he covered the patient's nose and mouth with something white, while Nikita dripped medicine on to it; the medicine had an odd, sweet smell, and went to even healthy heads. At first the patient would breathe hoarsely and begin to mutter, but gradually he would grow quiet.

In the crack between doorjamb and curtains glistened black eyes dilated with fear, awe, and curiosity. Suppressed exclamations sounded like the rustle of leaves:

"Ai, Ivan!"

"Ai, Nikita!"

"Ai, Vasili, good friend!"

The patient on the table slept a strange sleep. He could be seen to breathe, sometimes he even snored, but the pain didn't reach his sleeping soul. They touched him, sewed white towels and bandage to his very skin, cut him, stuck him with long needles, sewed him up with thread like deer-gut, but he went on sleeping. They cut a blue and withered leg right off one man, even sawed through the bone—and he never woke up!

Curiosity was stronger than fear. The forest folk volunteered to help if only they would be allowed to remain in the receiving room. They fetched wood and water and heated the stoves. The hunters brought gifts of fresh fish, rabbits, grouses, partridges, and lynxes (the meat of the lynx is as delicate in flavour as veal). There were more volunteer orderlies and charwomen than Ivan Ivanovich knew what to do with.

An Evenk girl from a distant nomad camp, who had never in her life held a scrubbing brush in her hands, was washing floors under the supervision of the old woman who served as night watchman. The girl snorted from her clumsy, but vigorous efforts, swishing the water over her shapely bare feet. Her long braids kept slipping over her shoulder and sweeping the floor, and she would toss them back with a jerk of her head.

"Put up your hair, Masha!" admonished Ivan Ivanovich as he made his way between the beds crowded into the second classroom, temporarily converted into a ward.

Frightenedly the girl straightened up, slim and straight.

"Floors are to be washed with brushes, not braids," said the doctor sternly.

Going over to her, he himself piled her thick, coal-black braids on top of her head.

"Matryona!" he said to the old woman. "Bring a gauze kerchief. A kerchief," he repeated in Yakut, smiling now. "Here, tie it up. That's right. And braids, my beauty, also require washing."

He had many other permanent helpers like Masha. He relied especially on three girls, fearless as little children, who studied at the Uchakhan seven-year school. Any one of them could kill, skin, and quarter a reindeer. But they too were intimidated by the sight of human blood. Yet so absorbed did they become during operations, that they forgot their fear. In off hours Nikita, and sometimes even Ivan Ivanovich, would tell them the names and uses of the instruments and explain the effects of medicines. The girls were quick and intelligent. They wrote everything down in their notebooks, and two of them already assisted.

"We're accumulating a whole staff, Nikita!" laughed Ivan Ivanovich at the end of the working day. "But we have no budget, and no money to pay salaries."

Nikita had just returned from the District Soviet, to which he had gone for the mail.

"Here are some newspapers—the latest," he said. "Only a month old. They tell about that English air raid on German factories. The war could have come to an end in the meantime. It's a good thing we have a radio."

"No news from Kamenushka?" asked Ivan Ivanovich.

"The post arrived, but no letters," answered Nikita reluctantly. Almost every day he himself went through everything on the postman's desk, desperately searching for a letter for his doctor. "Here are the newspapers," he repeated with renewed animation. "On the 15th of February the Eighteenth Party Conference opened in Moscow. They talked about medicine too. Here, read it. Last year more than nine billion rubles were spent on public health. This year it's to be increased by another billion and a half. There are to be twenty-seven thousand new beds added to city and rural hospitals and more than fifty thousand to nurseries. On the way back I figured that if there are a hundred beds to a hospital, we'll have to build two hundred and seventy new hospitals. At least ten wards to each, besides doctors' quarters and other service rooms. In other words, two hundred and seventy hospitals to be built in the course of a single year, in addition to five hundred nurseries! Think of that! Before the Revolution there was not even one decent hospital in the whole of Yakutia. Do you think the medical centre here in Uchakhan has been included in the budget, Ivan Ivanovich?"

"Certainly. Everything's been included, Nikita," replied Ivan Ivanovich. "But why do you suppose I don't get any letters?"

"I don't know, Ivan Ivanovich."

"None for you either?"

"No. I suppose our students haven't time to write. They'd rather hear from us—about what we're doing here—"

"Even Denis Antonovich keeps mum!" exclaimed Ivan Ivanovich again.

"And Varvara," said Nikita. "That means everything's all right, once they don't write."

"Or so all wrong that it's difficult to write."

"Why all wrong? There's no reason to think that."

"What is the news?"

"There is no news. *Kayurs* have come from far away. They don't know the news from Kamenushka."

"Do you think there is any news?"

"Oh no, I just said that for something to say."

39

Denis Antonovich was particularly attentive to serious cases in the postoperation period. He too was a staunch supporter of neurosurgery.

With his extensive experience, he might have been put in charge of the medical centre at some distant mine, or have taken the place of a circuit doctor. But he stubbornly stuck to his modest post as feldsher in the hospital.

"I like to be among people," he said to Sergutov when the latter dropped in to pay his trade-union dues (three times Denis Antonovich had been elected Chairman of the Trade-Union Committee at the hospital). "What would I do with myself out in some god-forsaken place? It's not in my nature, and besides that, I couldn't go away and leave my family. But the most important thing is that nowadays they only send people with a doctor's degree. They're squeezing out us feldshers. And here in the hospital, nurses are squeezing us out. An experienced nurse does just what I do—carries out the orders of the doctor."

"Looks like your profession's served its term," joked Sergutov.

"Not quite. Feldshers are still needed. But the future doesn't look so bright."

"Then why has Ivan Ivanovich spent two years training all these feldshers?" asked Sergutov, not without a touch of malice.

Denis Antonovich meditatively rubbed his nose before replying:

"In the first place, this region has its own peculiarities. Enormous distances and small settlements. You couldn't get enough doctors to supply all of them. In other words, for the present we feldshers are needed. In the second place, the people he's trained are all young. If they are seriousy interested in the work, and it seems to me Ivan Ivanovich has been able to rouse their real interest, they won't want to stop where they are; they'll go on raising their qualifications. Nikita Burtsev has already decided to take a correspondence course and bought the books. I drew up a list for him."

"So you too are studying?" laughed Sergutov.

"I've been studying for three years now. At the Primorsk Medical School."

"And kept quiet about it! Didn't say a word!" gloated Sergutov. "There's a foxy Ukrainian for you!"

Denis Antonovich gave a little laugh, pleased with the impression he had made.

"Less foxy than stubborn. Once I'm after something, I'll get it at any cost. And as punishment for lack of respect shown your elders, I appoint you to find out what's been done about getting Valerian Valentinovich a pass to a health resort."

"Orders is orders, Comrade Chairman," said Sergutov jovially, adding with a sudden change of tone: "Our whole northern branch of the All-Union Institute of Experimental Medicine is falling apart. Today Gusev said Ivan Ivanovich wasn't returning, that he was planning to go straight to Moscow through Yakutsk."

"Ivan Ivanovich not returning!" exclaimed Denis Antonovich indignantly. "That Gusev of yours doesn't know Ivan Ivanovich. What does he think he is—a deserter? Would a Communist go off like that—without even notifying the Party organization where he's registered?

If you ask me, Party considerations always come first with Ivan Ivanovich."

"In spite of what's happened in his private life?"

"That's a fine thing to say! He's not done anything wrong. If Olga Pavlovna left him, she's the one to answer for it. It's something else that worries me—he probably has so many patients out there in Uchakhan that he won't finish with them before the spring thaw. He may even stay until summer, while here we've got our own patients waiting for him. Gusev is afraid to operate on them. Two have arrived from the Kolyma Mines, and the bookkeeper from Okhotsk has been waiting for two weeks."

"I don't need your pass to a health resort, thank you," said the neurologist Valerian Valentinovich two days later. "I received a telegraph summons from Yakutsk. My old teacher and colleague has been put in charge of the city hospital. I'm leaving immediately to take over a new job."

"You won't be passing through Uchakhan, will you?" asked Denis Antonovich, who had stepped into Gusev's office after twenty-four hours on duty.

"I haven't asked the *kayurs* our route. I suppose we *could* go through Uchakhan. That would be even shorter, though it's a winter route. I have nothing against stopping in to see how our Ivan Ivanovich is getting on, but it's up to the *kayurs*."

"If you go through Uchakhan," said Denis Antonovich significantly, "I'll give you a letter to hand to Ivan Ivanovich personally. From Olga Pavlovna," he added, lowering his voice, though they were the only ones in the room.

Valerian Valentinovich made a wry face.

"Must I? I've got heart trouble myself. It's no joke, bringing a man such news."

"Shame on you!" said Denis Antonovich testily. "In that case I'll take advantage of my position as Chairman of the Trade-Union Committee and make my request official. Especially since you're a nerve specialist, and this is a delicate business."

"I've come to ask a favour of you, Denis Antonovich," said Gusev, who, on entering the room, had overheard the feldsher's last words. "The new circuit doctor doesn't know the work very well yet. I'd like you to take his place on a trip to the Slantsevy Mines. One of the women there—a bookkeeper—has come down with something, and Alexei Zonov isn't feeling very well. Remember him? Ivan Ivanovich did a gangrene operation on his foot last summer."

"Alexei? What's wrong with him?" asked Denis Antonovich quickly.

"Something wrong with his foot again."

"Why again?" said the feldsher, jealously springing to the defence of Ivan Ivanovich. "The operation was a success. His foot—"

"Hard to anticipate further developments," said Gusev offhandedly. "After all, the operation was just another experiment based on empiric data. The living organism represents a—"

"But we've done enough experimenting in this field to know just where we stand. In ten years we've had no complaints from patients we've operated on," interrupted Denis Antonovich, vigorously opposing Gusev's effort to discredit the new method of treatment.

"Nobody knows what will happen in another ten years," said Gusev irritably.

"Nothing will happen," answered the feldsher, belligerent. "That is, of course, if the operation has been done by an expert." He turned to the nerve specialist for support, but the latter modestly dropped his eyes, obviously avoiding a quarrel with Gusev. That only annoyed Denis

Antonovich the more, and he added challengingly: "It must be Zonov's left foot that's giving him trouble. Ivan Ivanovich warned him it would." To himself he thought: "He'd be only too glad to see a fellow suffer, so long as it proved his theory, the measly bastard."

But it never entered his mind to refuse making the trip. The bookkeeper, it seemed, was seriously ill.

"No sense in setting him against you," said Valerian Valentinovich gently as they issued from the hospital together. "There's no changing him. He'll stick to his own opinion no matter what you say."

"Let him, but I don't mean to back him up."

"He's the boss," laughed Valerian Valentinovich mildly.

The deep circles under his eyes gave his face a shrunken look. His nose was pinched, but his chest and abdomen seemed to be stuffed with pillows. For the first time Denis Antonovich noticed that this neurologist, until so recently a member of their staff, was well on in years.

"How he's changed!" thought Denis Antonovich with a wave of sympathy that was instantly replaced by annoyance with him for not defending Ivan Ivanovich.

"As for that pass to a sanatorium," said the feldsher in conclusion, "as an old medical worker, I'd advise you to take it and go patch yourself up."

"First I'll go to my new job, then to a sanatorium," replied the neurologist. "I don't want to miss this chance of working with my old chief."

40

Lulled by the movement of the sledge, Denis Antonovich kept nodding and drowsing. Once, when the reindeer took a sharp turn, he even fell off. They reached their destination before dusk.

It turned out that the bookkeeper had double pneumonia.

"Why didn't you consult a doctor sooner?" said Denis Antonovich during the examination, thinking to himself: "Her heart isn't so bad, but her liver is greatly enlarged, and I don't like her colour at all."

A thin, narrow-chested woman whose every vertebra could be counted, was sitting up in bed, hands limp, shoulders drooping, eyes wide with fear.

"I have no time to be worrying about every ache and pain," she murmured hoarsely. "I have three little children. My husband is dead."

Denis Antonovich thought to himself: "It's clear she has the jaundice. What she needs is a good dose of sulfapyridine, but I can't give it to her with a liver like this."

Denis Antonovich had her lie down again, prepared some medicine, cupped her, and gave her an intravenous injection.

"This'll keep me here a long time," he thought anxiously. "I can't take her back to Kamenushka in this state. Nothing for it but to remain on duty day and night."

His anxiety about the bookkeeper did not make him forget Alexei Zonov. As soon as the woman's neighbour came home, so that there was someone to leave her in charge of, he ran over to the hostel where the young man lived.

As far as Denis Antonovich knew, Zonov's left foot had not bothered him of late. At least he had not complained. After the operation he had gone back to his job, reporting to the local doctor from time to time, as Ivan Ivanovich had advised him to. Reports said he looked well and happy.

"But it *must* be his left foot," thought Denis Antonovich as he climbed the veranda, recalling what Ivan Ivanovich had said about probable developments in

Alexei's case. "With his disease, such developments are only natural, and that Gusev goes about croaking 'again'!"

His heart contracted when he saw his patient. Zonov was crouched at the top of the bed against a crumpled pillow, his arms hugging a knee drawn up to his chin. He glanced at Denis Antonovich when he entered, but without recognition, or perhaps without properly seeing him, then turned away with a nervous, impatient movement. What cruel force had so twisted his body and dulled his mind? Only from the spasms of pain which crossed his white face, from his dilated pupils and his bleeding lips could one tell he was not insane, but tortured by inexpressible physical suffering.

"Alexei. What's the matter, Alexei?" said Denis Antonovich softly, sitting down beside the bed and placing his bag on the table.

"I can't stand it any more. I can't," gasped Alexei.

"Which foot?" thought the feldsher. "Ah, the other one, the left one," he observed, almost with relief, shocked by the sudden realization that he had been hoping against hope it would be this foot, and not the one he had argued with Gusev about.

"I can't sleep. Haven't slept for four nights. First it was like ice. Now it's burning up," came the broken whisper. "First it only hurt when I moved. Now it hurts even when I don't. Just like the first time. I'm worn out. Can't stand it."

"Why didn't you come to the hospital?"

"What for? So that butcher Gusev could hack my leg off? He wanted to do that last time. I'll try to wait. But it's taking Ivan Ivanovich a long time to get here. The fellows phone every day. Morning and evening. If only I'd done what he told me to do!"

"Don't you recognize me?" asked Denis Antonovich, reaching for his bag.

Alexei glanced at him once more through his matted hair. Suddenly his feverish gaze softened, and his lips, which still retained their childish curve, opened as if he were about to cry, or perhaps to smile. He did neither: he was ashamed to cry and lacked the strength to smile.

"Denis Antonovich!" he said, his voice regaining something of its youthfulness. "Hasn't Ivan Ivanovich come yet?"

The feldsher only shook his head and turned away to avoid seeing Alexei's disappointment.

"I'll just give you a little injection now," he said presently, taking out the syringe and opening a bottle of alcohol. "When you're feeling better I'll examine your foot. How's the one we operated on?"

"All right. It'll stand me in good stead now. I'm glad I endured the pain seven months before the operation. If they amputate this foot now, at least I won't be a helpless cripple."

Just before dawn, following a sleepless night, Denis Antonovich sat down to write an urgent letter to Ivan Ivanovich. A courier would take the mail to Kamenushka at eight in the morning. Before the woman woke up he must write him in detail about Alexei's state, about Gusev's innuendoes, and about all the patients who had come from so far away for the aid which only Ivan Ivanovich could give them. In a word, he must urge Arzhanov to return to the mines as soon as possible. Too bad his letter could not be taken by Valerian Valentinovich, who had left the night before. The Evenk postmen did not hurry with their deliveries.

The twenty-four hour shift at the hospital (and Denis Antonovich was not one to slip away for a snooze, out of range of the moans and groans of his patients); the ride in the cold; the bookkeeper down with pneumonia, and Alexei with his foot.... The feldsher could not resist the desire to yawn. His blue eyes grew heavy and insisted

on closing. If only he could lay his head on the desk, on that piece of paper, white as a pillow, and go to sleep!

But there was Alexei, who had not slept for four nights. He was sleeping now, after the injection, and the hope Denis Antonovich had given him.

Denis Antonovich yawned, blinked, gave his red head a desperate shake, and courageously picked up his pen.

"Dear Ivan Ivanovich," he began in a large, bold hand. "Come back as fast as ever you can!"—the cry of a lonely, devoted soul.

Then he went on to write about everything, describing the state of those on whom Ivan Ivanovich had performed serious operations in the fall, and of those who had just come and were waiting for him at Kamenushka.

"Alexei is counting the hours till you get here. Now he is in urgent need of an operation on the left foot, where, as you expected, gangrene has already set in. The toes are swollen, so is the instep, and the flesh round the nails is already discoloured. The boy is in dreadful pain—it's enough to make your heart ache to watch him—but he's bearing up and swears he'll wait until the last minute. He keeps saying how sorry he is he didn't listen to you in good time. Gusev tried to spread rumours that it's the foot you operated on that is hurting him, but I put a stop to them at the very start.

"You mustn't let anything keep you there any longer. Yesterday I sent you a letter from Olga Pavlovna with our neurologist. Varya was against sending it, afraid of upsetting you—didn't know how you'd take it all alone out there. But I insisted. I said there would be good people there who would share your trouble with you. There's no sense in hiding anything—it only makes it harder in the end. I'm an old bird, and I know what I'm saying. It's only from

the weak and the ailing you have to hide things, so's not to crush them. Right now, for instance, I'm taking care of a woman who has double pneumonia and an enlarged liver and is generally run-down. If anything should happen to one of her youngsters, you can be sure I'd go on smiling as if everything was fine, even if it killed me. Because I know she hasn't very big chances as it is. But you're big and strong, though of course that means your suffering is bigger too. You've just got to grit your teeth and bear it, Ivan Ivanovich."

The dawn was already slanting through the window. But by this time Denis Antonovich had lost all desire to sleep, and besides, his patient had started coughing and gasping and tossing about. Hastily he sealed the envelope.

41

Until the very month of May the cold would continue. The trees would stand ice-shackled in the half-light until released by the blinding brightness of spring. But today it was warmer. Snow clouds had settled down upon Uchakhan like an enormous grey bird, warming it with encompassing wings. Then came abundant snow, like fluffy down, almost blotting out the houses and yurts scattered over the wooded valley. The capricious Uchakhan River had changed its course many times before finding the most comfortable bed. Its former courses were indicated by empty gullies and ravines, flats and islands covered with woods and bushes. Viewed from the mountainside, the vast valley seemed to be tufted with wool, like a mangy reindeer.

A man in a handsome fur cloak and a high pointed cap trimmed with wolverine was standing in a hollow between two mountains, gazing intently at the buildings clustered below.

He was not young; his beardless face was covered with a web of fine wrinkles, as were his sagging eyelids. Yet when he unharnessed the reindeer and led them down the slope, his movements had a youthful spring and suppleness. Having tied the animals to a tree, he climbed back with the same ease, tied the sledges together, and let them slide down the hill, holding them back with the weight of his body. Reindeer must be unhitched when descending steep slopes to keep the sledges, fastened by only a strap, from crashing into them and knocking them down.

"A bad road. Gives the deer a headache," muttered the old man, repeating a saying common among northern folk. He was now driving over untrod snow, and the second reindeer, looking weary indeed, was allowing the first to pull it along by the antlers.

In a thick grove of alders and willows they came upon a drove of wild horses. The sturdy, woolly beasts were huddled together, drowsing with drooping manes. The holes they had dug in the snow were filling up again, burying the dry stalks of weeds they had been feeding on. Except for their stallion-chief, who neighed on sensing the approaching reindeer team, the horses did not rouse. The deer passed at some distance, but the twitching of the stallion's pointed ears indicated that he was on the alert until the light hoofbeats had died away. If wild horses are to be caught for slaughter, or to be broken in, people appear on saddle horses. Then there is a great neighing and screeching in the forest, a breaking of branches, a pounding of unshod hoofs. But this time there was no cause for alarm, and the standing drove slept on, a many-headed mass that swayed almost imperceptibly as it twitched the snow off its ears.

The Yakut drove on. A winding road along the bank of the Uchakhan. Thin woods. Bushes buried in snow. Partridges rising from under the very hoofs of the

reindeer and settling, little white balls, on the branches of the willows, causing the snow to flutter down. And all of this seen through a dazzling veil of falling snow.

There is a scent of wood-smoke. The flat roofs of the yurts and their sloping walls are made snug against the cold by layers of snow under a coating of ice. Smoke is rising steadily out of the chimneys, forming pillars of smoke propping up the low-hanging sky. Firmly erect they stand, despite the heavy snowfall, for hearths are well fired in Yakut yurts. Nowadays the *khotons,* or cattle sheds, are located at some distance from human dwellings, and while this is colder for people and animals, Soviet authorities insist that it is essential to the health of the inhabitants. A contemptuous smile touches the fine lips of the passing Yakut. Yet he is impressed by the sturdiness of the *khotons,* made of clay mixed with manure. The doors of one shed open, letting out clouds of vapour and giving the old man a glimpse of inside walls covered with rime—the frozen breath of the beasts. It is feeding time, and the little black-and-white spotted cows of Yakutia come out into the enclosed yard. Mounds of hay are distributed over the flat enclosure, which is clean-swept as a table. Between the sheds stand piles of manure moulded and frozen into long bricks. In the summer these will be burned to drive off the mosquitoes. The bulls—lively, energetic beasts—are in separate enclosures. Some of them, when saddled, are as quick as horses; hitched to sledges, they haul as much as twenty-five poods.

"Well-fed beasts, there's no denying it," thought the Yakut to himself. "Collective-farm enclosures! They even plant manure in the earth these days. Bah! What fruit will it bear? All our old customs are being disregarded." As the old man passed the school building, he spat and turned away. "Teaching girls to read and write! Women everywhere! Here too a woman holds sway—Marfa!

Everything is wrong; the old way of life is being destroyed. For hundreds of years Yakuts clung to their national traditions, resisting Russian influence. The Russians who lived in our settlements learned to speak *our* language and adopted *our* manners. And now? Last autumn airplanes flew over the mountains; geologists made maps of lands none had ever been to before. As if we didn't have enough of those geologists wandering through the taiga with mallets in their hands and sacks over their backs! Now they are swooping down in airplanes."

The reindeer team crossed the ice of the river, skirting yawning holes with clouds of steam rising from them. On the opposite bank were the reindeer belonging to patients who had come to be treated by Doctor Ivan.

On reaching the end *chum,* the old man pulled sharply on the reins and proudly rose to meet the people who came running toward him. He frowned savagely, hunching his shoulders, and it seemed to the awed forest folk that he grew in stature before their very eyes. Throughout the settlement spread the news:

"The shaman has come. The *ulakhan** shaman."

"Fie upon you, stupid folk!" he cried imperiously to the silent, cowering crowd. "How could you have faith in a Russian doctor who cuts out your ailments with a knife! You have violated the eternal order of things. You have violated the wisdom of nature. When I call upon the spirits to come to the aid of man, I only ask them to restore that which was his originally. A man must summon all his strength to fight his illness himself. But if this is impossible, he must submit. Thus has it been decreed. All that is useless must perish. Of what use is a legless wolf? But how many of our hunters has Ivan-of-Kamenushka deprived of arms and legs?"

