Andrei Platonov

# Immortality



After midnight, on the approach to Red Peregon station, the FD locomotive began to shout and weep.[1] It sang in the winter darkness with the deep strength of its hot belly and then began to change to a gentle, weeping human breathing, addressing someone who was not replying. After falling briefly silent, the FD again complained into the air: human words could already be discerned in this signal, and whoever now heard them must have felt pressure on his own conscience because of the engine's torment – helpless, heavy rolling stock hung on the maternal hook of her tender and the station's approach signal was signaling red. The driver closed the last steam cutoff – the signal was still an obstinate red – and gave the three toots of a complete stop. He took out a red handkerchief and wiped his face, which the winter night's wind was covering all the time with tears out of his eyes. The man's vision had begun to weaken and his heart had become sensitive: the driver had lived some time in the world and travelled some distance over the earth. He did not curse into the darkness at the fools in the station, though he was going to have to take two thousand tons, from a standstill, up the incline, and the friction of the locomotive's metal wheel rims would draw fire from the frozen rails.

"It's a shame to wake Emmanuil Semyonovich, but it has to be done," the driver whispered to himself.

The constant slight vibration was making the locomotive's cab shudder. The fireman was stoking up the firebox, keeping the pressure in the boiler at its upper limit. One moment the balance valve was snarling in the air with steam; another moment it was stopping when the pressure had to be lowered by means of the injector.

"But it has to be done," said the driver. He grasped the siren's cord.

The machine again began to shout, sing, and weep into the winter's dark night, threatening and complaining.

In the pauses between his own signals, the driver heard dogs – apparently disturbed by the locomotive – begin to bark in some distant collective farm, while from Red Peregon itself came the singing of the station workers' roosters.

Now space was filled by an entire choir of voices: locomotive, roosters, and dogs ...

In a servant's room in one of the houses near the station a young woman awoke. She listened intently to the voice of the familiar locomotive: she knew all the engines of the Peregon depot individually, as if they were people of differing characters. She was the station chief's household worker, and she took a personal interest in the transport system.

"Either the brakes have seized up," the

young cook said to herself, “or something else has gone haywire – and that devil of a brake tester is asleep. What on earth’s going on? This is worse than torment, worse than chaos. What snakes – they’re making the whole of my heart ache!”

Barefoot as she was, she went to Emmanuil Semyonovich’s closed bedroom, to tell him about the locomotive shouting just outside the station. But she didn’t enter the room: she could hear her boss talking – he was already on the phone to the dispatcher.

“Is that you Mishchenko? Why are you holding the 4-0-3 on the approach?”

The cook went on standing outside the station boss’s bedroom door; Mishchenko was evidently on the other end of the telephone line, saying something.

“Good, accept the train right away!” said Emmanuil Semyonovich, “I’ll find out in the morning who’s to blame. Why aren’t I asleep? No, I am asleep. I’m fast asleep – but I’m having a dream about what you lot are getting up to out there. Hold on a minute! Listen to the hump yard!”

Galya the cook also began to listen. Now there were still more sounds: the pitiful toots of a second locomotive, coming not from where the FD locomotive was shouting, but from some other direction.

“Hear that?” the boss asked into the telephone. “Give an order to the hump yard. They need to release the brakes: the locomotive on the hump can’t pull the cars!”

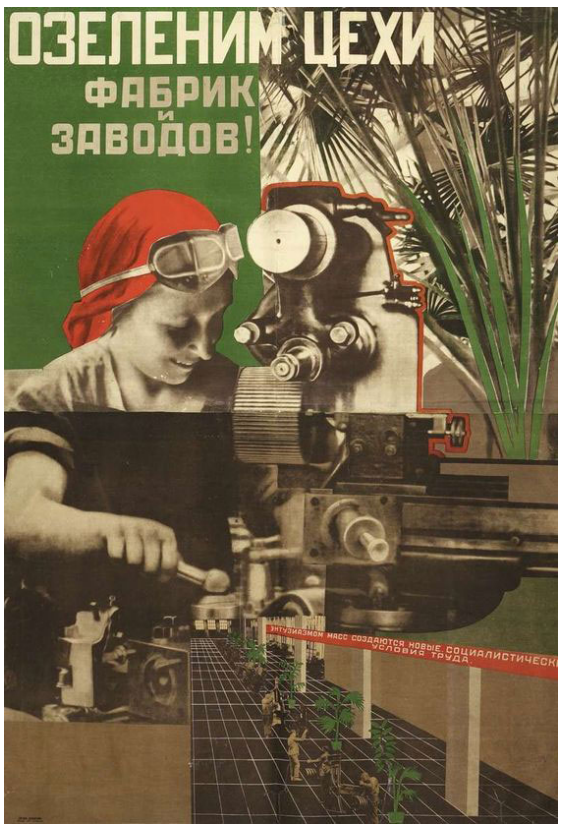
Emmanuil Semyonovich put down the receiver. The locomotives stopped shouting. Galya left the door, went back to her room and lay down in her bed. Now the shunting locomotive was whistling normally, not loudly, in the departure yard. She could hear freight cars rolling along the frozen rails and the discs of their buffers forcefully hitting against other cars.

