

# Paustovsky's war

by Emanuel Litvinoff

*SLOW APPROACH OF THUNDER, by Konstantin Paustovsky (Harvill, 30s)*

RUSSIAN autobiographies have a phenomenal range in contrast to the slender volumes in which Western writers tend to distil the experiences of a lifetime. In Konstantin Paustovsky's series "Story of a Life"—of which *Slow Approach of Thunder* is the second volume to appear in English—a magnificent work is unfolding, crowded with incident and character, compassionate, fresh, and alive as a sea full of mackerel.

Part of the explanation for Paustovsky's amplitude is that Russians are accustomed to relate themselves to society at large and to their history, where the prevailing preoccupations in the West are mostly with eccentricity, loneliness, the unique, and other fragmentations of experience. But where Ilya Ehrenburg, a writer of quite another order but of the same generation, reflects the vices of the Russian method in his weakness for rhetoricism, Paustovsky's vision is unfailingly true and his voice never that of the political ventriloquist.

"Slow Approach of Thunder" is about the First World War,



Konstantin Paustovsky

which began when he was 21. At first he was a tram driver in Moscow, assigned to routes running through the poor districts of the city, "the Copper Line," so that at the end of the day the sour smell of copper coins clung to his hands. The trams were like dingy boarding houses full of grumpy lodgers, "draughty coaches, floors sticky with slush and littered with torn tickets, the stale smell of damp clothes, steaming windows, and, beyond them, the procession of small, dark, timbered houses

and rain-slashed shop signs." After this despondent apprenticeship he was transferred to the hospital service, picking up mutilated soldiers at the station and bringing them in white-painted trams to Moscow hospitals, then became a medical orderly on a Red Cross train shunting wounded men from the Galician front to the rear. This experience is brilliantly described—inspired dispatches from inferno where the unspeakable sufferings of men contrast with timeless evocations of forests, rivers, mountains, all that is of the earth and indestructible.

There is a tender, deeply felt account of his first love for a young nurse who died of typhus in a plague-ridden Polish village, and of a convalescent episode when Paustovsky worked as a fisherman along the shores of the Sea of Azov. The book ends with the February, 1917, Revolution when Russia, not for the only time in its history, surged with an exhilarating optimism that the promise of life was about to be fulfilled at last. In subsequent volumes Paustovsky will no doubt show how February turned into October, October into Stalin's age of darkness. They will certainly tell us much about the ordeal of an honest and gifted man throughout that period.