

Excerpts from the novel *Ice*, by Jacek Dukaj

Translated from the Polish by Stanley Bill

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On the fourteenth day of July 1924, when the chinovniks from the Ministry of Winter came for me, in the evening of that day, on the eve of the Sibiriade, only then did I begin to suspect that I didn't exist.

Under an eiderdown, under three blankets and an old gabardine overcoat, in fustian long johns and a worsted pullover, in socks pulled up over socks - only my feet protruded from under the eiderdown and the blankets - finally thawed out after more than a dozen hours of sleep, curled up almost into a ball, with my head squeezed under a pillow in a thick pillowslip, so that the sounds reached me already soft, warmed, immersed in wax, like ants mired in resin, pushing their way through, slowly and with great toil, through my slumber and through the pillow, millimetre by millimetre, word by word:

"Gospodin Venedikt Yeroslavsky."

"It's him."

"Asleep?"

"Asleep, Ivan Ivanovich."

A voice and another voice, the first deep and husky, the second deep and melodious. Even before I had lifted the blanket and a single eyelid, I could already see them as they leant over me, the husky one by my head, the melodious one by my feet, my tsarist angels.

"We have woken Master Venedikt," declared Ivan once I had lifted the other eyelid. He nodded at Bernatova; the landlady obediently left the chamber.

Ivan drew up a tabouret for himself and sat down; he held his knees together, and on his knees a narrow-brimmed black bowler hat. A vatermörder collar, white as snow in the noon-tide sun, dazzled my eyes, a white vatermörder and white office cuffs, blinding against the simple black background of their vestiture. I blinked.

"Pray, permit us to be seated, Venedikt Filipovich."

They permitted themselves. The second one perched on the foot of the bed, his weight dragging down on the eiderdown until I had to relinquish it; after grabbing hold of the blankets I raised myself on the pallet, and in doing so uncovered my back, the cold air rushed in under my pullover and long johns, I shivered, awake.

I flung an overcoat over my shoulders and pulled my knees up under my chin.

They looked down at me with amusement.

"How's your health?"

I cleared my throat. The night-time phlegm pooled in my gullet, a caustic acid consisting of all the contents of my stomach, from garlic sausage, gherkins, and whatever else we had ingested the day before, from warm dogwood liqueur and ciga-

rettes, lots of cigarettes. I leaned towards the wall and spat into the crachoir until I was bent over double. And thus bent over I coughed violently for a long moment.

I wiped my mouth on the torn sleeve of my overcoat.

"Like a horse."

"Very good, very good. We were afraid that you wouldn't get out of bed."

I got up. My pocket book was lying on the window sill, squashed behind a flower pot with a dead geranium in it. I took out my bumaga and shoved it under Ivan's nose.

He didn't even look at it.

"My dear Master Yeroslavsky! Do you take us for beat constables?" He held himself up even straighter upon the stool. I had thought it impossible, but he held himself up even straighter, and now the walls seemed crooked, the cabinet like a hunchback, and the door frame scoliotic. Offended, the chinovnik raised his chin and puffed out his chest. "Sir is very kindly invited to Miodowa Street for tea and sweets. The commissioner always keeps himself supplied with sorbets, cupcakes, and cream cakes, straight from Semadeny, real debauchery for the palate, if I may say so - may I not, Kiril?"

"Indeed you may, Ivan Ivanovich, by all means," sang out Kiril.

Ivan Ivanovich had bushy moustaches, heavily pomaded and curled up at the tips; Kiril, on the other hand, was shaved silky smooth. Ivan took out a ticker on a tangled chain from the pocket of his waist-coat, announced that it was five to five, that Commissioner Preiss esteemed punctuality very highly - and when was he going out for supper? They had made arrangements with the Major-General at the Hôtel Français.

Kiril offered Ivan some snuff, Ivan offered Kiril a cigarette, they both scrutinised me as I got dressed. I splashed some icy water into the basin. The stove tiles were cold. I turned up the wick in the lamp. The room's only window opened out onto a cramped courtyard, but the panes were so thickly covered with grime and hoarfrost that even at noontide only a little sunlight seeped through them. When I was shaving - when I was still shaving - I had had to set the lamp in front of the looking glass, turned up to its full flame. Zyga had parted with his razor immediately after his arrival in Warsaw; he had cultivated a beard worthy of an Orthodox priest. I peered over at his pallet on the other side of the stove. On Mondays he had lectures, he must have risen at dawn. On Zygmunt's bed lay the black fur-lined shubas of the chinovniks, along with their gloves, a cane, and a muffler. The table was stacked high with dirty dishes, flasks (empty), books, magazines, and copybooks; Zyga was drying out his socks and undergarments, which were hanging over the rim of the table-top, held in place by anatomical atlases and Latin dictionaries. And in the middle of the table, on top of a well-thumbed, greasy edition of Riemann's *Über die Hypothesen welche der Geometrie zu Grunde liegen*, and on a pile of yellowed "Warsaw Couriers" kept for kindling, for patching up cracks expanded by the frost, and for thawing out shoes, as well as for wrapping butterschnitts, a double row of candles and candle-stubs rose up like the ruins of a stearic Parthenon. By the wall opposite the stove hardbound tomes were piled up in even stacks arranged according to size and girth, and according to how frequently they were read. Hanging over them on the soot-covered wall was a gorget with Our Lady of Ostrobrama upon it

- the only trace of the previous tenants, whom Bernatova had turned out onto the street for "indecent conduct" - which was entirely blackened and now looked more like a piece of medieval armour for Lilliputians. Ivan peered at it for a long time, with great concentration, stiffly planted upon the stool, his left hand with the cigarette cocked aside at an angle of forty-five degrees to his body and his right hand placed upon his thigh beside the bowler hat, wrinkling up his nose and brow, bristling his moustaches. It was then I realised that he was almost blind, an office myope, as he bore the marks of a pince-nez on his nose and under his eye sockets, and that without his pince-nez he was forced to rely upon Kiril. They had come straight in from the frost and Ivan must have had to remove his spectacles. I myself sometimes find my eyes watering in here. The air inside the apartment house is thick, heavy, and laden with all the odours of human and animal bodies; nobody opens the windows, the doors are opened and slammed shut again forthwith and the crevices under the doorstep are stopped up with rags lest the warmth escape from the building - after all, payment must be tendered for fuel and anyone with enough money for coal would on no account coop himself up in a dark annexe like this one, where the air is thick and heavy, and you breathe it as if you were drinking water spat out by your neighbour and his dog, each breath of yours having passed a million times through the consumptive lungs of peasants, Jews, carters, butchers, and whores; coughed up from blackened larynxes it comes back to you again and again, percolated through their spittle and slime, filtered through fungus-infected, lice-ridden, and festering bodies; they have coughed it up, blown it through their noses,

and spewed it out straight into your mouth, and you have to gulp it down, you have to breathe, breathe!

"Ex-Excuse me."

Fortunately the privy at the end of the corridor was not occupied at that moment. I vomited into the hole, from which an icy stench wafted up into my face. Cockroaches skittered out from under the shit-smeared board. I squashed them with my thumb when they came up under my chin.

After coming back into the corridor I saw Kiril standing on the threshold - he was keeping an eye on me, he was on his guard, in case I might flee from them out into the frost in my long johns and pullover. I smiled knowingly. He offered me his handkerchief and pointed to my left cheek. I wiped. When I wished to return it he moved back a step. I smiled for a second time. I have a wide mouth, it smiles very easily.

I donned my only outdoor attire, the black suit in which I had taken my final exams; if it weren't for the layer of undergarments beneath, it would hang off me as if from a skeleton. The functionaries watched as I laced up my shoes, as I buttoned up my waistcoat, as I struggled with the stiff celluloid collar tacked on to my last cotton shirt. I took up my documents and the rest of my ready money, three rubles and forty-two kopeks - as a bribe it would barely even be symbolic, but with empty pockets a man feels naked in an office. There was nothing to be done about my old sheepskin - patches, stains, crooked seams - I had no other. They watched in silence as I squeezed my arms into its unsymmetrical sleeves, the left one longer than the right. I smiled apologetically. Kiril licked his pencil and meticulously noted something down on his cuff.

