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Author	Maksym Kurochkin
Play Original name / translated	THE RED SWALLOW ЧЕРВОНА ЛАСТІВКА
Translator	JOHN FREEDMAN
Language of translation	English
Copyright of original text belongs to	makurochkin@gmail.com
Copyright of translation belongs to	jfreed16@gmail.com

(A sketch of the Russo-Finnish War, 1939-40)

An assembly is underway on a factory shop floor.

“Comrade workers! A daughter of peasant stock, our own heroine of the heavens, our legendary, most distinguished Zinaida Pidsukha has come to speak.

Applause.

“Comrade quilters and felters, dear friends!”

A voice cries out from the crowd of working women.

“Taras Petrovich is here with us, too, from quality control.”

Laughter in the shop.

“Taras Petrovich, too, of course... And thousands of other Taras Petroviches, who by the sweat of their labor... I’m sorry, comrades, I’m nervous. I am never nervous facing anti-aircraft guns, but here

I am nervous. Speaking can be more difficult than engaging in battle. In battle you know who your enemy is, in battle you pay for your mistakes with your own blood, but if you make a mistake with a word, others pay the price: Soviet children, their mothers, the elderly... Now, you invited me here to tell you what it means to be a heroic aviator of the heavens...

She falls silent, and remains silent for as long as a director's sense of proportion will allow – and then, another five seconds on top of that.

“Don't look at me as someone who is highly decorated, comrades. That is only by the grace and kindness of the Party. Our Party is good, yes it is. How could it be otherwise? If such an unwashed fool as I, one might say a second-rate... I used to play with manure, I'd make dolls from poop and straw. Sorry, but it's true. If someone like me, the last of the last... destined by birth, and by blood for ignorance, to be a pious churchgoer... I mean, at least I wasn't damaged or anything. Most any one of the local losers could've had me. And, if not, just keep slogging along until you die, Zina. So, if our Party entrusted the heavens to a filthy old nag like me... how could our Party be anything but good?”

“What's happening at the front?”

“The front does as war is, comrades! A battle of worlds is raging such as you and I have never, ever dreamed of, no writer before us could have imagined it. I'm not repeating hearsay, I have personally seen with my own eyes how the enemy predators take on our hard-fought, suffering Soviet nation. They aren't coming with bread, salt and hospitality, no they aren't. They come in a different way: you wouldn't believe it if I told you. You'd say, that half-witted Zina is lying!”

“Tell us all about it!”

“If you'll let me, I'll describe an incident from my combat experience. Our airborne squad was returning from a mission. We had bombed up the enemy's capital to a fare-the-well, and we were heading home. We were flying over their main road – just following it on ahead. Beneath us we see the retreating enemy, and a population dazed by propaganda. Sometimes they shoot at us, sometimes we shoot at them. We try to limit ourselves to military vehicles and personnel. That's what you do, war is war. And, I must say, I had in my crew a gunner and radio operator, name of Golyshev. Six foot, and handsome. Send a guy like that to do some cultural work in our village of Little Gilyaki, and in a month there'd be nothing left of him. Our women are evil when it comes to men, they're walking agents of dread.”

Laughter in the shop.

“Bring him here, we take care of our men.”

“Don't get ahead of yourselves, comrades! I only meant to say that Golyshev's eyes were like binoculars. He shouted: “Commander, look!” And I looked, and I saw clearly that the enemy had moved out. Moved out so that everything inside me rose up. As plain as day I see one of their women running down the road with a baby in her arms. And it's not like she's running 10 yards or even 100. She's running for the forest. The terrain there is wide open, and in the snow it's a long haul to the trees. Understand me properly, comrades: a bomber is no toy, it's a serious machine, any unprepared civilian would be frightened. But I had never seen any such thing as this woman out there running with such treasonous despair for so long! She runs and runs and runs as if the snow for her is not snow. She does not abandon her baby, as if her only goal is to move it as far as possible from the

reach of Soviet power. So that's it! - I think. And I put my plane into a low bank, because an airplane is not a dragonfly, it cannot hang in one place. And because I want, in contradiction of the laws of the air, to look into the eyes of this amazing woman. Because I am hoping that a human conscience remains alive in her, that she simply does not understand the meaning of the red stars on my wings, does not fully understand the righteous character of our worker-peasant Soviet State. Look, woman! Look at these red stars here, a symbol of the liberation of all labor. Look at our our high-powered M-103 engines. Stop and come to your senses, mother! Who are you running from in the snow, lacking all trust? You are running from brothers, from brotherly hands! May this betrayal of yours make you shudder! I said this in my heart, and I observed contempt in response: she ran on, there was no hint whatsoever that she appreciated the profound words I had addressed to her. She's now nearing the forest, and soon the whole world will draw the improper conclusion that, by running through the snow with a child under arm, one can escape the pride of our aeronautical, military might. And that so affected me that I gave the command to circle back 'round again! Where is your conscience, you beastly enemy? You yourself