

THE UNTOUCHED TABLE

Two snow-white cloths covered the extended dinner table and the desk that had been moved up to it. The centre of the combined table was set with dishes holding a crab salad in sour cream, opened tins of sardines and sprats in oil, plates laid with fine slices of many kinds of smoked and boiled sausage, and plates with pink, white-rimmed pieces of the juicy ham which adorned one end of the table. Close by was a dish with slices of delicate salmon that melted in your mouth, small bowls with black caviar and large ones with ruddy apples, heavy pears and clusters of grapes, which are so rare in the Arctic.

Rising above the table like so many mute guards were big bottles, pot-bellied and cut-glass decanters reflecting hundreds of electric lights, and small bottles with tempting labels, surrounded by sets of large transparent wine-glasses and small ones on slender stems, ready for action, and also by tiny tumblers that are usually overlooked on a well-loaded table.

The mistress of the house, was still young, with a fine profile and dark hair done in a bun on the back of her neck. Wearing the uniform of a captain of the medical corps, she was busy decorating the table with a large vase of chrysanthemums of a most delicate violet hue. Fresh flowers north of the Polar Circle on New Year's eve! She wished the coming year to be as radiant and beautiful as those flowers.

Yelena Alexandrovna glanced gratefully at her father who had brought the flowers and fruit from Moscow by air that morning. At the airfield he had impetuously put his arms around her and said in his habitually imperious voice, "Well, Lena, I quarreled with a lot of people at the ministry. The matter almost reached the minister. But I had it my way! I'm going to live here till summer. I've laid aside all my duties. What I need is quiet — the Arctic kind!"

She knew that in the Arctic her father planned to finish a major work. He, Professor Polyakov, wanted to sum up the experience acquired over many years in the treatment of ear, nose and throat diseases.

Just then he was pacing his daughter's flat, looking narrowly at the tempting dishes and bottles and rubbing his hands. He was rather short and spare; his greying tow hair and fair moustache were neatly trimmed.

Major Zagorov, commander of a squadron of the naval air force, exchanged a look of mutual understanding with his father-in-law. He was a heavyish man of athletic build, with the deliberate movements of one used to calculating them.

The bell rang and the host went to open. He came back with Rear-Admiral Frolov, whom he introduced to the professor.

A hum of voices came from the passage where naval officers were taking off their coats. Their wives, who had arrived earlier, were trimming themselves in Yelena Alexandrovna's room.

"We're going to be short of ladies this time, too," said Yelena Alexandrovna with a smile at stocky Frolov.

"We'll see that nobody disturbs you here," said Frolov to the professor. "It's quiet here anyway. Occasionally we even feel bored."

"I don't know what boredom is like, I really don't," said the professor quickly. "Do you ever have a chance to be bored, Comrade Rear-Admiral?"

Frolov smiled with the corners of his mouth and eyes. He had a pock-marked intelligent face.

"To tell the truth, I don't."

"You only feel bored if you don't know how to use your energy. If I were to find myself on an uninhabited island I'd only feel melancholy because of lack of patients."

More guests came in. The dining-room filled with noise.

Frolov glanced at his watch.

"Twelve minutes past eleven."

The bell rang in the passage.

"Who can that be?" said Zagorov. "Nobody's missing."

He went out. Those in the dining-room could hear his booming bass voice. "On a day like this — you're crazy! Not for the world!"

Thinking that he was wanted on some urgent business, Frolov got up and quietly walked out of the room.

A shortish seaman of the Arctic fleet, as the emblem on his fur cap indicated, was standing in the passage. On his sleeve were four chevrons.

"Good evening, captain! What's the matter?" asked Frolov, shaking hands with the new-comer.

Zagorov stepped in, "This is what we'll do, captain. Please take off your coat. You're going to celebrate New Year with us. We'll talk later."

"Make yourself at home, Boris Yefimovich," said Frolov. "The officers will be honoured by the company of the Sedov's captain."

"This is no time for celebrating, Nikolai Stepanovich," said Boris Yefimovich. "I was told that a famous professor was here with you. His advice is urgently needed."

Yelena Alexandrovna was standing in the doorway.

"Advice from Father? He'll never consent!"

