

Arkady Gaidar

TIMUR AND HIS SQUAD



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Translated from the Russian by Leonard Stocklitsky

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It was all of three months since Colonel Alexandrov, the commanding officer of an armoured unit, left home. Presumably, he was with his unit. In the middle of the summer he sent a wire home advising his daughters Olga and Jenny to rent a cottage in the country near Moscow and to spend the rest of their vacation there.

Jenny stood leaning on the handle of her broom in front of Olga, her print headscarf pushed back, and scowled as her sister issued instructions:

"I'll take the things down in a lorry and you clean up the flat. It's no use frowning and pouting. When you leave, lock the door. Return the books to the library. Don't go dropping in to say good-bye to all your girl friends but go straight to the station. From there you will send Daddy this telegram. Then take the train and come straight to the villa. Jenny, you must do as I tell you. After all, I'm your sister. . . ."

"And I'm yours."

"Quite right, but I'm older than you—and besides, it's what Dad told us to do."

When Jenny heard the engine of the lorry start up in the yard, she heaved a sigh and glanced around the room. Complete disorder met her eyes. She went up to the dusty mirror in which was reflected the portrait of her father on the opposite wall.

All right, then! Granted Olga was older and had to be obeyed for the time being! But it was she, Jenny, who had her father's nose and mouth and eyebrows. And, most likely, it would turn out to be she who had inherited his character too.

She tightened the knot of her kerchief, kicked off her sandals and picked up a duster. Then she whisked the cloth off the table, set a pail under the tap, grabbed the broom and swept a pile of rubbish toward the door.

Soon the oil stove was spluttering and the primus buzzing. The floor was flooded with water. Soapsuds frothed in the zinc washtub.

And, outside, passers-by gaped up at a barefoot girl in a red sun-dress standing fearlessly on a third-floor windowsill cleaning a wide-open window.

The lorry sped along the broad, sun-flooded road. Olga sat in the back in a wicker chair, resting her feet on a suitcase and leaning against a soft bundle. On her lap a reddish-yellow kitten was playing with a bunch of cornflowers.

At the 20th milepost they were overtaken by a motorised column. The soldiers, who sat in rows on wooden benches, the muzzles of their rifles pointed skyward, were singing lustily.

At the sound of the singing the doors and windows of j cottages were thrown wide open. Excited children tumbled out over fences and through gates. They waved and cheered, throwing the men half-ripe apples, and before the column disappeared from view started games of soldiers, cutting their way through thick tangles of weeds and nettles in dashing cavalry charges.

The lorry turned off into a sprawling holiday estate and came to a stop in front of a small wooden house with ivy-covered walls. The driver and his assistant let down the sideboards and began to unload. Olga opened the door of the glassed-in porch.

From here there was a view of a rambling, neglected garden. At the farther end of the garden stood a ramshackle two-storey shed flying a small red flag.

Olga returned to the lorry. Here, a spry old lady, the milkwoman from next door, popped up at her elbow. She had come to offer to scrub out the cottage and to clean the windows.

While the neighbour was making ready her mops and pails, Olga picked up the kitten and strolled out into the garden.

Warm blobs of resin glistened on the trunks of the cherry trees. A pungent aroma of currants, moon daisies and wormwood filled the air. The mossy roof of the shed was full of holes, and through these holes taut strings ran out and disappeared into the foliage of the nearby trees. Olga pushed through a clump of hazels, and paused to brush a cobweb from her face.

What was that? The red flag was gone from the pole on the roof of the shed.

Now Olga caught the sound of rapid, anxious whispering. Suddenly, the heavy ladder propped up against the window of the loft toppled over, breaking some dry branches in its fall and crushing the burdock as it thumped against the ground.

The taut strings leading out through the roof began to quiver. The frightened kitten scratched Olga's hands as it somersaulted into the nettles. Bewildered, Olga stopped, glanced around and listened intently. But neither up the trees, nor beyond the fence, nor behind the dark window of the loft was there anything to be seen or to be heard. She returned to the porch.

"It's them children up to their tricks again," the milk-woman informed Olga. "Yesterday they shook all the apples off two trees in our neighbour's garden, and broke some branches off a pear tree too. Awful brats they are— regular hoodlums. I saw my boy off to the Army the other day, dearie. He didn't so much as touch a drop before he went. 'Good-bye, Mum,' he says, and off he goes whistling, the darling. Towards evening I began to feel sorry for myself, like one does, and so I had a good cry. I woke up in the night feeling as if somebody was snooping around in the yard. 'Well,' I says to myself, 'here I am all alone in the world now, with not a soul to stand up for me ___' It doesn't take much to finish off an old woman like me, you know. A knock on the head with a brick— and that's the end of me. God was merciful, though, and nothing was stolen. They snooped and scratched around a bit and then they made off. I had a barrel standing in the yard—made out of oak it is, takes three men to shift it—well, this barrel had been shoved off all of twenty yards towards the gate. And that's all the story. Who it was and what they wanted I have no idea!"

At twilight, when the house was all cleaned and tidied, Olga stepped out onto the porch. Carefully, she took a white accordion, her father's birthday gift, from its leather case, placed it on her knee, fastened the strap over her shoulder and began to pick out the tune of a song she had recently heard:

*Ah, if only just this once
You would come back safe to me!
Ah, if only just this—once. . .
And the next time. . .
And again. . .
But you'll never understand
Flying fast above the land
How long and slow the waiting for your plane!
Ah!
Airmen all and pilots! Bombers all and fighters!
Now you've taken off for far away.
When will you come back to me?*

*I cannot tell when it will be.
Only—come back! Any time—on any day. . . .*

As she sang Olga glanced up warily every now and again at a dark clump of bushes near the fence.

Then she rose abruptly, faced the bushes and said in a loud voice:

"Look here! Why are you hiding there and what do you want?"

A man in an ordinary white suit emerged from behind the bushes. He inclined his head and replied politely:

"I'm not hiding. I'm a bit of a singer myself. I didn't want to disturb you so I stood and listened."

"Yes, but you could have stood and listened from the road. Why did you have to climb over the fence?"

"Me? Climb over the fence?" The man was obviously offended. "I beg your pardon, but I'm not a cat. There's a gap in the fence over there, and I squeezed through it."

"I see," said Olga ironically. "Over *there*, however, is the gate. Perhaps you will be good enough to squeeze back into the street through it."

The man did as he was told. Without a word he walked through the gate and bolted it behind him. This pleased Olga.

"Just a moment!" she called, coming down the steps. "Did you say you were a singer?"

"No," he replied. "I'm an engineer, but in my spare time I sing in the operatic society at our works."

"I say," Olga suggested suddenly as though it were the most natural thing in the world. "Would you mind seeing me to the station? I'm expecting my younger sister. It's quite late and dark already and there's no sign of her. I'm not afraid of anyone, but I don't know my way around here yet. Wait a moment, though! What are you opening the gate for? You can wait for me outside!"

She put the accordion away, threw a shawl over her shoulders and stepped out into the dark street that was scented with dew and flowers.

Olga hardly spoke to her companion because she was angry with Jenny. He told her his name was George Garayev and that he worked at a motor works.

Two trains went by, and still no Jenny. Then the third and last train came and went.

"You can't imagine the trouble that kid causes me!" Olga exclaimed. "If I were forty, or at least thirty, then it would be different. But she's thirteen and I'm eighteen, and she just won't do anything I tell her."

"No need to be forty!" George said firmly. "Eighteen's much better! And there's nothing to worry about: your sister'll come tomorrow morning."

The platform emptied out. George took out his cigarette case, and at once two tough-looking youngsters swaggered up to him, cigarettes in hand, and stood waiting for a light.

"Young man," said George, striking a match and holding it close to the older boy's face. "Before asking for a light you ought to say 'hello'. I've already had the honour of making your acquaintance in the park where you were so diligently pulling a board out of a new fence. Your name's Mikhail Kvakin, isn't it?"

The boy backed away. George blew out the match and offered Olga his arm to walk her home.

When they were out of earshot the second boy stuck his soiled cigarette behind his ear and drawled:

"Who's that agitator? He from hereabouts?"

"Uh-hu," Kvakín said wryly. "That's Timur Garayev's uncle. We ought to get hold of Timur and punch his nose for him. He's gone and got a gang together and it looks like they're out to get us."

Just then the boys caught sight of an old gentleman under the lamp-post at the end of the platform. He was walking down the steps leaning on his stick.

The man was Doctor Kolokolchikov, a local resident. They rushed after him asking loudly for matches. The old gentleman did not seem to like their looks or their manners, for he turned round and brandished his gnarled stick at them. Then he continued sedately on his way.

Jenny did not have time to send the wire to her father from the station in Moscow, so when she got off the train she decided to look for the local post office.

She sauntered through an old park, gathering harebells, and did not notice how she came out to a crossing of two roads bounded by gardens. The deserted appearance of the place clearly indicated that this was not the part of the estate that she had been looking for.

Not far away she saw a small, agile girl who was pulling a stubborn goat along by the horns and cursing it roundly in the process.

"Hey, will you tell me the way to the post office please?" Jenny called out to her.

But just then the goat wrenched free, tossed its horns and started across the park at a gallop with the wailing girl in hot pursuit. Jenny looked around her: dusk was falling and not a soul in sight. She opened a gate at random and walked up the path to the porch of a grey, two-storey villa.

"Can you please tell me," Jenny addressed the closed door in a loud but very polite voice, "how to get from here to the post office?"

There was no reply. She stood there for a while thinking, then opened the door, entered the hall and walked into a room. Nobody seemed to be at home. Feeling rather guilty, she turned to go out again but was brought up short by the noiseless appearance of a large, tawny dog from under the table. The dog studied the flustered girl for several moments and then, with a low growl, draped itself across the threshold.

"Don't be silly!" Jenny cried, spreading out her fingers in fear. "I'm not a burglar! I haven't taken anything! Look, this is the key to our flat, and this is the telegram for Dad. My father's an officer, understand?"

The dog did not stir. Jenny, edging her way surreptitiously toward the open window, went on:

"See? Just you stay where you are. You're a nice doggie, so clever and sweet."

But the moment Jenny touched the windowsill the sweet doggie leapt up with such a snarl that she took a flying leap onto the sofa and sat there with her legs tucked up underneath her.

"You're a nice one," she said, on the verge of tears. "You go ahead and catch burglars and spies, if you like, but I'm a— I'm a human being. Yes!" She stuck out her tongue at the dog and added: "Idiot!"

Jenny put the key and telegram on the edge of the table near the sofa. There was nothing to do but to wait for the owners of the house.

One hour passed, and then another. . . . It grew quite dark. Through the open window drifted the whistling of distant trains, the barking of dogs and the thud of a volleyball. Somewhere, someone was strumming a guitar. Only here, in the grey villa, everything was desolate and still.

Jenny propped her head against the hard arm-rest of the sofa and began to cry quietly. In the end, she fell fast asleep.

When she awoke it was already morning.

The luxuriant rain-washed foliage rustled in the wind outside the window. A pump handle creaked nearby. She could hear the rasping of a saw. But inside the villa it was as quiet as before.

Jenny found that her head was now resting on a soft leather cushion and her legs had been covered with a sheet. The dog was gone.

That must mean somebody had been here during the night!

Jenny sprang up, tossed back her hair, straightened her crumpled frock, picked up her key and the unsent telegram and was about to make off when she noticed a slip of paper on the table. On it was written in large letters with a blue pencil:

"When you leave see you give the door a good bang." The note was signed "Timur".

Timur? Who was Timur? She ought to find him and thank him.

She took a look into the next room. Here, she saw a desk with a writing set, an ashtray and a small mirror on it. To the right lay a battered old revolver, and a pair of leather driving gloves. Propped against the desk was a curved Turkish sabre in a scratched and much worn scabbard. Jenny put down her key and telegram, touched the sabre, drew it out of its scabbard and, brandishing the naked blade above her head, observed the effect in the mirror.

Her appearance was quite formidable. It would be wonderful to have her picture taken that way and then show it around at school! She could say that her father had once taken her to the front with him. The revolver would look better still in her left hand. Like this. She knitted her brows as far as they would go, compressed her lips, aimed at the mirror and pressed the trigger.

The room rang with a deafening report. A cloud of smoke veiled the windows. The mirror fell on top of the ashtray. Forgetting the key and telegram on the desk, Jenny shot out of the room and fled from this weird and dangerous house as fast as her legs could carry her.

Before she knew it she found herself at the bank of a stream. Now she had neither the key to their flat, nor the telegram, nor a receipt for the telegram. And now she would have to tell Olga everything: about the dog, about sleeping in the empty villa, about the Turkish sabre, and, finally, about the shot. What rotten luck! If Dad were there he would understand. But Olga wouldn't. Olga would be cross or, even worse, would cry. And that would be awful. Jenny could cry too—when in the mood. But when she saw Olga in tears she always felt like taking refuge on top of a telegraph pole or a tall tree or a chimney.

Jenny had a swim to cheer herself up and then went slowly off in search of their house.

Olga was in the kitchen starting up the primus when Jenny mounted the steps of the porch. When she heard the footsteps she swung around and fixed Jenny with a mute, hostile gaze.

"Hello, Olga!" said Jenny, stopping short on the top step and forcing a smile. "Olga, you won't scold me, will you?"

"I certainly will!" Olga retorted without shifting her gaze from Jenny's face.

"All right, do scold me then," Jenny said meekly. "If you only knew what a strange adventure I've had! Olga, please don't twitch your eyebrows; nothing terrible's happened. I only lost the key to the flat and didn't send off the wire to Dad."

Jenny shut up her eyes, gulped and got set to tell the whole story in one breath.

But just then the front gate flew open with a bang and a shaggy goat covered with burs came charging in with lowered horns, followed closely by the wailing barefoot girl whom Jenny had met the previous day.