We went out. Bernatova must have been peeping through the half-open door - she immediately appeared alongside the chinovniks, flushed in the face and jabbering away, to escort them back down the stairs from the second floor and through both the courtyard-wells to the main entrance, where the door-keeper Walenty, after straightening his brass-badged cap and putting his pipe into his pocket, hurriedly swept the snow off the sidewalk and helped the chinovniks into the sleigh, gripping the two gentlemen under the elbows lest they slip on the iced-up trottoir, while Bernatova, once they were already seated and wrapping their legs in rugs, showered them with streams of complaints against malicious tenants, against bands of thieves from Powiśle who broke into homes in broad daylight, as well as against the cruel frosts, owing to which the damp windows warped from the inside, and the pipes burst in the walls, and neither plumbing nor sewerage pipes lasted long in the ground; finally, she fervently assured them that she had long suspected me of various misdemeanours and iniquities, and that she most assuredly would have informed the appropriate vlast if not for the thousand and one other cares piled up on her mind - until the sleigh-driver cracked his whip from his seat behind Kiril's back and the horses jerked the sleigh off to the left, forcing the woman to step aside, and so we set off down the road to the Warsaw department of the Ministry of Winter, to the former Palace of the Cracovian Bishops, 5 Miodowa Street, on the corner of Senatorska.

Before we turned from Koszykowa Street into Marszałkowska it began to snow lightly; I pulled my shapka down over my ears. In their voluminous furs and bowler hats like nutshells, seated on the low benches of the sleigh, Ivan beside me, Kiril

with his back to the izvozchik, the functionaries reminded me of the beetles which I had seen in Zygmunt's text-book: fat, oval-shaped torsos, short legs, small head, all glossy black, closed up in the geometrical symmetry of ellipses and circles. A shape so close to a perfect sphere cuts itself out from the world. They looked straight ahead with a passionless gaze, with lips pressed tightly together and their chins lifted high through stiff collars, limply surrendering to the movement of the sleigh. I had thought that I might learn something from them on the way. I had thought that they would start to demand a contribution for their good will, for their lack of haste and urgency. They were silent. I would ask them - how? what for? They would pretend not to hear. Flakes of sticky snow swirled between us. I tucked my cold hands into the sleeves of my sheepskin.

The lights were burning in the French pastry shop, the electric glow shining through the great windows fringed the silhouettes of the passers-by with woolly halos. The summer sun ought still to have been far aloft in the sky, but as usual heavy clouds hung over the city; the street lamps - very high up with spiral tops - had even been lit. We turned to the north. At the crossway with Piękna Street some little girls in red cloaks and white capes with hoods were running out of the Ostrowski pastry shop, their laughter burst through for a moment above the din of the street. I was reminded of the unfinished letter to Miss Julia and her final scream-question. Next door to Ostrowski's, at Wedel's, we had been used to meet Fredk and Kiwajs for card nights. Right here, behind the "Sokół" cinema, at Kalka's, the Kind Prince had rented a room for night-time sessions. If I had lifted my head and looked to the

left, over Ivan's bowler hat, I would have seen the window on the second floor of the apartment building at number 71, the window which Fredek fell out of.

At the crossing with Nowogrodzka a fat cow hung frozen to a lamp post, a sinew of dark ice joining it to the top of the frontispiece of a four-storey building. The cow must have come from the last cattle round-up to the slaughter-house in Ochota, the winterers hadn't hacked her down yet. All the way down the street, over the roof of the "Sphinx" apartment building, loomed a blue-black nest of ice, a great clot of permafrost as hard as diamond, connected by a network of icy threads, icicles, spans, and columns with the apartment buildings on either side of Marszałkowska and Złota Street - with apartment buildings, lamps, stumps of frozen trees, balcony balustrades, bay windows, spires of turrets and cupolas, attics, and chimneys. The "Sphinx" picture theatre had clearly been closed for a long time; the lights were not burning on the top floors.

The sleigh slowed down as we passed Nowogrodzka. The sleigh-driver pointed at something with his whip. The wagon in front of us pulled over onto the trottoir. Kiril looked around behind him. I leant out to the right. At the crossway with Jerusalem Avenue stood two policemen driving the traffic from the middle of the roadway with the aid of whistles and shouts - above the roadway, just freezing across, was a frosten.

For several minutes we were held up in the traffic jam it had caused. Usually the frostens move about over the rooftops, in the cities they rarely descend to the ground. Even from such a distance it seemed to me that I felt the waves of cold flowing off it. I shivered and instinctively thrust my chin

into the collar of my sheepskin. The chinovniks from the Ministry of Winter exchanged glances. Ivan peeped at his watch. On the other side of the street, near a bill-post coated in posters advertising a grappling match in the circus at Okólnik, a man dressed in the English style was setting up an archaic photographic apparatus in order to take pictures of the frosten; of course, the pictures were not likely to appear in the newspaper, they would be confiscated by the people from Miodowa Street. Ivan and Kiril did not even notice him.

The frosten was exceptionally fast-moving, by nightfall it should have had time to cross over to the other side of Marszałkowska Street, it would rest on the rooftops through the night, and by Friday it would have reached the nest over the picture theatre. Last year when the frostnik was crossing the Aleksandryjski Bridge from Praga to the Castle the bridge was closed for nearly two months. Meanwhile this glaciante here - wait a quarter of an hour or so and probably I would be able to perceive its movement, as it froze from place to place, as it shifted in the ice, as ice, from ice to ice, as it shattered first one and then another crystal thread behind it and slowly strewed a blue-white detritus, one minute, kshtrr, two minutes, kshtrr, the wind blowing away the lighter particles together with the snow, but the majority freezing into a black sheet of coagulated street mud behind the frosten, the ice of ice; and this track of rough permafrost, like a trail of snail's slime, stretched out for dozens of metres to the east of Jerusalem Avenue, and over the trottoir, and over the frontispiece of the hotel. The rest of it had already been hammered by the winterers or it had thawed out by itself; yesterday afternoon the thermometer at Schnitzer's had shown five

degrees above zero.

The frosten was not moving along a straight line, nor did it maintain a constant height above the cobblestones (they also freeze below the earth's surface). Three or four hours earlier, estimating from the crumbled architecture of the ice, the frosten had embarked upon a change in trajectory: before then it had been shifting along at barely a metre above the middle of the street, but then, three hours ago, it had moved in a steep upward parabola, up over the tops of the lamps and the crests of the frozen trees. I saw the row of slender stalagmites it had left, they glittered in the reflected glow of the street lamps, in the reflections of the coloured neon lights, the lights shining through the windows and shop displays. The row broke off over the tram tracks - the frosten had suspended its whole weight on a radial network of frost-strings, stretched out horizontally and reaching upward towards the façades of the corner buildings. It would have been possible to enter under it if anyone had been crazy enough.

Ivan nodded at Kiril and the latter clambered out of the sleigh with a reluctant grimace on his face, chapped red from the biting cold. Perhaps I'm in luck, I thought, perhaps we'll be late, Commissioner Preiss will already have left for his supper with the Major-General, and they'll turn me away from Miodowa Street. Thank you God for that icicle-monstrosity. I shifted on the bench, leaning my flank against the side of the sleigh. A paper-boy ran up - "Hirohito Defeated!", "Special Express, Mierzow Triumphant!" - I shook my head. In the traffic jams in the centre of the city crowds form immediately, street hawkers appear, vendors of cigarettes, holy water, and holy flame. Policemen were chasing passers-by away from the

frosten, but in the end they couldn't keep an eye on everyone. A band of urchins had stolen up from the direction of the Briesemeister restaurant. The bravest of them, with this face wrapped in a scarf and in thick, shapeless gloves, ran up to within a dozen steps or so of the frosten and hurled a cat into it. The tom-cat flew in a high arc, paws outstretched, bawling as loud as it could... suddenly the fearful shriek broke off. It had probably fallen onto the frosten already dead, only to tumble slowly down from it into the snow, frozen to the bone: an ice sculpture of a cat with splayed limbs and a tail stiffened out into wire. The boys ran off, howling with amusement. A side-locked Jew shook his fists at them from the doorway of Epstein's jewellery shop, cursing sulphureously in Yiddish.

