

DRIVING AXLE

A Novel of Socialist Construction

By

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THE FIRST LINK

1

One day long ago, three heavy, gloomy buildings rose unexpectedly in the heart of an ancient forest, and the noise and smoke they created broke upon the calm of centuries. They were built in a hollow, near the bank of a torrential river. They stood on sand which had been deposited there throughout the ages. They intruded upon the life of the great pine forests—the wild animals moved their haunts further and further into the silent depths. Woodcocks, flying there to mate, were disturbed in the middle of their love songs. Only the ancient burial mounds, still haunted by dim memories of medieval battles with Lithuanian warriors, retained their eternal silence.

White lights shone in the dark night and the structures seemed a thousand-eyed monster, who roared threateningly at the little cottages cowering against the hillside. And with the morning, as the sun cleared the veil of mist, the roar and clatter became even more deafening.

It was an all-conquering onslaught of iron and steel. Fields, bearing their meagre wheat crops, were thrust back against the horizon. Thousands of men attacked the ground with pick and shovel probing it to the very core. Sand, clay and lime, moulded into bricks, grew into a giant which pressed heavily upon the earth. The forest retreated in wild disorder, leaving a trail of freshly cut tree stumps. Its ancient pine trees were replaced by red chimneys which spouted thick clouds of smoke. Meadows were turned into waste plots cluttered with mounds of rubbish and dumps of slag. Clear ponds, once full of fresh spring water, became stagnant oily pools, stained with brown and purple rust. Oil tanks stood like rotund fortress towers on the river bank. Such was the birth of the plant.

It roared day and night, sending black smoke far up into the skies—it smelted, crushed and rolled steel. A long double line of iron rails penetrated the virgin land, and iron monsters rumbled through the startled forest. The plant still advanced. The frightened villagers moved beyond the river and looked on inimically. For years hidden in their lairs, they had resisted the new and unwelcome force, but finally they had to throw up their work in the fields—change their habitual life for the new life of the factory. Thousands of houses and barracks grew up round the plant. So there came to be streets, and soon a city grew up in the forest. But it happened sometimes—and

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that quite often—that the plant put out its fires and became silent, closing its doors upon the workers, who then went back to their farms, where they grew long beards and sank once more into the old rustic life. This deeply rooted atavistic lure of the village was a drag upon the people; even on the threshold of a new life it tugged at them, making their long march into the future harder.

* * * * *

Kuzmich was standing at the top of the steps that led into the plant building. He was watching the familiar events which marked the usual beginning of the working day—events he had seen a thousand times but which were still full of stirring interest to him.

They brought memories of the past, the years when the plant had just started into life, and opened up old wounds.

The last shriek of the siren rose in a rush of white steam that spread over the electric power station—frightening the pigeons from the rusty roof of the hospital building. It began as a bass-note moan and climbed to a clarion pitch that resounded far and away, beyond the buildings.

Over the roofs it sped, over the town, into the encircling forest and over the peaceful fields beyond. Wild ducks, alarmed by the sound, flew out of their shady retreats on the river bank. In the outlying villages, the inhabitants moved the hands of their cheap clocks—the old fire bell answered the hoot of the siren in hollow tones—and soon the director's carriage could be seen coming down the road in a cloud of dust.

But the siren went on rending the early morning air with its screech, while thinning streams of workers came hurrying from streets and alleys towards the plant.

Men rushed up the steps, racing against the siren—hurrying to their posts at the machines, in the grimy, smoke-blackened shops.

Kuzmich remembered the years filled with such days. How he had entered those gates day after day—and passed through them at evening, spent with fatigue, hurrying home to his family and dinner which he knew would be waiting for him. Now there was no need to hurry. Others, whose names he did not even know, had taken his place at the machine and there was no one waiting for him at home. The thought of his family made the old man's head sink on his breast. He had forgotten much by now, but there are some memories which men carry with them to the end of their days—a load which the years

cannot lessen. Old people like to dwell on such memories.

“The family...” muttered the old man, and his white head sank still lower.

A stream of people were going past him, alive with laughter and busy talk. Young voices were heard in hot debate.

“If our goal-keeper had not slipped, what a trimming we would have given you!” shouted a curly-haired youth to a blue-eyed girl walking at his side.

“But we won six to two!” cried the girl.

The girl greeted Kuzmich.

“Good morning, ‘boss’!”

“Good morning, Olya, and don’t you spare him,” said the old man with a wink.

Olya and the curly-haired youth disappeared through a doorway leaving an echo of laughter behind.

Kuzmich observed the crowd closely and saw that they were unlike the men and women he remembered in the old days. They were better dressed, especially the young people. Very few carried bundles in their hands, which meant they had dinner at the plant. Only those who came from the villages beyond the river carried market baskets for their purchases and for vodka. Arms were bared to the sun. There were more laughing faces and more confident bearings. Some did not even walk, but rode past on bicycles whose nickel parts glistened in the sun. He started counting them—he reached eighteen, then lost track. Red kerchiefs and colourful shawls bobbed in the moving crowd.

All these things he observed for the first time today. They were new and unlike the pictures graven on his memory. The world was new—people were different, and the change, which struck him with the suddenness of a fresh experience, filled him with a strange elation. The sombre weight of his memories seemed lightened at last and in their place was a buoyant cheerfulness, caught from the passing crowd.

2

In order to shorten his walk to the plant, Andrushechkin turned down a narrow alley running between fences. The fresh morning air fanned his face. He took a deep breath, inhaling the sweet fragrance of lilacs. Birch branches covered with tender green shoots hung above his head, and apple trees, with their spray of white blossoms,

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peeped over the fences. He jumped and tore off a branch, shaking a shower of dewdrops into his face. He looked—suddenly aware—spring had come. It crowded in on him through the cracks in the fences—overran the little gardens—filled his nostrils with the fine scent of apple blossoms and the pungent odour of freshly ploughed soil. It came to him in the singing of the first birds—it overwhelmed him with its munificence. Andrushechkin began to whistle. A woolly dog crawled from under a neighbouring gate and answered him with a good-natured bark.

Andrushechkin accepted the friendly dog's greeting—and returned the salutation with a bellowing yelp. Titych came out through the gate, shaking his head with a smile.

“What's this I see? The secretary of the nucleus teasing a dog!”

“I've gone crazy, Titych! And no wonder—just look around you—and tell me who wouldn't.”

Andrushechkin held the apple branch under Titych's nose.

“Beautiful, indeed—look at all the future apples you've ruined,” grumbled Titych disapprovingly.

Andrushechkin threw the branch away with an embarrassed gesture. They turned the corner, and the blinding sunlight, streaming from behind the houses, fell on their faces.

“It's the same with the plant,” sighed Titych. “What we see now are the flowers. Wait till we come to the apples, and bitter fruit they will be.”

“What does the riddle mean?”

“My riddles are bitter ones,” said Titych sharply.

They were nearing the plant. A freight train was crawling along the track. Unwieldy tank cars alternating with gondolas loaded with frost-coated coal and coke, heavy pig iron plates and enormous cases of machinery slowly slid through the gates and disappeared.

“Look at all this material we use—it costs thousands and thousands. And what do we produce?”

Titych stopped and looked inquiringly at his companion.

“What do you mean?” asked Andrushechkin. “We produce engines and cars, of course.”

“Look here—that's what we produce.”

He pointed to a long line of unfinished cars resting on wooden trestles, like cripples on their crutches. Titych spat.

“Do you see that? It's a dirty shame!”

His face grew dark with anger.

Crowds of workers were coming from all directions and were disappearing through the many shop entrances. Andrushechkin was caught up by the wave of workers and swept through the doorway of the open hearth furnace shop.

The shop was filled with the hissing sounds of escaping steam mingled with the resonant clang of hammered metal, but the noise had not yet reached its full volume and separate sounds could still be detected. The intense glow of autogenous welding devices flamed. Crackling electrodes sent forth sprays of violet light. The pneumatic hammer re-echoed with thundering beats throughout the shop. The trimmer, Vasya Trusov, started his "machine-gun," and the shop began to tremble. A crane thrust its giraffe-like neck through the gates and, with a clank of chains, let down three wheels on the ground and swung off with a loud sniff.

Andrushechkin caught a wheel with a hand crane and dragged it to a welding apparatus in the corner of the workshop, but yesterday's wheels were still lying there in a soft layer of dust. There was nobody at the apparatus.

Andrushechkin looked at his watch and shook his head.

He looked at the welding apparatus and saw that the needles on the face of the pressure gauge were hanging down helplessly.

"He's drunk again, the dirty son of a bitch," he said aloud.

A minute later he was shouting at somebody over the telephone, demanding that a welder be sent from among the spare brigades, and hearing there was none to send, swore again.

He bent over the wheels examining the dents and cracks in the metal, and remembered his talk with Titych. The welding apparatus was silent, its black cable lay coiled like a snake.

The crane stuck in its long neck again and discharged another load. Andrushechkin stared at the wheels helplessly, and swore.

"And to think he is such a young fellow, the rascal. If I were his father, I would teach him a good lesson. Those learned men!"

"Be quick, there!" shouted Boretsky.

"No need to tell me."

Andrushechkin went up to the apparatus, straightened the cable and turned on the switch. Still grumbling to himself, he pressed the electrode and lowered his mask.

An orange flame sprang up and sputtered, the electrode melted away, filling the hollows on the surface of the wheels with a metallic fluid. The steel boiled as it poured into them, filling in the cracks,

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cooling immediately into bluish red scars.

Blue flashes darted above Andrushechkin's head. Seen from a distance, they seemed like blue-winged birds beating against the glass roof.

So thought Comrade Yuzov as he neared the shop. The first sentences of his article were arranging themselves in his head:

"The May sun is powerless to conquer electricity. In vain does it oppose its ancient rays to those of the new fountain of light. Armed with electricity, man challenges the sun. He creates machinery which shall finally make the sun do his bidding...."

"That sounded effective, eh."

"Come to pay a visit to the plant, Comrade Yuzov? You can admire it to your heart's content!"

It was Benjamin Pavlovich—the technical manager—who was coming towards him with his hurried, uneven gait, his plaid silk jacket open to the wind, a smile on his face, his fingers pressing a pair of unruly pince-nez against the bridge of his nose.

"See, Comrade Yuzov—isn't it beautiful?" he exclaimed, gazing fondly at a new engine which was coming towards them. "That's our pride—the 'S.U.'"

The unruly pince-nez dropped into the waiting palm. For a brief interval a pair of piercing eyes were uncovered—but soon the pince-nez were back in place.

"What would you say moves that wonderful machine?" asked Benjamin Pavlovich with a sly smile.

"Steam, of course. Any baby knows that."

"Steam? Such profundity! Can steam be got without coal?"

"Oh, naturally, coal too. You're quite right there," said Yuzov, blushing. He was embarrassed by this peculiar questionnaire.

"Wrong again! Not coal at all, but that which made it. In the words of Stephenson, the inventor of the steam engine: 'That force is—the sun, which is the source of life and movement in this sinful planet of ours.'"

"The sun is the primary source, of course," agreed Yuzov.

"Primary source? Not at all! The primary source which moves the engine is here!" and, so saying, Benjamin Pavlovich struck his sunburnt forehead with his forefinger. "It is we, engineers and technicians, who conquer the sun and make it work for us. It takes brains to do it! Yes, brains! And when I meet old Stephenson in the next world, I'll whisper in his ear: 'Human brains are making your pet

engine move!’ ”

And Benjamin Pavlovich limped away, leaving a dumbfounded Yuzov.

Yuzov felt displeasure at being unable to find the right answer to Turchaninov’s words. He walked briskly into the shop, his ear taking in the dry crackling of electricity. There was a peculiar smell as of roast steel—or no, that comparison would not do, it sounded crude, like roast meat. It seemed to Yuzov that the black screens, lit up by the momentary violet flashes, were hiding uncanny sorcerers who were busy making alchemic gold. For it was true—all these engines and cars were worth their weight in gold. Yuzov was proud of having free access to the gigantic plant where 16,000 people were forging the country’s nervous system—of being able to greet familiar faces which always smiled in answer to his salutation. Gladdened by the feeling that he was a necessary, even if only a small part of that great whole, he blinked into the blinding flashes of electric light and shouted:

“Good morning, Andrushechkin!”

The violet sun went out. Yuzov stepped behind the black screen, his feet tripping against scraps of iron and sprawling coils of cable.

“Good morning,” answered Andrushechkin drily. “You’re still around, are you?” And he gazed inimically at Yuzov.

“Of course, I’m around. As newspaper editor, I must know everything.” He spoke precisely as if weighing each word carefully before speaking.

“Know everything! Better take care you don’t take to drink, like Sergey Vekshin. He finished the intermediate school and became a learned man, but he does not give a damn about his work. All the fault of too much learning.”

Andrushechkin tugged at the wheel angrily, preparing to start work again.

He readjusted his mask, with an impatient movement. He reminded Yuzov of a diver with his diving helmet on. The likeness was enhanced by the canvas overalls which covered the short, rounded figure. Yuzov smiled condescendingly.

“Grumbling as usual? You speak in paradoxes. How can learning be harmful in our epoch?”

Andrushechkin pushed his mask up, with an impatient gesture, his face full of vexation.

“I know what the epoch demands. It demands work. But he has

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finished school and won't work. Why is that? Since he knows so much, he should apply it. But no, he gets drunk and sleeps like a log. Oh, those learned men!"

He threw a spent electrode angrily aside, pushed busily at his wheel, puffing and blowing as he moved it.

Yuzov felt that the last sentence referred not only to the absentee, Sergey Vekshin, and turned away offended. The beauty of violet flashes no longer moved him and he noticed, for the first time, what a lot of waste and rubbish there was in the shop.

"This is the blind and dark force resisting the power of thought and technique," he thought; "these workmen who still harbour a hidden mistrust of those who stand on a higher cultural level." He conjured the figure of Benjamin Pavlovich and clothed it with a halo of hidden power.

"Power," he murmured, "that's it—power!"

The gate creaked as he passed through it. He filled his lungs with fresh spring air. Meanwhile, Andrushechkin ran up to Trusov who was clutching the pneumatic chisel in his hands.

"Vasya! You haven't forgotten, I hope, that we have an International Labour Defence meeting after working hours? Oh, you have forgotten! I'll break your neck for that! Those fellows Sacco and Vanzetti would have given it to you. They would have put you idlers to shame."

He wiped his damp forehead and became thoughtful, trying to remember something which escaped his memory.

He turned this way and that, rumbled his hair, but that did not help. He pushed the finished wheel angrily away and rolled another in its place.

While replacing the electrode, Andrushechkin ran his eyes over the room. Trusov had stopped his clatter and taken out the blunted chisel. He threw it into a heap of rubbish.

"The scoundrels! Can't even give a man a decent chisel," he said with an oath, and taking out his tobacco pouch, sat down on the ground.

"And who must give you a new one?"

"Those who get the most salary," said Trusov, ejecting a stream of tobacco. "The management, of course."

Andrushechkin looked up in astonishment.

"Do you mean you're going to sit there and do nothing about it?"

"That's just what I am going to do."

“To the end of the day?” shouted Andrushechkin, furiously.

“To the very end,” Trusov assured him, calmly puffing at his cigarette. “They’ll pay the average rate just the same.”

His grey eyes had a stubborn look. Andrushechkin found no more to say. He was furious at the thought that he was wasting time, yet unwilling to leave Trusov idle. He recalled the long line of crippled cars he saw that morning and he rushed at Trusov with clenched fists.

“Go find a chisel at once, or I’ll do something to you! You are a candidate for the Party.”

“What has that got to do with it? You mind your own damn business,” said Vasya threateningly, “and don’t yell at me.”

Boretsky ran over to them.

“What’s going on here, Vasya?”

“It’s Andrushechkin again, who is nagging me for no reason at all, just because I’m a candidate. Does he expect me to work with my bare fingers, when my chisel is no good?”

Boretsky patted him on the shoulder, whispering in his ear:

“Do your best, Vasya, we have no wheels. I’ll remember it, you know I will. Come around for the night shift, there’s a job for you.”

Trusov’s eyes filled with gratitude. He ran to fetch a new chisel and the room filled again with its clatter.

Busy at his welding, Andrushechkin could still hear him shout in his direction, in a spiteful tone:

“That’s the way to speak to a man. None of your threats for me! I will be decently spoken to, you damned tadpole!”

Trusov’s oaths sounded through the clatter of steel. The sight of the pressure gauge on Vekshin’s silent apparatus irritated Andrushechkin, as did the fact that Boretsky had been able to silence Trusov at once, while he, who was secretary of the Party nucleus, had not been able to do it.

Nosov passed by with his dry cough and shuffling walk. Andrushechkin looked at his back, which was bent with sickness. His anger left him and he shouted reproachfully to Trusov:

“That’s the way to work! That man ought to be taking a cure in the Crimea, he’s in the last stage of tuberculosis, yet he’s on the job.”

Trusov suddenly burst out laughing. He dropped his tools and doubled with laughter, as at an excellent joke.

“Tuberculosis!” he shouted between guffaws. “Hear him! Tuberculosis! The last stage!”

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Old Kuzmich, the “boss” as he was called, appeared suddenly in the shop and, standing before Trusov, shook his shaggy head reprov- ingly.

He said nothing, but the long, piercing look he gave him made Vasya feel uncomfortable. He lifted his pneumatic hammer with a sigh, while the old man stood gazing at him for some moments before he shuffled away to the machine shop. He did not hear Vasya saying after him with some respect:

“Queer old man! Just looks at you without a word. Might swear a bit at least.”

The “boss” was making his usual round. He went to the machine constructing shop and stood for a long time gazing with wonder at the two hundred and fifty ton crane, destined for Dnieprostroy. Its colossal mass took up half the shop. After that he paid a visit to the engine assembly shop and found out that assembling was delayed by a shortage of driving wheels. He wandered to the open hearth furnace shop, where he met Boretsky, who greeted him testily.

“Well, my friend, why is it you are leaving us short of wheels?” said the “boss” looking severely at the foreman.

“That’s no business of yours,” said Boretsky, turning his back on him.

The “boss” lifted his bushy eyebrows.

“So, so, Antonych! There’s no harm in my being curious. I am an old man, my friend, not much left to worry about now-a-days.”

The “boss” saw that Boretsky was trying to hide something from him, screening it with his wide back from his keen old eyes.

Offended at Boretsky’s attitude, he scowled and shuffled off to the machine shop. The smoke-blackened buildings rose on all sides. They had been erected within his memory, one after the other, and he remembered the time when the boundary of the plant site ended at the machine workshops which now stood close by the entrance gate. He remembered that gate in flames, in 1897, when the workmen had risen in revolt and set fire to them and the flames had reached the workshops so that the whole plant was enveloped in smoke and fire. There were many things the “boss” remembered, but there was not one case when he had kow-towed to anybody. But, Boretsky, who was young then and was called Stasik by everybody, had liked stand- ing at attention before his superiors and therefore made himself a good career. As soon as the gate was built again, he had been the first to pass through it into the abandoned plant.

He was now Comrade Boretsky, Stanislav Antonych.

“No business of yours!” thought the old man with anger, as he shuffled along, muttering and grumbling to himself.

The accustomed racket of machinery in the machine shop was powerless to still the anger in his heart, and he tramped wearily to the next department.

Voices shouted on all sides:

“Good morning, father!”

“Here is the ‘boss.’ ”

“Come and have a talk.”

“I’m busy, friends, no time for talking,” answered the “boss” in a preoccupied voice, and walked on.

A shrill signal sounded. An engine axle was carried through the air on a crane hook and lowered over Zaytsev’s machine. The “boss” looked on while Zaytsev tugged at the axle, involuntarily mimicking his movements—clutching his fists, gathering his body as for a mighty effort, while his dry lips moved. He felt an accustomed excitement at the sight of all those people at work, whose united effort found echo in his being. His shrewd old eyes ran over every detail, searching for defects; his heart beat faster, it tightened involuntarily in contact with metal. Unable to suppress his feelings any longer, he shouted:

“A little more length, there. That’ll do, stop!”

3

Olya looked from the crane cabin and saw the men bent over their machines threading and planing. The clank of metal and the whirr of machinery filled the air, and it seemed to Olya that her ear caught a peculiar rhythm to which she hummed.

Zaytsev was making a wheel fast to a stand with wooden wedges. The wedges would not stay in. A half hour passed, still the wheel was not made fast enough. Yet, it had to be finished by the end of the day, and so much time wasted. The “boss” was trying to help. Placing a wedge with great care between the spokes, he said:

“Now then, friend, hit it hard!”

Zaytsev gave it a good blow with the sledge hammer and the wedge was driven in fast.

The foreman came up and cast an indifferent look at Zaytsev.

“Hurry up,” he said. “Your norm has been increased since yesterday, so you must turn a wheel and a half per day. Those are the

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orders. Simon Petrovich gave them. It seems we are behind in our engine production.”

Zaytsev was moving one of the four saddles by hand, turning the head of the leading screw with effort.

“One and a half? Why I can’t even do one with the tools I have. I lose about an hour just making the wheel fast. It can’t be done, Bulavkin.”

Bulavkin rolled a cigarette and thrust it into an old holder with a sigh.

“I know it myself, but, since those are the orders, what can I do?”

He had a bluish wart on his cheek with stiff black bristles growing in the middle—nothing would take it off. He bore its ugliness with the same resignation as he did the orders of the management.

“Nothing to be done, Zaytsev.”

Zaytsev started hurriedly placing the second saddle in position for side threading the tires, but the saddle seemed unusually heavy and suddenly stopped dead, as if rooted to the ground. Zaytsev examined the carriage closer and noticed that the slides were clogged with sand and shavings which jammed the leading screw.

He wiped the dirt off with a rag and moved the lever again. The machine gave a start and the wheel began to turn slowly round, while shavings poured from under the four cutters. Zaytsev wiped his forehead and looked round.

His neighbour, Mokhov, was looking over his spectacles at an axle and muttering something to himself.

“Well, Mokhov, how’s life?”

Mokhov pushed his spectacles up on his forehead and turned a discontented face on his neighbour. His greenish eyes narrowed.

“Not worth a darn! It’s all those new rules.... I’ve been working for years at these axles, you would think I know what’s what. But they want new ways in everything—I’m to work this way and not that way. I used to make my roundings smoothly enough before, it was a pleasure to look at my axles. Now the drawings are different. To hell with them! And the machine is all topsy-turvy; the saddle is shaking like a leaf, can’t get it right at all.”

Zaytsev examined Mokhov’s machine—the leading screw was clogged with shavings, the slides creaked and vibrated—sand shavings had gradually, over a period of years, unsettled the precision of the mechanism.

Mokhov shrugged his shoulders despairingly.

“That’s no machine! It was found in Noah’s Ark!”

Zaytsev watched the rust and sand flying from under the cutters and falling in showers over the saddle. Hundreds of machines roared, screeched, whirled in the large low-roofed shop, turning shapeless casts into bright engine parts. Fifteen hundred turners, drillers, threaders and planers were creating an engine, giving final shape to its innumerable parts. The glistening pieces of steel, joined piece to piece, grew into one powerful engine.

Zaytsev was fascinated by machines—they seemed to him living beings, endowed with a thinking mind and a complicated inner life. He looked with greedy curiosity at the combination of wheels, shafts and pinions, marvelling at their correlation. These observations and his working experience had given him an inner understanding of machinery. He could catch the sound of fatigue in the accustomed voice of every machine. Guided by scarcely perceptible signs, he recognized the cause of its irregular action. Whenever the rhythm of a machine showed a slight alteration, he felt it in the very marrow of his bones, as if the machine were part of him. At such times he would get busy taking the mechanism to pieces, cleaning and wiping the parts until he could hear it hum with its usual rhythm. The others often made fun of him and his fondness for machinery, but he thought little of them or their jokes. He considered them yokels.

Zaytsev evaluated people according to their attitude towards machinery. He divided them into three categories: yokels, careful people, and those who understood machines. He despised the first, respected the second, and worshipped the third. The third category included very few people. He placed in it men like himself. But first he had passed through all these stages and having now risen in his own estimation above the general run of people who worked in his shop, he looked upon them with a certain condescension. Yokels were in the majority. The careful people, like Mokhov, were very few, and of those who thought over machinery there were only three. That was a pity, but the fact that he himself had gone the whole way filled him with pride. An inner consciousness of machinery was, to him, a measure of his own development.

The thing he had now discovered in his own and Mokhov’s machine was new to him. Shavings had jammed the leading screw before and he had fought that by daily care and tending. But he now saw that it was a defect in the construction of the machines, for the most important working part was unprotected and subject to

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premature wear and tear.

He thought of the following comparison: the human eye was naturally protected by eyelids and lashes from dust and other particles, whereas the saddle screw and slides remained exposed during work—that was wrong. Machines ought to be constructed so that the working parts would be protected from damage.

He bent over his machine, walked round it, knelt beside it thinking:

“What if the saddle were to be covered so that neither shavings, rust, nor sand could get in?”

Zaytsev thought of his wife at her stove and of the blue apron covering her pink calico dress. Perhaps this also needed an apron. It was a simple guess and Zaytsev was struck by its simplicity. He walked round the machine and, excited by his new thought, shouted to Mokhov:

“Makarych! How would it be to have an apron on that saddle?”

Mokhov listened to his explanation and his angry face cleared somewhat at first, but soon went back to its former gloomy expression.

“You would think that saddle was a woman! You’re talking nonsense. Olya! Come and lend Zaytsev your pretty little apron!”

The embarrassed Zaytsev went back to his work, but the idea of the apron stuck in his head and the next time Bulavkin appeared, he explained it to him. The latter stared at Zaytsev with cold indifference.

“Better put a stop to your imagination,” he said, “and look after your work. Be careful of that tire there.”

Zaytsev looked disconsolately at Bulavkin’s retreating back and cast a glance round the shop. Here a lathe was turning a bright wheel spoke, in a slow, smooth movement. Further on, a gleaming axle was revolving at great speed. Next to it, a tire turned round and round like a windmill, sending the fine shavings shooting in all directions. Further still, a hydraulic press was puffing and blowing as it drove the driving axle crank into the wheel. The operator was tensely watching the movement of the crank as it moved into place oozing yellow oil, and suddenly noticing a little incorrectness in the movement, he seized a lead sledge hammer and set the crank right with a well-aimed blow.

Completed axles were carried away in trucks on the miniature rails that led to the engine assembling shop. Their bright cranks tilted

in mid-air as the trucks rolled noisily through the shop. Milling machines cut into copper cross heads, "Armstrong" lathes planed shafts and parallel bars. Polished coulisses sparkled with their bright scales like newly caught fishes.

All those bright, polished pieces of steel were carried to the engine assembling shop next door, where they would be linked together to form a powerful engine—which could pull thousands of tons of goods.

Zaytsev struck at the wedges to set them right without stopping the machine, and opened the factory newspaper.

INTERNAL RESOURCES MUST BE MOBILIZED

Our plant demands large working capital. This working capital is provided by the state. But we can and must find means within the plant itself. They do exist. Thousands of rubles are strewn about the plant yard, among heaps of rusty steel. They exist in raw materials, in machinery which we do not properly care for. In the preceding month, in the machine shop alone there were six hundred cases of work stoppages due to damaged machinery. We are wasting millions. We must save them, collect them all over the plant and put them to use.

Zaytsev gazed thoughtfully at the bright surface of the tire, which gradually came to view.

"Millions," he thought. "Millions strewn about this floor, hidden in this lathe, they must be saved, just as Nastya is used to saving her pink dress. An apron will do the trick."

During the dinner hour, Zaytsev went to the shop office, munching bread as he walked. The shop manager, Zorin, heard him and said drily:

"You must speak about this to the Commission for Assisting Inventors. We have no time for such things just now. Go and see the chairman of the Commission, engineer Kraysky."

Zaytsev found Kraysky just before the signal sounded.

Kraysky smiled and stroked his heavy moustache.

"The lathe does not need an apron, but a person who knows how to use it. Aprons would necessitate funds and we haven't got them. And they wouldn't be worth it. Did you read today's article on

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resources?”

“But the saddle gets damaged by metallic dust and sand. Repairs will cost still more.”

Krasky loosened the belt over his protruding stomach and sighed.

“Let me tell you that if this had been of importance, any engineer or designer would have got the idea long ago. Such aprons do not exist anywhere. Not anywhere! Yet work goes on. Besides those lathes are beyond help. They are simply finished. It’s time they were sent to a museum and replaced by universal automatic lathes. But you can send in an application to the Commission. We’ll examine it.”

The signal sounded and Zaytsev rushed to the machine shop tripping over people in his haste.

Shavings ran from under the cutters in short curly bits, clogging the saddle, covering it with metallic dust.

“Perhaps aprons are nonsense, after all,” he thought. “Otherwise other people would sure have thought of them long ago. That’s what Krasky says.... But where are the millions the newspaper spoke of?”

Still mistrustful of his idea, but unable to resist his mood, Zaytsev found a piece of tin and started covering the right saddle frame. The shavings shot from under the cutter and stung his hands which trembled with impatience.

He could not take his eyes off the tin fender against whose surface the shavings now struck with a metallic clang.

* * * * *

The tall stacks spouted volumes of thick black smoke. The sun pierced through it, so that it floated in a pale cloud streaked with gold. This was a sign of fair weather. The sun rapidly rose over the town. The glass roofs of the plant sparkled. It warmed the ground, covered with mounds of iron and steel. The air became pungent with the mingled odour of oil, metal and coal. Tiny black particles of soot began to fall on the white sand which covered the streets.

Sergey woke up.

The sun shone through the foliage of a maple tree and threw undulating patches of light and shadow on the walls and floor. The shadows moved incessantly, so that it seemed as if each part of the room was swaying with irregular movements.

The events of the night before came back to him at once. He remembered the stifling atmosphere of the dark, crowded shed heavy

with hot human breath. People pressed upon Sergey on all sides, in a maze of arms, legs and heads. A ventilator buzzed unceasingly and irritatingly. Darkness filled the shed. Suddenly an intense shaft of bluish light pierced through the room, right over Sergey's head, creating the vision of a sunlit street—houses, trees—a mangy dog running away in a panic somewhere in the distance, and a man, armed with a stick, pursuing it. His legs moved with incredible speed, until he suddenly fell right in the middle of the road.

“Charlie Chaplin is beginning his antics!”

“Ho! He'll make us roar!”

“Start the laughing, Mishka!”

For some moments the darkness was filled with shouts and giggles, then silence. From the screen, a wan faced man in a bowler hat was looking at Sergey and twiddling a stick. He pulled up his trousers, made a strange caper and fell down on the pavement. A loud squeak of delight, followed by a roar of laughter, jarred the silence.

Sergey felt bewildered. Was it right to laugh when a man fell? Might he not be sick or drunk, writhing there in anguish on the pavement? Surely he was hurt! He stared intently into the victim's face, but it was absolutely passive, showing neither pain, anger nor anguish. It seemed a horrible, cold mask. Sergey was especially struck by the eyes—they were inane, devoid of any expression, horrible. Convinced that this was a maniac, a miserable, unhappy man, and the rest of the people in the room heartless villains, he stood up and speaking into the darkness, said in an excited but low voice:

“What is all this laughing about?”

Hisses and laughter answered him from the darkness and Sergey roared in a furious voice:

“What are you laughing at? That's what I want to know. Can't you see the man is hurt?”

The little man disappeared quite suddenly after that, but he seemed to reappear again quite close with the same immovable face and, taking Sergey by the arm, said in a lugubrious voice:

“Citizen, you're not allowed to shout here and if you're drunk you'd better get out and take the air.”

But Sergey felt it was quite vital for him to find out why these people laughed when they saw a man fall and knock himself on the pavement.

“You damned fools! What are you laughing about? Maybe he is crazy and not in his right mind?”

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“You’re crazy yourself!”

“Drunk, that’s what he is!”

“Take him out!”

The lights flashed up and the little man’s head was enveloped in blinding flames. Sergey dodged aside in fear, covering his face with his hands.

“He will set me on fire!”

The audience laughed, whistled, shouted something about disturbance in a public place. The scattered sounds accumulated into a general racket. Sergey spat and left the shed. A ball of fire swam through the air at his side, stinging his eyes.

As soon as he was out in the street, the ball of fire died out, and was replaced by a man’s head, so black in contrast that it seemed carbonized. It nodded reassuringly at Sergey.

“Go and sleep it off, my boy!”

The inane expression in the little man’s eyes was replaced by one of touching pity. Sergey embraced him and felt his head—it was as cold as metal and he saw that it was a fireman’s helmet.

The earth swayed under his feet. Branches tickled his face. Sergey walked along an endless black passage. Street lamps stood at attention, nodding their yellow firemen’s helmets at him....

And now, the shadows played in intricate patterns on the walls of his room. The sunlight made him blink and a heavy fatigue filled Sergey’s body, his heart beat sluggishly, his eyelids felt heavy and there was an unpleasant taste in his mouth.

A distant metallic ring suddenly came to his ears and as he lifted his heavy lids, a copper worker’s badge on which the sunlight fell, struck his eye.

He pulled the blanket over his head, but the insufferable sunlight which filled the room chased sleep away.

“To hell with the plant,” muttered Sergey, as he threw off the blanket and walked to the window.

A warm wind was quickening the pale green leaves of the maple tree. The wind came through the open window in light gusts, bringing with it the insistent sound of pneumatic hammers and the clank of iron. Sergey closed the window and looked round the room. A muddy boot stuck out from behind a flower pot, his coat lay under a chair and a kitten was curled up on it. There was a hole in the knee of his new trousers, which were all crumpled. The pillow was covered with green and yellow stains.

“They might have taken my clothes off at least,” he thought, feeling he had been most unjustly dealt with.

The house was quiet, the inhabitants having evidently gone off to the market. Only a sobbing sound could be heard from behind a wooden partition. He looked in. The end of a bed protruded from under a flowered bed curtain—from behind, came the sound of sobs. He could only see a thin leg which shook spasmodically. He gazed at it in disgust.

“Crying.... She’s got the works again, no mistake about it!”

An old yellow stool with a bulging leather bottom stood in a corner. It was his dead father’s work stool. This, Sergey’s mother was religiously keeping, together with other remnants of his trade—a rasp and a handful of wooden nails. Sergey sighed and felt an accustomed, yet to him hateful smell of shoemaker’s wax. It seemed as if the blackened walls, everything in the room, even his mother’s thin, dark-skinned leg, were saturated with that smell.

It was six years since his father had toppled over, while driving the last nails into a pair of boots, never to rise again. But the smell of tar, wax and leather still clung to Sergey’s nostrils, making his life miserable.

Seized with sudden rage, he walked over to the stool, took hold of it and smashed it furiously against the floor. The thin, sinewy leg withdrew under the bed curtain—the stool creaked plaintively and rolled away.

Sergey sat at his window and stared sadly into the street, which ran in a wide sandy line to the very gates of the plant. Bits of glass and empty cans glistened in the white sand and blades of tender green grass stuck out here and there. The tiny-grained white sand lay everywhere.

A charcoal dealer’s cart was crawling down the street, laden with blackened coal sacks, its wheels creaking as they sank deep into the sand. A little horse with thin flanks drew the cart with visible effort, stretching out its neck and swishing its tail. A gloomy looking individual, himself as black and unwieldy as a coal sack, struck at the thin horse with a whip. It retaliated by feeble kicks and stopped, breathing heavily.

“C-o-o-a-1! Who’ll buy c-o-o-a-1!”

Sergey looked at the horse, at its tired head bent towards the ground.

“That is the way I shall drag through life, weighted down by

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joyless labour, with my lungs full of smoke as that man's are full of coal dust. Why should I be doomed to it?"

...It was five years ago, on a sunny May day just like this one. He had come home joyful, elated, drunk with sun and air.

"Mother, I am going to college! We have decided to go together, Senka Platov and I."

His mother went pale with fright.

"And what about us? How are we to live—Yulya, Zhenya, Manya, myself?"

His sisters blinked and started to cry. Sergey lost his wits, became weak at the sight of their tears, and suddenly realized that he would not have the strength to go. He felt the family's hold on him, but cried out, in a last effort at rebellion:

"I won't live my life as my father did!"

He got drunk that day and broke the windows with the rasp. Then he ran away into the forest and threw himself down in the grass, stopping his ears with his fingers so as not to hear the hated signal which called him back to the plant. Next day, he walked through its gates with his heart full of anger and hatred against his family, the blackened plant buildings, Senka Platov—the whole world.

That was five years ago.... The hum of the plant could be heard incessantly behind the window, disturbing and irritating Sergey. Was it really his fate to drag out a joyless life at the plant, just like that miserable horse with its load of coal? Do the same thing over and over again, day after day, until old age came and he became like that white-haired, feeble old lunatic, Kuzmich.

There he went, stepping heavily in his large stiff boots, his bare silvery-haired pate bent down gloomily.

"Oh, you poor, broken-down old horse!" thought Sergey ironically and leaning out of the window he shouted for all the street to hear:

"You old lunatic!"

The "boss" did not turn round. He went on his way, sunk in thought, his toes digging deeply into the sand.

The sound of sobbing still continued behind the old partition. How could he get away from it all?

The kitten played at his feet, tickling his toes with its pink tongue. The hole in his trousers looked pretty bad. Remembering that he had promised to go and see Valya that day, Sergey clumsily threaded a needle and started mending his trousers.

“A letter for you, Vekshin!”

A sunburnt hand was thrust through the window and a blue envelope fell on the floor. The kitten made a rush at it, crumpled it and rolled through the room, digging its claws into the crackling paper. Sergey rescued the letter with a smile and opened it impatiently.

Dear Serezha!

You'll get a visit from engineer Platov one of these days. I am coming to work in your plant. I propose to stay with you at first, it will be more convenient for me, seeing you're an old friend, and more jolly for you. Any objections? So long!

Yours, Semyon

The forgotten needle stuck out of the trouser leg. The letter fluttered in Sergey's trembling hands. Suddenly the room seemed filled with a swarm of white moths, which floated in the air only to fall slowly ground-wards. The kitten ran after them, clutching them in its paws while the white particles circled and swirled about its head.

4

The entrance gate had cleared of the stream of people when Boretsky appeared at last. He had been going in and out of those gates—that threshold worn out by the passage of heavy boots—for forty years. He had absorbed the plant's life—he had grown up and grown old with it—until his hair lost its lustre and looked as dull as the grey soot that spread everywhere.

The warm May weather could not make Boretsky alter the habit of years; he wore the same padded coat and the same red muffler round his neck.

Boretsky disliked a crowd, because he felt lost in it, became an infinitesimal part of it, while if he came by himself, the watchman on duty invariably saw him off the premises with a few flattering words, such as:

“Hello, Antonych! Had enough work?”

“He's not one to run home in a hurry! Knows his own value too well!”

Antonych heard and welcomed those remarks and his step became even more staid and imposing. His eyes and tightly compressed lips expressed cold, obstinate will.

The engineers who caught up with him stopped to shake his hand

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and exchange a few words.

“Stanislav Antonych!”

Boretsky turned at the sound of his name. It was engineer Kraysky, a heavy man with a moustache like a walrus, who stood in front of him, his fat body swaying on its short, stubby legs.

“Just a word, Stanislav Antonych! Nosov wants to get a leave. It can’t be done, understand? Not on any account!”

“I understand,” said Boretsky, lowering his glance.

“We can give him a compensation, promise something—but he cannot get a leave. It’s against the interests of the business. Do you understand me?”

“I get you,” Boretsky repeated, gazing at the toe of his enormous boot.

Kraysky turned back into the “Red Walk” where the technical manager of the plant and he, who was chief of the open hearth furnace shop, had their lodgings.

Boretsky turned into a narrow, quiet alley. Through the open windows of the cottages, he could see families sitting at their table, and hear the clatter of spoons and crockery. The smell of food tickled his nostrils, inviting him to hurry, and he walked on faster.

The “boss” was walking quite briskly behind him. Boretsky’s broad back swayed rhythmically before him and the hard swing of those sinewy arms suddenly opened before the “boss” a vision of the past which had become dimmed for a time. Panting from his quick walk, he muttered under his bristling moustache:

“So my friend! You and I will come up against each other again, I feel it in my bones!”

Boretsky walked up the creaky steps of his porch and gave his accustomed three knocks. Hasty steps sounded in the passage and the door flew open.

“Here’s father! Sergey, father has come!”

“No need to shout the news to the whole street.” Boretsky divested himself slowly of his coat and remained in his shirt sleeves. He unwound his scarf, baring a prominent Adam’s apple and a thick neck covered with bristles. He washed thoroughly with much splashing of water, brushed his straight crop of hair and went into the dining room.

“Hello, Sergey! Rather early today, aren’t you?”

Sergey shrugged his shoulders instead of answering and involuntarily crossed his legs so as to conceal the tear in his trousers. In

order to change the subject, he asked:

“Tell me, Antonych, is it possible your whole life was spent in that way—to work at seven and home at four—dinner—to sleep—and work again at seven—home at four?”

Boretsky drew a chair from the table and, having carefully dusted the seat, sat down.

“Such is life, what would you have it be?”

“Do you hear that, Valya? What would you have it be?”

And Sergey winked at Valya and smiled wryly.

“Life can’t be different,” said Antonych with conviction. “Plant life has always been like that.” He poured some soup into his plate and wiped his knife on a towel, munching impatiently. “I see you’ve still got your idea of a different life. Drop it, Sergey. You’ve got a job, that’s all you want and you should be jolly glad not to be out of work, like Valya here.”

“Why should others live differently then? What about Senka Platonov—is he better than I am?”

“Really now, father, it’s unjust!” said Valya, looking pityingly at Sergey.

Boretsky ate for a while in silence. His face flushed and the grey bristles on his cheeks became more prominent.

“Everything has its set place, I tell you. Take an engine, for example: it has a boiler, and wheels, and a driving mechanism and all sorts of bolts—everything in its own place. And every part is equally important—the nut, the whistle, the smoke pipes, but what you are after is the driving axle. That’s wrong!”

“No!” cried Sergey furiously. “I just don’t want to be a nut for others to screw in.”

“All men can’t become engineers, Sergey. The state would not have enough money to pay wages, at the rate of half a thousand per man. And who makes the money? It’s we, the workers, don’t you know that? The manager must be paid, the engineer must be paid and so must all kinds of people, and all at our expense.”

Sergey kept silent.

“Where did you get that tear in your trousers?” asked Antonych, looking at the poorly sewn patch on Sergey’s knee.

“Had a bicycle accident.”

“When am I going to get a bicycle, father? You’re always only talking about it,” said Valya, compressing her capricious mouth in an injured expression.

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Boretsky's face clouded,

"You shall have your bicycle. I'm doing all I can. You'll have it very soon. And now I think I'll have a nap before tea. How would that be, hey, Sergey? And you should lay off the booze.... I know you're lying about that bicycle accident. Nosov told me all about the row you made at the movies last night." His voice sounded harsh and authoritative as he added:

"You'll never get Valya if you keep to booze. Understand me?"

He walked slowly out of the room, which seemed to Sergey to become immediately larger.

He bit at his cigarette in dumb irritation.

Silence filled the room, except for the buzzing of a bee, which circled over the flower pot.

"So, Valentina Stanislavovna, I'm not good enough for you it seems, being only a dirty workman, when there are so many educated people about," said Sergey, as he got up and pulled on his cap.

Valya looked intently at the bee which was circling over the flowers, and said nothing. She knew her father and felt he would keep to his word. His voice had a firmness which no argument could shake.

"Can't you give it up, Serezha? Take yourself in hand, you know it's wrong of you,..."

Sergey ran out of the room and Valya saw him from the window, walking quickly down the street.

She rested her head on the window sill, and the radio aerial pole on the opposite roof, at which she stared fixedly, became blurred, as her eyes filled with tears.

* * * * *

Andrushechkin walked up to his house, with quick short steps and the wind blew his blouse up like a balloon, making him look like a swiftly rolling ball.

Thoughts, provoked by the smallest incidents, chased each other in his brain. A spotted pig walked slowly across the road and this set him thinking of a tramway line which would come to replace the narrow drive; he actually saw in his mind's eye a tramcar rushing swiftly along it. But the pig diffused a heavy unpleasant smell of manure and Andrushechkin rolled on at a swifter pace. A fat baby was sitting alone on the sidewalk, trying to stuff a rusty tin can into its mouth. Andrushechkin pounced upon him, tore the thing out of his hands and threw it away indignantly. The child's cries followed him up the

street and he rushed on, feeling guilty for making it cry. The thin little voice seemed to accuse him of something much more important—the fact that the baby was left there, unprotected in the street.

But what was the main thing?

Andrushechkin hurried on and so did the thoughts in his head, there was no time to give them shape and they weighed upon his brain more heavily from being thus left shapeless.

The “boss” was shuffling slowly in front, like an overladen horse. “How’s life, ‘boss’?”

“Life’s all right but there are too many lice in it.”

“What are these lice you’re talking of, ‘boss’?” asked Andrushechkin with astonishment, as he stopped and stared suspiciously at the old man’s coat.

But the coat seemed clean enough and the edge of a fresh cotton shirt peeped from under the collar, against the wrinkled brown neck.

“It’s not the lice you can see but those you can’t catch that matter,” said the “boss” gloomily. He walked on and turned into a narrow muddy alley.

“Damn it all,” thought Andrushechkin, “everything is full of cracks and hollows like a cast wheel. Only it’s easy to deal with those: you catch hold of an electrode and switch on the current and the melted steel fills in the hollows. Life is much more complicated!”

“Riddles everywhere! These lice now—what on earth does that mean?” he muttered under his breath.

He put his fingers on the door handle and suddenly backed away. The thing he had been vainly trying to remember at the plant suddenly came back to him, and he rushed down the steps.

“Where are you off to now, you boob? Dinner is cold already!” shouted an angry female voice after him.

“I’ll be back in a second. Just off to say a couple of words to Nosov. You can pour the soup!”

He turned the corner and knocked on a window.

“Nosov! The circle meets at seven thirty.... You feeling sick? Drop it! You’re an active member of our nucleus. It’s the last lesson. Yuzov is here. And, oh, I’d almost forgotten—get Zaytsev to come, will you?”

The soup was barely warm by the time he sat down to it. His wife sat with drawn eyebrows, striking her spoon sharply against the tureen and said not a word. Her handsome face was gloomy, which made her look aged. A brooding silence filled the room, the window

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curtains were clean as usual; a collection of post cards were carefully arranged over the bed. The atmosphere of silence, order and cleanliness woke a feeling of indescribable dullness in Andrushechkin's mind. The staring post cards, the prim and proper air of everything roused a feeling of quiet anger in his breast.

He felt a vast difference between the feelings which were boiling in him, the impressions he had brought back from the plant and the staid and quiet atmosphere of the room.

"You should think a little of me, Grisha.... I'm alone the whole day long and you spend every evening away from home."

His wife was sitting with bent head, fingering the folds of her spotted calico dress. Her voice sounded dull and hopeless.

Andrushechkin cut a piece of bread, sprinkled some salt on it and looked at his wife. The spots on her dress were irritating, attracting his attention involuntarily until he caught himself trying to find symmetry in their disposition. There were a multitude of black dots which made him blink.

"I'm going out again tonight. Can't help it."

"Even on Sundays you're hardly at home for a minute. No chance to go to the movies or for a walk in the woods. I'm always stuck at home like a log."

Andrushechkin was silent. It was the truth and there was no sense in gainsaying it.

"I'm the laughing-stock of the neighbours. Might as well not go out at all."

"Listen, Marusya, just don't give a darn for what the neighbours say. Find yourself an occupation. Be a delegate or something.... If we had children now, it would be different," and Andrushechkin's mouth tightened.

Could he get her a job at the plant? No, that would not look good, he was secretary of the nucleus. And his brain set to work again, fighting out unsolvable problems. He remembered the baby, left out in the road because the mother had probably ten more children to attend to. And here was Marusya, weighed down by sorrow because she had not one. How could these things be explained?

Andrushechkin felt irritation against Marusya and himself and those persistent dots rising up in his heart.

He started up.

"Six thirty.... I'm off. Why don't you get a book to read. There's a good book for you—it's about the way the bourgeois torture the

workers in foreign countries—International Labour Defence edition. Makes your hair stand on end.”

Marusya gazed sadly through the window.

“I’ll try it....” She took the book from him with a shaking hand and her bent shoulders were convulsed with sobs.

5

A hedge of young firs grew beyond the last houses of the working quarter and gradually merged into a forest which stood out in a black line against the horizon.

The forest lured Sergey with its promise of solitude and calm. Valya’s words were still in his ears and he started humming a march, so as to get them out of his head.

Silence had fallen over the town, the first lights were beginning to twinkle here and there and the sky became a darker blue.

At such a time, people do not sleep, in spite of the fatigue of the day. A low hum of talk comes from the porches, the strains of a guitar mix with the sounds of girlish laughter—old neighbours sit together smoking in silence—a bicycle swishes past softly and the white shirt of its rider dissolves itself slowly in the brown dusk. The air is full of healthy freshness. The fragrance of fruit trees and lilac bushes float from the gardens and fill the street—disturbing the minds of men and women.

“Vekshin!”

A woman’s head and rounded shoulders bent out from a second floor window.

“Haven’t seen my man about, have you?”

“No... we didn’t meet,” said Sergey, stopping under the window. “And may I ask what you’re doing at home all by your lonely? And on such a night, too!”

“I’m left like that every night. He comes in just to get a bite and off he goes again. Can’t understand it. Running about all the time, with no thought of his home.”

“Well, you know, Marya Sergeevna, Andrushechkin has business to attend to. He’s a member of the Party.... Can’t do otherwise.”

Sergey felt guilty before Andrushechkin for his absenteeism and spoke at random, trying to justify him.

“What about me? Am I to remain stuck here all my life?”

Marya Sergeevna spoke in an injured voice, fingering the ends of her handkerchief, which swayed in the blue twilight above

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Sergey's head like a white dove come to rest on the window sill. Suddenly it fluttered down to his feet.

"How clumsy of me!" said Marya Sergeyevna playfully, as she bent her body out of the window.

Sergey picked up the handkerchief and wanted to throw it up to her, but thought it would not reach her and stopped undecided.

"Throw it up, Vekshin!"

The handkerchief exhaled a ticklish smell of woman's hair, powder and scent. Sergey's nostrils expanded, as he stood in thought. Then he hurriedly dived through the entrance of the house and ran up the creaky new stairs.

The room was very quiet and sunk in twilight; a warm smell of habitation and feeling of homely comfort, unaccustomed to him, pervaded the room. He sank on a chair and his greedy eyes searched the firm rounded figure of the woman, and stopped at her legs.

"Why so glum, Vekshin? It doesn't suit you at all. My! Didn't I laugh last night at the movies! Thought I'd burst with laughing."

This hint at the events of the night before, which he had almost forgotten, put a damp on Sergey's humour and he moved his shoulders restlessly.

"I'm sick and tired of everything. Sick of playing the fool. Let them laugh," he added after a silence. "But as for you, Marya Sergeyevna, I see your life is no laughing matter. That tadpole will ruin your life for you. Restless man, that! And what's the good of it to anybody?"

Marya Sergeyevna drew her shawl closer round her and shivered.

"And you such a good looking woman!" And Sergey let his eyes rove over her breast and noted that his glance set her trembling.

She twisted her handkerchief into a tight knot.

"And he's much older than you are too," continued Sergey, deciding to pursue his advantage and feeling that every word of his put Andrushechkin off further and further.

"What's the good of talking about it? It's my fate, it seems."

Sergey smiled.

"Ah, but you can make yourself a new one.... Just say to yourself you won't give in; see yourself damned first."

The objects in the room lost their contours. Sergey stretched an impatient hand out into the darkness.

"That's right! I'll see myself damned first!" cried Marya Sergeyevna and her voice sounded anguished and broken.

The electric switch clicked sharply and Sergey's hand fell to his side.

"Mind you don't get damned for good," said Andrushechkin, who had come in noiselessly, with a bunch of books under his arm. "Here I am home—welcome me," he added.

He saw a guilty colour flood his wife's cheeks, while her eyes seemed a deeper blue. She ran away behind the partition, her new shoes creaking. Vekshin looked at him with a guilty smirk.

"Oh, it's you, is it?... Making fools of women is easier than welding, I see."

Andrushechkin kicked off his dusty boots and drank some water.

"You talk like a book. Are you a poet also, by any chance?" asked Sergey mockingly.

"Of course, I am. The modern man must be able to do everything. Reading poetry is better than getting drunk, I say. But I'm as hungry as a wolf. Marusya! Have you got any food?"

Marya Sergeyevna set the table, looking pale and gloomy.

"Draw your chair to the table, Sergey. Only we haven't any alcohol," said Andrushechkin with a wink.

Sergey stared at his round head, thinking:

"A real tadpole! Just like him to come home at the wrong time!"

Andrushechkin wiped his lips with the back of his hand and stepped to the middle of the room. His eyes became dark and serious. He lifted his hand and unexpectedly began reciting poetry, poetry which spoke of spring, apple blossoms and the song of the nightingale.

Sergey looked at him in astonishment and failed to recognize his voice which now sounded passionately intense. His appearance too was unusual: his big head seemed to swell, the blood rushed to his face, and Sergey thought he looked like a large balloon about to rise up into the air.

One of his suspenders became unfastened and dangled behind like a tail.

Sergey laughed.

Marusya was looking dreamily at the dark square formed by the open window. Andrushechkin swayed his body about, lifting his hands up to the low ceiling, and the grotesque shadow on the wall repeated his movements. Suddenly he gathered his body as if for a leap and shouted:

"Watch out for the danger that lurks in the softness of spring!"

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His face became serious and solemn, his eyes sparkled. Sergey uttered a squeak of delight and went off into a series of guffaws, with his hands pressed against his stomach.

Andrushechkin looked at his wife's flushed cheeks and at Sergey's impudent, insincere eyes, and thought:

"I guess Titych must have felt like that when he watched me from behind the hedge, playing with his dog and picking his apple blossoms. But there are worse things ahead."

He looked round the room, as if suddenly becoming aware of his surroundings, sighed, took Sergey by the shoulder and pushed him out of the room saying:

"Get out, you fool, you're incapable of understanding these things."

* * * * *

Night fell over the town. The day was over. But the movement of life is incessant and the short day is not sufficient to consume its energy, so it invades the brain, chasing sleep away until a new dawn rises, gradually growing into a new and restless day.

Zaytsev worked far into the night, beating a sheet of tin with a hammer to give it the necessary shape. Nastya cast anxious glances at her husband's preoccupied face.

"You're at it again? Will you never rest? You're becoming just like a lunatic—like old Kuzmich. What is it you're making?"

"An apron."

"An apron?!"

"Well, yes, an apron for my lathe. A machine demands a lot of care, you know. It expects you to attend to it. It's a matter of some millions," he added, striking with his hammer as if he wanted to convince some invisible audience.

"What nonsense is this? You'd better go to bed and sleep it off."

Having finished the "apron," Zaytsev sat down to write an application to the Bureau of Workers' Inventions, stating figures which showed the reduction in the number of accidents and damages to the machine.

This is what he wrote:

"A saddle, when you think about it, is like a human hand only it's made of metal. The worker thinks that because it is steel it will stand anything, but if he hurts his own little

finger, he's off to the dispensary at once and the usual complaint is: 'Why don't we get working gloves?' Just look at this lathe closely and you'll see the way shavings, scale and sand get into the leading screw, and that wears the metal out, and the saddle starts working wrongly because the cutter loses its precise action. The worker then loses his time in cleaning the screw and the carriage. So I propose to arrange a tin cover, something like an apron. Now as regards fastening the wheels to the lathe: wooden wedges must be replaced by a device for gripping the spokes, which should be done so..."

He made a drawing, the lines of which were not very firm, which showed the construction of the apron and the device for fastening wheels.

Lifting his head for a moment from his work, Zaytsev looked out of the window and saw with astonishment, that night had melted into dawn and in its light the railway bed was plainly visible. The lights above the railway switches had paled. The red eye of the semaphore blinked over the dull grey rails, then suddenly went out altogether. The screech of an engine was heard immediately after. The soft and musical sound of the signal horn rose in a momentary answer which was drowned in the approaching thunder of the three o'clock express.

The tall body of the engine seemed to cleave the still, morning air. The windows of the cars flashed past in a swift line of light. Soon the toll of the station bell emerged from the rhythmical clatter, and all became silent again, except for the heavy breathing of the vanishing engine.

* * * * *

The short May night was over. The last stars were fading out in the turquoise sky. Dawn was rising hurriedly over the town, which was still sunk in silence. The "boss" was walking down the empty street in the direction of the works. He stopped from time to time, gazing at the little cottages sunk in morning sleep, and murmured something with his dry lips. He remembered those houses since ever so long ago—how they were built along the wide sandy streets, advancing further and further into the fields. He remembered the smell of freshly cut logs and pitch. The town had expanded more and more. Years went by—the roofs of the houses were darkened by time,

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covered with gray moss, seeming to sink into the ground under its weight. It was the same with people, and he himself had shrunk with the years, as if he too were gradually sinking into the earth. Time flew as fast as an express train, nearing the inevitable station. Still the old man continued to live as he had done all his life—rising with the signal and hurrying to the plant—coming home with the rest. The cheerless, empty rooms of his house were silent; that silence was almost unbearable at night. The old man turned and tossed in his bed, but sleeplessness drove him out on the porch. At such times he walked through the accustomed old streets to the deserted plant. The watchman let the “boss” in with a mock bow.

This morning the “boss” was more preoccupied than usual. Failing to notice the watchman’s greeting, he changed his habitual course of inspection and went straight to the open hearth furnace shop. Stopping on the spot where he had talked to Boretsky the day before, the “boss” squatted down, put on his spectacles and felt the cold steel with his rugged fingers. Having done so, he folded his spectacles carefully into their case and left the shop.

A cracking sound came from afar, from the spot where the branches of a drooping willow sprawled over the plant fence. And the old man, hidden behind an old engine gear box, which had sunk into the ground, saw Vasya Trusov hacking away at an engine wheel with a pneumatic hammer, while Boretsky, bending over another wheel, was pointing with his fingers to a spot which Nosov started striking with short, staccato hammer blows.

The “boss” dug his fingers into the slippery steel of the gear box and gazed intently. The rising sun lit his old colourless eyes with a new gleam.

So did the “boss” meet the sunrise that morning, becoming involved in a network of events which were part of life. His heart beat faster with a rejuvenated movement, and his impatient hands tightened.

THE SECOND LINK

1

The clank of iron and the puffing of the crane came in through the window. The shriek of its signal rose above the din of machinery. The puffing came faster and turned into a threatening growl—the crane was lifting a weight and its long neck reached out as far as the window, so that it seemed to Vartanyan that someone was trying to peep into the room.

He left the table at which he had been sitting and went to the window. Below lay the plant enclosure and the crane was busily digging into a heap of rusty waste. The heap, which consisted of metal parts, pieces of iron, and various fragments, was covered with patches of spring grass.

That grass reminded Vartanyan of a cottage in the country near Moscow—pines, meadows, flowers—and he imagined little Lazo chasing a yellow butterfly. Naturally, the boy would catch it—he was as nimble as a monkey—then he would sit under the pines for hours watching the clever work of the ants, with his curly head on one side.

He ought to write to the boy. He'd only sent him one letter since he was here. He took up a sheet of bluish paper.

How fast time flies! He had left Moscow with the first snows. Little Lazo was near the house making a snow man....

“Will you come soon, dad?” asked Lazo, stopping at his play.

“I will be back when the cherry trees blossom,” and he snatched his son up and smothered him in an embrace.

The car was hooting impatiently and Vartanyan, who felt sure that spring would find the work with which he had been entrusted by the Party at the “Krasny Proletary” plant completed, waved his cap from the car and shouted out:

“I'll be back even sooner. I'll be back when the sun melts your snow man!”

But the sun had melted the snow man long ago. The flowers were blossoming, covering the earth with pale, pink petals, and Lazo was still waiting for his father who had gone away to a distant plant.

...It had been in January. He remembered the crowded meeting of active members of the Party of the Zamoskvoretsky district. He made a hot, passionate speech, but a strange silence hung over the audience, which boded no good—cold, unfriendly glances were

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thrown at him. When he spoke of the situation within the Party, the mistrust turned into excitement. He thundered against Communists who were lulled by the consciousness of their lengthy membership, and expressed a doubt of their being ready for revolutionary battles. He appealed to the activity of the young people who got to the bottom of all truth of their own accord, because they doubted everything... His speech was broken by scanty applause and furious shouts of “get out” and he left the tribune to the accompaniment of frantic shouts from the audience.

That had been five months ago but it seemed only yesterday—so fresh was the pain. He had long since sent a letter to Moscow with a full confession of his errors, but he still thought his repentance was not believed.

“Such mistrust is comprehensible,” he thought. “It is not enough to make amends with words. I must work. I must develop that old plant.”

The plant with its blackened buildings was visible from the window. It weighed Vartanyan down with the weight of all its ills. It was waiting to be cured and Vartanyan felt his whole life; all his thoughts and feelings to be an integral part of it, so that the shrieks of the crane sent a thrill of anxiety through him.

The plant, lost among the endless forests and marshes of the western part of the republic, was as decrepit as the epoch that had built it.

It had passed through the hands of various joint-stock companies, changed many owners, and every one of them had run the business in a different way, erected new buildings on the plan which seemed most profitable. From rail rolling which had yielded tremendous profits in the eighties and nineties, the plant had been switched to machine building. The growth of cities caused a mechanized brick factory to be annexed and an extensive development of nail and wire manufacture. The later development of big estates farmed by machinery and of rich peasant farms necessitated the construction of special shops for making agricultural machinery—harvesters, mowers, ploughs. The great imperialist war made killing and maiming profitable, and so the owners stopped constructing machinery and started producing shells and bombs. The lathes were tended by inexperienced women, hired to make hand grenades and bullets. Scores of trains filled with war supplies started to the west.... Death had proved to be the most trustworthy and profitable of clients.

The years of tremendous class struggles, the smoke and bitterness of the civil war were absorbed by the decrepit walls of the plant. It seemed as if there would be no wizard strong enough to bring those rusty machines back to life. It seemed they had served their time and stopped at the limit of their working capacity. It seemed that the plant which had grown up as if by magic in the middle of forests and marshes was fated to become overgrown with bush which was advancing on all sides, covered with rust and mire. It seemed as if the forest would reclaim this land and wipe out the human labour spent on those machines and structures. The plant seemed a vast cemetery over which swayed the dead bodies of turners and founders hanged on telegraph posts. The bloody epoch clothed in the uniforms of Denikin's bands had died at the foot of its walls leaving a heritage of rust, ashes and blood for the new owners.

Metal workers spent with the struggle came back to the rusty lathes. Their emaciated fingers started to clean off the rust from the machinery which was now theirs. The first manager started his administration by taking off his army coat, putting on an apron, and dismantling a dismal-looking machine. Engine shafts had to be made—the country was starting upon the road of great construction. Hundreds of thousands of working hours regenerated the plant.

The tremendous volume of the plant and its complicated inner life struck Vartanyan during his very first inspection of the shops. At night he vainly tried to remember all their names and specialities and that next morning he roamed for a long time through the vast buildings, feeling lost in the constant metallic uproar.

The plant impressed him by its universal character. It produced passenger train engines, ploughs, rails, cranes, mowing machines, and even wire and pipes. He found the rusty remains of tractor parts in the enclosure—signs of an unsuccessful attempt at tractor making.

Vartanyan's arrival at the plant coincided with a workers' conference which met to discuss the production program. The announcement made by the chairman of the trust to the effect that the production of railway carriages would be increased to two thousand, was welcomed by the workers with loud applause. There was a silence when he said that wire and nails would have to be transferred to another plant. Theirs would have to make equipment for Dnieprostroy, but as soon as they heard the figure of engine production, a hurricane seemed to pass through the room. The audience became terribly excited, men shouted, stamped on the floor with their feet, swore—there

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was some difficulty in restoring order. Titych appeared on the tribune.

“What I want to ask the chairman is: can a man live without a heart?” he asked politely. Amid the general silence, the chairman answered with a smile that “he certainly could not.”

Titych, purposely turned his back on him, and shouted to the workmen:

“Comrades! Just as a man cannot live without a heart, so we cannot live without engines! We were born and grew up with them. That’s all I wanted to say!”

The room filled once again with a loud hum as in a disturbed beehive. The chairman of the trust was not allowed to speak—and he was obliged to telephone through to Moscow to get the figure of engine production altered. Vartanyan felt that the workers were specially attached to engines, ready to defend them as bears do their young—lovingly, furiously, ready to make any sacrifice.

Vartanyan liked sometimes to stand on the high, steep bank of the river and gaze at the landscape of bluish forests stretching away into the horizon, and follow the windings of the river with its slow floating rafts, or the smoke of a distant train. The noise of the plant down below seemed to him to be the heart pulses of that forest land. Woods and fields, broken here and there into narrow strips of cultivated land—symbolic of the peasant’s individualism—stretched out for hundreds of miles towards the western frontier, stern and menacing.

And Vartanyan knew that the age-blackened plant was fated to lift on its shoulders the tremendous weight of the epoch.

He looked at the map of the country and was overwhelmed by a disturbing feeling which he had felt for the first time during his trip to Siberia—the feeling of space.

He remembered the journey in the Far Eastern Express —fields, forests, villages, towns, mountains and steppes flashed past, to merge again into never ending virgin forests. Hours passed, the day declined, night came on and day dawned again over the Barabinsky salt lakes. A lanky American kept timing his thick gold watch, because the express was rushing fast, towards the sun, following the movement of the earth, crossing the limits of zones and time. Again there were plains, rivers, forests, for the space of one, two, three days. The train sped on, rushing through boundless plains, and the American took his watch out again, measuring the length of that singularly vast

and terrible country. Vartanyan, using his fingers instead of a compass, measured out the same distance on the map but in the opposite direction—from Moscow westwards.

That was in Novosibirsk. And the same distance reached across Poland, Germany, France and to the Spanish coast.

He stood astounded and excited before the map in the corridor of the railway car, and his fingers trembled over the red points that marked the sites of four world capitals.

“Hello!”

Vartanyan turned—saw the American and could not understand whether he was envying him, or gazing with fear at the movements of his fingers towards the west, or merely expressing his astonishment. That was long ago.

And now, looking at the map of the country, Vartanyan felt his fingers tremble again. The imaginary line which he had then drawn in the corridor of that express train, passed over this plant, these pine woods, over his own head towards that silent and menacing frontier. He understood that as soon as the first shots were fired, the front would be here.

The fact that the plant stood lost amid those forests, that the line passed over the stacks of the plant, crossing fields still covered with the persistent patches of private farms, drove his mind back to thoughts of the plant and he felt the weight of tremendous responsibility resting on him.

His heart beat faster as it filled with anxiety. He seemed to hear an anxious note in the nervous screech of the crane, the rattling of an iron truss which had loosened—he felt it in the lines of the little newspaper clipping before him:

...Defects at the ‘Krasny Proletary’ plant are *still* interfering with the production of engines which are absolutely necessary to the country. Complaints about the bad quality of engines are *still* coming in.”

It was a clipping from the *Pravda*, an ordinary press cutting, which Vartanyan’s hard breathing sent fluttering and trembling. His eyes were fixed on the word *still* which stood out in fat, black letters.

“This black lettering is evidently something more than the usual trick so common in journalism for making a word impressive. It is a very clear hint at me, as much as to say: ‘He’s been there for six

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months, that oracle, yet things are unchanged at the plant, and the conclusion.....' ”

He threw the unfinished letter to Lazo into his briefcase. How many times had he done that already?

“It will have to be another time, Lazo, and meanwhile, you little monkey, you must go on chasing yellow butterflies.”

“I want to speak to the manager.”

A rasping noise in the receiver interfered with his hearing the voice properly.

“Korchenko? How are things for the last ten days? What about heavy carriages?” He seized a pencil. “Seventy? How about those on the trestles? Talk straight now. I want a straight answer, Korchenko. A Bolshevik should talk straight. What are you trying to get at?” Vartanyan’s black eyes flashed.

The rasping noise increased, blurring Korchenko’s voice.

“Talk like a Bolshevik, will you? That’s another matter... fifty cars. No wheels? Back on the trestles again? What about engines? So we’ll not be able to deliver on time. We shall? I don’t get that, Korchenko, you’re not talking straight. ‘Don’t worry,’ indeed! How should I not worry? Why didn’t you report at the bureau meeting?”

His voice rose ever higher. His speech grew more hurried, and rushing over the wires poured into Korchenko’s ear.

“Come to the district committee at once!”

Vartanyan flung down the receiver and walked to the window.

He could hear the reports of pneumatic hammers, the suppressed roar of the boiler shop, the drone of the overhead crane in the open hearth furnace shop. A worker was shuffling down the narrow-gauge line, his feet tripping against the sleepers, his hand on his heart.

“Hurt,” thought Vartanyan, but immediately afterwards remembered that the dispensary was in the opposite direction, so his first guess was wrong. He saw the worker go to the gate, but the watchman on duty barred the way with his arm.

“Here I am, Vartanyan.”

Korchenko sat down firmly, and slowly opened his briefcase. His dull grey eyes looked straight at Vartanyan and were as cold and calm as usual.

“Go ahead,” said Vartanyan, sinking into an easy chair.

But Korchenko was silent, although he still kept his eyes on Vartanyan’s glistening black hair.

“Go ahead, I tell you,” repeated Vartanyan in an impatient and

authoritative tone.

Korchenko unfolded a document and pointed with his finger to a figure, marked with red pencil.

“We’ll do it in time. The order will be delivered in full. Don’t worry.”

“Again your eternal ‘don’t worry.’ ”

Vartanyan glanced through the summary, found the paragraph headed “engines” and his eyes flashed.

“Where do you see the word ‘deliver’? Just look at this, Korchenko!”

The manager looked quite unconcerned. He took out a cigarette, struck a match and waited for it to burn properly.

“Did you verify the summaries?”

“That’s a draft... It may contain some inaccuracies.”

“The devil it may! It may not! I must have precise facts! The Party must not be deceived! You’re not talking straight, Korchenko. Just look at this high percentage of waste in engine parts.”

Vartanyan started up and paced the room with quick steps, his heels playing an even tattoo on the parquet floor.

“Have you read this?” he asked, pointing to the newspaper clipping.