"I beg not to believe you," said the captain of the Sedov in a resolute tone. "Being a doctor yourself, you'll understand. I represent the Northern Sea Route administration here while the Sedov lies at anchor. There's trouble on Thrifty Island. The chief of the polar station has been taken ill. They consulted the doctor on Bleak Island. They fear it's serious. Just think whose life is at stake! It was he, Stepan Fyodorovich Kushakov, who explored polar lands and got down to some of the richest deposits. Mapped it all, too. He's the best geologist and seaman up here in the North. Wants to build towns with asphalted streets here, and even health resorts. A man of rare qualities. Served as a lieutenant in the Navy." Boris Yefimovich glanced at Frolov.

"But what's happened to him?" asked the hostess.

"A polar bear seldom attacks people, but this time it hit Stepan Fyodorovich hard, at close quarters. I wonder how he managed to shoot it down. Things've been going from bad to worse ever since. The man's dying. The Bleak Island doctor says some prominent ENT specialist should be consulted

by wireless. It's already night over in Moscow, they're celebrating there, and tomorrow's a holiday."

"I am an ENT specialist. Only, since Father's here —" Yelena Alexandrovna was embarrassed. "But we couldn't let Father go with you tonight."

"We'll do it this way," said Frolov, stepping in with determination. "I'll tell my wireless operators to communicate with Thrifty Island and connect the Zagorovs' home with it. I'm sure the professor here won't refuse his help."

Boris Yefimovich rejoiced.

"Thank you so much," he said, taking off his overcoat with Zagorov's help.

"Come in, please do come in," said the hostess. "It's wonderful you're going to celebrate New Year with us!"

The rear-admiral went to the telephone. The noise in the dining-room died down at once; everybody felt that something unusual had happened.

As soon as he learnt what the matter was, the professor sat down in an arm-chair by the telephone and quietly put a few questions to the Sedov's captain.

"Did you say it happened three weeks ago?"

Boris Yefimovich nodded.

He felt ill at ease.

"That's right. Frolov speaking," the rear-admiral said over the telephone. "Hurry up, get in touch with them. I'm waiting. But how long must I wait?"

The others stood in a semicircle around those sitting by the telephone.

Yelena Alexandrovna came up to her father and put her arms around his shoulders.

"Yes, yes! Professor Polyakov is here, at the microphone!" Frolov shouted into the receiver. "Can't you tune in better than that? What? You can't hear well? You never can when I have to talk to somebody. Last time I could hardly hear Vladivostok. At the world's end, is it? But that's what wire-

less was invented for! What? Thrifty Island? Good. I'm passing the receiver to Professor Polyanov. Tell him what happened."

He handed the receiver to the professor.

"What? How's that? Can't hear a thing," said the professor in an annoyed voice, half rising from his arm-chair. "How am I going to advise them if I can't make out a single word?"

"You just aren't used to it, Dad. Here, give me the receiver. I'm going to pass on your questions and answers."

"Do you really think you'll be able to hear? As an ENT specialist I'll investigate your sensitive hearing apparatus."

Yelena Alexandrovna took over the receiver.

"Hallo, Thrifty Island!" she said in a low but clear voice. "I shall ask you questions for the professor.

"Did the patient lose consciousness after he was struck in the region of the ear?"

Yelena Alexandrovna repeated the professor's question and at once replied, "He was found unconscious an hour later, near the killed bear. He had fired the moment he was hit. The bear attacked him unexpectedly when he went out to the storehouse to get some cartridges to shoot seal. The dogs had nothing to eat."

"That has no bearing on the diagnosis," grumbled the professor. "Was there any haemorrhage? How large is the wound? Any temperature?"

Yelena Alexandrovna told him that the helix was torn, a lacerated wound stretched to the back of the neck, and part of the scalp was torn off. The temperature was a hundred and two."

"His pulse? What treatment was he given? Have they a doctor there?"

"There's no doctor. The Bleak Island doctor suggested a sulphidin dressing and hasn't allowed him to rise from bed for three weeks."

"That's good," said the professor.

"Did he have nausea or vomit?" asked Yelena Alexandrovna.

"I don't think I've had a chance to ask that yet," said the professor testily. "However — it happens to be very important."

