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ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ  
НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ  
МОСКВА

**YURI KRYMOV**

**THE TANKER  
DERBENT**

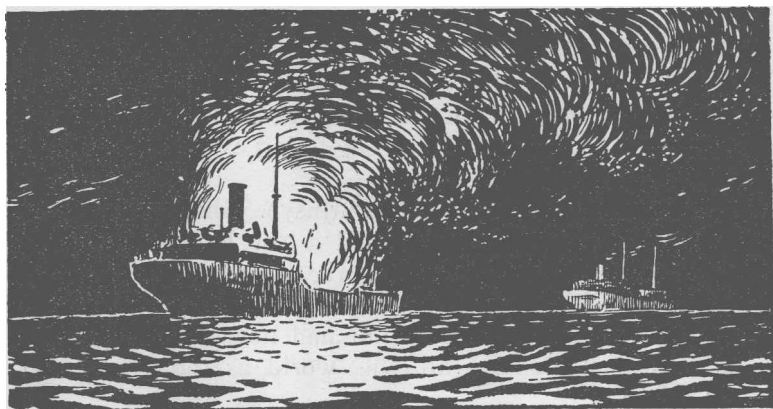
**FOREIGN LANGUAGES  
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### THE MORSE KEY

THERE WERE two of them on night duty at the Caspian Shipping Line wireless station—Tarumov, the operator, and Beletskaya, whose job was to pass on the radiograms to their destination. Tarumov was a youth of twenty, but he had the reputation of being the best operator on the line. They said he could tap out over a hundred signs a minute. When questioned on the subject he would smile as much as to say: "What do you take me for—a man or a machine?" He knew every screw and wire of his set and could do without the help of a technician. If he noticed anything wrong he would whistle, bite his nails and then get to work behind the control panel. Beletskaya would laugh. "If you get electrocuted, Arsen," she would say, "I'll die of fright. Think of me, at least!"

They were both the same age and had been working together for quite a while. Beletskaya was in charge of taking in and sorting the telegrams. It was a wearing, monotonous job which required no special knowledge. Arsen liked to watch her when they were by themselves in the transmitter room. She went efficiently and unobtrusively

about her work, her lips moving slightly as she read the telegrams. Her hazel hair would fall over her eyes and she would toss it back with a jerk of her head. On such occasions he thought her very attractive. At the end of the shift she was just as fresh as at the beginning except for a slight trembling of her hands.

At the station they called her Musya. She looked quite young, liked a bit of fun and had a glib tongue. Tarumov sometimes saw her home after work, and she calmly hooked her arm in his.

He knew she was married but had never heard a thing about her husband—for all the world as though he had never existed.

Once, as they were going along the sea front, he saw a couple kissing on a bench and looked away.

"What on earth do people kiss for?" Musya whispered mischievously, looking him straight in the face. "Some pleasure it must be, and I don't think!"

He answered in a rough tone to hide his own embarrassment:

"Then don't you kiss your own husband so often. Show more sense than the others."

Musya was silent for a while.

"I've not seen him for a long time," she said with what might have been a sigh or a yawn. "I don't know how long."

"How's that?" he asked, wondering whether she was joking or telling the truth.

"He's fa-ar, far away," Musya drawled out. "He's chief engineer on the tanker *Derbent*."

A change soon came about in the relations between Musya and Tarumov. He caught himself thinking of her even in her absence. He liked to touch articles of clothing or other things belonging to her and it gratified him to hear their names mentioned together, which often happened at the wireless station.

He sometimes felt irritated at himself without any reason: there he'd gone and fallen in love like a schoolboy with a

workmate, another chap's wife. And nothing but dreams could come of it.

And sometimes, watching the stack of papers mounting on her table, he would get a sudden scare; suppose she got fed up with the job and left it, and that was the end of it all. He could not imagine another girl sitting in her place. But Musya had no intention of leaving. She was as merry and as untiring as ever. And when she left him at the crossroads after work she would shout:

"Thank you, my cavalier! Don't get run over by a tram!"

