# LEV KASSIL

# The queen of . SNOVS

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE MOSCOW

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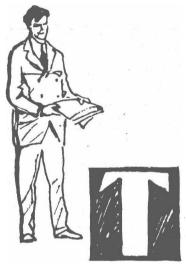
ЛЕВ КАССИЛЬ ХРУСТАЛЬНЫЙ КУБОК (ХОД БЕЛОЙ КОРОЛЕВЫ)

# SOVIET LITERATURE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

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"... I AM AWARE THAT SOMETHING MORE MIGHT BE MADE OF THIS EPISODE, BUT I PREFER TO TELL IT AS IT WAS CURRENT AT SANDY BAR—IN THE GULCHES AND BARROOMS—WHERE ALL SENTIMENT WAS MODIFIED BY A STRONG SENSE OF HUMOUR."

BRET HARTE

## PROLOGUE

here is hardly a newspaperman who has not at one time or another attempted to write a novel or some other work of fiction. Therefore, I was not in the least surprised when one

day my friend Yevgeny Carichev confronted me with a bulky manuscript and rather diffidently asked me to read it and to recommend it for publication if I found it worth-while.

When I took it, I little suspected that Carichev's manuscript would deprive me of peace of mind, that I would have to undertake a long journey in order to solve some of its puzzles and that I would finish the story for the author who had ended it rather abruptly. And it never occurred to me that that harmless, neatly typed manuscript would urge me to renew contact with the world of skiing, a world once very close to me, taking me back into the nipping frost to watch skiing meets, to see the boisterous winds fanning the Olympic flame and fluttering the little flags along the ski tracks.

Carichev's manuscript, I regret to say, lay for a long time neglected on my desk. As a matter of fact, being very busy, I had completely for-

gotten about it, and the author was apparently too shy to remind me. But one day, as I was going over some papers on my desk, my eye fell upon it and, feeling compunctious, I at once gave the manuscript my attention.

I had known Carichev, whose pen-name was Y. Car, for many long years. We had once worked on the same big Moscow daily, and even then he had the reputation of being a first-class reporter and correspondent, always on the spot where important news was to be got. More than once during the war I ran into him at the front lines. His reports were always so fresh and accurate one could almost smell gunpowder in them. I had always liked him for his modesty and pleasant sense of humour. But there were moments when he was unbelievably shy.

Opposites attract, they say, and Carichev, who thought himself awkward and unprepossessing, was attracted to persons of athletic build, grace and poise. It was natural, therefore, that he should crave the company of sportsmen. Their exuberant spirits and the easy camaraderic existing among them were particularly to his taste. Sportsmen, on their part, thought him a fine fellow and were proud to have him for a friend. Moreover, his vivid and forceful manner of reporting sports and genuinely professional knowledge of them won him the admiration of all sportsmen.

He himself had never gone in seriously for any kind of sports because of his "accursed" shyness. He was convinced for some reason that he looked his worst in a sports outfit. He was so terribly sensitive on this point—and that sensitiveness increased with the years—that he thought he couldn't don a pair of skates or skis without people poking fun at him.

But nothing could prevent Carichev from being an ardent sports fan, a friend of all champions, and a troubadour of the glory of sports. He was a very popular sports radio commentator, especially winter sports, so eloquent, moving, convincing, fiery, one would never have thought him shy.

Carichev's novel, as might have been expected, dealt with sports, with skiing, his favourite sport, at that.

"I've written a sort of short novel," he said timidly as he handed the folder with the manuscript to me. "Take a look at it if you can spare the time. It's about some of our girl skiers, or, to be exact, about one of them. The story will probably remind you of things you've read in newspapers. It's based on some of my reporting—I got an idea I could make a story out of it. I don't suppose I've succeeded. Still I'd like you to read it. But on one condition—you must tell me perfectly frankly what you think of it."

When I finally got down to it, I read the story and then reread it. There were a number of puzzling things in it, a sort of aura of mystery, I was intrigued.

There were, too, certain incongruities of style. For example, having set out to tell the story in the first person with himself as an observer of all the events, the author suddenly, without a word of explanation, proceeded to describe episodes which he could not have possibly witnessed. I also thought the story was overburdened with technical details and figures.

Hence there were the puzzling points that needed clarifying and bits here and there that I thought should be deleted.

