

Nodar Dumbadze



GRANNY,
ILIKO,
ILLARION
AND I



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Dumbadze

GRANNY,
ILIKO,
ILLARION AND
I

A NOVEL

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Н. Думбадзе

Я, БАБУШКА, ИЛИКО И ИЛЛАРИОН

На английском языке

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GRANNY, ILIKO, ILLARION AND I

To the right of my village flows the river Gubazouli, to the left, the stream Lasheh teeming with crabs, bullheads and bare-foot boys. A small bridge spans the Gubazouli. Every spring the flood waters carry it off, leaving only black piles sticking out of the water.

Still and all, my village is the prettiest and the merriest in Guria. I love it more than any other village in the world, because it is here that we all live, Granny, Iliko, Illarion and I, and also my dog Murada.

My Granny is a wise woman. She keeps telling me, "You must study, you rascal, or you'll be no good for anything."

Granny has her own views of science. Once when I was sitting on the balcony and cramming rules of Georgian grammar into my head, she asked me,

"What is it you're swotting, Sonny?"

"Modal verbs, Granny."

"Model verbs? Do they make them to a pattern?"

"Modal verbs have nothing to do with any patterns."

"What's so model about them then?"

"Nothing," I said, shutting the textbook. "Admit that you don't know a thing about modal verbs!"

"I know that you are not a model boy, that much I know!"

"You haven't learnt your lesson, Granny. I give you a bad mark for grammar."

"I'll show you bad marks, you wretch! Go and tie the goat down this very minute, or I'll give you a model hiding!"

"Just one more question, Granny, before I go. How do modal verbs conjugate in the subjunctive mood?"

"What d'you mean mood? People get awfully moody nowadays, and so do the verbs I suppose. As for you, scamp, you never have the mood to do any honest work, and that's a fact."

"I bet I'm not the only one!"

"To be sure you aren't. There's also our postman who scrapes the stamps off envelopes and then says there has been no stamp on the letter, and you've got to pay the price of the stamp and a fine as well!"

“There! And you say I’m a loafer!”

“Of course you are! And also a rogue, scoundrel, bum, crook and an infidel to boot!”

No woman in the whole of Guria has a richer stock of invectives than my Granny. But I pay scant attention to them for once she let slip, “My lips may be cursing you, but my heart blesses you all the same...”

I must tell you that Granny takes a very dim view of the Ministry of Education’s heartless directive that obliges a pupil to spend six hours at school every day of the week, except Sunday. Not that I have ever given her cause for complaint, for I rarely stick it out to the end of the lessons. Towards the end of the fourth hour I lose all sense of time and space and ask my desk-neighbour Romuli in a voice that is louder than one is supposed to use during a lesson:

“What can be the matter, Romuli, has the bell broken down or has the watchman fallen asleep?”

Romuli grins delightedly by way of an answer, while the teacher points his finger at me and drawls in honeyed tones,

“Get up and out this very minute! And don’t come back until I have spoken to your parents.”

I know better than to ask him why and what for, since this would only make him lose his temper. So I pick up my satchel and cap and make for the door.

“Goodbye,” I say to Romuli.

“See you soon,” he replies, and waves a hand.

The next day I bring Granny to school, then Granny takes me home, then I bring Granny to school again, and again she takes me home, and so it goes on and on. It may well be said that Granny has been going through school together with me, and this, I believe, is the only case of its kind in the history of mankind.

I am an ordinary village boy. I carry in my satchel fruit, a catapult and a toy pistol. I go to school barefoot until the puddles ice over. I have only one pair of patched-up trousers, and every spring I fail in at least two examinations and have them put off until autumn. The villagers call me Mongrel because of my friendship with Murada who follows me wherever I go, at

school they call me scamp and lazybones, while Granny usually calls me rascal. My real name, though, is Zuriko.

When Granny is cross with me, I spend nights in the grape-pressing shed, and when we make up, I move back into the house. In the daytime Granny pursues me with a switch in her hand, calling the thunder of heaven down on my sinful head, and at night she washes my feet and when I drop off to sleep, kisses me on the forehead. I know because sometimes I only pretend to be asleep.

What is my conduct at school? As regards that there exists an official document called Minutes of the Teachers' Council. Below is a fair sample of what this document has to say about me:

"Minutes of the meeting of the Teachers' Council of School No... of March 18, 1940.

"Present: the entire teaching staff.

"Agenda: information of the home teacher of Form 4 about the conduct of the pupil of this Form Zurab Vashalomidze.

"Speakers:

"The teacher of physics: 'There does not exist the kind of energy in nature that could arouse Vashalomidze. This boy is like a solid body immersed in a liquid and immune to all influence.'

"The teacher of mathematics: 'For me Vashalomidze is something in the nature of an equation with a hundred unknown quantities. I am incapable of solving such an equation.'

"The teacher of chemistry: 'There is no reaction at all! He just sits there tearing my nerves to shreds. Anomalous litmus paper, that's what he is. He never turns red!'

"The teacher of Russian: 'In my view he is just a plain idiot.'

"The teacher of geography: 'Vashalomidze's knowledge of geography is negligible. Either he is anomalous, or undernourished.'

"The teacher of history: 'He is the primitive man of the Stone Age rather than a representative of the twentieth century. You can never catch him in the state of even comparative quiet during a lesson. Nor has he been making any progress. Vashalomidze is a smirch on the reputation of the Form.'

“The school watchman: ‘Why are you running down the poor child? If he is as stupid as you say, why have you been promoting him from one form to the next?’

“Principal: ‘It’s none of your business. Your job is to ring the bell at the proper time.’

“The teacher of Georgian (a close relative of mine): ‘I don’t understand you all! One might think this Vashalomidze was a fly in the ointment. Go ahead then, tell me who is better! Perhaps the headmaster’s son? He has top marks in all subjects, but I’ve never seen a stupider oaf. He sits at the lessons like an owl in his hollow!’

“The PT teacher: ‘And why do you give him excellent marks then?’

“The teacher of Georgian: ‘I know better than not to.’

“Principal: ‘Shut up, everybody. What have you got to say for yourself, Vashalomidze?’

“Vashalomidze: ‘The teacher of Georgian is quite right!’

“Principal: ‘Dolt! I’m not asking you who is right and who is wrong. What have you got to say for yourself?’

“Vashalomidze: ‘For myself? Forgive me once again, and I’ll try to mend my ways.’”

After hearing my character described in terms like these on more than one occasion, I began to have doubts as to my health and sanity, but a lucky chance dispelled my doubts.

Once I missed school for a whole week for corn needed to be hoed in a hurry. They could expel me from school for such massive truancy, so I had to bring them an illness certificate. In those days it was impossible to obtain such a certificate unless you were actually ill, so Granny put me to bed and called a doctor.

Since morning I had been given nothing to eat to make me look pale and sickly. A wet towel was placed on my forehead, and Granny set out to summon the doctor to my sickbed. Half an hour later the doctor was dismounting in our frontyard.

“What’s the matter with you, lad?” he asked, sitting down on the edge of my bed.

“I’m dying...” I groaned.

“You are? But what exactly hurts?”

I had not expected such a question and gave my Granny an alarmed look.

“He hurts all over,” Granny said.

“Does the hair hurt too?”

“It does,” I groaned.

At that point Iliko and Illarion came in. They had been let into the secret and so began to lament my poor health.

“I’ve noticed the poor boy sickening of late,” said Illarion.

“Can you specify?”

“Of course. He lost his appetite. The other day it was all I could do to make him eat three helpings of *lobio* * and one *mchadi*. ** Can you imagine that? And not another morsel!”

“Really?” the doctor said.

“I swear it! He used to eat a head of cheese at one go, but no, he said he did not want any more. He said he’d had lunch at home.”

“Is that true?” the doctor asked me.

“True enough, doctor. I grow sick at the sight of *lobio*.”

“And what about fried chicken with garlic sauce, or young *sulguni* *** with mint, or a chicken boiled whole with tarragon, or, perhaps, trout in nut sauce? What would you say to that, my dear chap?”

“This dolt will drive the child crazy,” Granny muttered.

Iliko could not feign indifference to such a choice menu and rushed out onto the balcony. But Illarion was as staunch as they make them, and began looking at photographs in the family album.

“What else is wrong with him?” the doctor asked with a smile. Then he picked the towel from my head and wiped my mouth, which had watered like a river in spate at his enumeration.

“He sneezes all the time,” said Illarion.

“And what about his urine?”

This had Illarion stumped good and proper.

* A dish of beans with spices.

** A maize cake.

*** A kind of cheese.

“What is his urine like?” he asked Iliko, who had come back into the room at that moment.

Iliko rose to the occasion:

“I must tell you frankly,” he said, “that I don’t like his urine. It’s gone all wrong lately.”

“Was it good before?”

“Excellent!”

“Any other complaints, young man?”

“Er,” Iliko cleared his throat, “he’s also not quite right in...” and he twirled a finger near his temple suggestively.

He meant I was not all there.

“Indeed?” said the doctor. “How many fingers do you see?” he asked showing me his outstretched palm.

“Seven,” I said with a stupid smile.

“Correct!” the doctor exclaimed.

Illarion dropped his spectacles in surprise, while Granny shrank back in fear. The doctor turned out my eyelids, lowered them, then raised them again, peered into my eyes, shook his head mournfully and asked:

“Does he recognise his family and friends?”

“Barely,” said Illarion with a sigh.

“I see. Who is this man?” the doctor asked me pointing at Iliko.

“He is no man, he’s a horse,” I said and twisted my face into an expression of such utter idiocy that even Iliko was taken aback.

“Why, Zuriko, I’m your Uncle Iliko, don’t you recognise me?” he asked in dismay. I shook my head and focussed my eyes on the bridge of my nose.

Granny bit her lower lip and grasped her head.

“What medicine have you been giving the patient?” asked the doctor.

“We’ve been rubbing his temples with vodka.”

“Bring the bottle here, please.”

Granny brought the bottle.

“Give me a tea-glass.”

They gave him the glass. The doctor filled it with vodka and said:

"The child is gravely ill, I'm afraid he may not last till morning. He must go to hospital at once to be operated on."

"Why, what for?" I screamed jumping out of my bed.

"We must open up his skull."

"Over my dead body!" Granny yelled. "Open up his skull, how'd you like that! It's a head, not a pumpkin! What do you know about disease? The boy is as healthy as they make them, and you want to take him to hospital. Get up, Sonny, before he has driven you into an early grave!"

"So much the better! So you say he's quite well? I wish all of you health then," said the doctor with a smile and downed the glass of vodka.

"Here's something to follow it with," said Illarion handing him a pear.

The doctor bit off a huge piece of the pear crunchily, patted me on the cheek and took polite leave of us all. On the way out he said:

"Sure enough, the boy is the very picture of health."

With these words he jumped on his horse, waved a hand to us and galloped away.

THE HUNT

A week after my miraculous recovery Illarion came into our yard. He lay down on the grass beneath the pear-tree, lit up, stretched lustily and asked:

"Well, Mongrel, how was the operation?"

"It may be a laughing matter to you, but I was on the brink of death."

"Listen to that! 'Brink of death', indeed! What danger threatened you, may I ask? Very well, so they would have opened up your miserable skull and then closed it shut at once. What's the point of rummaging in an empty box?"

"Get off it! 'Empty box!' One might think you and your pal Iliko are two sages!"

We were silent for a while.

"Where's that dog of yours?" Illarion asked, and that very

moment, as though in response to his words, there came a piercing yelp of a dog.

"I'll kill the damned beast, I will! Blast you, Zuriko, you cursed scamp, with this scurvy cur of yours! Have you ever heard of the likes of it? First he stole eggs from under broodhens, and now he's started on the chicks!"

Our neighbour Efrosina was waddling along the path between the fences, brandishing a stick and yelling her head off, preceded by my poor Murada, who was whining and dragging a hind leg.

"Catch him!" Efrosina's husband bellowed from their yard.

"What are you raising the devil for, woman?" Granny asked running out of the house. "So our Murada is a scurvy cur, is he? Let me tell you that he is a nobler creature and has a better pedigree than your husband and all your clan! Get out of here, if you know what is good for you! Scurvy cur indeed! I paid two heads of cheese for him to the miller Simon, if you want to know!"

Efrosina, who went in mortal fear of Granny, retreated at once, while Murada lay down at my feet with the air of injured innocence. He watched the retreating figure of Efrosina and now and then gave a yelp of pain. But the yelps stopped as soon as Efrosina disappeared from view.

"Hello, Murada!" Illarion greeted the dog.

"Hello!" Murada responded wordlessly and gave a wag of his tail.

"Up to foxy tricks again, are you?" Illarion said with a smile, removing a bit of chicken down from the corner of the dog's mouth. "What did they put the stick to you for?"

"As if one could tell," said Murada wordlessly. "First they leave the chickens in the street unattended, and when you have a go at one they chase you with sticks..."

"Did she give you a good whack?"

"Good enough," said Murada and glanced at his injured leg.

"Never mind, it'll mend."

"Well, it does not really hurt all that much, not half as much as Efrosina would like," Murada said with a smile, shook his ears and licked Illarion's hand.

“What’s the matter with his face?” Illarion asked me.

“He burned it, the silly beast. He stole a *mchadi* straight from the frying pan yesterday, and got his face singed.”

“Is that true, Murada?”

“I *was* a bit hasty, that’s true enough,” Murada said with a sigh and licked his chops.

“Well, brother, you are a dog in a million, I must say that for you,” Illarion said respectfully. “This here Mongrel—look what a strapping fellow he’s grown to be—but he still is provided for by his Granny, while you provide for yourself. Good for you, dog! On the other hand, it’s a bad thing to steal. A stolen piece sticks in one’s throat. Take our storehouse manager Datiko, for instance. He is on his death-bed. He could never have enough, the poor bugger. And now he’s lying on his back like a useless carcass. See what I mean?”

“I see alright, but what’s the point? Everybody steals, why must I be better than the others? After all I’m just a dog,” Murada argued wordlessly.

“All right, go and lie down, but don’t leave the yard again if you don’t want to get a good hiding, you son of a bitch,” I said to Murada and gave him a light kick.

“Easy with your kicks!” Murada snarled, and, tail between his legs, slunk his way to the kennel.

Illarion rolled himself another cigarette, inhaled and said: “I had a look at the fields this morning. The soya shoots are all gnawed to the roots—must be the hares... I saw their tracks, too. Let’s go after them with a gun tomorrow morning.”

“I’ve had enough of your hares! Last time you dragged me along to hunt hares in a spot where goats had been having a ball.”

“And these are hare tracks, I tell you! And hare droppings as well!”

“Well, all right. Only see that the droppings don’t prove to be the goats’ again!”

“Don’t you teach me my business, you milksop! Get the gun ready by morning, and take your silly dog along—he may be of some use after all...” With these words Illarion pulled my cap over my ears and went off.

The next dawn found us making our way through knee-high dewy grass. Illarion led the way, I followed, and Murada, wet through and sporting a good dozen burrs, brought up the rear.

“Call that a dog?” Illarion mocked. “Does he take us for hares or what? Following in our tracks like that! Tell him to run ahead.

“Forward, Murada!” I commanded. Murada sat down obediently.

“He is tired. Perhaps we should make a halt and have a bite?” Illarion asked, lowering himself onto the ground.

I had no objections and sat down beside him.

Illarion produced a boiled chicken out of his bag, a *mchadi*, a head of young cheese and a bottle of *chacha*,* and placed the goodies on a big flat stone. My contribution to the feast was some *pkhali*** , *lobio*, boiled potatoes and salt. And we fell to.

“Don’t champ so, Illarion,” I said. “You’ll scare all the hares away.”

“Making fun of me, you rascal? There are hordes of hares about, but you need to know a thing or two about tracking!” Illarion said indignantly.

He filled his glass with *chacha*, said the usual “Here’s to good luck!” and drank.

“Here’s to luck!” I said and downed my glass too.

“Eat something. You’ll get your guts burned!”

“Ha! As though this is my first taste of rotgut!”

“Scoundrel! It’s your Grandmother who brews rotgut... Well, let’s have another!”

“Let’s,” I agreed, drank another glassful, and suddenly felt on top of the world. “Doesn’t it hit you in the kidneys!”

“Of course! It’s *chacha**** of the purest!”

“Perhaps we should have another?” I suggested.

“Good idea!”

* Grape vodka.

