

The Blue Sea

Boris Pilnyak

Translated with an introduction by

G T Owen and D M Pursglove

Boris Pilnyak (1894-1938) was the pen-name of Boris Andreyevich Vogau, of Jewish-Volga German descent. Born in Mozhaisk near Moscow, he spent his early life in Saratov, Nizhny Novgorod and Moscow. His first book, *The Naked Year* (1922) dealt with the civil war between the Reds and the Whites which broke out after the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917. But *The Story of the Unextinguished Moon* (1926) landed Pilnyak in serious trouble as it explored the suspicious death of Frunze. Frunze was the People's Commissar for War and candidate member of the Politburo who died in 1925 at the age of 40, very probably at the instigation of Stalin. Pilnyak was forced to recant, admitting to a "gross error" but from then on he was a marked man. *Mahogany*, published in 1929 was immediately banned in the USSR because of the favourable light it shed on Trotsky, the arch-enemy of Stalin and once again Pilnyak was in grave danger of arrest. However it seems he enjoyed the protection of Maxim Gorky. He attempted to make amends with his book *The Volga falls to the Caspian Sea* (1930) a rather forced eulogy of the Five-Year-Plan as well as his travel impressions of the United States (*O'Kei*, 1932) but he was never a communist and saw no reason why he should become one. Such heresy together with the death in 1935 of his protector Gorky left him wide open to Stalin's henchmen who finally arrested him during the purges of 1937 together with millions of other real or imagined opponents of the regime. In April 1938 he was brought before one of the notorious revolutionary courts, found guilty of the usual trumped-up charge ("Enemy of the People") and summarily executed by firing squad. He was rehabilitated after the death of Stalin in 1953 but his books only became available in the Soviet Union in the late 1970's.

Commentary on the Blue Sea.

This translation, the only one known in English, was a collaboration in 1989 between myself and Michael Pursglove, then senior lecturer in Russian at Exeter university. I was responsible for most of the translation and many of the footnotes while Pursglove researched the wider historical context in which the story took place. It was published on-line in the *Literary Magazine* in December 2005. However, the present translation is a slightly revised version incorporating stylistic improvements together with an introduction and commentary.

The *Prince* was one of twenty-one British ships out of a fleet of twenty-seven which sank in the great storm which hit Balaclava on 14 November 1854. She was known to be carrying winter clothing for the army besieging Sebastopol and rumoured to be carrying gold to pay the troops. The press guessed wildly at the amount involved: 300,000 dollars, half a million pounds, even ten million roubles. Unsurprisingly, expeditions were mounted to search for the treasure by Italy, France, America, Germany and Japan. In 1923 an expedition was mounted by a newly formed Soviet organisation called EPRON, a Russian acronym for Special Underwater Expedition but it was the Japanese expedition of 1927, the subject of Pilniak's story, which claimed to have found the wreck of the *Prince*. Previous expeditions had found neither the wreck nor the gold.

The Blue Sea was published in the journal *Novy Mir* in 1928 when Pilniak occupied the prestigious post of chairman of the Moscow branch of the All-Russian Union of Writers and was republished under the title *Pod Vodoi* (Under the Water) by EPRON in 1936. However, Mikhail Zoshchenko undertook research in British parliamentary sources and established that any gold the *Prince* may have been carrying was off-loaded in Constantinople.

At one level, the *Blue Sea* reads as a piece factual reportage, using names of real-life people and based on documentary evidence. But Pilniak makes dubious assertions such as that the finding

of the skeleton of a diver proves that the British raised the gold themselves. It is now thought that they were attempting to find ways of removing the sunken wrecks blocking the entrance to Sebastopol harbour. At another level, this account of a Russian-sponsored Japanese attempt to salvage a British ship in Russian waters reveals Pilniak's fascination with all things exotic which contributed to the suspicion in which he was held by the Soviet authorities. He had been to Japan and had written up his experiences in *Korni Yaponskogo Solntsa* (Roots of the Japanese Sun, 1926) and the combination of a Japanese team, fishing and cooking in Japanese style clearly fascinated him. His mention of Norwegian fjords, Virginia cigarettes, Panama hats etc adds to the international flavour of the story. Opposed to this diversity is the unifying omnipresence of blueness – the blue sky, blue light and above all the blue sea into which he descends. Ultimately, perhaps, it is Balaclava itself which dominates the story, the town he terms in the last line as the "harbour of Symbols".

1.

