

HARVEST

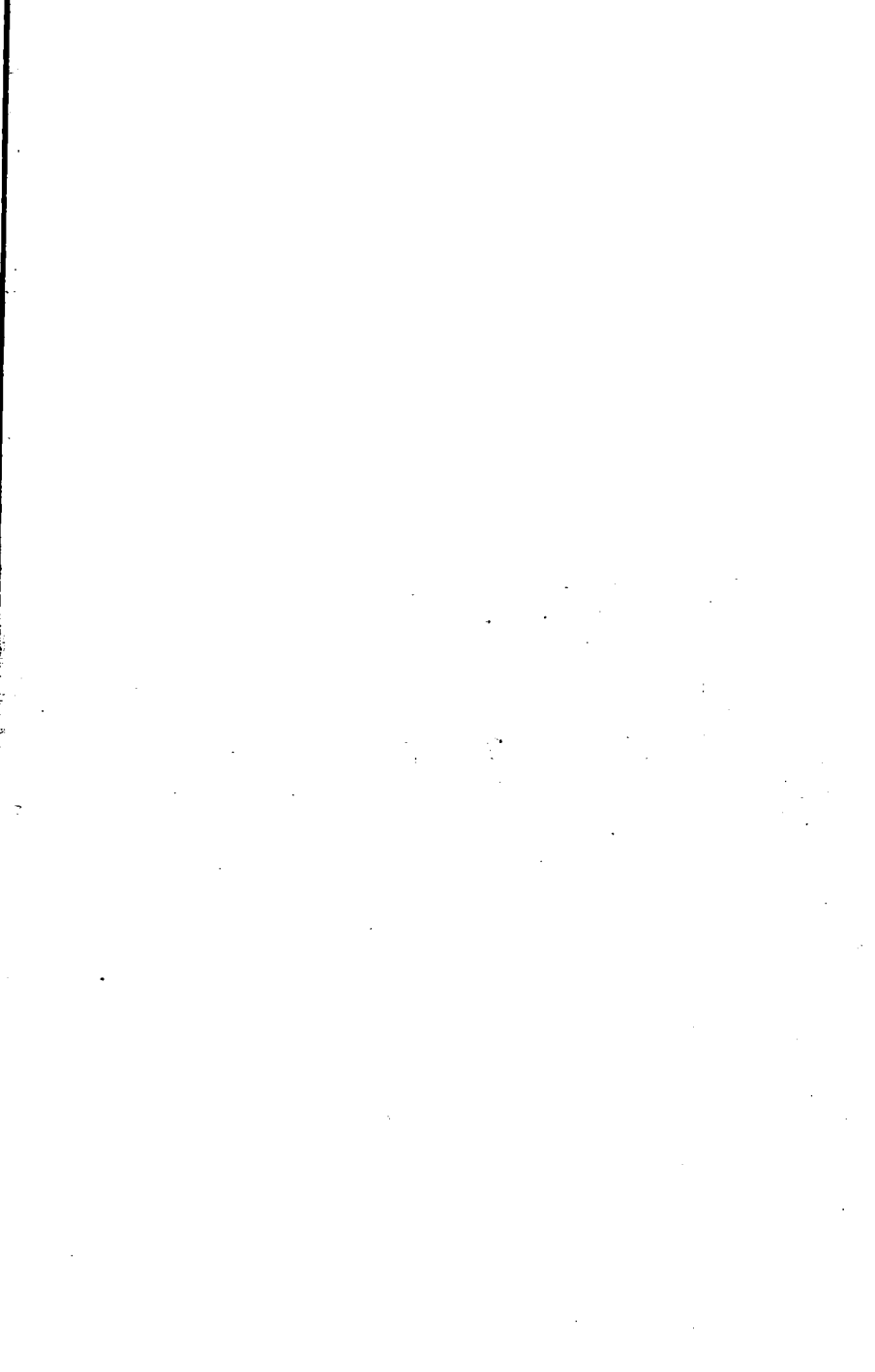
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Galina Nikolayeva