The ringing sounds of metal, groaning and squeaking under the hammers, saws and presses, became more distinct in the silence of the room.

Korchenko glanced over the clipping and put it calmly aside.

“It is easy to criticize, Vartanyan, but you just try to run a big plant of thirty shops. Is our proletariat all equally qualified? Why are there no wheels? Why is engine production delayed? Because the amount of waste is as high as fifteen per cent. All the staff of the foundry shop is new—all country yokels who don’t know the business, and so we have no machine parts and any amount of waste. That shop is not a foundry at all, it’s more like a training-school for peasants.”

Vartanyan turned on his heel.

“Did you think a plant should not be a school for peasants? It must! In a year or two, millions of peasants will come to our plants and those who are working now will form but a thin streak in the bulk of the new working class. Those peasants will become the basic staffs. They must! The thing is to teach them as quickly and as thoroughly as possible.”

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The manager puffed at his cigarette.

“That is entirely in the hands of the engineers and foremen. They must become interested in it from a material point of view. That is the main thing. The rest will come naturally. I had an interesting conversation with the technical manager. We were alone and he told me straight out: ‘Make us interested and everything will be done!’ Money, Vartanyan, is a great power.”

“Do as you think best—you’re the best judge. But remember that we must soon report at the plenum of the regional committee. We must make an effort, Korchenko. The worst of our shops is the open hearth furnace shop. All efforts must be concentrated on it. We must increase the staff of specialists in that section. I had a visit from Platonov this morning. He’s been sent down by the Central Committee. An interesting man, that! Full of youth and heat. What will you say to our appointing him to be Kraysky’s assistant? He may help the shop out.”

Korchenko smiled.

“Young and full of heat? Well, you’re the judge in this case. We’ll not let you down.”

And he walked to the door.

Vartanyan opened his briefcase, but the signal sounded and he seized his cap and rushed out, for he had to make a speech in the open hearth furnace shop during the dinner interval.

Tripping against iron waste which cluttered the passages, knocking against moulds and flasks for steel casting that crammed them on all sides, Vartanyan made his way to the shop.

The Red Corner of the open hearth furnace shop was full of workers. They were having their dinner. The broad leaves of artificial palm trees trembled over their heads under the strong current of air that came from the fan. The radio was broadcasting Beethoven’s “Eroica” symphony. The midday sun poured through the glass roof, and its rays roved over the tousled heads of the moulders.

Titych was sipping a large cup of tea and felt he would like to sit so for a long time, feeling the strength coming back to his body. He could hardly believe that those things—the sunlight and palms and music of the piano—were only next door to the dusty and smoky open hearth furnace shops, where he had spent half of his life. He liked these intervals and cherished the holiday atmosphere of the Red Corner, because he well remembered something very different—the scanty, dry lunch in a bit of paper, which he had spread over a heap

of moulding sand. He reprimanded Vekshin for throwing a cigarette butt into a flower pot, but no sooner had he turned away than a dirty bit of newspaper was thrown into a palm.

Titych was gloomily watching a bald-headed worker who was cutting pork fat on the oilcloth. "He'll cut the oilcloth, that yokel," thought Titych anxiously and was going to shout when a familiar voice suddenly sounded from the corner in which stood the model of Lenin's mausoleum:

"Comrades!"

Vartanyan waited for the hubbub to cease. He ran his eyes over the workers' faces, taking mental notes.

"As I was going through the shop just now, I heard men grumbling at the bread queues. That's quite lawful. But where does the trouble come from? From the fact that the small peasant farms are way behind as compared with the speedy development of industry and cannot catch up with it, just as a row-boat cannot catch up with a steamer. Yet some men, some of you even, want the steamer to wait for the row-boat. Five hundred people were absent at the plant yesterday. And why? They were busy planting potatoes—no time to spare for engines. Yet you yourselves insisted on raising the production program with regard to engines. You kicked up a whole row about it. Is that right? It's all wrong, comrades! Very wrong!"

Vartanyan glanced at the audience reprovingly.

Sergey listened impatiently and it seemed that Vartanyan's piercing eyes were fixed on him. No matter which way he turned, their glances constantly met. His lips tightened with silent fury.

"We have a number of new workers at the plant. They have come from rural districts, from the petty middle class. They have not yet imbibed the plant spirit. Plant work to them is an unavoidable evil instead of being a high aim."

Vartanyan's eyes rested on a milk bottle.

"Cows, not plants are the main thing in their eyes. But are cows fit to transport grain from Siberia? Or the Ukraine? Can our plant find support in cows?"

"Can't be done, the cows would drop dead," said the bald-headed worker sarcastically and stuffed half a hard-boiled egg into his mouth.

"Ha—ha-ha-ha! That's smartly said!" exclaimed Vekshin delightedly.

"Why don't we get paid? Isn't today the first of the month?"

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Everybody waited for the answer in silence.

Vartanyan said nothing. The workers watched his face intently.

The hands of the clock were nearing twelve—the signal would be given soon.

“Because there is no money. And there is no money because we haven’t delivered our order in time to the Commissariat of Railways. That’s why you don’t get paid.”

Sergey Vekshin rose to his feet.

“That’s not an answer, comrades! If we work, we must get paid,” he shouted, and his face went pale with excitement. “I guess you’ve got your pay long ago and it’s the workers who have to wait for theirs!”

“We don’t care for reasons!”

“Pay! We want our pay!”

Andrushechkin’s round head suddenly appeared before Sergey.

“Who talks about work done—you? You?! Well, you have cheek! Drunkard, idler, absentee—that’s what you are! And you an educated man! Drop it, Sergey!”

They stood facing each other, ready to come to grips. Vartanyan saw Vekshin’s lips tremble and an evil gleam appear in his eyes.

The hubbub around them increased.

“Leave him alone!”

“What right have you to accuse him! I may do more than you in a day’s work yet I’m not boasting about it,” shouted the bald-headed worker, his mouth full of egg.

“Who’s done more? You!” cried Titych. “Hear that, comrades! Griaznov has really done more wrecking than anyone else, that’s true.”

“Have you made less?” cried the bald-headed worker.

“Yes, you tell us about yourself!”

“I will!”

“Bread! Give us bread!”

“We want our pay!”

Boretsky stepped out of the crowd. He walked to the middle of the room without any hurry and loosened his scarf, which seemed too tight round his throat.

“We’re all very good at kicking up a row,” he glanced at Vartanyan, Andrushechkin, Vekshin and everybody present, and it was impossible to decide whom he was accusing. “The bread we eat is bitter bread and that’s the truth. I’ve been at the plant for thirty-nine years

and the bread I've eaten was always bitter. And why is it bitter? Because it's wet with our sweat. Such is the workers' fate—so what's the use of making a row?"

Boretsky spoke in a dragging, hopeless voice and his words poured slowly into the people's ears, calming down the uproar. Vartanyan nodded, pleased with the effect of Boretsky's speech. But Titych scowled, trying to get at the bottom of Boretsky's idea and said in a hoarse voice, very slowly, weighing his words:

"That's not the way to speak! Life is different now, so why should your bread still be bitter? You're acting falsely, Antonych, you don't mean what you say."

Again the room filled with a hubbub of noise.

The signal, which sounded through the open windows, stopped the noise and drove the workers back to work.

Vartanyan went slowly through the shop, observing the men.

"Step aside, will you, comrade?"

A bearded worker brushed past him with heavy steps, carrying a large bluish core on his back. Vartanyan stepped aside and immediately heard a voice shout in his ear:

"Be care—ful!"

A batch of wheels hung over his head, radiating heat. With a lurch, the wheels came to rest on a heap of moulding sand near him. He hurriedly stepped to the left and almost put his foot into a mould. Titych looked up at him.

"You may break a leg quite easily here when you're not used to it. Things have gone wrong in the shop." Titych jumped up and whispered into Vartanyan's ear: "There'll be trouble in the shop—I feel it in my bones. What a life! It's not for nothing Antonych spoke about bitter bread to you—he's a cunning old devil!"

Titych knelt down and started smearing his mould over so that its pale yellow colour changed to a pale bluish one, which was like the colour of his faded eyes.

"Look here, Vartanyan, what kind of work is that?" said Titych pointing aside.

The bearded worker had climbed on top of the moulding sand and was idly poking at it. Titych shrugged.

"Stepan," he shouted, "you must work faster than that or there'll be trouble again."

The bearded man began to poke faster, making the mould ring.

Over his head, the air was full of shouts and the clanking noise

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of electric cranes. Someone was shouting at the top of his voice:

“Hey, there! Swing it to the right!”

Metal, dust and heat were overwhelming and made thought impossible. Those endless heaps of flasks and casts, covered with clay, aroused a feeling of irritation. He thought of blue twilight in the country and the cry of partridges in the wheat fields. Then he took a shovel and walked to a box full of sand, and as he went, the iron hooks with which the floor was strewn prodded his feet.

Vartanyan stood on the landing near No. 2 furnace, and looked down. The noise was deafening. The men were busy moulding clay into the shape of engine parts, pneumatic hammers echoed as they rammied the clay down. A blue smoke rose over the steel foundry, swirling up to the roof where it gathered in thick viscous clouds.

The crooked finger of an electric crane snatched at an engine wheel, which it lifted and carried over the workers' heads to the trimming department where the thudding of pneumatic chisels could be heard, like volleys of rifle shots.

The wheel swung through the air, swaying on its chains. The crane signal warned the men who were busy working at the moulds. A red-haired, unwieldy man, deafened by the unaccustomed noise of the plant, was slowly crossing the shop with a shovel in his hand. In order to get around some flasks, he climbed on top of a heap of sand, in which his bast shoes became stuck. The wheel lurched towards him. He made a frightened movement to avoid it, but it struck him and he fell down in a heap, striking his head against the sharp angles of the moulds. Vartanyan saw the blood spurting and cried out. Some workers ran to where the fallen man lay and surrounded him so that he was screened from Vartanyan's sight.

“A peasants' school,” thought he, remembering Korchenko's expression, “that's right! And we are graduating with those peasants, who are handling that moulding sand down below. And we Communists must pass our examinations properly.”

“Money is a great power,” the manager's words came back to him, and he suddenly felt them to be childish and naive, he smiled derisively, and said aloud:

“What nonsense!”

“It's easier to live with nonsense. Brains just bring you unhappiness. The fool is content with little, but the clever man wants more. But it takes some broken bones before you can get at the big things.”

Someone in back of him was muttering angrily to himself.

Vartanyan turned and saw a wizened little old man with a short bristling beard.

“Who are you?”

“I’m the ‘boss.’ And you?”

“Oh, me—the secretary....”

“Oh, that means you’re on secret business,” said the old man, putting on his spectacles and looking closely at the bewildered Vartanyan. “You’ve got quick and clever eyes. Look here, friend,” and the old man thrust out his trembling old hand above the shop. “I’ve worked under this roof when I was as young as you are—fifty years ago it was—casting engine parts. Our engines were the best in Mother Russia. But what they’re making here now is—coffins!” The old man’s voice shook over the last word.

“What coffins? What are you talking about, old man?” asked Vartanyan with suspicion.

“Oh, he’ll tell you any amount of nonsense, Comrade Vartanyan, if you’ll only listen to him,” said Benjamin Pavlovich, suddenly appearing on the spot and, putting out his soft damp hand, he whispered: “He’s raving mad. As old as the hills. Just let him be. And you, Kuzmich, had better go and get some sleep. I must see you on urgent business, Comrade Vartanyan. Will you give me a minute?”

He took hold of Vartanyan’s sleeve and dragged him to the door. The old man looked after them dazedly and remained standing, like a blackened, knotted, old tree stump.

Kuzmich gazed at the people working in a cloud of smoke and steam; and his own life, blackened by misfortune until it was as dusky as this old shop, rose before his memory. Thousands of engine wheels had gone through his hands to roll afterwards down the innumerable tracks of the forest-grown country. They often brought misfortune with them. This happened more than once. They brought yelling Cossacks, who cracked their whips over the workers’ heads, and they took away founders, fitters and turners in the cars which they had themselves built. They transported riches which were unattainable to Kuzmich, and carried the men who were masters of life—those who rode in soft, plush-cushioned carriages. A day had come when the wheels took the old man’s last treasure—his two sons.... While casting an engine wheel and carefully smoothing the yellow mould, he cursed those creations of his sinewy hands and often felt like hiding some treacherous hollow in the spokes of the wheel, and causing a catastrophe which would avenge his cursed labour. But his hands

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would never obey his thirst for vengeance, some deeper feeling opposed itself to the destruction of the things he created. He was proud of himself at heart, admired the perfection of an engine assembled from parts cast by him, and at such moments forgot what it might bring back tomorrow. Love and hatred of engines, of machinery, moved in his heart with an anxious expectation of days when labour would be a joy.

And those days had come. They followed each other in a tempestuous stream, similar to a flood of spring waters, washing off the soot of centuries—filling men with the joy of labour for their own benefit. Kuzmich could not handle clay any more, for his hands were bent with rheumatism, but he went on working, guarding his engines and human labour. He had now come to those old furnaces with his heart full of anxiety. The sight he had seen at sunrise, under the old willow, had filled him with dismay. He was looking for a man capable of understanding his anxiety. He had seen Vartanyan and felt elated at detecting the same feelings in his eyes.

But he had made a mistake—that man, with his quick eyes, had also taken him for an old lunatic.

He stood with bent head, in front of the hissing open hearth. Suddenly he rushed down the steps with an angry cry:

“Yegorka! You’ll break the mould! That’s not the way to put it together. Oh, you damned stupid villager!”

2

Zaytsev’s questioning eyebrows remained uplifted even at the sight of the usual home picture and of Nastya in the act of darning socks. She looked up at him sleepily and yawned.

“Go to bed, Nastya. You’re tired, I’m sure. I’m working for another hour or so.”

Zaytsev reached for a bundle which was lying on a shelf and, having untied the string, unfolded sheets of drawings on the table.

“At it again!” grumbled Nastya with contempt as she retired behind the partition, unfastening her skirt on the way.

Zaytsev sharpened a pencil and grew thoughtful. The lecture had filled him with unfinished thoughts and a feeling of anxiety. He had thought the instructor would touch upon things which stirred him and weighed in his mind. Often he felt that an invisible thread was being stretched between them and that help would come to him that way. But Yuzov’s answer, which so strangely coincided with Kraysky’s

words, broke the thread and filled him with confusion. Now, sitting before his drawings and figures, he felt angry and offended. Kraysky had turned his project down, but he would not abandon it, he would go on advocating it and gain his end. He had spent some nights over his drawings and he must finish them tonight. He would finish them and obtain what he wanted.

At the meeting of the Commission the day before, he had been unable to give sufficiently sound arguments and had felt like breaking into bits the slim pencil with which Kraysky had crossed out his calculations.

Zaytsev lived his humiliation all over again and with a sigh started pacing up and down the room.

The boards creaked under his feet, and a glass tinkled plaintively against a saucer.

“Go to bed, Mitya. It must be quite late,” called Nastya in a compassionate tone. “These thoughts of yours will make you sick. Go to bed now, or you’ll be late tomorrow.”

Zaytsev looked in silence at the pile of crossed sheets and felt obstinacy grow in his heart. His fingers clutched the pencil and drew a new line across the old drawing. Gazing at the drawing with bated breath, he suddenly noticed that the firm line which had destroyed the results of former labours had given a new and unexpected result.

He drew the pencil across the paper again and his eyebrows went up a little higher. Afraid to trust himself, he verified the drawing a score of times. There was no doubt of it—he had found what he wanted.

He sighed with satisfaction, stood up and stretched his heavy body with its slightly bent back.

“And now for bed. I’ll do the rest tomorrow. We’ll see what you will say, Comrade Kraysky.”

Before dropping to sleep, he remembered Nastya. He drew closer to her warm side and put an impatient arm round her....

The signal sounded, loud and peremptory, driving people out of their beds, calling them to work.

Nastya tied some bread and lard in a red kerchief and put a bottle of milk in her husband’s pocket. He tied the drawings with a piece of string and put them in his breast pocket. The steady thud of a thousand feet announced that the morning shift was on its way to the plant.

“Olya!” shouted Zaytsev, looking up to the interlaced iron trusses. The crane growled in response as it brought a wheel. Zaytsev

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nodded playfully to Olya and she laughed in response, making a chain clank. He laid an axle on his lathe, screwed the saddles and drew the lever. Convinced that the cutters worked properly and listening with pleasure to the regular hum of the lathe, Zaytsev gazed at the curly shavings coming out.

“Semenych!”

Zaytsev turned round. Mokhov was looking at him over his spectacles with an ironic smile. He seemed to have some interesting information to impart. Zaytsev came over.

“Have you read it? You’d better have a look at it, Semenych,” said Mokhov, handing him a newspaper. His cunning smile was intriguing.

“What is it about?”

Mokhov wiped the oil from his hands with some tow and continued gazing at him with the same mysterious smile.

“Oh, get it out, will you, Mokhov, don’t keep me waiting.”

“It’s on the third page, at the bottom,” said Mokhov slowly, and while Zaytsev was unfolding the paper, he kept his eyes on his face.

Zaytsev glanced down the page:

“The country, which is constructing socialism, is in need of engines, yet we have only 75 per cent fulfilment....

“The percentage of spoiled engine parts is becoming menacing....

“ ‘What about your promises of hot water, that’s what I want to know,’ wrote a worker correspondent under the pseudonym of Shaft.”

“Oh, there it is!”

“The Bureau of Workers’ Inventions will meet tomorrow—engineer Kraysky will make a report on the safety device which he has invented for protecting saddles from dust, etc. The yearly economy to the plant from this invention will be....”

The figure dazed Zaytsev, he rubbed his eyes, but a film seemed to screen off all the shop. He could vaguely see Mokhov emerge from it, with his blackened teeth showing in a grin.

Zaytsev’s eyes fell on his lathe. He stopped it with an expression of fear and rage and saw even without taking measurements that the axle was spoiled.

He stood for a few seconds, staring at the ruined axle, then rushed

to the door, out of the shop.

Mokhov went up to Zaytsev's lathe, examined the axle, shook his head and spat. He picked up the newspaper from the floor and folding it carefully, thrust it into the pocket of his overalls.

The machine shop went on working. Mills and cutters ate into the steel, the soapy water gurgled as it poured over to cool them—the belts flapped dully as they rushed on, polishing pulleys.

Zaytsev's coat hung on the door of the cupboard near his lathe—a milk bottle bulged out of its pocket. The red bundle hung from a nail, the ends of the kerchief sticking out like a rabbit's ears.

Olya thrust her head out of the crane cabin and stared in astonishment at the silent lathe.

Having run home all the way—a matter of a kilometre and a half—Zaytsev threw himself on his bed.

His wet shirt, cooled by the fresh wind, felt very cold but Zaytsev lay perfectly still, with closed eyes. Nastya came home from the market and seeing her husband on the bed in the middle of the working day, became anxious.

“What's the matter, Mitya? Not ill—are you?”

Zaytsev made no answer and drew his pale lips still tighter together. Nastya bent over him and sniffed to see if he was drunk. Zaytsev liked a drink, but this time there was no smell of alcohol and Nastya felt ashamed of her suspicions.

“Why don't you answer, Mitya? Perhaps I'd better call a doctor? I'll run for him at once....”

“Don't,” whispered Zaytsev with an effort.

He lay till dinner time and refused to eat, only smoking, and drinking water as if to still the fire that was burning in his heart.

Evening came. The sound of young voices, talking and laughing, came from the street. A radio set was clamouring next door. A female voice was heard under the window saying reproachfully:

“You old whisky bottle! All the worry I have with you! Go home and sleep it off! You look a sight—go home, you old whisky bottle!”

An indistinct muttering sounded in response, like the grumble of a good-natured dog.

“Don't you tell any lies.... I'm no whisky bottle, I'm Mokhov, a fitter of the seventh category—I remember that, and I have a son... Sashka. I'm sitting here because there's a sick comrade in this house. You should have some pity for him—and instead you go and call me a whisky bottle.”

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Zaytsev lay in the darkness with open eyes, feeling heavy and listless. His limbs and muscles refused to obey him. His brain worked intensely, he was searching for a way out. He felt right to be on his side and did not want to give up his drawings without a struggle. He was absolutely certain that his calculations were right, he had spent nights making them, full of the joy of creative labour. He often stopped before the interlacings of thought which he himself could not understand and turned the pages of his son's school books on physics and trigonometry, but the formulas remained impenetrable. At such times, he threw the books away in a rage and ransacked his memory for hours, searching every nook and cranny for anything which might reinforce his idea.

It seemed as if he had conquered. The accuracy of his calculations was confirmed by the precise lines of his drawings and the columns of figures, dictated by the experience of numerous years. Last night he had slept as soundly as a child, with his arm around Nastya—tonight he was humiliated, shamefully vanquished...

After leaving the shop, he burst into the plant trade union committee room. The chairman, Telezhkin, was busy among his papers.

“What do you want?”

“I've come to ask the committee to look into my case. Engineer Kraysky has appropriated my invention.”

“What's that you're saying? We know all about Kraysky—he is a social worker and lectures at the technical school.”

“He is a thief!” cried Zaytsev, shaking with fury. “Do you stand up for crooks like him?”

Telezhkin stood up and, stammering with excitement, shouted:

“Stand up for crooks? The trade union committee? How dare you say such things!”

A number of workers came into the room and Telezhkin lowered his trembling voice.

“We'll look into this matter. What's your name? Shop?”

“He's Zaytsev, from the machine shop,” said one of the newcomers obligingly.

“Zaytsev? From the wheel department? They've just telephoned. So it's you, is it? It's you who ruined an axle and left off work in the middle of the day?”

Zaytsev made no answer and his lips trembled.

“So you come here accusing others, yet you're none too good yourself, it would seem. What sort of an inventor are you if we have

to kick you out of the plant? Who's been stealing anything from you? What were those aprons you invented? Tin—were they not? Well, they're no good. Kraysky has invented others, made of canvas.

“But I was the first to speak of aprons.”

“You may have spoken, but it's the engineer who did it,” said Telezhkin.

Feeling perfectly crushed, Zaytsev ran home. So the plant did not want him and his inventions, the plant which he had loved as a father does his child. So there were people stronger than he and obstacles stronger than trigonometry! True, that his apron was not quite suitable, but the whole idea was his. Kraysky had never thought about it before.

He felt weak and empty, without any energy to get up or go and talk to anyone. Besides who was there to go to?

Zaytsev imagined himself coming to the nucleus to complain about Kraysky. The secretary of the nucleus—Zhukov—would take out a canvas cover and ask:

“Is this yours? Did you do it?”

“No.”

“Then what are you talking about?”

Zaytsev felt he was up against a dead wall and that increased his helpless fury. Kraysky had stolen his idea. But how was he to show that idea to others, prove that it was his own, since an idea had no visible substance, no colour, no smell—you could not feel it with your hands. To bring a tin apron would only be to show that he had been unable to embody his idea, that the “safety device for protecting saddles” belonged to Kraysky alone. No, he could not prove it. But he must do something to make people feel he was right.

He felt like lying there for days, without moving, so as not to hear or see anything which might remind him of his defeat.

“Whiskey bottle, indeed! What a woman! You've no understanding! Here's Sashka now—he's clever, I grant. But he must obey me, or I'll smash his head for him.”

The voice dwindled to an indistinct mutter and it was evident that Molkhov was about to drop off to sleep.

“Dad! Say, dad! Come home, or you'll be late for work tomorrow.”

“Sashka... is it you? Is it you, sonny? Right you are—I'll be late. Mustn't be late, Molkhov's never been late yet, sonny. Let's go home, my boy.”

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The voices retired, melted away and finally stopped altogether. A heavy silence set in.

Zaytsev closed his eyes and immediately the figure of a short fat man rose before him. He was looking at Zaytsev with a smile, a bundle of blueprints rustling in his fingers, and his smile was so uncanny that Zaytsev cried out and woke up.

The darkness seemed to press against his chest and throat. It was a struggle between them—Zaytsev and Kraysky. Who would win? His heart beat faster and faster. The world seemed non-existent, all except Kraysky and that short, heavy body of his.

3

Vekshin left the shop in an angry and irritable frame of mind. Nobody had ever dared to humiliate him in public before, yet today he had been called absentee and idler in front of the whole shop. Yes, he was an absentee... what of it? Mustn't he have a rest now and then? Youth was fleeing. His education... what had he got out of school? A thirst for knowledge, a longing for something better, a restless discontent—that was all. It had only made him feel disappointed with life.

With Andrushechkin now, it was quite another matter. He did not wish for anything. He was content with what he got out of the plant and could spend his life fulfilling an unlimited quota of voluntary work, forgetting even his wife, for the sake of a meeting of the I.L.D. nucleus. Yet Marya Sergeevna was rather good looking.... Should he take her away from him? That would be fun! He hurried on, full of malicious joy at the thought.

It was Saturday—should he go to the movies? He had just gone past and seen people standing in a long line for tickets. No, it was not worth it. The white walls of the Palace of Culture rose on his right, in a network of scaffolding over which stone-masons were crawling like so many black flies. Sergey thought with joy: "They'll have it finished by autumn, after all." But the question was—where to go at the moment? Football? It would feel good to drive the ball past the other side's goal-keeper and get applause for it! Sergey felt a desire to move about, use his muscles, wrestle, prove his physical superiority.

"Go into the woods with the boys, perhaps, have a couple of good drinks and play about?"

"Valya will be waiting for me. Shall I go? If there's anyone sitting on the porch, I'll go."

He said that because he felt sure nobody would be sitting on his porch, but even from a distance he actually saw a black figure waiting.

Who on earth could it be?

A man was sitting on the rail, bending over a book. His face was hidden, but the thick hair had a familiar appearance.

“Senka! So it’s you?”

“Sergey! I didn’t see you come up.”

He looked at Sergey out of small, narrowed eyes and smiled.

“You’re a real worker, there’s a smell of the plant all over you. You have certainly made yourself dirty.”

Platov ran his finger over Sergey’s smoke-blackened cheek and wiped it on his blouse.

“But you are as clean as if you’d never been inside a plant. You’ve probably even forgotten how to mould a wheel? Well, come on into my room, comrade engineer, tell us dirty louts all about cultured life.”

Struck by Sergey’s unpleasant manner, Platov stopped smiling and walked into the house.

Sergey sat down at the table without washing.

“Are you going to eat your dinner like that? You might at least wash your hands,” remarked Platov.

Sergey struck his spoon against his plate with irritation.

“I’m as hungry as a wolf. When a man has worked all day, he’s got no taste for cleanliness; all he wants is to get his belly full.”

He purposely took the loaf in his dirty hands and cut it. Platov gazed in astonishment at his furious face and noticed that every movement of his held a definite purpose, which he did not as yet understand. Sergey’s mother served the dinner, with down-cast eyes, handling the crockery with deft, accustomed fingers.

“How are things at the plant?” asked Platov, trying to change the conversation.

“They are in such a state that we don’t even get our wages. There’s plenty of posters and lectures, hut when it comes to paying—they’ve got no money. Just making fools of us. Always calling a man absentee and idler. I’m not a machine, I must live my life. If the engineers can, why shouldn’t we workers? There’s a lot of talk about what they do for the workers but it’s all humbug really. We don’t even get enough bread.”

Sergey spoke bitterly, while he stuffed fried potatoes into his mouth.

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“The worse is there are some among us who are ready enough to kow-tow to the management. Much they care for the workers’ interests! Do you remember Andrushechkin?”

“A funny little man? Looks like a tadpole?”

“That’s him. You should see him now. An active social worker, if you please! Preaching morals in the shop all the time.”

“Oh, lie’s always been restless. Never content and doesn’t know himself what he wants.”

“I prefer the old guys. There’s Boretsky—Antonych, for example. That’s a proper man! No fear of his fawning on anybody. Let’s go to his house tonight, Senka. You’ll see Valya, and we might have a drink, eh?” Seeing the excitement in Vekshin’s eyes, Platov did not object.

After dinner, they shaved, ironed their trousers and went to visit Boretsky.

“Valya, the engineer’s here. May I introduce you?” and Sergey clicked his heels together and made a funny face.

“How you’ve changed... you’re quite different,” remarked Valya, looking attentively at Platov.

“He’ll be wearing horn-rimmed spectacles soon, like an American ape. Oh, how I hate those spectacled fellows!”

Sergey switched on the radio. There was a rattling, hissing sound, then came the chords of a piano; they broke with a loud crescendo and a violin began to play a familiar melody. Sergey started singing a sentimental tune in a shaking tenor voice,

Platov was examining the photographs on the wall.

An old yellow photo showed a group of bearded foremen, standing in two rows and, in the middle, a man in an engineer’s cap, his right hand in the breast of his uniform coat, a briefcase held nonchalantly in his gloved left. The picture was dated 1904.

Among the foremen, Platov recognized Antonych, by his broad figure and hawk-like nose.

“Do you know I’m just crazy about that song,” cried Vekshin. “Even when I’m working I can’t help humming it. What a lot of feeling and sadness there is in that music. Just listen! Simply makes you feel all upset, so one doesn’t want to hear any more about the plant and its noise and smoke.”

Platov made a wry face. He wanted to put on his glasses, so as to get a better look at the faces on the photo, but, remembering Sergey’s remark about spectacled fellows, he could not make up his mind. He

squinted at the photographs with narrowed eyes. The solid, bearded figures of foremen, and men in engineers' caps, appeared everywhere with the plant in the background, standing near engines, or at the door of the office. In one of the men, he recognized Inspector Akatuyev and his face darkened. He thought he could hear a familiar voice in the sound of the violin. But Vera was in Moscow and it was no use thinking of the past.

Platov glanced round the room, looking for signs of new times. Oh, yes, the radio. But he was astounded to see tears on Sergey's face.

"I can't stand it, Senka, I must get dead drunk, so nothing will matter!"

"That's right, let's go into the woods, Senya! We'll take the old man along and make a bonfire. That'll be fine," cried Valya gleefully and started putting crockery, food and bottles into a basket.

There was something irritating in the quiet atmosphere of that house, in the flowers which screened off the daylight, the photos which obstinately clung to the past. Platov suddenly felt the old, almost forgotten world, which had become dimmed in the heat of studies, in the noise and novelty of Moscow streets, closing round him again.

He had been glad to come back to his plant, to see his shop, his comrades, but now, looking at Sergey, at Valya, at those walls hung with photographs and post cards, he felt himself out of place.

The years spent in college had altered him a great deal. They had weakened the ties which bound him to the circle of his former friends and acquaintances. He began to see in them new and hitherto unnoticed traits, new aspects of their character. The world appeared changed, revealing new and unexpected contours. So now, when he came in actual contact with people with whom he was tied up through childhood associations and years at the plant, he felt vaguely estranged.

The past looked down from those discoloured photographs—it sounded in Sergey's sentimental singing—it came in cloying whiffs from hyacinths.

"Why are you so thoughtful, Senya?" asked Valya, sitting down next to him and attacking him with her eyes.

Platov pulled himself together. He looked into Valya's quick piercing eyes, which bore a resemblance to those of a little wild animal, and the sensitive nostrils of her amusingly turned up little nose.

"Just a little tired from the trip. What about you, Valya? As lively

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as usual, I see. Still driving the local boys crazy?" he asked with a smile.

"I don't, they just go crazy on their own! No fault of mine at all!" Her body shook with laughter, her eyes sparkled, she wrinkled her nose amusingly. She looked at him provokingly, as much as to say: "Shall I drive you crazy, too?"

Platov admired her in this laughing coquettish mood. He brightened under her influence and laughed at the remembrance of the pranks they had played during the nightly walks he remembered so well. They chattered gaily and Valya's loud, carefree laughter drowned the sound of the radio. Sergey looked gloomily in their direction, fingering his cap angrily.

Antonych came in, shook Platov's hand heartily, looked him up and down and patted him on the shoulder:

"So you've come back to show us old fellows up, eh? It's time we retired, what? Not fit to work nowadays. Still whenever there's anything serious I've noticed you come to us—too young yet."

Antonych was tying his tie, and his face slowly grew crimson, either from his efforts or latent excitement.

Platov sensed the same note in the voice of Antonych that he caught in the ironical remarks of Sergey, and trying to keep himself in hand, he began to speak:

"From the way you greet me, one might really think I was not one of you any more. Yet we've rammed moulds together for over a year. The only difference I can see is that they've put my brains in order, for the rest I'm still the same old Senka Platov."

So saying, he pulled up his trousers with an accustomed gesture.

"The same, yet different. You'll be earning about 500 rubles now and hob-nobbing with specialists. I know the likes of you!" said Sergey, pulling out the plug with an angry movement so that the radio grew silent.

"There you go," Antonych interrupted him. "Haven't seen each other for so many years and quarrelling already. Oh, you young people, you hot heads! Let's be off."

The sun penetrated behind the thicket of pines and the yellow tree trunks glowed with the colours of sunset. They sat down on a dry, sandy mound near the railway track and Valya spread a towel on the ground and placed the food on it. Antonych rubbed his bristling chin with the palm of his hand and took a bottle out of his pocket.

"That's fine," shouted Sergey gleefully.

“Well, Senya, here’s to your new life!” said Antonych with a sigh.

They all drank.

“What sort of work are you going to do at the plant?” asked Antonych.

“I’m appointed to your shop—assistant chief.”

“Assistant chief? In our open hearth furnace shop?” Antonych choked and spat. “So you’re going to be a boss over me? Extraordinary! What a time!”

His face darkened and he turned away and became silent.

Tomtits flitted about in the pine wood.

Sergey, already tipsy, was lying back on the grass and singing in his high, sad tenor voice.

Valya looked back dreamily into the sky with its pale floating clouds streaked with the gold of the sunset. Mokhov came out of the forest, surrounded by his family. He was swaying slightly on his feet and lecturing his tired and sleepy children:

“You’re a Pioneer, Sasha. That I have nothing against. Wear the red tie if you want to. I see there’s no harm in it, does you good, on the contrary. Only you listen to this now! You’re to obey your father.”

Sasha was dropping with fatigue, his red tie was wrinkled and the branches he carried on his shoulder seemed to weigh his body down.

“Sasha! You listen to your father and don’t you try to oppose me. Just keep to your part of life!”

“That’s right! Those are the proper words,” said Antonych approvingly.

They all became silent.

A man came out of the bushes and stopped in the middle of the clearing. He was undersized and thin, his yellow face was like a wizened apple. His torn trousers barely clung to his thin frame, showing the white body through the holes. His pink striped shirt was dirty and torn at the elbow, and a sharp bony joint stuck out of the hole in the calico. He stared at them all attentively. His browless eyes seemed sad.

“Give the embittered man a drink,” he said.

Boretsky handed him the almost empty vodka bottle.

“Finish it, Zhorov, and beat it.”

Zhorov took the bottle and drained it.

“That’s too little. I’m awfully bitter, friends. I’ll kill somebody this night for my heart is burning!”

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He sighed gloomily and disappeared in the bushes.

Andrushechkin and Marusya came out in the clearing, walking at a distance from each other.

“Grisha! Come and join the company!” shouted Sergey, waving his cap at them.

Andrushechkin noticed the food basket, the scattered bottles and hurried on.

“Rather late—time we were getting home,” said he, glancing at Marusya and noting that her eyebrows drew together in a hurt expression.

“Come on, have a drink,” Sergey insisted, running up to Andrushechkin and tugging at his sleeve. “Come and join us, Marya Sergeyevna.”

“It’s no use, Sergey, you know I don’t drink,” said Andrushechkin.

“Every man must drink. He must!” shouted a voice and Zhorov came out of the bushes.

“Are you the man who won’t drink?” cried Zhorov. He walked up to Andrushechkin and poked Marusya in the ribs. His mouth slobbered an evil smelling saliva.

Andrushechkin looked at Zhorov, gazing intently at his gaping mouth and made no sound.

“Why don’t you do something, Grisha?” cried Marusya angrily. “I don’t want him to touch me. Don’t stand there like a fool.”

“Comrade, you’re drunk. Go home. Leave people alone. Don’t start a row,” said Andrushechkin soothingly.

“It’s not vodka makes me drunk—it’s sorrow. I’m a destitute man and my life’s a wreck. My life is no use to me! I’m all empty inside! I’m smouldering away. And you go and accuse me of being rowdy. What right have you....”

He swayed and would have fallen, but embraced Marusya for support.

Marusya shook him off with a shriek. Zhorov lost his balance and fell.

“Listen now, comrade—you stop making a row,” said Andrushechkin in the same soothing tone.

Zhorov picked himself up and drew a knife. Andrushechkin jumped aside and Zhorov fell. Sergey jumped like a cat on Zhorov’s back and wrenched the knife away from him. Boretsky and Valya ran to the fight.

Sergey caught Marusya's grateful glance and seized with a desire of vengeance squeezed Zhorov's throat. Zhorov twisted his body around and bit his hand, and Sergey, driven mad with pain, thrust the knife at him.

Zhorov's roar had nothing human in its sound, as he sprang up and ran, tripping over his torn trouser legs. His cries woke the echoes of the forest.

"O-O-Oh! They've knifed me! O-O-Oh!"

"What have you done?" cried the pale and shaking Andrushechkin.

Sergey looked calmly at the blood-stained knife and threw it into the bushes.

"Taught him to leave women alone, that's all. As to you, Andrushechkin, you're worse than a woman. Much use your propaganda did—'Comrade Zhorov, be reasonable!' You're an old woman. Can't even defend your wife."

Marusya was gazing intently at Sergey's figure, beside which Andrushechkin seemed to her small and sickly. Valya, excited by the event, narrowed her lids and drew close to Platov.

They all went home discussing the event. Platov kept quiet. He had been a silent observer of the events in the clearing. When the knife flashed in Zhorov's hands, he had jumped up, started to run and stopped immediately. Pictures of the recent past, which now seemed so far away, came back to his memory: a fight... blood and himself thoughtlessly rushing in with a knife clutched in his fingers. But if he did it now, rumour would say: Platov—the Red engineer—and Vekshin have knifed Zhorov. So he walked back to the pines and sank down listlessly on the grass.

And now Platov felt Sergey's heavy accusing glance riveted on his back.

Sergey was swearing indignantly.

"Sloppy intelligentsia! Don't want to soil their cultured hands!"

Platov felt some justice in those angry words, glanced at the gay and animated face of Marusya and strode quickly along, feeling ashamed of his behaviour.

An accordion was playing somewhere, a voice bellowed out the lines of a doggerel and the forest echoed with laughter. A train came rushing from behind a turning of the railway track and its rattle drowned the dismal sounds of the accordion and the cries of the tomtit.

Engineer Kraysky came back from the shop and threw his cap wearily on the table. It was hot. The sickening smell of burning coal came in through the open windows of the office. Kraysky opened his shirt, baring a fleshy chest, covered with dark hair. The smell of his heated body reminded him of the plant bath house and he made a grimace of disgust.

The telephone bell sounded and he took up the receiver listlessly.

“Hello! You want to know about the health of Andrey Nikolaevich? There’s no change. It’s hard working alone, as I’ve told you more than once. No, no, thanks, I’ll manage alone somehow. What? Arrived, has he? That’s interesting, very!”

Kraysky rose a little in his chair. His whole short, fat figure reminded one of a disturbed walrus. He thought for a minute and took up the receiver again.

“Two-forty-five, that you Alya? That’s fine! Please have something extra for dinner. My new assistant has arrived just now.... Don’t know anything more. Please do.... So long.”

Antonych came in, extended his rough fingers to Kraysky and drew his hand hurriedly away from contact with that warm, moist palm.

“Terrible heat, Stanislav Antonych! How can you work with your coat on?”

“Habit, Vladimir Pavlovich. Heat can’t harm a man.” Boretsky gazed at the large ink stains on a sheet of blue paper. They seemed strange and out of place and he felt like covering them up.

“What I’ve come about is this: We’ve got an order for forging material. Smelting No. 2220. You know about it—we’ve got doubts. Axles are rather important. What are your orders?” And Boretsky tightened his lips.

“You know what the manager’s orders are, Stanislav Antonych. The program must be fulfilled. There can be no doubt about No. 2220 smelting, none whatever. It’s laboratory data, and that’s the main thing. Understand?”

The two ink stains, with a dash between them, reminded Boretsky of bicycle wheels and Valya’s entreating eyes. He took the paper weight and covered up the stains. “I understand. What about Akatuyev?”

“You know what to do. Akatuyev will accept the parts. He can’t fail to accept them. Understand?”

“I understand, Vladimir Pavlovich. There’s one thing more—about Nosov, he wants his leave. He’s spitting blood. We ought to have pity on him, I think.”

“On no account! Are you mad? Nosov can’t get his leave now. Not on any account.”

Krasky took out his handkerchief and wiped his moist hands.

“Promise him a compensation and so forth, but he can’t get a leave. That would ruin everything. Just get that—everything! Who can replace Nosov?”

Krasky’s eyes bulged with irritation.

“Nobody, Vladimir Pavlovich.”

Boretsky turned away and pulled the handle of the door, the block weighted with a heavy brick creaked and the brick shot up. A man’s quick figure dashed past him into the office, before the brick had time to come down again.

He stepped quickly to the table, took a seat without waiting to be asked and examined Krasky out of his bright little eyes. His mobile body, clad in a porous undershirt, reminded one of a big fish caught in a net.

“I’ve come to see you, Comrade Krasky.... You don’t remember me? But, then, how should you?”

The newcomer’s flat nose was so ordinary, that it seemed cast in a standard mould.

“Go on, what is it you want?” asked Krasky, standing up and taking up his briefcase. “But make it short, please.”

“I worked in the open hearth furnace shop five years ago.... Went to college. Now I’ve graduated.”

Krasky felt a growing impatience. The man’s words seemed full of hidden meaning. He threw the briefcase down and stared intently into his visitor’s face with a sudden vague recollection.

“I must introduce myself, since you’ve forgotten me: I’m engineer Platov and here’s the document appointing me to your shop.”

Krasky saw the characteristic flourish at the end of the manager’s signature and the lines above it danced before his eyes:

Extract from _____

Appointed by Trust _____

In the capacity of assistant chief open hearth
furnace shop _____

Korchenko, Manager

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“What about Andrey Nikolayevich then?” asked Kraysky bewildered.

“And who’s Andrey Nikolayevich?” asked Platov, likewise bewildered.

“What am I saying! ... One gets fatigued after a day’s work, you know. So you are—er—the same....”

“The very same. In other words—Platov who used to mould engine wheels in your shop. I’ve come back to my old plant.”

Platov kept his bead-like, humorous, black eyes on the engineer and all of a sudden Kraysky recollected that rather coarse face which seemed carved in wood, and those mocking eyes.

“Very glad to meet you again, Comrade Platov. How very interesting this is, eh? And how quickly those five years have gone by! And so you’re the same Platov, who... you remember?”

“I do remember, Comrade Kraysky. I was moulding a wheel, you—standing beside me and giving instructions which I refused to obey. You started shouting and so did I. You called me a lout. Later you got a reprimand....”

“What’s the use of recalling those old times!” interrupted Kraysky hastily. “I’d forgotten it. What was it I wanted to say? Oh, I remember! What about Andrey Nikolayevich? There’s nothing about it here....”

A yard engine passed in front of the window, letting out a cloud of steam and emitting a thin whistle, the buffers clanked and squeaked, a voice shouted:

“Switch off... switch off, I tell you!”

Kraysky made a rush for the telephone.

“Two-forty-five. Alya?”

“Switch off, you devil!”

“Alya? It’s me. Yes. No, nothing wanted, nothing!”

He threw the receiver, which dropped down on its flexible wire—the mouth piece unscrewed and rolled on the floor.

Platov picked it up and fastened it on to the receiver and when he turned to the table again, Kraysky was gone.

Outside, the voice was still shouting for someone to switch off and was answered by the whistle of the engine.

The engine whistles and sounds of the steam outlet seemed to drive Kraysky on and he hurried along the track with quick short steps of his fat little legs, puffing and blowing as he went. The heat, which had concentrated in the narrow passages between the plant buildings,

parched his throat and made his ears sing.

“I won’t have it! I must show them they’re making a tremendous mistake. Are they mad? To appoint that—what’s his name.... I’ve even forgotten his name. It’s something grey and colourless like the dust upon this road.”

He tried to recall his new assistant’s face, but the features would not take shape, all except the coarsely cut nose. Kraysky thought that very likely the man blew that trumpet nose of his with his fingers. That man an engineer? Kraysky smiled a wry smile and wrenched open a door with gold lettering:

Technical Manager’s Office
BENJAMIN PAVLOVICH TURCHANINOV

“Well?” Kraysky sank into an easy chair and stared at Turchaninov.

The silence was so complete that the ticking of his wrist watch could be plainly heard. Turchaninov said nothing and observed Kraysky. Brooks who was sitting at the window, gazed in a dazed way at a stain on his trousers.

“Why don’t you say something, Benjamin Pavlovich?” said Kraysky, biting his heavy moustache with suppressed irritation.

“What do you expect me to say?”

“But such things are not admissible.”

“You must submit.”

“Are you joking?”

“I’m quite serious! You must submit.”

“I am of the same opinion,” put in Brooks, as he scratched at the stain with his nail.

“There! Adam Adamovich agrees with me,” said Turchaninov. “My hunting motto is: submit and subdue! For example, I have a natural aversion for dirt, but the last time I went out shooting the wood-cocks, I crawled on my hands and knees, with my nose in an evil-smelling bog. I submitted to necessity, made myself muddy up to my eyes. But I shot at the wood-cock from a distance of thirty feet and didn’t miss him—he was subdued by my shot!”

“I like shooting grouse, too!” sighed Brooks sentimentally.

Korchenko’s voice could be heard next door, in the manager’s office.

“There’s your wood-cock, Kraysky. You’d better crawl and get him!” ordered Turchaninov smiling.

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Krasky had no interest in hunting and the allusions of Benjamin Pavlovich were incomprehensible to him. Why should he crawl, when he could stride with proud, firm step into Korchenko's office?

Korchenko was holding his hands over his ears and shouting into the telephone:

"We'll do it, I'm telling you. Hallo! Hallo! Moscow. Cut us off again, damn them! Hallo! I tell you we'll do it. Nonsense! Have to write something in the papers, you know. What about the new plant? Go ahead? Good. The project is ready. So long.... Not an easy thing, these telephone conversations with Moscow," he added, wiping his forehead and casting a glance at Krasky. "Good thing you've come, Vladimir Pavlovich. The construction of the new plant must begin tomorrow. We've got permission at last."

Krasky being no hunter, had no idea of stalking game, but he had read somewhere of a very simple way of killing it, which was to lie in wait in the middle of the path which led to the drinking place.

"I've come to tell you, Peter Petrovich, that although it's painful for me to leave the plant, I am obliged to do so. Please arrange for my release by July first."

"What's that?" asked Korchenko, his eyes becoming gloomy.

"I cannot be responsible for the open hearth furnace shop under present conditions. It's you who have signed the appointment of my new assistant. You evidently think it expedient. I, on the contrary, am quite convinced it's a mistake. The shop needs experienced chiefs just now. We must get out of that break—an enormous effort is needed, a knowledge of the business. Platov is not a suitable assistant. I had better have my release."

"How is that? The open hearth furnace shop will remain without a head at the most important moment? That's impossible! It's the most backward of our shops! You've organized it so well. The percentage of waste is decreasing. Why, it's not possible!"

Korchenko stood up excitedly.

"All this is unfortunately true, but I cannot go on working like this...."

"Where am I to find a new engineer at such short notice? It's impossible, Vladimir Pavlovich! We've practically begun to build the new plant, and it's you who must attend to the construction of the furnace shops."

"Unfortunately someone else will have to do it," said Krasky, biting his moustache.

Korchenko opened and closed his briefcase nervously. He saw sheer obstinacy in Kraysky's eyes.

"I can't let him go," he thought. "Should I give in and annul Platov's appointment? But those are Vartanyan's instructions and he's obstinate, too, and will not agree to reverse the resolution of the district Party committee. But then Kraysky will go and the construction of the new plant will be delayed."

The expression of Korchenko's face changed incessantly—his brow wrinkled with impatience and irresolution, vexation and anger—his eyes roved to and fro.

"That's the way a thirsty animal strives to reach his accustomed drinking place," thought Kraysky.

"I can remain at the plant on two conditions only: first—Platov will work within the limits I set for him, secondly—Andrey Nikolaevich must remain in the management—I need his help."

Korchenko heaved a sigh of relief.

"Why didn't you say so at once? Of course, I agree. Platov must get thorough training under your guidance, for you're an old and experienced engineer. There's no doubt about that! I'm extremely glad we've come to an understanding."

Kraysky walked out of the room, gaily stroking his heavy yellow moustache. As he passed the door of Turchaninov's office, he smiled ironically:

"Those lion-hunters!" he thought.

The beacon of the fire station watch tower shone dimly, like a waning moon, when Platov entered the open hearth furnace shop. The shop was sunk in semi-darkness, out of which hazy contours slowly emerged. The only light was the red glow of the furnaces, which waxed and waned on the nearby moulds.

* * * * *

A twenty ton ladle, which was being heated before the smelting process, was spouting clouds of smoke. But in the shadowy depths of the shop everything was silent.

Platov looked over the shop which he had left five years ago. Everything was in its place, unchanged since he remembered it. It seemed as if it were only yesterday he had left these cranes, girders and high piles of moulds. He moved into the depth of the shop, where he used to cast engine parts. The shop was deserted at night, but in the morning it would again fill with noise, shouts and anxious signals.

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He would come here tomorrow, so as to superintend people whom he must teach to work quicker and better. He would meet the very men, to whom he— engineer Platov—had been Senka the moulder. Had been? Maybe he'd remained that, whether for good or ill, who could tell?

He suddenly saw a bent figure he remembered so well, near his old work bench. An old man was crawling on his knees round a mould, with a hand lamp set in wire netting.

“Titych? What are you doing here at night?”

“Oh, Senya! I've heard about you. So you're back? I'm still crawling on my knees, as you see. Boretsky begged and prayed me to do some night work—they're short of driving wheels. What could I do? And here I am. Such is life.”

Titych hung his lamp up and, having wiped his hand on his apron, extended it to Platov.

“So you've absorbed all the German science, I guess?”

He clutched his thin grey beard in his fist and stared intently at his former helper in the moulding brigade. There was little change. The thick, black hair still stood in a shock over the high forehead, and the narrowed eyes flashed fitfully from under the thick eyelashes. The wide, flat nose reminded Titych of something funny and convinced him of the lack of change in Senya's appearance.

“You've still got a nose like a potato.”

“Still got it, Titych, it's on for life,” said Senya, wrinkling it with a mock sigh. “In foreign countries, this kind of nose serves you instead of an Asiatic passport. But I don't mind! It's the head, not the nose that matters when it comes to making engines.”

“And your head is pretty strong!”

“I've seen some things, but I didn't get to the bottom of their science, those devils will not let us do it. There's really something to learn there, Titych. I worked at the Borzig Locomotive Works—an old plant, but many interesting things in it. We make a hundred fifty engines a year here with difficulty, while they make thousands.”

“Oh, but they're Germans, you know!” interrupted Titych in a tone of envy and respect.

Semyon Platov smiled and rolled his eyes.

“What of it? Isn't Brooks, who's at the head of our engine construction work, also a German? Yet that does not seem to improve things. You must remember this, Titych. The efficiency of labour in German engine works is double that of ours. A moulder here loses a

whole hour, in order to find a shovel....”

“That’s right, Senya, quite right. Waste is ruining us. But the main thing is: the amount of peasants who’ve come here to work. Do you think they can ever mould properly?” asked Titych with disgust.

“That’s nonsense, Titych. You and I were peasants, too. Where do you think we can get labour from? And we actually can do better and more than the Germans, -even with those peasants to do the work.”

“Better indeed! They make me sick! They sent Zhorov to help me yesterday. I shouted to him: ‘Cover the mould,’ and the drunken fool starts knocking at it with the rammer! I sent him off to hell. That’s the way things are, Senya.”

Platov recollected Sergey’s furious face, Zhorov, the bloody knife, Marusya, Boretsky.... He stood amid the silence of the shop and thought over the doubts expressed by Titych.

“Yes,” he thought, “the influence of the past still exists. Its dirty shadow still hangs over the workers. Black blood, which has gathered through centuries in the veins of the people, formed of hardships and cruelty, is still boiling, striving to find an outlet—like pus out of an abscess. Unruly, uncalmed blood! How much of it is still to flow from peasants’ veins? Some rusty, unwieldy yokel like Zhorov will come to the construction sites of new cities and plants, to operate machines and lathes. He will draw out the folds of his noisy accordion and bel- low in a bold, drunken voice: ‘O-ho-ho-o.’ His heart will fill with spleen, as hopelessly grey as the twilight over his native marshes and the yokel will tramp in an unwieldy dance, drunk with the unaccus- tomed smells of oil, gasoline and coal, and afterwards get into a fury and let the rusty blood out of some friend of his, as Vekshin has done today.”

These thoughts crowded in his brain, against his better judg- ment. It seemed Titych was right. But then, the fact that he, Senya the moulder, would come here tomorrow and be chief over Zhorov, Ti- tych, Boretsky and hundreds of others like them, filled him with as- surance again. He had been just like others: had sworn, got drunk on Sundays, and poked about sleepily at his work on Mondays, yet life had shaped him. His life appeared before him in the form of a piece of steel turning on a lathe— first coarse and unsightly, a flood of rust and sand flowing from under the cutter, then the first shaving show- ing a gleam of steel, still many cracks and crannies though, on the surface—the cutter must bite in deeper; finally, the second lot of

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shavings showing the real cast. What a lot of fuss over that piece of metal! It must be tempered, turned, polished. It was the same with his life: through years of labour at the plant, through the Young Communist League and Communist Party, nights spent over books and in laboratories—Senya the moulder had become an engineer. And in the years which passed before him, he saw himself, Titych, Vekshin, Zhorov, his own class, the whole country getting rid of the rust which still clung to them.

In answer to the doubts expressed by Titych, he said gaily:

“Never mind, Titych! We’ll polish them. We’ll make things hum, old man.”

“Of course we’ll make them hum, Senya! See all the way we’ve gone, there’s not so much left now.”

“Not so much, Titych, but we’ll have to do some hard work.... Never mind, we’ll do it. The German workers expect it of us. You can’t imagine, Titych, the emotion I felt when I heard their opinion of us, the expression of their flaming hopes! They’ll start it soon, Titych, Germany will be up soon. Europe must look out. I remember....”

Platov walked nervously round the mould and found a firm footing on a heap of sand. His eyes glistened like pieces of black enamel.

“I was standing in the Unter den Linden, reading the *Vorwärts*—that’s a menshevik rag. It was spitting venom at the U.S.S.R. There had been two German engineers—wreckers—arrested here. The fascists mobilized all their forces, organized demonstrations against the U.S.S.R., waved clubs and fists in the air.

“And I saw a band of fascists standing in front of our embassy, squealing and snarling like a lot of angry dogs. They threw rotten apples and eggs at the embassy windows and shouted: ‘Down with Communism! Give us those agents of Moscow.’ It was the first time in my life I saw such a sight. We so rarely think of what’s going on abroad.

“Suddenly, from the left, from the direction of the Tiergarten—that’s a large park in Berlin—I saw Red Flags coming. They seemed to fill the street, came nearer and nearer and the howls of the fascists were drowned in shouts of: ‘Heil Moskau! Heil!’

“Then came a single revolver shot and everything became confused in a general melee.. The Red Flags and posters swayed above the crowd, like trees in a storm, they were thrown about, fell and rose again over the sea of heads ‘Heil Moskau!’ ”

“Hey—you German—don’t speak them foreign words —talk

Russian," said Titych.

"In Russian it means—world revolution, Titych!"

Platov ruffled his hair with his fingers and grew silent. A whiff of fresh wind reached them from outside and the lamp sputtered in its current.

There was a rumble of thunder over their heads which sounded like somebody running over the roof.

Platov glanced at his watch and moved to go. He continued—

"Later, when the street was cleared, a man dressed in a worker's blouse, remained on the pavement, and strips of Red Flags strewed the ground round him.... That reminded me of Volodya Pylayev. I tell you, Titych, the earth is at white heat."

Platov put on his cap.

Titych gazed at him anxiously. He saw Senka's familiar face, but the deep emotion, which stained his cheeks crimson, was unfamiliar and catching.

He followed Senka with his eyes and sighed.

"Such is life!"

And he saw this life in a new light. The walls of the shop seemed to recede into the endless distance and things, which only yesterday had seemed far away and unattainable, were within his reach. He saw large crowds streaming in from all sides, merging into a sea of human faces, an angry and terrible sea, covered with the white foam of up-lifted hands.

"Heil Moskau!"

Titych turned round. The oil burners hummed, sending forth fitful shafts of red light. A signal bell sounded and the electric crane was set in motion with a dull rumbling noise and got ready to lift twenty tons of steel. No. 2 furnace spat liquid fire—a fountain of sparks rose in the air, flaring against the roof trusses and all things in the immediate neighbourhood were flooded with lurid light. The melting process began.

Outside, the rain started falling on the glowing glass roof as if it tried to quench the flames below. It was midnight as Platov walked through the streets under the falling rain.

The town was sinking into sleep.

The lights in the cottages went out one by one. Only a solitary electric lamp shone on a crossing, from amid a network of wires. The

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wind grew stronger, making the leaves dance and the time-worn iron roofs creak. The lamp swayed in the wind—its silvery shaft of light lurching across the pavement from side to side, climbing up to the rusty roofs and showing plainly a sign board saying:

COMRADE PYLAYEV STREET

The wind swung the lamp about, scattering its light on the pavement, the fresh boards of the sidewalk, the sleepy windows of the cottages. The wind rattled about in the old street, playing with fence gates and shutters, making window panes tinkle, sweeping the unswept streets of their rubbish, driving it to the crossing as if to examine its find by the fitful light of the lamp. And the rubbish, straws, bits of torn paper it brought, danced in a whirlwind under the uncertain light.

The raindrops pattered on the iron roofs. Hundreds of wires ran from all sides of the tall post in gleaming strings, to disappear in the black darkness. The lamp seemed to draw them out of the night, and one could see the raindrops rolling down the gleaming wires, from the white porcelain cups above. A woman stood with her cheek pressed against the wet wood of the post which was roughened by time and climbing irons.

The lamp post stood above her, slightly bent to one side as if unable to resist the tug of the numerous wires which seemed to draw it this way and that.

The woman stood, with her shrivelled arms hanging lifelessly by her sides, but a light shone in her eyes—or was it a reflection of the lamp light on her wet face? But then maybe they were not raindrops which rolled from her lashes?

The rain slashed at the trees, pattered like shrapnel on the roofs, the peals of thunder reminded one of bursting shells and the lightning flashed like search-lights over the town.

The wind carried the sound of engine whistles and the sharp barking of dogs. The street sprang from darkness to light, only to sink again back into darkness. Platov turned the corner and was momentarily dazed by the light of the electric lamp.

Through a mist of, rain, he saw the drab figure under the telegraph post.

“Some sentimental turner, or factory school student come to keep a date with his sweetheart,” he thought with a smile.

But the figure suddenly lurched away from the post and dived

into the darkness, a shaft of electric light fell on it and Platov saw that the running figure was a woman's. A vague memory came to him; he stopped, examined the telegraph post, glanced at the name of the street, saw the wet porcelain insulators and heaved a deep sigh. The wind scattered a heap of rubbish, sending its particles high up into the sky from which the clouds were gradually being washed away. The air grew still, except for a rumble of thunder, like the noise of a distant cannonade.

The lamp now diffused an even light off the uneven paving stones. And Semyon Platov saw himself as he was at fifteen, walking through the streets of the town. He remembered...

The crowd walked in undulating ranks, and flags, ranging from a deep red to a discoloured rusty crimson, waved above their heads. The resonant brassiness of a band floated through the sun-drenched air, setting a dirge-like pace which the crowd followed silently. The distant boom of guns was heard, driving away the victors of yesterday—the Denikin army. That bloody yesterday was retreating before the attack of the Red Army. It might even have been forgotten had it not been for the ravages of artillery fire, for the deeper ravages in the hearts of men, for... But the band was leading the crowd, and it carried its sorrow through the town. Stiff with hatred, the workers were assisting at the funeral of Volodya Pylayev.

Senya tried to get in front of the crowd, to the place where the band walked behind a chugging truck, which bore the body of Volodya Pylayev. He caught sight of the face of Volodya with its black moustache. He saw the figure of a little girl in a pink dress, cowering beside the driver. He guessed that it was Olya—the daughter of Pylayev and was glad to think that she would not have to walk in the sand with everybody. Volodya's old mother dragged herself behind the coffin, supported on either side by neighbours.

Where was Olya now? And why on earth was he, Semyon Platov, a Red specialist, standing on that crossing at midnight, making the past live again in his memory?

He shook the raindrops off his cap and crossed the street with hasty steps. Yes, it must have been old mother Pylayeva who had rushed down the dark street just now, hiding her madness from men's sight. She was probably in the habit of coming at night to that crossing, with its network of wires, the only place her dimmed mind still recollected. She stood there at night, under the old telegraph post, like a living monument of days which had receded into the past.

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* ..* ..* ..* ..*

The repairman fastened on his straps, tried them to see if they were solid, then walked slowly to the post and climbed clumsily up, clinging with his climbing irons.

The pavement fell away and the wet paving stones, glistening under the sun, seemed to him to be the bared heads of an innumerable crowd. The rusty roofs of the surrounding cottages receded further and further back. The chimney pots turned up their blackened cavities, blowing out scattered threads of smoke into the morning air.

The repairman was seeing the town as those who walked in its streets had never imagined it. He saw thousands of smoke-blackened chimneys, black, rusty, patched roofs, green garden patches, sandy streets which cut the town into irregular strips. New blocks of buildings rose white among dusky, crowded old districts. They were scantily scattered through the town, but the ancient houses seemed squat and afraid beside these tall new buildings. The old houses were fleeing into the fields, but even there the tall buildings rose in a circle round the town. A yard engine, dragging cars loaded with bricks and iron, was hurrying in that direction along a track which unceremoniously ran down the middle of the main street.

Workers were hurrying from all sides at the screech of the siren. They lifted their faces to look at the repairman clinging to the top of the post. And he shouted down laughingly to an old man who stood with his mouth open: "Hey, father! Better close your mouth or you'll have to swallow me if I fall!"

There was laughter below. The old man disappeared into the crowd, but other people came up and stared intently upwards.

The repairman nipped a wire off and it fell to the ground, where it lay shivering and twanging. The insulator hook came out as easily as a rotten tooth.

"Quite rotten!" murmured the repairman, as he climbed higher, feeling the top of the post with his hands and breaking off bits of rotten wood. They fell down to the ground, where they splintered into bits.

"The head's all rotten!" he shouted and the wind caught up his voice and carried it over the roofs.

Suddenly, from far down below on the pavement, came a piercing, angry shriek. He could not discern the words, but the tone was insistent. He looked down and saw people hurrying from all sides

towards the post, round which they crowded in a ring.

“One of these pieces I threw down must have struck somebody,” thought the repairman climbing hurriedly down.

“Weren’t you told repairs were being done—why don’t you stand aside then,” he cried.

The crowd grew, people came from all sides, trying to get near the telegraph post. A female voice was crying in angry and authoritative accents:

“I won’t let you touch him! I won’t, I won’t!”

Silence reigned in the street. The crowd listened intently to that hoarse voice.

The repairman pushed through the crowd and found himself inside the ring and met the stare of old mother Pylayeva’s terrible, empty eyes. She was clutching a kerchief in her hands and shouting frenziedly:

“I won’t let you touch him, I won’t! I won’t!”

The wind blew her grey hair about, sweeping it across her old grief-withered face. Her whole thin, bent old figure breathed anger. Her crooked fingers pointed upwards, to where the insulators gleamed white in the sunlight; she panted and cried hoarsely:

“He’s mine! Mine! I won’t give him up!” Suddenly her voice broke and sank to an inaudible whisper: “I pray you, don’t touch him!”

The old woman looked into the surrounding faces, for signs of pity and sympathy. For one moment reason seemed to shine in her empty eyes.

“The Whites hanged her son on this telegraph post,” said a voice in the crowd.

The old woman lifted her long arms in a solemn gesture and remained immovable, staring dry-eyed at the top of the post, as if she saw something there which was invisible to the rest.

The heads of the crowd lifted—there was something dangling from the top of the post.

“It’s only my overall,” said the repairman with a laugh. “I felt hot, so I took it off.”

His laughter found no echo.

Everyone saw that it was an ordinary canvas coat, but all faces grew gloomy at the thought of the past, as if their owners saw something else.

The “boss” was standing in the crowd. Smitten to the heart by

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the old woman's cries, he also lifted his eyes to the network of telegraph wires. The insulators gleamed white in the sunlight.

The past stood out of the accustomed trend of daily life and threw a cold, grey shadow on the faces of the workers. The "boss" looked attentively at their faces; all eyes were shining under the bent brows, like hundreds of insulators sparkling in the sunlight. The days which were almost lost in the mazes of memory, came back in a terrible picture, bringing anxiety for the morrow into the busy life of the day.

The old woman's muttering sank lower and lower and her body, weighed down by grief, was gradually sinking down, too.

But suddenly, thrusting the crowd aside, she ran up to the telegraph post and, clutching it with her **thin** bare arms, she cried frenziedly:

"I won't let you touch him!"

Her eyes shone with firm decision.

A man, whom the repairman had seen at meetings, pushed through the crowd and said in a voice which shook with emotion:

"Comrade, leave that post alone for the time being!"... During the night the wind stopped, the wires were silent, the sky had cleared and innumerable stars gazed down on the old telegraph post.

THE THIRD LINK

1

Vartanyan looked with some anxiety at the motley pile of correspondence which had just been brought to him. Fat, heavily sealed parcels peeped from under heaps of thin grey envelopes and the grey bindings of magazines and pamphlets, tightly rolled in thick wrappings, crowded the desk. A volume of Lenin, in its stiff yellow covering, reminded one of a field satchel with its map of the next march.

A picture of the far away past rose before Vartanyan's eyes. He recalled everything down to the smallest details. A fine, clear day in September. Silvery cobwebs on the grass. Dead autumn leaves falling on an open map covered with blue and red marks. Anxious thoughts of the morrow written on the weary faces of the commanders. A difficult situation—the enemy was trying to surround the division by a flank manoeuvre. Contradictory reports coming from the outposts. The hours speeding mercilessly on—the time of battle drawing nearer. Some decision must be arrived at. He remembered the dry leaves rustling as they fell on the heads bent over the map and reports.

But why should this picture come out of the past today of all days, and the same sharp feeling of anxiety fill his mind?

Vartanyan tore the seal from a heavy package, ran his eyes over the inscription, then threw the document into his briefcase and took a red bound book carefully out of its jacket.

“Going in for philosophy?” asked a mocking voice behind him.

Vartanyan looked up to see Korchenko standing over him.

“How's tricks?”

“Good news, Vartanyan,” said Korchenko, unfolding a report. “The percentage of waste is reduced by half for this month: it was eighteen per cent and is eight now.”

Vartanyan twirled a pencil thoughtfully in his fingers.

“I don't quite understand. You told me a month ago that the amount of waste was due to the number of peasants who had come to work in the open hearth furnace shop. Can it be that they've been taught to work better inside of a month?”

“That's my secret!” said Korchenko with a self-satisfied smile. “The miracle has happened, even though there are no miracles nowadays. The whole thing was done by paying bonuses to the specialists and foremen. The ruble has done it. You should see the foremen

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working now—two shifts one after the other. That Boretsky is a trump, he's even made Trusov and that drunkard Zhorov work. I've given them the necessary stimulus."

"So you think that even in our time the only stimulus is money?" asked Vartanyan wrinkling his forehead.

"See here, Vartanyan, I'm not accustomed to discussions and I don't go in for abstract philosophy," said Korchenko pointedly. "I look upon it entirely from a practical point of view. Here are the results: the percentage of waste has been reduced by half and the quality of our engines—perfect. Even engineer Akatuyev is pleased, and he's an expert on the subject. Naturally the masses have got enthusiasm and all the rest that Yuzov preaches about in his articles, but the decisive role is played by the engineers and foremen. They really know what's to be done and where the difficulty lies. They're a power, Vartanyan, and I've mastered that power. There's only one hitch—I'm speaking of Platov now. He's hardly been here a day and there's a row already. He's young and hot-headed and full of self-assurance—that can do a lot of harm just now. Do you know what he had the nerve to say at yesterday's meeting of engineers? Turchaninov was making a report on fatigue of metals—he's probably the only expert on this question, has published several books, etc. A very complicated problem. For example, I've been working on metals three times as long as Platov has, yet I would not have the courage to speak. But he just stood up and said. 'These theories remind me of a priest's sermon about the sinfulness of man.' It was scandalous! Turchaninov left the meeting. It took a lot of effort on my part to calm the engineers."

Korchenko paced the room excitedly, puffing nervously at his cigarette.

"Still Platov belongs to us," interrupted Vartanyan, "he's a worker. Been abroad. A Red engineer. It's natural his having doubts about everything and looking independently for new ways. Collisions are unavoidable. That is just the peculiar form that class struggle takes under our conditions."

Korchenko turned sharply on his heels, with unusual speed for a man of his bulk.

"So you also prefer to have doubts?"

Vartanyan blushed and turned away to the window, twisting his pencil with nervous fingers.

"You're talking nonsense, Korchenko, or else you purposely

misunderstand me. Maybe I failed to express my thoughts clearly. The question is not whether we have a right to doubt, but that it is the duty of every one of us not to trust in mere words. I'm not talking about you, you're a member of the Party, for whom I have every respect, and I am not talking of the Party, but of class vigilance with regard to enemies, of whom there are still many wearing the engineer's cap. I shall always be on Platov's side in such matters, Korchenko. As regards lectures and reprimands—I'm not in need of them!"

He threw the pencil down on the table.

"All right, all right! No need to get all worked up, you hot-headed Caucasian," said Korchenko with an embarrassed smile and left the room.

Vartanyan read his mail, biting his lips as he did so. There was a loud singing in his ears, as if the room was filled with the hum of bees—it was the beginning of an attack of neurasthenia. He swallowed a powder, made a wry face, drank some water and glanced at his watch. It was not going. Vartanyan shook it, turned it in his hands; the second hand moved and stood still again. Could the watch be broken so soon? He had bought it quite recently. He opened the lid with a penknife—the mechanism was motionless. So he would have to go to the watchmaker. Vartanyan moved the spring with a match, it pulsed slowly and grew still again. He started mechanically winding the watch which was immediately set going!—He'd simply forgotten to wind it the night before. He smiled and went off to the plant.