Seizing the opportunity to postpone the ticklish explanation Jenny dashed into the garden to chase out the goat.

She overtook the panting girl just as she had got a grip on the goat's horns.

"Have you lost anything!" the girl asked rapidly through clenched teeth without pausing in her immediate occupation of kicking and pummeling the goat.

"No," Jenny replied, puzzled.

"Then whose is this? Not yours?" The girl showed her the key to the Moscow flat.

"Yes, that's mine," whispered Jenny, glancing apprehensively back at the porch.

"Here, take the key, this note and the receipt. Your telegram's already been sent," said the girl, still speaking quickly through clenched teeth.

Then, thrusting a small paper package into Jenny's hand, she struck the goat with her clenched fist.

The animal bolted toward the gate, and the barefoot girl darted after it, heading straight through a patch of thorns and stinging nettles. They shot out of the gate and were gone.

Jenny opened the package, hunching her shoulders as though it were she and not the goat who had taken a beating.

"Here's the key. And a receipt for the telegram. That means somebody sent it off. But who? Ah, this must be the note. What *does* it all mean?"

The note, written in large letters with a blue pencil, read:

"No need to be afraid of anyone at home. Everything's fine and I won't tell." It was signed "Timur".

As if in a trance, Jenny quietly tucked the note into her pocket. Then she squared her shoulders and calmly went back to Olga.

Olga was still standing in the same place by the unlit primus, her eyes brimming with tears.

"Olya!" Jenny cried remorsefully. "I was only joking. Don't be cross with me! I cleaned the whole flat and the windows too. I really worked hard. I washed all the dusters and scrubbed the floors. Here's the key and here's the receipt for Dad's wire. Now let me give you a kiss—you know how much I love you! Want me to jump from the roof into the nettle patch for you?"

Without waiting for Olga to reply, Jenny hugged her.

"Yes, yes—but I was so worried," Olga said in desperation. "You're always making the most pointless jokes. And Dad told me—stop it, Jenny! Jenny, for goodness' sake, my hands are all covered with kerosene! Look, Jenny, suppose you pour some milk into the saucepan and put it on the stove to boil."

"I—I can't help making jokes," Jenny muttered while Olga walked over to the washstand.

She placed the pot of milk on the primus, felt for the note in her pocket, and said:

"Olga, does God exist?"

"No," replied Olga, lowering her face to the faucet.

"Well, who is it up there, then?"

"Leave me alone!" Olga exclaimed impatiently. "There isn't anybody!"

Jenny was silent for a moment and then resumed:

"Olga, who is Timur?"

"He's not God, he was a king," replied Olga grudgingly as she soaped her hands and face. "A cruel, lame king out of the Middle Ages." <

"But if this Timur isn't a king and isn't cruel and isn't out of the Middle Ages, then who is he?"

"In that case I don't know. Leave me alone! What's all this about Timur anyway?"

"Because I have a kind of feeling that he's a person I love very much indeed."

"Who is?" Olga raised an incredulous, lathered face. "What nonsense are you talking? Why must you always be making things up? Why can't you let me wash in peace! Just wait till Dad comes home. He'll see about this love of yours!"

"Will he, how?" Jenny cried with feeling. "Even if he does come, it won't be for long. And he certainly wouldn't mistreat anybody so lonely and defenceless."

"Who's lonely and defenceless?" Olga asked in surprise. "You? Oh, Jenny, I really don't know what to make of you; I can't imagine who you take after!"

Jenny lowered her head. Staring at her reflection on the nickel-plated surface of the tea kettle, she replied proudly and without hesitation:

"After Dad. Just Dad. Him and him only. And after no one else in the world."

The elderly gentleman, Doctor Kolokolchikov, was sitting in his garden tinkering with a wall clock.

In front of him stood his grandson Nick with a doleful expression on his face.

Nick was supposed to be helping his grandfather. Actually, however, he had been holding a screwdriver in readiness for more than an hour, waiting for his grandfather to ask for it.

But the steel spring which had to be pressed back into place was proving stubborn, and his grandfather was very patient. And it seemed there would be no end to Nick's waiting. It was just too silly, especially since Sima Simakov's tousled head had already bobbed up several times over the fence, and Sima was a fellow who always knew everything that was going on. And this same Sima was making such strange and mysterious signs at Nick with his tongue, head and hands that even Nick's five-year-old sister Tata, who was sitting under a linden tree trying to stuff a bur into the mouth of a sprawling dog, suddenly let out a scream and jerked her grandfather by the trousers. At this Sima Simakov's head instantly disappeared.

At long last the spring was properly installed. "Man must toil," observed the grey-haired gentleman Kolokolchikov raising his moist forehead and addressing Nick. "You've no call to look as though I'd been giving you a dose of castor oil. Give me the screwdriver and take the pliers. Toil is ennobling. And nobility of character is just what you lack, my boy. Yesterday, for example, you had four helpings of ice cream and didn't share any with your little sister."

"She's lying, the shameless little brute!" cried Nick indignantly. He glared at Tata. "I let her have two bites three times. And she goes and tells on me and takes four kopeks off Mum's table as she goes."

"And you climbed out of the window on a rope last night," Tata announced imperturbably, without turning her head. "And you've got a torch under your pillow. And yesterday a bad boy threw stones through our bedroom window. He kept on and on—throwing stones and whistling, throwing stones and whistling."

Nick gasped at this base treachery on the part of the shameless Tata. He began to tremble from head to foot. Fortunately his grandfather was too occupied to pay attention to such dangerous slander, or else he simply had not heard. Luckily, too, the milkwoman came into the garden with her cans at that moment. Pouring out the milk, she lamented:

"Can you imagine, dear doctor, some burglars got into the yard and tried to steal my oak barrel last night! And people say that two fellows were seen on my roof early this morning: sitting on the chimney, mind you, and dangling their legs, the scoundrels."

"On the chimney? Why should they do that, pray?" inquired the puzzled gentleman.

But at that moment an ear-splitting clanging and jangling issued from the chicken coop. The screwdriver jolted in the old gentleman's hand and the capricious spring took advantage of this opportunity to pop out and hit the roof with a bang. Everybody, even Tata and the lazy dog, spun round at once, wondering what it could be. Without uttering a word Nick scampered off across the carrot patch like a hare and disappeared behind the fence.

He halted near a cow byre from which, as from the chicken coop, was issuing the sound of sharp, clanging blows; it sounded as if somebody were hitting a section of steel rail with a hammer. Here he ran into Sima Simakov and asked him excitedly:

"I say, what's up? Is that the alarm?"

"No! I reckon it's No. 1 general rallying signal."

They scaled the fence and dived through a hole in the paling of the park, where they bumped into a sturdy, broad-shouldered chap named Geika. Vasili Ladygin showed up next, and after him several others. Swiftly and noiselessly they sped toward their destination along paths known to them alone, exchanging clipped phrases as they ran:

"Is that the alarm?"

"Nope. It's No. 1 general rally."

"What rally? This isn't 'three-stop, three-stop'. It's some lunatic wheeling off ten at a time!"

"All right, we'll see."

"Sure, we'll check up!"

"Come on! Full speed ahead!"

As all this was going on, a tall, dark-haired boy of about thirteen was standing in the living-room of the villa where Jenny had spent the night. He was wearing black trousers and a dark blue sleeveless shirt with a red star embroidered in front.

A shaggy, grey-haired old man came in. His coarse linen shirt was threadbare and his baggy trousers were covered with patches. A roughly made wooden leg was strapped to his left knee. In one hand he held a piece of paper, and in the other he was clutching a battered old revolver. ; ,,

"When you leave see you give the door a good bang, he read out derisively. "Well, perhaps you'll let me know who slept here on the sofa last night?"

"A girl I know," the boy replied reluctantly. "I wasn't at home and the dog wouldn't let her leave."

"That's a lie!" said the old man testily. "If you knew her you'd have written her name on the note."

"When I wrote it I didn't know her name. Now I do."

"You didn't know it? And you went off in the morning leaving her all by herself? My dear boy, you're obviously not a hundred per cent, and it's high time you were put in the loony bin. That good-for-nothing girl broke the mirror and chipped the ashtray. It was a good thing the revolver was charged with blanks. What if they had been real bullets?"

"But Uncle—you don't keep real bullets, because your enemies' sabres and rifles are—only wood, after all."

A suggestion of a smile flitted across the old man's face. But he tossed back his shaggy head and said sternly:

"Better look out! I notice everything, I can see you're up to some monkey business, and if you don't take care I'll send you back to your mother."

The old man stumped upstairs. As soon as he was gone the boy jumped up, grabbed the front paws of the dog, which came trotting in just then, and kissed it on the nose.

"Well, Rita! We didn't get away with it, this time! It's okay, though. He's in a good mood today. He'll start singing in a minute."

And that was exactly what happened. The old man upstairs cleared his throat, let out a trial tra-la-la, and then began to sing in a low baritone:

*Three nights I've kept my wearing watch. I peer
Into the dismal dark and always seem to hear
Muffled, suspicious sounds. . . .*

"Stop that, you mad dog!" Timur cried. "You'll tear my trousers! Where are you trying to drag me?"

A moment later, however, he slammed the door of the staircase leading up to his uncle's room and raced the dog down the hallway and out onto the veranda. In a corner of the veranda, near a small telephone, a little bronze bell attached to a cord was jerking and banging against the wall.

The boy put his hand over the bell and wound the cord around a nail. Then the cord stopped jerking and slackened—it had probably broken somewhere along the line. Angry and baffled, he picked up the receiver.

An hour earlier, Olga had been sitting at a table with a physics textbook before her.

Jenny had come in and picked up a little bottle of iodine.

"Jenny," Olga had said severely. "How did you come by that scratch on your shoulder?"

"Oh, I was walking along," Jenny answered carelessly, "and something prickly or sharp got in my way. That's how it happened."

"Why doesn't anything prickly or sharp get in my way?" Olga mocked.

"Well, it does! There's a maths exam in *your* way. That's both prickly and sharp. Watch out you don't get scratched! Olya, don't you be an engineer, be a doctor," Jenny chattered on, shoving a small mirror in front of her sister's face. "Just take a look at yourself: what sort of an engineer would you make? An engineer ought to be like this—this—and this." (She made three faces.) "And you look like this—this—and this." Jenny rolled her eyes, arched her eyebrows and smiled sweetly.

"Silly!" Olga said, hugging and kissing her sister and then gently pushing her away. "Go away, Jenny, and don't bother me. You'd be more useful if you fetched some water from the well."

Jenny took an apple from a plate and retreated to a corner, where she stood gazing out of the window for several minutes. Then she opened the accordion case and said:

"You know what, Olya? Someone came up to me today—not bad-looking, blond, white suit—and said, 'What's your name, little girl?' 'Jenny,' I said."

"Jenny, stop bothering me and leave that instrument alone," Olga said without turning round or raising her eyes from the book.

"'And your sister's name,' " Jenny continued, tugging at the accordion, " 'is Olga, I believe?"

"Jenny, stop bothering me and leave that instrument alone!" Olga repeated, beginning to listen in spite of herself.

" 'Your sister plays very well,' he said. 'Does she intend to study at the Conservatory?' " (Jenny was dragging the accordion out of its case and fixing the strap over her shoulder.) " 'No,' I told him. 'She's specialising in reinforced concrete.' Then he said, 'Oh!'" (Jenny pressed one of the keys.) "So I said, 'Boo!' " (Jenny pressed another key.)

"You horrid child! Put that instrument back at once!" Olga cried, jumping up. "Who gave you permission to speak to strange men?"

"All right, I'll put it away," Jenny said huffily. "It wasn't me who spoke to him. It was he who spoke to me. I was going to tell you the rest, but now I won't. You just wait till Dad comes home, he'll show you!"

"Me? It's you he'll show. You won't let me do any work."

"No, you!" Jenny cried, picking up an empty pail and flying out onto the porch. "I'll tell him how you send me running for kerosene, soap and water a hundred times a day! I'm not a lorry, or a horse, or a tractor either!"

Jenny brought in the pail of water and set it on a bench, but since Olga did not even look up from the book, she went out into the garden, a pout on her face.

She strolled over to the little green clearing in front of the old two-storey shed, took a sling out of her pocket and, stretching the rubber band, shot a tiny cardboard parachutist up into the air.

Soaring upside down, the parachutist turned a somersault and a little blue paper parachute popped open over his head. But just then a gust of wind bore him into the blackness of the loft window.

A casualty! Something had to be done to save the little cardboard man. Jenny ran round the shed, from the roof of which taut strings stretched in all directions. She set the rickety ladder back against the window, climbed it and jumped down onto the floor of the loft.

How strange! The loft appeared to be inhabited! On one of the walls were hanging some twists of twine, a lantern, two crossed signalling flags and a map of the locality marked with mysterious signs. In a corner lay a pile of straw covered with sacking, and an upturned soap box.

A large wheel that looked like a ship's helm was sticking out from the wall near the mossy sieve of a roof. Above it hung a home-made telephone.

Jenny peered through a crack in the wall. Outside, the foliage of the overgrown gardens stretched rippling like a sea and pigeons were frolicking in the sky. Jenny decided to make the pigeons seagulls and the old shed with its ropes, lanterns and flags—a big ship. She'd be the captain.

It was great fun. She turned the wheel. The taut strings had begun to vibrate and hum, the wind whistled and whipped up the green waves. It seemed just as though her "ship" were slewing slowly and majestically through the waves.

"Helm to port!" she commanded loudly and put her weight on the heavy wheel.

Just then a few straight and narrow shafts of sunlight broke through the holes in the roof and fell on her face and frock. But Jenny understood that these rays were the searchlights of enemy vessels trying to pick her out and decided to give battle.

Wrenching the creaking wheel, she manoeuvred to right and left, imperiously rapping out her commands.