** Edible boiled grass with spices.

*** A play on words: **chacha** in Georgian means both “grape vodka” and “kidney”.

Illarion tossed off another glassful and produced his tobacco pouch.

“Try mine,” I said, offering him my pouch. “It’s first rate Istanbul tobacco.”

Illarion took the pouch, sniffed at the tobacco, gave me a suspicious glance, but then rolled himself a cigarette, inhaled ... and toppled over.

“What’s the matter with you, Illarion?” I cried in alarm, rushing to him. He was lying on his back, white as a sheet, his eyes closed.

“Bring him some water, Murada!” I shouted. At this Illarion shook his head, slowly rose to a sitting position and fixed his reddened eyes on me. Finally he gave a deep sigh and asked in the voice of one sentenced to death.

“Where did you get this tobacco?”

“It’s Iliko’s present. Why?”

Illarion filled his glass, wiped away the tears, lifted his hand skywards and said in solemn tones:

“May Lord Almighty strike dead all scoundrels and swindlers in the world! May he send down a punishment on Iliko Chigogidze that would make him writhe in torment, with not a soul about to help him but me! Amen!”

“What’s wrong, Uncle Illarion?”

“There’s pepper added to this tobacco!”

“Well then, let’s have another, and may God punish Iliko!” I said. I downed my fourth glassful and suddenly felt an urge to kiss Illarion’s long nose.

“Uncle Illarion, my dear, you’re the best person in the world. If only you knew how much I love you! You have a long nose and a warm heart. If it weren’t for you, there’d be no point in living in this world. Believe me, Uncle Illarion! Let me kiss you!”

“Well, Zuriko, my dear lad, to be quite frank, you’re a boy in a thousand. It doesn’t matter that I’m thirty years your senior! Was I your age at one time? Yes, I was. Will you be my age some time? Yes, you will. So what is the difference between us? There’s none. What does it matter that one of us has more hair on his head than the other? We are friends! So let’s have another drink!”

*I walk about aggrieved
Among a host of friends...*

I started a song.

“Why aggrieved? What grieves you, my dear? Do they bully you at school? Remember then – I’ll burn that school to cinders! Or have you got an enemy perhaps? Just you tell me who he is!”

Illarion grabbed his gun and brandished it threateningly.

“Shoot away, Illarion! Let the world know what kind of people we are! Halloo!”

Illarion pressed both triggers, the gun thundered. The echo dashed back and forth from one mountain to another, like a bird locked in a cage, then found an outlet and flew away.

...I awakened from cold, rubbed my eyes and looked around. Murada must have finished his breakfast, licked the table clean and gone off on some business of his own.

I roused Illarion.

“Don’t you stand above me like a prison-guard,” he barked. “And put that gun down before you shoot somebody. If you fire it, I’ll smash your silly nose to a pulp!”

“I’ll take a stroll – perhaps I’ll see a hare...”

“All right, go then. And don’t forget to close the left eye when you take aim!” Illarion shouted after me.

Before I walked ten paces, Illarion burst into a volley of abuse:

“Damn your hide, I wish you dropped dead, you blasted creature! What kind of a shitty dog are you? Are you too lazy to bark, you bum?”

“What’s happened, Illarion?” I asked, running up with the gun at the ready.

“Here, take a look,” he said, showing me several balls of hare droppings he held in his palm.

“They’re warm, can you imagine it?” Illarion groaned, pressing the droppings fiercely with his fingers. “A hare was here a moment ago, and your stupid dog never gave so much as a squeak!”

“Where did you pick them?”

“I tell you, right here, not up two steps away! Get a move on!

Go up that slope, and I'll wait here. This hare must be somewhere close by!"

I cocked the gun and slowly made my way up the slope. Soon I saw some soya stalks with the leaves gnawed off and hare tracks. They led to a big hazel bush. I walked round the bush several times, then gave it a powerful kick, and suddenly a hare rushed out from the midst of it, a real live hare, with long ears and a white stripe on his back.

"Catch it!" I screamed like one scalded, and fired. The hare was racing downhill, his ears pressed to his back. "Illarion, get it!" I yelled.

There was silence for a few seconds, followed by the click of a trigger. Illarion spat loudly, then there was the sound of a fall, curses and groans.

"Watch out, Zuriko, he's running towards you!" he yelled.

I squatted and held the gun at the ready. Suddenly a shot sounded below, then another, followed by a blood-curdling scream of a dog. All went dark before my eyes, my legs gave way and I slumped on the ground.

"Murada, my pet, look at me!" I sobbed, kissing my faithful friend.

"Don't cry, Sonny, be a man," said Illarion, wiping away a tear.

Murada half opened his eyes and looked at us.

Now we all three were crying: Illarion, Murada and myself.

"Does it hurt, Murada?"

"Terribly," the poor dog said with a sigh.

"Woe to me, I wish my hands withered and my eyes went blind!" Illarion wailed.

"Don't take on so, Illarion. You didn't mean to hit me, it's just because of all that drink... I know what your gun is like – you aim at an enemy and hit a friend... Do you remember killing your own dog from it? No point in being so upset... I don't hold it against you... One thing grieves me though – Efrosina will be happy! On the other hand, let her..." Murada said all this wordlessly and rubbed his head against Illarion's knee.



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"And this creature is a dog, while Iliko is titled Man. Is there any justice in the world?" Illarion sighed.

"Bear up, Murada, my dear! You'll get well yet," I said bending to the dog.

"No, I'm done for... What is it you people say: 'It'll heal, as good as on a dog.' But I'm dying... I'm dying, Zuriko..."

"Bear up, Murada! Be a brave dog!" Illarion pleaded.

"Dying is easier on you people. When you die, your family laments you and buries you. And who is going to lament the death of a dog? Nobody. If they bury us, it's only so that our corpses shouldn't stink..." a shudder ran over Murada's body.

"Illarion, help! Murada's dying," I cried.

"Farewell..." Murada gave me one last glance, closed his eyes and lay still.

"He's gone, may my arms wither," Illarion said quietly and wiped away his tears with a sleeve.

...Granny's sobbing and wailing alarmed the entire village. The neighbours burst into our yard in a panic. When they found out what the lamentations were about, they became indignant:

"Are you people in your right mind? Raising such a hullaballoo about a dead dog! What a crazy family!"

And they went on their way.

Illarion had guilt written all over him. One could take him for a murderer awaiting execution. In the evening he called me over and said:

"We must give him a decent burial. Under that there plane-tree."

We dug a grave together and committed the remains of our dead friend to earth solemnly. Then I asked Granny to give us a jug of wine, and we had a funeral repast on Murada's grave.

Illarion made the first toast:

"Zuriko, dear boy," he began, "inconsolable grief has brought us here, to this grave. We lost our comrade and friend Murada. He was a faithful dog, and if there is dogs' paradise in the other world, its gates must've been flung open for Murada. We shall always treasure his memory in our hearts. God rest his soul! Let's drink!"

"Thank you, Illarion... Let's."

"I raise my second glass to the family and relatives of the deceased. I wish you happiness and prosperity and I wish this were your last bereavement!"

"Thank you, Illarion!"

A black dog stole into the yard. It walked round Murada's grave several times, then sat some distance away and howled.

"The mourners have come," said Illarion.

"This is Murada's mother, the dog of Simon the miller," said I.

"Good Lord! Come here, dog!"

The dog approached Illarion. He tossed a piece of meat to her. The dog turned her face away and lay down.

"She may be a dog, but she has her feelings too," said I.

"Let's drink to Murada's parents. Your health, dog. It's all my fault, curse me!" Illarion said and drank. I drank too.

Four more dogs slunk into the yard one after another.

"Look, there's Asalo's dog ... and Datiko's. And that one's Despineh's, and the one over there is Maki's. But where is Matryona's cur? Why hasn't he come?" asked Illarion.

"He and Murada fell out last year, and Murada gave him several nasty bites," I replied.

"And so he's settling old scores, is he? I spit on such a dog. He has no honour, no sense of decency. Pshaw!"

"Master," a voice was heard at the wicket.

"What is it?"

"May I come in?"

"Of course!"

A seven-year-old boy entered the yard. He was the son of Makhareh Gogichaishvili.

"What is it, sonny?" Illarion asked.

"A telegram for you."

"Let's see it!"

The boy handed him a telegram. Illarion unhurriedly took his glasses out of his pocket, wiped them carefully with his handkerchief, put them on and read out:

"Express. To Zuriko the Mongrel and Illarion the Big Nose. Accept my sincere condolences on the tragic death of dear Murada. I mourn this loss with you deeply. My grief is so profound

I am not sure I shall survive it. I am dolorous not to be able to join you at this melancholy hour. Don't know how to comfort you in your loss. Damn you, you two half-baked hunters, stupid oafs! Next time you set out hunting dogs, take me along. Love and kisses.

"Your bereaved friend."

"No signature," said Illarion. "Who can it be? Come here, sonny," he said to the boy. "Don't be afraid."

The moment the boy came within his reach Illarion grabbed him by the ear so ferociously he squealed like the whistle of the tea factory.

"Tell me who gave this to you?"

"I won't! He'll kill me!"

"And if you don't I'll kill you! Make up your mind!" Illarion said, twisting his ear.

"Iliko Chigogidze gave me three rubles and told me to deliver the telegram and keep mum, or he'll tear out my tongue!"

"Iliko, you say?"

"That's right."

Illarion let go of the boy's ear and hit himself in the chest with a fist.

"Just you wait, you one-eyed devil. I'll pay you in the same coin!"

I felt sorry for Iliko.

Night came, an ordinary village night. All around was as peaceful as though nobody had died in our family.

REVENGE

This spring again I failed an examination in Russian, and it was postponed till autumn. Granny arranged with the teacher of Russian that I should come twice a week all summer to have lessons. She was to receive in payment a sackful of beans, four heads of cheese and a goatskin of new wine. This levy was nothing as compared to last year's when I had had two exams in autumn.

"Get up, you lie-abed, enough lazing! You'll be late for your

lesson!" Granny's voice awakened me in the morning. I jumped out of bed promptly, ran to the window and back a couple of times making as much noise as I could, moved chairs to and fro with a lot of crashing, then returned to my bed on tiptoe, got under the blanket and sank back into sleep. The final awakening came with a cold shower and Granny's maledictions coming down upon my sinful head.

"Why have I been saddled with this good-for-nothing wretch? I wish the earth open up and swallow you, you shameless villain!"

"What do you want?"

"I want your speedy death, that's what! I'd have buried you beside Murada and lamented you in Russian. Yes, in Russian, you blockhead! You think I couldn't learn? All of Russia speaks Russian, why should you be such a dunce? Name one single person in our family who could not speak Russian? Your poor grandfather would be writhing with shame! He spent seven years in Russia and knew Russian better than Ivan the postmaster!"

"Iz zat so?" I brought out in horrible Russian.

"Yes, it is, and don't you goggle at me! My late husband talked to Ivan for two hours, and Ivan just gaped at him, never saying a word, and then he turned to the crowd of people standing there open-mouthed and said he had never heard such Russian in his life. That's how it was!"

"Zat's can't be!" I provoked her further, after which followed the familiar whistling of a raised switch and my hasty retreat in the direction of the teacher's house.

"Good morning, teacher," I would announce my arrival to the teacher Zablonia.

"Good morning. What are we going to do today?" she inquired.

"Today? I'll finish weeding the corn, then drive the cow to pasture, then take the grain to the mill, then chop some firewood, and then we'll have a lesson," I'd answer mixing Russian and Georgian words.

"Very well then," she'd bless my plan and I'd start on my tasks. After lunch she would ask me about the ground covered:

“How’s the corn?”

“I’ve finished it, teacher.”

“Did you go to the mill?”

“I did, teacher.”

“Did you water the cow?”

“I watered her, teacher.”

“What about the firewood?”

“I’ve chopped enough to last you a week.”

“What is grammar?”

“Grammar is a Greek word.”

“Correct! You’re a good boy, Zuriko! Run along home now.”

One morning, as I was getting ready for yet another lesson, Iliko entered our gate.

“Can you lend me your Zuriko for a day, Olga dear?”

“What now? And what about his Russian lessons? Will you perhaps teach him?”

“The kind of lessons Zablonia gives him, I can give him too. I’ll have him hoe my vegetable beds, and after he’s been at it for some ten hours, you’ll think he’s speaking Chinese. And you won’t have to pay me either!”

“May your tongue wither in your mouth, you one-eyed devil! Still, what is it you want him for?”

“It’s not your bother, my dear woman. Just you let him go with me!”

“Alright, bum, you may go with the one-eyed pest, may the crows peck out his remaining eye. We shall see what he teaches you.”

“Furwurd!” Iliko commanded in Russian and made for the gate briskly.

“What is it, Iliko?” I asked him when we were outside the gate.

“I want you to do something for me, Zuriko: can you go to Illarion...”

“What for?”

“You must persuade him to give me three goatskins of wine— Illarion makes the best wine in the village!”

“Why didn’t you ask Granny? She’d never refuse.”

“Thank you very much! It’s wine I want, not vinegar. I’m not going to pickle cucumbers.”

“I’ll tell Granny what you said about her wine.”

“If you do I’ll sew up this big mouth of yours, and that’ll be the end of it. You do what I tell you. Go to Illarion and ask for the wine. I’ll pay him money for it or return the three wineskins from the new harvest. He respects you and he won’t refuse...”

“It’s you who wants the wine. Go and ask him yourself.”

“Zuriko, my dear chap, would you do that for me? Please, be so kind, do as I ask you. After that telegram Illarion won’t let me within a gun shot... And if he refuses, then...”

“What then?”

“Then you must mark the vat in which he keeps *tsolikauri*.* I’ll play a trick on him the whole village will talk about.”

“What kind of trick?”

“This kind: the wine from the vat you mark will be transferred to my vat at midnight. Do you understand?”

“Are you crazy, Iliko?”

“Don’t yell, whelp! Have you forgotten whose tobacco you smoke?”

“You and your tobacco! Poison for the lungs!”

“Enough backchat! Let’s talk business. I give you ten handfuls of tobacco, and you keep mum. Is that a deal?”

“Do I get the tobacco right away?”

“Of course!”

“Well, you go home then, and I’ll be off to Illarion’s. I’ll come and tell you what he said.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

“Cheerio.”

Iliko kissed me on the forehead, patted me on the cheek and said dramatically, boring me with his only eye:

“Remember, Zuriko, betraying Iliko Chigigidze is the same as betraying your mother country. Don’t you forget it...”

“Now, who do you take me for?” I cried indignantly. Reassured, Iliko strode off towards his house, and I made for Illarion’s.

* A brand of wine.

The chopped apples that were strewn for drying on the floor of the balcony had been browned by the sun to a beautiful rich colour. Illarion himself was half-recumbent on a rug spread on the floor, reading a week-old newspaper with great absorption. In our village we never have today's, yesterday's or the day before yesterday's newspapers. The earliest we get them is a week late.

"Hello, Illarion!"

"Greetings, Zuriko! What did the one-eyed devil want from you so early in the morning?"

"Oh, he just dropped in."

"Still, what did he say, that scoundrel?"

"He said he needed wine. He told me to go and ask you to sell him three wineskins."

"Wouldn't he like some rat poison instead?"

"No, he said he wanted wine."

"I have no wine that I would be prepared to waste on that crackpot."

"Take pity on him, sell him the wine."

"Did he take pity on us when he palmed off that pepper-doctored tobacco on you? And have you forgotten about the telegram?"

"No, I haven't."

"So don't you try to soften me."

"Do you know what he told me?"

"What?"

"He told me, if you refused, to mark the vat with the best wine, and he would come at midnight and empty the vat in two shakes."

"So that's how it is! I want you to help me, Zuriko!"

In the evening I was at Iliko's place haggling about the promised tobacco.

"Here's two handfuls—it's more'n enough!"

"What d'you mean two? Did I mark that vat for nothing?"

"Very well, take four!"

"Ten!"

"Four!"

"Ten!"



“Take pity on your lungs, fool! Smoking will kill you!”

“Never mind my lungs! You promised ten and you cough it up at once!”

“Five!”

“Either give me the ten handfuls or I’ll go to Illarion this very minute and let him have the story!.. Goodbye!”

“Take it, you grasping devil, may your belly burst from greed!”

Scowlingly, Iliko measured out ten handfuls of golden choice tobacco and added: “In that case you will come with me tonight and help me get the thing done.”

At midnight Iliko and I were lying in dew-wet grass near the hole in the fence right opposite Illarion’s *marani*.*

“Ah-choo!.. Ah-choo!.. Ah-choo!” I sneezed several times running.

