VICTOR KIN

ACROSS the LINES

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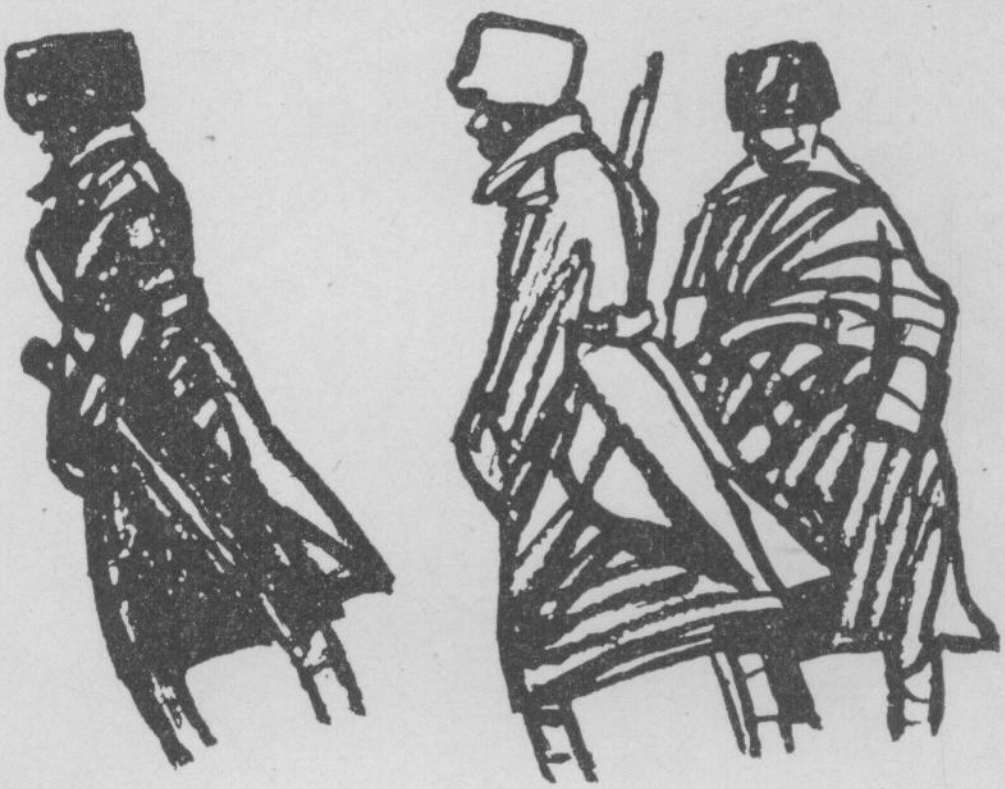
VICTOR KIN



Виктор Кин

ПО ТУ СТОРОНУ

ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО
ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ
Москва

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VICTOR KIN

ACROSS THE LINES

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TOO MUCH NATURE

"I KNEW it," said Bezais, picking at the putty on the window. "There's another of those chicken-sheds over there. The train's going to stop near it and wait five hours until it's had enough. I'm just itching to jump out and give it a shove or two, just to make it go a bit faster."

Bezais stole a glance at Matveyev. Matveyev was sitting on an upturned packing-case drawing five-pointed stars on the palm of his hand in indelible pencil. It was evening. Sleet was falling outside. There was a murky light inside the empty saloon-car. A bottle rolled noisily about the floor. For over an hour Matveyev had been waiting for it to roll into a corner and stop rattling, but the bottle went on rolling. Finally he got up, swore, and tossed the bottle through the door. Bezais watched him with a bored expression and turned back to the window. He was wrong: this time the train did not stop.

"This Amur railway is an utter wreck," Bezais resumed after a pause. "The guard told me the sleepers

are quite rotten. You can put your finger through them. The bridges rock—they only stand up through force of habit. Damn it all, there's nobody in this stupid republic to keep order. Remember that scoundrel of a station-master at Ukurei? The way he snapped: 'It's none of your business!' They're terribly spoiled here. That's because they don't feel a firm hand over them. When we're settled in Khabarovsk I'll go to the station-master there and give him a piece of my mind."

Matveyev finished his doodling and admired it through narrowed eyes.

