

Konstantin Paustovsky

**SELECTED
STORIES**



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
Moscow 1949

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Konstantin Paustovsky was born in 1892 in Moscow. His father was a railroad employee.

He spent his childhood in the Ukraine, where he lived part of the time in a village and part of the time in Kiev.

On graduating from *gymnasium*, Paustovsky entered Kiev University. Later he transferred to Moscow University, but the outbreak of the First World War interrupted his studies. For almost the entire duration of the war he served at the front as a stretcher-bearer.

The writer tried his hand at many occupations: he was a streetcar motorman and conductor in Moscow, a hospital orderly, an iron and steel worker in the South, a fisherman on the Azov Sea, a seaman, a teacher of Russian literature, and, finally, a journalist. His aim was to learn as much as possible about people and various occupations.

Paustovsky's first story was published in 1911 in a Kiev magazine, and his first book came out in 1926. Ever since then he has devoted himself wholly to writing. He is the author of about forty books, besides numerous short stories, sketches and articles published in various periodicals. His writing has won him the Order of the Red Banner of Labour and the "For Val-

orous Labour" Medal, both awarded by the Soviet Government.

During the Great Patriotic War the writer was a war correspondent on the Southern Front.

The present volume includes Konstantin Paustovsky's two most popular books (*The Gulf of Kara-Bugaz* and *Colchis*), and several short stories.

THE GULF
OF
KARA-BUGAZ

LIEUTENANT ZHEREBTSOV'S ERROR

"No other part of the Caspian seaboard
is so definitely and completely barren."

G. Karelin (noted traveller).

"I HASTEN to inform you that I have complied with your request and am bringing you two very rare birds which I shot down in the Gulf of Kara-Bugaz during our voyage. Our ship's quartermaster took it upon himself to stuff the birds, and they now stand in my cabin. They are Egyptian birds, called flamingos, and are covered with pink feathers of exceptional beauty. Their presence on the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea is a puzzle to me, since hitherto Africa was known to be their sole habitat. The circumstances linked with the shooting of these birds are quite remarkable and merit a comprehensive description.

"As you already know, this spring of 1847 I received orders to make a most thorough survey and description of the shores of the Caspian Sea, for which purpose the steam corvette *Volga*, fitted out with engines of English make, was put at my disposal.

"We sailed from Baku to Astrakhan and thence to Guryev, from which point we proceeded south past unexplored and desolate shores. I shall not encumber you unnecessarily with a description of them.

"I shall touch only on the amazing view presented by the shore outlying the Mangyshlak Peninsula. Here Asia rises abruptly out of the trans-Ural desert as a black tableland. It stretches away in a solid wall to the east, where mirages blot out of sight everything save sun, sand and clay.

The tableland is inaccessible. According to the tales of the nomads, it may be ascended in one place only—along the dried bed of a stream. It juts a sheer black and brown cliff into the sea. During all my long years of peregrinations I have never seen a coast so forbidding, and menacing, as it were, to navigators.

"All the way to Kinderli Bay we sailed in the teeth of a *moryana* carrying clouds of dust and a smell of sulphur from the deserts, where, it is said, there are sulphur hills. This rough south wind impedes breathing, and I believe it is harmful to all living things.

"I myself experienced a sickly sweet taste in my mouth, and the sailors spat so vigorously that the bosuns were driven to genuine despair: the entire deck was covered with spittle and had to be swabbed three times a day. I must explain that this was due to an old sailors' superstition against spitting into the sea lest it take offence and give the ship a stiff shaking-up. In many things the sailors still abide by the traditions of Christopher Columbus' day and are not easily swayed by the influence of such an enlightened century as ours.

"After a short stay in Kinderli Bay, where for the first time in two months' cruising we feasted our eyes on lush green grass—a miracle in these salty regions—we set sail for the Gulf of Kara-Bugaz in a violent north wind. This wind likewise has some remarkable qualities. It brings cold, clear weather, and a sensation of hollowness about the whole body, as though it has been deprived of its blood and bones. This lightness is not in the least pleasant; quite the contrary, it is exceedingly painful and causes the ears to ring and the head to swim.

