A Christmas Story

By Sarban (pseudonym of John William Wall)

1951

"Shining i-in the heavens beyo-ond them far..."

I will tell you a Christmas story. I will tell it as Alexander Andreievitch Masseyev told it me in his little house outside the walls of Jedda years ago one hot, damp Christmas Eve.

It was the custom among the few English people in Jedda in those days to make up a carol-singing party on Christmas Eve. For a week before, the three or four of us who had voices they were not ashamed of, and the one or two who had neither voice nor shame, practised to the accompaniment of an old piano in the one British mercantile house in the place: an instrument whose vocal cords had not stood the excessive humidity of that climate any better than those of some of the singers. Then, on Christmas Eve, the party gathered at our house where we dined and, with a lingering memory of Yule-tide mummers in England, arrayed ourselves in such bits of fancy dress or comic finery as we could lay our hands on; made false whiskers out of cotton-wool or a wisp of tow, blackened our faces, reddened our noses with lipstick supplied by the Vice-Consul's wife, put our jackets on inside-out and sprinkled over our shoulders "frost" out of a little packet bought by someone ages ago at home and kept by some miracle of sentimental pertinacity through years of exile on that desert shore.

I am no singer, but I always had a part in these proceedings. It was to carry the lantern.

Our Sudanese house-boys served us with more admiration than amusement on their faces, and the little knot of our Arab neighbours, who always gathered about our door to watch us set out, whatever the occasion, gave not the slightest sign of recognising anything more comic than usual in our appearance. We made our round of the European houses in our Ford station-wagon; I holding my lantern on its pole outside the vehicle and only by luck avoiding shattering it against the wall as the First Secretary cut the corners of the narrow lanes. Fortunately, except for our neighbours, who never seemed to go to bed at all (or, at least, didn't go to bed to sleep), the True-Believers of Jedda kept early hours, and by nine or ten at night the dark sandy lanes were deserted but for pariah dogs and families of goats settled with weary wheezings to doze the still, close night away. Poor Jedda goats! whose pasture and byre were the odorous alleys; pathetic mothers of frustrated offspring, with those brassieres which seemed at first sight such an astonishing refinement of Grundyism, but which turned out to be merely an economic safeguard — girdles not of chastity but husbandry; with your frugal diet of old newspapers and ends of straw rope, to whom the finding of an unwanted (or unguarded) panama hat was like a breakfast of *'Id ul Futr*; how many a curse and kick in the ribs have you earned from a night-

ambling Frank for couching in that precise pit of darkness where the feeble rays of one paraffin lamp expire and those of the next are not yet born!

From the façades of the crazy, coral-built houses that hem the lanes project *roshans*—bow-windows of decaying wooden lattice-work— and on the plastered tops of these bow-windows the moonlight falls so clear and white this Christmas Eve that to the after-dinner eye it seems that snow has fallen.

Our first call was always at the Minister's. There, in the panelled hall which, but for its bareness, might have been in England, we used to range ourselves and, in comparatively good order, deliver our repertoire while the Minister, in his study above, turned down the wireless for a few minutes and his Lady and family listened from the staircase. We always gave the meteorological data of Good King Wenceslaus with feeling, perhaps more conscious than at other times of our prickly heat and the sweat trickling down inside our shirts. Then the Minister's Lady descended to congratulate us, kind-heartedly, on our singing and, spontaneously, on our disguises, while the mustachioed Sudani butler brought wassail on a tray. After our own Minister, we used to go to the American Legation and then to the Dutch Chargé d'Affaires where, also, loyalty to tradition had its traditional reward in the Red Sea equivalent of the wassail-bowl. That used to be about as far as our organisation was capable of maintaining a good custom with coherence. A touch of the strayed reveller used to creep in after that. But, while most of the party had still not lost their papers of words and while two or three were still agreed on the tune of any one carol, the Vice-Consul's wife used to insist on our going out to the Masseyev's. We were all always agreed that we wanted to go there; the argument used to be about the order it should take in our round of calls, for at this stage, the length of our stay at any particular house was unpredictable. However, the Vice-Consul's wife always won. So, letting in the clutch with a jerk, the First Secretary would roar round by the town wall and out of the Medina Gate and along the tyre-beaten track to the hut-suburb of Baghdadia.

