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FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE MOSCOW 1955

HEXA

It was absolutely necessary for us to make Glacier Island, one of the remotest and least accessible islands in the Arctic.

Once a pick and a shred of the Russian tricolour were found among the bare basalt rocks of Glacier Island. They marked the grave of a Russian explorer who had pushed on undaunted to the North.

Afterwards the most northerly polar station was set up on the island by Soviet people. It proved most valuable for the science of weather. But during the war the station was evacuated.

Whenever an attempt was made to re-establish the Glacier Island station in the post-war years, impassable ice blocked the ship's way.

Having failed the year before, Boris Yefimovich, the captain, was resolved to land a group of winterers on Glacier Island at any cost.

The ship was running north through a mass of ice-floes separated by dark spots — not of water but of fresh ice that looked like brittle glass. Its thin, transparent cakes piled upon each other as they gave way to the ship. Inside them I could see the white sheets of ice and lumps of snow that did not melt in water.

In Ruby Bay I heard the story of the re-establishing of the station on Glacier Island by reaching it on foot.

One of the principal characters of the story was Hexa, a dog.

The name means "witch" in Nenets.

Hexa was presented to polarniks on the mainland by an old Nenets. He apologized at great length for the fact that she had only three legs, one having been bitten off by a polar bear. But he insisted that Hexa had many good qualities, that she could all but talk, and understood whatever was said to her.

Such was Hexa's fame, and whenever she hung about the mess-room door, as was her habit, the polarniks laughed and said she was "eavesdropping."

In Ruby Bay Hexa unexpectedly gave birth to four pups. The shaggy pups, petted by all, bounced about the station like balls.

Meteorologist Mikhail Ivanovich, a stout man suffering from asthma, took them along whenever he went out to check his instruments; they scurried after him, barking in unison and protecting him, he said, against polar bears. Vanya, the wireless operator, always waited for the pups to burst into the wireless room in search of some tasty morsel, which he always had in store for them.

By spring the pups had grown up to be sturdy dogs. They raced about the shore and started barking, as Hexa had taught them, whenever an inquisitive seal popped its head out of the water. That meant they wanted someone to come and shoot the seal.

The day when the question of an early re-establishment of the Glacier Island station was discussed in the mess-room, Hexa hung about the door, "eavesdropping" as usual. This time, however, she had a good reason for listening and worrying. The talk centred about her own sons.

It was Mikhail Ivanovich who suggested setting out for Glacier Island on foot. He planned to harness the four young dogs to a sledge. The men were expected to help them pull the load.

"We're sure to make it, while a ship might fail again," he said.

Lavrov, chief of the station, was surprised.

"What is this now, Mikhail Ivanovich? Do you really think you can? Why, it's a hundred and fifty miles! Then there's your weight ... and that asthma of yours."

"Never mind," Mikhail Ivanovich replied, mopping his broad face framed with a beard that he had let grow shortly before. "Young people need a senior companion on a march like this. Who else should go but the Party organizer?"

"No easy job, that," said senior mechanic Matvei Sergeyeovich, a judicious and deliberate man, shaking his head. "It's an archipelago, you know. You'd have to make your way across islands and straits. The ice might break. Besides, the blizzards are heavy in those parts. Once you're snowed over you can't dig yourselves up."

"Rubbish!" said second mechanic Yury, a long-legged youth. "Men carried the Russian flag on foot all the way to Glacier Island. And it was this bay they started from, too. Their ship lay at anchor here."

"Yes, they did make the island. Only they buried their chief there," remarked Matvei Sergeyeovich, "but we must work."

"You may stay here!" said Yury hotly. "As for me I'm willing to go."

Matvei Sergeyeovich shrugged his shoulders. He did not feel like leaving Ruby Bay. He was building a rotor wind motor to replace the one broken, and was anxious to finish the job.

The group was finally made up of Mikhail Ivanovich, Yury, and Vanya, the wireless operator who had once worked under geologist Galya. Moscow authorized the expedition.

