

NIKOLAI VIRTA

A L O N E

A Novel



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE

M O S C O W

NIKOLAI VIRTA

A L O N E

A Novel



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE

M O S C O W



TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN

BY OLGA SHARTSE

DESIGNED BY A. GONCHAROV

Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

CONTENTS

Page

Part One

INSURRECTION	7
------------------------	---

Part Two

DEFEAT	135
------------------	-----

Part Three

THE WOLF	303
--------------------	-----





PART ONE

INSURRECTION



CHAPTER I

A chilly and desolate city, filled with cowardly whispering, was the provincial seat of Tambov in that autumn of nineteen-seventeen.

The wind surged through the streets with a wild howling and whistling, driving the clammy snowflakes before it, tearing great strips of paper from the walls and advertisement pylons and sending them soaring like birds through the air. The puddles, the bare branches of the trees, the wet sheet-iron of the roofs glistened in the uneven yellow light of the street-lamps. Waterspouts rattled, telephone wires groaned and the snow drifted down

and down, until the roads and pavements were covered with a thick mushy layer.

Fear and the inclement weather had driven the citizenry to their homes. Doors were fastened with heavy bars, windows blotted out with oaken shutters.

The city lay silent and empty; the railway station was dead and deserted. Only from the depot and the repair-shops came the sound of clanging iron, and a ruddy glow coloured their smoke-blackened windows.

Flotskaya Street was shrouded in darkness. Here, by the river, it was colder still; a chilly draught blew from the woods. The street-lamps had gone out long ago.

The tall green mansion of Lawyer Fyodorov stood secluded from the street by a high fence and a front garden. Not a ray of light penetrated through its tightly fastened shutters. It stood dead and silent, as though the lawyer's family were already deep in slumber. But appearances are deceptive—it was not the habit to retire early in this house.

The master of the house was out. In the drawing-room on a plush sofa, a man sat waiting for his return.

He was small and spare, with thick pale lips, sunken, angry eyes, and dark hollows on the temples. His hands were white and narrow. He

was dressed in semi-military style: tunic, breeches, neat top-boots of box-calf. He sat in silent absorption, his eyes staring straight ahead. The maid had passed through the room twice, but he had not turned his head.

This was a habit—Alexander Stepanovich Antonov had served ten years in a penal settlement. He was subject to fits of violent temper, and had been condemned many a time to the punishment cells. There he had sat like this, hands resting on his knees, staring ahead with unseeing eyes, groaning and sighing as his troubled thoughts oppressed him.

What was he thinking of now? The cares of today? The men he had met in far-off Siberia? Or was it his past?

There was a man in the convict prison with whom he had been friendly for three years—Pyotr Tokmakov. They had been tried in Tambov, on the same day and for the same deeds. Lean and sallow, Pyotr himself was not fond of talking, but when an argument was on, he would listen with keen interest, his eyes wide open, and a frown on his tall, bony forehead. Pyotr often chided his friend for his savage disposition and the malice he harboured for people, but Antonov would only smile ironically.

"But what will you do when the revolution

comes?" Pyotr expostulated. "What have you got to take back to Kirsanov? What have you learned in all this time?"

"Revolution!" Antonov snorted. "We'll be dead and rotting before it comes. I'm sick of that drivel, Pyotr. I don't believe in it, so stop talking about it!"

Pyotr shook him viciously and hissed:

"You don't believe in it, you doubt it! Then why did you get into this business at all?"

Antonov said nothing. And what could he say to good old Pyotr? He had often wondered himself why he had "got into this business," what could have induced him to give up the quiet, untroubled life of a village schoolmaster for the lot of a Socialist-Revolutionary—the constant anxiety over he knew not what, the waiting for he knew not whom, the lurking in ambushes, shivering with cold and fear. . . . Programmes and platforms had never meant much to him; he had never even read them properly or given any thought to them. Instead, he had read romantic novels and adventure stories in plenty. And how attractive they made the violent, reckless life of an S.-R. militant, with its raids, expropriations and shooting frays!