Meanwhile, Kiril had caught up with the older policeman, seizing him by the elbow so that he could not make off in pursuit of the guttersnipes, and began to persuade him of something in a hushed voice, though with considerable help from the expansive gestures of his other hand. The constable turned his head away, shrugged his shoulders and scratched the crown of his head. The younger of the constabular couple was yelling at this comrade to get a move on, help! On the Avenue a pair of sleighs had got their runners locked together, causing even more of an uproar, wagons rode up on the sidewalks, pedestrians, cursing in Polish, Russian, German and Yiddish, fled from under wheels and hooves, in front of a wine storehouse a matron the size of a Danzig wardrobe slipped over in the frozen mud, three gentlemen endeavoured to pick her up, a pot-bellied officer rushed to their aid, and thus they hoisted her up with four-fold force, once - she fell - twice - she

fell - thrice - already half the street was bursting with laughter, and the old dame, as red as a cherry, screeched fearfully, dangling her podgy legs in her dainty slippers... It was no strange thing that only at the sound of torn metal and the crack of splintering wood did we look hindward to the crossway. An automobile had crashed into a coalman's wagon; one horse had fallen over, one wheel had come off. The policeman pushed Kiril aside and hurled himself towards the crash. An automobilist trapped inside the covered machine began to press the claxon; in addition something went off under the bonnet of the motor car, as if fired from a shot-gun. This was all too much for the grey harnessed to the sleigh beside it. Frightened, it lurched forward, straight towards the frozen. The sleigh-driver grabbed hold of the reins, but the horse itself must have felt what a wall of frost it had rushed into - even more energetically it kicked over the traces, twisting the sleigh around on the spot. Did the runners get caught on the kerb? Did the grey slip on the black sheet of ice? I was already standing in the ministry sleigh, together with Ivan, staring at the accident over the rank of vehicles in front of us, but it all happened too quickly, too unexpectedly, too much motion and screaming, too many lights and shadows. The grey fell over, the sleigh behind him overturned, the cargo fell off it, a dozen flagons in baskets with sawdust, the baskets and flagons rolled down the middle of the street, some of them must have smashed, for a glowing celadon-coloured liquid spilt out over the ice - paraffin, I thought - and at once it exploded into flame - from what? - from an electrical spark from the automobile, a discarded cigarette, a shod hoof striking against the cobblestones, I don't know. A pale blue flame

leapt across the whole breadth of the puddle, high, ever higher, up to a metre, a metre and a half into the air - almost reaching the aerial network of the frozen frosten.

The photographer, hunched over his apparatus, slowly, methodically burned in picture after picture. And what would he later behold in them, what would be preserved on the glass and imprinted on the paper: snow - snow - the pale haloes of the street lamps - dark mud, dark cobblestones, a dark sky - the grey façades of apartment buildings in a vista over the wide ravine of the city - in the foreground a chaos of angular shapes, vehicles blocked up in the traffic jam - betwixt the human silhouettes the glow of pure flame blazing, so bright that in this spot the plate seems to be completely unexposed - and above him, above the flame of white whiter than white, in the heart of the hanging arabesque of ice, the frosten stretched out, the frosten, a massive bolt of freeze, a starfish of hoarfrost, a living bonfire of cold, the frosten, the frosten, the frosten above the fur toques of the damsels below, the frosten above the caps and bowlers of the men, the frosten above the heads of the horses and the tops of the carriages, the frosten above the neon lights of the coffee-shops and salons, the shops and hotels, the cake-shops and fruiteries, the frosten over Marszałkowska Street and Jerusalem Avenue, the frosten over Warsaw, the frosten over the Russian Empire.

Later as we rode along Królewska Street to the Saxon Garden, beside the dead garden under its perennial permafrost and the colonnade hung with icicles, beside the tower and the Orthodox church covered over with snowy brows on Saxon Square, towards Krakowskie Przedmieście, that image - the after-image of an

image and an imagining - haunted me again and again, a persistent recollection of unclear significance, a vision beheld but misunderstood.

The functionaries exchanged gruff remarks in an undertone, the sleigh-driver shouted at careless pedestrians; the blizzard was abating, but it was getting colder, my breath was freezing upon my lips into a white cloud suspended in front of my face, the sweaty horses were moving in a haze of sticky moisture - the Royal Castle was ever closer. Before the turn into Miodowa Street I saw it over the Zygmunt column: the Castle enclosed in a lump of shadowy ice - and the great nest of the frost above it. The black-violet clottery spanned half the roofs of the Old Town. On fine days one can see waves of frost standing in the air all around the Great Tower. There is no scale on a thermometer to measure this kind of cold. By the bonfires on the boundary of the Castle Square gendarmes keep watch. When the frost freezes out of its nest, they block off the streets. The governor-general had set up a cordon of dragoons here from the Fourteenth Little Russian Regiment, but in the meantime the regiment had been dispatched to the Japanese front.

The roof of the Palace of the Cracovian Bishops had somehow remained free of the icy accretion. Elegant shops were still located in the annexe on the Senatorska Street side - electric floodlights illuminated the advertising boards of Nikolai Shelekhov's Exclusive Delicatessen and the teas of Sergei Vasilovich Perlov's Moscow Department Store - but the main wing on Miodowa, under a rococo finial and in pilasters with Corinthian capitals, belonged to the Ministry of Winter. Under both portes cochères hung black, double-headed eagles beneath the

crowns of the Romanovs, encrusted with an onyx-finish tungetite.

We drove into an internal courtyard, the runners of the sleigh screeched on the cobblestones. The functionaries got out first, Ivan at once disappeared through the door, placing his pince-nez upon his nose; Kiril stood on the steps, before the threshold, and looked round at me. I opened my mouth. He raised his eyebrows. I lowered my gaze. We went in.

The apparitor took my sheepskin and shapka, and the porter pushed towards me the great register in which I had to enter my name in two places, the pen dropped out of my numbed fingers - might one sign for the honourable sir? - no, I, I'll do it myself. The illiterate hoi polloi also visit the corridors of the executive of Winter.

Everything here sparkled with cleanliness: the marbles, the parquetry, the glass and crystal and the colourful coldiron. Kiril led me via the main staircase, past two secretariats. On the walls, beneath portraits of Nicholas II and Piotr Rappacki, hung sunlit landscapes of the steppe and the forest, spring-time St. Petersburg and Moscow in the summer, from the times when spring and summer still visited them. The personnel did not lift their heads up from their desks, but I saw as the councillors, officials, clerks, and scribes furtively followed me with their eyes, and then exchanged disapproving glances among themselves. When do office hours end? The Ministry of Winter never sleeps.

Commissioner Extraordinary Preiss W. W. occupied a spacious cabinet with an antique stove and an inoperative fireplace, high windows looked out onto Miodowa and the Castle Square. When I entered, crossing over the threshold with Ivan, who had

clearly already announced me, the commissioner was bustling about by the samovar with his back turned. He himself had the figure of a samovar, a bulging, pear-shaped body, and a small, bald head. He moved about with frenetic energy, his hands fluttering over the table, his feet in an unceasing dance, a mince to the left, a mince to the right - I was certain that he was humming under his breath, that he was smiling to himself, from a ruddy face two merry little eyes looked out at the world, no frown wrinkled the forehead of the Commissioner of Winter. In the meantime, as he had not turned round, I stood by the door with my hands placed behind my back and allowed the warm air to fill my lungs, wash over my skin, and melt the coagulated blood in my veins. In the cabinet it was almost hot, the great, colourfully painted majolica stove did not cool down even for a moment, the window panes were so steamed over that through them I saw mainly the fuzzy rainbows of the street lights, pouring through and spilling out over the glass. It is a question of great political weight that the cold never hold sway in the Ministry of Winter.

"And wherefore do you not sit down, Vendikt Filipovich? Pray be seated, be seated."

Ruddy face, merry little eyes.

I sat down.

Sighing audibly, he settled down on his side of the bureau, clasping in his hands a cup of steaming chai. (He did not offer any to me). He had not held office here for very long, the bureau was not his, behind it he looked like a child playing at ministers, he would certainly change the furniture. They must have just sent him, they had sent him, the tsar's commissioner extraordinary - whence? from Petersburg, from Moscow,

from Yekaterinburg, from Sibiria?

I took a deeper breath.

"Your Blagorodyeh will permit...Am I under arrest?"

"Under arrest? Under arrest? How on earth might such an idea have entered your head?"

"Your Blagorodyeh's functionaries."

"My functionaries!"

"If I had received a summons, certainly I would of my own accord..."

"Did they not invite you courteously, Mr. Gierosławski?" He finally pronounced my name correctly.

"I presumed..."

"Bozhe moi! Under arrest!"

He was out of breath.

I clasped my hands on my lap. It was worse than I had thought. They weren't throwing me in the tiurma. The high officer of the tsar wanted to talk with me.