He had had time to get used to this. Every day Bezais would go to the window, pick at the putty and curse the railway. He used the strongest words in his vocabulary and wanted to complain to someone. That raised his spirits a little. "Otherwise it will all stay bottled up inside me," he said, "and I'll get ill." Matveyev did not interrupt him—after all, it was better than the violent scene, accompanied by shouts and foot-stamping, that Bezais had put on at Ukurei. The train had stopped there for two days and Bezais had been a pitiful sight. Finally he had run growling to the station and turned the place upside down. He thirsted for blood.

"Calls itself a democratic republic," he yelled as Matveyev dragged him away to the doors. "What do they think it is? The Art Theatre?"

His was a restless nature. He could not sit still and wait for the train to trundle up to Khabarovsk. He was eighteen and youth stirred in his veins like green sap.

At first Matveyev himself had taken part in these outbursts though he had never gone beyond deciding

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to argue with the guard. But the days had passed and every morning the dawn shed a pink light over the taiga slumbering under the snow. Snow-clad stations appeared and vanished in a frosty haze. Rugged rocks and red-tinged larches ran by. Sometimes from under the snow at the foot of the embankment twisted rails would protrude, or the ribs of goods wagons or rusty railway engines. The crimson sun rose with monotonous regularity, the stained kettle simmered on the iron stove and Bezais would go to the window and curse the railway. Matveyev had had enough of all that. He was not capable of remaining angry for several days running. So he preferred to sit in silence and to concentrate his thoughts on how fine it would be if spring were suddenly to come and he would no longer have to run for firewood at every stop.

Three weeks had passed since they left Moscow, but to Bezais it seemed like several months. As far as Irkutsk the train had been so crowded that it had been difficult to take one's hand out of one's pocket. They had slept in their seats or on their feet, wincing at the jolts of the train. For days on end the train had stood in sidings. On one run the axle overheated—the whole carriage held its breath and listened to the piteous squeal of the wheels. Everyone was afraid that the carriage would be uncoupled. And one night they were all awakened by a wild and terrible howl—a woman was in labour, lying on the floor of the corridor. They made room for her in the compartment, spread newspapers; the men were asked to avert their eyes. Towards morning the woman gave birth to a boy. Everyone thought up names for him and cussed the wench for her stupidity.

But the worst part of the journey began at Irkutsk. There they had to leave the train and apply to the Gubernia Cheka to have their papers stamped so that they could enter the Far Eastern Republic. Then, howling oaths and imprecations, they entrained in a goods van which was already occupied by a troupe of actors of the Political Department of Nth Division. The actors swore at them all night and all the next day, right up to Verkhneudinsk where they grew exhausted. Matveyev and Bezais tried to snap back at first but after a time they fell silent and sat glum and worried, thinking that, after all, life was a bad joke.

The first to wake up in the morning was the producer. He lowered from his berth a pair of fat legs clad in voluminous trousers and, yawning, scratched the scrub on his cheeks and chin. Then he kicked the comedian, a seedy individual held in the utmost contempt by the rest of the company, and sent him for hot water. The tragedian woke up and went to drink tea, adding sugar from his knapsack. He was an intense, wiry, acrimonious fellow. He got on everyone's nerves, was always picking quarrels, and slapped the face of an old woman who played comic roles, when he could not find his sugar or his herring. Nothing was good enough for him: the van rattled, there was a draught from the doors, no one respected him. Matveyev scrutinized him with curiosity: it amazed him that a man could be such a beast.

Later the whole carriage woke up, coughing and complaining. The stove was lit, tea was brewed, people related their dreams. There were three women in the troupe: two young and one quite old. This old woman was beautiful, with well-marked features and

snow-white hair. She had retained the habit of caring for her appearance from better times, and when the tragedian hit her, her only concern was to prevent his blows falling on her face. The young women were plain and were so approachable that no one even asked their consent.

But at Chita a miracle occurred. A capacious saloon, a converted ordinary carriage, was allotted to them. How it happened they had no idea. At the Party Committee where they received their papers to proceed to Khabarovsk, an excited-looking man in army uniform dashed up to them and pressed them warmly to accompany this saloon to Khabarovsk and turn it over to an armoured train that was waiting there. They graciously consented and hurried to the station in high spirits. The outside of the carriage was decorated like a book for children. There were drawings of workers and peasants, of Negroes, of socialism, and of a big green snake with red eyes. Matveyev and Bezais were astonished. They felt full of self-esteem. It did not fall to everyone's lot to travel in such a carriage.

