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LOVE

"It's only aboard the Sedov that you come across people going in opposite directions" — Boris Yefimovich spoke. "You wonder how this can be? It's quite simple. She sails tirelessly from island to island, delivers provisions, coal and equipment, and shifts people at polar stations. And so it happens that she picks up polarniks from some islands to take them to the Big Land while carrying other polarniks the other way. As a result some of her passengers are sailing to the Arctic while the others are returning from there. They take up neighbouring cabins, and occasionally this leads to tangles."

We realized that Boris Yefimovich felt like telling us a story, so we asked him for it.

He consented readily and screwed up his eyes, as if peering far ahead. A pleasant smile, somewhat sly, lit up his weather-beaten, wrinkled face.

"The Sedov was making a routine tour of the islands. We had a girl of twenty or so aboard. It was her first Arctic trip — she'd signed on for three years. She'd finished a seven-year school at a collective farm and it had been her pet idea to travel far, to enjoy the romance of the North, so she'd studied meteorology in Moscow. She was small and well-set. Brimming with health. Her hair was cut short as after an illness. She'd done it purposely, to show she didn't care for any foolishness in the Ear North. Well, on board the ship she met a poliarnik. He was a famous wireless operator. Everybody knows him in the Arctic. Grachov by name.

Masha met Grachov, who was on his way to the Big Land after spending several years at a polar station, and she saw him as an Arctic hero. Of course, he didn't at all think he was a hero. In fact, he was a staid and quiet young man, but —

I recalled Grachov's tall form, his square face with the deep wrinkles, and his even, deliberate voice.

— is there anyone who can't be won by a woman's friendly attention?

They strolled on deck together and were seen by all. They didn't seem to think anything of it, but people made fun at their expense.

Now I must say that the two lovers didn't at all feel like fun. You see, they were sailing on the same ship, but going in opposite directions.

Mashia was to stay for three years on Dreary Island, and Grachov was going home for a rest. Who could tell when they'd have a chance to meet again?

I used to look at those two passengers of mine and shake my head.

One day Grachov walked into my cabin. His face was set and his lips were pressed tight.

"Can you spare me a moment, Boris Yefimovich?" he says. "What can I do for you, Grigory Ivanovich?" said I. "Could you tell me, Boris Yefimovich, how much a day's food costs on the Sedov?"

"Why not? I called my second mate — he keeps the ship's books. He made his calculations and told the amount to Grachov. Grachov carefully put it down in his note-book.

"Now please tell me, Boris Yefimovich, how much is the passage on the Sedov?"

I was surprised. I couldn't make out what he was driving at. But he was a serious man who wouldn't ask idle questions. My second mate told him that, too. The fact is, polarniks never pay anything for their passage or meals. All that is provided free of charge under their contracts.

"Would you by any chance know the price of an air trip from Moscow to Bleak Island via Arkhangelsk?" he says. "That costs a lot of money," I told him.

I happened to know the price. He jotted it down in his note-book, thanked my second mate and myself, and walked out.

Next day he came again. For some reason he looked embarrassed. I offered him some cognac, but he wouldn't have any.

"Boris Yefimovich, it's you I want to ask for something. Do you think you could lend me two hundred and sixty rubles? I could wire it to you in a month, when I'm back on the Big Land."

I was amazed. I knew that, during the several winters he'd passed out here in the Arctic, he must have piled up a nice sum of money. But he's a man you can't refuse anything.

"Why two hundred and sixty? Take three hundred," I said. 'No,' he says, "two hundred and sixty is enough".

He took the money with thanks and went.

We hove to off Dreary Island where Masha was to land. Vasily Vtasilyevich Skhodov was chief there. He's a well-known polarnik, a stern man, but a good manager at that, and a square dealer. It was to his station that Masha had been appointed.

I went ashore to see Skhodov. Masba went with me in the launch. Grachov started for the shore, too. I thought he just wanted to see the girl off. Well, I said to myself, here's a man who's lost his heart in good earnest.

I must tell you that the chief of a polar station has many functions to perform. Grachov, too, knew that.

Shortly after I walked into Skhodov's office, along come Masha and Grachov.