Soon the sharp searchlight beams paled and died out. That, of course, did not mean that the sun had hidden behind a cloud. It meant that the routed enemy squadron was going to the bottom.

The battle was over. Jenny wiped her forehead with a dusty palm. Suddenly the telephone rang. Jenny had not expected that—she had thought it was a toy telephone. She began to feel uneasy. She picked up the receiver. A sharp voice came through.

"Hullo! Hullo! Who's there? Who's the silly ass who's breaking the wires and sending out stupid, incomprehensible signals?"

"It's not an ass," Jenny muttered in confusion. "It's me, Jenny."

"You crazy girl!" the voice exclaimed with a suggestion of very real anxiety. "Leave the wheel alone and run for your life! They'll come piling in at any moment and knock your head off!"

Jenny dropped the receiver, but it was too late. A head popped through the window—Geika's—and then Sima Simakov, Nick Kolokolchikov and the others all tumbled in one after another.

"Who are you?" asked Jenny, backing away from the window in fright. "Go away! This is our garden. I didn't ask you to come."

But a silent, compact wall of boys advanced shoulder to shoulder on Jenny. Cornered, Jenny let out a scream.

At that moment yet another shadow darkened the window. The boys turned and opened ranks, and Jenny found herself face to face with a tall, dark-haired boy in a blue, sleeveless shirt with a red star embroidered in front.

"Less noise, Jenny!" he said loudly. "You mustn't shout. No one's going to hurt you. We know each other, you and me. I'm Timur."

"You're Timur?!" exclaimed Jenny incredulously, opening wide her tear-filled eyes. "You mean it was you who covered me with a sheet last night? Who left the note on the table? Who sent off the wire to Dad and had the key and receipt brought to me? But why did you do it? How do you know who I am?"

At this he came across to her, took her hand and said:

"You'd better stay here with us now. Sit down and listen, and then you'll understand everything."

The boys settled themselves on the sack-covered straw around Timur, who had spread out in front of him the map of the estate.

A lookout was stationed on a rope swing suspended in front of a hole in the wall above the window. From his neck dangled a pair of dented opera glasses.

Jenny sat not far from Timur and gave all her attention to the proceedings of the conference of this top-secret headquarters. Timur was speaking:

"At daybreak tomorrow, while everybody is still asleep, Kolokolchikov and I will repair the lines she (he pointed to Jenny) broke."

"He'll oversleep," gloomily interjected the bullet-headed Geika, who was wearing a striped sailor's jersey. "He only wakes up for breakfast and lunch."

"That's a l-lie!" Nick jumped up and stuttered. "I g-get up with the first r-ray of the sun."

"Well, I don't know which is the sun's first ray and which the second, but I do know he'll oversleep," Geika retorted stubbornly.

At this juncture the lookout on the swing whistled. The boys sprang to their feet.

A mounted artillery battalion was galloping down the road in a cloud of dust. The powerful horses, in heavy harness of leather and metal, were pulling along their green ammunition wagons and tarpaulin-covered cannon at a spanking pace.

The sun-tanned, weather-beaten postilions took the bend in dashing style without swaying in their saddles, and, one after another, the batteries disappeared into the woods. Soon, the entire unit was out of sight.

"They're headed for the station to board a train," Nick explained importantly. "I can tell by their uniforms. I can tell when they're out on drill, on parade, or on anything else."

"You just keep your eyes open and your mouth shut!" Geika stopped him. "We've got eyes too. You know, boys, this windbag wants to run away to the Red Army!"

"You can't do that," Timur intervened. "It won't wash."

"Why not?" asked Nick, flushing. "How come boys always used to run away to the front?"

"That was before! And now the officers and other bosses have strict orders to kick out all the kids."

"How do you mean, kick 'em out?" cried Nick, turning a deeper red. "You mean—their own side?"

"That's right!" Timur heaved a sigh. "Their own side. And now, fellows, let's get down to business."

The boys resumed their places.

"Unidentified boys have been stealing apples from the garden of No. 34, Crooked Lane," Nick announced sullenly. "They broke two branches and trampled all over a flower bed."

"Whose house is that?" Timur glanced at his notebook. "It's Kryukov the soldier's. Now, which of you is an ex-specialist on other people's gardens and apple trees?"

"Me," muttered an embarrassed voice.

"Who could have done this job?"

"Kvakin and his assistant, the chap they call Figure. They picked out a Michurin tree; it grows Golden Sap apples."

"That Kvakin again!" Timur reflected a moment. "Geika! Did you talk to him?"

"I did."

"Well?"

"Got him on the jaw twice."

"What'd he do?"

"Well, he got me once or twice, too."

"All you can say is 'I got him and he got me.' And a fat lot of good it does! We'll make Kvakin a special case. Next?"

"The son of the old milkwoman who lives at No. 25 has been called up into the cavalry," a boy in the corner reported.

"Some piece of news!" Timur shook his head reproachfully. "We've had our sign on the gate for two days now. Who put it there—you, Kolokolchikov?"

"Yes."

"Then why is the upper left point of the star all wavy like a leech? If you take on a job, do it properly. People'll laugh when they see it. Next?"

Sima Simakov jumped up and rattled off his report.

"A goat's been lost at No. 54, Pushkaryov Road. I was walking along when I saw an old woman beating a girl. I yelled out, 'Missis, beating's against the law!' She says, 'She's lost the goat, blast her hide!' 'Where was it lost?' 'Over there, in the gully back of the woods. Chewed through her rope and made off, you'd think the wolves'd clean swallowed it.' "

"Wait a minute! Whose house?"

"Paul Guryev's—he's in the Army. The girl's his daughter. Her name is Annie. It was her grandma who was beating her. Don't know her name. The goat's grey, with a black back. They call it Manka."

"Find that goat!" ordered Timur. "Take a squad of four—you, and you, and you. Well, fellows, is that all?"

"There's a girl always crying at No. 22," Geika submitted reluctantly.

"Why does she cry?"

"I've tried asking her but she won't say."

"You ought to have asked her better. Perhaps someone beats her—or treats her badly."

"I asked her, but she wouldn't say."

"A big girl?"

"She's four."

"There's a real tragedy for you! If she'd been a person ... but—four years old! Just a moment though— whose house is that?"

"Lieutenant Pavlov's. The one who was killed at the frontier not long ago."

" 'I've tried asking her but she won't say,' " Timur mocked, obviously disappointed in Geika. He frowned and thought a while. "All right. Leave that one to me."

"Kvakin's in sight!" cried the lookout. "He's walking down the other side of the street, eating an apple. Timur, let's send out a squad to give him the bumps!"

"No. Remain where you are. I'll be back soon."

He climbed down the ladder and disappeared into the bushes. Now the lookout continued his running commentary:

"A good-looking girl just came into my field of vision. Name unknown. Standing at the gate with a jug and buying milk. She must be from the house."

"Is it your sister?" asked Nick, tugging at Jenny's sleeve. Receiving no answer, he warned her with an important and rather offended air: "Better not try calling to her from here."

"Shut up!" retorted Jenny derisively, jerking her sleeve free. "I'm not having you ordering me about!"

"Better leave her alone," Geika teased Nick, "or she'll clock you one."

"Who? Me?" Nick was stung to the quick. "What's she got? Nothing but nails! Me, I've got real muscles. Here, look at these biceps! Feel that? And calves too!"

"She'll clock you one anyway—muscles or no muscles. Hey, fellows, watch out! Timur's going up to Kvakin."

Idly swinging a branch which he had broken off one of the trees, Timur was making to cut across Kvakin's path.

Kvakin saw him and halted. His vacant features registered neither surprise nor fear.

"Hiya, Commissar!" he said quietly, cocking his head on one side. "Where you off to in such a hurry?"

"Hiya, Chief!" Timur replied in the same tone. "I was off to meet you."

"Glad to see you. Pity I haven't anything for you. Except this. . . ." He fumbled in his shirt and produced an apple.

"Stolen?" asked Timur, biting into it.

"That's right," Kvakin said. "Golden Sap. Only trouble is, it's not really ripe yet."

"Sour as vinegar!" Timur made a face and tossed the apple away. "Look here: did you notice a sign like this on the fence of No. 34?" Timur pointed to the star embroidered on his blue shirt.

"Well, and what if I did?" Kvakin was on his guard. "Brother, I keep my eyes peeled day and night."

"Then take my advice, and when you see this sign anywhere, day or night, run like a scalded cat."

"Say, Commissar, you're a bit of a fire-eater!" drawled Kvakin. "That'll do—enough said."

"Say, Chief, you're a bit of a mule," answered Timur without raising his voice. "This is our last parley, so keep it in mind and pass it on to your gang."

Nobody watching this scene would have thought that those two were anything but the best of friends. So it was not surprising that Olga, standing at the gate with her milk jug, should have asked the milkwoman whether she knew the boy who was talking to that ruffian Kvakin.

"No, I don't," said the milkwoman vehemently. "I suppose he's just another one of them hoodlums. I've seen him hanging around your house lately. Watch out they don't go knocking your little sister about, dearie."

Olga was disturbed. She shot a hostile glance at the two boys, walked back to the porch, put away the jug of milk, locked the door and went out to look for Jenny, who had not set foot in the house for more than two hours now.

On his return to the loft Timur told the boys about his talk with Kvakin. They decided to send the gang a written ultimatum the following day.

The boys climbed down noiselessly from the loft and ran back to their homes, some crawling through gaps in the fences, others clambering over them.

Timur turned to Jenny.

"Well?" he said. "Is everything clear now?"

"Absolutely," she replied. "Only not quite. Make it simpler."

"All right, but first climb down and follow me. Your sister isn't at home now."

When they reached the ground Timur gave the ladder a push and sent it toppling over.

It was growing dark now, but Jenny followed Timur with complete confidence.

They halted at the old milkwoman's house. Timur glanced around. There was no one in sight. He drew a tube of oil paint out of his pocket and went up to the gate. The upper left-hand point of the red star drawn on it was indeed all wavy like a leech.

He straightened the line with a steady hand and tapered the point nicely.

"What are you doing that for?" Jenny asked. "Please, tell me what it's all about."

Timur put the tube back in his pocket, wiped his stained finger with a burdock leaf, and, looking Jenny straight in the face, said:

"That star means a man living in this house has gone to the Army. And that from now on this house is under our care and protection. Is your father in the Army?"

"Yes!" replied Jenny with pride and deep feeling. "He's an officer."

"That means you come under our care and protection too."

They stopped at the gate of another cottage. There was a red star with a thick black border here.

"See that?" said Timur. "A man left this house for the Red Army, too, but he's dead. This is Lieutenant Pavlov's house; he was killed not long ago at the frontier. His wife and little daughter live here—and good old Geika wonders why the girl's always crying. If you get a chance, Jenny, do something nice for her."

He said all this very simply, but cold shivers ran down Jenny's back, though the evening was quite warm.

She stood there silently, her head bent. Just for the sake of saying something, she asked: "Is Geika really good?"

"Yes," said Timur. "His father is a sailor. He likes to take the mickey out of that swank Kolokolchikov, but he always sticks up for him just the same."

A peremptory, angry shout "Jenny!" made them spin around. Olga was standing quite close behind them.

Jenny touched Timur's hand. She wanted to lead him up to Olga and introduce him.

But a second call, stern and cold, made her think again.

Nodding apologetically to Timur, and shrugging her shoulders in bewilderment, Jenny walked over to Olga.

"Jenny!" said Olga, on the verge of tears, breathing heavily. "I forbid you to talk to that boy. Do you hear?"

"But Olga, why?" Jenny muttered. "What's wrong?"

"I forbid you to associate with that boy," Olga repeated firmly. "You're thirteen and I'm eighteen. I'm your sister. I'm older than you. And when Dad left, he told me. . . ."

"But, Olga, you don't understand a thing!" Jenny cried in despair. She was trembling. She wanted to explain, to justify herself. But she could not. She did not have the right. She waved her hand hopelessly and did not say another word.

She went straight home to bed, but sleep would not come for a long time. And after she fell asleep she did not hear someone knock on the window in the night and deliver a telegram from her father.

At daybreak the shepherd blew his wooden horn. The old milkwoman opened her gate and drove her cow out to join the herd on the common. She had scarcely turned the corner when five boys jumped out from behind an acacia shrub and scuttled over to the well, trying not to make a clatter with their empty buckets.

"Pump it!"

"Let's have it!"

"There!"

"Take it!"

One after another, the boys rushed into the yard, cold water spilling on their bare feet as they ran, emptied their buckets into the oak barrel and dashed back to the well.

Timur ran up to Sima Simakov, who was wet from exertion and asked:

"See Kolokolchikov anywhere? No? Then he has overslept. Hurry! The old woman'll be back any minute."

Timur stole into the Kolokolchikovs' garden, stood under a tree and whistled. Without waiting for an answer he climbed the tree and peered into the room. All he could see from his perch was the end of a bed standing by the window and a pair of blanket-covered legs.

He threw a piece of bark onto the bed and called softly:

"Nick, get up! Nick!"

The sleeper did not stir. Then Timur pulled out his pocket-knife, sliced off a long, thin switch, sharpened the end and cast it into the window. He hooked the blanket and tugged.

The light blanket slipped out over the windowsill. A hoarse shout issued from the room.

His sleepy eyes almost starting out of his head, a grey-haired gentleman clad only in his pyjamas leapt from the bed and, grabbing the retreating blanket, rushed up to the window.

Finding himself suddenly face to face with this venerable old man, Timur dropped to the ground.

The old gentleman, however, flung the recaptured blanket onto his bed, snatched his double-barrelled gun off the wall, hastily put on his spectacles, poked the gun through the window and, pointing the muzzle skyward, closed his eyes and fired.

Timur was so frightened that he did not stop running until he reached the well. There had been a misunderstanding. He had taken the sleeper for Nick, and the old gentleman had, naturally, taken him for a burglar.

