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THE BEAR-CUBS

In the second half of September, which is very late for navigation in the Arctic, the Georgy Sedov weighed anchor to sail once more along the great Northern Sea Route. But before long she made a sharp turn and headed north. She had a route of her own running to the "northernmost land," as Valentin Gavrilovich, Doctor of Geography and a new acquaintance of mine, called that archipelago. He had boarded the ship at Bleak Island with a scientific expedition out to explore the archipelago.

Ice conditions in the western parts of the Arctic were exceptionally favorable to us. In fact, there was no ice at all for a long time and we saw nothing around us but a boundless expanse of clear water. The ship rolled heavily. At last we reached ice.

The roll ceased the moment we sailed into the ice zone. Passengers came on deck. The sun peeped out to show us colors of exquisite delicacy. And yet I had been told that there are no bright colors in those parts. The white fields parted, forming greenish lakes as calm as backwaters.

However the sun soon disappeared. A darkish haze enfolded us. Visibility dropped to zero. The ship had entered ice-free water and dense fog.

Seamen have every reason to dislike that sea, where gales and fog are so common.

"I'd have preferred ice," said Boris Yefimovich.

To crown all, the things in the cabins had come to life. The ship was rolling. I could hardly tear open the door of my cabin. My suit-case had broken loose from under the berth and was skidding round in the company of a chair. The water-bottle had pitched out of its socket on the shelf and been dashed to pieces. In short, the cabin was a horrible mess.

The deck kept sinking away underfoot. It would have been easier to crawl than to walk on it, for it was like the slope of a roof continuously changing angle.

It was with a roll like that and in a blind fog that the Sedov gingerly sailed the neighborhood of the "northernmost land." While searching for the archipelago, the captain was afraid he might suddenly crash into it or into one of the icebergs that came floating from the islands.

Taking your bearings in fog is a hard job. The sun did not show for a moment, nor did the stars. The wireless which transmitted bearings from Ruby Bay seemed to be mocking at the captain. After every check-up the ship turned out to be dozens of miles off .the meridian of Ruby Bay.

"Ruby Bay is in the middle of the archipelago," Boris Yefimovich told us. "The radio waves are distorted by the rocks along the coast."

I had never heard about the phenomenon. Despite her excellent navigation equipment the ship now depended largely on her captain's skill.

The fog was very thick. The sky seemed to hang on the mast-tops and you could have thrown a life-buoy to the farthest of the waves in sight.

Valentin Gavrilovich and I stood on deck, with our backs to the funnel, near which it was warm as near a stove. My companion was a tall, sinewy man with a weather-beaten face and dreamy blue eyes.

Suddenly a vague mass loomed into view out of the fog.

"Hard to starboard!" rang out Netayev's alarmed voice. 'Harder! Harder!"

The door of the captain's cabin banged.

"A bear," said the geographer calmly.

A polar bear stood on an iceberg at a level with the ship's deck.

I thought it was about to leap upon us. But the beast ran to the top of the iceberg. There it lay down and covered its black nose with its paw. It obviously imagined it had made itself invisible.

The iceberg swept past, towering above the water like a block of crystal as high as a four-storey house. I knew that it was another fourteen storeys deep in the water. Foam seethed at the dark entrance of a grotto.

All of a sudden the fog was gone.

"There's the land whose existence was guessed by Kropotkin," said Valentin Gavrilovich, pointing" to the horizon. "It should've been named after him, too."

Boris Yefimovich came along.

"We nearly took the bear aboard," he said with a smile. "We'll have to do so, anyway." He showed us a radiogram which read: "Earnestly request you to pick up bear-cubs in Ruby Bay for zoo."

"So we're going to have bear-cubs for passengers?" Netayev said to me in the saloon, after being relieved from his watch. "That's interesting."

Soon the ship cast anchor in Ruby Bay, at the foot of the most remarkable cliff in the North, to which the bay owes its name. In summer-time the reddish lichens growing on it give it a ruby hue. Its walls are perpendicular and the cliff itself rises like a sky-high pedestal. A statue of proportionate height, set upon it, would have reached up to the northern lights.

Polarniks were coming to meet us in a swift little boat. The first to climb aboard by a storm-ladder was a young Georgian with black joining eyebrows and a little moustache of the kind men wear in his homeland. He at once addressed the captain.

"Please be so kind as to take two bear-cubs over from us."

When told of the radiogram about the cubs, he beamed and asked the captain for two sacks of coal.

His request was granted and he at once began to lower the sacks into the boat.

"You'd think there was eiderdown in those sacks, not Coal," said the captain.

The Georgian blushed like a girl.

