

Translated by S. Apresyan
FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE MOSCOW 1955

HELP

Rock Mouth is a small fishing village. Its few log cottages stand on the sloping bank of a river that is so wide you would think it swollen by a flood. Beyond them rise the cones of Nenets chooms. Near the chooms we saw sledges, each with a team of six reindeer harnessed fan-like. The surrounding country is tundra, a delusive carpet of green which squelches when you tread on it.

Once the sledge was the only vehicle used in the tundra. In winter a team of four is enough — snow makes pulling easier, my fellow-traveller, who had arrived with me by a land plane, told me.

As soon as we landed he went for news to the chief of the polar station. Baranov's flying boat was to touch down at Rock Mouth on its way back from an ice patrol and take us to Bleak Island.

We heard the distant hum of a motor.

A cross-country car with a covered top was coming over the tundra. Slowly it climbed a hill, then went down into a hollow. There it was again, on a hill crest. It looked like a tiny launch sailing a green sea in a swell.

The car drew near the reindeer teams. Now we could see its wheels cutting into the grassy ground. Its tracks left a broad wet trail behind.

The reindeer did not mind the rumbling monster; they were apparently used to it.

On the edge of the village the car pulled up in front of a cottage. A slim youth in quilted jacket and land trousers jumped nimbly out of the cab. I crossed to the car.

The youth who had alighted first was gone. A thickset man in overalls and a crumpled leather cap was busy with the car. He had lifted its bonnet and bent over the motor every now and then again, humming some tune in his moustache.

Suddenly I heard a familiar woman's voice. - "Kuzma Andreyevich! Go and fill it up, then come back for me."

The woman was standing on the steps of the cottage. She looked slender even in her quilted jacket and trousers. A lock of dark hair escaping from under her cap helped me recognize her.

I recalled the group of army surveyors I had met at the front near Pet-samo.

Galina Nikolayevna recognized me, too. With both hands stretched out, she came running down the steps.

"You here? Where've you come from? Where are you going?"

"And what are you doing here?" I asked, shaking hands with her and gazing into her handsome face, with its softly outlined chin, fine lips, and stern grey eyes already marked by wrinkles.

"I'm a geologist now," she answered.

"And where's your husband?"

"He was killed shortly after you left," she said and turned away.

The mechanic banged down the bonnet. He was looking at me reproachfully.

"But where are you going?" asked Galya, who had regained her calm, turning to me again.

I told her I was flying to Bleak Island to board a ship which would take me to the Georgy Sedov.

"I'm going to stay on board the Sedov to the end of the navigation season. I'll visit many islands, including some of the northernmost."

Galya was roused.

"What a lucky meeting! Please give my regards to Vanya. He's a wireless operator. Used to work with me in the tundra. Then he made up his mind to leave for the islands. The very northernmost."

We sat on the wooden steps and watched the orange afterglow gathering colour.

I asked Galya questions, glancing at her fine profile, her quilted jacket, her high rubber boots.

She told me the story of her first trip as chief of a geological survey group.

The cross-country car was carrying her over the tundra. Far ahead of the car ran its long shadow. It would pass the car, glide up a ridge, and then merge with the dark spot beyond.

Galya was sitting next to Kuzma Andreyevich Dobrov, the driver. In the early days of the trip, she had had a hard time with him.

He did not conceal his resentment. "So I've got a chief now!" he muttered. "This is what all your life and work has earned you, mechanic Dobrov! Now you'll be taught how to drive in the tundra! Next you'll get down to pots and pans."

Galya had actually announced that they were all going to cook meals by turns. Dobrov, too, had to cook. He carried out her order without a word, looking at no one, as though he were ashamed of himself.

"I'll only suggest the general direction by the compass, Kuzma Andreyevich," Galya had said, climbing into the cab, "and as to picking your way in the tundra, you can do that better than I."

Then Dobrov had given his chief a swift glance. They were travelling against the sun and that made them blink.

"So that's how it is. She does know, after all, what a mechanic is worth."

The third member of the group was Vanya, the wireless operator. For him, as for Galya, this trip was the first serious test. He was proud to be in charge of wireless communication.