Mikhail Ivanovich at once began the preparations and introduced training practice. Every day the three climbed a glacier, pulling loaded sledges that were too heavy for the incomplete team of four young dogs. Hexa invariably accompanied the group of her own accord.

They returned to the station worn out.

"I wonder why we do all this," grumbled Yury. "At a pace like ours we could've made Glacier Island long ago. Back in Moscow I used to take part in ski contests. Bah! We haven't all got surplus fat to get rid of!"

Vanya, bashful, blue-eyed and freckled, kept an embarrassed silence; Mikhail Ivanovich smiled good-humouredly but objected in a rather harsh tone.

"Boys, you must get used to discipline as well as to walking. We have no right to fail."

At the station they toasted bread and rigged up a wireless for the expedition.

Yury, who was impulsive and easily carried away, urged the others to start. But Mikhail Ivanovich was taking his time. He wanted every single contact in the wireless to be soldered as painstakingly as parachutes are fitted out before the take-off.

No one but Lavrov heard Mikhail Ivanovich groan at night.

"Why don't you cut down your load?" he said to Mikhail Ivanovich. "The thing is to get to the island. There you'll find everything you need. The storehouse is full."

"Is it?" said the other doubtfully, rubbing down his aching feet. "Ever hear of disappearing islands? The sea is whittling away the shore at Glacier Island. During the past years the buildings may have tumbled down."

"Perhaps so," the chief agreed. "I think you'll have to take provisions for the journey back, too. You must come back if there are no stores left."

At last Mikhail Ivanovich announced a long training march of thirty to sixty miles. Yury hinted to the girls that although Mikhail Ivanovich called it a training march he would try to reach the goal.

The courageous three were seen off by all the Ruby Bay winterers.

It was mid-April, the sunniest season in the Arctic. The Arctic night had ended a month before and the days grew longer with every sunrise. Snow and ice glittered with myriad sparks. The only place where the snow did not hold was Ruby Cliff, then dark-grey and looking like a giant block of concrete.

The men embraced each other. The girls — there were three of them — kissed Vanya and Yury.

"I'll ski over to see you!" cried Yury. "A hundred and fifty miles isn't much of a distance."

The young dogs were barking impatiently in the harness. Crafty Hexa was tugging at her straps, the hair on the back of her neck bristling.

Soon the little caravan stretched out on the sparkling snow. In front was a roundish form followed by another two forms, one tall and one short, then came four very small ones and the sledge which, seen from afar, was a mere speck on the white snow.

Heavy Mikhail Ivanovich led the way, straining at the straps. They went along the coast, over crusted snow which glittered in the sun like a bright waterway. Icebergs frozen into the ice rose in the strait.

The dazzling whiteness of snow is dangerous. Mikhail Ivanovich was afraid of snow blindness and had everyone put on sun-glasses.

He had started at a swift pace, as if he wanted everybody to wear out on the very first stretch. Yury was twice compelled to overcome his self-respect and hint at camping. Mikhail Ivanovich laughed away the idea and pushed on.

Before long the two young men ceased to notice the steep shore-line or the icebergs along the route.

Their only thought was: "Just keep going. Forget all around you and walk on. Pick out some point far ahead and make for it. Draw breath every three paces — in, out, in, out. Don't think of anything else."

They halted only once to have some food which they warmed up on the primus.

Then they started towing again, with their eyes on the ground.

Mikhail Ivanovich was the only one who looked ahead, and whenever he looked back he smiled at his companions.

The sun set. The afterglow tinged the sky with delicate shades of orange, and faded.

Yury could not stand it any longer.

"I personally don't mind, of course," he pleaded, "but a man's system has to get used to it, you know."

"We'll camp on the other side of that cape, out of the wind," replied Mikhail Ivanovich.

It was in a state of complete exhaustion and with numbed feet that the three crawled into their sleeping-bags.

"Why didn't I think of it before!" said Mikhail Ivanovich. "We should've slept the last nights in bags to get used to it."