There was not much work that evening. At 11 p.m. Tarumov tapped out the weather report: "In the Astrakhan area, medium-clouded, dry, wind north-east, up to three points. In the Makhach-Kala-Krasnovodsk area, possible light showers, wind not more than five points. Forecast for the next twenty-four hours—further drop in wind, light cloud." In the log-book he found reports from ships that were be-

hind schedule because of bad weather. There had been no reports at noon.

The gale veered off to the south, its tail trailing between Krasnovodsk and Baku. Towards evening the gale signals were taken down and the first steamer left the freight docks with a hoot of triumph.

After sending out the weather report, the operator switched over to reception.



Judging by the morning's reports, no tankers would be arriving within the next two hours. The call wave was idle. Faint, hardly audible singing filtered through the headphones like the scratching of some tiny delicate insect on the diaphragm.

Tarumov turned the vernier and the sound grew louder and fuller, the melody could be clearly distinguished, interwoven in the accompaniment on a piano. Another turn, and the amazingly clear female voice died away in a long hum of applause.

The operator switched on the loudspeaker and pulled off his headphones. The loudspeaker spluttered, shaken by an earsplitting din out of which strident voices detached themselves like shouts for help. Beletskaya left her place by the telephone and came over.

"Have you gone crazy?" she asked in alarm. "Suppose somebody calls you up?"

She leaned on the back of his chair, breathing in the back of his neck. The applause subsided. The female voice started singing the same simple homely lullaby again.

"A lullaby," Musya whispered. "She sings fine, doesn't she? Move up a little, Arsen."

She sat down on the edge of his chair, with her arm round his shoulders to keep her balance. Her face was so near that he could see the moist glimmer of her teeth between her half-parted lips. He slowly let his head drop back towards her and her hair tickled his cheek. This she did not notice; her eyes were fixed on the loudspeaker. He was not listening to the music, he was thinking that they had never yet sat like that, so close, and that they would get closer and closer until . . . until they were man and wife. "That's the way it happens," he thought with joy, "yes, just like that." Another thunder of applause brought him back to his senses.

"That'll do," said Musya. "They're cursing you somewhere at sea. You'll get yourself into trouble."

He turned the switch and cast a side glance at Musya. She clasped her hands at the back of her head and stretched.

Her eyes were friendly, caressing. It seemed she already knew that he liked her and yet she didn't hold aloof from him. On the contrary! Perhaps the time had come to speak to her!

He slowly put his headphones on and tuned in to the ships' calling wave. Silence. Musya had gone to her table; her hands were deftly running through a heap of papers, sorting and stapling them. Nothing could be heard in the transmission room except the hum of the gas stove on the other side of the partition. He looked at his watch: 1.50 a.m. Suddenly he thought: "If there's a call from sea before two, I'll tell Musya today." He felt surprisingly cheerful and yet apprehensive. He remembered how when he was a kid he and his friends used to toss a stick into the air to decide important arguments. They went about it seriously and in complete silence. The stick spun in the air and fell either flat or on its end. One way was as good as another.

1.54 a.m. Only six minutes left. It didn't look likely. Better think of something else. But what? Musya's husband was on the *Derbent*. That ship had been in the news a lot recently. Her crew had started the idea of Stakhanovite trips, and had been the first to put it into practice. Now there was emulation between the *Derbent* and another tanker—the *Agamali*—a jolly fine crew she had too—and there was still no telling who would come out on top. There had been a radiogram from the *Derbent* that morning: she was towing some ship that had engine trouble. Musya had seen the message and not said a word. The day before there had been a gale. She never even as much as mentioned her husband. And once—that was on the day of the *Derbent's* Stakhanovite victory—she hadn't even gone to the wharf to meet him. Tankers don't stay in port for more than three hours. So they'd cooled off towards each other. Well, that happens sometimes.

What was her husband like, he wondered. A ship's engineer, Vlasov was his name—no—Basov. No longer on the young side probably, and sparing of words like all ship's engineers. And Musya liked a bit of fun.

1.56 a.m. Some ship's radio was tuning in; there was a faint click and a humming in his phones. If only they would start calling! He dipped his pen in the ink and brought the log nearer. He must talk to Musya today. But it was awkward on duty; he must see her home and then...