Years and years ago, before even the Vice-Consul came to Jedda, Alexander Andreievitch Masseyev, sometime a lieutenant in the Tzarist Navy, exiled by the October Revolution, had ended a pilgrimage through the Middle East by accepting the post of instructor to the Arabian Air Force.

When I knew him, he and his wife, Lydia, lived in a little white-walled house with a tiny courtyard before it between the straggling suburb and the sea a mile northwards from the Medina Gate.

There, then, we arrive this Christmas Eve. We are expected, but pretend not to be. We shush each other a good deal, and everybody shushes the Vice-Consul, and after the Vice-Consul's wife, being in conspiracy with Lydia, has caused the courtyard door to be opened we tip-toe in and range ourselves round, or some of us, upon a flower-bed the size of a pocket handkerchief, and let fly with 'Christians Awake'; then, after a lot of fierce 'all-togethering', render 'Hark the Herald Angels Sing', and, as a concession to the Vice-Consul, who thought that was what we were singing to begin with, 'Good King Wenceslaus' once more. Alexander Andreievitch and Lydia appear in their lighted doorway, smiling, not quite understanding, but smiling because this is something Christian with a faint affinity to white winters far away. With loud "Merry

Christmases" we crowd into their little sitting-room, while Lydia exclaims at our daubed visages and disarray, and chatters in a mixture of broken French and English, and Alexander Andreievitch, beaming all over his broad face, brings out bottles and glasses and tumbles his six words of English out at us. He and the Vice-Consul understand each other in what they call Arabic — but it would puzzle an Arab.

Lydia has made a cake. The Vice-Consul's wife has brought a bottle of wine for a present; we have produced a bottle of whisky, and the Vice-Consul is discovered to have brought a bottle of rum on general principles. There are little dishes of salted almonds and olives, slices of well-matured sausage, and even bits of ham procured from Yanni, the Cypriot grocer in the Suq (at a price that would make the Black Market look like a bargain counter). It is hot in the little room; burnt cork and lipstick trickle down the plump face of Bartholomew, our sole representative of British Commerce; the First Secretary props open the door and fans himself; but Moslem Arabia is shut out beyond the courtyard walls: we are but fifty miles from Mecca and the desert between us and Bethlehem is ten times as wide, but we settle ourselves on the few chairs or the floor and, every Christian glass being filled, sing 'God rest you Merry, Gentlemen!'.

On the wall there is a faded photograph of some prospect in St Petersburg, and there hang from a nail a prismatic compass and an aneroid barometer in stout though worn leather cases, once the property of the Imperial Navy, which Alexander Andreievitch has saved from the wreck and managed to preserve through all these years. Alexander Andreievitch is a short, squarely built man with short, iron-grey hair and a broad, deeply-lined face that does not often smile. His heart is not so good now as it once was. He no longer flies in the two or three temperamental old Wapiti aircraft that constitute the Arabian Air Force. His job now consists mainly in trying to keep the saleable stores of the Air Force from seeping away into the Suq; in endeavouring to explain to the Nejdi camel-rider who commands the Force that the principles of aerial navigation are not explicit in the Quran, and in petitioning the Minister of War for arrears of pay. He has never announced any notable advance in any of these directions.

I sit near Alexander Andreievitch and pledge him in Russian, at which he smiles, then, with an exclamation as if suddenly remembering something, gets up and fumbles in a little cupboard in the wall. He brings out a strange-looking bottle which he proudly shows me. The label is one I have not seen within a thousand miles of Jedda. Then I remember that some months ago Alexander Andreievitch went to Baghdad.

There, by a lucky chance, he has lighted on a bottle of Zubrovka, smuggled down, I expect, from Tehran or Tabriz. I am the only one in our party who knows what it is. The others prefer whisky or rum. Alexander Andreievitch sets out two little glasses and fills them. Back go our heads: *do dna*! We perform this exercise a good many times while the others are sipping at their longer glasses. Alexander Andreievitch smiles frequently now and talks all the time, in Russian.

