Translated by S. Apresyan
FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE MOSCOW 1955

HARD TO PORT!

We had yet to put into Harbour Bay, one of the most beautiful spots in the Arctic.

The cloud-like mountains we had sighted on the horizon were now growing and rising higher. We were drawing near the last Arctic land on our route.

Netayev was off duty and we decided to go ashore together.

The ship sailed up to the stern rocky mountains, hoary with snow.

Harbour Bay nestled against their foot.

A black rocky island lay like a fort at the entrance to the bay. Slightly to the left of it, where the waves broke on invisible reefs, white pillars of foam rose aloft.

Boris Yefimovich could have worked as a pilot in any bay of the North. He confidently steered the ship along a narrow, unmarked fairway.

Water gushed up close by the ship's side. I had momentary glimpses of black rocks in the water — they looked like glossy-skinned sea animals.

The powerful grey cliffs were bare and inaccessible. Nothing grew on them. The little houses of a trading station stood on the shore to the left of us and those of the polar station, to our right.

A small launch cast off from the shore and headed for the ship.

But what was that mottled strip stretching down into the sea from a cleft?

"It's a glacier," Netayev told me.

What a strange glacier' It did not resemble iany of the smooth, snow-covered glaciers we had come across before. Only where an iceberg had broken off could we see the rugged wall of greenish ice.

"We'll have a chance to see it at close quarters," Netayev promised me.

The launch took us to a narrow spit separating the larger bay from the small one.

We set out for the glacier, which slid down into the small bay. The thin snow showed our footprints.

On climbing a top of the spit we saw the bay and stopped in surprise. What was that?

Strange ice-floes of the most unusual shades — green, bright blue, azure, white, and even black — were tafloat on the calm surface of the water. Their shapes were as much out of the ordinary as their colours.

I wondered where they had come from.

"The ice breaks off in slabs from the glacier and falls into the water," said Netayev.

From high up we had a good view of the whole glacier; ribbed like a heating radiator, it consisted throughout of vertical, rugged slabs of various colours, frozen together. A motley ice river slid down from above

As we drew nearer we saw the extremity of the glacier overhanging the sea.

There was a booming blow.

"The glacier's 'calved,' " said Netayev.

One of the upright slabs had broken off and dropped into the water. The new-born ice "calf," as polarniks call it, sank into the sea, only to re-emerge the next moment.

Some of the coloured ice-floes had been washed ashore. We examined them with curiosity. They were as transparent as glass and lacked the colour they had seemed to have when seen from afar. But inside the ice we could make out a multitude of grains, apparently of coloured sand. It was they that imparted to the ice-blocks their unusual appearance.

"Curious," said Netayev, shaking his head. "It looks as if the glacier up there were made up of different streams of ice."

"And each stream had a colour of its own?"

"Perhaps each little ice stream glides over clay of a different colour and in that way clay particles get into the ice. Look." Netayev pointed to the floe we had just been scanning.

But I looked at him instead. His blue eyes were dilated with joy and his face was beaming.

"It was to see wonders like these that I became a seaman," he said all of a sudden. "I love the sea. But I love the coast better still. The things you see on it! You, too, have seen quite a lot during this voyage. But I'm going to sail all my life. I shan't just see the coasts, I'll see them change. Suppose they build a resort hotel here. Then I'll certainly bring tourists here from all over the Soviet Union! And over there, across the bay, they may build a factory or a mine."

We walked back to the launch. I thought of Netayev's words. I had always imagined that seamen must love the sea with its gales and all that. But here was a man who loved the coast.

"Or take Kamchatka. What a wonderful region!" Netayev went on. "There I've seen grass grow in the very snow during winter. Near hot springs. Then there's the Ussuri coast. You know, I was in India on board the Sukhumi when we ran her from Arkhangelsk to Vladivostok. Well, in the Ussuri Territory Indian trees grow side by side with our own pines. Tigers live there along with deer. And the towns! Ever been in Komsomolsk? Or on Sakhalin? What a rich country! And the Vladivostok bay — have you seen it? The town lies spread out in a sort of amphitheatre and is reflected in Golden Horn Bay. I wouldn't compare it with Frisco!"

I had never heard modest and taciturn Netayev talk so enthusiastically.

While the ship was sailing out of Harbour B,ay I looked at the bare coast, imagining fine multi-storey hotels and, across the bay opposite them, factory chimneys and piers equipped with harbour cranes. All that would come. It was sure to.

The mountains receded and soon merged with the wavy line of the horizon.

The Sedov was bound for Arkhangelsk now; she had covered more than nine thousand miles in the course of a single navigation season and run into some of the least accessible regions.

The seamen were talking of home and wives and children. Packing was under way in the cabins.