1.57 a.m. Loud and clear the signals broke into the quietness of the room. Their unaccustomed monotony puzzled him; as though a hand was playing about with the key. Dot, dot, dot. Dash, dash, dash. Dot, dot, dot... S.O.S. ... He pulled down the wires of his phones and the steel half-circle dug into his skull. The loud crystal hammering beat madly at his temples:

"S.O.S. ... S.O.S. ... S.O.S. ... *Uzbekistan* calling. 42.36, 18.02 south of Chechen Island. Fire on board. Unable to control it... S.O.S. ... S.O.S. ... S.O.S. ..."

The operator started writing. He felt as you sometimes do in a dream, when in the middle of lazy fantasies somebody shouts one word in your ear and everything seems to be full of dreadful forebodings. The hammering went on:

"S.O.S. ... 42.36, 18.02 south of Chechen Island. Tanker *Derbent* had me in tow. Cut tow-cable. Following previous course. Answers no signals. Situation desperate. ... S.O.S. ..."

"Musya, the rescue service!" cried Tarumov. "Quick, Musya!"

He heard her voice muffled by his earphones:

"What's the matter, Arsen?"

"Don't say anything. Here's the message."

Her hand reached over his shoulder and seized the log-book.

He heard her rattling the phone-rest.

"Shipping Line," she said calmly; "give me the rescue service. Look sharp!"

The wireless rapped out again:

"S.O.S. *Uzbekistan* calling... Cargo heavy oil. Number ten tanks burst. Losing stability. Fire on quarter-deck, boats

hard to launch. 42.36, 18.02. *Derbent* heading away ... not answering signals ... S.O.S. ... S.O.S. ..."

A pause. Musya was phoning the message through. She had her back turned and her hand cupped over the mouth-piece. She was speaking in a low voice so as not to hinder reception. A splendid girl! She clapped the receiver on the rest and came over to him.

"The scoundrels!" she exclaimed angrily. "Abandoned their comrades! Listen, Arsen!"

"What?"

"Can you hear anything?"

"No."

"Arsen, why are they sailing away?"

"Dunno. Carrying heavy oil too, aren't they. 'Fraid of catching fire, I suppose."

"The rotters! Saving their own hides, eh?"

"H'm, h'm..."

"Arsen, are you listening in?"

"Yes. Don't talk to me."

He pressed his hands on his headphones till his ears hurt. The ether in alarm was discordant with a bustle of signals.

"*Bolshevik* calling *Uzbekistan*. Thirty miles away. Coming to you. Baku, Makhach-Kala, Krasnovodsk, send all freight ships to 42.36N 18.02E south of Chechen Island. ..."

Tarumov switched over to transmission. Behind the partition the dynamo wailed as it revved up. The glass of the transmitter lit up with the yellow glow of the valves. He put his hand on the key and started tapping. Blue sparks flew from the contacts. The loudspeaker whistled.

"All freight ships ... proceed 42.36, 18.02..."

Then he switched back to reception. Ships' wirelesses squeaked once or twice and were silent again. A tense, businesslike silence set in during which he seemed to hear the rattle of anchor chains, the hiss of steam, the foaming of water churned up by screws. And suddenly the hoarse tonal wireless piped out with great distinctness:

"*Derbent* calling *Uzbekistan* ... *Derbent* calling *Uzbekistan*... I am coming. Shall approach from starboard, am putting out boats. Assemble crew. Keep calm. Over. ... *Derbent* calling Baku, Makhach-Kala..."

"Musya, ring up the emergency station," Tarumov bawled out, missing the connected sequence of the signals, "D'you hear, Musya?"

"*Derbent* calling Baku, Makhach-Kala. . . Going to rescue crew of *Uzbekistan*. Have full load of heavy oil. Risk fire in spite of precautions taken... Send rescue ship 42.36, 18.02."

Musya ran up to the table.

"The emergency station's waiting on the phone," she said. "Have you finished?"

