

ALEXANDER YASHIN

Levers

The Collective Farm Office was dimly lit by the usual oil lamp. The battery set crackled noisily. Music could be heard only faintly. Four men were sitting round the heavy square table. The smoke was so dense - nearly as dense as during a mass-meeting - that the flame in the oil lamp flickered precariously. It almost seemed as if it was the smoke that made the wireless cough and splutter. On the table a small earthenware pot served as an ashtray; it was already brimful. From time to time a carelessly dropped cigarette-end rekindled the embers and Tsypishov, the bearded cattle-breeder, would cover the pot with a broken piece of glass. And as he did this, somebody would invariably tease him : " If you burn your beard, the cows will lose all respect for you." And, just as invariably, Tsipyshov would reply : " Well, who knows, they may even increase their yield if they're no longer frightened." And they all laughed.

The ashes they threw carelessly on the floor or the window-sill, into the ends they dropped into the ashtray.

They sat thus a long time, talking unhurriedly about this and that, confiding in each other like good friends, without fear or apprehension.

Through the smoke haze there could be seen on the timber walls some old posters and slogans, a list of the Kolkhoz members together with the monthly total of labour days to their credit, the tattered fragment of a wall-newspaper, and a blank blackened board divided by a white line into two equal halves : one half was inscribed ' black-list,' the other ' redlist.'

" Only the other day, though, the Co-op received another delivery of sugar," said Shchukin, the Kolkhoz storekeeper, the youngest of the company. His dress already betrayed urban fashions: he wore a shirt and tie, and from the breast pocket of his jacket a fountain-pen and a comb were sticking out.

"How do you know - who reported it to you?" the third man, asked with a sly smile. He was a stout, flabby man with only one arm. Over his shoulders he had thrown a worn waterproof that still betrayed its army origin.

" Nobody denounced him to me; Mikola and his wife themselves sent me a few pounds - we'll settle for it later, they said."

" And you accepted it?"

" Of course. If you don't, you'll spend your whole life without ever even tasting the stuff. Wouldn't you have accepted?"

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" Mikola certainly won't send you anything, Peter Kuzmich," Tsypishov laughed noiselessly, screwing up his eyes and looking sideways at the one-armed man. " He's angry with you. But Serge here is his pal " - he turned to Shchukin - " Serge didn't fire him, though he stepped into his job."

Until quite recently Serge Shchukin had been a rank-and-file member of the Kolkhoz. He had joined the party about a month ago, and immediately he had started going around saying that all key positions in the Kolkhoz ought to be held by communists and that it would be rather embarrassing if he — a member of the party - was not given promotion. Everybody agreed. They remembered that the Kolkhoz storekeeper had already been given several warnings for pilfering, and they transferred Shchukin to the store-room. At the General Meeting no objection was raised to this decision. Shchukin bought himself the fountain-pen and began to wear a tie. His predecessor went to work in the village Co-op. It was him they were talking about.

" Yes, I confess, I did accept some sugar," Shchukin said after a short pause, " But, all the same, there's no justice in all this. What's happening to the sugar, where's the soap, where is everything?" He took the comb from his pocket and began to smooth his thick unruly hair.

" You needn't worry yourself about justice now that you're our storekeeper," the fourth man said. He was middle-aged, but had gone grey prematurely; he was pale and obviously not in good health. He smoked without a break, more than the others, and hardly stopped coughing. When he stretched his hand to drop into the ash-tray a cigarette-end that had begun to burn his fingers, one could see that his big strong fingernails were black with soil, real soil. This was Ivan Konoplev, the leader of a Kolkhoz brigade. He had the reputation of being a decent but irritable fellow; he spoke little, but with biting sarcasm. But his sarcasm was free of contempt and nobody ever took offence. Shchukin was not offended by his words.