Vanya and Yury made no answer. They were asleep.

Mikhail Ivanovich got up before the stars faded, and woke the young men.

Yury was annoyed to realize that he could not get up.

"I don't understand it, Mikhail Ivanovich. If this is a march to the island, please say so. I'm willing to stand anything, but doing it for the sake of training — why, there's no sense in it!"

Mikhail Ivanovich said nothing, but gave the youth a hard look.

Vanya scrambled out of the bag which he shared with Yury. The other at once felt cold and ashamed. He crawled out, too. His feet and back were aching.

"No sportsman trains like this, I can tell you," he muttered.

Once again they put themselves to the sledge and set off. The sun was not up yet. But the sky had brightened and the stars had grown paler.

Yury was breaking down. He was equal to any brief physical effort and had actually taken part in ski sprints. He had also patiently borne up under the daily training. But the strain put on him now seemed beyond human endurance. He bowed his head and bit his lips till it hurt; still he did not pull hard enough. Vanya noticed it but said nothing.

Suddenly Yury stopped the dogs and sat down on the sledge.

"I just can't go on," he stammered, afraid to look Mikhail Ivanovich in the face.

Mikhail Ivanovich sat down beside him. "See here, my boy," he said in a soft, good-humoured tone.

"How do they test, say, a rope? With a weight heavier than it'll ever have to bear when actually used. If it holds it is considered strong enough. It's the same for us. This is more than training, it's a test. You'd better go back now than fail to fulfil the task later."

"I'll rest a little," mumbled Yury in confusion.

Mikhail Ivanovich turned back.

It took them two days to get back, and all that time Yury was gloomy. A struggle was going on in him. When Ruby Cliff came in sight he asked for a halt.

"I'm not shirking, Mikhail Ivanovich," he said, "please don't think I am. It's just that I don't want to be a burden. You've got a task to fulfil, but I haven't got the strength."

"Thanks for saying that, boy," answered Mikhail Ivanovich.

At Ruby Bay the three were given a hearty but wary welcome.

All the polarniks gathered together again.

"I'm willing to work as a mechanic," said Yury, staring at the floor. "I can finish the wind motor. And I'm ready to do any odd jobs. I'm going to train. Perhaps I'll have to go some other time." As he spoke he swore to himself never again, as long as he lived, to cut such a sorry figure in front of his comrades.

"Yury'd certainly have held out and made it," said Mikhail Ivanovich. "But you know we mustn't take any chances. We've got to fulfil the assignment. That training proved useful after all. See how slim I look now. Well, who'll take Yury's place?" he asked, looking at Matvei Sergeyevich.

Lanky Matvei Sergeyevich stroked his hollow unshaven cheeks and made no reply. "So it's a mechanic they need again," he said to himself. "Whether you want to make a wind motor or pull a sledge, you can't do without a mechanic." The fact was, he did not want to go, for he was building a wind motor of a wonderful design he knew well. He had already made all the calculations with the aid of an engineering encyclopaedia and had riveted together two iron half-drums.

"What do you say?" Mikhail Ivanovich asked him.

"When are we supposed to start?" queried Matvei Sergeyevich in a businesslike voice. You could read his thoughts on his face.

"In a day or two. Before the straits come back to life."

"Then I suppose I must go," said Matvei Sergeyevich with a sigh, and beckoning to Yury, he went out. He led the youth to the workshop and told him all about how to make the rotor; then he made him repeat his advice over and over again.

Yury was ready to tackle any job, whether it was building a home-made wind motor or a second Dnieper power station in the Arctic. But because nobody had a word of reproach for him he felt unhappier still.

Once more the polarniks saw their comrades off. But this time everybody felt less excited.

Yury was waiting for the party beyond the cape.

He heartily shook hands with each one, saying nothing, embraced and kissed Mikhail Ivanovich, and ran back. Mikhail Ivanovich lingered a little and smiled as he watched Yury go; then he went on.

"Look, here comes Hexa!" cried Matvei Sergeyevich.