The earth seemed to be breathing heavily. It seemed weighed down by thousands of tons of steel, iron and copper and constricted with the narrow knotted railway tracks. A worker, bare to the waist, was hammering at a girder, making the iron ring under his blows.

"Couldn't they do it on a lathe," thought Vartanyan. "But then perhaps that's the right way."

He recollected the watch incident. It was the same thing with the plant: he saw only the outward signs of its life. Shops working, machines humming, sixteen thousand people at work. But his mind could not penetrate to the bottom of this mechanism which was as complicated as that of his watch. Something was wrong somewhere. The quality of engines was not satisfactory. But he was powerless to find out the reason for this in the plant mechanism. So he was obliged to call for the watchmaker, Korchenko, and to rely on his word. He could only wind the watch, not guide its workings. In that case—who

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was actually directing this plant, he or Korchenko? And how he hated to interfere in that unpleasant incident of Platov's attack against Turchaninov. Whatever did "the fatigue of metals" mean? Something very complicated and highly technical. Yet he would have to interfere.

Feeling discontented with himself, he walked slowly through the machine shop, nodding to members of the Party whose faces were familiar to him. Lathes hummed around him. Driving belts flashed past his eyes, hundreds of machines spun, planed and drilled metal.

Vartanyan went up to Mokhov, who was silently gazing at an axle.

"Why is that lathe not working? Is there not enough work to do?"

"Not enough? As much as you like, but who is to do it? You need a man with a head to work that lathe. It has four saddles. The driving axle demands precision, the smallest flaw—and the work is ruined. There was a turner working at that lathe but he's not there any more. A very good turner, he was."

"Where is he?"

"Discharged," said Mokhov gloomily as he turned to the tool chest.

"For what reason?"

"You better ask the management. He ruined an axle. That costs a lot of money, of course."

"But you say he was a good turner. How did it happen?"

Mokhov could not understand himself how it had happened that Zaytsev, the best turner in the shop, had ruined an axle. He did not understand the events which had happened before his very eyes. He felt that an injustice had been done. He remembered the anxious look in Zaytsev's eyes—the newspaper paragraph which made Zaytsev grow so pale and shaky, but he could not correlate these facts and shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"Something must have snapped in his head. He thought a great deal. Just stood there thinking about his lathe. He'd often stop it for no reason at all and start tinkering with it, like a boy with his toy. He was dotty about machinery. Thought maybe he could do better than an engineer."

Vartanyan understood very little of what he said. Mokhov spoke as if he were thinking aloud, trying to convince himself.

"Does the trade union know about it?"

"The trade union—what can it do? Our trade union wears a skirt."

Naturally she chattered a lot about it, as a female will. But what good can that do?"

"Who is your trade union representative?"

"There she is, hanging on to the crane. Olya! Come here. Comrade Martemyan wants to see you," said Mokhov, pronouncing the difficult name in his own way, but with much respect for the man with the bright black eyes. Mokhov thought of the plant, and life as a whole, as a many storeyed house in which every one occupied his own floor. In that house Vartanyan occupied the very top floor, because he was always elected chairman at all meetings, always made speeches and spoke clearly and sensibly. And Mokhov believed that, from his top floor, Comrade "Martemyan" saw everything with those quick black eyes of his, and that life in all its details was quite plain to him.

"It's a difficult matter, Comrade Martemyan, takes a good head to get to the bottom of it. A man, you know, is very much like a machine. Maybe Zaystev has a screw loose somewhere."

Olya was coming up the steps. Her blue working blouse, belted tightly around the waist, revealed the curves of her light, supple body. Her stained hands and bare muscular legs somehow failed to fit in with her girlish complexion. Her skin was transparently pink and her laughing eyes bright blue.

"You wished to speak to me, Comrade Vartanyan?"

Vartanyan cast an admiring glance at her lithe figure and involuntarily smiled into her shining eyes.

"I want to know what happened to the turner Zaytsev."

"Oh, that's a whole story. He was the best turner in the shop and unexpectedly he ruined an expensive engine part and left off work in the middle of the working day. A commission came to look into it. The foreman, Zorin—the chief of the shop—said he had 'demonstratively refused to fulfil the new increased norm and wilfully ruined the axle.'"

"And what's your opinion, as representative of the shop?"

Olya became suddenly embarrassed and her cheeks blushed a deep red.

"I expressed my opinion, but nobody would listen to me. I raised a row, refused to sign the complaint, but Telezhkin agreed with the conclusions of the commission and Zaytsev was discharged. I did not think it was fair."

Vartanyan remembered Mokhov's contemptuous remark about

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the trade union wearing a skirt and smiled broadly.

“What is your name?”

“Pylayeva.”

“So Pylayev was your father?”

“Yes,” said Olya, flushing deeper under Vartanyan’s insistent gaze. She set her scarf right, trying to subdue her unruly fair hair, which fell on her forehead in fluffy strands.

“And how is old mother Pylayeva?”

“I hardly see her now. She spends her days in the museum. Just sits quietly in the corner where she can see that telegraph post from the window. She sweeps the floor occasionally. She’s not so afraid of people as before. The head of the museum pays her for her work, but she doesn’t know the difference between rubles and kopeks. I’ve got two queer ones in our compound now: old mother Pylayeva and Kuzmich; they’re funny ones, both.” Olya spoke gaily and her face was lit with a kind smile.

Vartanyan turned at the door, saw the still lathe and Olya’s flushed face, and shouted:

“You must go on raising a row, Olya.”

He walked from shop to shop finding something new everywhere among the conglomeration of machinery and metal—in human faces—in the smallest details of this complicated plant life. He was deafened by the roar of steel, the steady drone of lathes.

Vartanyan paused near the open hearth furnace shop and watched a worker, who looked shabby and ragged, breaking pig iron ingots. Bending low, the worker lifted the grey lump of pig iron with difficulty and threw it down flat on a rail. The pig iron would not break, it slipped and he had to do it over again. When the pump broke in two at last, he sank exhausted to the ground.

“Is that difficult work, comrade?”

The worker looked up angrily.

“Why don’t you try it and find out?”

Vartanyan felt embarrassed and wanted to go on, but the worker kept his inimical stare fixed on him. He stood uncertain. Should he speak to him? But what effect would words have on this tired man? They would only irritate him. He felt the heavy glance contemptuously running over his figure.

The shining copper wires of high tension lines hung over his head. They cut through the air and were lost to sight behind the walls of the building. And that other imaginary line drawn across the land

also passed over the plant, over Vartanyan's head and over this man, resting on the floor. Once more Vartanyan felt the weight of responsibility for the plant, for that shabby man, and for the thousands of other workers. Yes, he—Vartanyan—must know about everything: the workers' thoughts, their feelings, their labour, so as to have the right to direct men who were constructing engines beneath that terrible line of the future which cut through the ether over their heads.

He bent to lift a lump of pig iron.

"You'd better put on mitts, or you'll hurt your hands," said the worker, throwing him a pair of working gloves.

Vartanyan thrust his hands into the shapeless, dirty little bags, feeling their sweaty lining, and grabbed the lump of pig iron. In lifting it, he suddenly felt a difficulty in straightening his back. It seemed as if all his muscles and sinews were strained to the last degree, yet the weight was only lifted half-way. He made an effort and straightened himself, forgetting what was to be done with that heavy piece of metal.

"Throw!" ordered the worker.

Vartanyan let the piece fall limply from his hands and it slid on the rail and came to rest unharmed in a thick layer of dust. He bent again. The weight now seemed lighter, but when he tried to lift it higher, so as to strike it with force against the rail, his hands refused to obey and the lump fell with a thud into the dust again.

"There you are!" said the worker triumphantly. "When a man does that the whole day long, he must have a drink to pull himself together. How can I help drinking, doing work like that? And if I do drink, everybody says 'Zhorov has gone wrong again.' It's true, drinking doesn't make me very pleasant company!"

"You must keep yourself in hand and not drink too much," said Vartanyan, still panting.

Zhorov cast a long, sorrowful glance at him.

"Can't keep myself in hand! My soul's embittered. I've been at the plant for two years, yet I find no peace. I've been torn up by the roots, I have! And my name's not Zhorov at all, but Zuravlev.... We're all Zuravlevs in our village."

"Where have you come from?"

"From over there," said Zhorov vaguely pointing in the direction taken by the copper wires.

"So you're a peasant?"

"I was," said Zhorov, and a shadow fell over his face.

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“What made you come to the plant?” insisted Vartanyan.

Zhorov seemed to shrink together.

“What was I to do? I’m a destitute man. Not a rag to my back.”

“Won’t you tell me what happened to you?”

Vartanyan sat down next to Zhorov and looked into his face—it was full of distress and suffering.

“There’s no getting rid of you!” grumbled Zhorov. “I had my own farm. A horse, a cow and other ‘immovable’ property. But I was torn out by the roots. Everything burnt and the children with it. And the wife... and the horse and cow ... they did that to me because I wanted justice.”

Zhorov sat with his hands, which were as hairy as an ape’s, cupped under his chin.

“So I came to the plant. It’s hard work, of course. If only I could get a machine to operate I’d be all right. I’m fond of machines. It’s because of a machine I was undone—I arranged for the village to have a common thresher and they repaid me by burning me out of house and home. I tell you I was torn out by the roots. I’ve got an embittered soul now.”

“Who are ‘they’?”

“Them that does all the harm,” sighed Zhorov as he stood up. “Well, I must get back to work. As to justice—I’m ready to die for it, that’s the sort of man I am!” he stuck out his chest. “If only I could get a machine to operate.”

He took hold of an ingot, and the next moment it cracked and fell to pieces, showing its coarse-grained substance along the fissure,

Vartanyan glanced at his hands: they were covered with a thick layer of metallic dust which made them look strong and heavy. The fingers were shaking from unaccustomed effort and he felt a pleasant thrill, a kinetic experience of the work in which thousands were taking part. His blackened hands and the stiffness in his back made him sense and understand things which only yesterday had been abstract generalities. The skeleton figures in the plant reports and resolutions took shape in machinery, wheels, axles, shining engine parts, and in the strained tension of his own muscles. Each of the sixteen thousand workers who filled the large smoky shops appeared in vivid figures, like this shabby Zhorov, with their complicated inner lives. Sixteen thousand individual lives were tied in the strong knot of the plant collective, simply through the movement of metal from process to process—from Zhorov with his shapeless grey lumps of pig iron to

grumbling old Mokhov and slim Olya, who completed the process of engine construction. That myriad-armed working collective, surrounded with the ring of metal, the smell of oil and smoke, came to life. The mass lost its grey vagueness and became animated with the thousand vivid spots—these human faces—each distinct, and yet a fragment of one dynamic whole.

A new engine was moving along the track, trembling with inner tension. It carried its long, copper bellied body easily, clearing the way with short treble whistles. A five pointed star flamed on its breast.

Vartanyan stood, admiring the engine, the poise of its wheels, the smooth gliding movement of its parts whose names he did not know, the gloss of its polish which mirrored the surrounding objects. And suddenly, he recollected the object of his visit to the plant. Could it be that this engine was still made in the same way as those which caused the reproach in the *Pravda*? Would this engine be the cause of a new campaign of criticism?

How could he find that out? How could he penetrate its inner workings and see whether everything was in order. Must he have recourse to the watchmaker again? And he—would he know better? As for the workers—they were limited to their machine, their particular piece of work. Who then could tell him differently?

Vartanyan followed the shining engine with anxious eyes. The materialized labour of sixteen thousand people was passing before him in a rumble of steel, and it was too complicated for him to understand. He only saw what each railway traveller sees—an awe inspiring, powerful machine. But he was not a traveller. He was the political engine driver. And he was again seized with anxiety. He knew he could not direct without confidence. He did have confidence in the sixteen thousand workers, for they were building these engines for themselves—for their own state. This copper star on the engine's breast, for example—it was not a technical necessity—that was clear. Engines had run without ornaments before. This star was a sign of affection and care, the desire to give the engine a festive appearance. The star was a piece of art, which was penetrating into the prosaic life of the plant. It was an irrepressible flight of new feelings which overwhelmed the worker while creating a machine for his own benefit. It was the progress of the revolution to a new level. But were all the sixteen thousand full of the same feeling?

Going through the shops, he saw workers engrossed in their

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work, painstaking, persistent, intent and joyful. He also saw the dull faces of those who were working as of old, mechanically and thoughtlessly, and he saw the careless hurry of those who were after high earnings. The first were a majority—Vartanyan saw that. But an engine embodied the work of all—those who lovingly decorated it with the shining star, and those who were after rubles only—and men like Zhorov—who belonged here but were still unadjusted.

Something must be done so as to have this enormous collective guided by those revolutionary workers already in the majority. This would be a guarantee. Their initiative must be given free expression. They must be made to understand the process as a whole. They must be made into “watchmakers.” They could be trusted fully whereas Korchenko could only be trusted to a certain extent. He remembered Korchenko’s words about engineers: “They’re a power and I have mastered that power.” Is it really so? he thought. The main thing is to give more attention to the new type of worker.

He remembered Zaytsev, the best turner, yet discharged. Left his work suddenly, under strange circumstances—Vartanyan went to the plant trade union committee.

Telezhkin was writing assiduously, with his tongue stuck out and his body bent over the table.

“I’m writing up my report to the plant committee. I’ll sweat for a couple of hours, I guess,” he said to Vartanyan.

The latter interrupted him impatiently.

“Do you know anything about Zaytsev’s being discharged?”

“I do, what about it?”

“You’re the chairman of the plant trade union committee. What was your reaction?”

“What should it be—? The thing was clear. He was discharged in accordance with the factory rules.”

“In accordance with the factory rules,” said Vartanyan thoughtfully. “And according to the trade union rules did you visit him at his lodgings?”

“Visit whom? Zaytsev? At his lodgings?” inquired the bewildered Telezhkin. “Are you trying to be funny? There are a thousand workers’ lodgings and I have no time to be running around to them. Who’s to do the work then?”

Telezhkin straightened his body and sat bolt upright.

“So,” said Vartanyan, his eyes flashing. “And, what is it you call work? Writing? You’re to go to his lodgings tomorrow morning.”

Telezhkin threw his pen down.

“What do you think I am? A messenger boy? I’ll not go!”

“Yes, a messenger boy if necessary. And if you don’t want to go, you can go to hell!”

Vartanyan turned sharply round, banged the door and the abashed Telezhkin heard the floor boards in the passage creaking under his angry and determined steps.

That evening Vartanyan called a meeting of the secretaries of all the nuclei.

He spoke to them about his impressions of the plant.

He spoke about the alarm which must be raised throughout the plant. “The quality of engines,” he said, “depends on the quality of those who make them: workers, foremen, engineers, managers and every Communist in the shop.”

Andrushechkin was overwhelmed by the stream of anxious, burning words: observe and see, trust and mistrust, go to the workers’ lodgings, listen to them, know everything and verify over and over again.

It was all new and unexpected. Vartanyan’s words raised a feeling of anxiety. His speech, his shining eyes, his slim nervous fingers tearing paper to bits, were full of anxiety.

2

Akatuyev was awakened in the night by a loud knocking on his window.

The continual strain had worn out his weak heart. It felt unduly swollen and was beating loudly, as he ran to the window.

“Open, father! It is I!”

Vera! Why is she here, thought Akatuyev, when she was to have gone to the Urals. Both anxious and glad at his daughter’s unexpected arrival, he opened the countless locks and bolts with trembling hands.

“How long you are! I’m chilled through!” shouted Vera and her voice, which sounded hollow and unfamiliar, made Akatuyev still more clumsy. He could not turn the key, which got jammed in the door.

“Just a minute, my dear, I’ll open it at once.”

The door flew open at last and Vera came in shivering.

“Is it as cold as all that tonight?” asked Akatuyev, kissing his daughter’s frozen cheek. “I thought it was stifling in the bedroom.”

Vera rubbed her hands nervously and shivered.

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“That’s probably because it was so hot in the car. I got chilled when I came out in the air.... Or maybe I don’t feel quite well.”

“But you wrote and told me you were going to the Urals. I’m glad—I am very lonely. For how long have you come?” asked Akatuyev, nervously buttoning his coat as he spoke. “You’re sleepy, I guess?”

“Yes, I did not sleep either yesterday or today. I shall go to bed. We’ll talk tomorrow, father. I’ve come for the whole summer. The study section suddenly changed its mind and sent me here for practical work.”

“That’s fine. We’ll spend the whole summer together. That’s great!”

Vera took a letter from her travelling bag and gave it to her father with a shiver.

“It’s for you, father, from your friends.”

Akatuyev clutched the sealed letter, glanced at it impatiently and stood up.

“You’d better go to bed now, Vera. Have a good rest. I’ll go to my room.”

In his study, Akatuyev opened the envelope carefully with a pen-knife and became engrossed in the single page, covered with pencil writing. At each new line his eyes bulged excitedly, his eyebrows rose and fell. His heart started beating violently.

After reading the letter, he continued to hold it for some time in his gouty fingers. An uncertain smile lifted his bristly moustache.

Dawn was streaming in through the window, the window panes took on a greenish tint. The woodbine and honeysuckle which grew in the garden could be plainly seen now, their branches heavy with dew. But he still sat immovable in his easy chair and smiled. At last he stood up and paced the study. His face grew thoughtful. His heavy footsteps resounded in the silence of the house.

At sunrise, Vera called to him suddenly.

“Come to my room, father.”

She lay dressed on her bed, staring at the ceiling with tired eyes.

“I did not sleep either, father, and I heard your footsteps. I want to have a serious talk with you....” She stopped, as if the necessary words suddenly failed her.

Akatuyev looked anxiously at her limp, reclining figure.

“I’m listening, Vera my dear.”

“Father, I know everything....”

Akatuyev started.

His hands gripped the arms of the rocking chair and he stared into her grey eyes, which had suddenly grown dull. Fear and joy alternated in his face, convulsing it.

“Does it mean, Vera, that you are—with us?”

He could not bring himself to take his eyes off her face. His heart was beating madly against his ribs.

Vera raised herself on her elbows and whispered in a voice hoarse with excitement.

“I am—against you.”

She slid from the bed and walked over to her father, her body swaying.

“Father! Give it up...”

Akatuyev threw her cold, trembling hand off his shoulder and cowered down in the rocking chair.

His grey hair was rumped and fell in strands across his convulsed face.

He saw the stubborn, grey eyes and thought of her mother. She had the same eyes—full of cold hatred, inexorably cruel. Struck by the resemblance, he covered his face with his hands.

“Father, I’ve come to a final decision on this matter. It was hard, but I...”

“Go then! Go and denounce me!” hissed Akatuyev, shaking in his rocking chair. “Go! Let them take me and shoot me. I’ll not change my ideas. I’ll not give in. I’ll fight to the bitter end! I’ll roll on the ground and bite the enemy’s feet. To the very last minute. To the last—you hear! To the last drop of blood in my body. Go! Denounce me!”

“Father, calm yourself. I have not come to denounce you. I want to convince you that your attempt is hopeless—I know a lot. There’s still time to give up, to retreat, begin all over again.”

“Begin life over again? You’re mad! At sixty? In the name of what? The triumph of the rabble? The universal brothel which they call socialism?”

“What are you saying father? Come to your senses!” cried Vera.

“I’m talking about what will happen after our defeat. You’ll be sorry but it will be too late, Vera!”

His voice sounded feeble and full of entreaty.

Vera bit her lip in silence.

“Vera, my darling!” cried Akatuyev slipping from his chair to his

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daughter's feet. "I'm kneeling to you like a beggar.... Vera! My daughter! Come to your senses, I beg."

His voice broke and sank to an unintelligible whisper.

The sun was rising, beating against the window panes and sparkling in the dew. It shone into Akatuyev's dulled eyes and on the tears which ran down his bluish face.

Vera started, as if something had broken inside her. Her heart filled with pity for her father, a lump rose in her throat. She tried to wrench herself free, but her father clutched her hand with his moist, clammy fingers.

"Vera, have pity on your father. For the sake of your mother—have pity."

At the mention of her mother Vera pushed her father away.

"Don't speak of my mother. It will only make it worse for you. She wilted and died in these damned rooms, stifled by domestic cares, grown limp among those soft cushions, hating all those things you call comfort. I'm against you! I don't want that damned, calm, clean, scrubbed life to come back. It's made a cripple of me, a miserable sentimentalist—that wonderful life of yours. I've seen and thought much. I've seen people full of the fever of labour, who had not slept for nights at a time, yet laughing as gleefully as children. They are strong, but you and those who are with you are miserable, doomed people. Living corpses."

Hot words burnt her throat, stifling her, and she sank exhausted on a chair.

Akatuyev threw himself down in an easy chair. He was furious at the realization of his own helplessness and the uselessness of prayers, tears and caresses. His big body grew lax with weakness. Oppressive silence filled the room. Akatuyev lifted his head and met the glance of a pair of inscrutable, unfriendly eyes—he had an enemy before him.

"Get out! Leave this house," he said.

"No! I shall live here—in this room. I shall not go. I shall work in the mechanical laboratory. As to you—you may live in your own way."

Akatuyev left the room with unsteady steps. In his study he buried himself for a long time with his papers, taking them out to sort and lock away. He dressed, went out, came back again to feel if the door of his study were really locked and went out again on tip-toe.

He now sat in the warehouse, at the open hearth furnace shop and

examined a heap of rusty metal waste: broken odds and ends, worn out machine parts, crooked bolts, rods, shavings. Those broken, rusty bits of steel created an atmosphere of doom.

A rusty wheel stuck in the ground—it had served its time and was now lying quietly there, waiting to be sent to the smelting furnace. Akatuyev thought for a moment that his own life was like that rusty engine wheel, used up by thousands of kilometres of road.

“Yes, time is on the march—we are doomed.”

He recollected the scene with his daughter and started, suddenly filled with an acute desire to live.

That day was the thirtieth anniversary of his work at the plant. Thirty years of an inspector’s life, hundreds of thousands of engine parts branded, millions of minutes full of the expectation of the last day. The dates of certain events which he saw coming were approaching. Vera—oh, irony of fate! She knew, too, but did not believe. She was on the side of those sweating turners and foundry-men, while on the other side were thousands of men like him, irreconcilable and merciless. Doomed men?—he was not so sure about that.

He stood up and shuffled heavily in the direction from which came the clank of a hammer striking metal. The sun hung like a ripe orange over the furnace stacks.

“Nosov! Take the stamp and use it. I’m off. Feeling a bit seedy.”

He took a little stamp pad out of his pocket and handed it to Nosov.

“Don’t worry, Pavel Yakovlevich, I’ll do it alone.”

Nosov waited until Akatuyev had disappeared round the corner, then sighed with relief and started to work. Bending and coughing, he examined the details, placed the stamp against them, struck with his mallet, and a circle with the hammer and sickle in the centre appeared on the brown surface of the metal. Nosov pushed his body in between the pyramids of castings, crawled inside enormous steel boxes and cylinders, always striking with his hammer. His legs felt as heavy as lead and his lungs inhaled the hot air to exhale it again in short, jerky breaths. He felt a moisture in his throat and a desire to cough. He spit and left traces of yellowish phlegm on the metal, near the little circles with the hammer and sickle. He had been refused his leave.... Who had refused him? He did not know. Boretsky had said yesterday: “It’s your own fault. You should have thought of it before.” Yes, he ought to have thought of quite a few things before.

There was a white cross shining on the rim of a wheel. He must

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not stop here. Nosov made a step so as to get away from the cross which reminded him of something unpleasant, something he'd rather not think about. But he saw Boretsky coming towards him and turned back to put his brand next to the white cross, as if to make this uncanny omen harmless.

Boretsky was already puffing at his back.

"Come back at night, d'you hear?"

"I'm feeling sick, Antonych, don't make me come tonight."

"Don't make you come! And who was it got thirty rubles yesterday?"

"I needed them, Antonych. There was a good, cheap cupboard in the market. Oak it was—they're not made nowadays. There was also a nickel bedstead but I didn't have enough money."

"That I can supply, but you must come tonight."

Antonych took out twenty rubles and handed them to Nosov.

"I'll go and get it now, Antonych, or it'll be sold. They don't make such beds nowadays. It's got balls on the corners and a spring mattress."

"What a greedy fool you are! Go on and get it...."

Nosov carried the bed home from the market. It weighed heavily on his back, bending him to the ground. His shortest way lay through the park, but he took a roundabout road, through lanes and alleys. His breath failed him, the bed seemed to cut into his back.

Vasya Trusov caught up with him.

"Oh, you sickly ape! Why do you torture yourself? You greedy invalid. There's an invalid for you!"

Vasya's big strong body shook with laughter.

"Stop it, Vasya, you heartless devil!" panted Nosov, feeling stifled and hurrying in an attempt to escape from Vasya.

He saw the carved shutters of his cottage in the distance. The sun was beating against the window panes, which flamed like molten metal. White pigeons rested on the roof, like so many snow-flakes.

Among the rickety, age-blackened cottages, Nosov's looked like a cheeky boy lost in a crowd of old women. Nosov dragged the bed hurriedly into the passage which was filled with the smell of tar. He pulled off his shirt, glad of the coolness that reigned in the room. He felt eased and joyful. The water from the tap was pleasantly cold on his neck.

He examined his emaciated body attentively, rubbing it long and steadily, but it did not turn pink. The breast, with its thick covering

of black hair, breathed heavily and the lifeless skin stretched taut over the ribs at every breath. Frightened at the sight of his body, he pulled on his shirt and sighed longingly at the thought of the distant south. The smell of tar which came from the pine logs filled the passage and had a disquieting effect. Nosov glanced at his long hands and suddenly imagined them folded on his breast, yellow and immovable, against the dull white of the pine boards. The room seemed heavy with a smell of incense. He suffocated, rushed to the door in a panic and striving to break the deathly silence, shouted with all his might:

“Is dinner ready?”

The children were sitting quietly at the table, stuffing bread into their mouths. His wife was standing at the sideboard, holding a stack of plates against her protruding stomach. At the banging of the door, the plates suddenly slid from her hands and broke to pieces on the floor. Nosov, trembling with rage, made a rush at his frightened wife. His dry, yellow fingers clutched the air spasmodically.

The irritating ticking of the clock alone broke the silence, until Peter, a fat, sunburnt, seven year old, was unable to bear it any longer. Staring with frightened, blue eyes at his father’s terrifying fingers, he cried, with shrill entreaty.

“Don’t, daddy! Don’t! Oh-o-o-o!”

The woman saw the blow coming. She shut her eyes and sank to the floor. Nosov struck her on the head with his fist.

“Take that, and that,” shouted Nosov, accompanying his blows with choice oaths. “That will teach you to be more careful. Damn you! All you can do is break things and it’s I who have to work to pay for them.”

Panting with rage, he struck again and again into something soft and moist. The children opened their mouths, which were full of bread and howled loudly. Peter shook all over and the bread, mixed into a pulp, dropped from his open mouth to his pink spotted shirt.

Nosov drew up a chair noisily. His eyes passed over the tear-stained faces of the children and came to rest on the table—there was a fresh cut in the new oilcloth.

“Who’s done that?” he asked in a threatening voice, pointing to the cut.

A deep silence ensued. The clock ticked on indifferently. The children sat stiff with terror.

“Who’s done it? Speak out!” shouted Nosov and his yellow fingers started clutching the air again.

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Nosov glanced at Grisha—the eldest, and the boy lowered his frightened eyes. Nosov guessed that he was the culprit, lifted his fist and let it fall with a dull thud on the light blond head. Grisha fell to the floor with a howl that made the window panes rattle.

“Daddy, it’s me. I did it,” bravely cried Peter, his father’s favourite, gulping his tears down. And Nosov, finding no outlet for his fury, struck the table with his fist, making the crockery dance.

“I’ll teach you!”

He staggered behind the partition and fell on the bed, cowering in anguish and rage. He heard his wife talking in whispers with the children as she collected the broken plates from the floor.

“She’s probably gathering the bits into her apron,” thought Nosov. Sickles and hammers and crosses flashed before his eyes. Nosov failed to find the calm which seemed to breathe from the green-shuttered exterior in his own home; neither did he find it at the plant. He thought his restlessness came from the sun which burnt and penetrated everything. It lit up every corner, every crack in the walls. Every rough place on the plank partition burnt into his brain and brought to light all his hidden thoughts.

That house had been his dream ever since he had come to the plant from his village. He had refused to live in the workers’ barracks but had dug himself a mud hut on the outskirts of the town and lived in hopes of a house. He saved obstinately for three years, depriving his family of necessities, and he built the house. But he had not enough money for the roof. It was then that Boretsky appeared on the scene and took him out to the woods, where they had a lot to drink. The next day Nosov sat, humble and timid, in a room hung with leather coats and engineers’ caps. A piano stood black and silent in a corner and above it sat a stuffed woodcock perched on a birch tree branch, as if ready to take flight....

Since that day life had changed. The house acquired a brilliant red roof; the windows hid at night behind carved green shutters. But inside, the house was still empty. The wooden bed, which the family had brought with them from the village, seemed out of place in the large rooms. Nosov wandered about the market, in search of furniture, bargained long and stubbornly and brought home a cupboard or a sofa, covered with flowery cretonne.

He could be happy now. The rooms were overstuffed with furniture and had the aspect which befitted an urban interior. On coming home from his work, Nosov looked round him with pleasure. But his

eyes immediately filled with terror and he clutched at his breast as a long fit of coughing tore his lungs, until he spat little clots of blood on the highly polished floor. Now he also felt a spasm coming.

Heavy furniture hemmed him in on all sides. Had it screamed like Grisha, he might have felt better. But the oak cupboard stood firmly in its corner, pressing its weight against the floor. The gramophone trumpet shone under its sprinkling of dust, with its toothless mouth silently open. A fat-bellied chest of drawers showed its shining handles like a row of buttons on a fireman's uniform.

Nosov imagined himself lying dead. Silence around him. Curious neighbours whispering in the next room. The furniture standing like sentinels. The gramophone trumpet with its mouth wide open in a soundless call.

He jumped up, covered with clammy sweat, gazed round the room and saw with terror that every object in the house conspired against him. Their dead weight seemed to press upon his heart and in fear that it would suddenly stop, he cried:

“Peter! Pe-e-e-ter!”

The nickel trumpet of the gramophone echoed his cry with a hollow din and the trumpet grew still again.

3

Sergey's life, like a ship after a storm, had reached a quiet pleasant haven, which consisted of little joys and cares which Marusya had brought with her.

Marusya had grown younger and stronger, budding with life, like a flower in the sun. She spent her days in impatient expectation of her evening meeting with Sergey. She came home late, when Andrushechkin was already asleep. He saw that his wife was content and so bore the affront to his feelings in secret—leaving the house each morning with a cordial goodbye.

Sergey did not expect Marusya to be capable of such passionate love. His casual and joyless love affairs seemed to have deadened all his capacity for a durable romance. But Marusya, with her untapped reserves of passion, conquered him. He spent his free time with her and felt no desire for drink. The gnawing sadness left him. He was punctual at his work, and enjoyed the feeling of healthy fatigue. His mother's spirits rose and she often talked of this unexpected happiness to Platov.

She would sit on the broken-down shoemaker's stool and tell him

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about her unhappy life. And strangely enough—spoke of the most dreadful acts of cruelty which she had suffered at her husband's hands, with a voice full of tender love for that wild man.

Then she would go to her room for the night, taking the stool with her, and Sergey would come back, tired and quiet. An endless conversation would start. Platov would tell him of his experiences for the past five years, of Moscow and foreign countries and technical novelties. Sergey would listen for a while in silence, then turn the conversation to local topics and the inevitable argument would begin.

In listening to Platov, Sergey saw that he knew next to nothing and felt ashamed. But this feeling was soon superseded by a bitter feeling of injustice. Senya was a made man—an engineer getting hundreds of rubles, while he still continued to swallow dust and ruin his eyes at electric welding. He gazed at Platov's clean hands, at the German magazines which he could not read, and felt an acute envy. At such times he would retire into his shell, trying to find some way of hurting his friend and thereby getting the better of him. He generally began with ironical jokes directed against Communists, then spoke of difficulties—the bread shortage, the long queues of people, and he always ended by saying that it was unavoidable, since there were thousands of idlers and parasites living on the working class.

This time he started talking about Andrushechkin, who, he said, rushed about the shop, interrupting Communists at their work, whispering with them in corners while the machines stood still.

"I know all about the way our Communists work. Running round chattering. He evidently wants to raise the quality of engines and he just runs about like mad."

Platov lifted his head from his German magazines and took off his horn-rimmed spectacles.

"We are really in difficulties over this question of quality. It's the weakest of our points. We are still unable to cope with it properly."

"What business had you to start it then, if you don't know how to do it? This man Vartanyan comes around and pours a lot of propaganda into the workers' ears, but it's the workers who'll have to make the engines. Just count how many bosses there are at the plant: in the office, shops, plant committee, district committee—two managers, three assistants, hundreds of engineers. And each one must get four or five hundred rubles, while the worker is as ragged and starved as he ever was.... And that's called socialism!"

"Wait a bit, Sergey.... In the first place you're neither starved nor

ragged. Just see how many pairs of trousers you've got hanging in the wardrobe. In the second place—difficulties are unavoidable, everything cannot be done overnight. There are bound to be mistakes, but we'll learn."

"At the workers' expense?" interrupted Sergey.

"Yes, the whole revolution was accomplished at the workers' expense. There's no shame in that. The workers have to bear a lot in the name of the future. It is true that we are still weak in our management here and there. But you must not forget that, besides our lack of culture, we have to overcome the resistance of class enemies."

"Where the hell do you see class enemies in such a business as engine making? You've simply not got brains enough to run the business."

"If you want to know, it's the class enemy speaking through your lips, Sergey."

Sergey's face went dark and he clenched his fists. Platov looked at him calmly and smiled.

"It's no use trying to frighten me with looks. Better think over what you've said. I can't understand where you get it from. You're a worker after all."

"I am, and I earn my bread by the labour of my hands. I don't exist at other people's expense, like you, Vartanyan or the other engineers and managers. And I want everybody to work. Promenading through the shops is not work. You should stand beside me and sweat as I do! You talk of socialism, equality and all that nonsense and you sit back and do nothing. If we have equality, all must get paid equally, so as not to have a new bourgeoisie form right under our noses. But what's the use of talking!"

Sergey threw his cigarette away angrily.

"Tell me straight, Sergey, what is it you want?" asked the bewildered Platov. "You get good wages—a hundred and fifty rubles per month—that's what a responsible district official gets. You're young and full of strength, what are you grumbling about? You're a worker, yet you reason like a fish-vendor."

Sergey turned belligerently.

"Be careful what you say—I'm not referring to you. I'm talking generally—yes, I'm a worker, but not the kind they have on the posters, with chest puffed out, Red Flag waving and all the rest of that bosh. You think all workers are like that? Well, some are different."

"In what way?"

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“In every way,” said Sergey evasively and sank into a brooding silence.

Platov paced the room excitedly. He had long since noticed Sergey’s inimical attitude towards him. It had struck him from the first. The reason, he thought, was that the sight of him reminded Sergey of his frustrated ambitions. But he had lately noticed a new trait in Sergey. He now started with minor details and proceeded to generalities as if in his discussions with him he wished to defend some definite principle. But he never said anything new or original—merely repeating old platitudes about equality and the difficulties of life. Platov attempted to trace this attitude to its source. Sergey had been at the plant for five years. He was not stupid. Why then, did he say those things? It could not be explained by his personal disappointment alone. He would then simply have grumbled and sworn, like hundreds of the old workers did, about various defects and drawbacks. But they never came to such definite conclusions. The painful feeling arising in consequence of single failures, did not, in their case, grow into a negation of the entire new system of life which they liked, valued and defended at the first alarm. But Sergey did have that feeling of negation. Where did it come from?

Platov remembered the years of their friendship. He was always struck by his friend’s exuberant spirits and vital force. In those days Sergey was one of the mass of working youth, in holiday-making, football games, skating, wherever boisterous youth was to be found.

Then came thoughts of college, joyful days which nothing could make him forget. Yes, Sergey was evidently suffering from disappointment. Longing for a wider life, brooding over every-day labour. But there was so much more that was interesting in the plant. Plant life was so intense. Yet Sergey stood aside. He had gradually drifted away from the Young Communist League. Platov now had an inimical stranger before him. What was the matter with him? His private life seemed to be satisfactory; he had calmed down in that respect, even his gait had become quiet and dignified.

Platov suddenly caught sight of the worn-out, old stool in the corner. He stared at it for a moment in wonder as if probing it to the very core of its rotten wood. It seemed as if the strips of frayed leather, the rusty nail heads which looked like bugs, had come to life and brought back to Platov memories of the far away past when the old shoemaker was still at that stool. All this unexpectedly fitted in with the thoughts which worried him, and everything became clear

and comprehensible. He ran his fingers through his hair and pulled up his trousers.

The triumphant smile which played on Sergey's lips changed to an expression of disdain.

"Do you know, Sergey, what's at the bottom of your peevishness? Only please don't get offended. I'm going to speak bluntly—in the proletarian way."

"Let's hear it," said Sergey, ironically.

"Listen then!" Platov ruffled his hair again. "It's the damned heritage of the handicraft worker in your blood. Sergey, handicraft is the enemy of labour discipline and the advocate of drink and debauch—not from an excess of spirits, but from the loneliness of labour born at the individual bench. This old stool here reminds me of your father, of handicraft and lonely handicraft workers. They dream of happiness for themselves only, and howl when they're made to work for everybody. Equality indeed! The equality of shoe nails, stuck side by side into a rotten sole."

Sergey jumped up and advanced on Platov, shouting: "You lie! My father was an honest worker. He was the first shoemaker in town. He was very good at his work!"

"And just as good at reconciling himself to the idiotic life he led."

"You lie! He always hoped that I would not be a shoemaker. He dreamt of the time when equality would reign. He drank from grief, but all the time he dreamt of making a man of me."

Sergey was trembling all over, breathing hard into Platov's face, while the latter smiled calmly.

"He dreamt of equality while the workers fought and shed their blood for it. Your idea of equality is that of a petty-bourgeois. It consists in making your way in life at the expense of others."

Sergey gesticulated furiously.

"Take care you don't go too far, Senka!"

"I'm simply stating facts and not inventing anything. Don't get excited. It's your misfortune—not your fault. You're not the only one at the plant either. There are many like you. There are millions of you in the country and you trickle in a thousand little streams into the working class, bringing the dirt and mire of the damned past with you. The proletariat has pulled you out of that mire, yet you bring it new difficulties, making its path harder. We'll have a lot of trouble with you, until you really get into the worker's skin."

Sergey rushed at Platov, his face grey and convulsed with rage.

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“What was that you said? I—a bourgeois? I, who get you your five hundred ruble salary by the sweat of my brow?”

He was shouting at the top of his voice.

His frightened mother scurried from behind the partition, making the sign of the cross and shaking like a leaf. His sisters came out, half dressed, rubbing their sleepy eyes. Platov looked at him with pity and shook his head thoughtfully.

Sergey threw him a glance full of hatred, wrenched the door open, knocked something down in the passage and banged the wicket gate behind him.

4

Sergey switched on the current, the transformer began to hum and the needle of the pressure gauge jumped upwards.

Andrushechkin was watching him from behind the black screen, his light bristling eyebrows drawn together.

“Yes, Sergey is young,” he thought. “Even when he is angry his face is handsome and attractive.”

He remembered the incident with Zhorov, and understood at last what it was that had drawn Marusya to him.

He sadly put on his mask and sighed so that his breath dimmed the glass.

Sergey noticed that Andrushechkin was watching him and, lifting his hand in a mock solemn gesture, recited a parody on the verses which Andrushechkin had read to him.

Vaska Trusov guffawed and his laughter rose above the clang of steel and the hum of transformers. Andrushechkin drew his mask down tighter. Vaska laughed with glee.

“That’s good! Ha-a-a! That will teach him to mind his wife!”

Sergey selected an electrode, put it into the holder and pulled his mask down. The feeling of irritation over his talk of the night before with Platov still persisted, making his hand tremble, so that the seam he made was crooked and rough.

“What do you think you’re doing? Just look at that seam! You must look out for quality.”

Andrushechkin was standing over him, pointing at the ugly seam with an electrode.

Sergey pushed the electrode aside.

“Beat it, before I lose my temper. What are you butting into my affairs for? Look after yourself!” And in a sudden fit of fury, he

added: "Are you jealous, you tadpole?"

Andrushechkin moved away hastily and walked back to his apparatus, feeling crushed and helpless.

Sergey was young, handsome, good looking, insolent, he thought; he was also educated, how quickly and cleverly he had parodied those verses, which it had taken him so much time and trouble to write. He had made fun of those verses, written with the author's heart blood, and flung them out for the whole shop to mock. That dirty minded Vaska had heard them and would mimic them every chance he got.

Sergey examined the engine wheel which the crane had deposited beside him, and stood fixed with astonishment. The whole surface of the rim was covered with little dents as if someone had pricked the metal with a fine bodkin. There were so many of them that they made the metal look like a sponge. That was a bad sign. Large cracks are not so dangerous, but when the surface of the metal looks worm-eaten—don't trust the metal.

"Sieve casting!"

"What are you staring at? Don't you know we've got to get that out?"

Antonych stood before him. His glance was cold and forbidding.

"Look at this Antonych—it's like a sieve—it can't be used. This wheel's meant for an engine, not a baby carriage."

"You should not think so much, Sergey, better work more. This shop's keeping the whole plant back. The orders are to get a move on."

"It's a queer thing...."

"Didn't you see this?" Antonych pointed to the brand.

Sergey glanced at the hammer and sickle and the impressive figure of engineer Akatuyev rose before him.

"I suppose everything is passed according to rules?"

"Naturally, Sergey, naturally. Couldn't be otherwise."

Antonych lingered for a moment, observing Sergey who was preparing an electrode. An intense blue light flared up.

"Yes, I must work. Labour is inevitable and I must submit as Antonych has, and become as proud and independent as he is. Antonych has a high opinion of himself. He doesn't lose his dignity even before engineers. He'll teach that upstart, Senka, a lesson. Petty-bourgeois—eh! And so is Boretsky a petty-bourgeois. You're getting above yourself, Comrade Platov!"

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Sergey felt elated, he welded part after part without taking a rest, became covered with bluish red welts.

“Sergey! Vekshin! Have you gone deaf?” cried Andrushechkin, who was standing over him again. “Are you mad? What is this you are welding? Orders?... Haven’t you got a head on your shoulders?”

“There’s the brand.”

Andrushechkin swore.

“What are they about! The damned scoundrels!”

He dived in between the castings which were stacked on all sides and disappeared. Zhorov, who was working at the crane, smiled slyly.

“None of my business, that’s what I always say. They say: Zhorov do this and Zhorov do that—what do I care?”

He stopped suddenly. Platov had come up.

Zhorov examined the engineer with a smirk. Platov’s dusty appearance did not inspire respect. He was, after all, the same Senka Platov who....

“Stop it! Who gave you these instructions?”

It seemed to Zhorov that Platov’s shabby figure had suddenly grown taller—his face took on a severe and authoritative expression.

Platov glanced over the wheels, which were prepared for welding. His cheeks flushed deeper red. He kept pulling up his trousers irritably.

Zhorov guffawed hoarsely.

“Still getting up on your high horse, Senya? Still pulling up your trousers? Your belt must be loose, comrade engineer. What kind of an engineer are you? None at all, as far as I can see. Ain’t I right, Sergey?”

“You bet! We’ve got a hundred bosses ordering us about.”

Sergey pulled his mask down and the electrode crackled in his hand, generating flame and blue smoke.

Platov left, the workers’ eyes on him. Jesting remarks and jeers came to his ears.

“Look at our Senya playing the boss.”

“He’s up against it, though.”

“Sergey is able to take care of himself.”

“And who’s going to obey Senka! He’s just one of us. We’ve all been boys together.”

“Look at him pulling up his trousers!”

“Loose, are they?”

All these jests, usually so harmless and customary, now smote

him to the heart. There was a time when they sounded funny and Senka himself had laughed at them. Now these jokes were like so many pin pricks. It was an ordeal. He had not yet won their trust. To them he was still the gay moulder, Senka. He must not retreat. He must stand his ground, accept the challenge. But he must be calm. No weakness now!

“Vekshin, stop your work!” repeated Platov in a calm and insistent tone, but Sergey went on welding, as if he had not heard.

Sergey’s resistance and Zhorov’s mocking guffaws made him furious, but he restrained himself and his mouth tightened. Curious eyes were observing him from all sides. He walked up to the wall, pulled the switch and the transformer became still—the electrode sputtered and went out in Sergey’s shaking hands. Sergey stood up and slowly lifted his mask, showing a pair of threatening eyes.

They faced each other, measuring each other’s strength. Sergey’s thin lips were distorted by a derisive smile. Zhorov’s gleefully expectant face was looking over his shoulder.

Platov suddenly recollected his encounter with the engineer in that same shop five years ago: the irresistible desire to strike Kraysky, the effort he had made to hold himself back—he remembered it all. He saw the electrode cap, firmly clutched in Sergey’s hand. He stepped back and calmly asked:

“Why don’t you obey your chief’s orders?”

It might have been Platov’s prudent retreat, which he took for cowardice, or those hated words “your chief’s orders,” which roused Sergey. He swung his hand and the black cable, interwoven with flexible steel ribbon, coiled like a snake and hit Platov full in the face. But at the same instant Zhorov’s long, ape-like arms closed round Sergey.

“Joking’s all right, but you keep your hands off him,” he cried, crushing Sergey’s fingers with malignant joy, as he suddenly felt full of strength and daring.

Andrushechkin hurried to the spot, pushing up his mask, which obstinately slid down again, while Boretsky walked up with measured steps.

“Hah! My friend! You’ve not got a drunk to deal with this time,” shouted Zhorov triumphantly, puffing out his narrow undeveloped chest.

Platov drew his hand across his face, felt a moist cut and said to Boretsky, in a voice which shook with excitement:

“Those wheels are to return to the furnace,” and turned to the gate followed by hundreds of eyes.

5

At night the open hearth furnace shop looks like a sleeping town. A few lanterns throw a faint light on the high piles of ingots that rise in black rows. The light which filters in between the piled moulds gives one the feeling of windows still illuminated here and there. The large steel supports and the square cast frames look like low, squatty cottages. Nameless parts are scattered about like country huts. The rails throw a dull red glow on the ground. A distant rumble of iron can be heard through the silence, like a belated cart creaking over the cobblestones of a sleepy town.

The metal city sleeps and the heat which it had stored during the day melts in the night wind. The metal glints with cold drops of dew and feels slippery to the hand....

Zhorov was fighting off the desire to sleep and attending to the lifting of an engine support. The hoisting crane groaned as it wound the steel cable on its drum. The rusty support swung slowly up, stopping for a second in midair, and then came to rest in front of Sergey. A deep crack ran along its side, almost splitting it in half, wide open, like a wound.

Sergey examined the crack thoughtfully. The sides of the crack could be welded together and the support would form part of an engine. The heavy body of the engine boiler would rest on it, the boiler would start working and the engine would move off, pulling thousands of tons after it. Would this support hold out?

He turned and saw Antonych in the distance. His dark figure wandered like a shadow about the warehouse, disappearing for a moment to come out again in the light of a lantern. Sergey thought he looked like a sleepless wizard engaged in some mysterious midnight traffic.

“That’s some crack, Antonych!” said Sergey shaking his head.

“Go on, go on, don’t make a speech—you’ve patched some worse ones,” said Boretsky grumblingly and Sergey shaken by his tone of condescending assurance, pulled his mask on and started welding.

A violet-blue radiance shone above Sergey, above the warehouse and the whole plant. The transformer of the portable welding apparatus hummed like a bee-hive. Sparks flew and crackled around.

The metal city woke up, roused from its sleep by the brilliant lightning-like flashes.

Sergey welded the crack carefully. He did his best to make the seam as neat and good as he could, just as his father had made seams on shoes. For the first time he felt pride in his work and, stroking the slightly rough seam with his hand, he smiled contentedly—the seam was coming out even.

Sometimes Platov's stonily serious face came up before him and he tried hard to think of something else. But that morning's scene always recalled itself. He felt now that he had acted badly towards his old friend. He tried to drown his regret in work and so get rid of the anxious thoughts which assailed him.

He had never felt as much pleasure in his work as he did now. His hand guided the electrode with unusual firmness, keeping to the right bend.

Later on he rested, tired out, but contented. The fresh wind fanned his face and braced him. Zhorov came and sat beside him, yawning and shivering with fatigue.

"Don't you accept less than twenty-five rubles for one night's work from Boretsky. He's stingy, but he'll pay—nothing else he can do."

"How's that? I'll get paid at the usual rate, same as everybody."

"Usual rate? There's no rates-for that kind of work. Antonych himself pays."

"Out of whose pocket?"

"His own, Sergey, and it's well lined, believe me. The secret alone is worth not less than fifty."

"What secret?" asked the bewildered Sergey.

Zhorov yawned sleepily.

"There's a secret in every business, that's all. Don't play innocent. You're no baby."

A cold sweat covered Sergey's forehead; his throat felt parched.

A train was rumbling somewhere in the neighbourhood. The engine screeched. The guards' whistles answered each other in the night. Dawn was coming. He wanted to go on with his work, but his hand had lost its firmness. The electrode danced about, the seam spread and made an uneven, wavering line. He threw the cable away and went to the gate with unsteady steps.

"Where do you think you're going with that mask?" asked the watchman, stopping him. "Just turn back and leave all state property

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behind.”

When Sergey had turned back unwillingly, the watchman exclaimed half-admiringly:

“Ain’t they some crooks!”

Sergey started as if struck and his cheeks flushed crimson, as they had not flushed since he was caught as a child, stealing apples in the neighbour’s garden.

He came home worn out and glanced in astonishment at the table—the piles of books and magazines had disappeared. The table was bare, except for dust and ashes. Platov’s bed was empty.

“Gone—what a hurry. Well, there was not much pleasure in that friendship so there’s nothing to regret.”

Sergey went to bed, closed his eyes, lay still, but sleep would not come. Something tickled his heavy lids—he opened them and saw the sun searching the room with its rays, tracing a luminous path on the floor and making the polished frame of his bicycle glisten.

Sergey got up, washed his face in cold water and took out his bicycle. It rolled lightly down the path which bordered the railway track. He pushed the pedals and rushed under the pines, taking deep breaths of the pitch-scented air.

An engine came rumbling up behind him, breaking the silence of the pine forest.

* * * * *

An engine was making its test run. Still sheathless, rough with countless rivets and covered with white marks, it nevertheless seemed to Strakhov a beautiful and clever living creature. Strakhov stood on the side platform, holding on to the handles, and listened to the regular breathing of the engine. A mighty heart beat in the engine’s body. The steam pressed against the sides of the boiler and, finding no outlet, rushed into the cylinders, driving the piston out. The long, bony hand of the shaft hooked into the crank of the driving axle and sent the engine along the rails.

This was a festival to Strakhov. He was letting out his three hundredth engine. Two hundred and ninety-nine of his engines were scattered in every part of the vast country. They were rushing light express trains along or drawing long freights that uncoiled slowly like over-fed boa-constrictors. But that was not what caused Strakhov’s joy. The other two hundred and ninety-nine engines which he had assembled had become strange to him—he did not see them. He was

enjoying the first strained breaths of the three hundredth engine. In the complex interlacing of parts, the rush of steam and rumbling of wheels, he heard a bit of himself—engineer Strakhov, chief of the engine assembling shop.

Each part of that engine, assembled and tested by him, intertwined with scores of other parts, was now living its own particular life, and yet contributing life and movement to the complete mechanism.

The engine rushed into the scented pine forest. The tall trees seemed running to meet it, and flashed past at lightning speed. But Strakhov saw neither the forest, nor the curious people who stood open mouthed at the crossings. His accustomed ear was listening to the rhythm of each individual part, which he heard distinctly amid the general clamour.

The engine was gathering speed. Telegraph posts flew by and wires swished past. The earth seemed racing at a mad speed to meet it. The wind blew Strakhov's hair about. All of a sudden the engine gave a start, slowed down and stopped altogether.

“Something wrong with the driving axle, Andrey Sergeyeovich,” shouted the engineer and all the men who were on the engine jumped down hurriedly, slipping down the sliding sand bank.

They examined the wheel boxes, tires, brake-bands and springs. The engine trembled with impatience, squirting out steam that blew off the heads of the dandelions on the railroad bed.

Strakhov squatted down to examine the coupling of the shafts on the crank of the driving axle. He felt the hot, oily metal with his hands and his face grew worried and anxious.

The engine made the run back at a slow pace, as if tired out, and stood for a long time screeching before the semaphore. Its impatient cries sounded through the windows of a little cottage, facing the track, scaring the sparrows from a lilac bush and striking the ears of a man who lay still on his bed.

The man buried his head in his pillow, but the screech of the engine penetrated to his ears.

He lay there, trying to lose consciousness of the outside world, but it forced its way in with the screech of the engine and the gusts of wind which carried the smell of burnt coal. The man's cheek bones protruded above his hollow cheeks, which were covered with a black growth.

“Mitya! Mitya dear... oh, what'll I do! Eat some soup, I've made

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it on purpose. You've been days without food ”

Nastya hid her face in her apron, stifling her sobs. Zaytsev lay still and the lines on his face deepened. He felt an extraordinary lightness of body, but could not move. A heavy lightness—could there be such a thing? Yes, for there it was in his body, which felt quite bloodless.

How many days had he lain there? He did not remember, he had lost count; besides, what was the use of counting the days which were so similar, colourless and empty?

The feeling of mental exhaustion suited his physical weakness—he had no wish to think, move or live. Now the screech of the engine called him insistently back to life. It sounded sharp and exacting, reminding him of the plant, the movement of men and machines. Life flowed back to his weakened body. Zaytsev resisted, but it continued to sound in the rumble of the passing trains. It was there, behind the window—in the screech of the engine, in its axles, which he had turned with his own hands.

The engine passed and silence set in again, broken only by the ticking of the clock. A mouse came out from under the cupboard and stopped in its tracks with a crust of bread in its mouth. Zaytsev looked at it like one hypnotized. There was something familiar in its cowardly appearance and the greedy light in its eyes reminded him of someone. The mouse began to swell and grow, taking on a human shape, and Zaytsev recognized engineer Kraysky—bent double. He was furtively crossing the room, dragging Zaytsev's apron after him. In a minute he would dive under the cupboard and disappear.

Zaytsev rushed from his bed and clutched at something hard. He smelled an odour of mildew. His throat contracted with nausea, but he was unable to withstand the feeling of hunger and buried his teeth into the hard, mouldy crust.

* * * * *

The morning's business in Korchenko's office began with a sharp ring of the telephone. But its persistent and noisy ring remained unanswered, for at five minutes to seven Korchenko was still absent. The bell stopped, but started ringing again a minute later, and went on ringing until Korchenko came in on the stroke of seven and took off the receiver without waiting to remove his coat.

“Hello! Yes... it's you, Vartanyan? I wonder when you get time for sleep? You call me up twice during the night, and no sooner am I

here than this contraption starts ringing. About engines? What can I tell you at such an early hour? You must wait until the staff comes. I'll find out and ring you up. By ten? All right, I'll do my best. Don't be in such a damned hurry. Yes—Yes, I'll check up."

He threw the receiver down and sat at his desk. Impossible to work under such circumstances. Ringing him up every minute! Always the same question: what about engines? It would make any man nervous and interfere with his work. He knew what he had to do without being reminded. Vartanyan seemed to think that a plant was so easy to manage. Let him try it!

Korchenko took up the receiver.

"I want Turchaninov's office. Benjamin Pavlovich? What about engines?"

The business day had begun. The telephone rang continuously. His right ear was sore from contact with the receiver. By evening his ears would hum like seashells.

Engineers came in, chiefs of departments, managers, bookkeepers and secretaries. The piles of reports, summaries, orders, mail, telegrams and newspapers grew and grew. The room overflowed with papers, flooded with sunlight and filled with the persistent buzzing of the telephone.

"Did I promise to ring you up at ten? I've been very busy.... Don't you worry, Vartanyan. I'll ring you up in half an hour." He threw the receiver into a heap of papers and the stream of engineers, secretaries, mail and business flowed on.

After all the sound of the telephone bell could be stilled by muffling it in one's cap, or the telephone girl could tell everybody that the line was busy. However, the anxious ringing of the bell continued to sound dull and muffled, but still persistent, even under the cap.

"You again, Vartanyan? I think I'll go crazy in the end. Is your place on fire, or what? Oh! I see. Well, my head's about bursting from your continual rings. In fifteen minutes, yes, yes, ye-e-e-s!—damned machine!"

The telephone receiver could, of course, be wrenched off, thrown out of the window, but that would not help—he'd only have to go to the district Party committee, which would be much worse.

Again the telephone.

"Benjamin Pavlovich, how about engines?"

"I believe No. 7 is in the paint shop, Peter Petrovich."

"This 'I believe' won't do, Benjamin Pavlovich. You're the

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technical manager. Please let me have exact information in ten minutes' time."

"What can I do, if the shops don't hand in their reports on time? I've done it.... Yes, I quite appreciate.... Oh! Naturally. No need to tell me.... I'll do it, Peter Petrovich, I shall do it." Here the connection was broken off and Benjamin Pavlovich finished the sentence to himself.

*

"Where's No. 7? Making a trial run? Fine! Which do you say it is, Adamovich? No. 6? Where's No. 7 then?"

"No. 7 is still being assembled. No. 6 is making the trial run."

"No. 6? How can that be? What the.... Today's the twentieth. Do you hear? That's impossible, Adam Adamovich! Im—possible! The manager's just telephoned. We're breaking the plan. You're at the head of engine construction, aren't you?"

"That's all true, Benjamin Pavlovich. But who's to blame? I've told you about it a hundred times over. The boiler shop does not fill its orders, nor the machine shop—the open hearth furnace shop is making parts full of flaws."

"That's an old story! No. 7 must be delivered on time! Hurry up No. 6. More poods—that's our business. More poods! We're all interested in it. Have Kraysky, Strakhov, Antonych get a move on."

"I'll do my best...."

"Adam Adamovich speaking. Is that you Semyon Petrovich? The assembly shop says the machine shop is late in supplying engine parts. That won't do, you know. Won't do at all. You must snap things up."

"I understand, Adam Adamovich. I'll do all I can—but you must know that we get a lot of spoiled casts from the open hearth furnace shop."

"Don't talk to me about spoiled casts—it's no use. There must be none; why should there be?"

*

"Kraysky! Why are you late in supplying parts to the machine shop?"

"For the very simple reason that we have none, Benjamin Pavlovich. I'd better come and talk it over...."

"Be quick, then."

A minute later Kraysky came in and sank into an easy chair.

“I can’t go on working under these circumstances. Platov does everything to contradict me. He’s sent a whole lot of wheels back into the furnace.”

“How about the mechanical laboratory tests? The quality of samples?”

“Everything was flawless.”

Turchaninov thought for a moment. His birdlike eyes took on a yellow tint and the pupils widened and narrowed by turns.

“This is what I’ve decided, Kraysky. You’re to leave the shop for a time and attend to the construction of the new plant. Let Platov manage the open hearth furnace shop alone.”

*

“Hello, is that you, Adam Adamovich? Strakhov speaking. Good morning. Yes, No. 6 is back from the test run.... Not quite. Something wrong with the springs. The springs, I say.... And the crank, too. How long will it take? About three days. Can’t help it! I’m responsible. Can’t pass a defective engine, besides Akatuyev would never pass it. I’m sorry, but it can’t be helped.”

*

“Now listen here, Korchenko. Tell me on the level—what’s the position with regard to engines?”

“What are you worrying about, Vartanyan? I’ve only just got full data. No. 7 is being assembled. No. 6 is back from its test run. Akatuyev will inspect it tomorrow. No. 7 is a little late, but we’re doing everything that’s in our power.... Don’t worry!”

“Don’t worry? One should always worry! Remember we’re to make our report to the regional Party committee soon.”

“I’ve told you everything would be done. There will be no need to be ashamed of our work. Only for goodness sake, stop calling me every other minute!”

*

“Is this engine to go to the sheathing shop?”

“Yes.”

“And what about the crank? It’s rather weak, you know. And those springs....”

“That’s not your business. We’ve got our instructions.”

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“The hell we have! It’s no use trying to understand you fellows. This one saying one thing and that one another.”

*

“Comrade Rykhov! Who told you to take engine No. 7, to the sheathing shop? It’s not in shape yet.”

“Well, this is a mess, Comrade Strakhov. I was told to take the engine to the sheathing shop. I was told those were your orders and now you tell me just the opposite.”

“You’re to take the engine back to the assembling shop—do you understand?”

6

Sasha Mokhov stood at the entrance gate reading the inscriptions which all reduced themselves down to one anxious word “break.”

“Break, break,” murmured Sasha, as he walked on his way to the park, where a special meeting of his Pioneer group had been called.

As he went, he read the slogans, which were pasted on the fences.

“Drunks and absentees ruin the plant.”

“Throw them out of the plant!”

Sasha thought this rather amusing and he capered on, singing to himself:

“Throw them out, throw them out, throw them out of the plant.”

Suddenly he stopped, recollecting that his father also drank. It was true old Mokhov rarely missed a working day, still the slogan evidently referred to him, too. Sasha stopped singing and walked thoughtfully on, kicking his bare toes against the stones. It was his father’s birthday. That day was always marked by plentiful libations, the guests being turners of Mokhov’s age from the machine shop. Sasha’s mother busied herself at the stove since early morning and ran to the market a number of times, always forgetting something.

Sasha met her near the market carrying two baskets bulging with provisions. She kept shifting their weight from one hand to another, although this did not make it any lighter. What with the heat and natural excitement, her face was as red as a ripe tomato. Sasha tried to get away unseen, but his mother called out loudly to him.

“Sasha! Such a misfortune—there’s a line at the vodka shop. I stood until I could not wait any longer for fear the pies would burn. You go and stand in the line like a good boy, while I run home and look after the pies. Here’s the money.”

She thrust a ten ruble note into his hands and, picking up her baskets, disappeared in the crowd.

Sasha stood irresolute, crumpling the note in his hand. He must hurry to the group. There was an important meeting that day, their leader Simka was getting up something very interesting. What was he to do? He was ashamed to be seen standing in line for vodka. Yet he could not very well shirk it—his father would not forgive him if he had a dry birthday. He walked uncertainly to the line and stood at the end, behind a shabby man who diffused a rank and sickening smell. His bony legs showed through his torn trousers. One sharp elbow stuck out of his rent sleeve and seemed to threaten Sasha. He recognized Zhorov and moved back a step in disgust.

“Aren’t you ashamed of yourself, swaying about like a drunk and you a Pioneer! Stepping on men’s feet!” said a grumbling voice at his back.

Sasha remembered he had his red tie on. He looked about with an embarrassed countenance and pulled Zhorov by his trouser leg.

“I’m standing behind you, Zhorov—see that nobody takes my place. I’ll be back in a second.”

He ran behind a booth, tore off his tie and shoved it into his pocket. His turn was coming. He had already handed the ten ruble note in at the cashier’s window when someone called him from the street.

“Sasha Mokhov!”-

Sasha’s hand shook, he drew the note back. Angry voices shouted from behind:

“Get a move on—don’t keep people waiting!”

“Sasha, what are you doing there?”

The red-cheeked Zeitlin was coming up with his light, athletic step. Sasha lowered his eyes and his face turned pale.

“It’s for my father,” he stammered. “My mother sent me.”

Simka’s black eyes bulged and he cried into the cashier’s window:

“What right have you to sell vodka to children, eh? I’ll call the militia, I will!”

“Don’t, Zeitlin,” entreated Sasha, pulling his sleeve.

They walked down the street. Zeitlin swore and threatened to put the case before the nucleus of the Young Communist League. Sasha walked beside him, crushing the ten ruble note in his hand.

“I’m afraid to go home now, Zeitlin, there’ll be a row.”

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“All right, we’ll go and see your mother together at once and talk to her.”

They came into the house at the very moment when Sasha’s mother was taking a pie out of the oven.

“Have you brought it?”

Sasha walked silently towards the window. Simka stuck his hands in his pockets and spoke in a dignified manner:

“I’ve forbidden him to. It’s not his fault, Comrade Mokhova.”

“Forbidden! And who are you, pray? Comrade Mokhova, indeed! Just listen to this shrimp. Sasha, have you brought the vodka?”

“Pioneers are not allowed to buy vodka, Comrade Mokhova.”

Mokhova ran up to her son, waving her arms furiously.

“So you haven’t brought it? So you won’t obey your mother? Get out then. Fancy a son refusing to help his mother. Nice state of things and all because of these red ties of yours. And you—what are you staring at me for, boy? Get out, both of you!”

She banged the door with such force that the crockery rattled.

Simka and Sasha came out into the street, very silent and gloomy. Zeitlin felt ashamed for being called “shrimp” before Sasha and because it had all ended in the most stupid way. Sasha was thinking of the interview which he would have with his father.

They came to the First of May Park and sat down on a bench. A strong pleasant smell of tar filled the air. Rooks hung in clusters to the pine tree tops. They seemed limp with heat.

“Don’t go home today, Sasha. They’ll be drinking, and your father will be sure to beat you. We’ll go to the Pioneer group now and I’ve got a bit of work for you all tonight. Only take care you don’t tell anyone about it.”

Simka whispered the rest into Sasha’s ear.

Today’s meeting of the Pioneer group was not an ordinary one. The children’s faces looked mysterious. Everyone felt that Simka was preparing something very special. He was always one for inventing things. Meetings usually took place on the square before the cinema, but today the meeting was to take place at the very end of the park, in a grove of young pines. The children had to push through the thicket behind which they disappeared.

The Pioneers surrounded Simka in a close ring.

“Come closer and promise you won’t blab—it’s a secret,” whispered Simka.

Sasha stared with bated breath at Simka’s mobile mouth, with its

sharp, squirrel teeth. Simka had a habit of screwing up one eye, which reminded Sasha of old Grigoryevich Zeitlin with his magnifying glass, rummaging among a heap of clock parts.

Grisha Nosov held his hand over the bruise on his cheek and listened absent-mindedly. He had joined the group the day before his disgrace and was now ashamed to think that the children would find out about it. He was thinking of the far away south, where summer was eternal and grapes always ripe. Fat and solemn Vanya Korchenko, nicknamed "the manager," nodded approvingly. The children's faces were very serious and intent. It was such serious business and they were afraid to spoil it. Each was appointed his task.

"One more thing, fellows. Grisha's father gave him a beating yesterday. What shall we do about it?"

Grisha stared at Simka in astonishment. How did he know? But then Zeitlin knew everything, nothing could remain hidden from his piercing eyes. He seemed to see all daily events through his father's magnifying glass.

"Have a trial at the club," said Vanya "the manager," in a business-like voice.

"No, it's not worth it," said Sasha. "Better write something about it in the paper."

They all agreed on that and left the park to scatter in groups about the town in search of veneer, coloured paper and paint.

"I am very hungry," sighed Simka, "but there's no time to eat. Haven't had anything since this morning."

"That's nothing," said Sasha. "We've got a neighbour who hasn't eaten for two weeks and he's still living."

"Don't tell stories, only fakirs can hold out that long."

"Fakirs live in India, I know, but he's a turner," said Sasha hotly, offended by such scepticism. "He worked with father in the machine shop. His house is right next to ours. He's had nothing but water for two weeks."

"That's curious—why does he do it?" asked Simka, his interest aroused.

"Father says he's gone crazy from being too smart. Used up all his brains making drawings."

"Well—well," said Zeitlin, gravely closing his right eye just like his father did.

The night advanced silently. It covered the town with thick warm darkness. The lighted windows of the cottages winked sleepily. Suddenly the street woke up. Lights leapt in through sleepy cottage windows. A bell tolled insistently. People rushed out of bed, rubbed their eyes, ran out on their porches, trying to pierce the curtain of darkness and find out the source of the fire.

The bell tolled loudly and anxiously and red flames ran through the streets, creating panic.

Mokhov rushed to the door, knocking down vodka glasses and chairs on the way. His guests followed unsteadily. On the porch he slipped and fell on his nose. The others tripped and fell over him like so many limp sacks.

“It’s a fire!” thought Mokhov. When the lurid light of the flaming torches stopped before his door, his heart filled with terror. The street filled with shouts and the noise of banging doors and gates. There was a sound of broken glass. All the dogs in town were howling mournfully. Suddenly the bell stopped tolling.

A panicky voice was heard crying.

“Marusya! Bring some water!”

It was answered by a shrill cry coming from the spot where the torches flamed.

*“All absentees, drunks, idlers—
Who ruin our Soviet plants
Must be thrown out, out, out!”*

A deafening roar of childish laughter rose out of the dark and Mokhov, sprawled helplessly in the sand, thought it was the night jeering at him.

A bass voice was swearing profusely. A shrill female voice shrieked.

Laughter and shouts, jests and oaths.... Red lights floated in the air and the bell pealed joyously above the din.

The red light of the torches disappeared around a corner and darkness set in again. The “boss” walked down the street, tripping and grumbling, cautiously feeling his way. Finally he let himself be led by the instinct of years, which drove him in the direction from which the wind brought the smell of plant smoke.

He had just seen the night recede before the flickering light of

torches and heard the hated silence, which weighed so on his old mind, broken by gay childish voices. So it was not he alone who suffered from sleeplessness? The old man smiled and walked on more firmly. He must make quite sure tonight. He would walk through the shops and verify his observations and tomorrow he would go and see that black-eyed secretary and tell him everything. They would see then that the old man was not mad yet, that he was still able to take care of the plant—the engines which he loved with a father's love. The "boss" strode firmly up the steps that led to the gate.

"Your pass!"

He looked back in bewilderment, as if hearing the word for the first time and walked on.

"Show your pass, old man!" shouted the watchman, catching up with him and taking hold of his sleeve.

"Here's my pass," said the old man, showing his rheumatic hands, permanently roughened and blackened by work and moulding clay.

"You're a cunning one," laughed the watchman. "Go back," he added, turning him round by the shoulder.

