

NOVIKOV-PRIBOI
**THE SEA
BECKONS**

SHORT NOVELS
AND
STORIES

FOREIGN LANGUAGES
PUBLISHING HOUSE
M O S C O W

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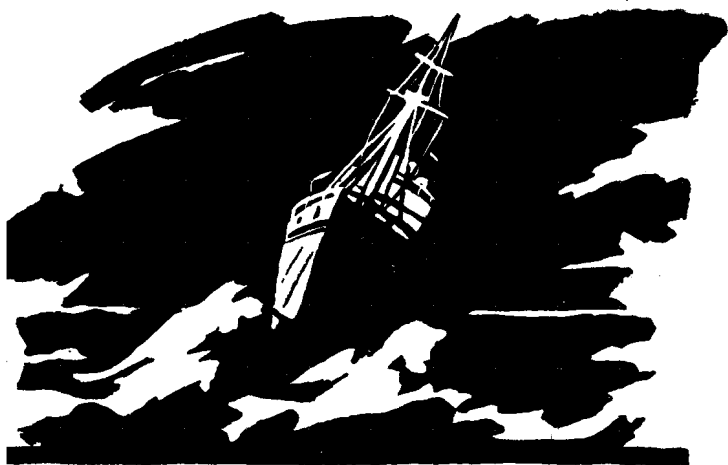
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НОВИКОВ-ПРИБОЙ
МОРЕ ЗОВЕТ

ПОВЕСТИ И РАССКАЗЫ

—

ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ
НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ
МОСКВА

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DESTINY



Y T happened long ago, when I was quite a child.

I remember a calm summer evening. Mother and I, with bags over our shoulders, had just left the monastery, where we had gone to pray, and were returning to our village. The road wound through a lovely wood. Slender pines reared their green heads into the cloudless sky, offering resinous incense to the sun. A golden shower of sunbeams, streaming through the tree-tops, fell upon the silvery carpet of moss, tracing upon it patterns as intricate as life itself. A greenish lustre lay upon everything. The dry pine needles crunched underfoot.

It was hot.

Mother, in her drab calico dress, white kerchief with pale-blue spots, and worn-down shoes, walked with a light tread. Her face, which had once been beautiful, was covered with a fine web of wrinkles and her thin lips were set in a severe line. Her blue eyes alone shone with the light of an unearthly bliss. She was pleased that I had consented at last to become a monk.

"You will lead a holy life, son," she said affectionately, touching my shoulder. "Imagine a white clean little cell.

Icons on the walls. An icon-lamp burning. You live all alone. No temptations, no sins. Just you alone, communing with the Lord."

My father, a soldier in a Polish gubernia town, had eloped with my mother and settled down in a poor little village lost amid the backwoods. Although, in marrying him, she had adopted the Orthodox religion, our image-case at home to this day contains Catholic as well as Orthodox icons, both of which are held in equal esteem. Homesickness, drudgery, the ridicule of neighbours, who treated her as a foreigner (she spoke with a Polish accent), and the soul-killing, squalid peasant life to which she was unused, made her life a misery. She grew old before her time and often wept over her lost youth. And so she came to look upon the world as a vale of tears and sorrow, and turned all the thoughts of her dreamy soul to religion; she was particularly fond of visiting the monastery, and brought me up in the same pious spirit.

"The thing is you will not be tainted by worldly sins," my mother went on in her sweet melodious voice. "In the monastery no human malice will poison your heart. Quietly and humbly, by righteous paths, you will go your earthly way with heavenly bliss in your heart. And God, too, will be pleased to see your soul clean as fresh snow, without a single stain upon it. . . ."

My mother's gentle speech fell soothingly upon my ear, attuning my soul to a devotional key. My thoughts travelled back to the monastery, that lovely cloister standing in a grove of tall trees between two big rivers. This time I had been more than ever impressed by the magnificent churches, the shining splendour of the gilt iconostasis, the gorgeous vestments of the bishops, and most of all by the solemn singing of the choir, which had sent my young soul soaring heavenwards as if on wings. The voice of one of the monks, a broad-shouldered hairy man with a head like a lion, still sounded in my ears. When he sang, his

mouth wide open and the whites of his eyes rolling, the very walls of the cathedral shook with his tremendous booming bass.

"You know what, Mamma?" I said.

"Yes, my dear?" she said, straightening the kerchief on her head.

"When I grow up there in the monastery I'll have a voice like that big monk has."

"What monk is that?"

"The one who looks like a lion. With the wart on his nose."