HARVEST

STALIN PRIZE

1950





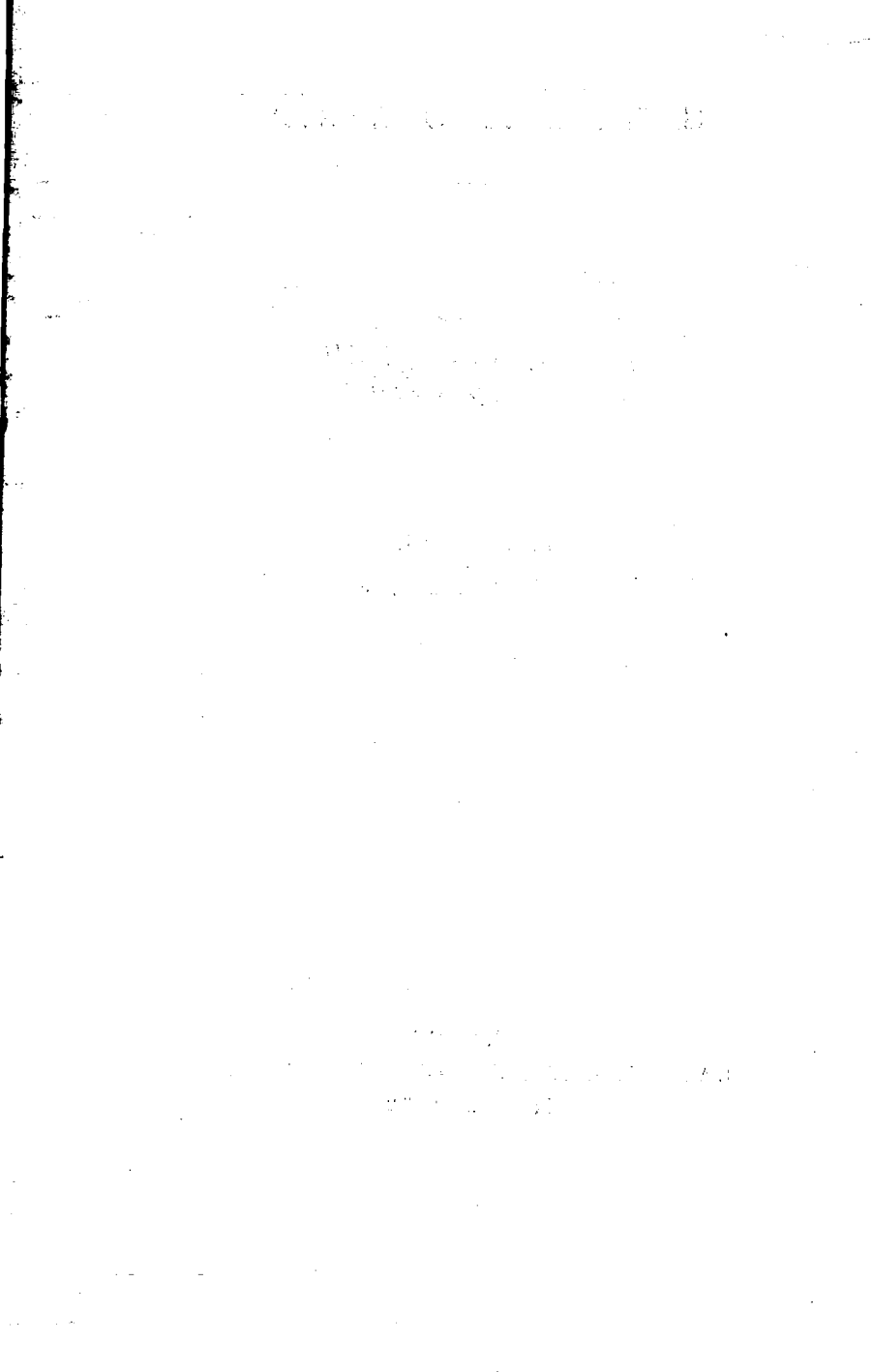
Thomas Finckel

GALINA NIKOLAYEVA



A NOVEL
In Three Parts

FOREIGN
LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
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PART
ONE





1. THREE

Vasili Bortnikov had been lying in hospital for two years with a dangerous brain wound.