The "boss" resisted, but the watchman was young and strong. He led the "boss" out by the hand, like a child that has wandered astray.

"We've got strict orders not to allow you to get inside the plant. You've no business there, they say, might get injured or what not. Good night, father!"

The watchman closed and locked the door.

The "boss" stood in the dark, feeling weak and bewildered. He could see the lantern's fitful light through the iron grill of the gate.

It was the second time in his life that he found himself outside these gates, against his will. The first time, was in the famous year of 1914, on the second day after one of the engines he had helped build had borne his two sons away to the west.

On that day he could not work, but walked round the shops, telling everybody about his grief, but all of them—turners, fitters and foundrymen—had their own griefs. They also left off work and walked in groups about the yard and in the streets. By evening everything was quiet again and the old man, expelled from the plant for agitation, was standing before the gate, as he did now.

But at that time the plant had different masters. What could have happened now? Korchenko was manager now, Korchenko whom he remembered at the Kolomna Works, when he was, it is true, simpler

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and more accessible. His own people were everywhere, and even the Pioneers were full of care for the plant. Who was there to harbour evil feelings against the old man?

He remembered the grey and furious face of Benjamin Pavlovich on the landing, in the open hearth furnace shop, and cold anger rose in his heart. So the plant did not need him any more. He was a finished man, an old lunatic....

He sighed and shuffled slowly away into the night. The moon was rising over the town, its greenish light made the shapes of the cottages stand out clearly. On the last street the “boss” came up against a man.

“Where do you come from, old man?”

“Who’s that?”

“Senka Platov—do you remember me?”

“A-ah... Semyon Petrovich. The old man remembers everything. He’s not out of his mind yet. I remember you, Semyon Petrovich, and your father, Peter Nikolayevich also—I remember him very well. You remained an orphan, I know.”

Platov smiled bitterly.

“Yes, and now, as you see, I’ve got no place to spend the night.”

“Why so?”

“It’s a long story, old man. I wish I could have a sleep somewhere. I’m tired and I have to go to work early tomorrow.”

“What shop are you working in?”

“Open hearth furnace shop.”

“I’ve heard that a fellow had struck an engineer in your shop.”

“It was me he struck.”

The “boss” stepped back in astonishment.

“You an engineer?” he asked incredulously and even put on his spectacles to get a better look at Platov.

Platov told him shortly of all that had happened to him and why he was out in the street that night.

“So you’re persecuted, too?” asked the astonished old man. “Simply can’t understand it. What a life! Well, come to my house, it’s quite empty anyway.”

Platov, carrying his few bags, walked behind the old man who kept repeating delightedly:

“What a life! What a life!”

By the light of a small kerosene lamp, the “boss” opened one of the fat books which Platov had brought, saw the letters were not

Russian, closed it carefully and pointed to his own bed.

“Lie down on that bed, Semyon Petrovich. You’re a welcome guest.”

Platov lay down and closed his eyes. And immediately an extraordinarily lucid picture of the shop appeared before him: the tense faces of the workers, Sergey’s furious eyes and Zhorov’s triumphant cry. He seemed to hear the clang and rumble of steel, the hiss of the cranes, the ironical jests.

Yes, he was disgraced in the eyes of all those workers—before the men who had known him as Senka the moulder, and who from the very first had looked askance at engineer Platov. He felt a burning, unbearable shame. He felt stifling hot. He threw off the blanket and pulled off his shirt.

His assurance and fitness gave way to weak irritation. He thought he would never rise again in the eyes of those moulders and foundry-men, that he would hear their jeers and derisive laughter tomorrow. He knew that the jeers would have turned to admiration and respect if he had struck Sergey back. He would then have risen immediately in the eyes of those men who were accustomed to measure human will by the strength of a man’s fist.

What a disgrace! He ground his teeth. The room was silent except for the creaking of the little old sofa on which the “boss” was turning from side to side.

“All people nowadays seem to be pretty sleepless, Semyon Petrovich. Why is that, I wonder,” he asked. And without waiting for an answer, said thoughtfully: “Because of the restless life, I think...”

* * * * *

Zeitlin was dashing about the plant entrance gate, placing his sentinels. He was very serious and full of a feeling of responsibility. He wore straps over his Pioneer jacket which stretched tightly over his well developed chest. He was hurriedly giving Sasha his last instructions.

“Stand fast,” he said in the end, and went off at a run, his feet moving lightly in their white sport shoes.

Sasha put his tie straight and planted himself in front of the black veneer board which was nailed up near the entrance gate. The second signal sounded long and shrill and made his heart beat fast and loud. A light rain was falling. Sasha paced in front of the board, shivering with excitement and the morning damp. He was thinking over what

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he was going to say.

“If only I could talk like Simka! He just rattles the words off. What was it he told me to say? Something like this: Comrade! Our epoch is formed of priceless minutes and you are late for your work and have stolen a whole hour from the plant.”

No, that did not sound right. And if the man was old, how could he call him “comrade”? It would sound funny. Also, he could not be a comrade since he was late for his work. Sasha remembered the derisive tone in which his mother had repeated the word after Simka. No, better say simply: “Why are you so late?” and when the man shrugged his shoulders in an embarrassed manner, make him thoroughly ashamed of himself by saying: “You must not do that, you know; it causes a break at the plant.”

Workers were streaming into the narrow entrance gate and Sasha followed them with his eyes and thought:

“At-a-boy, they got up early.”

The third signal sounded, short and sharp. The workers hurried and pushed into the plant yard and the stream stopped. Sasha stared intently at the entrance for fear someone would slip past him. The watchman glanced at him and smiled good-naturedly.

“Those kids! What things they think of.”

Sasha felt injured by the condescending tone and was going to answer when a man ran up the steps. Sasha stretched his arms out across the entrance.

“Comrade!” (That sounded pretty strong and serious.) “You’re late. Our epoch consists of...” but the next word stuck in his throat. Sasha stepped back and let his hands fall limply.

“Sasha! What the devil are you doing here?”

Mokhov could not understand why Sasha should be standing there and what all this “comrade” and “epoch” was about. He had to make his way to the machine shop as quickly as possible, but Sasha stood in his way in the narrow passage.

“Stand aside!”

Mokhov moved close to his son, diffusing a smell of stale vodka.

But Sasha stood firm. Suddenly Mokhov remembered the incident of the day before, the vodka which Sasha had failed to buy and the latter’s disappearance. He clenched his fists and lurched towards him.

“Get out of here!”

Sasha saw the watchman’s smile of derision, he trembled with

hurt pride and pressed more stubbornly against the hand rails.

“Stand aside, damn you!”

Mokhov seized his hand and pushed him aside. Sasha cried out in pain, but clutched his father’s coat and dragged after him, scraping his feet on the ground. Mokhov tried to shake him off and swore. The workers who were working in the yard ran to see what the noise was about and surrounded the pair.

Then Mokhov struck his son in the face.

The men laughed good-naturedly. Sasha stumbled, covered his face with his hand and turned to the gates. His cheek was burning and it seemed to him that not only the men but even the plant buildings were laughing at him. The tears started from his eyes. He dashed them away with his hand, but they went on trickling down.

“That’ll teach you to leave people alone,” said the watchman with a smile of pity.

Sasha felt furious at the uncalled for and offensive pity and cried out in a shrill, cracked voice, with flaming face:

“You fellows don’t care a damn about the break. How can we work with people like you!”

He strode firmly to the black board and wrote in chalk:

MOKHOV IS AN ABSENTEE

Feeling the worker’s eyes upon him, and content with the size of the letters, Sasha walked proudly out of the gate. But outside, his legs grew limp and the tears gushed in a hot stream and leaning against the plant fence, Sasha cried loudly and bitterly.

7

Vartanyan came home late, when the uncertain twilight was filtering through the windows.

He sank into a leather chair before his writing desk, stretched out his legs and shut his eyes.

He felt tired. Fatigue had dogged him all day long and had now at last vanquished him. His legs felt as heavy as lead, his head ached from tobacco smoke and the many impressions of the day. His heart beat irregularly—at times he ceased to feel it at all, then it would start beating with loud strokes against his chest. His body felt limp and loose like a dismantled machine.

“Even metal gets fatigued... engineering practice gives many examples of destruction caused by metal fatigue...” Where had he read

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that? In Turchaninov's article, of course, which was printed in the regional newspaper. Why had it come into Yuzov's head to deal with such a purely technical question? Turchaninov... Platov... metal fatigue.... He'd have to interfere....

Buildings, machinery, human faces swam indistinctly before him. Olya Pylayeva gazed at him with a smile, while she pulled her blouse straight with a coquettish gesture. Her blue eyes drew him, his lips moved. He made an effort and Olya disappeared, only to be replaced by the figure of an old man in spectacles, who came quite close to Vartanyan muttering all the while, "It's coffins they're making."— Why coffins? Poor old man! Will I be as old and useless one day? Even metal ages and corrodes. I'm only thirty though. Only thirty. The graceful, lithe figure in the blue overalls reappeared. Again he saw Olya's attractive face in its frame of golden hair, the soft, ripe mouth and her fascinating blue eyes.

He saw himself walking by Olya's side, their shoulders touching. He started and opened his eyes. What was the matter with him? "You're getting undisciplined, Comrade Vartanyan," he said to himself, with a smile as he stood up.

Darkness surrounded him. He could clearly see the black interlacing of the window. He felt the loneliness that reigned in his bachelor flat. He turned the switch and the room became more gay and cosy with its books and ornaments. The fat-cheeked face of Lazo smiled knowingly at him, from a photograph on the wall.

Vartanyan opened his note-book, covered with pencil writing, and glanced over his notes of the day, making mental remarks:

...Workers going home on vacation... Saw them off at the station. Spoke about tractors, collective farms....

...Must visit shops: machine, boiler, open hearth.... "Haven't had time for the boiler shop. Do it tomorrow."

...Report to the Regional Committee on new construction.— "Sent in."

...Meeting of group organizers at 7.... "Took place. Spoke about quality. How very slow things are still!"

...Report in the nucleus of the rolling shop... "Done."

...Talk with Korchenko... "No use!"

... Analysis of the growth of the Party organization for the last 6 months... "Disgraceful!"

...Must visit the territory of the new plant... "Saw tree stumps and a lot of green grass."

His note-book was full. Notes covered the margins, and corners of the pages. He had been everywhere, made speeches, listened, given instructions and advice, warned, praised, threatened. And how much was still undone!

...Give Telezhkin a good shaking up... See Korchenko about mechanizations of pig iron breaking.... Talk to Platov about his attack on Turchaninov—"Fancy saying such a thing! But I'll have to read something on this question of metal fatigue."

...Incident at the gate... "Refer to Pylayeva."

"Yes, the Pioneers must be attended to. Fathers and children, although I've heard a young Communist say there is no such problem."

...Assault upon Platov... "That open hearth furnace shop again," he said impatiently. "Must do something to defend the specialists."

...Arrival of Comintern delegates.—Letter from workers of Kursk depot....

"Again a scandal! What a shame!"

The leaves of the note-book rustled, reminding Vartanyan of a hundred different things. Conferences, reports. He had been in a hurry throughout the day—on his feet all the time—had dinner as late as eight o'clock, and still did not have time to go everywhere and see everything with his mistrusting eyes. And everything was going as before. He had called scores of meetings, talked and exhorted, but he was not sure that his instructions were being carried out. So he took to the telephone—reminded and worried people, spreading alarm like a fire engine when it rushes through the streets....

Vartanyan sat, holding his aching head in his hands. His eyes were sunk and had blue shadows under them. Fatigue was gradually giving way to nervous excitement, which meant a sleepless night.

The impressions of the day crystallized gradually in his memory and he began to see the main guiding power in the life of the plant, of its workers and his own private life. That power had touched his hands when he was breaking the lump of pig iron. It loomed silently in the face plates of the lathes and flashed joyfully, in the shape of a red star on the engine's breast. It had caused the meeting between father and son at the gate of the plant. It had trembled in his own furious voice when he had shouted at Telezhkin. The letter written by the Kursk railway workers was full of it. That force knew no obstacles. It smashed them and led the country on—connecting plants, depots, towns and rural districts. It was transfiguring the country: erecting hydro-electric power stations, transforming the frozen Siberian

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steppes, making foundations for plants which did not have their like in the world.

Seething class energy!—It constructs, creates, conquers, sending its current through millions of hearts, turning the country into a powerful and dynamic storage battery. It sweeps like a storm over this plant, over Vartanyan's head—over frontiers—to the west. It hangs like a threatening cloud over terrified Europe. It breaks the ancient linguistic barriers in the swelling wave of revolutionary energy that it has brought to the masses....

Vartanyan sat down at the table again and shook out the contents of his bulging briefcase. Letters, telegrams, and reports streamed out and, among them, a forgotten sheet of blue paper. He focused his tired eyes on it and read:

“My little, curly-headed Lazo—

Your dad is very naughty—not writing letters and not coming to see his little son. But you must not mind it. Just play about and run after butterflies.”

Vartanyan turned the letter in his hands thoughtfully.

“Yes, Lazo, my nimble little monkey. Play about now, and run after butterflies. I still have to write an article.”

He sighed and bent over the table and started to write a leading article for the plant newspaper.

“The basic and decisive problem is to unloose the energy of the working masses and organize it for struggling with the defects of our plant. It is the duty of every Communist to be able to take up the initiative of the masses and use it for overcoming difficulties in plant life. Our plant is sick and the best remedy for it is the creative energy of the workers themselves. That is the greatest creative power. All must remember that, from the manager downwards.

We must not confine ourselves to our offices, documents and conferences, but go into the shops and listen to the workers and learn from them.”

Outside the firs woke in the morning wind and stirred their bristling branches. The sun peeped from behind the roof of the neighbouring house. Vartanyan wrote on, his pen flew over the paper, following his burning thoughts.

* * * * *

“Hey, Andrushechkin!” bellowed Trusov at the top of his mighty bass voice. “You’re to go to the district committee immediately after work.”

“What’s the hurry?”

“The committee probably wishes to comment on your poetry,” said Trusov ironically.

“That fellow’s a real plague!” murmured Andrushechkin and grew thoughtful. Maybe it was something personal after all?

He went to the district committee with the presentiment that the special meeting touched him directly and got ready with his answer—trying to recollect the number of meetings he had organized, the number of new members he had brought to the Workers’ International Relief, the Society for the Promotion of Aero-Chemical Industry, etc. He was enumerating all his services and abilities. At the meeting he got into a corner, next to Olya Pylayeva and listened morosely.

Vartanyan was speaking quickly as he always did. He ran his tired eyes over the attentive faces and started his case at once.

“Today’s meeting of active Party members has been called especially because things are going wrong at the plant. We’re not working properly. We’re supplying bad engines. Things have been unusually bad lately in the open hearth furnace shop. Some of the workers haven’t the right spirit—yesterday’s assault on Platov is characteristic. There’s a growing mistrust with regard to specialists, a general slackening of tempo. The construction of the new plant is not advancing.... What is the reason for all this?”

Vartanyan gazed silently into their faces, as if searching for the solution.

“You all know the importance of our plant in the life of the region and in the economy of the entire country. We are a proletarian base—the railways depend on us. How are we fulfilling our task? Here’s a letter that will tell you about that.”

He took a sheet of paper from the table and read:

“Comrades:

On behalf of the meeting of two thousand railway workers of the Kursk depot, we express our strongest protest with reference to your production. We have five of your engines standing in our depot, with such defects that they’re continually in for repairs.

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We expect an answer from the workers of the Krasny Proletary and an improvement in the quality of your engines. You are retarding the development of the country's transportation system."

"Do you hear?" Vartanyan repeated very emphatically, "You are retarding the development of the country's transportation system."

A silence ensued, broken only by the rustling of paper in Vartanyan's hand.

Korchenko was the first to speak. He spoke slowly, as usual, using few words, which gave special weight to every word he uttered.

"There's nothing strange about that. Those engines were made last year. And you know how the situation was at the plant then. We can now answer the workers of Kursk with a clear conscience. We are putting out good engines. We were hampered by the enormous amount of spoiled castings, but the position is quite improved now. Here are figures: The percentage of waste has been reduced from eighteen to eight per cent in the last month. Eight is the normal and unavoidable percentage. There's no cause for panic. The situation with regard to specialists is much worse. Persecution of specialists is rising and the worst is that it finds support among our comrades. I'm speaking of Platov's case, when he insulted Turchaninov, our technical manager, without any reason. 'But he who plies the sword, by the sword shall he perish' and Platov himself experienced only yesterday the danger of that weapon. We must have respect for our old specialists."

"We must have respect for the labour of thousands of workers," came a girl's voice from a corner of the room. Vartanyan saw Olya's tender pink cheeks flush, and smiled.

Korchenko's face grew dark.

"I am not going to answer obscure demagogy. Lenin said that we would not construct socialism only with our own hands...."

"We have sixteen thousand pairs of hands of our own!" shouted Andrushechkin excitedly.

There was an uproar which drowned Korchenko's voice. Yuzov, who had been summoned to the meeting by Vartanyan, was taking hurried notes. He went to the telephone. He called up hurriedly—

"That you, Glazman? Hold all page one makeup. Leave a space for plant topics. I'll be in late."

He made his way between the chairs and nodded

condescendingly to Andrushechkin:

“Kicking up a row?”

Andrushechkin turned away.

The debate promised to be a stormy one. There was a general uproar and heated quarrelling. The room was filled with tobacco smoke. Vartanyan glanced from time to time in Olya’s direction, but Andrushechkin thought he was looking at him and was astonished at the encouraging smile on those usually severe lips. Olya buried her flushed face in her note-book.

“Comrades, I’m a newcomer at the plant, and there’s much I don’t know, but I have grave doubts as regards the figures given out by Korchenko.”

Silence ensued.

Olya looked at the speaker. He was wearing a yellow net under-shirt, which left his muscular arms bare. His shock of unruly hair and plain face made him look like any one of the many workers who filled the room.

“Who is he?” she asked, bending towards Andrushechkin.

“The new assistant chief of the open hearth furnace shop. A Red specialist. Do you remember Senka the moulder?”

Olya examined Platov. So that was what he was like. Yet the “boss” had said all sorts of things about his having been abroad—being able to read German... He looked quite ordinary.

“I think that the question raised by Vartanyan must decide the fate of our plant. There’s already a doubt in Moscow about the expediency of building a new plant here—I’ve just had a letter from Moscow. And that’s no wonder. The country cannot entrust a new mechanized plant to people who have not justified the confidence placed in them.”

“What do those hints mean? Can’t you speak plainly?” shouted Korchenko, red with inward tension.

“Keep cool, Korchenko. Let him speak,” said Vartanyan, striking his pencil against a glass.

“I’m talking plainly, without any hints; the management of the plant does not run the business properly. You can read that in the *Pravda*; it said very clearly: ‘the quality of engines is still very bad.’ And what does the letter of the Kursk workers say? Does it speak of your ‘wonderful work,’ Korchenko? The whole system of management is such that it’s not you who are the real manager, but people like Turchaninov and Kraysky. I, who am a young engineer, am

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placed under conditions that are impossible for work. Yesterday Kraysky cancelled the orders I had given. I came to you, Comrade Korchenko, and what did you say? 'Kraysky is your chief and you must submit to him.'"

"Your orders were evidently wrong and so they were cancelled."

"Evidently! Did you attempt to find out anything about the case? No! You have transferred your authority entirely to the specialists. You're not a manager but . . ."

"Vartanyan! Stop this demagoguery!" shouted Korchenko furiously.

"Don't be personal, Platov, speak strictly on the matter in hand."

Korchenko jumped up again.

"Platov's speech is a proof of the danger of specialists' persecution. Platov is placing all specialists in a wrong position. They do not merit it. You yourself had some experience of it yesterday."

Platov calmly waited until Korchenko finished.

"You're wrong in putting me in with all the other engineers, I..."

"Oh, you're not like others, of course! Cleverer than the rest?"

Platov's face went somewhat pale and his little black eyes shone.

"You cannot mix me with them, no more than you can mix oil and water... I have an engineer's education for the purpose of leading the workers, not for the purpose of increasing my personal income. I and my technique are at the disposal of the Party. There's the difference—"

Korchenko laughed.

"Education! Why, you made a laughing stock of yourself and me into the bargain at the engineer's meeting, showing your ignorance in technical matters, when you spoke of metal fatigue as being a 'priest's sermon on sinfulness.' Ridiculous."

Korchenko shook with laughter, but after a glance at the audience, he stopped and looked embarrassed: all faces were stern and intent.

Platov suddenly straightened like a spring.

"I did say it and I'm ready to repeat it now for the benefit of Comrade Yuzov who popularizes such noxious doctrines. They may be technically well grounded, but I'm not only a technician. I'm also a Communist and it's my opinion that at the present time, when we must save the plant, it's politically wrong to waste time in discussing theories about fatigue. Wrong and stupid."

Yuzov looked at Platov in astonishment. Olya never shifted her eyes from that passionate face, which a minute before had looked

grey and ordinary. His straightforward and independent speech aroused her admiration, and coincided with her mood.

“That’s right,” she cried. “It’s not theories we want, but engines, and we’ve got lathes that are not working.”

“It’s a bad business,” bellowed Andrushechkin.

“Comrades,” cried Platov, waving his hand for silence. “Korchenko hinted that I had also suffered from persecution directed against specialists. But, however strange it may seem, persecution in that case was prompted by a specialist, engineer Kraysky, who surrounded me with an atmosphere of mistrust.”

“But it was a worker who struck you, not Kraysky!” shouted Korchenko.

“But why did he strike me and not Kraysky? Why? Just answer that,” cried Platov, losing self-control.

“Comrades! Keep cool. Order, order!”

The glass tinkled plaintively under Vartanyan’s pencil. The shouts, and the noise of moving chairs grew louder and louder.

“Because he had a personal account to settle with you!” shouted Telezhkin. “I’ve found out all about this case. You even lived at his lodgings and are an old friend of his.”

Platov looked at Telezhkin in astonishment—he did not expect that his conflict with Sergey would be interpreted as a personal quarrel. The audience waited in tense silence.

“That’s not true. I did stay with him. But this case is of public significance.”

“I confirm it!” said Andrushechkin. “I know Vekshin to be a hooligan and an idler.”

“And I know that there’s a woman in the case, and you’ve a grudge against Vekshin for taking her away from you,” interrupted Telezhkin sardonically. “No love lost between you two, I guess.”

Andrushechkin’s cheeks flushed a deep red. He was so dumbfounded by Telezhkin’s words that he found no answer and stood helpless, with his mouth wide open.

He looked so comical that everyone laughed.

“A pretty advocate!”

“That was smart of Telezhkin!”

Telezhkin twisted his long neck about triumphantly and smiled. The humour of the audience had changed suddenly, and Korchenko seized the advantage immediately. He saw Platov’s embarrassed face—Andrushechkin’s bewildered countenance, and began to

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speak. He said that the meeting had been led astray, that the case was reduced to personalities. He cleverly reminded them that Platov had had a clash with Kraysky in the olden days and was now evidently seeking revenge.

Platov and Andrushechkin sat silent and crushed.

It was difficult for the audience to understand what had really happened. Everything was hopelessly entangled and confused.

While listening to Platov, Vartanyan sensed in the words he addressed to Korchenko, something that corresponded with the anxiety which he himself felt, and was glad that the criticism of the management had been started from below. It made his projected attack against Korchenko's self-complacency easier. But on seeing the downcast faces of Platov and Andrushechkin, he lost his bearings. Meanwhile Korchenko was getting the audience under his influence by his calm and firm speech. Only his lips, which still kept an injured expression, showed suppressed excitement.

Vartanyan had seen him thus at the time of the spring floods... The brown waters were rising threateningly, swallowing everything they came across, flooding expensive imported machines, mutilating and breaking them through the impact of the heavy logs that swept along. The electric light fell on Korchenko's bulging eyes as he stood up to his chest in the cold water, bent under the weight of the metal. The deep lines on his forehead gave the impression that his skin had cracked with the effort.

"No, that man cannot cheat the country," thought Vartanyan. "He is capable of sacrificing his life to the Party should it be necessary. Platov is young, hot-headed, self-confident. It's the usual thing at his age...."

"Comrades! We have known Korchenko for a long time. The accusations are too serious for us to accept them on the strength of Platov's words alone. You, Platov, are too hot and hasty, although you may be motivated by the best intentions. You're right in wanting to lead the specialists in your wake, but that must be done carefully. You must establish good relations with the management."

"And old specialists," put in Korchenko.

"And old specialists, of course."

Platov strode up to the presidium and struck the table with his fist.

"But first I'll fight them! You, Korchenko, have surrounded them with boundless trust, because you don't know how to manage the

plant. But I don't trust your Benjamin Pavlovich, nor my chief, Kraysky!"

"Maybe we ought to appoint you in his place?" asked Korchenko sarcastically.

Platov's eyes narrowed.

"I wouldn't refuse, if it were necessary."

"I'm for the engineer, Comrade Senka!" shouted Andrushechkin.

"Has every one had his say?"

"I asked to speak long ago, Comrade Vartanyan."

"That's right. Go ahead, Olya."

Olya made her way through the mass of hot human bodies, flushing deeper still, because Vartanyan had called her by name.

"This is what I want to say, comrades. One of the comrades here said that the machinery was often broken by the workers. But I'll say that it's human beings that often get broken here. I'm talking of children. I know it well. I'm at the head of the children's movement at the plant. Children often get beaten at home...."

"That's got nothing to do with the present business!" said Telezhkin testily.

"Hold your tongue!"

"Keep quiet, can't you?"

The whole room was in a uproar again in a moment.

"Silence!"

Vartanyan rapped his glass furiously and nobody noticed the little shower of broken glass falling to the floor.

"Yes, it has, Telezhkin! Very much so. It's got to do with you, too," shouted Olya, boiling up. "Yesterday a Pioneer was beaten up by his father at the plant gates. Today we have a newspaper paragraph about a child being beaten in the Nosov family. No one pays any attention. The children are helping the plant. They're helping a lot! They want to work, but the elders won't give them any of their time."

"Make it shorter, Olya," said Vartanyan, sensing the impatience of the audience, although he liked to hear her speak warmly of children, it reminded him of little Lazo.

"I'll be through directly.... Adults also get broken. The workers' labour is not appreciated. The worker wants it to be appreciated and does not spare himself for the plant. Remember how many of them perished in the civil war—" her voice shook and the audience grew very quiet, so that Olya could be heard rustling the leaves of her notebook. "Just a few words more, comrades—I agree with Platov, he's

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right. It's all a muddle about those engineers—they're ready to eat the workers alive. There's a man who has been discharged from our shop for no reason at all and he's now lying on his bed, starving,"

"Starving?" asked Vartanyan. "No money, you mean?"

"Oh, he has money and food, he's doing it because of the injustice. He was a good turner."

Vartanyan turned to Telezhkin.

"Have you been to his lodgings?"

Telezhkin looked embarrassed.

"I'll go tomorrow. Haven't had time yet."

The pencil cracked in Vartanyan's fingers and broke in half.

Yuzov ran to the telephone.

"That you, Glazman? Start on the first page. Cancel the second part of the article about metal fatigue. Put the *Pravda* article about the plant as leader. Leave the other for the next number. There is a regular war going on here!"

They came out into the plant yard, flushed and excited from the discussion. Vartanyan's eyes were sunk even deeper and his cheeks were pale.

Korchenko desired to efface the impression produced by the meeting and invited Vartanyan and Yuzov to see the new turbine. Vartanyan put his arm under Platov's and they walked along the railway track, through the metal yard.

Sheet steel lay in grey piles on their left, while on their right the sun was reflected in rows of copper mounds. Church bells covered with mould, as if they had turned green with envy, were heaped in quaint pyramids, with their tongues hanging out. They had been brought as part of the non-ferrous metal supply. They had once sent their chimes far out over fields and meadows, calling people to mass. Their powerful boom had once hypnotized people into the belief that their traditional servitude was predestined. On hearing their loud peal floating over the scanty fields and moss-grown roofs, the people walked with the slow gait of the doomed towards the gloomy icons, stifling their rage and impotent thoughts. There were some small noisy bells in the pile. These used to chatter at the top of their voices to welcome the flower-decked carts of bridal trains—emaciated horses once galloped to their sound, raising clouds of dense dust. People, forgetting their miseries on these rare festive occasions, danced about on unsteady feet.

The bells of Lent which used to toll slowly, evoking melancholy

moods in the people's hearts, now lay helpless with their mouths gaping. Their sound once had an accusing note, reminding people of their sinfulness, drowning rebellious thoughts about the inadequacy and barbarism of a life which drove them to crime.

The bells tolled meekness and submission to the ancient system of life. People bowed down by hopelessness murmured hypocritical confessions in their wake—of firewood stolen from private forests, adultery committed with a neighbour's wife, false bills, which had caused the ruin of a partner. But next day they stole, lied and were hypocrites all over again. And the copper in those bells was as deceitful as the people. In the dark of the night, the Lent bells would wake up the villages with their alarm. People would run about in the red light of the flames, rescuing their belongings, and trying to quench the fire with cupfuls of water, and prayer, unarmed to resist the elements and the deceitful voice of the church bells.

There were also days when the bells called furious crowds together, armed with pitchforks, scythes and axes. Then fires flared up again; crowds stormed private mansions with their columned facades, and attacked the ancient system that made their lives so starved and destitute. On the morrow the same bells sang the inevitability of death, as they tolled for those whose bodies were carried to their graves. No sooner were they buried when the bells' false voice boomed again in praise of the ancient social system.

The bells were silent now. They would ring for the last time beneath the hammer. They would go to make copper bearings for machines and engines. They would generate life-giving electric current.

Vartanyan looked thoughtfully at the florid inscription on a bell which proclaimed that it had been given by the merchant Pafnuty Krisanfov "as a present to the village of Zausaylovo in the year 1890."

Yuzov gazed intently at the bells and wrote in his note-book:

"Bells—remind one of Vereschagin's picture, 'The Apotheosis.' The old world smelted in open hearth furnaces, cast into socialism. Here's an idea—get up a campaign for taking down church bells in the district."

At that instant they all saw an extraordinary sight: a pair of legs, clad in striped trousers, sticking from the pile of bells and twitching spasmodically. Their owner seemed to be crushed by the weight of metal. Platov took hold of the legs and tugged at them.

"Come out of there, will you!"

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“Let go, damn you! Keep away!” answered a furious voice.

But Platov pulled persistently. There was a sound of tearing material and the owner of the legs jumped up and showed a face pale with rage and a row of gold teeth gleaming in his open mouth ready to unloose a volley of oaths. But catching sight of Yuzov, he thought the better of it.

“You’ve spoilt it all!” he said, spitting dejectedly.

“Zinkin! What are you doing here?” cried Yuzov, recognizing his photographer.

Zinkin dusted his trousers and shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

“Comrade Yuzov, that idiot has ruined my last plate. I was all set for a great perspective shot. It was wonderful! This four ton bell, photographed from the inside without its tongue—very original! And he comes along and pulls me out just as I was fixing the plate.”

Vartanyan was shaking with laughter. Youth had come back to him. He clapped his hands like a boy.

“Bravo, Yuzov. This Zinkin of yours is inimitable.”

Korchenko’s face was red with suppressed laughter, but he glanced at Platov and became serious.

“What is perspective, Yuzov?” asked Vartanyan, wiping the tears of laughter from his eyes.

Zinkin rushed at him.

“Don’t you understand? It’s a photographic point of view. I’ll give an example: imagine a night watchman standing on a ladder, lighting a lamp, and me lying on my stomach and taking the shot. Then on the picture—he—I mean the night watchman, will look as if he were climbing up a skyscraper. That makes it original.... Smoke, smoke!” squealed Zinkin, rushing off and disappearing in the distance.

“Look here, Yuzov, I can’t stand any more of this, I’ve got laughing pains already. What smoke is he talking about?”

“He’s a splendid photographer, Vartanyan,” cried Yuzov with admiration. “He’ll get anything you tell him to photograph. There was a case once....”

At that moment they all saw Zinkin again. He was putting up his tripod in great haste, dancing about, bending to put his head under the black covering, showing a great smear on the seat of his trousers as he did so. He was projecting at the high stacks which were spouting black smoke.

“Just a minute, Comrade Yuzov... I still have two plates left. Look at this picture! A lucky chance. One moment . . .”

Korchenko cast satisfied glances at Vartanyan and from time to time at Platov.

“Comrade Yuzov! Will you please take a look at the objective? Very original! The picture will express the power of labour. Smoking stacks—the symbol of advancing socialism.”

Yuzov dived under the black cloth.

“Ye-es, we’ll put it on the front page, with the report of the regional committee. Zinkin—you’re an ace! It’s really wonderful, comrades. Just look at the sun striving in vain to pierce those shaggy clouds of smoke. Take a look, Comrade Platov. And you—Korchenko and Vartanyan.”

Korchenko and Vartanyan took turns under the black shawl and gazed at the “symbol of advancing socialism.”

Platov alone stood apart and gazed gloomily at the tripod.

“What is an ‘objective,’ Zinkin? And why are the stacks upside down?” joked Vartanyan.

Zinkin lifted a solemn finger.

“That means—an objective point of view. For example, a man usually stands on his feet, but when you look at the objective you see him standing on his head. It’s one of the technical laws of photography.”

“What stupidity!” murmured Platov angrily and ran towards the open hearth furnace shop.

“What’s the matter with him? Swollen head,” grumbled Korchenko. “That’s what comes of going abroad. His title of engineer has driven him crazy. He should be put in his place.”

They were nearing the open hearth furnace shop. Platov came calmly out of the boiler room.

“What was up?” asked Yuzov ironically.

“A very usual thing. The coal is not charged regularly into the boiler and the result is an incomplete combustion of fuel. Tons of coal are thrown out through the stacks. You were admiring the smoke just now—that black smoke is unburnt coal—black gold flying up into the skies! And you admire it like a lot of savages. ‘Objective point of view!’ ‘Symbol of advancing socialism.’ Bosh!” Platov turned sharply on his heel and disappeared in the black opening which led to the boiler room.

Korchenko flushed and hurried off to the electric power station.

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Yuzov walked beside Vartanyan with an ironical expression on his face.

“He has no aesthetic feeling whatever. He’s capable of drying up every source of inspiration by his technical explanations. It’s the American business man under the mask of a constructor of socialism.”

Yuzov went on to say that people like Platov were ready to bury every instinct for beauty in the rubbish heap, that they were a serious danger to socialism, which was concentrating on the development of art and the finer human emotions.

Vartanyan looked back.

A light transparent smoke rose out of the black, tall, steel-bound stacks, to disappear immediately as the breath of a healthy man does on a frosty day.

Vartanyan glanced at Yuzov and Korchenko and smiled. He smiled like a man who had just seen his own funny, smeared face in a mirror.

THE FOURTH LINK

1

The date set for the meeting of the regional Party committees was drawing near.

Korchenko locked himself up in his office to prepare his report. He was surrounded by files, reports and diagrams which overflowed the sofa, chairs and tables. He unfolded the large sheets of summaries, examined the columns of figures and glanced impatiently at the total. His eyes ran anxiously over the pages. He rang the bell.

“Call Benjamin Pavlovich. Wait—find Platov, too.”

Korchenko pressed his fingers against his temples.

“Why the hell did I listen to Vartanyan. What am I to do now. We’ve put this cock-sure boy at the head of the shop and now look at the fix we’re in. It’s a good thing Kraysky did not kick up a row and took on the new plant. But waste! What’s to be done about it? The percentage is increasing every day.”

Turchaninov ran into the room with his usual limp. “Benjamin Pavlovich, I don’t like the totals for these past nine months. We’re behind, it seems. What you said was quite different.”

Benjamin Pavlovich took the summary, set his pince-nez right and shrugged his shoulders.

“Peter Petrovich, you know under what difficult circumstances we are working. You know that the administrative and technical staff is doing its part, but various objective reasons prevent proper fulfilment. For example we are permanently short of certain parts which the Sormov Works ought to provide.”

“Yes, I know.... All that’s true, but just the same I don’t like the figures. How will my report sound? We have given so many promises.... Sent telegrams to the editorial office pledging ourselves to set everything right by July first. And the result is—one hell of a mess!”

Korchenko threw away his cigarette, he aimed at the ash tray, but it fell into a glass of tea.

“It’s unpleasant for me, too, Peter Petrovich. Believe me when I say that the reputation of our plant is as dear to me as it is to you. I’m very much cut up about it. You know—Akatuyev’s continual objections in passing engines interfere very much with the fulfilment of the plan. I have great respect for Akatuyev. He’s a valuable man and all that, but he is so fussy. Can you imagine that he refused to pass

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engine No. 7 because the glass was not in. And the engine was ready, mind you! Nothing but the bureaucratic rules of the Commissariat of Ways interfered with its being passed. It was the same thing with engine No. 8... Strakhov also has taken it into his head to be squeamish. Refuses to deliver an engine because there's some little thing wrong somewhere. I think it's outrageous! In general, Strakhov is too independent. I think he and Akatuyev have come to an understanding. He ought to be spoken to."

Korchenko seized the telephone receiver.

"Andrey Sergeevich! Come to my office at once."

Strakhov came very quickly.

"Andrey Sergeevich, why are you delaying the delivery of engine No. 6 of the June consignment? What's up?"

"The engine came back from its test run with its springs weakened and the crank of the driving axle out of line. You will have to wait until we make repairs."

"Wait? Why was that not seen to at the time of assembly? It's your own fault. You are delaying the delivery of this engine, and that leads to a delay in the payment of wages to the workers. Everything is going to the devil!" shouted Korchenko furiously.

Benjamin Pavlovich was examining his long nails with great attention and cleaning them with a match. Strakhov bit his lip.

"I don't deny it's my fault, Peter Petrovich, you are right, I missed it. That could happen to anybody—I am not trying to justify myself. But, since it has happened, I must correct all defects in the engine and deliver it in such a state so as not to be ashamed of it."

"You won't be ashamed, it's I who shall have to blush through your stupidity! All the dates we have set, all the promises we have made have gone to the devil. I have no wish to suffer because of your stupidity. You bet I haven't!" Korchenko turned the telephone receiver nervously in his hands.

Strakhov went pale and glanced at Benjamin Pavlovich with narrowed eyes—the calm movement of the man as he cleaned his nails tempted him to speak sharply, but he held himself in check.

"I'm surprised that all the reproaches are addressed to me. Benjamin Pavlovich keeps quiet, but he knows that I got a lot of spoiled parts, especially in the last few days. How can I make a good engine out of bad parts? That's the reason for defects."

Benjamin Pavlovich laughed nervously.

"You are very cautious, Andrey Sergeevich. Very much so and

even too much so. What defects are you talking about? We delivered engines before the revolution with those defects, and control was much more strict then, I can assure you. I think you want to be more catholic than the pope—you know of whom I am speaking? Really, Akatuyev would not notice such defects.”

Strakhov made a gesture of disdain.

“I have never yet given a button instead of a penny to a blind beggar, just because he couldn’t see. My honour does not allow it.”

Benjamin Pavlovich laughed.

“You see, Peter Petrovich, he’s up on his high horse again. Strakhov’s honour, indeed! What about the honour of the plant, Andrey Sergeyeovich? You’ve forgotten all about that? You will read in all tomorrow’s papers about ‘the disgraceful break in the Krasny Proletary Plant,’ and about ‘Specialists not fulfilling their obligations.’ Shame! Besides this thing is going to cause a lot of trouble for Peter Petrovich. Engine No. 6 must be delivered tomorrow.”

Strakhov bit his lips in silence. A blue vein could be seen pulsating on his temple.

“I’m sorry—but that is impossible.”

“Comrade Strakhov! The engine must be delivered tomorrow,” said Korchenko, trembling with rage.

Benjamin Pavlovich was watching Strakhov with a smile. He saw his trembling lips open and close again and his eyes flash for an instant.

“But I am obliged to tell inspector Akatuyev that the engine has defects.”

“It’s not you who will talk to Akatuyev, but the technical manager. It’s no business of yours,” said Korchenko, clenching his fists.

Strakhov opened his eyes wide.

“You must excuse me, Peter Petrovich, but I fail to understand you. I am responsible for the engine. I cannot hold my tongue. You can dismiss me, but I shall not agree to what you suggest!”

He took his cap from the table, crumpled it with nervous fingers and put it on backwards. He turned to the door.

“Naturally, if things go on in this way, we’ll have to part company!” shouted Korchenko furiously, casting a look of hatred at Strakhov’s retreating back. “I shall not allow the engineers who are under me to set Akatuyev’s opinion above mine. I’m master here, not Akatuyev!”

Benjamin Pavlovich nodded his head in confirmation and his

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pince-nez shook and looked as if it was about to fall off his nose.

Strakhov left the room, closing the door carefully.

“We must fight against such things, Benjamin Pavlovich.”

“We are fighting, Peter Petrovich, but then you’ve seen for yourself what they’re like. We are always fighting him and Akatuyev. Just as if we were class enemies. I worked here before the revolution, as you know, and it was always the same thing. Nothing changed, actually nothing. Things were a little easier then, of course. Speaking between ourselves—we’d get up a little banquet at the manager’s or a nice picnic party and instructions would become milder somewhat. Ha-ha!”

Benjamin Pavlovich set his unruly pince-nez right.

“What a fix—what a fix,” sighed Korchenko.

He thought of the meeting of the regional Party committee, himself on the tribune, below him heads and briefcases lying on the desks, note-books rustling. Those damned figures would spread all over the region. What a disgrace!

Benjamin Pavlovich had taken off his pince-nez and was examining them closely to find the reason for their lack of equilibrium.

“The spring is weak.”

“What spring?”

“Oh, I was only remarking on my pince-nez.... The spring’s gone weak, but I have no time to have it set right. I’m simply overloaded with work. You would not believe it, but in the whole month I’ve only had one evening’s rest. That was yesterday. Just a few of us, had a friendly chat. And even then I could not keep myself from arguing with Akatuyev, argued for a whole hour. But the way he’s always complaining about his apartment, it’s really awful. The house is old and has not been repaired. He’s got a very good grand piano which is being ruined by the damp....”

Krasky came in and reported in a short, business-like way: the construction of the new plant was begun; workers were coming in; a train with equipment for building and excavating was expected in a few days; the project was organized down to every last detail. He liked his work and wished to express his gratitude for the confidence shown him. The only thing which weighed on his mind was the serious condition of the open hearth furnace shop... that was evidently unavoidable until Platov got the shop properly in hand. He would be able to, of course. He was so energetic and knew such a lot.

He bowed, extended a limp, moist hand and waddled off on his

short, fat legs.

“That’s all very well, but what are we to do about these, Benjamin Pavlovich?” asked Korchenko, bending over the summaries again.

Benjamin Pavlovich set his pince-nez on the bridge of his nose and his eyes seemed to bulge behind the thick lenses.

“You see, Peter Petrovich, everything in this world is relative, isn’t it? Figures can also be explained relatively. And really, come to think of it, engines No. 7 and 8 are practically ready. They are actually finished, with the exception of a few trifles. Of course that will reduce production for August, but then in August we can make an extra effort and cover the shortage.”

Korchenko fumbled irritably with the page in front of him. Silence reigned in the room. The hum of a motor was heard in the distance. It reminded Korchenko about the meeting of the regional Party committee, where there was always an electric fan humming. He saw himself on the tribune again.

When Korchenko was sent to the plant he was told by the Trust and the regional committee: “Don’t let us down. Remember it’s the Krasny Proletary—one of our industrial giants.” And Korchenko had answered: “Don’t you worry.”

He always felt a tremendous responsibility for this enterprise, which had the interest of the whole country focused upon it, and always acted so as not to diminish its prestige. He worked tirelessly, honestly, assiduously. In his speeches he always asserted, with great assurance, that the plant was fulfilling and would fulfil the plan. This was always answered by applause, which reinforced his belief in his own powers. Korchenko was never dishonest—he spoke of things he had seen personally, things he was convinced of. He could not and did not want to deceive the Party with regard to the situation at the plant. Now he would have to say that the program of engine construction was not fulfilled. And he would say it.

“We could enter part of the August production on July first, Peter Petrovich.”

“But that would be”

“It’s very simple—the total will not be changed by juggling the amounts a little. And at least the plant will not be disgraced. We cannot allow our plant to lag behind the others. I’m a non-Party man myself, but believe me I’m not feeling this any less” Here the pince-nez slid down again, but he caught it with a practiced hand

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and set it back in its place.

The motor was humming outside like a great big gadfly which lacked the courage to fly in.

“As a matter of fact, both engines and cars are actually completed,” thought Korchenko, “there are only some minor details wanting. The engines would have been included in this summary, if not for the idiotic, bureaucratic objections raised by Akatuyev. What had that to do with the plant? What had it to do with him and that nice old Benjamin Pavlovich? Why should the plant suffer and lose its prestige because of this ever-lasting red tape?”

Korchenko felt that he was standing on firm ground and said firmly:

“Enter those figures!”

“That’s right, Peter Petrovich! Now I can go to sleep with an easy mind. Because I’ve been worrying all the time, you know. . . .”

Platov came in and Benjamin Pavlovich stopped speaking.

Korchenko unfolded the summary of the open hearth furnace shop with a nervous movement.

“The percentage of spoilage in your shop has risen ridiculously in the last few days. What is the reason, Comrade Platov?”

“It has risen, I know.... I’m studying this matter. . . .”

Platov leaned on the table, looking very tired, and examined the summary.

“You should have studied the open hearth furnace business in college and not now, when we need engine parts!” said Korchenko irritably.

“Perhaps I’d better go?” asked Benjamin Pavlovich, making as if to rise.

“No, please stay. How about it, Comrade Platov? You took the shop over from Kraysky in good condition. The percentage of spoilage has been reduced to the inevitable minimum, so I thought I could transfer Kraysky to the new plant, and appoint you in his place. Do you remember telling me you were not afraid of the responsibility? And what is the result? An enormous increase of spoilage in wheels, axle boxes. . . .”

“I don’t understand either why that should be,” answered Platov gloomily. “There may be various reasons. The composition of the batch, for example....”

“Not that, in any case,” put in Benjamin Pavlovich. “The quality of the casts is splendid, I saw the samples in the laboratory.”

“Perhaps the quality of moulding has deteriorated,” continued Platov.

“But the moulders who work in the shop are the very same, who worked under Kraysky. There’s evidently some other reason....” said Turchaninov meaningly.

“And what is that other reason?” asked Platov, stiffening.

Korchenko glanced at his intent face, noticed how grey and sunken his cheeks were. (How thin he’s got in those few days!) He replied slowly, emphasising each word:

“The reason evidently is that you have not the experience or knowledge that Kraysky has. And instead of acquiring experience from him you ignore him. Remember your speech at the engineers’ meeting.... I must again ask Benjamin Pavlovich to excuse you for your attack... .”

“Not at all! I’ve forgotten all about it,” cried Turchaninov, jumping up and waving his hands deprecatingly. “That’s nothing.”

“So, Comrade Platov, I’ve told you the secret of your failures. Keep it in mind. In any case, I cannot stand such a state of things long. Either you will get the shop in hand and lift it to its former level, without delay, or....”

“Or I shall go of my own accord!” interrupted Platov sharply.

“I hope that will not happen,” said Turchaninov with a conciliatory smile. “We need fresh forces, young enthusiasm.”

“You cannot make engines with enthusiasm alone, Benjamin Pavlovich. Engines need good engineers,” said Korchenko. “And we are short of them, very much so indeed.”

“Yes, we are short of them,” cried Platov and rushed out of the room.

Korchenko feigned not to have heard the last sentence and coughed angrily as he rummaged among his papers.

Pavlovich collected the summaries and stuffed them into his briefcase.

“We’re walking the same way, aren’t we?”

They went. A thick crowd was streaming out in the direction of the gates, carrying Turchaninov and Korchenko along towards the crossing. People jostled each other in their hurry, making themselves hotter than they were already.

The yard engines whistled shrill warnings, holding the crowd up on the tracks.

“Just think of it—a splendid grand piano ruined by the damp. F

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sharp won't work. We tried to play the Internationale, but F sharp did not sound—damaged through the damp,” cried Benjamin Pavlovich excitedly.

“Cultured people!” thought Korchenko. “They work like horses, yet get excited over some F sharp whatever that is.” He did not ask what an F sharp was, so as not to show his ignorance of music and sighed when he thought of his own uneventful home life and his continual worries. He felt contempt for himself for being behind the times and for his lack of culture. His children were growing up, running about the streets. His wife was always at her studies in the workers' faculty, he—always busy. The children ought to be taught German, music if possible. Were they to grow up as he had, not even knowing what F sharp meant? No, he would see to that!

Before parting from Turchaninov at the crossing, he said to him:

“Tell the building department to make repairs in Akatuyev's apartment.”

“That's right, Peter Petrovich, you are wonderfully thoughtful about people's needs. Because it's such a pity, you know—a splendid grand piano and to be ruined like that. I tell you seriously, we began to sing and there's such a wonderful half-tone change.... *Arise ye pris'ners of starvation*,” hummed Turchaninov in a shaky tenor voice, “*Arise ye wretched*—that's the place, *wretched of the earth*... that's where F sharp comes in and it won't sound. And further on: *For justice thunders condemnation*... F sharp again!”

2

Platov walked out of the manager's office with a nervous stride. He was so engrossed in his thoughts that he failed to hear Olya's voice calling to him in the passage.

She ran a little way after him, but seeing how hurriedly he walked she stopped. What was she running for? She just wanted to say a few words to him. Perhaps he saw her but did not want to speak. He looked very gloomy. Of course, he had so much to do now and no time to waste in conversation. Well, she could do without him! Olya shrugged her shoulders with an offended air and went into the plant trade union committee office.

Meanwhile Platov, still busy with his thoughts, was hurrying to the mechanical laboratory. He must once more verify the quality of the casts. Engine wheels had been spoiled for three consecutive days. What was the reason? Various suppositions came to his mind, to be

set aside and replaced by others, but none of them seemed serious. He had looked into all the possible technical reasons a number of times. There was not a hitch anywhere—the work went on as it had under Krasky, but the percentage of spoiled casts, rose at a tremendous rate. The open hearth furnace shop failed to fulfil orders for other shops and the entire program of engine construction was upset. Spoilage abounded like some dreadful plague which had fallen on the steel casts. Wheels, frames, couplings, axle boxes were returned in batches to be broken again and charged back into the furnaces.

Platov saw that all the technical knowledge he had was powerless to fight against this plague, but he would not own to being beaten. At times he fell into fits of despair—he sat nights poring over books and notes—and the “boss” would sit nearby, silently watching him. In the morning Platov hurried back to the shop and stood for hours over the moulders. The mould seemed satisfactory. Titych at last felt injured at being under observation.

“Are you going to stand over me forever? You think the old man is not working properly? That mould’s a beauty,” he said, striking it with pride. “There’s no need for you to watch over me, Senya. I’m as good as any engineer as far as this is concerned.”

Platov felt embarrassed and turned away.

He must now verify the cast samples again. If they really stand the test, then... what then?

He went into the laboratory and was immediately struck by the silence that reigned there. The various apparatus were bright with nickel. The shining disc of the “Sharpi” pendulum hung like a setting sun, throwing a red glow on the copper switches along the wall.

Ostrovsky was laughing noiselessly, winking to somebody in a corner of the laboratory and the pencil in his hand danced and drew whimsical lines on a sheet of paper.

“What are the results, Vera Pavlovna?” he asked shrilly at the sight of Platov and buried his nose in a list.

The hum of an electric motor sounded in the corner where he had directed his winks. The hum rose only to end in a crash, like that of a fallen block of metal, and a soft musical voice answered him.

“The same result, Ostrovsky. The specimen has split right in the middle. The structure of the steel is excellent.”

Platov looked in that direction with astonishment and turned back with an embarrassed air.

“Where are you rushing, Comrade Platov,” said the same vibrant

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voice behind him, and Platov felt the touch of a hot hand on his shoulder.

“You here? I did not know,” he murmured, moving towards the door, but Vera held him firmly by the shoulder.

“I came three days ago and am working here in the laboratory. And you? I’ve heard you were chief of a shop. You’re making quite a career, Comrade Platov. That’s fine. Ostrovsky, this is the man I told you about, we are old friends,” her voice broke and stopped.

Ostrovsky coughed meaningly and Vera remembered, she was in the laboratory.

“Look here, Platov, we were just testing samples of steel casts. Look at this splendid surface of the fissure.” She showed him a piece of steel rod.

Platov noticed that the steel was shaking in her hand.

“Your shop produces fine steel, Platov. Are you glad? You should be, yet you look rather gloomy. Maybe you are not glad to see me?”

Platov glanced at Vera’s excited face and added in a low voice:

“Why do you start the whole thing over again? I thought we had parted without any ill feeling?”

Vera’s face grew dark. She threw the pieces of steel on Ostrovsky’s table.

“Of course, and I want us to meet in the same way here. Oh! Ostrovsky, it’s four already. I’m free to go. Come on, Platov.”

She walked out, clicking her heels firmly on the ground.

Ostrovsky stretched his neck and stared at their retreating backs. When the door had closed he muttered:

“So, that’s how matters stand!”

Vera and Platov walked through the silent building.

“Listen, Platov, there are three kinds of tests going on in that laboratory: I test metal, test myself and am subjected to a slow torture by that long worm-like creature, Ostrovsky. The last is the most difficult and unpleasant of all the tests. He is a cold, slimy, disgusting creature.”

“And so you have put yourself to the test, Vera? Or are you still wandering between the two opposite poles of our epoch in search of the promised land?” asked Platov, with an ironical smile.

“No, Platov! I have found the promised land. It is here!” said Vera enthusiastically. “And I have come to that land so as to make it even more full of promise in conjunction with thousands of other

people. My travels are ended. I have left the hated island of solitude and spleen.”

“But, if I’m not mistaken, your honoured father still lives on that island,” said Platov with a smile.

Vera drew her light, fluffy eyebrows together.

“Let him live as he likes. It’s no business of mine.”

“No business of yours? Those words seem to me to hold an echo of the abandoned island. You still remain an individualist, interested only in your own world. He is your father, after all.”

“Let us not speak of that now. I am so glad to have met you. I am very happy. Look at me. Do you recognize the Vera of old?” She took a short run and jumped over a high pile of rusty rails.

Platov gazed admiringly at the smooth and easy movement of her body.

Yes, it was the same Vera whom he had liked to whirl round the room, to the sounds of the accordion, during their gay student parties. Where then was the other Vera, with her cold contempt of life, whom Platov had learned to hate. It was that other Vera which had made him forget the first—wipe her brilliant image out of his memory.

He was now seeing the old Vera again. She walked beside him, their shoulders touching, and laughed at her recollections of their Moscow parties. Her eyes sparkled and she seemed full of life and joy, emanating light and laughter.

They walked through the hot streets of the town.

“And so, Platov, we’ll meet as friends again, won’t we? I have a lot to tell you—very important things—but we’ll leave that for another time. And now, will you tell me why you came to the laboratory looking so gloomy and anxious? Why did you attempt to leave at once? What is the matter with you?”

She touched his arm solicitously.

“Things are going wrong in the open hearth furnace shop. I cannot find the reason why casts split like dry wood when we break them. I begin to doubt my own judgment at times. And I think I’m losing the assurance I always felt in my own powers.”

Platov drew his eyebrows together gloomily.

Vera looked into his face, which looked grey and aged, and felt a sudden impulse to make the confession she had put off for a later date.

Might it not be that what she knew had a direct connection with those cracks? She remembered her father’s face, distorted with

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hatred, his foaming mouth and lips twisted with fury. All she had gone through in the last few days, the strain on her nerves came back to her and she shivered.

“What is the matter?”

“Nothing.... I am a little upset. Listen, Senya.... I may call you that? I did before, you know?”

“I like it, Vera. I am glad to find you so changed for the better. I was always straight with you, you know.”

Vera clutched his hand.

“Senya, you’ve helped me with your straightforwardness. Do you remember calling me ‘a tearful intellectual’? My tears are dried, Senya. I hate my past. I am full of a new feeling—a feeling of respect for the labour of thousands of people and for advanced people like you, Senya, who take life by storm—a feeling of boundless admiration for absolutely everything created in this promised land.”

Platov smiled at her enthusiasm.

Vera hurried her steps.

“Well, goodbye!”

Olya was looking at them from the window. She saw them talking with animation and noticed their prolonged handshake.

“So that is what he is like! I suppose that when I saw him in the passage a little while ago he was not thinking of his work at all, but of that forward, fidgety girl.”

She felt a rising anger and her blue eyes darkened as they followed the white-clad figure which was disappearing down the street.

“Still thinking of spoilage, Comrade Platov?” she called with a laugh.

Platov stopped and looked at her.

“Yes, Olya, it is worrying me terribly.”

“You are right, something must be done, because our lathes are standing idle for want of wheels. Very bad business, comrade engineer.”

Platov felt the irony in her voice and his eyes took on an injured expression.

“You seem to be glad of it, Olya. I did not expect that attitude in you.”

* * * * *

Vera was pacing up and down in her room, still excited by her meeting with Platov. She fancied she was still walking beside him,

his sturdy shoulder touching hers, hearing his voice, a little gruff and yet so attractive.

Smiling to herself, she took off her dress, put on a pale blue dressing gown, sat down in an easy chair and opened her diary. The straggling lines on the first page reminded her of the day when she had felt dissatisfied with her empty life. She had written:

“I do not understand the new life, which that piece of pig iron, Semen Platov admires. He clashes with all my thoughts and feelings. His nature is foreign to mine. The new life is merciless to people who still retain tender feelings about nature or beauty, without which existence is meaningless. It breaks all those who refuse to bend to its iron discipline. It is cold and cruel. Like a gardener, it is armed with shears with which it levels everybody. I don't want this life. I refuse to recognize it. I shall retire to an island of solitude. I shall wait. Some day my ship will come and I shall start to search for the promised land which people have lost. And I shall find it! Be sure, I shall, Comrade Platov.”

Vera smiled as she read these peculiarly sentimental lines. How far away all that was now. She was on the shores of the new land. A land filled with human sweat and the thunder and smoke of industry, but as dear to her now, as that funny piece of pig iron, engineer Platov.

She flung the diary on the sofa. It slid off the smooth leather and fell on the carpet, opening on the front page. Vera shivered, as her eyes fell on those lines full of despair. She put her foot on the crackling paper. But as soon as she lifted her foot, the straggling lines stared at her again. She snatched up the diary and threw it into the waste-basket.

There was a soft, uncertain knock on the door.

“May I come in, Vera?”

The voice sounded hollow and vapid. Heard through the door it lost all expression and became wooden. Vera sank deeper into her chair.

“You are not asleep, Vera? I want to talk to you.”

Vera did not answer. She sat with closed eyes, biting her lower lip.

“Vera dear, this may be our last talk,” the voice shook. “It's my birthday today, Vera—I am feeling so lonely.”

DRIVING AXLE

A shaft of yellow light streamed from under the door, but behind the door there was silence.

He stood there for a little while, then went back to his study.... Life was cruel! It had taken from him his shares in the Railway Equipment Construction Company and given him a trade union card instead. It had further limited him to the prison inside of the plant fence, where he had spent eleven years of his life like a wolf in his cage. And now it had stolen from him his most valuable possession—the weapon which he most depended upon in an uneven fight. That weapon was now in strange hands. Was everything lost? She would not talk to her father. They were enemies.

Akatuyev sighed heavily and feeling that his heart started beating weakly, he doled himself out fifteen drops of black liquid. A heavy, medicinal smell filled the room. He felt more calm and went back to his desk, which was covered with manuscript. He dipped his pen into the ink and grew thoughtful. He had been at the plant for thirty years. He remembered that it had rained heavily on the day of his arrival and that he had to jump across pools of water (there were no pavements then) so as not to get his boots and the cuffs of his black trousers muddy. He remembered wiping his highly polished shoes with his handkerchief, before entering the manager's room. He remembered his own vigorous and stately figure, clad in a tightly fitting military outfit. At that time the sign board over the plant read:

ENGINE AND RAILWAY CAR CONSTRUCTION AND
RAIL ROLLING CORPORATION
Founded 1883

Benjamin Pavlovich was also nimble and sprightly in those days. His pince-nez held firmly on the bridge of his nose and there was a perpetual condescending smile on his thin, well-shaped lips.

Years had gone by. Akatuyev weathered the revolution. Pavel Yakovlevich and Benjamin Pavlovich were also still about because they were both necessary to the revolution. Socialism meant machines and engines, and engines meant Akatuyev and Benjamin Pavlovich. Therefore socialism was impossible without them. Was that the way they had been taught to form syllogisms when studying logic at school? Life was wisely ordained—it went its way, like a train along a track, and every train had its own terminal. Akatuyev noted down the itinerary of his life in his service-record, as a station-master notes the movement of trains:

“Arrived at such an hour.... Left at.... No damages.”

Akatuyev could be proud for he was making his way without damages. The Ministry of Ways and Communication had been replaced by the People’s Commissariat bearing the same name. Rules for passing engines had remained unaltered and Akatuyev had retained his post of inspector. There were certain new paragraphs and footnotes, but it was impossible, he thought, to make a revolution and to do without additional paragraphs of some sort.

He was sick to death of wandering about the shops and laboratories, looking after the assembling engines and sample-tests. Every day was just like the preceding one. Everything became a habit. Everything was horribly familiar and uninteresting. The management appreciated him—the engineers undoubtedly called him a fat pig behind his back but they made a point of showing him respect when they met. Akatuyev had reason to be content. He was well off financially and his budget was trebled by special additional payments for “normalizing engines.”

Still the revolution worried Akatuyev because of its unexpected surprises. Yesterday, for example, he had been told that Vartanyan had written to some place or other that he, Akatuyev, was not doing any social work.

He might have trouble. The reason probably was that he had done something to anger someone in the management. The fear of losing his position always reacted on his weak heart and he usually became nervous and went to bed.

But today he must write. He would fight with the weapon which was his sole property, and which had not been stolen from him. He had just finished a book entitled “Practical Manual of Engine Construction (the process of making, assembling, and testing the main parts).” He had only yesterday written that title.

AXLES

“Axles are made of steel, tempered according to existing technical rules. Most plants make axles according to a system of their own. Here is an example of one of these systems:

“The steel is cast in a pig iron mould, with a covering of chamotte bricks weighing 57-59 poods. Before going to the blast furnace, the cast is slightly heated, up to 50 degrees. It is then placed in the blast furnace where it is gradually heated up to 1,100 degrees after which it is sent to the hydraulic press.”

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Akatuyev's pen wrote quickly and easily in a good, rounded handwriting.

"The cast is not allowed to cool, but is immediately transported by cranes to the forge where it is shaped into an axle, allowing for the loss in turning, and an additional length of about 16 seconds for taking samples, tests, etc...."

He imagined this additional length being cut off for a sample and smiled.

"They won't do it, the rascals! I ought to go and verify it one day, just for fun. What if I went this minute and asked: 'Where are the samples? What? No samples? Must do something about it. I did not know, naturally. I'm only a fat pig you know!'"

"The diameter of the axle outside the wheel is made greater than the diameter of the orifice by 0.2 mm. This is done in order to set the wheel permanently in its axle, which is done by means of a press, in accordance with the normal rate of pressure specified by the State Department of Ways of Communication (Akatuyev smiled and ran his pen across the words "State Department" and substituted People's Commissariat).

The word *pressure* struck a hidden chord and he shook with burning hatred.

"Yes! My worthy comrades! Managers! Plant Committees! Regional Committees! Nuclei! The normal rate of pressure: that's constant—the same for capitalists and Communists. You have to submit to technology, to engineers, to the power of pressure! Submit then to the pressure of science! You have stolen my daughter, but you will have to submit to the pressure of science."

He did not notice that he was writing these words down in the text of his book and murmuring in a voice hoarse with anger, "Submit! Submit!"

Akatuyev dashed his pen on the paper and wrote in large letters: "Submit to the engineers, you scoundrels!"

His heart was beating as if it would burst, and his wet shirt clung to his back like a cold plaster.

"As regards the transition in diameter to the end of the axle which is to fit into the wheel, it must be effected with a radius of rounding which. . . ."

His hand shook again with helpless rage.

"With a radius which I shall not tell you about. That radius is my own property," muttered Akatuyev, making blots on his manuscript.

“I shall not let you into the secret—you who are masters of life will get it only with my heart’s blood.”

He felt quite exhausted as he wrote the following note in a shaky handwriting:

Sergey Mikhailovich!
It is urgent that we have another interview.
I am waiting for you. P. A.

He addressed the note to: S. M. Grayev, Kamerguersky, 43, Apt. 4, Moscow, 9.

After that he closed his tired eyes. He thought of the future. The long expected day would come and he, Akatuyev, would open his heart so that all might see the weapon he had fought with. The radius of rounding. Only two years. Two whole years, months, days. The semaphor was up and no one knew for what kind of train it was making way.

His muttering grew louder and louder. He sat with closed eyes, his heart beating irregularly, his whole body limp with exhaustion, but his mind full of the keen anticipation of the coming days.

3

The “boss” had a little garden surrounded by a rickety old fence. A garden with five apple trees, a pear tree and three red currant bushes, full of the smell of aromatic grasses.

Scores of grasshoppers were chirping in the grass. Apple tree branches hung to the ground, laden with fruit. Thick clusters of ruby-coloured berries hung from the currant bushes. The “boss” shook a bush and the over-ripe berries fell to the ground in a shower. The old man collected them carefully into his cap. The sun was hot upon his face; he closed his eyes under its blinding rays and when he opened them again, the red currants seemed like so many drops of blood.

He shivered and moved away. Why blood? Here in this quiet, sunlight garden. Oh, he had seen a lot of blood in his days—red human blood. It had flowed in streams in the streets of the old town. There were days when the plant was shut down and the workers, with their backs bruised by the lash of Cossack whips, ran to hide in alleys and cellars. It flowed like a river on the day when Volodya Pylayev was hanged from a telegraph post. On that same day old mother Pylayeva screamed in her little house, on the other side of the fence, in a voice which made one’s hair stand on end. And the last time he had

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seen blood it was on the pages of his son's note-book.

Was he to see it again?

Olya's laugh could be heard behind the old fence, in the Pylayev's kitchen garden.

"Oh, grandmother! You'll make me die with laughing. That's not a carrot at all, it's a horse radish."

Olya's red kerchief could be seen through the chinks in the fence.

"Come here, Olya," called the "boss." "The currants are ripe and there's nobody to eat them."

Olya jumped on the fence, making the old boards creak.

"Good morning, Kuzmich. I do like currants ever so much."

She jumped down into the grass and swooped upon the currants, picking them with her mouth. The red juice ran down her lips, leaving pink stains on her chin and neck.

The "boss" looked at her tenderly and laughed while she stuffed her mouth with currants like a greedy child.

"Youth!" thought the old man. "Sunlight, currants, blood, laughter and life." Maybe the drops of dried blood on Victor's note-book lived again in this spirited girl? Maybe it was his blood making those lips red, filling her with laughter and joy. Maybe it was his blood that ran into the roots of the currant bushes and gave the fruit its colour. Here was life itself, running riot in his little garden, plundering his currant bushes, laughing and showering red juice.

"Leave some for the engineer, Olya," laughed the "boss," blinking his watery, old eyes.

"He should look out for himself. And serve him right for running after minxes!" pouted Olya, diving deeper into the bushes.

"But he's a quiet man, Olya, he has no time for girls."

"Don't you believe it. He's already very thick with that Akatuyev girl."

"Akatuyev? Is that the daughter of Pavel Yakovlevich?"

"Yes—Vera."

The bush shook as in a storm.

"You don't say.... And so you're quite cut up about it?"

The bush cracked furiously.

"I don't care a fig. What's your engineer to me?"

"Who's talking against specialists? Show me that evil-minded person."

Platov appeared from behind an apple tree. There was immediate silence in the currant bush.

“Find her for yourself, Senya,” cried the “boss” jokingly-

Platov jumped into the bushes, but Olya slipped out like an eel. She made for the fence and was already half way over when she felt herself clutched in a pair of strong arms and carried towards the apple tree. She struggled to free herself but the arms closed still more firmly round her, holding her in a vise-like grip.

“I give up!” she cried and was promptly deposited on the grass. Platov stood over her, breathing heavily.

“That’s right, Senya. Give her a good spanking. She’s been eating all the currants and saying nasty things about you. Said you’d got entangled with the Akatuyev girl and forgotten her,” said the “boss” with a smile.

“I never said that!” cried Olya.

“She’s been telling him tales about me,” thought Platov. “So she does think of me.”

He sat down beside her, looking at her embarrassed face. She took off her kerchief and her fluffy hair fell on her face and eyes. Her striped jersey revealed the form of her breasts and Platov flushed at the touch of that soft strong body. He stretched out on the grass, taking deep breaths of the scented air.

The “boss” meanwhile gazed at them both, at the red currant bush and the red kerchief hanging on an apple tree branch. He was pleased.

“What are you smiling at, old man?” asked Platov.

“Because I think I’m seeing happiness again, my children.”

“Have you ever seen happiness?”

The “boss” drew his lips tight together and pulled his beard.

“I have, and not once either.”

“That’s interesting! Tell us about it! What is happiness like? What about it, Platov? Maybe it’s only a bourgeois prejudice. May a young Communist, and head of the children’s movement at the plant, dream of happiness?”

“You bet,” said Platov with a smile. “I permit it, and I want some, too, Olya. Tell us about it, old man.”

“I was not born here, my children, but in Dengubovka, about sixty versts from here. That was in 1844. You can count for yourself how many years ago that was. It was marshy country and we had swarms of mosquitoes. The village was surrounded by thick woods. The land was of no use for ploughing—whatever was planted near the tree stumps, perished. Yet the landlord had to have his tithe. We were the serfs of a landlord whose name was Sukhoyarov. He was a

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queer fellow! Always made us dig ditches in the forest. ‘You’ve got nothing else to do,’ he would say, ‘so you might as well dig.’ What he wanted those ditches for I don’t know. We worked for whole days at a stretch, so that we could hardly walk home at night—our feet refused to move. Yet we just wasted our days on that work. I used to wonder when it would all end, and if I would ever get any happiness in life.

“What happiness could I expect? Only to get rid of the ditch digging and to have my own little farm with a cow and a horse. I was young then, like Olya, strong and sinewy. I hungered for the soil. My hands were strong enough, I felt, to wrest crops from its bosom.