"Silly boy! Fancy saying such things. A lion is a beast, but a monk is a holy father."

"I'll have to eat a lot more though—*shchi*, and porridge, and fish—to become a strong man. Then I'll drink vodka or something to get a gruff voice with a proper roar in it. Then I'll sing louder than that monk, won't I?"

Mother flung her hands up in dismay.

"Oh, you sinner, you. Why, you will have to fast. . . ."

But I was not listening to her. I stopped, puffed out my cheeks, and began to sing *By the Rivers of Babylon* in a gruff voice, in imitation of the booming monk.

"Do I sound like him?"

"You do, son," my mother said, smiling, and kissed me on the cheek. "Come along."

The road turned off and ran along the edge of the high bank. Under the steep bluff the broad river slid by slowly, its surface a flaming mirror of sunshine. The opposite bank with its golden sand sloped gently down to the water. Along it ran a wide strip of flood-meadow dotted with clumps of bushes and small lakes. Here, to the strong smell of resin were added the scent of flowers and the tang of the river. The bell in the monastery rang for vespers. I crossed myself and looked back: the domes of the churches with their shining golden crosses stood out sharply against a dark background of blue sky and green forest.

The deep-toned peal flowed over the countryside, and it seemed to me as if everything around—the quiet river, the green meadows, the slumbering woods and the limpid air—had sprung to life, palpitating for sheer joy and singing in tune with that bell. My soul, filled with heaven-sent music, was prepared for any deed of valour. I looked down at the glassy surface of the water, and found myself thinking, for some reason, that the life of a monk resembled the sparkling river, whose clear waters flowed gently and peacefully between picturesque banks to the twitter of soaring swallows and the warbling of the larks, forever onward into those unknown regions where sky and earth meet. There, probably, were the golden gates of paradise.

"Not bad," I said aloud.

"What?" Mother asked.

"Not bad to be a monk."

"Rather."

Now all the bells were a-ringing, and the woods repeated the changes with a merry echo.

A smile lit up my mother's face.

A little way in front of us, slightly off the road, a man lay, resting on his elbow, gazing out into the blue distance. He was about twenty-six, dressed in a peculiar style of costume that I had never seen before.

"Who is that?" I asked my mother in a whisper.

"A sailor. One of those who travel in ships."

The day-dreams inspired by the ringing bells vanished at once, fell away from my soul like the petals of a beautiful flower shaken by a gust of wind.

When we drew abreast of him he got up and said cheerily:

"Good day, godly folks."

We answered his greeting with a bow.

"Where are you bound?" the sailor asked, joining us.

Mother began telling him, while I stared at him, unable to conceal my astonishment. His black bell-bottomed trou-

sers, and his dark-blue flannel shirt with an open collar baring part of his chest and the whole of his neck, went well with his trim figure. His face, flushed with the heat, looked extremely brave and dashing in that white-edged little cap which he wore tilted on one side of his head. The gold letters on the satin band, whose long ends fell down his back like two plaits, filled me with awe. I read the mysterious words "Storm Conqueror" over several times.

"I want to fix my son up in the monastery," my mother was telling him. "They promised to take him in next month."

"So you're going to be God's pipe, eh?" the sailor said, peering into my face with a laugh that revealed a row of sugar-white teeth. His breath smelt of vodka.

"I'm going to be a monk, not God's pipe," I answered rather huffily.

"You ought to get a little more experience of the world and its sinful ways before becoming a monk. Otherwise you'll find it dull: what will you ask of God?"

Mother threw the sailor an angry look, but what interested me was the writing on his cap.

"That's the name of the ship I sailed in, my lad."

"Did you sail in a ship? On the river?"

"No, on the seas."

"The real seas?"

"Yes, of course."

"Would you believe it!" I exclaimed, using a pet phrase of my father's.

Twirling his fair moustache, the sailor told Mother that he had been on a visit to his father-in-law in another village, where he had washed down an omelette with a little vodka. Now he was returning home and felt as gay as a lark.

"God likes fun, you know—he was a jolly old boy himself. That's why he made singing birds and all kinds of flowers and things. I'm sure he hates the sight of sour

mugs, whether they belong to devils or monks. You can take my word for that, madam."

He spoke noisily, as if addressing a deaf audience, waving his arms and laughing with an engaging candour brimful of youth and vitality.

Excited, dying to know more, I kept bombarding him with questions.