“Stop this bloody sneezing. May you not grow another inch,” Iliko whispered fiercely, giving me a mighty poke in the ribs. “A six-footer of a fellow and still unable to control his nose!”

“There’s the vat, the hundred-gallon one ... see the stick driven into the ground?” I whispered to Iliko.

Iliko crawled through the hole he had made in the fence and, flattening himself to the ground, made for the vat I had pointed out to him. I pushed the wineskin we had brought in my bosom and followed him.

“Well, let’s begin!” Iliko commanded in a whisper and gave me a hoe.

We worked fast and noiselessly. Fifteen minutes later the lid of the vat came into view.

“Open it!” said Iliko and prepared the wineskin. The mouth of the vat was so big we could have both got inside through it.

I raised the lid with difficulty. Iliko bent down, pushed his head into the vat and suddenly growled:

“What’s this? The vat’s empty!!!”

“It can’t be, Iliko, look deeper inside!”

Iliko leaned over almost to his chest.

“Thieves!!!” suddenly came a yell. “Just you wait, robbers!”

* A special building for storing wine.

shouted Illarion as he jumped down from a nearby tree. "Stop or I'll shoot!"

"Look out!" I yelled, grabbing Iliko by his legs.

Panic-stricken, he jerked ... and toppled over into the vat. Illarion grabbed my shoulder.

"Who are you? Tell me, or I'll kill you here and now!"

"It's me, Zuriko! Don't kill me, Uncle Illarion!" I pleaded.

"And where's the other one?"

"I don't know!"

"Tell me, or I'll skin you alive!"

"I don't know, Uncle Illarion!"

"Who is he?"

"I don't know!"

"How can it be? You were together, weren't you?"

"I don't know!"

"Put the lid back on the vat this very minute, before I've shaken your guts out of you! I'll let you have your deserts later!" Illarion said and gave me a clout on my head that had not been envisaged by the script we had worked out and to which I reacted not with the tearful complaint that had been provided for but by a yelp of pain.

I closed the lid fast, put a heavy stone on it and, picking up the hoe, prepared to cover the vat up with earth, when a voice came from its womb:

"Almighty Lord and all saints, may the earth open up and swallow all rogues, scoundrels and two-faced people! God the Almighty, send down thunder and lightning on the heads of Illarion Shevardnadze and Zuriko Vashalomidze! They have fooled me, the infidels!"

"Who is there? Speak up or I'll shoot your head off!" cried Illarion, pushing the barrel of his gun into the mouth.

"It's me, Iliko! Put that gun away, you long-nosed devil, do not take yet another sin on your soul!"

"Thief is your second name, Iliko! What are you doing in an empty vat?"

I was gasping with laughter.

"You can't bury me alive, Illarion! Aren't you afraid of everlasting flames?"

“I’ve no reason to fear anything. If I rid the world of such an ungodly sinner, God will thank me for it.”

“Let me out, Illarion!”

“Go and wake up the neighbours, Zuriko, let them see the one-eyed badger I’ve got me in my vat!”

“Illarion Shevardnadze! Don’t disgrace me in the eyes of the village! Aren’t you content to have me gasping for breath in this rotten vat! You’ve had your fun, now let me out!”

“I’m in no mood for fun at all. I’ll keep you under the lid for a month and then distill your remains. They’ll make strong heady vodka!”

“Who will want vodka smelling to high heaven,” I said. “It’ll be pure poison.”

“So you betrayed me, Zuriko, sold me like a goat, you reptile!”

“Better think about that peppered tobacco and that telegram as you sit in that vat and breathe sulphur!”

“Haven’t you tortured me enough, you godless pagans? Am I to spend the rest of my days in the vat?”

“Let’s let him out,” I said. “I feel sorry for him.”

“Well, I suppose we may. Only I want him to cry outloud that he’s a blockhead.”

“Do you agree?” I asked Iliko.

“I’m a blockhead!” Iliko shouted with resignation.

Once out of the vat, he took such a deep breath of the damp night air as if he were one of the crew of a submarine which had just surfaced from a long submersion. Then he picked up his wineskin and, bending his index finger, said:

“Very well then, you win.”

With this he turned and went to the gate, muttering something under his nose.

“Where are you off to, you ingrate?” shouted Illarion after him. “Don’t you want to give us your blessing?”

“God bless you, thank you very much, you have been very kind,” said Iliko.

“That won’t do! Wait a minute!.. Here, throw the earth off that there vat, Zuriko!” Illarion said to me pointing to the top of another, full vat.

Before taking up the hoe, I took out my pouch and rolled myself a cigarette of the tobacco I had received from Iliko.

"Don't smoke it, Zuriko, there's pepper in that tobacco," Iliko warned me timidly.

...Songs, toasts and loud kisses issued from Illarion's *marani* till late cock-crow.

In the morning Illarion and I dragged a senseless Iliko and a full wineskin to Iliko's house.

THE WATCHMAN

One day I was making a short cut from school through the tea plantation. Bunches of ripe black-blue Isabella grapes peeked at me slyly through the leaves. Finally I could not stand the temptation any longer, hung my satchel on a branch and climbed up to the very top of the tree. The grapes were delicious! Some townfolk say Isabella smells of bedbugs. I am no judge here for I've never tasted a bedbug, but if they taste like that, good for the bedbugs! At first I swallowed the grapes whole, then, having satisfied my first craving, I began to eat slowly, rolling the juice on my tongue and spitting out the seeds and skins.

"Hey there, up the tree! Who is it stealing collective farm property?" suddenly came a thunderous voice. I all but tumbled down from the tree in fright and barely managed to catch hold of a bough. I sat still with bated breath.

"Hey, can't you hear me? Are you deaf or what?"

I looked down. It was Iliko—wearing a wide-rimmed straw hat, with a rope slung across his shoulder and an axe stuck in his belt. Beside stood a skinny goat picking the skins I has spat out.

"Can't you hear me? Who are you, tell me this minute! Think you can climb a tree and eat collective farm's grapes just like that? Are you a fiend or what? Tell me at once."

"That's right, I'm the fiend himself."

"Be you thrice the fiend, you ought to know that a collective-farm plantation is not the Garden of Eden for grapes to be plucked by every hungry son-of-a-bitch! Get down at once, or I'll shake you from that tree!"



"Better come up here, and we'll have a chat!"

"Come down, I tell you!"

"I won't!"

"You won't?"

"Not on your life."

"Very well then, stay up there. Let's see how long you'll last. I'm in no hurry," said Iliko and squatted under the tree. I wasn't in the least worried and went on eating grapes.

An hour passed. Finally Iliko called out to me:

"Hey, fiend, what are you doing up there?"

"I'm building myself a nest," I replied.

"You'd do better to come down peaceably and let me take you to the office."

"Not until I've had my fill."

"Are you a human being or a wine press? Come down at once!"

"I won't!"

"So you defy authority, do you?"

"Yes!"

"Very well then. Take this rope and axe and guard the plantation yourself."

"Why're you pestering me? Just go your own way and leave me alone!"

"I'm giving you your last warning: either you come down at once or I'll call for help." At that moment Iliko noticed my satchel on the branch.

"Aha! Now I've got you. I'll find out who you are in a jiffy."

Iliko made himself comfortable on the ground, took the satchel by the corners and tipped out its contents on the ground.

"*Decameron...*" he read aloud and put the book aside. "*How the Steel Was Tempered ... Alone Among Cannibals ... Tristan and Isolde ... The Knight in the Tiger Skin...* Who are you, drat you?! And what kind of a pupil are you, if you have not a single pencil or notebook in your bag?" Iliko said in exasperation, seeing that the chance of identifying me had slipped him.

"It's me, Zuriko, Uncle Iliko!"

"Ooo, may you burst, you damned scoundrel! You've driven

me nuts! Come down here at once and bring me a couple of good big bunches!"

I climbed down and hugged Iliko.

"How are things with you, Uncle Iliko?"

"Hear him ask, the shameless cur! Playing hide-and-peek with me for a whole hour! You've spoiled a good chance!"

"What chance?" I asked in puzzlement.

"Well, you know I've been working as a watchman for the collective farm these last six months, don't you?"

"Yes, I know it. So what?"

"They gave me a horse... It's no horse but devil incarnate. The other day lame Sinito's cow got into the plantation. I jumped down from that horse and seized the cow by the tail. But when I looked round for the horse, he was making off at a trot. So I chased after him and just barely caught the devil, but in the meantime the cow had wandered off. I let the horse be and ran after the cow. I caught the cow, but no horse! I left the cow and went after the horse, but then I had no cow. In other words, I kept at it all day long, running from the cow to the horse and back, my tongue lolling out, until both gave me the slip. And yesterday I had a dressing down from the chairman. He said either I do my job conscientiously or he sacks me."

"What has it got to do with me?"

"That's what. When I saw there was a thief up this here tree, I thought now I had a chance to prove my worth. I'll catch the thief and bring him to the office and I'd like to see the chairman tell me I wasn't doing my job properly. But you've gone and spoiled it all."

"Well, why not take me to the office?"

"Are you crazy? Do you want your Granny to gouge out my only good eye?"

"So what are you going to do?"

"I'll take the goat to the chairman. Let him do what he likes with it."

"But whose goat is she?"

"What do you mean whose goat? She's mine! Haven't you seen her before?"

"But didn't she use to have a beard?"

“She did. I’ve cut it off.”

“Whatever for?”

“So that people shouldn’t recognise her. It’s not right that a watchman should be catching his own goat.”

“Don’t you need her?”

“What for? The animal is no earthly use to me. You may give her milk to drink if you like, but don’t expect her to give you any. You can’t slaughter her for meat – she’s just skin and bones. All I have is expense without any returns.”

“What if they recognise her?”

“They never will. I myself can hardly believe it’s my own goat... Well, be on your way, sonny. Thanks for the grapes. My throat was that dry!”

“Goodbye, Iliko!”

“See you don’t blab to Illarion – or he’ll be the ruin of me,” Iliko pleaded.

“Don’t worry, Iliko, I won’t.”

A month later Iliko was rewarded for exemplary work – the collective-farm board gave him the same goat, who had by then grown some meat on her bones.

A GENERAL MEETING

There is a lonely fir-tree growing on a hill near our village. On it hangs a bell that belonged to the old church before it was pulled down. In the morning they ring the bell for school, and in the evening it is rung either to give a fire alarm or call the collective farmers to a meeting.

Being the only man in the family I am always invited to such meetings – but I only have a deliberative vote.

That day the bell was rung towards evening. Since no fire or smoke were visible, it meant they were calling the people for a general meeting.

“Are you coming, Zuriko?” I heard Illarion’s voice.

“Yes, Illarion, I’m coming!” I shouted, leapt over the wattle-fence and the next moment was striding beside him.

“What is it about, do you know?” I asked.

“What’s there to know? I’m sure it’s about the office again.”

The meeting had already started when we arrived. We took seats in the back row and listened. The speaker was the collective-farm accountant, who also chaired the meeting.

“Well, it’s like this, folk! Avxenty, when he was elected chairman, ordered the office to be dismantled and moved nearer to his house. Then, if you remember, Kirill was elected chairman, and the office was moved to a new place. Last year the office stood in front of Dmitry’s house. And now our new chairman, Shalva, demands that it should be moved to his house. Anybody have anything to say? Only I warn you—not more than five minutes for a speaker. I know your kind—you take the floor and there’s no chasing you off it...”

“I have a question!”

“Speak up, Trifon!”

“What do you prefer, respected Shalva—that a new office should be built in front of your house, or that the old one should be moved and given a new roof?”

“Trifon Sikharulidze!” the chairman yelled, jumping up. “Don’t you make a laughing matter of it, or I’ll put you in your place! The office must be dismantled and moved in front of my house. Is that clear? I can’t afford to waste time traipsing back and forth! I leave early in the morning and do not reach the office before evening!”

“Walk faster, dear Shalva!”

“Who said that? Come, show yourself!”

“Comrades, enough idle chatter! Any more questions?”

“I have one,” said Makary Tskhoidze and cleared his throat so mightily he nearly snapped his vocal cords.

“Come on, Makary!”

“What happened to the pedigree heifer I brought from Samtredia last year?”

“The poor creature did not survive the birth of a son to the respected chairman.”

“Who said that? Get up, show your mug, provocateur!”

“I have a proposal to make! May I?” said Illarion.

“Give Illarion the floor!”

“Comrades, there’s no point in bringing up old grievances—what happened to the heifer, why the farm’s building materials

were spent on the chairman's house, how the farm's wine found itself in the chairman's vats and so on... What's the point of it? If people find out about all these goings on, we shall be the laughing stock of the district... One should not wash dirty linen in public..."

"Illarion Shevardnadze! I'll sue you for libel! Better sit down before it's too late!"

"Let the man finish! He's saying nothing but the truth!" Iliko intervened.

"Well, what I have to propose is this: why not dismantle the chairman's house and move it nearer to the office?"

"Why, Illarion, how can you dismantle his house when he's just given it a new roof?"

"Then let's move the chairman into the office and make his house an office instead!"

"Are you mad?" the chairman exploded. "Palming off that rotten shack on me in lieu of my handsome new house!"

"Then I have another suggestion: let's dismantle the chairman's house and put it on the site of the office, and then dismantle the office and move it to where the house had been."

"The sum does not change when the summands change places," said the teacher of mathematics.

"That will be all. I have no other suggestions to make," Illarion said and sat down.

"I have another one," said Margarita Chanturia. "A touring company from Tbilisi is coming here tomorrow. Since the building materials intended for a club went to the chairman's house, I suggest we hold the concert at his place."

"Whatever could I have been thinking of when I appointed you team-leader!"

"I have a question," somebody said. "When does the chairman intend to start repairs of the school building? The classrooms are near collapse."

"What does he want with classes? He's building a classless society!" Illarion remarked.

The chairman went pale. Tension had mounted.

"I have a good suggestion," Iliko said raising an arm.

"Speak!"

“Friends, we have again departed from the point at issue: where the office is to be placed.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Perhaps we shouldn’t dismantle the office at all? Perhaps we’d do better to make a collection and buy our chairman a car?”

“Not on your life! Are you out to ruin us all? What if there’s an accident, God forbid? What shall we do, poor orphans, without our chairman? Better send two hefty fellows to his house every morning to carry him to the office.”

“Isn’t it enough that he’s riding us piggyback—must we now carry him in our outstretched arms?”

“All right, then there’s another suggestion... Where’s our driver?”

“I’m here, Iliko!”

“How are things with you, is your car in order?”

“Thank you, we’re both well... And how’s your health?”

“Thank you, I have no complaints.. You would not have an extra four wheels by any chance?”

“What do you want wheels for?”

“We’d put the office on wheels and roll it back and forth!”

The auditorium responded to this one with a roar of laughter.

“Iliko Chigogidze!” the chairman said, rising ominously.

“Remember today’s evening well... You may spit me in the face if you do not live to regret it!”

“Suit yourself, dear Shalva, suit yourself... I asked you to make me a postman, and you appointed me watchman instead... Me, a man with only one eye! An invalid! Is there any worse punishment you can mete out to me?”

“I suppose you wanted me to appoint you chairman?”

“Why not? Do you think I wouldn’t be able to build myself a house of collective-farm bricks? Do you think my appetite is any worse than yours?”

The Chairman was at a loss for an answer.

“Well, what will be the meeting’s decision?” asked the accountant.

“May I speak? I have a suggestion!” I blurted out, frightened at my own boldness.

“Shut up, you snotnose!” I was shushed on all sides.

“Let him speak!” Iliko shouted. “Every member of the meeting has the right to speak his mind.”

“Alright then, speak, you scalawag!” voices came from the audience.

“I have a suggestion... Since the whole village is gathered here, and the meeting is drawing to a close... After all we cannot go without taking a decision...”

“Stop beating about the bush! Out with you proposal!”

“Give me a drink of water, please,” I brought out with difficulty. My mouth had suddenly gone dry.

“Give him a glass of water, blast the blighter!..”

I drank half the carafe unhurriedly, wiped my lips and went on:

“Since we don’t seem to be able to come to a concerted decision...”

“Make it short, rascal! Our patience is giving out!”

“I suggest that we sack the old chairman and elect a new one—one that lives nearer the office.”

A deep hush followed. I waited for thunder to strike. My knees were trembling.