On the 14 November 1854, during the Crimean War, the British warship *Black Prince*¹ sank without trace in the Black Sea just off Balaclava.² Humanity keeps the register of all ships which sail the world's high seas. The *Black Prince* was a British troop carrier, the first iron-built vessel of the Navy, a two and a half thousand ton, four-boilered ship also fitted out with sails. She approached the Crimean coast on 12 November 1854. Balaclava bay was occupied by the allied fleet at war with Russia and laying siege to Sevastopol. On 12 November she cast anchor in the outer Balaclava roads and extinguished her boilers. She had brought from England four million pounds sterling (forty million Russian gold roubles) to pay the troops. Queen Victoria, the Englishwoman who had tricked Russia, had also sent a diamond sword to be presented to the commander.

At midday on the 14 November, a severe storm broke over the Black Sea, the memory of which has remained with Balaclava fishermen to this day. They recall that even the Genoese towers, standing about half a verst³ inland, were drenched with the spray of the waves breaking on the shore. Military historians record that the storm destroyed thirty-two ships of the allied fleet, including the *Black Prince*. The Russian historian of the Crimean War, Lt-Gen. Bogdanovich, described the storm and the destruction of the ships in these words.

The French and English ships tried in vain to cast their anchors into the sea; the savage waves snapped the chains and severed the anchors; the ships became playthings of the storm, crashed into each other, broke up and disappeared into the watery depths. It was impossible to remain on deck without holding fast to the rigging⁴.

Nothing - or very little – is known about the fate of the *Black Prince*. The storm drove the ship towards the shore. The boilers had been extinguished. It was impossible to manoeuvre the ship by its sails. The captain ordered the masts to be dismantled in order to relieve the anchors and they were thrown into the sea. The result was a catastrophe. The mizzen-mast fell into the sea before the ropes could be cut, was dragged under the stern-post and the ropes got entangled with the rudder. The ship, now out of control, was doomed. The captain gave his last order; abandon ship! Of the 255 crew, only one survived to describe the last moments of the *Black Prince*.

¹ Her actual name was *Prince*. The epithet *Black* was attached by the Italian expedition which failed to find either the wreck or the gold.

² The storm which hit the Crimea on 14 November 1854 and the damage it caused is well attested in contemporary documents. In Kinglake's exhaustive study of the war, he quotes the following account from the Journal of the Royal Engineers.

Among the 21 English vessels wrecked was the *Prince*, a ship containing everything that was most wanted.; warlike stores of every description, surgical instruments, guernsey frocks, flannel drawers, woollen stockings and socks, boots, shoes, watch coats – in short, all that the foresight of the government could devise for the equipment and comfort of the troops.

A W Kinglake, *The Invasion of the Crimea*, 1880. Volume 4, chapter 7.

³ A verst is equal to about two-thirds of an English mile.

⁴ The source is M A Bogdanovich *Восточная война (Vostochnaya Voina)* St. Petersburg 1876, vol. 3 ch.25. A French source adds the following information.

La perte la plus sensible, ou qui du moins fit le plus de rumeur, fut celle du navire à hélices Prince; il apportait d'Angleterre à Balaclava un demi-million de livres en souverains d'or, et, ce qui valait mieux dans les circonstances, toute une cargaison de vêtements de laine, d'habillements d'hiver pour l'armée anglaise.

C Rousset, *Histoire de la Guerre de Crimée*. Paris 1894, page 349.

Nothing more was heard of the *Black Prince*. The storm raged throughout the night. On the morning of the 15 November, the sea was blue and calm again and a golden sun shone in a blue sky. Together with 254 men, all the gold and Victoria's diamond sword had gone down with the *Black Prince*. Her last resting place was forgotten and all that remained was the legend of the *Black Prince's* sunken gold for anybody to find and recover. A cruel legend for gold is wealth and enrichment, one of those brutal and terrible forces which intoxicate mankind.

At the graves of Malakhov and on the ships during the Sevastopol campaign, sentries guarded piles of corpses of fallen soldiers; half a million poods⁵ of gunpowder were fired together with two million cannon balls and forty five million cartridges. All this is now forgotten. Not forgotten however is the *Black Prince's* gold. Frenchmen, Italians, Russians and Greeks have all searched for the wealth below but found nothing because the spot where she went down has never been located, forgotten in the watery depths.

2

How much blue, how much sun there is in the world! On winter nights in December it is pleasant to think of those countries in the south, bathed in sunshine under blue skies. I think of the Black Sea, the Sea of Marmara, the Aegean, the sea around Tsushima and the great ocean around Japan. I think of the lands around these seas and when I do I always see and feel the sun and the blue, that extraordinary sunshine and blueness of the sky and space, the most miraculous blue in the world.

Then one day in Moscow, in Povarskaya street, my friend the Japanese writer Kuroda Ottokichi told me that tomorrow he was going to the Crimea, to Balaclava for a few days where his compatriots were scouring the seabed in search of the gold from the *Black Prince*.