Hexa was running towards them with a piece of cord around her neck.

Mikhail Ivanovich shouted at her in a shrill voice. She sat down on the snow, but when the three moved on she hobbled after them. Then they stopped.

Vanya and Matvei Sergeyevich hurled a few snow-balls at Hexa. She ran off and sat down again. There was a wolfish obstinacy about her. The harnessed dogs barked nervously. Mikhail Ivanovich picked up a rifle from the sledge and threatened Hexa with it. But she remained sitting there, with her tail curled about her forepaws. Mikhail Ivanovich fired a shot in the air. Hexa hid behind a jutting ice-block.

They started off again. Hexa was nowhere to be seen. She must have gone back.

The men were following an old trail which was not snowed over yet.

This time Mikhail Ivanovich was leading his companions at a slower pace and the halts were more frequent. He was anxious to spare both men and dogs.

The first days were particularly trying. At the halts the exhausted dogs dropped down on the snow and rolled up. Matvei Sergeyevich lit the primus with soldierly alacrity. Mikhail Ivanovich pitched the tent, humming some air out of tune, while Vanya called up Ruby Bay by wireless.

Hexa followed them after all. Nobody tried to drive her back any longer. She ran busily now ahead of them, now at the side, sniffing.

"Just look at that scout," said Matvei Sergeyevich, nodding at her.

"Leave her," said Mikhail Ivanovich. "She'll at least warn us of bears."

By the third day walking had become a habitual state with them and their feet seemed to move along of their own accord. Now they looked oftener about them.

The route led from island to island. White-capped cliffs, treeless and powdered with snow, rose steeply all around. There was nothing but that white expanse of ice, dreary as a clouded sky.

"A barren land," said Matvei Sergeyevich.

"Don't be so sure!" Mikhail Ivanovich objected. "There might be coal here. And the magnetic anomalies in these parts — isn't that a sign of iron? I can't use my compass, you know. It misleads me. I try to go by the map, from cape to cape."

It was a fact that Mikhail Ivanovich did not use his compass. He had studied the map of the archipelago so thoroughly that he seemed as much at home on the islands as in his own hack-yard.

Fine weather gave way to a head wind that made breathing difficult. The wind brought tears to the men's eyes, beat against their chests, checking their advance, and doubled the weight of the sledge.

They plodded on against burning tongues of white flame that swept over the crusted snow or sped upwards in a foam-like stream. It was like wading through water. They felt dizzy and had to grope for their way. The dogs could not be seen.

The best thing to do was to sight a cliff, cape or iceberg ahead, and make for it; that took away the dizziness.

Gathering strength, the wind grew into a frenzied blizzard.

The three had to pitch camp. The dogs at once nestled against the tent and were snowed over, and soon the tent became a pile of snow. Men and dogs lay side by side, with just a canvas between them. They could not so much as stick their heads out. Still Vanya managed to send a report to Ruby Bay that they lay under snow. Ruby Bay radioed back that Moscow was following their every step.

Vanya lay in the same sleeping-bag with Matvei Sergeyevich.

"What if the house has tumbled down with the shore, as it did on Disappearing Island?" he said softly.

"In that case we'll go back."

"I'm not afraid," Vanya hastened to add. "I was just wondering."

Two days and nights were spent in the snow-drift. Ruby Bay radioed a weather forecast. The blizzard was expected to die down. The men decided to dig their way out. While they were at it the blizzard did subside.

Once again they marched on at a measured pace; snow-covered cliffs and the blue zigzags of glaciers, sliding downwards in huge "ice cataracts," moved past.

They had gone more than half the way. But the blizzard had covered the straits with snow.

It was risky to cross them, there might be cracks or thin ice under the snow. Mikhail Ivanovich led the way, taking every precaution and probing the ice with a pole. He had a reason to consider himself the heaviest man because he weighed more than two hundred pounds. If the ice held him they were all safe. But the sledge was heavier still.

Suddenly Vanya was jerked back.