Grachov said they'd decided to register their matrimony in due form and wanted Comrade Skhodov, chief of the polar station, to do it as an official registrar.

I praised Grachov in my mind. Only I felt sorry for Masha because she'd have to part with him right away for a long time.

As I said, Skhodov is a dry and stern man. His face and figure fit in with his nature. He's wiry, with hollow cheeks land grey eyes, and he seldom smiles.

He got out his books, asked those he called 'the parties contracting wedlock' for their identification papers, checked the papers thoroughly and, well, wedded them, that is, had them sign their names, then gave each of the newlyweds a firm handshake, and his eyes at once filled with warmth.

I knew all about Skhodov. He had buried his whole family — his wife and his son, a boy of ten — on a far-off island. That was long ago. Life in the Arctic was hard at the time and some people couldn't bear up under it. Since then Skhodov had become gloomy. Most likely he thought the death of his dear ones was his fault. Still he wouldn't give up the Arctic. He loves these parts.

Skhodov congratulated the young couple and told Masha he'd show her to her room as soon as he'd finished his talk with me.

She walked up to his desk, with eyes cast down.

"Comrade Skhodov," she said, "I'm now Comrade Grachov's wife and can't stay on the island for family reasons."

Skhodov sat back. His clenched fists lay on the desk and he had a sullen look.

Then Grachov stepped forward.

"Don't misunderstand us, Vasily Vasilyevich. You know I've lived in the Arctic for the last six years. And this is the first time I'm in love. Please let my wife go with me! We'll come back afterwards. As regards the expenditure on Masha — the trip money, the price of her flight from Moscow to Bleak Island via Arkhangelsk, her passage on the Sedov and her meals during the voyage — I'm repaying you all that. Most of it by a transfer from my savings bank and the rest in cash. That'll be two hundred and sixty rubles."

Grachov put on Skhodov's desk the money and a telegraphic order to his savings bank.

Masha stood there looking down. Grachov was red with excitement. And Skhodov — you'd have said he'd turned into stone.

At last he spoke up in a hollow, jerky voice. 'What's the meaning of this, now?' he says. "Would you be offering me a ransom for your wife?"

Grachov's square face went crimson. But he checked himself and said in a calm, clear voice, "It isn't a ransom, Comrade Skhodov. I'm repaying the state for the outlay it's made and ask you to cancel the contract with my wife because —" he stopped short.

"Do you really imagine it's just a matter of money, Comrade Grachov?" says Skhodov icily, lashing Grachov with his words. "Don't you, an experienced polarnik, know that if your wife doesn't stay here, the station will be left without a meteorologist?"

"But try to understand, Vasily Vasilyevich!" Grachov pleaded. "Don't you see this is a matter of human happiness? I've never spared myself, I've given myself up to the Arctic, body and soul. Masha won't spare herself, either. Only give us a chance to start our married life, don't part us just yet!"

He sounded so sincere. I felt heartily sorry for them.

"The polar station on Dreary Island cannot do without a meteorologist," Skhodov declared bluntly.

Then Miasha looked up, smiling, and the smile made her face handsome.

"So we'll ask the meteorologist you've got now to stay here another year. He couldn't refuse, could he?"

There was so much selfishness and naivete in her words that you couldn't have heard them without a smile.

Skhodov was taken aback, he frowned worse than before and muttered, "That's up to him. See if you can talk him into it."

The Grachovs went at once. Skhodov angrily thrust into a drawer the money and the telegram which he himself would have to transmit to the savings bank, locked the drawer, and said to me, 'Meteorologist Yurovsky has just recovered from a severe illness. He's weak. I've got no doctor here on the island and Yurovsky will never consent to stay for another year.'

I pictured to myself Yurovsky, who must have his things packed and ready and his pockets full of letters to the Big Land, and then those two who suddenly made their request, thinking that nothing mattered on earth but their happiness.

"Yurovsky won't consent, not for the world," said Skhodov. "I know he won't. It was on account of his illness that I asked for a substitute to be sent here."

As a captain I often have to look into the affairs of my passengers, but now — what could I do now? I could only look on.

Suddenly the newlyweds came back, beaming like the Arctic sun in April.