And thunder did strike. There was a roar of approval. The first proposal I ever made at a general meeting was passed unanimously.

“At last!! Thank God there’s one person with brains among us. If it were not for him we’d be sitting here until Doomsday. Tomorrow we’ll elect a new chairman, and that will be the end of it!”

Illarion walked up to me and kissed me on the forehead.

CAPE, BOOTS AND SOCKS

The winter that year was a fierce one. It was snowing all the time, and a piercing wind blew the cold in through every hole and chink in the walls. Granny stopped them with rags, and when she ran out of rags, she started on my homework notebooks. You cannot imagine how gladly I helped her to ex-

terminate these shameful documents of my academic failures.

At last all the chinks in the house were filled in, and the warmth now stayed inside. But outside the blizzard went on raging. Granny and I were sitting by the hearth. She was telling me a tale, darting a glance now and then to check if I was listening. I was lazily chewing a flat *lavash* loaf thinking thoughts of my own. The young prince had killed the guards and reached the coveted doors of the chrystal castle. He was on the point of embracing the beauty imprisoned there, when we heard the sound of stamping feet on the balcony.

“See who it is,” Granny said.

I glanced out of the window. Iliko and Illarion stood there shaking the snow off their coats and hoods.

I opened the door and invited them in.

“Good evening!” said Illarion and tossed a new pair of skis into the corner.

“Where did you get these skis, Illarion?” I asked.

“You’ll be snowed in by the morning. How do you expect to go to school? Try them on, dunderhead! They’re for you...”

I hugged Illarion and gave him a smacking kiss on a cold prickly cheek. Then I glanced at Granny pleadingly. She gave me an understanding smile, rose with an effort and made her way to the closet, which she for some reason called “the cashier’s.” A minute later a low table was installed in front of the hearth, and on it was a bottle of *chacha*, a couple of *choorchk-heli** sweets and a plate with apples and pears.

“You needn’t bother, Olga,” Illarion said. “We just dropped in for a chat.”

“Please yourself,” said Granny. “I can take it all away if you like,” she added stretching her hand to the bottle.

“It you don’t want any, nobody forces you, but don’t speak for others,” Iliko thundered and snatched the bottle.

“What, do you drink *chacha*?” Illarion said with such amazement written on his face as though he was looking at a prehistoric monster.

* Nuts boiled in grape juice syrup.

“In weather like this you will swallow a thermometer, let alone a glassful of *chacha*, to get the temperature up,” said Iliko filling his glass.

“It certainly is cold,” Illarion said, filled his glass too, drank it up and started chewing an apple. “Now, Olga, in the autumn these apples were so sour a pig would tear itself free from its tether after tasting one. Why are they so sweet now?”

“Aren’t you one for making up to people?” Granny said with an indulgent smile. “Just give you a glass of *chacha* and you become as sweet as sugar yourself.”

They poured themselves another glassful and drank it. Then a third.

“The postman came to see me today,” Illarion said. “Brought a death notice... About Gerasim’s son... He said he had not the heart to give it to him... Tell him, Illarion, he asked me...”

“Oh my God! What grief to the unfortunate father!.. Poor Gerasim!” Granny broke out into a lamentation.

“He was killed in Kerch, the poor lad... That’ll be the seventh death in our village...” Illarion continued.

“Did you tell Gerasim?” I asked.

“How can I? The poor man’s been counting days awaiting his son’s return—how can I tell him?”

“Oh God, punish this Hitler beast... Let him have no joy in life, neither him nor any of his family,” Granny went on wailing.

“What are you going to do then?” I asked.

“Here’s what!” Illarion brought a folded sheet of paper out of his pocket, looked at it for a long time, then quickly tossed it into the fire. The flames lit up his face. Two large tears were rolling down his bristly cheeks.

“If the lad is alive, he’ll turn up sooner or later. If he is really dead, let the unfortunate father wait for his return anyway. Man lives by hope. See you don’t let on, Zuriko!”

“I won’t.”

“Olga!” a voice came from the balcony.

“Who’s there? Come in!”

Georgy Vashakidze entered the room.

“Excuse me for coming so late, but it’s urgent business.”

“Come sit by the fire,” Granny said hospitably.

“Well, what’s new? How’re things at the front?” Illarion asked him.

“The fighting at the front is going quite well. The advance of the enemy has been stopped. Hitler’s plan for a blitzkrieg has collapsed!” Vashakidze announced.

“Wait a minute. We read this piece of news in the papers a month ago... Tell us something really new!”

“New? I have a serious business with you. Listen!”

“Out with it,” said Illarion.

Georgy stood up, cleared his throat and spoke as though addressing an audience of many thousands:

“Comrades! Our socialist Motherland is in danger! The ruthless enemy is trying to strangle our freedom and independence with his bloody paws! The gallant Red Army is dealing the nazis crushing blows...”

“Hey, stop dishing out newspaper leaders to us!” Iliko interrupted him in exasperation. “Tell us straight out what it is you’ve come about.”

Vashakidze was put out of countenance.

“Come on, what is it?” Illarion urged him.

“Well, we’re collecting gifts for Red Army men... Perhaps you will contribute something too?” he finally brought out.

“Why didn’t you say so straightaway, son?” Granny asked with a smile.

“What kind of gifts do you want?” Iliko asked.

“Any kind: fruit, *choorchkheli*, warm clothes, mittens, warm socks... Today is Thursday and on Monday a waggonload of gifts will be sent to the front from our village... So if you think of something to donate bring it here, to Olga’s place. Our chaps will drop in tomorrow and collect them.”

Vashakidze took leave and went on his way.

For a long time we sat thinking, wondering what gifts we could give the Red Army men.

Iliko was the first to break the silence:

“What treasures have I? Just my *boorka* cape—there it sits on the floor outside the door. Bring it in, Zuriko!”

I looked at Iliko in surprise.

“What are you goggling at me for? Will the world go to the dogs if an old gaffer like me parts with his cape? It’ll be spring soon anyway. Come on, bring the cape in!”

I went out onto the balcony and came back at once with Iliko’s felt cape, which was almost new and which he used instead of a blanket and cherished like the apple of his eye, refusing to lend it even to Illarion.

“Brought it? Put it in the corner. When the fellows come to collect the gifts, give it to them,” said Iliko without looking at the cape.

“Shame on our Lord God for depriving you of one eye, Iliko. Of course I knew you had a heart of gold, but I never suspected you had a whole nugget inside that sunken breast,” said Illarion and scratched his head. Then he began fidgeting in his chair and suddenly jumped up and dashed outside.

“I know where the Big-Nose has gone,” Iliko said with a grin.

“Where?” asked Granny.

“Home! Don’t you know his ways? He’ll turn the house upside down to do one better on me. But what has that pauper got in his bare house?”

Before five minutes were out Illarion came back. He silently placed his only pair of new high boots beside Iliko’s cape.

“Are you mad, wretch?” Iliko shouted, jumping up.

“Get up, you old mushroom. Are you going to spend the night here?” Illarion said and made for the door.

...I woke up from a slight rustling sound. Granny was sitting on the edge of her bed and putting her clothes on quietly. Then she walked on tiptoe to the “cashier’s” and came back with a carding comb in her hands. She set it up by the hearth, came up to her bed, ripped open her mattress and began to pull handfuls of wool out of its inside. Then she sat down on the goatskin that lay on the floor and began carding the wool, swaying back and forth in time with her movements and humming something monotonously all the while.

I watched her silently for a long time, tears welling up in my eyes. I tried to picture an unknown soldier for whom my Granny, on that freezing winter night, her hands shaking with cold, was carding wool to knit a warm pair of socks.



RECITATION

We often spent a winter evening at Iliko's place. The fire would be crackling merrily in the hearth, bacon would be sizzling in the frying pan sending out an appetising smell, and a jug of wine would be standing nearby getting warm by the fire. We would play the *nardi** or read aloud, but most often discuss the war news. It was uppermost in our minds, and not ours alone: it was the winter of 1942.

Illarion sat reading aloud the Sovinformburo communiqué. Then he folded the newspaper and announced:

"That's the end of Hitler!"

"What does the newspaper say, Illarion?"

"They haven't moved an inch towards Moscow."

"Is there anything about the second front?"

"The Allies are in no hurry... England is being crafty... It says to America—forget about the Soviet Union and help me instead."

"And what does America say to that?"

"It says mind your own business!"

"And Germany meantime is trying to talk Turkey and Japan into striking at us as soon as the Germans capture Stalingrad."

"Perhaps they think capturing Stalingrad is just a matter of wishing it?"

"Well, all I say is I don't like Turkey's policy much."

"Oh, Turkey is a sly one... If it sees Germany is getting itself into a fix, it'll bite its backside."

"Do you think so? I'm not so sure."

"You may shave my whiskers off if it all does not work out the way I say!"

"And what about Japan?"

"What about it? Germany is egging it on—what are you waiting for, come on, join the fray! But Japan says: you're a fine one to talk! You've been marking time near Moscow for God knows how long, and now you want me to join you! What is there in it for me?"

* A popular table game in the East.

"And what does Hitler say to that?"

"Hm, Hitler... Hitler has already announced the capture of Stalingrad twice, but Japan is no fool. They are cunning, the Japanese are... No, the Germans have had it!"

"I wish you were right. Pour out a glassful, Zuriko!"

We raised glasses to victory, to those who are out there fighting, to peace.

"I wrote a poem yesterday!" I suddenly blurted out.

Illarion was so stunned he dropped a piece of ham. Iliko choked on his wine and became as blue as a chicken's stomach.

"What did you say?" Iliko asked when he regained his breath.

"I wrote a poem... About the war!"

Iliko and Illarion exchanged glances.

"Let's hear it."

I took a sheet of paper out of my pocket, rose, stretched out my left arm and recited loudly:

*The treacherous enemies
Our country attacked.
They'll never win victory,
We'll fight staunchly back.
Our heroes are valorous,
Our tanks forge ahead.
If Motherland tells me,
My blood shall I shed.*

I finished reciting and waited for the verdict of my friends with trepidation.

"Ye-es... It sounds ... er ... loud!" said Illarion after a pause that seemed to stretch into half an hour.

"It's not so much a matter of noise—it can be spoken softly too... But what's going to happen to him now?" Iliko asked, looking at me pityingly.

"Have you had this poetic bug for long?" Illarion asked me.

"For a month."

"Why didn't you tell us earlier, wretch? What are we going to do now? I'm sorry for your poor grandmother. I knew all along

you'd go off the deep end one of these days," said Iliko and waved a hand.

"Well, and how do you find it—does rhyming come easy?"

"Easy enough... I make up eight or nine poems a day. I'd probably do more if I had the paper."

"That's not much," said Iliko.

"Does Granny know?" asked Illarion.

"No."

"Well, don't tell her. She has enough worry as it is... Have you any other poems with you?"

"Yes. About love."

"Let's hear it."

I cast a hesitant glance at Iliko.

"Never mind, read it, it makes no difference now," he said.

I took another sheet of paper out of my pocket and recited in softer tones:

*It is night. The moon is shining.
Snow and wind, a blizzard's blowing.
Out I set, to roam in darkness,
My heart full to overflowing.
I can't sleep, I weep in gladness,
I'm afraid my mind is going.*

The silence lasted all of five minutes. Iliko and Illarion looked at each other in embarrassment.

"Well, what d'you say?" Illarion finally asked.

"The last line has real feeling."

"But he said the poem was about love, and there's not a word about love in it!"

"The lad is shy."

"It's poetry, Illarion!" I tried to explain. "You can't put everything into words in poetry."

"In the first place it's no more poetry than I am the Shah of Persia! And in the second, if you undertake to write about love, you should at least mention it."

"Much you know!" I said in disgust. "If a person cannot sleep nights, if he wanders around and is going out of his mind—what is it if not love?"

"I'll tell you this, my dear chap: Iliko went out of his mind years ago and he does a lot of wandering at night – does it mean he's in love?" said Illarion.

"Mind what you're saying, old man!" Iliko shouted jumping up. "The boy has scrawled some balderdash on a sheet of paper, but why d'you have to bring me in? What has it got to do with me? Take your doggerel away, you scamp!" he snapped at me.

"Just a moment, let's analyse the poem first," Illarion cut him short. "Now, look here, you say in one line that the moon is shining and in the next that a blizzard is blowing. How can it be?"

This caught me unawares.

"Then there's this: You cannot sleep, there's wind and snow, the world is going to the dogs. What then are you so happy about? What makes you weep in gladness, nitwit?"

"What do you know about poetry, you two dotards!" I said in a huff.

Iliko poured out some more wine. Illarion raised his glass, put his arm round my shoulders and said tenderly:

"I know what's the matter with you, my boy... I know what makes people suddenly break into rhymes... When I was a lad like you I used to write poetry as well. Do you remember, Iliko?"

*I won't live without my darling!
Fire of love my heart's consuming.
If I cannot have Matryona,
Give me rifle and some bullets!*

Iliko nodded affirmatively and giggled.

"Yes, I thought you had gone out of your mind, but it passed after a while. It will be the same with him."

"That's how it is, son, but don't let it stop you writing poetry... This is not a punishable offence... Your girl, if she's as silly as you, may even like it. And if she doesn't, don't worry. This little bird, love, has laid an egg in your heart. With time little fledgelings will be hatched and will learn to fly. And there you will be wandering about the world, smitten with love... To your love, my boy!"

As I listened to Illarion in bashful silence I had a feeling he was holding my heart tenderly in his cupped hands, reading all that was written there.

FIRST LOVE

“Chigogidze!”

“Here!”

“Kaoandadze!”

“Here!”

“Sikharulidze!”

“Sikharulidze was taken ill! Chkoniya, Tsenteradze, Burchuladze, Koridze, Ninidze and Glonti have gone to see him home.”

“I am surprised all of you didn’t go...” the teacher said peevishly. “Vashalomidze! Vashalomidze! Va-sha-lo-midze!!!” the teacher yelled banging his fist on the table.

“I’m here, teacher.”

“As if it makes any difference whether you’re here or not!”

“To be or not to be, that is the question!” Romuli pronounced solemnly.

“Romuli Kalandadze, leave the classroom at once!”

“It’s cold outside, teacher!”

“Take your share of the firewood and get out!” I said in support of the teacher.

Romuli went out giving me a dirty look. The next minute the storm broke over my head.

“Vashalomidze, what was the assignment for today?”

“The uses of sodium bicarbonate...”

“Come here then and tell us all about it!”

I rose and ambled to the blackboard in the lowest of spirits.

“Well?..”

“There are several ways to use sodium bicarbonate,” I began.

“Iliko Chigogidze puts a pinch of it on the tip of his tongue and swallows it without water; Illarion Shevardnadze prefers it dissolved in a glass of warm water; and my grandmother...”

“Vashalomidze, get out of the classroom at once! Who lives near his house?”

“I do,” said Mary Sikharulidze.

“You will take my note to his grandmother after lessons... What are you standing there for? Get out!”

“Very well, so I’ll get out. But who will remain in the class?”

“Out...” the teacher whispered glancing longingly at his inkpot.

I made myself scarce in a hurry. I doubt that Columbus was so happy to sight America as Romuli was to see me.

“Kicked you out too?”

“It’s all because of you!”

“What have I got to do with it? You sit at lessons with your head in the clouds, seeing and hearing nothing... Don’t think I don’t know why! You’re in love!”

“Who with, dunderhead?”

“With Mary!”

“If you ever say it again, I’ll knock your teeth in.”

“Why me? The whole class speaks about it.”

“Are you crazy? Who falls in love at fourteen?”

“Why not? My grandmother got married at fourteen!”

“Well, what then?”

“Nothing. Would you like me to tell?”

“If I were in love, I’d tell her myself...”

“Like hell you would! Declaring love is not like saying a lesson. The thing to do is to write a letter.”

“Did you ever write such letters?”

“Didn’t I! Scores of them!”

I gave Romuli a searching look—was he pulling my leg? But his eyes were warm and candid. So I trusted my secret to him.

“Romuli, you’re like a blood brother to me... What’s the use of denying it... Help me! I am terribly in love with her, can you understand it?”

Romuli guffawed delightedly, hugged me with all his strength, lifted me from the ground and then, after bringing me down again, said:

“All will be fine! Just you do as I say!”

We had all the time we could want. We found an empty classroom, I sat down at the table, while Romuli paced up and down in front of the blackboard, dictating:

“Well, let’s begin... ‘My precious darling! Love is a great feel-

ing. It causes a person to grow deaf, dumb, blind and crazy!..’”