He began to take some papers out of the bureau. He took out a fat wad of rubles. He took out a stamp. The sweat was streaming all over me beneath my undergarments.

"Yeesss," Preiss loudly slurped his tea. "Please accept my condolences."

"Excuse me?"

"Last year your mother died on you, did she not?"

"Yes, in April."

"You were left alone. That's unfortunate. A man without a family is like... well, he's alone. That's too bad, dear me, too bad." He turned over a leaf, slurped, and turned over the next one.

"I have a brother," I murmured.

"Yes, yes, a brother on the other side of the world. Now where did he head off to again, to Brazil?"

"Peru."

"Peru! What is he doing there?"

"He's building churches."

"Churches! He writes often I'm sure."

"Well, more often than I do."

"That's nice. He misses you."

"Sure."

"And do you not miss...?"

"Him?"

"Your family. When did you last hear from your father?" One leaf, another leaf, slurping.

Father. I knew it. What else could it be about?

"We don't correspond, if that's what you mean."

"That's awful, awful. It doesn't interest you whether he is even alive?"

"Is he alive?"

"Ah! Is Filip Filipovich Gierosławski alive? Is he alive?" He went so far as to leap up from his operatic bureau. Against the wall stood a large globe on a flimsy stand made of cold-iron, on the wall hung a map of Asia and Europe; he span the globe and slapped the back of his hand into the map.

When he looked back at me not the smallest trace of his previous merriment remained, his black eyes stared at me with clinical attention.

"Is he alive..." he whispered.

He picked up some yellowed papers from the bureau.

"Filip Gierosławski, son of Filip, born in the year 1878 in Wilkówiec, in the Kingdom of Prussia, in East Prussia, powiat

of Lidzbark, Russian subject from the year 1905, husband to Eulagia, father of Bolesław, Benedykt and Emilia, sentenced to death in the year 1907 for taking part in a conspiracy against the life of His Imperial Vyelichestvo, as well as armed rebellion; nu, by way of a pardon the sentence was commuted to fifteen years of penal servitude with deprivation of nobility rights and sequestration of property. In the year 1917 the rest of the sentence was remitted, imposing a prikaz for life within the borders of the Amursk and Irkutsk General Governorship. He hasn't written? Never?"

"To mother. Perhaps. At first."

"And now? Recently? Since '17. Not at all?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"You surely know very well yourself when and to whom he writes."

"Do not be cheeky, young man!"

I smiled weakly.

"Excuse me."

He scrutinised me for a long moment. On a finger of his left hand he had a ring with some kind of dark stone set in a bezel of precious tungetite, with the engraved emblem of Winter on it; he tapped the ring on the top of the bureau, tic, tic-c, the even taps were harder.

"You graduated from the Imperatorski Universitet. What are you doing now?"

"I was preparing for the rigorosum."

"How do you make a living?"

"I give private lessons in mathematics."

"And you earn a lot from these lessons?"

Since I had already smiled, all I could do was drop my gaze

down to my clasped hands.

"A lot, a little."

"You're a frequent visitor at the moneylender, all the Jews on Nalewki street know you. You owe three hundred rubles to Abiezer Blumstein alone. Three hundred rubles! Is that true?"

"If Your Blagorodyeh will just tell me in what matter I am to be questioned, it will be easier for me to confess."

Tic, tic-c, tic, tic-c.

"And perhaps you really have committed some kind of crime, for you to be here all sweating with fear, eh?"

"Your Blagorodyeh deigns to open the window."

He stood over me; he didn't even have to stoop especially in order to speak straight into my ear, at first a whisper, then a droning soldierly tone, and in the end well-nigh on a scream.

"You, my dear Benedikt, are a gambler, a compulsive card player. Whatever you win, you lose - whatever you earn, you lose - whatever you borrow, you lose - whatever you scrounge from your friends, you lose - you no longer have any friends - you no longer have anything, and you even lose that, you lose everything. Blackjack, baccarat, Old Man Winter, poker, it makes no difference. Once you won half a sawmill - you lost it in the same night. You have to lose, you are not capable of getting up from the table until you have lost so completely that nobody wants to play with you any more. Nobody wants to play with you any more, Venedikt Filipovich. Nobody wants to lend you money any more. You've pawned everything for two years in advance. Bolesław doesn't write to you, so you write to him, you beg for money, but he hasn't been sending it any more. You don't write to your father, because your father

hasn't any money. You wanted to get married, but your father-in-law-to-be set the dogs on you when you gambled and lost your fiancée's dowry. At least you could blow your brains out, as might befit a nobleman, but you don't blow your brains out, phth, and that's the kind of nobleman you are, you scum!

I was smiling apologetically.

Commissioner Preiss paused for a breath, then he amicably slapped me on the back.

"Come now, don't be afraid, we are acquainted with scum too. Never mind that your own father means as much to you as the Japanese emperor's gout - but then one thousand rubles does mean something to you! Does it not? A thousand rubles means as much to you as... well, it means a lot to you. We'll give you a thousand, and then perhaps another thousand if you do your part. You will go to visit your father."

Here he fell silent, apparently awaiting my response. As he did not receive one, he soon went back behind the bureau to his steaming tea (it had cooled somewhat, so he now slurped longer and louder), to his papers and his stamps. With a massive pen he placed his signature on a document, thumped it with one stamp, then with another; satisfied, he rubbed his hands together and lounged back on his leather-upholstered armchair.

"Here's a passport and a napravlenie to our office in Irkutsk, they will attend to you there. They have already purchased a ticket for you, you are leaving for Moscow tomorrow, otherwise you won't make it for the Siberian Express - today is the first of July, the ticket is for the fifth, departure at ten in the evening from Yaroslavsky Station, you'll be in Irkutsk on the eleventh, there they'll stick you on the Cold

Line for Kezhma. Here's the thousand, sign the receipt. Buy yourself some clothes, wherefore to look like a human being! And if it has entered your head to take the money and lose it all - well, go ahead, lose it, just as long as you make it to Baikal. Go on, sign!

A thousand rubles. What was it that they wanted me to do there? Extract from my father the names which he hadn't betrayed at the trial? Only why was the Ministry of Winter applying to me about this and not Interior Affairs?

"I'll go," I said. "I'll visit my father. And what? Is that all?"

"You will talk with him."

"I will talk."

"And when you talk, well, things will come along nicely."

"I don't understand what Your Blagorodyeh..."

"He has not been sending any letters, that obviously has not surprised you." Commissioner Preiss opened a folder bound in cloth and tortoise-shell. "Irkutsk informs us... He was a geologist, am I correct?"

"Excuse me?"

"Filip Filipovich studied geology. He didn't cease to be interested in it in Siberia either. I am informed here... From the beginning he was very close, they took his detail on the second or third expedition, which went there in the spring of 1910. Most of them died from the frostbite. Or they froze on the spot. He survived. Then he came back. To them. I don't believe it, but this what they write here. They have given the order, they have given the money, so I am sending them the man. Your father talks with frostens."

* * *

"All men are monsters. You will judge whether I'm lying, Mister Benedykt. I was always sickly, especially after the eighth year of my life, the next five or six years - that was the hardest time, I don't know myself how many times the doctors foretold that my passing away was nigh, not telling me anything of course, they just smiled, stroked my head and assured me that everything would be alright; but I always managed either to eavesdrop, or to drag it out of a servant, or to figure it out from my aunt's countenance and mood - something bad was happening. The worst thing was that it was never one terminal illness, but dozens of smaller infections and lingering ailments, following one after another, overlapping and provoking one another: illness was a permanent state, not a particular illness, but being ill, a kind of internal *dia-thesis*, for by the time I succeeded in coming out of one feverish delirium, two new maladies had already managed to creep into my system, and so on without end. One might say that my main illness was the extreme susceptibility to any sickness whatsoever, in other words a kind of inborn infirmity of body, but how to assess this, since I had been ill for as long as I could remember - perhaps everything had been decided by the first ailment, the stone which had prompted the avalanche? In any case, I seldom raised myself out of bed.