Just then Timur saw the milkwoman going through the gate with her water buckets.

He dived behind a clump of acacias and settled down to observe what would happen next.

When she returned from the well, the old woman lifted a bucket and poured the water into the barrel. The next moment she sprang aside, because the water splashed back at her out of the already brimming barrel.

Gasping and peering round in bewilderment, the old woman inspected the barrel from all sides. She plunged her hand into the water and sniffed it. Then she hurried over to the porch to see if the lock on her door was in order. Then, finally, not knowing what to think, she tapped at her neighbour's window.

Timur laughed and came out of his hiding place. He had to hurry. The sun was already rising. Nick had failed to turn up and the lines still had to be repaired.

As he made his way through the garden to the shed, Timur glanced into an open window which gave onto the garden.

Jenny, dressed in shorts and a polo shirt, was writing at a table near her bed. She kept tossing back her hair impatiently from her face.

When Jenny saw Timur, she made no sign of alarm or surprise. She only motioned to him not to wake Olga. Then she put her unfinished letter into a drawer and tiptoed out of the room.

When Jenny heard about Timur's morning misadventure, she forgot all Olga's instructions and gladly volunteered to help him repair the lines which she herself had broken.

After they had finished the job and Timur was leaving, Jenny said:

"I don't know why, but my sister absolutely hates you."

"There you are," said Timur with chagrin. "And my uncle feels the same way about you!"

He was about to go but she stopped him.

"Wait a minute. You ought to comb your hair—you look frightfully shaggy this morning."

She got out her comb and was just handing it to him when Olga called out indignantly from the window.

"Jenny! What *are* you doing?"

A moment later the two sisters stood facing each other on the porch.

"I don't choose your friends for you," Jenny defended herself desperately. "What friends? Quite ordinary friends. In white suits. 'Oh, how wonderfully your sister plays!' Wonderfully! He ought to hear how wonderfully you scold! See this? I'm writing all about everything to Dad!"

"Jenny! That boy is a hoodlum and you're a little fool," said Olga coldly, trying to keep her temper. "Write to Dad if you like, but if I ever see you in that boy's company again we're leaving here and going back to Moscow at once. And you know I keep my word, don't you? "

"Yes I do, you tyrant!" replied Jenny with tears in her eyes. "I know it all too well!"

"And now read this," said Olga. She placed the telegram received the night before on the table and went out.

The telegram read:

"Stopping in Moscow few hours en route. Will wire date and time later. Dad."

Jenny wiped her eyes, pressed the telegram to her lips and murmured:

"Daddy, please come soon! Dad, your Jenny isn't getting on too well!"

Two cartloads of firewood were delivered to the house of the old woman who had spanked the spry little Annie for losing the goat.

Grandma groaned and wheezed as she began to stack the logs, cursing the careless drivers who had just dumped them all anyhow. The work was too much for her. She was seized with a coughing fit and sat down on the steps to catch her breath. Then she picked up a watering can and hobbled off to her vegetable garden. The only person remaining in the yard was Annie's three-year-old brother, a young man of evident energy and enterprise for, the moment Grandma was out of sight, he picked up a stick and began to beat out a tattoo on a bench and an upturned wash tub.

At this Sima Simakov, who had been hunting for the runaway goat—which could have vied with a Bengal tiger in bounding over bushes and across gullies—left one of his men at the fringe of the wood and dashed into the yard at the head of the other four.

He stuffed a handful of wild strawberries into the youngster's mouth and stuck a shiny crow's feather into his hand while his squad began feverishly stacking the logs.

Sima Simakov himself ran off round the garden fence to detain Grandma in the vegetable patch. He stopped at a place where a clump of cherry and apple trees grew close up to the fence and peeped through a chink.

He saw that Grandma had gathered an apronful of cucumbers and was about to go back.

He tapped softly on the boards of the fence. Grandma gave a start. Then Sima picked up a stick and began to stir the branches of an apple tree with it. Grandma

thought she saw somebody climbing stealthily over the fence to steal apples. She dumped her cucumbers onto the ground, pulled up a great tuft of nettles, crept over to the fence and hid behind it.

Sima Simakov peeped through the hole again, but this time he could not see the old woman. Worried, he jumped up, caught hold of the top of the fence and began to pull himself up cautiously.

At that moment the old woman leaped out of her ambush with a triumphant whoop and lashed Sima across the hands with the nettles.

Wildly waving his hands, Sima dashed back to the gate, through which the other boys, now finished with their task, were running out.

Again, the yard was deserted but for the little boy. He picked up a chip of wood, put it on the edge of the woodstack, and then dragged over a piece of birchbark. Grandma found him thus occupied when she came back from the vegetable garden. She stared with bulging eyes at the neatly stacked logs.

"Who's been at work here while I was away?" she asked.

The youngster added his birchbark to the stack and said importantly:

"Can't you see, Grandma? It's me."

The milkwoman came into the yard and the two old women began to talk excitedly about the strange happenings with the water and wood. They tried to pump the youngster but they learned very little from him. He told them that some people had dashed into the yard, stuck sweet strawberries into his mouth, had given him a feather and even promised to catch him a hare with two ears and four legs. Then they had stacked the firewood and run away.

Annie came into the yard.

"Annie," said Grandma, "did you see who came into our yard just now?"

"No, I was looking for the goat," Annie replied sourly. "Been running around all morning looking for her."

"They stole her!" Grandma wailed, turning to the milk-woman. "What a goat she was! Not a goat but a regular dove. A dove!"

"Some dove!" snorted Annie, moving away from her grandma. "When she starts tossing her horns you can't jump out of the way fast enough! Doves don't have horns."

"Hold your tongue, Ann! Keep quiet, you silly good-for-nothing!" cried Grandma. "I'm not saying the goat wasn't a bit high-spirited. I wanted to sell the darling. And my dove has flown."

At that moment the gate flew open with a screech. Sweeping the ground with its horns, the goat galloped in and headed straight for the milkwoman. That good woman snatched up her heavy milk can and leaped onto the porch with a shriek and the goat ran into the wall of the house and came to a stop.

Everybody noticed, then, that a board had been fastened to the animal's horns. On it was written:

*I am a goat—beware!
A goat of note—take care!
Who Annie would beat
Vengeance I'll wreak!*

Meanwhile, at the corner beyond the fence, the boys, feeling very pleased with themselves, were laughing fit to split their sides.

Sima Simakov drove a stick into the ground and went galumphing round it in a wild dance, chanting proudly:

*We are not a gang of roughs
Nor a rabble band.
We are disciplined and tough
And our pranks are planned.
Pioneers all are we!
Pioneers are we!*

Then the boys darted off noiselessly like a flock of martins.

There was still plenty of work to do, but the chief thing now as to draw up an ultimatum and to send it to Misha Kvakin.

Nobody knew how to draw up an ultimatum, so Timur asked his uncle.

His uncle explained that each country had its own way of drawing up ultimatums but that courtesy obliged you to wind them up with the following words:

"Please accept, Mr. Minister, the assurance of my highest esteem."

After this the ultimatum should be tendered to the head of the hostile country by an accredited ambassador.

But this did not appeal to Timur or to any of the others. First of all, they had no intention of conveying any kind of esteem to that hoodlum Kvakin; secondly, they had neither a permanent ambassador nor even an envoy accredited to Kvakin's gang.

After discussing the point they decided to send a simpler ultimatum, like the one the Zaporozhye Cossacks sent the Turkish sultan. They had all seen the picture of the Cossacks writing their ultimatum and they had read about how the brave fellows fought the Turks, the Tatars and the Poles.

Behind the grey gate with the black-bordered red star in the shady garden of the house opposite the house where Olga and Jenny were living, a fair-haired little girl was making her way down the gravel walk. Her mother, a young and pretty woman but tired and sad-looking, was sitting in a rocking chair near the window; on the sill stood a huge bouquet of wild flowers.

Before her lay a pile of open telegrams and letters— from relatives and friends, acquaintances and strangers.

The letters and telegrams were full of warm sympathy. They seemed to speak to her from a distance, like a forest echo, which calls nowhere and promises nothing, yet comforts the traveller with the knowledge that there are people close by and that he is not alone in the dark woods.

The fair-haired little girl stopped by the fence, holding her doll upside down so that its wooden arms and hempen braids trailed over the ground. A painted rabbit cut out in ply-board was dangling from the top of the fence. The expression on its face was droll and rather sad. It was jerking one of its paws strumming a little balalaika.

Thrilled by this miraculous occurrence, which naturally seemed to her strange and wonderful beyond compare, the little girl dropped her doll and ran up to the fence. The rabbit, apparently eager to please, dropped right into her hands! Jenny's smiling face popped up from behind the fence.

The little girl looked up at Jenny.

"Are you playing with *me*?" she asked.

"Yes. Would you like me to jump down?"

"There's some nettles here," the little girl warned her after thinking it over. "I stung my hand yesterday."

"That's all right," said Jenny, jumping down. "I'm not afraid of it. Show me the nettle that stung your hand yesterday. This one? Well, just watch: I'll pull it up, and throw it down, and stamp on it and spit on it. All right? Now let's play. You have the hare and I'll have the doll."

From the porch Olga had noticed that Jenny was hanging about near their neighbour's fence, but she did not want to interfere with her sister. There had been enough tears for one morning. But when Jenny climbed over the fence into the neighbour's garden Olga began to worry. She left the house, crossed over to the gate and opened it.

Jenny and the little girl were now standing at the window beside the woman, who was smiling as her daughter showed her how the funny, sad-looking rabbit played the balalaika.

Noting Jenny's perturbed expression when her sister entered the garden, the woman guessed that Olga was displeased.

"Please don't be angry with her," she said quietly to Olga. "She's only playing with my little girl. This is a sad time for us. . . ." The woman fell silent. "I've been crying my eyes out, while she"—the woman pointed to her tiny daughter and added almost in a whisper—"she doesn't even know that her father was killed at the frontier not long ago."

It was now Olga's turn to feel abashed, while Jenny watched her from some way off with an expression of bitter reproach.

"And I'm all alone," the woman continued. "My mother lives far, far away in the taiga. My brothers are in the Army and I have no sisters."

The young woman put a hand on Jenny's shoulder and pointed to the window.

"Was it you who put this bunch of flowers on my porch last night?" she asked.

"No," replied Jenny without stopping to think. "It wasn't me. But I expect it was one of our. . . ."

"One of our what?" Olga gave Jenny a puzzled look.

"I don't know." Jenny was frightened. "It wasn't me. I don't know anything about it. Look, somebody's coming."

Two air-force officers were climbing out of a car that had stopped in front of the house. They opened the gate and came striding up the garden path.

"They've come to see me," the woman said. "I know what it is: they're going to ask me again if it wouldn't be good for me to have a change, if I wouldn't like to go to the Crimea or to the Caucasus, to a sanatorium or to a holiday resort. . . ."

The men touched their caps. The senior officer, a captain, must have caught her last words, for he said:

"No, neither to the Crimea, nor to the Caucasus, nor to a sanatorium, nor to a holiday resort. You wanted to see your mother, didn't you? Well, she's coming to pay you a visit. Leaving today from Irkutsk. She was brought to Irkutsk by a special plane."

"Who brought her?" the woman exclaimed in a happy and dazed voice. "You?"

"No," the captain replied. "Our comrades and yours."

The little girl came running up and looked boldly at the visitors; it was obvious that she was used to the blue uniform.

"Mummy," she said, "make me a swing and I'll go flying to and fro, to and fro. Far, far away, like Daddy."

"Oh no, don't!" her mother cried. She picked up the little girl and hugged her tight. "No, no, never fly away as far ... as your daddy."

On a daisy-covered green off Maly Ovrazhny Lane, behind the chapel whose peeling murals depicted stern, bearded old men and clean-shaven angels, and somewhat to the right of the picture of Judgement Day with its cauldrons, boiling oil and darting devils, Kvakin's gang was playing cards.

They had no money, and so they played for "back-breakers", "flicks" and "revive-the-stiff". The loser's eyes were bound, he was forced to lie on his back on the grass, and he was given a "candle", that is, a long stick. With this stick he was supposed to repel his kind brethren, who out of pity for the dead man would do everything they could to revive him by energetically lashing at his bare shins, calves and heels with nettle.

The game was at its height when the shrill call of a bugle came from the other side of the fence.

Timur's envoys stood there.

Nick Kolokolchikov, the staff trumpeter, gripped a shiny brass bugle in one hand, while the barefoot Geika, his face stern, held a big envelope made of wrapping paper.

"What kind of circus act is this?" asked the boy they called Figure, leaning over the fence. "Misha!" he yelled over his shoulder. "Drop the game, there's a sort of delegation here to see you!"

"Here I am," said Kvakin, hoisting himself up on the fence. "Hiya there, Geika! Who's that shrimp you've got with you?"

"Take this envelope." Geika handed over the ultimatum. "You have twenty-four hours to think it over. I shall come back for your answer at the same time tomorrow."

Touched on the raw at being called a shrimp, Nick Kolokolchikov raised his bugle and, blowing out his cheeks, sounded a furious retreat. The two envoys then departed in a dignified silence under the inquisitive stares of the boys strung along the fence.

"What's this, anyway?" said Kvakin, fingering the envelope and looking at the gaping boys. "Here we were, minding our own business, and then bugles, threats! No, fellas, I can't make head or tail of it!"

He tore open the envelope and, perched as he was on the fence, began to read:

"To Mikhail Kvakin, Chief of the Gang for the Mop-ping-up of Other People's Gardens.' That's me," he explained in a loud voice. "Full title and all the trimmings. 'And his,' " he continued, " 'inglorious assistant Peter Pyatakov, otherwise known simply as Figure.' That's you," he explained with satisfaction to Figure. "Sounds good, 'inglorious'! Too high-sounding though, if you ask me; they could have called the fool something simpler. 'And likewise to all the members of their infamous band—an ul-ti-ma-tum.' What that is I don't know," announced Kvakin sarcastically. "Most likely a swearword of some sort."