"Not many!" cried an old man from the crowd.

* Great.

"Not many? Phooh, you old raven, deaf and blind! So the fox hasn't yet gobbled you up? You'd like to see Doctor Ivan cut the legs off half our hunters, wouldn't you?"

"He cut the leg off fisherman Pavel after he froze it by falling through the ice. The whole of him would have rotted if the doctor hadn't cut off his useless leg," replied he whom the shaman had called deaf and blind. "And I'm not blind any more! Let me get a better look at that cunning face of yours! For many years my eyes were blinded by trachoma. I was useless, but I did not perish. The wisdom of nature allows a blind man to go on eating and sleeping and living, even if he is of no use to anyone. Can it be wrong of Ivan-of-Kamenushka to cure me of my blindness? And can it be right for a man to be blinded by trachoma from childhood? Who wants your 'eternal order'?" A murmur of approval passed through the crowd. "You filled your yurt with riches by chanting over our ailments, but Ivan helps us without any payment! You—"

"Fool!" cried the shaman, interrupting the excited old man. "You are deceived into thinking this is all done without payment! In the end you will be stripped of everything you have. Where is Pavel the fisherman?"

Through the crowd the young man named Pavel made his way with difficulty; he was not yet used to crutches.

"Here I am."

"Here he is!" mimicked the shaman mockingly. "A fine sight, I must say! You have good cause for rejoicing. They have given you a wooden leg for nothing! Propped you up. It would be better to die than to live such a cripple. How are you, a hunter and fisherman, to make a living for yourself in the taiga with that wooden leg of yours? Even a fox will die if it loses a leg. A reindeer will not survive a day."

"They are beasts," calmly retorted Pavel, still pale from the operation. "But we are human beings. We have no wish to live according to the laws of the beasts. You ask me how I am going to make a living with my wooden leg? We now have a rich cooperative; our storehouses are bursting with fish. I have been promised the job of watchman. I can shoot down any prowling beast, even one like yourself, on only one leg."

"True, true!" came the shouts from the crowd. "We no longer want to live according to your evil order!"

"A true Yakut has straight eyes," shouted someone tauntingly. "The *ulakhan* shaman has slanting eyes, like a fox. And his pupils, no doubt, are long and thin, for he is indeed a beast!"

"Let's take a better look at his eyes!"

"Let's give him a ducking through a hole in the ice!"

"He should be handed over to the militia for talking against Soviet power," was the weighty opinion of a young hunter, member of the Komsomol, who had just joined the crowd. And now all of them—some playfully, to frighten the shaman, others seriously and vengefully—took a step toward him.

"A sin—a sin on your souls!" cried the terrified shaman.

With lightning speed he untied the reins, whipped up the reindeer, and threw himself on the sledge to escape his former followers, who now, laughing and hooting, threw snowballs at his retreating figure.

42

March passed. The days grew bright and sunny. A spring crust formed over the snow.

One day some Yakuts on snowshoes drove two wild reindeer to the schoolhouse.

"Meat," they said.

The exhausted animals stood with their tongues lolling, their sides heaving, blood streaming from their knees, lacerated by the snow-crust.

Ivan Ivanovich stepped out on to the veranda in his white gown, his head uncovered, to thank the hunters. But suddenly his smile faded and his eyes clouded. It seemed to him that he resembled these unfortunate beasts. Others found him always joking or scolding. He laboured unceasingly, drawing those about him into the work, and none of them knew of his heartache, of his fear of nightfall, when he would be left alone with his thoughts and feelings.

"Thank you," he said again, and quickly went back into the house.

That evening they brought him the letter. It was handed to him by Marfa Antonova, who had been infected by Nikita's anxiety and was now delighted to be able to give the doctor a happy surprise. She had not got the letter at the post office, but from a man in gold pince-nez who happened to be passing through the settlement. The minute he had entered the yurt he had fastened the yellow glasses to his yellow foxlike nose. He was in such a hurry that he could not take the time to see the doctor, though night was already at hand, his deer were exhausted, and the nearest camp was two hours away. Marfa's face beamed as she handed Ivan Ivanovich the wrinkled blue envelope. In uneven letters at the top was written: "I. I. Arzhanov"; and at the bottom: "From Olga Pavlovna."

The doctor went white, and the corners of his mouth began to quiver so painfully that Marfa felt uncomfortable.

"Let's go see the patients, Nikita," she said.

Ivan Ivanovich heard nothing. He remained standing in the middle of the room staring at the envelope. The

light—too light—envelope seemed to nail him to the spot, his heart pounding like that of a cornered animal.

From Olga Pavlovna. At last. What did it contain?

With an enormous effort he overcame his weakness. He opened the envelope. His mouth went suddenly dry. Blinking slowly, he looked at the narrow sheet whose fine letters pierced his heart and his mind like splinters. His mouth grew drier, the ringing in his ears louder. Perhaps the blow caused him to stagger. He felt the bench strike him under the knees as he sat down, his eyes still glued to the paper.

"Forgive me. I am going to live with Tavrov. For good. Life no longer has any meaning for me without him. I cannot do otherwise. Try to understand and forgive me.

Olga"

So that was who had stolen her away from him!

Ivan Ivanovich clutched his head. His shoulders drooped. He got up, went over to his luxurious bed and threw himself down on it, burying his head in the pillow.

" 'Life no longer has any meaning for me without him.' And me? What about me?"

He remained there all evening, evading Nikita's timid questions. He fell asleep only in the morning. And he wept in his sleep. Nikita, awakened by the sobbing of this grown man, sat up in bed, cold and miserable, at a loss what to do.

Ivan Ivanovich lay with his face to the wall throughout the following day.

"Come have breakfast," said Nikita softly.

"You must have something to eat," said Marfa Antonova severely.

"Later," Ivan Ivanovich forced himself to reply, realizing, in spite of his anguish, that he was indispensable

to these people. "Tell them I'll be getting up soon, Nikita," he said, but he continued to lie there, stunned by a grief which was no easier to bear because it had been anticipated.

Briefly he recalled Tavrov. How had he won Olga? Could it be because he was some eight years younger than Ivan Ivanovich? The same age as she was. It was for her sake Tavrov had come to Kamenushka. They had first met on the steamer to Glubokoye. How candid his eyes had always seemed! A futile fury rose within Ivan Ivanovich. The desire to die, to disappear without a trace. But the voice of Nikita reminded him of his duty:

"It's six o'clock already. Shall I do the dressing myself?"

"Yes," answered Ivan Ivanovich.

"Six o'clock of the next day," he thought. "Almost a whole day and night have passed, and I am still alive. I kept waiting, fearing it would come, and now I know everything. Everything is over. Everything." He groaned and bit the pillow. "Everything is over."

"Look what I've brought you, Ivan Ivanovich," said Marfa from the doorway. "Do look!" she insisted, coming over to the bed.

Reluctantly he raised his heavy head. The Chairman of the District Soviet was sitting on the rug holding a log in her hands. One end of the log was covered with what seemed to be a fur cap or a fur mitten.

"What is it?" asked Ivan Ivanovich wearily, narrowing his swollen eyes.

"You'll see in just a minute." Marfa took away the cap, disclosing a dark hollow from which came an angry rumble like the quick roll of a drum.

"Is it a squirrel?" asked Ivan Ivanovich, involuntarily smiling at the old woman's ingenuous efforts to cheer him.

"No indeed!"

Marfa moved aside, and in the hole appeared a round-eyed, broad-browed face like that of a fox, except for the round little ears. It disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. But presently the tawny creature with a bright yellow spot on its throat jumped out of the hole and rushed about the room, muttering and darting quick glances from side to side. Its long, supple body and all its movements were those of a cat.

"A marten!" exclaimed Marfa triumphantly. "It is sly and cunning, but it won't run away. It has little ones in there. Our boys stopped up the hole and then sawed off the limb. It lives high up in a tree. They said to bring it to you, so that you could see what kind of creatures live in the taiga."

Marfa waved her skirts to shoo the terrified beast under Nikita's bed, then pulled the log over to the doctor's bed. Something could be seen to stir in the nest lined with soft fur. Propping himself up on his elbow, Ivan Ivanovich made out four newborn martens, all nestled together. He was about to stretch out his hand and make a closer examination when a wave of despair overwhelmed him, and with a shake of his head he sank back on the pillow again.

"They're beauties. Very interesting," said Marfa glad of having roused him from his torpor if only for a moment. "I'll leave them here. Look at them again. If they are in your way, tell Nikita. He will take them away."

"How are the patients? Anything new?" asked Ivan Ivanovich, his eyes on the ceiling.

He could not lie there forever, forcing people to think up means of amusing him as though he were an eight-year-old child.

"Many new things. The German land has declared war on Greece and Yugoslavia. Already they are throwing bombs from airplanes. Houses are burning. Very bad. They are bombing the English too. Only the Soviet Union

stands peaceful. But it is not easy to fight us. More people have come to Uchakhan. Word has gone round how the people here chased the shaman away." For a moment Marfa was silent, then she said hesitantly: "Again today Stepan almost died. Nikita could hardly bring him back."

"Stepan?" asked Ivan Ivanovich in alarm, rising with one strong movement. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"When could we tell you? We had no time," answered Marfa, but with one look into the doctor's eyes she confessed: "We didn't want to disturb you."

"Too bad Valerian Valentinovich was in such a hurry," put in Nikita. "It would have been a good thing if he too had examined Stepan."

"Valerian Valentinovich?" asked Ivan Ivanovich with a frown.

"According to the description, he was the one who handed Marfa Antonova the letter yesterday."

Ivan Ivanovich's face expressed painful perplexity, quickly supplanted by joy.

"Where is he, bless his heart? He's come just in time! The very person to help us diagnose Stepan's case!"

"But he didn't stay," said Nikita unhappily.

"Went on his way yesterday," confirmed Marfa with a sigh, vexed with herself for having let the doctor go.

For a moment Ivan Ivanovich was dumb-struck.

"So that's the sort he turned out to be!" he thought, as though the neurologist could have guessed that his aid was needed here.

"Could we bring him back?" asked Ivan Ivanovich when he recovered from this minor jolt.

"We could," said Marfa, brightening at the thought that she could yet make good her mistake. "Their deer were exhausted. They couldn't have gone far in one day. We'll harness our best team right away."

"He must be brought back," said Ivan Ivanovich, already making himself ready for the trip. "I'll go myself and talk him into it."

"He'll come," said Marfa. "He's a Soviet doctor."

43

Zakhar's wife Leokadia, or simply Kadka*, an exceptionally pretty young woman with almond-shaped eyes, was sitting at the hearth with her legs drawn up under her, kneading squirrel skins which she herself had dressed. Zakhar, Stepan's brother, was sitting beside her, sorting the skins he had caught, tying them into bunches, shaking them and admiring their silky glint. Kadka could well have done everything unaided, but Zakhar took pleasure in chatting with her.

"I warm up quicker beside you than beside the fire," he said, placing his arm about his wife's firm hips. "Your blood is hot, yet I fear I shall never have a son or daughter of you."

Kadka laughed.

"My mother bore me when she was forty years old," she said, "and I too shall probably gather the strength to bear children only when I am an old woman—perhaps fifty."

The woman's voice and laughter rang like a carefree challenge to happiness. It was this voice and this laughter that told Ivan Ivanovich and Nikita which of these forest dwellings was the one in which they would find Stepan. Valerian Valentinovich was with them; Marfa's reindeer had overtaken him during his second night's halt, some fifty kilometres from Uchakhan. At first he had been put out by their arrival, but when he learned it was a matter of saving a man's life, he returned without

* *Kadka*—Russian for "tub."

protest, only warning them that he would not be able to wait for the operation.

Ivan Ivanovich had promised to let him go as soon as the diagnosis was made. Not a word had been said about Olga, a fact which greatly cheered the neurologist, himself in need of medical attention.

"Hello," said Ivan Ivanovich, nodding to the various members of Stepan's family.

"Hello Kadka!" said Nikita.

"Such a name doesn't suit her," said the neurologist. "The priest who baptized her must have been crazy. Why did he ever give her such a name?"

"Because I was baptized in a *kadka*. I was already twelve years old when the first priest came to our settlement. I was too big for his baptismal vessel, so he dipped me into a *kadka*."

The woman really believed this story. And she did not object to her name. Could any other sound as sweet to the ears of Zakhar? A proud smile crossed her finely-chiseled lips. Even Nikita, chaste and ascetic as he was, could not resist feasting his eyes on her.

But Ivan Ivanovich and the neurologist were already examining Stepan, and Nikita hastened to join them.

Stepan's condition had grown considerably worse. Just before the arrival of the doctors he had once more lapsed into a coma, and was now stretched like a corpse on the bed, his eyes rolled up to the ceiling. His wife began to weep, his children to wail. Even Kadka grew sombre, and soon began to cry. She had a great fear of the dead, and pitied Zakhar's brother.

Doctor Ivan kneeled beside the sick man, holding his limp hand and talking softly with the other doctor. They lifted Stepan's shirt and went over his chest with a funny thing at the end of two long cords. Ivan stuck the free ends into his ears. For a little while nobody said a word. Then Nikita, looking more cheerful, took a shiny little

bottle with a long needle at one end and handed it to the doctor. Ivan looked at it, chose a good place, and pushed the needle into Stepan's arm.

Zakhar clicked his tongue and shook his head. Several minutes passed. The doctor and his assistants rubbed the sick man who looked like a corpse, and gave him something to smell. At last Stepan opened his dull eyes and sneezed.

"Well, what's wrong?" asked Ivan Ivanovich in a tone of rough affection.

"You ought to know," answered Stepan weakly.

"Perhaps we should order a plane from Yakutsk," said the neurologist. "It's still possible to clear a landing place—the real thaw hasn't set in yet. If what you contend is right, then the case is serious and the operation must be performed at once. The patient is in a very precarious condition."

"Where shall we send him?" asked Ivan Ivanovich. "I can't fly to Kamenushka at present. I still have too much work to do here."

"Perhaps to Irkutsk? Or to Novosibirsk?"

"I don't know who is in charge of neurosurgery there. Perhaps we should send him straight to the Moscow Clinic."

"What if we send you to a doctor in Moscow, Stepan?" asked Nikita.

The Yakut's face grew strained.

"*Sokh!*"* he said. "*Sokh.* I won't fly. I'm sick."

"*Sokh!*" cried his frightened wife. "I won't let him go. He is old, with a sick head. His heart will break with loneliness."

"Ah, foolish ones," said Zakhar importantly, turning to his brother and sister-in-law. "He will fly high and see the whole land. It will be very good."

* No.

"You fly," said Stepan. "I will not. My old woman was right. My heart will break with loneliness. Let the young ones fly, the well ones."

"What shall we do with him?" murmured Ivan Ivanovich on hearing the remarks translated by Nikita.

Suddenly Stepan began to weep.

"You cure everybody else, doctor. Why don't you want to cure Stepan? I waited and waited with my sickness, you promised to help, and now you want to send me away. No, you must do it yourself. I will not go away."

"Beg the doctor to do it, Nikita," said Zakhar. "Why should he torture my brother? He must cure the poor man, and do it here."

"First we must make sure what is wrong with him," answered Ivan Ivanovich on hearing the opinion of the family council. "We'll have to put Stepan in our little hospital for observation in any case, and then we shall decide what is best. I have essential equipment for such an operation. Ask them again, Nikita, just where the blow landed."

"It was so long ago," said Stepan's wife, wrinkling her low brow. "Eight years ago. In the spring. We went to a big settlement, to a fair, with horse races. The men drank much vodka and had much fun. Then there was a fight, and a boy from the next settlement hit Stepan on the head with a stone. There was a lump like my fist. Right here. For some time he knew nothing. He was like a dead man."

"Yes, a lump—like a fist," confirmed Stepan in a faint voice. "Here."

Then all of them—Stepan's wife, Stepan himself, Ivan Ivanovich, and the neurologist—touched the place where Stepan had been struck.

"When he fell down he said he saw stars," continued his wife, excited by her recollections.

"Yes, stars," murmured Stepan.

"Just what I thought," said the neurologist in a preoccupied manner. "Naturally he fell unconscious if there was a lump the size of a fist."

After Stepan was placed in the hospital, the neurologist helped Ivan Ivanovich diagnose the case. Long and frequent examinations were held before the diagnosis was finally established: a tumour—meningioma—in the frontoparietal region of the right hemisphere of the brain.

Marfa used all her eloquence to persuade the stubborn hunter to agree to the Moscow trip. There was no time to lose. Already spring storms with heavy snowfalls had set in, and they would be followed by thawing. And the patient's condition was growing worse every day. But he refused to give his consent, suspecting some hidden motive behind the efforts to send him away.

"Ivan cures everybody else. Why does he not want to cure me?"

His family supported him.

"You must not force him to go," said Zakhar. "If it is so serious, you must be good to him. Why torture him so? Ivan cured people who had such a sickness in Kamenushka; he must cure them here."

"Very well. Let's perform the operation here," decided Ivan Ivanovich.

"You can be perfectly sure that the localization is correct," said Valerian Valentinovich just before leaving, twitching his freckled nose as was his wont.

"Many thanks," said Ivan Ivanovich, with an affectionate smile.

He had come to love this man's ungainly form and freckled face, and even his rabbitlike habit of twitching his nose. But for these distinctions, the neurologist would never have been identified.

"Thanks. Thanks ever so much, friend," said Ivan Ivanovich, shaking both the doctor's hands.

"Don't mention it," said he, also touched. "I'll always be glad to do whatever I can to help you. Good-bye and good luck."

"Report to your new chief and then go for a rest," called out Ivan Ivanovich as Valerian Valentinovich walked away. "Be sure to take a rest!" he repeated as the reindeer started up. The reindeer team to take the doctor to Yakutsk was waiting for him fifty kilometres from Uchakhan.

"Well, he's gone," said Marfa, happy as a child. "I told you he would help."

Late that evening a small conference was held in the room occupied by Ivan Ivanovich and Nikita. Marfa Antonova was present.

"Feldsher Vasili will watch the patient's condition and tend to the electrical equipment. Nikita must stand next to me and hold the hooks. But we need two more assistants to hand me instruments and dressings," said the anxious Ivan Ivanovich. "And someone who is quick on his feet to look after the stove and hot water bottles and keep us supplied with water. I can rely absolutely on Nikita. If only every assistant were as calm and self-possessed as he is! He could keep from blinking a whole hour if the situation demanded, couldn't you, Nikita?"

Nikita smiled modestly. He was always embarrassed by compliments.

"This operation will last three or four hours."

"Four hours!" gasped feldsher Vasili. "And will you be working fast?"

Ivan Ivanovich shook his head.

"I can't work fast in a case like this. The more calm and cautious I am, the greater the chances of success. It's a ticklish business."

"Then we won't have to hurry handing you the instruments?"

"You'll have to be very exact in handing them to me."

"Let's hold a rehearsal with our girls," suggested Nikita. "They've been present at operations, so they won't be afraid. They remember the names of the instruments."

"I also thought of that. The girls are clever. We'll rehearse for two days. That's a fine idea. We'll let them really assist at all operations."

"I'll also help when the time comes," said Marfa.

44

In a clean night shirt, his head bluish from just having been shaved, Stepan approached the operating table, which was covered with white oilcloth. The jerking of his facial muscles was more noticeable than ever.

Everything about him was dazzlingly white—the gowns of the surgeon and his assistants, and the sheets drawn tightly across the ceiling. On two tables stood sterilized basins and trays containing shining instruments, rolls of bandage, cotton swabs, gauze, and bundles of silk and catgut of various lengths and thicknesses. There were also little flasks and vials and dozens of other things. All this for poor Stepan! Lancets and scissors and a sort of drill. How would the doctor ever reach his brain? Stepan knew only too well that in order to reach the brain you had to penetrate the skull. It was not for nothing they had shaved the hair off his head.

Stepan went cold. He was seized with a violent chill. Indifferent to his condition for the past few weeks, he was now suddenly gripped by fear. But he was encouraged by the kindly gaze of the doctor standing beside the table with sleeves rolled up and wet hands upraised.

"Don't be afraid, Stepan. Lie down. Only lie still. If you don't move, everything will be all right."

"I will lie still," promised Stepan, glancing at the bristling grey eyebrows of feldsher Vasili, whose wrinkled red face, like all the other faces, was covered with a white mask.

Once more his eyes turned with hope and pleading to the doctor. The latter nodded and smiled. Stepan took a deep breath and climbed up on the table. Vasili turned his body, rigid with fear, on to the left side, slightly lifted the hard pad under his head, and then, at the request of the doctor, bound something warm about his legs. Stepan would have to lie for a long time on this dread couch. But if there was no alternative, he would try to bear it.

Something like a large mosquito stung the back of his head. Again. And again. He had expected something so much worse that he didn't even wince. What was a mosquito-bite to a roamer of the taiga? But then even the bites stopped. He felt only light jerks, touches, something pulling, accompanied by a squeaking and crumbling. He did not sleep, but felt no pain, all his attention concentrated on his own sensations and on everything about him. He remembered only one thing: he must not move, lest he hinder Ivan. Certainly no one had to teach a true hunter like Stepan how to remain motionless!

Ivan Ivanovich, all his faculties concentrated on his task, washed the operation area with benzine, then with alcohol, before administering the local anesthetic. All his movements were calm and precise, yet he was filled with anxiety. He was alone. Not one of his assistants could lend him any significant aid; that was why, before beginning the operation, he himself arranged everything for the intravenous infusion in the patient's leg, and then administered the anesthetic.

In the adjoining room a blood donor of the first group was waiting in case of emergency.

All preparations were completed. After a final survey of the operation area, Ivan Ivanovich, with one swift,

sure stroke, made a semicircular incision of the skin where it had swelled after the novocain injection.

"Clamps," he said tersely, and a young girl, blinking her comprehension, handed him instruments resembling scissors, with blunt, toothed blades, designed for clamping blood vessels.

She had no time to watch what Doctor Ivan was doing to the head of the poor hunter. Her task was to listen, comprehend, and supply him with whatever he needed. She was all attention.

Nikita carefully applied the clamps in clusters of five. His deft fingers moved swiftly, and he ably fulfilled his task.

"Current!"

The surgeon's eyes turned anxiously to the second assistant, who only that month had learned to operate the electrical equipment. The poor girl was under such a nervous strain that little drops of perspiration beaded her nose and forehead.

"Less current. Set it at one. If it hurts, let me know, Stepan. Be sure to tell me if it hurts. I must know."

Ivan Ivanovich frowned: the current was switched on at the wrong moment. But to avoid upsetting the nurse he did not reprove her.

A second incision. A third. The doctor was gradually removing the skin flap from the operation area, separating it with gauze and entrusting the hooks to Nikita. Finally he turned the skin flap over the ear, carefully arranging the clusters of clamps. After that he made an incision in the periosteum, cautiously pressed it back, inserted a hook, and took up his hand trephine.

