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THE HALTED WAVE

The river reflected the glowing sky, and the water seemed orange-coloured.

Men were busy on the bank, laying a fishing-net.

My fellow-traveller Netayev, a young seaman who was on his way to the Georgy Sedov to replace the third mate taken ill, had gone to see the chief of the polar station and did not come back for a long time.

I thought I would watch the fishermen at work and went down to them.

Several men were dragging the net along the bank, while their mates, in oilskin overalls, waded chest-deep through the ice-cold water.

The net was pulled out on to the sand. The fish wriggled in the meshes like quicksilver. I had never imagined that fish of so many kinds could be caught in the Far North. There was smelt and dorse, and even plaice which I had thought was only found in south seas. Sometimes the net brought in a puny, ugly fish — the sea-devil — which looks like a wood-goblin. The fishermen threw it back into the water with disgust.

At last Netayev returned. He was trying to look calm, but his blue eyes kept shifting uneasily.

"There's trouble on Guessed Island," he said in a level tone that obviously cost him an effort.

The fishermen walked over to us. One or two nimble fish leapt out of the net and, flouncing spasmodically, reached the water.

"Two men from the polar station are missing: mechanic Gordeyev and wireless operator Panov," said Netayev.

"What do you mean?" an old fisherman with a greyish-yellow moustache asked anxiously.

"Yesterday they started out to hunt seal and haven't been heard of since."

"Oh, what a misfortune!" cried someone. "Did anybody search for them?" asked someone else.

"Yes. Followed their ski-tracks, but the tracks broke off at the edge of the ice."

"Must've drifted away on a floe," said the old man and took off his cap. His hair was grizzly, with a touch of yellow.

"And what's the weather like over there?" asked a young fisherman in a greatcoat.

"Rough"

"That would mean the gale broke off the floe."

"Were there just two of them?"

"Yes. And a dog. No food, though."

"Oh, what a misfortune!" said the old man sorrowfully. "The Arctic — it's so hard and changeable. The boys must've lost their lives. I suppose they were young?"

"Yes."

"Are you waiting for Baranov?" the demobbed soldier asked us.

"Uh-huh."

"If only Baranov was here"

"That's it, if he was here!" those around us agreed.

We walked to the station. I was thinking off the missing men. It was more than six hundred miles to Guessed Island. The fishermen had taken the news of the misfortune on the far-off island just as if it had happened in their own village.

The wireless operator at the station gave us the latest news. The dog had just come back to Guessed Island — wet and alone. It had a knife wound in its neck.

What had happened on the floe while it drifted in the gale along the island? Who could tell?

A plane came into view in the sky. A mere speck at first, it then grew into a beautiful soaring bird. The bird skimmed over the water, furrowing the smooth orange surface with its breast. Two grey-crested waves followed it.

The two roaring propellers of the flying boat looked like shining disks. Its wings were much higher than its body, which was as shapely as a sea-gull's. Two floats had appeared on the tips of the wings; one of them was already frothing the water.

The boat wheeled round and began to draw near. Trestle bridges led to the river from petrol tanks on the bank. Men in top-boots and quilted jackets were getting ready ,a hose.

"Why do we fill up here and not on Bleak Island?" asked the broad-shouldered pilot as he stepped ashore.

He was Matvei Baranov.

The chief of the polar station handed him a radiogram by way of reply. The flyer glanced at us, nodded, and began to read the message.

He had large features, with deep lines at the corners of his mouth, and bushy eyebrows. His face might have looked stern but for the dimple on his chin, which somehow softened it. Like all pilots he often screwed up his eyes, straining them, and tiny puckers fanned out from their corners.

"And I'd thought I'd spend the night here and bring down the humidity at your refreshment-bar," he said to the chief of the station with a smile.

The other, a veteran pilot who had long before given up flying, shook his head. "I'm thinking of something else. Why, you've been flying fourteen hours on end."

"We must check the engines," said Baranov and turned to his companion who was taking some bags out of a boat. "Put 'em back, Kostya, we'll be taking off right away!"

"Taking off? And how about filling up?"

"Can't you see the tanks?"

"Those aren't for the sort of filling I mean." Kostya's eyes twinkled mischievously.

Compared with Baranov, Kostya looked small and agile. This is what the chief of the port told us about him.

During the war Kostya was a war pilot. He was reprimanded more than once for reckless flying and finally was sent to iron-handed Baranov for correction. They became friendly. One evening Kostya went to bed and Baranov, who was going to a party, could not wake him up. When Kostya discovered that Baranov had gone without him he took a human skeleton in the laboratory of the school where their unit was stationed and tucked it under his friend's blanket. Coming back, the enraged Baranov pulled Kostya out of bed.