Helpless as a child, plunged as it were in a dark well of unrelenting pain, he had not written a single line home to his folks, whom he could now bring nothing but suffering.

From a company messmate whom he happened to meet in the hospital he learned that his unit considered him killed and had notified his wife Avdotya to that effect.

"Shall I write and tell her you're alive?" his comrade had asked.

"What for, she should bury me a second time?" Vasili had said, moving his pain-racked jaws with an effort. "She's mourned me once—that's quite enough. . . ."

In 1946 a Batumi professor ventured to perform a risky and almost hopeless operation.

The patient's recovery was nothing short of a miracle. His lusty body, revelling in the freedom of movement, regained strength with almost incredible rapidity.

Vasili dared hardly believe in his unexpected luck. On leaving the hospital he flew out to Moscow without notifying his family. The next day found him travelling by train through his native parts.

The nearer he drew towards home the more poignant became Vasili's anxiety on account of his wife and children.

Now that he was himself again, going back to his old life, such a wild yearning and love for his family took possession of him as he had never experienced before.

At the last wayside stop he met an acquaintance—a collective farmer from a neighbouring village. Upon hearing that the latter had recently seen his wife and daughters at the market, Vasili began bombarding him with questions. He had to know everything—what coat Avdotya had been wearing, what she was buying, how the little girls looked—but the neighbour kept repeating:

"They're all alive and well, you'll see yourself. . . ."

Little as this was, it made Vasili happy. He stopped worrying, and the joy of home-coming thrilled him more strongly than ever.

Only four days ago he had walked the sunny streets of Batumi in a light tunic, and now snowstormy night lay outside the carriage window. At the train stops one could hear the forest, hidden in a pall of snow, rumbling in a low menacing voice.

Neither the blizzard, so early and unusual for November, nor the dark night could quench Vasili's spirits. He jumped off the car at each stop, exchanged a cheery word with passers-by whose figures loomed dimly in the semigloom, peered at the shadowy outlines of the houses and the low station fences, and took delight in every little fir tree that stood out in the dark. For all these were of Ugren, these people, and the cars, and the fir trees belonged to his native district.

Vasili got off at a wayside station. It was five kilometres from here to his home village of Krutogori. In the car he had tossed off a quarter-bottle of vodka, and now, after long abstinence, his legs felt limp and sort of loose in the joints.

The snowy murk swirled all round him. There was neither earth nor sky—only a blurred driving maelstrom and the ceaseless roar of the forest, now rising in volume like the breaking of surf, now ebbing away.

The forest, too, was almost invisible. But even unseen, its pervading presence could be felt dominating everything around. The night was filled with its sounds. One could hear the pines sighing in the dark, the supple firs creaking in the wind, and the frozen birches scratching icy branches against each other.

The forest in places closed in upon the road, and then the black firs, like a bear rearing on its hind legs, reached out snatching paws, tugging at the sleeves and skirts of Vasili's sheepskin coat.

At times the snowstorm drew back only to rush out of hiding with redoubled fury, eddying and lashing the face with wet sheets of blinding snow.

Vasili turned up his collar and pulled his cap down over his forehead. Now only a small part of his brow was exposed to the stinging blasts. They were at once hot and cold, and his ears were flooded with the rumble of the forest and the howl of the blizzard.

He moved forward bull-fashion, with his head lowered and forehead thrust out, cleaving the blizzard with his whole body, like a boat fighting its way against the rapids, while the snowstorm, lashing itself into a fury, drew its eddying ring closer and closer. It somehow reminded him of the war, of those still memorable days when he had fought his way out of encirclement together with his regiment.

The war, the blizzard, home, victory—all merged into one in his head, which tingled with liquor, joy and fatigue. The memory of all he had lived through since last he travelled this road rushed back upon him.

When the gusts were particularly fierce he threw his head back and said:

"So we meet again. Glad to see me, aren't you!"

He floundered knee-deep in the drifts, every now and then straying from the snowed-up road.

The going was hard, but he enjoyed it immensely.

Suddenly, a dense clump of fir trees rose in his path.

He stepped aside, only to run into a snowdrift. He turned the other way, but here hidden snags waylaid him in the deep rut.