"At first he didn't," was the reply, "but during the last three days he has. Nausea gets stronger when he turns his head. His ear bled at first, now it's suppurating."

The professor shook his head.

"Tell them to show the patient a tea-cup and ask him what it is," he suggested.

Those around him started a surprised whispering.

Yelena Alexandrovna passed on what she was told to.

"They haven't got any cups, just a tin mug," she said.

In the hush that fell everyone pictured the mug being brought to the patient, who must be lying on bear-skins.

"They showed him the mug. He says, 'That is to drink out of.'"

"Good," said the professor, taking off his spectacles and wiping them with his handkerchief; his eyes turned out to be of an azure or rather deep-blue colour. "Let them show him a watch."

"He says, 'That is for — time.' "

"A sugar-bowl? Have they got one?" the professor went on to ask, putting on his spectacles and glancing over the table laid to celebrate New Year.

"No."

"What about a vodka bottle? Let them show one to the patient."

"He's sure to recognize that," whispered Zagorov.

"They've got alcohol. They showed the patient a bottle of alcohol. He said, 'That is for bitter — it burns.' "

"I see," said the professor. "Give the patient my thanks."

"May I tell them to switch off?" asked Frolov as he took the receiver from Yelena Alexandrovna.

The professor nodded and then said to his daughter, "It's amnesic aphasia. Occurs with cerebral abscesses, when the left temporal lobe is affected. Was he hit on the left ear?"

"Yes," said Boris Yefimovich.

"What now?" asked the rear-admiral.

"It's very bad," said the professor. "Death is inevitable unless —"

"Unless what?" the captain and Frolov asked as one man. The captain's furrowed, weather-beaten face and Frolov's slightly pock-marked face were equally tense.

"— unless he's immediately trephined."

"He needs an urgent operation," put in Yelena Alexandrovna.

"It can't be done," said Boris Yefimovich with a sigh. "No ship can make her way to the island before August. No plane can land now either on the island or near it."

"That means he's doomed?" asked Frolov.

"I don't know, I'm not a polarnik," replied the professor angrily. "It isn't for me to judge whether a surgeon capable of performing this very difficult operation can be taken to the island, but he's indispensable there."

Boris Yefimovich propped his elbows on his knees and rested his greying head upon them.

"What a man he was, comrades! What a loss!"

"Not only for polarniks," added Frolov, "but for us, too."

"Vasya," Yelena Alexandrovna said softly to her husband, "could anybody fly to the island in the Arctic night? Could you?"

"Yes."

"Nikolai Stepanovich ... Comrade Rear-Admiral, I mean," said Yelena Alexandrovna, stepping up to Frolov and standing at attention, "Kushakov can be saved if a surgeon is landed by parachute."

"By parachute?" asked the professor, raising his eyebrows.

"What are you talking about!" Boris Yefimovich cut in. "Tomorrow's a holiday in Moscow. We can't have anyone before the day after. Besides, is there a specialist who can also handle a parachute?"

"I've handled one, Comrade Rear-Admiral. If you ordered a flyer — Major Zagorov — to take me to the island I would jump."

"You?" exclaimed Zagorov in spite of himself. "What about our little one?"

There was a hubbub in the dining-room. Frolov rose. Although he was not tall, just then he did look tall and sturdily built. He was expected to decide.

"It's praiseworthy, to be sure," said the professor. "Very praiseworthy indeed. But may I ask the captain of the medical corps here a question? Have you ever performed such an operation, captain?"

"No, Dad, I haven't. But you'll teach me. Tell me, Dad, could you teach me tonight?"

"I?" The professor sat back in his arm-chair. "So you want your husband to fly you and your father to teach you, eh?"

"Is that really possible?" asked Frolov.

The embarrassed professor took off his spectacles to wipe them.

"Yes, of course, but —"

"What do you need to do it?" asked Frolov quickly.

"Two or three cadavers. Yes. Two or three cadavers. We could try the operation on them tonight."

"Comrade Lieutenant," said Frolov, speaking to a young officer, "ring up the morgue, and the hospital, too. Right away!"

"May I go ahead with the preparations?" asked Zagorov, stepping forward.

"Wait," said Frolov; but Zagorov went out.

The lieutenant soon had the necessary information.

