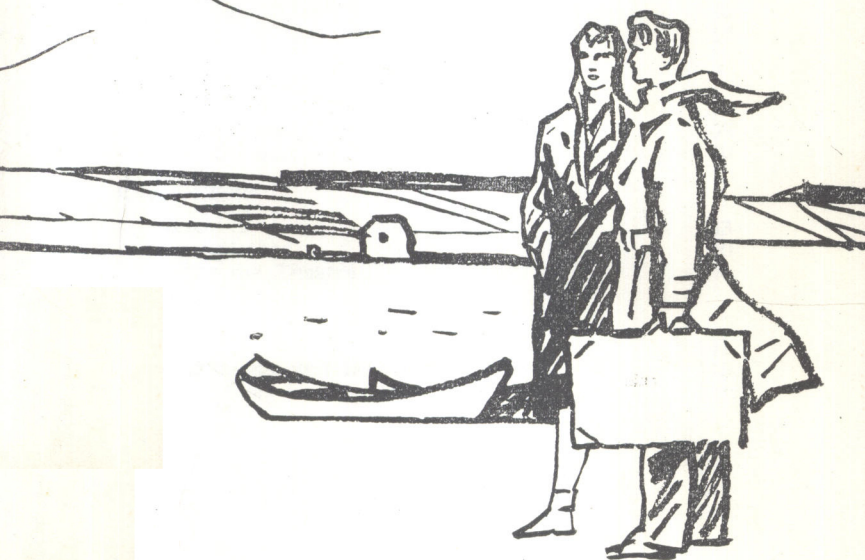


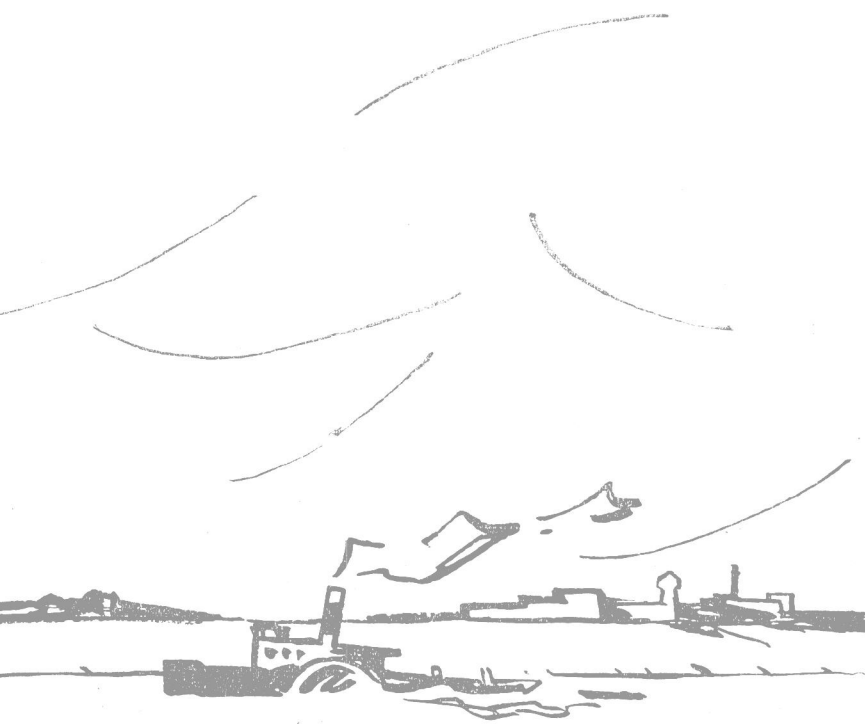
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*And never ending battle!
Tranquillity is but a dream....*

ALEXANDER BLOK



Chapter One

NATURAL SCIENCES

It happened to him when he was in the ninth form. All at once Volodya lost interest in everything, even in the chess circle, which instantly fell apart without him, even in his form-master Smorodin, who had always considered Volodya Ustimenko his best pupil, and even in Varya Stepanova, with whom till only a little while ago, during the November holidays, in fact, he used to enjoy watching the slowly flowing Uncha from the edge of its high, steep bank. Life, so jolly and amusing, so busy and noisy, so fascinating in all things big and small, suddenly seemed to stop, and everything around Volodya stood still, listening apprehensively, on the alert, as much as to say: let's see what's going to happen to you next, youngster!

And yet, nothing had happened really.

He and Varya had gone to the cinema. There had been the usual autumn drizzle that night. Varya talked her usual nonsense about the "art of the theatre" (she was the star actress of her school dramatic circle) and some smug-looking hens of a special breed flapped about the screen. And then Volodya became all attention and started breathing loudly through his nose.

"Shut up," he said to Varya.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked, surprised.

"Will you shut up?" he hissed.