"But why had I joined them, what for?" he asked himself, but there was no answer. It

must have been simply that his young blood was afire, craving for excitement and for merrymaking, riotous living.

But the fever was gone. They caught him one day. In the cold, clammy cell the fire in his blood subsided. Antonov knew that the fun was over and the bill had to be paid.

There came that grey cloudy morning—the day of reckoning. The bald-headed old man on the bench had asked him:

“You have robbed and taken human life—in the name of what? Who are you?”

Antonov had no answer; he stammered and stuttered incoherently.

“What party do you belong to?” the judge had asked.

“Party? I am a Socialist-Revolutionary.”

They gave him twelve years.

“Oh, why did I get into this business?...”

Pyotr Tokmakov was transferred to another prison. Antonov was now alone. His eyes sank deeper into their sockets; he became more reticent than ever. But he had not forgotten his friend’s chidings: when disputes arose, he did not turn away, but listened attentively, and from the threads of others’ thoughts he wove for himself a tissue of dreams.

One winter day after work, his bunk neighbour—a Bolshevik from the Putilov Works in

St. Petersburg—sat down by his side. "Putilovets"—as he was called by the prisoners, political and criminal alike—was small and slight, but muscular and with hands of enormous strength; his handclasp was enough to make you cry out with pain, and an inadvertent push from those hands left a black-and-blue mark on a man's body.

"I'm always bruising myself," Putilovets would say, laughing. "Sometimes I want to kill a mosquito on my forehead and I almost knock myself senseless."

Antonov respected him, as he did all strong men. Besides, Putilovets was honest and forthright, and his authority with the prisoners was undisputed. Even the jailers gave him a wide berth.

"Well, why don't you ever say anything?"

"I'm no talker," Antonov answered brusquely. He was out of sorts and his head ached. "And what's the use anyway? All your arguing is just flogging the air. You stick to your point, and so does that fellow there, in the glasses. Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, S.-R.s—but when you get down to it, it's all a lot of rot."

"Listen, my lad, did you ever hear of a man called Lenin?"

"Yes, I heard of him and even saw him, when I was young."

"And I both heard him speak and read him. No comparing him with your wind-bags!"

Antonov shrugged contemptuously. Putilovets puffed at his makhorka cigarette; a violet pall enveloped the bunks.

"Still searching for the truth?" Antonov said maliciously. "Well, there are as many truths here as there are men. You argue till you're hoarse, you think up deaths for the tsar, but he's alive and has no thought of dying. He'll outlive you and me yet."

"You don't say?"

"I do say."

"Outlive you and me?"

"There's nothing to laugh about. The tsar, man, is a power. He owns these here—fettlers!" Antonov shook his iron chains. "And all you do is invent words! You can't overthrow the tsar with words."

Putilovets threw a sidelong glance at Antonov.

"Well, teach us then, tell us how you would set about it."

"I would try it differently. I'd get hand-grenades and revolvers somehow and hit out at all that scum—tsars and sub-tsars."

"Lenin, now, has a different notion. He says it's got to be done differently."

"I know, I know. Three committees to every

two members? Reading jolly little leaflets at jolly little forest meetings?"

"Wait a minute, fellow. At our works in '98 there were about eight of us who gathered at those jolly little forest meetings. But in 1905 we were more than two hundred. And what fellows they were! You're not a patch on them. Take me—" Putilovets took off his spectacles and wiped them—"I'm fifty, and was thirty-eight when I learned to read and write. See? I don't sit around moping all day, like you. I study. Maybe I'll come in useful some day. Why, man, just listen to what's going on around. Our voice is sounding everywhere. And you talk of jolly little forest meetings and committees!"

Antonov interrupted him curtly.

"You make me tired, old man. How many years have I been listening to people like you—wind-bags, that's all you are, you bore me stiff! No, not a glimmering in sight; we'll all rot here..." Antonov fell back on the hard, foul-smelling mattress.

And suddenly, it had come! The journey home was one long trail of flowers, songs, bunting, rapturous faces bathed in tears. At the benefit bazaar in Tambov, Antonov sold his chains link by link. Fat, jewelled fingers