" Well, of course, justice is a good thing," Peter Kuzmich who was well-respected by everybody replied. " Justice - we're all for it. But there is another thing that I find difficult to understand. I'm puzzled by what is going on in our district office. First we are told - the Plan must come from below, **let** the Collective Farm decide what crops they want to sow. But then they refuse to confirm our Plan. Three times they've returned it already for revision. What's happened, I reckon, is that they must have looked at all the Plans submitted from below and found that, on balance, they didn't agree with their Plan for the whole district. And it's obvious the District Plan has been decided by somebody higher up still. There isn't much

we can do about it. It's like banging one's head against a wall: sparks flying all over the place but to no good purpose. Our Plan has been whittled down to nothing. That's justice for you - they don't trust us."

"In our district justice is given a place of honour on the platform - to flatter her and keep her quiet," said the pale Konoplev, dropping a cigarette-end into the ashtray.

"Yes," Shchukin agreed, "Justice is useful - but only at meetings and on special festive occasions - it's the same as with criticism and self-criticism. But when it comes down to brass tacks there's no need, it would seem, for justice."

Tsypishov's face suddenly expressed reserve and a vague feeling of embarrassment - obviously, he began to dislike this intimate conversation. "You just go on kicking but look out who you are hitting," he said bitterly to Shchukin but immediately changed his tone; as if regretting his rudeness. "Justice, brother, is one thing but . . . if we gave you a place of honour on the platform you, too, would forget the soil," he added laughing loudly. Tsypishov's beard grew not only on his chin but also on his cheeks, behind his ears, it was entangled with his thick ginger brows, hung heavily over his eyes, and when he laughed his whole face and heard laughed and his eyes twinkled from the unfathomable depths of his hair.

"The other day I went to the District Committee and saw the boss in person," continued Peter Kuzmich referring to the first secretary of the District Committee as the boss. "What are you doing to us, I say to him. The Collective farmers won't agree to change the Plan a third time, they'll be hurt. We need flax, I say to him. Even our best soil ought to be used for flax. Experiments . . . we've had such experiments before - what with rabbits and the new crop rotation systems. How many people have been ruined to no purpose. After all, if we can't make a living, the state, too, will lose. For a start, I say to him, let's use ten, even twenty hectares but not a hundred, not a thousand. When we get the hang of it, we'll extend it ourselves, we'll ask for more ourselves. But don't let's force the pace . . . 'No,' he says, 'we must, right now. We must,' he says, 'overfulfil the Plan. We must actively put into practice the party's new line.' Alright, I say to him, actively . . . but we haven't sufficient people, the soil needs to be handled properly and is our Northern climate suitable for this kind of thing? People need convincing. As Lenin pointed out - people need to be convinced actively. But he says to me: 'That's your job, to convince. We convinced you when we organized collective farms, and now it's up to you to convince others, to carry out the party line. You, he says, are now our levers in the village.' But from the way he said it I guessed that he himself

wasn't feeling so good. But he is rigid, he doesn't understand what the party wants of him, he's afraid to understand."

"The atmosphere is tense," Shchukin said as if in explanation of Peter Kuzmich's words, and again he reached for his comb.

"No, he won't be feeling so good. In spite of everything he won't be here for long," Tsypishov said. "He's adopted the wrong attitude, he's too severe. He won't listen to anybody, decides everything himself. People mean nothing to him - they're just levers. And that, in my humble opinion is what we mean by a bureaucratic outlook. Well, I look at it this way: when he calls a meeting, I would at least expect him to treat me as a human being, to talk to me in a friendly way. But no, he can't do without severity, it's almost a duty with him to be severe. And how he looks everybody over; then he begins to growl: 'Comrades, let's begin. Everybody present?' Well, after that we all just sit and wait with trepidation for the inevitable thrashing . . . If things aren't what they should be why doesn't he say so straight off - for one honest word the people are prepared to move mountains. But no, he just can't be frank."

"He thinks that the party's authority will suffer if he speaks bluntly, humanly. He knows well enough that all we get in the Kolkhoz is 100 grams per labour-day but he insists on saying: the value of the labour-day increases year by year and the Kolkhoz grows more prosperous in proportion. We've no cows left - but according to him: livestock-breeding in the Kolkhoz is being successfully expanded and consolidated . . . Why doesn't he say: I know things aren't going too well for you, it can't be helped, comrades, because of this, that and the other - but things will improve and we shall live better. If he could only put it that way, people would be willing to work hard."