"...Now, Mister Benedykt, try to enter into the world of a child who has been bed-ridden for years. By strength of circumstance the border between truth and fiction is shifted a long way. Signals reach the child from the world - scraps,

echoes, traces left upon people by the world, like the traces left by a murderer upon the props of his crime - but the child does not experience the world directly. So what does she do? She builds a world as idea. Not a city, but the idea of a city. Not fun in the snow, but the idea of fun. Not a friend, but the idea of a friend. Not a love affair, but the idea of a love affair. Not life, but the idea of life. The thought arises that reconstruction is possible, that ultimately all of these traces have to fit together: the murderer exists, the crime took place. Experience is no longer necessary: it will always be random, fragmentary. Whereas the idea is complete. And it seems to me that you, Mister Benedykt, as a mathematician - am I mistaken? - that you know this feeling, that this ordinary disposition of the mind is not foreign to you.

"...There are apparently certain categories of insanity, a rancour of the soul, which leave people entirely detached from experience, cut off from sense impressions. It is said: they live in their own world. In Professor Zylberg's clinic I saw catatonics. The perceivable world is of no use to them, the idea has triumphed. Probably it turned out to be more real in the end. Is that what you had in mind? If we lose the measure of truth - what decides? Anything.

"...It was a fever, very fatiguing, the kind from which all your muscles ache and after the night-time sweats you only fall asleep in the cool morning, in a body by then light and softened up; these are the rare pleasures of a long illness, which you have probably never had the chance to experience, never had the chance to savour. But for me - bliss. Nevertheless this is accompanied by a strange clarity of the senses; after such a night you see things more clearly, with great

acuity, you see, you hear, you sense, both touch and smells, everything reaches you with great strength - all the stronger the weaker the person is, the more the fever has exhausted her. Of course then the weakest of all is the mind. (...)

"...So the dawn is coming, your head is clearing up, the curtains are fluttering - and behold, the fluff beneath your fingers is fluffier, the light in your eyes is brighter, it almost dazzles you, the air is fresh, even if it isn't fresh, and the people are new, even when they're the same. The doctor comes in. The doctor is well over fifty years old, with a thick beard, a balloonish paunch, fingers like frankfurters, he reeks of pipe tobacco and ammonia; clasping me by the wrist (and the doctor's skin is elephant-like, coarse), he mumbles something under his breath, the sounds are strange and wheezy. So by now I'm looking with wide eyes, suspiciously, and on him - I see - bunches of grey hair are growing out of his nose, little black bushes from his ears, under his beard like a hedgehog pincushion some kind of strange organ is moving about, and as the doctor glowers through the glass of his pince-nez a shiver passes through me from the watery glance of his enormous beady eyes, and now out of intuition a certainty arises in my clean, clear mind: but this is not a being of my species, it is something else - some kind of monster, an animal, not a human. From out of his gob comes a low gurgling: 'Ho-ow are we fee-ee-ling?' In fright I barely whisper an answer. That I'm fine.

"...You think that in the end I had a good sleep and it all passed? But with this the whole thing is that it would be better if it were not to pass! For who brought me every day the traces of life beyond my illness, from whom did I read the re-

ality which lay outside my bedroom, who gave me the circumstantial evidence for an idea of the world? Aunt Urszula. Mother. Julka and old Guścowa. And sometimes Mrs. Feschik, who came to read me fairy tales, because that was the greatest pleasure in her life: reading fairy tales to sick children. Do you see? Women. The doctor came when something in my condition had changed, when it had got worse, so only after a difficult night like this. And then I saw what I saw, what I had to see. How long did it take before the idea established itself for good? The rule was irrefutable. There is me, me and other women; and there are them, like the doctor, those strange, inhuman creatures.

"...In the memory there is no difference between the world and the idea of the world. If you imagine that you eat a locust - have you heard that there are peoples who live on them? - but you imagine properly, to the point of sense impressions, then after a certain time you will not differentiate the memory of the taste of a locust from the memory of the taste of bread: they taste differently, but with equal reality. And so I remember very well that I was living in a world where men were males from another species of beings. What had happened to the other half of human kind? The men had probably killed them off, so as to take their place. It was a hoax on a historical scale. They hid this from us, camouflaged, pretended, played roles, albeit imperfectly, unskilfully, sloppily, because they do everything clumsily and sloppily, that is their inhuman, masculinesque nature. You don't need much to see through them. For instance, how they behave in a bunch of their own kind, when they think that none of us are around. At once their voices change, get deeper, words lose meaning, the

men shift into their own language, some kind of bestial dialect of inarticulate splutterings, growlings, rumblings and guffaws; from human language they have found a use only for vulgarisms. They descend from scavengers, they eat like scavengers, I would see rats as they bit into red meat, stuffing the grub into their mugs, until they went all purple from the effort and their eyes were popping out, greasy sweat pouring out over their skin, but with their jaws working indefatigably, only faster, only more, and the noises they were making at the same time, the snorting, and the stench of their masculinesque bodily secretions...! Or that rapacious love of blood and battle - so that no matter how hard they try to control themselves, it's enough to show them some kind of bloodshed, even a street scuffle, let one smash the nose of another: already their eyes light up, already their nostrils twitch - they've sniffed it out! - and at once they close in with tensed muscles. In the evenings, after dusk and late at night, masculinesque rituals take place in their caves, they cultivate real customs of pain, sweat and violence; sometimes they return to their homes, to us, without having wiped off all the traces. In secret they worship inhuman gods with hideous effigies. For they have arranged everything such that we might not have access to the places of their meetings. Whole chambers and buildings remain forbidden to us, only men may enter there; neighbourhoods, and perhaps cities too, perhaps on Earth there are these not-for-women cities - erased from the maps by men-cartographers - subterranean metropolises, where they live in their natural state, free from the theatre of human culture, naked, covered with rough stubble not only on the cheeks and chin, but over the whole body, they live in mud, in

darkness and in the dark glow of red flame, in hot smoke, pummelling one another and biting blindly in thousand-strong herds, rolling about in the urine and blood of the victims, and whoever takes the most wounds and is the most disfigured, he is made the idol of the horde and exalted above other men, that they might admire the image of a god, with guffaws, with vulgar shouts, with spitting and farting, free. And when they hunt down a lone woman, a wild battle takes place for the privilege of consumption. And when they must return among women for longer they pine away and bemoan their exile and groan through sleep and take revenge on us as they can, that it has fallen to them to live in such bondage, in hiding and in suppression of their masculinesque nature, and only then is there a slight glow of joy and an expression of satisfaction on their lumpish countenances, when they have succeeded in inflicting grief and pain upon a woman. All men are monsters.

"...How to get out of this world? You can't, not entirely, the memory will always remain. Of course it's possible in time to veil it with another memory. But it happened so that before I had managed to accustom myself to men... You were talking about first love; it was not love. I don't know what it was - a hunting ritual perhaps. He stalked me on the estate of my father's friends at Saskie Łużyce, their cousin, a young man arrived from school for the summer, and I happened to feel well enough at that time to go into the country, no serious illness, a real miracle, while the frosts never reached those regions, so that the summer was as the Lord God had ordained, long evenings, warm air, crickets chirping, the fragrance of the greenery - he stalked me by the light of the moon. It was not the case that I was still living in the idea,

after all I was no longer mouldering in the sheets for months at a time; but it was also not the case that I had completely forgotten, I tell you that I had not forgotten, I will never forget. So he..."

"You won't tell me his name, miss?"

"Artur. Artur. A type of gentry landowner, well built, strong legs from horse-riding, sunburnt, his hair as well, like overripe grain, he never combed it, a lion's mane - my God, do you hear how I am describing him, Mister Benedykt? From the very beginning I saw more of the animal in him. Are you able to appreciate the beauty of a steed with noble blood? How it moves, the walk, trot, canter, gallop, how the muscles ripple under skin which glistens from the warm sweat, and there is great harmony in it, a rhythm like in music, there is great strength in a perfect body, perfectly tuned. Artur probably recognised that in my eyes. The drawing teacher told me that I have talent. Take note some time of the way in which people look at others. Painters, sculptors, dancers and denizens of the South immediately look at the whole figure of a person, even upon greeting, upon first meeting, they don't rest on the face, they must scrutinise the body. Artur recognised my look. I don't remember what pleasantries he uttered when we were introduced. But I remember how he smiled: he showed his teeth, bared his canines. The hunt had begun: a male hunts a human, that is, a woman.