“Who’s making trouble in the shunting yard?” Once again the boss, still in his bedroom, was shouting down the telephone. “Why aren’t they using retarders? Where’s the through train from the zero yard, why don’t I hear it? It should be here by now!”

He went silent; someone was answering him.

“Check everything and call me back!” said Emmanuil Semyonovich. “If it stays as quiet as this over there, I won’t be able to go to sleep anyway … What? No, I’ll be dozing. I won’t go to sleep until the locomotives are all whistling! Goodbye!”






Soviet poster, date unknown. The poster reads: “We will green [used as a verb] the shops, the factories, the [power] plants!”

Galina sighed on her bed. “What are they all? Demons? Devils’ spawn? I must inform Lazar Moiseyevich about the life we live here – I’ll write him a card. Let him take these good-for-nothings to task. The boss is getting no sleep at all, neither day nor night.”

Galina’s large body was in such agony over the transport system because all the people she cared for at Red Peregon were also expending their hearts on the railroad. In the beginning, when Galina first learned about this kind of life, she had decided: Why should I care what troubles people let into their souls, I’ll live on foot and I’ll bear any burdens away on my own back. Locomotives, freight cars – it’s all the same to me. I’m a woman after all, I’m a young lass!

After a while, however, Galya had found she had nothing to live on: if she wanted to exist alone as a pedestrian, carrying food in a knapsack on her back, then there was nowhere for her to apply her heart, her affection, and thoughts. And then, bowing to people by virtue of life, she began to share their lot and anxiety. As for living on foot, she could have lived like that, but she no longer wanted to; it was no longer of any interest.

She didn’t sleep for a long time, warming herself under a blanket with her own warmth through the work of her own powerful heart.

“Enemy winds are whipping down the railroad and into the steppe,” she thought. “People say that cold like this can make rails snap in half ... Well, either the rails split or they don’t split! Let them not split, or there’ll be no goods being loaded and Emmanuil Semyonovich will grow thin again ... I need to buy him some sour cream tomorrow. I don’t know why, but the collective farmers are hardly bringing us any now: they guzzle it all up themselves, the prosperous devils, phoo, what ugly, greedy mugs you get in the steppe!” Galya began recalling the faces of collective farmers she knew. “I’m happy now – but the people we used to see in the past! Nothing but alien skin and hostile bones – and peasant pride! Yes, I’d thrash every one of you now, each in turn, because of the past! Class against class – that’s what you lot were asking for! I’ll give you class! *There’s* class for you.” Galya made a weak movement with her torso in the direction of the station boss’s room: “He sleeps and he hears.”

Galya herself had also once been a peasant and a collective farmer, though her heart was not drawn towards the one and only collective farm that was native and dear to her: it offered her




Poster for the Soviet documentary by Viktor Alexandrovitsh Turin, *Turksib* (1929), which retells the story of the construction of the Turkestan–Siberia Railway.

little joy because of its smallness of scale.

She fell asleep. The telephone above her boss's bed was silent; her boss also slept and his body, accustomed to brief rest, was gathering strength, quickly, hurriedly – his heart had stilled in the depth of his chest, his breathing had shortened, supporting only a small watchful flame of life, each muscle and each tendon was secretly tugging, struggling against monstrosity and the creases of daytime tension. But in the darkness of a mind abundantly irrigated with blood, one quivering spot still gleamed, shining through the half-dark of eyes half-shuttered by lids: it was as if a lamp was burning on a distant post, by the entry switch of the main track coming out from real life, and this meek light could be transformed at any moment into a vast radiance of all consciousness and so set the heart to run at full speed.

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In the morning Galina took the station chief's knapsack and went to the bazaar. She had wanted so many times to throw away this decrepit, ancient knapsack – this awkward knapsack that had been stitched so long ago, in ancient years, from pieces of soft Russian leather and Ukrainian linen; Galina had patched up this knapsack-bag more than once, and, all the same, it was horrid. Beggars from afar had once travelled with knapsacks such as this, but even they had now stopped. But Emmanuil Semyonovich loved this knapsack: he had lived his whole life in peace with it, tramped and ridden one hundred thousand kilometers or more over the earth, and it had been his only property in childhood, in youth, and at a mature age – in his Cherkasy motherland, in the Ussuriysk taiga, on the outskirts of Moscow, and here, in Peregon. He had wandered about with this knapsack and wealth had never swelled it – only the surrounding apparatus of power had put on weight from goods, from throngs of people, and from the movement of corpulent trains. It felt as if goodness itself issued from this knapsack, from the hands of the person who carried it, though the knapsack itself was always empty.

Galina didn't find her master when she returned from the bazaar, but near the door of the closed apartment she came upon Polutorny the yardmaster: he had come to consult the station boss about where he could find a rooster for his Plymouth Rock hens. Galya ordered him out of her sight.

"Goodbye," said Polutorny. "I am now going to comrade Emmanuil Semyonovich Levin's office. I'll tell him not to keep boorish women in his home – they insult personnel and damage the mood of the cadres ... "

"Go off and have a good weep!" said Galya. "You've grown used to Soviet power dancing attendance on you. But I'm something else!"

"What are you then if you're not Soviet power?" asked Polutorny. "Are you a contra or something?"

"That's it!" agreed Galya.