"The atmosphere is tense," Shchukin again added to Peter Kuzmich's impassioned outburst.

Ivan Konoplev nervously finished another cigarette preparing, obviously, to say something - something harsh and caustic but suddenly he was seized by a fit of coughing and had to get up from the table. He moved the broom from the corner by the threshold and stood there for a long time coughing and spitting.

Tsypishov said with feeling in his voice: "I expect you've changed your tobacco again. How often have I told you to stick to a light mixture."

Konoplev was still bent over though his cough was less violent. He raised his head and said hoarsely: "Our district chiefs have forgotten how to talk to the people; they're embarrassed and ashamed - they understand the position very well but they're afraid to take the plunge. They're incapable of convincing anybody. So they rely on

levers. Of course, they can see the boarded-up houses in the village but they don't want to talk aloud about them. All they care for are nice round production figures in their reports. But what about the people, what are the people left with? . . . " And again Konoplev began to cough painfully.

" You'd better shut up now, or you'll be done for," Tsypishov said getting up from the table and going up to Konoplev. " You'll see, Ivan, we'll persuade the District Committee to get you a travel pass. Sea air will do you a world of good; you'll have a good look at how people live there, you'll learn a lot and when you come back you'll tell us about it. You'll give us new courage."

Konoplev waved his hand impatiently. Tsypishov returned to the table.

" His wife won't let him go," Shchukin said, " She's as sharp as a watchdog: she doesn't mind him coughing, smoking, drinking as much as he wants but she won't allow him to leave her . . . "

" Ours is just as good as sea-air," Peter Kuzmich said dreamily " We've plenty of good air. In the olden days people would cure their coughs in our pine forests. They used to distil tar there or collect pine-gum. You would live there for three or four weeks collect this gum and transfer it into barrels - without much effort you would have earned some money and your breathing would have eased. I wonder whether nowadays anybody buys this gum? I don't seem to have heard anything about it lately. They used to make it into turpentine and into some kind of resin for fiddlers. Nowadays I expect, they fiddle without resin."

" It's been replaced by plastic - by this stuff," said Shchukin holding up his comb. Nobody looked at his comb.

" Our lamp is going out," Tsypishov said, lifting his beard.

From the threshold Konoplev said : " We can't live without air. Even the lamp needs air."

Konoplev returned to the table, pale and breathing heavily.

" Now, that's how I see things," he said, " As long as there is no confidence in the rank-and-file peasant, things can't be right, and there'll still be a lot of suffering in store for us, They tell us: a new man was born. True - a new man. The Kolkhoz, they say, has changed the peasant. That's also true. Our peasant is different. Splendid ! But now that he's changed, they ought to trust the peasant. He has as much sense as anybody."

" Nobody has taken that from him yet." Tsypishov assented slyly. " Let them teach us. by all means, but let them also listen to us. But no, everything has to be handed down from the top. Plans from the top, chairmen from the top, even crop-fields are prescribed from the top. They haven't the time to convince the people; it doesn't matter

in any case, it's so much easier this way : just launch out, regardless of anything, and keep on ' recommending.' Cultural work has been wound up - it's too much trouble; clubs and reading-rooms figure only in reports; there's nobody to conduct classes or give lectures. All that's remained are the various delivery campaigns and money-raising efforts: Five-day campaigns, Ten-day campaigns, Monthly campaigns . . . "

Konoplev paused to catch his breath and Peter Kuzmich seized the opportunity to say :

" It's like this : if you can't drive the axe into the tree, blame the tree - it's rotten. You just try not to agree with the District Committee. They claim to give you advice, to make recommendations - but all they really do is to give instructions. If you don't carry them out, they'll say you've slackened the reins. If the Collective farmers disagree - it's a political failure."

" But why, why a failure?" Konoplev almost shouted. " Haven't we all the same cause at heart, don't we all pursue common interests?" " If anything goes wrong, the District Committee, too, get into trouble. They're also expected to produce results."

