



L. SOBOLEV
THE GREEN LIGHT



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THE GREEN LIGHT

A story

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THE GREEN LIGHT

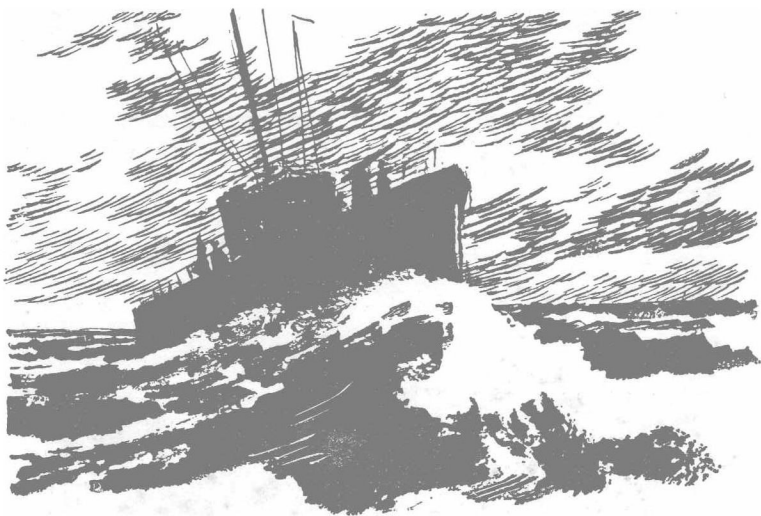
A STORY

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY
RALPH PARKER AND VALENTINA SCOTT

DESIGNED BY
P. Y. KARACHENTSOV

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To O. I.—my faithful friend

CHAPTER ONE

CHARGED with a special task behind the lines, sloop 0944 was on its way to a part of the coast held by the enemy.

It was early spring on the Caucasian coast, but out at sea this could not be felt. The warmth of the sun, now dipping to the horizon, had gone out of the air and the head wind was quite chilly. The sea heaved slowly with the swell of the previous day's storm; with all three engines running, the sloop easily outstripped the long rollers. The lazy furrow cut by the stem flowed evenly along the sides of the ship, hardly strong enough to rock it in its rapid course. Astern, the screws sucked it in, kneaded and tossed it up into a high wall of foaming surf, and it seemed that it was

in these boiling, upturned waters and nowhere else that the low, powerful roar which followed the speeding sloop originated.

No sound is so pleasant to a captain's ear as the confident voice of a man-of-war. The fine, strong roar of the three engines clearly distinguishable through the chug of the exhaust gases conveys the comforting knowledge that the sloop is in perfect trim and that only a touch at the helm is needed to steer clear of any mine which may suddenly poke its round black head above the surface, or to dodge the bomb streaking from under the wing of a diving plane. That is why Lieutenant Alexei Reshetnikov felt in excellent spirits.

His right side propped against a breast-rail so that he could keep an eye both on the compass and on the sea ahead, he stood motionless. His bulk took up a full third of the bridge for it was a tiny place and he was wrapped from head to toe in an enormous sheepskin coat. The frantic revolutions of the screws set the whole bridge vibrating; the resilient deck drummed, the rail stanchions trembled, the binnacle shook, the taut signal halyards smacked against a canvas windscreen, the wooden yard on the short mast sang out with a hollow ring. But the Lieutenant's motionless sheepskin towered like some symbol of calm and inflexible pertinacity, just the qualities required on the bridge. Beside Reshetnikov, completely covering the small wheel with two huge sleeves, stood a second motionless sheepskin concealing the helmsman in its depths; a third rigid monument towered by the fo'c's'le. The heavy spray breaking from time to time off the high plume of foam below the stem came showering on to this monument with a rattling noise but, failing to penetrate the smooth, light-hued leather, ran down it in swift dark rivulets. No better proof was needed to show that the nickname "night watchmen" given by the other captains to Reshetnikov's crew was the result of sheer envy and regret that they had not thought of acquiring these great sheepskin coats and turning their own

sailors into "one-man mobile deck-houses," as Reshetnikov called them.

The Lieutenant's sheepskin moved, and out of the matted wool collar appeared a weather-beaten, surprisingly young face with a snub nose. His alert grey eyes narrowed, stole a quick, searching glance at the sky and the horizon, and then no less quickly and searchingly scanned the sloop from stern to stern, a process which made the entire sheepskin turn with incongruous alacrity.

From up there on the bridge the whole sloop could be seen—a mere cockle-shell of timber and metal, lost in the deserted wastes of the enormous sea. Yet so precise and well-proportioned were the ship's lines, her masts, deck-house, bridge and guns that you did not notice how small she was.

