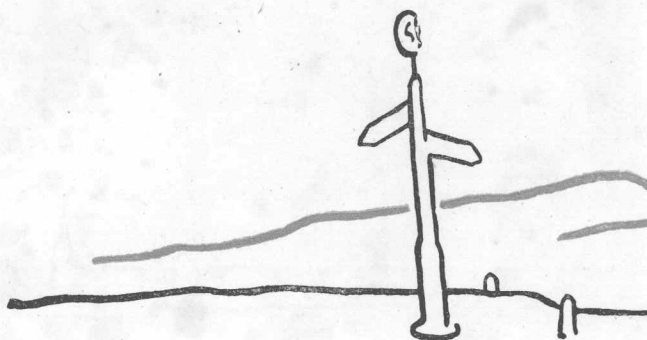


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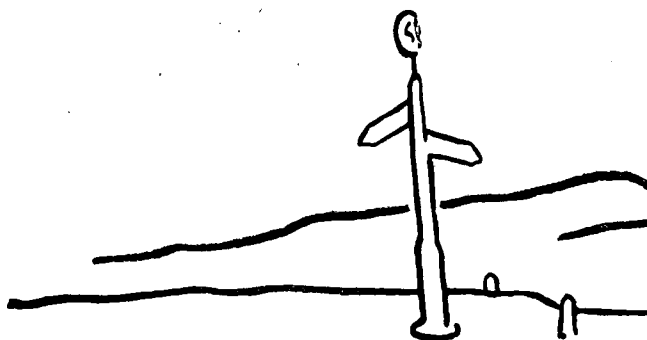
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НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ

Москва

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E. KAZAKEVICH

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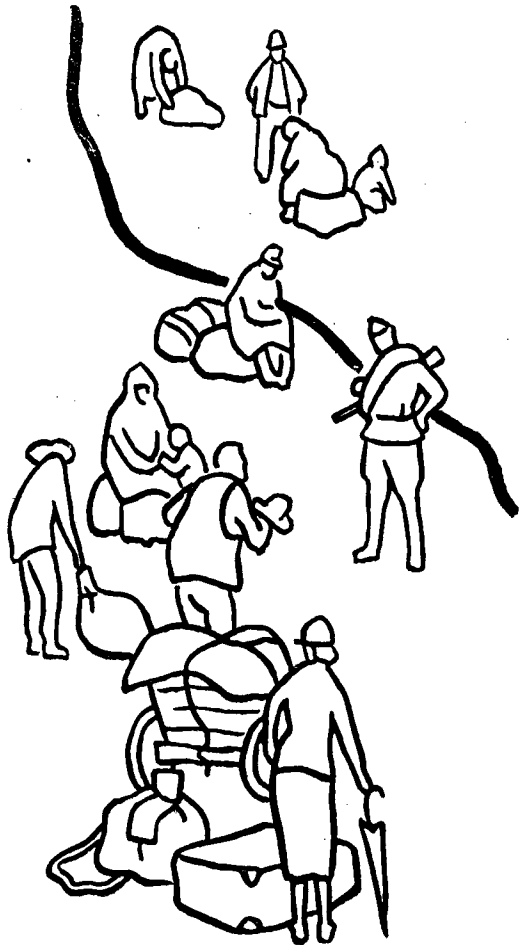
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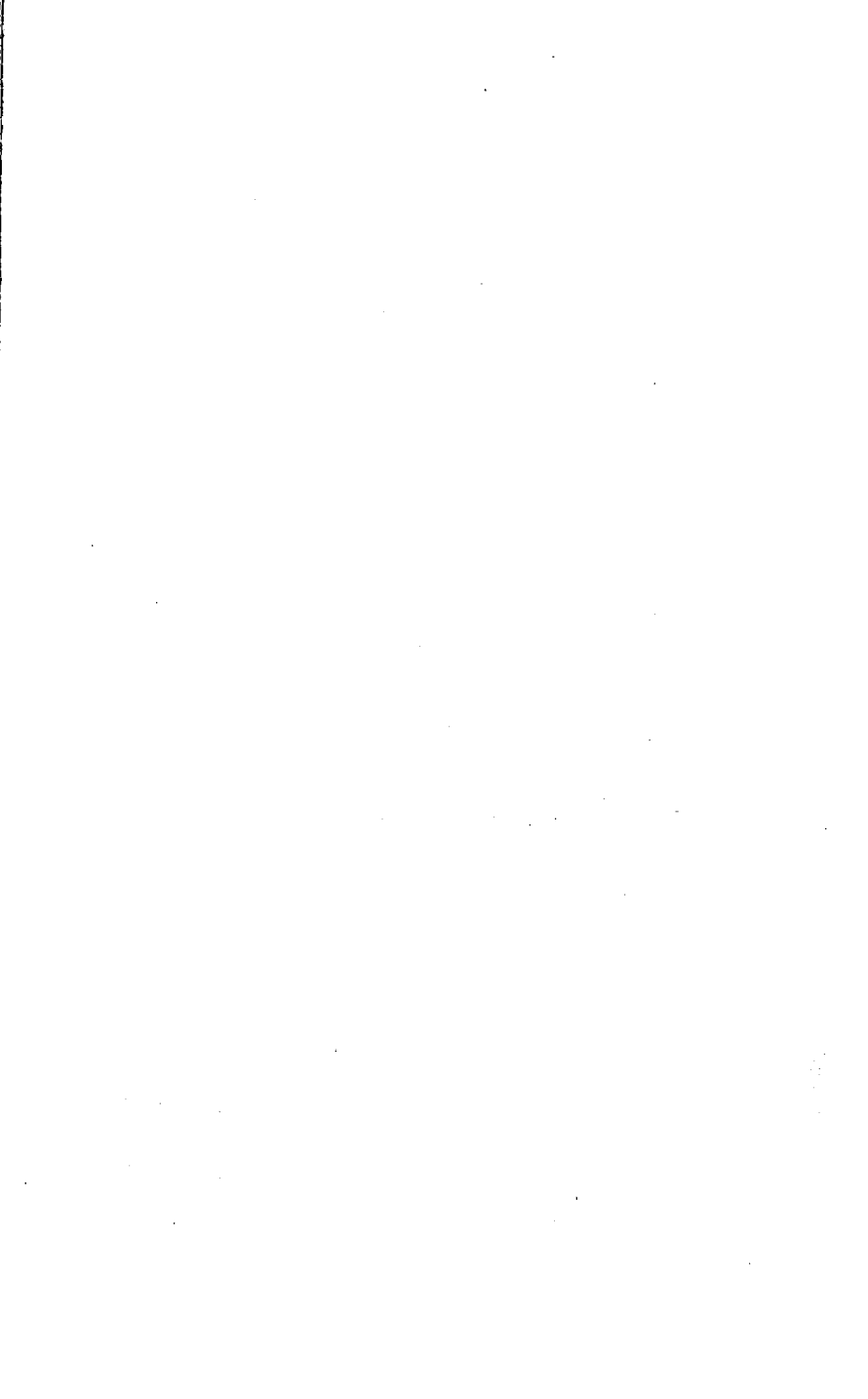
*... Du hast nicht oft
Zu solchen edeln Tat .Gelegenheit
Versagen kannst du's nicht;
Gewahr es bald.*