" Results, indeed," Konoplev said heatedly. " Next door to us, in the G. District things are run differently. The other day my brother-in-law stayed with us. In their District, he says, no chairman shakes in his boots when he is summoned by his superior to the District office. They just aren't afraid. The secretary himself drops in at the Kolkhoz without formalities, talks to people himself, directly, without any red tape."

The wireless on the shelf suddenly grew louder. It still crackled and spluttered like an expiring fire-extinguisher. A halting voice could be heard reading out letters from the Virgin Soil Territories. Then a young boy spoke about his work and his successes in the Altai region. The four listened.

' We're all called Muscovites here though we come from different towns. We stick together and stand up for ourselves. Last year's harvest was a record. The wheat stands as tall and strong as reeds. Even the old men can't remember the like. There wasn't enough storage room though, it wasn't easy . . . ' The boy then addressed his ' dear mother' in such a voice as if he had never pronounced the word mother before. The microphone obviously frightened him.

" You see," Peter Kuzmich said, " even there they have their troubles: no room for storage." He pointed in the direction of the wireless; his weatherproof slipped from his left armless shoulder.

" We can't all go to the Altai," Konoplev growled, but a new attack cut him short, he got up, took the ashtray into both hands and went to the threshold. He kicked the brush aside and emptied the cigar-

ette-ends into the corner.

And suddenly they discovered that throughout their conversation another person had been in the room. From behind the wide Russian stove they heard an old woman's peremptory voice :

" How do you like that! It won't be the cripple who'll sweep it up. I've just scrubbed the floor and they're messing it all up again."

The men were so much taken by surprise that they looked at each other trembling with the sudden shock.

" You still here, Marfa? What d'you want?"

" Want . . . I'm watching you. If you set the office on fire, it'll be me they'll drag to court. The timber is dry - just a spark, God forbid

" You go home now."

" I'll go in my own good time."

The men fell silent. They all seemed to feel guilty for some reason or other. For a moment street-noises, the rustling of the wind and a distant song could be heard.

Serge Shchukin switched the wireless off.

Again they began to roll cigarettes, tearing small pieces off a newspaper. For a long time they smoked in silence . . . And when they started talking again, their sentences were short and non-committal, about nothing in particular, not addressed to anybody in particular. About the weather, how awful it was and how it affected one's health ; about newspapers, the many different kinds there are, some of them no good at all, you can't even smell the tobacco if you use them to roll your cigarettes; then something was said about yesterday - somebody should have gone somewhere or other but hadn't. .. then about tomorrow - one ought to get up really early seeing that for once the wife was going to make pancakes . . . Idle talk - and yet now their voices were muffled and they kept on looking round the room and at the stove, as if behind the stove was hidden not Marfa, their char-woman, but some outsider, some mysterious intruder against whom they had to be on their guard. Tsypishov had grown serious, he took no part in the conversation, no longer smiled, only once or twice ho asked :

" What's happened to the teacher? Why is she late? We ought to start the party meeting."

Shchukin suddenly began to behave a little strangely; he restlessly moved on the squeaking stool under him; his young impudent eyes sparkled slyly as he looked defiantly at the others. Shchukin seemed to have suddenly discovered something that nobody had noticed before, and that made him feel superior to the others. At last, he could not contain himself any longer and burst out laughing :

" My God, how this damned hag has frightened us," he shouted,

Peter Kuzmich and Konoplev looked at each other and also laughed.

" Regally, what a witch. To roar like that suddenly from behind the stove. Well, I thought to myself . . ." Ivan Konoplev finished the sentence only with difficulty. " I thought to myself the boss himself had come and taken us by surprise . . ."

" We were as frightened as little boys in the neighbour's apple-tree."

Their laughter had cleared the air and they began to feel at ease again.

" And what are we afraid of?" Peter Kuzmich said suddenly pensively and a little sadly. " Look what we've come to - we're afraid of ourselves."

