

CADET PLOSHKIN

by

ILYA VARSHAVSKY

Translated from the Russian by Gladys Evans

From the compilation "JOURNEY ACROSS THREE WORLDS"



Mir Publishers
Moscow
1973

OCR: <http://home.freeuk.com/russica2>

Captain Chigin glanced at the ancient chronometer hanging on the wall beside the electronic clock. Apparently, it was time!

He went to the door and locked it. That way he was more confident of not being caught. Then, from the left drawer of his desk, out came the spirit-cooker, two small silver teapots that doubled as kettles, and two tea-caddies decorated with dragons.

To be sure, an open flame in a spaceship was breaking regulations, but tea was tea and not one lover of this beverage would ever think of making it on some fool slow-neutron cooker. Besides, Captain Chigin might permit himself the liberty. Fifty years of service in space ought to give him some privileges. Space regulations were excellent in their way: iron discipline

aboard a spaceship was a must or it wouldn't be a ship, but a pig-sty. However, it would never do to apply the yardstick used for a greenhorn cadet to an old space-wolf like Chigin. Serve as long as Captain Chigin, and you'd have special privileges, too. So there!

It called for know-how, also, to make tea. Not the kind of slop they give you at astrodrome canteens, but a high-class brew—an elixir of vigour.

First you rinse the teapot and set it over the flame. When a faint steam comes from the spout, you dump in a portion of black tea leaves, put the lid back on, and set the teapot on the radiator. Let it steep for ten minutes. While waiting, boil water in the second teapot or kettle—only don't forget to put a little green tea in the cold water. What, you never heard of such a thing? Well, old fellow, that means you don't know what real tea is. Green tea, that's the ticket. That's the whole secret. Try it once, and you'll never want tea any other way. Well then, pour the boiled green tea into the first teapot, and put it back on the fire. Only now you have to watch it doesn't come right to the boil—or it's all spoiled. Fine! You can take it off and cover it with a tea-cosy. In five minutes the tea is ready. It should be drunk out of tiny china cups. Sugar? Now who ever drinks real tea with sugar! At the very outside, you can add a pinch of salt.

The captain sniffed the magic aroma and took a small sip of tea, savouring it for a few seconds in his mouth before swallowing, blissfully closing his eyes.

Setting the cup down, he pulled a leather folder from a desk-drawer, licked a finger that somewhat resembled a Weiner sausage, and leafed over the stitched pages that were yellowed by time. Aha, here it is!

"I, Captain of the S. S. Zhulan, due to short rations and being undermanned in the stoke-hole, am forced to discontinue the run, pay off the crew and turn the ship over to the local authorities.

"At the present moment, I have put into Colombo on the island of Ceylon, and will return to the Russian Empire by the first available company ship, in order to clarify the aforesaid statement."

The captain leaned back in his chair, the better to admire the even lines of penmanship.

"In order to clarify the aforesaid statement," he repeated with a smack of the lips, lifting his cup for a sip. "What style! Clarify the aforesaid statement!"

The captain was reaching for the teapot as somebody guardedly knocked at the door. He frowned, slipped the spirit-cooker back into the drawer, went to the door and unlocked it.

"May I come in, Master?" The first mate stood at the door.

Chigin gave a grin of satisfaction. They had borrowed the title of 'Master', like that of 'Captain', from logs of the old days and now felt quite at home when they used them. Try to find any other astronaut who was addressed like that! Captain—that was for outsiders or the crew. But his close assistants were permitted a certain familiarity. Master—it sounded a bit of all right.

"Come in, Chief. Maybe you'll have a cup of tea?"

The first mate released a deep sigh. He could not stand the captain's special brew, but to refuse would mortally offend the old man.

"Thanks. A pleasure!"

Chigin took a second cup from the cupboard.

"What's new?"

"A radiogram from the space ferry. Bringing us out cadets—twelve of them."

"What year?"

"All freshmen. Twelve 'Capricorns', as they call their academy."

"Take them aboard through the starboard lock."

"Yes, sir."

"What else?"

"The doctor on board the space ferry radios that everything's all right—he has stocked up on all medical supplies."

"I see."