"Some surgeons prefer electric trephines," he said to Nikita, "but I don't like them. The hand ones are easier on the patients. Less danger of making a slip. The brain wasn't meant for rough handling. Fifteen minutes longer,

but not so rough. Stepan, if this is very unpleasant, just say so," he said as he quickly turned the instrument.

"All—all right," answered Stepan.

His voice was faint.

The surgeon bored five small holes at the edge of the incision. Removing the perforator and substituting it by a cutter which in size and shape resembled a blunt bullet, Ivan Ivanovich continued drilling all five holes.

The intravenous drip infusion of saline in the patient's leg had already begun. Marfa was afraid to leave the apparatus, though the supply of solution would last a long time. Again she whispered strict instructions to her personal assistant concerning the stoves and the temperature and hot water. Everything must be just as ordered.

The holes bored into the patient's skull were covered with tampons. Having removed the pinkish bone dust from the nearer two, Ivan Ivanovich took a blunt, slightly bent metal plate with which he inserted a fine thread-saw into one hole and brought it out through the other. With quick movements of both hands he sawed through the bone, thus making one edge of the "window."

"I'm making a lot of fuss and noise, but that's nothing," he said to Stepan.

When the segment between the last two holes had been sawed through, he removed the bone flap, hinged by the periosteum, which in this place had not been cut through. One edge of the bone was very thin and rough, and the surgeon covered it with wax to stop the blood flow. The bone and skin flaps were covered with gauze and then with a napkin, leaving nothing to be seen but the cluster of clamps.

"Here's the dura. See how abnormal it is—blood vessels enlarged—no pulsation," Ivan Ivanovich said to Nikita. He usually instructed his pupils during operations. "We'll have to make a lumbar puncture in order to lower the intracranial pressure."

When this was done, Ivan Ivanovich returned to his place. The bulging brain began to subside, the taut membrane to relax, wrinkling as if withering up. Slowly the brain began to pulsate. It moved, it breathed.

Ivan Ivanovich grasped the dura with his forceps, inserted a ligature, and then, lifting the membrane by this thread, cautiously cut it with special curved scissors.

45

In the meantime, many people had gathered outside the door of the operating room, and they were pushing each other in their efforts to reach a crack between the doorjamb and the curtains. The anxious Zakhar was standing beside Kadka. But the operating room was large, the table stood in a far corner, and Marfa cut off the view. Zakhar strained up on tiptoe, leaned on somebody's shoulder, on somebody else's back. Suddenly a chance look from Ivan Ivanovich made the audience step back, and Zakhar slipped and fell, pulling down the curtain.

The crash set the bottles ringing on the little table, but Ivan Ivanovich did not so much as turn round. He may not have heard.

"Get out!" whispered Marfa loudly in Yakut.

There was no need to repeat the command. Zakhar, more dead than alive, was dragged away by the feet. In a second the curtain was replaced. Everything was quiet again, not even a door banged. The people had withdrawn through Ivan Ivanovich's room rather than through the main entrance, for they knew that a half-naked man was lying on the table and there must be no draughts.

"It hurts!" said Stepan. "The bone hurts."

"That's because I'm touching the membrane. The bone never hurts," answered Ivan Ivanovich.

"Blood is flowing somewhere," said Nikita, noticing stains on Ivan Ivanovich's gown.

"Stanch it," replied Ivan Ivanovich shortly. "Every drop is precious." Remembering that his assistant was inexperienced, he himself found the open vessel and clamped it.

The drops on the gown quickly darkened, looking like rust.

The removing of a flap of the membrane revealed the dense, tuberous tumour.

"Here it is," said Ivan Ivanovich softly, with a little gasp. "Stepan, my friend, you're left-handed, aren't you? Talk to him," he said to feldsher Vasili and the nurse.

"Solution!"

"Clamps."

The instruments seemed to rise of themselves and fall into the strong, sensitive fingers of the surgeon.

He was under less of a strain now. The diagnosis had been correct, and as he continued his work, Ivan Ivanovich was filled with gratitude to the neurologist. Painful thoughts of Olga also flitted through his mind, and he straightened up, as if to throw off some oppressive burden.

"What's his blood pressure? Current! Here, my dear, get him to talk, but you listen to me."

The nurse blushed as she switched on the current. Vasili watched the gauge.

"His blood pressure is ninety."

"Hm, that's all right for the present."

A large part of the tumour had grown fast to the dura. As the surgeon removed it, blood flowed copiously from numerous enlarged capillaries at the point of cohesion. He washed it away with saline, swabbed it with sterile gauze, sucked it up with an electric pump, until the flow was stopped.

With the greatest care, bands of gauze soaked in saline were inserted between the tumour and the brain tissue. They isolated the tumour and at the same time pressed on the blood vessels to stop bleeding.

"Tell us if you feel anything, Stepan."

No answer.

"Stepan! Stepan!" called Ivan Ivanovich softly, without interrupting his work.

"Hot," murmured the patient in a strange voice, as though in delirium.

"Give him some water. What is his pulse?"

"Fifty-six," answered Vasili.

"A camphor injection."

One side of the tumour refused to be separated. Here it had grown deep into the brain tissue. Ivan Ivanovich pressed away the grey matter with the tip of the forceps, then with spatulae.

"Clamps."

He took up tiny silver teeth with his forceps and clipped them to the blood vessels of the pia mater. With a sudden smile he said to Nikita:

"When a fellow has a lot of these clips in his head, an X-ray picture looks as if he'd taken a load of grapeshot. The advantage of clips is that they don't shrink or irritate the membrane."

Once more he enlarged the opening into the brain in order to reach the base of the tumour.

"Talk to the patient."

Gradually bands of gauze were inserted around the entire growth; Ivan Ivanovich stuck a needle threaded with thick catgut through it and then, slowly drawing on it, pulled the tumour out of the brain. In places where it had grown fast, he cut it away, along with the dura mater.

"Talk to the patient."

The growth resembled a head of cauliflower funnelling down some six centimetres into the substance of the brain.

"His blood pressure is falling," reported the old feldsher. "It's only seventy."

"What was it when we started?"

"A hundred and thirty."

"A hot napkin." Ivan Ivanovich thrust it into the cavity left by the tumour. Blood dripped on to his knees. "Speak, Stepan."

Stepan said nothing.

"Talk to him, talk to him! What's the pressure?"

"Fifty-five."

The surgeon dried the wound and covered it with sterile gauze.

"We'll give him a transfusion."

The donor lay down nervously on a table drawn up next to the operating table.

Ivan Ivanovich and Vasili performed this serious task. Vasili was substituted at the pressure-recording apparatus by a black-eyed schoolgirl from the seventh form. The rehearsals had served her in good stead.

"What is it now?"

"Seventy-five," she answered.

"Good. That's enough. We've given him almost two hundred and fifty c.c.'s."

"My face hurts," said Stepan.

"That's all right, the worst is over," said Ivan Ivanovich, and went back to his place.

Stepan began to hiccough.

Ivan Ivanovich again covered the wound and waited patiently a few minutes.

The cavity left by the tumour began to fill in so rapidly that the surgeon began to fear an acute brain oedema, which would prevent the replacing of the bone flap. He kept remembering how the typist at the mines had died

during the operation. Stepan simply could not die now! Yet every moment threatened the most dangerous complications: shock, heart failure, arrested respiration, motor and psychic excitement. The surgeon's whole being was concentrated on countering any emergency.

All bleeding was stopped. The exposed area of the brain was washed with saline. The dura was sutured, the gaps were filled in by layers borrowed from the meningeal membranes.

Finally the bone flap was replaced. The periosteum, rich in blood vessels feeding the bone, was also sutured. The skin flap, which seemed to have withered, was replaced and sutured with a thicker needle and stronger silk. Along the forehead edge of the incision, Ivan Ivanovich made interrupted sutures with horse-hair.

"So as not to leave a nasty scar," he explained. "Well, *dagor*?" he asked, glancing into the patient's face, "how are you feeling? Speak."

"Not dead yet," replied Stepan faintly.

"I kept insisting that he talk because he is left-handed. In left-handed people, speech is represented in the right hemisphere, and I was afraid of injuring it," explained Ivan Ivanovich to his assistants. "Now he needs complete rest. Bring his bed in here and heat it with hot-water bottles. We'll keep Stepan in this room until tomorrow. And we'll keep the donor here for the night in case his blood pressure drops again."

46

Only after Stepan had been removed from the operating table and under observation for some four hours, did Ivan Ivanovich really relax. When he retired to his own room for a smoke, he recalled Olga's letter. He had had no time to think of it during the day, and now the poignancy of his grief was dulled by his weariness and the

impressions of the operation—he kept seeing the bleeding wound, the incisions where the tumour had grown fast to the brain, the faces of Nikita and Marfa, and the grave, dark-faced girls who had rendered such excellent aid.

"What splendid girls they are!" he thought to himself with a feeling of gratitude and affection. "Just think—we did it! We did it! If only nothing goes wrong in the course of the day."

And again he began to meditate, not on his personal affairs, but on all possible complications which might set in after an operation on the brain. He could think of nothing but the difficult task he had just accomplished, and it was almost with admiration that he gazed at the tumour which Nikita had placed in a jar of alcohol.

"I should have cut you out long ago," he muttered with deep satisfaction as he studied the spots of adhesion. "We made a fine job of you, there's no denying that!"

Nikita entered the room.

"What is it?" asked Ivan Ivanovich, on the alert at once.

"Nothing. He's lying still. Marfa and the girls are watching him."

"Don't let them smoke in his presence."

"Oh no. They go out into the receiving room—open the stove door and send the smoke up the chimney."

"The girls were splendid," said Ivan Ivanovich softly.

"Weren't they though?" chimed in Nikita proudly. "I knew they would be. They were terribly interested."

"Splendid," repeated Ivan Ivanovich, unable to find a more suitable word. "But they shouldn't smoke. Marfa's an old woman. It's excusable in her."

"They've been smoking since childhood," mused Nikita. "They'll stop it as soon as they realize it's harmful. Varvara has stopped already."

"Varvara. There's another fine girl, and a clever one," said Ivan Ivanovich, with a touch of melancholy.

"What would have happened if we had postponed the operation for another year or two?" asked Nikita, intentionally changing the subject.

"Stepan wouldn't have lasted that long."

"Does the brain hurt during an operation?" asked Nikita.

"No, the brain itself is not sensitive to pain. But the membrane is very sensitive, especially in the region of the middle meningeal artery. But it can be anesthetized by novocain. What a wonderful thing neurosurgery is!" exclaimed Ivan Ivanovich, warming to his subject. "You're still young, Nikita. Hardly more than a boy. And you have all the makings of a surgeon: steady nurves, endurance, deft fingers, and a keen eye. Don't stop halfway. Work here as a feldsher for a year or two and then go on with your studies. Enter a medical school."

"That's what I want to do," answered Nikita happily. "I feel that I just *have* to become a surgeon, however difficult and frightening the task. I was dreadfully afraid today," he admitted with a bashful smile.

"Why? Because I opened up his skull?"

"No. That was interesting. At first I was afraid we would open at the wrong point. What if the tumour had been in another place? After all, we had no X-ray," continued Nikita with growing shyness. "Then I was afraid that the electricity wouldn't work, like that time in Kamenushka; or that we would cause a haemorrhage, and Stepan would die of it. Remember when he began hiccoughing?"

Ivan Ivanovich listened attentively.

"Do you suppose *I* wasn't afraid? That's why it was necessary to think of every contingency beforehand. In our field it is especially important to remember the saying: 'Look before you leap.' I open up a patient's skull

and enter the brain; the brain is a soft, grey-and-white mass. I can stick a needle or lancet into it and the patient won't feel it and no trace will remain. But not everywhere. There are areas where a bullet or a shell splinter can lodge, or some vile weed like the one we removed today can grow and the patient won't die. Of course he won't be normal, but the effects will make themselves felt gradually. But if I overreach these areas by a hair's breadth, I shall pay for it dearly. Remember my talking about the topography of the brain back in Kamenushka?" Ivan Ivanovich gave a deep sigh, was silent for a moment, then, with a toss of his head, resumed: "I laid a whole map in front of you, explaining what was found where—the centres of vision and pain, and the headquarters for issuing orders to hands and feet. A person doesn't necessarily die because he gets a bullet in his brain. We have plenty of cases where such people go on living. You can remove a piece of brain the size of your fist from the right frontal lobe without killing a person. But if the bullet lands in the back of the head, in the medulla oblongata—in the respirating centre—a person dies immediately. The circulation centre on which the beating of the heart depends is also located there. The area around the central fissure is the motor area. Injury to this region will reduce a strong, lively individual to an inert mass. Today, for instance, I feared leaving Stepan without the power of speech. Not by a single millimetre can we invade forbidden ground. And so we're afraid. But my fear would not stop me from trying to save a person's life. That would be sheer cowardice. With fear in my heart I take the greatest risks, first carefully weighing the circumstances and trying to foresee everything."

Ivan Ivanovich got up and walked quickly about the room. He seemed glad that he had someone to talk to, just as he seemed glad that there were people in every

corner of this large building. As Nikita watched him, a lump rose in his throat. He felt that this huge man was dearer to him than any of his relatives. Nikita knew that if misfortune should come to any single person here, Ivan Ivanovich would be the first to offer aid, and he would no more betray a comrade than would Nikita himself. Different as they were in age, education, and nationality, they were identical in their attitude towards their work and towards the society in which they lived.

Ivan Ivanovich went to the door and glanced into the receiving room. Marfa was sitting smoking next to the round stove. A stream of blue smoke rose from the log she had just added to the fire.

Sensing his presence, the old woman turned round.

"Why do you not sleep, not rest?" she asked sternly. "We do not sleep. The girls are watching Stepan. Then I will watch. You are tired."

"Yes, I am tired," said Ivan Ivanovich, walking noiselessly over in his fur boots and sitting down beside Marfa on a pile of logs.

"Remember how Zakhar fell down out there in the hall?" said Marfa with a laugh. "The silly fool! Came crashing down like a bear that has stuck its paw into a wasp's nest. I was frightened. I thought your hand would slip. With Stepan's brains lying there all open. Our hunters will keep teasing Zakhar for that. Such a shameful thing! It's just as if he pushed your hand."

"I didn't even notice it."

"A disgrace. Shameful," repeated Marfa. "How could he? And a hunter at that! Have you ever seen his wife, Kadka? Such a pretty woman. If you don't feel like sleeping, I'll tell you about Zakhar and Kadka. But first let me call Nikita. I don't know all the words in Russian. He'll translate for me."

"And I must take a look at Stepan."

"Well, now tell me about Zakhar and Kadka," said Ivan Ivanovich on returning from the operating room. Marfa began her story:

"Kadka's father, a rich *tayon*, lived on the Artykan River. He owned all the best land. He had many cows. And there was no counting the number of his horses. Vast herds of his cattle grazed on the meadowland. He had armies of workmen and relatives. Now Kadka is over forty. She is still pretty, but when she was young she was like an angel from the ikons, only without wings. She was already a big girl when they baptized her. Before that she was simply called Matryona. At that time a rich Yakut, who did business with the Russians, came to Artykan with the priest. He was the one who made up such a funny name for her. He and Kadka's father began an evil trade. They sold the Russians cattle for meat, and made contracts for hay. Hay is more important to Yakuts than bread, and these men began to sell it. They sold the best mowings, reducing their own people to poverty. Then Kadka's father forced her to marry his friend, the rich Yakut. Her father received a large sum of money for her.

"But at that time Kadka had already fallen in love with Zakhar. They had grown up together. He was an orphan, the adopted son, or rather the hired man, of the whole community. Kadka wept when she was taken away. Her husband was old enough to be her grandfather.

"The old man brought her to a large settlement in Kukhtuyi. His house was Russian, and his habits Russian. His larders were full to overflowing. Kadka wept day and night. For a year she wept, and then she thought to herself: I cannot leave my husband and go home; my father will bring me back. So she decided to violate the

law, so that her husband and her father would drive her away, and she could join Zakhar. The girl was not very wise, but very bold. So she lived in sin with her husband's son, born of his first wife. The old man found out and was very wrathful. He married off his son, but did not drive Kadka away. He merely beat her every day, as if she were a dog. At that time Zakhar came to Kukhtuyi. What did he care? He had nothing to lose. He was poor, but he was daring—even if he was a fool," added Marfa, recalling how Zakhar had disgraced himself during the operation. "His elders did not prevent his going. Being a grown man, he could go wherever he liked. So he appeared in Kukhtuyi like thunder out of a clear sky. This should be the end of the story: he and Kadka should have run away together. But Kadka was afraid. She knew it would go hard with Zakhar. She thought to herself: once more I will anger the old man. Perhaps he will put me out this time. So she began openly to flirt with the lowest of the men, thinking to disgrace her husband in the eyes of all the inhabitants of the *ulus*. She got what she wanted. Her husband put her out. Kadka was free! She went in search of Zakhar, but Zakhar had gone away. He was hurt and angry and had sold himself to a *tayon* to herd reindeer. With some Evenks he had gone a hundred versts and more into the taiga. How could she ever find him? Kadka began having a very bad time. A pretty woman with an ugly reputation. Wherever she went, the men were after her. They hunted her down like dogs after a wolf-cub."

"When did she and Zakhar meet again?" asked Ivan Ivanovich, touched and interested by Marfa's story.

"I will tell you," said the woman, filling her pipe. "Not in a year's time, nor yet in two. It was not until after the Civil War. Zakhar lived in the taiga, herding reindeer. At that time some of the settlements were so far away that the inhabitants only learned about the new

government five years later. But at last the new way of life came to even those settlements. And then Kadka arrived there. How had she found out where Zakhar was? The taiga has its own means of spreading news—*kapse.* For a whole month she travelled with herds of reindeer. She, too, was tending them. So the two met in the taiga—the man Zakhar and the woman Kadka, each in bondage to a *tayon.* But they broke bondage and ran away and have been living together and loving each other ever since."

For a long time the silence was only broken by the crackling of the fire in the stove, whose flames sent bright reflections playing over the contemplative faces of the people.

"He's asleep," whispered one of the girls as she glanced through the door of the operating room.

Ivan Ivanovich got up and quietly walked over to the patient's bed.

Stepan had indeed fallen asleep. His pulse was normal. There were fine beads of perspiration on his upper lip and on his forehead between his flaring black brows. Ivan Ivanovich found Stepan's dark face almost handsome in its frame of white bandages.

The other girl who had handed the surgeon his instruments during the operation was sitting beside the bed, watching the doctor with clear, expectant eyes.

"You were splendid!" he said softly, still failing to find any other word to express his feelings. He ran his hand over her round head, which was covered with a cheesecloth kerchief. "And you were splendid too," he added, turning to the other girl who approached from the doorway. "I shall write an article about you for the newspaper when I return to Kamenushka. Let everybody know what fine girls we have here in the taiga."

Suddenly Ivan Ivanovich's eyes filled with tears which he himself could not have explained. He left the operating room as softly as he had entered.

48

During the first days of Olga's life with Tavrov, she was under a constant nervous strain. She feared the return of Ivan Ivanovich, feared to meet his close friends, feared to be separated from Tavrov for long. She started whenever the door was opened or the telephone rang. When she was out gathering material for an article, she was as restless as though an infant were awaiting her at home. And if she were delayed, so that lights were already showing in the windows when she returned and the shadow of Tavrov could be seen moving about the flat, she would almost run up the steps and into the house, sometimes "catching him red-handed" in the kitchen with his sleeves rolled up. She still hesitated to be seen with him in public, and while waiting for him to come home from work would go to the mirror twenty times to adjust her dress or arrange her hair. She had never fussed in front of the mirror for Ivan Ivanovich. Somehow she had imagined he loved her no matter how she looked.

"But Boris and I are the same age and I don't want to look older," she once said to herself as she sat down at the desk strewn with her papers. "I want to improve my work, so that he will love and respect me more."

On hearing steps outside, she jumped up joyfully and ran to open the door, taking off her apron and patting her hair on the way. At this moment no one could have guessed the little disappointments and the great disquietude she was suffering.

Tavrov was not alone. Platon Logunov was with him, and Olga felt embarrassed, not knowing quite how to behave. Tavrov hesitated to kiss her before their guest,

and simply pressed her hand. This filled Olga with alarming doubts. Was he happy with her? Did he not feel ashamed that he was living with another man's wife? But she was glad he did not make a show of his feelings, hiding them as one hides his most sacred thoughts. It was just when he was so reserved with her that the strength of his feeling was expressed in every glance, in every innocent gesture. He helped her set the table and joked about their modest household. He gave her an opportunity to overcome her embarrassment by turning the conversation to her latest article. Logunov watched them with curiosity, and then with sympathy.

"You should be among people more," he said to Olga, remembering the friendly conversation they had had before the departure of Ivan Ivanovich. "You were once getting along very well with that English study-circle you taught, but you seem to have lost interest of late. Perhaps you mean to withdraw from society altogether? That won't do. I'd like to see you get out among people. What if you were to take charge of yet another study-circle—a current-events circle for some of our women?"

"That would suit her," laughed Tavrov.

"I wouldn't object to leading such a circle. In fact, it's just what I should like, but am I up to it?"

"Nobody could do it better!"

"You're looking even younger," observed Varvara on seeing Olga at a production meeting held at the club.

It was during an intermission. Everyone had left the hall for a smoke, and through the open doors came whiffs of tobacco smoke and a hum of voices. Olga was sitting alone, finishing the notes she had taken.

She reddened slightly as Varvara sat down next to her on the bench.

"Do you still feel sorry for me?" she asked half-jokingly, to hide her discomfiture.

"N-no," replied Varvara.

Varvara was one who would be sure to stop anyone she saw making a wrong selection, even if this was at her own expense. Her simple soul despised people who failed to appreciate effort and ability. Once, when examining some new dress goods, she had said:

"The artist had a kind heart and a noble mind. His work has brought joy to many women. I wonder how long it took him to select such lovely colours! And how did he ever think up such a charming pattern?" And another time, as she gazed disconsolately at a pair of her shoes that had quickly become worn at the toe: "The shoemaker must have been a mean fellow. Why should he have punished me by doing such a bad job?"

And now they were talking about the choice of a husband. Could anyone be preferred to Ivan Ivanovich? Varvara loved him, and she was sure her choice was based on purely objective advantages.

"I understand," said Olga, studying the girl's face as though reading the thoughts disturbing her. "But why did you fix your choice on one whose heart had already been given away?"

Varvara blushed, but bravely met Olga's gaze.

"He has done so much for me," she said with deep feeling. "He taught me how to live and work and study."

"You could have limited your feelings to gratitude. He is a good friend, isn't he?"

"He is indeed," murmured Varvara.

"But your feeling for him is more than that of mere friendship, isn't it?"

Again Varvara blushed.

"Yes it is. I love him."

"Tavrov has become for me what Ivan Ivanovich is for you. I love him. I tried not to, but I couldn't help it.

And now what once seemed my happiness has become my grief."

"Are you unhappy?" asked Varvara quickly.