But even now Tsypishov refused to smile. He pretended not to notice that both Peter Kuzmich and Konoplev were laughing and looked reprovingly at Serge Shchukin.

" You're too young yet to laugh at that kind of thing. When you've lived through as much as . . ."

But now there was no stopping Shchukin. He realised that Peter Kuzmich and Konoplev sided with him. They winked at him encouragingly and went on laughing.

" Yes, yes, we're afraid of ourselves," Konoplev said.

Marfa kept silent.

Two boys entered the office.

" What is it?" Tsypishov turned to ask them.

" May we listen to the radio?"

" Impossible. We're having a party meeting."

" And where are we to go? There are more of us outside."

" Go wherever you like."

Tsypishov turned round to look at his friends and to make sure they approved of his conduct. Peter Kuzmich disapproved.

" Listen," he said to the boys, " We'll get through our business quickly and then you come in here and take possession."

At last Akulina Sergeyeвна, the teacher, arrived; a very young person with an almost girlish figure. With tired movements she untied and took off her grey woollen headscarf and sat down in the corner under the shelf with the wireless. With her arrival even Tsypishov revived a little. But, nevertheless, he adopted a somewhat severe and bossy tone towards her :

" What's the idea to keep us all waiting?"

Akulina Sergeyeвна looked guiltily at Tsypishov, at Peter Kuzmich, then at the ashtray, the lamp, and lowered her eyes.

" I was delayed . . . at school. I'd like," she said, turning to Peter Kuzmich, " to settle one problem before we start the meeting. We

have no firewood left at the school..."

" We'll talk business later, Tsypishov interrupted, " We must first hold our meeting. The District Committee has been insisting for a long time that we hold two meetings a month, and we can't even arrange to minute one. How are we going to explain this state of affairs?"

At this Ivan Konoplev sighed and Tsypishov again for a moment seemed embarrassed and to have lost his self-assurance; he looked round timidly and apologetically. But (hey all remained silent. Now Tsypishov finally adopted a harsh and overbearing tone . . . His beard opened out and lengthened, his eyes harshened and lost their former sparkle. To the charwoman Tsypishov now spoke in a tone that brooked no contradiction.

" You, Marfa, leave us alone. We're holding a branch meeting here."

Marfa had become aware of the change - she obeyed without murmur. " Of course, of course; I understand. I'm off."

When the door had closed behind a chastened Marfa. Tsypishov got up and pronounced the same words which on similar occasions were spoken by the secretary of the Party's District Committee; and he even pronounced them in the same dry, severe, and as it were conspiratorial voice.

"Let's begin, comrades. Everybody present?"

As he said this, he seemed to be pressing the switch of a magic mechanism : everything in the room began to be transformed beyond recognition - the people, the objects and even, it seemed, the air Shchukin and Konoplev noiselessly moved away from the table Peter Kuzmich remained in his seat but he gathered up his water proof and put in on a bench nearby. The teacher pressed herself closer to the wall in her corner. Everybody's face showed signs of tension, concentration and boredom; they seemed to be preparing for something that had been long familiar but had still retained its importance and solemnity.

Their native sense of the realities of life was blotted out: the action had been transferred into another world, into a complex, alien setting the significance of which remained a mystery to these simple kind folk.

" Everybody present?" Tsypishov repeated, looking round ponderously as if at least several dozen people were present.

But altogether, as we know, there were five of them. The cattle breeder S. Tsypishov was the branch secretary. He had been elected: recently on the recommendation of the District Committee. Highly flattered, Tsypishov tried to play his part as well as he could and, being inexperienced in these matters, he began to imitate ' the Dis-

trict boss' in all manner of ways. True, sometimes he laughed at himself but all the same, he carried out all instructions from the top zealously and literally - out of fear that otherwise he might make a mistake. But things could not have been worse if from time to time he had failed to interpret instructions faithfully. The regional instructor of the District Committee who had been present at Tsypishov's election had remarked jokingly that comrade Tsypishov had many good qualities but that, of course, he also had some shortcomings; the most important of these shortcomings was his beard. Tsypishov had taken this seriously, an instruction, and he had decided that the beard and other hair would have to be removed from his face without fail, but so far an appropriate occasion had not yet presented itself.