Unlike Dobrov, he at once recognized the authority of his chief. Perhaps he even showed her too much attention. Rather short of stature, with a freckled face and down just beginning to sprout on his chin, he was highly solicitous for Galya and insisted on cooking in her stead. When Galya said she would not hear of it, he was sincerely hurt.

Still she could not stop him from doing little things for her. He would open a tin of food before Galya could so much as think of it. Her sleeping-bag would be found unrolled before they camped.

One day Vanya read Galya some poetry about the goddess Diana. Overtaking reindeer, Diana raced in the tundra in search of magic treasures she could see hundreds of yards down in the earth.

Galya asked him whether he had ever seen a statue of 'the goddess. He confessed that he had not. Then she told him that her son would have been nearly Vanya's age if he had lived. But the fact was, she had never had children; at any rate, she could not possibly have had a grownup son.

Her words stunned Vanya, the more so as they were spoken on the day the wireless failed.

He forgot all else on earth and tried in vain to repair the wireless. He stripped it, then put it together again, resoldered wires, turned knobs, and sighed ruefully. Galya was at pains not to come near him.

"Out here in the Arctic," Dobrov grumbled by way of edifying the others, "everybody must know how to replace everybody else if necessary. But all we can do is cook meals by turns."

"That's true," said Galya, looking him straight in the eyes. "You must absolutely teach me to drive, and I'll teach you geology. As to wireless engineering, we're going to learn that together."

Dobrov twirled his moustache and said nothing.

"Well, Galina Nikolayevna," he said next day, "the wireless is done for. We've got to turn back."

Galya frowned.

"We haven't fulfilled our task yet. You say they'll lose track of us at the base? During the last days the wireless worked by fits and starts anyway. They'll realize that it's out of action and we're going on with our job. That's what we'll do, too."

Dobrov shrugged his shoulders. But he approved of his chief's decision.

Vanya was in despair because of his inefficiency, and Galya was moved to treat him more kindly. She charged him with collecting samples of rock wherever they halted.

For two months now the geological survey group had been roving the tundra. Only occasionally did they come upon reindeer herds being driven closer to the sea and farther away from the unbearable mosquitoes which swarmed from the taiga.

In the last days the group had made discoveries that called for large-scale work, which could perhaps be started before the snow came. Flad the wireless been in order Galya would have asked for an additional group with the necessary equipment; but now she herself was compelled to hurry to the base.

The sun hung low above the horizon. Running on ahead, the long shadow of the car seemed to be groping for the way.

Galya thought of her mother, an old teacher, of Khibini, and of the fishing village where she was born.

When geologists had arrived at the site, there had been nothing there but tundra and mountains. Then a remarkable town and factories had sprung up.

At that time Galya looked on the geologists as people who blazed new trails into tomorrow. She decided to become a geologist. When the war broke out she went to the front to defend her homeland. And later, a geologist herself, she came to this northern wilderness where towns would also rise some day.

It was not easy. She was fortunate to have been born in the North, to have been taught by her mother to love work; this helped her a great deal

The body of the car rocked and tipped on knolls. One moment Galya slid to the door, the next was pitched against Dobrov's shoulder.

He glanced at his chief now and then with friendly concern. A dark lock of hair escaped from under her cap. The corners of her mouth were lined by weariness. What might she be dreaming of? Perhaps of the asphalt highways of which she had spoken to Dobrov a short while before, or the factories and towns that would rise here, near the places where they had made their discoveries.

How her eyes had shone when she inspected the pit they had dug out last'

Dobrov had jumped down to her. He had listened to her, understanding only part of what she said. Yes, he was sure he wanted to study geology. Forty years was not so old. And the fact that he was a mechanic would make things easier. In the Arctic, people must be able to replace each other. Take Vanya, for one — he was so green and yet nobody could lend him a hand

Galya was pitched against Dobrov's shoulder again. The car had careened to the left. Dobrov quickly turned the wheel to the right. But the body of the car careened more and more until the car stopped, its wheels skidding. Galya woke up.

"This is what comes of day-dreaming!" cried Dobrov angrily.

Vanya drummed on the partition of the cab.