"I am exceedingly happy until I remember the existence of Ivan Ivanovich."

Varvara sprang back, shocked by her words.

"Would you want him not to exist?" she asked.

"Heavens, no!" said Olga, truly frightened, as she clasped Varvara's hand. "I don't wish him anything but happiness. But you haven't yet tied up your life with another's, and don't realize what a serious thing that is. I have no fears for myself, and yet I am profoundly uneasy."

"You have no reason to be," said Varvara, but there was no real conviction in her words, for suddenly she remembered the doctor's face that night in the hospital when he had almost met Tavrov face to face. "Ivan Ivanovich would never strike him or kill him," she added innocently.

Olga shuddered, and Varvara drew her own conclusions.

"How could you allow yourself think such a thing!" she cried impulsively. "Ivan Ivanovich is always thinking of others; he would never ruin a man's life for the sake of his own selfish interests."

"You mistake me, child," said Olga. "It is not fear that Ivan Ivanovich will take revenge that torments me, but the knowledge that I have caused him so much suffering."

49

Pava Romanovna's husband, head bookkeeper Pryakhin, felt that his career at the mines was quickly coming to an end. He refused to accept the fact; he still made his voice heard and tried to look efficient. His clothes

were as neat and smart as ever, his buckles as shiny, but his authority was gone.

"He had things all his own way under Skorobogatov," thought Olga, noting his pallor and the nervousness of his movements. She put her pencils and notebook into her small briefcase, preparatory to leaving the meeting; it was almost time for her current-events circle to begin. She would scarcely have believed anyone who, a short time before, had told her she would be making lengthy reports on topics like the advance of English troops in Abyssinia and the retreat of the Italians in the direction of Addis Ababa; she even supplemented her talk with a description of the geographic and economic peculiarities of the country and the aspirations of colonial powers. She could not yet handle her material with the necessary freedom; she was too dependent on her notes. Sometimes she would lose the thread of her story, and in her nervousness find herself groping for words. But on the whole her audiences listened with interest and their number was noticeably increasing.

"It's good for me, and indispensable for my work," she had once said to Tavrov on returning home in a state of happy excitement.

She had resumed teaching her English circle in the Evening School for Adults. She no longer felt the lack of confidence that had hindered her in the summer.

"That's because I am getting into the swing of it, and since this is not my main job, but a mere 'side line' (remembering Ivan Ivanovich's word), I am enjoying it and want to do it well."

Olga was about to get up when she saw Tavrov making his way to the table at which the presidium sat.

She suppressed a smile as she watched him pass through the rows of people, a middle-sized man, broad-shouldered, with a wide belt at his waist. It was still cold in April, and Tavrov, like most of the men at the

mines, was wearing high fur leggings and a dark woollen suit of half-military cut, without, of course, the shoulder straps and appurtenances that gave Pryakhin such an air. But was Pryakhin to be compared with Tavrov?

Now he had halted at the end of the long table. He tossed back a lock of hair and cast a glance about the hall before sitting down. There were at least six hundred people gathered here, but for some odd reason the eyes of Olga and Tavrov met for a brief instant, and she caught the happy smile that passed over his face as he sat down.

All was well at last. The restiveness that had shadowed Olga's happiness at first had now disappeared; she felt at ease, and that she was among people who were her friends. Not one of them had rebuked her; even if they disapproved of what she had done, they refrained from passing judgment, giving her opportunity to square her shoulders and gain self-confidence. Already she was standing firmly on her feet, and not an hour of her day was wasted.

It was time for her to go, but she was reluctant to leave this hall, where she felt so much at home.

The questions now being discussed did not interest Olga as a reporter, but they concerned the ore mill, which meant they concerned Tavrov. She listened attentively until the appearance of one of the speakers made her thoughts take another turn. It was the worker whom Olga had met that summer in the hospital. Then he had been sitting next to Tavrov, tugging uneasily at the undersized hospital gown pulled on over his street clothes. The snow-white linen had made his rugged, massive hands strikingly conspicuous. He was a senior mechanic at the mill, and one of the most active of the Party members. The sight of him now reminded Olga of her circle. He too headed a current-events circle at the mill. At Tavrov's suggestion, she had twice attended it in order

to learn how to conduct hers. She had been impressed by his ability to make his listeners actively participate in the discussion of the topic of the day. She envied him this ability.

"I too must give my listeners assignments to prepare at home. Let them get used to taking part in the discussion," thought Olga, getting up and going towards the door. Her circle members were waiting for her.

50

A strange animal was running down a distant mountainside. It advanced in long leaps, lunging from side to side, almost rolling over, as though all four paws landed on one spot, and it left deep tracks in the spotless surface of the snow.

Ivan Ivanovich lowered his gun and strained forward to watch the animal's awkward movements. The beast was darkly silhouetted against the bright blue horizon, and he could see the wind blowing out the long hair which hung like a horsecloth about the animal's flanks.

"What is it?" asked Ivan Ivanovich, turning round on hearing a swish of skis. "A wolverine?"

"Yes," replied Nikita, out of breath from climbing the hill. His clothes were covered with rime, his skis were powdered with newly-fallen snow. "We'll find another one. Soon the deer will be feeding. The wolverines track them and fall upon them. A wolverine can even kill an elk. It climbs a low tree like a lynx and lies in waiting. It has huge paws and hooked claws. During the winter it goes prowling about day and night. It hunts mice, steals game from the traps, and will eat a dead body if it happens to unearth one."

A strong snow-crust lay under the fluffy new fall. Ivan Ivanovich slowed down on approaching steep descents, but Nikita rushed ahead in a cloud of snow, show-

ing off his skill in taking curves. The spring sun shone brightly overhead, but the weather was very cold. Like a wolverine the wind roamed through the mountains, stinging their faces and bringing tears to their eyes. Over the peaks wound narrow paths worn by the hoofs of mountain goats and rams, and by beasts of prey. But the scent of other beasts did not drive the goats from their favourite haunts. It was warmer on the mountain tops than in the valley during the winter, and here their hoofs did not break through the crust and sink into the snow, a thing which proved fatal when being pursued.

On reaching a heap of boulders, Nikita signalled Ivan Ivanovich. In this spot he hid the doctor among the stones not far from the point where the paths of the mountain goats converged. He himself went off in search of another hiding place.

Left alone, Ivan Ivanovich settled himself as comfortably as possible and began to look about. He was eager to kill a wolverine. Or a mountain goat. He had killed goats, but never a wolverine. Wolverines were harmful, and rare; their pelts were highly valued by the Yakuts.

Time passed. Neither goats nor wolverines. The first excitement wore off. Ivan Ivanovich placed his skis on a stone and sat down on them. From time to time he rubbed his nose or his cheek and gave himself up to thoughts that brought a sombre look to his face. He thought that soon he would be forty years old; the best part of his life had already passed. To be sure he was still strong and healthy and comparatively young, and if it were not for this business with Olga he would never have given age a thought. How was he to go on living? He was sure he could not love a second time. He shrank from the very thought of another woman. Olga! He kept yearning for her in spite of the rational dictates of his mind.

"How can I ever forget her?" he murmured.

At that moment he heard a rustle on the path. He turned his eyes. The path crossed the ridge, winding invitingly among boulders which in some places were furry with moss and lichen, in others banked with snow. But no living creature was to be seen. Ivan Ivanovich listened. The wind brought a faint sound resembling a bark, or a wail. Suddenly there was a shot, and the echo went crashing through the wild mountains, breaking the silence of this wilderness.

"Ah!" exclaimed Ivan Ivanovich enviously. "He's made a kill."

But almost immediately came a second shot.

"Missed," thought Ivan Ivanovich with involuntary satisfaction. "For a marksman like him to miss! Shame on you, Nikita. You'll have a long wait for another chance now."

Just as he was beginning to be sorry that Nikita had missed, something yellow-grey and spotted flashed before his eyes. Down the path rushed a musk deer, its hornless head thrown back, the long tusks of its lower jaw visible from afar. It was indeed the very incarnation of swift movement, but Ivan Ivanovich had no time to admire its speed, or to remember that the female musk deer would be pregnant at this time of the year. His hand automatically reached for his gun, and a third shot sent the echoes rolling. The deer reared in full flight, as if repelled by some obstacle, and then, with one tremendous leap, left the path in a flash of strong legs and round hind-parts decked by a stub of tail.

Before Ivan Ivanovich could shoot a second time, the wind blew a cloud of snow dust into his eyes.

"Missed!" he muttered in vexation, straining upon his toes to watch the flight of this frightened creature, humped and clumsy, with incongruous tusks, but with legs furnished with steel springs. Now Ivan Ivanovich remembered Nikita's having said that musk deer were

hornless. If this were a stag, the size of its tusks indicated that it must be old. The realization only increased Ivan Ivanovich's regret at having missed.

"The devil with it!" he thought in an effort to console himself. "Its hide is probably not worth a button anyway. And I have no use for its musk; I treat ruptures in my own way."

For another two hours he sat in strained expectation. At last the black silhouette of a wolverine appeared on a slope. There it was among the boulders—arched back, grey brow shadowing black-ringed eyes.... The animal approached in its strange, loping gait, swinging its long head set with tiny ears.

Ivan Ivanovich let it come close before pulling the trigger. He scarcely heard the shot this time, so loud was the beating of his own heart. He felt the slight kick of the rifle against his shoulder, and it seemed that it was from this kick the wolverine stumbled, slumped forward, and fell.

Ivan Ivanovich rushed out on to the path, rifle in hand. The animal stirred, then with a wail and a howl and a baring of teeth it lumbered off to one side. Ivan Ivanovich shot once more and came to a halt, frowning as he watched the wolverine dig its nose into the snow-covered pebbles with which the ground was strewn, then slowly collapse on its side, large paws and shaggy tail twitching. Its thick black winter coat, striped with grey from shoulder to tail, had a lovely sheen.

51

"What did you bring down with your first shot?" Ivan Ivanovich asked Nikita as he touched the cold carcasses of a stag and a musk deer his pupil had killed.

"The deer," answered Nikita, adding twigs to the yellow flames of the campfire.

When they had first resolved to take this short holiday, they discussed at length whether they should hunt bear, elk, or wolverine. Ivan Ivanovich had held out for wolverine, and so they had come to these mountains. Some Yakuts had brought them here and then gone down to the valley below, where their reindeer could graze. According to agreement, one of the guides, on seeing the hunters' campfire, was to come and help them make their way to a *chum*, where they would spend the night.

"This cold will last for another three weeks," said Nikita, moving away from the roaring fire. "Then it will grow warm all of a sudden. Time to be getting back to Kamenushka. We must hurry."

"I have to watch the patients I've just operated on. I can't leave them yet. And I must know how Stepan weathers the postoperation period. His is a particularly interesting case. And I shall never see him again," added Ivan Ivanovich in sudden regret.

"He can come to Kamenushka. If we tell him to, he'll come this summer."

"He may come, but I won't be there. In the spring I'm going back to the 'mainland'.... Far, far away!" Ivan Ivanovich seemed to be talking to himself, and the expression on his face was such that Nikita dared not question him further.

"In another two or three weeks the snow will begin to melt," Nikita ventured to say after a prolonged silence. "If we are late, we'll have trouble along the way."

"Don't worry, Nikita. We won't be late. Ten days can't make much difference, and during that time we can attend to the Evenks who have come here all the way from Little Jeltulyak. We can't let them go home without helping them. They'd be offended, wouldn't they?"

"I suppose so," admitted Nikita. "But new patients keep coming and holding you here. And I'm the one who

answers for your safe return. That's what is worrying me. The journey will be difficult."

"Don't worry, Nikita," repeated Ivan Ivanovich. "We aren't afraid of a few difficulties. We're strong people. Hardships aren't a bad thing if you know how to conquer them. The worst thing is to find yourself up against a situation in which you can do nothing."

Ivan Ivanovich took up his gun and quietly walked off to a heap of stones not far away. He wanted to be alone. The slope was strewn with weather-blackened boulders resembling lonely huts. The similarity was heightened by the layers of snow that overhung them like roofs. Further on, there was nothing but chaos. Ivan Ivanovich sat down on one of the boulders and looked about. The contours of the mountains merged with the blue twilight; only in the west did the jagged peaks assert themselves, etched in faint purple. Here winter reigned supreme, and everything lay spellbound, in utter silence. A golden slither of moon cut into the blue like a curved needle. Pick it up, surgeon, and sew with it! But there was no surgeon here; there was just a plain man. Up on this mountain, between heaven and earth, sat one who bore the same name as the beloved heroes of Russian folklore: Ivan-the-Prince, Ivan-the-Fool. But he was neither. He was Doctor Ivan. And the time of miracles was past. No living waters could heal the wound in his heart. Everything only aggravated his pain. The wind blew, wafting a soft fragrance like a harbinger of spring—like a remembrance of lost happiness. High in the firmament glittered the stars, fluttering their golden lashes.

Was it mere chance that had brought Doctor Ivan from Kamenushka to this still slumbering world? Yes, a new era of miracles had dawned. Cities were being raised in the taiga. Collective farmers from Uchakhan were abandoning their dark and smoky yurts in the forest,

and moving into the well-built houses of new settlements.

Just before leaving for their hunting trip, Ivan Ivanovich and Nikita had been present at the opening of a collective-farm club. The first film shown in the taiga! What gasps of fear and ecstasy and amazement came from the audience when the lights were extinguished, and on the screen appeared the sights and sounds of life on the "mainland." Ivan Ivanovich would have experienced a similar sensation, had some good or evil spirit suddenly lifted him by the collar of his shaggy coat and born him away above the majestic spaces of this sleeping earth.

Today a bustling settlement had sprung up at Uchakhan. Tomorrow a cultural centre would grow up about some new industrial plant.

"Yes," breathed Ivan Ivanovich. "This is not the dream of a liberal visionary, a sated bourgeois with humanitarian aspirations. This is the actuality created by the Bolsheviks. The city which is to be built on the Uchakhan River will be called Stalinogorsk, in honour of the man who inspired its creation. I may be a queer duck, and I certainly have bungled my private life, but no one can accuse me of being a bad surgeon! 'Let's give the floor to Dr. Arzhanov, comrades!'" Ivan Ivanovich stood up on his stone rostrum, took off his fur cap, and turned to the southeast, from where the wind was blowing, and where the road led back to the vast Russian land. With deep feeling he breathed:

"Long live the new city—the city of Stalinogorsk!"

52

"A big city they will build. They will build a road, and bring machines. No, the machines will come themselves. In these machines they will bring other machines

that cannot come themselves, but stand in one place to work," said Zakhar happily, on returning to his *chum* after a visit to the District Soviet.

Marfa had allowed her guests from the taiga to be present at the sitting of the Executive Committee, and they sat listening for hours, some of them on benches, some on the floor.

"Let them hear what Soviet power is doing for them," said Marfa.

Zakhar eagerly drank in every word. To be sure, he would continue to be a hunter—every man has his own lot. But—

"We went into a yurt where they make e-lec-tris-ty," he told Stepan and his wife. "A Russian yurt. With a big boiler and a stove and a chimney as high as the highest tree. That's where they make light."

"Fire," corrected Kadka, eager to put in her word.

Zakhar laughed deprecatingly, as if she were a child.

"I can build a fire myself. And so can you, and even Stepan's Nikola. But there they make *light,* and it runs through covered wires, as green sap runs through the boughs." Inspired by this simile, Zakhar began to sing in a loud, throaty voice.

Clasping the knee of one of the legs crossed in front of him, his eyes fixed on the roaring hearth fire, he rocked back and forth in time to the song he was composing. His brows were raised as if in astonishment, but there was a thoughtful gleam in his eyes.

He sang that soon the wondrous wires would reach all the settlements in the taiga. A true network of wires, with as many golden buds as the willows have in spring. A golden bud would blossom in every yurt. It would give no warmth, but it would shine like a bit of sun. By its light the old women, half-blind with trachoma, would be able to find a bead lost in a dung heap. But no longer would there be dung heaps in the yurt. No longer would

people live with the cattle, in smoke and darkness. Light had come to the taiga! And there would be no more trachoma. And there would be no more old women, for now everyone would grow young. And the long-braided ones would sit beside the hearth sewing beads on their holiday attire, by this light.

It was a lovely song that Zakhar sang. He had justly won the reputation of being the best singer in the settlement, and Kadka gazed at him proudly. But suddenly some vague doubt seemed to trouble her, and she said in her silvery voice:

"But perhaps there will be no hearth?"

Zakhar chanted in reply:

"Yes, the hearth will remain."

"No it won't," protested Stepan who was sitting on the other side of the fire with an old fur coat thrown over his shoulders and a fur cap almost hiding the clean white bandage swathing his forehead. "Stoves are better. They take less wood and give more heat."

They did not understand that the words of a song admit of no changing. A good song had been made for them, and they were interpreting it in terms of firewood! But Zakhar was not a vain poet, jealous of his fame. And besides, what could be expected of them? One was a sick man, the other a woman. Zakhar solved the problem in a practical way:

"Each will choose what pleases him."

The doctor had removed the stitches from Stepan's head on the ninth day. When the wound was healed, Stepan brightened up appreciably, though he continued to feel that he was of special importance, like a man in a new suit, and this found expression in a certain restraint of movement and the assuming of amusing airs. The frequent visits of Ivan Ivanovich encouraged him in this. Stepan was flattered and a bit embarrassed by the doctor's solicitude, especially since, with native honesty,

he disappointed his innumerable visitors by confessing that he had not suffered pain during the operation. To be sure, others on whom the doctor had operated said the same thing, but their operations had been simpler. Stepan's position would have justified a bit of bragging, but he was not as imaginative as his brother Zakhar. Gossip came to his aid.

Various stories were spread: some said that Dr. Ivan had cut off Stepan's whole head to cure it, and then had sewn it back; others insisted that he had only split it open and taken out the brains. There was talk of dendrites that grow in the brain like tiny trees, with thoughts perched like birds on every branch. The forest folk flocked to see Stepan. He saw, he heard, he answered their questions, remembering everything. That meant his brains were sound; the dendrites and the birds were intact.

When the wound had healed and the doctor had removed the stitches, people could at least see, if not touch, the "window" that had been cut into his skull. Everyone, including Stepan, found this a great distinction. For the first time in his life he became the centre of attention. His wife and relatives took the greatest care of him. Strangers and acquaintances brought him gifts. Thus he basked in glory for some two weeks, at the end of which he suddenly became bored by it all, spoke rudely to his visitors, and then disappeared.

Ivan Ivanovich was particularly upset by Stepan's disappearance. The time for his own departure was drawing near, but his fame kept spreading throughout the taiga, bringing more and more patients to Uchakhan. He was tempted to send for more medicines and instruments and remain here for the summer.

But every day Nikita kept saying: "It's time to be leaving. Soon the roads will be impassable."

"You're right, we must hurry. A fine time Stepan

chose to vanish! How can I leave without knowing what has happened to him?"

For several days running either Ivan Ivanovich or Nikita went to Stepan's *chum* after work. In reply to their questions, Stepan's wife wept, his children whimpered.

"Did he take anything with him?"

"His gun. A hunter dies with his gun."

One day Kadka said: "I fear he has gone mad."

And through the settlement went the rumour: "Stepan has gone mad. Does this not prove that you must not touch a man's brains? Once they are spoiled, a man must die. If a mushroom took to growing inside his head, there must have been good reason for it."

"You *can* touch a man's brains," stubbornly insisted Doctor Ivan at a gathering of the entire community. "Nothing exists without a cause. Every illness has its cause. We must not talk nonsense about things we do not understand. A hundred years ago surgeons were unable to perform painless operations. Now they know how. Not long ago no one dared operate on the brain. Now we know how. Such operations are difficult, but quite possible."

53

Denis Antonovich's letter arrived. At long last it reached its destination. Ivan Ivanovich stood holding the stained and wrinkled envelope, hesitating to open it. He was nervous, filled with some elusive dread. Comrade Khizhnyak, the excellent feldsher, future doctor, enthusiastic *gorodki* fan, bland swindler at cards—it had taken him a long time to write! Why had he remained silent so long? And what had made him write at this late date, when according to the calculations they had made together, Ivan Ivanovich should already be on the road back?

Once more Ivan Ivanovich looked at the address and the stamp. The letter had been written long ago. Appar-

ently the *kayur* who brought it had visited all his friends on the way. Ivan Ivanovich opened the envelope slowly, but devoured the letter in one glance. News about the hospital, Gusev, Alexei, the woman with pneumonia, Olga (ah, Olga!), something about Burdenko....

"What's this about Burdenko?" thought Ivan Ivanovich, rereading the end of the letter. "A Stalin Prize. That's good. 'Nikolai Nilovich Burdenko, Member of the Academy of Sciences, for outstanding achievements in surgery of the central and peripheral nervous systems... by decree of the Council of People's Commissars, published in *Pravda* of 14 March....' Why didn't we read it?"

"Nikita!" called Ivan Ivanovich to his secretary and assistant. "Didn't we receive the *Pravda* for March fourteenth?"

"No," said Nikita. "I told you the post was held up, and then the sledge carrying the mail sank through a hole in the ice. There was such a blizzard the *kayur* lost his way. That was on the eighth of May."

"The eighth of May!" exclaimed Ivan Ivanovich, turning back to the passage about Alexei. The other foot. Poor chap! He must have an operation, and as soon as possible. Turned black in spots already. Damn it all, when had the letter been written? And today was—"What's the date, Nikita?" asked Ivan Ivanovich in alarm.

"The eleventh of May," replied Nikita sullenly. He could not reconcile himself to the doctor's complete disregard for his own person. All the sick could not be cured anyway. They kept coming and coming, regardless of the fact that soon travelling would be impossible. Nobody stopped to consider how Nikita would then get the doctor home. Marfa said nothing: she would be only too glad to have the doctor stay here for good. Ivan Ivanovich himself was busy from morning to night and had no idea what the spring thaw in the taiga was like. Whenever Nikita tried to explain to him, he said:

"Tomorrow we'll operate on that. . . ."

The excuses were manifold, and of course all of them were sound enough. They were working with human beings who were badly in need of medical aid. How could one refuse to offer it to them? And they did not refuse.

"It's the eleventh of May," repeated Nikita. "According to the Yakuts, winter is a white bull with two horns. One of them breaks off on the first Afanasi—that's the fifth of March—the other on the second Afanasi—that's the twenty-fourth of April, and on the third Afanasi, the fourteenth of May, the whole body of the bull goes to pieces. The thaw is about to set in, Ivan Ivanovich! Of course, if you plan to stay in the taiga until summer, we can travel mounted on reindeer."

"Why mounted?" asked Ivan Ivanovich, still busy with the calculations occasioned by the letter. His face was full of determination as he said:

"Tomorrow we are leaving by reindeer train."

Nikita was so taken aback that he almost upset the shiny boiler into which he was putting sterilized gauze.

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes. Run over to the District Soviet and tell Marfa Antonova that we must leave for Kamenushka tomorrow. I am needed there—to operate on a patient who is very seriously ill."