"It's an international word. Means they're going to lash us," explained the boy, who was standing next to Figure, a close-cropped lad called Alex.

"Then why don't they say so!" said Kvakin. "Now we come to Article One:

"In consideration of the fact that you make night raids on the gardens of peaceful inhabitants, not sparing houses bearing our sign—a red star—or even those bearing the star with the black border of mourning, we order you, you cowardly scoundrels. . . ."

"Can you beat it? Just listen to how they swear—the dogs!" continued Kvakín, forcing a smile. "And look at all the fancy words and commas! Boy!

"We order you, Mikhail Kvakín, and that altogether inglorious individual, Figure, to appear at the place indicated by our messengers at a time not later than tomorrow morning, bringing with you a list of all the members of your infamous band."

"In the event of a refusal, we shall consider ourselves at liberty to take any further action we may think fit."

"What do they mean—'at liberty'?" Kvakín pondered. "We never locked them up anywhere, did we?"

"It's another of those international words. Means they're going to lash us," the close-cropped Alex explained again.

"Then why don't they say so?" Kvakín said with annoyance. "Too bad Geika's gone; looks like he hasn't cried for a long time."

"He won't cry," Alex said. "His brother's a sailor."

"So what?"

"His father was a sailor too. He won't cry."

"What's it to you, anyway?"

"My uncle's a sailor too."

"Cut it out, will you!" Kvakín flared up. "Father, brother, uncle, what's it all mean, anyway! Better let your hair grow, Alex—looks like you've got sunstroke. And what are *you* mumbling about?" he turned on Figure.

"We've got to catch those messengers tomorrow and give that Timur and his lot a licking," said Figure sullenly, nettled by the ultimatum.

They left it at that.

Withdrawing to the shade of the chapel, the chief and his assistant stopped by a painting depicting agile and muscular devils dragging howling and resisting sinners towards the everlasting furnace. Kvakín asked Figure:

"Look here, was that you in the garden where that girl lives, the one whose father was killed?"

"That's right. What about it?"

"You see, it's like this," Kvakín muttered glumly, poking his finger at the mural. "I don't give a damn for Timur's signs and I can make mincemeat of him any day. . . ."

"Okay," agreed Figure. "So what're you poking your finger at the devils for?"

"Because," replied Kvakín with a crooked grin, "even though you're a pal of mine, Figure, you're not human, you're more like this dirty fat old beast of a devil."

In the morning three of the milkwoman's regular customers were not at home when she called to deliver the milk. It was too late for her to go to the market, so, lifting her milk can onto her shoulder, she set out on a round of the houses.

She trudged from door to door without success until she finally stopped to rest near Timur's house.

She heard a deep, pleasant voice singing in the yard. That meant the owners were in and she might have some luck there.

As she came through the gate the old woman sang out:

"Milk, anyone want milk here?"

"Two measures!" replied a bass voice.

Lowering her can to the ground, the milkwoman turned around and saw a grizzled and tattered old man come limping out from behind the bushes brandishing a sabre.

"I was saying, did you want any milk, sir?" the milk-woman asked, backing away in alarm. "Goodness me, how rough you look! What do you use that sabre for— to cut the grass?"

"Two measures. You'll find a jug on the table," the old man answered shortly and stuck the point of his sabre into the ground.

"You ought to buy a scythe, sir," the milkwoman continued, hastily pouring the milk into the jug and glancing warily at the old man, "and throw that sabre away. You might scare a simple body to death with a sabre like that."

"How much?" the old man asked, thrusting his hand into the pocket of his baggy trousers.

"The usual price," replied the milkwoman. "Two-eighty a litre. I don't overcharge."

The old man rummaged about in his pocket and produced a large, battered revolver.

"Oi, you can pay later," the milkwoman babbled, snatching up her can and making off. "Don't trouble yourself, dearie!" she went on, almost running now and glancing back over her shoulder. "I can wait for the money."

She hurried through the gate, slammed it shut and shouted out angrily from the lane:

"You ought to be put away, you old devil, and not left to run about loose. Yes, yes! Under lock and key is where you belong!"

The old man shrugged his shoulders, stuffed the three-ruble note which he had been holding ready back into his pocket and quickly hid the revolver behind his back, for Doctor Kolokolchikov, the elderly gentleman, was coming into the garden.

The doctor was stalking down the gravel walk with a serious and concentrated mien, leaning on his stick. When he caught sight of the eccentric old man he coughed, adjusted his spectacles and inquired:

"Can you tell me where I can find the owner of this house, my good man?"

"I live in this house," the old man replied.

"In that case," said the elderly gentleman, tipping his straw hat, "perhaps you can tell me whether a certain young lad, one Timur Garayev, is a relative of yours?"

"He is. That 'certain young lad' happens to be my nephew."

"It pains me very much indeed to tell you this," began the elderly gentleman, clearing his throat and looking askance at the sabre which was still sticking out of the ground where its owner had left it, "but yesterday morning your nephew attempted to rob our house."

"What? My Timur tried to rob your house?"

"Yes, just imagine!" continued the elderly gentleman, trying to see what it was the old man was hiding behind his back and beginning to get worked up. "He tried to steal my flannel blanket while I was asleep."

"Who? Timur? Stole your flannel blanket?" The old man was quite at a loss. The hand holding the revolver involuntarily fell to his side.

The elderly gentleman was now visibly alarmed. Backing toward the gate with as much dignity as he could muster, he began to speak soothingly:

"Of course, I wouldn't swear to it, but still the facts— the facts! My dear sir! I beg you—please do not come any closer. Naturally—I have no idea why—but your appearance, your strange behaviour. . . ."

"Look here," declared the old man, advancing on the doctor. "There must be some misunderstanding."

"My dear sir!" cried the elderly gentleman, staring hypnotised at the revolver and continuing to retreat. "This conversation of ours is taking a most undesirable and, I might say, considering our age, a most undignified course."

He stepped quickly through the gate and hurried away, repeating:

"No, no, a most undesirable course—most undignified!"

The old man reached the gate just as Olga, on her way to have a swim in the river, came level with the agitated gentleman.

Suddenly the old man began waving his arms and calling to Olga to stop. At this the elderly gentleman leaped over a ditch with the agility of a goat, seized Olga's hand and, in a twinkling, the two disappeared around the corner.

The old man burst out laughing. Obviously elated and thoroughly pleased with himself, he went stumping off on his wooden leg singing:

*But you'll never understand
Flying fast above the land
How long and slow the waiting for your plane!
Ah!*

Then he unfastened the strap at his knee, flung the wooden leg into the grass and, tearing off his wig and beard, ran into the house.

Ten minutes later the young and cheerful engineer George Garayev ran down the steps, wheeled his motorcycle out of the barn, called the dog Rita and set her to guard the house, pressed the starter, swung into the saddle and sped off to the river in search of the frightened Olga.

At 11 a.m. Geika and Nick set out for the reply to the ultimatum.

"Walk straight," Geika growled at Nick. "You ought to walk with a light and firm step. But you go hopping along like a chicken trying to catch a worm. Your get-up's fine—pants, shirt and everything—but you still look like nothing on earth. Don't go and take offence—I'm talking sense to you. Now why do you have to lick your lips as you go along? Stick your tongue back in your mouth and keep it where it belongs. . . . And what are *you* doing here?" Geika asked Sima Simakov, who had just popped up in their path.

"Timur sent me to act as liaison," Simakov rattled off. "It's okay even if you don't know what it's all about. You've got your assignment and I've got mine. Nick, let me blow your bugle—just once. Boy, aren't you looking important today! Geika, you nut! You might have put a pair of boots or shoes on when you're on a mission! Ever see a barefoot ambassador? Well, so long—you go that way and I go this way. Be seeing you!"

"What a rattle-pate!" Geika shook his head. "Shoots of a hundred words where four would do. Sound your bugle, Herald, here's the fence."

"Bring up Mikhail Kvakin!" Geika told the boy whose head appeared above the fence.

"To the right, please. You'll find the gate open to welcome you," Kvakin called from the other side.

"Let's not go," Nick whispered to Geika, tugging at his hand. "They'll beat us up."

"You mean all of them against us two?" Geika said contemptuously. "Blow your bugle, Nick—louder! We go wherever we choose!"

They walked through the rusty iron gate and found themselves face to face with a group of boys. In front stood Figure and Kvakin.

"Let's have the answer to our letter," Geika demanded firmly.

Kvakin was smiling, Figure scowling.

"Let's talk this over," Kvakin offered. "Sit down a while, what's the hurry?"

"Give us the answer to the letter," Geika insisted coldly. "We can talk afterwards."

It was hard to tell whether he was play-acting, this upright, sturdy chap in the sailor's jersey, at whose side stood the puny, now pallid bugler. Or whether he was really demanding an answer as he stood there, barefoot and broad-shouldered, his grey eyes mere slits, confident that justice and power were on his side.

"Here, take it," said Kvakin, handing him a note.

Geika unfolded the sheet of paper. What he saw was a crude drawing of a thumb to a nose captioned with a dirty word.

Geika calmly tore the sheet in two; not a muscle of his face moved. And at that moment the two boys were seized by the arms.

They did not resist.

"You deserve a black eye for delivering ultimatums like that," said Kvakin, coming up to Geika. "But we don't want to be too hard on you. We'll lock you up till night time in here"—he pointed to the chapel—"and during the night we'll clean out the garden at No.24."

"Oh no, you won't," replied Geika unruffled.

"Oh yes, we will!" cried Figure, hitting Geika in the face.

"You can hit me a hundred times," said Geika. He shut his eyes tight and then opened them again. "Nick," he grunted encouragingly, "keep your pecker up. I've got a feeling there'll be a No. 1 general rallying signal today."

The captives were shoved into the small chapel with its closed iron shutters. Both doors were then locked, bolted and barred from the outside.

"Well," Figure shouted at the door through cupped palms, "how are things going now, your way or ours?"

From inside came a hollow, scarcely audible answer:

"No, you bums, from now on things'll never go your way any more!"

Figure spat in disgust.

"His brother's a sailor," the close-cropped Alex explained morosely. "He and my uncle serve on the same ship."

"So what?" Figure asked menacingly. "Who are you, the captain or what?"

"You hit him when he couldn't use his hands. Is that fair now?"

"I'll sock you one, too!" Figure snarled and swung his fist at Alex.

The two boys rolled over and over on the grass. The others grabbed them by the arms and legs and tried to haul them apart.

Nobody noticed Sima Simakov's face appearing briefly in the thick foliage of a lime tree which grew near the fence.

Sima slipped to the ground and sprinted across the vegetable patches toward the river, where Timur and the boys were swimming.

Olga, her head covered with a towel, was lying on the hot sandy beach reading.

Jenny was having a bathe. Suddenly somebody came up from behind and gave her a hug.

She turned round.

"Hello," said a tall, dark-eyed girl. "Timur sent me, my name's Tanya, and I'm in his company too. He's sorry you got into trouble with your sister because of him. Your sister must be awfully bad-tempered, isn't she?"

"Tell him not to feel sorry," muttered Jenny, reddening. "Olga isn't bad-tempered at all, she's a bit tough, that's all." She made a little gesture of exasperation and added on a note of despair: "Oh, sister! Just you wait till Dad comes home!"

They clambered out onto the steep bank a little bit to the left of the beach. Here they ran into Annie.

"Hello, recognise me?" she asked Jenny, speaking, as always, very quickly through clenched teeth. "You do? I recognised you right away. There's Timur!" She pointed to the opposite bank, which was teeming with boys. "I know who found the goat for me, and who stacked the firewood, and who gave my brother the strawberries. And I know you too," she said, turning to Tanya. "I once saw you sitting in your vegetable garden crying. You oughtn't to cry. Doesn't do any good. Hey, stand still, you devil, or I'll throw you into the water!" she yelled at the goat, which was tied to a clump of bushes. Then she pulled off her dress. "Come on, girls, let's jump in!"

Jenny and Tanya exchanged glances. She was somehow very comical, this sunburned girl who looked like a Gypsy!

Holding hands, they went up to the edge of the steep bank overlooking the clear, rippling, blue water.

"Well, shall we jump?"

"Yes, let's!"

And all together they plunged into the water.

No sooner had they surfaced than somebody else plopped in by their side.

It was Sima Simakov who had taken a running dive from the bank in his sandals, shorts and shirt.

Tossing back his wet hair and spluttering and snorting, he swam off with long strokes toward the opposite bank.

"Trouble, Jenny, big trouble!" he shouted over his shoulder. "Geika and Nick've been locked up!"

Olga strolled up the hill reading her book. Where the steep path cut across the road she came upon George standing by his motorcycle. They greeted each other.

"I was riding along when I saw you coming. So I thought I'd wait and give you a lift if you were going the same way."

"That's not true!" Olga retorted. "You were waiting for me on purpose."

"All right, I was," said George. "Have it your way if you like. I must apologise for scaring you this morning. I was the lame old fellow at the gate, you see. I was dressed for rehearsal. Climb on and I'll take you home."

Olga shook her head.

He placed a bouquet of flowers on her book.

It was a nice bouquet. Olga blushed in confusion—and threw it to the ground.

George had not expected that.

"Look here," he said with chagrin. "You play and sing well, and you have nice straightforward eyes. I haven't offended you in any way. I don't think even people of the most reinforced concrete professions should act like that."

"You shouldn't give me flowers!" Olga said guiltily, frightened by what she had done. "You—you can give me a lift without offering me flowers."

She took her seat on the leather cushion and the motorcycle sped off.

When the bike came to a fork in the road it ignored the road to the estate and tore down the one leading out into the open country.