She grabbed the paper and hurried to the telephone. Tarumov saw her put the receiver to her ear and look at the paper. Suddenly she leaned against the wall, bit her lip and shut her eyes tight. She stood like that not more than a few seconds. Then she opened her eyes and spoke into the phone in her usual voice: "Ready? Here's a telegram: Tanker *Derbent* calling Baku, Makhach-Kala..."

Tarumov leaned his chest against the table. Again the ships' wirelasses began crackling. In the noise they were making he was afraid to miss the hoarse piping of the station. His ears were ringing with tension and his thoughts were confused with the snatches of Morse messages.

"It's bad luck that there's no steamer in the vicinity. Why are they calling freight ships? Tankers easily catch fire. The *Derbent* is a tanker. Cut the cable and sailed away, then went back. Strange! It'll be harder for her to save the men now. The wireless operator was the last to leave his post... Who's operator on the *Uzbekistan*? Valya Lastik—just a boy. Perhaps he's got suffocated? Perhaps they all have? No, the *Derbent* will put out boats and pick them all up. But why did she go away? And not answer the signals? And why did she go back? A dangerous cargo she had—Krasnovodsk oil. Very volatile, and highly inflammable—like

petrol. What were they saying about that tanker? Oh, yes, Stakhanovite runs! Ahead of shipment plan. And Musya's husband, Basov, is chief engineer on the *Derbent*. She got a scare when she read that radiogram... A strong wind blowing, sparks flying and heavy seas... The chief thing is not to miss any calls. They said the ship was losing stability, heeling over. So when the superstructure was on fire and the ship was about to capsize, Valya Lastik was still at his wireless. His clothes were singeing on his back and he was choking from the smoke of burning oil and paint. And him a mere kid..."

The ships were silent. Barely audible music once more filtered through the phones. Tiflis? Erivan?

"Farewell, my camp, for the last time I sing..." The gipsy girl's rending cry seemed to come from behind the blind wall.

A lousy receiver, no selectivity! With a turn of the regulator the operator tried to get rid of the song. He was cross at the gipsy who knew nothing about Morse or the distance to rocky Chechen Island and its breakers. But at last the applause died down and all was quiet again.

The ships' call wave was silent.

Turning round, Tarumov saw Musya. She was standing behind his chair, her hands pressed to her breast. Her face was pale. He had the impression she might collapse.

"No news, Arsen?"

"No."

"You know, I can't work. Do you mind if I stand here a little?"

"Of course not." He moved up, making room for her on his chair. "Sit here. Don't get excited."

He felt his superiority over her because he was calmer. But at the same time there was something that vexed him.

Musya sat on the edge of the chair and a cold shudder shook her frame.

"I'm shivering," she complained. "It's cold here."

"It's the excitement, Musya."

"No, it's really cold here. Listen, Arsen."

"What?"

"Last year the petrol ship *Partisan* was burnt out. Do you remember? They were carrying Krasnovodsk oil. It's explosive, isn't it?"

"Nonsense!"

"No, tell me the truth!"

"Nonsense, I tell you!"

"Ah, you're only fibbing. I'm awfully scared, Arsen," she admitted. "Suppose something happens..."

He put his arms round her and drew her closer, amazed at not feeling the slightest shyness. He saw Musya's pale face resting on his shoulder in miserable apathy. And to cheer her up he said:

"Your husband is not taking part in the rescue work. He's in the engine room, it's not so dangerous there."

Musya sighed.

"You mean Basov? He's not my husband any more."

"What do you mean?"

"What I said. We've parted. For good..."

She was silent a while.

"You know, I don't think he ever loved me at all. But perhaps he did in his own way, I can't say. He's so—queer. He just went away and that was the end of it. Don't think I'm afraid for him! There are forty-five of them on the *Derbent*, and if anything happens..."

He patted her shoulder, thinking that the man must have hurt her somehow and she was miserable and couldn't forget. And it made him proud to think she was confiding in him and looking to him for sympathy, as though she had united with him against that unpleasant man, her former husband. Then the page of the log-book caught his eye and he read over the words of the telegram: heading away... not answering signals. He imagined the vivid glow of the fire and the silhouette of the ship treacherously sailing away into the dark. Basov, the engineer, he thought, had something to do with that.