The captain mused. First-year students again. Young cubs. During launch overload they would lie like the dead; later, in weightlessness, they'd be space-sick all over the ship. A trial run, a so-called 'space-habitation of personnel'. What trash to call it that! Space-habitation. Imagine! Launching from a permanent orbit, then an elongated ellipse round Mars and finally a return to orbit. They should be put through a regular launching, then a landing on Venus. They would soon find out what 'space-habitation' was! Half of them would put in for a release from the space academy, or a transfer. But what could you do, since the spaceship Aldebaran had been dropped to category 4-E long ago, and no longer had planetary landing-rights. It could be used as a training base for another two years, and then....

"Thanks, Master. Your tea's really super."

"Wait a minute."

The first mate resumed his seat.

"Look here," and the captain loosened his uniform collar. "Look after the cadets yourself. The main thing is to set them to work right away. Nothing like idleness to corrupt youth. No easing off, in cases when they don't feel too good, and things like that. Iron discipline and work— that's the best medicine for all ailments."

"Shall we split them up to serve on different watches? "

"Certainly. By fours. Two from each watch will work for the boatswain. Tell him not to give them any leeway."

"And the others?"

"In the navigation deck, and the engine-room. They can change about every twenty-four hours."

"All a waste of time," remarked the first mate. "Just the same, it's a health-resort."

"That's just it, you must see it isn't a health-resort. Give them a hard workout."

"Not so easy, when everything operates automatically. Times aren't what they used to be."

"They certainly aren't," agreed the captain. "If you asked these green kids

what hounded them into space-academy, they'd be sure to spill out a lot of nonsense about space being romantic, full of adventure—but where's the adventure in it these days! Of course, before...."

"In our youth," nodded the first mate.

The captain banged on the table.

"That's not what I mean! Take my great-grandfather, for instance. He was captain of a steamship."

"A what?"

"A steamship. It sailed the seas."

"What for?" The mate's face wore a look of utter bewilderment.

"Well, steamships transported various goods."

"Strange. Whoever took it into his head to pull around goods out at sea, among all those oil-derricks!"

The captain shrugged. "There weren't so many derricks then, probably."

"An anachronism, just the same."

"Romantic," said the captain, thoughtfully. "People were different, then. Just you listen to this, now."

He opened the ancient folder, and read: "The said Sergei Malkov, whom I, captain of the S. S. Zhulan, while hound for the Russian Empire, lodged in a Cardiff marine hospital, was given his pay up to the day of docking, which fact is confirmed by this document bearing my true signature and to which is affixed the Great Seal of the Russian Consulate in the City of London."

"You don't s-say," said the mate.

"That was my great-grandfather, the captain of the S. S. Zhulan," said the captain smugly. "The log and the chronometer are old family relics."

"But to sail the seas," grinned the mate. "Whatever you say, it's still an anachronism!"

The captain frowned.

"You aren't reasoning properly, Chief. That wasn't like commanding a spaceship. It took a lot more than that. Courage, skill. And the sailing-ships, the clippers. What people sailed them in those times! 'Ease out the starboard royal-main-brace!' How does that strike you?"

"What the devil does that mean?"

"Oh, it was a command of some kind," said the captain, uncertainly.

"I don't get it," and the mate threw up his hands in dilemma. "I don't get it at all! What does 'royal-main' mean?"

"There's a lot I don't understand now, either," said the captain. "Before, I knew it as well as the palm of my hand, hut now I don't, begging your pardon. The year before last, I had to take a two-month course aboard the new interstellar ships. A certain flap-eared young feller gave the lectures. First time I heard him, I asked: 'How does it fly, sir?' 'Here,' he said, 'according to this formula.' And I told him: 'Young man, I'm not used to flying by formulas. I've flown everything,' I said, 'ion-craft and annihilation-powered craft but never yet by these here formulas.'"

"But the ship isn't really flying!" frowned the mate. "Instead, it's a matter of space rolling up."

The captain's red neck took on a purple shade— a clear storm signal.

"Rubbish!" he said, standing up. "Space—that's a myth, a vacuum; and it's impossible to formulate it. It would be like eating the hole out of a doughnut, but leaving the doughnut. No thanks, just give me a ship I can launch and land in. But spare me your formulas."

"With your permission, sir, I'll go," suggested the mate prudently.

"Take over, Mister. And I'll rest a bit."

The captain rinsed the two teapots under the tap, put away the tea caddies and, glancing at the chronometer, threw back the blanket on his bunk.