A scientist had appeared on the screen and was filling a syringe with some sort of liquid. The man had a prominent forehead, thin lips and a haggard face. There was nothing very pleasant or, as Varya's mother liked to say, "charming" about this great scientist. And he was not doing his work so very skilfully either. Probably he was annoyed because they were taking pictures of him for the news. People of his sort hate being photographed at all, and now he was surrounded by cameramen!

Varya was all sympathy for the doomed guinea-pig.

"The poor little dear," she said with a frightened glance at Volodya.

He did not so much as hiss at her now. He seemed to glow inwardly as he listened to the man in the white cap and smock earnestly telling the audience the story of the wise old Aesculapius and his daughter Panacea.

"I don't understand a thing," Varya complained in a whisper. "Not a single thing. Do you, Volodya?"

He nodded. And afterwards, when the feature came on, he just sat there glumly, biting his nails and thinking. And he did not smile once, although it was a funny film. He had a way of suddenly removing himself from everyone, of leaving the world of small talk for one of

meditation, of withdrawing into some secret retreat of his own. That night, too, though he took Varya home after the show, he was not with her, but quite by himself, alone.

"A penny for your thoughts," Varya said.

"I have none," he muttered ungraciously, absorbed in those thoughts.

"What fun to be with you!" Varya said. "Such tremendous fun! I'm afraid I'll split my sides laughing."

"What?" he asked.

And so they had parted for about three months. Varya was touchy and proud and he had suddenly entered a strange world of seeking and mental strife, discoveries of long discovered truths, a world of sleepless nights, a world of infinite knowledge in which he was nothing, a trifle, a speck of dust caught in a storm. He was tossed and whirled about amid words which he had to keep looking up in the *Encyclopedia*; he tore his way through books in which he understood next to nothing; there were hours when he all but wept from the sense of his own impotence, but then there were moments when he fancied that he understood, that he was grasping it, that he was almost at home, if only in that one particular chapter, that one page, and all he wanted now was to dig into it deeper and then everything would go splendidly. But again he would be plunged into gloom for, after all, he was still only a "silly goose" as his Aunt Aglaya was wont to say.

"What's that?" she asked one very cold night coming into Volodya's "den", as his slit of a room had long been called.

"Where?" Volodya asked, tearing himself away from his book with an effort.

"Why, there! Have you taken to buying pictures?"

"That's not pictures, that's a copy of *Lesson in Anatomy of 'Doctor Tulp'* by Rembrandt."

"Oh, I see," Aglaya nodded. "But what d'you want this *Lesson in Anatomy* for, you silly goose?"

"The reason why I want this *Lesson in Anatomy*, dear Aglaya Petrovna, is because I'm going to be a doctor," Volodya declared, stretching himself luxuriously and yawning with relish. "That's what I've decided."

"For the time being, you mean," Aglaya suggested. "At your age, decisions are altered pretty often. I remember very well that you were going to be a flyer first, then a detective."

Volodya said nothing and smiled. Yes, he could recall something of the kind.

"Was this Tulp man a good doctor?" Aglaya asked.

"He was a Dutchman," Volodya said, peering at the faded reproduction. "Van Tulp. He was a doctor of the poor and a professor of anatomy in Amsterdam. He is usually portrayed carrying a candle and the doctor's motto: A light to others, I burn myself out."

"That's beautiful," Aglaya said with a sigh. "To think of the things you've learnt. And all these books you've cluttered your den with. . . ."

She opened an anatomical atlas Volodya had borrowed from the library and shuddered.

"Ugh, what horrors! Let's go and have tea, it's late. Come along, you future Tulp."

By the time the winter holidays came round, Volodya had so many bad marks in his report that he was quite surprised himself. He had to talk to someone. He walked to Proletarskaya Street to see Varya, striding angrily over the crisp snow and thinking in perplexity: "A light to others. . . ." It was just stupid the way that phrase had stuck.

"Oh, she's out, she's at a rehearsal," said Yevgeny, Varya's half-brother, a round-faced youth with a languid manner. He was wearing a hair-net. (Yevgeny was very

particular about his appearance, he liked a sleek head of hair and went to no end of trouble to keep it so.) He was lying back comfortably on the sofa, reading his science. There was a cloying smell of vanilla biscuits in the flat; Mme. Lisse, a friend of Yevgeny's mother, was playing the piano in the next room. Two voices were talking there, one in the weary tones of Yevgeny's mother, the other in the rumbling baritone of Dodik, the well-known motorcycle and automobile man. He was also a tennis player and chief umpire for the town and the region.

"Want to buy a car?" Yevgeny asked. "Dodik's selling one. A Hispano Suiza, 1914 model, in running order. He's sold two already and got himself a new one. He's a fast worker, a really smart chap. I envy the man."

Volodya said nothing.

"This is a dog's life," Yevgeny went on in a bored voice. "Cramming and cramming, but what's the use? However, study we must." He changed to a briskly businesslike tone. "Which is what I do. But you, people say, are making no effort at all."

"I'm not," Volodya admitted indifferently.

"There, you see! It's bad, you know. Take me, now. There are some subjects I can scarcely master at all, it's a terrific strain. And, mind you, I've had T.B."