The deck planks, washed by countless salt waves, gleamed a faint moist yellow; the hatchways leading to the engine-room and the wardroom were well-defined rectangles of darkness. The machine-guns glistened with grease and burnished steel. With their barrels raised pugnaciously to the sky they looked like strange musical instruments. Beyond them, firmly fixed to the deck on its dove-grey, cone-shaped base, stood the aft gun, its brass and nickel instruments glittering. It looked sleek, elegant. At one side was a metal container, its lid significantly open to reveal a golden honeycomb of brass shell-cases. Up against the rail stanchions were ranged the smooth, dark cylinders of small depth charges. The sloop was not carrying its usual complement of heavy ones that day; the place where they usually stood in the stern was occupied by a six-oar boat, lying at an awkward angle. And from the fact that an ordinary ship's boat was too long to fit across the deck space of the sloop it became evident that it was also no easy matter for a heavily-clad man to squeeze through the hatchways; that the gun was more like a pistol stuck on a post; that to cross the width of the deck was only a matter of five or six paces, and that this fearsome man-of-war with

its deck mountings and machine-guns and depth charges was after all nothing but a small sloop, a cunningly-devised shell around a powerful heart of three strong engines.

The boat was an alien body. It had been taken along to enable SK 0944 to fulfil the mission on which she was speeding to the enemy-held coast.

A week before, in a secluded little cove along that coast, a similar boat had been lost. Sloop 0874 had put it ashore with a reconnaissance party. Senior Lieutenant Somov waited until dawn for it to return but had to leave without knowing what had happened to it and to the two sailors who were supposed to bring it back from the coast after the landing operation.

Surprises of all sorts were to be expected during these night landings. Sometimes, at a place where similar clandestine operations had been made successfully before, Germans would appear: they would let the boat get close in to shore and then meet it with hand grenades and machine-gun fire; sometimes, however, they would let it put the landing party ashore undisturbed and draw out some way off the coast, and only then would they fall on the scouts, giving the boat no opportunity of coming back for them. At other times, a mine lay in wait among the pebbles and a fiery column would shoot up over the dark water, an ephemeral monument of light before which the sailors in the sloop would remove their caps in silence. But on this occasion sloop 0874 heard no sounds of shooting and saw no explosion. Yet the boat had not returned.

Of course, when the sea was rough boats would founder on the rocks or be cast ashore. Then the sailors would scuttle the boat near the beach and make for the enemy rear with the men they had landed. No signal could be sent to the sloop that would jeopardize the operation. But on the night Senior Lieutenant Somov lost the boat the sea was calm.

In any case, the boat had failed to return to the sloop and there was no news of it or of the men. The mission was of such a nature that the group could not use radio to send

news of its fate. Yet to wait for one of them to slip through the lines was out of the question. Besides, a week later circumstances required that another reconnaissance group be sent to the same locality with another important task to do. As there was no clear evidence that the operation was unfeasible, Lieutenant Reshetnikov was ordered to carry it out and, in addition, pick up the landing party again.

Had it been possible, Reshetnikov would have gone ashore in the boat himself: it is so much easier to get to the bottom of things when one is on the spot oneself than by telling others what to do in this or that situation. But, of course, he could not leave the sloop; all that he could do was to entrust the mission to someone he could rely on completely. From those who volunteered to man the boat he chose the boatswain Khazov and the helmsman Artiushin. Artiushin was a man of fabulous strength who could do the work of three at the oars. Besides, he had audacity and imagination. Khazov had once before saved a boat and its men in circumstances no less suspicious. That was before Reshetnikov had received his command. A German ambush had been expected and, prepared for complications, Khazov had brought the boat into the shore stern first so as to be able to make a quick getaway if necessary. Circumstances had proved him right. The boat's stern had just grounded when a hand grenade grazed Khazov's knee and fell hissing at his feet. Without the slightest hesitation he picked it up by its long wooden handle and from where he crouched hurled it over his head back to the beach. There was an explosion, then followed by a hail of hand grenades flung into the undergrowth from the boat. "Push off!" shouted Khazov, and the boat shot back to the sloop as Khazov returned the welcome with sub-machine-gun fire at the undergrowth.

Judging from the wry look on Reshetnikov's face as he stared at the boat in the stern it still occupied his thoughts. Once before he had taken a large boat like this along with him on an operation and that had given him trouble enough. It could not be towed; it was so bulky and heavy that it

would have held back the sloop for the tow-line might have broken when they were making speed. And so, to the accompaniment of many oaths, they had hoisted the boat on deck and laid it on the only available place, the rack for the depth charges. Even so, it had to lie slantwise and tilted. Launching it at night, under the enemy's very nose, had been a troublesome business: from the high depth-charge racks it slid into the water at too steep an angle. To be more accurate, they had to plunge it into the sea like a spoon into a bowl of borshch. The stern dipped so deep that half an hour's baling was needed afterwards, not a pleasant operation in the immediate vicinity of a coast in enemy hands. That time the sloop was taking supplies to partisans in another, relatively quiet place. But this time. . .