The label of the bottle has always interested me. My Russian is not so copious that I can see the connection between the name Zubrovka and the picture of the European Bison which seems to be the Trade Mark. So Alexander Andreievitch explains and adds a word to my vocabulary. "*Da*…", he says, with a melancholy drawing-out of the syllable. "They are all gone now. There were a few in the deep forest of Lithuania until the Revolution. The Tzar preserved them." He

sighs. I too remember, when I was a little boy, I saw an old, high-withered, ungainly beast with matted hair hanging on it like worn door-mats leaning against the rails of an enclosure in Regent's Park: a huge, tired, solitary beast hanging its heavy head with half-closed eyes, while a grubby fist thrust monkey-nuts under its muzzle and cockney voices wondered what it was.

"Did you ever see one?" I ask Alexander Andreievitch. He shakes his head so sadly and looks so full of the irrevocable past that I am led to see a symbolic correspondence between him and the Zubor, between them both and Imperial Russia, and the weight of what's gone beyond recall lies heavily on my spirit until we have lowered the level of the Zubrovka below the Bison's feet. Then we cheer up a little and I suggest: "Perhaps… Who knows? Russia is very wide… There are untrodden forests still…"

Very gravely Alexander Andreievitch nods his head. "*Da, v Rossii* . . . Yes, there are rare things in Russia. I have seen — listen, Meester — , will you believe I have seen something, oh! far away beyond the forests, something that was not a Zubor?"

"No? What then?"

"No. Not a bison, not a reindeer, not an elk. I was a hunter when I was a boy. I know all those things. Once, it was in 1917, I was on board a cruiser, the *Knyaz Nicolai*, and we were ordered to Archangel. From there we cruised eastward in the Arctic Ocean to the mouth of the Yenessei River. It was summer, naturally. Why we went there no one knew. It was 1917. Some of us thought our orders were to go through the Behring Straits to Japan. We were young. We joked about going ashore in Siberia to chop firewood when the coal ran out, the same as the troops did on the railway. That shore in summer looks just the same as these Hejaz mountains, brown and bare. The *Knyaz Nicolai* carried a sea-plane, an English machine. That was a very new idea then. The English had thought of doing it. We Russians did it. We made experimental flights in the fine weather up there in the Arctic Ocean. The pilot was my old friend Igor Palyashkin. I was his observer. It was a revolutionary idea. I think the Russians were the first who practised it, though the English no doubt thought of it.

"Well, there was a little station near the mouth of the Yenessei River, far, far away from anywhere. A few Russians kept the station and collected furs from the natives; there was also an officer of the Imperial Navy. He did not collect furs. He just drank. The *Knyaz Nicolai* was ordered to call at this station — it was called Kamyenaya Gora — and deliver some provisions. We approached, but the winter that year began early. Already, when the sea should have been open for another month, ice was forming. We met fields of ice that stretched as far as the eye could see; thin ice, you understand, which the cruiser could break through. But it was dangerous, for in one day or so of sudden hard weather that thin ice will become solid and lock you in immovably; then it begins to squeeze. The *Knyaz Nicola*i did not reach Kamyenaya Gora. We returned to open water, but because we were so near our captain decided to send the sea-plane with a message. It was something that had never been done before. We were to circle the station, drop our message and return and be picked up on the open water.

"We made our calculations, Igor Palyashkin and I, and we took off. It was very fine weather; the last, still, clear days of the Arctic summer. We could not see far; the circle of our vision was

bounded by a blue wall, but beneath us we saw the sea quite clearly, without waves, for it was covered with a thin skin of ice, but moving gently as if it breathed; and a little further on we saw the land, brown with streaks of snow. We flew a long way over the land. It is a mournful land, and empty! Ah, emptier far than any you have seen even between here and the Persian Gulf. We flew so far over the land that I thought our calculations must be wrong, but we found that little station, Igor Palyashkin and I! It was the first aeroplane they had ever seen, those people, I think. We saw them running out. We went very low and I waved and dropped the message, then we headed back for the cruiser again. We were the first men who had ever flown in the Arctic Circle, Igor Palyashkin and I."

Alexander Andreievitch refills our little glasses. Bartholomew and the Vice-Consul are singing 'Good King Wenceslaus' again, but merely, I gather, to settle an argument about something. The Second Secretary is leaning against the wall behind the door. He appears to be asleep.

"*Da*," says Alexander Andreievitch, as he sets down his glass on the tray, speaking softly to the Bison. "They shot him afterwards, the Bolsheviki. But we were the first, Igor Palyashkin and I." He shakes his head and I wait.