The thought of the golden sun and wonderful blue skies decided me to join Kuroda and travel to the Crimea and to the bottom of the sea. In the international carriages of Russian trains it seems you can travel according to prints mounted in each compartment. I have thus been to the ruins of Hellenic culture in Greece and there too I have seen the ruins of Genoese monuments. I have encountered Turks, who bear a fraternal resemblance to Crimean Tatars. I have been to England, that ruler of the waves. I have been to Japan and found it difficult to imagine Japanese in Balaclava which, before the birth of Christ, in Hellenic times was called Symbolon. Under the Genoese it was called Cembalo and only with the arrival of the Turks in the fifteenth century did it become Balaclava where, to this day, there remain the ruins of a Genoese fortress and Greek marble pathways. I wanted the place which had been a crossroads for Greeks, Turks, English and Japanese to be a crossroads within myself. The train was lulled by the night silence from Moscow to Kursk and by the endless, relaxing day from Kursk to Alexandrovsk. Kuroda kept his kimono on all day long.

⁵ A pood is equal to 16 ¼ kilos

In the USSR there is a certain organisation which has the ability to see not only forward into space but also many sazhen⁶ downwards under the earth or sea. This organisation is called OGPU. OGPU, among other things, controls economic organisations like EPRON, a body responsible for recovering sunken ships. EPRON has a diving school although it is not called a school as such but, according to nautical tradition, a “party”. The director is Dr K A Pavlovski and it was his divers, Chumak, Galyamin and Fedotov who found the remains of the *Black Prince* on the seabed. The honour of finding her, this golden legend, belongs to Dr Pavlovski but the rights belong to EPRON. It had always been assumed that she had sunk in deep water and would therefore be impossible to locate. But the diving “party” where young divers were trained, worked in the shallows.

Here are extracts from the divers’ log-book covering the days when the *Black Prince* was found.

17 November (1925). At 6.50 Chumak went down to survey the second half of Square III₃. The bottom was stony. Depth, 5-6 sazhen. The whole area was surveyed but no objects were seen. From Square III₃, a large object was noticed in Square III₂ and was investigated. It appeared to be of iron and resembled a steam boiler. At 9.20 the diver was brought up. At 9.30 Galyamin went down for a thorough investigation of the object seen by Chumak. Galyamin examined the object and confirmed it was a ship’s boiler. A little to the right and further out to sea a second boiler was discovered but slightly damaged. Proceeding further, a little to the right and further out to sea, a third boiler was found but severely damaged and nearby a fourth boiler was found, also very badly damaged. A ship’s funnel was found near the fourth boiler and two strips of channel iron. Also recovered were two fragments of the flues and a piece of iron (apparently a piece of the deck).

19 November. Chumak saw on the seabed large pieces of iron, a funnel, a steam boiler and two bits.⁷ A large piece of shell shrapnel, another piece (damaged), a medicine chest (inscribed in English with town and firm), an earthenware jar and a piece of copper from a type of hatch were recovered from under the stones and brought to the surface. Fedotov brought up an old hand grenade and a boiler pipe.

10 December.....on the seabed part of the ship’s side was seen with its ribs and three portholes.....

14 December. On the seabed the divers noticed a lot of iron. Voronkov saw a piece of lead piping sticking out from under the stones. Attempts to raise it by winch were unsuccessful. It was necessary to raise a few stones in order to recover more objects. It would be interesting to remove one of the stones with explosives to discover what lies beneath it.

From 17 November to 14 December the log-book also included, apart from the above, the following entries;

20 November. At 3.40 strong winds blew from Shaitan Dar⁸. The diver was brought up and we returned to Balaclava.

26 November. A powerful sea swell from the south west. Fedotov went down. Winds intensified. The swell increased. The diver began to roll. He was brought up and we returned to Balaclava.

1,2,3-8 December. Storm at sea. No work.

⁶ Sazhen, a Russian fathom, 1.83 metres.

⁷ A bitt is a post on the deck of a ship used for securing ropes and cables.

⁸ Valley of the Devil. A valley in the Taurid mountains surrounding Balaclava which opens directly on to the sea.

Although the *Black Prince* had been found, not once did its name appear in the divers' log-book because nobody had ever thought that the ship could have sunk 100 sazhen from the shore in only six sazhen of water and which on calm days might have been visible to the naked eye. The divers did not suspect that they had found the *Black Prince* on the main road, as it were, right under the cliffs on top of which stood the ruins of the Genoese tower. They wondered what sort of ship they had found and why it was buried under so many stones.

That winter, a copy of the divers' log-book found its way to EPRON in Moscow. All ships, wherever they sail in the world, are registered and, like people, have passports. The demise of all ships are noted as are their names, tonnages, draughts, steam power and sailing equipment. When the divers' log-book was studied in Moscow, it was noted that there were no records whatsoever of any iron ship sinking off Balaclava apart from the *Black Prince*. Plans and specifications of the *Black Prince* were found in the British shipping registers and they were checked with the objects recovered from the sea off Balaclava – boilers, their dimensions, the teak fittings, the bilge. The *Black Prince* had been found – or rather, what remained of her.

