

VLADIMIR KOROLENKO

LIGHTS

Translated from the Russian by Suzanne Rozenberg

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Long ago, on a dark autumn night, I was journeying in a rowboat on a grim Siberian river. Suddenly from round a bend of the river, beneath the dusky mountains, a light loomed.

It shone bright, commanding, positively near....

"Thank God!" I cried out with joy. "Shelter is near!"

The oarsman turned his head, glancing over his shoulder to look at the light.

"Tis far away!" he said indifferently, and went on plying his oars.

I did not believe him: the light stood out so bright, piercing the murky darkness. Yet he spoke the truth: the light indeed proved to be far away.

It is a feature about nocturnal lights that they approach out of the dark, and beam, and promise, and tantalise by their proximity! Another few strokes and one thinks the journey is at an end—when indeed the light is far off!...

On and on we journeyed upon the jet-black river. Dark chasms and cliffs sailed into view, advancing, drifting off, remaining behind and being swallowed up by the endless vistas, while the light still shone, twinkling bright, beckoning—seeming near and yet being so far away.

Often I recall the dark river lying in the shadow of the rocky banks—and that beaming light. Many lights, before and after, have tantalised both me and others as well by their seeming proximity. But life flows between the same grim banks and the lights are still far off. And again you have to ply your oars. And yet ... and yet lights are there, ahead!

1990

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This is a kind of poem in prose, jotted down on May 4, 1900, on the spur of the moment in the album of the writer M. Watson. In a letter to one of his readers Korolenko had thus explained the substance of this short piece: "I did not mean to say that after the arduous journey would follow peace and happiness for all ... no, there would be yet another station to reach. Life consists in constant striving, achievement, and fresh striving."