The thing to do was to get in touch with Carichev. But that was easier said than done. As in former times, he was always on the go. One day I would be reading his accounts of new developments in the uncultivated areas of Kazakhstan. And then before I knew it he was out with a party of land surveyors on the shores of the Angara. Some time later he would be broadcasting about a skating meet in the town of Kirov and then he would be off to a North Pole drifting station. When finally I managed

to get him in Moscow he told me hurriedly over the telephone that I had literally "caught him by the tail." He was on his way to the airfield, he said, to make a plane leaving in an hour for Italy to cover the winter Olympics.

"Well, have you read the thing?" he asked anxiously. "I bet you think it's pretty bad. You needn't spare my feelings. I can take it. You know what the old peasant said when he fell out of his sleigh and his horse had run off, 'I wish somebody would give me one in the neck so I could get up and walk.'"

"I've no intention of slamming you," I said. "But I do want a serious talk with you."

"Is it really very poor?"

"Not at all, it makes good reading, quite gripping in parts, I should say. But there are things that seem superfluous—"

"Throw them out, every word that's not needed. You'll forgive me, but I can't talk now. I'm in a hurry."

"Wait a minute," I shouted. "You've got things that are not clear." "Not clear?" Carichev repeated. "Then my style must be faulty. I didn't invent anything. I took it all from life and it was pretty clear. Thanks anyhow for reading the thing and calling me up. Got to go now, the car's waiting. Say, I've an idea, why not come along with me?" Carichev said quite casually as though inviting me for a stroll in the park. "You were keen on sports once yourself, weren't you, and did some pretty good sports reporting. Come along to the Olympics in Italy—for old times' sake. You'll see something you may never see again in your life."

"I'm sure but...."

"Well, what's the word? You're getting stale. Don't hesitate. And, by the way, I hope to write a new ending to my novel. I can now see things developing that way. And if you come you'll realize how clear everything really is. Well, see you in Italy!"

It would be wrong to suppose that this telephone conversation alone was responsible for my finally going to the Olympic Games in Italy. To do justice to Carichev's reproaches I had myself for some time past been thinking that I was getting too tied down to one place. Of late I had not attended any of the big sports events which in previous years I would not have missed for anything in the world. From the very first pages Carichev's novel reminded me of our common interest in sports. And now Yevgeny's going off to the Olympics in Italy, where the world's renowned sportsmen and sports fans were gathering, got me all excited. I was both eager to attend the event and to learn the answers to the things that had puzzled me in Carichev's novel.

Soon afterwards I was on my way to Italy as a tourist and simultaneously as a correspondent of one of our daily newspapers. At the bottom of my suitcase lay Carichev's manuscript. I had edited it slightly, deleting tedious details of a technical nature, but making no stylistic changes.

And here it is—the story as it is told by Carichev in the manuscript he called *The Crystal Cup*.



### THE CRYSTAL CUP

(A novel by Yevgeny Carichev)

### CHAPTER

### "I'M THROUGH FOR GOOD!"

erited Master of Sports? No such person living here!" Stepan Chudinov slammed down the receiver and turned to me. "I hope you see now that I'm quite serious. I'm through for good, I tell you."

"Listen, old man, I wish you'd explain."

The telephone was buzzing again. Chudinov snatched the receiver.

"I've already told you that no such person lives here. What did you say? You want Chudinov? Chudinov speaking.... He was a Merited Master of Sports once but is no more. Is that clear? Forget it!"

Bang went the receiver again. Chudinov rose from the sofa and began pacing the room. I gave him a searching glance which took him in from his prematurely greying temples to his powerful feet. Stepan walked with a light but firm step though he limped slightly on his left foot. We were friends of long standing and I could read him like a book. Stepan, I could see, was in one of his very stubborn moods and to argue with him was a sheer waste of time. Yet the decision he had just taken was too staggering to let it go at that.

"Surely, you're not serious, Stepan?" I asked.

"I am. I tell you again I'm through for good!"

He stopped in front of a china closet with dozens of gold medals, badges, cups, trophies, boxes and other prizes won by Stepan Chudinov, a ski champion who was as well known in Europe as he was in the Soviet Union.

"A lot of drinking gimcracks," he said morosely, "but nothing to drink to today."