"The wireless!" he shouted, rushing to the sledge which had sunk under the ice.

The ice was crackling and the dogs were floundering helplessly.

"Lie down flat!" shrilled Mikhail Ivanovich.

Vanya fell down. Matvei Sergeyevich and Mikhail Ivanovich crawled to the sledge. So did Vanya.

The dogs were being dragged under the water.

"Cut the straps!" shouted Mikhail Ivanovich.

"The wireless! The wireless!" Vanya kept on shouting. "Wait a second!"

By then the wireless was under the water with part of the sledge. Its loss would spell complete failure for the expedition. It was expected to serve them not only on the way but on Glacier Island as well.

The loss of the sledge would mean the loss of the provisions. The men pulled at the straps. But the ice kept on cracking. It was a thin upper Layer. Now the water was gushing from the gap and the cracks.

"Leave the sledge, crawl back!" Mikhail Ivanovich commanded.

But Vanya wriggled to the gap like a snake and lowered his arms shoulder-deep into the icy water. He felt the sledge, grabbed the wireless, and strained to pull it out. The ice was crackling and breaking under him. Matvei Sergeyevich caught hold of Vanya's feet.

"Pull!" cried Vanya.

Matvei Sergeyevich started to crawl away from the gap, cautiously dragging Vanya by the feet. Vanya clung on to the wireless.

Finally it was out on the wet ice.

Then Matvei Sergeyevich whipped out his knife and cut the straps. The dogs broke loose and scrambled out, mad with terror. The sledge was gone.

The men crawled towards the shore, leaving a broad trail on the snow-powdered ice.

The soaked wireless was all that they had salvaged from the load. Nothing else was left — no food, no rifle, no primus.

The drenched men could not even get warm.

"We must go on, boys," said Mikhail Ivanovich when they reached the shore. "That's our only hope. We must keep going to get warm. There's nothing else we can do."

"Which way shall we go?" asked Matvei Sergeyevich.

"It's a hundred and twenty miles to Ruby Bay and thirty to Glacier Island. We have no food, but we must get to the station."

"So it shall be Glacier Island," said Matvei Sergeyevich grimly, dancing to warm himself.

"But we might find nothing on Glacier Island," said Mikhail Ivanovich.

"Or the storehouse might still be there," replied Matvei Sergeyevich to the rhythm of his dance.

"The wireless is soaked, but I'll fix it up — on Glacier Island," Vanya put in, his teeth chattering. "Once I couldn't repair it, out in the tundra, but this time I will."

The dogs were busy licking their wet hair and biting out icicles from between their claws.

The men walked on, taking turns to carry the wireless.

Ruby Bay was alarmed. No one knew what had happened. Moscow was worried, too.

Yury was nervous, he insisted that a rescue party be sent and wanted absolutely to go himself. He spent days on end in the wireless room, tapping out again and again:

"Glacier Island, where are you? Answer us, we are listening. Glacier Island, where are you? Where are you? Tell us what happened. We are listening. Where are you?"

Those words were heard throughout the Arctic; the three guessed that they were being searched for, but they were unable to answer. They trudged on day and night in their frozen clothing.

They had had nothing to eat for over forty-eight hours now. They did not halt to rest but simply fell down on the snow.

At their last halt they lay very long. Dangerously long.

The first to sit up was Matvei Sergeyevich. He looked darkly at his exhausted companions who lay in the snow, then at the dogs with the hair standing up in tufts on their ribs. The four dogs from the team and Hexa sat beside the men, staring at them with hungry eyes.

Matvei Sergeyevich got out his knife, deliberately pulled off his mitten and tried the blade with his thumb. Then he began to call one of the dogs.

"Hey, you there! Come here, doggie, come, you walking food."

All the dogs jumped up and looked at the man, wagging their tails.

"Come on. Here! Want some meat?" He made a show of taking something out of his pocket.

Vanya propped himself up on his elbow.

One of the dogs walked up, cringing and licking its lips.