“Then came the day when we serfs were freed by the tsar’s decree. We collected all the spades and barrows and made a bonfire of them. We lost our heads at first from sheer happiness. But when we came to our senses, we started clearing the land of stumps to make room for the fields, and we worked from morning till night.

“The crops were that high!” the “boss” lifted his hand to the level of his head.

“Autumn came. We brewed home beer and got blind drunk and went about shouting with glee.

“But one day we woke to find that officials had come to collect payment ‘for the land which had been given to us’—so they said. We paid and got blind drunk again—this time to drown our grief. But we had no grain, so we went to our old master to beg for some.”

“‘I haven’t anything to do with you,’ he said, ‘you are free now.’

“So we lived from year to year. We ate weeds. Children died like flies. We cut bark from birch trees and made bast shoes, but if the foresters caught us they took our coats away and beat us.

“My parents found me a wife and I got married. We used to go out ploughing together, Katya and I. The mare mostly refused to budge, and time and again our wooden plough would break against the tree stumps. I became furious one day and whipped the mare with a stick. Katya cried and screamed, but, I beat and beat the mare on the head though I felt like crying myself.

“I thought all hope of happiness was gone and it seemed as if it had been easier digging ditches.

“Then the children came. They were born and died immediately. All of them were born before their time, because of the heavy work Katya did. She became as thin as a stick. ‘Where’s my happiness then,’ thought I.

“Then came a rumour that a railway plant was going to be built here. The villagers went in crowds and I went with the rest. We were set to dig at first, but later we were engaged to work at the plant. Machinery was brought. Such a noise and racket! There was a forest on the very spot we’re sitting on—some of the pines in the May First Park are remnants of it.

“I was scared stiff when I first saw a machine; it made such a noise and looked as if it would grab me at any moment. Still, there was nothing but hunger waiting at home so I went to work at the plant. They put me in the foundry to cast pig iron. My! but it was hot! We worked for twelve hours with the sweat pouring over us. The nights we spent in sheds. We lay down on the floor and slept like cattle. The foreman had to pour water over us in the morning to wake us.

“I saw that a bachelor’s life was of no use. We always spent our last penny on vodka. I wrote Katya to come and join me and started building a little cottage. It took me five years to build. I worked like a horse. Katya went to work as a labourer. We only met at night and then we were too tired to talk.

“We built the frame and put in a stove, but for five years we lived without a roof.

“Still the house, such as it was, was our own. I planted this very pear tree at the time.”

The “boss” stroked the rough trunk of the dry old tree with a loving hand and grew silent. Olya lay on her back staring up into the sky.

Light clouds, edged with the gold of the setting sun, flitted slowly across the sky. The old pear tree lifted its dry old branches as if to touch them.

“So life went on. I hated that smoky plant at first, but later on I accepted it. I was strong and deft. I had only one accident—spilt some hot metal; it burned through my boot and damaged the bone. Otherwise I did very well. Other men from our village could not stand it and ran away, but where was there for me to go?

“I began to earn more—life seemed to be getting easier. My fear of machines left me. In a word—I became a worker. I moulded engine wheels. I earned about sixty kopeks per day. I built a roof for the house and bought some clothes for Katya.

“I thought luck had come at last. When Victor was born, I was drunk three days for joy. I was forty then, and I hoped that this child at least would live so that we might have someone to support us in our old age.”

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The old man sighed heavily.

“Mitya was born a year later. Both boys were as tough as iron; strong and black-haired like their mother. Katya became quite stout and wore her clothes like the townswomen. It was then that I planted the apple trees.

“In those days the plant expanded until it reached to the very river bank. The boiler shop was built. The nail making and the rolling shops also. I saw it all done. There were more than eight thousand workers. The town kept on growing. I worked in the machine shop then. Had a lathe to work and it obeyed me like a dog. I grew very fond of my machine. A turn of the fly-wheel and it would start working—without a whip.

“Very different from the old mare with the wooden plough.

“But my luck soon came to an end.... A turner worked beside me—a poor worker, called Panyushkin. He was a sickly devil and there was always something wrong with his lathe. It so happened one day that he ruined an engine piston—an expensive part, you know! The foreman ran up to him and started beating him. Panyushkin fell on the saddle and his sleeve got caught in it. He was being mauled by the lathe—I stopped the machine and dragged him out. He was unconscious. Kraft—the foreman, a German—stood by and laughed. This was more than I could stand—I knocked him down with a heavy wrench I had in my hand.

“What a row! They took me to the police station. The whole shop was on my side. They threw up work and went in a body to the office. ‘Set Kuzmich free and we’ll go to work.’ The open hearth furnace shop joined with them, then the boiler shop, and finally the whole plant walked out. The police were summoned but our fellows met them with volleys of stones. They broke the windows of the office and dragged Kraft out in a barrow and threw him into a ditch. They got me out of jail and carried me around on their shoulders. The mounted police were summoned from the provincial capital. Then the real fight began.

“By evening the entrance gates were on fire.

“The machine shop building caught fire. Smoke and flames! It was a frightening spectacle. The sand was red with blood. They took away a whole train-load of people they had arrested. One of our new engines pulled that prison train and we never found out where it went. They caught me here in my garden, under this very currant bush. They beat me with lead-weighted sticks—I lost about five pints of

blood.”

Olya shivered and walked cautiously up to the bush. Some fallen currants glowed red in the grass and she drew back in fear.

She sank under the apple tree, very pale and quiet. It seemed to her that her hands, stained with currant juice, were blood-stained. She took her handkerchief and rubbed the dry stains nervously. She remembered her own street, the telegraph post, the silent crowd walking behind the flower-decked hearse.

The “boss” sat with bent head. Purple shadows were lengthening in the grass and trees. Evening was coming. An engine whistled in the distance. An accordion started playing, then stopped suddenly. The grasshoppers’ cries grew louder.

“And now I’ll tell you of my last bit of happiness, my children.

“I did my time in prison. Came home. The boys were grown up. Old scars healed gradually. Life started anew.

Only Katya was growing thin and coughing. I apprenticed both boys in the machine shop. They went to work and I thought I was going to enjoy life at last.

“Victor was a great hand at playing the accordion. There was no better player at the plant. His dance music set your feet moving. I was almost sixty at the time, but with a little drink in me, I’d start dancing myself. It is never too late to be happy.

“Suddenly—crash! The war came. Mitya and Victor had to go. I heard him play his accordion for the last time at the station. Katya died very soon after.

“Six months later I got a card with a red cross on it. I wanted to honour Victor’s and Mitya’s memory as is the custom and poured out a glass of vodka, but I could not drink it down.

“So I went to the machine shop. I wanted to smash my lathe to pieces. But I just took a look at it and walked off—I couldn’t lift my hand against it. And now I’m eighty-five, my children.”

Brown dusk had sunk over the garden. The branches formed a dark roof over their heads. Only the gnarled branches of the old pear tree were outlined against the pale background of the evening sky.

Platov lay still, weighed down by eighty-five years of human life—filled with blood and grief.

“And so you did not find happiness after all, father?” asked Olya in a shaky voice.

“Maybe I’ll find it yet. There’s something I must do—a man I want to meet and talk with.”

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He took a little book out of his pocket and drummed on it with his fingers.

“That’s my Victor’s book. A German sent it to me in 1918. A good man he must have been. Felt sorry for the old father. Karl his name was. You know some German, Senya, tell me what he’s written here at the bottom, that man Karl.”

Platov strained his eyes and read the faded words.

“ ‘Auf Wiedersehen, Großvater’. That’s what it says.”

“And what can it mean, Senya?”

“It means: ‘Till we meet again, grandfather.’ ”

“Till we meet—so, my children—Achviederze is it?”

The “boss” stood up and shuffled through the rustling grass to the house. He muttered to himself as if he were trying to memorize some valuable word.

4

The little station was filled with a noisy and excited crowd. People ran about the platform and obstructed the railway tracks. Myriad voices filled the air. Excited Pioneers darted between people’s legs. The brass instruments of the band shone in the sunlight. The station bell started ringing.

“It’s coming! It’s coming.”

The crowd swayed back, leaving the track free. Sasha Mokhov bounded across the platform.

“Quick, Zeitlin, have you got it?”

Zeitlin unfolded a red velvet banner as he ran.

The sunlight fell on the gold lettering and glistened on the copper ball at the top.

“Come here, Sasha,” shouted Olya.

“Comrade Vartanyan, you stand here, I’ll be in the middle and Sasha on the left. We’ll make a column of three generations.”

Vartanyan smiled and played with the silver-tipped end of his Caucasian belt.

“Right you are, comrade commander!”

The “boss” was pushing through the crowd. He got to the platform at last and catching sight of Platov, tugged at his sleeve.

“Come here, Senya,” he said excitedly. “Just tell me that word again. You know—the one you read yesterday. I’ve forgotten—Af Sidorya, is it?”

Platov repeated the word and the old man mimicked the sound to

himself, walking toward the spot where he saw a red banner waving.

Vartanyan was meditating on his speech of welcome. But the noise of the crowd and the feel of Olya's breath on his bare arm, would not let him concentrate. He turned and saw the "boss." The old man's dry, bloodless lips were moving quickly and he was putting on his spectacles.

"There's that queer old man muttering to himself again," he whispered to Olya.

"You're queer yourself, Vartanyan. That old man is worth three of us. Come here, Kuzmich! So. Now all four generations are present."

The "boss" obeyed meekly and took his stand beside Vartanyan.

"Look, you fellows, the 'boss' has got to the very front."

"He's putting on his spectacles."

"The old devil."

"Leave it to him not to miss a thing. He's thorough, that's what he is."

The train loomed around the bend. The blare of trumpets rent the air and the strains of the *Internationale* merged with the whistle of the engine.

"Show me the German," whispered the "boss" poking Vartanyan in the ribs. "Point him out with your finger, yes?"

Englishmen, Germans, Americans, Chinese, Negroes came out of a yellow carriage with large plate glass windows and were immediately lost in the crowd of workers. Outstretched hands met in friendly handshake—foreign voices sounded amid the din of laughter. Someone shouted: "Hurrah!" The crowd cheered the newcomers. The foreign guests and delegates from the plant organizations moved with the crowd. Sasha Mokhov had great difficulty in holding up the banner, for he was squeezed on all sides by human bodies. The solemn speeches which had been prepared beforehand were unnecessary. They were replaced by joyful cries and handshakes and smiles. A curly-headed Negro, with flashing eyes, lifted Sasha in his arms and kissed him. It seemed to Sasha that a hot black sun had brushed his face. He became confused—felt hot all over—forgot to shout "Always ready." Vartanyan spoke a few words of welcome, but they were not heard.

"Where's the German? Show me the German!" shouted the old man in his ear.

Vartanyan seized him by the hand and led him up to a blue-eyed

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German in a gay coloured sweater. The old man set his spectacles right, wiped the palm of his trembling hand on his coat, and extended it to the smiling, blue-eyed German.

“Achviederzen, friend,” he muttered and took off his cap. His white hair glistened in the sun. The German bowed respectfully and patted the old man on the shoulder.

Nobody, except Platov and Olya, knew why the “boss” looked so intently at the German worker, and why his hands shook so. He looked steadily at the laughing, light-haired man and his old eyes expressed deep gratitude.

When the crowd set off in the direction of the plant, the “boss” followed the German, trying to keep his bright sweater in sight.

* * * * *

Andrushechkin gazed sadly at the faded, dusty posters on the walls, sniffed the air, which smelt of stale tobacco smoke, and grew thoughtful. The Red Corner was empty. The meeting of the nucleus of the I.L.D. had not taken place again. Newspapers, magazines, and greasy papers were scattered on the table. A lonely pawn stood on the chess board. He walked out.

The first sight that caught his eyes outside was a red poster:

“Welcome to the Delegates of the Comintern Congress!”

He smacked his thigh and went off at a run.

“What an idiot—ought to have my brains examined.”

He rushed into Vartanyan’s office and stopped dead. Strangers, dressed in foreign looking clothes, sat round Vartanyan. They spoke a strange language and the air was filled with the fine aroma of cigars. Andrushechkin came nearer, staring intently at their faces. They looked calm and somewhat tired. Vartanyan was talking enthusiastically about the plant, telling them of the workers’ life and the new construction work.

Andrushechkin was struck by the appearance of one of the foreigners—he was extremely thin and wore an overcoat in spite of the heat and shivered and coughed continuously. He focused his serious attentive gaze on Andrushechkin, who answered the glance with a sheepish grin. The foreigner, a Polish comrade, smiled out of the corner of his emaciated lips.

“I see you want to make friends with our visitors, Andrushechkin. I’ll introduce you. This is one of our workers, a member of the regional committee and secretary of our nucleus,

Andrushechkin. A good fellow, only likes to kick up rows occasionally.”

“Welcome, comrade I How do you like our plant?”

“Very much, very much!”

The foreigners started to talk in German and broken Russian.

“It’s your own plant. Soviet engines are the best engines.”

“Everything isn’t going so smoothly, comrades,” said Vartanyan with a sigh.

The thin man went up to Andrushechkin, tapped him on the shoulder, and said in a low, hoarse voice:

“Good morning. My name is Lozinsky.”

“Why do you wear so many clothes in such warm weather? Are you sick?”

“Yes, comrade. I was in prison—Pabiyanitsy—have you heard of it?”

Overjoyed at hearing him speak Russian, Andrushechkin shouted:

“That’s fine!”

Everybody laughed.

“You understand,” Andrushechkin went on, “won’t you make a speech? Talk to our fellows about the International Labour Defence. They’ll come if you talk!”

“Your organization has helped us. Thanks!” said the Pole.

“We have not done anything yet, comrade. It’s a real shame. What if you made a speech after the plant closed? Maybe that would rouse them.”

Lozinsky agreed.

Andrushechkin spread the news quickly to his own and the adjacent shops.

The Red Corner filled with workers. Andrushechkin was triumphant. The room was covered with hastily printed posters.

“Comrades! Comrade Lozinsky will tell us about the way our comrades suffer in Polish prisons. He’s just out of prison. Tell us about it, Comrade Lozinsky.”

Lozinsky’s low, hoarse voice did not reach those who sat far back. There were shouts of: “Louder, we can’t hear you.”

Lozinsky said that he could not speak louder. He would tell them why!

A deep silence set in.

“It is done very simply.... They tie you hand and foot, open your

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mouth and pour in water. Litre follows litre. After a time you seem to have no blood or bones in your body—only water. You feel ready to burst—but more and more water is poured down your throat. Your body is like a balloon. You feel you'd like to prick your stomach so as to let the water squirt out, but your fingers are soggy with water and will not obey you. You bite your hands so as to let the damned water out, but blood comes instead. You fall into a faint. When you regain consciousness they pour more water in, litre after litre and the excruciating pain returns. The executioners prefer this kind of torture because it does not leave any outward marks."

Vasya Trusov swore profanely. Lozinsky stopped speaking. He looked tired. Andrushechkin sat pale and gloomy with his elbows on the table. He looked at the workers' excited faces and saw a new light in their tired eyes.

Titych had his grey beard tightly clenched in his dirty black fist, and seemed turned to stone. Trusov was wrinkling his forehead painfully and striking matches every minute. Lozinsky took his handkerchief out and wiped his wet forehead. The audience stared at him intently and it seemed to Titych that scores of hands, thrust through iron bars, were waving bits of red stuff at him from the walls. He closed his eyes and the whole world seemed to him an enormous gloomy prison, soiled with blood. Titych stood up in excitement, and was about to shout, but sat down again.

"And when they began their tortures we declared a hunger strike. It was our last weapon in the uneven struggle with the class enemy. We starved for thirty days."

"Thirty days?"

"Starved!"

"D'you hear that?"

"How could you? Thirty days! If I miss my dinner once I feel all wrong inside...." It was Vasya's voice speaking.

His unbelief set them doubting for a moment, but everyone immediately realized Lozinsky's terrible emaciation and felt ashamed.

"I say—the last weapon, because there was nothing else left to do. It may be difficult for you, who live under the Soviet system, to understand the reason for our hunger strike. You don't need it, but this system of struggle with executioners gives good results. If I am here today, it is thanks to it.... We won, after all!"

Lozinsky sat down, breathing heavily, and continued:

"They could not break us with torture, nor threats. I remember

once.... We lay in a stone cell, our wounds were bleeding, when your newspaper got to us from outside. We fell upon it, fighting for our turn. You see, comrades, what bolsters us in our uneven struggle, is our deep faith in Soviet construction. News of your extraordinary successes put new strength in us, made us firm as steel in our struggle with the class enemy. But we read that in some plants there were breaks, retreats, defects. And as we read, we wanted to shout through the thick walls of our prison, shout so that our voices would reach over a distance of hundreds of miles, so that you should hear us: ‘Comrades! Is that true?!’ ” Lozinsky shouted the words out and his voice broke. “And if these breaks are bitter truth, you ought to know how the enemy rejoices at your failures—how they harm our common cause, the cause of world revolution.”

Lozinsky uttered the words quickly, as if they were burning his throat and suddenly, in a last intense effort, he cried:

“Produce good Soviet engines, comrades! Make them for the day when you come to us again.”

And the crowd as one man, shouted in answer:

“We shall come! We shall come!”

The window panes shook with the noise. Titych waved his blackened fist in the air and shouted in a frenzy: “Here are my old hands! They’re still of some use for that purpose!”

Trusov’s tremendous, bass voice shook the air.

“We’ll smash the bourgeoisie!”

Andrushechkin saw tears running down Lozinsky’s face.

* * * * *

Andrushechkin came home late at night. After Lozinsky’s speech, he had spoken long and enthusiastically in favour of taking part in the work of the Workers’ International Relief Society, distributed old pamphlets, put through a resolution about giving up a day’s work for the benefit of prisoners in capitalist prisons, and collected an enormous number of subscriptions to the Society’s magazine. His feet were very heavy as he climbed the stairs, but his heart beat calmly and joyfully.

“Here I am!” he said as he threw the door open.

The familiar smell of the room struck his nostrils, holding a promise of rest.

He looked around. Everything was in its usual place, but Marusya was away.

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“She’s probably gone to visit some neighbour.... the door was not locked so she can’t be far off,” he thought.

He walked to the table, to get a drink of water and saw a small sheet of paper on it:

Grisha,

I cannot go on living with you this way. I am alone the whole day long, you are either at work or at meetings. What sort of life do you think it is? You are always telling me to read books—but I am a young woman and want to live. So I am leaving you. You will soon find out to whom I am going. Do not try to get me back.

Marusya

Andrushechkin sat immovable, his eyes glued on those curt and painful words. “I am leaving you.”

He looked up and saw his face in the mirror and remembered the Red Corner, the silence that reigned there—the solitary pawn on the chessboard.

He went up to the wall, took down his wife’s photograph and stuck it behind the mirror.

His eyes roved round the room, as if in search of some forgotten memory. He went up to the window and sat down dejectedly on the window sill. The maple leaves rustled over his head. An engine whistle cried mournfully in the distance.

5

The sun was rising in the pale sky, peeping through a narrow band of grey clouds. The air was getting hot and difficult to breathe. The heaps of metal exuded heat. Nosov was stamping with his little hammer.

Nosov took off his cap with a tired movement, and with the lining, wiped the clammy perspiration from his forehead. The feel of his wet shirt against his back was unpleasant—it reminded him of his illness, of the necessity of getting a vacation, and what was more—the knowledge that he could not get it.

Antonych had said so. He could not get his vacation. Nosov glanced with hatred at the little piece of steel in his hand, which contained so much power. It stood in his way. He could not hand it over to anyone, simply could not. It had become part of his life and dominated it, filling his soul with terror. Nosov looked round. The “boss”

was coming up, staring anxiously at him. Nosov made as if to light a cigarette.

Always the same thing....

Days, months, years went by and that cursed bit of steel dominated him. He had taken it so as to accomplish his heart's desire and build that house with the green shutters. This bit of steel had been the fairy rod which had given him the green shutters, the whole house in fact. The shutters were already discoloured and Nosov's cheeks were yellower than before, his breath more difficult every day. The fairy rod had built him a house which had an iron roof, clean window curtains and a soft strip of carpet on the floor. The desired life had come, but Nosov felt a dreadful emptiness. He could not drink because of his health. He had bought a gramophone to drown his sorrow, but its hoarse bellow only made him feel worse.

Despair and anguish filled his heart, sobs stuck in his throat, but his eyes were dry.

He remembered his fright when Andrushechkin spoke of thousands of gramophones whose hoarse voices would drown the glorious voice of the epoch! He remembered how he had felt at that meeting—was the secret out?—Bosh—only a fool's tongue stumbling on a half-truth!

He heard footsteps drawing closer. Someone was speaking.

"This is where parts are selected. Every engine part is carefully controlled and examined before being joined to the engine.

"Are you the controller?"

Nosov started at the sound of the foreign voice. Benjamin Pavlovich, Platov, the "boss" and a stranger in a fancy waistcoat were coming up.

"Guten Tag, Kamerad!"

A light-haired man in a checked waistcoat stood before Nosov, smiling with extended hand. Nosov gave him his moist palm with an embarrassed countenance.

"That's Comrade Kampf, a German delegate from the Comintern Congress," whispered Turchaninov. "He's interested in our work."

Kampf shook hands with Nosov, smilingly.

"Heavy work? I'm a metal worker myself. Go on controlling, comrade, do your best. Soviet engines must be the best."

"Comrade Kampf wants you to do your work as best you can, Nosov," Turchaninov translated, "so that Soviet engines will be the best in the world. He is proud of the workers of the U.S.S.R. He is

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struck and moved by what he has seen here. He welcomes the Soviet engines—the engine of the revolution!”

Nosov clutched the hot steel in his fist, fixing his frightened eyes on the German delegate. He stood looking yellow and bent, like an alder struck with early frost.

He still felt the touch of the foreigner’s hot hand on his palm, saw the blue eyes and the bright checks of his waistcoat. Then everything disappeared and the eyes alone remained, transfixing him with a persistent and accusing glance.

He sighed heavily and coughed.

The foreigner’s large, blue eyes smiled trustfully and the smile seemed so terrible to Nosov that he closed his eyes in anguish.

He staggered to the gate. He was not conscious of the engine which bore down on him, he did not hear its signals and the driver’s furious voice!

“Where the hell are you going?”

The train stopped sharply, but Nosov did not even notice it. He went on and on, tripping against the metal waste. He imagined that the blue eyes were following his movements and he started running.

At home he was met by the children’s joyous chatter.

“Dad, dad! We’ve seen a Negro. He’s given Sasha Mokhov a pencil. He’s black all over, as black as coal.”

“Our clock must sure be slow!” exclaimed his wife, never doubting her husband’s punctuality.

Nosov walked unsteadily into the clean, cool parlour, took the gramophone trumpet and dashed it against the wall, then he seized the gramophone and threw it on the floor. He stood there, stamping on the shiny trumpet, destroying his hateful reflection on its highly polished surface. The children crowded around their mother, weeping quietly to themselves.

* * * * *

The heavy engine axle rotated slowly, turning its newly forged, rough sides to the cutter, which bit into the steel, peeling off hard, short shavings. Mokhov watched the metal lose its roughness and turn into a bright engine axle.

The noise of hundreds of machines and the clang of steel seemed to hammer on Mokhov’s head, pressing it down, and he shivered as he leaned his hands on the cool, oily bed of the lathe. He wanted to turn and look around the shop, but the fear of seeing derisive smiles

on the familiar faces, kept him doing it. He glanced up and lowered his eyes immediately—the crane was hanging almost directly over his head and Olya glanced at him from her cabin.

Mokhov swept the shavings off his lathe with an impatient gesture.

“What is she staring at? We have a new boss, it seems. ‘Don’t dare beat your children.’ You should bear some yourself first. It’s hell, having young pups bossing over you... .” he muttered, furiously throwing the shavings to the floor.

All the things which had happened to him and turned his life topsy-turvy within the last days stood before him now in the shape of a malignant beast. It watched his every movement, snarled angrily in the clatter of machinery, pursued him to his home where it lurked in corners creating a dreadful silence, shared by his wife and Sasha who sat with lowered eyes.

It was Sasha’s fault! He had let him down—left him and his friends without vodka. He had forced him to hunt for hours before a bootlegger was found. Had Sasha obeyed his mother and brought the vodka in time, Mokhov would certainly not have been late that morning.

It was Sasha who had organized that panic—torches and bells tolling in the middle of the night. It was Sasha who had caused his own father to crawl on all fours in sight of everybody. And Sasha again had mocked his father at the gates of the plant. Served him right—that beating, and he’d get another if necessary.

Mokhov felt Olya’s severe glance. She had brought him a little yellow slip of paper yesterday—a notification.

“You’ll have to stand trial, Mokhov. Mustn’t beat children nowadays....”

Mokhov had crumpled up the notification and thrown it into the tool box. He needed a wrench very badly just now, but nothing on earth would make him go near that hateful slip of paper.

Imagine having him, Mokhov—an old turner—tried. The world was turned topsy-turvy indeed! He was not even allowed to handle his own son—could not look other people in the eyes now. He felt that he had been unfairly treated.

He would not go to the trial. He was neither a murderer nor a thief. He did his work as well as any of them. He felt more and more convinced that he was in the right, and yet....

Did not all those turners, planers, and drillers, who gazed at him

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so maliciously, whip their children? Of course they did. Why then should such a fuss be made about him alone? Was he worse than the others? And what had it to do with the plant, Olya and that boy Zeitlin? It was a family affair.

Mokhov walked to the tool box, threw the notification out of the window and was reaching for a wrench.

“Comrade Mokhov, I want to have a few words with you.”

Young Zeitlin came up to him.

“Listen, Comrade Mokhov, I’ve come on behalf of the Pioneer group and the Young Communist League. Your case will come up before the court the day after tomorrow....”

Zeitlin stopped in embarrassment.

“There can be no case of mine before the court. I’m busy and haven’t any time for gabbing.”

Mokhov drove the broken cutter out with one furious blow.

“Don’t get angry, Comrade Mokhov, it’s a public matter. You struck Sasha, while he was fulfilling a public duty. It’s a serious matter...” said Zeitlin glumly.

Mokhov grit his teeth and tugged on his wrench.

“I’ve come to you in a friendly spirit. We’re not interested in having you disgraced. The matter can be settled differently.... For example, say, you come to our group and repent—we’ll cancel the charge against you....”

Mokhov opened his round eyes wide.

“What do you mean? Repent before a lot of babies? I haven’t been to confession for twenty years and I don’t want to start now.”

“Choose for yourself, Comrade Mokhov, that’s up to you. But it’ll be worse if it comes to a trial. Much more humiliating. I’ll come in again tomorrow. I leave you to decide what’s best.”

Mokhov switched the gear sharply. The belt slid to the extreme left on to the very smallest pulley, and the axle started spinning with great speed. The lathe trembled, rattled and coughed hot shavings.

“You’ll break the lathe,” shouted Koshkin, who was working at Zaytsev’s old machine.

“I know what I’m doing. Don’t you try to teach me. There’s too many advisers here to suit me,” growled Mokhov, gazing gleefully at the rush of smoking shavings.

His fury abated by the end of the day. His heart beat with even strokes. The axle he was turning rotated calmly as if tired out with its mad rush. The cutter tore off the rough surface of the casting and laid

the bright steel bare. Suddenly Mokhov noticed that little dents, as small as the marks on Koshkin's face, became more and more frequent. Mokhov was disturbed. He stopped the lathe and called the foreman.

"Look here, Bulavkin—what kind of work's that?"

The foreman shook his head.

"Rotten castings we got. But they'll weld all this—it'll do. Simon Petrovich is forever telling us to hurry up. The program's not being fulfilled, he says."

Mokhov glanced at the familiar wart on the foreman's cheek and thought:

"People are also born with flaws." His anxiety was appeased.

"You're right—it'll do. They know what's necessary."

He measured the diameter of the end, moved the saddle and started the lathe again. The shavings ran in a thin spiral.

As the cutter bit into the metal, more dents, cracks and little gaps came into view. The more their number grew, the more anxious Mokhov felt, but he decided that was because of the morning's occurrence.

"I'll give him another good thrashing when I get home, for trying to teach his own father. Poking his nose into plant matters! I'll teach him to lay complaints against me!"

Mokhov felt uneasy. His one concept about life was threatened. Mokhov thought of life as a many storied house in which everyone occupied his own floor. The secretary of the Party committee occupied the very top floor. Managers and engineers were a little lower down. Foremen came next—and then the workers and their families. Mokhov cherished the security and orderliness of his mental diagram. Now he felt that the floors were mixed up. Zaytsev wanted to move to the engineer's floor—Sasha and Zeitlin, the little pups, were climbing over his body—and he, Mokhov, was being pushed down into the cellar. Life had lost all its stability.

"Court trials indeed! I'll show them! Repent! What kind of a new priest is he?" murmured Mokhov.

He went past his own house and went in to see how Zaytsev was.

Nastya was sitting on the porch and looking sadly at the workers who passed on the way from the plant.

"How's Mitya?"

Nastya made a hopeless gesture. Mokhov went into the room and was struck by the awesome silence.

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“What’s the matter, Mitya?”

A pair of black eyes stared up at him from the pillow.

“How’s life, Mitya?”

The eyes moved restlessly and became fixed again. Zaytsev’s yellow face was terribly thin. Mokhov sighed.

“Drop it, Mitya!”

The answer came in a hoarse whisper:

“I must go on with it, Mokhov.”

“Must go on with what? What are you talking about?”

Zaytsev closed his eyes.

“I must . . . must go on... I’ll get my rights.”

Mokhov jumped up in surprise.

“So you’re doing it on purpose? Avenging yourself? Are you mad? Or tired of life, or what?”

Mokhov stood with his hands spread out helplessly.

“I want to live, perhaps more than you do, Mokhov. But they’ve taken my life—my drawings. I was doing it for the plant, wanted to improve things and they’ve... they’ve... the dirty bastards....”

Zaytsev’s voice stifled and broke. Mokhov sat down, started up again, put on his cap, took it off again and wiped the perspiration from his face with it.

“I hate everything... everybody.”

“How’s that, eh? That’s not right you know, this thing I mean. Go and smash their dirty faces, Mitya!”

Zaytsev lifted his head with a frightened look. That thought had never come into his head yet—was it possible? He considered himself beaten in an uneven fight, he was rejected by the plant and so he rejected the plant in silent anguish. He could not understand why the old man had grown so excited. Mokhov waved his fists in the air and rolled his eyes furiously, shouting:

“Mitya! You’re an enemy! You’re your own enemy. An enemy to the plant! You’re like the dents in the axle. What are you doing, damn you? You mustn’t, you mustn’t,” shouted the old man, stamping his feet.

Nastya ran in.

“What are you shouting at a sick man for?”

“Bring some milk, Nastya. Have you any that’s warm? Pour it into a cup.”

Zaytsev was breathing heavily.

Mokhov lifted his head and put the cup to his lips. Zaytsev set

his teeth together.

“Drink, Mitya, drink, damn you!”

Zaytsev put out his stiff, blackened tongue and lapped up a few drops, then he opened his mouth and gulped down the warm milk.

Heavy drops of milk hung on his black beard. Tears rolled slowly from under the closed lids and down his face, mixing with the drops of milk.

His exhausted body absorbed the food greedily yet at the same time resisted it—a spasm choked his throat, the milk overflowed from his mouth—over Mokhov’s trembling hands.

“Just like a baby.... Drink, Mitka, drink. How could you be so silly, an old bearded man like you? You’re more idiotic than my boy Sasha.”

Broken by the forced feeding, utterly exhausted, Zaytsev listened intently to the tinkle of crockery. Plates, bowls, spoons clattered joyously in Nastya’s hands. She was glad of the success obtained by Mokhov, she was cooking her husband’s favourite dish. Zaytsev felt a pleasant lassitude, a slight dizziness, provoked by those sounds and smells. Life was coming back to him.

A continual rumble came from the direction of the plant—engines whistled, cranes creaked, steel clattered. Zaytsev visualized the plant, the workers, the machinery, his own shop....

Thousands of people were hacking, cutting, smelting and pressing the metal. It echoed and groaned under the hammers, cutters and drills, losing its shapelessness and forming into a thousand parts. These thousand smoothly turned pieces are fitted together by human hands and make up an engine. There it was, staring at Zaytsev from a side track and seeming to reproach him.

And he had been torturing his body for twenty days, wearing himself out with hunger and solitude. Those twenty days seemed a black gulf now.

Zaytsev shivered and drew the blanket up to his chin.

Nastya came in carrying a steaming pan. She looked cheerful—almost gay.

“Eat, Mitya, you must get well, my dear.”

Zaytsev snatched a piece of meat with his fork and munched it hurriedly and greedily. He felt he wanted to get up and go out immediately. His whole body breathed impatience. He was angered by the realization that those sounds, that metal, the smoke of the tall stacks and the silent engine existed independently of himself and would go

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on existing—life never stopped, not even for a second.

The weight of his error pressed on him. Full of helpless rage against his lifeless body, he threw his fork away and bit his pillow.

Everything existed as before and went on living.... Kraysky also. And he lay there on his bed and waited. For what?

He must get up. Get up and do something so that Kraysky would cease to exist.

He pulled on his trousers with shaking hands and put on his shirt, but the room spun around him and he sank back on the bed. Sleep overwhelmed him—his exhausted body, drunk with food, demanded rest.

He woke up early—only the rooks were awake and flying off to the fields in a noisy chorus, in search of food. Zaytsev jumped to the floor, cast a glance of disgust at the bed, put on his coat and left the house. He climbed up the sandy embankment and stopped near the engine. A few solitary rooks were hopping between the rails, picking grains of spilt oats.

Zaytsev stroked the black surface of the engine and felt drops of dew under his hands and sniffed the familiar smell of metal and fresh paint. He stood beside the engine, thrilling at its strength. He bent, searching for something in the complicated interlacing of parts. He felt the driving axle with his hands, stared at the marks and figures stamped on the wheel, but could not find the familiar signs—the axle had been turned by a stranger's hands.

“Isn't our engine fine?”

Zaytsev started and looked up to see a round face at the window.

“I'm going to accompany it on its run. Oh, I've delivered many engines in my time.”

For the first time Zaytsev felt that he had no right to rejoice with this man, or say “our engine.” He felt ashamed and moved away, walking quickly in the direction of the station, then turned aside, and headed towards the “Red Walk.”

A car rushed past, leaving a trail of blue smoke. The animated faces of Olya and Vartanyan flashed for a moment.

“Stop in front of that little house, the one with the garden,” shouted Olya to the chauffeur. The car stopped.

Olya jumped out and ran up the steps.

Vartanyan followed, admiring the play of muscles in her bare legs.

Nastya appeared on the threshold, barring the way.

“What do you want?” she asked, casting a gloomy glance at them.

“We’ve come to see Zaytsev. We must have a talk with him,” said Olya kindly.

“He’s ill and can’t speak to anybody,” said Nastya sharply. “Why d’you come to a sick man’s house at this hour? Why didn’t you come when he was well?”

She spoke in an injured tone.

“We’re in a hurry, comrade, and we’ve come on important business, for just a couple of minutes,” said Vartanyan.

Nastya looked at the shining, purring car with hatred.

“Are you engineers?”

“No, we’re from the Party committee. Will you please tell Zaytsev that we want to talk to him?”

“Wait here then. And make your infernal machine stop its noise. There’s enough noise here all day as it is. A sick man ought to have some peace and quiet.”

Nastya banged the door. She looked into her husband’s room and finding his bed empty, shouted into the yard:

“Where are you, Mitya?”

She spread her hands in bewilderment and went to look for him in the kitchen garden.

She came out again.

“I can’t find him. Maybe he’s at the neighbours.”

Nastya knocked on Mokhov’s door; he was not there either.

Vartanyan cast a disappointed look at Olya.

“Perhaps we’d better wait a little?” she asked.

“Oh, no, why should we. Perhaps he’s not interested in seeing us, And we must go to the meeting of the regional Party committee—we’re late as it is. Come on. But I’ll give Telezhkin a good talking to just the same.”

6

The car sped towards the crossing. The barrier was down. A string of new cars was passing. A new engine, with its cranks wrapped up, was in the middle.

“Our engine!” exclaimed Olya proudly.

Vartanyan gazed thoughtfully at the endless line of red cars and bit his lips. He was angry at himself. He ought to have attended to Zaytsev’s case before. Telezhkin had not fulfilled his instructions and

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he had not verified the fact in time. He could not forgive himself for it. Being exacting to others, he was much more so to himself.

“We’ll be in trouble yet, because of those engines, Olya,” he said thoughtfully. “And serve us right, too!” The car lurched on the uneven road, screeching as it cut around corners, then rushing forward again only to pull up suddenly before some exceptionally deep rut.

“You admire that engine, Olya. Its beauty and power. That’s understandable, but you can’t imagine how sad at heart it makes me. I feel anxious about it—responsible for anything that might happen to it. That engine’s with me day and night. I went to bed at four this morning and it’s the same almost every day.”

“At four? Then you haven’t slept at all? You won’t last long that way!” Olya scrutinized his tired face.

“I know it. It’s inevitable. We’re on the march. All must be sacrificed to future victory. Can a victory be won without its toll of maimed and dead? Work, sleepless nights and anxiety are the lot of our generation. I can’t even go and see my little son. I start writing him a letter every day and can never finish it. No time.”

“But, you’ll make yourself ill, Vartanyan! A human being is not a machine, after all! Do you work without joy or pleasure then? You’re always glum and uncommunicative and your eyebrows are always drawn together. What kind of life is that?”

“Yes, people say I’m stern, sharp and coarse. But those who say it are mostly people who are reprimanded by me for their carelessness. I’m merciless to such people and they don’t like me. But I’m not always like that. I feel joy and pleasure, too. But I can’t explain these feelings to you, Olya. They’re very complicated. The funny thing is that they come at moments of great tension and exhaustion. Sometimes I am dead tired when night comes, yet I cannot sleep and sit alone for hours, thinking, walking up and down, until my feet refuse to carry me. The years of my life given up to the revolution, pass before my eyes! The war—Party discussions, victories and failures. I gather new strength from these memories. But anxiety comes back in the morning. Is the present not made up of these things?”

The car rushed into the streets of the regional town, Zvansk. Grey houses, steeple-less churches, wooden sidewalks, sign-boards, flashed by and were swallowed up by the vanishing road. The car rushed down, as if to plunge on the glass roofs of the plant buildings which clustered at the foot of the hill.

“What a small plant! It can’t compare with ours....” said the

astonished Olya. "But the river is beautiful here. Look at it, Vartanyan."

"We'll get it in the neck at this conference, Olya. You'll see. And serve us right," murmured Vartanyan. Absorbed in his thoughts he did not see either the river or Olya's admiring eyes.

The meeting was assembled when they arrived. The snub-nosed, bald-headed secretary of the regional Party committee, rang his bell.

"Shall we begin?"

Vartanyan opened a newspaper. On the front page was a half page picture of smoking stacks and an engine with the caption:

THE WORK OF THE KRASNY PROLETARY MUST BE
PLACED UNDER THE FIRE OF SELF-CRITICISM

Vartanyan ran his eyes over the leader and turned the page. An article, signed by Kraysky, entitled "The Open Hearth Furnace Shop Struggling For The Industrial And Financial Plan," filled seven columns on the second page.

"Comrade Korchenko will make a report on the first point on the agenda."

Korchenko walked up the steps of the tribune without undue hurry and took a fat bundle of papers from his briefcase.

"Oh-my, oh-my, those papers are good for at least three hours," said a protesting voice. "Can't you make it shorter?"

Vartanyan turned round at the sound of that voice and shook hands with a man in military uniform,

"Good morning, Volsky. Kicking up a row, aren't you? You're accustomed to act quickly and with few words in your department, but that can't be done here, you know."

"We've no time to lose, Vartanyan."

"Comrades! I shall begin my report by giving you a short sketch of the situation in which the plant was a little while ago, so that you may get a clearer idea of the things we have done in the last two years, and be able to judge better of the progress we have made. I must remind you, comrades, that our plant is very old, technically backward and its production process is antiquated. These things hamper the work a great deal but, in spite of them, we have obtained important successes..."

Korchenko's report flowed on glibly.

Volsky bent towards Vartanyan.

"I don't like these reports which begin with successes, They

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sound too good.”

Yuzov attacked him on the left:

“Haven’t I done things well? Not only a leader of two hundred lines, but an article which I’ve had to write myself. You should read it, Vartanyan.”

“Comrades! The problem of how to make proper use of specialists is of decisive importance in our work. I want to remind you that Lenin raised that question in 1919, when, at the VIII Congress of the Party he said that, in the transitory period, we must give specialists the best living conditions we can. That will be the best policy, the most economic way of management. Otherwise we will economize a few hundred millions, but we can lose so much, that no expenditure, even to the amount of billions, will restore the loss. You see how clearly, simply, the question was formulated by Comrade Lenin. And so, following the Bolshevik principle, the management of our plant introduced the system of bonuses for specialists, dependent on the degree of fulfilment of the plan for each given shop. We have fixed a bonus for shop plan fulfilment and also for general plan fulfilment. In that way we are killing two birds with one stone. ..

“Take care you don’t miss both!”

Everybody turned round.

“Do you know who that was?” asked Yuzov, nudging Vartanyan. “I have cause to know the voice. It’s that restless devil—Andrushechkin. He’s a member of your district committee, isn’t he?”

Korchenko had lost the thread of his idea and was irritably turning over the material that lay before him.

“I shall continue. Instead of shouting here, Andrushechkin, you would do better to work properly in your shop. The open hearth furnace shop is the weakest spot of our plant. We **had it set right, through** the efforts of our specialists, and especially engineer Kraysky. The percentage of spoilage had been brought to a minimum. Unfortunately, as soon as Kraysky was transferred to the construction of the new plant, the shop went back to its former state in that respect, although we appointed Comrade Platov, a Red specialist, as chief. We evidently acted too hastily and made a mistake. We shall have to make use of Kraysky again. That is why the inimical attitude towards specialists, which has been increasing lately, and in which, I feel certain, the people at the head of the shop have a hand—the Communists, I mean—is especially harmful at present. We must take care of men like Kraysky. The fate of our engines is in their hands....

“It is in our hands!” shouted Platov, paling.

“Tell us what care you give to the workers and what the opinion in the shop is?” put in Andrushechkin.

Korchenko decided to leave these remarks unanswered.

He was coming to the results of the six months’ work and the closer he got to the summary, the more anxiety he felt.

“Comrades, all those conditions have enabled us to fulfil our industrial and financial plan with success.” Korchenko caught sight of the total figure, written over in red ink, but he did not name it. “We have, it is true, to take into account a hundred bureaucratic quibbles on the part of the inspection of the People’s Commissariat of Ways, in passing our products, which complicates our work to a great extent. Still we... Korchenko caught sight of the red figures again and for a second he seemed to see engines, without funnels or sheaths, showing their rough sides. “Still we have been able to fulfil our program by July first...” He searched for words, carefully avoiding the figure **which** stared persistently at him. He felt there was something wrong about it. Maybe, because the red figures were done in a straggly hand, or was it because the black figures of another amount persisted in peeping from under their red network... He looked before him and stopped in embarrassment.

Hundreds of eyes were fixed on him, watching the movement of his lips.

“Go on, Comrade Korchenko!” said the secretary of the regional committee, turning to him.

Korchenko realized that he was standing silent, paralysed by the conflicting red and black figures. He was not accustomed to compromise with his conscience. He had always told the Party the truth. He would tell it now...

“And so our total figure for this period, a figure which has been influenced by the unfavourable conditions of this year is...”

The members of the presidium held their pencils ready.

“The total figures are as follows: with respect to engines, the plan is fulfilled with a...” he saw the black figure and stammered.

“I can’t tell them,” he thought, “people expect success from the Krasny Proletary. The whole territory, Moscow itself, will know tomorrow.”

He looked over the faces before him and suddenly caught sight of Andrushechkin’s spiteful face and Platov’s inimical glance.

“With a little... surplus, that is—by 100.5 per cent.”

DRIVING AXLE

“Fine!”

“I told you Korchenko would not let us down,” said Yuzov, nudging Vartanyan.

“The same thing with regard to railway cars—100.7 per cent fulfilment, that is—a little in excess as regards the main production items.”

Somebody gave a timid hand clap and after that the whole room shook with applause.

Korchenko calmly lit a cigarette and became engrossed in the newspaper:

THE STEEL HEART

By Yuzov

The July sun is powerless to conquer the electric light, generated by the rumbling giant. Its ancient light is powerless to outshine it. I see a welder, armed with an electrode, challenge the sun. The steel boils and melts. The electric light flutters like a violet-winged bird. A square piece is cut out of a steel ingot. I do not know what it is meant for and do not want to take up the welder's time by asking, so I write down the number of the ingot—1007. I know that, in its pre-ordained progress from shop to shop, that piece of metal will become the steel heart of the “SU” express engine which is the pride of the Krasny Proletary.

When I go into the mechanical laboratory, a couple of hours later, I see that same piece of steel being tested. Its powers of resistance and solidity are tested here. Pressed, crushed, torn, it still remains intact. A twenty kilogram ram strikes the piece of steel fifteen times in one spot, from a height of two metres, but it stands the test. After that it is placed in an apparatus to test its degree of fragility, and a twenty-five kilogram, shining nickel pendulum tears the metal and its index shows the fine quality of steel. I see the contented face of engineer Ostrovsky, who strokes the steel affectionately and says:

“A splendid sample of cast, Comrade Yuzov! Such an engine axle will stand hundreds of thousands of kilometres.”

I understood then that the labour of the welder who cut the ingot and the labour of the engineer merge in one common enthusiasm, directed to a common end.

The “SU” is the pride of the plant. Its light, lean body is the symbol of speed and impetuosity, the symbol of the new tempo of socialist construction.

The whole plant collective of sixteen thousand people, from the welder to the engineer, burns with the enthusiasm of this greatest of epochs!

“Fine!” muttered Korchenko in a pleased tone.

“Idealized!” shrugged Volsky.

Yuzov shook his head in a condescending manner.

“It’s difficult for you to judge, comrades. But you must understand that a proletarian artist fights for the ideals of his class, for the transformation of life, criticizes his enemies, blames some sides of modern life and, if necessary, idealizes others. It’s the initial principle of creative art. Idealizes—that’s right.”

“And where do you, the author of this article, ‘criticize your enemies’? I don’t see it. It’s nothing but literature,” growled Volsky contemptuously and turned away to examine Andrushechkin’s gloomy face with great attention.

Korchenko suddenly became restless.

“Listen here, Yuzov, you’ve got it wrong. Samples of casts are not taken from ingots. Additional size is allowed for the purpose of forging the axle. You’ve got it wrong, I tell you. Can you tell me what you saw: an axle or an ingot, or was it a cow? Oh, you writers...!”

The discussion began and Andrushechkin asked to speak first.

His short figure disappeared behind the tribune and only the round head with its shock of hair showed above the desk.

“I shall not say much. I have neither summaries nor figures. But I declare that I do not believe Comrade Korchenko’s figures. No, I don’t believe them in the least! He said the percentage of spoilage in the open hearth furnace shop had been reduced to nine per cent thanks to Kraysky—I don’t believe it.”

“You must give facts. What are your facts?” interrupted Korchenko nervously.

Andrushechkin saw that the faces of the audience had become attentive and were all directed towards him.

“Comrade Korchenko spoke of one-man management and referred to the Central Committee, but I tell you that, should I see cracks on the wheels of an express train, I’d take both the worker and the specialist who had allowed it to happen by the scruff of the neck.

DRIVING AXLE

Why, it's unbearable ! I must obey and it would seem that it's not my business to interfere, but I'll say that no amount of patience will stand it. What the hell do we want this one-man management for if it does not do things properly? Now as regards specialists....”

Yuzov was called to the telephone. As he passed near Andrushechkin, he murmured sarcastically:

“We all know you're a specialist baiter!”

“Comrade Korchenko has been quoting Lenin.... Well, I don't know about that, haven't read it, maybe Comrade Lenin did write about specialists. Let us say he did. But, comrades, if Comrade Lenin could come out of his mausoleum now and have a look at our specialists, he would not only say 'no bonus,' but also 'kick them out of the plant.' ”

The audience laughed.

“Facts!” cried Korchenko. “This is demagoguery.”

“I tell you again that I don't believe in those specialists whose praises Korchenko sang just now. Everybody in the shop feels the same way. All the workers are against specialists and that is right, comrades, hundred per cent right! They're all the same!”

“I must stop Comrade Andrushechkin,” said the secretary of the regional committee, rising. “This is out and out persecution of specialists.”

“I'm through as it is,” said the excited Andrushechkin, coming down from the tribune and, as he sat down in his seat, he cried shrilly and nervously:

“I don't believe in the figures! I don't trust the specialists!”

He turned round, in search of support, but everybody was looking coldly and accusingly at him. Yuzov came in at that moment and threw a paper down on the table of the presidium.

“Here's an incident that illustrates Andrushechkin's speech:

To the Editor of *Zvansky Rabochy*.

The chief of the open hearth furnace shop, engineer Kraysky, was assaulted this morning by Zaytsev—a worker of the Krasny Proletary plant. Zaytsev hid himself near Kraysky's house and, as the latter left it, struck him on the head with a stone. Several other engineers interfered in time to prevent a possible murder, and Kraysky escaped with a head contusion. It has been ascertained that Zaytsev was discharged from the plant after ruining an expensive engine

part. During the last weeks he was ill with an attack of neurasthenia and never left his house. It is supposed that the assault was perpetrated in a fit of insanity. Zaytsev has been placed under observation in a hospital for mental diseases. The plant committee held a special meeting at which it excluded him from membership in the trade union. The case is in the hands of Comrade Glezer—examining judge of the regional court....”

All eyes were intently fixed on the presidium. Yuzov looked at Andrushechkin and shook his head.

Vartanyan mounted the tribune.

“Comrades! We have just heard about an assault on the person of engineer Kraysky. This is the second case we have had lately and so we must be very energetic in repulsing antagonistic attacks upon specialists. We must condemn Comrade Andrushechkin’s speech, for example. Things have evidently gone too far and we must take drastic steps.”

Korchenko glanced at Platov and smiled significantly. “Now as regards our discussion.... I understand Comrade Korchenko’s desire to have our plant in the front ranks. We all share it, I am sure. But it is my opinion that we must subject Korchenko’s report to criticism, especially because he left out the question of quality altogether. The quality of production is bad. We have had a warning from the workers of the Kursk depot, but the management has paid no attention to it, has not verified its staff properly, nor given sufficient care to this matter. The quality of production is an indication of the quality of the staff and economic management. We are threatened with great trouble in the future, unless we immediately rectify the situation. We may actually be refused permission to build a second mechanized plant.”

Vartanyan spoke of insufficient attention being given to the workers’ opinion, giving Zaytsev’s dismissal as an example and declared that the District Committee was obliged to take Telezhkin from the factory committee.

“In closing, I must admit, with all Bolshevik candour, that I am not satisfied with the work of the plant. I do not size up the situation on the basis of the satisfactory percentage which Korchenko has reported. It’s more difficult for me to say it than it would be for anybody else, but I declare we are doing bad work, things are not going right at the plant!”

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Vartanyan's declaration created a sensation—it was the first time that the committee had witnessed such marked difference of opinion on the part of the two men who were at the head of the plant.

“Have you had a quarrel with Vartanyan?” asked the secretary of the regional committee of Korchenko in an undertone.

Korchenko did not answer. He could not understand things taking such an unexpected turn. He had compromised with his communist conscience and chosen the red figures, so as to uphold the prestige of the plant. He had had a long and painful struggle with himself, but his work was thus suddenly frustrated. Of course, Vartanyan would gain from this self-criticism and he needed to raise his political reputation so as to make the Party forget his former mistakes. That was clear. If Platov spoke now, he, Korchenko, was undone.

But Platov did not speak. He sat with tightly drawn lips, sunk in deep thought.

Korchenko's face quivered with a suppressed sense of injury as he began his closing speech.

“I have not come here to confess my sins, as Vartanyan would have it. That evidently becomes the profession of people who often make mistakes and are in need of confessions. I am not in need of it so far. Of course, there are many defects, but is that a reason for getting into a panic? It would naturally be much more easy to say: 'everything is all wrong.' Acting is much more difficult than talking. We need the spirit of firm assurance which characterizes Yuzov's splendid article. I recommend it to those who see nothing but the bad side. Every line of that article rouses the enthusiasm of the reader and a feeling of pride in the Soviet plant. It is with that feeling of proletarian pride that I leave this tribune.”

There was some scanty applause, which died down almost immediately. The secretary of the regional committee went up to the tribune with the resolution in his hand.

“Comrades! In spite of all that's been said just now, we shall support Vartanyan—he has spoken like a Bolshevik.”

The resolution was accepted in dead silence. It contained the opinion expressed by Vartanyan.

It was night when they went home. Korchenko took the silent Platov home in his car and stepped out before his own door, feeling absolutely spent. In his study he found a telegram under a cup of cold milk. Korchenko opened it listlessly, while he sipped the milk. All of a sudden, the cup started shaking in his hand—the milk spilt over the

table and trickled to the floor.

He followed the curt sentences of the telegram. The heavy drops of milk fell with a loud patter.

The sounds of a piano and singing voices could be heard from somewhere. The words of the song could not be distinguished, but the sounds reminded Korchenko of Benjamin Pavlovich and the pince-nez which was always falling off his nose.

“F flat. F flat.”

“Hello—is that the man on duty? Find me Benjamin Pavlovich! Yes! He’s to come here! Yes—yes! Immediately!” shouted Korchenko hoarsely into the telephone.

7

“You’ll excuse me, Andrey Sergeyevich, but you are not a far-sighted man. More than that—you’re near-sighted.”

Benjamin Pavlovich cast a sly glance at Strakhov and sipped his cold tea.

Strakhov sat in a wicker rocking-chair, with his legs stretched out, sunk in deep thought, dropping cigarette ashes on his shirt.

“You’ll burn holes in your shirt, some day, Andrusha,” said Lyalya, dusting the ashes off carefully with her handkerchief. “Do you know, Benjamin Pavlovich, my husband has become terribly absent-minded lately.”

“He ought to do less thinking, this husband of yours, or he’ll fall sick one of these days. I always wonder about you, Andrey Sergeyevich—you are successful in everything—work, family life....” Lyalya grew pink and fanned herself with her handkerchief. “Where do you get your energy? But then you are still young and your blood has not yet grown sluggish. My heart and eyes are like a cracked engine cylinder. It’s all ‘sour grapes’ to me, I’ve lived too well in my youth, ha, ha!” The pince-nez fell off, but his hand, which was holding a biscuit, was not in time to catch them and they fell on the floor.

Krasky, Brooks and Zorin sat on the leather sofa. Ostrovsky stood at their side—telling a funny story. Krasky rested his bandaged head against the back of the sofa and looked intently at Strakhov—he was evidently interested in the conversation and not in Ostrovsky’s jokes.

“This spring is quite loose,” said Benjamin Pavlovich, disconsolately, trying it with his finger. “You see, I’m near-sighted myself, but I am armed with my control over technique—that is my

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magnifying glass—while you, Andrey Sergeyevich, are blinded by your love of technique, which makes you near-sighted. How could you for a moment think, when we had that talk in the manager's office, that I agreed with him at all?"

Strakhov looked astonished.

"But, Benjamin Pavlovich, you said I was too scrupulous, and thereby delayed the delivery of engines and ruined the prestige of the plant. Did you say it, yes or no?"

"Of course I did," said Benjamin Pavlovich, nodding in confirmation, while his pince-nez shook in preparation for a new fall.

"I fail to understand you then," said Strakhov.

"That's just what I am talking about—your near-sightedness. You came in and said 'I cannot' straight away. Do you think you were right? Do you think I am in the habit of talking to him straight like that? I would be a fool if I did and would lose all self-respect forever. If the manager wants a thing to be done in time—do it."

"But in what way? It can be done in various ways."

"You are naive! Even Lyalya blushes for you.... Do as you like, but set the man's mind at rest. You have been at this plant a scant three years, while I have been here for thirty-three years and have worked under eleven different managers since the revolution alone. Just think of it—eleven! And I am still in line, as you see, while you go and injure yourself from the very start. 'I can't,' up on your high horse immediately, prancing about in your armour of principles. That's not sensible."

Strakhov lit a new cigarette, after breaking a number of matches in his nervous fingers.

"I am no politician, Benjamin Pavlovich. There may be many things I do not understand about modern life, but I am fond of machines, as fond as a father is of his children. Can a father be glad to see his son born with crooked fingers? And, mind you, it is no fault of his in that case. Whereas I assemble a machine and see every part riveted on for good, see those parts coupled together and waiting for the first turn of the driving axle. You cannot imagine the shame I felt when I saw my engines in the Kursk depot, standing there useless. And you think I ought to let it go at that. Go my way without saying a word about it? There's not a worker but would have the right to call me a scoundrel in that case. I value my honour and I shall never compromise with my conscience." He stood up excitedly. "Managers change, there may be eleven or more, that's no business of mine, but

the laws which rule the correlation of engine parts, created by my hands, the hands of a technician and specialist, do not change." You are an expert in engine construction, Benjamin Pavlovich, and none knows better than you that the work of the whole system of steam distribution in the engine, its soul, so to speak, depends on the precise position of the counter-crankshaft of the driving axle. . . ."

"Oh! Stop it, stop it!" cried Benjamin Pavlovich, waving his hands in mock distress. "I see you are about to deliver us a regular lecture. You are an incorrigible dreamer. The 'engine's soul,' indeed! You had better think of your own soul. Does it not crave for things—for a life different from that which we are leading? What sort of life is this!" he exclaimed, pushing his glass away nervously, and spilling his tea, while the pince-nez fell off his nose again. "Just look at this miserable handful of bad candy—that's all we specialists and brain workers get for creating the engine's soul."

He smiled a wry smile and his long nose dropped over his moustache.

"The soul—ha-ha-a!" bellowed Kraysky's bass voice in between loud guffaws.

"Die Seele!" repeated Brooks, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes.

The leather sofa shook with their laughter.

Strakhov frowned and moved to the window. Crowds of people in holiday attire were moving about in the streets. Youths and girls from the plant rushed by on shining bicycles. It was Sunday. Women were carrying heavy baskets laden with vegetables and fruit. There was laughter in the air; the setting sun gave a copper glow to sunburnt arms.

Strakhov felt stifled in that semi-dark room, filled with furniture and the sound of unnatural laughter. He turned quickly to the table and extended his hand to Benjamin Pavlovich.

"Come on, Lyalya, we must be going—it's getting late." Benjamin Pavlovich sat for a long time staring at the bowl of candy, then jumped up quickly and rushed round the room with the tails of his coat flapping about, like a pair of clipped wings.

"He's a finished man—a maniac! It's no use wasting time on him. Honour! Love of machines! Professional pride! The fool! Damn him! Let us have a rest and enjoy ourselves. You tell us a snappy story, Kraysky."

"It's Brooks' turn."

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“No, it’s not. I made you laugh last time. It’s not right to exploit me like that, not right at all.”

Brooks poured some beer into his glass and shook his head.

“Count me out.”

“You’ll have to do the telling yourself, Benjamin Pavlovich. Am I not right, colleagues?” asked Kraysky.

“I see there’s no getting out of it,” said Turchaninov with a smile, setting his pince-nez right. “I’ll tell you a funny story: Akatuyev comes to the laboratory not so long ago—”

“Oh! not about Akatuyev! Leave the old fool alone, for god’s sake”—begged Ostrovsky.

“It’s old stuff and as dull as Akatuyev himself.”

“Tell us a new one, Benjamin Pavlovich, something with a tang!” begged Kraysky.

Turchaninov smiled good-naturedly.

“I’ll tell you the kind you like later on, but you must hear this one about the immortal Akatuyev. You’ll laugh your heads off.”

“Here it is: Akatuyev comes one day to the mechanical laboratory, sees people working—testing metal, this way and that. At that very moment, as fate would have it, Boretsky dashes in with some samples and, not noticing Akatuyev, shouts:

“ ‘Here they are, but be careful with them, because Akatuyev might sneak in at any moment.’

“Akatuyev gets all worked up—‘What’s that you said, Antonych,’ he asks, ‘why should they be careful?’

“Well, Boretsky saw he was in for it, and so he says:

“ ‘Oh! Pavel Yakovlevich, I was referring to the fire. They’ve just rung us up to say there was a fire near your house. So I’m telling them to be careful and not to give you a fright, because of your weak heart, you know.’

“ ‘A fire? Why didn’t you say so directly?’

“And he disappeared in a second. Antonych rang up the watchman at the gates and said to him:

“ ‘If Akatuyev runs past, tell him they’ve rung up from the station to say it was all right—only some soot burning.’ ”

“What a joke! How cleverly he got out of it”—squealed Ostrovsky.

“Ha-ha-ha,” puffed Brooks.

“Here’s another one about Akatuyev.

“We had a commission from the Commissariat of Ways here a

few days ago, who came to verify the delivery of products. ‘Show us the cars you’re to deliver on July first,’ they say. Can you imagine how happy that made me? The cars were not there to show! They got all sorts of documents out—our own reports, protocols and so forth. ‘Show us cars Nos. 240600 to 240750.’ There were none, you understand. What was I to do? So I told them they’d better have a rest after the journey, for fear they would injure their precious health. Told them we’d get the cars out for them to verify next morning.”

“They agreed to that and went to bed. I went to Akatuyev. ‘Did you sign the certificates for cars Nos. 240600 to 240750?’ I asked him.

“ ‘I think so, but I’m not sure,’ he said, and he looked in his book—he had signed them.

“ ‘There’s a commission here—we must show them the cars.’

“As soon as he heard this he collapsed on the sofa and went all stiff. His heart’s no good, you know. I thought he’d have a stroke.

“ ‘You’ve done for me,’ he squeals with his lips as white as chalk. ‘What am I to do? You know the cars are not there. You got the certificates a month beforehand.’

“ ‘I know there are no cars,’ says I.

“At this he collapses again and clutches at his heart. I felt like laughing, yet was anxious, too, for where would we get another inspector like him, if he happened to die? Can you tell me where?”

He gazed at his audience, as if expecting an answer.

“ ‘Couldn’t find another one like him,’ said Kraysky firmly.

“ ‘You must be careful you don’t lose him then,’ said Turchaninov and catching his pince-nez, just as it was about to fall, he went on with his story.

“ ‘Do you know how we got out of it?’

“ ‘There was no answer—it seemed there was no way out at all.

“ ‘We mobilized all the painters for the night, paid them ten rubles each, and by morning a hundred and fifty cars of the May delivery had their numbers changed for June numbers.’”

“ ‘How clever!’ exclaimed Brooks.

“ ‘Extraordinary!’ squealed Ostrovsky.

“ ‘That’s not all,’ said Benjamin Pavlovich and they all drew nearer. “ ‘Here’s another....’”

“Akatuyev gets up one morning and sees men unloading bricks and stacking them right in front of his house. He dashes out in his pyjamas. The men tell him the management has decided to build a

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workers' tenement there. He gets all flustered—says the new house will shut off his view and his house will be in the back yard then. 'I won't have it!' he shouts, but the men have their orders and they go on unloading. So Akatuyev rings me up. 'What does it mean, Benjamin Pavlovich?' I naturally make believe I know nothing about it. 'It's absolutely impossible,' he shouts into the telephone. 'There's nothing impossible,' I tell him. 'Will you give me those certificates for the June engines?' 'Why, yes,' he says. And so I got the certificates and we all got our bonuses for June thanks to that, and Korchenko was able to make a perfect report at the plenum, and everything was all right...."

"What about the bricks?"

"The bricks were taken away to another site outside of town, where plots for workers' tenements were allotted. They don't mind where they live. It cost some money, of course, but then good policy is worth good money, ha-ha!"

Ostrovsky sat bolt upright and his eyes were full of sincere devotion to that clean little man. His puffy face was set like a mask, but, suddenly his nose wrinkled, he threw his head back, his lips parted, showing the gleam of gold teeth and he gave a ringing laugh.

He shook, squealed and doubled with laughter. Kraysky glanced at him and started laughing, too, making his fat stomach shake. Brooks began prematurely and the beer squirted from his mouth and sprayed Zorin's face. The whole room filled with contagious laughter.

Brooks laughed loudest of all. He held his mouth wide open and his laugh sounded like a snarl. His head, with its perfectly bald skull and puffed-out cheeks, looked like a balloon. It was his turn now.

"Say here's a good one about our dear boss, Korchenko. One day Korchenko was in the tool shop, nosing around. A worker was grinding a coulisse—Verstanden?—Well, a coulisse has a stone, that's what we call it in the shop. The stone fell out of the worker's hand and started rolling towards Korchenko, stopping at his feet.

"Hey, Korchenko,' the worker shouted. 'Throw me that stone, will you?'"

"Korchenko turned as red as a beet, or to put it more choicely, he looked just like a young girl on her first visit to the doctor.

" 'Well, hand it over, will you,' the worker shouted, angry as the dickens by now. Korchenko ran over to the supply desk and said: 'Give me a brick for that end machine....' Ha-ha-a-a! What an uproar

there was in the shop. I bet they're still laughing."

Brooks sipped at his beer and looked around approvingly.

"That's the great Korchenko for you. With a manager like that we can even make locomotives out of bricks. Say when I saw that, I can tell you that I felt as happy as a young girl after the doctor's told her that the pimple is only acne."

Benjamin Pavlovich took off his pince-nez, wiped his eyes and looked at the little group.

"Now we'll have the other sort of story," said Turchaninov, smacking his lips.

Zorin stood up.

"I must be going, or my wife will grumble. Besides, I'm not feeling very well," he muttered, as he put on his coat.

He shook their limp hands and went out.

"His wife! Not well! The coward!" spluttered Turchaninov viciously. "A time will come when he'll beg me on his hind legs, like a dog. But it will be too late. That will be a bad time for you, you frog."

Ostrovsky made a funny face.

"Oh! But I've got a stomach ache, too."

"You've got a priest's belly and that's a pretty solid thing. We'll be knocking Communists against that belly of yours pretty soon."

"How diverting!" exclaimed the flattered Ostrovsky.

But their laughter stopped quite suddenly, for the telephone bell started to ring ceaselessly, filling the room with its irritating noise. The hands of the clock pointed to half past twelve. The town was asleep, yet the telephone went on ringing.

"Benjamin Pavlovich! The manager wants you in his flat immediately. Please hurry. It's an urgent matter," shouted the militiaman on duty, breathing heavily into the telephone.

* * * * *

On coming home from the Plenum, Platov found the "boss" in a most happy frame of mind. He was pacing quite briskly up and down the creaking floor, humming under his breath.

"What are you doing at this time of night, father?"

"Waiting for you, Senya. I've made you some tea, thought you would come home hungry."

"And what makes you so gay?"

"I don't mind old age any more, Senya. I shall now be gay to the

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very end. I've found my last happiness but one, my dear."

"Oh! The German, I suppose? And what will the last one be?"

"The most difficult to find.... You've sort of shrunk and your face looks dark. Being a chief is no easy thing, I know. You don't need to tell me. I've had a lowly life, yet even that wasn't easy, but you have climbed to the very top. There are many of you now. You must hold on tight, Senya, find a good support.... But remember, that Akatuyev girl is no fit support for you—she'll break down when you need her most. It's your own business, of course, but maybe you'll listen to an old man's advice. Keep closer to the workers, they'll not fail you.... As regards the thing you're worrying about, I've got an idea. But I must make sure first. If I can do that you'll see me dance for joy. Now listen, Senya, I'm going out to look into something and tomorrow morning I'll tell you all about it. I've been at it for a whole month."

He put on his boots, took a birch stick and disappeared into the night.

"What a store of energy in that old body," thought Platov with admiration, gazing after the old man's bent back. "What an extraordinary hold on life. Seething class energy fills his worn-out body with strength. Our epoch is heroic—our class is young. Its youth conquers physical senility. Whereas abroad, old people, rotten from the excesses of their youth, submit to the surgeon's knife, hoping for rejuvenation with the help of monkey glands—poor monkeys!"

Platov gazed out at the black square beyond the window with a smile. Out there somewhere, the "boss" was striding through the warm night, towards the plant with its eternal clank of steel.

The "boss" showed his pass at the entrance and walked to the dark open hearth furnace shop. He picked his way without difficulty among the piles of moulds and casts. He stopped at the entrance of the trimming department.

A greenish light flamed at the very end of the room and some dark figures moved about, throwing gigantic black shadows on the wall.

The "boss" went up noiselessly and stood still.

"Hurry up, Trusov, cut it off. I have work to do that will take me till morning."

"It shall be cut in a moment, Antonych. The steel is mighty solid. Lend a hand, Zhorov."

"Yes, that steel is first quality. Ready? Zhorov, take the pieces that are cut to the machine workshop. Which? The one in the open

hearth furnace shop of course—opposite the second smoke stack. What a fool you are!”

The “boss” stepped back, turned round the corner and pulled a small, oil-smearing door, which opened on the shop. A few lathes could be distinguished in the light of the single lamp. The “boss” hid in a dark corner, heaped with steel waste.

The door opened noiselessly and Zhorov came in, puffing and blowing under a heavy load.

“What a weak creature you are, Zhorov, and all because of drink.”

“No, Antonych, it’s because I’m pining for a proper life. As soon as I’m on the straight path, I’ll give up drink. I hate myself as it is. But I’ll not follow your path, Antonych. You’re a damned rascal!”

“Instead of talking nonsense, you’d better run and fetch the second lump.”

Zhorov went out, the lathe was set going, filling the little workshop with the gritting sound of the cutter. Antonych laid aside the rod he had been working at, leaving one end rough. The “boss” strained his eyes to get a good look at the piece of steel. This was the way samples were prepared for the laboratory tests. They were turned in the form of short rods, out of pieces of steel obtained from each cast. The rods were placed in a testing apparatus, which drew, tore and broke them, so as to test the quality of the steel.

The shining sample was clearly outlined against the black bench. The “boss” watched with bated breath, and saw sample after sample laid side by side in a glistening row. So his guess had been right! Next day engineer Platov would know how to solve the riddle of his shop.

