

A RACE IN THE ARCTIC NIGHT

The starlit sky foretold frost.

"I've been wasting my time," Fedot Ivanovich Fomin said to himself, looking up at the Great Bear, "and it's well on towards noon. See how that dipper's tilted. It's all right, though, I think I'll make it."

The old hunter whistled to Taimir, a powerful broad-chested husky, and started to put on his skis.

He did not lock the door — some wayfarer might come along. A bundle of flotsam wood washed ashore by the sea lay near the stove. The lamp was filled with paraffin. A frozen bear ham hung conspicuously in the passage, a nice treat for any visitor.

"No fox can open the door, but a man'll find a square meal here," said Fomin aloud.

Taimir looked up with his clever eyes.

Fomin often talked to himself or his dog; it was a habit he had got into during the long years of solitary life after his wife's death. True, he had fine sons, but they had scattered all over the country.

Having fastened his skis, he set out. The snow looked grey in the scanty starlight.

Fomin was looking forward with pleasure to the chat he was going to have with people at the polar station he was bound for. There he might well hear about his sons. He was sure to hear about Alexander, his eldest, for who didn't know Alexander Fomin, the Arctic captain?

On his way Fomin inspected five snares. Splendid foxes had got caught in three of them.

Suddenly there rose a strong wind. Mixing with the prickly snow, it became a compact mass. The stars vanished.

"This isn't a blizzard yet," muttered Fomin. "You can't call it one."

He recalled a blizzard that had nearly cost him his life. Some Chukchi had found him in the snow, frozen and numb, and had warmed him up in

their yaranga. That had 'been during his escape to the tundra from exile in Siberia.

Ever since then Fomin had lived as a settler on the coast up in the Far North, a severe region he had come to love dearly.

It was no good returning to his native Tambov Region, as none of his kin were left there. His father had been arrested with him, because they had set fire to the landlord's house together; as for a wife, well, he had had no chance to get married yet. It was in the North that he did it, marrying a Chukcha woman. She had been a good wife to him.

His father had died serving a sentence of hard labour. His own son Ivan was much like his grandfather. If only the old man could have known that his grandson had become an officer! He had only seen tsarist officers, while Ivan was a Soviet officer. Ivan had left for the front as soon as the Patriotic War broke out. He was an excellent hunter and had brought home quite a few silver fox. Nor had he spoiled a single fur; he always hit the fox squarely in the eye. He became a wonderful sharpshooter, did Ivan.

"It looks as if the blizzard's working up into a real one," Fomin interrupted the thread of his thoughts, peering anxiously at the sky.

The wind howled and moaned and roared, trying to knock him down. At some other time he would certainly have stopped to dig in and sleep a couple of days until the storm had blown over and he could go on; but this time he had much too important business to see to.

He was out on a sixty-mile run to the nearest polar station to take part in electing a deputy to the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union. A Chukcha acquaintance of his from a reindeer collective farm had brought him a special invitation as far back as the previous month.

The icy wind made breathing almost impossible. The old man's moustache had frozen together. He could see nothing, not even Taimir. The snow seemed to be roaring around him like the sea in a gale.

"So this is how you, an old hunter, know the tundra, is it?" Fomin reproached himself. "This is what you brag about. See that you don't go wrong

in your reckoning! It seems that you'll have to make a halt if you are to get there at all."

With a heavy heart he crawled into his parka as into a sleeping-hag. Taimir lay down near his master.

Trying to keep warm with his own breath, Fomin said to himself, "No matter what happens, Fedot Ivanovich, you must share in the general happiness, together with your country and all your three sons."

He had sent the three of them to the Big Land where they, sons of a hunter and grandsons of a peasant, could study and get on in life. The youngest, Alexei, had become a flyer. His grandfather could hardly have imagined that people would be flying through the air before long.

"I must go on at any cost. I've already wasted so much time," he thought, terrified, as he scrambled out of the snowdrift.

The wind sent the snow racing in waves. They broke against the ground as the surf breaks against the shore. A single wave like that was enough to snow you over from head to foot.

It was not snow alone that chilled Fomin but cold despair as well. Still he plodded on.

"How can I be late on a day like this? What a shame it would be. And I who was thinking of a chat with people!"

But he was forced to halt. Once again he and Taimir dug in. He tried to reckon how many hours he had been going and how many more he had to go to arrive in time. It appeared that he had not a minute to spare.

Luckily the blizzard began to die down. A hard frost set in. Fomin's black beard, in which there was not a single grey hair, grew hoary. He sped on, unaware of the cold. The important thing was to arrive before dusk — before midnight.

The speed with which that dipper up there shifted! Nothing could stop it.

As if vying with Time, the old hunter ran on across the earth, which was racing inexorably from west to east.

In spite of the late hour the polar station was in a bustle. The passengers and crew of an aeroplane that had just arrived from the east crowded in the well-heated, cosy rooms and the spacious mess-room with the station people.

"We'll just fill in. Then on we go!" said Matvei Baranov, a tall, broad-shouldered flyer renowned throughout the Arctic.