Matvei Sergeyeovich put out his left hand, grabbed the dog by the scruff of the neck and swung up his right hand holding the knife.

"Matvei Sergeyeovich! You can't do that! You can't!" Vanya yelled as he seized the other's arm.

The dog whined. Hexa started barking.

Matvei Sergeyeovich was wrestling with Vanya.

"What's come over you?" he cried angrily. "Do we want to fulfil our task or behave like sissies? Don't you see this is food? We haven't -aten for two days. We need strength."

Vanya would not give in.

"But they are dogs! Our own dogs! We'll need them yet."

The delay gave the dog a chance to break loose. It ran off a few paces, but Hexa flew at it and began to bite it in rage. The dog yelped and ran farther away.

Hexa drove away the other dogs, too.

Mikhail Ivanovich had to settle the argument between Vanya and Matvei Sergeyeovich. The point at issue was whether one of the dogs should be eaten or not.

"Think how useful they'll be to us when we get to the island," said Mikhail Ivanovich, looking at Matvei Sergeyeovich with entreaty.

Matvei Sergeyeovich shook his head.

"That settles it," said Mikhail Ivanovich firmly, "we won't touch the dogs."

Matvei Sergeyeovich shrugged his shoulders.

Vanya asked his comrade to give him the knife, as though distrusting him.

"What for?" asked Matvei Sergeyeovich angrily. "D'you think I don't know what discipline is?"

Vanya was embarrassed. "No, I didn't mean that. Just give me the knife. I'm going to scrape off the ice from the wires."

"All right," said Matvei Sergeyeovich sarcastically.

To justify his request Vanya set about prying into the wireless with his benumbed fingers, cutting the ice off the wires with the knife.

Suddenly he gave it up and looked at Matvei Sergeyevich.

"Does ice conduct electricity, Matvei Sergeyevich?"

"No," the mechanic retorted.

"That's what I thought, too," said Vanya joyously. His eyes shone. "These condensers here — they're wet and have lost their insulating properties. But what if we dried them? I don't mean that, though, I mean if we froze them thoroughly? Wouldn't that be the same as drying them? Hey?"

"I suppose so," said Matvei Sergeyevich doubtfully.

"What are you waiting for, then?" cried Mikhail Ivano-vich. "Get to work, try it."

"Just a moment," Vanya replied cheerfully.

"Bring that wireless here. Stand against the wind, freeze it through!"

Standing there in the piercing wind, their clothes frozen stiff, the men tried hard to freeze the wireless.

Then Vanya tried with trembling fingers to tune in.

There was a crackle in the earphones.

Vanya hugged Matvei Sergeyevich, forgetful of his quarrel with him. Mikhail Ivanovich hurried him; he wanted to send a radiogram.

At last Ruby Bay received the message.

"Twelve miles from Glacier Island," it read. "Lost communication because of soaked wireless. Sledge sank into ice-hole. Trying to fulfil assignment."

The message came on the third day after communication was lost. People in the Arctic drew a sigh of relief. There was not a single polarnik but listened anxiously to the ether or asked a friend thousands of miles away for news about them.

No one had an inkling of the price which the three polar-niks were paying to "fulfil the assignment."

They no longer walked but staggered on, falling and rising again. They had made the straps into a rope and tied it round their waists. Their eyes

had dimmed and their ears were full of a din like the roar of a sea freed from ice and buffeting rocks.

The dogs ran after the men but never came close to them. Most likely Hexa would not let them.

The men got there just the same.

"Ascending glacier on Glacier Island," they radioed.

They did not ascend the glacier but crawled upon it on their bellies, strapped together. They crawled up gnashing their teeth, their eyes shut tight with the exertion, biting their lips, and scratching their frozen cheeks sore against the rugged snow-crust.

And they reached the summit.

They had to go on. The goal was not far off now.

The three men stumbled on. The dogs followed them at a distance.

Mikhail Ivanovich led the way as before, straining at the rope. He held a stick in his hand, leaning upon it, or perhaps groping his way like a blind man. And suddenly he dropped out of sight.