"...In the cool shade of the manor house and under the azure sky of the harvest, in the air trembling with butterflies and the heat of the sun-baked earth. With each passing day everything fit more and more with the idea, but perhaps I then fell back into it, dragging Artur behind me in some mesmeric way,

idle questions, and either way I will only tell you what I remember. And so with each passing day. From the beginning we did not say much, but Artur very soon gave up the illusion of human language entirely, keeping to the phrases of the masculinesque dialect; so we did not speak at all, there was no language between our two species. The earth was hot - I was not wearing shoes, I walked barefoot, for the first time in my life with bare feet over the bare soil. He lured me with a jug of cold lemonade, a juicy apple. He never approached, never handed it over. He stood with an outstretched hand, I had to draw nearer, to take it. Then he leaned over, seeking my eyes with his eyes. The point was for me, in time, to start eating from his hand, literally, that is without the use of my own hand, with my mouth straight from his palm, with my tongue from his skin. He didn't trail me, he didn't go after me as he would have gone after normal game; and yet even on a walk alone I always felt his presence, his watchful eye, and in fact more than once, more than twice, I caught a glimpse of him somewhere in the distance, a silhouette on the background of the horizon or a shadow between the trees, so that I took on the habit of looking over my shoulder, stopping and listening intently - like a deer in the forest. At the table he didn't look at me - he looked at those with whom I was conversing. He came in and out of the room before me. Then... We were coming back one red evening from the river bank, the estate owners, the steward's daughters, someone from the neighbours' place, a slow stroll along a dirt road; I was walking barefoot and I cut myself on a sharp stone, which sliced open the not yet calloused skin between my toes, I hopped along on one leg, and some tipsy peasant passing by

made an indecent remark, I had fallen behind, limping, but then it turned out that Artur had stayed too, Artur grabbed the peasant by the ear and began to twist it, to pull it and pinch it so that he dragged the boozer down onto his knees and eventually pushed his face in the dust of the road and almost tore his ear off, the peasant stayed there on the ground with blood on his mug. Do you understand? I stood there, I looked, I kept silent. Of course Artur didn't even look back. I hobbled after him. I felt that the hunt was coming to an end, it was a question of days. There would be no warning. He would say nothing, he wouldn't ask, he wouldn't say please, not he, long muscles under his sun-bronzed skin, the masculinesque melody of movement, the mane of fair hair, the white canines. What was to be done? I couldn't sleep. He didn't come in the night. After dawn I still didn't fall asleep. He didn't come in the day. I couldn't eat. At the table I followed Artur with my eyes, the others took notice, it became too obvious. Someone said something. Artur turned round and with a smile leant over towards me, in his open palm he had a quarter of a juicy pear, the sweet syrup ran over his fingers, over the bare skin of his hairy forearm. I licked my lips. Out of the apple pie I pulled a knife and thrust it into his chest.

"...They sent me off to Professor Zylberg's clinic. There I was treated for a 'nervous breakdown' and there, when I fell ill, I fell ill with tuberculosis."

* * *

"Tsushima, 1905. Otherwise are the wars of Summer. We had left Lipava to go the relief of Port Arthur on the third of October in the previous year, in twenty-eight ships, seven battleships. Later, on the way from the Baltic to Vladivostok, over a dozen vessels joined us. The whole Second Pacific Squadron was commanded by Vice-Admiral Zinovy Rozhdestvensky. It was the largest naval convoy in the history of modern warfare. The Japanese had attacked in January, without warning assailing the First Squadron at Port Arthur, Vladivostok and Chemulpo; you should know that they regard the advance declaration of war as a foolish European eccentricity. In April, His Imperial Vychelichestvo summoned the Second Squadron to the aid of the First and as cover for the Manchurian Army, over a million of our soldiers were fighting there; but as early as August the Japanese crushed the Far Eastern Fleet and lay siege to Port Arthur. It became clear that it would fall to the Second Squadron to face them unaided. All battle-ready Russian vessels were assembled, with the exception of those blocked by treaties in the Black Sea. Howbeit, repairs and construction of new ships were hastened such that there was no way to find crews for them with a sufficient number of experienced sailors. So peasants were conscripted, common criminals and political offenders were dragged in from the tiurmas and onto the decks, and from the Petersburg Navy Corps cadets premature promotions of young officers were performed. And thus I found my way straight from school as a freshly-baked gardemarin onto the battleship "Oslyabya", the flagship of Rear-Admiral Dmitri von Fölkersahm, Rozhdestvensky's second in command. I was sev-

enteen years old when on that October morning I sailed out on a round-the-world voyage in the most powerful armada of the Russian Empire for the greatest armoured battle in the history of the seas. (...)

"...Later I tried to get my mind around this, to arrange it according to cause and effect, truth and untruth. Futile investigations! We had hardly entered the Danish straits, nay, earlier, for even whilst we were still lying at anchor in Kronstadt, Revel and Lipava constant alerts and night watches and anti-torpedo blockades were ordered, in expectation of a Japanese covert attack, and as we entered the straits - why in artillery exercises we got so lost in manoeuvres that the "Oslyabya" ran into the destroyer "Bystryi", smashing its bow, and anon from the Copenhagen intelligence post came the information that Japanese torpedo boats indeed had been spotted already, as well as fishing boats with camouflaged launchers, submarines, balloons laying mines in the path of the Squadron from the sky. Lies, fantasies? Naval intelligence and the Okhrana received half a million rubles for this occasion, so perhaps they thought up the whole thing - but perhaps not, perhaps not. The dispatches were already coming in from our own ships: about unknown torpedo boats under the lights of fishing boats, about schooners with no ensigns, dark silhouettes in the night. Rozhestvensky ordered the guns to be trained at all passing boats and to be fired at any cutting across the Squadron's course in spite of a warning. And thus we passed through the straits, firing upon boats with neutral ensigns. The next day our supply ship "Kamchatka" lost its way; she didn't respond until the evening, reporting that she was fleeing in a zig-zag path from eight unknown torpedo

boats. Rozhestvensky announced a combat alert. The middle of the night, Dogger Bank, pitch black, everyone awaits the attack. And then suddenly a missile, shadows on the water - we turn on the searchlights. And I stood there alone at the stern binoculars, I stared goggle-eyed, my heart thumped, that save me God. We look: two larger vessels, a lot of smaller ones, we check the profile, we count the smokestacks, Pyotr says one thing, Ivan says another, Grisha something else again, but already the report goes out: two torpedo boats in an attack on the flagship and the whole fleet is resolutely bearing down under our bows. They have lit up all the searchlights in the Squadron, the cannonade has commenced: beams of light in the darkness, flames from the gun barrels, a terrible roar, panicked searching for shapes on the waves, suddenly something looms out of the night, a couple of seconds and the explosion of a torpedo rips it to shreds. By and by it turned out that they were merely fishing boats and trawlers. We also managed to shoot the smokestacks off the cruiser "Aurora", almost killing the ship's priest at the same time. A week later we are bunkering coal at Vigo Bay when a dispatch arrives from Petersburg. Russia and Great Britain are on the brink of war, we had shot up five British trawlers from a fishing company on the anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar, killing some fishermen and leaving the scene of the crime without coming to their aid. Crowds are marching through London, demanding that the Royal Navy be dispatched with orders to sink our armada. But anon the matter becomes still more muddled, because the enraged fishermen are firmly avowing that a Russian destroyer cruised between them until morning, not responding to the calls and pleas for help of the drowning. But at that time no

destroyer had been sailing with us! What then? Had the Japanese ships really taken us by surprise among the English fishing boats? There was an investigation by international commission; do you think, gentlemen, that it led to anything? Who had attacked us? Had anyone attacked us? Had the reports been lying? Had we seen the Japanese, or had we not seen them? After all I had been there myself, I myself had been watching! So had I seen what I had seen? - or had I thought that I was seeing what I was not seeing? - or else do I now simply remember alike what I saw and what I did not see, what was and what was not? With whom did we fight the battle? Did the battle take place at all? Such is war without the Ice, a two-faced whore!