* * *

Under full sail, the barquentine tacked about, smoothly manoeuvring through the channels among the oil derricks. The salt spray stung Captain Chigin's sunburnt face as he studied the approaching shoreline through the spyglass.

The wind was rising.

"Lower away the fore-tops'l and the mains'l aft!" commanded the captain.

"Fore tops'l and mainsail aft lowered away!" The cadets nimbly sprang to action.

"Coral reefs—straight ahead!" called the man in the crow's nest.

The captain peered ahead. The white rollers of the surf beat angrily at the traitorous reefs, not more than two cable-lengths away. No time must be lost.

"All hands on deck!"

"All hands on deck!" The boatswain saluted.

"Cut the shroud-linos, cut the top-lift, masts overboard!"

The watch below swarmed up the rigging with axes.

"Captain, we're sinking!" screamed a young cadet, pointing at a giant, white-topped wave rising above them.

"Blast it all, too late!" The captain cast a last look round the barquentine's deck. A better ship you wouldn't find, but how could she hold out against such powerful breakers. So long, men! You were a good crew!

Crash! There came the crack of splintering, broken planking, the cries of the drowning, the roar of the surf. The giant wave swept over his head, tumbled him over and over, blinded and choked him. His strength was gone!

The captain went down like a stone. But what was this? Trumpet peals, the beat of drums, wild screams. A crowd of people were swimming toward him—naked they were, with green skin.

"Aha, got you at last, Turkey!" howled one old man with a long green beard, swimming ahead of the rest.

"How did they get hold of my nickname?" wondered Chigin.

"Caught you! We've caught you!" howled another with an ugly green face. "Write out the formula of rolled-up space—and you'll be our chief. If you can't—it's death!"

"Death to Turkey!"

"Ugh, the devil!" The captain raised his head from the pillow. "To dream such things!"

He turned over on his back, trying to figure out where the noise was coming from.

A sudden guess made him leap from the bunk: The cadets in the forecandle. All right, boys, now you'll get your space christening!

The captain went below to the cadets' compartment, and froze to a stop at the door.

Great Ti-ka-tu, what a row they were making! The feast was at its height. All the food doting mothers had loaded their poor sons with, for the long space run, was being got rid of with unbelievable speed. Tomorrow these kids would keep to their bunks, moaning and holding their tummies. Chigin was willing to bet that not one would stand his watch. But now—hot, burning faces, gummy mouths that howled a rollicking song to the sound of an electronic accordion. The same idiotic song that Captain Chigin hated so much, all about a brave lad in space.

The captain's nostrils widened, sniffed suspiciously. No, it hadn't gone that far, apparently. But, just the same....

*When we end our stellar journey
In some cosmic Timbaktu,
We'll be patted on the noddle
By Almighty Ti-ka-ta.
In reward for all privations,
They will give us bubble-and-squeak.
We'll be tucked in bed by a Nanny
With a third eye in her beak....*

So rang the song howled by a freckle-faced fellow, dangling his legs from his bunk, oblivious of everything around.

The captain's anger was slowly ripening, like fruit under the rays of an autumn sun.

*A woman's skin is fragrant,
Underneath, it's dust to dust.
Women kiss us—what do we care? —
Let them kiss us if they must!*

This was a bit more than even a training-ship commander could stand.

"As you were! 'SHUN!!!"

The noise momentarily stopped.

"It's Turkey, you guys!" came a voice from above.

The captain clenched his fists. Again that nickname, curse it! Where did they pick it up?

"Petty officer, stop forward!"

A loan, young fellow approached.

"You're the petty officer?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, my lad," said the captain with deceptive gentleness, "number one,

keep in mind that when a superior officer enters the forecandle you're supposed to give the command 'Attention!' Have you got that?"

"Yes, sir. Certainly, sir."

"Well, then. Go ahead."

"Atten-tion!" the fellow squeaked out.

The captain frowned.

"Louder, petty officer!"

"Atten-tion!!"

"Not good enough!"

"ATTEN-TION!!!"

Chigin glanced at the cadets standing at attention.

"At ease!"

"At ease!" repeated the petty officer, in an unexpected basso. Somebody snickered.

"That's number one," repeated the captain. "Number two, you don't sit on the bunks in the forecandle. You have thwarts for that."

"What's that?" queried a voice from above.

"Thwarts."

"But what are they?"