Polutorny did not get in to Levin's office immediately: a dispatchers' meeting was taking place there. Then Emmanuil Semyonovich himself came out to talk to Polutorny. The yardmaster said that he did not know how to carry on being. Day and night he was in a state of anguish: his hens had no appropriate, worthy rooster. They were special hens and they laid eggs all year round, but now, without a rooster, they were tearing about and shouting, and several had already taken to flying: they rose high in the air like regular birds and cackled up there. The lunacy of nature!

Levin looked silently into Polutorny's face. Goodness, what things in this world people find to live on: even hens and roosters can nourish a soul, and a heart can find consolation through poultry operations in the yard!

"I understand," said Levin quietly. "I know a certain chicken breeder in Izium, he's an acquaintance of mine. I'll write you a note for him now, you go and see him on your day off. If he doesn't have Plymouth Rocks, he'll tell you where you can find them. He has friends among serious chicken experts. I'll explain everything to him." Even as he spoke, Levin had bent over the table and begun writing.

Polutorny left. He was satisfied: let his farmyard peasant of an old woman just manage the hens and stop managing him. If it were up to him alone, he would have roasted all the hens long ago so he'd have something to eat with his fruit spirits ... But his life was not progressing in a straight line: he had to use the very same hands to couple large-capacity freight cars and to palpate petty fowl – mere peasant-woman's creatures. Polutorny resolved to speak with comrade Levin about all this too, before this wife of his completely damaged his soul and he lost all his value as a capable Soviet worker. Oh, life, when will you get yourself sorted so we don't need ever to sense you!

Levin sampled the papers on his desk: communications, reports, notices, registers. A freight car had been derailed on the seventh track; the inspection point was still holding trains ... It was impossible for him to do the work of a thousand people all by himself; his system of preliminary notifications about train arrivals was, so far, delivering only weak benefits. Any system for work is but the game of a solitary mind unless it is warmed through by the energy of heart of every worker. Here in Peregon, he would also need to penetrate inside each person, to trouble and touch each soul so that a plant

would grow out from it, blossoming for all.

Levin was smiling timidly. He was alone, thinking with shame and tenderness about the people near to him, his assistants in his work. He had understood long ago that transportation was, in essence, something quite simple, not a problem at all. Why then did it sometimes demand grievous martyrdom instead of ordinary, natural labor? A dead or hostile person – now that truly was a problem! And for this reason it was necessary constantly, unceasingly, to warm the other person with one's own breathing, to keep them close by so that they would not grow deathly numb, so that they would feel how necessary they were and – if only from shame and conscience – would give back, in the form of honorable life and work, the warmth of help and consolation they had received from outside them ... Not everyone's soul, however, was turned forward towards work and the future; many people's souls had nested far away in the rear, on the home front, in a yard where hens range, a wife is doing the managing, utensils age, clothing wears out, and an ancient huddled need clings on – a need that chills any man to the bone and makes him weep secretly inside himself, into the blood of his own body.

The clerk came in. He began saying something to the chief about events during the last twenty-four hours. Levin had also lived through the last few days and so already knew everything about them. As was his habit, he listened above all to the pauses of speech, in which every person imperceptibly, almost unconsciously, struggles with a sudden onslaught of personal, intimate, and astonished forces, then crushes them, thinking they do not relate to the matter in hand.

"Very good, Pyotr Ivanovich," said Levin. "What else?"

"Emmanuil Semyonovich ... Let me do my day's work at night."

"Why?" asked Levin.

"Well," answered the clerk. His handsome young face took on a confused look, but the force of modesty and pride returned his composure.

"Remind me of this toward the end of the day," said Levin.

The clerk left. Levin picked up the receiver and called home.

"Galya, do you know our clerk?"

Galya, of course, did know the clerk. Whatever did not concern her directly, she knew about in especial detail.

"Go round to where he lives, ask if you can borrow something, something like a broom, have a word with his wife ... All right, my little southerner? And then phone me."

Levin got to his feet. It was time he was outside, on the tracks. Into his office came an unfamiliar elderly man, wearing an old railroad conductor's greatcoat that must have been made about twenty years ago.

"I wish you good health, chief!"

"Hello ... What have you got to say for yourself?"

"Er, well, I came about work. Here things are well ordered – you're an intelligent man. I want to progress now, I want to be in step ... "

"Are you from the collective farm?" asked Levin.

"Yes, where else ... Oh, Lord!"

"Why are you wanting to leave it?"

"'Cos our new bosses are so darned clever ... Yes, darkness rules: former menders of fences now yell about scientificness, the importance of proper planning, and the basis of authority, and then they go and leave all the hay out to rot – it got soaked. We scythed it – and now it might as well be dust and ashes. Where we live, it seems, even the sun burns in vain: it raises the grass, it makes the grass grow tall – and then we just kill it with rot!"

Levin listened and then asked, "So your hay gets left out to rot – and all you do is wander about sighing."

"Sighing? It was our souls that were aching."

"Aching!" said Levin. He was now looking at this man point blank. "Your soul was aching in vain, your soul was a fool, your soul was a kulak! You were a bystander, you just stood by and smirked. You were thinking, 'All right, let everything go to the devil's mother – all in one night!'"

"Darkness ground the life out of me," the visitor said quietly.

"Still, you understood everything!" Levin pronounced. "Which means there's darkness in *your* head too ... "

"Darkness? My head's full of thought!"