"You've taken the wrong road," Olga shouted. "We should have gone to the right!"

"This is a better road," George replied. "It's more fun this way."

Another turn, and they roared through a rustling, shady stand of trees. A dog left its herd to bark at them and chase the bike. But the motorcycle was already far away.

Then a lorry came whining down the road like a heavy artillery shell in trajectory. When George and Olga broke out from the clouds of dust which it had raised, they came into sight of the belching smokestacks, and glass and steel buildings of what looked like some strange city at the foot of a hill.

"That's our plant!" George shouted. "Three years ago I used to come here to pick mushrooms and wild strawberries!"

Almost without slackening speed, the motorcycle executed a U turn.

"Straight ahead!" Olga cried warningly. "Head straight for home!"

Suddenly the motor died down and they came to a stop.

"Just a moment," George said, jumping to the ground. "A minor breakdown."

He rolled the machine over to a birch tree by the side of the road, took out a monkey wrench and began to tinker with the motor.

"What part are you playing in your opera?" Olga asked, seating herself on the grass. "Why is your get-up so stern and frightening?"

"I've got the part of an old soldier," replied George, busy with the motor. "He's an ex-partisan and a bit off his head. He lives near the border and is obsessed by the idea that our enemies might outwit us. But the soldiers are a gay young lot and spend their off-duty ^ hours playing volleyball. There are all sorts of girls too."

George twisted his features into a frown and began to sing in a low voice:

*Again the moon is dimmed behind the clouds.
Three nights I've kept my weary watch—but shrouds
Of misty silence hide the slinking foe.
Even now he is at hand!
But I am old and weak, so sleep not thou,
Sleep not, my motherland!*

Then he switched to another key and chanted in imitation of the chorus:

Be still, old man—be still!

"What do they mean by 'be still'?" Olga asked, wiping the dust from her lips with a handkerchief.

"It means," explained George, continuing to work away with his monkey wrench, "it means sleep in peace, you old fool! Officers and men are at their posts. . . . Olga, did your sister tell you about our talk?"

"She did, and I scolded her for it."

"You shouldn't have. She's a very amusing child. I said 'Oh', and she said, 'Boo!'"

"That amusing child can make life pretty difficult," Olga said. "A boy by the name of Timur has been hanging around her. He's in with that hoodlum Kvakín. I simply can't seem to keep him away from our house."

"Timur? Hm-hm," George coughed in embarrassment. "Mean to say he's in that gang? I don't believe he's one of those . . . not likely ... oh well! Don't you worry. I'll see he leaves your house alone. Olya, why don't you study music? What's an engineer, anyway? I'm an engineer myself and look at me!"

"Aren't you a good engineer?"

"Good enough," replied George, moving closer to Olga and starting to tinker with the hub of the front wheel. "I'm not at all a bad engineer, but you play and sing so well."

"Look here, George," murmured Olga. She moved away in confusion. "I don't know what sort of engineer you are, but you certainly go about repairing your machine in a very odd way."

Olga gestured in imitation of his aimless tapping at the plugs and the outside of the engine with his monkey wrench.

"Nothing odd about it at all. Everything's being done in the proper way." He jumped to his feet and gave the frame a couple of taps with the monkey wrench. "There you are, the job's finished. Olga, is your father an Army officer?"

"Yes."

"That's fine. I'm one too."

"There's no making you out!" Olga shrugged her shoulders. "First you're an engineer, then an actor and now an Army officer. Perhaps you're a flyer as well?"

"No," laughed George. "Flyers dump bombs onto people's heads from above, but we strike through iron and through reinforced concrete—straight to the heart."

Again the rye fields, woods and river whirled past. Soon they came to Olga's house.

At the sound of the motorcycle Jenny came skipping out onto the porch. She blushed when she saw George, but after he had driven off she went up to Olga, hugged her and said enviously:

"Ooh, how lucky you are today, Olga!"

At the chapel, the boys had gone off after arranging to meet again later near the garden of No. 24.

Only Figure remained behind. He was perplexed and angered by the silence inside the chapel. The captives neither yelled, nor pounded on the door, nor responded to his taunts and questions.

He then tried a ruse. Opening the outer door, he entered the stone-walled vestibule and held his breath.

While he was standing there with his ear glued to the keyhole, the outer door suddenly closed with a bang, as though someone had hit it with a log.

"Hey, who's there?" he demanded angrily, springing to the door. "Hey, cut out the tricks or I'll sock you one!"

No one replied. He heard strange voices outside. Then he heard the shutters creaking. Someone began to talk to the captives through the bars of the window.

Then the boys inside the chapel burst out laughing. The sound of that laughter made Figure feel uneasy.

At last the outside door was thrown open. Timur, Simakov and Ladygin stood in the doorway.

"Open the second door!" Timur ordered without stirring from his place. "Open it yourself, if you don't want things happening to you!"

Figure reluctantly drew the bolt. Nick and Geika came out of the chapel.

"Now take their place!" Timur ordered. "Get in, you swine, quick now!" he shouted, clenching his fists. "I've no time to waste talking to you."

Both doors were slammed to on Figure. A heavy bolt was shot through the iron loops and a padlock fixed to it.

Then Timur took a sheet of paper and scribbled on it with his blue pencil:

"Kvakin, no need for a sentry. I've locked them up and am taking the key. I'll come straight to the meeting place this evening."

They ran off. Five minutes later Kvakin came through the gate.

He read the note, fingered the lock, grinned, and retraced his steps to the gate while Figure pounded frantically at the iron door with his fists and heels.

At the gate Kvakin turned around and muttered indifferently:

"Pound away, Geika! You'll have plenty of time to get fed up with it before evening!"

Just before sundown, Timur and Simakov made their way to the market square. At the edge of a straggling row of stalls dealing in soft drinks, vegetables, tobacco, groceries and ice cream, stood a rickety empty booth where cobblers worked on market days.

Timur and Simakov spent a few minutes in that booth.

At dusk the helm in the loft went into action. One after another the wires tightened, conveying the right signals to the right places.

Reinforcements poured in. Quite a large number of boys had already gathered—about two or three dozen. And more kept creeping noiselessly through gaps in the fences.

Tanya and Annie were sent away. Jenny stayed at home too. Her assignment was to keep Olga from going out into the garden.

Timur stood by the helm.

"Repeat the signal over the sixth line," Simakov requested anxiously, sticking his head through the window. "We don't seem to be getting any reaction on it."

Two boys were busy making a kind of placard out of a piece of plywood. Ladygin's group arrived.

At last the scouts came in with reports. Kvakin's gang was assembled on the common outside the garden of No. 24.

"Time to start," said Timur. "Get ready, boys!"

He released the wheel and pulled a rope. Slowly the company's flag rose and rippled over the old barn in the uneven light of the moon that was shuttling in and out of the clouds. This was the signal for battle.

A file of a dozen boys crept along the fence of No. 24. Halting in the shade, Kvakin said:

"Everybody's here but Figure."

"He's smart," someone remarked. "I'll bet he's in the garden already. He always barges in first."

Kvakin removed two previously loosened boards from the fence and climbed through. The others followed him. Alex remained in the street to keep watch.

Five heads peeped out from the nettle and weed filled ditch on the other side of the road. Four of them disappeared again. The fifth—Nick Kolokolchikov's—did not

follow immediately, but a hand reached up and slapped it on the crown and this head, too, vanished from sight.

Alex, the sentry, looked around. All was quiet, and he stuck his head through the hole in the fence to see if he could hear what was going on inside the garden.

Three boys crept out of the ditch. The next moment the sentry felt strong hands gripping his arms and legs, and before he could cry out he was yanked back from the fence.

"Geika!" he muttered, raising his head. "Where'd you come from?"

"Never mind," hissed Geika, "better hold your tongue! Or I'll forget that you stood up for me."

"Okay," agreed Alex. "I'll shut up."

Whereupon he immediately and unexpectedly gave a shrill whistle.

His mouth was clapped shut at once by Geika's broad palm. Hands grabbed him and dragged him away.

The boys in the garden heard the whistle. Kvakin spun around. The whistle was not repeated. Kvakin peered into the darkness. He thought he saw the bushes in the corner of the garden moving.

"Figure!" he called in a low voice. "That you hiding there, you fool?"

"Kvakin! There's a light!" somebody shouted suddenly. "Look out, here they come!"

In the bushes behind him at least a dozen electric torches were switched on. They advanced quickly on the raiders, confusing and blinding them.

"Fight 'em, don't run!" cried Kvakin, reaching into his pocket for an apple and hurling it at the lights. "Grab the torches and twist their arms off! It's Timur!"

"Timur is here and so am I!" Simakov yelled as he leapt out from behind a bush.

Another dozen or so boys bore down on them from the rear and flanks.

"Oho!" yelled Kvakin. "They've got a regular army here! Run for the fence, fellas!"

The ambushed band made a panic-stricken rush for the fence. Jostling and bumping into one another, the boys tumbled out into the road and fell straight into the arms of Ladygin and Geika.

The moon had quite disappeared behind a cloud. Only voices were to be heard in the darkness:

"Lemme go!"

"Leave me alone!"

"Hands off! Hey!"

"Quiet, everybody!" Timur's voice rang out. "Don't knock the prisoners about! Where's Geika?"

"I'm here!"

"Take them away!"

"Suppose they won't go?"

"Frog-march 'em!"

"Lemme go, you filthy rats!" someone whined.

"Who was that?" Timur demanded furiously. "Aha, you can dish it out but you can't take it! Geika, give the order and get a move on!"

The prisoners were led to the empty booth on the fringe of the market square and pushed inside one after another.

"Bring Kvakin over here to me," Timur ordered.

Kvakin was led up.

"Ready?" asked Timur.

"All ready."

The last prisoner was shoved into the booth and the door was bolted and locked.

"Run along," Timur told Kvakin. "You're just a joke. Nobody's afraid of you and nobody needs you."

Kvakin stood looking down, expecting a beating.

"Run along," Timur repeated. "Take this key and let your friend Figure out of the chapel."

Kvakin did not move.

"Let the fellas out or lemme in with them," he growled.

"No," said Timur, "that's over and done with. You're finished with them and they're finished with you."

A cacophony of whistles and catcalls followed Kvakin as he slowly walked off, hunching his shoulders. Ten paces away he stopped and straightened up.

"I'll beat the life out of you!" he shouted savagely at Timur. "I'll smash you single-handed. To a pulp!" After which he plunged into the darkness.

"Ladygin, you and your five can go," said Timur. "What's your next assignment?"

"No. 22, Bolshaya Vasilkovskaya—stack the logs."

"Fine. Get to work!"

A whistle blew at the station nearby. A suburban train had pulled in and the passengers would soon be coming from the station. Timur began to hurry.

"Simakov, you and your five—what's yours?"

"No. 38, Malaya Petrakovskaya." He added with a laugh, "Same as usual: buckets, barrel and water. S'long!"

"Fine, get to work! Well, and now . . . people are coming this way. The rest can go home. Quick now!"

As the new arrivals began to trickle into the square an infernal clatter broke out. They stopped in alarm. Another outburst of banging and yelling followed. Lights went on in the windows of neighbouring houses. Somebody switched on the light over the market stalls, and the crowd saw the following notice hanging on the booth:

PASSERS-BY, DON'T BE SORRY FOR THEM!

Inside are people who sneak into the gardens of peaceful residents at night and steal apples and things.

The key to the padlock is behind this notice. The person who releases the prisoners is warned first to make sure he has no relatives or friends among them.

It is late at night and the black-bordered red star on the gate is invisible. But it is there.

Once again, the scene is the garden of the house where the little girl lives.

Two ropes are let down from a branch of a tree. A boy climbs down the rough trunk, fastens a board to the ropes and sits on it to see whether the new swing—for swing it is—is strong enough.

The stout branch creaks a bit, the leaves rustle and stir. A bird, disturbed from its slumbers, twitters and flaps its wings. It is quite late. Olga has gone to bed long ago. Jenny is asleep, and so are the boy's comrades: the jolly Simakov, the taciturn Ladygin, funny little Nick. Brave Geika is tossing about in his bed and mumbling in his sleep.

The clock in the watch-tower strikes the quarter hour: "A day's passed—a deed's done! Ding-dong! One, two!"

Yes, it is quite late.

The boy gets off the swing, searches in the grass and picks up a heavy bouquet of wild flowers.

Jenny had gathered them.

He tiptoes softly up the steps of the moonlit porch so as not to wake and frighten the sleepers, and places the bouquet carefully on the top step. The boy is Timur.

It was Sunday morning. The Young Communist League had arranged a grand carnival and concert in the park to celebrate the anniversary of the victory of the Red Army at Lake Hassan in the Far East.

The girls had run off to the carnival grounds early in the morning. Olga quickly ironed her blouse and then took stock of the wardrobe. When she shook out Jenny's sun-dress a slip of paper fell out of the pocket.

Olga picked it up and read:

"No need to be afraid of anyone at home. Everything's fine and I won't tell. Timur."

What wouldn't he tell? What didn't she need to be afraid of? What sort of a secret was that sly, close child hiding from her? No! This must be put an end to. When Dad left he had said. . . . She must act quickly and firmly.

George tapped at the window.

"Olga," he exclaimed, "you've got to help me! A delegation's come round—they want me to sing at the concert. Today's such an occasion—I couldn't very well refuse. I want you to accompany me on your accordion."

"Yes—but why don't you get a pianist?" Olga said in surprise. "Why do you want an accordion?"

"Olga, I don't want a pianist, I want to sing with you! It'll work out fine. May I jump in through the window? Put that iron away and take out your accordion. Here, I've got it out myself. All you have to do is press the keys and I'll sing."

"Look here, George," said Olga, ruffled. "Must you climb in through the window when there is a perfectly good door?"