"That's a naval term for benches."

"A-ah."

"Number three, all food is turned in to the galley. There's no nurse on board, and nobody to give you enemas."

The captain could have sworn that he heard somebody behind him clearly pronounce the word 'blockhead'. He turned sharply, but there was nobody there. Apparently, he was mistaken.

"Give the accordion to the first mate."

A low murmur swept through the forecandle.

"Beg pardon, captain," said the petty officer hesitantly, "you can't...."

"Can't?" Chigin interrupted him. "Not in the regulations. On return to Earth, you'll get your accordion back. You're not here to sing songs, but to work. Have I made myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," said a voice from somewhere. "Perfectly clear!"

"Then all's ship-shape! Remember, I won't stand for idleness on board."

The captain swept his eyes round all the gloomy boyish faces and turned to the door.

"SHUN!" cried out the petty officer.

"At ease!"

That's the way to do it. Always, thought Chigin. A little firmness from the very first, and these young roughnecks will soon be mild as lambs. Whatever you say, it wasn't by chance that they gave Captain Chigin the command of a training ship. Above all, the job called for an experienced hand. No formulas for you, young feller-me-lads!

Gripping the hand-rail, the captain shot a glance back over his shoulder. The cadets were packing their provisions into a large suitcase.

The very moment the right foot of the Aide-bar and ruler was firmly set on the first step of the companionway ladder, a shattering blow landed on

his head. The figure that had jumped down attempted to slip between the captain's legs, but was grabbed by the scruff of the neck on the instant.

"Who's this? Your name!" roared Chigin.

"Cadet Ploshkin." Grey eyes with long and curving black lashes gazed mockingly at the captain. So help him, Chigin had heard that voice before, somewhere. Aha! 'It's Turkey, you guys!' So that's who he was—a lookout!

"Ploshkin, you say?"

"Ploshkin."

0 for the blessed times of the old clipper ships! A dozen lashes and twenty-four hours in irons. That would be the thing, all right!

"So, it's Ploshkin?" The captain's powerful arm raised the puny creature by the collar.

"Ploshkin."

"Then, hear me, Ploshkin. Find the bosun and tell him the captain gave you five watches out of turn."

"Is that all?"

"That's to start with," said the captain reprovingly, letting his prisoner touch ground again. "Just to start with. In general, Ploshkin, it looks as if you're going to get many and many an extra watch, but that will come later. Shake a leg now. On the double!"

Receiving a paternal cuff on the head in farewell, Ploshkin dived into the forecabin.

"Ugh, what a day!" The captain wiped his sweating neck with a checked handkerchief and headed below decks to the engine room.

Three mechanics were practising witchcraft over the centrifugal-gravitation generator. From the expression on their faces, Chigin realized that even here nothing good awaited him. Chewing his lips, he silently watched them tap the insulation.

"The windings are broken down," said the chief mechanic, noticing the captain. "We'll have to change them during weightlessness."

"You have four hours of weightlessness," said Chigin, "according to plan. You will manage it in that time."

"Fraid not," said the second mechanic. "No hope at all. It's two days' work."

The captain was on the point of opening his mouth to remind them that all of this could have been done during the last twenty days of forced idleness on constant orbit, but changed his mind and, with an absent shrug, headed for the lift. He knew only too well the futility of arguing with the mechanics. They always had some excuse on tap.

"Lift's not working," said the chief mechanic. "Why not?"

The other shrugged. "You know the time's up for the second auxiliary reactor. Inspection's due."

"And why didn't you call for an inspector?" "I did, but he said it wasn't worth while wasting time on such an old crock. 'You,' he says, 'should've been put in dry dock long ago.'"

"In dry dock!" snorted the captain indignantly. "It's not that pipsqueak's job to decide who's to go in dry dock. Soon as we finish the run I'll go to the

Head Inspection Office."

"Operating life of the rocket-engines will be up in a month's time," added the chief. "Then you won't get away with anything less than a complete overhaul, all new installations. Last year...."

"Okay, I know what's needed just as well as you!"

He was already well up the ladder when he heard the condoling voice of the chief mechanic.

"Our Turkey's a complete nervous wreck."

"He's long overdue for dry dock, too," observed the second mechanic.

That was the last straw needed for Chigin's patience to finally break.