The divers had reported that the remains of the ship were buried under piles of stones. Dr Pavlovski added;

We would have had to lift these stones and put them to one side. Using explosives would not have been feasible because the bigger stones, shattered into smaller pieces, would have covered the exposed parts of the ship even more. Further investigation without removing these stones would have been pointless.

4

The concession for raising the *Black Prince's* gold was awarded by EPRON to the Japanese diver Kataoka. It was he who completed the picture of the loss of the *Black Prince* by explaining why she had not been found and how she had been lost. The description of her loss was drawn in sketches and noted down in mathematical formulae. The ship, having lost its steering and become the "plaything of the waves" as Lt.Gen. Bogdanovich described her, was driven sideways on to the rocks, smashed to pieces by the waves and sank there and then, a hundred sazhen from the shore. That same night, when the waves were hurled three hundred sazhen into the air towards the Don Tower, there was a landslide and the cliffs collapsed into the sea crushing the *Black Prince* and concealing her from human eyes. Terrible must have been that night, the November gloom, the torrential rain, the storm and hurricane, the ships being hurled against the cliffs, the cliffs collapsing on them utterly destroying them and their crews.

We arrived in Balaclava as the Japanese were diving to the seabed and dragging boulders about, each one weighing 1500 poods, in order to clear the area where the *Black Prince* lay and gain access to her remains. Kataoka, the leader of the expedition, a former sea captain, was a man with a world-wide reputation. Before the *Black Prince*, he had salvaged gold from the Japanese ship *Yasaku Maru* which had been sunk in the Mediterranean in 1915 by a German submarine in 200 metres of water. The *Yasaku Maru* was carrying gold. It sank in the open sea but its precise location was unknown. The British, French and Italians declined the opportunity of finding her because of the depth of the water and the uncertainty of its location. But Kataoka located her using mathematical

formulae and invented a new diving apparatus, once more using mathematics and his knowledge of the physiology of the blood. Kataoka recovered three million roubles from the bed of the Mediterranean and gained a world-wide reputation.

5

We remained in our compartment during the whole journey. Kuroda was in his kimono and all his belongings smelt of Japan. In the intervals between our conversations about the Black Prince and our memories of Japan, I read the *History of Genoese Settlements in the Crimea* by Nikolai Murzakevich, published in Odessa in 1827 and the academic journal *Antiquities of Taurid*. My friend Kuroda sat opposite me, his legs on the seat Japanese style and smoked, smiled and wrote an article about Murman where he had spent a week before our journey south. Every hour it got stuffier and stuffier in our compartment as the sun and blue intensified. The southern lands rose up before our eyes and with them, Japan. In the evening Kuroda talked about his childhood in Japan. During the night I watched him sleeping, his legs crossed in a way no European would sleep and I thought about how different sleeping habits were between East and West.

The monasteries of Inkerman woke us up with the sun. There was a holiday atmosphere in the train. Sunshine bathed the land in pellucid light. Kuroda and I wore white with sun hats to observe the holiday. The train sped between suffocating jet black tunnels and dazzling patches of sunlight before finally pulling in to the cool, white stone station of Sevastopol where the light threw green shadows. Tartars' teeth flashed blue in the sunlight. Greeks looked the colour of lilacs. One night separated Russia from Taurid, Kazyril⁹ and the Crimea. Under the palm trees by the station restaurant stood a Japanese, an interpreter, who came forward to meet us waving his straw hat. A large car roared up in a swirl of dust and drove us off. Poplars, glimpses of the sea, bullock-carts, our companion's smile, a short stop at a sleepy pharmacy and a telegraph office. The expedition was getting down to serious business. Yesterday they had raised some copper coins of Queen Victoria dated 1854. Kataoka was now out at sea. Breakfast and a bath were ready. Kataoka would call in the evening. Many Russian fruits and fish go well with Japanese food but rice is not available here and has to be ordered by telegraph from Moscow.

Balaclava, (Symbolon, Cembalo) is like a Norwegian fjord. Huge cliffs rise from the sea, crowned with the ruins of a Genoese fort. The water in the bay is deep blue. Poplars line the road and little houses stick to the sides like bird nests, those on the sea front at least two thousand years old.