Once Baranov had to parachute from his damaged plane; to help his friend, Kostya belly-landed his own plane in a marshy tundra. The wireless was out of order and the two flyers were unable to signal their whereabouts. They spent a whole week levelling the ground for a take-off and straightening out the bent propeller, and succeeded after all in reaching their airfield where they had been considered dead...

The boat headed for the flying craft. The mechanics got to work on the engines. Baranov came up, greeted us, and offered a smoke. Children from the fishing village surrounded us One of them, a swarthy Nenets dressed in a tiny but real parka, was probably feeling hot.

I could guess what message the radiogram carried, and was watching Baranov with interest. He cast frequent glances at the flying boat being prepared for the flight, but his face was inscrutable. He cracked jokes with the children, then held out his leather cigarette-case to them. The children gasped in amazement and shook their heads. Baranov laughed, "This is what always happens. The cigarettes are interesting as long as they're out of reach. All right, now, take them as souvenirs!"

Still the children took none. Baranov turned to us.

"I've got two naughty boys like these. Each of them I've presented with a silver cigarette-case. I'm sure they aren't going to smoke. It's the forbidden fruit that is sweet. Got a radiogram from them yesterday. They want a bear-cub. But I'll bring 'em a piece of strange coal. It was found on

an island. Looks like coal, but is lighter. Why are you standing here?" he asked suddenly in a different tone. "Where's your luggage? We can't waste time."

As we went for our luggage, we managed to learn a thing or two about Baranov.

He had been an Arctic flyer for nearly fifteen years. In winter he lived with his family in Moscow where he tested aircraft, but with the beginning of the Arctic navigation season he flew north and did not return until navigation was over. He dreamt of night flights in the polar regions in winter and helped in making them regular.

When we came back the flying boat was being refuelled. Baranov, tall and heavy, was talking to a man from the station, his feet in high dog-skin boots planted wide apart.

"So it won't die down before three days, will it?" we heard him say. "Is the sea rough?"

"Happy landings!" said the man as Baranov took leave.

Baranov disappeared inside the flying boat. Soon Netayev and I climbed in, too, and found ourselves in a roomy cabin with a semicircular glass top.

A launch steamed up to tow the boat to the middle of the river.

Kostya put his head out of the cockpit, winked at us, and was gone again.

The flying boat floated slowly along in the wake of the launch. The river was surprisingly calm. It still reflected the golden afterglow. In those latitudes, nights are golden in August. Through the glass top of the cabin, we could see the launch drawing away to the bank.

The engines roared. It seemed as if the flying boat were about to dash forward and take off. At last!

A moment later we lost sight of the launch. Fishermen's houses and the tiny figures of fishermen on the bank were gliding rapidly past. Then we saw ahead of us a smooth expanse of water and far away, the vague outline of the opposite bank.

The boat was wheeling round. Perhaps Baranov was choosing the direction in which to take off. Once again we sighted the fishermen's houses, the polar station, the launch.

The boat was turning round and round. Why? Was anything wrong?

Kostya emerged from the cockpit.

"We're waltzing," he told us. "Warming up the engines, you know. A land plane doesn't move an inch while warming up its engines, but we must dance. It's more fun this way, though!"

We spun many more rounds in that peculiar dance. The powerful engines were being checked for the last time, the propellers roaring at an even pitch.

And suddenly the boat hurtled forward. The houses dropped behind. Waves rose and screened the windows of the cabin. We felt like having submerged. White foam sped past the panes.

Unexpectedly the waves vanished. The zooming boat headed for the open sea.

"The Sukhumi," said Netayev.

I saw a toy-like steams'hip lying in the roads.

It was a pleasure to view the land below. On our way north, the plane had flown above the clouds all the time.

Soon the village, the mouth of the river and the steamship passed out of sight.

"Mountains!" Netayev shouted.

I looked back. On the horizon behind us rose the hazy sky-line of cloud-like mountains.

"It's the Urals," said Netayev right in my ear.

"The Urals?" I queried in astonishment. "How far are they?"

"Sixty-five miles or so."

So we saw them from a distance of sixty-five miles It seemed incredible.

The bay fell behind. A strange landscape spread below. Could it be the sea with drifting ice-floes?

Thousands of round and oblong spots — dark-green, blue, brown, or white — were scattered over a greenish expanse. Some of them wound like coloured ribbons.

"Tundra," said Netayev.

So that was it. The colour spots were water — innumerable pools, lakes, rivulets, and rivers, their hue depending on the kind of soil and the depth of the reservoir.

The peninsula was lost to view behind us. We were flying above the polar sea.