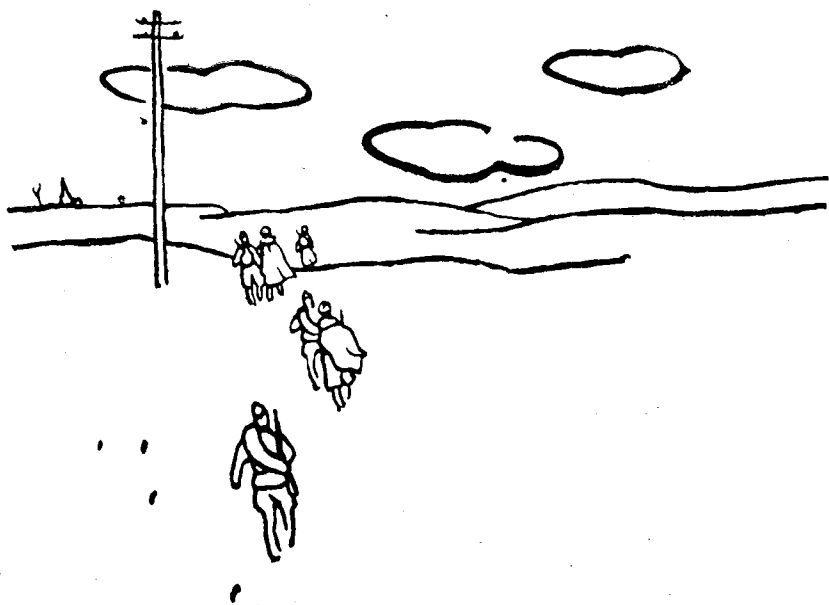
"Iphigenie auf Tauris." Goethe.