Peter Kuzmich turned out to be the Kolkhoz chairman. Ivan Konoplev, as was mentioned already, was a brigade leader. S. Shchukin was the storekeeper. Since Shchukin had been made storekeeper and his predecessor had been struck off the register because of his transfer to the co-op store, there had been no rank-and-file collective farmer in the party branch. Akulina Sergeyevna was looked upon as an intellectual though she was a native of the village and depended on the Kolkhoz in all things.

" I call on the Kolkhoz chairman, comrade Peter Kuzmich, to report on the first item on the agenda."

Peter Kuzmich rose.

Tsypishov sat down.

The party meeting had begun.

And now happened the very thing they had, just now, so frankly condemned as red tape, pedantry and bureaucratic callousness.

" Comrades!" the Kolkhoz chairman began, " The District Committee and the District Executive have refused to confirm our production plan. It seems to me that we have failed to provide for certain things and others we have allowed to drift. We can't afford this kind of thing. We haven't carried out explanatory work amongst the masses and we have failed to convince them. But, comrades, it is our task to convince the masses. You and I, comrades, are the party's levers in the village - this has been pointed out to us by the District Committee and the District E.C...."

The teacher stealthily tied her scarf again round her head, her race was completely hidden and nobody could have guessed her thoughts. Shchukin again smiled. He took the fountain-pen from his pocket, unscrewed the top and screwed it on again, then he pulled out his comb, looked through it at the lamp, softly blew at its teeth and put it back - without combing his hair this time. His face broadened out in a malicious grin and a sly mocking light sparkled

in his eyes. Any moment now, it seemed, Shchukin would again burst into hilarious laughter. But he only nudged Konoplev and whispered :

" Now can you see what's up ? Can you recognise him ?"

Konoplev also smiled but his was a forced, unkind smile :

" Never mind, let him have his say. That's as it should be. Pete Kuzmich is performing his official duties now. We do here as they do in the District. Like master, like servant."

" But what about honesty? What about truth?"

" Truth will prevail, you'll see. Very soon, brother, it will find way to us and we shall hear its voice."

" Very soon we'll have reached the end of our tether."

" No, we shan't."

And Konoplev reached out to move the ashtray nearer . . . He suppressed his cough though from his chest strange gurgling and whistling noises could still be heard . . .

Peter Kuzmich spoke only briefly. The gist of his report was that the district would doubt their ability and efficiency to fight for the party line of the Kolkhoz crop rotation plan for next year was not amended immediately and unreservedly in accordance with the instructions of the District Committee and the District E.C. All those who spoke in the discussion, expressed their agreement. Nothing else could have been expected.

In the discussion Akulina Sergeevna, Shchukin and Konoplev have spoken. There were no differences of opinion just as there had been none earlier, during their friendly conversation; it is true, of course that now their harmony and unanimity had a rather different, one might even say, a completely inverted significance.

Tsypishov was gratified by these proofs of communist solidarity he himself took the floor to report on the second point of the agenda. It appeared that one of the secretaries of the District Committee had somehow found out that no politico-educational work was carried out in the Kolkhoz. This very unsatisfactory state of affairs he had duly reported to the First Secretary of the District Committee.

" We, comrades, fail to give encouragement to the best element; amongst us," Tsipyshov said in reference to this report, " and the backward elements are not punished; there's no competition. As an illustration, take this " - he pointed to the board inscribed ' black list' and ' redlist' - " it speaks for itself. The masses must be given leadership, comrades ! I suggest that we work out a few projects and offer a couple of prizes. These would be awarded to one or two people whom we select from each team . . . And, of course, a few chaps must be fined, to keep a just balance . . . We can rely on the support of the District Committee . . . "

The meeting decided unanimously to pick five prize-winners and three people who were to be fined. The discussion turned on one point only : which of the projects should provide the prize-winners and which the people to be punished. There was no time to put even a single motion on paper - Marfa returned to tidy the office and to lock it up. Peter Kuzmich moved that the secretary should draw up the motions.