"Huh, you a consumptive!" Volodya said with a smirk, looking at Yevgeny's healthy flush.

"Looks are extremely deceptive," Yevgeny replied peevishly. "By and large, T.B. should not be regarded as..." "By and large" was a favourite expression of his.

He dwelt at length on the subject of T.B. and on how he had been rescued from the clutches of that dread disease when it was almost all up with him. Yes, literally rescued, they had tried everything including aloes cooked with honey and lard.

"A mother's love can move mountains!" Yevgeny proclaimed emotionally. He liked to indulge in a bit of pathos occasionally. However, Volodya's long yawn made him cut short his T.B. tale and he now proceeded to criticise his friend.

"You have also broken away from the collective." Yevgeny's tone was well-meaning. "By and large, you're all wrapped up in yourself. That's bad. You ought to show more enthusiasm, vigour and cheerfulness in the true Komsomol spirit. You and I, don't forget, are studying at good Soviet schools, workers' schools, not at some bourgeois college."

"How d'you know my school is good?" Volodya asked.

"By and large, all our schools are better than bourgeois colleges." Yevgeny suddenly winked as much as to say: "Fend that one off!"

Volodya found nothing to say quickly enough, and Yevgeny continued:

"If you're in difficulties, the collective of pupils and teachers will help you. Haven't you got a close-knit collective? Of course, you have. And so it will help. Why, you have Vovka Sukharevich in your form, he's an ass, of course, but an ass full of noble impulses. I've heard he's always helping the backward. Ask him, he'll give you a leg up."

In the next room, Dodik gave a loud chortle. Yevgeny got up, shuffled to the door in his bedroom slippers and shut it tight.

"I honestly don't know what to do," he said looking worried. "He practically lives here, this comrade dealer in cars and motorcycles. And what does my dear mama see in him anyway? Fun will be had by all when the Terror of the Seas comes home."

Volodya sat blinking vacantly. He supposed that "Terror of the Seas" was Yevgeny's name for his step-

father. Volodya's eyes felt full of sand and the back of his head ached from the nights he had spent without sleep, poring over books that had nothing to do with his school subjects.

"But why fun for all?" he asked.

"Can't you guess?"

"No."

"Husbands, I imagine, take exception to situations of this kind."

Yevgeny nodded at the door. Now it was Mme. Lisse who was laughing. Still Volodya understood nothing.

"All right, but what am I to do anyway?" he said.

"By and large, I'd say take yourself in hand," Yevgeny said. "To be quite honest, as man to man, you're a lot cleverer than I am, but you can't stick to one thing at a time. It's a damned bore, of course, but we've got to finish school. We have our paters behind us today, but tomorrow we may have to face our destiny single-handed. After all, we don't want to end up as porters or something like that. . . ."

Yevgeny flung his science book on the sofa and started giving Volodya some instruction. He was as well-meaning as ever, but his preachings made Volodya feel as if he had eaten too much toffee. Yevgeny was right, of course, but not really right somehow, there was something twisted and shameless about his rightness. Staring in front of him with his transparent eyes, Yevgeny spoke in an affected drawl:

"Take school activities. It's your own affair, but it is nice for the school to have a good dramatic circle and be able to put on good shows. It's a point in your favour at teachers' meetings. Or take the wall newspaper. I've been the editor for over a year. I couldn't care less about it really, but *they* need it. I suppose you think it takes up too much time, but I have it all worked out. All the teachers know that I'm the editor,

and they simply can't help making allowances for my public spiritedness. And then the teachers have human frailties too. It tickles them to read something flattering about themselves in the paper, whether it's thanks or just good wishes. Now, you're keen on natural sciences. Fine. The school loves such things, but within the limits of the school, my dear friend, within school limits, mind you. What you ought to do is get a group together and go and see the teacher. Dear Devil Ivanovich, or whatever his name may be, we pupils have come to earnestly beg you to take charge of our natural science circle. You and you alone sort of stuff. Understand?"

Yevgeny took a cigarette out of his bedside table, lit it and inhaled.

"Clear enough?"

"You're no fool, you know," Volodya replied.

"Such is our stand," Yevgeny quoted resignedly. "Are you going to wait for Varya?"

Volodya started back home feeling low. The smell of vanilla biscuits and the sound of Yevgeny's bored voice haunted him for many blocks. Turning the corner where the monument to Radishchev was, he saw Varya. She was walking along in a crowd of boys. She waved to him. The cocky voice of Sevka Shapiro, their chief producer, carried clearly in the crisp, frosty air:

"I support the principles of biomechanics, and am wholly opposed to the doctrines of Stanislavsky. With all due respect. . . ."

"The young fools," Volodya reflected with senile condescension. The thought startled him, for it was not so very long ago that he himself had thought it all such fun.

High in the sky a bell began to toll. It was Saturday and they were ringing for evening service at the cathedral. Boom! went the bell again.