“So, so, Antonych,” muttered the “boss,” “you’re still following the old path that leads to an easy and plentiful life. You were the first to go back to your machine, when the whole plant was seething with hatred and fighting desperately for life. You are betraying thousands of workers at this very moment, bringing my plant to shame. You’re ruining my engines, damn you.”

The last came out suddenly and unguardedly—he did not even recognize his own voice, so loud and terrible it sounded. Something heavy and black was upon him in a moment and he was pressed against the wall.

“What do you want here, you old lunatic?”

Cold fingers were clutching at the old man’s throat, like a spider’s tentacles closing on its prey. His breath failed him, he fell down,

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stifling, but he managed to gasp:

“You thief! Stealing men’s happiness, as you always did. Black-guard! I’ve caught you....”

His voice stifled and sank under Boretsky’s feet, and its dying whisper blended with the tinkle of the steel samples.

“Caught you! ah-a-a—”

Boretsky lifted his boot and brought its iron-shod heel down on the spot where the old man’s white hair gleamed on the floor. The voice died down in a hoarse rattle.

The belt spindle still rustled, the lamp fluttered above the lathe like a frightened bird and a deathly shadow fell on the silvery white head lying against rusty pieces of steel.

A heavy silence hung in the workshop.

THE FIFTH LINK

1

A short shrill whistle cut through the air as the train rushed into the night. Having passed the string of station lights, it sped eastward through the fields, towards the gathering dawn.

It seemed as if the night fell back under the dynamic onrush of the train, hurriedly putting out the stars and the moon to cover its retreat.

Dawn began to lighten on the windows of the cars. Inside the carriages faces were beginning to stand out grey and cold.

Platov noticed a crumpled cap set far over the wearer's face, as if to hide the eyes. The car shook, the cap slid still further and further down and it seemed to Platov as if Turchaninov was purposely hiding his eyes.

Mokhov was sitting stiff and upright on the cushioned seat and the pale light of dawn was reflected in his wide glassy eyes. He looked straight before him, as if hypnotized by the shining nickel buttons on the partition. His dark brown lips reminded one of a freshly welded crack.

Platov caught sight of a third face, which looked strangely familiar and wore a puzzled look. He moved closer and recognized his own face, staring back at **him** from the mirror. It had something in common with the other two faces in the compartment, despite the absolute lack of resemblance between them.

The face of Benjamin Pavlovich was mostly hidden under the rim of his cap, but the nervous trembling of his lips showed Platov that the engineer was not asleep. Mokhov who was sitting in a wooden stupor caught Platov's eyes and blinked in an embarrassed way.

The sun rose and tinted the sky with a luminous haze. The contours of all things stood out sharp and clear. The wayside bushes glistened with dew—the fields flew past. Platov noticed the thick, bluish veins on Mokhov's hands.

“Where is Titych?” he asked, looking round.

“Up in front with Antonych,” growled Benjamin Pavlovich as he took off his cap. “They've quarrelled about something and are fighting it out. What a commission! We're not there yet, but the members have differences already. We ought to be more careful, because railway men always try to shift the blame on somebody else. We must

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expect it to happen in this case, too. I'll tell you of an interesting case in my engineering practice, Comrade Platov.

"I was a young engineer then, and took part in the construction of a bridge across the Neva in St. Petersburg. Two years after it was built, the steel trusses collapsed and the bridge crumbled like a rotten beam. Naturally, there was an investigation. The construction engineers were blamed. The real reason was found only after lengthy researches. The bridge was perfectly constructed, of course. It was destroyed simply by the silly orders of one of the tsar's military puppets. This stupid general was leading his regiment across the bridge, and insisted on having the soldiers keep in step—the old idiot! The bridge was destroyed by rhythmic vibration. We call that metal fatigue, in technical language. Oh! but I'd forgotten," he added with a smile, "you do not admit the influence of fatigue, Comrade Platov."

"I never denied it, but I look upon it from a different point of view," answered Platov drily and turned away towards the window.

"I'm glad you don't deny it at least. It is one of the basic principles of modern technology. Those who know nothing about this science will think you mad, if you affirm, for example, that a bridge can be destroyed by playing the violin. Nevertheless, it is a proven theory. There's nothing mysterious about it, no mysticism whatever. It is fatigue again—caused by oft repeated sounds which produce a sympathetic vibration and destroy the metal."

Mokhov looked askance at Benjamin Pavlovich, trying to get at the meaning of his quick short sentences, but his mind was full of different thoughts. He reviewed the impressions of the past few days. He saw Sasha beside a soot-black Negro. He saw Zeitlin's stern round eyes. He tried to shake himself loose of these visions. He looked out of the window and watched the telegraph wires flash by. Then he suddenly remembered that he was travelling for the first time in his life in a first-class compartment, as a member of the commission sent by the plant to the site of a railway accident. The thought filled him with pride.

"So when there's any serious matter they do turn to me," he thought. "That's the kind of a man Mokhov is! And fancy those boys wanting to nail me before the court!"

These thoughts cheered him—and his lips opened in a smile, on hearing that a bridge could be destroyed by playing the violin.

The train rushed past a station crowded with other trains held up by the accident. Anxious faces could be seen at the windows of the

cars. The idling engines let out thin wisps of steam.

Mokhov was struck by a sense of responsibility. Those faces looked to him for help.

The train slowed down and stopped. Mokhov felt heavy at heart as he clambered down the grading.

* * * * *

Black night hanging over the earth. Now and then the splash of a fish on the surface of the water breaks upon the silence of the night.

For a moment the reflected stars dance on the animated waters—then all grows calm. The night is still and heavy. Again a sound. It is a crane crunching through the reeds—a bittern cries out from beyond the river. The sound is carried on the autumn wind like a low plaintive sigh.

The wind carries the mingled sweet smelling scent of rye and new-mown hay which surges in warm waves across the sleeping earth. An indistinct sound comes faintly from beyond—it is almost like the sound of wind sighing through the undergrowth. But it is too regular. The sound grows louder and louder, echoing on all sides. It rushes into the silence—dispelling it. It drowns the sigh of the bittern, the crunching footsteps of the crane. The sound turns into a growl. The silent woods are suddenly filled with the jangle of iron. A heavy mechanical breathing has torn the silent night into shreds. A fountain of red light shoots up against the darkness, sending a cascade of sparks into the sky. The porcelain insulators of the telegraph posts fly by in this reddish glow. The dark body of the engine is wrapped in it—as it speeds along with its two flaming eyes searching out the rails.

The driver's face is lit by this flaming torch of light. The train is a speeding oasis of light. Beyond and about is the prowling, black night.

Two thousand tons pulled up a hill makes the fountain of sparks rise higher. The open valves of the ash-pit suck the air which rushes into the boiler—eating up the crumbling coal.

“A good engine!” shouts the driver, satisfied with its regular chug.

“What's the grade?” asks the fireman.

“0.003. A good engine that!”

The engine gives a sudden jerk and the wheels spin helplessly on one spot. The driver turns the air pressure gauge and sand feed wide

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open—and the engine grips—and climbs on at a rush.

The engineer smiles contentedly, takes out a cigarette and watches the roadside bushes fly back. Once out on a flat stretch, the engine gathers speed. A green signal light flashes past. The engine gathers momentum with every piston stroke. Its whistle hoots shrilly into the night.

Grade—0.008.

The train starts on its downward rush. Fifty cars press on the engine pushing it forward with lightning speed. The air is filled with its thundering rush. The dark sky might be rent asunder and fling a shower of stars on the shaking earth.

“A good eng.....”

The driver’s joyous cry was cut off. The engine and cars suddenly became a straining ball of steel—tumbling down the flaming incline.

Thousands of tons of metal, wood and oil crash down the embankment—crashing, mangling, twisting—amidst the ringing of metal—the splintering crackling of wood—the hissing gusts of steam. Impact follows impact like explosions—the engine still vibrates with its full belly of steam and boiling water—throwing sparks and tongues of flame from its blasted furnace.

There is a short silence. The boiler explodes. The ground is shaken by the force of the explosion. After that there is silence again broken only by the moan of a solitary human voice.

The cry of the crane rises again in the dewy meadows and the bittern answers it with a sad plaintive cry, like the moan of a dying creature.

Platov climbed up the grass-grown incline. Bees hummed among the clover at his feet and grasshoppers flew round him with a dry, crackling sound.

He looked down and shivered.

For the length of half a kilometre, the embankment was strewn with the wreckage of broken cars. Their smashed, red frames were bent into monstrous shapes. Twisted rails stuck out from among their iron skeletons. An excavator lay on its side—its enormous mouth gaping wide open in front of a daisy bed. Grey, pear-shaped concrete mixers lay about like giant bombs. The ground was sprinkled with black coal dust. A heavy smell of oil, which trickled from the overturned tank cars, filled the air.

Platov shivered with nervous excitement and slid down the steep

incline. The figures of peasants could be seen converging from all directions to the spot.

Platov tripped against rails which lay like black snakes in the sand. A case of broken, imported machinery stuck out of the motley of steel, wood chips, stones, earth and coal. It was marked:

MOLVA STATION

Moscow-White Russian-Baltic R. R.

“What does it mean? Is it equipment meant for us?” thought Platov.

He caught sight of Mokhov standing beside the case and muttering.

“That’s the name of our station it seems, Comrade Platov, but I can’t make out the first word.”

“There’s much more than that I can’t make out,” said Platov gloomily, shaking his head and walking on.

Mokhov moved after him, casting anxious glances at the heaps of broken metal, and stopped suddenly. A yellow hand, which still clutched a green signal flag, stuck out from under a heap of splinters, broken bits of wood and lumps of coal. Seized with unreasoning fear, Mokhov dashed on.

He saw something black on the grass. He walked towards the spot. Four bodies were lying on the thick carpet of grass, covered with the red, tattered signal flags.

A pale-faced railwayman, with a dark clot of blood over one eye, led the way before Platov, Benjamin Pavlovich and Titych. Boretsky walked slowly behind, with eyes fixed on the ground.

“It’s here.”

The broken end of an axle, carefully bound with rags, stuck out of the sand, near the engine. The railwayman tore off the rag and the fine-grained broken surface sparkled in the sun. Benjamin Pavlovich squatted down and gazed at it intently.

Crowds of peasants pressed from behind, surrounding the commission in a silent ring. Mokhov bent, felt the rough surface with his fingers and spat. Platov watched Turchaninov’s face attentively. He saw a joyful smile suddenly light up his face.

“Here you are, Comrade Platov. A very good illustration of the conversation we had in the car. A very characteristic line of break! Look—here are the polished zones, so typical of metal fatigue—the so-called fatigue spots. This is one of the very rare cases where the

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reason of the accident is so obvious. What a weight off my mind! I was afraid it might be a crack. That would have been unpleasant for the plant.”

The peasants who were watching them gloomily from a distance could not understand why the spectacled man smiled so happily, as if the sight of the broken axle caused him joy. Mokhov thought the same, while he felt the axle carefully with his hands.

Platov gazed at the shiny piece of broken metal in gloomy silence. The explanation given by Turchaninov was not to be gainsaid—the characteristic fatigue spots showed too plainly.

“What’s your opinion?” asked Benjamin Pavlovich gaily, glancing at him from behind his pince-nez. “I have no doubts whatever.”

Platov looked at the stern and silent crowd, the pale face of the railwayman and said, with a nod in the direction of the peasants:

“If you have no doubts whatever, go and explain the thing to them.”

Benjamin Pavlovich glanced up in astonishment and walked to the crowd.

“Comrades, I want to explain the reason for the accident to you.”

“Tell us! Tell us!”

“It’s very simple....”

“Nothing can be simpler—a whole train smashed to pieces!” interrupted a mistrustful bass voice.

“Yet it is simple. There’s the axle which caused it. The surface of the break is smooth—almost as if the piece had been sawed off. That is a typical sign of metal fatigue. The structure of the metal changed imperceptibly under the influence of alternative and numerous tensions.....”

“Very ‘simple’ indeed!” growled the bass voice.

“Don’t you cram any more of this stuff into our heads. They’re crammed full already by these here orators!”

“Think of the losses!”

“Five people killed!”

The voices merged into an indistinct hum, which sounded full of suspicion and enmity. Turchaninov took off his cap in an embarrassed manner, waved it in the air without any apparent reason and put it on again.

“Look here, comrades, in order to understand this matter, we must have at least an elementary knowledge of the structure of metal, some amount of technical knowledge; we must have.....”

“But you said it was so simple!” jeered the bass voice.

“What do we know about technical things—we’re illiterate.”

“You tell us in plain words, did you make that engine or not? What were you about when you made it?”

“This engine was made at our plant, that’s true. But this break caused by fatigue occurs unexpectedly, so to speak—accidentally, it cannot be foreseen. Science is so far powerless to solve this mystery.”

“That’s different! You should have said so from the first!” put in the bass in a satisfied tone. “What’s the use of talking about this here science and technology, using all them grand words. So you don’t know so much about what happened—eh—?”

Here, the speaker, a sturdy, short-legged man, stepped forward, stroked his beard down over his pink shirt and lifted his hand.

“Citizens! D’you understand it at all? They’re all in the dark, yet they’re always making a fuss about themselves. ‘We workers are the vanguard of the world!’ That’s what they say. But what I want to know is—how much of our money is gone to waste here? A million one hundred thousand rubles! Is that right, citizens?”

He ran his piercing eyes over the faces of the crowd.

“Of course, it’s right!”

“Yep, it’s right!”

“Just think—citizens. A million one hundred thousand rubles. All out of our pockets. It’s we who pay the taxes. We must pay taxes, I don’t say no—but this means all that money thrown away. That’s our peasants’ lot. But it’s no use coming here to stuff our heads with them learned words. Am I right, citizens?” Suddenly he turned to Turchaninov and said: “What right have you to boss it over our lives, damn you?”

Platov saw Turchaninov turn to him as if in search of support. The peasants’ faces were cold and gloomy. The railwayman was smiling spitefully and his own vague suspicions were suddenly strengthened under the influence of the moment. He felt full of daring and made a step towards the crowd.

“What good can come of you,” continued the bearded man angrily. “We had one rascal in the village—a man named Zhorov. He’s now in the proletariat, the world’s vanguard!”

“You leave Zhorov alone, Arkhip!” cried a hysterical female voice. “His children were burnt. I know, you’re glad. You beast!”

“She’s right! Never kick a man when he’s down,” grumbled voices in the crowd.

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“We ought to be sorry for Zhorov!”

Platov smiled thankfully at the sharp-nosed woman who had been the first to speak.

“This man,” he said, pointing to Arkhip, “rejoices at our common misfortune, as he probably rejoiced at Zhorov’s misfortune. He wants to arouse your feelings against the workers and the government. I know Zhorov and value him ten times more than this bearded fellow here. He’s one of us. Men like Arkhip have thrown him out of his village, but the plant took him in and shall make a real man of him. Just remember this,” he said, speaking into Arkhip’s face, “Zhorov will come back to the village to fight enemies like you.”

Arkhip disappeared in the crowd. The peasants looked respectfully at Platov.

“Comrades, your displeasure at the explanations given by engineer Turchaninov is just. He expressed only his personal point of view, but we are five in the commission. We are answerable to you—to the entire country. It is we who made this engine and we must bear the responsibility for what’s happened. Learned words, which may be right, are not sufficient. Am I right, Comrade Mokhov?”

“Right, Comrade Platov. We must set our brains to work over this.”

Turchaninov was listening attentively. He was amazed. He could not understand why Platov was assuming responsibility for the accident upon himself—upon the plant—and for the workers. He felt sure that Platov would attempt to justify himself and shift the blame. Had it not always been so? Had not those who ruled the country always protected themselves from criticism at the expense of others? But no—he was hearing right—Platov was telling the peasants to pick three men to come to the plant and see what was going on. Why did the crowd become quiet so suddenly?

“And so, comrades, we’ll take this broken axle with us and we shall hold a trial over ourselves. You’ll read about it in the papers soon. And now let us help clear the track.”

And so saying, he took hold of the heavy body of the excavator. Scores of people ran to his assistance and by their united efforts the excavator slid down the incline into the grass below.

Turchaninov was standing on the grading, watching the hundreds of people who were clearing the tracks. He could not believe his eyes. Were these the same peasants, who only a few short months ago seemed an inimical, vengeance-thirsting crowd? Now they had

forgotten their fields and were swarming around the track to help carry away the wreckage. Their idle scythes were glistening in the sun. Their shirts were reeking sweat. A group of five peasants were prying loose a packing case with German lettering on its side. Beneath it the mutilated figure of a crushed man could be seen. A sharp-nosed peasant woman was staggering under the load of a heavy piece of timber. She saw the dead man and dropped her load—and making the sign of the cross, began crying.

In this cry of the peasant woman at the sight of a strange corpse—Turchaninov sensed the meaning that had escaped him all along. He shuddered involuntarily and started walking towards the engine.

The railwayman sat down beside the broken axle and started to bandage his hand. He unfolded his bloody bandage and murmured angrily:

“Those that did it ought to have their heads off.”

Mokhov stared at the shiny grains of steel and tried to remember something. His heart was filled with a vague anxiety which oppressed him. He tried not to look at the bloody rag in the railwayman’s hands and fixed his eyes on the distance. Bumblebees droned as they circled over the red clover—dragon-flies darted about like tiny aeroplanes—a rail, which had become twisted into a spiral, rang plaintively under the strokes of a pick-axe. A smell of oil was in the air. All these things reminded Mokhov of the plant.

Hundreds of axles had passed through Mokhov’s hands, all similar to each other so that they could not be told apart. And here was one of them sticking out of the sand like a terrible note of exclamation.

“He ought to have his head off! Who? The man who made the axle. And who is he?”

And so thinking he saw the plant again and foreman Bulavkin with his bluish wart, saying: “It’ll do, Mokhov. You’ve turned it and there’s an end to it.”

Mokhov drew nearer to the railwayman, looked at the black clot on his forehead and words failed him. In his embarrassment, he picked a blade of grass and started chewing it.

He saw a familiar expression of stern reproof in the feverish eyes of the railwayman. Where on earth had he seen it? And suddenly he saw his son Sasha. Yes, it was Sasha who had looked at his father with the same stern feverish glance.

He walked off along the embankment with bent head.

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The green signal flag followed accusingly before his eyes, out of a heap of fragments.

Mokhov came home late. Everybody had gone to bed. Sasha lay on his back with his mouth wide open and snored. The blanket had fallen off and showed the sunburnt body. One of the toes was bound with a rag and reminded Mokhov of the bandaged axle.

“He’s stepped on something sharp again. Hear him snore, the rascal!”

Sasha’s snub nose, from which the skin was peeling off, emitted a funny frog-like snort. Mokhov felt like coming up to his son and saying:

“Well, Sasha, your father’s lived for fifty-five years, yet he’s none the wiser, so you’ll have to teach the old fool.”

He drew the blanket tenderly over Sasha’s feet. The boy started out of his sleep and rubbed his eyes.

“You sleep soundly, comrade inspector,” he said jokingly. “You should watch your father more closely; I’ve been absent from work the entire day.”

“That’s all right—you were away on business,” said Sasha soothingly.

“So you will let me go to bed now? Ha-ha! What times! Where did you hurt your toe?”

“On the rubbish heap at the plant. Zeitlin told us we must take the rubbish heap under our patronage and so we’re carrying pig iron from there. Our pants are all torn. We’ll go back to it tomorrow.”

“What do you want the pig iron for?” asked the astounded Mokhov.

“We’ll sell it to the plant and buy a football with the money.”

“Ha-ha: that Zeitlin of yours is a sly beggar,” exclaimed Mokhov adding a word which made Sasha wince.

“We’re not allowed to use that word in the group. It’s only a bourgeois habit.”

“Put my foot in it again, darn it! What times!”

Mokhov drew the blanket over his head and fatigue overwhelmed him immediately and his sleepy brain absorbed half-conscious impressions.

“That’s nothing! You wait and see. Zeitlin says we’re going to organize a commune, as soon as we find a suitable house.”

“What sort of a commune?” asked Mokhov in sleepy bewilderment.

“Pioneers’ commune.... We’ll live there always, and we’ll have everything in common.”

Sleep left Mokhov at the news. He threw off his blanket. “What d’you mean by that? You’ll come home for the night though?”

“We’ll sleep there, too—live there altogether, one hundred per cent.”

Sasha spoke with such happy assurance that Mokhov lost his wits entirely. So his son would leave him. Mokhov suddenly remembered the trial appointed for the next day.

He lay there, all limp, covered with sweat, staring at the wall. Sasha made no sound either, it seemed as if he was not there at all. Mokhov felt that he really was going to leave him. Sasha’s voice when he spoke of the commune told him that. So the walls, with which his world had been surrounded hitherto, were crumbling and falling. New forces were intruding on all sides, changing Mokhov’s order of life, rearranging all the floors in his intellectual house. And Sasha would leave him and exist independently somewhere in the neighbourhood.

“Sasha! d’you hear me? Tell this Zeitlin of yours that I’ll come tomorrow. He asked me to come and talk something over....”

He drew the blanket up, and lay still, feeling a tremendous relief. Sasha started to snore again. The black lettering he had seen on the case of imported machinery swam for the last time before Mokhov’s eyes—then sleep.

2

That evening Vartanyan received a telegram from Moscow:

MOLVA
 DISTRICT COMMITTEE
 VARTANYAN
 IN VIEW UNSATISFACTORY SITUATION KRASNYY
 PROLETARIY AS CONFIRMED BY YOUR SPEECH AT
 PLENUM TRUST RESOLVES HOLD BACK CON-
 STRUCTION OF PLANT STOP CREDITS CANCELLED
 STOP SPECIAL COMMISSION ON WAY.
 PTYZIN, SECRETARY

Vartanyan sat and thought over the telegram. What would the workers say? They were so accustomed to the thought that the plant would be built. The ground work was begun already. Kraysky was

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carrying it on at a quick rate.

Korchenko would naturally say sarcastic things and put it all to Vartanyan's "passion for self-criticism." It is necessary to organize resistance to the trust. The matter must go up before the Central Committee. We must fight tooth and nail. What would become of the plant in that case? The old plant would finish its days in effecting endless repairs of its worn machinery. The skilled workers would leave, and so would the specialists.

That would mean death to the plant. What would happen then to this tremendous forest-grown region, inhabited by peasants? It would be like a man whose brain was atrophied. Could a sentinel like that stand watch on the frontier of the republic on the eve of terrible battles? Everybody would be saying: "This happened under Vartanyan's supervision." No! This must not be. They must fight to the end. Use every means.

He called Korchenko on the telephone and asked him to come.

"That was to be expected," said the latter calmly, after reading the telegram.

"Yes, that's the result of your management," answered Vartanyan as calmly.

"The telegram very clearly specifies the reason why Moscow stopped the construction of the plant. Your speech did it."

"So you think I ought not to have subjected our work to self-criticism?"

"You might have spoken without injuring the plant. You overreached yourself. Self-criticism ought to help to reinforce our cause, while you have shattered it. You were evidently thinking more of your reputation than of the plant. I insist that it was the cause. Confessions are advantageous to you."

Vartanyan stood up with a pale face.

"Korchenko! Leave your guesses alone and don't talk to me about them any more. I did make a mistake and I recognized it. Don't you dare give me any more of your indirect hints."

"I am not hinting. I am stating facts. Here they are, in black and white, on that telegram. And moreover, the defects of which you spoke so righteously are also your fault."

"What do you mean?"

"I appointed Platov head of the shop at your request, and what has he done? The percentage of spoilage has become tremendous. I'm going to have him removed today and put Kraysky back in his place."

“You dare not do it without the permission of the district Party committee!”

“I shall do it. I am responsible manager, Vartanyan. You must not forget that. There is sufficient reason for his dismissal. Now, about this telegram—if you want to fight the trust, you must write an article for the *Pravda* immediately and mobilize public opinion in our favour.”

“I shall think about an article.”

“That’s not all,” continued Korchenko. “There is a new misfortune threatening us. That railway accident happened because of our engine. We must be unanimous in our opinion as to the reasons for the catastrophe. We must prevent Platov from starting another discussion with Turchaninov. It is a purely technical matter and the old specialists must settle it. That’s all. As regards our relations, Vartanyan, I am older than you are, and the Central Committee knows the value of each one of us to the Party. Goodbye!”

Korchenko calmly left the room and his bulging briefcase swayed in rhythm to his firm tread.

Never had Vartanyan felt as crushed as he did now. Apart from hints, there was much truth in Korchenko’s words. Facts broke his self-assurance and he felt his resistance weakening. Korchenko had the initiative. He was calm. Calm and self-assurance were necessary for victory. Meanwhile he himself was giving way to his nerves, was full of doubts and anxiety. Would he have to beat a retreat? That would be an indelible blot on his Party honour.... His reputation—he could not think lightly of it. It was easy to lose, but would be difficult to restore. But he must hold himself together, not let himself become engrossed in the small personal feelings, which Korchenko had roused. They were upon him now, attacking his nerves, clouding his brain and weakening his will. He must resist them!

His pencil flew over the paper, making an outline of the future campaign. Vartanyan awaited Platov’s return with impatience so as to warn him in a friendly way that he would have to be removed in the interests of the plant.

Platov came in late at night, tired, dusty, and smelling of oil. Vartanyan looked pityingly at his yellow face, which was lined with fatigue.

“Well, what did you find?”

“Losses, blood, disgrace... .”

Platov passed his hand through his hair and black coal dust

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scattered over the papers.

“What is the opinion of the commission?”

“We quarrelled on the way.”

“What does the majority say?”

“There is no majority.”

“What’s the matter, then?”

“Turchaninov and Boretsky explain it by fatigue. Titych sighs and exclaims: ‘What a life!’ Mokhov swears and both of them expect me to give my opinion.”

“And what about yours?”

“Mine?” Platov remained silent for a moment. His hair, glued together by sweat and dirt, rose above his forehead in a tangled shock. “As a metallurgist, I must support Turchaninov’s theory. Metal fatigue is a fact and I cannot deny it if I wish to remain an engineer.”

“Very good then. The specialists’ opinions coincide. You’re a majority, the question is a purely technical one. That opinion will make our position easier. Do you know what the trust has decided?” Vartanyan pushed the telegram towards him. “It’s a good thing this accident, at least, is no fault of ours.”

Platov glanced through the telegram with heavy tired eyes.

“But it is our fault, after all.”

“How is that? It’s an accident which could not be foreseen.”

“Yes, an accident. A tragic accident. And the destruction of imported machinery, meant for the construction of the new plant, is also accidental. But every accident has its reason and motive. I don’t want to play the mystic and use scientific formulas to conceal devilry. Besides metallurgy, I have casually studied dialectics.”

Vartanyan laughed.

“You’d better keep to metallurgical data in your arguments. As regards dialectics, you’re probably like everybody. Remember what Mayakovsky said:

We did not learn dialectics according to Hegel.

It broke into our verse with the noise of our battle.

“That is very well said, I think. And by the way, he’s my favourite poet.”

“I have no favourite poets. Haven’t had time for them. But the lines which you have quoted just now hold a danger for those in whose verse ‘dialectics broke in.’ That’s a bad sign. Dialectics must be mastered and that is not as easy as it sounds in verse.”

“Oh! and you, you have studied it according to Hegel, and mastered it?”

“I have read him. He’s difficult to understand. I keep to Lenin, he’s simpler.”

“I’ve caught you there, Platov! Why, it’s the first source of Marxism. You’re behind the times.”

“Lenin is enough for me, so far,” said Platov in a tired voice.

“But we have gone off into a philosophic discussion and it has taken us far away from our subject.”

“I don’t agree with you. There’s a reference. What was I saying I’m so tired. Oh, yes! about accidents.”

“What is your opinion?”

“I believe the reason can be found in our plant. I base this opinion on some other accidental occurrences. Very curious, for instance, that Turchaninov’s and Boretsky’s opinions should ‘accidentally coincide.’ ”

“What do you mean?”

“That I must be careful in my conclusions. I’ll think it all over before tomorrow.”

“What do you intend to do?” insisted Vartanyan.

Platov rose with an effort.

“I intend to oppose Turchaninov on this.”

“Wait a bit, you’re contradicting yourself. You said metal fatigue was a fact.”

“I recognize it as such, but I’ll try to oppose Turchaninov’s opinion on the basis of that fact and build up my own.”

“I don’t quite like it, Platov. This is no time for technical discussions. A general meeting of plant workers is set for the day after tomorrow to discuss this matter.”

“I shall be on time. I only need sleep. I’ll go now. The ‘boss’ is waiting for me, I guess.”

Platov went out unsteadily. Vartanyan remembered that he had said nothing about Korchenko’s decision. But then how could he give such news to an exhausted man.

Platov went up the creaking steps and knocked on the door.

“It’s the chief himself. You’re welcome!” said a hoarse excited voice from the doorway.

“Who is that?”

“It’s I—Zhorov—the keeper of this asylum.”

“Where’s the old man?”

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“Very far away. About to make his last journey.”

“What nonsense are you talking? What journey?”

“The usual one. The next world as it used to be called, but I suppose you call it an aerial trip now-a-days. They’ll provide him with a pine wood aeroplane, made in the collective farm, for eleven rubles twenty kopeks, and off he’ll go.”

“Are you drunk?” inquired Platov, dragging him into the living room.

“Not drunk, but I’ve had a drop to console me. I mustn’t drink much now, Senya, for I’ve saved two men! I’m a hero, that’s what I am!” Zhorov stuck out his chest and drew himself up proudly. “First I saved you, and now I’ve saved the old man. I’ve been lucky that way. I’ll save people all my life. They’ll have my name in the papers again. And my picture! That’s the kind of a fellow I am. Look at me—Zhorov—drunkard and hero!” He marched round the room stroking his chest with his long, ape-like hand.

“Stop this nonsense and tell me where the old man is,” asked Platov anxiously clutching Zhorov’s hand.

“In the hospital.”

“What’s the matter with him?”

“Lost his memory.”

“Is he ill?”

“Yes, he’s fallen ill from something heavy.”

“What happened?”

“A steel beam broke his head.”

“Where?”

“I came into the furnace shop last night, with a cast, and found him lying on the floor, stiff-like. Antonyich shouts: ‘He got struck on the head with a beam! The old man is blind—he missed his way in the dark. Run and get a stretcher,’ he says. I spent an hour looking for that stretcher, then I gave it up and carried the old man to the hospital in my arms. He’s as light as dry wood. He came to himself in the hospital and says: ‘Zhorov, go to my house, tell Senya’ and off he went again. I’ve been waiting for you a whole day here, I felt so dull I had to have a drink.”

Platov ran out.

He ran, tripping and falling in the dark, jumping across the ditches of the new water conduit and over piles of stone, rushed through the park and in through the hospital gates.

A nurse led him to one of the wards. All things seemed white and

shapeless under the electric light which shone through the frosted glass.

“There he is. He was talking deliriously a while ago, but is quiet now. A girl called Olya came to see him and sat here for a long time, he said something to her, I think.”

Platov sat down on a stool. “Olya is a brick,” he thought. Everything round him was white. The old man’s white beard blended with the white bandage, which covered his head and the greater part of his face. The white hair against the white pillows. He took the heavy hand of the “boss” and felt it burning with fever.

“I’ve seen my last happiness but one, and the last one is difficult to get at.”

He remembered the old man’s words. The accident had happened at night. The old man had gone to investigate something. Antonych had been there. A beam had fallen—an accident again! They had become too numerous lately.

Platov remained beside him until dawn and went home with dragging steps. His head was aching and ringing.

He knocked at the Pylayev’s window. It opened and a touselled blond head appeared.

“Platov! I sat with him all day long. He’s very bad. Raved all the time. Begged for the German. He opened his eyes only once and asked about you. I said you were away. He said: ‘Senya must verify the samples’ and lost consciousness again. I think he must have been raving. What samples could he be talking of? I’ll go back to the hospital in the morning and will sit with him. Did you see him?”

Platov went into the house, now empty of its master, stared dully at the rickety little sofa, and threw himself on the bed, without taking off his clothes. Zhorov lay on the floor snoring, his long ape-like arms thrown out on either side of him.

* * * * *

The old leather-bottomed stool rolled noisily from under the bed and through the room. Sergey ran after it and struck it with the toe of his boot. The worn leather covering gave way and cracked, letting out a little cloud of dust and a shower of shoe pins and rubbish.

Sergey laughed, ran after the stool and struck it again and again, as if playing football with it. The stool rattled and creaked and dropped showers of rubbish, accumulated through the years.

“That’s my heritage. Look at it, Marusya,” cried Sergey, flinging

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the stool against the wall.

The stool was kicked back into the middle of the room, where it whirled round with its fragments of leather flapping about.

“The damned thing’s hard to smash,” shouted Sergey. He spat on it.

“Oh, how I hate you,” he turned away and sat down on the floor. His mother cringed in the doorway, crying silently.

“Go to bed, Serezh, take a rest,” said Marusya, putting her arms round him.

“I cannot rest, I cannot.... I’ll be in court tomorrow, Marusya! What can I say in my own defence? What?” he shook his head sadly. “Nothing! Nothing! I’m guilty. The court will condemn me. I’ll be kicked out of the plant.”

His mother collected the broken pieces of the chair. She was crying softly to herself.

“Stop the water-works, mother! Look at her, Marusya, gathering up her relics. Ha-ha! I’ll burn that stool to an ash. It’s poisoned my life. Senka called me a petty bourgeois. That’s hard to take. I’d like to smash every blessed thing here!”

He swayed and the room seemed to sway with him.

“Lie down, Serezh, dear, you mustn’t get so excited,” entreated Marusya. She tried to drag him to his bed.

“I hate everybody! And I’ll say so in court tomorrow. Let them condemn me.”

“There he goes again, holy mother of god!” murmured the old woman.

Sergey tossed on the bed, but sleep overcame him at last.

“Vasilyevna, I’m going out for an hour. You stay at home till I come back.”

Marusya hurried to that two-storey house on the outskirts of the town, where she had once dropped her handkerchief at Sergey’s feet. The trial would take place the next day. What would happen to Sergey? She was afraid to think of it. Her one thought at the moment was to help him. She went to see Andrushechkin with that thought in her mind.

She came in timidly. Andrushechkin was writing.

“How are you, Grisha? Haven’t seen you for a long time.”

“I know that,” he said drily, and went on writing.

“I’ve come to speak with you, Grisha, don’t be angry. I love him... it’s not to be helped.”

“That’s your own business, you can live your own life.”

“I am happy. But you—you are all alone?”

“I manage somehow. I eat at the plant.”

“The floor’s not been swept for a long time. Where’s the broom?”

Marusya seized the broom and started to sweep.

Andrushechkin was reminded of their past life together. He threw away his pen.

“Why did you come?”

“To beg you..... Sergey will be tried tomorrow. You, as a member of the Party, can help. You will give evidence against him?”

Andrushechkin made no answer.

“Your evidence is most important. Have pity on Sergey—I beg you, Grisha, don’t make me unhappy.”

Marusya laid the broom across her lap and covered her face with her hands.

Andrushechkin breathed heavily, gasping for air, as if he had his welding mask on. Yes, he was to give evidence in court tomorrow. And it was written out.

“I know Sergey Vekshin to be the worst of workers, an habitual absentee and malcontent.”

“Grisha, don’t avenge yourself because I left you.”

“Sergey Vekshin led a loose life.”

“Have pity on me, Grisha! Sergey is young yet. He’s only started to live since we are together. Don’t ruin his life. Grisha”

“Vekshin is young and strong. He might do the work of three men but he did not like his work and tried to get out of it.”

“Why don’t you say something, Grisha? Sergey loves me.”

“Vekshin has had an education, he knew more than others, yet he always started a row on the smallest pretext. Men like him cannot be allowed to remain at the plant, citizen judges. . . .”

“Grisha! He’s become a different man lately. Why should you ruin his life? And what will become of me?”

Andrushechkin gazed in silence at his written evidence. Everything was true and Sergey must bear the consequences. And—didn’t he meddle and ruin another’s life? His life with Marusya had been full of misunderstandings, yet he loved her and this feeling was most acute in the days of his loneliness. He had hoped she would return. And she had come, was sitting beside him, and the smell of lilac was floating in the room, bringing memories of the past.

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“Grisha! I beg you!... I am with child.”

Andrushechkin started in anguish.

“She will not come back now,” he thought. “Besides, I would not want her with another man’s child.”

“All right,” he said. “You can go. I don’t bear any grudge.”

Marusya went away, made hopeful by his words. Andrushechkin opened a copy-book.

“Beware of the danger that lurks in the softness of spring!”

The words sounded like a mockery. His fingers closed nervously over the paper, crumbling it and tearing it.

3

Sergey heard his sentence with lowered eyes. The tall, thin, consumptive judge read it out in a hoarse voice, confusing the words, repeating his sentences and continually wiping his wet forehead.

“I wish he’d get it over with,” thought Sergey. He felt hundreds of curious eyes fixed on him in pity or accusation.

The crowded courtroom was very hot. The people sweated from heat and excitement. Marusya clutched the rail of the barrier and stared with terror at the judge, whose long, white teeth seemed to eat into her heart.

The crimson-faced Andrushechkin stared at the wall and his white eyebrows worked up and down.

“... the Court sentences the accused, Sergey Vekshin, to three years penal labour without confinement. An appeal against this sentence can be filed in the usual way. Court fees to the amount of fifteen rubles fifty kopeks to be paid by the accused.”

Sergey turned to the door, without lifting his eyes, and pushed his way roughly through the crowd.

“He got off with a light sentence,” said an astonished voice.

“Andrushechkin’s evidence was very favourable, or he would not have got off so easily,” said another.

“I suppose he’ll work at the plant on half pay.”

Sergey ran down the court house steps and walked quickly along the street, without paying any attention to Marusya’s shouts. It seemed to him that every passerby knew about his sentence. He hurried on with lowered eyes.

He turned down Likhvinskaya Street, and walked to a little house with pink shutters. He had heard his sentence calmly, for he had expected much worse. Why was Andrushechkin so lenient? Sergey was

much astonished to hear him say that the accused had shown much better conduct during the last month, lived a regular life and married.

“And yet, I’ve taken Marusya away from him. Queer man! Not even able to avenge himself. But I shall avenge myself.”

There was the street, the second house on the right was the one. The shutters were pink in the light of the setting sun.

The air was hot and damp. Sergey’s feet sank in the soft, damp sand. There was the porch. The passage. The checked overcoat. The padded jacket. Valya.

She stared at Sergey with angry, frightened eyes.

“What have you come for?”

“To see your father. Is he in?”

“He will be, soon. What do you want him for. You can see him at the plant tomorrow.”

“I must see him today. I’ll wait.”

He sank on the familiar sofa and stretched his legs out.

“Why are you so spiteful?”

“Why should I be kind to you? You’ve got Marusya, she’s kind enough.”

“That’s true. She’ll go on being fond of me even after I’ve been sentenced.”

“What sentence did you get?”

“Three years without confinement.”

“Well, you’ve earned it. It’s your own fault, you’ve got nobody but yourself to blame,” said Valya with satisfaction.

“I’m not complaining. It’s you I am sorry for, Valya!”

“Save your pity. I’ll wait till some other fellow is sorry for me.”

The smell of freshly mown hay came through the open window. It reminded Sergey of certain summer nights and blades of dry grass entangled in Valya’s auburn hair.

“What I’m going to say is for your own good, Valya, although you may not like to hear it. The truth is always bitter. I’m suffering through your father’s fault. I thought he would be my example in life and I followed him, but he proved to be a broken reed. I’ve made a mistake, Valya, your father is a croo. . . .”

The door opened with a slight creak and a bicycle wheel was pushed through the opening. The tires rustled, the nickel spokes flashed. A yellow hand appeared, holding on to the seat, and was followed by the stooping figure of Antonych.

“Here you are, Valya!”

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Sergey sank deeper into the corner of the sofa. Valya ran and threw her arms round her father and showered kisses on his grey hair, which smelt of oil and smoke.

“Is that for me, dad? Really for me? I can’t believe it. Oh, you darling dad!”

Valya stroked the leather seat with trembling hands, looked at the shining wheels, felt the tires and threw herself on her father’s neck again.

There was a happy light in Boretsky’s colourless eyes—his lips trembled under the bristling moustache. Suddenly Sergey appeared, like a phantom, before him. Antonych sank down into a chair.

Driven mad by rage, Sergey struck him in the face, and clutching Valya’s hand, cried:

“To hell with his present, Valya! I... he... We are both crooks! Don’t touch it! Shout it, so that all may hear. So that people may come and see the faces of those who steal their happiness.”

He went on screaming in a hoarse voice, which sounded unfamiliar in his own ears. Valya went pale and sank on the sofa.

Sergey rushed to the door, and as he ran out, heard a scream, the sound of a fall and Valya’s hysterical crying.

He walked through the streets, full of spiteful joy and the feeling of satisfied vengeance.

He felt pride at the strength and fitness of his body, but a vague anxiety beset him. It was disquieting and irritating and he hurried on as if trying to get away from it.

He glanced around and saw that all things were pursuing their usual course. A stream of people walked as usual down the streets which were full of sounds and movement. People were going home for the night. He would also get home in a minute and go back to the usual trend of his life.

But would it be so? Sergey felt the palm of his hand burning and felt the coarse, rough skin with astonishment—there was nothing the matter with it. And suddenly he remembered what had just occurred in the little house with the pink shutters and he felt the pricking sensation produced by the impact of his palm with Boretsky’s unshaven cheek.

Sergey wiped his hand carefully with his dirty handkerchief.

He was right. Boretsky had done him irreparable injury. Why then was he ashamed of the memory of his act?

He was delayed at the crossing, a small crowd was waiting for a

string of new cars to pass. The cars passed in a long red line, as in a parade, before the eyes of those who had made them.

There was Titych, smiling and stroking his moustache, nudging a man who carried a red bundle under his arm and saying:

“That car is a beauty.”

“Sure is,” said the other.

The cars were followed by new engines. There was the squat “V” followed by the heavy, short-legged freight engine “EB” and, at the very end, the long-bodied, express engine “SU” on its high, shiny wheels.

“Just like a thoroughbred race horse,” said Titych fondly.

“What about this one—its plainer and sturdier, like a cart horse, but strong!” said his neighbour.

But Sergey thought of the terrible cracks which might be hidden under the bright new varnish—cracks which nobody saw, or knew of. How could they be so blind?

Tomorrow, maybe, those beautiful engines would be smashed and blood would flow and death leap out of the crashing thunder of mangled cars.

And Sergey understood at last how small and petty his indignation was.

He glanced questioningly at the crowd and saw warm happiness shine in the face of Titych. A feeling of acute pity filled his heart.

Suddenly he started to run. He pushed people out of his way.

He ran faster... faster. People shouted after him.

“Has he gone mad?”

“Are you blind, or what?”

How was it he had not thought of it before? Could it be too late now?

Sergey arrived at the entrance gate, covered with sweat. He explained in a rambling way to the astounded watchman that he must get in, must see the manager on an urgent matter, that Boretsky was injuring the cause of socialism and that he, Sergey, was sorry for the people who were standing at the crossing and admiring the faulty engines.

The telephone bell sounded and rang persistently. The little hammer beat against the nickel cups in an alarmed manner. Korchenko took up the receiver.

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At dusk, Platov got an unexpected visit from Vera.

She drew her coat nervously round her and sank quietly on the little rickety sofa.

“I am feeling miserable, Platov. May I sit here for a while?” she asked, leaning her head against her outstretched arm. “You are always at work, don’t you ever tire? Come and sit beside me.” She stretched out her arm and drew Platov to her side. “Come!”

Platov closed his book and sat down beside her. It was stiflingly hot and rain hung in the heavy, low-hanging clouds.

“What is the matter, Vera?”

“I’m frightened, Platov. I undressed, went to bed and started to read. Suddenly, I seemed to hear someone moaning plaintively in the next room. The house was empty, father was at the plant. I went stiff with terror. Drew the blanket over my head and lay there, breathless. It seemed to me that something terrible was about to happen, some misfortune. I felt panicky. I jumped out of bed, threw this coat over me and ran. Feel how cold my hands are.”

Her hands and arms slid slowly from under the coat.

“I have hardly any clothes on.... Had no time to dress. I am still terribly frightened. Tell me something cheerful. Make me laugh—get me warm again. I’m freezing.”

She had about her the sensuous odour of mignonette. Her half-opened lips were ripe and moist.

“Senya!”

Platov started. A feeling of intense fatigue seemed about to vanquish his body, his mind was in a fog, he was conscious of nothing but the heavy seductive smell of mignonette and the half-dressed body. He was sinking into a pleasant stupor. He shook himself and moved away suddenly.

“Your nerves are out of order, Vera.”

He walked up and down the room.

“Have I come at the wrong moment, Platov? Were you expecting anybody else? I can go.” Tears sounded in her voice. “I have gone through so much these days. I lived in the hope of finding comradely support. I thought I could look upon you as my friend. You avoid me. Tell me... tell me, Senya, have you no affection for me left in your heart?”

Platov looked at her long and searchingly. She was the same old Vera he hated. Her white arms were stretched out in anguish. Her coat was open.

“Tell me frankly, Platov, do you like Olya Pylayeva?”

“Yes, I like her. She is a very capable girl. She has also gone through much. More than others, perhaps. She has retained her spirits, she is full of energy. Life has given her a good education.”

Platov spoke excitedly about Olya. He caught the cold, resentful look in Vera’s eyes.

“What can I do? Life has given me a different education. My father, unfortunately, was not hanged.” Vera shivered and closed her eyes. “I came to the revolution by another road. Does it mean that I have no right to share it with those who have earned that right by their proletarian origin? Does it mean that I shall never be able to get out of this damned closed circle? Am I then to be deprived of riding in this train, which you call socialism? Answer me!” she cried hoarsely and waited for his answer in tense silence.

Platov turned his back on her and walked over to the window. The sky was heavy with thunder clouds. Lightning flashes uncovered the garden for brief interludes, and he could make out the gnarled shape of the old pear tree. The soft sighing of wind-blown leaves came to his ears.

“That pear tree must be cut down,” thought Platov. “The old man won’t do it. He’s too fond of the young shoots, but they will only grow wild and rob the soil of its fertility. Yes—our garden is small and we must cut away all old growths and destroy their wild shoots.”

Platov felt Vera’s excited breathing behind him. “Yes, I must show no mercy—impossible.” He felt like saying something withering—crude—even offensive—in order to end this uneasy silence.

“There is plenty of room in our train. Get in if you like. The passengers are workers, peasants and also intellectuals. We take everyone who was rusting away on the side tracks of history. Get in, but leave your luggage at the station—your self-complacency, all this rot about sacrifice, your individualism, all the little parcels full of intellectual trash and egotism. We don’t want that luggage. We workers still have enough trash of our own—you often see a metal worker get into the train with a pig in his sack. Get in, please! But buy a ticket first. Pay for it by the resolution to leave off whining and start fighting. And remember there are no sleeping cars in our train. Only hard benches. Get in, by all means, but remember that you can get out of your closed circle only by breaking it with your own hands. Now answer me, since you make demands upon us: What have you done to help us on our way? Where is your ticket?”

Vera looked at him in mock fright.

Platov stood before her expectantly.

Vera remembered the letter she had brought from Moscow, her talk with

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her father and understood that the circle was not broken—its iron ring still held together the disintegrating particles of the old world. It still existed and she felt its cold impact every day, on her father's return. What must she do? Betray her father? Tell Platov all she knew? Was the sacrifice she had made not sufficient? Must she hand her father over to be shot? Yes, the circle would surely be broken then.

“Your ticket!” demanded the dry, stern voice.

Vera jumped up from the sofa and drew her coat round her. She was shivering with excitement. She felt ready to fall at the feet of that merciless man.

“So you want to save your fare? Can't be done! We'll put you off at the first stop. We'll travel without you to our destination. Goodbye, Vera.”

She stopped at the door and looked at him wildly. Her coat opened, showing her bare breast, above the low cut of her chemise.

“You'll come for a ticket yourself, Platov!”

Her voice was lost in the passage....

Platov opened his book, but the lines swam before his eyes.

“Tomorrow is the decisive day,” he thought. “The last battle. He who is sure of himself will conquer. I am sure of myself. My self-assurance has been with me in the most trying days. I must hold my weapon firmly—that weapon is the help I get from friends like Kuzmich, Olya, Titych, Mokhov, Vartanyan.... Vera? We'll see. I must post my sentinels. Olya, Mokhov, Titych have thousands of people at their back—a whole class. Close connection with those thousands, their inner life, their vague, unformed ideas are a new weapon. The enemy has not got that weapon.”

He went out in the garden. A strong smell of ripening apples struck his nostrils. The trees looked unreal in the moonlight and the humped roof of the Pylayev cottage was outlined in black against the sky.

He knocked on the window. Old mother Pylayev stuck her head out and drew it in immediately, muttering to herself in a frightened whisper.

“Open, grandmother. It is I—Senya.”

The old woman opened the window cautiously.

“Is Olya asleep?”

“She's been running about. She's always running about. Hasn't had any dinner. Ate some apples though.”

“Is that Platov, grandmother?” asked Olya, coming to the window.

“Forgive me for disturbing you again, Olya. How is the old man?”

“Don't talk so loud, grandmother must not hear,” whispered Olya in his ear. “The doctor says he will die. He's lost a lot of blood. He's not been conscious once. Always raving about the German. What hard luck, Senya!”

“Yes, it is hard for us, Olya,” said Platov in a shaking voice. “We must fight a battle at the general meeting tomorrow. You must help me. I will not go to the meeting. I must verify what Kuzmich said. That will take a whole day. You must speak against Turchaninov. He will talk about metal fatigue and explain the accident that way. You must oppose him.”

“But I have no idea what metal fatigue means. It’s something very learned,” said Olya thoughtfully.

“That does not matter, Olya. Don’t be embarrassed by that. Titych, Mokhov, Vartanyan will support you. You must kick up a good row. There is no need to teach you—the thing is to rouse the whole meeting against Turchaninov’s theory. Do you remember what I said at the engineers’ meeting? Talk in that vein. That’s all. Go to bed, Olya.”

He extended his hand, which Olya pressed firmly and lingeringly.

* * * * *

In the morning Platov was told that Korchenko had reappointed Kraysky to be head of the shop and that he was left temporarily as his assistant. He smiled and made his way to the laboratory.

“So I’m not fit to be a commander, am I? Well, I’ll fight as a private and it’ll not be the first time either.”

He had to pass through the entire shop. He saw the familiar faces of the workers—the workers who were proud of their Senka, who had become chief of the shop. He could, of course, work as assistant chief. He would become a simple moulder, if necessary. But then hundreds of familiar eyes would look at him quite differently tomorrow, and engineer Platov would become plain Senka, who had attempted to reach a high post and failed. They would laugh at him, pity him. No, not pity! That was as insulting as a penny thrown to a beggar.

* * * * *

Titych saw Platov run past without a word and go out through the gate. His face was scarlet and seemed to be burning. Titych stared after him in astonishment and bent his head in deep thought.

The laboratory was as clean and cosy as usual. Ostrovsky was absent. Vera was verifying samples of casts according to a list.

“Oh! the conductor has come. Have you come for the ticket?” she asked with a tired smile.

Platov waved his hand round.

“You have been working here for some time. Vera, tell me—who brings the samples?”

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“Boretsky. He just brought a new lot. Here they are.”

“And, tell me—are the tests properly made?”

Platov took one of the rods and clutched it in his fingers. It was marked with the figure 2220.

“Certainly. The samples go through all the testing devices. The results are noted down in our books.”

“Does Pavel Yakovlevich carefully look after the way in which samples are treated and delivered?”

Platov fixed his burning eyes on Vera.

“Why do you ask? I do not watch my father.”

As soon as Platov spoke of her father, Vera had the same feeling of physical weakness she experienced the day before. Her father, the letter, the cursed, closed circle. She would not retreat behind the fatal line. Yet she had not the strength to destroy it. Why should she accomplish this bloody sacrifice, since the man before her refused to take any notice of her feelings? Since he had spoken of another girl with so much admiration.

“It’s not my business to know about my father’s work,” she said with an effort.

The stern, black eyes seemed to pierce through her. She started and went pale.

“Not your business? Very good, goodbye then!” said Platov, turning to the door.

Vera took a step after him. She felt like shouting: “Stop! I know... I will tell you.” But her lips refused to move and she sat down on the table, wringing her hands. The samples fell with a ring on the tiled floor.

* * * * *

Like a hunter stalking his game, Platov went furtively into the forge shop. He was deafened by the noise of numerous steam hammers and presses, workers’ shouts and the hiss of oil-burners. The gigantic piston of the hydraulic press worked slowly up and down. The air quivered with the blinding flame of the blast furnaces.

“Stand aside!”

A ton of steel heated up to one thousand and one hundred degrees, moved slowly through the shop, diffusing an intense red light that blinded and stung the eyes. It looked like a glowing orb hanging on the black chains of the electric crane. Men, bare to the waist, rushed round the fiery mass, and covering their eyes with their hands, directed its movement, by means of hooks, towards the steam hammer. Their bodies were covered with sweat and glistened like polished copper.

The fifteen ton steam hammer lifted its heavy paw and, as soon as the steel ingot was on the anvil, the hammer struck it a smashing blow, sending a shower of particles in all directions. Its severed head rolled to the ground and its fat body reared itself upright. The hammer struck it again and again, giving it the shape of a barrel. The sweating men turned it over hurriedly and it began to lengthen under the blow of the hammer, which turned it into a roughly shaped engine axle.

The hammer beat mercilessly at the shapeless lump of steel, fashioning it into an engine axle. The force of the blows made the ground shake under Platov's feet. He even thought the heavy axles which were cooling on the ground were shaking, too. The axle was forged and placed on top of the pile of axles which had cooled already—its surface turned a deep red, gradually grew dark and cooled into a greyish blue.

Platov felt the rough surfaces of the axles with his hand, in search of something. His eyes roved over the black piles of metal as if trying to probe them to the very core, and suddenly flashed with satisfaction.

He verified the number of the sample. That was it—No. 2220.

A roughly forged, bluish-coloured axle was marked with that number. One of its ends was partly cut, forming a sort of head to the forged cast. No. 2220 was marked on the head as well as on the body.

Platov carried away a piece of dark steel with him as he walked hurriedly out of the shop. Platov clutched it in his hand and ran to the mechanical laboratory.

The laboratory was as clean and quiet as a scientific study. The testing devices stood silent and shining with nickel parts. Ostrovsky was noting figures in a book. Vera was engrossed in the examination of samples.

“Can we do anything for you, Comrade Platov?” Ostrovsky flashed his gold teeth in a polite smile. Platov smiled, too, as he clicked the samples together.

“I want to test these samples which have been cast according to a system I want to propose to the management. An experiment of mine. I believe I have discovered the secret of making the strongest possible steel.”

“Are you serious?” asked Ostrovsky with an incredulous smile. “So you want to become famous. Let me congratulate you! I never thought you went in for scientific research work. Why—you have only just finished the technical university.”

“I do go in for it, Comrade Ostrovsky, and I am sure my steel is of the best quality. I'll call it ‘Victorite No. 2.’”

“I'm all at your service, Comrade Platov. So many wonderful things happen now-a-days, that I've ceased to wonder. An extraordinary epoch this.”

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He hissed the words through his wide-spaced teeth, as he walked up to an apparatus. He adjusted the sample and switched on the current. The counterweight sank and the needle moved along the bright strip of the indicator. The hum of the motor grew louder and louder, filling the laboratory.

The steel rod which was being tugged by the apparatus began to thin out and suddenly snapped with a loud crack. Vera started nervously and buried her face in the entry book.

Platov and Ostrovsky collided with each other in their haste to view the result of the test.

"I don't envy you, Comrade Platov," cried Ostrovsky maliciously, as he showed him the broken piece of steel. "The result is scandalous. Look here—in the first place, it snapped near the head and not in the middle, secondly—see these hollows—that's it—the structure of the metal plainly shows its bad quality."

Platov took the piece of steel and saw that Ostrovsky was right.

"Let's have another test."

"Just as you like, Comrade Platov."

The result proved the same. Ostrovsky grinned.

"The steel is absolutely worthless, Comrade Platov."

"You are right, Comrade Ostrovsky, absolutely worthless," Platov repeated in a mocking voice.

Ostrovsky stared at his soot-smearred face and burst out laughing.

"Pity you wasted your time on such an invention, Comrade Platov. It's just ordinary, in fact—mediocre steel. 'Victorite' is too good a name—better change it."

Platov's thick lips stretched in a wide grin and his body shook with laughter.

"'Victorite!' ha-ha-ha! And I hoped to make myself famous with it," he gasped.

They stood facing each other and laughed. Ostrovsky in a thin hissing cackle—Platov in a rich ringing laugh, so that the quiet laboratory echoed with their laughter. Vera looked at them and shuddered involuntarily, for she felt a menacing danger lurking in that unnatural laughter.

Platov walked away from the laboratory wrapped in thought. There could be no doubt. The "boss" had not suffered in vain.

"Poor old man! Can it be that you will not get well enough to share my happiness?"

"Yes, my worthy engineer Ostrovsky. Senka Platov—the Red specialist—is making scientific researches and will carry them out to the end."

Nosov's tense figure, which he had watched from a distance a few days

ago, rose before his mind's eyes.

The time for action had come.

Clutching the pieces of steel in his hand, Platov opened the door of the shop office.

“Good morning, engineer Kraysky!”

* * * * *

Having avenged his fury and hatred of himself on the gramophone, Nosov felt calmer with the knowledge that he had found the necessary strength to resist the damned “fairy rod.”

He gazed for a long time at the things which surrounded him. They occupied their usual places and looked solid and silent. Everything was as solid and firm as the walls of the new house.

Must he then destroy it all, as he had destroyed the gramophone? He felt bewildered and unable to think clearly.

Yes, he was deceiving the plant, the workers, the whole country and the blue-eyed foreigner. There was deceit in everything: in that furniture, those curtains and rugs. The mirror of the wardrobe in which those vain things stood reflected, multiplied the deceit.

He walked out to the orchard. The apple trees hung their heavily laden branches over his head. There was a pungent smell of mint and parsnip. He thought of the country and the vast expanses of rye field.

Memories of his childhood flooded his brain. He thought of his own son.

He had struck Grisha. That was five days ago. The boy had not cringed as usual, but advanced upon his father with clenched fists and bared teeth. There was something tigerish and uncanny in his movements. Nosov had stepped back. Grisha had thrown him a glance full of hatred and left the room.

That night, Nosov found twenty-five rubles missing from his drawer. The lock was broken. Grisha did not come home that night, nor on the next day, nor on the third. His wife cried. The other children went about very quietly. People said they had seen Grisha in the market in the company of homeless waifs. They said that he told one of the neighbour's children that he was going South, to the sea-side, to the country where oranges grew, where you could spend days on a sandy beach with no one to beat you for making a hole in the tablecloth.

“Your face looks a fright. Are you sick? Or maybe you're worrying about your son. He's run away, hasn't he?” asked a pitying neighbour from the other side of the fence.

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Nosov passed his hand across his face as if to wipe off a cobweb. But the cobweb could not be wiped off and drew a film over his eyes. He walked quickly out of the garden.

He remembered that he had been absent from work for two days and felt joy at the thought of the way work must be going on without him. Kraysky's "work" could not progress without him. That thought gave him new strength and he walked quickly in the direction of the plant.

The nearer he came to the gates, the louder grew the familiar noise and he walked quicker and quicker. He thrust his hand into his pocket and felt a malignant joy at the contact of cold metal.

This little bit of steel with the hammer and sickle contained a double force. The one had dominated him, created a life full of deceit and finally robbed him of his son. The other still abided with the metal and he could use it. He was master over it now and could do what he liked.

He went into the open hearth furnace shop.

Titych was busy handling moulding sand and was black with dust and soot. Hundreds of other men were turning the beam over, moulding and ramming it until the shapeless mass took on the necessary contours. Titych bent fondly over a pale yellow mould and his face expressed a proud satisfaction—he was admiring the creation of his own hands with disinterested joy. Nosov saw the old clay-coated hands tremble with excitement.

Nosov felt a wild desire to live. Jumping over the heaps of steel waste, he disappeared in the smoky depth of the shop.

In his impetuous run, he knocked against a cast and fell down. He began coughing. The old pain came back and reminded him.

He found Kraysky and Antonych in the office. They were standing by the window. Antonych was saying something, speaking close to Kraysky's face.

"Ah! Nosov! Where have you been? Drinking? Away for three days. What the hell is the idea."

Kraysky struck the table nervously with his fist.

"You must never do it again. You must not delay us like that."

Nosov stood before him, looking strangely fit and joyful, with bright spots of colour in his cheeks. His eyes sparkled, his narrow chest breathed heavily.

"Never again, Vladimir Pavlovich. Right you are. I'll never use the damn stamp again."

"What do you mean? What is all this nonsense? Have you become too rich? Had too much of a good thing?"

Nosov drew himself up.

“I’ve had enough and plenty, damn you!”

Krasky rushed at him and seized his hands, shouting: “Be quiet, you fool, don’t shout. Are you drunk? Go and sleep it off. Think over what you’re saying. Not so loud, for god’s sake.”

Nosov drew back and shouted at the top of his voice:

“Oh! You’re frightened, are you? I’m boss now—here’s my weapon.”

The stamp flashed in his hand. Krasky rushed at him, whispering hoarsely:

“Give it back, Nosov! Give it back. He’s mad, Antonych! Take it away from him.”

Antonych seized Nosov’s hands and tried to wrench the stamp from him. Platov suddenly walked in.

“Good morning, engineer Krasky!”

He stopped in astonishment at sight of their heated faces.

“What’s wrong? What’s happened?”

Krasky sank limply into a chair.

“Another assault. That man’s drunk. Burst into the room. Threatened me....” Suddenly raising his voice he screamed shrilly: “Take him away, Antonych! He’s crazy.”

The pale and trembling Nosov cowered against the door.

“Comrade Platov. . . .”

Platov heard the entreating whisper, although Nosov’s lips hardly moved.

“Comrade Platov, here’s the false stamp. I don’t want... to be ... a scoundrel.... I don’t....”

“You ought to have done this before, Nosov. Too late now,” said Platov, watching Krasky narrowly. Krasky stared stupidly at him and bit his moustache.

5

The high, gloomy hall of the former school building, which was now turned into a workers’ club, was fast filling with workers. When Mokhov came; the best benches were already occupied. He swore and climbed to the balcony.

From the height of that balcony, which overhung the room on all sides, Mokhov looked down, fidgeting uneasily in his place.

Men’s heads—bald, grey, black, blond and of no particular colour, and women’s heads—bound with red kerchiefs, seemed to grow straight from their owners’ shoulders and seemed unnaturally squat to Mokhov. A hum of many voices floated up. It waxed and waned at intervals.

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People came in, looked round and made their way through the room. A little table, covered with red cloth, stood at one end near the wall. A dark object, shaped like an ancient cannon, lay on the table. The newcomers went near it, gazed at it, felt it with their hands and turned away, moving quietly as if in the presence of a corpse. Mokhov felt a heavy tension in the room, such as reigns in a dead man's house.

“What are they staring at?” he asked of his neighbour.

“The driving axle.”

“Oh! I couldn't make it out at that distance.”

Although Mokhov had seen and felt the axle on the site of the accident, he now strained his eyes, trying to make it out. It seemed to generate the anxiety which Mokhov felt in the room. He bent over the balustrade, looking for somebody in that crowd—and heaved a relieved sigh when he saw Olya waving her hand at him and smiling. Mokhov sat back, his mind was at ease.

Vartanyan stepped to the edge of the platform.

“Comrades! We must this day find an answer to the following question: What was the cause of the accident to the train which was drawn by our engine? We must do this with true proletarian consciousness and responsibility. The country has suffered heavy losses. There have been victims. Comrade Platov expressed it very justly when he said that he had seen ‘losses, blood and disgrace.’ Blood cannot be redeemed. The state will have to cover the losses. But what about the disgrace? It is a blot upon our plant!”

A heavy silence filled the room. Hands, heads, shoulders, head kerchiefs seemed turned to stone. Mokhov's neighbour caught his breath, and Mokhov sighed aloud.

“You must remember, comrades, that this is not the only case. You have all read the letter of the workers of Kursk. You also remember that a number of unfortunate incidents have lately occurred at the plant. Two assaults upon engineers, a tremendous rise in the amount of spoilage, the hunger strike of a turner of the machine shop, the queer accident that happened to an old man in the open hearth furnace shop. All these things show that all is not well at the plant. What is the matter? And another thing you have to remember is that we must defend our plant. Moscow—which means the country—does not want to entrust us with the construction of the new plant. I have serious reasons to believe we will not be allowed to build the plant, because we have not justified the country's trust.

“Comrades! The country, the Party, the working class expect us to amend all our defects. The foreign Communists—proletarians who visited our plant—expect us to give an answer. And we must give an honest and straightforward Bolshevik answer.

“It is engineer Turchaninov’s turn to speak.”

Benjamin Pavlovich ran out from behind some ragged, grey stage scenery, holding his pince-nez in place with one finger.

“I shall not keep you long, comrades. To us specialists—engineers who know the technical laws of metal structure—the various idiosyncrasies of metal and their reasons, this case is a very simple one. This is a typical instance of metal fatigue. A change in the structure of metal occurs in consequence of concentration of tensions and fractures occur unexpectedly and catastrophically.... The phenomena of metal fatigue are determined in the same way by German scientists, such as Hort, Fepl, Meilender, Lehr and others....”

“Can’t you speak simpler?” shouted a dissatisfied voice from the balcony. It seemed to break the silence, for the room filled with a buzz of voices, a sound of coughing and moving of chairs.

“We don’t understand!”

“Leave out the foreign names.”

“These big words make my head ache,” cried a girlish voice.

“You’ve got metal fatigue on your brain!”

“Don’t shout, let him have his say.”

Vartanyan asked Turchaninov to speak more simply. Benjamin Pavlovich fumbled with his pince-nez, wiped it with his handkerchief and smiled calmly.

“I shall explain myself by means of examples. For instance, if we take a child’s toy hammer and knock continually with that, over a period of hours on a certain spot of steel—the steel is bound to crack. Yes—a child’s toy hammer can splinter a steel girder.”

“Really!” said a hoarse, tenor voice and the room became animated again with jokes and laughter. The tension was gradually melting.

“There’s another example. There was a case—I don’t remember the year in which it happened—when the ceiling of the State Duma caved in. There was naturally a big row, an investigation, etc., although there were no killed or wounded, for the accident occurred at night and the place was empty. The building was properly constructed—no defects were found. Do you know what the reason was?”

The audience opened their mouths expectantly.

“The cause. . . .” Benjamin Pavlovich spoke slowly on purpose, taking a delight in the sight of the hypnotized faces before him and getting the audience under his influence. . . . “the cause was the engine of the heating system, which had vibrated the building rhythmically for a number of years and finally caused the roof to fall in.”

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The audience gasped. Benjamin Pavlovich did not let his audience come to their senses but told them his favourite fatigue story about the bridge in St. Petersburg, and ended it by calling the tsar's general a damned idiot. The audience laughed long and loudly over the stupidity of the general who did not know about fatigue. Vartanyan gazed at the workers' faces. He saw that the serious business meeting was turning into an amusing performance—the audience was getting too gay and good-humoured. He felt that his opening speech was forgotten and useless. Sympathies were on Turchaninov's side. The expression of the workers' faces showed that they were all inclined to think it was an unfortunate accident and that the plant was not at fault—that was good. But then all the important questions raised were side-tracked and that was bad. What choice should he make?

“Here is another example... or is the matter clear enough?” asked Benjamin Pavlovich affably from the stage.

“Let's hear it! Tell it! Tell it!”

“What I am going to tell you may seem mysterious, miraculous, supernatural. But we scientists do not believe in god and all that nonsense. We solve every mystery by means of technology. You all know the railway bridge over the Molva river. Let us place a violinist under the bridge and let him play the same melody with the same tempo for a month—and I assure you that the bridge will fall. Sympathetic vibration will cause metal fatigue—yes—the bridge will fall.”

“No...o?”

“That's a damned lie,” bellowed Mokhov from the balcony, and Olya supported him by shouting:

“Humbug! We are being humbugged. We've enough of it!”

“Don't interfere! Let him speak.”

“Stop that row!”

But the irate Mokhov went on bellowing from above:

“We've heard enough fairy tales. Tell us about the axle!”

“Yes, what about the axle? Did it crack because someone was playing the violin?” shouted the excited Titych.

Vartanyan shouted for order.

“The representative of the special commission of the Trust and the Supreme Council of National Economy, engineer Grayev, will speak next.”

A tall, blond man in a perfectly cut, grey suit came out on the stage.

“I was going to speak after the discussion, but some of the exclamations I heard made me decide to speak now. I heard some remarks about humbug, fairy tales, etc. Any man not versed in technical matters may think that the theory of metal fatigue is humbug. That is unavoidable. I forgive these

technically ignorant people their insulting remarks. The whole commission of the Supreme Council of National Economy, as well as myself, entirely agree with the opinion of engineer Turchaninov. There has been an accident, which has nothing to do with the plant. And so we shall report in favour of the construction of your new plant, when we get back to Moscow.”

This announcement was met with unanimous applause.

Olya had not expected that this commission from Moscow would take a hand in the matter and support Turchaninov. What was she to do? She wished Platov would come. She looked appealingly at Titych, lifted her face to where gloomy-faced Mokhov was sitting and lost her wits.

“What shall we do, Titych?” she whispered to the old man.

“Do as Senya told you,” said the old man gloomily and curtly, while he tugged at his beard.

“Who wants to speak. I am sorry to see that Comrade Platov is absent, and we don’t know what his point of view is,” said Vartanyan.

“Oh, yes, we do!” bellowed Mokhov from the balcony. Afraid that Mokhov would speak first and make a mess of things, Olya asked to speak.

“Comrade Olya Pylayeva will speak next,” shouted Vartanyan with a smile and the noise stopped.

Olya ran up the steps that led to the stage, with a beating heart and saw thousands of eyes fixed on her.

“Comrades, I belong to those whom engineer Grayev accused of technical ignorance. Nine-tenths of the people in this room are like me in that respect. Yet we must decide this matter, otherwise, why should we illiterate people have been called to this meeting? Am I right, comrades?”

“Quite right.”

“Go on, Olya.”