"Thought? Then what was this thought of yours doing? Why did it let the hay go to rot? Darkness can happen, but it's not the rule, and if your thought achieved nothing in the collective farm, then what use is it going to be here in the station? Go back home, I'm closing the office. You won't be working here."

Levin set off on his rounds of the station. A passenger train was waiting to leave. People were travelling north, to Kharkov, Moscow, and Leningrad. Moscow was where Kaganovich worked; it was where the station chief's wife lived. In the half-dark of the train carriage's window he could see an unfamiliar woman. She was gazing out in boredom at a station that was alien to her, at people who were of no interest, people whose lives here were going by, like hers, in hopes and concerns of their own, and probably she was wishing the train would leave soon, and then she could forget without a trace the people

who remained at the station, and later she would never even remember the name of this place or think of the people living in the distant, smoking, little huts that could be seen from the moving train on the steppe horizon.

The station chief smiled modestly at his inadvertent thought. He considered the woman a fool to be thinking like this, but then he answered himself straightaway: Did he really think she ought to be getting off the train and staying here to work in Peregon?

"Yes," Levin abruptly said out loud and laughed.

He remembered another woman, young and endowed with the gift of living other people's feelings, a fine, unhappy actress. She had disappeared somewhere without glory, without a name, destitute, proud and meek, never giving him another thought, probably unable to sense what lay far away, what had long been of no use to her impressionable and fast-living heart. She was right, fate was irreversible, and the station chief already had a second, beloved wife; he had a little girl of a daughter with whom he would be going out into the world, arm in arm, into happiness, into a real, present life when the little girl had grown into a young woman.

Levin came to a stop absentmindedly, then went back to the passenger train. The woman who had been looking out of the window had stepped outside. She was standing by the end of the carriage, wearing a dark blue suit and with a southern cashmere shawl over her head. Her eyes were examining the unfamiliar station, the workers, the whole strange local world – and not with indifference but with surprise. She was around twenty years old; her fresh, focused face was watching intently, equally ready for a smile or for sorrow. Walking past her, the station chief raised his hand to the peak of his cap; the woman slightly bowed her head to him in response.

A lonely man, Levin rarely saw in person those faraway people for whom he worked. "That's what my daughter will be like soon," Levin decided for himself. "She'll be even better, happier ... But the station chiefs won't be like me. They'll sleep at night and go away on vacation, and they'll live in a family, with a wife, among their own dear children."

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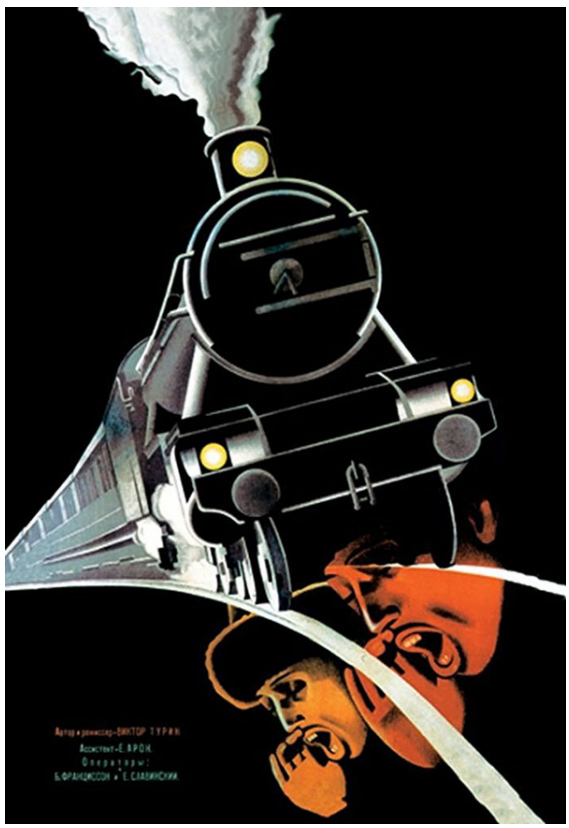
Levin was out on the tracks when Galya caught up with him.

"Emmanuil Semyonovich! The clerk's wife works at the railroad tie factory and the child's yelling behind the door – and the door's closed





Poster for the Soviet documentary by Viktor Alexandrovitsh Turin, *Turksib* (1929).

with a lock ... What kind of life do you call that? No, it's no life at all!"

"What door do you mean?" asked Levin.

"What do you think? In their room, in their own hut ... The child lives there alone all day long. The mother and father are out at work! It's not right, Emmanuil Semyonovich. It's time someone went and organized them!"

"Go along to the clerk and get the key to their hut," said Levin. "You can stay with the child until the father's back from his shift. There's no one who can stand in for him today."

"And your dinner – who's going to make that? What do you think you're going to eat?" exclaimed Galya.

"I won't eat," said the chief. "I'll run on empty."

Galya put her hands on her hips and marveled. "Would you believe it! A man who won't eat! In the Ukraine – and not eating! And our bosses will get to hear of this, and then comrade Levchenko will descend on us again and then there'll be someone or other from Moscow, and then they'll find out a bit more and then it'll be, 'What's the matter with you, why all this fasting, where's your cook, where's your evil snake of a cook?' And then it'll be off to the northern forests with that damned cook and for the next ten years she'll be making borscht for a thousand mouths! So better I go and fetch that wee scrap and wrap him up in a blanket and take him with me to the apartment. Then I can coddle him a bit while I cook lunch for you."