"All right. Only first we must figure out whether we have time to—"

"Why shouldn't we have time?" broke in Ivan Ivanovich impatiently. "The ice on the rivers lasts until the twenty-fourth of May—or even until the sixth or seventh of June. So we have some twenty days."

"We'll travel slower now than in the winter, because no one will have time to send us a change of reindeer," answered Nikita as he carefully adjusted the lid of the boiler.

"We'll go by sledge as far as possible, and make the rest of the trip on floats."

Nikita's face brightened. He hated delay, but he was also against plunging into things headlong.

"Yes, we must leave as soon as possible," said Ivan Ivanovich, narrowing his eyes in the dazzling sunlight.

As he crossed a bridge of ice beside open water, he reached into the pocket of his fur coat for his dark glasses. Before putting them on, he stopped at the river's edge and carefully examined the scene. Spring had come to the land of ice and snow. Thousands of miles had she travelled, forcing her way past the barricades raised by winter, arriving here at last, as young and beautiful and disturbing as ever, though she arrived only in the middle of May.

But these regions have a special spring, lasting no more than two weeks. The sun soars high in the heaven with a summer's radiance, while the blanket of snow covering the earth remains almost unaffected by its warmth. The glitter of sun on snow is so fierce that should a traveller journey for a day or two without dark glasses, he would be forced to bed at the first way station with a damp cloth over his flaming eyes, and thereafter would be fit to travel only at night. For that reason, dwellers of the taiga wear masks of bark, with narrow slits for the eyes.

"Where could Stepan be wandering on such a bright, cold day?" thought Ivan Ivanovich with a frown. "Spring. True enough, but you can't go roaming the taiga so soon after such an operation! It may lead to serious complications."

With a gesture of annoyance, Ivan Ivanovich put on his glasses and quickly walked toward a nearby *chum.*

He was met by the cries of women and children.

"Stepan has come back!"

"He has come back in good health!"

"He killed an elk! *Ulakhan*—elk! *Ulakhan*!"

Ivan Ivanovich entered the *chum* without stopping to speak to the people who ran out to meet him.

Stepan, who had been warming himself at the hearth, rose guiltily.

"Where have you been, *dagor*?" asked Ivan Ivanovich.

"Away."

"Why did you go away?"

"Stepan is a hunter. He cannot sit like an old woman. He must try hunting while you are still here. If his head is no good, you must treat him some more. Stepan hunted well—*uchugei*," said Stepan, looking up at the doctor appealingly.

A restrained smile played about the lips of Ivan Ivanovich as he tried to make out what Stepan was saying. He could not help admiring this sturdy forest dweller. On catching a reflection of his own smile on the face of Stepan, Ivan Ivanovich realized the relief his patient was experiencing. He laughed, and immediately all who were gathered there began to laugh and talk and move about.

"All right, if that's how it was—*uchugei*!" said Ivan Ivanovich, throwing off his coat and sitting down next to Stepan at the hearth. "Head doesn't hurt? It's too soon for you to be going hunting. You must wait a bit—until you get back your strength. Nikita!" cried Ivan Ivanovich as his assistant entered the *chum*. "Translate to Stepan just how he must take care of himself. Ask him if he sees all right. Could he see the deer far away? Only when nearby? Well, that's not so bad either. Did you hear what he said? He had to try hunting while I was still here! Think of that, the wretch! But I'm glad you came back, Stepan."

Ivan Ivanovich gave his patient's shoulder a friendly shake and then said:

"Tomorrow I'm leaving—returning to Kamenushka."

54

Ivan Ivanovich's main work at Uchakhan was accomplished, and ever since he had received Denis Antonovich's disturbing letter, he was impatient to get back to the gold-fields.

"Do you think we'll have trouble on the rivers?" he asked Marfa, who had come to help him pack. "What if we do? A dip or two won't hurt us; it's warm now."

"Perhaps you'll leave your apparatus here?" asked Marfa hopefully. "Perhaps you'll be coming back?"

"No, Marfa, I'm afraid I won't be coming back. Soon you'll have a large new hospital and other doctors. We have no lack of good people."

Marfa gave a sigh.

"You'll travel very slowly. We had no time to send out a change of reindeer. We thought you would be staying until summer."

"I thought so too. But now I can't. Patients are waiting for me there. We'll travel slowly if necessary. Nikita said that tomorrow a large group of Evenks were leaving for summer pastures. Perhaps they will help us, since we are going in the same direction."

"Any day now the snow will give way under the reindeer," said Marfa, playing her last card. "There is a lot of snow in the lowlands this year. You will sink up to the neck," said the old woman. "Your feet will not even touch the ground. Snow and water. Very bad."

"Don't worry, if other people can manage, we can."

"Others are used to it. A reindeer and sledge is not apparatus. Your apparatus breaks easily."

"We shall pack it with special care. Over in your storehouse I saw some zinc cans and boxes. That's just what we need. We'll solder the lids so that no moisture can enter during the trip. Our surgical equipment is not very heavy—nothing weighs much more than ten kilo-

grams. We can put it inside packs or even carry it on our shoulders if need be. Nikita and I will manage to transport it anywhere at all."

Early in the morning all the inhabitants of the settlement, young and old, gathered in front of the schoolhouse. Here too were assembled reindeer teams belonging to the Evenks and Yakuts. The route to be taken by the Evenks did not entirely coincide with the doctor's, so the two parties would travel together only part of the way.

The sun had just risen. Above the taiga and the distant peaks hung a rosy haze, and the chimney smoke was rosy, and torn by a piercingly cold wind. Louder than usual was the crunching of the snow under the feet, while along the edges of the snowy roofs hung the first little icicles.

"We'll have time. We'll just manage to make it," Ivan Ivanovich assured himself as he glanced at those icicles and at the columns of blown smoke. How bitter the wind was!

"I am sorry to see you go," said Marfa, grasping the doctor's large hand in both her own. "And everybody is sorry. Why don't you stay here? Plenty of work."

Other people from the Uchakhan District Soviet and the District Party Committee came up and shook Dr. Arzhanov's hand and expressed their regret that he was going away. The leave-taking was warm and sincere, but not for a moment did Ivan Ivanovich doubt that he was right in hurrying back to Kamenushka. The fate of Alexei, "counting the hours until your arrival" as Denis Antonovich had written, gave him no peace.

The hunters and fishermen and Uchakhan collective farmers who surrounded the doctor took him over to see their gifts. These people were richer than Marfa and her comrades, and they had brought the doctor vast supplies of frozen fish, game, and smoked reindeer tongues, em-

broidered fur boots and caps, as well as rich pelts ranging in tone from black and brown to beige and white. A whole mart rose about Ivan Ivanovich, surrounded as he was on every hand by furs and fur-clad people. He examined everything; he smiled and praised the gifts, but refused to accept a single one.

"Thank you," he said.

"Thank *you*!" came the answering chorus.

A small sturdy Yakut swathed in furs to the very ears, his tousled head bared, came running up to Ivan Ivanovich with beaming face. In his hands he held a fluffy silver fox.

"Take it Doctor. Because we respect you. Very respect. For your woman. Your wife."

"I have no wife," said Ivan Ivanovich quietly but distinctly.

"Will have. Can't live without a woman."

The Yakut pushed the fox into the breast of his coat with the black-and-white tail swinging, and hurried at the heels of the doctor, insisting that if he refused this, he should take some other gift, more to his taste.

"Very respect Doctor. Very respect. Why hurt our feelings, Doctor?"

When he had extricated himself from the crowd, the dazed Ivan Ivanovich accepted a carved ivory object resembling a pencil box, and gripped the hand of the indomitable Yakut.

"Good-bye, *dagor*! Farewell, friends!"

"Farewell, friend! Good-bye, friend!" came hundreds of voices, old and young.

55

The session of the District Soviet was in progress. Spring had come to Kamenushka too, and the bright sun streaming through the window fell warmly on the back

and smoothly combed head of Varvara. She was sitting among other delegates at a long table covered with cloth as green as spring grass. She was a bit nervous as she listened to the words of the Chairman. She was preparing to make a speech about building projects to improve cultural and living conditions.

These projects had been discussed the preceding year. At that time it had been decided which of them should be financed by local funds, and which (an electric power station for distant collective farms, for example, and a seven-year school, with dormitory, for the Evenks) should be included in the state budget. The present discussion was taking place after the Regional Soviet had passed a resolution designating the sum to be invested locally, while the session of the Supreme Soviet had allocated state funds. The talk was now about how the decisions already adopted were to be carried out. In addition to the building of an automobile road to connect the most distant corners of this vast region with Kamenushka, the plan included a collective-farm power plant, six child nurseries, a large bathhouse at the state farm, and two schools with dormitories. It also provided for the enlarging of the hospital and the building of a new surgical wing. It was this last project which was most dear to the heart of Varvara.

Last year the building of the new wing had been entrusted to the Director of the Mine, inasmuch as it was included in the building plan of the Ministry of Non-Ferrous Metals. This meant that its realization was sure to be put off indefinitely, for the Mine Administration, represented by Pryakhin, was averse to adding this large new item to its building estimates. Last year Varvara, irritated by Pryakhin's evasions, had lost her temper.

"We may as well face the facts," she had said to Pryakhin. "You are only making empty promises. You

don't *refuse* the job, but you don't make any definite statement as to when you will do it. You're just beating round the bush."

Instead of taking offense at her tone, Pryakhin gave a faint smile. Apparently he considered it beneath his dignity to attach significance to the words of this child, even if she had been elected deputy to the Soviet.

The cost of building the new hospital wing had been included in the state budget.

Varvara eagerly listened to what the Chairman of the District Soviet had to say. According to Tavrov, the Yakuts had made up songs and legends about this man. He was a very giant—over six feet tall, but with features so delicate as to be almost girlish. The burning spring sun left no marks on his tender skin. When he was angry, he spoke almost in a whisper, as if loth to make a show of his strength and authority. For this reason he was nicknamed "The Quiet One," but people became frightened when he began to speak quietly. It was just such strong, kindhearted people who, first in Ukamchan and then in Moscow, had read the request for a new maternity hospital in the gold-fields, and had said:

"We cannot allow the decision of such a serious question to be treated lightly. We can only rejoice that the women in Kamenushka give birth to so many children. It is a very good thing if Yakut and Evenk women have overcome their superstitions, and now come to give birth to their children under a doctor's supervision. We must provide them with a warm, well-equipped building. We can turn the present surgical department into a maternity hospital and build a new, more modernly-equipped wing for surgery. We shall be doing it for the whole people, whose labour has earned them a right to the best of everything."

"That will please Ivan Ivanovich," thought Varvara. As she imagined his return and the joy of seeing him

again, she was filled with a happy excitement that went to her head like strong wine.

Her mood was further induced by the spring sun, pouring such a luxurious stream of golden light into the room. Yakut women and children had formerly spent the whole winter locked up in their yurts, and they always rejoiced at the coming of spring, bringing with it the vivifying warmth of the sun. But at present such a mood in no way harmonized with the businesslike atmosphere of this meeting, and Varvara glanced about guiltily to see whether anyone had noticed her elation. Her eyes met those of Logunov, who was sitting in front of her at the Chairman's table. No doubt he had noticed, and she defended herself by smiling at him—the slightest bit, just with the corners of her mouth. This ruse was innocent enough; the smile came of itself, but Logunov blushed and kept glancing in her direction, while she sat frowning and blushing too.

56

The snow on the path, softened by the sun, registered the prints of little feet in galoshes. Logunov followed these footprints, his mind full of the remembrance of Varvara's smile and the glance she had cast him during the meeting. Could this have meant a change in her attitude toward him? Later she had made her speech with such nervous intensity that little chills of excitement had run up and down Logunov's spine. She did not listen to her own words, as many experienced orators did, nor become embarrassed, as if she were a novice, but was so carried away by what she was saying that she completely captivated her audience. She took her seat in a storm of applause, pale but outwardly composed, and not once did she glance in the direction of Logunov. How was he to guess her feelings?

Her footprints led him out on to a road trod by many feet and marked by the runners of sledges. This road ran into the taiga, first along the bank of the Kamenushka and then across the ridge. Where could Varvara have gone—up along the riverbank, or back to the gold-fields? Logunov stopped in query. Had she wanted to speak to him, she would hardly have disappeared so quickly while he was delayed in conversation with other deputies. She would not have left him nothing but her footprints. Logunov turned back to the gold-fields.

Varvara was already far away. On emerging from the District Soviet, she stopped, overwhelmed by the beauty of this May day. The sun had bathed everything in warm light, and at first it was only this warmth and this light that made itself felt, like transparent waves rising caressingly from the earth. Then came a sense of the blueness of the sky and the whiteness of the glittering snow, whose surface, moist and granular, shimmered in the distance and was almost black underfoot. Ah, this was spring indeed! The path Varvara had taken led her, as it later led Logunov, out on to the sledge road.

On either side stood dark trees whose moist branches gave off a heady fragrance. The outlines of bushes grew distinct as the snow under which they were buried softened and settled; it seemed that at any moment it would fall away completely, leaving them to shake and preen themselves in the soft breeze. The river was still sleeping in its deep bed; the ice was not yet ready to break. And at any time now the reindeer teams bringing Ivan Ivanovich out of the taiga would come galloping along its smooth surface.

Varvara began to sing softly, like a brook gurgling between banks of melting snow. She continued on her way. She had been on duty for the last twenty-four hours, and now she was free for two days. Gusev did not let her work in the operating room; he had taken

another nurse to assist him, and Varvara was not sorry. She disliked working with him; he was too nervous, and she found his manner of inspecting every instrument she handed him insulting. She preferred working even with the young inexperienced Sergutov; but only when assisting Ivan Ivanovich did she feel completely happy. Now, serving as nurse on the ward, she longed with all her heart to have Ivan Ivanovich back, and to return to her work as his assistant.

Varvara was overtaken by a reindeer train. The deer were thin and mangy, with the fuzzy stumps of new horns showing, some of them with blood-stained knobs indicating where the old antlers had fallen off. The sledges were piled with household goods, including an iron stove. Two newborn deer were lying on the canvas of a folded tent.

"*Kapse*!" said Varvara, smiling and shielding her eyes from the sun.

"*Kapse*!" replied a Yakut woman with an infant in her arms. "Tell us what is new, friend."

"Come with us as our guest into the taiga!" cried another, looking with curiosity at Varvara's coat with its rich trimmings of otter, and the little otter hat perched on her head.

The entire train slowed down and then came to a halt. These people were collective farmers from a distant settlement who had come to the gold-fields before the thaw set in to pay a visit and make some purchases.

"Where are you from, maiden?" asked a middle-aged, bow-legged Yakut in dark glasses as he tied up the deer and reached for his pipe and tobacco pouch.

Varvara told him, and then sat down on the sledge where the newborn deer were grunting hoarsely. As she talked, she stroked their velvety muzzles and silken ears.

"Come live with us," laughingly proposed one of the young lads. "I'll wrap you from head to foot in my holi-

day furs to keep you warm. There's plenty of fun where I come from, and plenty of Komsomol boys and girls too. We'll find a husband for you. Maybe *I'll* do," he suggested, blushing as Varvara gazed at him.

What right had a girl to look at him like that—as if dousing him with cold water! But he could not tear his eyes away from her.

"Come along with us," he urged, this time with quiet seriousness.

"How foolish you are! How very foolish!" exclaimed Varvara, but the spark that had kindled Logunov was again in her eyes. "How can you propose to a girl without knowing what she's like? What if I'm already married?"

"Oh, but you're not! I can tell that. You're all so fresh and clear-eyed. Married women aren't like that."

"How are things where you live?" asked Varvara in an attempt to change the subject. With a dainty little hand she kept stroking the timorous creature cuddled beside her.

"Now we live in villages—not as in the old days," said the young boy, accepting the rebuff. "The yurts used to stand a kilometre apart. A few yurts made a settlement; fifty or a hundred kilometres away—another settlement. And that was your district for you. But our collective farm is building a big settlement. With real houses. They say we shall soon have electricity. Things are well with us now," concluded the youthful Yakut, seeking the girl's eyes.

Varvara was gazing into space.

"Yes, I know. Soon you will have electricity," she said, and with a laugh she hugged the little deer, kissed it, and jumped off the sledge, looking back and waving her glove as she ran in the direction of the gold-fields.

Everyone but the youthful Yakut waved back to her. He remained watching motionless until the reindeer once more started off.

On reaching the mines, Varvara looked back again. The reindeer train had long since vanished beyond a bend in the road. The sun glistened on the melting snow, and again the distance lured her. Or was it the sight of the reindeer team on this May day that had stirred her soul? She recalled her former life in the nomad camp. The Yakuts had spent most of the year in their "winter quarters" on lowlands dotted with stacks of hay. The winter was long and hard. Everything inside the yurt, including clothes and dishes, reeked of cow dung and urine, which soaked into the wooden floors of the sheds where the poor cows stood tied in a row. Only at the end of May did the Yakuts move to their "summer quarters" in mountain pastures. On just such a bright and sunny day as this they would drive off the cattle, thin and mangy from months locked up in filthy sheds. Whole herds were driven away, accompanied by long strings of ox-carts piled high with chattels. The men riding in the carts or walking beside them, were joyful; the women and children laughed and chattered, happy to be freed from their winter's imprisonment. Only once a year did life seem worth living, and that was during this merry spring migration. The lowlands they left behind became submerged when the river flooded its banks. Later the herdsmen made hay there, and then in the autumn they returned for the winter.

How much time had passed since those days! Varvara was now twenty-three years old, but it seemed to her that only now had she become young, and that a long life stretched before her, whereas in childhood she had been like an old woman.

57

No one was home. But that same omnipresent sun came flooding through the windowpanes, now free of frost, sending coins of light dancing on walls and ceiling.

"Spring is here! Spring! Spring!" repeated Varvara as she opened the door and hung her coat and hat on the rack.

She laughed lightheartedly as she recalled the youthful Yakut who had offered her his heart out there on the thawing road. "He lost his head completely!" she said to herself.

Taking a piece of bread out of the cupboard, she bit into it and went into her room. She was tired and happy and felt that she had not a care in the world. Presently she would sit down with her books. How wonderful it was to be alive!

Varvara changed her dress, thrust her feet into fur-lined slippers, and glanced into a mirror hanging on the wall. Her hair was dishevelled, and suddenly she wanted to try arranging it as Olga now wore hers. Would it become her? Varvara swiftly unbraided her hair and began to comb it, lifting the heavy dark tresses to push the comb through to the very end. She threw it behind her shoulders and shook her head, but when the shining mass was hanging down her back and she was considering what to do with it, there came a knock at the front door and somebody entered. It was neither Denis Antonovich nor Elena Denisovna. Who could it be? Heavy, masculine steps. Familiar steps.

Comb in hand, the excited Varvara pushed back the curtain over the door and glanced into the other room.

"Oh, Platon Artyomovich! Is it you?" she said, her radiance fading.

He searched her face without answering. What could he say? Yes, it was he. A strange question, and an even stranger answer when a man was standing there looking into your very eyes.

"Who did you think it was?" he asked hesitantly.

"I didn't think it was anybody," retorted Varvara, defending herself against any intrusion upon her inmost thoughts. The woman in her was awakening.

Logunov kept looking at her. She took half her hair over her shoulder and slowly began to braid it. Suddenly she brightened, and a joyful smile lighted her face.

"What a marvellous spring day, Platon Artyomovich!" she almost sang.

And that smile and that singing voice shook his very soul.

"Varvara!" he said, taking a step toward her.

"No. Platon. No," she said quickly.

"In other words, I was mistaken?" he asked in despair.

"Mistaken?" she answered, genuinely puzzled. "Why, did I say something you misunderstood?"

After Logunov's precipitous departure, Varvara became uneasy, indeed, very anxious, about Ivan Ivanovich. "What could be keeping him so long?

"Is there no news of him?" she asked Denis Antonovich when he came home from work. "What could Nikita be thinking of? Does he suppose they can draw the sledges over bare ground? A fine guide he turned out to be! Another day or two of such warm weather and the snow will be mush. Then there will be no walking or riding over it."

"Must you, Varya? I'm worried enough as it is. Whenever they call me to the phone I go cold all over—Alexei Zonov again. 'Is he back?' 'No, he's not!' Why should I be punished like this? All I can do is send the boy medicine to kill the pain. There are other patients gritting their teeth, waiting for him, but it's Alexei I can't get off my mind." Denis Antonovich paced the floor as he said softly: "Today I met an Evenk who had just come from

out there. He said something about Ivan Ivanovich planning to stay in Uchakhan until summer."

Varvara went white.

"Until summer? That means he won't be back before July."

Denis Antonovich gave a wave of his hand.

Varvara went into her room, but was unable to study. "Will he really stay there till summer?" she thought. "Why, he might even stay for good!"

For another hour she tortured herself with such thoughts, then took out a sheet of paper and pulled the inkwell toward her.

Kamenushka, May 15, 1941

"Dear Ivan Ivanovich,

"Without you, everything is dull. Gusev is teaching us, but we know he is bored and would like to hurry and get rid of us, and often we do not even understand what he is saying. We decided to spend more time studying at home, so as not to miss anything. He has made me a nurse on the ward. I go on working, doing my best, and waiting for you, Ivan Ivanovich." (At this point the pen seemed to stumble, and a blot resembling a big black tear appeared on the paper. Varvara carefully dried it with a piece of blotting paper, but the mark would not be removed, so she began the next letter at the very edge of the blot, trying to make it appear part of her neat handwriting.) "Spring has truly set in at Kamenushka, still I can't see why I shouldn't have gone with you. I'm afraid that Nikita will not be able to bring you back from Uchakhan before the thaw. The sledge runners already make deep grooves in the winter roads because the snow is softening.

"Today at the meeting of the Soviet we talked about the building of a new hospital wing. The project

has already been approved. It's too bad to say goodbye to our present quarters, but the new ones will be even better. Just now Denis Antonovich said that someone had told him you were thinking of staying at Uchakhan until summer, and he is upset about Alexei Zonov. Denis Antonovich says Alexei is doomed; he won't let Gusev operate on him because he refuses to have his leg amputated. Don't you think you have stayed in Uchakhan long enough, Ivan Ivanovich?

Varvara Gromova"

58

Home. To Kamenushka! Every step of the reindeer brought Ivan Ivanovich closer to the one he loved.

Home. A mean and bitter irony sounded in the word.

Damn it all, he was no slave!

The dark trees lining the forest trail rushed to meet him. Behind the reindeer came the sledges, leaving deep marks in the soft snow. In just such a way did the life lived by Ivan Ivanovich drag out behind him. And it was impossible to cut off life, as if it were an ailing limb, and cast it aside. Nor had he any desire to cast it aside. It represented his study, his work, wonderful hours and days spent with Olga. Some things had caused him pain, others had brought him joy, and all of them taken together represented the essence of this individual named Ivan Ivanovich.

He jumped off the sledge and for a kilometre or so ran beside it, holding the reins in his hand. But now his running was not to warm himself, but to divert his thoughts.