"The seal!" he exclaimed, glancing at me with his keen grey eyes. "That's where you have free space, my lad! No matter where you turn your ship's head, you have an open road before you. Ah, that's life! That's where you see the world! And the creatures in it—you'd be surprised! Sometimes you can't tell whether it's a fish or some kind of beast. There are so many of them, and all built on different lines. You see something swimming about in the water, round and shiny like a rainbow. But when you pull it out it's just a lump of jelly. You wouldn't believe it, but it's a living creature, too. Why, kid, if you was to take just a peep at the sea with half an eye you'd be struck all of a heap."

Then he told me about ships, and how they were handled.

"Do our ships go to foreign countries, too?" I asked, staring at the sailor with all my eyes.

"Yes. I've been overseas several times."

"But don't they kill Russians out there?"

"Goodness, no! Why should they? They're men just like us. It's savages you're thinking of. They go about stark naked. Some of them are as black as a raven's wing. Real funny, I tell you."

Foreign lands were associated in my mind with the beautiful fairy-tales I had heard from Mother. There everything was strange and wonderful, not at all like it was in our village. The sailor confirmed it, too, when he spoke about palm-trees that grew there, about nuts the size of a baby's head, about gigantic flowers, about fruits as sweet

as honey, and a blazing sun right overhead that could kill a man like a bolt of lightning.

Occasionally we met passers-by, and it seemed to me that they all looked admiringly at the sailor and his wonderful dress.

"You ask whether one can see the shores at sea?" the sailor continued, flattered by the breathless interest with which I was listening to his yarns. "You couldn't see a damn thing, not if you was to climb up the tallest mast. Sometimes you sail for a week, two weeks, with nothing round you but water and water."

Glancing at the river, silvered by the slanting rays of the setting sun, I tried to imagine the vastness of the sea, but the opposite bank cut off my vision. All I saw were sand-banks, lush green meadows, and farther out a rolling field, like a steppe, with villages and hamlets lost in it.

"But how can there be shores you can't see?"

The sailor smiled.

"Look at the sky. D'you see any shores there? It's the same at sea. And it's just as deep. Plenty of room, eh?"

I walked along with my head thrown back, my eyes sweeping the fathomless blue of the sky from which poured the merry notes of a lark, and I saw there a soaring kite. That, I thought, is probably the way the ship *Storm Conqueror* sailed the seas. How wonderful! Just like a fairy-tale!

The sailor could not keep silent. While I was day-dreaming, he was telling Mother how he had learned painting under an icon painter.

"A terrible drunkard that master of mine was, and one of the bawdiest fellows alive. One day he passed over to me an order for a picture of Our Lady and went off to the pub to make a night of it. Well, I painted that icon as best I could and waited for the master. He came home the next day. Stood swaying in front of the holy image, arms

akimbo. 'What d'you call that? he says. 'Is that supposed to be the Mother of God? Why, she's a . . . ' And he started showering curses down on me and my art from the upper bridge. Then he wound up by saying: 'Stick a beard on, and she'll do for St. Nicholas.' You daren't disobey him—he'd get wild and pitch into you. So that's how our icons are painted if you'd like to know. . . ."

The sailor was about to enlarge upon the subject, but Mother got cross and pleaded with him:

"Please tell us rather about the sea."

He agreed with alacrity and told me about gales, dropping his voice and making frightened eyes.

"That's when you're in for it. . . . Not long ago, on my last voyage out, we came up against it in the Atlantic. All at once clouds came scuttling up. The sky was black with them, as if God had spilt a river of ink. The wind started blowing like mad. It was a snorter of a gale, just like a drunken tramp tearing about on the rampage. At first the ocean just sort of scowled and looked sullen, then it started heaving and snarled like a beast. It was awful! But our ship didn't bear the name of *Storm Conqueror* for nothing. Gales meant nothing to her. A tremendous sea would crash over her, flooding the whole upper deck, but she'd just shake herself and push ahead like a maddened beast. And our commander, let me tell you, fitted his ship to a T. Had a face that would stop a clock—regular signboard for a pub. All red and bloated with a moustache to his ears, and eyes like mutton-pies. A downright bully he was, as fierce as they make 'em. One day, when he was drunk, he saw a shark in the sea, and he went for it with just a dagger in his hand. And what d'you think? He killed the damned brute, stabbed it before it knew where it was! Well, as I was saying, during that gale he was pretty well loaded up, and just stood on the bridge, grinning and enjoying himself. You couldn't tell the sky from the ocean, the whole world was topsy-turvy, and it looked as if it