"While in Kinderli Bay we drew relatively fresh water from some ancient wells. But toward nightfall the water became brackish. I reflected upon this phenomenon at great length and made a few tests with the help of my assistant. We found that the water becomes brackish when left in a vessel that is partly or completely uncovered. From this I concluded that the air in these latitudes is filled with a very fine salt dust which settles in carelessly covered barrels or open buckets. By the same phenomenon I account for the

extraordinary misty grey colour of the sky. Thick strata of the atmosphere are filled with salt, as a result of which the sun acquires a dim, slightly silvery hue, though it scorches unmercifully.

"In the Gulf of Kinderli we saw the remains of fortifications built in Peter the First's day by General Bekovich at the outset of his mad march on India. They say he wintered here with his periwigged army and from here moved on to Khorezm, where the Khivans perfidiously beheaded him and used his skin to make war drums.

"Near the fortifications, which were densely overgrown with wormwood, we found three mulberry trees of such venerable age that their pith looked like old silver.

"I should like to point out to you that the medieval English traveller Jenkinson, if he is not lying, informs us that he saw—either on the Gulf of Kinderli or on the Gulf of Kara-Bugaz—a huge walled city with minarets and caravanserais, smothered in greenery and washed abundantly by fresh springs. I believe that Jenkinson was right, for not far from the Gulf of Kinderli we came across the foundations of massive buildings that had cracked and were crumbling to dust from old age and the heat.

"From Kinderli we proceeded to the Kara-Bugaz in a state of anxiety and dissatisfaction. There were many reasons for this. We had to sail into a gulf that no one before us had entered. About this gulf we had heard many frightening tales while still in Baku. The captain of the corvette *Zodiac* had told me the story about the time, in 1825, when his corvette was at the disposal of Academician Eichwald. The academician had ordered him to weigh anchor at the entrance to the Gulf of Kara-Bugaz so that he might explore it. But the captain, not wishing to risk his ship, categorically refused. His fears were aroused by the fact that the waters of the Caspian Sea were rushing with unheard-of speed and impetus into the gulf; it was as though they were being impelled into a bottomless chasm. This phenomenon, by the way, explains the name of the gulf: Kara-Bugaz is the Turkmenian for 'black mouth.' Like a mouth the gulf unceasingly sucks in water from the sea. The latter circumstance has given rise to the surmise that at the eastern shore of the gulf

the water rushes in a powerful subterranean torrent into the Aral Sea or into the Arctic Ocean.

"Our renowned and courageous traveller Karelin gave me quite an unflattering written testimonial concerning the Kara-Bugaz and warned me against entering it. According to him, it is almost impossible to get out of the gulf against the race. Moreover, the water of the gulf is corrosive; it eats away even steel objects in a short period of time.

"Not only we, the officers, knew about this, but the sailors too, who were naturally agitated and cursed the gulf up hill and down dale.

"My instructions were at all costs to map the shores of the gulf, which on a Mercator's projection marine chart were depicted as two curved lines with a gap between them. It was in extraordinary circumstances that I filled in the gap and drew up a nautical description of the gulf.

"As we drew near the Kara-Bugaz we espied a cupola of red haze, like the smoke of a small desert fire, floating over the sands. That smoke, our Turkmenian pilot told us, was rising up from the Kara-Bugaz. This discovery, no previous mention of which had ever been made, filled us with alarm and perplexity. We proceeded with extreme caution, sounding the bottom almost continuously, until we reached the barely perceptible entrance to the strait.

"The current here was very strong, and the entire strait was not unlike the Volga during the spring high waters. There was no use hesitating, since it was our bounden duty to enter that terrifying furnace of Asia. We turned our engines down to low and let ourselves be carried through the strait by the current. We cast anchor only when the blue water of the sea had given way to the dead, tin-coloured gulf water.