It was not bad inside either. In the middle of the saloon stood a huge friendly stove, as massive as a house. Up against the left wall leaned a scratched grand piano; some silly chump had written various indecent words in indelible pencil on the keyboard, obviously at the expense of much time and effort. The piano was frightfully old, its red-painted legs wobbled, but somehow it stood up and bore its fate submissively, a fallen aristocrat among the hefty proletarians. On the bare wall hung a poster depicting a carelessly-clad maiden waving a red flag. Bezais em-

bellished her with a beard and moustache, saying that he found it embarrassing to undress in the presence of ladies. At the top end of the carriage there was a stage with all accoutrements: a prompter's box, curtain and a splendid winter forest scene.

They left Chita and at first everything went swimmingly. They lounged about the saloon, surprised to find it so large; they crept into the prompter's box and drew the curtain to and fro. On the evenings they sat beside the hot stove and talked and talked, consoled by their unexpected stroke of luck. Outside the windows a white haze lit by occasional sparks flew past. The wheels beat out each step on their journey into the obscure distance, far beyond Khabarovsk, beyond the dense forest, to the rocky gorges where a beast, on meeting a man, looks him straight in the eyes.

On such evenings the two young men warmed to each other and spoke of things which men are usually silent about, things that lie deep in the soul and are treasured for oneself alone. They had in common one word which bound them to each other almost like brothers. It is a fine, manly word which has few to match it in human speech. It contains the echo of the old years that have passed, years warmed by splendid wrath and by the best blood. It stirs a memory of people clad in Russian peasant shirts and old-fashioned jackets, whose names sounded like oaths—and Bezais felt that the great shadow of these people was falling on his freckled boyish face.

But then their misfortunes started. To begin with, the railway engine lost a piece of its funnel. They took this event bravely: they ran up the train to look at

the damage and spent a long time discussing how it had happened. Then some connecting-rod broke, followed by an accident to a valve, and later the locomotive began to fall to pieces—every day something else broke. This was all very dull and vexing. With a bit of patching the engine moved slowly on. Then it was replaced by another. But then they ran into snowdrifts, delays, track repairs. The route stretched like a piece of elastic: according to the time-table they should have been in Khabarovsk long ago, but the train was still dawdling at unknown little stations, between the mountains and the snow, and it seemed that Khabarovsk did not exist at all, that the line ran endlessly through the frost and mist.

For the first few days they stood at the window admiring the scenery. Their eyes, accustomed to the broad Russian landscape, were shocked by the abundance of rock and forest. Everything here was a definite, clear colour, without half-hues. The sky was deep blue, the colour of corn-flowers, the forest—a succulent green against the brown rock. They tried to take in everything and, their faces pressed to the glass, marvelled at every detail.

In this way the first days passed, but then life became so tedious that their jaws went out of joint with yawning and their shoulders began to ache insufferably. There was absolutely nothing to do. They had examined the saloon, the piano, the stage in the minutest detail. The day passed in stupefying idleness and ended senselessly in deep twilight when there remained nothing to do but sleep. Bezais lost his temper and thumped the keyboard until he was utterly exhausted. Everything around them was familiar; the

routine was so endlessly repetitious that it irritated them beyond words. By the end of the first week Matveyev felt he could not look out of the window any longer.

"You know, old man," he said once, "I've already counted a hundred and one mountains with a single pine on them and I'm fed to the teeth with them. You can't turn your head without bumping up against natural scenery of some sort. I need very little nature: I can stand a few flowers or a butterfly, but here there's God knows how much."

That was a stab in the back. But Bezais hung on for a few more days. Finally he too had had enough and gave up.

"I'm going to concentrate on sleeping as much as I can," said Matveyev.

Immediately after dinner he would go to the stove, stretch out on his greatcoat and lie there for several hours, placing his tobacco, paper and matches beside him to economize movement.

"It's silly to stand when you can sit," he said, "but it's even sillier to sit when you can lie down."

Then he grew so addicted to this practice that he lay on his back nearly all day. Bezais tried in vain to emulate him.

That was the beginning of the demoralization which at first made them feel ashamed of themselves and think up feeble excuses. They became so lazy that they reached a stage when they did not want to wash or dress or even think—when every movement was torture. For several days Bezais contemplated extracting from the door the nail on which he had torn first

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