We were given a room in the Rossiya hotel near a house leased to the Japanese and here it seemed we were back in Japan. A Japanese servant brought us tea and indicated the bath set up behind the kitchen made out of a sort of Japanese barrel in which the water was almost boiling. The house was empty and smelt of ink and the sea. The clerk handed me his visiting card. Divers suits were laid out in the corridor, their legs dangling down and looking like visitors from Mars. In the bathroom we were given Japanese towels with which you had to both wash and dry yourself. Breakfast awaited us in the dining room; pickled plums, green tea, fish with soya and rice. The sight

⁹ The reference is probably to the Khazars, Turkic and Iranian tribes who occupied what is now the Caucasus, Ukraine and the Crimea from the sixth to the tenth centuries AD. They adopted a form of Judaism. They are the subject of Arthur Koestler's book *The Thirteenth Tribe*.

of chopsticks instead of knives and forks and the flavours of the food transported me back to Japan. We smoked Virginia cigarettes. A motor-boat was waiting to take us out to the divers. On shore, the holiday mood prevailed; men and women were strolling along the sea front, northerners who had come for the sun sporting barbaric bathing costumes disgusting to behold, hardly suggesting the image of northern Hellenes. The boat rocked gently in the blue waters of the bay, edged towards the shore and the engine spluttered into life. The Japanese helmsman had wrapped his head in a towel. His national working garb left his arms and legs bare in a sensible and graceful manner.

The diving party, consisting of a steam-powered barge with cranes, a motor-boat, two diving barges and some dinghies, lay on the blue sea under the blue sky, the Don tower and the sheer cliffs, encircled by little flags on buoys. Kataoka came to meet us on the steam barge, a small man with a brown face the colour of roasted coffee, a man of world renown dressed in an oil-stained European working shirt and white gloves, just like all the other Japanese working on deck, whether deckhands or engineers. He smiled, revealing perfect teeth, doffed his Panama hat, shook our hands and introduced us to the other Japanese and to the Russian Dr Pavlovski, the man who had found the *Black Prince*.

When we arrived they were laying dynamite charges on the seabed. After greetings, I said I would be pleased to go down in a diving suit to the bottom. Kataoka agreed provided Dr Pavlovski permitted it, in other words, if I was fit enough. We then moved aside to observe the proceedings without interfering. The divers sank into the water leaving trails of bubbles behind them looking like enormous beetles or their larvae. On the seabed they laid dynamite charges in the form of landmines before surfacing again. The boats spread out like a fan. The foreman pressed the detonator. The sea shrieked and shuddered and the boats all came together again. Dead fish floated to the surface which the Japanese caught with great dexterity, gutting and beheading them with their thumbnails before swallowing the still struggling fish and spitting their tails into the sea. Like a fearsome maggot, the diver went down again, gave a signal and fastened ropes around the huge fifteen hundred pound rocks. The crane creaked into action and the steam barge moved the rocks out into deeper waters.

Doctor Pavlovski, dressed in the uniform of a Russian sailor with a gold-braided peaked hat on the back of his head and a vest revealing his chest, suggested a swim. Under the cliff hanging like a roof over us and among the stones which had fallen into the sea and where the water was not so much blue as green, I whiled away hours of sunshine, water and leisure. I lay in a crab-cool crevice between two enormous rocks, my legs trailing in green water. A gentle wave, sounding as if it were breaking on a pebbly beach, washed over my shoulders. A relaxed, holiday-like sensation stole over me. Konstantin Alexeevich Pavlovski listened to my heart to decide whether it was fit for those watery depths. The blue haze of leisure and cigarette smoke looked white against the sultry blue of the sky.

And so the day passed. At dusk we dined, Japanese fashion, from ten little dishes. At sundown we strolled along the cliff top. Night fell, a night of female laughter along the promenade, a starry sky, the song of the sea, whistling guardsmen, heady perfumes and intoxicating darkness – a typical southern night.

We went to see Kataoka. He was waiting for us in his study, the nerve centre of the expedition. Alongside black American suitcases, doubling as portable wardrobes lay strange, unfamiliar objects. One corner of the room was full of bits and pieces which had been recovered from the seabed. The walls were covered with drawings and plans and behind them stood a camp-bed. On the table Japanese tea and delicacies of sweet beans and seaweed were laid out, European-style, together with English cigarettes.

Kataoka was wearing a cream flannel suit, looking quite white except for his brown, sunburnt face. His manner was deliberate and business-like. Kuroda interpreted for us. I asked whether there was a reasonable chance of finding any gold. He replied that the chests of gold, those one hundred chests which had been on the *Black Prince*, had shattered on impact. They would have to search the seabed with pumps and a sieve and even then they might not succeed in finding any gold if it had all been scattered by the waves. In that case, I asked, why had he taken the concession? "Gold".

"And if there isn't any?"

Kataoka's answer was firm. The whole world of diving was watching him, England, America, Japan – the whole world. If he didn't find the *Black Prince's* gold, then he would at least destroy the legend. That seemed to him to be worth the money. Kataoka was an artist, engaged in creative work. He began to speak again before I could question him further.