Unfortunately, though the valiant descendant of the S.S. Zhulan's captain was referred to in official documents as commander of the auto-propelled space-training base, his officers and crew consisted only of a first mate, a doctor, three rocket-engine mechanics self-elevated to the rank of engineers, and one able spaceman who was sometimes boatswain and sometimes cook, depending on the work he did at the given moment, seeing that all was ship-shape or opening tins in the galley.

On this last two-faced Janus fell all the weight of the captain's anger.

"A pig-pen!" he roared, stamping a foot encased in a size twelve boot. "A waterfront dive! The hand-rails haven't been cleaned since the last run! The cadets' forecandle is a pig-pen. Pipe up a duty detail and have everything shining and ship-shape in two hours. Got that?"

The surprised cook put the bag of flour he was carrying on the floor, and in the wink of an eye became a brave boatswain.

"Yes, sir. Pipe a detail of cadets!"

Say what you like, but Captain Chigin could certainly keep discipline.

"That's right," he added, calming down. "Make them work, old fellow, and see they're not idle for even a day. By the way, there's a certain Cadet Ploshkin. Today I gave him five work details—that's exactly enough to polish all the hand-rails."

"The driver of the space ferry wants to know if you've any commissions for Earth," broke in the mate. "He's getting ready to de-lock."

"Let him go. No, wait!" The captain scratched his head. "Hold him up for an hour."

"Why, sir?"

"Because," growled the captain vaguely, "he may be needed. And now, ask the doctor to report."

A few minutes later, the doctor entered the captain's cabin. He was carrying a package of perforated cards.

"You called me?"

"That's right, Doc. How're things going at your end?"

"Quite all right. Received the medical supplies, and checked all the medical certificates."

Chigin cast a disapproving glance at the perforated medical certificates. He put little trust in all these electronic diagnostic computers.

"Hm ... mm.... That's why I called you. Give the cadets personal check-ups. All of them. So it won't be like the last time—one with a stomach-ache,

another with whooping cough, still another with a lump under the arm that stops him working. I don't need any free passengers on board. Give them a thorough medical check-up, and if you've the least suspicion—back to Earth they go."

"Certainly, but...."

"Precisely, a thorough check-up," said Chigin, heavily. "That's an order."

"Very well." The doctor gave a shrug, and left.

Groaning, the captain unlaced his boots. The, devil! In the end, no matter how much you trained yourself physically, steeled your will, something inside you kept count of every day you lived with abominable accuracy. And when you were getting on for seventy, there were moments you were reminded of how many years, hours and minutes had been marked on your balance-sheet. That's how things are. Yes, sir. And no reason to hold it against an old man if, for a good cause, he sometimes cuffed one or another snotty-nosed lazybone or rated a negligent bosun. A ship had to be kept Bristol fashion, or it wasn't a ship but a kindergarten. That's what a ship is, without discipline—if you want to know. In the old days, you see, on the old clippers.... Chigin reached out and took from the shelf the tattered log-book in cloth binding, and was carried away into a mysterious world of waterfront dives, buried treasures, gales at sea, fights with pirate ships even to grapnels and boarding-parties. An irresistible, spell-binding world the captain so longed for in his heart, tired as it was with the monotony of humdrum life in space.

As for the doctor, knowing that no concern in the world is so important that it needs immediate attention, he filled a glass with water and added

a pinch of silvery powder—the Stimulator of Pleasant Experiences. In a few minutes, he was buried in delightful recollections of three unforgettable Earth days he had spent in the society of a very charming young lady.

Meanwhile, having awaited the hour agreed upon, and after joining the mate in emptying the traditional small decanter of weakened whiskey, the space-ferry pilot de-locked and began his return trip, after wishing the Aldebaran crew a lucky run.

* * *

It was 3.45 in the afternoon Earth-time, when the first mate brought Captain Chigin back from the kingdom of fantasy and adventure to sad reality.

"Fifteen minutes to count-down from orbit, Master."

The captain sighed, clapped shut the old logbook and headed for the flight deck.

"Pipe all hands," he said, thoughtfully, pressing the emergency-signal button.

A few minutes later, a green eye lit up on the control panel: the engine-room reported the rocket engines ready for launching.

"All to stations, and weigh anchor!" Chigin fed the flight-information into the computer and grabbed the microphone of the radio while he awaited

the report from his cybernetic navigator.