"You understand," he says, "our calculations were not quite right. We saw the land, oh! land on every side. Brown land with streaks of snow, and when we came low we saw the forests of little grey bushes and the mournful marshes, all the wide taiga on every side. But we did not see the sea. And then the blue wall which had been all round us between the sky and the sea turned grey and came very close, and soon we could see nothing at all but grey mist unless we flew very, very low. So we came down very close to the land, just over the tops of little fir trees and grey bushes and over the surface of desolate pools, black and glinting like steel. Up above there was no sun and no sky, and on every side there was only the mournful grey taiga.

"Then, soon, Igor Palyashkin turned and looked at me and I knew that we had no more petrol left. He signed with his arm that he was going to land, and we went down, swiftly, to the drab grey marsh; we touched the tops of the little bushes and then a blackness like steel spread before us and the floats of the machine sent up fountains of water and sheets of white ice. We came to a stop with the nose of our machine in the bushes at the edge of the marsh and we climbed out unhurt. He was a good pilot, Igor Palyashkin.

"We had our map and the compass and we made fresh calculations and set off to walk to Kamyenaya Gora. But the night came down, so we stopped and lit a fire. It took a long time to light that fire. The little willow bushes would not burn very well and before we had got it going well enough to put some moss on to make a smoke we were being tortured by millions of mosquitoes. We had our iron rations: enough for one meal. We ate those, then wrapped our heads in our coats and lay on the wet ground in the smoke of the fire. But still the mosquitoes got at us. *Bozhe moi*! How they bit. 'I wish it would freeze!' Igor Palyashkin said. 'It would kill us but it would kill these damned mosquitoes first.'

"When it was light we began to walk, but you cannot walk very well in the taiga. Everywhere in summer the ground is soft; the little bushes grow in the marsh and you cannot push your way through them when you are up to your waist in water and mud. And the mosquitoes never left off

biting. We kept at it for two days. The second and third nights we could not even light a fire, because there was nowhere dry to light it and the matches had got wet, too. It was miserably cold and we had no food, but Igor Palyashkin was cheerful. He had his revolver. 'I shall shoot a reindeer,' he said. I said there were no reindeer in the marshes. 'Well, then, a wolf. No? a fox, a hare, a rat. What matters it? I shall shoot the first thing I see and we shall eat it raw. And if God sends us nothing else to shoot I will shoot you and then myself, so we shall not die a hard death.' 'Igor Sergeievitch,' I said, 'shoot me now, for there is nothing alive in all this cursed taiga but the mosquitoes and we.'

"But I was wrong. On the third day we came to some dry ground where some fir-trees grew. Oh! little fir-trees like Christmas trees, but we were so glad to see them and to stop wading through the marsh that we clasped hands, Igor Palyashkin and I, and danced round one of them and sang the children's song about the Yolka.

"Beyond that dry ground was a broad river, so broad we could just see the other bank like a brown bar under the grey gloom of the sky. The river was full of spongy, water-logged ice so that it did not flow or ripple, but stood still while we, standing on the low bank by the little fir-trees, we, you understand, seemed to move backwards. It was so quiet! There was no bird or animal moving in all the world; even the mosquitoes had left us. It was so quiet that we could hear the sap creeping down the little fir-trees into the ground and we knew, Igor Palyashkin and I, that that night the Lord Frost would come to the taiga and bind the river and snap the boughs and freeze us like stones to the earth. It was so quiet that we could hear the Frost coming from far away and Igor Palyashkin pulled out his revolver and shot six times into the north. He was not afraid of God, Igor Palyashkin.

"Then, between the fir-trees, stepping softly in their skin boots and holding their bows in front of them, came six little men dressed all in skins; six Samoyed hunters. They took us to a little hut they had built among the fir-trees and gave us meat to eat. We ate and ate until we were sick. Then we lay down on some skins in the hut and heard the frost come walking through the dark, cracking the trees as he passed. It was too cold to sleep, but because they had a handful of fire in the middle of the hut and we cowered round it, eight men huddled close together, we did not freeze. They gave us some more meat and this time we kept it down and crouched over that little heap of embers all night, Igor Palyashkin and I and the six Samoyed hunters. Not a word of Russian had they and not a word of their tongue had we. Ah! If we had had a bottle of Zubrovka that night — one glass, even!