Pursing his lips, Lieutenant Reshetnikov went on looking at the boat for a while. Then, with a swift movement which was evidently typical of him, he drew a whistle out of his pocket and blew two short blasts, after which he stood as before, with the expression of a man who well knows that he does not have to issue an invitation twice.

And indeed, Khazov appeared promptly at the bridge. He had, probably, been about on deck, for his belted oilskin glistened with spray and the ear-flaps of his fur-lined cap were turned down. The bridge was so low that he did not have to mount it but simply stood on the deck beside Reshetnikov looking up at him questioningly. Ruddy from the wind, with a calm, earnest expression and regular though rather blunt features, Khazov could almost be described as a handsome if not very cordial-looking man. His mind seemed to be overcast by a certain pensiveness, a preoccupation, as if he were always conscious of some inner urge, some pressure of unhappiness which could not yield even to the jokes with which Artiushin—the helmsman now buried in the sheepskin, at the wheel—kept the whole ship's company amused. The boatswain's taciturn manner was obviously well-known to Reshetnikov, for, without waiting for

the other's formal question, he leaned from the bridge and called through the roar of the engines:

"What d'you say to tying some life-belts to the transom? Five belts, say. D'you think they'd keep her from dipping?"

Khazov turned towards the boat. Reshetnikov was concerned to see him lift his left hand to his cheek. Khazov ran the palm of his hand twice over the clean-shaven skin as he pondered uncertainly, then grasped his chin hard between his fingers and gazed aft with narrowed eyes. Reshetnikov impatiently shifted from foot to foot so that his sheepskin shook. Artiushin smiled over the compass; he was expecting Khazov to say in a sad but firm voice: "It wouldn't work, Comrade Lieutenant,"—the overture to a pithy discussion that would help to speed the dull peaceful watch.

But this did not happen—Khazov removed his hand from his chin and replied:

"Better to put 'em under the keel. They'd keep her higher out of the water that way."

Now it was Reshetnikov who turned to the boat. He, too, screwed up his eyes as he weighed up Khazov's amendment to his plan.

He had reckoned that if the life-belts were tied to the transom, they would keep it afloat while the stem was still resting on the deck. But, of course, it would be simpler and better to fix them under the keel as Khazov suggested.

"Right you are," said Reshetnikov with a nod.

That finished a conversation whose brevity was governed by three reasons at once—the boatswain's character, the roar of the engines and the complete mutual understanding that reigned between the participants in it. Reshetnikov glanced at his watch.

"But you'd better have your supper while everything's quiet and normal," he said. "Watchman, call Lieutenant Mikheyev to the bridge."

He plunged back into his sheepskin. When, some time later, he stuck his head out for his routine scanning of the horizon, he was astonished to find Khazov still on deck.

"You'd better go and get your supper, Nikita Petrovich," Reshetnikov said to him. "You'll get your fill of freezing in the boat."

"It's a lovely sight," replied Khazov, gazing ahead pensively.

Reshetnikov turned his head. The evening sky, which somehow he had not noticed, spread all the power of its beauty before his eyes.

Over the calmly heaving sea hung the enormous disk of the sun, already slightly flattened. Higher up a cloud spanned the sky, its long, narrow outline dividing the vast expanse into two tightly stretched bands of transparent silk: the lower band rippled like a yellow flag, the upper one dazzled the eye with its pure, fresh, pale blue. Still higher stretched a fanlike tracery of cirrus clouds, light as a day-dream; they still flashed with white, but the soft rose-pink reflection of the sunset was already touching their transparent edges from below, prelude to a fantastic play of colours. And when one raised one's eyes from the ominous sunset over the sea to this free expanse of blue, somehow one breathed more freely. The world seemed to become a place where such things as war, grief, death and hate were unknown, and the future held only success and happiness and peace.

At first, Reshetnikov simply looked at the sunset and wondered how he could have missed noticing all that loveliness before. But soon vague, elusive thoughts floated dimly into his mind to the low, powerful roar of the motors which held a note of solemnity like the chords of an organ. He could not describe those thoughts any more than a man can put into words the frail reveries that come before sleep, when visions flash and fade, appearing for a second only to merge into something else. Turning his face to the wind and yielding to the powerful throb of the engines that came through the rails, he delighted in the headlong course of the vessel, in the sea and the sunset, conscious of an incomprehensible but strong, splendid sensation which grew