Levin went to the marshaling yard, then to the hump and the inspection point. Things had gone wrong in the night without anyone letting on and four trains had been thrown off schedule. Shunting still seemed to entail any number of minor accidents and unfortunate moments with people. But Levin knew very well that every little chance misfortune was, in essence, a big catastrophe – only it happened to have died in infancy.

Settling for a while in the switchman's booth, the chief summoned the night controller of departures, who was still wandering about on the tracks. For some reason, he hadn't gone home.

"Comrade Pirogov," said Levin. "A while ago, you said you had nowhere to live – we gave you an apartment. You were suffering from exhaustion – I arranged for you to go to a health resort. You weren't getting enough pay – we gave you more, we began arranging bonuses for you, paying you overtime ... At home you get bored and drink vodka; at work you fail to keep a proper


Soviet poster, date unknown. The poster reads "Sleeping at work/ Helps the enemies/ Of the working class"

eye on your trains, and your freight cars shear the switches ... What's wrong with you, comrade Pirogov? Do you have some secret sorrow?"

"No, chief, I've no sorrow at all ... "

"And I've no more good will for you. I'm a poor person too, perhaps poorer and unhappier than you are!" said Levin, his control momentarily slipping. "Tonight I shall do your shift myself. You stay at home. You can collect your wits, have a rest, and report tomorrow to the Party Committee. I shall ask them to take your Party membership card back."

Pirogov stood before Levin without saying a word, a sad, confused person swollen by the night wind.

"Go on home," said Levin.

Pirogov did not leave.

"Finish the job, chief. Cripple me well and truly."

He turned away and, of their own accord, warm streams of tears inadvertently began running down his face. Pirogov had not been expecting them; he went straight outside immediately and set off into the wind so the air, in place of his mother, would dry his face.

Assemblers and couplers came into the booth. Levin asked them to speak only about the small details of their work; he already knew the main problem.

Assembler Zakharchenko began demonstrating that accidents were of no real importance; it was impossible for them never to happen.

"And what about your hopper wagon?" asked Levin. "Why was it derailed at the switch?"

"Comrade chief," said Zakharchenko, "conscience made me bring up all the day's food. I was so upset that it gave me the runs."

But he did not know what had derailed the hopper wagon.

"What derailed your hopper wagon," Levin explained on his behalf, "was your own greed. You doze off at work; you were late signaling and they changed the switch just as the wagon was passing over ... You are greedy, Zakharchenko! You live ten kilometers away – and at home you and your wife make pots to sell. You finish your shift, you go back home – and you sit down immediately at your potter's wheel. Then you have a little sleep, you sit down again with your pots, and you work away till it's time for your next shift ... You arrive here exhausted, almost ill. What you need is some sleep, but you have to take charge of trains ... How many rubles do you and your wife pull in from the pots?"

"About six hundred rubles," Zakharchenko answered meekly. "Somehow we never manage to make any more."

"You're lying," said Levin, "you earn more. But that's still not a lot for two people. Let me explain to you how you can earn more: pots are something we need, there aren't enough of them in the Ukraine. Come and see me after your shift and I'll draw up a schedule for you: when you should sleep, when you should throw pots, when you should come here. Then you'll arrive here fresh and there'll be no more incidents – *and* you'll manage to make more pots. Understand?"

"Yes, you're right, Emmanuil Semyonovich," said Zakharchenko. "We shouldn't have left this so long. Pots are important too."

"You married quite recently. How's your wife getting on with your dad?"

"Oh, she's all right, she's sweet enough ... Maybe she'll bitch up later."

"No, she's not going to bitch up. We'll educate her, we'll regulate her. But mind *you* don't do anything to ruin her ... "

"It's all right, comrade chief. I live carefully with her ... "

"Yes, you be careful," said Levin. "If you can't work well here, at least be sure to live accident-free in your own home!"

In guilt and distress, Zakharchenko left the booth. He walked up to the switch signal, sat on the switch rod, and saw the reflection of his own face in the glass of the signal light. "Eh, you Moscow schlub, you greedy devil," he said into the glass. "Bliny and more bliny – that's all you want ... You damaged a wagon and now they don't trust you with your own woman. And as for all these pots of yours, all these clay devils ... "

An hour later Levin was on the hump, taking part in disassembling inbound trains sent there by the control center. He noted in his little book what adjustments were needed to the technical equipment. Some fault or other appeared every day – either the retarders would fail or the brake shoes would be wearing out, or something was ailing in central control. Perhaps his eye was becoming keener and now seeing what it had not seen before, or perhaps mechanisms could not for even a moment be removed from a human being's breast and attention. To be on the safe side, Levin did not put his full trust in either people or mechanisms, his instinct being to love both.

On the way back to the office, Polutorny caught up with Levin.

"Emmanuil Semyonovich, I need to speak with you."

"Go ahead, comrade Polutorny."

"My wife's just been round, she was bringing me a cheese pastry. She says she wants to learn French – we've got a teacher here in Peregon now."

"All right," said Levin. "Why shouldn't she?"