They were travelling at night, when it was colder. During the day the reindeer grazed and the men slept in tents. Whenever a tent flap was lifted it seemed as if the world were enveloped in white flame, so blinding was

the light reflected by the snow. One look at it made the eyes fill with tears. Now at last had come the belated betrothal of sun and northland.

On the fourth day of their journey from Uchakhan it became really warm. No longer were there frosts at night, which meant that there was no longer any reason for travelling in the dark and risking losing the way.

Early one morning, soon after they had started out, the train came to a halt in the forest. Here the road descended into a valley. The soft snow grew ever deeper. The deer kept floundering, unable to keep on the surface.

"Things look bad," cried Nikita to Ivan Ivanovich as he climbed the hill. His coat was thrown open, his fur cap pushed to the back of his head, and large drops of perspiration glistened on his forehead above his dark glasses. "The river is a small one, but the snow is as high as the banks. We cannot reach the ice. And there is no path along the shore. Many willows and poplars grow there. Two of us could ride up ahead and cut a road through. But the snow is so soft the deer would hurt themselves on the stumps. The old people want to hold a council."

"A very good idea. Do let's."

It was an extraordinary council, held there on the dazzling snow beneath the pale blue sky. The newborn deer, unhitched from the sledges, hastened on thin, but sturdy legs to their mothers, who were calling vociferously. They themselves let out hoarse bleating sounds as each sought out its own. The uproar forced the postponement of discussion until the deer quieted. The men who gathered about the doctor's sledge stood patiently smoking and staring at the snow, darkly blue as seen through their smoked glasses, and at the darker sky. Their faces expressed the joy they took in the spring—and the anxiety attendant on spring's arrival. Evenks and Yakuts sat next to each other on their sledges. The Yakuts were

faced with the task of getting the doctor to the goldfields, and to do this, they had first to reach the outpost on the great river, whose icy surface was the winter road. The Evenks were considering how they could help the Yakuts achieve this. Doctor Ivan had helped many of the Evenks. Now it was their turn to help him.

"We must travel over the hilltops, where there is less snow, even if there is no road. Going always in the direction of the setting sun. As far as the two rocks resembling white bulls. Then cut through the valley where the Kelugych River flows, cross the pass, and turn north. Then we shall be near the outpost ... near, but still it will take long to reach it. It is hard to travel without roads." Thus spoke the most experienced of the Evenk herdsmen—a lean, swarthy, agile old man in worn deerskin apparel. Having uttered this weighty opinion, he fell silent, drawing on his pipe, and everyone else fell silent, for they were sure the speaker had not said all.

After a few deep draws, the old man turned to the doctor, smiling with every wrinkle in his face as he continued in his native tongue:

"We will help you. We will make camp here and leave the deer, and the women, and the children. Let them wait for us. We men will go with you to help the Yakuts take your sledges over the difficult places. It will be difficult everywhere," he added comfortingly.

And so the Uchakhan reindeer train set out through the trackless forest. At the head went two Yakuts and two Evenks on skis. Behind came the reindeer led by the reins, each team pulling only one sledge. The first day they covered some twenty kilometres, the second about sixteen, and the third, despite strained efforts, they covered no more than ten. "We're almost there," insisted the Yakuts and the Evenks, but the road kept getting more and more impassable. At last they had to trample a path in the snow.

Ivan Ivanovich, Nikita, and some others walked in single file along the ski trail. The snow was underlaid with water, so the path they made was slushy. When they had trampled down some four-hundred metres, they returned to the deer. The first sledge easily covered the distance, but those that followed almost swam through the water, which filled the path like a gutter.

"What shall we do now?" said Ivan Ivanovich to the anxious Nikita.

"We will have to chop down branches to strew along the path," answered Nikita after consulting the *kayurs*.

Without wasting any time, the men began to cut down larch saplings, break off the brittle branches of alders, and dig out heavy cedar boughs from under the snow. These they laid over the watery path.

"The outpost is still some seventy kilometres away," said Ivan Ivanovich anxiously as he saw the men take hold of the reins and almost drag the animals along.

The bristling carpet leading through the black-and-white forest snapped and crackled as the sledges passed over it. The Yakuts shouted in their tongue, the Evenks in theirs.

When the entire train had covered those four hundred metres, it was already past noon, and the sun shone brightly through the bare branches of the trees.

"We can make one more road like this before nightfall," said Nikita. "The Evenks say that then we shall reach the turning at the white rocks. Tomorrow we shall set out across the valley very early in the morning."

59

On the following day, they progressed only two kilometres in sixteen hours of the most intense labour. The valley through which the little river flowed was buried in snow. People sank up to the neck in the drifts. The

loaded sledges were twice as heavy for being water-soaked. The reindeer grew exhausted. Towards evening the harness began to snap.

"I'm afraid we won't be able to get through. The road along the river will be impassable," said Ivan Ivanovich, studying the callouses the axe had left on his hands.

"Do they hurt?" asked Nikita who was sitting on the trunk of a felled tree covered with trailing white moss.

"It's my heart that hurts, Nikita," said Ivan Ivanovich, watching a reindeer lift its muzzle to a mossy bough. He reached up and pulled down the bough and gazed abstractedly as the animal stripped off the moss with furry lips, twitching its hairy nostrils as it chewed. "It's my heart that hurts," he repeated with a sigh. "I can't bear to be late when my help is needed."

"If you had refused to treat those who came to Uchakhan at the end of April, we would have been in Kamenushka long ago," said Nikita. "I told you then...."

"I know," interrupted Ivan Ivanovich. "What good can come of talking about that now? I have an idea: why should we drag these sledges with us? The further we go, the harder the going."

"But on the river? We can move fast over the ice. The river has 'boiled over.' There will not be any snow there."

"Do you think we'll be able to travel on the river? If we advance at the rate of two kilometres a day, we'll reach the river in fifteen days. By that time there won't be any ice to travel on."

After a moment's consideration, Nikita joined the *kayurs,* and an animated discussion began. Ivan Ivanovich caught a few familiar words.

"They say if we abandon the sledges and lead the loaded reindeer over trails along the ridges, we'll reach the outpost in four days."

"A big difference between four days and fifteen," observed Ivan Ivanovich. "Perhaps we'll be lucky enough

to get some sledges there. If not, we'll have to wait until the ice breaks and the river clears. Tell the *kayurs* to unharness the reindeer. We have bags for making packs."

The men set to work. There was still much time until nightfall. The day was fine and balmy. If only they hadn't that accursed journey to the outpost ahead of them!

A squirrel with a rusty-looking coat glanced inquisitively down at this nomad train. It seemed to realize that the hunting season was over and nobody cared for its mangy fur now. With a little rustle, a cedar bush pushed its way out of a melting snowbank, its dark boughs swaying, shaking off the wet snow. High time! The larches, still knee-deep in drifts, gave off a faint odour of resin and showed the brownish tinge of awakening young shoots. Only the limbs of dead trees, sticking up in stark crisscrosses throughout the forest, remained grey and lifeless. They would never wake up; they were frozen to the very core.

On the fifth day the loaded reindeer came to a high ridge. Ivan Ivanovich took off his glasses and looked about in some surprise. The snow was no longer so dazzling. It was as if a cloud had settled over the taiga, casting its shadow on the dwarfed trees of the mountainside. The intense light flooding the world had been tempered as the snow softened and lost its brilliance.

Further down, the slopes were tinged with the brown of the larches and the red of willow bushes, while along the very bottom of the valley lay the motionless river with its coating of blue ice, alluringly smooth as seen from the distance.

"There it is, our road!" called out Nikita, waving a mitten in that direction. "And that smoke beyond the bend is coming from the fur-trading outpost." Nikita took off his smoked glasses and put them in his pocket. "Enough of looking at the world through dark glasses!

When we go down there we'll get soaked again, but at least we can call a halt to hang up our socks, as the folks in the gold-fields say. Since we have no socks, we'll hang up our fur leggings."

They hung there drying for several days. Sledges which could be repaired were found at the outpost, but the river ice was already dark and swollen, though some years it broke only at the beginning of June. The breaking of the ice wrought great changes in the taiga. A warm wind would unexpectedly sweep down from the upper reaches of the river, bringing with it the roar of a myriad of spring freshets streaming from the heights. The snow settled, and was mottled with puddles. Reddish clumps of willow bushes emerging from snowbanks suddenly were splashed with the white of bursting buds; no sooner were they white than they turned to gold—fuzzy ears cocked to the rustle and murmur of spring. The forest grew darker; nights grew brighter.

One warm windy night the river broke loose. On hearing the sound of rushing ice, Ivan Ivanovich pulled on a pair of boots, slipped into his fur coat, and left the stuffy cabin. The wind struck him in the face, bringing the intoxication of spring.

For a few minutes he stood motionless, drinking deep of the smell of thawing earth and limp wet foliage, and of the forest, whose boughs, now soft and supple with spring, brushed the very door of the cabin. In front of him the river fumed and raged. With accumulated fury it was freeing itself from an incarceration which had lasted for more than eight months. Some obstruction arose at a nearby bend. Enormous blocks of ice piled up on the bank with a crash and a roar. The river immediately mounted some three metres, piling the ice ever higher, while the water sieved with a fierce hiss through the

cracks. Finally the irresistible pressure broke down the barrier, and the river tore like a demon through the white twilight of this northern night.

"What a sight!" breathed Ivan Ivanovich as he watched the scene. "What strength! What colossal strength!"

He remembered the eruption of the frozen river he had witnessed that winter on his way to Uchakhan. In one terrific explosion the water, compressed under ice, had burst its bonds and rushed over the blue cumuli pressing down on it. Blocks of ice a metre and a half thick had gone racing along at the rate of an express train, ripping up trees along the bank, carrying away the piles supporting fishermen's piers. For a long time thereafter the intense silence had been broken by the thin ring of minor floes.

"That's how it has been with Olga and me," thought Ivan Ivanovich wretchedly. "Accumulated pressure—a sudden explosion."

60

And now everything was behind him: the unforgettable spring in the taiga, the snow, the breaking up of the ice on the river, and the forest folk, young with a spiritual youthfulness. On a hot June day Ivan Ivanovich and Nikita were riding in a lorry to the gold-fields. The road was covered with a thick layer of dust which rose from under the wheels of the motor. The grass and bushes on either side were grey with it. And, like the dust, dire forebodings rose in the heart of Ivan Ivanovich. He was hot and uneasy and miserable. He wanted to leave his seat beside the driver and climb up behind, where Nikita was perched high up on the tarpaulin-covered baggage, hanging on to one of the ropes tightly securing it. But a change of seat would not bring a change of mood. Realizing this, Ivan Ivanovich remained where he was.

They had found this lorry at a mine depot at the mouth of the Kamenushka River, which they had reached on a raft floating down a tributary of the Chazhma, and then the Chazhma itself. The raft had been turned over to the depot, the boatman who steered it joining an expedition returning to Yakutsk from Sredne-Kolymsk.

"A fine chap he was," mused Ivan Ivanovich as he recalled his talks with the boatman in the evenings as they sat about the campfire and sailed down the cold, fuming river. But at this point his attention was distracted by the view which opened up beyond a bend in the road.

He had not imagined he would be so moved by the sight of this familiar settlement. He supposed that he had lived through his bad moment and achieved a certain equanimity. But now his heart began to thump, and he turned so pale that the driver, who glanced up at him with the intention of making some remark, instantly stopped the lorry.

"These twists and turns must have gone to your stomach," he said, as he reached to open the door.

"No, it's nothing," said the doctor, ashamed of his weakness. "I did feel queer for a moment, but it's all over."

They passed the houses of old inhabitants, surrounded by newly-planted gardens and the grey and brown mounds of slag. The fresh leaves of the poplars along the stream went by in a green blur, followed by the two-storey houses of the miners, the large club building, the cottages in which the leading officials lived, and the green patches of kitchen gardens. The heart of Ivan Ivanovich kept beating faster and more painfully. It seemed that at any moment it must burst.

The lorry came to a halt beside the bridge over the old river bed, now grey with sand and boulders. There was the well to which he and Olga had come to draw water that time they had met Tavrov. She had let down

the pail. Ivan Ivanovich recalled the words of love and tenderness she had spoken to him, and the look she had given him. Then she had truly loved him! It was here under the poplars they had kissed on the day of her arrival. He thought of her now as one remembers the dead—with anguish and despair. Ah, yes! She still lived in one of those houses, breathed this same air, talked and laughed—but for him she was dead. He forgot about his baggage, about Nikita and the lorry. Slowly he walked across the bridge, and beside him walked vivid memories of the past. Here on this bench he had had that memorable conversation with her. She had blamed him for the barrenness of her life. Had she been right? If it were he who had lost his feeling for her, what else could bind him to her?

He glanced up through the green of the poplars and saw the blank windows of his empty flat. The entire house standing on the slope was visible, but he saw only those dark windows. Again his heart contracted. He almost collapsed, but with a great effort he conquered his weakness and climbed the steep path.

He mounted the Khizhnyaks' veranda. The door was locked; everyone including Natasha was at work. Ivan Ivanovich walked with heavy tread past rows of newly-planted bushes until he came to his own door. It too was locked. With a glance about, he sank down on the porch steps, and at that very moment he heard someone running along the path encircling the house. Varvara! The same slip of a girl, but with eyes shining with womanly longing. Breathless with running and excitement, she could only stand there and hold out her hands to him. He took them silently and pressed them to his face. Varvara felt the warm tears flow over her palms and saw his strong shoulders heave.

"Ivan Ivanovich!" she murmured. "You mustn't cry. What can be done about it now? Dear Ivan Ivanovich!"

Carefully she freed one of her hands and removed the unfamiliar cap from his bowed head.

"Here, I'll bring you some water to wash with. And I'll bring the key." Her low voice was steady again. "But you better come over to our house first," she said, foreseeing how painful it would be for him to enter that empty flat alone. "Soon Elena Denisovna and Denis Antonovich will be coming home. It's almost dinnertime."

"Thanks, Varya. But I'd rather go home first."

61

Varvara brought a pail of warm water, some soap, and a large bath towel. There near the porch, in the shelter of some bushes, she helped him wash. She stood on the steps in her white slippers, holding back the skirt of her flowered dress with one hand while with the other she poured water from a dipper over the hands and the head of Ivan Ivanovich. She did not call Nikita, who had remained at the Khizhnyaks' in charge of Ivan Ivanovich's baggage. She did not know that Nikita had purposely stayed behind, so as not to intrude.

Ivan Ivanovich's hands were covered with scars. Varvara noted them with a feeling of pride that he had come to grips with the taiga. And he had emerged the victor. To be sure, he had just wept like a little child, but this only made her love him the more. She opened the door of the flat, glanced about the neat rooms, and brought him a clean white undervest and blue checked shirt. After gathering up the pail, dipper, soap, and wet towel, she silently withdrew.

Let him enter the flat alone.

By the time Nikita brought over his bags, Ivan Ivanovich had already examined every corner of this strangely empty home. The bed in the bedroom seemed like a coffin to him. Without touching the single pillow, he

closed the door, went into his study, and lay down on the divan with his old jacket under his head. He lay down and seemed to die for a moment, blotted out by utter forgetfulness. Just then the none-too-cheerful but exaggeratedly noisy Denis Antonovich came in.

"You certainly weren't in any hurry to get back to us!" he said. "We heard about your work out there—heard plenty about it! Don't get up. Have a rest. How are you? Haven't seen you for so long!" He embraced and kissed the surgeon, feigning not to notice his distress. "Took you a devilishly long time to get here. We thought you'd never come. There were rumours you intended staying there for the summer. Alexei gave up all hope—he's in the hospital now."

"Have they amputated his leg?" asked Ivan Ivanovich.

"No. He asked them to postpone it for two more days. But his toes have turned black and the swelling and discolouration are a sight to see!"

"Good for him for waiting!" said Ivan Ivanovich, dropping his head on the jacket again. "I'll have a look at him presently."

He closed his eyes, and for a moment silence reigned in the room.

"When did it happen?" he asked at last.

The ruddy Denis Antonovich grew ruddier than ever. He blushed as if guilty of some crime.

"When did Olga leave?" explained Ivan Ivanovich in a steady voice.

Denis Antonovich's blue eyes expressed genuine suffering. He rubbed his forehead and adjusted the collar of his immaculate shirt.

"Soon—that is, not very soon—two or three weeks after—"

"Hm. Didn't lose any time," said Ivan Ivanovich with a grim smile. Again he closed his eyes wearily.

He frowned, and his brows twitched on his lean, bronzed face with its growth of black beard.

"What a handsome fellow!" thought Denis Antonovich in pained perplexity.

Quietly he rose and started out of the room on tiptoe.

"Could you spend the night here, Denis Antonovich?" asked Ivan Ivanovich suddenly, without opening his eyes. "And Nikita too. After the taiga—it will seem lonely."

"Be only too glad," answered Denis Antonovich quickly. "We're going to have dinner now. I'll call for you in fifteen minutes. After dinner we'll go straight to the hospital."

When he had left, the silence thundered in Ivan Ivanovich's ears. He could no longer lie still. He rose and again went through the rooms, driven by an exhausting restiveness. He tried to occupy his mind by unpacking his things. A little ivory box slipped out of a pile of linen. Ivan Ivanovich picked it up and mechanically turned it over in his hands as he examined the intricate carving.

He recalled his last morning in Uchakhan. The tiny icicles hanging along the edge of the roofs—harbingers of spring. The cold. The rosy mist above the settlement. The antlers of the reindeer, and the crowd of people clad in furs.

"I should have brought something for Varvara," he thought as he remembered all the gifts he had declined. "It would have made her happy."

As he stood there lost in thought, he tapped the desk with the ivory box. Hearing a little click, he glanced down. On one side of the box he discovered a tiny knob. Ivan Ivanovich pressed it. The object turned out to be a case with a sliding lid, like a pencil box. On the chamois lining lay a Yakut dagger with a highly polished bone handle in a sheath of beautiful workmanship.

The blood rushed to Ivan Ivanovich's face and hammered in his temples. For a moment he stared spellbound

at the glistening blade. What evil hand could have offered him such a gift at such a moment!

But again he recalled the crowd of people and the Yakut with the tousled hair, who, when the doctor had refused to accept his silver fox, had pressed this other gift on him.

There could be no doubt but that the present had been inspired by the most generous of impulses.

62

The hospital seemed like a dream to Ivan Ivanovich after the Uchakhan medical centre. He glanced into the doctors' room and the operating room before he set out for the ward where Alexei lay.

"How's the woman with pneumonia?" he asked Denis Antonovich as they walked down the corridor.

"She pulled through," replied the feldsher. "It was a difficult case. If I could have given her sulfapyridine, things would have been easy, but she had a bad liver. Had to use urotropine and glucose. I also gave her injections for her heart—camphor and caffeine. On her last legs, and capricious as a child. For the ten days or so before the crisis she just wore me out." He smiled, not without a shade of pride, but presently he hustled ahead with his funny one-sided jog to warn Alexei that his weary waiting was at an end.

Ivan Ivanovich, as impatient as Denis Antonovich, entered the ward almost at the same moment.

He did not immediately recognize the ravaged face of Alexei, grey from sleepless nights. This patient with the fixed, filmy, half-closed eyes, could hardly be the young man he had known and treated only a year before!

"We just gave him a morphia injection. That's why he's in this state," said Denis Antonovich quietly.

The patient started and looked up. The glance that

fell on Ivan Ivanovich brightened, his eyes grew wide and animated. He attempted to raise his head from the pillow, supporting himself on his elbows.

"You've come!" he whispered, and tried to smile, but his parched lips remained immobile.

"Lie down," said Ivan Ivanovich, deeply moved, "Let's see how things are with you. What's going on here?"

He was more cheerful after the examination, and said: "Things could be worse. We'll have to deprive you of some of your toes, but perhaps not all. We can hardly save the first three, begining with the big toe. Willing to have them amputated?" he asked Alexei.

"You know best," replied the boy, his spirits rising too.

"True enough, but we might have managed without losing anything! Get him ready to be operated on in the morning," he said to Sergutov.

The operation was a repetition of the one performed the preceding year, except that this time the patient lay on his right side and the incision was made on the left.

Another difference was that Alexei could now guess from the doctors' conversation what was being done, and for that reason this operation seemed longer to him than the first. Whenever it was hard to bear, he concentrated all his attention on the voice and movements of Ivan Ivanovich, and this acted as a sedative. Through endless torture he had waited for this man—waited until he was utterly exhausted, and now, as he obediently gave himself up into his hands he kept saying: "I made a mistake once, but I have done everything I could to correct it. I know that he too will do everything he can to help me."

There was one moment during the operation of which Alexei alone remained ignorant. It occurred when Ivan Ivanovich had reached the trunk of the nerve and had removed two lumbar ganglia which he showed to his assistant. Suddenly his attention was attracted by the

strained face of Nikita, who, as usual, was watching the state of the patient.

"Pulse?" asked Ivan Ivanovich shortly.

"Tell you in a minute," answered Nikita with a look indicating that all was not well.

"A camphor injection."

Nikita picked up the syringe lying ready on the table.

"Alexei! How are you feeling?"

"Sweating," came the thick answer after a pause.

"Quicker," said Ivan Ivanovich without raising his voice or changing his tone. "Was his pulse normal before?"

"Yes," replied Nikita as he injected the camphor into the patient's arm.

"How do you feel now?" asked Ivan Ivanovich, then, to Nikita: "Give him a shot of caffeine and then of adrenalin."

"All right," said Alexei slowly. "Only my left foot hurts."

The operation was a success, and the pale, weak, but relieved Alexei was carried into the ward.

"What happened, Nikita?" asked Ivan Ivanovich as he took off his rubber gloves.

"His blood pressure suddenly dropped to zero, and there was no pulse at all. Went cold all over. Broke out in perspiration, but didn't lose consciousness."

"I was afraid of that. Worn out by pain and lack of sleep," said Ivan Ivanovich. "You have to be particularly careful with such patients."

63

Tavrov woke up at six in the morning. For several minutes he lay without stirring. The arm of the sleeping Olga lay across his shoulders, and he was loth to remove it.

But on remembering the additional equipment the ore mill had just received, his blissful smile was replaced by an expression of concern. Carefully he edged away from Olga, but as he got up he placed his cheek against her face and her hair, which lay strewn across the pillow. His wife! Yes, now she was his wife! He dressed quietly and went into the kitchen in his socks, carrying his boots in his hand. But scarcely had he lighted the kerosene stove when Olga appeared in slippers and dressing gown, yawning and smiling, still rosy with sleep.

"Here, let me do it," she said, taking the empty tea kettle out of his hand and immediately bustling about preparing breakfast, then washing and dressing.

"All day long I have the feeling of having missed something if I oversleep and don't see you off," she said with a clatter of dishes.

Half an hour later Tavrov was running down the veranda steps. The early morning was sunny and cloudless. Once more a hot day was ahead.