“That’s not true,” I objected.

“I know, but that’s what you’re supposed to say... Write: ‘Ever since I first set eyes on you, I grasped the absolute truth of beauty. I understood the purpose of my existence, and perceived you as the apotheosis of spiritual beauty and aesthetic delight...’”

“Romuli,” I said in amazement, “where did you learn all these words?”

“A college student from Tbilisi used them in a letter to my sister. He’s in love with her.”

“Is she going to marry him?”

“She was, but then a friend of ours in Tbilisi wrote that the student has been put away in a lunatic asylum... Write on: ‘There is no point in concealing that I love you more than life itself. Be my spiritual friend, I beseech you. I have been robbed of all peace by your heavenly eyes, your silky eyelashes, your pearly teeth, your coral lips, your agate hair, by your fingers, your hands, all of you. Either I must have you for ever, or I shall die. Adieu...’”

“Well, how does it sound?” asked Romuli, striking a lordly posture.

“I’m not surprised he nearly got your sister,” I said.

“It’ll make a stone weep!” said Romuli.

I ran to the post office, bought an envelope, placed the letter inside, licked the edge, pasted the envelope and put it in my pocket.

Towards the end of the last lesson I pushed the letter into Mary’s bag when no one was looking, and went all numb, like a corpse. I did not hear the bell ring, did not see my friends go home. I went on sitting at my desk in a daze until the cleaning woman came.

“What’s the matter with you, Vashalomidze? Since when do you love school so much that you refuse to go home? Raise your feet—I have to sweep the floor,” she said to me.

“Good morning, Aunt Maka!”

“Goodness me! Have not we met today?”

“Goodbye, Aunt Maka!”

“Christ Almighty!” The woman made the sign of the cross and walked out hastily, giving me a frightened glance.

In the evening I was again at Iliko’s playing the *nardi*. I had become so absorbed in the game that I nearly forgot about the letter.

“Well, have you been writing any more poems?” Iliko asked me.

“Read one to us, be so kind,” Illarion put in grinning.

“Iliko!” came from outside.

“Who’s there?”

“It’s me, Olga. Have you got my scoundrel there?”

“Come on in, Olga! He’s here!”

Granny came into the room, all hunched up, took off her shawl, put her stick into the corner, sat down by the window, and said after a pause:

“Zuriko, my lad, how old is your chemistry teacher?”

“Thirty, may be thirty-five... Why?” I asked eagerly.

“Is he all there? I mean is he all right in the upper storey?”

“A pupil like Zuriko here will send anybody off his rocker,” said Iliko.

“No, Granny, not at all. His brains drip out of his ears,” I said.

“Illarion, dear, have a look at this note here. Can you imagine a teacher writing a note like that to his pupil’s grandmother?”

I went cold.

Illarion put on his spectacles, unfolded the letter and asked:

“Who brought you the letter, Olga?”

“Mary, the daughter of Lado Sikharulidze.”

Illarion began to read unhurriedly:

“‘My precious darling...’”

“Is he writing that to you?” Iliko asked Granny.

“I swear by the Almighty God he is.”

My mouth had gone dry, my hands were ice-cold, perspiration stood on my forehead.

Illarion meantime continued: “‘Ever since I first set eyes on you, I grasped the absolute truth of beauty...’”



"Where could he have seen me, the damned fool?" Granny giggled and turned to Iliko, who was sitting there gaping in disbelief.

"I understood the purpose of my existence, and perceived you as the apotheosis of spiritual beauty and aesthetic delight..." Illarion continued.

"I didn't get that one," Granny said.

"Love is unfathomable, dear Olga," said Illarion.

"When did he manage to fall in love with her?" said Iliko.

"They asked her to come to school about that scamp of ours so many times that he had plenty of opportunities."

"I have been robbed of all peace by your heavenly eyes..."

"May he go blind!" said Iliko.

"Your silky eyelashes..." continued Illarion.

Iliko fell to the floor in convulsions of laughter. Illarion had an attack of hiccups, but went on reading:

"...your pearly teeth...' I think he's exaggerating here," said Illarion.

"What teeth, may he drop dead, where did he see teeth?" Granny exclaimed.

"...your coral lips, your agate hair, your fingers, your hands, all of you..."

Illarion was weeping with laughter.

"Stop it this minute, I can't stand it any more!" Iliko said faintly. Illarion stopped reading and began reviving Iliko. Granny had a fit of giggles. I alone did not laugh. I stood there rooted to the spot, turned to stone.

"You're going to marry your Granny off soon, Zuriko! I hope you invite me to the wedding!" Iliko managed to bring out and fell on the floor in a heap again.

"I must say this is a rum business," Illarion said thoughtfully.

"Really, Olga, driving a young man crazy like that!"

"Uncle Iliko!" came a voice from outside.

"Who's there?" Iliko responded, getting up from the floor.

Mary came into the room. She was pink with the frost. For a moment she stood by the door blowing on her frozen hands, putting them in her armpits and stamping her feet. When she was a little warmer, she said:

“I’ve been looking for Granny Olga...”

“I’m here, lass. That letter you brought me... It nearly killed the three of us oldsters,” said Granny giving her back the letter.

“Granny, the teacher’s letter is here... That is a different one... I have no idea how it got into my bag...”

“Oh God, not another letter? Will you kindly read it, Illarion.”

“Please come to school at your earliest convenience to discuss the outrageous behaviour of your grandson.”

“Again? Putting me to shame again, you wretch?!”

Granny grabbed her stick. I dashed outside.

“Don’t you dare come home, scoundrel! I won’t let you in!”
Granny shouted after me.

Soon Mary came out of Iliko’s house. She walked slowly, her head bowed, her bare hands exposed to the frost. Her kerchief had slipped to her shoulders and a strand of hair fell across her forehead. She looked like a painting by some famous artist, only I could not remember his name. She walked by without so much as noticing me.

“Mary,” I said softly.

She stopped short. I came up to her and gently smoothed the strand of hair into place. She never moved.

“Did you read the letter?”

Mary said nothing. She only gave me a thoughtful glance and went on her way.

“Mary!”

She stopped again.

“It’s all Romuli’s fault... He dictated the letter. I wanted to say it differently, but he said that’s how it is done.”

“It’s not nice to play such a joke on a person, Zuriko...”

“It isn’t a joke, Mary!.. I... Don’t think I’m all that bad, Mary!..”

“I don’t think you’re bad...”

We walked slowly side by side over the freshly fallen snow. It went on snowing and a cold wind was blowing. We did not speak. We passed my house and the plane-tree wrapped in a snowy blanket.

“My Murada is buried here...”

“I know.”

“I was very fond of Murada. I loved him as much as Granny, Illarion and Iliko...”

“I know, Zuriko.”

“I love him more every day... And Murada loved me too. I used to talk to him like I would to a person... We understood each other... When he died I was on the point of killing myself... A man really can go mad from love!.. Are you cold?”

“Yes...”

“And I’m not!”

I threw off my sheepskin and put it on Mary, leaving my arm round her shoulders. We walked on over the fresh snow without speaking... We passed Mary’s house.

“Are you warmer now?”

“Yes, Zuriko.”

“You knew my Murada, didn’t you?”

“Yes...”

“He was very fond of you. He often said to me: ‘Mary is a nice girl, she’s better’n all the others. No other girl has such beautiful eyes. Mary is a kind and a clever girl...’ Murada loved you as much as me, perhaps even more than me. He never barked at you... You did love him, didn’t you?”

“Yes, Zuriko, I was very fond of him.”

“Mary!”

“What, Zuriko?”

I put my arms round Mary, drew her to me and buried my face in her hair. Mary was crying, and I was crying too. Big snow-flakes were falling, the wind was blowing in gusts, there was the moon and the sun and love and tears and a great deal of snow. To listen to Iliko, I had nothing to be happy about – there was wind and snow, and the world was going to the dogs. But I rejoiced in the wind, the moon, the sun and my love and those great quantities of white snow.

ELEVEN SACKS OF CORN

Iliko's favourite pig – a pure-blood Yorkshire sow with huge flapping ears, small bloated eyes and a short upturned snout – was called Serapiona by everybody in the village.

The pig littered twice a year, in spring and autumn, each time bringing into the world twelve fat pink piglets. Iliko sold them and made very good money out of it. During the war years Iliko began exchanging piglets for corn.

No wonder Iliko cherished his Yorkshire sow like the apple of his eye, called her his breadwinner and all but carried her in his arms. He might go hungry himself, but he would never leave his sow without her swill. If you wanted to make up to Iliko all you had to do was to praise his pig. He would at once treat you to a glass of *chacha* or a pinch of pepperless tobacco, promise you the best piglet in the next litter and what not. Illarion and I were well aware of this weakness of Iliko's and never missed a chance to laud the sow. That day, too, we were sitting under a leafy apple-tree in Iliko's yard, casting respectful looks at Serapiona who was lolling on her side nearby, and chatting unhurriedly.

"What a sow! I've never seen the likes of her in my life!" said Illarion.

"My breadwinner! My treasure!" Iliko purred, tickling Serapiona's belly tenderly. The pig closed her eyes and grunted blissfully. Iliko gazed gratefully at her red swollen teats – twelve nipples! Twelve pedigree piglets! God willing, Serapiona would litter in a day or two, and then twelve sacks of golden corn would be Iliko's.

"Where did you buy her, Iliko?" I asked. "With a pedigree like that?"

"It's a long story, my dear boy... Serapiona's great-grandmother was given as dowry to my grandmother Kalenti, God rest her soul! They say that pig was nothing to boast of, a sickly creature, and grandfather Khariton was ashamed to keep such a scurvy beast and decided to get rid of her."

"He'd do better to kill her for meat," Illarion said.

"Who wanted the meat of a sick pig? We weren't as hard up then as we are now."

“It’s wartime...” I said. “Of course everybody is hard up.”

“True enough... People are having a difficult time... It’s not so bad here, but they say they ate cats in Leningrad during the siege.”

“Leningrad is far away. But I am afraid to smile in my own house,” said Illarion.

“Why?” asked Iliko.

“Because when I open my mouth and show my teeth, that stupid rooster of mine dives for them like a hawk, thinking it is corn.”

“Make soup of him,” I advised.

“And will you come every morning and crow to wake me up?” Illarion asked.

“Well,” Iliko went on with his story, “so grandfather Khariton declared he would not have that pig in his yard. And my grandmother Kalenti was so angry she nearly burst. ‘Thickwit,’ she yelled. ‘You don’t know the first thing about pigs! This is a pedigree sow, she will show what stuff she’s made of yet!’ and what do you think? Granny was right. My Serapiona is a descendant of that same sickly piglet.”

“Oh, she’s a fine animal, she is!” I said.

“You’re a clever boy, Zuriko,” Iliko beamed. “Now tell me in all honesty—isn’t Serapiona worthy of the highest respect?”

“I think you don’t do her justice, Iliko, if anything. Why in hell’s name do you keep your grandfather Khariton’s photograph on the wall, with his leer and his goggling eyes? Better ask Pavlusha the photographer to make you a portrait of Serapiona—she deserves to be hanging on the wall in your best room,” said Illarion.

“Illarion Shevardnadze, may I carry her out of my house in a coffin, if this here pig is not a worthier creature than you,” said Iliko and gave Illarion such a glare that I realised a row was in the air—and that when the cherished bottle of *chacha* was nearly within our grasp. I winked at Illarion, to dissuade him from any more jokes and said: “Take no notice of him, Iliko! Your pig is as good as any person, for all that she can’t talk.”

Iliko looked at me suspiciously, and I gazed him candidly in

the eye. Then he rose and went inside, mumbling something as he walked. He had gone to fetch that bottle.

“Must you rile him?” I growled at Illarion.

“Aw, go to hell, the lot of you!” Illarion snapped. “One has to watch one’s step all the time. Would you perhaps like me to kneel before this stinking pig?”

Iliko brought a bottle of *chacha*, three glasses and a couple of *choorchkheli*. We drank the first two glasses in silence, just nodding to one another before downing the drink. But when we filled our glasses the third time, Iliko made a speech:

“Zuriko, you’re an educated person now. You have reached the ninth form, even though at the cost of great suffering to yourself and your teachers. Now, I wonder if you heard—perhaps even learnt—that man has descended from the ape.”

“What other creature could you have descended from if not the ape?” Illarion put in. Now he could crack jokes to his heart’s content—there was no risk involved. The bottle was safely ensconced in front of him. Iliko went on pretending not to hear.

“I may not be very well versed in science, but I think this is not quite correct. I should imagine that different people are descended from different animals. Take Serapion Seperteladze—I’m sure he’s descended from a pig. Look at my Serapiona and at Serapion Seperteladze. Don’t they look like twins? She can’t talk? So what? Some people are born mute too. And that is how it is with my Serapiona...”

“Wait till I tell Serapion Seperteladze about this theory of yours,” said Illarion. “He’ll show you who’s descended from whom.”

“Tell him by all means. Do you think he doesn’t know!” Iliko retorted. “Now let me tell you something else, Zuriko my lad. Do you see this here Illarion?” Illarion looked wary.

“Yes, I see him.”

“Do you know how stubborn he is?”

“Well, let’s say I do.”

“Did you hear him laugh? Doesn’t he bray like a donkey?” I couldn’t deny that either.

“And do you see his long ears?”

I could say nothing to that—certainly Illarion had long ears.

“And now are you going to deny that Illarion is descended from an ass?”

Illarion choked on a piece of *choorchkheli* and began to cough. When he regained his breath, he rose, took his cap and, without saying a word, made for the gate. Half way there, he looked round regretfully at the bottle, returned, filled a glass, gulped it down and went to the gate again, still without saying a word. And only when he reached the gate, did he turn round and shout:

“Just you wait, you one-eyed devil! I’ll make you swallow your words!”

Iliko was chuckling with contentment.

...The day when another litter of Yorkshire pure-breds was expected was near at hand. Would-be pig-owners thronged to Iliko’s yard, each with a sack of corn. Each was given promissory note, which said:

“I, Iliko Chigogidze, have received from citizen so-and-so a sack of corn in exchange for which I promise to give him one piglet of male (or female) sex after it is through sucking its mother.”

The negotiations were conducted amicably enough, in an atmosphere of friendship and mutual understanding, but for one circumstance: each and every prospective buyer wanted a female.

“What d’you call that?” Iliko lamented. “Whoever saw a pig having a litter of twelve females?”

“Why not,” somebody said. “Kuchulia Tsintsadze has twelve daughters.”

“Then go and talk it over with Kuchulia and Serapiona. Let Kuchulia give you promissory notes. And leave me alone!”

“Iliko Chigogidze, if you were a little younger, I would tear out your filthy tongue!” Kuchulia fumed.

“If I were younger and stronger, I’d rip you at the seams!” Iliko retorted.

Some of the buyers made a bid for Serapiona herself. But Iliko had a sober view of life as seen through his only eye. He might have sold his soul, but not Serapiona.

“Now, what more do you want?” Aslan from Surebi pestered him. “Am I not offering you a decent price? A horse and two hundred select shingles for a pig! Well, is it a deal?”

“Go and look for another fool, Aslan! In wartime they may commandeer a horse into cavalry, but nobody will take away my Serapiona.”

“Sell the pig before it’s too late!” Aslan tried intimidation. “It’ll soon make bacon for the Germans. Hitler is within a stone’s throw.”

“We’ll live and see, dear Aslan. Has Hitler perhaps attacked us on account of my pig, have you heard?” Iliko inquired.

Aslan waved his hand in exasperation and went away.

One evening Iliko came to our house and dropped a sack of corn in our yard under the damson-tree.

“Why the corn, Iliko?” Granny asked.

“Yesterday I gave out eleven promissory notes for Serapiona’s litter and received eleven sacks of corn. It’ll last me till next autumn.”

“Why eleven?” Granny asked in surprise. “Doesn’t Serapiona always bear twelve piglets?”

“I make a gift of one piglet to this here scamp. And of this corn too. You know how fond I am of this lazybones, Olga.”

“God Almighty, send joy and happiness to Iliko Chigogidze and all his family! May he prosper and enjoy good health,” Granny wailed in delight and kissed Iliko on the forehead.

“Let’s go and mill this corn tonight,” Iliko said to me. “Come and fetch me in an hour’s time.” With this he went away.

It was daybreak when Iliko and I, with sacks of flour on our backs, returned from the mill. Roosters trying to outcrow each other perched on tree-branches together with their harems. Suddenly we heard a fearsome scream.