Galya flung the door open and jumped lightly down on the grass. It squelched under her feet.

The left front wheel had sunk axle-deep in the soggy ground.

Galya ran round the car and bumped into Vanya. He was standing by the left track, almost knee-deep in water.

"Don't rev it up!" he shouted. "You're just digging the track deeper in!"

Pulling out her feet with difficulty, Galya walked round the car. Dobrov leaned out.

"Back up, easy," Galya commanded calmly.

"Hadn't you better climb in, Galina Nikolayevna?" Vanya suggested. "The water might get into your boots."

Galya smiled.

"Get a spade, Vanya."

The motor now roared, now toned down to a hum. The churning wheels were throwing up lumps of sticky mud.

Galya and Vanya, bespattered and besmeared, made vain efforts to help the motor. The car was bogged up to its body now.

"Well, well!" said Dobrov dejectedly, examining the mired tracks. "But still asphalt roads will cross here some day, I'm sure they will."

"This is no time to be talking about paved roads, Kuzma Andreyevich," Vanya put in with a sigh.

Galya frowned.

"Must we wait till the ground freezes? We can't waste time."

"This is the time to talk of paved roads," Dobrov countered Vanya's remark and turned to Galya. "We're going to dig up the upper layer on a hummock. It's less than a half-yard to frozen soil. We'll pave our way with frozen 'bricks.' "

Vanya flushed and climbed into the oar to get a crowbar and another spade.

"Galina Nikolayevna! We'll manage it — why are you taking the spade?" he protested.

Galya worked as hard as the two men.

On the northern slope of the hummock they lifted the layer that had thawed up; then they dug on till they reached the permafrost stratum and, cutting out with difficulty chunks of frozen soil, began to carry them into the deep rut made by the tracks.

Three hours Later Dobrov climbed into the cab and switched on the motor. The car shook. Its wheels spun one way, then the other, flinging up clods of frozen earth. And then all of a sudden there was a crash and the motor howled as with pain. The wheels stopped.

Dobrov jumped out of the cab, his face pale. He dug himself a hole and crawled under the car.

Galya and Vanya watched him in silence.

At last he clambered out from under the car, soaked to the skin and covered with mud from head to foot.

"Well, Galina Nikolayevna," he said, "we're in a bad mess — the cardan shaft's bust. It's all up now."

Galya turned away so that her companions would not see her face.

She found the situation a desperate one. What was she to say to her subordinates who were waiting for her word? It was all her fault. They ought to have turned back as soon as the wireless broke down. But that would)

have meant putting off the further exploration for a year. Had she the right to risk it? And was it a very great risk after all? Would anyone at the front have considered such a trip risky? There they would have pushed on foot.

She turned round swiftly to face Dobrov.

"How far do you think it is to the base, Kuzma Andreyevich?" she asked in a calm voice.

Dobrov did not dare to look his chief in the face.

"Over a hundred and twenty miles, Galina Nikolayevna," he said, dropping his head.

"Vanya, get the provisions ready. We're going on foot," said Galya resolutely.

"On foot?" echoed Vanya, flabbergasted.

They set out.

For a long time they could see the car, tilted helplessly to one side.

Vanya often looked back. Galya did not look back at all. She was leading the way and her rucksack was as heavy as the men's.

Crestfallen Dobrov was following her.

It was hard going. The delusive green carpet was impassable in places. Time and again the three came upon rivulets, lakelets and sloughs.

Galya plodded on untiringly with a manly, springy gait. Tall and wearing quilted trousers, she looked like a slim youth.

They made their brief halts atop of hummocks where it was not so damp.

Next day the sun hid behind straggling clouds. A heavy snow-fall turned! the tundra grey.

The three walked on. The snow melted on the ground, but the flakes blinded them and got under their collars. A rough wind rose.

"Over a hundred and twenty miles," Galya thought, terrified. "In the first twenty-four hours we didn't make so much as ten. Why, we had to pull out our feet after almost every step. What's in store ahead? The hardest thing is to control your feelings and show an example. Will my strength last long enough?"

"Above all I must see that my step is firm and confident. I mustn't show I'm tired."

Suddenly she gave a joyous cry and turned to her companions, pointing to the nearest ridge.