There was a noisy crowd in the park. Cars filled with holiday-makers rolled up in a continuous stream. Vans drove up laden with sandwiches, buns, soft drinks, sausages, sweets and cakes. An array of ice cream vendors spread out over the grounds.

Phonographs screeched in every imaginable key over the lawns where picnickers were settling down to unpack their lunches.

The bands blared. At the entrance to the open-air theatre the old doorman was arguing with a telegraph line repairman who was trying to enter with all his tools—monkey wrenches, straps, iron spikes and all.

"Listen, man, you can't go in with those tools. Today's a holiday. You go home first, give yourself a wash and brush up and put on some decent clothes."

"But it's a free performance, isn't it? I don't need a ticket!"

"Makes no difference. They're singing in there. Only thing you've forgotten to bring with you's your telegraph pole. You move along too, citizen," he said to another man. "Can't you hear there's a concert on, singing and music? And you've got a bottle sticking out of your pocket!"

"But look here, old boy," the other stuttered. "I've got to—I'm the tenor!"

"Get along with you—Tenor," retorted the old doorman. He pointed to the repairman. "This Bass over here isn't making trouble. You'd better keep quiet too."

Jenny, who had been told by the boys that Olga had gone backstage with her accordion, fidgeted impatiently in her seat.

At last George and Olga came onto the stage. Jenny was terrified: she was afraid the audience would laugh at Olga.

But nobody laughed.

George and Olga looked so nice, young and gay standing there on the stage that Jenny felt like rushing up and hugging them both.

Olga picked up her accordion.

A deep line furrowed George's forehead. He hunched his shoulders and lowered his head. He was an old man now, and in a low, sonorous voice he began to sing:

*Three nights I've kept my weary watch.
I peer Into the dismal dark and always seem to hear
Muffled, suspicious sounds—my rifle burns
Uneasy in my hand
And, as full twenty years ago, so my heart yearns
Now to defend my land.*

*As in the long nights of that other war
I keep good watch as I have watched before..
And if I'm called upon to help my country's plight
Against a hireling foe,
'Then—old man though I be—I'll stand and fight
As twenty years ago.*

"Lovely! Poor brave old fellow! What a beautiful voice," Jenny murmured to herself. "That's the way, Olga! What a pity Dad isn't here to see you play!"

After the concert George and Olga strolled hand in hand through the park.

"It's all very well," Olga was saying, "but I can't think where Jenny's got to."

"She was standing on her seat and yelling 'Bravo, bravo!'" said George. "Then—" George faltered, "then a boy came up to her and they disappeared."

"What boy?" Olga asked anxiously. "George, you're older than me. Tell me what I am to do with her. Look, I found this note this morning."

George frowned thoughtfully as he read the note. " 'Don't be afraid' means 'don't do as you're told,'" Olga said. "Oh, if I could only lay my hands on that boy I'd give him a piece of my mind!"

Olga tucked the note away. They were silent for several moments. But the music was so gay and everybody about them so merry that they soon linked hands again and resumed their stroll.

Suddenly, at a crossing, they bumped into another couple walking along hand in hand in an equally friendly fashion. It was Timur and Jenny.

Both couples were so taken aback that they greeted each other politely without stopping.

"That's him!" said Olga, clutching desperately at George's sleeve. "That's the boy,"

"Yes," said George, abashed. "And the worst part of it is that it is Timur, my own daredevil of a nephew."

"And you—you knew!" Olga bristled. "And never said a word to me!"

Shaking off his hand she ran down the walk. But neither Timur nor Jenny was in sight. She turned down a crooked little path and came upon Timur who was standing facing Figure and Kvakín.

"Look here," she said, walking right up to him. "It's not enough that you sneak into gardens and break trees, even old women's and the little orphaned girl's. It's not enough that even the dogs run away from you. You're leading my sister astray and turning her against me into the bargain. You may wear a Pioneer tie, but you're nothing but a scoundrel!"

Timur turned pale.

"That's not true," he said. "You don't know anything."

Olga made an impatient gesture and ran off to find Jenny.

Timur stood there and said nothing.

Figure and Kvakín could make nothing of it and they, too, were silent.

"Well, Commissar?" said Kvakín. "I see you have your nasty moments too."

"Yes, Chief," replied Timur, slowly raising his eyes. "I don't feel very happy right now. I'd rather you had caught me and beaten the life out of me than have had to listen to that on your account."

"Why'd you keep quiet?" Kvakín sniggered. "You could've said it was us and not you. We were here all the time."

"Sure!" agreed Figure gleefully. "You could've said that and we'd have given you a sock on the jaw for it."

But Kvakín, who had not expected this particular kind of support from Figure, stared coldly at his friend. Meanwhile Timur slowly walked off, slapping the tree trunks with his hand as he went.

"He's proud," said Kvakín quietly. "Wants to cry, but won't."

"Let's give him something to cry about," said Figure. He hurled a fir cone at Timur.

"He's proud," Kvakín repeated hoarsely. "And you— you're a stinker!" And he swung his fist at Figure.

The Figure gaped, then let out a howl and bolted. Kvakín ran after him and punched him twice in the back.

At last Kvakín stopped, picked up his cap, hit it against his knee to shake off the dust, went up to an ice cream vendor, bought a cone, leaned against a tree and, breathing heavily, bit greedily into the ice cream.

Down by the rifle range Timur came upon Geika and Sima.

"Timur!" Sima called. "Your uncle's looking for you and he seems pretty mad."

"I know, I'm going home."

"Will you come back?"

"I don't know."

"Timur!" said Geika with unexpected gentleness, taking his comrade's hand. "What's the matter? We haven't done anyone any harm. And you know that when a man's in the right. . . ."

"Yes, I know—he's not afraid of anything in the world. But it doesn't prevent him getting hurt."

Timur strode away.

Meanwhile Jenny ran up to Olga, who was carrying her accordion home.

"Olga!"

"Go away!" said Olga without looking at her sister. "I don't want to talk to you any more. I'm going to Moscow right away, and you can gad about till dawn with whomever you like for all I care."

"But Olga. . ."

"I don't want to talk to you. The day after tomorrow we'll move back to Moscow. And we'll wait for Dad there."

"Yes! I'll tell Dad, and not you—I'll tell him everything!" Choking with tears of rage, she ran off in search of Timur.

She found Geika and Simakov and asked them if they had seen Timur.

"He's been called home," Geika said. "His uncle's cross with him because of something to do with you."

Jenny, now beside herself, stamped her foot and clenched her fists.

"There's—justice—for you!"

She flung her arms around the trunk of a birch tree, but just then Tanya and Annie rushed up to her.

"Jenny!" cried Tanya. "What's the matter? Come on, Jenny! An accordion player has come and the dances have begun—the girls are all there."

They shook her and hugged her and dragged her over to the ring where frocks and blouses bright as flowers could be seen whirling round and round.

"Jenny, don't cry!" said Annie, speaking quickly, as usual, through clenched teeth. "Grandma hits me sometimes but I never cry! Come on, girls, let's get inside! Her-r-re goes!"

"Her-r-re goes!" Jenny chimed in laughing imitation of Annie.

Breaking through the ring, they whirled and span in the gay abandon of the dance.

As soon as Timur came in, his uncle took him up.

"I'm sick of your night adventures," George began. "Sick of your signals, buzzers and ropes. What was that strange business with the blanket?"

"That was a mistake."

"Some mistake! And I'll ask you to leave that girl alone; her sister doesn't like you."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I suppose you deserve it. What are these notes you've been writing? What sort of peculiar dates have you been keeping in the garden at dawn? Olya says you're making a hoodlum of the girl."

"She's lying," retorted Timur indignantly. "A Komsomol member, too. If there's anything she doesn't understand, she could ask me. I'd tell her."

"Good. But until you *have* told her, I forbid you to go near their house. And, in general, if you don't do as you're told I'll ship you back to your mother instanter."

He turned to go out.

"Uncle," Timur called after him. "When you were a boy what did you do? What did you play at?"

"We? We used to run around, jump, climb roofs. Sometimes we fought. But our games were all quite simple and everybody could understand them."

To punish Jenny, Olga left for Moscow that evening without saying another word to her.

She had nothing to do in Moscow, so she looked in on a friend of hers instead of going straight home. It was almost ten by the time she got to the flat and saw a telegram pinned to the door.

Olga scanned the short message. It was from their father.

Toward evening, when the vans began to leave the park, Jenny and Tanya ran home. Jenny wanted to change into gym-shoes for a game of volleyball.

Just as she was tying her laces the mother of the fair-haired little girl entered the room. The little girl lay asleep in her arms.

The woman was crestfallen when she learned that Olga was not at home.

"I wanted to ask your sister if I could leave my girl here," she said. "I didn't know she wasn't at home. The train arrives tonight, you see, and I have to be in Moscow to meet my mother."

"Leave her with me," said Jenny. "What if Olga isn't here—aren't I good enough? Put her on my bed. I can sleep on the other one."

"She's sleeping quietly now and won't wake up till morning," the mother said, brightening. "All you have to do is to take a look at her and straighten her pillow now and then."

They undressed the little girl and put her to bed. Her mother left. Jenny pulled back the curtains so that she could see the bed from outside, and closed the door. Then the two girls dashed off to play volleyball, having settled that they would take turns running back to look at the child.

They had no sooner gone than a postman came up to the porch. He knocked for a long time, and since there was no answer he crossed over to the neighbour's to inquire whether the people who lived in the cottage had moved back to town.

"No," the neighbour said. "The girl was here a moment ago. I can give her the telegram."

The neighbour signed for the telegram, put it in his pocket, sat down on a bench, lit his pipe, and waited for Jenny.

An hour and a half later the postman came round again.

"Here's another one," he said. "What's all the fuss about? Be a good fellow and sign for this telegram too."

The neighbour signed the book. It was quite dark now. He opened the gate, went up the steps to the porch and glanced through the window. Inside, a little girl was asleep, with a tawny kitten curled up by her head. That meant the owners were not far away. He opened the top window and shoved the two telegrams through. They fell neatly onto the windowsill, where Jenny was certain to notice them at once.

But Jenny did not notice them. She came in, adjusted the child's pillow by the light of the moon, chased off the kitten, undressed and went to bed. She lay for a long time thinking about Life! It wasn't her fault, and it didn't seem to be Olga's either, yet there they were, having their first big quarrel.

Jenny was sad. She could not fall asleep. She decided to eat a slice of bread and jam. Jumping out of bed, she ran over to the cupboard, switched on the light—and saw the telegrams on the windowsill.

Her heart missed a beat. With trembling fingers she tore open the telegrams.

The first read:

"Will stop over en route midnight to three in morning. Wait for me town flat."

The second read:

"Come immediately. Dad will be in town tonight. Olga."

Jenny glanced at the clock with a sinking heart. It was a quarter to twelve. Pulling on her dress and picking up the sleeping child, she dashed out onto the porch like one possessed. Then she changed her mind. She put the child back in bed, ran out of the

house and made for the milkwoman's house. There she pounded on the door with her fists and heels until the milkwoman's neighbour poked her head out of the window.

"What are you knocking for?" the neighbour asked in a sleepy voice. "What are you up to now?"

"Please, I'm not up to anything," Jenny pleaded. "I must see Aunt Masha, the milkwoman. I have to leave a baby with her."

"Rubbish!" exclaimed the neighbour, shutting her window with a bang. "The old woman left this morning to visit her brother in the village."

A train pulling into the station blew its whistle. Jenny ran back into the road and bumped into the elderly gentleman, the doctor.

"Sorry!" she gasped. "Can you tell me what train that is?"

The old gentleman produced his watch.

"The eleven fifty-five," he replied. "The last train to Moscow."

"How do you mean, the last?" whispered Jenny, a lump rising in her throat. "When does the next one leave?"

"The next one leaves in the morning, at three forty. What's the matter with you, child?" he inquired solicitously, catching the reeling girl by the shoulder. "You're crying? Can I help you in any way?"

"No, no, you can't!" said Jenny, choking back her tears and rushing away. "Nobody in the world can help me now!"

At home she flung herself down on her bed, but the next moment she sprang up and glared at the sleeping child. Then, pulling herself together, she straightened the little girl's blanket and whisked the tawny kitten off the pillow.

She switched on the lights on the porch, in the kitchen and in the living-room, sat down on the sofa and began to rock her head. She sat that way for a long time, thinking about nothing in particular. She accidentally touched the accordion which was lying by her side. Lifting it up mechanically, she began to finger the keys. A sad, solemn melody filled the room. Jenny abruptly laid the accordion aside and went over to the window. Her shoulders were shaking.

No! She could not stay there alone and bear such torture a minute longer. She lit a candle and stumbled through the garden toward the barn.

There was the loft, with its ropes, map, sacks and flags. She lit the lantern, went over to the wheel, found the right rope, hooked it on, and then jerked the wheel.

Timur was fast asleep when Rita touched his shoulder with her paw. He did not feel the gentle push. Rita then fastened her teeth into the blanket and dragged it off him onto the floor.

Timur sat up.

"What's the matter?" he asked, perplexed. "Anything wrong?"

The dog gazed into his eyes, wagged her tail and tossed her head. At that moment Timur heard the little bronze bell tinkling.

He went out onto the porch and picked up the receiver, wondering who could want him at that time of night.

"Hello, Timur listening. Who is it? You? Is that you, Jenny?"

At first Timur listened calmly. Then his lips began to twitch and the blood rushed to his face. He was breathing hard.

"And only for three hours?" he asked agitatedly. "Jenny, you're not crying, are you? I can hear you— you *are* crying. You mustn't! Don't! I'll come right away!"

He hung up and snatched a timetable from the shelf.

"Yes, there it is, the last one's at 23:55. The next one leaves at 3:40." He stood there biting his lips. "Too late! Couldn't he do something? No! Too late!"