“It’s Mashiko’s voice,” said Iliko. “Has the poor soul received a death-notice about her son?”

We quickened our steps.

“Oh God, why must the damned sow lie dying in my yard!” Mashiko was lamenting. “How am I going to convince the one-eyed devil that I’ve had nothing to do with it.”

Seized with a terrible presentiment, Iliko dropped his sack



and sank on the ground. I raced over to Mashiko's yard, glanced over the fence and froze in horror. Serapiona was lying at the gate grunting feebly. She was so thin as to be barely recognisable. Nearby were scattered twelve tiny dead piglets.

"What happened, Mashiko?" I gasped.

"Oh, woe to us, Zuriko! The stupid beast had to push her way through this hole in the fence—and here's the result... Times without number I told the old devil to keep an eye on his sow and not let her go where she pleased! But did he listen? Now let him kick himself!"

A crowd of neighbours had gathered—victims of Iliko's misfortune, sympathisers and merely curious onlookers. The last to hobble into the yard was Iliko. Pale and drawn, he looked at Serapiona for a long time, then snatched off his cap and threw it on the ground in anger.

"Is this divine justice, Lord? Have you no heart? What am I to do now?"

"Don't be so upset, Iliko," people said consolingly. "It's not all that bad. The sow is alive after all, things will right themselves. With her temperament..."

"And what am I going to do about my creditors?" Iliko wailed.

"You'll come to some agreement."

"Neighbours, good people, will you wait till the next litter?" Iliko addressed the creditors.

An awkward silence ensued.

"Well, shall we wait?" one of the creditors asked the others.

"What else can we do? We can't very well take the corn back. And he won't give it to us anyway!"

The crowd laughed. Even Iliko smiled. The incident seemed to be drawing to a happy conclusion. But at this moment Serapion Seperteladze ploughed his way through the crowd.

"You one-eyed devil!" he stormed. "This is the last time I'm warning you: either you change the name of your blasted sow or I'll smash your two stupid heads together! Let all these people bear witness to my words!"

"What are you yelling your head off about?" Iliko snapped. "Have you gone stark raving mad or what?"

“Look at him, he’s asking me what I’m yelling about? Half the village has come to my place to offer condolences – poor Serapion, they say, what a misfortune dropping twelve dead piglets! You’re making me the laughing-stock of the village! I’ll kill you both, you and my stinking namesake!”

The crowd was in stitches. Iliko was laughing as wholeheartedly as the rest of them. Serapion was constrained with some difficulty and led, struggling, home.

“To think that all the twelve piglets were females... Have you ever heard of such a thing?” said Iliko, casting a sidelong glance at Kuchulia Tsitsnadze.

Gradually the neighbours dispersed. The only ones left were Iliko, Illarion, Serapiona and I.

“She’s ruined me,” said Iliko.

“Let’s go home,” said Illarion.

“Come on, Iliko,” said I.

That night we held the wake over the piglets who met an untimely death...

SCHOOL-LEAVING

Time marched along, days followed one another as different as the buns Granny baked in hot ashes. Each day brought new joy, for fathers, husbands, sons and brothers were returning home from the war.

I had no near kin in the army, yet every day I went out onto the highway with the others to meet the lorries which brought home our soldiers, their chests hung with decorations, their sleeves wearing wound stripes. I hugged them and kissed them as heartily as did the rest.

Strangers smiled in embarrassment, neighbours patted me on the cheek and said how I had grown. Joy, happiness and peace, which had so suddenly left our village four years before, were now returning. And the village greeted them, like a mother greets a beloved son, long lost and suddenly restored to her.

It was the spring of 1945...

Nature was flowering, awakened from her winter sleep by the

sun's generous rays. In the distance, on the velvety mountain slopes herds of cattle could be seen grazing. The air was filled with the fragrance of field flowers.

School was over. We were cramming for school-leaving examinations.

Each morning Mary and I would go to the abandoned old mill at the edge of the village, sit down in the shade of a tall walnut-tree and pore over the textbooks.

One day we were sitting in our favourite spot preparing for the exam in Georgian literature.

"You must know these poems by heart," said Mary. "Listen now, this is Galaktion: *

*A dream lurks in my heart.
The dawn is a rosy wave.
The youth implores: "Stay, beloved!"
The maid retorts: "Vanish, knave!"*

"My Granny would say: 'May the earth swallow you up, you shameless cur'," I said. Mary laughed and covered my mouth with her palm so that I should not interrupt her.

Then I recited my favourite poem, which was not in the programme, but which I intended to recite to the examiners by all means:

*Again the Ksani meadows flower.
The air's alive with buzzing bees.
I taste the pollen and the honey
Again on your delicious lips.*

Mary sat hugging her knees and looking into the blue expanse of the sky where wispy clouds were floating. I recited another verse:

*Over thousands of years I address this appeal to you: Come!
In your lightnings a handful of ashes I'd gladly become.*

* The reference is to Galaktion Tabidze, People's Poet of Georgia.

"Are you making up poetry again?" I suddenly heard and jumped as though stung. Illarion was grinning broadly down at me.

"We are preparing for exams. Good morning, Illarion!"

"Call this preparing for exams? Well, well... Hello, both of you!" said Illarion and sat down. "How're things going with you?"

"We've almost finished," said Mary.

"Almost finished or barely begun?"

"What are you saying, Illarion! There's just this one exam left!" I cried.

"No, my dear boy, your exams are just beginning. And don't pretend you don't know what I mean!"

I knew what he meant all right, but still looked at him questioningly and shrugged my shoulders.

Illarion poked at the ground with a stick for a while, then asked me if I had any tobacco. I told him I had not. Then he produced his own pouch, rolled himself a cigarette unhurriedly, lit up, inhaled, let out a cloud of smoke and suddenly launched into a speech the likes of which I had never heard him make:

"A human life, my dear children, is like a water-mill. Can you see that water-wheel? It is the fate, and the water running down the chute is human life. Water is a great force, children. It is stronger than fire, stronger than the wind, it can even hollow out stone. And it's up to you to give this force direction... All kinds of people come to the mill: some to have their grain ground into flour, others to have it hulled, still others have no business here at all and merely sit about all day long listening to the rumbling of the millstones and then go away... I remember the time when we built a mill for our collective farm on our little river Lasheh. The water struggled and struggled but it had not the strength to move the wheel. Then we channelled the other branch of the river to the mill and things went swimmingly. The wheel just hummed! Do you understand why I am saying all this to the two of you? Two rivers can do more work than one, isn't it so? You will be finishing school in a few days. I suppose you are thinking of continuing your studies... That is all very well, but... For some reason people forget their village fast once they go to

live in town. They also forget their friends... Are you going to the city, my girl?" Illarion suddenly asked Mary.

"I don't think so, Uncle Illarion... I don't expect I'll get into college..."

"That is all right then. It means Zuriko won't leave us either." Illarion slapped me on the shoulder and rose. Mary was looking down in embarrassment.

"The whole world is open to you, children, the whole world. And Iliko and I are like this old millstone." Illarion pointed to an old millstone lying in the grass. A large grey lizard lay flattened on it, basking in the sun, its eyes closed.

We were given our school-leaving certificates in a solemn atmosphere at the tea-procurement office, which also doubled as the community centre.

There was no brass band in our school, and so a funeral orchestra had been invited from town to play a flourish each time a certificate was handed to a school-leaver. Before the ceremony began the orchestra, on Romuli's request, played the song "Mother had a little son". Then I asked them to play something more cheery, shoving seven rubles into the pocket of their leader, the one who played the clarinet. The orchestra broke into "Hey, brother Spiridon". Then somebody asked for "Khasanbegura", but the chief said they had not the instruments for folk songs.

At last all were gathered and the ceremony began. Teachers and parents of the best pupils sat on the platform. My Granny did not attend—she was feeling poorly that day.

In his address the principal said that now we were adult people, that school had given us all it could and from now on we were free to do what we liked, even if it was banging our heads against a wall. Then he began calling us out, one after another, in alphabetical order, describing each briefly and handing each his "maturity certificate", as the thing is officially called. He shook hands with the school-leaver and gave a glance to Pavlusha the photographer, who stood in readiness to immortalise the historical moment. The school-leaver would freeze into

frightened immobility, Pavlusha would count to ten and wave his hand to show the shot had been snapped—and then the orchestra would break into a deafening flourish.

But when my turn came, the orchestra for some reason imagined themselves at a funeral and started playing “Tavo chemo”.*

The principal glared, and the orchestra at once changed into a flourish.

After the ceremony our village choir was to give a concert, but since we had heard their songs at least a thousand times, we all went home.

Granny nearly hugged me to death when she saw my certificate. “Now death will never get the better of me,” she said and wetted the certificate with tears. Then she grew grave all of a sudden, gave me a dirty look, laid the certificate on the table and walked out of the house. I stared after her incomprehendingly.

Some fifteen minutes later Granny returned accompanied by Iliko and Illarion.

“Pray be seated, neighbours,” Granny said. The two sat down.

“Well, what have you gone and done now?” Illarion asked me.

“Nothing. I just got my school-leaving certificate,” I said handing him the certificate.

“I have called you here to have a look at that certificate and tell me whether it is the real thing or something like last year’s honours testimonial, which proved to belong to somebody else.”

Illarion picked up the certificate, examined the stamp, the signatures; even held it against the light, then passed it on to Iliko. Iliko scrutinized the certificate even more carefully and then pronounced:

“It’s his all right. There’s no doubt about it.”

“Are you sure?” asked Granny.

“Yes. In the first place, he could never have got hold of the

* A melody from Z. Paliashvili’s opera “Daisi”, which is often performed at funerals.

form, in the second, the stamp is as it should be, in the third, the certificate's back side says the same thing in Russian, and no pupil of our Zabloná has enough knowledge of Russian to forge that, and in the fourth, there is not a single good mark to be found in it—just C's all the way down—so it's obviously his."

"Thank God! You've set my heart at ease, Iliko!" Granny breathed with relief.

Illarion picked up the certificate again.

"Cer-ti-fi-cate of Ma-tu-ri-ty!" he pronounced, syllable by syllable. Then he rose, walked over to me, tapped me on the head with his forefinger, listened to the sound and then said to Iliko in distressed tones:

"Now, brother, if this is called maturity, then I'm a Chinese mandarin."

"Never mind... Tomatoes are also picked when they're not quite ripe. They mature on the way to the market."

"Well then, let us now decide what he will do next, what profession he will choose. A man must have a plan, if he does not want to look silly in the city," said Illarion.

"What department of the University are you going to try for?" Iliko asked me. I shrugged my shoulders.

"My grandson must become a doctor," Granny announced. "I am an old woman and I must have professional care."

"Do you mean to say you want to die at his hand?" Iliko asked.

"Perhaps he should enter the History Department?" Illarion said.

"If I were him I'd choose law!" said Iliko. "Look at our judge now—he's shaped up to be quite a man. When he first came to our village, he wore torn galoshes, and now he's sporting a leather overcoat and kid top-boots."

"No, no, he's too soft-hearted to have anything to do with law. He'd never be able to arrest a criminal."

"Perhaps he should specialise in literature? He certainly has the gift of the gab, and he writes verses too. What else does one need?"

"Isn't there a college that makes you a professor right away?" Granny asked.

"Of course there is!" cried Illarion gleefully. "Our Iliko graduated from one."

"What's the matter with you, have you swallowed your tongue?" Iliko barked at me. "Tell us at once what you intend to try for. Don't you see the long-nosed varmint's showing his forked tongue!"

"I'll be an actor!" I blurted out.

There was a deathly silence.

"May I lose the sight in my poor old eyes!" Granny wailed. "That he should lead a life of debauchery!"

"He's gone out of his mind," said Illarion.

The argument lasted till daybreak. At last we adopted Illarion's proposal that a man whose trousers were in such a sorry state, ought to go in for economics—in order to ensure his future material well-being.

Granny took a silver chain off her neck, and with the big flat key that hung on the chain unlocked our old chest, lifted the lid and brought out solemnly Grandfather's riding breeches of green velvet, a pair of huge kid-leather boots with steel heel-tips, a woollen blouse with big sewn-on pockets, a silver belt and a tall Astrakhan hat. She laid out this raiment in front of me, wiped a tear with her apron and said:

"Put these things on, Sonny. I can't let you go into a strange city with a bare behind. You must be the best-dressed man of the lot, my dear boy."

I embraced Granny, kissed her eyes tenderly, ran into the next room, changed quickly and presented myself before the "commission".

"Look at that! Simona Dolidze,* no less!" Iliko said grinning.

...Early on a Sunday morning, Granny, Iliko, Illarion and I were standing by the roadside trying to flag down a car. A fine drizzle was coming down at a slant and there was a chilly wind.

"Sit with the driver in the cab," Granny said.

"Don't forget to eat a lot of garlic, or you'll come down with some infection or other," Illarion admonished me.

* The hero of Georgian legends.



"When you enter the carriage, pour some scent on yourself—it's a sure way to keep away bedbugs and all kinds of vermin," Iliko warned me.

"I'll expect a letter tomorrow!" Granny demanded.

"Better send a telegram. Or better still send a note with somebody coming this way."

"Don't you dare hobnob with city bums!"

"Come back soon!"

"If you want some wine, write to me, don't be shy!"

At last a lorry stopped in response to our frantic waving. A woman with a child was sitting in the cab. Granny turned me round three times—against the evil eye—Iliko and Illarion both kissed me heartily, I climbed into the lorry's back and we were off.

Suddenly a girl with a bundle appeared on the road. She was running with all her might. The lorry picked up speed, and the girl ran faster still. But gradually she slowed down and came up to my send-off party quite slowly. She followed the lorry with her eyes for a long time and then turned and buried her face in Iliko's jacket. I was crying too. The lorry sped along, taking me farther and farther away from the four people I held dearest in the world.

There was a fine drizzle, the wind was chilly, and I felt cold. There, far away now, stood four people. The girl was crying on Iliko's chest. I was crying too, crying and rejoicing at the same time that she should be crying because I had gone. There was rain, there was wind, there was the sun, there was love and tears of joy. Even Iliko would not have objected that there should be the moon in the sky and snowflakes as well. And why was it I could not sleep, and whence these tears of joy, and generally wasn't I a lucky man?

The lorry rolled on and on. I could now see nobody on the road. I stood upright in the back whispering:

"Goodbye, Granny!"

"Goodbye, Illarion!"

"Goodbye, Iliko!"

"Goodbye, Mary!"

THE TRAIN

The lorry-driver brought me to the railway station in Makh-aradze and demanded that I pay him. I unhitched the silver belt, lifted the skirts of my loose-fitting blouse and began to undo my trousers. The driver looked around in alarm and caught me by the hand.

“Are you off your rocker or what?”

“Didn’t you tell me to pay you!”

“But must you take off your pants in order to pay me?”

“My pocket can only be reached from the inside,” I explained and went on with the undressing business. At last I managed to locate the secret pocket. Holding up my trousers with one hand, I began to rip it open with another. Just when I finally got the money out and began counting off the fare, the engine sneezed several times and sent a burst of violet smoke into my face. While I recovered, the lorry made a circle and stopped dead in front of me. The red face of the driver split in two by laughter poked out of the cab. He pushed my hat low over my eyes, and said chuckling:

“Never mind the fare, just put your pants back on. I don’t want your money.”

The engine gave another snort and the lorry dashed away.

“Goodbye!” I shouted after it.

The driver gave me a friendly wave of his hand, leaving me in the middle of a square, with my pants half way down, staring round dazedly.

...I discovered from a brief exchange at the ticket-office that it was easier to reach Tbilisi without a ticket than to buy one. So I gave up the idea of buying a ticket and went straight to the platform.

A train arrived within an hour. The would-be passengers caught me up and pressed me against the steps leading into the carriage. I was being crushed. I wanted to cry out, but my mouth was stopped by the conductor’s bare heel, and I just fluttered helplessly like a chicken hung by the head. Moreover, somebody’s knee was jabbing into my back. Then somebody else began pulling at my hair. Realising that my “maturity certifi-

cate" was in grave peril, I clutched at the conductor's heel with all my might and main. The locomotive and the conductor screeched in unison. The hubbub mounted.

"What are you standing there for! Give them a shove!"

"Take your foot from my head!"

"Don't you worry, mister, I've just washed my feet!"

"Then put the other there too!"

"Punch him!"

"Why should he punch me?"