"Cosmos-3, Cosmos-3. This is Aldebaran. Do you read me? Over and out!"

Silence. Only a crackling of static from the radiovideophone loud-speaker, and the screen was blank.

"Cosmos-3, Cosmos-3! Come in. This is Aldebaran. Over and out."

Again without result.

"Cosmos-3, Cosmos-3!" Chigin hit the black videophone box with his fist. "Cosmos-3! Blast, the devil! How many times have I asked for a repairman, even for this junk.... Cosmos-3!!!" Even the live green eye winked on the panel, from the thunder of the captain's voice. "Cosmos-3, this is Aldebaran. Why the devil don't you answer?? Cosmos-3!!!"

Suddenly the grinning mug of the flight-controller appeared on the screen.

"Beg pardon, Captain, but Sparks from the Transolar Station was passing on a joke, see? It seems a certain person...." The image vanished, and the frosty screen was crisscrossed by black, wavy lines: somewhere close by, one of the new interstellar ships in rolling-up space.

"Cosmos-3!" The captain waved his hands helplessly. Have to wait until that bedevilled space let signals through again.

"A really marvellous joke!" Again the video-image showed a toothy grin on the screen.

"Ye-es. ." said Chigin, uncertainly.

"What's up, Captain?"

"Can you clear me?"

"All documents O.K.?"

"All correct."

"Then scramble. Only, this time don't revv up all rockets at once, when you launch. Last time you left black rocket-burns all over our sheathing."

"Training schedule calls for a triple-pressure power launch," said Chigin. "They're absolute greenhorns, these Capricorn cadets. Freshmen!"

"So you make a slow launch from orbit for half a million air-miles or so, and then give it the gun so they get the feel of a ten-power rocket launch. I have no practising students here to do a clean-up job for me."

"Okay," said Chigin. "Nothing will happen to your sheathing. I've already tuned in the cybernetic navigator. So long!"

* * *

"Turkey's in his cabin?" asked the doctor.

The first mate put a finger to his lips.

"Yes, but you'd better not go in. Or he'll force his slops on you."

The doctor made a face. He was still nauseous from the blessings of Earth life, which he had had too much of for the last three days. In such a condition, the very thought of the captain's tea made him gag, involuntarily. All the same.... No, really, he couldn't put it off. Hesitantly, he took hold of the door-knob.

"Has anything happened?" asked the mate.

"It's this way. The old man took it into his head to set up a medical check-up per capita. And I was fool enough to do the silly thing!"

The mate's face clouded with anxiety: "There's infection!"

"Worse!" Giving the mate a salute, the doctor opened the cabin door. "May I see you, Master?"

"Come in. A cup of tea, perhaps?"

"No thanks. I've come on a matter relating to duty, sir."

The captain frowned. To refuse tea, made by the captain in person. That was really too much.... "I'm listening," he said, dryly.

"The thing is...." The doctor stopped in confusion. "The thing is that Cadet Ploshkin refused to come for the medical."

"Aha, Ploshkin again!" The captain's eyes lit up with a predatory gleam.

"Why did he refuse?"

"He says that he's ... that she's ... a girl!"

"Who's a girl?"

"Cadet Ploshkin."

For several minutes the captain silently stared at the doctor, trying to picture Cadet Ploshkin in a silk dress with a rose in her hair. In his recollections, girls were always like that. Something was missing. Why, of course. The hair—shaved close and ear-high!

"Nonsense," grunted Chigin. "It's impossible. Girls aren't accepted in this academy."

"But she's not really a cadet. That's her brother—Cadet Ploshkin. Before take-off, he got sick and stayed on Earth."

"Then how'd he get here?" The captain was at an absolute loss. Since the fellow stayed on Earth, he couldn't be here. If he was here, then how? Dropped in out of space, appearing like the Cheshire cat?

"He didn't. He stayed on Earth, but his sister, Inessa Ploshkina took his place, and is here on the ship."

"Wha-at?!!" It suddenly dawned on the captain. Those amused grey eyes with the curling black lashes....

"Cadet Ploshkin, report to the wardroom!!" roared Chigin, banging his fist on the table with all his strength.

* * *

"...To the doctor of the Spaceship Aldebaran, for showing indifference denoted by failing to carry out the captain's order in the time required, this is a last reprimand with a warning, for conduct made clear from the aforesaid.

Captain Chigin."