Vanya jerked forward and fell. Matvei Sergeyeovich sat down and spread out his long legs, digging his feet into the snow. He threw down the wireless, which he had been carrying, and clung to it as to a life-buoy.

Hexa rushed forward and started to bark at the hole in the snow.

"Hold on, commander!" shouted Matvei Sergeyeovich.

Vanya recovered from his bewilderment. Together with Matvei Sergeyeovich he began tugging at the rope. Mikhail Ivanovich's face, bearded and frost-bitten, emerged from the hole. He was snatching convulsively at the snow. His comrades helped him out.

"It's a cleft, boys, a cleft," he mumbled with an effort.

Vanya threw a snow-ball into the hole. There was a plop somewhere deep down.

Matvei Sergeyeovich shook his head.

They must make a nearly mile-long detour to round the cleft.

Another mile to go!

The men's strength was spent. The detour cost them a greater effort than the last ten miles had. They could no longer rise to their feet but made headway on all fours as they crept up a hummock, thinking it to be the last.

Meanwhile Mikhail Ivanovich was saying in his cheerful little tenor voice:

"It's the last one, boys. The moment we get to the top we'll see the houses. There's a storehouse there, too," he went on, dropping his voice to a whisper for some reason, "and in it we'll find fat hams, smoked sausages, tinned food, sardines, sprats swimming in oil, or tinned meat. There's a primus there, we're going to light it and make a fine broth, fat and hot — so hot we'll burn our lips."

His words gave the men the strength to climb the knoll.

"We'll see it as soon as we're on the top," Mikhail Ivanovich whispered on.

They crept to the last top, too. And they did see it.

The place was lifeless and white with snow. The thin mast of a wireless station, bent at the top, jutted out of the snow as on the brink of a precipice. As to houses, there were none near it.

The men lay in the snow. They were afraid to look at each other. The old polar station had vanished. It must have tumbled into the sea with part of the shore.

Sitting in front of the wireless in Ruby Bay, Yury was crying, unashamed of the presence of girls; he had received a radiogram about the situation on Glacier Island. No relief could be sent because the ice was gone from the straits by then. Besides, there were no team-dogs in Ruby Bay.

Six months Later the Sedov drew near Glacier Island.

While viewing the island through binoculars, I recalled all that I had been told in Ruby Bay.

First I saw a thin mast, slightly bent at the top, rising above the bastion-like rocks.

Then I saw the glacier to which the captain wanted to sail up.

Three men were standing on the glacier; one of them was big and stout, the other lanky, and the third small. Something was moving about on the snow at their feet.

Later I made out a foxy dog with a leg missing.

The ship's bow butted into the glacier. Men sprang down on the ice. They were polarniks who had come to reinforce the staff of the station. The new arrivals heartily greeted the three heroes who had succeeded in setting up the station six months before the Sedov called.

It was they who had kept the Sedov informed on the state of the ice, guided her and helped her to get through all but impassable ice.

We shook hands with the heroes, who would have been frankly surprised to be called heroes to their faces.

I brought Vanya greetings from someone in the far-away tundra. He blushed with embarrassment.

Mikhail Ivanovich came aboard with us.

"We owe it all to our three-legged Hexa, you know," he said gaily as he sat in the cabin, stroking his long beard. "We'd have starved to death but for her. We saw her run to the wireless mast and start digging the snow. What made her do that? I crawled up to her and lent her a hand. We dug on till we hit on the ridge of a roof. We had been standing right on a house-top! In six years the snow had completely covered up the house. Well, we dug it up. But first we found the door of the storehouse. I wonder where we got the strength to do it from. We opened the door and what should we see in front of us but a fat ham! I took Matvei Sergeyevich's knife and carved off the finest morsel." He smiled. "Matvei Sergeyevich gave it to Hexa."

While Mikhail Ivanovich was telling us his story the crew began to unload provisions, cargo and fuel. The wind was snowing over the unloaded boxes.