A reindeer!

The animal stood there as though peering at the oncoming men, and a moment later sped down the slope. More and more reindeer appeared on the ridge, then raced downwards in the tracks of the first. As they galloped along their antlers seemed to float above the ground.

A reindeer herd! There must be people near.

The three hastened their steps. The reindeer kept on fleeting past. They were small beasts, reaching no higher than a man's chest

Galya stopped to admire the ease with which the reindeer swept along.

"A sledge!" shouted Vanya

A reindeer team of six was coming down the ridge. A Nenets in a deerskin parka was steering with a long pole.

The three waved their arms; the Nenets stopped the sledge and alighted.

"Much good day," he said to Dobrov. "Why go tundra on foot?"

The narrow eyes in his wrinkled face were puckered up in a friendly smile.

"Our car broke," answered Dobrov.

"Oh! Oh!" The Nenets shook his head. "Bad business. Come our choom. We treat you. Tell wife put down bag."

"She isn't my wife," said Dobrov. "She's my chief."

"Chief?" said the Nenets, eyeing Galya distrustfully.

It was hard for the beasts to pull four people. So the old Nenets decided to walk and handed his long pole to Dobrov. Dobrov shook his head.

"Steering, a sledge is more'n I can do."

"I'll do it," said Galya. "Give me that khorei."

The Nenets glanced at her with respect.

An hour later they were seated in the choom of the old man who was chairman of ia reindeer-breeding collective farm.

"Oh! Oh!" said the old man, shaking his head sadly as he listened to his visitors. "Wireless broke, car broke."

"We ask you very earnestly," said Galya, "to take us to the nearest place where there's a wireless. We want to give notice of ourselves and get help."

"Oh! Oh! Very many miles. So your wireless quite bad shape?"

"Quite," Vanya confirmed. "I'm a wireless operator, but I couldn't repair it."

"You couldn't repair?" echoed the old man.

The fur flap of the choom was thrown open, and a woman came in. The old man got busy.

"I slaughtered reindeer," he said. "Now we eat meat. You like raw meat?"

He spoke a few words to the woman, then explained it to his visitors, "Now she will call man we want"

"Please let me cook the meat," Galya begged. "I know very well how to do it."

"Why spoil good meat? As you like. You my guest," said the old man with a shrug.

Galya followed the woman out

"Not wife?" the old man asked again incredulously. "Woman go tundra alone. Chief? Why she want to cook?"

More Nentsi were coming in. Each of them shook hands with the two men and sat down near them on reindeer hides spread out on the floor. Despite the warmth the newcomers kept their fur parkas on. One of them wore a soldier's greatcoat. He must have returned from the army shortly before.

Galya brought in boiled meat, and the host began to treat his guests to it. The Nentsi ate the food cooked by Galya out of respect for the three.

"We don't eat so," the old man explained "Cooked meat is spoiled. We eat this way."

Taking out a sharp knife, he picked up a piece of raw meat, bit into it, and cut it off with the knife just short of his lips.

"We've got no vegetables or vitamins," said the Nenets in the great-coat. "Raw meat protects our people from scurvy."

Vanya looked at the speaker in surprise.

"That's true Galya corroborated. "Once I had to try it on myself. Raw meat cured me of scurvy."

The old man cast an approving glance at her.

"You use khorei, go tundra, know meat. You all right."

Galya seated on her lap a little boy with beady eyes and stiff black hair.

"Why aren't there any older children here?" she asked.

"Went school," replied the old man.

"We now have boarding-schools out here in the tundra," said the wearer of the greatcoat. "The children are already arriving there."

"Vilka will teach there." The old man pointed at the speaker.

Vilka was embarrassed.

"I don't know yet. I haven't yet made my choice."

"You mean after military service?" asked Galya.

"Yes."

"He not come home six years," put in the old man. "Father went, brother went."

"Where did they go?"

"His father Executive Committee chairman. Brother draw pictures."

"My brother is an artist and bone-carver," said Vilka.

"I thought you wife," the old man said again to Galya. "Russian woman not go tundra before. Trader come without wife. He come camp. He eat, drink, trade. Then he want wife!"