The Vice-Consul's wife is on her feet, drawing out a long farewell to Lydia; the First Secretary is holding open the door, still fanning himself; the Second Secretary is on the floor behind the door leaning his back against the wall: he has been asleep for the last ten minutes. But the Vice-Consul has begun another argument with Bartholomew. "What's your hurry?" he says. "There's half a bottle of rum left yet. Time enough for the next folks!" So his wife and the First Secretary sit down again. "Another little glass!" says Alexander Andreievitch to me. "It's still early." And he tilts the Bison.

"In the morning light we set out," says Alexander Andreievitch. "We said Kamyenaya Gora very loud to the Samoyeds to make them understand where we wanted to go. So they picked up their

bows and arrows and one of them took up an old, old gun, so old and so heavy it had a fork attached to the barrel to support it by, and they beckoned to us to go with them. But Igor Palyashkin was eating some more of the meat, and in the morning light he was looking closely at what he was eating. It was a large piece of meat, purplish, like beef, you understand, but there was a piece of skin on it, and on the skin some hair, and that hair was long and woolly and reddish in colour, not like the hair of any cow or ox in Russia or Siberia. 'What is this meat?' says Igor Palyashkin. I looked at it closely, too, and tasted it again, and because my hunger was appeased now I could taste it properly. Ah I it had a strong, high flavour; it was more than half rotten. I wondered how I could have brought my snout near it the night before. It was not cooked, you understand, just warmed in the ashes. It stank of age and the earth. I had heard that in summer when the Samoyeds kill a beast they bury what they cannot eat by digging down a little way until they come to the frozen earth which never thaws and there they lay their meat and cover it with earth and it will keep all summer through: or keep well enough for them. Dear God! It smelt like a grave-digger's boots!

" 'This meat! This meat!' cries Igor Palyashkin, as he grips the oldest Samoyed by the stiff skin sleeve. 'The Devil take you! *Ot kuda eto myaso?* From where, man, where?'

" '*Myaso! myaso!*' bellows Igor Palyashkin, seeing they do not understand. He points to the rotten gobbet of flesh with the long red wool on it and roars '*Myaso!*' until the little old fellow looks frightened and they all put their heads together and mutter, and it seems they're wondering what to do to calm this ferocious Russian. Then they point away down the river and smile timidly and beckon to us to go with them again.

" 'Kamyenaya Gora!' we said again and again to the little hunters as they led us through the brittle grey trees. They nodded their heads and smiled. God knows whether they understood that Russian name, but they knew that we were Russians and they would lead us to the nearest Christian men. It had grown bitter cold! The black sky was no higher than the fir-tree tops and so solid you bent your head, like going into a hut. An icy mist stood among the little trees like a palisade round us, not two arms' length from us. When we spoke our words rang sonorous as if they reverberated from solid walls all round us. They gave us the skins we had slept on to wrap round us, and we waddled among those little men, Igor Palyashkin and I, like bears on their hind legs.

"We walked all day in single file with the Samoyed hunters, and in the afternoon we came again to the wide marshes. But now the frost had bound them, and we walked over them, sometimes on black ice that bent like thin planks under us, sometimes on frozen mud that squeaked and whined when our boots pressed it, and we broke the brittle willow twigs like stubble on a reaped field. Not a living thing but ourselves did we see and not a sound of anything with a soul came through the cold mist to us.

"But towards evening, towards the early evening, a whisper woke far away on the marshes and came to us, and the mist thinned and a keen wind cut our cheeks. The Samoyeds stopped and looked at each other and snuffed the wind. We too knew what that wind was. It was the snow-wind.

“Far and wide we could see now over the immense, sad taiga: a level, lonely waste of drab brown and faded grey, every particle of life in it stilled by that one terrible grip of the Lord Frost and its dead body stabbed through and through by the bayonets of the snow-wind. When the wind ceased we knew that the winding-sheet would fall from the black sky. The mist, you understand, had not gone entirely, it had thinned to a ghost of mist that rode upon the wind and still half-veiled the lifeless world. There was neither light nor dark, but a mixture of both, as if the night to come were powder blown about us by the freezing wind. The wind cut us to the bone, but it did not rustle the bushes: they were frozen stiff as stone. We could see far and wide, we could see to the world’s end, for there was nothing in all the world but that cancelled light, that drab brown earth and that drab grey scrub, as dead as a dead man’s hair.