There they were, the floes — small white spots strewn over the water. I was struck by the unusual geometric pattern, something of a hatching, that covered the water.

Baranov stepped out to invite us to a snack in the "living cabin."

"That's waves," he said, meaning the mysterious hatching.

The walls of the cabin were fitted out with double tiers of berths. We sat down on the lower berths. A board suspended from the ceiling was lowered. It served as a table.

Smoked omul is a surprisingly tasty and delicate fish.

"I've got instructions to fly to Guessed Island," said Baranov. "We must spot the floe with the men."

"Then why aren't we going north?" asked Netayev.

Baranov looked up at him.

"There's a gale off Guessed Island," he said. "I'll land you on Bleak Island."

Netayev and I glanced at each other. Why did Baranov have to land us? Wouldn't it be simpler to take us to Guessed Island?

Without explaining anything more, Baranov went to relieve Kostya who feared that the omul might be eaten up without his help.

"The floe with the men — we're just going to take a look at it from up here," he told us as he stowed away the fish. "The sea is rough. We can't land. It isn't easy to land even in the bay of Bleak Island. That choppy sea, damn it!"

Bleak Island came in sight. We described a circle above it. Ships rode at anchor in the bay which separated the island from the mainland. A few houses and a wireless mast clung to the greyish-blue rocks. The port appeared across the bay.

We began to descend rapidly. The waves were white-crested. Kostya peered anxiously through the window.

Suddenly there was a jolt. Netayev was pitched back and hit the partition. A grey-crested wave rushed past the window. And then we had another jolt.

"That was a nice shake-up, all right!" said Kostya in a voice that sounded happy for no obvious reason, and disappeared in the companion-way.

Through the half-open door we caught a glimpse of the faces of the air mechanic and the wireless operator.

The floor of the cabin was sinking away under our feet.

"A regular roll," said Netayev with satisfaction.

I looked out. We were sailing across a ruffled bay. Basalt rocks, two two-storey houses, a tall wireless mast, and a wind motor were swinging up and down ahead.

"The sea's choppy enough," remarked Netayev.

I recalled Guessed Island.

"I wonder what it's like over there," said Netayev as if having guessed my thought.

A launch came alongside and started bobbing an the waves. Netayev handed me pieces of our luggage.

The launch pulled away shorewards, dipping its bow. The spray doused us from head to foot. We did not go down into the cabin but watched the flying boat wheel round as it made ready to take off.

Now it swept ahead with outspread wings, tossing on the waves. Through the howl of the wind and the roar of the sea, we heard the rumble of its engines Hopping from crest to crest, the powerful craft was moving

farther and farther away. A few seconds later I sighted a strip of the grey sky between its body and the waves.

A gale was raging somewhere. An ice-floe broken off from an island was afloat in a misty sea, with two men stranded on it.

"Baranov's going to drop them some food and tell us where they are," we were told on the shore. "The Sedov will hurry to their rescue, but —"

"Will it be hard to spot them in the open sea?"

"Very. Almost impossible."

The Sedov was in the north. Netayev and I were to reach her by some ship going our way. If she moved off to Guessed Island, we would miss her.

We roamed Bleak Island. Snow lay here and there at the foot of the rooks. Moss and low polar grass grew between stones. I found a few tiny, strong-scented flowers Lemmings scurried back and forth underfoot; they look like rats but are mottled. Neat little paths trodden smooth linked their holes.

We walked over to the polar station

We were introduced to Grachov who had set up a record in a contest of Arctic wireless operators. He managed to receive by ear and type out an incredible number of words per minute — nearly twice as many as an average typist can.

At that moment he was keeping in touch with Guessed Island. There was a frown on his large, almost square face with prominent cheek-bones.

"Baranov's passed over the island. He's on his way here," he said, speaking over his shoulder to Vilka, the Nenets chief of shift, who had just come in.

Vilka crossed to the telephone. As I looked at him I recalled what Galya had told me in Rock Mouth.

Netayev and I had had no chance to sleep in Rock Mouth. Since we took off from Arkhangelsk we had not slept for more than twenty-four hours, but we could not think of sleep just yet. Every message sent in by Baranov was immediately broadcast all over the island.

Two hours after we landed, the entire population of Bleak Island was gathered on the shore. Things like that happen only when cargoes arrive.

With heads tipped back, people were peering lat the sky.

There were loud comments.

"Nobody but Matvei Baranov could've done it!"

"I won't believe it till I've seen it."

"Did you see the way he hit the water when he landed in the bay awhile ago?"

"That's just why I can't believe it."

"I received the radiogram myself," said Grachov weightily.

"He's coming! There he comes!"