"...We crossed the equator - nobody knew when; the strength of the Atlantic currents was poorly reckoned, the time and the degrees of latitude got mixed up. There were constant problems with bunkering coal, the German company HAPAG didn't want to honour the contracts, Japanese and British diplomacy closed ports against us, forcing the neutrality of one state after another; only thanks to Rozhestvensky's obstinacy did we reach Madagascar. There we joined up with the lighter cruisers, which had steamed through the Mediterranean Sea and the Suez Canal, and there, at Nossi Bé, the news caught up with us about the capitulation of Port Arthur, as well as about the revolutionary rebellions in Russia and about Bloody Sunday. So on the one hand, from a military point of view, the expedition no longer made any sense; however, on the other, from the political point of view, for the Emperor it constituted one of the last resorts, a chance both for peace within the country, as much as for peace with Japan, because only after laying a

suitably weighty success upon the scale would it be possible to sit down to making some kind of reasonable treaty with the Japanese, and next, after putting out that fire - to send the army from the front to stamp out the fires in Russia herself. We conducted exercises in shooting at targets. Of several thousand shells not one hit. Vice-Admiral Rozhestvensky sent a dispatch to Petersburg with a request to be released from his responsibilities on account of the poor state of his health. The Admiralty refused, they agreed to a transfer of command only in Vladivostok. Rozhestvensky then set himself the principal objective of reaching Vladivostok as quickly as possible. And so we sailed across the Indian Ocean, in one bound from Madagascar to Indo-China. That was a voyage...! No two ways about it, pain and torment, the sailors very nearly mutinied, Rozhestvensky quickly filled the prison boat in any case, there was a lack of fresh water, there was a lack of food, there was even a lack of clothing, people's boots were falling apart, the stokers worked in soft shoes made of hemp cord, we sailed without stopping, overloaded with coal, Rozhestvensky was terribly afraid that we would be left without fuel, the ships lost about two or three knots of speed, sailing with such a draught that the armour belts on the "Oslyabya" were entirely hidden beneath the water, and in spite of this we constantly had to load up on coal from the transport ships, I tell you, gentlemen, pain and torment - but then as we saw the faces of the British in Singapore, when the whole Squadron paraded past them through the strait after a lonely voyage across the ocean...! I understood how the legends of the high seas are born.

"...Rozhestvensky decided to reach Vladivostok by the short-

est route, that is, between the Korean Peninsula and Japan. We entered these waters in battle formation, with an order for radio silence. With every moment we expected an attack from the entire Japanese fleet. Again it started, the watching for foreign ships and submarines, the vigilance and fears. At night we kept in contact by flashing Morse code onto the clouds in the sky with the searchlights. On the "Oslyabya" spirits were exceptionally low, von Fölkersahm had not been in command for a long time, struck down with a serious apoplexy, and finally on the evening of the tenth of May he gave up the ghost. But Rozhestvensky forbade the taking down of the admiral's flag from our ship! The officers were saying that this was so as not to destroy morale in the Squadron. So von Fölkersahm was closed up in a coffin beneath the deck of the "Oslyabya" and thus we sailed on as the flagship. Mark ye well, gentlemen, how from the first falsehood flow all the subsequent distortions - and thus crumble the foundations of all things, as the cracks in the ice split open at one blow; and only the thunderclap of Zeus, at which the ice breaks, only the thunderclap is not heard.

"...When everything falls apart, what can be depended upon? We were to enter the Korean Strait on Friday the thirteenth of May, so Rozhestvensky first of all ordered a day of senseless exercises, in order to avoid a battle on the unlucky date. The priests scrupulously blessed the guns on all the ships. We sailed in three, then in two line columns, the day was grey, foggy, clouds covered the sky. At night the airwaves crackled with Japanese communiqués, we knew that their fleet was close. At dawn the first enemy cruiser appeared, it called forth the next ones, they sailed parallel with the Squadron, but there

was an order to hold our fire; finally the men couldn't restrain themselves, the first was probably one of the artillerymen on the "Oslyabya", hard to say for sure, because one fired and straight away the whole cannonade, we even hit once - the men were eager for battle after all, yes, yes. At noontide the main Japanese forces emerged, flag battleships in formation, cutting across our path. They were faster than our ragtag bunch of mixed-class ships, chock-full of coal, fouled up with seaweed; they were faster, they were able to select and impose the position and distance for the exchange of fire, and the angular course, the approach angle of the line columns. Rozhestvensky tried to outmanoeuvre them, without success, he only broke up his own formation. You must know, *messieurs*, that in the old naval tactics of Summer in a clash of battleships the position of one ship relative to another may have a greater influence on the result of the clash than mere weight of guns and strength of armour. A ship exposed to a full broadside and itself unable to respond with naught but the front artillery is condemned to destruction in advance. And so the first simple manoeuvre: pass in front of the bows of the armada, cutting off its course at an angle of ninety degrees. The Japanese squadron, faster than ours, sailed to and fro in front of our bows, blasting away from six miles off with a concentrated barrage, as they must have immediately received orders that they hit the flagships before all else, from the nearest - and which flagship sat like a duck in their sights? The "Oslyabya"! With a dead man's jack on the mast, we had anchored in place, driven from the line, for when Rozhestvensky on his "Knyaz Suvorov" had wanted to go to the head of the column, he had almost caused a mass collision: the "Suvorov"

had blocked the path of the "Imperator Alexander", the "Alexander" of the "Borodino", the "Borodino" of the "Oryol", and we came in between them, that is the "Oslyabya" at the head of the second division of battleships. We lay at anchor, they raised black cannonballs on the spars, the formation split up to the sides. The Japanese bombarded us without mercy, both the flagships, but us more insistently, it was then that I escaped death by a miracle, the man two steps away from me was swept off the deck, the shrapnel slashed through my skin like a broom of razorblades. The bridge at the bow was under fire, our anchor broke off. The worst of it was that we were hit twice in the port side from the bow, when such a hole was smashed through the armour and plating, right above the water line, that a trojka could have driven through it no problemka, and we began to list more and more heavily, and there was no way to patch up the hole, the swell was high, the "Oslyabya" still tried to get away from the bombardment, but there was nothing doing, only a greater and greater trim was dragging us, as far as the chain pipe. They blasted our fore-turret, the electricity went down across the whole ship, the combat bridge was burning, coal dust hung in the air and settled on everything in a hideous goo, sticky, acrid, blinding, rivets, dowels popped out of the metal in their dozens, plates of armour peeled off us like dried out scabs - the commander ordered the ship to be abandoned, the "Oslyabya" rolled over keel up and headed to the bottom.

"...I saw it floating upon the waves, a few dozen arsheens from me, as I swam towards the destroyers which were collecting survivors - the coffin with the body of Admiral von Fölkersahm. The "Buinyi" picked us up; yet half the crew of the

"Oslyabya" drowned, the Japanese didn't cease their fire, in any case they couldn't even be seen on the horizon, fog, smoke, grey sky, grey sea, and they had also painted their hulls and superstructures in a dark-olive paint, so that it was now entirely impossible to make out who was firing at us, who was murdering us, the "Buinyi" - hit, the "Bravyi" - hit; we were fleeing into the fog, just as far away from the battle as we could. Only the rumble drifting over the waters of the strait, only the spot flashes breaking through the emulsion of greyness told of the battle's course. Captain Kolomeitsev was searching for the squadron of light cruisers, I don't know if we were wandering lost, or if the captain wanted first of all to establish some kind of order on the "Buinyi" - over two hundred survivors had to fit on board. I squeezed onto the bridge, barely bandaged, with one eye pouring blood, frozen through, I listened in on the officers. They knew little more. There was an order to follow the light forces and on their port beam - but where were the light forces grouping? Was Rozhestvensky still alive? There was no plan of battle, no plan had reached the captain. The officers tried to read something from out of the older orders - from when the orders hadn't fit the situation. We had hardly gone into formation behind the cruisers, Kolomeitsev pulled the "Buinyi" out of it. A great vortex of smoke, like an upside-down pyramid of black clouds in the sky, and under it, under its peak - red flames. That was the "Suvorov", the flagship of Admiral Rozhestvensky, it was burning, half sunk already. The officers protested that there was no space on the ship; the captain ordered that we approach the battleship and take on its crew. We sailed in under fire, the "Suvorov" was covered by the Japanese artillery,

they were smashing it into smithereens, and our deck was like a parade, hundreds of men stand and stare, a shell hits - slaughter. Lifeboats - there are no lifeboats; on the "Buinyi" they're all smashed, on the "Suvorov" they're all smashed or on fire. What to do? Kolomeitsev orders that we go in even closer - but the swell is already high and the fire from the "Suvorov" is like a furnace and the Japs are aiming in better and better - he orders that we go in and take on the men broadside to broadside. And so they conveyed the officers and the wounded over to us, until eventually the "Buinyi" too was hit, the shrapnel decapitated a cook saved from the "Oslyabya". Pitching heavily, we left the sinking battleship. I was called to the officer's cabin, the first one ordered me to take care of the staff officers from the flagship. I go into the mess, which was by then a hospital room... who is lying on a sofa under a bull's eye? Vice-Admiral Zinovy Rozhestvensky.