He looked gloomily round the room. Upright by his large desk stood a couple of draughtsmen's boards with blueprints. On one of the walls hung beautifully framed pictures of quaint wooden cottages, pavilions and stage platforms. Chudinov was an expert in wooden architecture. Before the war he had designed one of the finest wooden pavilions for the Agricultural Exhibition in Moscow, devoted to forestry and tree-planting. The opposite wall was lined from top to bottom with artistically built book-shelves. Among his many books were the thick gold-backed volumes of A History of Architecture and an array of encyclopaedias. This wall with its indented lines of shelves and closely packed volumes was strangely reminiscent of an organ with rows of shining pipes.

A collection of cigarette lighters, neatly arranged, occupied a little shelf just about his desk. Collecting cigarette and other fire lighters was one of Chudinov's hobbies. His collection contained the queerest specimens imaginable. There were German scare pistols—you pressed the trigger and a perfectly harmless blue flame came from the muzzle; the lighting bars of the Polynesians, cartridge lighters of the Civil War period, the popular front-line flint and wick lighters, miniature torches strung on a chain with five-coloured rings—these were souvenirs of the Olympic Games; and a combination fountain pen, compass and cigarette lighter, one of Chudinov's recent acquisitions. Here too were spec-

imens of some very ancient tinder and steel lighters and quaintly carved apocalyptical animals—press the tail and a flame springs from the maw.

But now Stepan Chudinov seemed to have no eyes either for his lighters or his favourite books, or his blueprints. His gaze rested on the wall where from a photograph Chudinov himself, unexcelled ski-runner, champion of many years, looked down upon us—youthful, athletic, smart. This was the Stepan I had known for the last fifteen odd years. Time and again I had sent to Moscow dispatches about his prowess on the ski course and stumbled over the spelling of his name when I cabled my reports from abroad. Over and over again, shielding the microphone from the frosty wind with a cupped mitt, I announced him winner of ski tournaments.

To Chudinov sports was something he could not do without. After a fatiguing day over his designs he had a habit of skiing a few miles in the hilly country round Moscow, returning home refreshed, rejuvenated and in the best of spirits. "After skiing my head is clearer, my senses keener and all my self-confidence returns to me," he would say.

But being of a very ardent nature, putting heart and soul into whatever he did, never sparing himself or resorting to half-measures, Chudinov was inclined to regard skiing as something more than a pastime. When training for an important competition, he would put all his effort and energy towards the achievement of the goal he set himself, make use of every inch of muscle and of every tissue. His zeal knew no bounds. And he was the same in his designing work. Once convinced he was right, there was nothing that could stop him. Some of his associates thought him too blunt, even overbearing at times. Such traits are unforgivable in a coach and teacher of sports.

Stepan was not an easy person to get along with and I knew that well. He was stubborn, preferring to change his place of employment rather than his convictions, even when small matters were at stake.



His enthusiasm carried him to the sites of new towns. He did not mind roughing it, often living for long periods in barracks. I ran into him in Komsomolsk, the new town that sprang up on the River Amur, and in other parts of the country where new settlements, some designed by him, were rising.

And now because of a conceited slip of a girl with a tongue more nimble than legs, Stepan was through with skiing. It was hard to believe that he really meant it. True, as a celebrated skier he had been out of the running for several years already. A bullet wound in his left leg during the war had struck him off the lists of those vying for the U.S.S.R. title which had been his for many years.

Stepan volunteered at the very outset of the war and became commander of a reconnaissance ski detachment. Quite frequently the unit operated behind the enemy's lines and in one of the sallies on the Karelian Isthmus Stepan was wounded. The surgeons did their best, but Stepan was no longer able to stand the strain of long ski runs, his leg often paining badly. Unable to participate in ski meets himself, Chudinov took to training other skiers, dividing his time between his job at a designing bureau and the training grounds.

After his wound he thought of dropping sports altogether—he even stopped attending competitions. But some time passed and by the sports checkered blazer he usually wore he was recognized first among spectators at stadiums and later on the ski course. Sports circles were happy to hear that Chudinov was coaching skiers.

As a coach Chudinov was particularly strict in his relations with the opposite sex, especially with the girls he trained. They found him attractive, but he pretended not to notice this.

There were cases of coaches falling in love with their pupils and marrying them. Chudinov considered such marriages a violation of certain unwritten laws that he had set up for himself. "When on snow, be cold