"Will he manage to land? Perhaps he's got something broken."

"You don't mean Baranov, do you?"

"Yes — he may have damaged something."

Netayev had a pair of fine binoculars. I saw the flying boat through them. It was coming down hurriedly, without having described the customary circle.

Soon it was just above the waves. Now it grazed them, bounced as if thrown up, then alighted again and sped across the waves, raising spray.

"He's landed'" people cried in the crowd

The flying boat roared into the little bay.

People ran to the jetty, their feet sinking in the soggy ground.

A launch was tearing along to meet the craft.

Before long several men ascended the jetty. Kostya was among them, gesticulating vigorously.

"Who's wireless operator Panov here? Which of you is mechanic Gordeyev?" people asked.

"There he goes, in a fur jacket, that tall one with the rifle. It's Gordeyev. We wintered on Russian Island together."

"Did he move to Guessed Island from there?"

"Yes."

"And now he's on Bleak Island all at once. He hardly thought of it two days ago."

"He had no hope two hours ago."

The excited crowd parted to make way.

The two rescued men, in fur jackets and with rifles slung over their shoulders, were received with open arms. Netayev and I walked up to shake hands with them.

Their haggard faces were at once embarrassed and joyful. Panov, a little snub-nosed chap, apparently spending his first winter in the Arctic, was almost bewildered by the hearty welcome. Gordeyev, tall and gaunt, was unwinding a red woollen scarf from his neck.

"We just went there to shoot seal," he was telling someone, "to feed the dogs. We didn't mean to stay long. But how shall we get back to Guessed Island now?"

Both were taken to the refreshment-bar for a treat.

"We had our fill of smoked omul," Panov tried to excuse himself.

We elbowed our way to Kostya. With shining eyes, he was relating the story of the rescue.

"We sighted them as we flew over the area around the island. Baranov thought that since the dog had come back three hours before, they must be close by, somewhere near the island. They hadn't drifted far.''

Grachov came up.

"D'you know why they stabbed the dog?" he asked.

Everyone turned round to look at him.

"They wanted it to go to the polar station, so that people there'd know they were near. The dog had to swim to get ashore. But it wouldn't go, so they stabbed it to scare it into running away."

"I was going to tell you that myself," Kostya interrupted him. "They slashed its neck with a knife as a way of letting people know they were alive and near. Well, Baranov used that return address to find them."

"But how did you manage to pick 'em up?" asked Netayev.

Kostya gave him a mocking look.

"Remember that grand jolt in the bay, when the sea was choppy?"

Netayev rubbed his neck.

"That was why Baranov dropped you. He didn't want to take chances while you were aboard. He'd made up his mind to land on a rough sea."

"I can't make that out at all," Grachov put in. "We'd better ask Baranov."

Kostya was indignant: "He won't even talk of it," he said. "Don't you know him? I'll tell you how he did it. Ever seen the sea from a plane when it's rough? It's sort of hatched all over."

"Yes, I noticed that," I answered.

"That's waves. They run in rows. Each line is a wave-crest. If a crest like that hits the boat, it's done for. At landing speed that'd be the end of it."

"But how did Baranov do it?"

"At first I couldn't make it out myself. I saw we were going just above the waves. They were grey with foam and — kind of ragged. Baranov tried to steer along the crest. He did it, too. Then I knew what he was up to. I had a feeling that the waves had stopped short. We were flying over the sea at the same speed as the waves — flying along a wave, I mean. Just imagine you're running aslant along a railway platform, keeping opposite the door of a moving carriage. It was the same way with us. We flew athwart the saa, keeping above one and the same wave. And the wave was as high as a railway embankment. If there'd been less roll We'd never have managed to land. He' landed smack on a crest."

"A magician!"

"We landed on the crest without a jolt. It was afterwards that the jolts came, when we'd lost speed and slipped off the wave. My, what a jolting it was, what a tossing! I thought the boat would be smashed to bits. But it wasn't and we picked up the men. They'd had a hard time on the floe. They couldn't believe we'd landed.... And this is how we took off: Baranov taxied to two ice-fields north of the island. The seas weren't so bad between them. So we were able to take off."

"Now we'll catch up with the Sedov!" Netayev rejoiced.

Then we saw Baranov. Tall and broad-shouldered, he was lighting a cigarette, shielding it with the flap of his jiacket. He flung away the match, turned round, and held out the familiar leather cigarette-case.

"Have a smoke?" he said, smiling.

Everybody took a cigarette, including myself who did not smoke.

Incidentally, nobody lighted ihis cigarette — because of the wind, or for some other reason.

I keep flyer Baranov's cigarette as a souvenir of the Arctic.