"Made clear from the aforesaid," the captain repeated aloud, and took a fresh sheet of paper from the packet on his desk.

"The aforesaid Inessa Ploshkina whom I, Commander of the Spaceship A Idebaran, discharged from ship, is being transferred...."

The captain hesitated, and put the end of the pencil in his mouth. Easy to say—transferred. The space ferry could not reach them here. Hand her over to a passing spaceship! The devil a one would show up on a training route.

Impossible to turn back. That would mean breaking off the run, and he would be the butt of each joke told in all space-ports! 'Did you hear about the trick played on our Turkey?' No, what to do with Inessa Ploshkina was not at all clear from the aforesaid. Let her live on the ship with the cadets? Impossible! 'Women kiss us—what do we care!' The captain thought about his niece. The last place he would care to see her in, was the cadets' fore-castle. Rascals, Grade-A devils!

'A woman's skin is fragrant.' Just wait, you'll still hear from Captain Chigin on that score.

The captain pressed his hands against both temples. What a situation!

That's the one to blame for it! From the wardroom, through the half-open door, came a muffled sobbing.

The captain swore and leaped from his chair. "Collect your things!"

The sobbing grew louder.

"Collect your things and move into my cabin!"

"And you?" In the wide-open, still tearful grey eyes, there was so much meekness and submission to fate that the captain felt awkward. That's bad. Mustn't yell at her so. After all, she's a girl, he thought to himself.

"I'll sleep on the couch in the mate's cabin," he said gruffly, staring down at his feet. "And you ... you make yourself comfortable. The bosun'll come in a moment, and make up your bed."

* * *

Inessa reacted badly to weightlessness, and Captain Chigin stormed his thunderbolts of anger down on the heads of the mechanics, who were outrageously taking their time to change the gravitation generator windings. Not having much faith in the boatswain, Chigin tidied up the cabin after the girl, and made her hot tea when she was nauseous with space-sickness. And even laughed good-heartedly at her request 'not to put in that terrible green tea—an unheard-of impertinence that would have cost any other bold spirit his life.

"You know," he told the first mate one day. "she's a very sweet girl. So quiet and modest. She told me her story. She lost her mother and father in a car accident. Now she's a complete orphan, and lives with her brother."

"Modest!" snorted the mate. "Modest, with the fine tricks she plays!"

The captain frowned.

"You don't understand, Chief. The girl's drawn to romantic things—conquering far planets, and all that. You see, in our time, young people have nothing else to dream about but space. And besides, she loves Stevenson."

"She loves who?"

"Stevenson."

"Also a cadet?"

"Stevenson's a great writer of ancient times; he wrote sea adventure tales."

"An anachronism," said the mate. "Your sea tale is an anachronism. Better tell me what to do with this Ploshkina! Weightlessness is over. Shall

we put her on duty?"

"On duty?" The captain scratched his head. "No, why on duty? Why, she's a ... a passenger."

Several days passed by, and Inessa had every comfort on board the spaceship. The captain's whole library was at her disposal, and the cabin floor was littered with the books she had read, well mixed with wrappers from the sweets she had swallowed with no less ardour than she downed the sea stories.

Inessa ruled the wardroom as completely as the cabin.

Captain Chigin, with his own hands, piled her plate with the most appetizing titbits, and at the end of the meal was the first to come up and gallantly kiss her slender fingers, invariably saying, "Many thanks to our dear hostess."

But most surprising of all was the behaviour of the doctor. After hating chess all his life, he sat for hours at a time over the chessboard with the passenger, deriving unaccountable pleasure out of every game he lost.

Meanwhile, a veritable hurricane was raging in the captain's romantic soul. The run was coming to an end, and the very thought that the Aldebaran would soon lose its little mistress made the captain build the most fantastic plans. At last he made up his mind. Yes, by heaven, he thought. Why shouldn't old Chigin adopt this wonderful girl? After all, she had no parents, and the Aldebaran was desperately in need of a radio operator. In the two or three months it would take her to finish a crash course, Captain Chigin could have her appointed radio operator on his ship. Yes, sir, on that score, you can rest assured!

Life is a tortuous affair, and a man never knows what devilish joke she may spring on him. And this time, capricious Fate confronted the captain in the person of the Aldebaran's doctor. One glimpse of his embarrassed face, and the captain instantly felt that something was wrong....