“We did not know, Igor Palyashkin and I, where we were going. We did not look at our compass or at our map. We bent our heads and stumbled through the dead world after the six little hunters. I did not think I should ever see Kamyenaya Gora; I did not think I should ever see Petersburg or any Christian house again. I thought I should die there where there was nothing but greyness and cold. I was young; I should have wept, but it was too cold to cry.

“But the little Samoyeds knew where we were going, and before the grey light was all gone they brought us where something with definite form was visible in that limitless murk. On one side we saw the broad river, immobile under its ice, but blinking pale and hard in that fugitive landscape; and before us, across the level of the marsh we saw a low dark brown cliff of earth caving above the river, its overhang that might have fallen in the brief thaw of summer arrested now and secured for all the long winter by the hand of the frost. About us on that immense and mournful level the thin grey bushes grew sparser but taller. They seemed like columns of smoke that had been drifting up to mingle with the low grey sky and had been frozen, they also, only a little more solid and more defined than the grey atmosphere. The brown mud that stretched so far on every side was wrinkled as it had shrunk in the grip of the frost and in all the wrinkles lay white veins and threads of ice.

“Just as we came in sight of the river and that low bank of earth, the snow-wind dropped. Igor Palyashkin and I, we looked at one another; our lips were so numb with cold we could not speak. The Samoyeds muttered together and their breath hung in little thick white clouds before them. In a few minutes it would begin to snow and not even a Samoyed hunter would then find his way across the waste when the white flurries filled all the air. The oldest hunter gazed round, up at the heavy sky, round at the spectral bushes, down at the glazed and shrunken earth and finally out at that distant low bank that just broke the endless level. Then he stared at us and his dark face, all seamed and wrinkled, was like the frozen mud of the taiga, and the moisture was frozen white in the wrinkles of his skin as it was in the furrows of the marsh. He smiled and the thick hoar-frost on his lip stirred and the skin of ice cracked over his cheeks. Then he pointed to the far-off bank by the river and in his thin, frozen voice croaked, ‘*Myaso!*’

“Igor Palyashkin struggled to shout and managed a hoarse whisper: ‘Devil take him! Tartar son of a bitch! What’s he mean, meat?’ I wanted to say, ‘He means we shall be meat if we don’t get to some shelter before it snows,’ but I do not think my lips could follow my tongue.

“The Samoyeds led us off at a quicker pace towards the little cliff. Nearer the river the ground was not frozen so solid and sometimes it would not bear our weight, but wheezed and creaked and then gave way with a sucking sound. But the hunters glided over, picking out the harder places for us, and we, plunging and ploughing along, managed somehow to follow them. The sky hardened above us, the light thickened round us, the bushes seemed to thaw into smoke once more and waver and dissolve into the twilight. Then we reached the over-hanging bank of earth and crouched under its frozen arch of clods. I squatted with my back to the bank, looking out into the dismal waste where all was now a dance of shadows with neither earth nor ice nor bushes any longer clearly to be distinguished from each other. Behind me I heard Igor Palyashkin making a strange noise: curses and laughter were clashing among the ice at his lips. I turned to look. He was kicking at the frozen earth. In the bank, sticking out where summer landslips had exposed them, and in the stiffened debris all round us, were huge yellow bones; whole mighty limbs, fleshy organs frozen hard as pottery, glassy hunks of purple flesh with the hide on them and rigid locks of wool like rusty iron.

“We asked with our eyes what devil’s graveyard had we got into? Igor Palyashkin kicked at some of the carrion he had devoured with such appetite that morning. The little old hunter nodded: ‘*Myaso, myaso!*’ he croaked, and champed his jaws and creased his stiff cheeks a little more. Igor Palyashkin wrenched at a long bone sticking up like a fence-post and I verily believe he would have clubbed the old fellow over the skull with it if he could have got it loose.