"It's impossible, Emmanuil Semyonovich! Then there'll be no end to the follies she'll organize! She's already had enough of the

Plymouth Rocks, now she wants to be rid of the rooster too ... All she wants, she says, is the French language, it's culture, she says. And before the Plymouth Rocks it was typesetting, but she gave that up because of her skin – the lead was going to spoil her complexion. Next she wanted to be a chauffeur, then it was agronomy and flower cultivation. Then it was target shooting, then she was leading other people's children around the park by the hand. And all to no purpose, all for nothing. And then she took to raising chickens, and now it's the French language ... "

"Does she often scold you?" asked Levin.

"She curses me through and through ... As soon as she notices that a person – me, in other words – has appeared, off she goes: gr-gr-gr-gr, blah-blah-blah-blah."

Levin stopped by a pole, held his notepad against it, and noted something down.

"You know the way to *The Transport Worker*'s editorial office? Give this note to the editor, comrade Levartovsky. I'll phone him and explain everything and then he'll ask your wife to come and work there. They'll accept her for the time being as she is, without French, but later they'll insist she learn it, as a journalist. Your wife's just playing about, so let her take on a real job. French lessons can serve as a bait – but then she's going to have to take them seriously. First of all, though, she can do something simple, like filling up water jugs."

Polutorny stood in happy surprise.

"Why, Emmanuil Semyonovich, you've taken a hundred kilograms off my shoulders!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, my woman! I mean my future journalist of a wife! Before eating, she weighs exactly a hundred kilos – she's a real petty bourgeois! Well, now I'll get down to some real labor, Emmanuil Semyonovich! I'll be able to push the wagons along by hand now, since that woman's no longer poisoning my heart!"

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Time was passing, more than half of his life had been lived ... After graduating from the institute, Emmanuil Semyonovich Levin had lived alone through all his best, mature years. His most solid and constant friendships were only with the railroad proletariat – his friendships developed through personal contact, mutual help in work, and affection. Without personal connection with people, Levin could not understand how to relate towards the working class: a feeling cannot be a matter of theory. But a feeling acquires strength and meaning only in the shared actions of friends and comrades, in the troubles and happiness of laborious labor.

Levin returned home from work. Darkness was growing weaker in the sky. Not taking off his greatcoat, the man went and stood by the window in his own room and began to listen intently to the noise of freight trains going far into the distance, escaping into the dawn. He had had to reschedule all the night's trains; he had himself sent every train on its way out of the station; he had accepted a newly arrived train for sorting; and he had got new trains ready for early morning departure.

The last through train was growing quieter in the distance; he could just hear the sound of the locomotive taking the slope at full steam. Levin opened the ventilation pane so he could hear the work of the train for longer, and more clearly. It was not in celebratory meals with friends, in midnight arguments, or even in the warmth of well-equipped domestic happiness that Levin found satisfaction or enjoyment. He could fall asleep during a conversation about the truth of life and awaken instantly at the anxious whistle of a locomotive. He deflected the hands of his wife and friends in order to leave for the station at midnight if he sensed sorrow and anxiety there. The wagons were full of goods: the flesh, soul, and labor of millions of people living beyond the horizon. He sensed these people more deeply than the loyalty of friends, more than love for a woman. The first service and aid for his concern about all the unknown – yet close – people living beyond the far ends of the railroad tracks out of Peregon had to be love. He loved and imagined all these distant people, everyone to whom and from whom heavy trains were travelling. For delight in a single beloved being is nothing unless it serves the cause of sensing and understanding the many beings hidden behind that unique person ...

It was already too late to sleep ... Levin stroked and caressed his own body, which was already far gone from weariness. But plenty of pure, whole strength was still languishing within him, and it was strange that he should be in a hurry to expend that energy quickly and to exhaust himself in labor and cares, so that another, unknown, better, happy heart could make use of the result of a life squandered without mercy to itself, for to Levin it seemed that he himself could never live a life of full value: he was a temporary, transitory being who would quickly pass by in historical time – never again would there be such anxious, uninteresting people, preoccupied with train cars and locomotives. And maybe this was a good thing.

Feeling melancholy, Levin began stroking the wood of the table; he had an urge to wake Galya up and talk with her as with a sister, perhaps to complain to her or to someone else, to any human being, if a human being were to appear.

But all through his life Levin had kept silent

when he was in pain, and his first pain had not gone away. Maybe it was then – in childhood – that his soul had been so shaken that it had begun to destroy itself and to sense, ahead of time, its own distant death. He was always able to picture, with precision, that childhood day, that nonetheless sweet day of a splendid, poor life. He was at school, sitting beside Volodya, who was not Jewish like himself, but Russian. Father David came in and began a lesson on the Law of God. He asked Volodya a question and the boy stood up awkwardly at his desk and leaned on it with inadvertent carelessness. The priest looked silently at Volodya, then said, "Look at you. You've been sitting beside a yid, and now you don't know how to behave yourself ... The two of you need to be separated." The entire class, all the pupils, silently looked at little Emmanuil, and Emmanuil noticed the smile, the satisfaction, and the pleasure on the faces of his own comrades. Emmanuil meekly opened his mouth a little so he could breath more freely through the pain and palpitations, and he gazed for the entire lesson at a desk where someone's small knife had carved the words: "want to go home." Father David himself was a baptized Jew.