"Master, perhaps you could tell me," began the doctor, playing with the edge of the tablecloth. "Do space regulations permit a space commander to perform marriages on board?"

For a moment, Origin's imagination was lit up by an alluring picture: on the port side, a line of cadets in parade dress; and on the starboard, the crew. Inessa wearing a wedding dress and white bridal veil; the doctor in a severe, dark suit. And in the centre, playing the main role in this wonderful ceremony—himself, the great grandson of the captain of the S. S. Zhulan.

But it lasted only a moment. A hundred devils armed with red-hot pitchforks began tormenting the captain's heart. Inessa! To lose the girl now, when his plans were all cut and dried! To hand his daughter over to this scoundrel? More than once had the captain heard of the earthly adventures, or meanderings, of this Aesculapius. Not for anything would he do it! After all, Captain Chigin was not to be made a fool of, either!

"Do you think," he inquired coldly, "that Inessa...?"

"I don't think she'd be against it," and the doctor modestly lowered his eyes.

The captain breathed hard. Things were worse than he had thought.

"The girl's still too young to marry," he said, examining a hairy fist. "And as for performing a marriage ceremony, I really don't see any possibility. None at all," he repeated, opening his leather folder. This usually served as a sign that the captain no longer desired to continue a conversation.

From that day on, Chigin surrounded Inessa with even more attention, and the poor doctor began spending most of the time in his cabin, seeking forgetfulness in the silver grains of his Stimulator of Pleasant Experiences.

* * *

Such things on a training cruise are rare. An asteroid that had lost its way in the outer space was due to cross the Aldebaran's trajectory. When bearings are not changed upon meeting bodies direct on course, or intersecting the trajectory, a collision is unavoidable. This is a truism every cadet knows.

It is hard to say now just why the old computer on the spaceship checked the calculations three times before yielding up the results to the cybernetic navigator. The important thing was, that when the command was given the asteroid was threateningly close. An accident was avoided by gunning the starboard manoeuvre engines, giving them full power.

This was before dinner.

Further, everything pursued the eternal and immutable laws of mechanics.

The ten technical units of the mass of the captain's body, impelled by their latent inertia, surmounted a distance of five metres and landed on the fragile body of the passenger, pressing it against the bulkhead.

Before anybody realized what had happened, the starboard engine was switched off, and the only witness was the figure lying stretched out on the floor.

"Doctor!" bellowed the captain, snatching Inessa up in his arms.

The thunderous echoes of the captain's voice had barely ceased before the doctor stood in the doorway.

"Quick!" he cried, pressing his fingers to the thin wrist with its delicate blue veins. "I don't think it's too serious. Bring me my bag from the surgery."

This was the only case in the annals of the A Idebaran when the captain carried out orders from an underling, and at the double.

"Now," said the doctor, opening his bag. "I will ask outsiders to kindly leave."

"Outsiders!!" The captain sighed, and meekly closed the door behind him.

Though Captain Chigin had experienced a long and difficult life, the next ten minutes of waiting were the hardest he lived through in all his seventy years.

"How is she?"

The look of the doctor did not presage anything good. His collar was undone, hair mussed, and great drops of sweat stood on his forehead. He sat down on a chair, and gave a tired wave of the hand.

"Speak up! What's the matter with her?"

"Captain," said the doctor, emptying a half decanter of water at one gulp.

"Captain, she's not a girl!"

"Wha-at?" It seemed as if, one moment more, and the captain's eyes would leave the place nature had intended for them, burst forward and burn everything in their path. "You mean to say you took liberty of ...!"

"Ex-actly! I took the liberty. The spine was bruised, and I had to put on a compress. She ...is as much a girl as you or I. An absolute run-of-the-mill fellow, and a son of a pig, to say the least! He confessed everything. Made a bet with the cadets that he'd spend the whole run in the captain's cabin, and do nothing. He has no sister, he's not an orphan. His father's some big shot in Space Management. What a fix we're both in, Captain!!"

Anyone who could have seen Captain Chigin at that moment would have realized where he got his nickname 'Turkey' from. Within several minutes, the captain's cheeks took on all colours of the rainbow, changing alternately all the way from red to indigo. And when he finally opened his mouth....

But it is not worth repeating here what Captain Chigin said when he opened his mouth. After all, the days of the clipper ships are long over.