

Title: Platonov and the White Sea Canal

Author: Robert Chandler, Queen Mary, University of London

Platonov's emphasis in the story "Among Animals and Plants" on the pleasures of life in Medvezhya Gora (Bear Hill) veils an abyss of irony. In 1931, this small northern station had become the headquarters for the construction of the White Sea Canal. The camp newspaper was called *Reforging (Perekovka)*. There is irony in such passages as this: "People have merry lives in Bear Hill. One can get oneself educated there, and it's easier to be noticed."

Platonov speaks his mind most clearly through using "the wrong word." Here the words "to blame for" (*povinen*) make sense only if we bear in mind that two of the main items of freight would have been *zeks* and the timber they felled: "Constantly seeing powerful locomotives and precise signaling mechanisms, ... the pointsman felt that his reason had triumphed, as if he too were to blame for all this universal technological power and its charm." The switchman who is the hero of the story keeps checking the state of his switches *both* because he loves them *and* because he is afraid of being accused of sabotage. And in the story's opening paragraphs Platonov evokes not only the lives of small forest creatures, but also the struggles of the *zeks* to shift earth and stones and uproot trees with almost no tools.

Platonov clearly indicates how he wishes this story to be read. By offering us two entirely different interpretations of a tear-wet, blood-stained handkerchief dropped from a passing train, Platonov invites his readers to use what he himself calls their "own supplementary imagination;" it is not difficult to guess that the handkerchief has been dropped by a *zek*.

Bibliography

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