Quickly he walked past the mine buildings, descended to the stream which flowed into the Kamenushka, and cut over to the mill, whose buildings were grouped on the slope of the mountain from which the ore was taken. The mountain was covered with the remnants of forest hewn by the first prospectors. Above the forest were heaps of boulders, and it was there that the fateful meeting between Olga and Tavrov had taken place. Tavrov vividly recalled that windy day of the preceding year. Then Olga had been depressed and at a loss what to do with herself. Tavrov rejoiced as he thought of her now, glowing with happiness and filled with purpose. He found her wonderful, as was everything she did. Tavrov loved both her and her work.

An empty car went clattering over the rails drawn by cable up the mountainside. Another, loaded with ore, came rushing down to meet it. Thus they pulled each other

up and down all day long, feeding the mill. Tavrov glanced back at the town once more before he entered the building.

The conveyor was bringing large lumps of ore from the bunker to the "jaws"—the first crushing-machine—after which the ore was sieved. The pieces which did not enter the bunker for fine crushing were carried to a crushing mill or a conic-crusher, the latter having been installed according to the new plan for enlarging the ore mill. After this the ore was carried by conveyor to ball mills.

In one of the shops some workmen were examining parts for another conic-crusher which was to take the place of an old machine.

Among them Tavrov caught sight of the lean figure of Igor Korobitsyn. This poet and mechanical engineer seemed to be fussing more than anyone else, but not without result. He had a thorough knowledge of machines, and, though he himself did not realize it, loved them more than his verse.

The crushing machines they were using were not entirely satisfactory. There had long been talk of supplanting them by more modern ones, but when Skorobogatov had been Secretary, he had interfered here too, insisting that only the machines on hand be used. He not only went to extremes in everything, but interpreted all opposition as an attempt to discredit him. Now his name was only a memory, and the mill was getting the machines it needed.

A shade of anxiety passed over Igor's face when he saw Tavrov approaching. Wiping his oil-stained hands on some old rags, he walked over to the engineer and drew him aside to say softly:

"I suppose you know already?"

"What?" asked Tavrov uneasily.

"He's come back. Ivan Ivanovich."

Tavrov had expected Arzhanov's return and knew that an unpleasant talk with him was unavoidable, but while he had prepared himself for it, in his heart of hearts he had hoped to escape it. Perhaps Ivan Ivanovich, impulsive as he was, would go straight to Ukamchan without passing through the mine settlement. Perhaps he would remain in the taiga, or leave altogether through Yakutsk. But his hopes had proved unfounded.

"I suppose there's no avoiding him," thought Tavrov. Aloud he said, looking Igor straight in the eye: "He should have come back long ago. We must come to a final understanding."

"Aren't you afraid—for her?"

"No. He's—he's a decent sort," said Tavrov quickly, blushing with embarrassment. "I can answer for us both."

64

But he phoned home more often than usual that day. He was alarmed in spite of himself, and his alarm kept growing. What was Arzhanov doing now? Had he gone back to work?

"Have you heard?" asked Olga in some agitation as she phoned to the factory.

"Yes. Don't be upset. I will speak to him."

That afternoon a thunderstorm broke over the goldfields—the first in two years. The thunder rolled in mighty echoes through the mountains and the rain pounded against the windowpanes. Telephones were temporarily disconnected, and this only served to increase Tavrov's anxiety. A strange, smothering heat filled the shops, making the men feel weary and listless. Relief was to be found only at the bunker, where an opening in the wall was screened by an oblique curtain of rain, now white, now blue in the flashes of lightning. Tavrov wiped the perspiration from his face and neck as he climbed to one

of the landings and looked out of the window. From here one usually had a view of the upper section of the settlement, but now the rain made it impossible to see twenty paces beyond the window. Nothing but a wavering, whitish curtain.

"If only the transformers aren't damaged," thought Tavrov, glancing about the shop where the work was proceeding silently amid the din of the storm. "We'd be left without light then."

Without stopping to decide what measures should be taken, he ran out to the upper terrace, pulling somebody's rain cape over his shoulders as he went. Turbid streams were rushing down the mountainside; the water at the spring was foaming and rising. This was the first time Tavrov had ever witnessed such a storm in the North. Holding the cape to his chin while the wind tore at the skirts like an angry dog, he ran down the empty road to the mining settlement.

He slipped on some wet clay and nearly fell while taking a sharp corner near the workmen's houses.

"Damn it!" he cried, clutching at the cape which had nearly slipped off his shoulders. At that very moment he found himself face to face with Ivan Ivanovich.

He did not immediately recognize this tall, bronze-faced man with the black beard who was taking shelter under an overhanging roof. But he stopped even before recognizing him, struck by his unusual appearance and the fact of his being here. Who would remain standing outside during a downpour like this, when the door of the house was open hospitably to receive anyone who wished to enter? Only when he caught the man's sharp glance did he realize who he was. Tavrov went cold all over, but he stepped under the roof.

For a moment both were silent.

"Were you expecting me?" asked Tavrov at last.

"No. I was not expecting you. Not you. I stopped in to

see a patient. One of the workmen—a Chinese—is dying. A bad heart. Then it started raining," Ivan Ivanovich broke off, as if short of breath. "Were you expecting *me*?"

His words were drowned out by a clap of thunder, which rolled away in dull reverberations. Seeing the strained incomprehension on Tavrov's face, he leaned over and shouted into his ear:

"Did you and Olga—Olga Pavlovna—ever give me a thought?" He saw the colour flood Tavrov's neck and cheek and even his ear, while the water kept dripping off his hair into his collar.

Ivan Ivanovich missed the reply, and while waiting for it to be repeated, he wanted to strike this fellow. Clenching his fists until they hurt, he stood there, conscious of the blood pulsating in his throat and ears.

"We couldn't have acted differently," said Tavrov, looking boldly into the eyes of Ivan Ivanovich.

"Exactly! You took advantage of my friendship to deceive me. Lacked the courage to act openly. Waited until I went away."

"That's not true. We did not deceive you," said Tavrov with spirit. "You yourself should have been able to see what was happening to her," he added quietly, but a lull in the storm enabled Ivan Ivanovich to hear every word.

"*Now* I can see what was happening to her," he said harshly. "You have shown me the true nature of a woman I loved for years, a woman I credited with virtues that were the product of my own imagination. Oh no," he said viciously as he saw Tavrov make an impulsive movement, "you needn't worry, I haven't the slightest desire to see her. But think of it—after living together for eight years!"

Ivan Ivanovich turned away abruptly and, regardless of the assaults of the rain, disappeared behind the houses.

Wet to the skin, his heart like a coal searing his breast, he climbed the steps to his house. No sooner had he entered, than he wanted to leave—never more to set foot in that flat, to set eyes on that furniture.

"Isn't it more attractive this way—more homey?" he heard a laughing voice say close to his shoulder, while he caught a glimpse of grey eyes framed in thick lashes. Ivan Ivanovich raised his arm convulsively as if to ward off a blow, and glanced furtively about. There was no one in the room. Everything was in its old place. No one had shifted the furniture in the hope of creating some new effect, appreciated, alas, only by the one who had introduced it.

But from Ivan Ivanovich's study came loud snores, followed by the apologetic voice of Shirokov, the eye specialist, who had waked himself up with his own trumpeting.

"I sat here waiting so long that I drowsed off. It seems I even did a bit of snoring. That's all the fault of the weather; rain puts me to sleep."

"Sorry, didn't notice you."

"That's only natural. It's the elephants people never notice."

"What a man!" muttered Ivan Ivanovich as he pulled off his coat and shirt. "If a storm like this puts you to sleep, you could take a nap on a battlefield."

"I'm a good sleeper all right—have no complaints to make in that line," said Shirokov good-naturedly. "But as for the snoring—it's been a bane to me all my life. Gives me away whenever I try to sneak in a snooze. I was quite sensitive about it in my youth—even went to consult a famous physician. And what do you think he said to me? 'Go right on snoring,' he said. 'Do you good. I snore myself, and so does my wife.' "

Ivan Ivanovich moved about the apartment changing his clothes and plugging in the electric tea kettle, heedless of Shirokov's pleasantries. But he felt better in the presence of this man, whom he liked. In spite of Ivan Ivanovich's tendency to daydream and his love for scientific research, he could not bear to be alone, especially during moments of great joy or sorrow.

They talked over their tea. Shirokov made no attempt to console his colleague; he did not even mention his domestic drama. He only talked about his own work in the nerve clinic and about his sailor sons serving in the Northern fleet.

"One is a young doctor, a general practitioner, the other a captain's mate. They followed in the footsteps of their grandfather—an old sea-wolf and lover of romance who filled their ears with tales of the sea from the time they wore knee breeches. My wife and I had no objections to their going to sea, though we felt like chickens that had hatched ducklings. The sea is hard on a fellow, but it makes a man out of him. When the boys come home on holiday, we can't help admiring them—cheerful, sunburnt, full of life, and with minds so wide awake that sometimes it puts us landlubbers to shame. While we're making up our minds to read some book, they read it, and argue about it, and form their opinions. I'm a lover of literature, you know—read all the new books. Soon my wife will be arriving here and bring me anything I've missed. She's an ethnographer by profession—has her M. A.—and is planning to do some research on the peoples of the North. She sent me ahead as a scout, so to speak."

At this point in the conversation both men began to feel self-conscious, and Shirokov hastened to change the subject.

When he had left, the surgeon remained sitting at the table lost in thought.

"That's how it'll be now—I'll keep getting hurt—bumping the sore spot." He rose and started walking about the room. His eyes chanced to light on a newspaper that Shirokov had forgotten to take with him, and on top of the newspaper lay a small book. Ivan Ivanovich mechanically picked it up and read the title: *Soviet Chazhma*, by Olga Stroganova.

"Stroganova." With difficulty he remembered that that was Olga's maiden name. He recalled the occasion on which he had first made her acquaintance, the daughter of Professor Stroganov.

But what had she to do with this book? He opened it. It was a collection of Olga's newspaper articles, put out in a separate volume by the local publishing house. "So she's not taking the name of Tavrov," was the thought that flashed through Ivan Ivanovich's mind.

"It must be a fine book if Ivan Nefyodovich fell asleep over it," he mused, unable to suppress his bitterness. "Well, we shall see."

He was unable to concentrate on the first few pages. He kept thinking of Olga and of their life together. Olga Stroganova, the lovely young girl, so truthful, so sparkling with life. The thrill of their first meetings. The joy of their married life. The birth of their child. The happiness of reunion when she arrived in Chazhma. If only they had not lost their second child! Surely it would have kept them together. But Olga would have been unhappy. Ivan Ivanovich recalled the dreariness of their life the preceding autumn, and made a despairing gesture.

"Nothing could have helped!"

66

He turned another page, and suddenly it was as if he heard the voice of the old Olga speaking to him—so spontaneous, so sincere. Who else saw things

in such a true light? As he read on his heart grew heavier.

How could Shirokov, that "lover of literature," have fallen asleep over such a lively, stirring book? Ivan Ivanovich suspected that the old eye doctor, who had come to the ends of the earth "as a scout" for his wife had intentionally left this book here for his suffering friend.

The entrance door banged. It was always unlocked these days (as though waiting for someone to enter). Firm masculine steps were heard in the hall.

"Welcome home!" said Logunov as he entered the study.

He gave Ivan Ivanovich's hand a strong squeeze, searched his eyes, and took a parcel from under his arm.

"People just can't leave you alone!" he said with a shade of genial envy. "It can't be helped. They 'very respect doctor.' But you caused them a lot of trouble by refusing to accept their gifts."

On the light parcel was written: "A present for Doctor Ivan Ivanovich."

The doctor cut the cord with his new dagger and removed the wrappings. A familiar silver fox fell on the floor and lay there as if alive, its fluffy black and white tail tucked under in a graceful curve.

"Very respect doctor. Very," recalled Ivan Ivanovich, as he lifted the fur. "It's a lovely thing, but who wants it now?"

"The fellow made his way along forest trails to the District Committee," said Logunov thoughtfully. "He said to us: 'Give this present to Ivan from the hunter. He wouldn't take it from us. You give it to him and thank him.' "

"But what do I want with it?" the doctor was obviously moved and embarrassed.

Logunov hesitated for a moment before answering.

"That Yakut also said: 'We don't believe Doctor Ivan is without wife. He must have wife.' I too believe that in time things will change for you." Logunov sighed as he touched the fur, then he sat down at the desk. "What are you doing now? Taking a rest?"

"Yes. Taking a rest," answered Ivan Ivanovich with a wry smile. "Reading the works of my former wife." He pointed to the book Shirokov had left.

"Why not—it's a good book," said Logunov. "Written simply, and you feel that she put her heart into it."

"Can't you see what it's costing me!" cried Ivan Ivanovich. "Do you mean to say you justify her in what she has done?"

"I regret it more than I can say," replied Logunov. "If I had realized what was happening, I would have warned you long ago."

"Her, or me?"

"You. Olga Pavlovna lived with you for eight years. Had she been older or less attractive, you would have noticed that she was getting out of touch with life; so much so, in fact, that you and she had almost nothing in common. You were absorbed in the big job you were doing. That was all very well, but you forgot she was badly in need of your friendship and support. And then this engineer turned up who was able to give her this support, pointing out to her just what she needed. Naturally all her affection became centred on him."

"What do you want to do—make me go hang myself?" interrupted the doctor bitterly.

"You're the one who began this conversation," replied Logunov, speaking calmly, though his face blanched. "I don't want to make it harder for you, but she was right in leaving," he continued with unrestrained frankness. "Probably it would never have happened had she lived a more interesting life with you. Then she would have seen you in a different light and wouldn't have exchanged you

for anyone in the world. Don't think I'm finding fault with you. Each of us has stains of the past on his character—the spiritual rust that has been eating into the human race for thousands of years. We make fine speeches about the new relationship between husband and wife, but some of us keep building our family life on the pattern of our forefathers. Is it possible to have a true Soviet family without social equality, common interests, and mutual respect? If we compare ordinary love to a beautiful spring whose waters are quickly absorbed by the sands, we can compare love based on profound spiritual affinity to a river whose waters grow deeper and wider the further it advances from its source. We are moving forward. Have we a right to allow even a small percentage of our women to lag behind? No we haven't. Neither the present nor the future gives it to us, for in every family children are being brought up, and the mother who educates them must be worthy of so high a calling."

Logunov stopped and smiled contemplatively as he ran his hand over his wide brow and dark hair.

"Just see, I've made a regular speech! Yesterday I had a talk with one of our miners—a Party member. He has eight children. His wife doesn't work in the mines; she has plenty to keep her busy at home. He said to me, 'That's all right, I can provide for them.' But I said to him: 'Don't be so sure that nothing else is required of you. It's not enough to see that your children have enough to eat. You have to bring them up to be worthy citizens as well. How much time do you devote to your wife? Do you know what her interests are? What has she to offer your children? She's bringing up a whole platoon to aid in building the new life—future citizens who will live under Communism. That's something to think of! It's up to you to help her grow morally and intellectually, so that she doesn't lag behind and become a mere servant for your large family.'"

Ivan Ivanovich sat with drooping head, nervously clutching the little book written by his wife. The more Logunov spoke, the lower drooped the doctor's shoulders and his head, covered with its mop of wiry dark hair.

67

In the middle of the night Ivan Ivanovich woke up with a dull pain in his chest. His heart contracted with such force that at first he feared he was having an attack of angina pectoris. He recalled the yellow, perspiring face of the sick Chinese after long hours of cruel suffering, and his body, held tensely rigid for fear of bringing on another attack.

"Can it be that I have the same disease?" thought Ivan Ivanovich. "How is it I never noticed it before?"

He made an intentionally abrupt movement, but suffered no consequences. The pain in his heart turned into a dull, gnawing sense of misery, and the face of Tavrov kept rising in his mind, driving away sleep.

"Ah," moaned Ivan Ivanovich, clutching his head and burying it in the pillow. "What fine phrases I said! Called them cowards! And what about myself? Why did I put my own head under the axe? I couldn't even find the courage to talk things over with Olga. I didn't know how. But it was too late anyway. Logunov is right—I failed to notice that she was losing all interest in life, and that's why I lost her." Ivan Ivanovich threw off the covers and sat up. He lighted a cigarette and began pacing the floor without turning on the light.

"I must go away," he decided at last. "I must forget everything. Wipe it out of my memory. Tomorrow I'll give notice."

But "tomorrow" all his attention was centred on his Chinese patient, whose condition was considered hopeless.

That evening Ivan Ivanovich placed him on the operating table.

Even Denis Antonovich doubted the successful outcome.

"He's so weak," he said, coming in just before the operation. "Is it worth it?"

"Yes it is," replied Ivan Ivanovich, who was washing his hands with liquid ammonia. "He's been suffering for a long time but he doesn't seem to have a bad case of arteriosclerosis. Such operations are not popular these days—too ineffective. But I don't want the man to die yet. I can guarantee improvement in his condition for at least six months. Who knows what will happen then? Why should we give him up without a fight? Haven't you and I agreed not to give up a single life without a fight?"

He resected the sympathetic ganglia on the left side of the patient's neck. When he had seen the man removed to the ward, his day's work was over. He washed, threw off his blood-stained gown, and stood beside his desk lost in thought. He wished to give notice that he was leaving, but how could he abandon the people on whom he had just operated?

"I can't leave right now, and I won't give notice, and I don't intend going away! It may be hard to remain here, but I can't run away like a coward."

He went out on to the veranda of the hospital. The weather was glorious after the rain of the preceding day. Swarms of gnats fluttered against the cloud pattern of the sky. Mosquitoes blew ecstatically upon their tiny tin horns. Blue rays of light emerged from behind lavender clouds in the west, fanning out against a gold and purple background. The sun was over there. Now it cut through a rim of cloud, rolling like a molten ball down to the horizon and disappearing behind the barren peaks. The colours flamed still brighter, changing every second and

flooding half the heaven. Tom rrow the sun would rise again, introducing another day—that small measure of human life. And it would be followed by millions, billions, of other days. As long as the sun lighted the world, so long would the days pass in uninterrupted succession. But this day was dying forever.

Ivan Ivanovich stood watching the sunset. His heart seemed bared to the quick, so that every impression caused him acute pain.

A soft wind was wafted down from the mountains like a breath from the blossoming taiga. This wonderful, beloved country! Ivan Ivanovich was stirred to his very soul by a realization of how needed he was here. Softly he descended the steps and wandered aimlessly through the mining settlement. People greeted him on every hand, questioned him about the taiga, invited him to have tea or supper. He answered absent-mindedly, gripped the hands extended to him, and hastened away. Was he searching for someone? At least he did not turn away when he heard the voice of Olga approaching. Somehow they had to meet.

Olga was not alone. With her was Pava Romanovna, flagrantly scented. Pava immediately began to squirm, but Ivan Ivanovich scarcely noticed her, having eyes only for Olga. He looked at her long and searchingly. She did not cringe or waver under his glance. Her face showed compassion for him and readiness to defend herself if necessary. This was a new Olga.

"Do you wish to speak to me?" she asked in a voice which revealed the agitation she was trying to control.

Ivan Ivanovich nodded without speaking.

"I can leave," proposed Pava Romanovna.

He glanced at her vacantly. "It makes no difference," he said, turning again to Olga. "I can see the past does not mean much to you. I suppose everything is for the better. We all seek what is better. That's why we're men,

I suppose—to seek. Only other people should not be made to suffer by our seeking." Ivan Ivanovich was silent for a moment, choked by the hurt which was still acute. "Why should you have deceived me for so long?" he asked huskily as he turned away. "I never expected it of you."

Olga took a step after him, but he quickly disappeared behind the houses.

68

"I want her to come back," thought Ivan Ivanovich as he paced the floor of his study. "But that will never be, and can never be, so I may as well put it out of mind."

He walked from room to room. He walked until he was exhausted. Everything was clear, everything had been thought through, yet the ache in his heart continued unabating.

"That's the worst thing," he breathed in despair. "It's not so shameful that they deceived me. The shameful thing is that now, when I know she no longer loves me, and no longer needs me, I cannot rid myself of the thought of her. Where is my pride?" he asked himself angrily. "But why should I talk of shame and pride? There's something more important. It's not that I've been disgraced in the philistine sense, but that I myself proved to have those rust stains on me. Logunov was right. In everything else I was right: I came to the North of my own free will, an honest man, a true Communist. But I proved a failure as a husband. Why should Tavrov, a stranger, have appreciated Olga's talent, while I, her husband, did not? Why didn't I support her efforts? Why did I not offer her encouragement when she suffered her first defeat with the newspaper? Tavrov, too, is a busy man; had I really no time to spare? I found time to play cards and *gorodki* and go hunting. There are times when only a word is needed to support someone

who is faltering. The facts cannot be denied: I am the one responsible for interrupting her serious studies. I took her out of her third year at the Institute. And then I considered myself an ideal husband because I let her—that is, I gave her the opportunity to take various courses. What if it had been my daughter who had left the university? Wouldn't I have talked her into going back? Why then, did I feel so irresponsible in respect to my wife?"

As he passed a mirror, Ivan Ivanovich stopped for a moment to study his features. "You're looking bad, old man. Got a beard. What is it—a make-up? Enough of this! No good trying to pose as a hermit!"

He shaved, wiped his cheeks and chin with Eau-de-Cologne, and once more studied his face in the mirror. His hair was standing up like a brush and his eyebrows were bristling. Ivan Ivanovich touched them and turned away with a sigh, wondering what to do now—how to spend this free evening. He could not read, and a pen fell out of his fingers. The ache of his loneliness gave him no rest.

At last he decided to go to the hospital and see what was happening there. On the way to the door he heard a knock, and in came Pava Romanovna, making the flat smell like a perfume shop.

"Good evening," she said ingratiatingly.

Ivan Ivanovich gave her an inquiring look without answering. He was not very hospitable.

"I've come on business," she said. Ignoring his attitude and the absence of an invitation, she sat herself down at the table.

"You always seem to be up to something," he observed coldly.

"Oh yes indeed, I'm a very busy woman," she replied, not quite sure how to take his remark. "No one can live just for himself these days. Every cultivated woman must take on some sort of social work."

"Is it your social work that has brought you here?" asked Ivan Ivanovich.

"Oh dear no! I've come to you on very personal business—"

"If it's about an abortion, there's nothing further to say," interrupted Ivan Ivanovich curtly.

Pava Romanovna blushed and shook her head.

"What a person you are!"

"Yes, I am."

"I don't know why you should be so angry with me," she said in a conciliatory tone. "I've always liked you, really I have, and especially now. That is, what I wanted to say was, there's really no reason why you should be angry with me." She was growing coquettish. "We'll be going away soon. My husband is being called back to Moscow. He finds it hard working out here. After all, he's an office man." Pava Romanovna paused a second before adding, without regret. "So you see we are returning to Moscow."

"You should have done that long ago," said Ivan Ivanovich, also without regret. "And now I'm sorry, but I'm very busy."

"Don't rush me," she said softly, opening her bag and taking out an envelope. "Olga Pavlovna asked me to deliver this to you, and I hadn't the heart to refuse. She shouldn't get excited in her present state," she added with a malicious smile.