Autumn gales in the Barents Sea are terrible.

The ship had been rolling for a long time. Seamen sailing in Arctic regions keep close to ice-floes to shelter from heavy seas. But there are no ice-fields in the Barents Sea and hence no such shelter.

The ship seemed to have diminished in size all at once. The seas rose higher than the bridge.

A strong breeze heralded the coming of a gale. There was a sharp drop in the temperature.

I spent a restless night. The berths in the cabins are usually placed athwart the ship, which prevents your falling out of your berth when there is a roll. But I had my quarters in the captain's saloon and slept on a sofa which was not placed that way. The sofa tilted at every list and it was all I could do to keep lying on it. There was no point in trying to steady it with a chair. The chairs were dancing at will about the saloon. Tired of wrestling with them, I had given them up.

The captain dropped in, wearing a drenched oilskin cape. He told me how to sleep in a gale. You must lie on your stomach, with elbows and legs spread out. I tried it and felt steadier.

A pendulum was swinging on the wall. In a motion unusual for a pendulum, it slowly deviated to one side, then passed across a vertical line and swung to the other side, as if climbing up the wall. It seemed to belong to an extremely slow-going clock. It was an instrument showing the list of the ship.

The roll was amazing; it reached forty-five degrees.

Next morning I went out on deck, utterly exhausted.

The wind whistled furiously. As it was impossible to stand up without holding on to some object, I grasped the hand-rail. It was coated with ice. A

layer of ice covered the lids of the chests standing on deck, the railings, the air shafts, and everything else. The masts and tackle, too, were crusted with it. The ice-bound ship lurched heavily from side to side and the water that soused her froze instantly.

It was very cold and I went back to my cabin to put on some warm clothes.

When I came out again I saw a thick rope stretching above deck. I had not noticed it before. Then I realized that it was the aerial covered with ice. No sooner had I thought what a weight hung on the wire than a huge sea struck at the ship's side and drenched me from head to foot. The foam burst against the funnel and there was a tinkle, as of pieces of glass scattering on deck.

I glanced up — the aerial was gone. It had snapped.

I knew only too well what wireless means for a ship. With the loss of the aerial the ship had no ears or voice.

Ivan Guryanovich, the ship's wireless operator, rushed out of the wireless cabin, smart as ever in his jacket, and looked up. He was alarmed.

I walked past the deck superstructure to mount the bridge.

The wind bore down upon me. 1 clung to the storm rope strung along the deck.

I could make headway only by holding on to the rope. I was soaked through and through before reaching the ladder that led to the bridge. The steps of the ladder sank away under my feet. My body seemed to lose its weight as if I were in a cage falling down a mine shaft.

The captain was not on the bridge. Netayev was on watch. He had an oilskin cape on.

I was surprised at Boris Yefimovich's absence. At times like that he was always on the bridge. Had his trust in his mate gone so far by then? I recalled Netayev's first watch when he and I had just boarded the Sedov. The ship was then sailing through ice and the captain, enraged by Netayev's clumsy butt at the ice, was telling him how to steer.

"Hard to starboard! Look sharp!" he had shouted to Netayev in an unusually angry voice.

I looked in at the wheel-house. I knew all the helmsmen by appearance. The seaman at the wheel seemed unfamiliar to me. But the next instant I recognized him.

It was the captain. He would trust no one with the wheel and was himself doing the duty of helmsman.

Soon I knew the reason.

The ship would not obey the wheel. To be exact, she hardly obeyed it because the seas kept on tossing her and buffeting at her sides, making her all but stop as her screw spun helplessly up in the air. It took particular skill to handle her just then.

The wireless operator ran up the ladder in a soaked jacket and reported the loss of communication to the captain.

"What a misfortune!" said the captain. "But don't you now take it into your head to climb the tackle in a roll like this."

"But they'll miss us if I don't! They'll think we've sunk. If you'll permit me, Boris Yefimovich —"

"No, I forbid it! They're sure to be worried at headquarters, but I'm not going to risk my seamen's lives. Wait till we're out of rough water."

The crestfallen operator walked away, planting his feet wide apart.

"The tackle's covered with ice and the mast's swaying— just look at it," said the captain to me, as if to justify his decision. "We must get out of this area without a moment's delay."

He was peering ahead, turning the wheel to the right or left all the time.

I walked up to Netayev to be out of the captain's way.

Netayev exchanged a swift glance with me and nodded at the wheelhouse. Never in his life had he had a chance to be on watch with a helmsman so skilled that there was no need to tell him what he had to do.

Incidentally, Boris Yefimovich had been an ordinary sailor for many years before the Revolution. The Soviet system had opened navigation school to him and promoted him to the rank of ship's captain.

Suddenly Netayev dashed forward and clutched at the rail.