"Report," ordered Frolov, who was walking up and down by the table with his hands behind his back.

"No cadavers, Comrade Rear-Admiral," said the young officer in a clear voice. "Nobody died on New Year's eve."

"That's that," said the professor.

Zagorov came back wearing his flying kit and high dogskin boots.

"Go and change, Major Zagorov," said Frolov. "Everything's off."

"Why?" asked the professor, rising solemnly from his armchair. "I shall fly to the island!"

"You, Dad? How can you?" cried the terrified Yelena Alexandrovna.

"Who would permit that?" asked Frolov blandly.

"What do you mean?" the professor retorted. "I've been relieved of all my duties till next autumn! There's no quieter place than that far-away island. I'll finish my book there and a ship will call for me next autumn."

Boris Yefimovich had straightened up and was looking at the professor with admiration. Frolov was silent.

"Damn it!" cried the professor. "Why was nobody afraid when I flew here? That was an Arctic flight too, wasn't it? Why were you willing to let my daughter jump, though as a surgeon she has less experience than I? I was ready to instruct her, but you can't send her untrained and that means I must parachute. That's a physician's duty — and a Soviet man's."

"Excuse me, professor," Zagorov interrupted him, "but have you ever used a parachute?"

"No, I haven't."

Zagorov made a cautious attempt to dissuade him, "Don't you know you must train first, just as in the case of an operation?"

"That's quite a different thing! Mustn't I make a first jump when training?"

"Of course you must."

"Well, why can't I make my first jump over the island just as well? It's easier to pull a ring than perform a brain operation. Don't you ever parachute loads in sacks? I'm no worse than a sack, am I? It's settled! I'll argue no more. Just try to understand, I realize full well what a physician has to do in my stead. The physician's title is one to be proud of. Whoever takes it swears to his people not to spare his life in fulfilling his duty. That's what the army and navy regulations say, too, as far as I know."

"You're right, professor," said Frolov, grasping his hand. "But now may I ask a few questions?"

"Please do."

"How old are you? What is your blood pressure? Is your heart in good condition? How are your nerves?"

"I'm a surgeon, Comrade Rear-Admiral. My hand never shook, though I'm fifty-four now."

"Even so, professor, your daughter will please sound you and report to me."

"May I start getting the plane ready, Comrade Rear-Admiral?" asked Zagorov.

"Go ahead, Major Zagorov. By the way, comrades, flyers never drink before a flight. It would be uncomradely of us to touch this table before the plane gets back."

"Hear, hear!" said the guests in unison.

The clock pointed to a quarter past twelve. Nobody had noticed the coming of the new year.

The guests left. Yelena Alexandrovna wandered about the empty house alone. Sometimes she stopped in front of the untouched table, shifted some napkins or covered up the slices of sausage or ham with an overturned plate, drew a sigh, and stared at the frozen window-pane. Somewhere out in the night an aeroplane was flying away with two men she loved most.

Frolov was dozing in the arm-chair by the telephone. No sooner did the telephone ring than he snatched up the receiver.

"Frolov speaking. What? The professor has parachuted? Polarniks found him a hundred yards from the house? Thank you, my friend! Thank you for doing your duty so well! I commend you for exemplary communication. Lena! Did you hear? Come here, let me embrace you! Vasya's coming back. He'll be here soon. I'm going to tell everybody to get together again. The table's waiting!"

The captain of the medical corps leaned her head against the rear-admiral's chest and cried.

New Year was celebrated on the night of January 1.

On the sumptuous table there stood — besides the bottles of wine and the hors d'oeuvres on which Frolov exercised his wit — steaming pots of Siberian pelmeni.

When Major Zagorov rose from his seat all the others did the same.

"I think a surgeon alone can show such self-control," he said. "We flyers can learn a lot from him!"

Yelena Alexandrovna came in. She had changed from her uniform to an elegant silk dress that made her look quite young.

"The operation was a success, comrades," she announced in a ringing voice, "a brilliant success!"

"May I offer a toast," said Frolov, "to our excellent people each of whom is capable of performing an exploit for his fellow-men and his country. Let those who feel like breaking peace tremble at these peaceful exploits of our people!"

A January gale was raging in the Barents Sea.