What she had seen of Ivan Ivanovich the day he had met Olga told her that he was a man who exercised self-control, and therefore she had nothing to fear. So now, after placing the letter on the table and giving it a little push towards him, she settled herself more comfortably in her chair and said, with a pat of her hair:

"Now that you see my good intentions, you ought to treat me better. There aren't many women who would have done this."

"No there aren't, thank goodness," replied Ivan Ivanovich, white with fury. "There aren't many who would act as such a go-between."

"Oh, but you're quite wrong if you think I acted as go-between for them too," said Pava Romanovna in genuine dismay. "They would never have trusted me. Not even *me*," she reiterated, puckering her smooth forehead. "You see I'm quite frank with you. Maybe it sounds as if I'd have been only too glad to have been their go-between, but that's not true, I swear to goodness it's not."

"An awful oath you're taking," remarked Ivan Ivanovich with a bitter little laugh. "And now I beg you to be on your way. Sometimes I'm reckless."

When Pava Romanovna had left, Ivan Ivanovich opened the envelope as if afraid of burning his fingers.

"I ought to be glad our brief conversation ended peacefully," wrote Olga. "But I am tortured by the thought that you give a false interpretation to my behaviour. I did not deceive you while living with you, but I was unhappy. When I tried to find my place in life, you were indifferent to my efforts, or you tried to interest me in your own work, or simply laughed at me, as you did the last time. When I met Tavrov...."

Ivan Ivanovich wanted to crumple the paper, which now really did burn his fingers.

"How could she!" he muttered.

"...I accepted him simply as a friend." He would have tossed it away, but could not. "Tavrov was interrested in me not only as a woman. He became my friend and advisor, and this was what made us important to each other. Yet when I found myself pregnant, I decided to remain with you. I hoped that the

birth of the child would restore our old relationship. I suffered deeply, as you yourself observed. But I thought that time would pass, the child would grow up, and once more we would be happy together. When everything ended in the hospital, my hopes collapsed, and I left you.

"I am writing this because I do not want you to think too harshly of me. Pava Romanovna, by the way, had nothing to do with what has happened.

"From the bottom of my heart I wish you nothing but happiness.

Olga Stroganova"

"Nothing but 'I, I, I.' Not a thought for me. But I suppose it's better so."

Ivan Ivanovich covered his face with his hands and sat without stirring for some minutes. Then he straightened up and said gazing into space:

"No, I was not mistaken in loving her."

69

"What shall I do, Elena Denisovna?" asked Varvara.

She was lying on the grass with her head on the knees of her older friend. They were resting in the garden, near the green rows they had just weeded. The entire slope of the hill was dotted with the colourful dresses of women and children and the white shirts of men. Voices rang out in the warm air. Couples walked past in holiday mood.

It was sunday. But in the valley beyond the mines the dredge scraped and screeched uninterruptedy, smoke poured from the tall chimneys of the power plant, and the carts which looked so tiny in the distance kept scuttling between the former domain of Platon Logunov, and that of Tavrov, two men who played such different roles

in Varvara's life. The mining of gold went on without cease. The mines were the heart of the region. The needs of all the inhabitants—food, clothing, shelter, education —all depended on the development of the mines, and each of those who laboured there was, in his own way, aware of the constant rhythm of the enterprise. Varvara worked as a nurse in the hospital, but in doing so she served the mines, and her own personality expanded accordingly. In a few days she would finish the course qualifying her as a feldsher, and then she would prepare to enter a medical school. This had been definitely decided. Varvara's life was full of interest, yet there were moments when she felt that she was only a lonely woman tortured by love.

"What shall I do?" she repeated, dropping her eyes. She put her arms about Elena Denisovna's sturdy waist and hid her burning face as she said:

"I tremble whenever I hear his step. That's not right, is it? I suppose it's shameful, but I can't help it. Do you remember how he used to laugh, Elena Denisovna?"

"Yes, I remember, Varvara."

Varvara got up and straightened her dress.

"Do you love Denis Antonovich?" she asked softly.

"Of course I do," answered Elena Denisovna.

"Could you live without him?"

"Heavens! Why speak of such a thing?"

"But could you?"

"I could. People live without arms and legs. The only thing you can't live without is your head."

"Don't be angry; I just wanted to find out how much you loved him."

"As much as any normal woman loves her husband."

"And have you always loved him?" asked Varvara, kneeling before her and searching her eyes.

"Oh, of course, from the very minute I was born!"

"Don't joke about it," said Varvara. "You're so lucky."

"And you'll be lucky some day. You're lucky now—such a pretty, clever girl and your whole life ahead of you!"

"And what about love?"

"That will come, too."

"What will come, Elena Denisovna?" asked Logunov, whose head appeared above the fence at that moment.

"Oh," exclaimed Varvara, glancing into his grave face. After all, he was suffering no less than she. "Where have you come from, Platon Artyomovich?"

"From a meeting."

"A meeting?" Varvara quickly jumped up, brushed the dirt off her knees, and went over to him. "Why didn't I know anything about it?"

"It was called unexpectedly."

"What has happened, Platon Artyomovich?" asked Elena Denisovna, suddenly turning pale.

"There was a government communication. At four o'clock this morning the Germans bombed some of our cities."

"At four o'clock this morning!" repeated the stunned Varvara. "I was making my rounds in the hospital then. Our day here begins seven hours earlier."

"War!" cried Elena Denisovna in a voice that startled Varvara and Logunov. "Again war! Again that accursed war!" A spasm of pain passed over her face. In 1916 her father and two brothers had been killed in battles near Lutsk; now her husband and eldest son would be called up.

70

In ten minutes the hillside was empty. The homes were also empty; all the people had gathered in the street.

"War!"

The ominous word had flown thousands of kilometres to reach the northland.

It came as a tocsin rousing Russian workers and miners, Yakut collective farmers, Evenk hunters.

"Our Motherland!"

The message sped along the trails of the taiga. The hunter listened, tightening his grip on his loaded gun and opening wide his slanting eyes. It was dangerous to hunt wild bears, it was frightening to grapple with wounded beasts, but the heart of the hunter was steeled to danger, for he had met it from childhood. At every step he risked his life. But only the greatest extremity could make him seek to take another man's life. How, as a soldier, could he conquer his dread of killing a human being?

"A fascist is worse than a beast," said old Marfa at the meeting held in Uchakhan. "He is worse than a mad wolf. He would make slaves of us and of our children. He would not hesitate to wipe us off the face of the earth if this meant more food and a softer bed for him. Shall we let him take our land?"

"*Sokh*! *Sokh*!" cried the collective farmers.

"It is the fascists who thought up the evil tale about a superior race," said the chairman of the Evenk fishermen's cooperative at a meeting held on the banks of a wild mountain stream with pointed *chums* dotting the slope. "According to that tale, the German fascists who are the neighbours of Russians, and the Japanese fascists who are *our* neighbours, are the finest people on earth. They look upon all other people as beasts of burden—beasts like our reindeer. To be harnessed. To be killed. But the Russians, the Soviet people, say: all people are equal. The idea of a superior race is a vicious, cunning lie. Have not we, Evenks and Russians and Chinese and Yakuts, all been equal under Soviet power?"

"Yes we have!" chorused this gathering of swarthy,

black-haired, well-built people. "All of us are considered good people by the Soviet power."

"Are we ready to defend it?"

"Yes! Nothing is too dear to sacrifice for the sake of our native land—the Soviet Union!"

"Now we are a fighting unit," said Logunov at a meeting held at the mines. "Gold can fight no less than iron and steel. The overfulfilment of our plan of gold production will be our blow at the enemy. No slacking! Even so far in the rear, we must have iron discipline!"

"We will win, won't we, Platon Artyomovich? We *must* win," said Varvara on their way home. "There's no turning back the pages of history. They fell on us unexpectedly, but we'll show them! We'll gather all our forces. . . ."

"So far, mobilization has been extended only to the western regions, as far as the Urals," said Logunov thoughtfully. "It will come much later to Yakutia if the war drags on. And then probably only to southern Yakutia. I hardly think they will call up those who are eligible here in the North. The population is so sparse and our enterprises so essential: gold and fur—stable values! Experts and responsible workers will no doubt be exempt, as they were during the war with Finland. But I don't want an exemption. I shall apply for permission to go to the front."

"I've already reported to the Military Commissariat," announced Denis Antonovich triumphantly as he approached the veranda where his family was gathered. "They're sending me to the front as a feldsher."

"Oh, Denis!" murmured Elena Denisovna, dropping the mat she was about to place on the step. "How could you—without even consulting me!"

"Why, would you have talked me out of it?"

She did not answer. Her face turned grey and seemed to melt in a flood of tears. Seeing her mother's silent weeping, Natasha began to cry vociferously, while the little boys sniffled.

"That's a fine concert for you!" growled Denis Antonovich in displeasure. "It's only my duty—"

"And it's our duty," said Elena Denisovna, wiping her face with the palm of her hand and a corner of her apron. "Boris will go too."

"Indeed he will!" said Denis Antonovich with exaggerated assurance to hide the fear which entered his heart at the thought of seeing off his eldest son, a student and a Komsomol member.

Ivan Ivanovich learned the news from the hospital attendant on whom he had performed the ill-famed operation the year before. She was still working in the hospital, though not in the surgical department. Ivan Ivanovich could not bear the sight of her—could not "stomach" her, as she put it. And here she was now, rushing up to him as if nothing had ever happened, and crying:

"War's begun, Ivan Ivanovich! Run to a radio!"

And he ran.

He listened to the recording of Molotov's speech and then slowly walked out of the recreation room where patients and nurses on duty were gathered.

Just as slowly he walked along the corridors of the surgical department, visiting recuperating patients, among them Alexei, who had lost only three toes. He exchanged a few words with the doctors and nurses on duty, but gave not a single direction. It was as if his mind were filled with something quite different. He was just as absent-minded all evening.

When Denis Antonovich dropped in to see him, he found him bending over a knapsack.

"See what I've—that is—I'm packing up and setting out," he said as he fumbled with the straps of the knapsack.

"Where are you going?"

"To the front. I've turned in my application already. I want to work in a front-line hospital."

"Why the front-line? Too risky. Ask them to send you to a hospital in the rear. The operations there are more complicated and serious. What's at the front? Amputations, dressings, preliminary treatment, rivers of blood. Hacking, washing, bandaging—one after another, one after another, conveyor system, until the wounded reach a real operating room in the rear. Nothing interesting for you at the front. We're the ones to work there—small fry that can easily be replaced."

"Are you planning to go?"

"Of course," said Denis Antonovich proudly. "I've got my papers already!"

"Well, and I'm also going out there, where there are 'rivers of blood,'" said Ivan Ivanovich. "The less blood our wounded lose, the greater their chances of recovery. The risk is worth taking if it means saving thousands of men for the ranks."

71

Ivan Ivanovich was sitting on a bench in the park. It was one of those white nights peculiar to the northland. Beyond the willows and poplars lining the riverbank could be glimpsed the dry bed of the Kamenushka, whose course had been deflected so that its waters would serve the mines.

A bird whistled from the opposite bank, while an answer came from the nearby bushes. The war which had invaded the country was far away, but its ruthless tread was heard even here. No longer were the nights filled

with the laughter and singing of young folks. Everyone, young and old, had suddenly grown sombre.

"It's only natural, this anxiety," thought Ivan Ivanovich. "Everyone is linking his own fate to that of his country. How moved Logunov was when he told us about the enthusiasm being shown in the mines and on the collective farms! We'll go off to the front—Denis Antonovich, Logunov, Nikita Burtsev, and many others—and those who remain behind will do our work for us, as well as their own."

He heard steps along the path beyond the bushes and the deep voice of Varvara saying:

"Yes, you're right, Platon. That's another one of the things that makes life worth living—the chance to show your mettle—to do some brave deed inspired by your convictions." Varvara's voice trembled with emotion. "I'm proud of you, Platon, and I intend to follow your example."

"Is that all you can say to me in parting?" asked Logunov sadly and tenderly.

Fearing to hear words not meant for his ears, Ivan Ivanovich coughed.

"There's someone here," said Varvara with relief. She could not deceive her friend and comrade who was leaving for the front, but she could not bear to hurt him.

"It sounds like—could it be Doctor Arzhanov?" she said when she was quite close to the bench. Presently the bushes were parted and her slender white form with black braids reaching below the waist appeared on the path. "Yes, it's the Doctor," she said, turning to Logunov, who was climbing through the bushes behind her. "Good evening, Ivan Ivanovich! Are we disturbing you?"

"No. Perhaps I am the one who is in the way."

"Oh no," said Varvara reproachfully as she sat down beside him on the bench and pushed back a wisp of hair

to hide her emotion. "And so you too are leaving tomorrow," she said with such sincere grief that Ivan Ivanovich could not help being touched. But the next moment he glanced uneasily at Logunov.

"Yes, we're leaving," he murmured softly. "Changing our course—like that river. Once it flowed merrily along in its chosen bed. Then they forced it to wash gold—to push through sand and clay. Hard, dirty work. Where is all its sparkle now? But a little further down it continues in its old course, as bright and clear as crystal We too will return. Or if not, others will come in our stead."

"I am going too," said Varvara resolutely. "Right now the District Party Committee won't release me. They're sending me to work as political propagandist in Yakut settlements. But as soon as I carry out that task, I shall make a new application to be sent to the front. Not much chance of entering a medical school now. Let people like Igor Korobitsyn stay behind. He's a good worker, but not very strong physically."

"What about Tavrov?" asked Ivan Ivanovich suddenly, to his own surprise. Varvara glanced at him almost in fright.

"Tavrov is remaining here for the present," answered Logunov for her.

His words were followed by a strained silence.

"Why must you keep thinking about her—your former wife?" thought Varvara bitterly.

Again she adjusted the unruly lock of hair, pulled her braids over her shoulders, and hung on to them with both hands as she glanced up at Ivan Ivanovich.

The high, narrow bench had been built by a carpenter at the mines who evidently had never seen a real park bench. It was so high that their feet dangled above the ground. Now if she were sitting beside Ivan Ivanovich—just he and she together.... But he was going to the

front. Well, what of it? So was she. She would find him there and share all his work and all his danger. Her very soul kept crying out in protest:

"Why do you reject me? Why do you torture me so?"

And here was Platon Logunov. He was to her, as she was to Ivan Ivanovich. Hardly a blemish could be found in Platon Logunov's character. Why could she not love *him*? Why must she strain towards one who had no need of her love?

A note of irritation sounded in her voice as she said to Logunov:

"What a lot of mosquitoes! We must have brought them with us!"

They were indeed swarming about the bench. Logunov slapped at his shoulder and neck. This brought Ivan Ivanovich out of his brown study. He glanced at his companions, and gently placed his hand on Varvara's brow.

"A mosquito," he said, looking at his palm. "Don't you feel them eating you up?"

"Let them," said Varvara after a pause with a flash of eyes and a smile.

"Well, I'm going," said Logunov, getting up impulsively. He seemed to have felt a prick sharper than a mosquitoe-bite. "I'm going," he repeated with an expectant look at Varvara.

"Good-bye, Platon," she replied, holding out her hand with such obvious satisfaction that there was nothing for him to do but leave.

"I'll come to see you off tomorrow," she called, impelled by a vague feeling of compassion. He did not even turn round.

The night seemed to grow lighter and more beautiful. Stronger grew the fragrance of the dewy grass and bushes. Brighter shone the stars. Tomorrow.... Tomorrow nothing would remain.

Varvara shuddered at the thought of her coming loneliness.

"Cold?" asked Ivan Ivanovich, the tenderness in his voice causing Varvara's heart to leap. "Time for us to be getting home."

"No, not yet!" she said. "You're going away tomorrow."

"That's why I must go home now. I have to do some packing—and write some letters."

"Perhaps not right now—those letters," murmured Varvara.

She resented the feeling of inferiority roused in her by his presence, by his commanding authority. Why did she always approach him like a shy pupil? The woman in her protested.

"You should give at least a bit of your attention to those who care for you," she said jokingly, but the tears were close.

"So you think the letters are to those who don't care?" he asked with an uneasy laugh.

"You can write them on the way. On the boat," she said, edging closer to him. Suddenly she broke into tears, and pressed her face against his shoulder. "Oh, don't, don't!" she gasped. "I think I shall die of misery!"

Ivan Ivanovich was at a loss. He looked into her tear-stained face, was conscious of the fragrance of her hair and skin and her warm, childlike breath; but these did not rouse in him a strong, masculine emotion. It was not desire, but a great pity and tenderness he felt for this girl. His heart was too full, and he too keenly felt his responsibility towards her.

"Varya," he said, gently placing his arm about her shoulder and helping her rise. "I can tell you only one thing: I shall probably never love another. Everything here—" he rubbed his chest with his palm "—is burned out. Don't cry. I too am miserable, but I haven't died of

it. And I don't intend to. Nor do I advise you to." He took her face between his hands and kissed her on both cheeks before he moved away.

They went down the path along the river and up the hill to their homes, he leading her by the hand like a little child.

72

Lorries spun along the smooth highway. A fresh wind was blowing. The grey ribbon of asphalt now ran between high poplars giving a glimpse of the shining surface of the river, now crawled at the foot of barren cliffs which squeezed it to the very edge of the water. Red, blue, and yellow were the peaks cutting clean into the sky. Nothing but moss and lichen were growing out of the cracks in the heaped boulders, but occasional hills were enlivened by bright green bushes of sweetbriar ornamented with bursts of rosy bloom. Here the highway plunged into a gloomy woods desolated by fire, where it wound greyly against a background of charred larches; there it came out upon an open stretch of bog with water gleaming among mounds overgrown with sedge, cloudberry and bilberry.

"Only seven years ago prospectors with knapsacks on their backs made their way to the gold-fields over trails that could hardly be detected," said Logunov, grasping his comrades' shoulders to pull himself to his feet. "At that time there was not a single settlement between the ocean and the gold-fields. Now there are dozens of them. Look, here's a new one."

Logunov pointed ahead, and everyone got up, hanging on to the side of the lorry or the roof over the driver's seat to see what he was pointing at. A town which seemed to have just sprung up out of the earth lay spread over the slope of the mountain. The sun was reflected in the windows of the buildings, while the streets were filled

with people and cars and loaded wagons drawn by bullocks brought from afar. The hill beyond the town was powdered with little white specks—chickens belonging to a large poultry farm. A sputtering tractor was making its way to a green-and-black field from which the stumps of forest trees had only recently been removed. In the driver's seat sat a girl who was either a Yakut or an Evenk. Her eyes reminded Logunov of Varvara, and he glanced back at her with a pang in his heart.

"She's one of our girls," said Nikita Burtsev, waving his hand. "I can't believe my own eyes when I see a Yakut woman driving a tractor. On the New Chazhma Collective Farm in the October District, they nicknamed one of the girl drivers 'Breakdown' because her machine was always out of order. This made her so mad she stopped having breakdowns.... I suppose all the tractor drivers will be girls now," added Nikita, gazing affectionately at the rocky mountains and the woods and the vast expanse of sky above his native land.

Already blue July days had come to the taiga. Hot blue days. A brief burst of rain had made the grass spring up in the meadows along the river and in the fields on the islands. A bear went plodding through the wet sand, slipped on a steep bank, climbed into some willow bushes, and went lunging away through the lush couch grass where sprigs of blue and purple campanula and honey-coloured clover tickled his nose enticingly. The grass, which in places was as high as a man's head, waved in the breeze with a soft rustle. The bear caught his paws in it as he padded over the cool, moist earth—a lord driven out of his domain. The noise of human settlements was forcing him away from the valleys, away from the rivers where schools of fat salmon climbed to the upper reaches in the month of June. Fisher-men were driving away fisher-bears. But sometimes it happened that a man from a taiga settlement would be walking

along, and suddenly from out of the tall grass and the bushes would appear a shaggy, green-eyed, low-browed head on sloping shoulders. More often than not both bear and man would rush frightenedly away.

"Many of our hunters are leaving for the front," said Nikita sadly. "Again the beasts of the forest will draw in on the settlements."

Ivan Ivanovich was amazed to see how the new town of Ukamchan had grown in size and beauty since he had last been there. It was a true centre. But here too everything spoke of war, and this, added to his constant sense of loss, depressed Ivan Ivanovich.

"No one would recognize you!" Logunov said to him when, after much fuss and running from one organization to another, they again met at the port just before boarding the steamer.

Ivan Ivanovich was wearing the uniform of a Lieutenant Colonel of the Medical Service, while Logunov was in the uniform of a Senior Battalion Commissar.

Neither of them recognized the uniformed Denis Antonovich when he approached accompanied by Nikita. Only his tilted nose and blue eyes remained unchanged.

"What's happened to you?" asked Ivan Ivanovich, squinting at him in the effort to detect what was different. Suddenly he laughed. "Your hair! How did you ever agree to part with those Titian locks of yours?"

"Well I did, you see." Denis Antonovich took off his cap and ran his hand over the prickly surface of his newly-shaved head, the scalp of which was several shades lighter than his sunburnt face. "Feldshers in the infantry aren't supposed to go tramping along with their hair flapping about their shoulders."

The four of them sat down on the steps of the narrow water-front at the base of the mountains forming a horseshoe about the bay. These mountains rose in sheer cliffs of wild and barren rock which was under ceaseless attack by the wind—from the continent in winter; from the sea in summer. The only touch of green was supplied by decapitated larches with drooping boughs, like broken wings. At the top of the horseshoe, beyond the yellow border of sand at the sea's edge, stood lone and battered willows. Above them could be seen the roofs of the houses climbing the hill, beyond which lay the city of Ukamchan.

A beloved, unforgettable scene!

The gulls cried shrilly. The shiny black head of a seal appeared without a splash from out of the sea beside the very docks, and remained there motionless. The seal "stood" in the water listening to the noise on the water-front. The attention of this creature was attracted by the stream of people moving in a solid mass along the shore.

A blast of music, and the seal vanished. The time was well past noon. A ribbon of light cleaved the bay, forming a scintillating road out to the open sea.

Beside the dock towered the red-and-black bulk of an ocean-going steamer which had not yet been camouflaged for war. And to this steamer streamed the people—some in uniform, others in civilian clothes. The women and children who had come to see their loved ones off brought flowers and packages and tears.

Above the port the strains of a song fluttered and soared:

The harbour at night, was silent and calm.
The evening was fair as a dream....

The evening was indeed fair. The harbour was filled with the towering shadows of other ships which had recently anchored there. A hydroplane came roaring

over the bay and landed on the water. It was high tide, and the sea flooded the crescent of sand. The song continued in time to the beating of the surf:

Farewell beloved city!
At dawn we are departing....
And there on the land,
My darling will stand,
Smiling and waving her hand.

"Ah, it's a fine song," sighed Denis Antonovich, blinking eyes which were blue as the sea. "And they sing it well. My Natasha knows that song already."

"You're a lucky man, Denis Antonovich," said Logunov.

"Yes, I am," replied the feldsher seriously. "That's why I'm going to fight."

"All of us are lucky," put in Ivan Ivanovich. After a slight pause he added: "At least our lives are rich and full."

Again they fell silent, while above the port rose a new song.