“I am technically ignorant—that is true. But I am sufficiently literate to know whether people are talking the truth or befuddling us. Besides, I’ve worked for five years in the machine shop and there are some things I do understand. Comrades!” Olya raised her voice and it sounded clear and firm. “Engineer Turchaninov told us many interesting things. He was quite amusing, but did he say anything of the reason for the fracture of the axle? He did not. No one heard him say anything about it. Although we met here for that purpose and not to listen to funny stories.”

“That’s right, Olya!”

“He said nothing about it.”

“We heard nothing.”

“That’s true, he said nothing,” cried the hoarse, tenor voice.

Encouraged by these friendly shouts, Olya drew herself up and shouted:

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“Comrades, working men and women! What did you understand from Turchaninov’s speech? I did not understand why the axle broke. From fatigue. . . . and what is the cause of fatigue?... The deformation of structure and the concentration of tensions.”

The audience laughed.

“What sort of explanation is that? Does he think we are fools? What is the reason for the concentration of tension—fatigue again?”

“She’s right! We don’t understand!” shouted the piercing, tenor voice.

“Go on, Olya! Go on!” screamed Titych excitedly.

“Remind him about the violin!” shouted Mokhov from above. “The violin, damn it all!”

Vartanyan was swayed by the general excitement and could not keep himself from smiling.

“Time’s up, Olya! Make it short.”

“Give her time!”

“Let her speak!”

Strakhov stared at her in astonishment from his seat in the front row. He had smiled ironically when he saw that pink-cheeked eighteen year old girl preparing to oppose Turchaninov’s theory. He thought she was speaking in order to do her duty as an active young Communist, that she would be content to speak in general terms. But his opinion of the pink-cheeked orator changed with every new sentence she uttered. He felt the passionate tension of her speech which affected her hearers like an electric current. He could not understand where the girl got the daring to express her opinion on such a purely technical question. But he involuntarily agreed with her when she expressed her dissatisfaction of Turchaninov’s theory. To Strakhov, in his capacity of engineer, the fatigue of metals was an undeniable fact, but the cause of this fatigue was not at all clear—the concentration of tensions in the metal had to have a definite reason. He sympathized with Olya’s indignation and shared her passionate protest. The engine accident was a matter that reflected upon the honour of the chief of the engine assembling shop, engineer Strakhov. The broken axle stared at him from the table like a gun pointed at his chest.

The pink-cheeked, blue-eyed girl was right. But Strakhov saw her helplessness as well as that of the whole audience—they could not discover the real reason of the accident.

He turned round and saw that all the faces expressed hatred towards the incomprehensible, scientific words which stood between them and such a plain fact as the death of five people and the destruction of a whole train. When the audience shouted unanimously: “That’s right! We do not

understand!" Strakhov felt ashamed that he, like all the rest, did not know the real reason for the accident. Yet he should know, for it was his engine. Strakhov moved nearer to the table where the piece of broken axle lay. The fracture had occurred at a place where the cross section changed and where a break was more likely to occur than any other part of the axle, since any change from one cross section to another naturally caused a concentration of tensions in the metal. Axles were turned in the machine shop—the chief was Zorin—not a bad engineer. He knew that he was responsible for elementary calculations in accordance with the laws of metal resistance. The drawings were certainly right. But maybe the workers had been careless and turned that part too sharply. In that case the tensions would increase many times in that very spot and so....

Strakhov looked narrowly at the axle.

That was it. The transition from the body to the neck was too brusque, not gradual enough—too much metal was taken off.

"Comrades!" Olya went on in her clear, girlish voice. "Let us for a moment believe Turchaninov's story of the bridge destroyed by a screeching violin or a monarchist general's command. But what I want to know is—where's the violin that played under the engine and destroyed this axle? What sort of violin is it, comrades. Engineer Turchaninov failed to tell us."

"That's right."

"To hell with his stories about the general!"

Strakhov gazed in astonishment at Olya. She had put the question quite plainly and logically. There must be a "violin" in that accident. Yes, the transition from one cross section to the other was too brusque. Too much metal taken off. The laws of metal resistance were unalterable. Any violation resulted in catastrophe.

"Comrades!" Olya's voice rang like high grade steel. "That theory is all humbug. Turchaninov explains everything by fatigue, just as a priest explains everything by the sinfulness of man. For example, if a man steals a piece of bread, the priest says its due to the sinfulness that's natural to him. And not a word said about the man's stealing because the bourgeoisie had seized all means of production, because of the exploitation of man by man. He won't speak about that—it's not to his advantage. Because the priest gets his livelihood that way."

"That's right."

"You're a brick, Olya."

"Go on!" shouted Titych, stamping his feet.

Korchenko ran up to Vartanyan.

"Stop this demagoguery, or close the meeting. I'm ashamed before the

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Moscow commission. Grayev is so angry that he has left the meeting.”

“Don’t be in hurry, Korchenko. See how interested the audience is.”

“I’m through, comrades,” said Olya in a thin, tired voice. “We humans are weaker than metal, yet no amount of fatigue can break us. Why is it that Titych, who has worked for forty years at moulding, making the same ‘rhythmical movements’ isn’t broken, but is working to this day? Why is it that our ‘boss’ Kuzmich, has lived over eighty odd years and is not fatigued. He has worked his life long for the working class. Now he’s dying,” Olya’s voice broke. Thousands of eyes flashed angrily in the tense silence. “If he dies it will not be from fatigue, nor old age, but because he has interfered with somebody’s dirty work. The reason is clear. We shall find out that reason, comrades. I’ve finished!”

Her voice broke and she sank on to a chair near the tribune.

The room filled with noise and clamour again and the hot breath of the audience stung Vartanyan.

“This matter must be cleared up, Vartanyan.”

“A dark business.”

“There must be a cause.”

“That’s right.”

“You can see the Pylayev spirit in her.”

Strakhov looked at Olya with respect—she had shown him the right way.

“Silence!” shouted Vartanyan, standing up. But the audience continued to shout and express its indignation, its approval of Olya’s speech, its anger and excitement. Benches cracked, bobbing heads and sweat-covered faces emerged from a cloud of tobacco smoke. The room had not witnessed such a troubled meeting since 1917.

“Order, comrades! Stand back, Korchenko, don’t interfere,” shouted Vartanyan angrily. “I shall not let you speak.”

“You have no right!” cried Korchenko.

“We’ll talk about my right in the district committee. I’ll not let you speak. Silence, comrades! It is my opinion that, being so excited, we can come to no conclusions.”

“That’s right,” screamed the same tenor voice.

“I propose that the question be transferred to the shops and discussed tomorrow. We’ll do it in a cool businesslike way there.”

The audience grew calmer, silence set in. People wiped their sweat-covered faces.

“And what is your own opinion, Comrade Vartanyan?”

Vartanyan turned round and caught Turchaninov’s malicious glance.

“That’s right, tell us your opinion, Vartanyan.”

“You must speak,” whispered Korchenko. “We must get them into another frame of mind, here or....”

Vartanyan kept an embarrassed silence. He did not want to speak. His mind was torn between two opinions. But if he spoke, he would have to give a firm opinion. There would be no middle way. The Party would be speaking in his person, to the thousands before him. They expected him to express his opinion. He must weigh all the arguments on both sides.

“Speak, Vartanyan!” shouted the audience.

“Give us your opinion, Comrade Vartanyan.” He felt a terrible strain of body and mind. He must save the plant. Grayev had spoken in favour of the construction of the new plant. Metal fatigue could not be doubted. Yet all those eyes could not see it, being blinded by mistrust and anxiety.... He must not let himself fall under the general influence.

“I think metal fatigue did actually occur. We have no reason to doubt Turchaninov’s words. And, of course, the representative of the Supreme Council of National Economy, engineer Grayev, is right in saying that there has been a tragic accident, for which the plant is not responsible. Comrade Pylayeva is wrong in many respects. A serious technical question cannot be approached so lightly.... It is true that the greater part of the audience supported her, but that occurred because Turchaninov failed to explain the matter in simple, easily comprehensible words. We shall amend that. We shall call upon all specialists to give explanations. Comrade Strakhov, for example, will, I’m sure, not refuse to give it in his shop. The meeting is closed.”

Strakhov looked intently at the broken axle. Yes, the turning of the transitory part had increased the tension to an abnormal degree. He looked at Vartanyan. Explain it in the shop? That was very simple.

People rushed to the doorway, filling it in an instant, coming in waves against Platov. He parted the hot bodies with shaking hands, stepped on people’s feet, caught his blouse on the edges of benches and tore it, but he went on stubbornly.

He caught sight of Olya’s happy, excited face and pressed her hands.

Titych glanced fondly at his ex-apprentice and wiped his bald head.

“We’ve done just as you told us, Senya. To the very last letter. What a life, hey?”

The wide avenue of the plant park looked like a high vaulted tunnel in the gathering dusk. The crowns of the pine trees met and mingled overhead. Electric lamps shone faintly here and there along the sides. It seemed to Olya that she walked down a tunnel dug in the heart of some high mountain. There was a presentiment of thunder in the air. It weighed heavily over the dark

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vault of the leafy corridor.

“You cannot imagine, Olya, the happy ending of that dreadful day. I could sing at the top of my voice for joy, only I’m afraid the people will take me for a drunk. I can hardly stand from sheer exhaustion, sleepless nights and nervous strain, yet I could walk like this with you for miles and miles. Were I a poet, I would write a poem about the happiness of people who are dead tired, yet walk on and on. This happiness, Olya, has its colour and smell. I think it smells of pitch and is as bright as that distant lantern. And you should hear it ring—listen.”

Olya heard a soft, melodious tinkle, like the coppery cry of grasshoppers in the tall grass.

“What is it, Senya? You are queer today. All things seem to ring, laugh and sing. It’s the same with me. I’m so happy because of our common success. But what is it makes that tinkling noise?”

Platov laughed quietly and pressed her hand against the pocket of his blouse. Olya’s fingers felt the cool surface of polished pieces of metal.

“What is that, Senya?” she asked, gazing in bewilderment at pieces of broken steel samples and what looked like a little steel stick.

“Those are the samples the old man spoke of, and because of which he perished without finding his last happiness. But I’ve found it. Let me mark your hand for a souvenir.”

He took her hand and pressed the steel stick against it—a hammer and sickle appeared on her reddish, sunburnt skin.

It was only then that Olya understood what a tremendous part she had played at the meeting. She listened to the gruff voice, speaking in such a happy tone and felt proud of herself and the man beside her. When his strong arm embraced her and drew her face close to his smiling face and she saw the little black eyes, wide, good-natured nose and parted lips, she did not resist, but gave herself up to the sweet languor that overwhelmed her.

They were nearing the house. A white figure was sitting on the porch. Olya remembered the hospital and shivered. She would pay another visit to the “boss” tomorrow morning. If only he would recover! What joy that would be.

“I’ll go, Senya. I’m tired and sleepy. I must go to the hospital tomorrow, before starting work. The only thing I can’t understand is why Vartanyan did not support me? That’s very strange.”

“How kind and considerate you are, Olya!”

Platov pressed her hand in his and felt her run her fingers through his hair, rumpling it.

“Don’t worry about Vartanyan,” he added, “we’ll win him to our side.”

And he made the pieces of steel ring in his pocket.

“Who is that?” asked Platov, peering at the white figure who sat immovable on the porch.

“It is I.”

He recognized the vibrating voice.

“I have come to speak to you for the last time. I saw your parting with that girl just now. You love her—that is clear. I have not come to beg for the impossible. I shall try to forget.... I have come to tell you what you want to know. I have brought you my ticket for the right to travel in your socialist train....” Vera’s voice sank to a hoarse whisper. “I have cried at home the whole evening.... I have thought it over—you are right. The fatal circle is still holding me back and I want to destroy it with my own hands. I want to tell you all I know.... about.... my father’s work.”

Vera looked dully out into the night, which looked like a bottomless pit to her—a terrible black abyss ready to swallow her, as soon as she had spoken her last word.

Life was cruel indeed. It expected this sacrifice of Vera. Why was the man before her so full of cold hatred....

“Platov.... Senya... I have come... I have resolved to make a sacrifice... my father....”

“To hell with your sacrifice! I know enough about your father. You’re late, Vera Pavlovna! You have been fumbling too long with your luggage. You missed the train.”

Platov banged the door and silence set in.

Vera rose slowly from the bench. She gasped for breath; the darkness stifled her and made her shiver. She clutched at her throat with moist fingers, slid down the porch steps with a low groan, and the dark vault of the night closed over her.

* * * * *

Akatuyev paced the room, casting impatient glances at the windows. Twilight was blurring the panes. Storm clouds were gathering in the south. Darkness was rapidly setting in.

The bushes of woodbine rose like black, silent fountains in the garden.

The stifling heat, the gathering darkness, created an atmosphere of anxiety. Akatuyev put his hand to his heart, and felt it beating loudly and nervously. He went to bed, turned on the switch and the light of the pink-shaded lamp on his night table fell soothingly on the open pages of the book he was reading. It was a novel called: *Among the Fjords*, which he had recently received from Moscow. The novel was full of ideas and feeling's which were

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akin to his own and made him forget the uneasiness occasioned by arguments with Vera. He knew his daughter and remembered her mother too well to harbour any hopes of winning Vera back. There was no help for it. He would have to fight single-handed to the end.

Why should he take an interest in her life now? She was lost to him. Still—why was all so strangely quiet in her room? What was she doing—that girl whom he both hated and loved?

He went out into the passage stepping quietly in his slippers. Vera's door was open. A copy-book lay upon the table.

"Her diary... what can she write about?" thought Akatuyev, bending over it.

"What a cruel, merciless epoch! It hangs over me as a thunder cloud. My heart is heavy. I have reached the limit. I want to live, but I must earn that right. So Platov says—that man who is as cruel as our epoch yet draws me to him by his powerful personality. He demands that I purchase my right to ride in his train by sacrificing the life of others. What a terrible price! How terrible and merciless life is!

"Let the blood of the man who is my kin, and yet a stranger, flow. I am ready, Comrade Platov, because of my love for you and my hatred for her who is taking you from me.

"I am determined to take this terrible step—I am coming...."

The words ran up and down the paper in a thick, black scrawl, dancing before Akatuyev's eyes.

Was everything over then? She was walking at this moment through the dark streets..... Nearing the fatal house. Akatuyev stared into the darkness with bulging eyes.

There was a sudden knock on the window pane. Akatuyev set his teeth and jumped up. He caught a glimpse of a familiar face behind the window and shuffled into the passage with a lightened heart.

"How are you, Grayev! So you have come at last."

Akatuyev put his shaking arm round the tall, slim, blond man.

"Come in."

Grayev went into the room, threw his coat off with a tired gesture and ran his fingers through his thick, blond hair.

"Things are in a dreadful mess down there. I left the meeting under pretext of protest against the wild demagoguery and persecution of a specialist

incited by some hussy. They are growling like hungry beasts. Turchaninov is not believed. My own speech did not help.” Grayev sank exhausted on the sofa. “I cannot stay here long. Speak quickly. You have been too long without writing to me—what is the matter?”

“What do you mean? Haven’t you come in response to the letter I sent you two weeks ago?”

“Two weeks ago? I did not get it.”

“How strange—I wrote asking you for an interview. Very queer!”

Akatuyev threw an anxious glance at the wall, which separated his room from Vera’s. A loud noise like the falling of a chair, was heard behind the wall.

“Whom have you got there?” asked Grayev.

“That is probably my daughter who has come home,” answered Akatuyev, breathing heavily.

“Your daughter? Nothing to fear then. Go on, I have no time to lose. Pavel Yakovlevich, I have only half an hour at my disposal,” said Grayev impatiently.

“In a moment,” whispered Akatuyev, listening intently. “I am not quite well. My heart is out of order. I shall be all right in a moment. ... I am fulfilling all your orders. A lot has been done. Successful work has been done among the engineers. Turchaninov is entirely with us and I have transferred that work to him. He is a most valuable man. The management has unbounded faith in him, he has great influence over the engineers and splendid powers of organization..... Kraysky is much worse, he is out for himself and perfectly indifferent to politics. I have taken Brooks in hand. That is very important, since he works in the planning section and directs engine construction. Naturally, nobody knows anything about the part I play, except Turchaninov.”

Grayev made notes in his book and, from time to time, threw searching glances at Akatuyev.

“Production is disorganized. Engines either stop or cause accidents. The last one was not incidental.”

Grayev interrupted him impatiently.

“The first thing I demand of you is that there should be no reasons for suspicion. A railway accident is too risky. Today’s meeting is menacing. We must stop all former crude methods of work. The main thing is to keep the plan in hand. All efforts must be transferred to that item. The plan and cadres! Cadres and the plan!”

A long groan sounded behind the wall.

“What is that?” asked Grayev suspiciously.

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“Something’s the matter with my daughter—she’s not feeling well,” said Akatuyev hurriedly. “I am afraid, Grayev, that we have gone too far with our old methods. Men with small, petty-bourgeois natures, like Kraysky, can do a lot of harm for the sake of getting an extra ruble. They have earned a great deal in bonuses, in connection with hidden flaws. They have no ideals, care for nothing but money. There are also some who are not to be trusted and are trying gradually to grow into socialism. Take Zorin, for example—a very clever man and a splendid specialist! But he is dangerous. He stands between both sides in the role of observer. He cannot fail to notice our work, but makes as if it were no business of his. But who can tell what he may take it into his head to do tomorrow? The demon of doubt is beginning to assail many people among us and that is a much greater danger than the presence of ten men like Korchenko. It lends our enemies added strength. We must hurry, Grayev, or valuable men will go to their side.”

“Time is growing short, Pavel Yakovlevich—we are on the eve of great events. That is why I don’t like the things you tell me. Such tempo of work and results are impossible, criminal!”

They heard another plaintive, prolonged groan.

“Perhaps your daughter needs help? You had better go and see.”

“Oh, no! It is the usual thing—women’s nerves,” said Akatuyev hurriedly.

“Remember, Pavel Yakovlevich, time is short. Everything is at stake. The forces abroad are prepared. If we miss our opportunity—all is lost. They are carrying out their Five-Year Plan successfully—there is no denying it. They have a lot of chances for victory if we lose the right moment. You must develop the work in connection with planning, use Brooks. A new idea—the construction of heavy engines—will be given out shortly. Those engines will demand a change of railway tracks. Construction will amount to millions, bridges—more millions! Take this idea up, make it popular among the masses. A man will soon come to your plant in order to work among the masses. He is a former worker. Keep in contact with him.....”

He was interrupted by a shrill cry.

“Again. How irritating!” exclaimed Grayev. “Go and give her some drops.”

“Drops will not help her,” said Akatuyev thoughtfully, feeling that his heart started beating loudly again.

“You must also delay the construction of the new plant in every way. Find some things to hinder it in every detail. You shall be responsible, Akatuyev, remember that. And here you are reading novels.” He took up the book that lay on the bed. “Oh! Strindberg! How well he expresses our idea—

that legislative power must be in the hands of people like ourselves. Do you know that this idea has even penetrated into the Soviet press. I recommend your reading the preface to "Science and Technology of the Future"—1928 edition. That idea is expressed quite openly there. We have to thank some writers—they have helped us a great deal. The hero of this novel *Among the Fjords* could not stand it and committed suicide, but we are strong enough to hold out until better days come. I am going—my time is up."

"One moment, Grayev," Akatuyev moved close to him and spoke in an agitated voice. "You see I have been working, writing... tell me, who will be minister of Ways of Communications?"

Grayev looked at him coldly and made a step in the direction of the door.

"It is too early—much too early to talk of that now. That post will have yet to be reached by a bloody route. Much blood will be spilt! It will flow in streams, into the sea and turn it red. We shall destroy everything. It is inevitable."

The sound of hysterical crying came from behind the wall. Akatuyev trembled and his bluish lips shook.

"Wait a moment, Grayev. You must help me. I do not know what to do. My daughter Vera has gone over to the other side, gone for good."

"Oh, that's it?" said Grayev, turning back. "You must send her away."

"That will not help us, Grayev. She knows all."

"Is that true?" cried Grayev, tearing off his hat. "How did that happen?" Akatuyev told him in stammering words. Grayev bit his nails.

"Do you know what this may mean, Akatuyev, for you and me, for our cause? Hundreds of people shot! What have you done! It may be too late to do anything... the orders for our arrests may be signed already. And you stand here and say nothing about it, as if it were a matter of no account! You are betraying the whole organization! Keeping an enemy in the next room, who knows all our secrets. What have you done!"

Grayev paced the room, pale with anger, agitated and furious.

"Is there no hope that she may come back to us?" he asked, turning something over in his mind.

"None whatever. I know her mother well enough."

Akatuyev bent his head helplessly.

The sound of crying behind the wall stopped, only a sob was heard from time to time.

"Can it be that she has denounced us already and is suffering from pangs of remorse? You know what to expect then, don't you? I do not wish to die. What about you?"

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Grayev's voice sounded cold and harsh.

Akatuyev made no answer.

A thunder cloud was gathering over the town. There was complete silence in Akatuyev's house—a silence unbroken by any sound.

But, suddenly, the silence was rent by a terrible cry!

“Oh-o-oh! Father! Help!”

Akatuyev entered Vera's room with fearful hesitation. Vera was rolling on her bed in convulsions, clutching at her throat.

“I am feeling bad... all burning inside... I have just swallowed.... O-o-oh!”

“What is the matter with you?” asked her father with harsh indifference.

“I am dying... burning... oh, father.”

Vera's eyes stared at him with an expression of childish, helpless terror, and struck by the look of doom which he read in them, Akatuyev rushed out into the passage shouting in a panic-stricken voice:

“Grayev! fetch a doctor! Be quick, for god's sake!”

He tugged at Grayev's sleeve and gazed with entreaty into his inscrutable eyes.

Grayev slowly put on his hat, set the rim straight with an accustomed gesture, shook off Akatuyev's cold hands and went out of the house.

Grayev hurried on, to get out of the dark. He stopped under a street lamp which threw a circle of light on a crossing and glanced at his watch.

“I'll be just in time,” he thought. “Oh, the doctor!”

He remembered Akatuyev's terrified glance, looked uncertainly at the polished, yellow surface of the telegraph post and walked on hurriedly in the direction of the station....

Akatuyev had not the courage to go into his daughter's room. He trembled at the thought of Vera's death and at the same time wished for it. He didn't believe in anything at the moment and had no other sensation except the feeling of some dreadful misfortune hanging over his head. In anxious expectation of the inevitable, he looked into Vera's room. Her glassy eyes were fixed on him. She tried to say something, opened her blackened lips. A spasm of pain convulsed her body, bending it double, throwing her against the wall.

Akatuyev wrenched with stiff fingers at his collar, and ran out on the porch, pressing his hand to his heart.

“Grayev! Grayev!”

A gust of wind whipped the bushes of woodbine and sent a shower of rustling leaves in Akatuyev's face.

He ran out into the wind-torn darkness, screaming.

THE SIXTH LINE

1

Mokhov woke up long before the signal sounded. He looked at the rough surface of the blackened walls. He remembered, how as a child he had run about these rooms inhaling the fresh scent of pitch which hung in transparent amber drops on the boards. He had thought it very funny to see flies get caught in it and remain there forever like immovable black dots.

Now these walls exuded a smell of damp and rot. Mokhov stopped up many holes, but that did not help much. Little cottages were being built on all sides, the street was lengthening—stretching out further and further into the fields. When Mokhov gazed at the narrow windows of the new cottages, he spat in disgust and went to the other end of the town where new stone houses were being built. The windows especially were a source of wonder to him. These expansive windows seemed to welcome the sun, which came in freely and shone on the white walls of the rooms. It seemed as if the people who lived in those houses scorned to hide from human sight and lived their new lives openly. Those windows made Mokhov think ruefully of the tiny peep-holes which formed the windows of his own cottage.

At this moment too, he thought, the morning must be brilliant outside, yet the room was half dark. The light filtered in through the tiny windows, screened off by the narrow lintels and faintly lit the room. That was the reason for its dampness. Mokhov expected to be told any day that he could move to the new district. That would be the best recompense for his years of labour. Besides, it was not of himself that he was thinking. There was Sasha, tossing in his sleep and snoring. Swarms of flies attacked his lips, nose and eyes. From time to time Sasha brushed them off in his sleep. Sasha must live in a house with large windows—he would not want to leave his father then.

Suddenly Mokhov felt a vague anxiety and the windows of the socialist city which his imagination had called up, became blurred and disappeared. He recalled the events of the preceding day. The socialist city meant a new mechanized plant. Yet the construction of that plant was stopped for the time being—Moscow had no confidence in the plant. The workers of Krasny Proletary were making bad engines... there was the accident... the axle. The socialist city would not be built. The beautiful windows were lost to Mokhov and Sasha.

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Mokhov jumped out of bed.

“Sasha! Wake up, comrade controller, the plant is in danger.”

He pulled his son by the leg, but Sasha kicked and sank back into his sound morning sleep.

“You do well enough without your sleep when it comes to catching your father at the plant gate, but when we must save the plant you can’t even open your eyes! I’ll not let you sleep! Get up!”

Mokhov dragged Sasha out of bed and the boy began to dress with slow, sleepy movements.

“The devil’s at work in the plant, Sasha, and you’re fast asleep,” continued Mokhov with a grim smile.

“There are no devils now,” growled Sasha angrily, in response to his father’s ill-timed joke.

“Ah, but there are! And see what they do: wrecking engines, breaking axles, so that a whole train is wrecked. And you snoring in your bed. A pretty Pioneer you are! That’s who you ought to catch instead of your father.”

“It’s not devils,” said Sasha knowingly, “it’s the metal got tired and it busted.”

“Tired!” said Mokhov, staring at his son. Mokhov thrust his bare foot into his boot.

“Yes, just like a man gets tired. Vanya—the ‘manager’—told me about it yesterday and he heard it from his father.”

“They should both go and have a look at that spot where the accident happened. Tired indeed! I tell you there are devils at work, Sasha. They sit under the bridge, playing the violin for a year or so, until the bridge falls plump down into the river. Clever devils, aren’t they?”

Sasha leaned against the bed and his eyes closed again to the sound of his father’s grumbling.

“Sasha! you must go to the manager. You asked me to wake you, remember? Get up then!”

Sasha remembered that he must go that day to the manager’s so as to get money for metal waste, on behalf of his group. He pulled on his trousers hurriedly and ran out into the yard to wash.

They walked along the sandy streets still damp with dew and Sasha’s bare feet left clear imprints in the wet sand. Mokhov walked with long, hasty strides, driven onward by anxiety, while Sasha hopped along beside him like a sparrow.

“I’m afraid to go to the manager’s, dad. Do you think he will

shout at me?"

"Why should he shout? He's not an ogre. You are going on business, aren't you?"

Sasha felt his heart galloping at the thought that he was going to see the manager himself on business. Important business too... Should it succeed, Sasha's group would be first at the plant. He hurried on, shivering slightly in the morning air.

"Dad! As soon as we get money for the waste, we'll have a radio in our street."

"Why don't you have a set at home? That will be more jolly. You would stay at home more—you're always running about. And it would be nice for me too, I'd listen to the music."

"We must have a loud speaker in the street first, so that everybody can hear. A house set won't do. See how many houses there are. We won't have enough money. We must have the radio in the street first," said Sasha in a tone of conviction, not aware of his father's naive ruse.

The moss-grown roof of the "boss's" cottage seemed to weigh heavily on the black walls, driving them deep into the sand. The warped boards were full of cracks; the little porch leaned on its rotten posts,

Mokhov sighed heavily as he thought of the "boss." Sasha looked intently at his wrinkled face. The usually grim and expressionless face looked thoughtful and anxious.

"Is the 'boss' going to die, dad?" asked the boy, gazing at the pretty golden-green covering of the roof.

"The 'boss'? Oh, he's a tough old man. He won't die. He's got a charmed life, it seems. Old people are tough—not like you."

Mokhov moved his large shoulders proudly, as if to shake off the weight of years.

"I shall live very long too!" exclaimed Sasha dreamily. "Until communism comes and everything is different—a hundred per cent different, I mean. People will fly to the plant—not walk as they do now, and there will be as many aeroplanes as there are dragon-flies in summer."

Mokhov imagined himself flying to his work on the back of a dragon-fly and smiled.

"You can fly, sonny, but I'll get there somehow on my own feet. I suppose it's that Zeitlin of yours tells you all those things?"

Sasha nodded happily.

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Mokhov turned round and walked quickly to the “boss’s” house. “You go on, I’ll go in and see Platov.”

There was no answer. Mokhov looked in. Platov was stretched on the bed, all dressed, with his hands thrust into the pockets of his blouse. A loud sound of snoring could be heard through the closed window.

“He’s dead tired. I’ll let him sleep,” thought Mokhov and hurried on to the plant.

He was one of the first to arrive in the shop and used the spare time to read the paper which had been placed for him near his lathe. He glanced first at the fourth page, then at the first. They contained the most interesting news items, both local and other, while the middle pages consisted of long articles, which were difficult to read.

It was said, on the fourth page, that the town soviet had included the outlying streets in the lighting plan and Mokhov approved of it. Then he found that a six storey apartment house for workers would be built on Zadnyaya Street, near the river. Why so? That was about three kilometres from the plant. That Mokhov could not approve of. He shook his head, tore a sheet out of his notebook and wrote in pencil:

“To the editor’s office:

Who is the fool that thought of building a house on Zadnyaya Street? He can’t have been thinking with his head. I don’t approve. This must be changed. There is enough room in town for this building and I insist the windows must be large.

Mokhov, Machine Shop.”

It was said on the first page that the Berlin metal workers had gone on strike and were demanding a raise in wages. Mokhov approved only in part: higher wages were all right, but they had better send their bourgeois to hell and have a Soviet government. What were they waiting for? There was an item lower down that the “War in Morocco has ended with the triumph of French imperialism which had drowned the revolt of the Moroccan people in a sea of blood.” Mokhov did not know where Morocco was or why there should be war there.

He could not imagine those people of Morocco, but recollected the mountains of corpses he had seen during the civil war, and sighed heavily in sympathy with those unknown people. The short, stern call

of the plant siren sounded above.

The transmission gear started to hum, belts began to move and flap. Mokhov fastened an engine axle to his lathe, screwed the saddle tight with a wrench and switched on the current. The axle started revolving slowly and its surface became white, and streaked with circular lines. Suddenly he noticed that cracks and dents showed more numerous with every turn. He switched off the current, and went to look for the foreman, swearing as he walked.

“Bulavkin! Come and see the mess that axle’s in.”

The foreman bent to look at it, passed his hand over the metal and said calmly:

“The usual thing. It’ll do after welding. It’s not the first time.”

The familiar wart on Bulavkin’s cheek looked as firmly rooted as in former years and he started to roll a cigarette, as he usually did—without undue haste.

Mokhov looked intently at the bluish wart. It was typical of a state of things which had existed for years, it reminded him of frequent nights when he and Bulavkin had been boon companions. That wart seemed to form part of his own life.

But at that moment the wart looked impudent and the tuft of black hair, which grew out of it, hateful. Mokhov felt suddenly full of the same daring which flashed in Sasha’s eyes—the force which had violated the accustomed order in the various floors of life’s building.

“I shall not turn this rotten thing on my lathe,” he said, in a firm voice.

Bulavkin lifted his astonished eyes.

“Are you drunk, or what?”

“I’m as sober as you are. If I were drunk I’d turn not only that rot, but your wart as well.”

Bulavkin calmly struck a match and said:

“If you won’t do it, another man will.”

“I’ll not let him do it either, damn you. Don’t you treat me as if I were a block of pig iron.”

“What’s got into your head, Mokhov?” asked the foreman, in a soothing tone. “You’ve worked all those years and now you suddenly turn unruly. Are you trying to become an engineer, or what? Think yourself awfully clever, don’t you? You’ve got to do what the foreman tells you!” he shouted angrily.

“Don’t you shout at me. I’ll not turn this axle and there’s an end to it. Give me something else to do.”

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The foreman looked round in confusion and caught sight of a pock-marked face.

“Koshkin! Come over to this lathe.”

Koshkin came up.

Mokhov placed himself threateningly between him and the lathe.

“Go away! I’ll not let you work.”

“What is this? A strike? You won’t work yourself and you won’t let others work? Want to make a fuss, I see. You’ll be sacked,” shouted Bulavkin furiously.

“I’ll not let anyone come near that lathe, d’you hear?” growled Mokhov threateningly.

The workers left their lathes and came running to the spot from all sides. The foreman ran to fetch the chief of the shop. Zorin came immediately and examined the axle in silence.

“There are some defects,” he said, “but they can be remedied, besides it’s none of the turner’s business at all. It is your duty to turn according to the necessary measurements—that’s all. Get to work!” Zorin was speaking calmly and convincingly.

“That’s right! Listen to the chief—he should know.”

“It’s an unheard of thing, Simon Petrovich! If every man is to have his own way, what need to have a foreman in the shop? He won’t listen to me. Seems to have gone mad or something. You should do what the foreman tells you,” said Bulavkin, puffing out his chest.

“I refuse to turn it, that’s all, and don’t you give me any of your lip,” said Mokhov, spitting disdainfully at the foreman’s boot.

“Mokhov! As the chief of the shop, I order you to get to work,” said Zorin irritably.

“I won’t.”

“According to the rules of internal discipline, I must have you dismissed for disobedience.”

Zorin was shouting now, having lost control, and the workers gazed in silence at Mokhov’s stubborn face.

“You’re sure drunk, Makarych.”

“He’s still feeling dazed after yesterday’s meeting.”

“There must be some reason why the old man is in such a state.”

“Look at him. Been working quietly for years and now....”

Zorin was waiting for his last answer. His lips quivered, he crushed his cigarette in his hand, spilling tobacco on the ground.

“Let the inspector come and see whether the engine can work with an axle like that.”

Mokhov leaned against the lathe, as if to screen it from Zorin's view.

"That's unnecessary. There is the inspector's brand. The axle has been passed."

Mokhov saw the hammer and sickle and had a moment's doubt. But he immediately recollected the heaps of splinters, broken machinery and cars. His green eyes shone with an anxious light.

"Let the highest authorities of all come and see it. I refuse to turn it."

The workers shouted at him:

"Stop making a fuss, Mokhov!"

"Keep your principles to yourself."

"That's because of the rates, I guess," said Bulavkin with malice. Mokhov's green eyes bulged furiously.

"Rates—you dirty bastard! Think I would do that in my old age! I've worked without pay when it was necessary, when you were still in your village growing a belly. And I'll work again without pay if necessary. Rates indeed! You grabber! You think all people are selfish pigs like yourself? It is true I worked before, turning anything that was given me. Worked like blind, that's it. But I see now! I see my life quite plainly before me. Listen you fellows! I have been the best turner in the shop..."

"Who wants to contradict you? Not only in the shop—in the whole plant."

"Don't get sentimental, Mokhov!"

But Mokhov did not hear them, he shouted on, clenching his oil-stained fist:

"Thought I was doing right when I had turned an engine part, delivered it and got my pay. Thought that was all I had to do—the rest was no business of mine. I don't want to work that way now, and I won't! Look me straight in the eyes, Bulavkin, don't turn away. What I want to know now is: what have I been working on? What sort of goods have I delivered? Where are they? What use are they? Chiefs indeed! I don't believe in chiefs!"

The transmission gear hummed, motors buzzed, cutters gritted against steel, cutting it with their teeth, but the people in the shop heard nothing except Mokhov's indignant voice.

"I don't believe them! Don't believe Bulavkin, don't believe you," he poked Zorin in the chest with his finger, so that the latter stepped back, abashed. "I don't believe this here hammer and sickle.

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It's a put up job, you fellows! I believe no one except myself—my own feelings. And I believe the newspaper! I believe all about the people in Morocco. But I don't believe in that wart of yours, you bald-headed devil, you selfish pig, damn you!"

"He's right. This needs looking into."

"Go at them, Makarych! We've had enough humbug."

Mokhov went on shouting:

"Zaytsev has been put in the mad-house, because of his drawings. He was driven to starve. Selfish pigs! Call the secretary of the Party, you fellows! Run and fetch Martemyan."

Among the floors of Mokhov's building, which were all mixed up now, there was one still left untouched—the topmost—and in it was "Martemyan."

"His name is Vartanyan."

"Call him! I'll believe him. Fetch Martemyan. He knew Lenin."

He shouted commandingly and persistently:

"Call Martemyan!"

And the others echoed:

"Get Vartanyan!"

"Let's go to the district committee."

"The Party shall settle this."

"Vartanya-a-an!"

The shop filled with deafening shouts which mixed with the clank of metal, it seemed the very walls were shouting out in fury.

Vartanyan rushed into the shop, wiping his anxious face as he ran.

"You must look into this and find out what's the matter, Comrade Martemyan," said Mokhov, pointing excitedly to the axle.

Vartanyan stared at it in perplexity and did not understand what was the matter. He did not even notice the dents which were as small as pin pricks. He was lost before that strange piece of metal which had caused such a disturbance in the shop and telephoned Korchenko to come.

"You must answer the worker and tell him what is the matter."

Korchenko walked round the lathe, passed his hand over the bright surface of the steel and delayed his answer. Vekshin's stunned face and his wild words about the welding of spoiled engine parts by Boretsky suddenly came to his mind and his heart beat fast.

"What is your opinion?" asked Vartanyan impatiently.

"The steel has some defects... but it bears the inspector's brand,"

said the perplexed Korchenko. "The axle is evidently in keeping with technical demands."

"Get Akatuyev!" ordered Vartanyan. "Have Turchaninov come here immediately. Also Brooks, Platov, Boretsky. This matter must be gone into on the spot."

Brooks came in at that moment. He examined the axle long and searchingly, bending over it, his bald head shining as it reflected the glitter of steel.

"My opinion is that one could safely drive around the world with an axle like that," he said finally with an unconcerned smile, as he wiped his bald head.

Turchaninov ran in, glanced at the people who were present and fixed his little, cunning eyes on the axle.

"This axle is no good. It cannot be welded. How did it get here?" he said, looking fixedly at Zorin.

Zorin made no answer, and fumbled with the end of his spent cigarette.

Bulavkin came up looking very gloomy.

"Comrade Korchenko, Platov has not yet come, nor Kraysky either.... I telephoned to his apartment and they told me he had been arrested in the night."

"Arrested?" echoed the bewildered Korchenko leaning against the side of the lathe.

Vartanyan cast a suspicious glance at his pale face, looked at Turchaninov, Brooks and the silent workers and walked up to Mokhov.

"Did you often have to turn axles like that?"

"Quite often, Comrade Martemyan. But, somehow I did not take any notice before. Just did my work and let it go...."

Akatuyev came up to them with a heavy step. There were blades of dry grass in his silvery-white hair. His yellow cheeks looked flabby and lifeless. He fixed a cold, indifferent glance on the shining metal of the engine axle.

"What is the matter with you, Pavel Yakovlevich?" asked Turchaninov in a whisper, frightened at his unusual appearance.

Akatuyev felt the axle and said, in a low voice:

"This brand is not mine."

"Whose is it then?" asked Korchenko with a wry smile.

"That I do not know. I do not know anything. My stamp gives a clear imprint, while this sickle here has no handle to it."

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He took a stamp out of his pocket, pressed it against the frame and struck with a hammer. Everybody saw that he was right.

“That is made by a false stamp,” said Akatuyev in a tired voice. “I must go now... go to the hospital... my daughter is dying.”

He walked slowly to the door, his white head glistening like a ball of snow.

Platov was just coming in with a smile on his face. Their eyes met. Akatuyev started and his body seemed to crumple up.

Platov felt rested and his cheeks had regained their colour. His twinkling eyes glanced over Akatuyev’s figure.

“What has happened, Platov? Why is Kraysky arrested?” asked Vartanyan in an anxious voice as he went forward to meet him. “There are extraordinary things going on.... I can’t understand.”

Platov yawned contentedly and told him about the victory he had won the day before. Vartanyan was so struck and crushed by the news that he could only look askance into his smiling eyes and wonder how he could find it in his heart to laugh at such a time.

“Go and tell them that axle is all wrong and the brand is false and that the crooks who did it have been arrested,” said Platov, still smiling.

Vartanyan went up to Mokhov, without looking at the men who stood round him, and said in clear, precise tones:

“You were right, Mokhov, this axle was made by crooks.”

Mokhov cast a disdainful glance at the gloomy Korchenko and extended his oily hand to Vartanyan.

“Thank you, Comrade Martemyan! I was sure you would get to the bottom of this.”

He pressed Vartanyan’s thin fingers firmly in his and closed his eyes, so great was his excitement. It seemed that he himself was looking down from a height on the surrounding people, machinery and the whole shop, to which he had given up forty years of his life. From that height, he saw his whole life. His son and Zeitlin had started climbing—well.... He would go and tell those puppies of all the things he had seen from the highest floor where Martemyan himself dwelt.

His eyes sparkled and he looked rejuvenated by the hot, youthful blood that flowed to his heart.

Vartanyan was just going out when Mokhov caught up with him and stopped him.

“You must obtain a Party card for me, Comrade Martemyan.... I

can't go on working without it now."

Mokhov's tone was such as if Vartanyan were at the head of a warehouse where tools were kept and he was asking him for a rare and valuable tool which he needed very badly.

He went back to his lathe, feeling calm and happy. And as he thought of Sasha he murmured: "I must not beat him—I see that now. But I'll give him the surprise of his life."

And he set his spectacles right with fingers which shook with pleasant excitement.

* * * * *

Vartanyan gave orders that he was not to be disturbed and locked himself in his study with Platov. The latter told him his story over again, while Vartanyan paced up and down the room, his nervous fingers playing with the end of his Caucasian belt. Suddenly the door shook under heavy and repeated blows.

"You can't go in! There's a conference going on in there!" shouted a stern voice.

"But I must! I must! I must!" answered a high-pitched female voice.

Vartanyan opened the door and a screaming tornado of bright printed calico invaded the room.

"Where's the chief? I want the chief!"

Vartanyan looked in astonishment at the untidy figure of the woman. She was rushing about the room, as if unable to remain still for a single moment, and she turned and twisted her body about, screaming.

"I want the chief!"

There was something familiar in the woman's face and Vartanyan took hold of her hand and made her sit down. She went suddenly limp and helpless.

"Tell me what is the matter?"

"You must set my Mitya free at once!" cried the woman in a tone of command—"or he'll really go mad."

"And who is Mitya?"

She looked in astonishment at Vartanyan.

"Why, my husband, of course. Zaytsev! I'm Nastya—his wife. Can't you understand? Don't you remember coming to our house?"

Vartanyan recollected it all—the woman's inimical attitude and the glance full of hatred which she had thrown upon his motor car.

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“He must be set free at once, or I’ll break every window in the hospital. They only torture him with their tricks. He’s laughing like a madman. Says they’ve arrested his enemy, that engineer,” gasped Nastya, stammering in her excitement.

Vartanyan ran to the telephone.

“Call the head doctor. Is that you, Comrade Rumyantsev? Please give the necessary orders to have worker Zaytsev leave the hospital immediately. He’s in the mental diseases ward. Is he? When? Just now?—Nastya, your husband is already at home.”

The chair in which Nastya had been sitting rolled over while Nastya’s bright calico dress whirled out of the room. Hardly had the smiling Platov picked up the chair when Valya came into the room. Tears trembled on her long lashes, her large, brown eyes were full of despair and had dark rings round them. Her little nose was working spasmodically.

She buried her face in her handkerchief and sank into a chair.

“Senya, what does it mean?” she cried, leaning her head on her arm and shaking with sobs.

Vartanyan gazed in astonishment at Platov’s gloomy face and at the sobbing, unknown girl and paced up and down the room with nervous steps.

“What did they arrest him for? The doors of all the rooms are sealed. He was taken away in the night. Didn’t even say good-bye to me. And why? He worked like the rest. He was a plain worker for years. You know it, Senya.”

“I know your family, I know you and your father. Know you too well as a matter of fact,” said Platov with a wry face. “But I can’t help you. That was bound to happen, Valya. Don’t cry for your father—he is not worth it.”

“Oh, but he was so fond of me! I was all the family he had. He would gladly have worn himself to the bone for me.”

The tears rolled down her slim fingers, on which she leaned her face, and made wet marks on her stockings.

Platov glanced at the crumpled figure and wondered that this lovely, laughing girl could cry so desperately.

“Your father has got his just deserts, Valya. You’ll know all about it later.”

“I know it’s Sergey Vekshin who has slandered him. He’d do anything, he almost killed father after the trial.”

“I know nothing about that. But I know your father is capable of

committing murder...” said Platov slowly, as he thought of the “boss.”

“How can you say that, Senya?” cried Valya, jumping up. “It’s false. You’ve all conspired to get father under. What has he done to you?”

Her eyes, which looked so much like a little, wild animal’s, flashed with hatred.

Voices were again heard shouting outside, men’s voices this time, and both stern and unyielding.

“You can’t go in!”

“I can go in anywhere.”

“Who are you?”

“And who are you?”

“Don’t shout.”

“Leave me alone.”

The door flew open and Zhorov appeared on the threshold. He looked preoccupied.

“I’ve come to see you,” he said pointing his hand at Vartanyan. “You were asking me questions when we broke pig iron together, you remember? Now I’ve come on much more serious business than this here pig iron. Who’re them persons sitting here?” he looked at Valya with suspicion. “My business is important and secret,” he added, in a mysterious tone.

“Speak Zhorov. What is the matter?” asked Platov. Zhorov threw back his touselled head and said in a solemn voice:

“I know who killed the ‘boss’—it’s Antonych.”

“What’s that?” cried Valya in a panic. “Father? Can you believe that drunk? He’d sell his soul for a bottle of vodka. Oh, whatever is going to happen?”

She sank limply into a chair.

“Don’t you raise any fuss, citizeness. That’s no business of yours. It’s a secret matter. Antonych it was that killed him. Took his life in fact. He was a good old man, he was. As I was carrying him to the hospital he comes to and says to me: ‘Stasik’s taken my life.’ Now, who may that be? He must be raving, thought I. Leave me alone, citizeness—don’t you go and interfere in this secret matter,” he put in, pushing away Valya, who was clutching his arm with trembling hands. “I heard them talking in the shop just now: ‘Antonych is arrested’ they said and Titych he nods his head and says: ‘Ah, Stasik will get it this time.’ That gave me quite a turn and I ran to this here

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office. So that's why he sent me looking for a stretcher until the old man was too far gone to speak. Citizeness! Let me alone, will you!" cried Zhorov. "I'm not drunk. I'm an embittered man! Life's been too much for me. I want to get on firm ground and get a hold on life."

Vartanyan paced the room, biting his lips. Platov wrote something on a bit of paper.

"Here, Zhorov, go to this address and tell them all about it. Hurry up now!" he ordered.

"Comrade Platov," said Zhorov touching his sleeve, in a voice full of entreaty. "Seems to me I've done quite a lot. You'll remember it, won't you? Do put me on to a machine. I'll look after it same as if it were a child of mine."

"We'll arrange that later, hurry up now."

Zhorov ran out. Valya stood sobbing by the window. Platov glanced at her and remembering something, took her by the hand.

An engine was moving down the track in the midst of a cloud of hissing steam. A red star shone on its breast.

"Your father wanted to stop this engine and it crushed him. It will crush you too if you ever dare stand in its way. Forget your father. He built you an easy life on the blood of others. Start living like those smoke-grimed people down there and you will find out what real life is like."

Valya went out slowly, setting her blouse right with a coquettish gesture.

"What sort of an institution do you think the district committee is?" exclaimed the indignant Vartanyan. "Who is that girl? What easy life were you talking about? I don't understand anything."

Platov smiled.

"I'll answer you in the words of your favourite poet, Vartanyan. He has some lines which refer directly to this girl and her father:

'Such easy life awaits all those
Who cease the fight for the general good,
Who dream of building a gilded cage
For themselves and their selfish joys.'

"Yes, the question of personal happiness is not as simple as it might seem."

"To hell with your poets," said Vartanyan, gritting his teeth.

The plant shops were full of the clang of metal. Clouds of blue smoke issued from the gates of the iron construction shop and spread in a thin veil over the yard. Workers were assembling a crane for Dnieprostroy, in the open. It was about thirty metres long and seemed to weigh heavily upon the ground. The plant had never yet made its like and even the iron construction shop was not big enough to hold it, so that it had to be assembled in the open.

“It will lift three hundred tons at a time,” said Platov proudly, patting the great thing with his hand.

“Did the old plant ever dream of constructing such things? There’s nothing impossible, even the fact that we could, for five years, be made fools of by Kraysky, Boretsky and the rest of that gang.”

“Did they start as long ago as that?” interrupted Vartanyan. “What, then, were the results to our plant—to our transport—to the country at large?”

“The whole system of work shattered, the plant slowly poisoned, tremendous losses for the country, the development of our transport delayed for years, our plans ruined.”

Vartanyan walked on, glancing anxiously at every building they passed, as if expecting to see cracks in the walls.

“What disgrace! What failure!” he exclaimed bitterly.

“But think what would have happened had we not discovered it when we did,” said Platov.

“You are right. Our... I mean your merit is great.”

“I am only one of many. It’s they who solved it,” and he waved his hand round the yard.

Men were busy unloading cars on the railway tracks. The iron rang, as it fell to the ground and its ring was answered by the whistle of manoeuvring yard engines. The metal was lifted by cranes and stacked in piles. Men covered with grime and black sweat were unloading a coal train, while a bucket came down from the electric trestle and dug into the coal and carried it away to the greedy bunkers of the roaring steam boilers. Workers were breaking pig iron by hand, preparing a charge for the open hearth furnaces. Another group of workers came by. They were dragging a greenish mouldy church bell to be broken. It resisted like an ox led to slaughter and emitted stifled groans, as it dug its edges into the ground.

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Vartanyan stopped Platov.

“Wait a bit.”

The bell was dragged to the head frame; a steel ram fell down on it, the bell cracked and sent showers of bronze fragments scattering round; then it grew silent.

“We’ll break them, shan’t we, Vartanyan?” asked Platov of his thoughtful companion.

“Yes, we’ll break them, Platov!” answered Vartanyan with a smile.

They made their way through the open hearth furnace shop among moulds and patterns. The shop was hot, dusty and cramped. Cranes signalled in alarm as they carried moulds over the people’s heads. Vartanyan looked searchingly into the dirty faces of the workers.

“Good morning, Titych.”

A pair of faded, blue eyes looked up.

“Oh, it’s you, Senya. And Comrade Vartanyan himself, come to look and admire! Why does your face look so sunken, Vartanyan? Not feeling sick, are you?” said Titych with concern.

“My heart’s not working properly, Titych.”

“Oh! That’s why you’ve grown so thin. What a life! It’s breaking even the young ones. What about us old men, then? That’s from worry you know, Vartanyan. Lenin’s heart burst from worry too, so I’ve heard. And no wonder when you think of all the worry pouring into your heart day and night, like molten steel into one of these moulds. It’s difficult to stand. Yet stand it we must.”

Titych was moulding a driving wheel. He was driving bright-headed pins into the yellow loam.

Titych drove a pin in and said thoughtfully:

“You are both burning like these pins, you, Vartanyan, and you, Senya. And so must every Communist. The Party sticks him in so as to hold the masses together—and you have to burn. It can’t be helped, can it?” Titych gazed questioningly at Vartanyan, as he drove the last pin in.

“Those are golden words, old man!” said Vartanyan with a kind smile. “Burn, yet remain alive, that’s the whole secret of living. Very difficult though, isn’t it?”

Sergey was putting an electrode into the holder when he saw Platov—now head of the shop. The events which had brought about the separation between them came back to his mind. And there he was,

back at his welding apparatus, broken and subdued, with a three years' sentence against him.

He thought of himself, Antonych and Valya and all his thoughts seemed to lead to a logical end. It was August now. So four months had gone by—for it had been spring then, a restless, sweet-smelling spring, which had got into his blood. Why, even the birch tree which had pushed its way up through the pile of metal waste, near the open hearth furnace shop, had seemed to triumph over the world of metal and machines, mocking it and asserting its own right to live.

The path of life is not all straight. It winds in capricious curves drawn by the hand of time. What was Antonych thinking of now, behind the prison bars? Sergey recalled his face, with the network of thin red veins. It looked out from behind iron bars, the eyes blinking like those of a captured hawk.

“There is a limit set for everybody.... Everything is in its place....” So he used to say, probably meaning himself. And Sergey too had been unable to break those limits. He felt he was stifling—threw off his mask and ran out into the air.

A strong wind was blowing, making the roofs of the plant buildings ring, yet the birch tree, caught as it was between casts, did not bend; only its yellowish, dusty leaves trembled. Sergey saw the shop buildings standing on all sides, firmly rooted, with their foundations reaching far down in the ground—heavy and secure in their iron armour. A hot breath seemed to fan his face. It was the breath of the plant. His agitation passed and he went back to his work.

It was all over now, and he felt easier as one does after a cold bath, on a hot summer day. Passions had burnt themselves out, leaving nothing but a light dust of the ashes of the past.

He shortened the electric arc and the metal crackled louder. Blue lights flashed and trembled under the roof.

“The shorter the arc—the stronger the welding.” Where had he heard that? Had he read it in a manual or was it the result of daily observations? He was looking at things in a different light. Details which had hitherto been hidden to him, now appeared quite clearly and distinctly. What did it matter if the passions of his youth had ended in disgrace? Did that not make men stronger?

Ultra-violet and infra-red rays coming from the smelted surface, roved to and fro, lighting everything on their way. Sergey knew them to contain the greatest creative powers. But he also knew that they carried destruction as well—that was why he must hide his hands in

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his leather working gloves and his eyes behind the blue glasses of his mask, so that the rays beat in vain, helpless before man's armour. Maybe life was that way too. Maybe he, Sergey, also had destructive as well as creative rays. And might not the former die out and the latter triumph?

"Good morning, Sergey. How are you getting on?"

Sergey pushed his mask up and saw Senka's laughing eyes. He wanted to draw the mask back over his embarrassed countenance, but Platov took it off and shook his head.

"How can you work in a mask like that? It's full of cracks. You'll spoil your eyesight. You must change it today."

The fact that Platov had not asked him about the trial, but had spoken in his ordinary way about an insignificant thing connected with his work agitated Sergey unspeakably. The electrode shook in his nervous hands. The arc flashed angrily, and the transformer hummed in an irritated manner.

"Come on, Vartanyan," said Platov. "By the way, do you know Yuzov helped me with his article. He mentioned No. 1007 smelting and I wondered how any such steel could still be treated, since the smelting numbers were already above two thousand. And so I discovered that the false samples were made under No. 1007."

They went into the little workshop attached to the open hearth furnace shop. A number of men were working lathes and the shop was full of the noise of whirling wheels.

"There is the very place—in that corner over there—on this heap of metal cuttings. See how rusty they look... Let us go, I can't bear to look at it," said Platov in a low voice.

They went out with slow, heavy steps, as if carrying a weight on their backs. Vartanyan remembered his meeting with the extraordinary old man in the landing of the open hearth furnace. The old man had spoken of some coffins, he had wanted to tell him something. Someone had come between them.... Oh, yes! It was Turchaninov who had diverted his attention then. Could he be in the plot too? No, that was impossible.

They went into the machine shop. The flashing of countless belts made Vartanyan's eyes ache. His head hummed with the noise of machinery and the clank of steel.

"Good morning, Olya!" cried Platov, smiling and waving his cap.

Olya's gloomy face looked out of the crane cabin. She did not even smile in answer to his greeting. There was evidently something

the matter with her.

Platov saw that her eyes were full of sorrow.

“Senya,” she called in a low voice. “Do you know Kuzmich will die today. He’s got blood-poisoning. Oh, Senya!” she cried, and her voice rose in shrill accents to the glass roof of the shop and suddenly broke.

“Give us another piece, Olya!” shouted Mokhov, who had finished turning an axle and Olya in her cabin moved through the air. Vartanyan looked after her thoughtfully and glanced at Platov.

The latter was running his fingers through his hair and seemed sunk in deep thought. Vartanyan took him by the arm and led him out of the shop.

“Listen, Platov, don’t you think everything seems so simple now that we have found it out, and yet it is so complicated. I can’t forgive myself for not having spoken with the old man that time. Everything would have come to light much sooner and easier if every one of us gave up nine-tenths of his time to such talks with workers and only one-tenth to drawing up resolutions.”

“That is true, but it is not enough, Vartanyan. Engines also must be spoken with and that is much more difficult. You must know their language and the trouble is that neither you, nor I, nor Korchenko, nor any of our secretaries of nuclei, nor our workers have learned it. The enemy, on the contrary, knows it perfectly. I can tell you that, even to this day, we don’t know the real cause of the accident. It is twelve now. We have time to go to the place where the course of the driving axle ends for the time being. Yes, for the time being!”

They walked out of the gate, passed before the empty tribune and went into the plant hospital. They were taken to the ward by the chief doctor.

“We have had many victims of accidents lately. There is no hope for the old man. It is extraordinary, his holding out so long, in spite of being unconscious. He is uncommonly strong. The patient in the bed next to his is the daughter of inspector Akatuyev. She was brought here yesterday in a very distressing condition with the symptoms of acute poisoning. She may recover yet. She is delirious most of the time and keeps screaming: ‘Take my ticket’—a love affair, I’m told.”

Platov felt his throat suddenly parched. His trembling legs refused to hold him and he leaned against the wall.

“What is the matter, Platov?” asked Vartanyan, bending over

him.

“Just a little fit of dizziness, over-exhaustion,” answered Platov half audibly, while he kept his eyes fixed on Vera’s blackened lips. Her body was stretched perfectly straight and motionless on the bed and she looked thin and unlike either the first Vera, or the second who had been rejected by him. That girl was a stranger with lips darkened by poison.

Silence reigned in the ward, except for somebody’s heavy breathing. Platov went up to the “boss” and touched his yellow hand. It was cold.

3

A short signal of the plant siren announced the end of the working day.

The watchman opened the gates to let the stream of workers out, but only a few went through.

The compound was empty. The noise of machinery had stopped. Pneumatic hammers had ceased their rattle. The transmission gears were motionless. The ground shook no more with blows of steam hammers. A saw ripped one and was quiet. The cranes stood like listening giraffes with their necks stretched out. The only noise that could still be heard was the hiss of steam.

Vartanyan was running about the compound in great agitation. He looked into the shops, listening to the voices of speakers, gazing intently at the begrimed faces and turning something over in his mind.

Wherever he went, he saw the watchful faces of workers, drawn under the shadow of yesterday’s events.

He opened the door of the engine assembling shop. The corrugated iron walls rose upward, to disappear in the indistinct, blue haze under the roof, among a network of iron trusses. The light, suspended platforms of electric cranes hung over the great shop.

Hundreds of moulders, smiths and turners sat on the floor, or on engine parts. Turchaninov was speaking from a tender. His weak voice floated away into the immense space of the building and he himself seemed puny, dwarfed by the light of the shop.

“I am through, comrades. This speech has been a difficult job, because you are naturally not favourably inclined towards engineers’ opinions, as a result of Kraysky’s arrest. I see that. But what I want to ask is—why should our plant be made answerable for the railway accident, just because Kraysky is liable to be tried for swindle and

falsification? The axle, after all, was of perfect quality. Not long ago, a chain broke in this very shop while lifting an engine and those who work here can witness that the broken link had fatigue spots on its surface.”

“That’s right! The chain was quite good. The fractured part looked as if it had been cut. No cracks!” shouted a number of voices.

Turchaninov was followed by Korchenko. His deep, authoritative voice rang through the shop. He spoke of the engineers who had proved to be crooks and betrayed his confidence, threatened to have a score more engineers and foremen arrested, shouted until he foamed at the mouth and made such brusque movements that his heavy body seemed in danger of toppling off the tender. Vartanyan smiled. This only caused Korchenko to gesticulate more angrily, and his threatening cries seemed to shake the very air. He mocked at metal fatigue and all such refined theories. His large figure was agitated by panic—it seemed he could not believe anyone now—neither workers, nor engineers, nor even himself. He was filled with helpless rage. He beat his fist against the iron wall of the tender.

Vartanyan took Strakhov aside.

“We know you, Comrade Strakhov, to be an honest Soviet engineer. You know your business well. You must help us to unravel this. You’ve got knowledge. You must know. You cannot fail to know. We are awaiting to hear your opinion.”

Strakhov looked into Vartanyan’s stern eyes which radiated a hidden power.

“Yes, I shall speak. I have an idea.”

He climbed up on the tender.

“I am an engineer. I built this unfortunate engine. I have thought much over the reason for the accident and I have found it.”

A tense silence set in.

“The reason is that there was too much metal taken off from the body of the axle at the end which is inserted into the orifice of the wheel. That caused a concentration of tension in one spot and made the axle break. It could not fail to break. It was evidently due to carelessness on the part of the turner.”

“So it’s the man at the bottom who’s at fault?” cried Mokhov shrilly and jumped on the tender. “I turn axles, so the accident is my fault? Very smart, I call it. Why, I’ve not spoilt a single axle in my life. May I drop down dead if I ever did. No, it won’t do to put the blame on the workers. We know who it was who gave us spoiled

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axles to turn. They're in prison now and don't you try to justify them."

Mokhov's face was red with pent up anger.

"But I insist that there was too much metal taken off and that the fault lies with the turner. I am not attempting to excuse myself. I was not careful enough, neither was Zorin," said Strakhov, keeping himself in hand. "We are all to blame in this case."

"He's trying to humbug us!" bellowed Andrushechkin, as he rolled out of the mass of bodies. "Everybody's to blame now that the crooks are in the cage. You're all crooks just the same as they are."

"That's right!"

"We've had enough humbug!"

Strakhov saw hundreds of eyes flash with terrifying hatred. The workers shouted, gesticulated and jumped from their places. Andrushechkin's head bobbed up and down like a ball in the midst of the oily, black jackets.

"Comrades! I am not defending either myself or those who have been arrested. They may deserve it. Though I do not for a moment believe that any self-respecting specialist is capable of wilfully damaging machinery. I have never seen engineers like that and if they do exist, then they are monsters who destroy their own children," shouted Strakhov, but his voice was drowned by an indescribable uproar of wrathful voices.

"He's trying to get around us!"

"Yes, comrade engineer—we don't believe you!"

Strakhov wanted to remind them that they had known him for some time. He wanted to tell them that he suffered as much as they did on account of the engines. But he seemed paralysed. His tongue refused to obey his brain. He climbed down from the tender and went to the gate, accompanied by a chorus of shouts.

Vartanyan ran up to Platov.

"You must help, Platov! You must cut that damned knot. You must calm the workers. Come in and save the plant!"

Platov screwed up his eyes and pulled up his trousers. His face looked lined and aged. He lifted his hand and the din stopped gradually.

"Comrades! I am also an engineer but a poor specialist as yet. I am bound to own that I don't know the real reason. I'm ashamed to say it, but it's better to own up than to deceive you. There's nothing disgraceful in that. It is much more disgraceful to act the wise

manager and then get into a panic and threaten people right and left. Let's think it over! Let's try and solve this difficult problem and keep ourselves in hand. I feel sure we shall unravel this mystery with the help of the engineers, Strakhov among them. They've got the power in this case. But we cannot conquer that power by shouts and threats, like Korchenko, but by our maturity, the maturity of the victorious class which, as Lenin says, is not proved by certificates but by experience and practice on the part of the class. We shall subjugate it by means of the moral weight of the victorious class."

Platov spoke with calm and assurance and so succeeded in winning his audience, arousing their powers of thought, making each return to his own self. After owning his own weakness he influenced them by his assurance, the extensive range of his ideas, opening distant perspectives, leading them onward just as an experienced guide leads travellers along a safe path which is known to him.

"Comrades! I grew up among you. I have the right to speak straight and fearlessly. We workers have developed to a tremendous extent in the years of revolution, but many of us are still sunk up to the ears in the clinging mire of the past. Old habits, a thoughtless attitude towards labour. The habits of working carelessly, of limiting one's horizon to one's machine, to the particular part which one is working on, or to the confines of one's shop are still strong in us. Do you think the whole trouble is that we have enemies at the plant? That is nothing new. We'll have to deal with many enemies yet. But through whose hands did the spoiled axles pass? Through your own working hands. You must understand that. May it not be that the outwardly strong-looking axle which caused the accident had some hidden defect and you failed to notice it?"

Mokhov listened intently to Platov's speech. His greenish eyes were very thoughtful and so were the faces of all the workers. Each was returning to thoughts of himself, mentally going over the past.

Mokhov recalled his life day by day, like the links of an endless chain. They had raised this revolt today, but the cracks had been there yesterday, last month also. Yet he had said nothing and had not attached any special importance to it. The past days unfolded before his mind's eyes, link by link, raising an anxious feeling. He strained his memory, trying to find some detail which had escaped him, and became lost in the trend of daily life. And at last he felt his old heart beat fast with the recollection of something which had suddenly come back to him.

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“Wait! Wait!” he shouted, jumping down from the tender. He rushed to the doors of the machine shop, jumped over a wheel, with the agility of a youth, sprang across a wide ditch before the eyes of the astonished workers, and shouting: “the drawings, the draw...” disappeared behind the silent engines.

“He’s gone mad!”

“Did you see him jump over that ditch as nimble as a goat?” cried Platov, choking with laughter.

“Nearly knocked the engine down with his head!”

“He’s smashed his spectacles to pieces,” cried Zhorov picking up the broken glasses.

Mokhov rushed back from behind an engine. He looked so extraordinary that Titych thought:

“Maybe he’s gone mad and it was he who frightened me last night with his wild screams. What a life!” he added with a sigh, feeling heartily sorry to see such a good worker gone wrong.

Mokhov ran up the tender and his eyes bulged with excitement.

“Here, check them,” he said, thrusting a bit of yellow paper into Platov’s hand. “Those are drawings for the axles. They gave out a new set three months ago. I made a fuss about it then—the neck of the wheel seemed to me to look mighty queer after turning.”

There was a general rush towards the tender. Some of the more curious and impatient climbed to the tender and tried to peer at the paper in Platov’s hands. Mokhov also tried to make something out in the network of lines. He started looking for his glasses. Zhorov was pushing his towards him.

“Here are your window casings—the panes are smashed. Nothing left. Too bad.”

Mokhov turned his broken spectacles round in his fingers.

“See, Comrade Platov,” he said, poking his finger at the drawing. “The neck of the wheel is not as it should be, too much clipped and not at all rounded.... No smoothness. Is that correct?”

Platov knit his brows as he tried to make out the unfamiliar drawings.

“Why was the drawing for engine axles altered?” he asked Zorin, who was searching for somebody in the crowd with anxious eyes.

“I don’t know. That drawing was sent from the engine construction department. It is no business of mine,” muttered Zorin.

“Where’s Turchaninov?” asked Platov, looking round. “Benjamin Pavlovich!” he shouted, but Turchaninov had suddenly

disappeared.

“There’s something wrong about this,” said Platov with conviction and put the drawing in his pocket. “You’re a trump, old man!” he added, patting Mokhov on his hot, damp back.

Mokhov shook his head sadly, as he tried to put his broken spectacles straight. Titych came up to him and handed him a worn, black case.

“Try mine. Maybe they’ll do. I’ve got another pair at home. Our eyes must be about the same, Makarych, for we’re of the same age. We’ve made the whole way together. It’s soon time for us to become pensioners,” said Titych with a sigh, as if seeing for the first time the number of young faces in the crowd.

The eyes of the workers who surrounded Platov shone with respect and trust.

“Our Senya is an eagle!” said Titych, gazing fondly at the worried face of his former apprentice. “He’ll fly far,” he said dreamily, as if he felt in him the best part of his own life, now in its decline.

4

Strakhov was used to finding rest from all the worries of life in his study. It was pleasant, after a tiring day at the plant, to sit in a comfortable leather armchair, reading a magazine freshly arrived from abroad.

Stephenson—the father of engines—whose portrait was the only one in Strakhov’s study, looked on inscrutably from the wall. Most of the room was taken up by bookcases. Strakhov was very proud of his library, which contained all known literature on engine construction—his favourite subject. There were also many shelves containing literature on mechanics and boilers. The books surrounded Strakhov.

Strakhov turned the leaves of a newly arrived German magazine and became engrossed in an article which told about the achievements of American technology and contained numerous figures and facts. It said that an American engine pulled a train weighing fourteen to sixteen thousand tons. The construction of extra-powerful engines made it possible for the load on the axle to be increased to thirty-two tons. Automatic coupling was introduced on all lines.

Strakhov laid the magazine aside. He was struck by the magnitude of the figures. He imagined the American “Pacific” express rushing along the track, pulling sixteen thousand tons. He thought of the engine assembling shop. There was the express “SU” engine, long-bodied and

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impatient. It was a child of his creation, but, oh, how humble and weak! That “SU” express could hardly compete in speed with ordinary American freight engines, while the solid reliable “E” engine could pull a maximum of two thousand tons. Two thousand tons and sixteen! Such was the distance that must be travelled to catch up with America. Would the country have strength enough? Could they do it? Strakhov visioned new plant buildings, spacious shops meant for constructing heavy engines, buildings made of concrete and glass, Palaces of Culture, bread factories, kitchen factories. Very likely they could. Arid they needed Strakhov—they could not do without him. He gave them his knowledge honestly and got in return four hundred rubles, this apartment and the respect due to a good specialist.

But that was in the past. He recollected his talk with Korchenko. What attitude was he to adopt with him? Benjamin Pavlovich knew how to do it. He adopted a very different tune when he spoke to his face and behind his back. But then Strakhov did not believe in duplicity. He wanted only to be a specialist who was fond of his work. He resisted all attempts on the part of Benjamin Pavlovich to draw him into talks on political subjects. He was not competent in them. Let others attend to that. He was content with doing his work honestly and well.

He opened the magazine, trying to fix his attention on technology. Powerful engines must be built instead of weak engines which were both slow and uneconomical. Powerful engines, however, demanded a corresponding track and that meant enormous investments. Where would the country, isolated as it was from the capitalist world, take those sums?

Thoughts of engines always led him to problems which he consistently tried to avoid. It was a sort of charmed circle from which he was unable to get away. Everything seemed so clear and simple to those who wished to overtake and surpass America. They wrote articles, made speeches; they were full of assurance and strength, like the pink-cheeked girl who had spoken at the meeting. Where was the source of that strength?

Strakhov walked up to a bookcase and glanced at the titles. Technology; engines; mechanics. The same in the other bookcase. He squatted down on his heels and rummaged on the lower shelf, which contained miscellaneous literature, but even there he found none of the books which he would have liked to have at the moment.