"...Injured in the head, injured in the back, injured in the hip and in the foot, the medics are dressing his wounds, I repeat the question of the first officer: should we fly the flag of the commander of the Second Squadron on the "Buinyi"? No! After all he himself is incapable of commanding, let Nebogatov command! I go back to the bridge - Nebogatov knows nothing of this, he cannot know, because there's no contact with him. What to do? A long evening on the Tsushima Archipelago, the officer's whispers over the vice-admiral's bed, I run to and fro, carrying questions, questions, questions and questions; no answers. How many vessels from the Squadron have been saved? Where are the rest of them? Where are the Japanese? What are the orders? What is the plan? What to do, what to do? The "Buinyi" is chasing Rear Admiral Enquist's division, but

with a damaged propeller it's difficult for us to catch up with him. And now dusk is falling, it's getting dark, visibility is worse and worse, the swell is bad, fog in a windless calm, and only more and more horrible communiqués explode over the heads of the officers like deadly pieces of shrapnel: the "Borodino" heavily under fire, the "Borodino" taking on water, the "Borodino" on fire! The "Oryol" torn apart! The "Alexander" is sinking, has sunk! No one has been saved, eight hundred men to the bottom. Communication was lousy anyway, the Squadron fell apart beyond the range of the radio station. Rozhestvensky repeated: Vladivostok, to Vladivostok. But what was Nebogatov ordering? Had the admiral's order reached the "Nikolai I"? Before total darkness had fallen we joined the formation behind Enquist after all, alongside the surviving battleships. Nebogatov raised the navigation signals - and indeed, onward, to Vladivostok. We awaited a battle plan, none came. No one dared to ask Rozhestvensky about anything. In the night the Japanese would have to cease their fire - but in the night their torpedo boats moved against us.

"...So once again: the threat of the dark ocean, looking out for shadows on the water, binocularing the gloom. Now we tried not to get lost, to stick with the main forces - some of us must have somehow broken away from Enquist in the darkness and approached the battleships, they, terrified too, took our destroyers for Japanese torpedo boats and we started to fire at one another. Upon which Nebogatov sped up, so that before long we fell behind, the formation broke up. A total blackout was ordered. And so we hung on in fear until dawn, heaving to for hours after damage to the boilers, lost in the darkness. But the nerves of that night I will never forget. No one knew any-

thing, so everyone imagined everything. On the "Buinyi" one engine after another failed, if the torpedo boats had fallen upon us then, we would not have got further than a mile. I ran from one high officer to another, and each one sent me off with a different question, a different fear, and a different version. And above the officers, on deck and below deck: an even denser swarm of fears and ghastly imaginings from the heads of hundreds of sailors. Midnight came, the night reached its height, we were certain that that the Japanese had already torpedoed everyone besides the "Buinyi", which had got lost in these foreign waters so completely that even the enemy could not find her. I will not depict for you, gentlemen, the atmosphere of that night, the terrible quaking in a million uncertainties, the outswelling of black imaginations - oh, that they would finally attack us, that they would torpedo us, sink us! Now, now, let it be decided! But no. And what was it coming to in the meantime... Rozhestvensky with his staff officers had submitted a proposal to break through to the shore, to sink the ship and to surrender to the Japanese, the staff officers pulled out a white sheet from beneath the admiral and went with it to Kolomeitsev. Kolomeitsev was seized by a hellish fury, tore up the sheet and flung it over the side. But at dawn he already had to send for help over the radio, the "Buinyi" was falling apart, it was necessary to trans-ship the admiral with his staff. The cruiser "Dmitri Donskoi" found us with the destroyers "Bedovyi" and "Groznyi"; we moved onto the "Bedovyi". The destroyers went full steam ahead for Vladivostok, whilst the "Dmitri Donskoi" stayed behind to escort the "Buinyi". Later on I found out that she had sunk the "Buinyi" - the Japanese appeared on the horizon, there wasn't

time, one direct salvo destroyed Captain Kolomeitsev's ship. And the "Biedovyi", as it turned out, had been chosen by Rozhestvensky because he knew her commander, Captain Baranov. This Baranov was unable to gainsay him in anything. At once the white flag was readied and a course was taken for Dagelet. All the same the "Groznyi" was still sailing with us and its commander in turn was a Pole, a certain Andrzejewski. Venedikt Filipovich is smiling - well yes, it's no surprise how the story continued. Baranov approaches the Japs with guns motionless, Andrzejewski asks what's happening, Rozhestvensky orders him to scam to Vladivostok and he himself on the "Bedovyi" hoists up the signals of capitulation and the requests for help with the seriously wounded - what does Captain Andrzejewski do? He disregards the order, turns back and fires with all guns at the Japs. The Vice-Admiral nearly has a heart attack from the nerves. We are surrendering whilst this Pole attacks - and the Japs shoot us both up just the same. You will ask me what I was praying for then: that they might send us to the bottom, or that they might take us as prisoners alive and in one piece? Very well, I'll tell you frankly, may my father curse me if I lie: both for that and for that."

"And God heard you out?"

"Well, I'm sitting here in front of you at any rate! Rozhestvensky surrendered, we went to a Japanese camp."

"And the 'Groznyi'?" asked Doctor Konieszyn, "What about the Polish captain?"

"He took the ship safely to Vladivostok. Only three or four made it, he among them. Admittedly the captain himself came out of it with serious injuries, after a fatal hit on the bridge of the destroyer." Nasboldt twirled the wine in his

cup, dropping his gaze to the red whirlpool. "What else can you say... you see, gentlemen: such are the wars of Summer.

"...And now we will fight differently. I won't betray any secrets, because both of you, Mister Pociągło and *Monsieur Ingénieur*, know this very well yourselves, working in Zimny Nikolayevsk, because what are the transports of the best coldiron from Sibirkhozhet going out for, whose orders have the priority? Thus I vowed to myself that I would do everything within my humble gifts and abilities to wipe out that shame, and I'm not talking here only about the Tsushima disaster. At first I looked after production matters there for the Admiralty - now it's no longer in the Land of the Frostens, but at sea that we must win the Winter. Much has changed since 1905. After all, the English built the first dreadnought forthwith - speed, manoeuvrability, long-range guns, uniform parameters, armour. And everyone began to copy them, adjusting to the new battle conditions. Everyone, so Russia at the very best could only even up the chances. But from the coming of the Winter, from the discovery of tungetite and coldiron, we have had a natural advantage. Coldiron dreadnoughts are at least ten knots faster than the dreadnoughts of the Summer. Their armour, though thinner and lighter, in spite of this can withstand hits from the heaviest shells. The heavy guns of Tomsk construction, in the Irkutsk cold, with barrels cast in Zimny Nikolayevsk, reach beyond the range of the largest guns on the ships of the Summer. Tungetite bombs, if they perform well now in practice on manoeuvres, in combat will sink vessels of the most solid construction, dragging them down into the depths with a million-tonne ballast of ice.

"...However, artillery, armour, technologies - it's not this

which will alter the face of war in the Winter. His Imperial Vyelichestvo is gazing into the future, the Admiralty is planning for years ahead, and Russia - Russia can wait whole generations, centuries and more, if necessary. The Ice is pushing through Asia, the frostens are spreading, the Winter is strengthening - slowly, at an unreckonable rate, in accordance with laws unknown to Petersburg professors, but however long it takes, in the end the wave will reach the boundaries of the continent, and the Ice," Dietmar Klausowicz in a broad gesture clasped towards himself the white landscapes through the window, "the Ice will fall into the seas. I'm not saying that the oceans will freeze at once, probably nothing of the kind will occur - but how different sea battles will be under the sky of Winter! We fire - and we know whom we are firing upon. If we have hit, then we have hit; if not, then we have not. We sail here and here, not somewhere else. Orders are such and such. Victorious is he who must be victorious; defeated is he who must be defeated. Unnecessity yields to necessity, falsehood to truth. Is this merely a Siberian fairy-tale, is this naught but a Baikalian legend? No! There are plans, there are strategies.

"...So such is my posting, for this I am going to the Pacific, such is my profession and my very first dream: wars which are icy clear, geometrically beautiful, with a course of mathematical inexorability. Once we have learned this, once we master the tactics of the Winter, what will stand in the path of the Imperium? Who will pose a threat to Russia? She will triumph, because she will not be able not to triumph."