Later we were told that the year before he had climbed Ruby Cliff to collect eiderdown and had nearly lost his life up there. He had to clear a cleft and land on the narrow ledge of a rock wall. He leapt, but the rock crumbled under his feet, and in order not to fall he had to stand flat against the cliff. He could not turn round to leap back. His comrades ran to the polar station

to get help. His strained muscles grew numb, he no longer had the strength to stand motionless, and seemed bound to fall. Then he risked a backward leap. He pushed himself away from the wall with both hands and feet and landed on the other side of the cleft.

When his comrades came running with planks and ropes, the daredevil was picking up eiderdown, as though nothing had happened. He wanted the down as a present for someone. It was this incident in the mountains that the captain hinted at. He had visited Ruby Bay the year before and knew the story.

The Petushok was lowered and the geographer went for his luggage. Just then a whole flotilla of ice-floes drifted into the bay. The alarmed captain ordered the launch to be hoisted back. The geographer came out of his cabin with his suitcase. Being impatient to land, he cursed the tidal current, which moves first one way, then the other. A little later, when the tide turned, the floes cramming the bay left it as by magic.

The launch was lowered again. Valentin Gavrilovich was the first to descend into it. I made up my mind to go ashore with him.

"Take a look at the bear-cubs," Netayev said to me.

We were welcomed by the entire population of the polar station, including a big polar bear-cub. The cub seemed very inquisitive and eager to see what was going on at the wharf. With its pointed muzzle thrust forward, it pried gingerly into every corner. Another cub sat chained to a post near the station house.

A young girl in a light jacket saw me watching the wandering cub.

"That's my Mashka," she said.

She was small, with a little nose slightly turned up, which gave her merry girlish face a mischievous look. Her name was Nina.

"Would you like me to introduce you to Mashka?"

We walked towards the cub. But a pack of shaggy dogs surrounded the cub, barking furiously. Mashka lowered her head and kept the dogs off by striking out with her paw at them. When the threatened dog ducked the oth-

ers tried to draw the cub's attention to themselves. It was just like a real bear-hunt.

As she beat back the dogs Mashka retreated to the post near which Mishka, the other cub, was straining at his chain with a menacing snarl.

Finally Mashka joined Mishka. They took up a defensive position, back to back. The dogs sat down in a circle, barked awhile with a bored look, and then scattered, feeling that they had done their duty and order had been restored.

"The dogs can't bear seeing Mashka out for a walk," said Nina. "They chase her to the post where Mishka always sits chained. But Mashka is an awful fidget, she follows me like a puppy wherever I go. She can climb up the ladder to the mast and the roof and knows how to unbolt doors to let herself into the house. She's always looking for me."

"Was she very small when you got her?" I asked.

"'Got her'!" echoed the girl with an unaccountable laugh.

We crossed to the cubs, if I may so call those fairly big beasts. Mishka squinted a distrustful eye at us, as befits a grown-up, serious bear, while Mashka began to sniff at me with frank curiosity.

I took on a careless air and even tried to stroke the she-bear, something for which I hardly needed to bend down. She did not mind it.

Then I set out to inspect the station. I also wanted to use the opportunity to look up my fellow-passenger Valentin Gavrilovich and see how he was settling down.

"He skied away to explore the island quite a while ago," was the matter-of-fact answer I got.

"Is that so?"

I had got no farther than the bear-cubs' post, while the geographer was already striding over the ice with carbine and map-case.

"Did you meet our bear-woman?" I was asked.

"You mean Nina who brought up those two bear-cubs?"

"She did more than that — she caught them. She's an excellent hunter."

To tell the truth, I was surprised. A frail, delicate girl like her a hunter!

When I met her again I asked her to tell me how she went about hunting bears. I learnt that she had more than ten bear-skins to her account. Sometimes she did go out hunting, but usually she just ran into bears.

"One night I went out to the porch," she told me. "I had to check the sky — I'm a meteorologist — and what do I see but a huge bear shaking the post under the box with my meteorological instrument. I was so scared!"

The girl had rushed back into the house, snatched her rifle from the wall, run out, and brought down the big bear with a single shot.

"I was so afraid it might break the box," Nina explained, almost apologetically.

I asked her to tell me how she caught Mishka and Mashka.

"I bumped into Mishka and his mother out on ice. I had no dogs with me. I took a shot at the she-bear and she climbed an upright ice-block to die. The cub — he was quite small — stayed below. When we started dragging the she-bear's carcass over the snow, Mishka scrambled upon her back, dug his claws into her fur, and rode like that all the way to the station. Afterwards I fed him out of my own ration. I had no condensed milk myself that winter because of him But he's grown up to be a vicious beast just the same. Mashka wasn't like him, she came to the station of her own accord, with her mother."

Although the cubs were of the same age, Mashka was for some reason bigger than Mishka. They were great friends and could not do without each other. But Mishka probably missed Mashka more because he was always chained to the post. The moment his fidgety friend went away he would roar in a way that sounded hurt rather than angry.