" You'll know what to say," he whispered, delighted that the meeting was coming to an end. " Our high level of productivity has created conditions in which throughout our Collective farm are deployed . . . "

" Throughout the country . . . " Shchukin corrected him.

They quickly prepared to leave. It is more than likely that their feeling of relief at having done their duty was matched by a feeling of embarrassment and self-dissatisfaction. Outside footsteps could be heard, the door opened and a crowd of youngsters appeared.

" Is it alright now?" asked one of the lads who had earlier called at the office.

" Yes, alright," Peter Kuzmich replied. " You're just in time. Come in, all of you."

The cold air from the street rushed into the room. The flame in the oil lamp grew brighter, chairs were moved. Somebody opened the window.

" How can you stand this smoke?" the girls said.

When the young people appeared, Akulina Sergeevna straightened herself and took her scarf off again. These were people of her own age, in their company she could breathe more freely.

Serge Shchukin circled round the room, tugged at his tie and attached himself to the girls.

The wireless was switched on again and this time its tone was clear and loud. Announcements about the preparations for the Congress of the Party were being read. Everybody listened.

Peter Kuzmich, before leaving, said in an unexpectedly mellow voice : " You'll get your firewood, Akulina Sergeevna, don't worry. I'll make arrangements."

And Tsypishov went up to Shchukin and patted him on the back : " You're staying?"

" Yes."

" All right - but see to it there's no mischief . . . "

Walking along the muddy street, the Kolkhoz chairman Peter Kuzmich and the brigade-leader Ivan Konoplev again began to talk about life in general and their own life in particular, about their work . . . in fact, about the things they had discussed before the meeting.

" Now we shall see what the Congress has to say," they repeated over and over again. And as before, they were decent, kindly, honest people - people, not levers.

Translator's Note.

Yashin's first prose work, ' Levers,' was published at the end of 1956 in the Second Volume of *Literary Moscow*. The publication of this Collection - just after the Polish and Hungarian 'events' was the last significant manifestation of the Soviet literary thaw. Its reception by Party writers and critics - after a short period of puzzled silence - foreshadowed a new phase of rigidity and intimidation.

In the first important review of ' Literary Moscow,' D. Eremin [*Literary Gazette*, 5th March, 1957) condemns the general tendency of the volume as ' nihilistic, biased, and hostile to many basic aspects of our way of life.' Yashin is charged with ' indifference, cold detachment and pessimism.'

Eremin's pronouncements were echoed at a series of regional meetings of the Union of Soviet Writers and, finally, at the III Plenary Session of the Committee of the Union of Soviet Writers held in Moscow from 14th to 17th May. In his final speech A. Surkov, the secretary of the USW, warned his audience against the dangerous example set by the Polish and Hungarian writers and accused Yashin and others of giving aid and comfort to the enemies of socialism by maintaining their ' conspiracy of silence,' i.e. by stubbornly refusing to retract their mistakes.

Meanwhile, on May 13th, at a meeting of writers with the Central Committee of the CPSU, and again on 19th May, at a reception given by Khrushchov to "writers, painters, sculptors and composers, Khrushchov himself had intervened and condemned Dudintsev and the refractory contributors to ' Literary Moscow.' Extnac'ts from Khrushchov's speeches were published only in August 1957 (*Kommunist* No. 12).

A few days later *Literary Gazette* began to publish a series of panegyric endorsements of Khrushchov's speeches. On 3rd September, 1957, a statement by A. Yashin appeared in which he accepts Khrushchov's criticism and endorses his definition of the Soviet writer's duty to follow the party line. He quotes with approval Khrushchov's ' Those who firmly adhere to the party line, will 'always be with the people.' Yashin goes on to confess that he failed to live up to his responsibilities and to understand that ' to serve the party means to serve the people'; it is precisely the acceptance of this fact that ' gives to the Soviet writer the feeling of complete freedom and helps him to interpret correctly severe criticism of errors in his creative work.'

Alfred Dressier.