"Looks like a regular encirclement!" he said loudly, pushing the snag aside. "How am I to get out of it? If there was only a star in the sky.... It's pitch black...."

He peered ahead with watering eyes, his eyelids frozen and sticky. All round was inky darkness. Something glimmered faintly ahead through the deep murk. It was hardly a light, but rather the blackness shading off into a dim greenish glow.

He went straight on, tearing himself out of the tenacious clutches of the fir trees. An unexpected sight met his eyes as he rose to the brow of the hill. Electric lights made dazzling patches in the distance.

"An electric station! Well I never!" he thought, amazed, and took the descent at a run.

It was quieter in the hollow, and the going was easier. The blizzard seemed to let go of him here. The moon shone out through a rift in the clouds and threw a bright curved arc on the climbing road. He ascended the familiar hill from which the village of Krutogori* got its name.

The streets were deserted. Electric lamps burned here and there over the roofs and branches of the tall firs, and squares of light shone whitely in some of the windows.

Two women cropped up from round a corner. Vasili recognized one of them and shouted:

"Hullo, Ksenofontovna!"

She recognized him too, but looked scared if anything.

* Meaning Steep Hill.

"God bless me! Vasili Bortnikov! We thought you was dead!"

"No deader than you, Ksenofontovna!"

Repeating "God bless me!", she turned abruptly and fled down the street.

"The woman's daft!" Vasili shouted after her, and burst out laughing.

The eddying snow and wide-armed firs looked festive in the light of the street lamps. The snowstorm here was playful and good-humoured. It seemed to be combing the street, and the curls that spiralled over the snowdrifts and roofs were smoothed down as quickly as they sprang up.

"This is the day I have lived for, the day of home-coming!" thought Vasili.

He kept quickening his pace as he drew nearer to his house and reached it quite out of breath. There were the same white carved frames round the dark windows, the same log jutting out at the joint to which Vasili used to hitch his horse when returning from the lumber working.

Vasili mounted the porch. One of the steps, as before, was rickety, and the frozen banister slid under the hand in the old remembered way. He lifted his hand to knock, but his heart began pounding so violently that he could scarcely catch his breath.

The sleeve of his sheepskin coat smelt of burning—Vasili had scorched it while lighting a cigarette in the darkness. He inhaled the smell, grown sharper and stronger in the frost, and suddenly recalled how he had one day scorched his coat when he had fallen asleep at the campfire. For a moment it seemed to him as if his whole regiment with its guns, waggon and field kitchens had come home with him and was standing at his back.

Vasili banged on the door with all his might.

"Goodness me! Who's there?"

He recognized his mother-in-law's voice.

"It's me, Ma! Vasili! Don't be frightened, Ma, I'm alive! Just come from hospital!"

She opened the door and dropped into his arms.

"Vasenska, alive! Is it really you? My God!"

He clasped her thin body and could feel the flat shoulder blades moving under his hands. A choking sensation came into his throat.

There was a smell of sour cabbage in the entry, and he no sooner entered the room than he was assailed by that warm delicious odour of bread in which the very walls here were steeped.

He strode swiftly into the front room, and in the ghostly moonlight he saw Avdotya. She sat up in bed, recognized him, and with a cry of "Vasenska!" jumped to the floor and clung to him, all atremble.

"Darling! Safe! Sound! Where have you been? Why didn't you write?"

"I was lying in hospital for two years like a log. Couldn't stir a limb. I didn't want to be a burden to you."

She lay in his arms, all of her—soft, warm, quivering. Her body was like that of no other woman in the world—loving, yielding, understanding—almost his own.

She clasped him in her arms, and her arms were a continuation of his own, her shoulders merged with his.

He pressed her closer to him, and the goodness of her, the warmth of her were home to him, sweet unchanging home.

Something seemed to let go within him. The terrible tension under which he had been living all this time loosed its hold upon him. He went limp and buried his face in his wife's soft neck, and tears wetted his cheeks.

It was then that he saw the figure of a man on the edge of the bed. He saw his temple, and mustaches, and narrow shoulders under a white nightshirt. He thrust his wife aside and shouted:

"A light! A light!"