Levin set off back towards the station; sometimes he did not feel like being alone. But there, running towards him, was a watchman; the man was hatless and, still far off, was already opening his mouth to shout something to the station chief. Levin began to run too, towards the man.

"Quick, Emmanuil Semyonovich, there's a phone call from Moscow, from Number One. The whole office is scared stiff ... they're holding a through train going north – the duty officer thinks there may be something urgent to deliver to Moscow, but who knows ... "

"Tell them to let the train go!" yelled Levin. "Who delayed it?"

"Comrade Yedvak," said the watchman. "Who else?"

In the operations room there were already about twenty people, without patience because of their interest. Levin ordered them all to leave, closed the door, and picked up the telephone receiver.

"Station chief Red Peregon here. I'm listening."

"And I'm Kaganovich. Hello, comrade Levin. Why did you come to the telephone so quickly? How did you have time to get dressed? How come – were you still up and about?"

"No, Lazar Moiseyevich, I was just about to lie down."

"Just about to lie down! People lie down to sleep in the evening not in the morning ... Listen, Emmanuil Semyonovich, if you cripple yourself at Peregon, I will seek the same damages as if you had damaged a thousand locomotives. I will check when you're sleeping, but don't you go making me into your nanny ... "

The dense, kind, distant voice fell silent for a time. Levin stood there without a word: he had long loved his Moscow interlocutor but had never been able to express his feelings to him in any direct manner: anything whatsoever would have been tactless and indelicate.

"It's probably nighttime in Moscow too, Lazar Moiseyevich," Levin pronounced quietly. "I don't imagine most Muscovites stay up all night, do they?"

Kaganovich understood and began to laugh.

"Have you invented anything new, comrade Levin?"

"Here we need to invent people all over again, Lazar Moiseyevich ... "

"That's the most difficult thing of all, the most necessary," said the clear faraway voice. A thin, groaning hum – the hum of electrical amplification – reminded both men about the long expanse of space, about wind, frosts, and blizzards, and about the concern they shared.

Levin told him about the work of the station.

The people's commissar asked Levin what help he needed.

At first Levin did not know what to say. "You have already helped me, Lazar Moiseyevich. Now I'm going to rethink myself all over again."

A pause. Again they could hear the work of the amplifier, the mournful whimpering sound of electromagnetic excitement overcoming the enormous spherical convexity of the earth. Both men listened silently to this torment of energy quivering across distance.

"Winter troubles me, comrade Levin," Kaganovich said slowly. "It'll be going on for a long time yet."

Levin winced. Kaganovich had been speaking as if to himself, and in his tone of voice could be heard thoughtfulness, humanity, and the anxiety of a genuine heroic soul. Levin waited for the right time, then answered, "It's nothing, Lazar Moiseyevich. We'll work, winter will pass."

Silence. Levin wanted to say still more, but his voice was in the grip of agitation. He was struggling with the secret shame of a happy adult person.

"Don't be too quick to comfort yourself, Levin," the commissar pronounced. "One must endure winter, grow during winter, and not just put up with winter because people say it's going to pass. A person should not even put up with his own self. If he does, he will become reconciled to the whole world – and the world, of course, is still bad ... Write me letters or ring up and ask to speak to me. Go to bed now. I wish you health!"

Levin walked away from the telephone and put his fingertips to his ribs, through his

greatcoat. He regretted that there was not enough goodness in his body to allow him to live through a whole new age without sleep.

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One of Levin's assistants, Yefim Yedvak, had the face of a sworn enemy of a Turkish sultan. He was an unusual person; you would have had to go a long way in the world to find anyone like him. There was nothing he couldn't do, but he never undertook anything except out of extreme necessity: only a direct threat of death would force him to accomplish life and movement. The chief universal evil, in Yedvak's view, was one simple circumstance: people work today on what should not be done before tomorrow, thus making everything whirl around and suffer. And so Yedvak himself never began any task until the last minute, but he always did it well and would finish on time. Levin often gave him difficult assignments with close deadlines. But all Yedvak needed was to understand – and then he could achieve any task. Never, though, did he think up anything himself, or try to be clever. In his free time at home Yedvak played the balalaika, drank fruit spirits, brought in young women and danced with them until the merriment led him into despair. Yedvak, a person of large but immobile intelligence, lived like a barge hauler from the old days: he could work like a master; he could live all the way to the grave without doing anything at all. Women – however many of them there were – did not put up with him for long. Yedvak's soul was probably of such spacious capacity that no woman had been able to build a family nest there, feeling she was like a sparrow in an empty tank wagon.

"You raging around?" Levin once asked Yedvak.

"I'm living," Yedvak responded.

Yedvak had worked previously at a large factory in Kharkov. Levin wanted to ask his advice: might it be possible to improve the work of the station by borrowing something from factories? Factories, after all, had been profiting for a long time from the experience of the railroads. This could be seen in assembly lines, for example, or in automatic signaling and dispatcher communication systems.

"It's not impossible," said Yedvak, "but it won't help. Our bosses and commanders are used to getting things done by using crowds of people, through sheer weight of numbers. When one person is needed, they use three. Our way is not to think but to endure."

"But do *you* think? You don't say anything at work either – and all you do at home is dance."