"Is it true that you had the custom of offering your wives to your guests?" asked Dobrov.

"We had no such custom!" Vilka protested vehemently. "That's a tale spread by traders. They made poor people give them their wives, then slandered them, saying it was a custom."

"No more trader," said the old man, "no more rich reindeer-breeder. We have kolkhoz. Reindeer common property, but every Nenets has own wife. We now live this way."

"We were going to ask you for help," said Galya, addressing the whole company. "We must radio our whereabouts. Where is the nearest wireless?"

"Far, very far," said the old man, shaking his head. "Reindeer must run long. Mighty far."

"I think the nearest point is where you left your car and wireless," said Vilka all of a sudden.

"But our wireless is no good now!" Vanya burst in.

"I thought so, too. Car near, polar station far. I asked Vilka." The old man nodded at the demobbed soldier.

"So you could s'how us the way?" Dobrov asked Vilka.

Vilka, a stocky man slow of speech and motion, did not speak at once.

"I'll show you the way," he said after a pause. "I'll try and help you. I'm going to take you to the car."

"To the car?" cried Vanya. "Are you making fun of us?"

Galya raised her hand in a reassuring gesture.

Four cross-country cars were moving over the tundra one after another. There was no road and each car was following its own roadless course, leaving a moist trail behind.

Their long shadows crept over the ground, climbing on hummocks.

The tundra was like a green sea that now threw up the cars upon a crest, now sent them down into a marshy hollow.

As they reached one of the ridges, people in the head car caught sight of a tilted car with a covered top, far ahead.

"There they are at last!" exclaimed the chief of the group, who was travelling in the head car.

A reindeer sledge was racing up to meet the cars.

Galya was steering with a khorei.

The head oar and the reindeer met in a hollow. Galya jumped down on the wet grass, ran up to the car and gave a strong, manly handshake to the hand stretched out of the cab.

Standing near the tilted car were Dobrov, embarrassed Vanya and Vilka the Nenets, his greatcoat unbuttoned and showing a bar of decoration ribbons pinned to his tunic.

The chief of the group was the first to greet him. "How are you, Comrade Vilka? Thanks for helping our people out."

Vilka smiled.

"Don't mention it, Comrade Chief. One condenser was ruptured and the other leaked. I only changed the circuit a bit, and the wireless started working."

"Thank you, Vilka," said Galya. "I suppose I'm thanking you for the thousandth time." Suddenly she threw her arms around the Nenets and kissed him. "Just think, Georgy Ilyich," she said to the chief of the group. "Who could have imagined we'd find such a fine wireless technician out here in the tundra!"

"He's an army wireless operator," the chief of the group remarked significantly. "They claim you, you know," he said to Vilka. "They want you to work at the wireless centre."

"Thank you," answered Vilka with dignity. He was standing calmly before the new-comers, a thickset, deliberate man. "Thank you. Perhaps I'd better wait. I want every Nenets camp and every choom to have a wireless. It's got to be done."

"It shall be done, and a lot more. Just get in touch with all those who're back from the army," suggested the chief.

Vanya managed at last to have a word with him in private.

"I'll take a training course," he said in an excited whisper. "Then I'll start for a polar station ... the farthest of all! Now I know what an Arctic wireless operator must be like." He looked at Vilka.

Galya and I were sitting on the steps of the cottage. The car, which had just refuelled, was coming over from the polar station.

"Vilka didn't teach Vanya alone," she was telling me. "He taught me how to control my feelings, how to offer and give help simply and readily. You know, he did put wireless in the chooms and now he's chief of shift at the wireless centre. He could hardly read and write before he was called up. Now he's planning further studies. If you see him give him a handshake on my behalf. You may see Vanya the wireless operator, too. Tell him Kuzma Andreyevich and I remember him often. And now, good-bye." She rose. "Dobrov is waiting for me." She shook hands with me. "Look, the fishermen are laying their net."

I looked after the car as it moved away. It now appeared upon a hummock, now dropped out of sight in a hollow. Geologists were on their way to blaze new trails into tomorrow.

There was an orange afterglow on the horizon, which in that season did the duty of night.