He asked Kuroda to convey to me that he and his twenty four colleagues and compatriots, his diving team with whom he had already raised a large number of vessels, great and small throughout the world, considered their work to be, above all, a responsibility to mankind. They felt this every minute of the day, he said, this brown-faced Japanese, smoking and eating his bean sweets. Great men have simple gestures. He showed me a Victorian copper coin which had been eaten away by molluscs and his face glowed with pleasure, pure and simple.

He suggested we go to a little restaurant on the sea-front and have a glass of beer. The night was warm and dark, often described as "velvet". I was able to form a picture of the life of this "Master of the Waters". He worked from dawn in his study on drawings, mathematics and background knowledge and on the sea on experiments and testing physical endurance. Russia was for him a distant, alien and incomprehensible country in the same way as some provincial port in Hokkaido would be for a Russian. In the evenings he would read Japanese newspapers and journals which arrived a month late, smoke cigarettes, eat rice with chopsticks, take nightly walks along the sea-front before retiring at midnight in order to begin work again at dawn on the secrets of the sea, mindful that he was being watched by the world which had acknowledged him as the greatest diver on earth. That evening, in a most deferential manner, I took my leave of Kataoka-san.

The next morning a wonderful feeling, unique and incomparable, spread over me; I was going down to the seabed. I have flown above the clouds, out of sight of the land below, have

travelled east and west, sailed over oceans and visited the Arctic and the tropics – but all this cannot be compared with going down to the bottom of the sea.

In order to descend to the seabed in a diver's suit, one must be in good health, especially the heart, ears and nerves. The heart has to cope with changes in the blood because with every sazhen of depth, pressure increases by one atmosphere, nitrogen forms in the blood and it begins to "fizz" like mineral water when you uncork the bottle. The ears must have strong ear-drums so that they can withstand changes in air pressure when used air escapes from the diver's suit. As for nerves, man is a terrestrial creature, fish die in air, pilots fly me up into the sky but under water in a diver's suit, my life is in my own hands and one must have strong nerves to remain in control. Learner divers first practise in diver's suits on land before going one sazhen under water and then one and a half sazhens.

It was a golden day. The motor-boat took me and my friends, in particular Vera Inber¹⁰, out to the diving party. Having heard that a writer was planning to dive, the Moscow-Balaclavan Hellenes in their bathing costumes gathered around the exclusion zone in their little dinghies. It was a beautifully hot day. I was to dive to the seabed under the supervision of Dr Pavlovski but under the guidance of the Japanese who could not speak Russian any more than I could speak Japanese.

The Japanese smiled and welcomed me. Dr Pavlovski made the final checks – heart, ears, nerves and rehearsed the signals with me, good, bad, return. I now put myself in their hands. The Japanese, tanned brown by the sun, their teeth flashing blue in the sunlight whenever they smiled, like those of the Tartars at the station, sat me down on a small bench while one removed my shoes and another my tie. They undressed me down to my underwear but in my state of dependency I felt no embarrassment. They then dressed me in a woollen jersey as thick as a finger and a similar pair of trousers. I immediately felt as if I were in a sauna. Taking off their headbands, the Japanese wiped the perspiration off my face. They then slipped me into a rubber suit which had been lying ready for me on the deck, holding it up by the legs so that I could climb into it. Inside it was suffocating. Boots made of lead and copper were the put on my feet, each one weighing a pood. A length of canvas was then would round me. They then placed me on the side of the deck. A copper ring weighting about one and a half poods was placed over my shoulders and screwed onto my rubber suit rather like a tyre is mounted onto a car wheel. Weights were hung from the ring, one on my chest and one on my back, each one weighing about thirty pounds. Further weights were attached by lanyards to my arms to prevent them floating about. The signalling rope was tied around my hips and tightened. Another five poods or so of weight were attached to me. Holding me under the arms, they put me on the ladder, up to my waist in water. I felt hot and happy. For the last time Dr Pavlovski said "heart, ears, nerves, good, bad, return" I held the signalling rope in my hands. Vera Inber was looking at me from her dinghy with concern while Kuroda was beaming at me. Pavlovski placed over my head the Martian-like skull-shaped diver's helmet, my last one and a half poods of weight and pointed out the valve which I had to press with my head to release the used air. The doctor removed my glasses. The helmet was screwed to the collar to form a hermetic seal. I was now cut off from the world and my head began to buzz with the noise of air being pumped down to me. Pavlovski waved.