"*I'm* not going to start thinking, I'm not that kind of person. And if I dance, it's from grief, from the chaos at this point of my life, in Red bloody Peregon!"

Suddenly aroused consciousness turned Yedvak's face a dark brown. He had not been so conscious of anything for a long time; even his moustache had gone hard and was beginning to stand up, as if constructed from fish bones.

"The people's commissar said habit is destroying us. A person should be able to break a habit and start to live anew … "

"Oh yes," said Yedvak. "He's a commissar – I'm not."

"You sure aren't," said Levin. "Yesterday you delayed two trains for ten minutes – you had to round up five couplers to move two wagons. You should have been my grandfather: if he needed one cart, he always hired three. The first cart wasn't going to arrive, the pintle on the second cart was certain to bend – but the third cart, one way or another, would probably show up … "

Yedvak felt dazed and hurt.

"Chief, you must give me some tasks that are more harder for me. Feeble tasks make me feeble. Moving wagons is an empty business. There was a duty officer there – but I'm a specialist of another order!"

"So there were two bosses in charge, were there? You were hindering people in their work!"

Levin then entrusted Yedvak with the task of thinking how best to transfer factory-style methods into certain jobs at the station. Yedvak had no intention of thinking forever and so he started on his thinking then and there. He drew on all his memories of factories, of garages, of collective farms, even of women, and completely absorbed himself in the problem. Levin was satisfied. The man's uncouth ways, his barge-hauler boorishness, his empty expenditure of both mind and heart – all this was only a public show, the distorted mask of a proud and talented temperament that had once suffered some hurt. Yedvak was secretly a serious person; to recover his well-being, all Yedvak needed was a task in accord with his abilities and his pride.

In the evening, Levin lay at home, fully dressed but with his head buried in a pillow. Sometimes his head ached badly, and his heart would beat painfully and close by, as if against the bones of his skeleton. This state, however, seldom lasted long; it was necessary only to suffer through it in silence. At night, after resting a little, Levin went off again to the station. Not that anything dangerous was going on there – but Levin had begun to feel bored in his room; he believed that a transient, temporary person like himself possessed nothing that might enable him to live on his own. Perhaps true future people had already been born, but Levin did not consider himself one of them. In order to understand others, he needed to turn away from himself for whole days on end; he needed to pinch and adapt his own soul in order to bring it

closer to another person's soul – something that was always shrouded and bewitched – and so be in a position to attune this other soul from within to the simple labor of moving train cars around the station. In order to hear every voice, it was necessary almost to go mute oneself.

Stooping, Levin walked a long way down the tracks to the arrival yard. "Couldn't we start the preliminary information system in the place where the trains are assembled?" he thought, and smiled. How strange: he was accustomed to thinking with passion only about his work. What a boring person he was! Could any other human being ever find life with Levin of any interest? Hardly! How much life was still left him? Well, about twenty years. No, less than that, he had to complete his life faster; a radiant world, a brilliant society, would have no room for such an archaic figure as Levin, a man who thought only about schedules, commercial speeds, train car utilization, and ways to reduce the time a train stands stationary in a station ...

"No!" The solitary station chief laughed out loud. There'll be no such devils in the new world: they'll all have died out! Or else they'll have retired. They'll be blind old granddads, sitting outside a hut and telling stories ...

Levin remembered how children listen to a blind old man: they don't understand his words and don't attach any meaning to them. They look at his eyes, at his worn face, and all that interests them is that he is old and blind, and yet still isn't dying: were they in his place, they'd have died.

The chief returned home at midnight. Galya was already asleep. "I should train her up a bit and send her out to work on the hump," Levin decided. "Why keep her here, why have her expend her life on serving a single person? It's outrageous!"

He lay down in his bed, trying to fall quickly into a deep sleep, not for the pleasure of rest but for the coming day. He listened for a long while yet to the work of the receiving and outbound yards, the zero yard, the through traffic, the hump, the shunting ... The locomotives' signals were normal, trains were being sent off on their way, locomotives hauling trains were singing goodbye as they moved into the distance. Levin began to forget himself, and the light of his insomnia-reddened eyes began to fade in the inner dark of unconsciousness.

An hour later the telephone rang.

"The dogs!" said Galya, waking up in her room.

Levin opened his bloodshot eyes. His greatcoat and all his clothes were hanging on the headboard of the bed. Just in case, he at once took hold of the greatcoat with one hand – to put it on directly over his underwear if need be – and he glanced down to check where his boots were.

"Speaking," he said into the receiver.

"It's all right, chief, it's me, Yedvak. They were phoning from Moscow to ask about your health: were you asleep or not? As if you were some great and immortal person! I said Levin goes to sleep nice and early in the morning. We don't want any more noise from Moscow!"

"But you've just woken me up!"

"Doesn't matter. You'll sleep all the sounder," said Yedvak.

Levin sat for a little while on the bed, then dressed and went to the station. He had had an idea for increasing the standard load of a wagon and he wanted to talk with the carriage men now. There was enough of a safety margin in the strength of the axle set – it could carry a greater load.

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Translated from the Russian by Lisa Hayden and Robert Chandler.

1
One of the main classes of freight locomotives produced in the Soviet Union from 1932 to 1942. “FD” stands for Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the *Cheka* (the Soviet security service).