An "all hands" job was on at the wharf. The chief ot the station, Nina, Victor — the polarnik who had borrowed coal from us — the research workers and we, the passengers, all lent a hand.

The only man missing was the geographer. Once I fancied I saw a skier flit across the dome of a far-away glacier. It might have been the geographer.

The job was finished in a couple of days. Provisions, petrol, equipment, boxes, boards and everything else were on shore. Then we took aboard empty barrels from the station. We were expected to pick up the cubs, too. I helped in carrying out of the storehouse a crate in which the two beasts were to be placed.

Victor and Nina brought Mishka on a chain, and Mashka followed him in meek submission. While boards were being prepared to be nailed on to the crate, Mishka had to wait, chained to a drum with paraffin oil. Mashka hung confidently about the crate, getting in everybody's way. But Mishka was in a less peaceful humour. He began to roar.

"What're you roaring for, now?" Victor tried to soothe him. "You're sailing for the Moscow Zoo. You'll always eat your fill."

Mishka tugged at his chain. His collar snapped and he took to his heels; Mashka followed him.

Victor chased the cub, pulling off his short fur coat while running. He overtook Mishka and, pouncing upon him as a goal-keeper does upon the ball, covered him with his coat.

"You're a queer chap all right," he said panting as he lay upon the bear and tried to push his arms under the beast's forelegs. "It's a zoo, not a cage, you're going to live in."

But Mishka went on roaring and kicking angrily. Later we learnt that he had managed to bite his adversary's hand.

Victor rose and lifted the cub, wrapped up in his coat. Mishka screeched and kicked and wriggled, but could not break loose.

Red with the exertion (Mishka weighed not less than a sackful of coal), Victor carried the cub to the crate. Mashka trailed meekly behind.

Mishka was installed in the crate, where he quieted down.

But then Mashka got excited. She had been calm as long as she had heard the voice of her friend. Now she started to roar and scurry about, sniffing the snow in alarm.

Victor walked indifferently over to her, but she had scented a trick. She snorted, as bears do when alarmed, and ran off. Victor made after her,

but she dodged him. Then he decided to use a method already tested: he took off his fur coat and flew at Mashka. But Mashka (she was stronger than Mishka) easily got away and slapped him across the face.

A clout from a bear!

The blow sent Victor sprawling fully two yards off. Before the men could raise him to his feet he was up and after Mashka.

He overtook her near the shore, but she flung herself into the bay. Victor ran into the water up to his knees. Nina dragged him out by force.

Mashka swam towards an ice-floe.

Awhile later everything was quiet. Mishka was taken aboard. Mashka came out of the water and crawled to her post. She let Nina come near her with some food, but did not touch it.

Victor called Nina and gave her a cord with a loop to be put around the cub's neck.

An attempt was made to talk her out of doing it.

"She isn't a bear, is she?" she said. "She's just Mashka. Besides, she'll be all right at the Zoo, but here — here she'll die. She'll have to die."

We all looked on to see what would happen.

Nina stepped to the cub and stretched out her hand with the cord.

Mashka seemed to be transformed. She dodged with a low roar. Then Nina bore down on Mashka's back and gripped it with her hands and legs. She was using force against her pet to save her.

The cub snarled, but Nina would not let her go. Mashka shook Nina, but the girl held on. Victor was only a few paces away. Just then the cub shook off the girl. Something like snow or fluff floated up above the scene of the battle. Instead of a harmless cub we saw a ferocious and strong beast. Victor made boldly for Mashka, holding his coat ready. The beast took to flight. Bear and man disappeared behind the storehouse.

We hurried to Nina, but she was already back on her feet. Her jacket was torn and her arm bleeding; the cub had bitten her hard to break loose. There was eiderdown whirling in the air.

"I regret nothing so much as my jacket," said Nina, her face twisted with pain. "This down is a present. Wha't a silly thing, that Mashka! How shall we save her now?"

They took Nina to the station house to dress her arm.

Victor came back, panting.

"We must shoot down that bear," he said. "Only Nina mustn't get to know about it. You know how she loves Mashka."

We agreed with him. A grown-up bear could not be left at the station, where there were people.

Dusk fell. The long northern afterglow hung above the bay. Now the sky was of a translucent orange hue, the sea greenish, with white ice-floes in it, Ruby Cliff a mass of crimson, and our ship just a dark silhouette. Grotesque ice-blocks rose farther away, in the strait between the bay and a neighbouring islet. Some of them looked like houses with roofs caved in and others like snow mounds sloping down into the water. The largest iceberg resembled an ancient ship with high bow and stern.

Suddenly I caught sight of a she-bear on one of the nearest floes. She stood motionless as a statue, her muzzle turned up towards the ship. Merged with the floe as if she, too, were made of ice, she was floating past the ship. But she was not made of ice, she was alive and roaring sadly.