P A R T O N E

Journey to the Flarz





A detail of six soldiers was unhurriedly making its way westward. With the exception of the sergeant in charge, who despite his seniority in rank was the youngest in years, they were all middle-aged men. They belonged to the rear echelon of a front-line division and had been left behind to guard some stores of hay near Gomel where the division had

last been stationed before being moved to the front. Their instructions had been to wait for the convoy of lorries which the divisional quartermaster was to send as soon as the snow melted and the roads dried.

The hay was stacked up in bales in a small birch grove tinged purple by the swelling leaf-buds. The soldiers took turns on sentry duty as prescribed by regulations. They lived there too, in a dug-out they had made themselves. When their supplies ran out Sergeant Veretennikov went to Gomel to collect another ten days' rations of bread, sugar and tinned foods.

The birch grove stood in the midst of farm fields. It was spring, and the collective-farm women came out with their horses and ploughs. As they passed the birch grove, the women would exchange the time of day with the soldiers and cast covetous glances at the hay. Sometimes they asked for some, but the soldiers, guiltily avoiding their eyes, always refused.

"Can't do it," they would say. "Belongs to the army."

But they often helped the women with the ploughing, and there was understanding and sympathy between them.

Time passed, yet no lorries came from the division. Nothing disturbed the serene calm of the grove where the leaf-buds now burst into tiny tender green leaves. Veretennikov grew worried. He could not sleep, and at night he would slip out to the edge of the woods and peer at the road through the pitch-black darkness. The black-out was still enforced and not a pin-point of light was visible. The highway was too far away for traffic noises to be heard and the country road leading to the birch grove was deserted.

This strange inactivity got on Veretennikov's nerves, although such things were not at all unusual in the confusion of war-time. And when the women came round with the rumour that the Soviet armies were already in

Germany, if not practically in Berlin, he could not stand it any longer. Contrary to his habit of never asking for anything and doing only what he was ordered to do, he went to the commandant in Gomel and induced him to take over the hay and issue the necessary papers relieving the six of their charge and permitting them to proceed.

As soon as he got back, he told his men to get ready for the road.

By now Veretennikov had come to look upon this spot as home. Every path in the woods was as familiar to him as his own back-yard. The others too had grown accustomed to their life here; they had taken a liking to the place, acquired some modest possessions, and made friends with some of the local people. To part with all this was not as painful of course as parting with one's own home and family, but it was nevertheless a wrench. That evening, when the news that the friendly, unobtrusive guardians of the hay were leaving reached the collective farm, some of the women came over to see them. With them came the village school-teacher, a young woman named Sonya, who had formed a warm but undemonstrative affection for Veretennikov, which the sergeant returned.

Many were the reminiscences and stories that were exchanged in the course of that farewell evening around the camp-fire. Marfa Gerasimovna, the chairman of the collective farm, discovered that Private Petukhov had been a collective-farm team leader before the war, and they discussed farm problems, oblivious of the talk that went on round them—some of it gay, some sad, and some clumsily frivolous. One of the women had brought along a bottle of home-brew, and one after the other the soldiers drank out of the single glass, grunted and laid the glass down on the grass, while Veretennikov looked the other way.

In this small company of people thrown together by chance the same complex currents existed as you might find anywhere in the big world—the same momentary likes and dislikes, warm emotions and petty intrigues, hidden passions and ulterior motives.

When the time came to see the women back to the village, Veretennikov went with the others, leaving Petukhov behind to guard the hay. For a long time he and Sonya strolled up and down the village—if the rows of dug-out dwellings beside the burnt-out house sites could be called a village. On the way back to the birch grove his eye caught the fresh tracks of a cart and between them some stalks of hay gleaming in the moonlight, and he remembered that Marfa Gerasimovna had stayed behind with Petukhov when the others left. And he also remembered hearing the hurried squeaking of cart wheels in the distance.

He found Petukhov alone at the edge of the woods smoking a cigarette.

Veretennikov went on to the haystacks. Sure enough, several bales were missing. Coming back to Petukhov he looked sharply at the sentry's expressionless face, but said nothing. After all, the collective farm was also theirs, the sergeant told himself in an effort to appease his own conscience.

In the morning the lorries came for the hay. Veretennikov and his men left the birch grove and set out down the road.

After a while they picked up a ride in a lorry going their way; then they walked again, rode for a while in a cart and once more in a lorry. The first night was spent in a deserted hut on the roadside. Dawn saw them on their way again, and at noon they reached a railway station—a rude shack put up next to the ruins of the brick station building. Here they boarded a goods train bound for Brest.