"Not you, your ticket."

"Gentlemen, let me through, I have a ticket!"

"Hold on to it well!"

"I've been robbed!"

"Drop that suitcase, you son of a bitch, there's nothing but pears there!"

"Police! Shoot!"

"Who at? Where's your robber?"

"Shoot me then!"

"Get a move on!"

There was a whistle, then two clangs of the bell, then somebody's blessed shove got me through the door, and at that moment the locomotive, as though it had been waiting for me to board the train, suddenly gave a jerk and a hoot, drowning the yells and laments of those who had been left behind.

Gradually the passions subsided. I climbed up onto the upper shelf, normally reserved for the bedding, used my bundle as a pillow and covered my face with my Astrakhan hat... Tobacco smoke was making my eyes smart. The carriage was swaying and creaking. The wheels were clattering monotonously. This rumble reminded me of something that was very close and also very far away, so distant I could not recall it. My eyes closed... I was floating away... A mist rose before my eyes... When you feel sleepy, the heaviest things on earth are your eyelids... But what was it clattering there? Oh, I was at the water-mill. It was the millstones. I had dozed off while waiting my turn to have the grain milled. Suddenly I heard my granny call me:

"Zuriko!"

"Coming!" I cried and jumped up.

“Zuriko!” Granny called again, shading her eyes from the sun.

“Coming, Granny, I’m coming!” I shouted running up a mist-veiled rise.

“Halloo, Zuriko! Where are you off to? Hallooo!” the train’s hoot merged with Granny’s anxious voice.

“Il-la-ri-on... I-li-ko... Il-la-ri-on... I-li-ko...” the wheels tapped out.

“The bridge,” I heard somebody say, far away.

“Hey somebody, open the window, there’s nothing to breathe,” another voice reached my consciousness.

“Let’s take turns breathing, otherwise the air won’t last us to Tbilisi,” cracked a third.

“Whose suitcase is this? Take it off my feet, or I’ll throw it out the window!” At this point I woke up, and leaned over to take a look at the bad-tempered passenger. He had a sharp hatchet-like nose, and the rest of his face was somehow sharp too.

“Just you try! I’ll chuck you out the window after it!” his neighbour snarled. He was a fat man with his face as speckled as a turkey’s egg. “There are four numbskulls in Tbilisi awaiting this suitcase like manna from heaven.”

“I don’t care a hoot for your numbskulls, but my corns are my own. Take the suitcase off my feet I tell you, or I’ll throw it out the window,” Hatchet-Face repeated ominously.

Turkey’s Egg picked up the suitcase reluctantly and raised his head.

“Hey there, what’s your name?” he called out to me.

“Zuriko.”

“Get down from that shelf at once! Sprawling there like it was your own bed! That shelf is for suitcases, see?”

“Am I any worse than your suitcase?”

“Sure you are. This suitcase holds three thousands’ worth of foodstuffs, and what does your head hold?”

“Why be insulting, mister?”

“I tender my apologies, worthy sir! Now get off that shelf, quick march!”

“I’m staying where I am! D’you think I haven’t a suitcase at home? I have, but I know better than lugging it along. Why

should a suitcase ride about in trains? Its place is under the sofa. Put that in your pipe and smoke it!"

"Just listen to him speaking to me in that cheeky manner, the dunce! If you want to know, I have four sons, and each is older than you!" Turkey's Egg exploded.

"And would you like to see one of them being chased off his place?" Hatchet-Face asked.

"Oh, so that's the way you feel? Very well then, let that whelp lie on his shelf and my suitcase stand on your corns! What do I care?" Turkey's Egg said, sitting down.

"Get down, you snot-nose! Get down at once!" Hatchet-Face yelled, seeing it was either me or his corns.

"I won't," I said and stared at the ceiling.

"Conductor!" Turkey's Egg screamed.

The conductor first thrust his lantern into the compartment, then his nose and the rest of his person and asked to see our tickets. The next moment he smiled at his own simplicity and told us to prepare the fare money.

Two passengers were discovered to possess tickets. The conductor eyed them with suspicion and went out.

There was silence in the compartment. Each was thinking his own thoughts. Lulled by the train's rhythmic swaying I dozed off again on the shelf I had defended against all encroachments... I dreamt of Iliko entering our yard with a sack of corn on his back. He dropped the sack under the damson-tree, sat down in its shade, rolled himself a cigarette and lit up.

"Give me a smoke, Iliko!" I begged, but Iliko took no notice of me and just gazed into the distance.

"Uncle Iliko, my dear man, give me a pinch of tobacco please! Don't you recognise me? It's Zuriko!"

Iliko rose and disappeared in the mist.

"Iliko-o-o!" I called after him.

"Who's that shouting?"

I woke up with a start. The passengers were dozing. Rain was lashing at the windows of the carriage. Wet trees were racing back to take cover... Suddenly a cold drop fell on my forehead, then another, then the dripping became steady. I moved out of its way. A small puddle was soon formed on the shelf. I traced

channel for it with my finger, and the water flowed down, trickling on to somebody's head.

"What's the matter with you, wretch!" yelled the victim, wiping his head and sniffing his wet palm suspiciously.

"Nothing's the matter with *me*. The roof leaks."

"Think of something then..."

"What can I think of? Get out and mend the tiling?"

"Stop blethering, you oaf! Can't you stop the hole?"

I sat up, fingered the ceiling, found the hole and stuck my finger in it. Water began streaming down my outstretched arm and inside my blouse. I unbuckled my belt to give it an outlet. Soon I felt that my boots were half full of water.

"Nothing doing," I said and lowered myself down from the shelf.

"Taking good money from us for riding in leaky carriages!" the passenger with the ticket said indignantly.

"You'd better keep your trap shut," one of the ticketless ones snapped. "We didn't see you paying any good money."

As I landed on the floor water spurted out of my boots like a fountain.

"Take your boots off, lad," Hatchet-Face advised me. "You'll catch cold. Give me your foot, I'll help you pull them off."

"There's no need for that, mister." I grasped the edge of the upper shelf and pulled myself up, my feet slipping out of the boots easily.

"Look at that!" Turkey's Egg exclaimed. "Why wear such tight boots, son? Couldn't you order them a size bigger?"

Everybody laughed. I managed to squeeze myself on the bench between the two former antagonists. The rain stopped, and all gave a sigh of relief. I was gradually getting warm.

"Look here," Hatchet-Face began again. "Take your bloody suitcase off my feet at last, or I swear I'll throw it out the window!"

Turkey's Egg picked up the suitcase silently and placed it on my shelf.

Again there was silence.

Suddenly someone gave an apologetic sneeze.

"Good luck to you!" a chorus of voices responded. Then

somebody else sneezed. Half an hour later everybody was wishing everybody else good health, a long life and the best of luck: it was as though kinsmen had come together after a long separation.

"This won't do at all!" Hatchet-Face suddenly declared. "We must think of something before we all contract pneumonia and this carriage has a red cross painted on it."

"He's not so stupid after all," Turkey's Egg said, producing a bottle of *chacha*.

"I have a large cask of wine up there on the third shelf," said a blond-haired young man whom nobody noticed until that moment.

"No, wine is no good for a cold... Vodka is just the thing," Hatchet-Face said, rubbing his hands in anticipation.

"As you like," the blond man acquiesced politely.

"Better take the cork out of your cask. The wine may push it out and we'll all be drenched!" the clean-dressed passenger who had a ticket said to the blond man.

The latter did as he was told in silence and sat down again.

The passengers began to unwrap their parcels. Somebody contributed another bottle of *chacha*, Hatchet-Face produced two more and volunteered for the post of toastmaster.

"Comrades! Not one of you here is actually a friend of mine, but you know how it is on a train. During a train journey people make friends readily. Who are we? Where in devil's name have we sprung from?"

"I'm returning from a business trip," the passenger with a ticket announced.

"Splendid!" the toastmaster said. "And who is he? Where the devil is he from?" Hatchet-Face pointed at Turkey's Egg.

"What d'you mean 'where the devil'?" Turkey's Egg reared. "Keep a civil tongue in your head or I'll..."

"Now, let me finish my toast! Why pick on words? So, what have I been saying? Oh, yes. Do you know me? No! Do I know you? I don't either. I wouldn't care a hoot about you if we were somewhere else. But the train has brought us together and made us friends. So let us drink to the train!" he concluded and tossed the *chacha* down.

"To our train!"

"Hurrah to the train!"

"Hmm... It's strange indeed... To the train!" said the passenger with the ticket and passed me the glass.

"Comrades, this is my first train-ride..." I began.

"Lucky man!" said Turkey's Egg.

"When I was setting out, Iliko and Illarion warned me that there would be many crooks on the train and I must keep my eyes peeled. I see that they were wrong. This man, for instance... What is your name, mister?" I asked Hatchet-Face.

"Ambako."

"Well, Ambako then... When I first saw him I thought, 'What a pest!' And what is your name?" I asked Turkey's Egg.

"My name's Antipo, but enough blabbing! Drink up and sit down!"

"Well, I thought at first that Antipo was a crack-pot."

"And what d'you think now?"

"Now I realise that the train has made us friends. Cheers to the train!" I concluded and downed my glass.

The toastmaster filled the glasses again. He wanted to propose the second toast standing, but the train lurched, causing him to hit his head on the upper shelf, so he sat down promptly and began:

"When God taught apes to speak, the first word they exchanged was 'Good day!' Then the forests were chopped down, houses built, and this railway laid. We boarded the train that ran over it and said 'Good day' to one another..."

"I said no 'Good days' to anybody!"

"You should have if you're a polite man..."

"So let's drink to the warm greeting - 'Good day!'" Ambako concluded.

"It's a good toast!.. To think of it, what is in a greeting? Nothing much! But some people refuse to greet a person. I have a comrade, we attended University together..."

"Where do you come from, dear man?"

"From Nigoiti."

"It's a good village. How's the harvest this year?"

"Thank you, good enough... Well, so I have a comrade..."

"Who doesn't want to greet you? We know all about it! But do you know that we have only one glass! Drink up, for Christ's sake!"

...It was my turn again. I held the glass in my hand, looked at the warmth-giving liquid in it and felt like telling these strangers all about Granny, Iliko and Illarion, and about Mary, too. I wanted to sing and to yell. But I was shy, as every village lad is shy of his patched pants and worn shoes.

"Your health, friends!" I said tearfully and sat down at once.

"Look, our hero seems to be blubbering!" Hatchet-Face said to Turkey's Egg. "What is the alcohol content of this *chacha*?"

"All of eighty per cent!"

"I bet it's no more than twenty," I said wiping away my tears. "It's not on account of the vodka, I've got a speck in my eye."

"Well, no matter... I'm continuing, comrades," the toastmaster went on in a louder voice. "We've been saying that God created apes and we descended from those apes. It's all a lot of nonsense... Most people are descended from their own parents. If not for our parents, we wouldn't be drinking this *chacha*. And if it wasn't for this *chacha*, we wouldn't be able to drink to our parents. I have never yet seen a drinking man who would not remember his parents."

"When I get drunk, I don't remember anything," the young blond man confessed.

"A good thing you remember that at least!" said Turkey's Egg.

After the toast to our parents, we lifted the blond man carefully and laid him to sleep on the upper shelf, beside his cask.

"Turn him face to the wall, I don't like that hiccupping!" warned Hatchet-Face, but it was too late. The blond man exploded like a volcano. Before we could bat an eyelid, our toastmaster's scarf was coloured deep red. Turkey's Egg and the passenger with a ticket stared in horror at each other. I was the only one to have been miraculously spared. Standing among them, like Christ among sinners, I was laughing wildly.

"The wretch!" screeched Hatchet-Face, snatched the dese-



crated scarf off his shoulders and tossed it out the window.

“Pull him down, the swine!” growled Turkey’s Egg.

“Goodness, how truly terrible! What am I going to do now! It’s not even mine!” groaned the passenger with a ticket wiping the vomit off his shirt with a handkerchief.

“Tie his mouth up with a towel,” somebody from the neighbouring compartment advised.

“What’s the matter, comrades? Surely the cask hasn’t burst?” we suddenly heard the blond man’s soft voice. His embarrassed face, white as chalk, was peering from the murk of the upper shelf.

“Make fun of us, would you, scoundrel? ‘The cask burst!’ if you please! Have you got a stew in your cask then? I’ll show you!” Hatchet-Face yelled in murderous rage. We barely managed to restrain him, before he pitched into the blond man, who was paralysed with fear.

Half an hour later the drinking was resumed. Before long Hatchet-Face and I were the only people staying upright.

“I want you to know me better, Uncle Ambako,” I said.

“What is your name?”

“Zuriko Vashalomidze.”

“Well, you’ve a good name, and a strong head for drink, too. Whose son are you?”

“I’m the son of my Granny, Iliko and Illarion.”

Ambako stared at me in consternation.

“Perhaps somebody else’s as well?” he finally said.

“No, nobody else’s. Just these three. I want to sing.”

“Is that why you’re going to Tbilisi?”

“No, I’m going to Tbilisi to enter University. I have a ‘maturity certificate’. Have you one? No? Then you don’t even know what a ‘maturity certificate’ is. Cheers to learning!” I said and downed my glass.

“Listen to what I’m going to tell you... You seem a decent enough lad... Are you listening? Stop laughing like a fool! Listen! I, Ambako Gordeladze, am also going to study. ‘What’s the point of studying at your age?’ you might say. But you will be wrong. It’s never too late to study... Now when Tsar Nicholas was dethroned...

“Now, hold onto the table, don’t topple over like this!.. I say, when Tsar Nicholas was dethroned, I was a milksop like you. I imagined the Tsar sitting on a big couch * and the workers and peasants dragging him off it by his legs... That’s what I thought. Do you know why? Because I was ignorant. But all my sons are educated. D’you understand? Cheers to education!”

“Cheers to Uncle Illarion!”

“My name is Ambako!”

“No, Iliko!”

“Ambako!”

“Iliko, I tell you! But when did you grow a second eye?”

“Listen, son, my name is Ambako!”

“Let me give you a kiss, Illarion!”

“To hell with you, let it be Illarion. But when you sober up, God willing, call me Ambako!”

“Don’t you want to kiss me?”

“Why shouldn’t I kiss a nice lad?”

Ambako wiped his lips with his sleeve and gave me a smacker. I laid my head on his shoulder and closed my eyes.

“D’you remember shooting down poor Murada, Illarion?”

“Of course, I remember, son!”

“And do you remember what you said then?”

“Remind me, I’ve forgotten.”

“You tried to comfort me and said, ‘Don’t cry, Zuriko!’”

“I remember now.”

“But you cried too!”

“Did I? Yes, of course I cried.”

“And d’you remember the tobacco? Iliko’s treat?”

“Of course, it was first-rate tobacco.”

“No, I mean the peppered tobacco he gave us.”

“Yes, I remember the peppered tobacco too.”

“D’you know that Iliko and you are the two people I hold dearest in the world?”

“I know, son... Go to sleep now.”

“Will Granny be asleep now?.. No, she won’t... She’ll be thinking of me...”

* A play on words: in Georgian “takhti” means both “couch” and “throne”.

"Of course she will. She loves you..."

The train raced along, the carriages swayed, the earth and all things on it swayed as well... What if the train ran off the rails? But I had nothing to fear. I was sleeping on Illarion's chest... His corny palm was stroking my damp forehead tenderly... The wheels clattered at the joints... The train raced along hooting:

"Halloo, Zuriko, where are you off too, halloo!"

"I'm coming, Granny!" I shouted as I ran through a thin mist.

"Go to sleep, son," somebody said to me soothingly.

THE HOUSE IN QUESTION

I am now a student of the Department of Economics. My whole earthly possessions still consist of a pair of pants and a flunk—an examination I failed in political economy. While I was in my first year, my grant went to my landlady, who never missed an opportunity to scold me: "If you didn't loaf about you could be an honours student, and receive an enlarged grant!"

Now that I have a flunk, my landlady has been deprived of my grant, so she takes an even keener interest in my studies.

"When are you taking the exam?" she asks me every morning.

"Leave me alone, Aunt Martha!" I growl. "You pester me worse than Granny!"

"I wish you both to hell and damnation!" the landlady shrieks. "Why did I have to get landed with you? Are you going to pay rent or aren't you? Have you forgotten about the house manager? He warned me yesterday again: 'You keep a lodger who's not registered, he said, but you forget about the thanks that are due me!'"

"Why can't you thank him? Do you grudge nice words?"