“Suddenly, one of them made a fierce hissing noise. The six Samoyeds all on the instant became as still as the frozen clods around us. Igor Palyashkin and I, we too shrank down against the earth; what we could hear then stilled us like an intenser frost, and I felt cold to the middle of my heart. Through the dead and awful silence of that pause before the snow we heard something coming across the blind waste towards us. All day in that dead world nothing had moved but ourselves; now, out there where the shadows advanced and retreated and the pallid gloom baffled our sight, something was coming with oh! such labour and such pain, foundering and fighting onwards through the half-solid marsh. In that absolute stillness of the frozen air we heard it when it was far away; it came so slowly and it took so long, and we dare not do anything but listen and strain our eyes into the darkening mist. In what shape of living beast could such purpose and such terrible strength be embodied? A creature mightier than any God has made to be seen by man was dragging itself through the morass. We heard the crunch of the surface ice, then the whining strain of frozen mud as the enormous bulk we could not picture bore slowly down on it; then a deep gasping sound as the marsh yielded beneath a weight its frost-bonds could not bear. Then plungings of such violence and such a sound of agonised straining and moaning as constricted my heart; and, after that awful struggle, a long sucking and loud explosion of release as the beast prevailed and the marsh gave up its hold. Battle after battle, each more desperate than the last, that dreadful fight went on; we listened with such intentness that we suffered the agony of every yard of the creature’s struggle towards our little bank of earth. But as it drew nearer the pauses between its down-sinkings and its tremendous efforts to burst free grew longer, as if that inconceivable strength and tenacity of purpose were failing. In those pauses we heard the most dreadful sound of all: the beast crying with pain and the terror of death. Dear Lord God! I think no Christian men but we, Igor Palyashkin and I, have ever heard a voice like that. I know that no voice on all this earth could have answered that brute soul moaning in the mist of the lonely taiga that evening before the snow. That beast was alone in all the world.

“So near it came before it sank for ever! So near! Just beyond the baffling curtain of the gloom where the grey bushes were woven with the sullen twilight — even to there, where another last fearful effort would have brought it to the harder earth and to those gigantic bones about us, it struggled before it cried its last long cry. The Samoyeds cowered behind us and hid their heads in the flaps of their skin coats and tried to shrink into the bare earth. Igor Palyashkin felt his empty revolver, then folded his arms on his breast. He did not fear God, and he was prepared to face the Devil. As for me, what made my heart sink so was the pain in that wild voice; the pain, and the drear, drear loneliness. *Bozhe moi!* I am a christened man and that was a brute soul come out of the wild forest; but it was drowning there on the dead Arctic edge of the world where there was neither forest nor field, land nor water, sun nor snow, but only an interminable chaos of cold between day and night, and there was no ear in all the world or in all time to understand its pain. Something that time had forgotten was drowning there, alone, in the gulfs of the freezing dark.”

“Jimmy!” roars the First Secretary, exasperated by my failure to heed his repeated summonses. The Vice-Consul is on his feet at last; even Bartholomew is on his — though rocking slightly. I rise. Alexander Andreievitch inverts the Bison over my glass and picks up his own. “*Da* …” he says, emitting the word on a long sigh, and turning the glass slowly in his hand. “I saw it. A moment only; but I saw it. A moment between the brown mud and the grey bushes. Then the snow came, sudden and thick, and nothing else was seen but the white swirls of the snow. Still the great head was above the morass, the head and the shoulders, robed with long red-brown wool; the great head and something upraised like a pliant arm and the long, long curling teeth sweeping out in front like sleigh-runners. Then the snow came.”

“Alexander!” cries Lydia. “Open the yard door!”

We stumble and jostle out into the little courtyard. The Red Sea night wraps its damp heat round us like a wet sheet hot from the wash-copper. We trip over the sill of Alexander Andreievitch’s narrow door; we block the entrance of the courtyard; we rouse the Masseyevs’ turkeys to emulation with our clamorous good-nights. Alexander Andreievitch treads in a flower-pot and kicks the fragments with violence against the house wall. “*Chort vozmi!*” he swears at it, but comes back to shake my hand. “*Da* … We saw it, Igor Palyashkin and I. Afterwards it was the Revolution.”

Someone has started up the Ford station-wagon. I have lost my lantern. I invariably do at about this point in the proceedings. “Jimmy!” squeaks the Vice-Consul’s wife. “What’s that star up there?” The Second Secretary is surprisingly wide awake. He sings in basso profundo:

“They looked up and saw a bright star

Shining i-in the heavens beyo-ond them far …”