"He's willing!" Grachov announced.

"He's such a dear young man ... such a wonderful comrade!" says Masha. "I gave him a kiss. His name's Zhenya."

Skhodov went crimson with fury, but said nothing. When the 'lucky' couple had left he said to me, 'Captain, you must help me. I know what human happiness means, but I know just as well what a man's life means. Yurovsky won't survive if he stays. 'Nobody knows that but me. He seems to have a kinder heart than I imagined, but he has no right to stay!'

We talked it over. I thought of a plan and we decided to try it.

I walked out of Skhodov's office. Masha and Grachov came up to me. "Won't you congratulate us, Boris Yefimo-vich?" says Masha. "We're so happy!"

I said coldly, "Can't do it, Maria Fyodorovna, because you're an Arctic deserter."

Grachov scowled at me. Masha turned pale.

"You came here to fight the severe Arctic nature like a hero and serve your country, but instead you got busy settling your own affairs."

"But mayn't I —" Grachov cut in, — "after so many years — mayn't I think of my own self for once?"

"Yes, you may, Grigory Ivanovich, because you've earned it. But I wouldn't be sure about the young lady here who hasn't yet had her cheeks frozen!"

They were going to explain something, but I said to Masha, "Now you're no longer a polarnik but a passenger like any other."

She was hurt.

I went back to the ship, found the Party organizer and suggested that we make it an 'all hands' job to land the cargo.

My assistant for political work was genuinely surprised. "Do you mean all the seamen and passengers to take part in it?" I mean all polarnks," I said. "But the polar station is a small one," he says, "and so's the cargo. We could handle the job without help."

I revealed him my plan.

We started the job. All my passengers readily consented to Lend a hand to the crew.

Work got under way at the landing. Not a single person stayed away from the job. Skhodov and I, too, offered ourselves to carry sacks and boxes ashore.

It's a custom with us in the Arctic. Even our cook with his little skipper's beard came running from the galley to 'toss over' a couple of sacks of coal.

The men walked up in single file to the kungas where heavy siacks were loaded on their backs The polarniks caught the sacks by the ears and hurried away up the shore. Up there they emptied the sacks. A black pile grew up in no time. The men went back to the water to grab fresh sacks and hurry away again.

They worked cheerfully, bandying jokes.

"Come on, now!"

"Run along!"

"Which sack is that? The eleventh? I'm taking my twelfth!"

"Polarniks, don't lag behind us seamen!"

"Step lively yourselves, sailors!"

I went down to the kungas for my next sack and ran into Grachov. He was carrying a sack, his face grimy with coal-dust. All you could see was the whites of his eyes glaring Then a little figure passed me. It was Masha.

"Heave one on my back!" she cried. "Never mind my size!"

Two seamen swung up a sack, but I stopped them and said to Masha, "I'm sorry, only polarniks are at work here. No outsiders allowed."

She was dumbfounded and just stared at me, and the seamen chuckled. Someone else took the sack they'd picked up for her.

"What do you mean, outsiders?" asked Masha "Don't you see I want to help?" "Please go to your cabin," said I. "You're a passenger who's paid her fare. We have no right to put you to work."

She turned away to hide her tears and walked off. The seamen grinned.

Grachov came back for a fresh sack.

"What's the matter, Masha?" he says.

But she ran away.

Afterwards I saw her sitting on a rock, looking at the surf I wondered what she was thinking about.

That evening my assistant gathered the seamen and polarniks in the officers' saloon. He announced that it was to be an evening of reminiscences. Anyone was welcome to tell some interesting story of life in the Arctic.

I was sitting in my cabin when somebody knocked. I knew it was Masha.

She'd been crying.

"Boris Yefimovich," she says, "they won't admit me." "Admit you where?" "Why, to the saloon. Am I a leper or something that I may not even listen?" "Well, that's pushing it too far," I said as I kept back a smile, and took her to the saloon.

It was packed chock-full. But a seat was found for Masha. Then I saw Grachov come in, moody and frowning.

My assistant said, "Well, who's going to tell us his story?" and narrowed his eyes at Katya, one of our renowned polarniks.