"A great hush reigned all round. All sounds seemed to drown in the dense water and in the heavy desert air tinted scarlet by the setting sun.

"We spent the night under steam. Since we had exhausted our supply of fresh water, we fed the boilers with gulf water. Toward morning we discovered an inch-thick layer of salt lining the walls of the boilers, although they had been air-flushed every quarter of an hour. From this circumstance

you can judge the saltiness of that gulf, which is so like the Dead Sea in Palestine.

"Our fool of a cook tried to take a swim, but the gulf would not accept him. The water tossed his legs high into the air, and try as he would, he could not sink in it. This spectacle amused the crew and somewhat raised their spirits. Toward evening the cook broke out in sores. He assured us that the gulf water was nothing but adulterated *aqua regia*.

"In the morning the grey mirror of the gulf rose before us in all its monotony. The water was not very transparent. Dead fish from the sea floated about in it. We found a great quantity of these salty dead fish on the shore. According to the sailors who tasted them, they were quite edible.

"I was amazed at the large number of birds I saw in these lifeless waters, and I soon found myself suffering from optical illusions.

"Hugging the northern shore, we reached Kara-Sukut Spit on the second day. Here we sighted extensive reddish strips of foam on the water. At night a storm blew up, and we noticed that the strips of foam moved with the waves.

"Struck by the unnatural colour of the foam, I had a boat lowered. We rowed over to the nearest strip of foam, some of which I scooped up. I found it teeming with the red, fine-grained spawn of crabs. I was surprised to discover spawn existing in water so caustic as this.

"I then made for a second, somewhat rosier and fluffier, strip of foam. Here something quite extraordinary happened. The foamy strip soared up into the air with a loud cackling and clumsily flapped away over our rowboat and the dumb-founded men. It was a flock of flamingos which had been sitting on the foam and feeding on the spawn.

"At Kara-Sukut we observed a countless number of wild geese and vicious pelicans, called by the local folk *babas*. I regretted very much that you were not with us on board the corvette. In my next letter I shall give you a description of the gulf itself, which is not devoid of interest.

"Yours faithfully,

Lieutenant Zhrebtssov."

Through the carelessness of the addressee the second letter was lost, and a description of the gulf is to be found only in a brief report sent by Lieutenant Zherebtsov to the Hydrographic Administration. This report is written in a clipped and clear style that is fully in keeping with the character of its author, a keen and courageous man.

An extensive study of sailing directions, as well as of descriptions of nature by writers of various periods, has convinced me that there are sometimes wide divergencies in the perception of natural phenomena at different periods. The descriptions are influenced both by the profession of the author and his social position.

If I am to believe medieval writers, the landscape in their time was cruder and harsher than it is today; there was something in it suggestive of a woodcut.

The sailors of the end of the eighteenth century visualized the sea as depicted by the famous English painter Turner—stormy and tinged red by the sunsets, whereas the average Englishman of today pictures it as a very delicate blue fabric sheathed in a faint mist, that is, such as the neurasthenic and aristocratic Whistler painted it.

I have digressed somewhat in order to make it clear that in the eyes of a contemporary, myself, for example, the Kara-Bugaz is far more simple and less mysterious than Lieutenant Zherebtsov was wont to see it.

In Zherebtsov's report to the Hydrographic Administration we read:

"The Gulf of Kara-Bugaz, called by the Turkmenians 'Bitter Sea' (Aji-darya) and 'Servant of the Sea' (Kuli-darya), constitutes a vast watery expanse, exceeding that of Lake Ladoga, and almost cut off from the sea by two barren spits. The gulf lies along the same latitude as Naples, but its climate is sultry and arid.

"I skirted the shores of the gulf and charted them. The northern shore consists of jagged cliffs of salty clay and white plaster stone. It is bare of grass and trees. Bleak hills rise along the eastern shore, whereas the southern is low-lying and covered with a great number of salt lakes.

"All the shores are barren. None contain fresh water. I did not discover a single stream flowing into this truly dead sea.