Both Marx and Lenin were absent from his library. He had not

read a single line of their works, which were the property of the people whom he directed at the plant. He knew that Communists, on the strength of Marx's works, based everything on the development of productive forces. But then, did not productive forces consist of technology, the means of production, machinery—all things which he, Strakhov, knew to perfection? What was the matter then? Technology united him with thousands of people. What was it that stood between them? His sole intention had been to help them in unravelling the intricacies of the disaster. He suffered from the consciousness of his isolation and solitude. He felt himself powerless to break through the wall which had grown up that day between those thousands and him. They were filled with terrifying power like the wires of a high tension line, and that power burnt him and drove him away. Such was the technique of life—a science about which he knew nothing.

He decided to get the works of Lenin the very next day from the library and begin to read them, so as to get an idea of this technique of life—whose laws united millions of people into one body. He wanted to find the driving axle of that impetuous engine called the Soviet Union, the country which was struggling against America and the whole world and moved by a power unknown to Strakhov.

He went into the shop before the signal had sounded. At the sight of the entrance, his eye caught the inscription: "C.P.S.U. Nucleus." He opened the door, thinking the room was as yet empty, but he saw Zhukov the secretary of the nucleus. Strakhov felt that it would look strange if he went past now and so went into the room.

"How are you getting on, Comrade Zhukov?"

Zhukov glanced round the room and searched his pockets for cigarettes.

"Always something going wrong."

Strakhov noticed that he twisted his thin black moustache more frequently than usual, which showed that he was ill at ease.

"I wanted to know your opinion on a question which I take very much to heart, Comrade Zhukov. As you know, I have been working in the shop for three years."

"I cannot help you in this matter, Comrade Strakhov," put in Zhukov, looking away.

"What matter? I am talking of certain ideas connected with technology and politics which came into my head yesterday."

"I can do nothing, Comrade Strakhov. Your dismissal is resolved upon."

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“My dismissal?” exclaimed Strakhov, turning pale.

“Yes, you are being dismissed today by order of the manager, for breach of discipline in connection with the railway accident. The engine came from your shop, didn’t it?”

Strakhov passed his hand over his forehead.

“So I am not chief of the engine assembly shop any more?”

“It would seem so,” said Zhukov with a sigh.

Strakhov walked to the head office without taking any notice of the people who went about the plant. As he passed the boiler shop, he recollected his intention of verifying the riveting of a boiler and went into the shop. The noise of pneumatic hammers and drills struck his ears. The riveters at work on the fat-bellied boilers shook with the fitful movements of the hammer. Strakhov climbed into a boiler and was momentarily deafened; the rattle of hammers inside and outside merged into a general deafening roar.

Strakhov examined the boiler inside with the aid of a pocket lamp and saw that the riveting was done as before and his instructions not fulfilled. He shouted to the worker. He remembered that he was no longer head of the shop and climbed out of the boiler as quickly as he could.

A meeting was in progress in Korchenko’s office and the secretary would not let anybody in. Strakhov caught his fixed stare, flushed and went hurriedly out into the passage. Benjamin Pavlovich was rushing headlong down the corridor, with bent head, and knocked against Strakhov in the doorway, loosing his pince-nez.

“Andrey Sergeyeovich! I have heard. I can’t understand it, my dear fellow. I must say, dreadful things are happening. Do you know that Kraysky is arrested? You have all my sympathy, Andrey Sergeyeovich.”

He ran through the door of Korchenko’s room and disappeared.

Strakhov walked out of the plant gates on the railway line. The curved lines of the bridge loomed before him. He would be asked for his pass. Strakhov turned to the right and walked down the incline into a meadow. There were heaps of slag and waste which the great plant threw out of its belly. The puddles here were covered with oil and rusty stains.

Children were rummaging among the rubbish heaps. They flitted about with joyful cries, like a swarm of sparrows. Some pulled an iron rod, others dug in search of lumps of pig iron, while still others sorted the booty. The movement and noise round these rubbish heaps

made Strakhov feel his loneliness more acutely.

He walked for a long time through the meadows, his brain empty of thought. He came back in the evening, went into the workers' club, took the first book he picked up and made his way slowly through the quiet streets.

Not knowing how it happened, he found himself back in the engine assembling shop—the streets, the gates, the passers-by, sounds, darkness—all those things had not entered his consciousness. He came to a realization of his surroundings only when he suddenly came up against the side of an engine which emerged from the silent semi-darkness of the dimly lit shop. The rivets had ceased to shine, and were like countless pairs of eyes closed by sleep.

Strakhov felt the weight of metal everywhere. It pressed against his brain. The heavy engine which loomed over him seemed about to topple and crush him. He moved nervously to where the electric lamp threw a circle of light. It fell on a double row of axles prepared for the next day's assembling. These axles would be coupled on without him. He had not the right to come here tomorrow and give orders. He was standing there for the last time.

He glanced sadly over the shop, the still engine, and fixed his eyes on the nearest axle again. Some power drew his glance irresistibly to the spot where the head of the axle contacted with the body. Not trusting his eyes, he passed his hand over that spot and felt a sharp transition from one cross-section to another—just as in that other unlucky axle. Seized with a vague anxiety he hastily moved from one axle to the other, jumping over them, feeling them one after the other with trembling hands. It was the same thing in every case. He did not feel the necessary smooth contour, his hands felt sharply cut contours everywhere.

He stood shaken and crushed, in the middle of the semi-dark shop and wiped his moist brow. He went out with dragging footsteps.

In his study he came face to face with Stephenson. His eyes were cold and stern. The town slept. Strakhov sat for a long time at the table, staring at the black hole of the window, then opened the book he had brought with him. He turned page after page—they contained words that were new to him. But their unaccustomed sound did not prevent their forming concise, almost scientific formulas. He wondered at the author's capacity for conveying a deep meaning in plain, short sentences, devoid of any embellishments. This simple and at the same time internally complicated way of expressing ideas reminded

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Strakhov of steel tools, they were just as unpretentious in appearance. He read on: "Whenever we meet a group of petty-bourgeois democrats who declare that they want to be neutral towards the Soviet state, we must say: 'neutrality' and good neighbourly relations are just old lumber, which is worthless from the point of view of communism..." "What assurance, what cutting force!" thought Strakhov respectfully. He suddenly felt terrified at the naked truth of what he read. He could not go to the plant tomorrow—he had been deprived of that right by the people whom he had up to now considered to be the driving axle of humanity—his comrades in work; specialists, engineers, men of brains and knowledge, who had been ruining his engines. He knew now why five of his engines at the Kursk depot had stopped running. Everything was clear now.

Strakhov recollected that, as a boy, he had once played on the bank of the Volga, sitting in a moored boat. Suddenly the boat worked loose and drifted away from the bank. He had no oars, he could not swim. He stared with frightened eyes at the receding bank. Should he jump? He did and learned to swim that very day.

And now his life boat had become unmoored from the quiet bank and was drifting away from it, out into the unknown open. It was tossed about by the waves of inexorable events. He had no oars and had not learned to swim. He had always gazed upon life from the bank. Should he jump?

He pressed his cold fingers against his temples.

5

The car lurched out of the narrow, crooked town streets and rushed roaring down the road. The scattered cottages of a suburban district flashed past in the obscure twilight.

The sounds of the horn made the people who were walking in the road swerve aside and its anxious call cut through the stillness of the evening. The speedometer climbed—35... 40... 50... 55. The hoots of the horn stretched into an uninterrupted howl. The little Ford jumped on the uneven road and the figures rose continuously and stubbornly: 60... 65...

Everything blurred into one dark, windy rush. Thousands of lights flashed into sight somewhere below, as if in a deep, black precipice!

"Isn't it beautiful?" asked Volsky and getting no answer, he shouted: "I say, isn't the plant beautiful at night, Yuzov?"

Yuzov woke up from his reverie and answered in an indifferent voice:

“Oh, very...” and, as a sequel to his thoughts, he asked: “Whoever could expect such a scandal? Who would have thought of it?”

“I, for one, did, Yuzov. I saw it coming for a long time. And I was not mistaken. The events of the last few days have only confirmed our observations and brought events to head just a little earlier than I thought. I don’t mind. All that Platov, Mokhov and the rest of them did, we have done in our own way. Our strength lies in that.”

“I know them all so well, Volsky,” said Yuzov with sudden animation. “Zaytsev, Nosov, others too—they were all in my study circle. I went through a course of Leninism with them.”

“A theoretical course, Yuzov.... You must now go through a practical one with them. And very useful it will be!”

The car stopped with a screech of brakes.

“Out, Yuzov—out—here we are.”

Yuzov followed him up the stairs with bent head, overcoming his fatigue with difficulty. He saw that Volsky was mocking him, and his laugh concealed bitter accusation.

Yuzov screwed his eyes up under the blinding light and sank in a chair near the entrance. Volsky walked to the table and made a military salute.

“Shall we start, comrades?” asked Vartanyan, glancing around the meeting room with tired eyes.

“Comrades! What has happened at the plant is a disgrace. Not a minor one either—a dreadful disgrace. We ought to be ashamed to look into each other’s eyes. You know the facts. It is not of them we must speak today. We must try to find out where we slipped up. Just think of it—five crooks succeeded in getting round sixteen thousand workers. We ought to be led by the noses throughout the country, so that all may see what asses we are. Who wants to speak?”

There was a silence. Vartanyan looked at the audience and many heads bent lower over their note-books. Korchenko smoked incessantly.

“Let’s hear what the chief has to say,” proposed Volsky, and all heads turned towards Korchenko.

“That’s right.”

“He ought to know something about it.”

“Come on, let’s hear what you have to say.”

Korchenko felt that everybody was looking at him and would

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presently listen intently to his every word. He decided to speak very slowly and think carefully over each sentence.

He opened his briefcase and took out a stack of papers, summaries and reports with shaking hands, but, as he laid them out on the table, he involuntarily hurried, mixed up the sheets and dropped his briefcase.

“A bad sign, that!” said somebody jestingly—a few people laughed, but the laughter died down immediately.

Korchenko set his collar right with an accustomed gesture. He began by telling them how he had come to the plant three years ago and found it in a sorry condition, how he had struggled night and day to raise production. He mentioned many figures and tried to prove that the plant had reduced losses and lowered the cost of production. He went on to speak of the construction of the new plant. More figures and estimates were cited.

Discontented murmurs were audible. Chairs creaked. A number of people went out into the passage. Soon heavy clouds of tobacco smoke floated in from the corridor.

Vartanyan was drawing something on a bit of paper. Volsky's eyes were half closed and he seemed to be dozing.

“Speak on the matter in hand.” shouted someone and other voices echoed.

“Stick to facts.”

“Tell us about the system of bonuses which you introduced.”

“Tell us about your method of management.”

These shouts irritated Korchenko, led his thoughts astray. He kept taking out the wrong papers, piling them up in disorder, mixed all the documents up. And suddenly he understood that this data was not necessary, that this was no ordinary meeting. Speaking was most difficult. These people knew everything he was telling them. They expected him to tell them something specific—something which could not be concealed any longer. He spoke, trying to overcome his own resistance, making an effort, but as soon as he came to the main thing, he always swerved aside. He stopped in embarrassment, poured himself a glass of water with shaking hand and drank it up at a draught, spilling some on the table.

Vartanyan was looking at his watch impatiently.

Korchenko began discussing the specialists. He tried to show how difficult his work had been—how he had always upheld the engineers' authority; but they had misused his trust. It had happened

unexpectedly, it is true, but he ought to have expected it. Lenin said.... Korchenko opened a book....

“Leave Lenin alone!” shouted Vartanyan. “Don’t try to make a shield of him. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

Everybody jumped up. Vartanyan grew pale and struck the table with his fist, while his eyes flashed.

“You have spoken for an hour and a half and never said a word about the mistakes you made, about your stupid blunders. Leave Lenin alone. You want to turn Lenin into a lawyer capable of defending any case? Lenin wrote a lot but he never said that he would defend the crimes of a blind blunderer. Leave him alone.”

Korchenko continued turning pages.

“I’ll read you something out of Lenin’s works you have never remembered. Listen!” Vartanyan snatched the book from Korchenko’s hands, turned the leaves quickly and, waving his hand in the air, started to read:

“ ‘Among the Soviet engineers, among the Soviet teachers, among the privileged, *i.e.*, the more skilled and best provided for section of the workers....’ Workers, Korchenko!... ‘in the Soviet factories, we see a *constant revival* of all the bad features of the bourgeois system, and only by continuous, tireless and prolonged struggle, proletarian organization and discipline will we be able gradually to conquer this evil.’

“Did you hear that? Memorize it because you will find nothing that is better for you.”

Vartanyan stood before Korchenko, shaking with passion and excitement, his fingers drummed nervously on the table and suddenly he put his hand to his left side and slumped down on a chair.

Volsky opened his eyes and stared at him fixedly.

Korchenko stood with bent head. The piles of summaries and statistics which littered the table irritated him. He understood that, instead of being an asset, all that rustling paper was making everybody furious and he crumpled the crackling papers, started stuffing them into his briefcase. But as he was doing so, he caught sight of Vartanyan’s helplessly lowered head and grew braver. He cried in a voice which shook with excitement:

“Who gave you the right to accuse me? You want to throw off all responsibility for that which has happened. You want to shift it all on to me. It won’t do! I worked, didn’t sleep nights—didn’t even take a holiday. My family is left to its own devices. And meanwhile you

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did nothing but draw up resolutions! That is easiest of all. You should put yourself in my place!”

“And so we shall!”

This sentence was shot out from the crowd of attentively listening people and struck Korchenko dumb. He looked in bewilderment at the wrathful faces turned towards him and sat down exhausted.

When Yuzov came back to the room, he was struck by the silence which reigned there. Vartanyan was speaking now in a calm voice, stopping often to take a drink of water.

“It would be beneath us to shift all the blame on the manager. We have all been at fault and must all bear our share of responsibility. I am also guilty, for I remember how, at the plenum of the regional committee, I failed to see the truth behind Andrushechkin’s clumsy words. I judged his speech from a formal point of view, it is my mistake! I did not take the pains to hear the man who came to me to unburden his heart. I did not look into the Zaytsev incident in time. All these mistakes are mine and I recognize them.”

“That is not all, Vartanyan!” shouted Olya. “You forget the main thing. You must own that you did not show very much firmness at the last workers’ meeting. Who was right? I, Platov, Titych, Mokhov—the whole meeting. But you vacillated this way and that and finally sided with the specialists against the workers. You bungled it, Vartanyan. That you must own.”

She spoke with a derisive smile.

Vartanyan did not expect her to make this most painful recollection of all. He recognized the injustice of his attitude at the meeting, but had not the strength to own it openly. The fact that someone else had pointed this out to him was terribly painful. “Went against the workers.”—That was, after all, true. But then who did not make mistakes?

Titych came up to the table, tugging at his discoloured beard.

“Olya speaks the truth. There’s no getting away from it. You went the wrong way, Comrade Vartanyan. We felt the enemy with our heart and guessed right. These here learned ideas seem all right, and you cannot find a flaw in them. But, the heart—it signals to you—stop! And your heart is blind, Vartanyan. Don’t you get offended at the old man, though, I’m talking straight.”

Volsky then stood up and took his stand near the table, as straight and stiff as a sentinel.

“The best of intentions, or so they would seem, namely, a desire

to maintain the authority and prestige of the plant—have led to sorry consequences. Recollect your report at the plenum, Korchenko! I saw your hesitation about which figures to choose, the red or the black. You chose that which showed the situation to be good and so led us to failure. But were you the only one that acted wrongly?” Volsky winked slyly at Vartanyan and fixed his eyes on Yuzov, who averted his glance. “Let us be straightforward! There is the editor of our newspaper sitting over there.... He should remember how he laid on his literary varnish over that very crack in the driving axle. It is so easy and pleasant to glide complacently over the smooth, polished surface of ice which often conceals stinking water. Our epoch does not need the polishing which serves to conceal cracks and chinks, through which the class enemy worms in. Let those cracks and chinks be on the surface. We are not afraid of them. We are strong enough to stand them.”

The telephone interrupted Volsky’s speech.

“Hello!” said Vartanyan, taking up the receiver—and laid it down again slowly, after giving a nervous start. His face tightened with pain. His eyes looked still more sunken.

“The ‘boss’ is dead,” he said half audibly and all held their breath at the sight of his sorrowful face.

Minutes flowed by in silence. Olya looked in bewilderment at Vartanyan and could not understand why his tired face suddenly seemed to swell out, blur and disappear. Oppressed by the silence, she turned round, but did not see the faces of the audience, spots of light flashed before her eyes, as if the electric lamps had melted and their uncontrolled light had blinded her. She heard a voice murmur somewhere in the distance:

“What a life!”

* * * * *

Korchenko left the district committee with a feeling of deep oppression. He made his way slowly across the dark plant yard. Fantastically shaped clouds, forerunners of a thunderstorm, moved across the sky. A high wind was blowing. It whistled through the open yard, eddying in and out of the mounds of metal, howling in the narrow passages between the black buildings. The wind lashed Korchenko’s face, cooling his heated body and moist back with its cold gusts. Vague thoughts whirled through his head, making his temples ache.

He saw the unforgiving expression of the workers’ eyes,

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Vartanyan's lips, set in a derisive smile. Yes, he had made a mistake.... The engineers had repaid the trust and respect he had shown them by disgracing him. A moment ago Vartanyan had been reading something to him, waving his hands at him wrathfully, but he did not hear. He could not and did not want to hear anything—he was dead tired. He imagined the cunning, knowing, stern eyes of the prosecuting judge. He would be examined tomorrow as manager of the plant, and accused. He would hear the usual question, so terrifying in its simplicity: "What do you, the accused, Korchenko—know about this case?"

He knew nothing about this case. The only thing he knew was that he thought Kraysky the best of engineers and he valued him accordingly, whereas it was now apparent....

"Oh, why did I not accede that day to his request for dismissal! On the contrary, I begged him to stay and accepted all his conditions. Peter Korchenko—you are an old fool!"

"Perhaps the accused will tell us whether any one from the working masses ever gave him a warning? Are you in the habit of walking through the shops? Of listening to the workers?"—the examining judge's eyes would narrow.... "For example, Vekshin, in his evidence, tells us that he came to see you and told you about Boretsky's tricks. What did you do about it?"

Yes, Vekshin did come. Turchaninov, the technical manager, had been called and instructed to look into this matter.

"Oh, what a blind, old idiot I am!"

Korchenko looked round him in anguish. The birch trees pointed their white arms accusingly, whispering: "Perhaps, the accused Korchenko will tell us...."

A yard engine whistled plaintively in the distance. A black, menacing cloud gradually hid the sky. Rain started to fall, streaking the greenish electric light, the buildings, the few lights which shone in the silent shops. Korchenko fancied he saw it all through the bars of a grating which had risen between him and the plant. He shivered and lifted his collar. "It is only rain," he told himself, but felt a sudden wild desire to escape from the darkness which held him like a vice—from the howling wind and the beating rain. He ran, tripping against the rails, dashing through the curtain of rain, as if he wished to tear it with his body. But it clung to his hands, his face, his shivering back and shaking legs. He fell and lost his briefcase. He searched for it in the darkness. His fingers touched something cold and slippery like a

frog and he drew his hands back in disgust. There was a flash of lightning and Korchenko saw his swollen black briefcase. He seized it, but the slippery heavy thing squirmed from his hands and dropped back into the darkness. The cold rain continued to fall mercilessly on his head, growing thicker and thicker and becoming a heavy, wet curtain which hid the surrounding world from sight. The rain thundered against the iron roofs, fell in torrents on the ground, making Korchenko's exhausted body bend under the impact. He crawled on his hands and knees, caught his trousers against sharp pieces of iron. The wind howled round him. Thunder shook the earth.

The thunder grew in volume. The lightning flashes enveloped the plant in greenish flame.

THE SEVENTH LINK

1

The day will come....

A wonderful city will rise in place of the old plant with its thousands of puny cottages. Smokestacks will disappear, for there will be no smoke. Noise will stop, for noisy pinions will be replaced by a soundless transmission system. The plant buildings will be as roomy, light and quiet as laboratories, because the universal automatic lathe will replace the transmission gear, which will become a museum exhibit.

The day will come!

The glass-walled buildings of a socialist city will rise high up in the air and old Mokhov will seek in vain for the vanished smokestacks of the open hearth furnace shop. His son will tell him of the last uprising of the people of Morocco and about the Red Banner of the Soviets waving above the Eiffel Tower. And Mokhov will remember the far away past and will fail to find many of those who are now struggling with him for the future.

For some will fall on the way because their hearts will cease to beat, others will lose their way, after losing their faith in the success of their cause. Others again will fall on the field of battle, and some the revolution will send away over great distances, to the places where the struggle will be fiercest.

Many will not reach the goal. But thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions will reach it in an impetuous rush, as irrepressible as an avalanche.

So it is in the mountains: some fall into a precipice covered over with treacherous ice—others freeze gradually in the cold gusts of the storm, some simply retreat and take refuge in the sheltered valley. The brave reach the mountain top and see a tremendous vista opening before them.

The day will come!

But today!...

All of them—Mokhov, Sasha, Vartanyan, Zhorov, and the thousands with them, are full of deep anxiety for that old plant, because it is the source of their own future and that of the whole country.

The present means sleepless nights and nerve-racking anxiety. The lights of the plant flash like danger signals in the night—the night which hides endless expanses of roadless lands.

These vast expanses stretch on all sides: to the south—endless plains, filled with the swishing murmur of grass and terrible deserts of restless sand; to the east—wild forests and mountains saturated with metal; to the north—uninhabited tundras.

It takes six months on foot from Moscow to the eastern frontier. And Peter Korchenko had taken that trip in irons in 1900. That year, 280,502 people set out into exile along the old Vladimir highway.

Korchenko remembered. The clank of iron sounded along a distance of thousands of kilometres, an endless procession of people in irons stretched along the road. Men gritted their teeth in silent hatred. Their chained feet struck the ground with a heavy thud and drops of blood fell from those wounded feet on the road. Bayonets rattled. The black vaults of virgin forests witnessed solitary death scenes.

There were days when Peter Korchenko closed his eyes and lay down on the ground, reconciled to death.

But his young body, which had not yet tasted of life, had great reserves of strength and a still greater desire to live, and so he rose to his feet again and walked on amid the clank of iron which tolled the prisoners' doom.

That was long ago. He saw that road now, with extraordinary distinctness and, giving himself up to the overwhelming influence of memories, he watched himself walking down the endless highway of life. The slow journey of the prisoner into exile. The flight back through unexplored wilds.... The nervous thud of his horse's hoof and his own dapper figure on horse-back as division commissar.

What a long journey! And all through it, Peter Korchenko had held out and not tripped, even when he was shot in the chest on the greenish ice near Kronstadt. It was only here, at the plant that his feet had been stuck in the quagmire.

Korchenko pressed his hand to his left side, as if to stop the aching pain in his heart, but his trembling fingers were powerless to hold it back.

The front? Yes, the front was here.

Korchenko suddenly understood that the whole journey he had made heretofore was only a preparation for the march which the country had now started upon. It was only now, in the quiet moments after the storm, that he understood the magnitude of the business which had been entrusted to him and the terrible weight of his own mistake.

"It will not do to lie down with closed eyes," he thought. "I must

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go on, on, without giving myself a moment's respite—until this worn heart stops altogether.”

He aged in these minutes. His face looked yellow and drawn and wore a sorrowful expression, but his jaw did not hang loosely. It was set in stubborn lines, which boded a hard resistance.

Korchenko came home at dawn and went straight to the telephone.

“Vartanyan? Hello! Vartanyan? Please ring that number once again. Hello! Have I waked you, Vartanyan? I am sorry. Do you know what I think? Talk it over tomorrow? No, I want to speak to you now. It is a most important matter. I propose that, from tomorrow on.... Do you hear? Yes, yes.... Listen now: I propose....”

* * * * *

The sheets of the plant newspaper gleamed white against the walls and incoming workers stopped before them.

“Let us organize the assembling of engines under the control of the working masses.”

“We must deliver Engine ‘SU-10505.’

“Everyone of the workers is responsible for that engine.”

Mokhov ran about the shop, and his green eyes twinkled.

“What d’you think, you fellows? Can we do it?”

The workers smiled at sight of his worried face.

“Don’t you doubt it, Makarych.”

“Just look at Makarych—he’s like a midwife helping deliver a child—see him roll up his sleeves?”

“He’s old on the outside but he’s alright inside.”

“He’ll give Bulavkin a hundred points and beat him.”

Bulavkin looked on peevishly. Here was Mokhov bossing it in the shop without any formal right to do so. He felt a sudden weakness about the legs. He trudged to the office with a dragging step, but even there he beheld an astounding sight: the manager was sitting at the chief’s table and Zorin was standing before him with his head bent in a respectful manner.

“Did you know that the drawings had been altered?” asked Korchenko, and his wrathful glance seemed to crush Zorin against the wall.

“I did.”

“And said nothing?”

“I did not attach any importance to it.”

“You were with them,” said Korchenko with trembling lips, making as if to rise.

“No, cried Zorin, advancing in his direction, as if afraid that Korchenko would leave. “Their company was hateful to me and they did not trust me. They had good reason not to. I am one of the few engineers who came to the plant before the rest, so as to restore it. I was threatened then, called a traitor. Afterwards they seemed to reconcile themselves and forget. But I made no steps to join them.”

“You moved neither backwards nor forwards? You waited to see what would happen?” said Korchenko with a wry smile.

Zorin looked him calmly in the eyes.

“Yes, that’s about it.”

“But were events in the country not sufficiently convincing for you to make your choice? To understand on whose side power lay?” asked Korchenko in astonishment. “Open any newspaper.”

“I do not read newspapers.”

Korchenko looked in perplexity at the man before him, as if he were some prehistoric exhibit, or the primitive image of a cave dweller.

“I made a mistake,” murmured Zorin dejectedly and stood with bent figure and lowered eyes.

Disconcerted by his frankness, Korchenko found no words to accuse him. He only shook his head, smiled ironically and suddenly recollecting something, walked to the door. He turned before going out and saw Zorin’s bent figure standing as before with lowered eyes.

“I shall superintend the assembling of engine ‘SU-10505’ myself. I hold you responsible for the timely delivery of the parts. Bear that in mind!”

Zorin recalled Brooks’ anecdote: “You can build engines out of bricks under a manager like him,” and a derisive smile came to his lips. Moved by an irrepressible feeling of curiosity, he looked into the engine assembling shop. The engine boiler was slowly descending like an airship, which is about to land. The crane deposited it on the engine frame as carefully as if it were a glass jar and the very next moment, scores of fitters and workers armed with pneumatic hammers and drills surrounded engine “SU-10505.” A machine-gun rattle filled the shop—the pneumatic hammers beat under the engine, inside it, against its sides.

To the left, polished engine parts were laid out on wide benches. A number of fitters were busy setting bearings. The bronze flashed

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under the biting files, and the golden dust sparkled gaily in the sun.

A bald-headed fitter with a large moustache tied the two halves of a bearing, smiled and struck them playfully together, so that the bronze emitted a clear, melodious ring.

“Ha! You’ll ring the right way now! Peter Petrovich is boss. This here engine’s made with church bells, so no deviltry can harm it now.”

And he laughed, as he fondly stroked the polished bronze with his rough palm.

Korchenko came up to him. He wore a blue working blouse. The movements of his hands were quick and sparse. He examined the bearings and shook his head.

They must be set a little more. Work must be more carefully done.

He walked on to the worker who was assembling the coulisse. Zorin watched him with the same sceptical smile, which, however, gradually changed to wonder.

“What’s this block you have here?” said Korchenko to the worker with an angry sniff, and taking a measuring instrument he measured the part and called to Zorin.

“What kind of work is your shop doing, Comrade Zorin? Is this the way to thread grooves? Do you know the difference between a sliding block and a brick?”

Zorin turned the piece of steel perplexedly in his hands. It glistened like Brooks’ bald head and he recollected Brooks’ face, distorted with laughter, enraptured with his own wit. What pleasure it would have given him to throw this piece of steel at Brooks’ insolent bald head.

“Have it reset immediately! You are delaying the work. Tell the foreman he stands reprimanded. Report to me in an hour’s time of the steps you take.”

Zorin stared at Korchenko in bewilderment and saw a stranger before him, a new man with stubbornly set, iron jaw—a man who had mastered the business and knew all about it.

He almost ran to the machine shop, rushed at the frightened Bulavkin and thrusting the sliding block in his face, cried:

“You disgrace my shop! You disgrace me before the manager, before the entire plant! I’ll put a stop to it.”

He shook as if under the impact of an electric current. His large, fat face was suffused with blood, only the ears remained as white as

if they were frozen.

The "SU-10505" engine became the weather glass of plant life. A nut which proved to be of the wrong diameter, was immediately returned to the shop. The name of the worker who had turned out this slipshod detail was mentioned with unconcealed indignation by everybody. Such names were published the next day in the plant newspaper and on special black boards and later they would be read in the regional and central press—the whole country knew the name of Bulavkin—the inefficient foreman. Zorin opened the *Pravda* for the first time in his life, and trembled at the thought of finding his name there.

Korchenko seemed to have forgotten all about his office, the telephone or the accumulating correspondence. He came to the engine assembling shop with the morning signal, and left at dusk. He verified every detail personally. He saw the cold expression of estrangement gradually die out of the workers' eyes and the heavy silence of the first day replaced by a gruff familiar attitude indicative of trust. His blue working clothes seemed to place him on an equal footing with the others, but Korchenko felt at the same time that, while becoming part of the mass, he was not lost in it, but on the contrary, had found new support.

Sometimes he noticed the workers' displeasure at orders issued by the management and was obliged to ring up the office and alter a great many things. But when the workers started to speak of Strakhov's dismissal as being unjust, he would not listen and changed the subject.

"Peter Petrovich," said the foreman, coming up to him, "what are we to do with the eccentric rod? It's too short, and if we wait for another that'll hold up the work." Korchenko racked his brains for a long time but could find no way out.

"We've had similar cases before, but then Strakhov thought of planing the wedges a little more. It's not a difficult thing to do, but who's to make the calculations? It's holding up the work."

Korchenko sent a note to Strakhov's lodging, asking him to come to the shop. Strakhov walked calmly up to the engine, with a business manner which gave no hint of the events of the past few days. He made the necessary calculations and handed them to the foreman.

"You must take off three and a half millimetres; that'll make it."

"Just a word with you, Andrey Sergeevich," said one of the workers, laying his hand on his sleeve and drawing him aside. "Don't bear me any grudge. I was hasty in giving those orders. Let us work

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together as before.”

Strakhov looked perplexedly at the worker, and suddenly laughed aloud.

“Whatever is the matter, Peter Petrovich? What does this costume mean? I hardly knew you.”

“It is well you know me at last,” said Korchenko smiling. “I have learned to know myself only lately. Life is a good teacher, Andrey Sergeyeovich,” he sighed and the lines on his forehead became deeper.

“Yes, life teaches us a lot,” Strakhov agreed thoughtfully. “And it is a good thing it does. A very good thing Peter Petrovich! Very.”

He went to the engine and still repeating this sentence under his breath, examined the bright mechanism fixedly.

The “SU-10505” was almost ready and the excitement in the shop grew.

The old plant had seen many severe storms in the course of its long existence. The violent wind of revolt had repeatedly passed over its roof, sending the red flames up into the skies. Many human lives had passed through its gates. But on that day, something invisible entered the shops, something which impressed people more than the fitful storms of those terrible decades.

The day was cloudless. The August sun shone and did not spare its rays. Stacks smoked calmly. Noisy little engines darted to and fro, cranes puffed heavily, the earth shook with the noise of hammers and presses, the air was full of soot and the smell of oil. The shops were thick with bluish smoke, boiling steam and the heavy smell of sweating human bodies. But on looking into the workers’ faces, Andrushechkin saw that their eyes, their muscles, their whole bodies were in tense motion. He noticed that Titych, having finished a mould, examined the yellow imprint of a driving wheel for a long time, walking round it, scraping it with his trowel, smoothing the surface as if refusing to believe his eyes. Seeing Andrushechkin, Titych called him over:

“Just look at it, Gregory, seems all right to me but I’m doubtful just the same.”

Andrushechkin was astonished that Titych who knew moulding to perfection, was asking his advice. “I’m a welder, you know. I understand very little about moulding.”

Titych shook his head reprovingly.

“And yet you’re secretary of a nucleus! You should understand everything. Poke your nose into everybody’s business. How d’you

know I have done this as I should? Who's to answer for it?"

"The foreman must correct anything that's wrong."

"The foreman!" exclaimed Titych derisively. "I guess we'd better get Antonych back, what? Oh, what a life!"

He went down on one knee and taking aim carefully with his hook, took out a tiny clot of loam which Andrushechkin had not even noticed.

"Maybe Kalinin himself will ride on that wheel, and all you can say is 'I don't understand,' " grumbled the old man.

He patted the mould tenderly, with his rough, black hands.

"What a thorough old man," thought Andrushechkin as he gazed at the loving movements of the hands which caressed the light yellow, damp sand.

Andrushechkin remembered a morning in May, the sweet smelling dew on the flowering trees and the reproving glance which Titych had fixed on the apple blossom in his hand. Yes, that was flowering time, but the fruit was ripe now. And it was bitter fruit—as bitter as gall.

The old man had been right, while he, secretary of the nucleus, being under the charm of spring had let the golden words pass out of his mind. He walked away, feeling guilty before Titych. The weight of all the emotions he had passed through oppressed him physically.

He saw the old, familiar faces of the workers, whom his eyes had seen a countless number of times and noticed new and unexpected traits in them. Even the thoughtless Vasya Trusov's brows were drawn in thought and looked gloomy as thunder. He had been silent for several days, avoided looking people in the eyes.

"He's over drunk himself properly and is feeling sick," thought Andrushechkin. Trusov cast an anguished glance in his direction.

"What d'you stare at me for? Can't you speak like a human? ... Standing there, saying nothing.... What d'you want with me?" he asked in a low, rumbling bass voice.

"I'm feeling dull, Vasya," answered Andrushechkin with a smile. "I miss your swearing. You seem to have lost your tongue."

"I may have lost something more important.... Oh! I wish I could have a good drink, this very moment!" cried Trusov in anguish and seizing the pneumatic hammer he raised such a deafening clatter that Andrushechkin put his hands over his ears.

Andrushechkin saw anxiety and thought in every face. It was a sequel to yesterday's meeting.

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Mokhov had set the example, and disputes between workers and foremen were going on in all the shops. The machines worked at top speed and produced more than their certificates provided for. The certificates became silent witnesses of the class maturity about which Platov had spoken. The force of enthusiasm and thought which filled the roused collective of the plant broke through the limitations of machinery. On this day the machines and lathes, operated by the workers' attentive hands, exceeded all normal rates. On this day, Platov found only eight per cent spoilage instead of eighteen. He walked about the open hearth shop, full of pride for himself and the people with whom he had gone through the time of trial. His spirits were quickened by the force that seemed to flow from the workers, from the rumble of steel and human voices. For the first time, he felt himself an engineer among people who silently recognized his right to that title.

"You seem rather jolly today, Senya," said Titych, screwing up his eyes and looking fixedly at his former apprentice's wide nose.

"And why shouldn't I? I'm young, Titych!" laughed Platov.

"Young and crafty—that's what you are," said Titych, with an admiring wink. "Have you found out what's the matter with that drawing Mokhov gave you?" he asked anxiously.

"I've found out that the drawings were wrong. Metal exhaustion was caused artificially by turning axles that way. That is the work of crafty and able hands. This wasn't done without the help of some people in Moscow."

"Who are they?"

"It's a complicated business, Titych, but those whose business it is will find out everything."

"Senya, does this mean that all our engines are unreliable?"

"I'm afraid so. We may have a number of accidents yet."

"So that's what it comes to!" groaned Titych. "A downright blow! The plant's lost to us.... And what's more, Senya, we're disgraced before the whole U.S.S.R.! They've struck us in the legs, damn them!"

"What d'you mean—in the legs?"

"Doesn't the whole country run on these axles? So they aimed to cut our legs off. But, no, I say! My wheel shall run! Stand aside, or it'll crush you to pulp."

Titych shook his fist at some invisible enemy.

Having calmed down, he continued:

“The main thing now, Senya, is for us all to stick together. Every man doesn’t see further than his own nose and that’s bad. We’re used to shift for ourselves and never mind what the neighbour does. Fenced ourselves round like, so we can’t get a damn sight of anything. But we must look sharp now. They’d better look out—we’ll take things into our own hands, Senya.”

Titych drew the overhead crane to his machine, put the chain round the mould, the crane hissed, and the heavy, round mould rose lightly in the air.

Zhorov ran up to Platov.

“You’ve forgotten me, comrade engineer!”

“No, I haven’t, Comrade Zhorov,” said Platov seriously. “Go to Sergey Vekshin and he’ll teach you all about welding. You’ll be a welder, Zhorov, only don’t you drink any more.”

“Comrade Platov! Semyon Petrovich! I’ll never...,” stammered Zhorov and ran at top speed to the end of the shop where the greenish flames of the electrodes could be seen.

Zhorov stopped before the pressure gauge and watched the nervous movements of the needle with fascinated eyes. Having gazed sufficiently, he imitated Andrushechkin’s movements, by drawing a dark mask over his head, and bent over the plate, for he had actually been given a machine to operate. Andrushechkin explained the primary operations to him. It all seemed extraordinarily simple. But as soon as the mask was on, Zhorov sank into pitch darkness—just as if he had looked out of his cottage window on a dark September night. He immediately lost all capacity for using his hands—they seemed far away and refused to obey him. Zhorov opened his mask a little way, placed the electrode on the fissure and a crackling flame flashed out. Blinded and terrified, he threw the cable away and lifted his mask with a trembling hand.

“Got it plump in the eyes, have you?” asked Sergey Vekshin with an ironical laugh, as he gazed at Zhorov’s dejected figure. “You’re a fine welder, you are! You’ll get blind for good, if you don’t take care.”

“Why, I just gave it a poke and off it went!” said Zhorov, rubbing his blinded eyes.

“Gave it a poke!” said Sergey disgustedly. “It’s a wonder you didn’t poke your mug in, you boob. Sit down and I’ll show you how it’s done.”

Zhorov was again sunk in the darkness of his mask. Sergey

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tugged at his hand and suddenly something boiled up in the darkness and a cold red flame ran sideways leaving an uneven trail.

“Your hand must be firm. Don’t press the electrode against the metal. The weight must be even!” Zhorov did as he was told.

“I’ve got it! I’ve got it!” cried the elated Zhorov. “I’ll find my bearings now, friend. Nothing’ll make me lose them now. I’m a made man!” he capered round the apparatus, waved his apelike arms about and proudly set his mask high, as if it was the smartest of headgear.

Andrushechkin lifted his mask. His watchful eyes were full of thoughts. He felt his heart beating faster, giving a passionate impulse to his whole being. It seemed to him that he was about to perform some important and great act. He examined his surroundings, listened intently to the ring of steel and his heart expanded under the hum of those sounds. He felt that the ancient decrepit plant, grown old together with thousands of its workers—old founders and turners—was seething today with an irrepressible and youthful strength.

Andrushechkin recollected the fairy tale about the wonderful tailor who could sew up wounds on a human body. But the electrode which shook in his hand had more wonderful power than the tailor’s fairy needle, for it sewed up cracks and holes in metal without the help of thread, making a solid, everlasting seam.

Sergey Vekshin often left his place to run up to Zhorov.

“That’s not the way to hold the electrode, you boob!” he would say with a smile, as he followed Zhorov’s hasty movements and guided his unaccustomed hand.

“I’ve got it, Serezha. I’ll be all right in a moment,” stammered Zhorov, starting at the unexpected flashes of the blinding lighting. Platov looked on from a distance and laughed.

* * * * *

Platov walked through the plant, listening to the continual noise, looking in at the open gates and, wherever he looked, he saw thousands of hands moving at the machines. He felt thousands of hearts united in one common aspiration—to create a locomotive that would truly conquer space.

Trainloads of coal, iron and timber rolled in through the plant gates. The country sent its riches from every side so as to have them smelted into engines. The country must have engines—boundless spaces hemmed it in on all sides—north, south, east and west—spaces formerly the highroads of wild animals and chained prisoners.

Men unloaded iron, coal and timber, charging thousands of tons into the greedy furnace throats and machines—but there were no engines as yet.

There was boiling, milk-white steel flowing in a heavy stream from ladles into moulds.... The steel heaved and bubbled as it ran along the intricate pattern traced in the mould, belching bluish flames and acid gases into the air and enveloping the shop in a luminous haze.

And still there were no engines—there were only countless rough and unsightly engine parts cooling on the ground.

Platov walked through the plant, from shop to shop, casting observant glances at thousands of faces, struck by the feeling of the new power which was born under his very eyes. People united themselves into one general whole, like parts of an engine, merging into one great collective. Those feelings quickened the movements of their hands and the pulsations of their hearts, sharpened their sight to the utmost limit so that the young eyes of factory apprentices became stern beyond their years.

“Hey! Hey! Push harder!”

“Don’t weaken, you fellows!”

“Call Bulavkin!”

Bulavkin ran over and picked up some engine parts in his shaking hands. A mistrustful crowd gathered round him.

“Oho!”

Bulavkin insisted that everything was accurate, they were simply nagging, but he was not believed. Zorin had to be consulted and the latter, covered with sweat, rushed about the shop in an atmosphere of anxiety and mistrust.

An engine whistled long and loudly at the plant gates which opened on the main railway track—it begged to be let out in the open for its first timid run.

Platov sighed happily, as he examined the bare body of the engine, unclothed, as yet, in its coating of varnish. It was open, plain and candid and his trusting eyes gazed fondly at every rivet and screw. The heat of the fire pot sent copper reflections over the brown face of the driver.

The gates opened with a melodious creak and the engine let out a cloud of hissing steam and moved in the direction of the bright green, welcoming light of the semaphore.

At the end of the second day of strenuous work at the plant, Korchenko, tired but excited by the general high spirits, listened to Mokhov's report on the preparation of engine parts.

"There may be a delay with the piston rods, otherwise all's going smooth, Peter Petrovich. It's fit to make your head go round. I've never seen anything like it. I recollect one day when I was asleep and suddenly heard someone shouting 'fire!' I made for the door, but it got stuck, damn it, couldn't move it one inch. And to this day I don't know how I did it, but it's a fact, I tore that oak door, there since my grandfather's time, clear off its hinges! There's a lot of strength in a man, Peter Petrovich, only it's sort of hidden, but once it gets out, it'll break through anything, just like a spring flood."

Very pleased with his role of supervisor over the shop, Mokhov had his sleeves jauntily rolled up, showing the play of his muscles.

"Not all are conscious yet," said Korchenko incredulously. "There is that lanky man over there on the left. See his hands—seems as if they were frozen. He won't do much work."

"Oh! That's Ugolkov, the very man who's making piston rods. A skilled turner, but so slow in his work that it makes you sick to watch him. He'll delay us with his piston rods," sighed Mokhov ruefully.

As he saw the manager approaching, Ugolkov demonstratively sat down and took out his tobacco pouch.

"Good morning, Ugolkov," said Korchenko, nodding to him. "How's the work getting on?"

"So-so, neither badly nor too well," answered Ugolkov gloomily.

"Why is that?"

"It's all work and very little pay. I'm working on regular wages—a hundred and twenty-five rubles a month and there's a fellow next to me who makes a hundred and forty and he's no worker at all. So why should I overwork myself?"

"But look at the others, how they make things hum— it's like a spring flood!" cried Mokhov, gladdened by the idea that he also was the cause of this elation.

Ugolkov glanced at him contemptuously.

"A spring flood comes once a year and doesn't last long either."

"When a horse draws a cart, the most difficult is the start, but after that it's easy going," insisted Mokhov.

“You know the old story about the devil boasting that he could shave a pig and d’you remember what happened?” asked Ugolkov with a sly wink. “Both the devil and the pig made a lot of noise but there weren’t any bristles.”

Feeling that he was no good at bandying words, Mokhov decided to talk straight.

“Stop that nonsense, Ugolkov, we want piston rods. Make an effort.”

“You make it, if it’s any pleasure to you,” growled Ugolkov and started the machine with slow, unwilling hands.

Korchenko did not take part in the conversation, but observed Ugolkov attentively. He wore a look of hopeless stubbornness. His whole figure had a listless appearance, quite unusual in the tense atmosphere of the section. So in the month of May, while the sun is hot and the warm earth is steaming, snow will continue lying for weeks in a ravine, cold and white, sparkling insolently.

The disappointed Mokhov led the manager aside.

“He’s one of the best workers, but there’s no getting over his obstinacy, damn him! Every man has his weak spot, but that man is just an unfeeling lump.”

Korchenko went from machine to machine, talking with the workmen and in every case he saw that they did not blame Ugolkov and many expressed the same ideas. The enthusiasm was there—most of the workers willingly doubled their working energy, but Korchenko saw that Ugolkov’s feelings could be detected deep down in most of them.

Before going to the office, he paid a visit to the district committee. Vartanyan welcomed him with a strong hand shake.

“Things are going on fine! We’re getting out of the hole, Korchenko! I’m heartily glad for your sake!”

“Yes, things aren’t bad, but I am afraid this enthusiasm is temporary and caused exclusively by the events of the last few days. The burn will heal and again...”

“What is this nonsense you are talking, Korchenko? This means that you don’t understand the substance of the new stage in the development of the working class. That may take you far, you know!” said Vartanyan irritably.

Korchenko told him of the observations he had made and the conversations he had heard at the plant.

“Oh! So that’s it,” said Vartanyan with a laugh. “I see it all now.

So that's all the good you get out of being in the shops. Very sad! Can't you see that Ugolkov belongs to the past? That the proletariat today consists of enthusiasts of labour, who are giving up their strength and energy to the cause of socialism?"

Korchenko passed his fingers nervously over his unshaven lip.

"I don't say Ugolkov is an advanced worker, that much I see, but as to his belonging to the past of the proletariat—that's hastily judged. Are not men like him found in every plant? Did not you yourself tell me once that peasants will soon come to the factories in millions and will have to be educated, that the plant must become a socialist university for them? You must bear in mind that those millions will be like Ugolkov and we must find the road to their hearts."

"True, I said that and I'll repeat it again, if necessary."

"And do you think those million Ugolkovs will become enthusiasts right off? That it will be enough for you to make a fervent speech for them to become so? Nonsense, Vartanyan! They'll be carried away for a couple of days and cool down again. The spring flood only comes once a year and does not last long," he added, wishing to support his argument by a comparison, but remembering that he had heard it from Ugolkov, he looked away in embarrassment.

Vartanyan looked in astonishment at the manager, saw his dust-covered face, the clumsy folds of his blue working blouse and felt an acute dislike for that costume, which was so unusual for Korchenko.

"He is hopeless, what lack of faith in the forces of the working class! How easily he falls under alien influence! Only yesterday he capitulated before the specialists and now before Ugolkov," thought Vartanyan, and his eyebrows knit in a stern line.

"By the way, I think it is time for you to leave the shops and go back to the head office. The manager should see further, while you, on the contrary, have narrowed your scope of vision down to one section and begin to look at the world from that point of view. That is the fault of your narrow practicality and disregard of theory."

"It is not theory I want, but piston rods! Piston rods!—d'you understand that?" shouted Korchenko, flushing and jumping up. "The piston rods which Ugolkov makes! And you can't convince Ugolkov by theory, money is what he wants, that is his weak spot!"

"You've come back to your old hobby, I see!" said Vartanyan, shaking his head reproachfully. "It has brought enough trouble to you as it is. You are really incorrigible. And you speak about it at a moment when voluntary labour is born for the first time in the history of

man, when the hitherto unknown incentive of socialist consciousness has begun to activate the workman. You want to resurrect the capitalist principle of personal financial interest. You're retreating and we will not allow you to do it."

Vartanyan ran about the room in great agitation, sincerely sorry that Korchenko, who had done such good work at the plant and seemed to be on the right way to correcting his errors, was again swerving aside.

"Listen, Korchenko, in your own interests you had better not mention that matter again."

Korchenko left Vartanyan's office still thinking of Ugolkov.

"Perhaps I am really mistaken?" he thought as he crossed the street.

"Just going back from work?" shouted a voice above him and, lifting his head, Korchenko saw Ugolkov sitting on the roof of a cottage and smiling good naturedly. Wood splinters flew up round him and slid down in white patches on the decrepit slanting roof. In his mouth he had some nails which he took out dexterously from between his thick lips and drove into the roof with a couple of well-aimed blows.

"And I've had time to mend half this roof since I came home!" he shouted indistinctly, and his hammer rattled on the roof again.

Ugolkov was unrecognizable. His face looked happy. His hands moved quickly as if playing with the hammer and splinters. His whole figure was agile and Korchenko wondered how his restless body could keep its balance on the steep slope of the roof.

"There it is!" thought Korchenko joyfully. "The great force bred by centuries—the love of work for oneself. It is not affected by normal working rates, physical fatigue or the movements of the clock, it is boundless in its greediness and irresistible in its impetus."

"Ugolkov!" he shouted gaily, glad at the sudden decision he felt. "From tomorrow on we shall pay you per piston rod. You will be paid according to the amount you do."

Ugolkov stopped his hammering for a moment and scratched his nose thoughtfully.

"Only don't let there be any of these here time clocks. I don't want anybody standing behind my back counting every time I sneeze."

"All right," laughed Korchenko. "I agree to do without it."

He walked down the street listening to the careful taps of the

hammer. He had decided to act in spite of Vartanyan's opinion, but was not yet sure he was right and he knew perfectly well that sooner or later they would fight on this point again.

3

The streets were quiet and empty when Zaytsev walked towards the factory for the first time in two months.

The silent emptiness of the wide streets oppressed him, reminding him of the days when he had walked to the plant with a light step amid a stream of people. His personality had then dissolved in the general stream and he had not felt it, had not heard the sound of his steps, which was lost in the tramp of the morning shift. He now felt his solitude and the limpness of his muscles very acutely. His body had lost the healthy elasticity caused by daily work at the machine. Enraged at himself and his weakened body, he clenched his fists, which had become white with inactivity.

An expectant silence reigned at the plant. Zaytsev listened to the echoing sound of his own footsteps and looked intently at the rows of machinery, as if he saw them for the first time. He was alone in this silent and stern world of machines, which was so simple, so comprehensible to him, down to the very last screw.

Ancient lathes looking good-natured and unwieldy, primitive turning lathes alternated with solid looking machines that bore a foreign stamp. And hundreds of machines gleamed through the network of belts, wailing for the transmission gear to be set going.

Zaytsev walked impatiently to his machine, certain that it had not been cared for in his absence. He already imagined himself cleaning and overhauling it. The sight that met his eyes struck him more forcibly than anything he had gone through lately. The machine shone with cleanliness and order, every part bore witness to the care of a solicitous hand. The machine seemed to be rejuvenated so brightly was it polished. Zaytsev looked into his tool chest and saw the shining tools lying in perfect order.

He moved the support, verified the automatic device, everything was in order. The door started to bang to and fro—the workmen were hurriedly streaming in. Zaytsev turned his back on them and fingered his tools nervously. When the transmission gear started turning over his head with its accustomed humming noise, Zaytsev switched in his machine and it began to move. At once he thought he heard a strange grinding sound which interfered with the rhythmic hum of the

machine. He changed the cutters, verified the fastenings—still the sound was there. He grew nervous, fumbled with his key, screwed the support and unscrewed it again without need. His serious, hesitating movements were not in accord with the rhythm of the machine—he had lost his intuition. And the more uneasy he grew, the worse the machine worked.

He cut off the gear and the belt rustled helplessly on the loose pulley. Zaytsev looked round in despair, saw Mokhov's tense figure, hundreds of heads bent over the machines. For the first time he failed to experience the strength, which in the past had raised him above the whole shop.

Having pushed his spectacles down to the very tip of his nose, Mokhov was bending close to the machine, staring intently at the axle, half afraid that he would catch sight of flaws again. But the surface of the axle was clean and smooth.

Eased in his mind, he turned his head for a moment and glanced to the left. Zaytsev, looking thin and gloomy, was fastening a wheel to his machine, puffing and bending with the strain.

“Mokhov! Help Zaytsev!” shouted Olya, leaning from her cabin.

Mokhov came up obediently.

“Let me lend a hand. Hip! That's the way. You used to do it quite easily alone—see how weak you've got. You should take a couple of weeks more so as to get stronger.”

“No, I'll be all right. I've had all the rest I want. Thought I'd go really mad, you know,” said Zaytsev with animation, thawing because of Olya's and Mokhov's sympathy. “I kept telling the doctor about the drawings, and he'd sit and smile to himself, as much as to say: ‘I know what sort of drawings these lunatics make.’ D'you know, I nearly smashed his face for him. And d'you know how I got around him? That was funny! He came to see me one night and started talking, when suddenly the light went out. He got nervous, it's dangerous being in a room with a lunatic, you know. He tried the lamp and the switch, but no use. I heard him gasping with fright. ‘Shall I crack him one on the head?’ thought I. But I decided not to and so I said to him: ‘You've gone through so many colleges, yet you can't do a simple thing like that.’ I went over to the fuse box and in a few minutes up goes the light. He laughed aloud and he says to me: ‘You're quite normal, I see. A lunatic would have done for me at such a time. Go home, comrade.’ ”

Zaytsev started his machine and sat down exhausted. His eyes

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were full of the joy of physical exertion. He examined all things around him as if it were the first time he had come to the plant. Everything was in its right place, his coat hung on the same nail, and the white neck of a milk bottle peeped out of its pocket.

“I’ve had a bad time, Makarych. I sat in that ward, thinking. I stole a newspaper from the nurse and found they’d excluded me from the trade union. It gave me quite a turn. ‘How’s that?’ thought I. I was fighting for these drawings. For the good of the plant. And the plant goes and kicks me out. My head got so muddled I thought I was really going mad. Couldn’t understand why life should turn out ‘that way.’”

Zaytsev got up in agitation and threw the machine into high gear.

Zaytsev was eagerly examining the familiar faces, and to his astonishment he discovered many, like Mokhov, were looking different. Even Klim Pushkov, whom he remembered as a chronic kicker, seemed strangely different. He was standing at his machine carefully inspecting the gear box. In which category did Pushkov belong, now? And could he himself, who, as he now realized, had thought wrongly about machines—remain in the highest category?

Zaytsev suddenly felt that he was not unique—that there were hundreds of cither workers who thought just as much about machinery. But he was not sad because of this revelation. On the contrary, he was elated at the thought that he was not alone, but surrounded by a living, critical, human collective. He was just learning the laws governing the social machinery. His own sad experience had taught him that an isolated individual falls into disuse just as a bolt that has been severed from its machine.

“That’s because I tried to do it all by myself, thought I’d break the wall with my head, while I should have got the whole shop up in arms and everything would have gone smoothly.”

“Oh, you’ve suffered from too much wisdom,” smiled Mokhov and hurried away to his own machine. The shavings came out in curly bits, which reminded him of Sasha’s hair.

“We’ve dug up fifty poods of steel,” he remembered Sasha saying. And Mokhov imagined those fifty poods being charged into the open hearth furnace, flowing in a fiery stream into the mould, writhing under the hammer, until at last the metal came to his machine in the form of a bluish-coloured axle. Maybe the very axle he was turning was actually Sasha’s driving axle.

Mokhov stroked the cooled steel, caught a hot crisp piece of

shaving from under the cutter and fixed his eyes on it. He thought of how best to take care of that precious steel, collected by Sasha.

Mokhov turned the piece of shaving thoughtfully over in his hands. Zaytsev saw his anxious face, the caressing movements of his hands and smiled. Mokhov did not know that at that moment Zaytsev's third and highest category of people—those who thought about machines—had acquired one more recruit.

The signal roused him from his thoughts, reminding him that he must, in a few minutes, speak at the plant gates and tell the workers something new and unheard of before.

* * * * *

Vartanyan stood on the tribune and watched the stream of workers swirling through the plant gates and surround the tribune in a compact circle.

The wind fanned the crowd and brought with it a sharp smell of oil and burnt coal. The faces that looked up at Vartanyan were black with soot and clay. He knew the people were tired and hungry, that he must be sparing of their time and labour and so he hurriedly began:

“Comrades!”

The familiar voice rent the air and the crowd grew silent.

“It is our important task to build locomotive engines for the Soviet Union. The engine is our heart. And the class enemy has stolen unperceived, quietly and cunningly to that heart, with a knife in his hand. He has struck us a heavy blow. It was his intention to destroy the arteries of the Soviet Union, so that our enormous country should have a smash up like our engine had in the railway accident. He wanted to run the engine of the revolution off the track and reinstate the old, cursed order of things. But he did not succeed. We knocked the knife out of the enemy's hands. And we shall demand the most cruel and merciless measures against those who have deceived the working class, the Party and the entire Soviet Union.”

The crowd swayed, stretched black fists, expressive of strength and hatred, and a wrathful cry rolled in thunderous waves over thousands of heads.

“Shoot the rats!”

“Stand them to the wall!”

“No mercy!”

“Death to the skunks!”

“Comrades!” shouted Vartanyan at the top of his lungs. “We

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have suffered terrible losses. This business has cost us much. But the lesson must not be lost. The enemy attacks us armed with knowledge, science and technology. We must master those weapons immediately. Delay means death! We have made many mistakes, many! But we must learn from them! We shall justify the country's trust. We shall vanquish the enemy! And why? Because there is no force which can break the driving axle of the revolution—the working class and its Party! And why? Because they are forged from the best steel in the world—indestructible bolshevik steel!”

“Death to the betrayers!”

“Shoot them!”

The shouts merged into a general roar which shook the air—thus did the hatred of thousands tear loose. The ring tightened round the tribune—it seemed that thousands of people had grown together into one gigantic body, shaken with wrath, and Vartanyan felt the precarious tribune shaking under him.

Suddenly the circle which surrounded the tribune broke. Sombre, melodious sounds floated over the sea of human heads, over the still plant. The crowd fell apart, forming a wide passage from the factory hospital to the tribune and Zhorov stepped first into the narrow passage, fanned by the hot breath of the crowd.

He walked solemnly along. In his outstretched hands he cautiously held an enormous wreath of dark red dahlias. Zhorov was sober, but his hands shook as if with age. The red petals fell. The sun caught them and they fell to the ground like drops of thick crimson blood.

They carried the “boss” along that trail of blazing petals. Mokhov carried the coffin lightly and without effort as he would have carried some engine part through his shop and his face looked serious and preoccupied. Platov, bent under the weight of the past few days, walked next to him. Behind them, on the left, walked Vasya Trusov, tramping clumsily, finding it difficult to keep in step. Andrushechkin's touselled, bullet-like head swayed next to him on the right.

Olya walked behind the coffin, with old mother Pylayeva, who kept muttering to herself. Sasha Mokhov, with a shining brass trumpet, marched at their side.

The sounds of the band died down. The crowd stood motionless. The thick smoke from the plant floated like a giant winding sheet over their bent heads and showered black powder on the “boss's”

rigid hands.

“Comrades!” Vartanyan’s voice sounded again in an anxious appeal. “In this struggle for our plant, for its socialist future, we have lost the best man in our ranks—old Kuzmich. He witnessed serfdom. He joined the ranks of the proletariat at the dawn of the workers’ movement. He fought, together with his class, for its future. He lost his family, which was stolen from him by the imperialist war. But he bore it all. He was very old when the revolution came but to the end of his days he never abandoned the plant. Kuzmich died like a soldier, faithful to the proletarian army to the very end. He did not see socialism. But he died on the eve of it, when our country is laying the socialist foundation, sacrificing his life to be an indestructible corner stone.

“Comrades! Our plant has gone through a severe illness. It has passed through a crisis. The powerful movement of the masses is beginning to grow and develop. The tremendous strength of the working class becomes apparent in this movement. It will sweep aside the last obstacles in our way. And we shall always remember Kuzmich, as the supremely devoted shock worker of our class. We must live and struggle as that old man did and if necessary, sacrifice our lives without hesitation. Remember that we are on the eve of great battles. The world is at red heat! The time draws near! We are on the way. Our train runs forward unswervingly and will continue to do so! The heroic death of Kuzmich should inspire us to greater efforts.”

“Long live the working class!”

The wind caught their shout—a crackling hurst of applause and the sounds of the *International* rose in a victorious cry of brass instruments over the crowd. Those sounds burst into the hospital ward and broke through its white stillness. Vera opened her eyes and started. It seemed as if the sea surged somewhere nearby, and wave after wave rolled over each other to break against the shore. She fancied herself walking along a stone pier—on which her footsteps echoed.

“Why all this joy? Why? I don’t want to die!” she cried in a voice at once happy and frightened.

Autumn crept in with slow, soft steps. It threw a yellowish, speckled hood over the drooping birches, flushed the foliage of the maple tree and curled the hard leaves of the poplar. It darkened the

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grass in the gardens and the streets were full of the bitter smell of wormwood. It threw the apples down on the dry earth, where they fell with a heavy thud. Dahlias flamed brightly in the gardens burning like wind-fed fires in the golden sunset.

Platov and Olya were walking down the street. The dry sand crunched musically under their feet.

A new telegraph post rose on the crossing. Hundreds of wires streamed away from it, and were gathered up again and clutched in the white fingers of the porcelain insulators.

Platov lifted his eyes to the top and remembered the far away past.

“Olya, I remember you when you were a little girl in a pink dress. You were riding on a truck—a great crowd walking behind you. Do you remember?”

Olya nodded.

“And your face stayed in my memory. It was so childish—so bewildered. It is just the same now.”

“Yes, Senya, there is still much that is bewildering to me. How grim, yet how beautiful this life is!”

Olya laughed like a child, her laughter came in ringing cascades tumbling down the quiet street. The crimson dahlias were also filled with the same happy laughter.

They came out of the town on the forest side. The ground was dug up with ditches, holes and pits, but silence reigned on the site of the future plant.

Platov and Olya sat on a dry hillock and gazed thoughtfully at the upturned earth. A busy bumble-bee droned, suspended over a flower, making it rock with the movement of its wings. A strong smell of wild mushrooms came from the thicket.

“And so, Senya, everything is over.”

“Over? No, I think it still continues. You see those holes, those pits, that silent plot? We shall have to fight much and long before all this springs to life. That is my dream, Olya. We shall build an enormous plant, equipped in the foreign manner. Shall I tell you, Olya, the daring thoughts that come into my head? I shall build that plant. I have the right to! I have earned it. I grew up at the old plant and it’s there I got my first taste of battle. From moulding wheels I rose to moulding our new life. I want to mould my epoch with these hands of mine. I have suffered humiliation and shame a number of times. I fell in the eyes of the workmen and you can’t think how painful that

was to me. But I now feel an unconquerable strength and am ready for any undertaking, no matter how difficult. To hell with the past! We shall build a beautiful plant on those tree stumps, Olya. And everything here will become unrecognizable. A socialist city will rise. And our Mokhov will move into a fine house with large windows.”

“And we also. And we’ll live in a new way, shan’t we?”

“Is that what you’re dreaming of?” laughed Platov. “I’m thinking of different things. Say we equip the new plant to produce engines, but very soon we’ll have to alter it all again.”

“Why?—Wilful damage?”

“You’ve guessed it wrong! Because we shall have no use for engines.”

“Why?” asked the astonished Olya.

“Oh, you technically ignorant young Communist. Because engines are the most uneconomical and glutinous of machines. The maximum efficiency of an engine is ten per cent. D’you get that?”

“And whatever does that mean? Please explain in popular language, comrade engineer, else I shall kick up a row.”

“It means that the engine lets ninety per cent of its power out through its funnel. And only ten per cent is transformed into mechanical power.”

“So nine-tenths are blown into the air? But that’s dreadful, Senya!”

“It is. And our socialist economy cannot be content with that and must do away with this predatory type of machinery. The engine shall slowly die out, Olya, and be replaced by electrically driven motors.”

“And what sort of beasts are they?”

“Beasts that are cheaper and more powerful. Just think—we have begun to build the greatest plants in the world at a distance of thousands of kilometres, in the depths of Siberian forests, and in the mountains of the Urals. We shan’t know old Russia in a few years. Men and freight will be transported in a continual stream over those distances. We are extracting valuable riches, which lie concealed in the ground of our country. We shall lay railway lines through boundless fields, forests and marshes and our electric locomotives shall drive heavy trains at a speed exceeding that of the ‘Pacific.’ It is my aim to outrun the ‘Pacific.’ ”

“Oh! You have great dreams! Engineers mustn’t dream. Catch up indeed! You’d better catch me first.”

And, so saying, Olya raced down the hillock and disappeared in

the bushes.

Platov ran after her, jumping over ditches. A red spot flitted in front of him, playing hide and seek between the rare pines, appearing now to the left, now to the right. Platov raced in the direction of those crimson flashes, and his feet thudded on the ground and on the dropping showers of crackled leaves.

5

Standing there, over the grave of Kuzmich, it was difficult to understand. The intense volume of events flashed by in kaleidoscopic disarray.

Vartanyan gazed thoughtfully at the street, luminous with the evening sun. The sand, washed by the night rain, was a mellow gold, which deepened in the shadow of the pine tree. "Like that girl's lips," thought Vartanyan. Yes, a shadow like that of the silent watchful fir tree lay on her lips. Had he been a painter he would have painted it. The dark green awning of pine needles—the scaly, sinewy trunk, amber-coloured with sap and the shadow on the bright yellow sand. He could call it "Before the Storm."

Symbolism—that was out of date. What was modern art like then? Vartanyan recollected with shame that in all those years since the revolution he had never been to a single exhibition, never seen one modern painting. But the star on the breast of the new engine was also real art. That art was born somewhere, deep down in the human heart and brain, awakened by the creative enthusiasm of the working class. It is here—in the plant. It is still hesitating and humble. But its strength is boundless. It is organically bound up with the labour of thousands at the plant. It makes labour, accursed since ancient times, a thing of joy. It has raised people to the ultimate height of the epoch.

Vartanyan remembered.... He would go to Moscow in a few days, to fight for the construction of the new plant. He would leave the train with a firm step, like a man who had the right to look men in the eyes.

He was writing an article for one of the central papers, telling the whole country in detail, honestly and unsparingly of the lessons of their defeat. He said that the working masses, lifted to the highest level by the struggle for their plant, were about to enter on a new stage of their revolutionary life. They were developing unprecedented forms of labour.

His sentences were full of passionate agitation and prophetic

belief in the future. But suddenly his pen moved spasmodically, staining the paper with ink. Platov and Olya were coming down the sand-carpeted street, their bodies pressed close together. The sun illuminated their smiling faces. They seemed to be walking in a dream. They stopped for a moment.

Vartanyan felt a dark, unclean feeling stir in his heart. Yes, Platov had known how to take what he had not dared to—what had seemed out of place to him....

Olya! Could it be that the vague agitation he had always felt at meeting her had grown into something stronger? Vartanyan felt that the new bond between Platov and Olya was as natural as that which he now saw beyond his window—the sad, soft, autumn imperceptibly shaping itself in the little abandoned garden. Vartanyan took a crumpled sheet of blue paper from his briefcase, tore it across and started to write a new letter to his son.

My darling, beloved Lazo!

I shall, at last, soon hold my little monkey in my arms, for I am coming to Moscow in a few days. We want to build a new plant, as big as Moscow. We are going to make beautiful, swift engines and each of them will have a golden star shining on its breast. You and I shall travel on such a machine, all shining with copper. It will hoot louder than a thousand Pioneer trumpets and rush like the wind. So expect your bad father, Lazo. I am about to leave. My train is all ready to start.

The cool August night hung over the town. The white glow of electric lights rose over the plant, where a little but stubborn group was busy working—the first shock-brigade, named after Kuzmich, formed that day at the sorrowful tribune. Mokhov had given a short promise from the tribune, on behalf of the brigade.

“We promise to see the driving axle through. All the way through, damn it!”

“Yes, the way of the driving axle is difficult!” thought Vartanyan, as he gazed at the twinkling lights of the plant. “We’ve only gone through the first stage. The second stage is still before us, and will it be easier than the one we have gone through?”

He thought of that other tomorrow. Thousands of workers would abandon their machines and scatter along muddy roads and medieval trails, so as to destroy ancient field boundaries, uproot the stubborn

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habit of individual farming and rouse the peasants to a new order of life. By its very impetus the driving axle of industry—class energy—would push the creaking wheels of the rural cart out of its rut.

* * * * *

Midnight tolled from the watch tower. Vartanyan switched on the radio. The black disc was set alive with swarming sounds. Distant cascades of melody chased each other as if rolling down a hill. They were followed by the sombre strokes of the Kremlin clock. The strokes fell sadly, sending plaintive notes out across the ether waves. Ancient Moscow was pealing its dirge.

The bells conjured the country's history, which flashed past his memory in blood-stirring sequences. Pictures shaped themselves.... The rusty chains of the ancient execution block in the Red Square—the fantastic byzantine, old world ornaments of St. Basil's nearby—and then in challenging and triumphant antithesis, the virile and severe architecture of the Lenin Mausoleum. Here the ebb and flow of centuries met. Epochs were beaten in upon the grey cobblestone hieroglyphics of the Red Square—worn smooth by millions of passing feet. The mouldy-green cannon no longer menacing, and the once imperial eagles, century old symbols of awe and wonderment, now covered beside the mausoleum....

The last stroke of the midnight Kremlin clock died away. Triumphant strains of the *Internationale* swelled through the microphone.... Carried by those same spreading waves—the melody sped lightning-like to New York, London, Bombay—to all the world. They burst like bomb shells into private mansions of the rich who hurriedly switched off the menacing tocsin strains. But they overflowed into the working quarters of the world cities, into Berlin, Paris. They sped to the huts of the colonial slaves—stirring them to revolt. A world was heaving with a great unrest. The stern shadows of the Paris Communards rose from the walls of Pere Lachaise and stretched their arms towards their old battle flag, unfurled above the tomb of Lenin.

At that hour, the "Kuzmich Brigade," led by Mokhov, made the round of the plant. Vartanyan stood before the window—his eyes fixed upon the lights of the plant. But his eyes saw only the vision of coming days. Stars, like over-ripe fruit, fell from the deep blue August sky.