I heard an answering roar from the ship. Mishka had recognized his friend.

The current swiftly carried the she-bear past. As I stood on the shore I saw Mashka jump into the water and make for the shore with the agility of a dolphin. She clambered out on to the rocks and ran towards the houses, growling softly and plaintively. The dogs she came across darted aside one after another, as though respecting her sorrow.

Mashka sped upstream along the shore and leapt into the water again. In a few minutes she was on another floe and sailed past the ship once more. And again the parted friends roared.

Then Mashka again ran along the shore. Her persistence was astounding. Again and again she sailed past the ship.

People looked on in amazement. Nobody joked.

The seamen were saying good-bye to the polarniks, for the ship was due to sail before dawn.

The geographer came aboard. He had been working on an article about the Ruby Bay glaciers. I was to take the manuscript to Moscow. It had prevented him from doing his share of the "all hands" job. His comrades had readily released him from all duties, but he would have none of it and had volunteered to heat the bath house throughout the winter.

"So these are our spoils: an article and a bear-cub," I said, taking the manuscript.

"What cub?" asked the geographer in surprise. "Were there any bears prowling about here?"

I broke into hearty laughter. That dear geographer! We embraced each other.

I shook hands with Nina and Victor and stepped into the launch. From it I could see well the whole area of the polar station. There was a crowd on the shore. My gaze wandered to the post near which I had first seen the cubs. Mashka was there. She stood hugging and shaking the post. I heard her mournful roar.

I glanced at Nina.

"I'll save her just the same," she said softly but firmly.

She knit her eyebrows for a second, then smiled at us who were sailing for the Big Land. She was staying for another year, out there at the world's end. I was sure she was going to take Mashka far out into the ice-fields and leave her there.

The launch cast off.

It became dark. We could no longer see the shore where the last lights had gone out in the little houses. I did not feel like sleep, so I stayed up till dawn. The captain ordered a farewell salute to the polarniks. He knew well how greatly people in the North appreciate the slightest signs of attention.

Rockets shot up. For an instant they snatched out of the dark the steep shore, the glaciers, the sombre mass of Ruby Cliff. Some of them fell

into the water before they had burnt out, and then spots of light shimmered under the water.

Whenever the shore was lighted up I could glimpse the houses and the solitary post. There was no one near the post.

Many days later we were sailing in a sea clear of ice.

The captain pulled open the door of my cabin.

"There's a bear on deck. Be careful!"

A bear on deck? I could not help recalling the iceberg with the bear which might have jumped aboard. But then we had left all icebergs far behind.

Mishka's cage turned out to be empty. It appeared that, like Mashka, he knew how to unbolt doors but had so far kept it secret. Now he had broken out of his cage.

He was searched for all over the ship, but could not be found. He had vanished.

We concluded that he had jumped overboard.

"He'll be all right," Boris Yefimovich assured us. "Bears have a remarkable custom: when a she-bear comes across a strayed cub out in the ice-fields she adopts it."

But the ice-fields were so very far away. Had the cub been able to swim as far as that? Hardly. But it might have.

Everything was cleared up when Netayev came from his watch back to his cabin.

The runaway cub was sleeping under his berth.

Netayev had been the only one to find the key to the beast's heart.

He had watched the whole scene of the bears' sorrow. Touched by it, he had visited Mishka's cage, fed and fondled him, and taught him this and that. And Mishka had taken to his new friend. Then, missing his protector, he had escaped from his cage, sniffed his way to Netayev's cabin, and stolen in through the half-open door. During the roll the door had slammed to.

The most stirring part of the cubs' story was probably its finale, which I unfortunately did not have a chance to witness.

Nina and Victor succeeded after all in saving Mashka.

They could certainly not leave the beast at large because she was used to the polar station and could find her way to it at any time.

So they put a cord around the already calm and submissive Mashka's neck, and skied thirty-five miles with her.

They reached a neighbouring point where the Nord was expected to call.

Mashka safely boarded the ship and soon, I understand, walked freely on deck and was petted by all.

The Nord arrived in Arkhangelsk immediately after the Sedov, and there Mishka and Mashka met.

The two beasts, I was told, at once recognized and fondly sniffed each other, then snorted and took up a defensive position, back to back.

The evening when Mishka was found in Netayev's cabin we learnt that Mashka was aboard the Nord. In the saloon Netayev engaged in a heated dispute as to whether it was permissible to shoot polar bears. He reminded those around him of the prohibition to kill polar bears unless they attack people. And the fact is, a bear seldom attacks anyone.

When the dispute was over, yielding to Netayev's arguments, we all voiced a desire for the establishment of a polar-bear preserve in our country. It might be set up in the Far North or north of a certain parallel.

"Glacier Island is a place where bears have lived a particularly easy life in recent times," said the captain, rising to go to the bridge. "No ship has managed to make it during the last five years."