"I won't keep you long," said the chief of the polar station. "You know I'm flying with you, but first we've got to open the ballot-boxes and count the votes."

The station chief glanced at his watch. Its hands were creeping up to twelve o'clock.

"You'd say we were celebrating New Year," said someone.

"Why do you stick to form?" Baranov protested. "You're delaying an experimental flight, that's all."

"Wait, Matvei. We're missing a voter. I wonder what it may mean."

"Is that so?" Baranov's tone had at once become grave.

The door banged. The station meteorologist walked into the room and threw off his fur jacket. There was a melancholy look on his lean face with prominent cheek-bones.

"Nobody in sight. I strained my eyes as hard as I could."

"Perhaps he voted at a deer-breeders' camp?"

"Oh, no! He must come here. He had an election card issued to him on the deer farm."

"Time's up," the station chief cut in. "Will the members of the commission please —"

"Get the plane ready, mechanic!" Baranov commanded.

The door banged again. The wireless operator ran through the mess-room, waving in the air a draft radiogram on the election returns to be transmitted to the District Electoral Commission.

"Let 'em know we're taking off!" cried Baranov to him, rising from the table. He stretched with all his well-built frame and looked round.

A man covered with snow and hoar-frost stood in the doorway.

"What time is it?" he asked hoarsely. "I'd like to vote." Fomin looked entreatingly at those around him.

There was an exchange of embarrassed glances. As no one answered, Fomin looked around helplessly, then sank heavily down on a chair that someone had offered him and concentrated on breaking icicles out of his beard.

"You're just a bit late, Fedot Ivanovich," said the meteorologist, "a matter of a few minutes. We'd been waiting for you so."

The station chief came in with a sheet of paper in his hand and stopped dead in his tracks.

"You here?" he cried, as though he would not believe his own eyes.

Fomin bent his head lower. Water was dripping from his thawing beard.

Nobody tried to comfort the old man. The general silence suggested understanding and sympathy.

Fomin raised his head.

"So I'm late. Yes, you can't catch up with yesterday. No river turns back." He paused.

Baranov cleared his throat.

The old man smiled bitterly.

"Sure I'm wrong, because I missed it."

Baranov glanced at the clock, then at the door.

"We'll make rivers turn back," he said confidently. "The Yenisei as well as the Ob. There's a plan like that, Fedot Ivanovich, a people's plan. Those rivers are going to run into south seas."

The old man shook his head incredulously.

"Joking, aren't you, son."

"No, Fedot Ivanovich. Do you want to catch up with yesterday and grab it by the tail?"

"Just how?"

"This is how. You listen to me till the mechanic comes back. The earth turns from west to east. On this parallel here, the seventieth, it rotates at three hundred and seventy miles an hour."

"So. What are you driving at?"

"Now consider it. If we flew at the same speed the other way, the sun would kind of stand still, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose it would."

"But what if we flew faster than that? What if we overtook the earth? Then the sun which had set would start rising in the west. See?"

"Well?"

"Now my plane, Fedot Ivanovich, flies faster than the earth goes round. So try to imagine what would happen if you flew in it." Baranov winked slyly at the old man.

"Time would move backwards for you!" cried the wireless operator.

"So it would," said the station chief. "They'd land in Arkhangelsk at eleven p. m. while here it's already past midnight. I give up my seat to Fomin!"

Fomin stood perplexed in the middle of the room. The air mechanic came in.

"And now, Fedot Ivanovich, let's hurry to the plane," Baranov said in his booming voice. "Every minute counts!"

"Hurry? I can do that. I've been hurrying all the way here. Only tell me again."

They went.

"That's right, the old man'll vote in Arkhangelsk!" said the meteorologist, slapping the table.

The door opened. A black beard was thrust in for a second.

"Please take care of Taimir. He's all right."

The door slammed shut.

"Don't worry, Fedot Ivanovich!" shouted the station chief as he put on his overcoat to fetch the dog.

Those left in the room walked over to the window. A dog was barking far away. Suddenly an avalanche of stone seemed to crash down from above and a sustained peal of thunder came from outside, so out of place in that frosty Arctic night.

The jet engines of Baranov's powerful craft were roaring.

"Are we really going to fly?" asked Fomin.

The pilot nodded. He was tracing the route on a chart. A luminescent clock hung on the wall in front of him. It did not show past midnight but a little past four p.m. That meant that the previous day had not yet elapsed.

"This is Arkhangelsk time!" cried Baranov.

"Can we make it?" thought Fomin.

Nothing could be seen through the window but the stars, among which the famous Dipper — the old hunter's clock hand — stood out.

The engines were roaring at a steady pitch and time was wearing on. To be exact, it was the pilot's time that was wearing on, while Fomin's star clock stood still. In fact, the hand of that clock had moved back.

Baranov's clock showed eleven p.m. and so did the Great Bear.

The aeroplane came down for landing. There was a jolt, the craft stopped. In the companion-way appeared the sturdy frame of Baranov who had defeated Time.