I pushed myself away from the ladder to experience a sensation both of sinking into myself and into the water. The green water closed over my head with a splash. The red bottom of the boat

¹⁰ Vera Inber (1890-1972). Odessa-born poet and writer. She lived through the siege of Leningrad 1941-44.

in which Kuroda and Inber stood began to rise. Arms waving above the boat began to blur and assume impossible shapes, elongated and flattened. The wooden bottom of the boat swayed and heaved as if it were alive. Then it dissolved into the blue and disappeared. The elements, blue and strange, enveloped me. I tried to catch the rays of the sun, reaching me in two ways, like pointed arrows and like blini-shaped blobs. I released the valve and air gurgled out. My heart, starved of air, thudded in my ears. The pump forced in new air and my heart sounded like heavy artillery as it circulated the thickening blood. And then, through the blue-green murk, I saw the dark stones of the seabed. A little fish swam up to my face. I tried to catch it but it calmly swam off to the side before coming up to me again. My hand surprised me. It moved oddly, zigzagging back and fore like an accordion being squeezed and stretched. I had dived head first, a fact I noticed when I saw the stones on the seabed. I moved my head and shoulders and realised that the weights attached to me no longer had any weight. I was weightless. Next to me was a reef, twice as tall as me, encrusted with seaweed and mussels. The sunlight streamed down like arrows and blinis. Everything was murky, greenish-blue, other-worldly. My eyes could not penetrate the blue darkness. The seabed looked like an enormous bowl, the sides of which curved upwards and disappeared into the opaque obscurity. It was totally unlike our human world, totally immeasurable by human standards. I wanted to touch the reef but my hand would not reach so I stepped towards it. The reef moved away. Stones half my size lay underfoot. I walked like a Cyclops.

I approached the reef, reached out to touch it, stretching my hand upwards and promptly took off from the bottom. A large fish swam out past me from under the reef. Weightless, I floated up the reef, my hands lightly touching the stones. I walked away from the reef and found myself amongst the shattered remains of a ship's bilge. The portholes looked sinister, like a three-eyed monster stirring in the fractured rays of the sun against the opaque blue of the water. The ship's ribs were covered with stones. Here it lay, the *Black Prince*, the human legend of gold. A fish swam out of a lifeless porthole. My heart was choked with blood and my ears were on the point of bursting. I had forgotten to release the used air. I opened the valve; legs, heart and head felt exhausted. Here it lay, the *Black Prince*, the legend and its terrible fate, death on the seabed.

From above signals kept coming down to me.
"Alright?".
I regretted I had no signal to say "incredible". The fish had accepted me into their realm, swimming around me without the slightest concern. Never and nowhere had I ever seen anything like this. Here on the seabed, in the watery elements, totally different laws of physics, visibility, density, breath and life prevailed than on land. Sunlight slanted down like green arrows. The dead *Black Prince* moved but the movement was lifeless. An incredibly dark, other-worldly blueness engulfed it.

From above the signals kept coming down to me more and more frequently. I mixed up my own signals. Suddenly I began to crawl slowly upwards, against my will, and hung a few sazhen above the *Black Prince*. These minutes of suspension were like an eternity. I rose another sazhen. The seabed disappeared. Land was not yet in sight, just a blinding blueness, nothing else. My heart convulsed in its struggle with the blood which was on the point of boiling. In order to prevent the blood from boiling as a result of too rapid changes in depth, divers are brought to the surface very slowly, a sazhen at a time and held there for a minute or two. I was the diver and these minutes were like eternities. I saw the bottoms of the boats – land, human life! – and like a thirteen year old

began to wave my arms and legs, kicking out in a frenzy of joy as I greeted land and the people hanging out over the sides of their boats.

Dr Pavlovski wanted to check my heart but I waved him away. Thankfully, I crawled out of my rubber suit, proudly pulled my trousers back on and knotted my tie, warmed by the sun, and slapped the Japanese on their backs – *yurosigoza imasil* – very good.

In the evening, after dinner, the last Japanese meal I was ever to have in Balaclava, we went to the station to return to Moscow. I mischievously enquired why Kuroda hadn't come down with me to the seabed. He made a joke in reply and a knowing expression appeared on his face. He told me that after our departure the Japanese had strewn salt over the diving barge and boats because they believed that this would eradicate the female taint left by Vera Inber. From the summery Crimea we returned to autumnal Moscow.

The following morning, in the Ukraine, I woke up feeling utterly exhausted. Lumps and bruises had appeared on my shoulders where the diving ring had been placed and on my head where I had released the valve. My legs refused to function.

8

Many months have now passed and many years will follow. Whenever the world is suffused with blue and sunlight, I often recall, and will continue to do so, throughout Decembers, winters and nights those extraordinary moments that I spent on the seabed. The more those days recede, the more wondrous those moments seem to become in accordance with the law that miracles, while experienced, do not seem miraculous. I noted down in detail everything that I saw on the seabed but now they seem different to me, still magnificent but somehow impossible to express. My imagination conjures up improbabilities and when I think, especially at night, about the seabed, I drift into a strange sensation of blueness which permeates me through and through. Everything becomes miraculous, even myself.