But a red star shone day and night over the gate of Jenny's house. He had lit it himself, with his own hand, and its rays glittered straight and sharp before his eyes.

An Army officer's daughter was in trouble! An Army officer's daughter was in need of help!

He dressed hastily and ran out. A few minutes later he was standing on the porch of the old gentleman's house. The light was still on in the doctor's room. Timur knocked at the door. It was opened by the surprised doctor.

"What is it?" he asked drily.

"I'd like to talk to you," replied Timur.

"Me?" The old gentleman reflected a moment, then opened the door wide with a flourish and said, "In that case, please come in."

They did not talk long.

"That's all we've been doing," Timur wound up with flashing eyes. "That's all we've been doing and that's how we've been playing. That's why I need your Nick now."

The old man rose without a word. He took Timur abruptly by the chin, tilted back his head, looked into his eyes, and then left the room.

He entered Nick's bedroom and tugged at the boy's shoulder.

"Get up," he said. "You're wanted."

"I haven't done anything," Nick babbled, his eyes rolling in fear. "Honest, Grandpa, I haven't done anything."

"Get up," the old gentleman repeated shortly. "Your comrade has come for you."

Jenny was sitting on a pile of straw in the loft, her arms clasped around her knees, waiting for Timur. But instead of Timur, what should come poking through the window but Nick's tousled head!

"You?" Jenny exclaimed. "What do you want?"

"I don't know," replied Nick in a low, frightened voice. "I was sleeping. He came. I got up. He sent me. He told me to tell you to come down to the gate."

"What for?"

"I don't know. I'm all dizzy myself. I can't make head or tail of it, Jenny."

There was no one of whom to ask permission. His uncle was in Moscow. Timur lit a lantern, picked up an axe, called the dog, and went out into the garden. He stopped in front of the door of the shed. His eyes shifted from his axe to the padlock. Yes! He knew that it was wrong, but there was no other way out. A well-aimed hit broke the padlock, and he wheeled the motorcycle out of the shed.

"Rita!" he exclaimed sadly, kneeling to kiss the dog on the nose. "Don't be angry! I couldn't help it."

Jenny and Nick were waiting at the gate. A light bore down on them swiftly from a distance. They heard the chugging of a motor, then screwed up their eyes and backed up against the fence as they were caught in a glaring headlight. Suddenly, the light went out, the motor was shut off and they saw it was Timur.

"Nick," he began, without saying hello or asking any questions. "You stay here and guard the little girl asleep in the house. You'll answer for her to the company. Jenny, hop on. We're off! To Moscow!"

Jenny squealed delightedly, hugged Timur with all her might and kissed him.

"Hop on, Jenny, hop on!" Timur shouted, trying to look stern. "Hold on tight! Off we go! Forward!"

The motor snorted, the horn honked and soon the red tail light was lost from view.

Nick, completely dazed, picked up a stick, and, holding it as though it were a rifle, tramped around the brightly lit cottage.

"Yes," he muttered, pacing importantly up and down. "A soldier's life is certainly tough! No peace, night or day!"

It was getting on for three in the morning. Colonel Alexandrov was sitting at a table on which was a pot of cold tea, some slices of salami sausage, cheese and bread.

"I'll have to go in half an hour," he said to Olga. "Pity I didn't get a chance to see Jenny. Olya, are you crying?"

"I don't know why she hasn't come. I'm so sorry for her, she wanted to see you so much. Now she'll go right off her head. And she's crazy enough as it is!"

"Olga," said her father, getting up. "Whatever you say I can't believe that Jenny would mix with a bad crowd, or that she could be led astray, or that anyone could order her about. No! It isn't like her!"

"There you go!" said Olga reproachfully. "You'll be telling her that next. As it is I hear enough about her taking after you. But you're wrong this time! Would you believe she climbed onto the roof and let a rope down through the chimney. Just as I was about to start ironing, the iron hopped out of my hand and went sailing up the chimney. Dad, when you left she had four frocks. Two are already in tatters. She grew out of the third and I won't let her wear the fourth. I made her three new frocks myself but they never last more'n a few days. She's always covered with scratches and blue marks.

And when you talk to her she purses her lips and opens her blue eyes wide. Of course, everybody thinks she's a pretty little flower, hardly a girl at all. But just try and touch her! Some flower! More like a stinging nettle! Dad, don't you go thinking she takes after you. If you tell her that she'll be so full of herself she'll go dancing round the chimney-pots for three days running!"

"All right," agreed her father, giving her a hug. "I'll talk to her. I'll write her a letter. But you mustn't be too strict with her, Olga. Tell her I love her dearly, that I think of her, that we'll soon be back and that she mustn't cry, because she's an officer's daughter."

"She'll cry all the same," said Olga, nestling close to him. "I'm also an officer's daughter, and I'll cry too." Her father glanced at the clock, walked over to the mirror, put on his belt and straightened his tunic.

Suddenly the outside door opened and shut with a bang. The hangings over the doorway were pulled aside and Jenny appeared, her shoulders hunched forward as though she were about to make a leap.

But instead of crying out or springing forward she glided noiselessly across the room and buried her face on her father's chest without uttering a sound.

Her forehead was spattered with mud, her crumpled dress all stained.

"Jenny, what does it mean?" Olga asked anxiously. "How did you get here?"

Without turning her head, Jenny waved her hand as much as to say: "Wait a moment! Leave me alone! Don't ask questions!"

Jenny's father picked her up, sat down on the sofa and took her in his lap. He looked at her face and wiped her spattered forehead with his palm. "Well done, Jenny! Good girl!"

"But you're all covered with mud—your face is black! How did you get here?" Olga asked again.

Jenny pointed to the hangings at the door, and Olga saw Timur standing there.

He was pulling off his leather driving gloves. His temple was smeared with yellow grease. His face was moist and tired, the face of a working man who has done his job well. He nodded his head in greeting.

"Dad!" cried Jenny, jumping from her father's lap and running over to Timur. "Don't you believe anyone! They don't know anything. This is Timur—my very good comrade."

Her father rose and, without hesitation, shook Timur's hand. A triumphant smile flitted over Jenny's face. She flashed a quick, searching look at Olga, who, still quite baffled, went up to Timur:

"Well, hello, then. . . ."

Soon the clock struck three.

"Dad," Jenny said anxiously. "Are you going already? Our clock is fast."

"No, Jenny, that's the correct time."

"Dad, your watch is fast too." She ran over to the telephone and dialled the time. A measured metallic voice answered:

"The time is now four minutes past three."

Jenny glanced at the clock on the wall and sighed.

"It's fast, but only one minute fast. Dad, take us to the station with you; we'll see you off."

"Sorry, Jenny, I can't. I'll be much too busy."

"Why? You've got your ticket already, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"In a first-class sleeper?"

"Yes, in a first-class sleeper."

"Oh, how I'd love to travel far, far away with you in a first-class sleeper!"

It was not a regular station but a sort of shunting yard where the trains halted before being switched onto their right lines. There were tracks, switches, trains and carriages—but no passengers. An armoured train was drawn up at the platform. An iron window opened and, for a second, the face of the engine-driver was visible in the light of the fire-box.

Jenny's father, Colonel Alexandrov, stood on the platform in his leather coat. A lieutenant came up to him, saluted and said:

"Comrade Colonel, may we start?"

"Yes!" The colonel glanced at his watch: three fifty-three. "The orders are to leave at three fifty-three."

Colonel Alexandrov went up to his carriage and looked about him. It was growing light, but the sky was overcast. He turned the moist handle and the heavy door opened. As he placed his foot on the step he smiled and said to himself:

"In a first-class sleeper?"

"Yes, in a first-class sleeper."

The heavy steel door shut behind him with a thud.

Smoothly, without jerking or creaking, the armoured giant went into motion and steadily picked up speed.

The engine glided past, then the gun turrets. Moscow was left behind. Mist was rising. The stars faded. Day was breaking.

Finding both Timur and the motorcycle gone when he returned from town in the morning, George decided to send Timur back to his mother then and there.

He had just sat down to write the letter when he glanced through the window and saw a soldier coming up the gravel walk.

The soldier produced an envelope.

"Comrade Garayev?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Please sign for this envelope."

The soldier left. George inspected the envelope and whistled significantly.

Yes! Here it was, what he had been waiting for so long!

He opened the envelope, read the message inside and then crumpled up the letter he had begun to write. Now he did not have to send Timur home, but to send a wire to the boy's mother asking her to come out to them.

Just then Timur entered the room. At the sight of him George brought his fist down on the table furiously. In Timur's wake came Olga and Jenny.

"Shush!" said Olga. "There's no need to shout or bang the table. It's not Timur's fault. It's your fault, and mine too."

"That's right," said Jenny. "Don't you dare shout at him. Olga, don't touch the table. That revolver of theirs makes an awful noise when it goes off."

George looked at Jenny, then at the revolver, then at the chipped clay ashtray. He began to see the light.

"So it was you who slept here that night, Jenny?" he said.

"Yes, it was I. Olga, tell him all about it while Timur and I get some kerosene and a cloth and clean up the bike."

Olga was sitting on the porch the following day when an Army officer came in through the gate. He walked with a confident stride, like a man returning to his own home. Olga, perplexed, rose to meet him.

George stood in front of her in the uniform of a captain of the tank corps.

"What's this?" Olga asked softly. "A new part in your opera?"

"No," replied George. "I've dropped in to say goodbye. This isn't a new part—it's just a new uniform."

"Is this," Olga asked, pointing to his insignia and blushing slightly, "what you meant the other day when you said 'We strike through iron—and through reinforced concrete—straight to the heart'?"

"Yes, this is it. Sing me something, Olga, something for me to take away on my long, long journey."

He sat down. Olga picked up her accordion.

Airmen all and pilots! Bombers all and fighters!

*Now you've taken off for far away.
When will you come back to me?
I cannot tell when it will be
Only—come back! Any time—on any day. . . .
Good luck, wherever you may be,
On the ground, above the sea
Or flying far aloft through foreign skies—
Where'er you roam
May your two wings bravely bear
Their red stars so bright and dear
And may they bear you back to me,
Back home!*

"There," she said. "But it's all about flyers. I don't know any good songs about tankmen."

"It doesn't matter," George said. "See if you can't say something nice to me—and forget about the songs."

Plunged in thought, seeking the right good word, Olga gazed quietly and intently into his grey, no longer laughing eyes.

Jenny, Timur and Tanya were in the garden.

"Listen," suggested Jenny. "George is leaving. Let's get the whole company to see him off. Let's send out the No. 1 general rally signal. Won't it cause a commotion though!"

"No, better not," Timur said.

"Why not?"

"Better not. We didn't see anyone else off like that."

"Oh, all right, if we oughtn't to, we won't," agreed Jenny. "You sit here while I go and get a drink."

When she left Tanya burst out laughing.

"What's the matter?" asked Timur.

Tanya laughed all the louder. "There's a clever girl for you! She's a sly one, our Jenny! I'll go and get a drink," she says!"

"Ten-shun!" Jenny's voice rang out triumphantly from the loft. "Here goes No. 1 general rally signal!"

"She's mad!" Timur sprang up. "That'll fetch up a hundred chaps! What are you doing?!"

But the heavy wheel had already creaked and turned, the ropes had jerked and pulled: "three-stop, three-stop, stop!" And under the roofs of sheds, in attics and in chicken coops the signal buzzers, bottles, tin cans and rattles rang, banged and clattered.

If not a hundred, at least fifty youngsters came charging into the garden in response to the familiar signal.

"Olga!" Jenny flew up onto the porch. "We're going to see George off too! There's a lot of us. Take a look."

"Oho!" exclaimed George in surprise. "You've got a big company there. Big enough to be loaded onto a train and sent off to the front."

"Can't be done," Jenny sighed, repeating Timur's words. "All the officers and other bosses have strict orders to kick out all the kids. It's a shame! I could fit in somewhere too—take part in a battle, in an attack. Machine-guns forward! Number one!..."

"Number one braggart in the world!" Olga teased. She fixed the strap of the accordion over her shoulder and said:

"Well, if we're going to see him off, let's do it properly, music and all!"

They trooped out into the road. Olga played her accordion, and an orchestra of bottles, tin cans, glass jars and sticks stepped out in front and struck up a lively accompaniment.

They tramped down the green streets, their ranks growing as they marched along. At first people could not understand what all the noise and the singing was about. But as soon as they were told they smiled, and called out to wish George good luck.

As they approached the platform an army train swept by.

The first carriages were full of soldiers. The crowd waved and called out to them. Then came flat-cars with a whole forest of green-shafted army carts. Then horseboxes. The horses tossed their heads and chewed hay. They, also, were greeted with "hurrahs". Finally came a flatcar bearing a large, angular object covered over with grey tarpaulin. Standing by it and swaying with the motion of the train was a sentry.

The troop train disappeared and a passenger train pulled in. Timur said good-bye to his uncle.

Olga went up to George.

"Well, good-bye!" she said. "Will it be for long?"

He shook his head and gripped her hand.

"I don't know. Let's hope not!"

The whistle blew. The orchestra blared. The train pulled out.

Olga stood lost in thought.

In Jenny's eyes there shone a great happiness, though she did not know why.

Timur was upset, but he tried to mask his emotions.

"Well," he said in a voice not quite his own, "now I'm on my own, too." And, bracing his shoulders, he added, "However, Mother will be coming tomorrow."

And what about "And this?" She

"What about me?" Jenny shouted, then?" She pointed to his comrades, pointed to his red star.

"Don't worry!" Olga said to Timur, shaking herself out of her reverie. "You've always thought about others, and they'll do the same to you."

Timur raised his head.

Grand, straightforward lad that he was, he answered exactly as might have been expected.

He swept his eyes over his comrades, smiled, and said:

"I see everybody feels fine. Then I feel fine too!"

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