"Hard to port!" he shouted.

Surprised though he was by the shout, the captain spun the wheel, obeying the order.

"Harder! Quick! Look sharp!" snapped Netayev.

I could see by the captain's figure and his fast-moving hands how hard it was for him to put about the ship, whose screw rose clear of the water every now and again.

I looked to where Netayev's gaze was fixed. Just ahead of the ship's bow I saw a floating mine poised on a wave-crest.

"A mine?" I cried involuntarily. "Out here in the Barents Sea? But how?"

Ball-shaped and bristling with strikers, the mine resembled some monster that had come up to the surface.

"A mine!" shouted Netayev. "Hard to port! Harder! Harder!"

He grabbed the handle of the engine-room telegraph.

"Stop! Full speed lastern! Full speed astern! Hard to starboard! Look sharp, damn it! Hard to starboard!"

The mine was at a hairbreadth from the ship's bow. Who knew where it had broken loose from and how long it had been drifting at sea before it got in our way in that heavy gale, at a moment when the ship would not obey the wheel.

The mine passed slightly to the left of the bow. But it was sure to hit the ship's side, it was!

"Full speed astern!" shouted the captain from the wheel-house. "Come on, full speed astern!"

But Netayev had already conveyed the same order to the engine-room.

"Hard to starboard! Hard to starboard now! Snappy!" he commanded in his turn.

A wave threw up the mine, which turned about, its pins standing out like lopped feelers.

"Stop! Full speed ahead!" Netayev commanded, shifting the handle of the engine-room telegraph. "Hard to port!" he shouted to the captain.

The mine glided past close by the ship's side. I rushed to the side railing, bent over it and stared down at the terrible ball, trying to reckon the distance that separated us.

Netayev stood by my side, bending over the railing like me. He took out his handkerchief and mopped his moist forehead.

The mine was already near the ship's stern.

The captain gave the wheel to another helmsman and crossed to us.

Netayev stood at attention. His face flushed.

"Forgive me, Boris Yefimovich —"

"It's all right," said the captain, dismissing the matter with a wave of his hand. "Well done! Where's the wireless operator? Call him. And get the bosun here, he's our best rope climber."

The wireless operator instantly appeared before the captain.

"Fix that aerial. I give you fifteen minutes."

"But you didn't permit me, Boris Yefimovich!"

"Climb the mast and fasten the aerial as you like, but it's got to be there. I'm going to climb the shrouds myself."

Netayev stepped in. "You mustn't, Boris Yefimovich. Please let me climb."

The wireless operator, the captain, the boatswain and several other seamen set about stringing up the aerial.

"We must let the mine-sweeper know. She wasn't far from us. She must find the mine and destroy it. Just now we don't need wireless communication for ourselves but for all the other ships, all those who may come across that damned mine at sea. And we've got to have communication!"

The fifty-year-old captain climbed up the ice-coated shrouds with amazing deftness. The mast he clung to was swaying; its top with the little form hugging it described an enormous arc, poising above the seas now on one side of the ship, now on the other.

While Boris Yefimovich and the wireless operator hung on to the frozen tackle, stringing up the aerial wire, Netayev kept the mine in sight.

I forgot about the roll and the cold wind and anxiously watched the seamen's risky work.

At last the captain Game down on deck and the wireless operator hurried to the wireless cabin.

"Radio the sweeper to head this way at once, and send the roll to hell!" the captain shouted to him. "And now we must get warm," he said to me in his usual, friendly voice.

As we sat in his cabin he filled his pipe, lighted it, and poured himself a glass of cognac.

After a pull at his pipe he drank his glass off, shut his eyes, opened them, and slowly sent up a curl of smoke, as if showing a trick.

"This is what I call the polarnik way," he said. "Now I must go to the wheel." He mounted the bridge to replace the helmsman.

The mine-sweeper, summoned by wireless, sailed up two hours later. During all that time the Sedov had been circling round the dangerous ball which had drifted into the Arctic from foreign seas, as if guarding it. Whenever the ship put about, turning her side to the seas, I thought she was going to capsize. The pendulum showing her list seemed to have gone crazy. The kungas had been swept overboard, but the launch Petushok was still there iand some sailors were busy securing it.

The little mine-sweeper came up, bobbing on the waves. The captain saluted it with a hoot. He turned over to it the dangerous beast he had come upon.

The Sedov resumed her south-westward run. We saw the sweeper astern; it was stealing up to the mine.

Suddenly there was an explosion. A black cloud of smoke rose above the dark seas.

"That takes care of it!" said Boris Yefimovich with relief, spinning the wheel. "How do you feel, Ivan Guryanovich? Have you got warm? Well, then send greetings to the navy men. Thank them on behalf of all Arctic captains."