The Japanese failed to find the *Black Prince's* gold but they found the wreck and so destroyed the legend. It was the English who had raised the gold soon after the loss of the vessel during the six months that they spent in Balaclava after 14 November. The English recovered not only the gold and Queen Victoria's diamond-encrusted sword but also the bronze fittings. Under the stones the Japanese found the remains of an English diver hermetically sealed in a diving suit. He had died on the seabed and the English had not bothered to bring the body to the surface. The Japanese did and in his pocket they found a page from a diary for 1854. The diver had been engaged in recovering the gold from the *Black Prince*. Everything was now clear. The rulers of the waves, those world traders, the English, know how to keep secrets and, a source of national pride, they love a joke. They debunked the legend of the Black Prince but the Japanese destroyed it. The historian of the Crimean War, Lt.Gen Bogdanovich, in the third volume of his work, noted;

Although on our side nothing was done to take advantage of the allies' disastrous position, the storm of 14 November nevertheless had dire consequences for them. Cholera and other diseases spread with horrifying speed and increased the death toll in the English camp.

The Genoese Don Tower still stands above Balaclava. Under the Genoese, Balaclava was called Cembalo. In a book published in Odessa in 1827, before the Crimean campaign, Cembalo is described thus;

The Europeans exchanged manufactured goods and products for Russian furs, silk from Asia and spices from Hindustan. Caravans with goods from China, Tibet, India and Turkestan arrived safely via Astrakhan and Tana.¹¹ China sent porcelain, India sent diamonds and spices, Bengal sent opium, Malabar sent saffron and sandalwood, Ceylon sent pearls and cinnamon, Ethiopia sent ivory by sea, Arabia sent myrrh and incense. In exchange for these luxury goods from Asia and Africa, the Genoese sent various sorts of cloth, especially purple and red, belts, necklaces, bracelets, rings and other female adornments as well as leopard skins. The Genoese obtained precious metals worth considerable sums of money from the Tartars who had acquired them in Russia.

Cembalo was re-named Balaclava by the Turks in 1383. Keduk Ahmet Pasha, the Turkish general, conqueror of the Crimea, took Cembalo by stealth. The Genoese were betrayed by the Armenians and a Genoese, the consul Squarciafico.¹² The chronicler noted;

On the ninth day the conqueror gave a banquet to which he also invited the Armenians who had participated in handing over the town, as well as the consul Squarciafico. After the banquet, they all received their just deserts for their treachery. As they left, each was taken down a narrow staircase out of the fortress and thrown to the waves.¹³

The word “black” in Black Sea is an exact translation of the Turkish “kara”. But “kara” has two meanings, black and evil. The Turks apply the word “kara” to the Black Sea in the sense of “evil”. The Russian translation from the Turkish is incorrect. Under the Greeks in Hellenic times, during the time of Herodotus and Tauride, Cembalo was called Symbolon. Herodotus writes;

“...further east lies a bay with a narrow entrance which is called the harbour of the Symbols”.¹⁴

Balaclava, the harbour of symbols. It is wonderful to live in this blue world!

Yamskoe Pole, 10 February 1928.

¹¹ Tana, a Genoese port on the mouth of the Don, now part of Rostov. The river Don was known to the Greeks as Tanais.

¹² Squarciafico, Genoese consul in the port of Caffa, now Feodisiya. He was by all accounts a corrupt and incompetent official who betrayed the port to the Turks.

“En 1475.....Caffa, assaillie et divisée par les intrigues at le mauvais gouvernement de son consul Oberto Squarciafico, tombe après un long siège”. J Heers, Gênes au XV Siècle. Paris 1961.

¹³ The source is N A Murzakevich *Istoriya Genueskikh poselenii v Krymu*, Odessa 1837. Murzakevich quotes two Italian sources for these details; *La Storia della Antica Liguria e di Genova scritta dal Marchese Girolamo Serra, Torino 1834* and *Lettere Ligustiche ossia Osservazioni critiche sullo Stato Geographico della Liguria fino ai tempi di Ottone Il Grande, con le Memorie Storiche di Caffa ed Altri Luoghi della Crimea posseduti un tempo da Genovesi. Abbate Gasparo Luigi Oderico, 1792.*

Squarciafico himself was not murdered at this banquet but his fate was no less gruesome. “Taken to Constantinople, he was thrown into prison and hanged on a hook under his chin”.

¹⁴ The reference is more likely to be Strabo.

“...a narrow-mouthed harbour where, generally speaking the Tauri, a Scythian tribe, used to assemble their bands of pirates in order to attack all who fled thither for refuge. It is called Symbolon Limen (Signal harbour)” Strabo, Geography VII (308). Loeb Classical Texts.