"Don't you make fun of me, dunderhead! Sit down and study! If they don't give you back your grant in two days, I'll kick you out of the house!"

"Would you perhaps have me do my post-graduate course in

two days? Calling this a house? A mouse-trap more likely!"

"It's good enough for the likes of you! Would you perhaps want a flat with a bath and hot water?"

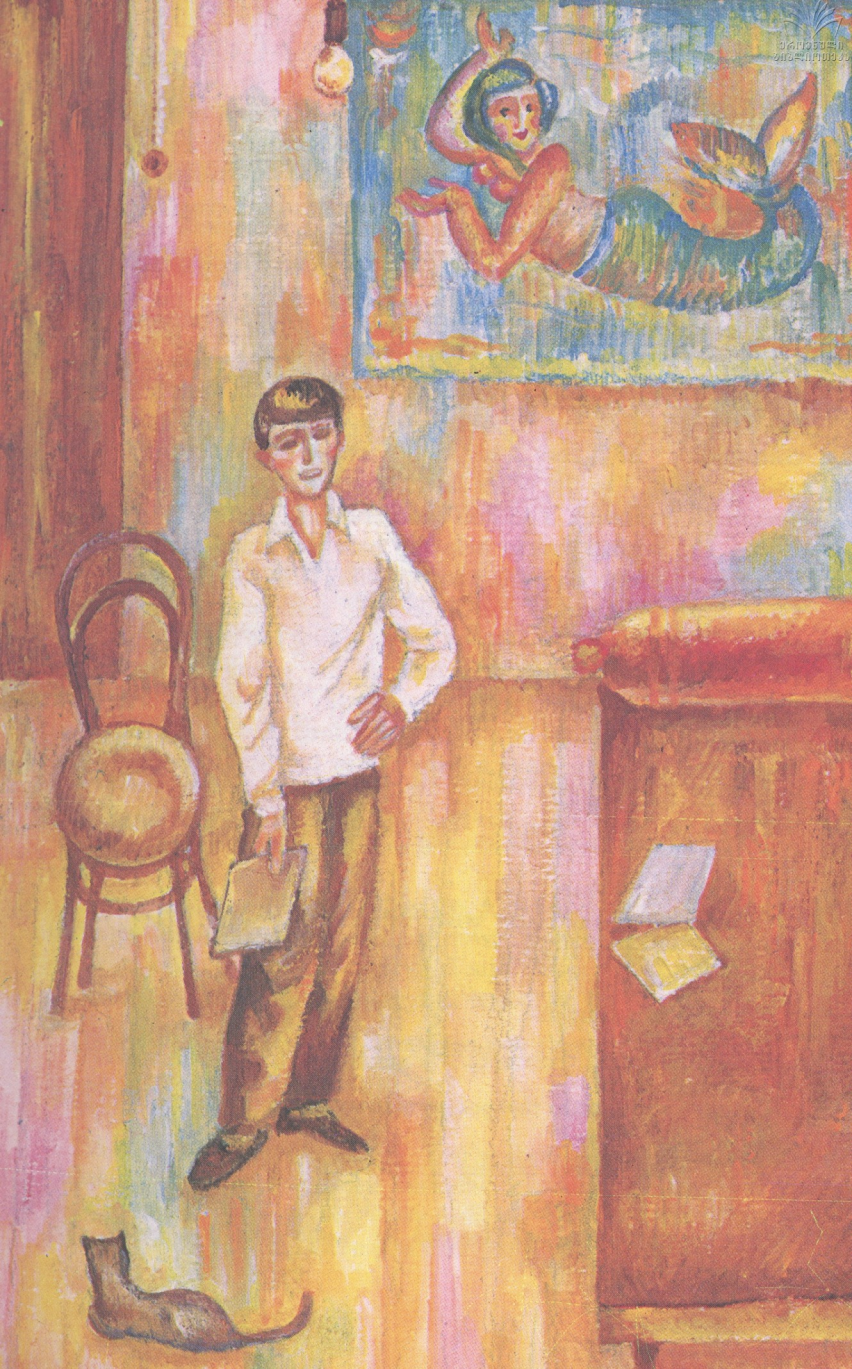
"No, but a glass of hot tea would be just the thing."

"I'm not giving you no tea! I'd sooner see you in your coffin!"

"And don't forget sugar!"

The landlady storms out. I look at my textbooks sadly. Aunt Martha lives in a tiny two-room shack at the very end of Vazaris-Khevi. She is ugly and bad-tempered, but she has a kind heart. I am her only lodger. I share my room with a couch, a chair, the cat Sophy and a woman with a fish tail embroidered on a rug which is nailed to the wall. Sophy has green eyes. In the morning, when I go to the University, she licks my only plate clean and spends the rest of the day sitting on the window-sill and watching the sparrows hopping on the old mulberry-tree which grows in the yard. Aunt Martha and the mulberry-tree, it appears, are of the same age, but nobody has ever seen that tree bearing fruit. Sophy is a cunning and self-loving creature. In the evening she waits patiently for me to get into bed and warm it. Only after that she leaves her window-sill and creeps underneath the blanket. I am very fond of Sophy—or rather, I've got used to her, but that probably is fondness. Neither Aunt Martha nor I know where she has come from. It happened one evening. She entered my room noiselessly, her tail held high, rubbed herself against the couch leg and gave me a quizzical look, as though to ask, "Do you like me?" She had the eyes of the girl who lives next door, so I liked her. "Sophy, come here!" I called to her. She turned her back on me and made for the door unhurriedly. "Where're you going, Sophy, please stay!" I implored. And she stayed. We've been living together ever since.

Sophy feels I am in trouble and does her best to cheer me up. I set about reading the textbook again, then close it in despair and place it under my pillow. Last night Aunt Martha said that all my troubles were rooted in my godlessness. I answered that God did a godless thing to rob me of my peace and her of my grant. Aunt Martha declared that God would not forgive me this blasphemy. I said I snapped my fingers at that God of hers. Then Aunt Martha demanded that I fall on my knees at once



and beseech the Lord to forgive me if I didn't want him to strike me dumb. I said he had already stricken me dumb: I had made two attempts to pass my exam and each time was unable to utter a single word. Aunt Martha made the sign of the cross fearfully, spat and slammed the door shut behind her...

...I'll try again this morning. Just in case, I decide to follow Aunt Martha's advice: I flop on my knees before the couch, raise my arms aloft to the ceiling and beseech the Lord:

"Dear Lord, please see to it that this rotten ceiling does not fall down on my head... And then, dear Lord, at ten o'clock I have my examination in political economy. Do you know what commodity * is? A cow, a pig, or a goat are not commodity, as I used to think. On the other hand, a cow, a pig or a goat may become commodity. You don't understand? Neither do I. That is why I'm asking you to help me pass this exam. Surely You don't want me to be a disgrace to Iliko, Illarion and Granny! Only don't tell me that you were a top student when you were young. I won't have it. Illarion keeps telling me that. Why must you old folk be always preaching to the young? If you're so clever, forget my blasphemy of yesterday and help me to pass the exam. That would be a truly godly deed! Surely it's no trouble to you to let me have a paltry C in political economy! Do you hear me, God?"

"What's your name?" a thunderous voice suddenly demanded.

I froze with fear.

"I'm asking *you!*" the voice repeated.

"Eh ... eh... Zuriko..."

"Vashalomidze?"

"Yes, Vashalomidze."

"Now, why haven't you registered as resident of this house?"

"What's that?"

"Come with me to the police station at once. You'll find out what's what there!"

So it wasn't God talking to me.

* A play on words: the Georgian for "cattle" and "commodity" are homonyms.

“And who are you?” I demanded in my turn, looking round. Before me stood a tall scrawny man in a battered hat and with a worn briefcase under his arm. It was our house manager Domenty.

“Uncle Domenty!” I said pulling a face.

“Old Nick’s your uncle!” Domenty retorted, pulling a face too.

“Comrade Domenty,” I corrected myself.

“Don’t you ‘comrade’ me!” Domenty snapped.

“The hell with it then,” I exploded. “I don’t care who you are, just leave me alone! I have an exam in half an hour!”

“Keep a civil tongue in your head! Get your clothes on and come along to the police station with me!”

“Don’t you talk to me with your hand in your pocket!” I yelled back.

Domenty moaned in astonishment.

“What the ... how dare you! Milksop!”

“I tell you reasonably enough: let me be, I have an exam today. I’ll come to the police station tomorrow—and I don’t need your escort either!”

“No, you’re coming today, because tomorrow they’ll bring you there by force!”

I could see he meant it. Sophy realised I was in trouble and began to meow like mad.

“Shut her trap, or I’ll throw her out the window!” Domenty said.

Sophy took the hint and shut up. I put my clothes on. Five minutes later we were walking down Vazaris-Khevi.

“You’ve no heart and no pity!” I said. “A person is having an examination at the University and you drag him to the police station.”

“Who has no heart? I haven’t?” Domenty asked with an injured air.

“Who else?”

“And do you have a heart? You’ve been living here, never thinking of registering your residence, caring nothing that I shall be held responsible. They will say that Domenty has a racket... Now tell me, have you ever paid me a single kopeck?”

“No!”

“There you are! And yet Domenty is a robber, Domenty extorts bribes, Domenty is a crook... Who is a crook now, who is a robber?”

“Who?”

“How much do you pay for your room?” Domenty suddenly asked.

“Two hundred and fifty,” I said.

“Where do you get all this money?”

“Granny sends me.”

“And where does she get it?”

“She borrows it from Illarion.”

“And where does Illarion take it?”

“If the harvest is good, he sells wine, if it's bad he borrows it from Iliko.”

“And where does Iliko get the money?”

“Aw, stop it! Better tell me who gives *you* money.”

“Nobody does. That's why I'm taking you to the police station!”

“Tell me straight—what do you want from me?”

“I don't want anything from you. I'll take you to the police station, give you into custody according to the rules and say: here's citizen so-and-so... What is your profession?”

“I have no profession yet.”

“Excellent! Here is citizen Vashalomidze, who has no profession, who has not registered at his place of residence and who has failed his examination in... What did you fail?”

“Political economy.”

“So much the worse for you... Who is politically ignorant and a believer to boot... You were praying when I came in, weren't you?”

“Yes...”

“Excellent! I'll give you into custody and... Have you ever been in prison?”

“No...”

“Take pity on yourself then! I can get you registered in a trice, all above board, clean as a whistle,” said Domenty and stopped near a cafe. “D'you know what I mean?”

“No...”

“Dunce! Blockhead! What’s the point of talking to you when you don’t understand the simplest things! What are you staring at me for? Let’s drop into Rigoletto’s and have breakfast...”

To tell the truth, I was very hungry. I gave Domenty a grateful smile and followed him down the cellar steps into the cafe.

We sat down at a corner table. Domenty folded the edge of the table-cloth, which was so dirty one could get soiled by just touching it, pushed aside a plate with a fly-killer, placed his briefcase between his own back and that of the chair, wiped his forehead and asked me solicitously:

“What will you have?”

“Everything!” I responded promptly.

“What about drinks?”

“I’ll drink kerosene as long as you foot the bill,” I cracked. Domenty smiled and banged his fist on the table:

“Rigoletto!”

The barman walked from behind the counter and limped towards us.

“Good morning!”

“Good morning, Rigoletto! Meet Zuriko, he’s a free-handed chap and a good friend of mine. Today he’s the host.”

I rose, bowed politely and clasped Rigoletto’s hand in the proper Tbilisi handshake.

“A sturdy fellow!” said Rigoletto, looking at me with something like pity. “What will you have?”

“Two beers, two cheeses, two dishes of greens – and don’t forget the radishes. Two loaves and a bottle of vodka. Have you got caviar?”

Rigoletto smiled foolishly. Soon the food was on the table.

Domenty filled the glasses, clinked his against mine and drank it in silence. We drank the second glass to our getting acquainted. Then Domenty made a toast:

“I, Domenty Khachapuridze, am a small person. But Napoleon was even smaller, and my father was smaller still, but he could move mountains. I am a house manager and I have a soft heart. It’s up to me to decide if a person will live in a house or out in the street. Have you ever lived in the street?”

“Why should I? I’m not a waif!” I said indignantly.

“I can drive you out into the street because you are not registered for residence.”

“Register me then!”

“Just like that?”

“Like what?” I said incomprehendingly.

“All right, drink up!” said Domenty, filling the glasses again.

“Do you know what a house is?” he continued.

“What is there to know? A house is a house.”

“Is that all you know?”

“Well, rooms, tiles on the roof, or thatch, or shingle...”

Domenty laughed and picked up his glass.

“You’re a fool. A house is, first of all, a home and a family. Have you a family?”

“No.”

“You *are* a fool, my dear lad! At your age, I will have you know, I was already married the second time. Now I’m living with my first wife again... What was I talking about? Yes, house and family are bound together. If you have no house, you cannot get married, if you don’t get married, your house will not have a mistress. Do you know how a house came into being?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me then!”

“It was made of bricks, boards, lime, stone, tiles...”

“Shut up, you despicable man! Before bricks were invented men lived in the trees...”

“In caves,” I corrected him.

“Some lived in caves, and others in the trees... Then man got tired of living up in the trees and he came down to earth. And do you know what happened to him there?”

“He strolled about and then climbed the tree again.”

“No, he strolled about, that’s right, but then he grew cold! And what did he do?”

“He put on his overcoat and became warm.”

“Moron! Where could he find an overcoat? He took a flint and struck a spark and made a fire and *then* he became warm. But Nature, as you know, is treacherous. Suddenly a cold wind blew from the east. The man then built a wall to the east of the

fire—to protect it from the wind. But the wind turned and started blowing from the west. The man built a second wall—in the west. The wind then started blowing between the two walls from north to south! What was the poor man to do? He built two more walls—north and south ones. It was autumn. A cold rain started pouring. The man could see his fire was getting flooded. Then it dawned on him to make a roof out of thatch!”

“And what happened next?”

“Next there was more trouble. The smoke from the fire had nowhere to escape and made his eyes smart. Something had to be done about it. He couldn’t very well dismantle the walls, could he? But he was a man, and we differ from animals in that we use our brains and can put two and two together.”

“You are an animal, Serapiona, that’s what you are!” I said grabbing at the bottle.

“Put that bottle down, dunce... Where was I?”

“Man was choking in the smoke.”

“That’s right, he nearly choked to death. But then he had an idea: he made a hole in the ceiling, the smoke escaped there, and he could breathe easily. Well, there he was, sitting by the fire, warm and snug. And then he started wondering if the rain had stopped outside. How could he find it out?”

“Stick his arm out, that’s how!”

“Out of what?”

“Out of the window, where else?”

“Addle-head, he had no windows! So he decided to make a window in the wall... Then he discovered he needed to go out... You can guess why... Rigoletto! Another half-bottle!” Domenty hiccupped and continued: “So he made an opening in the wall. What did he have now?”

“A hole,” I answered.

“Dimwit! He had a house, that’s what. A house!”

“I don’t know. My grandfather went about building a house in a very different way...”

“And mine did not build any house at all, he entered one that somebody else had built. But that’s beside the point... Then the man brought a dog from the forest, set it guarding the house and went away. Then he brought himself a wife, left her to run the

house and went away again. Then he brought some game... And they all ate it and praised him... And then he had children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren... A village appeared, then a town, then a city and finally the capital... The capital of Georgia—Tbilisi... Do you now understand how long it took for our Tbilisi to get built? And did you contribute any of your labour to the building of it? No! How dare you then to live here without registering your residence? Well, don't worry... I like you... What did you say your name was?"

"Zuriko."

"Zuriko... I'll talk to Martha specially, and from you I won't take more than two hundred rubles... Just don't tell anybody!.. What did you say your name was?"

"Zuriko!"

"Yes. So mum's the word, Zuriko. Get me?" Domenty winked at me slyly, and remained like this, with one eye closed. Then he winked with the other eye and could not open it either. He was fast asleep.

I filled a glass with vodka and called Rigoletto over.

"Sir?" the barman came along promptly.

"Here, drink it," I said, giving him the glass.

"I don't drink at work," Rigoletto said, placing the glass gingerly on the table.

I hugged him and asked:

"Do you know what political economy is?"

"I know politics and I know economy."

"Then tell me what is commodity?"

"What kind of commodity, critical?"

"Yes."

"Well, all things exhibited in the shop-window are commodities of a sort. There are also commodities in the storehouse, critical, they're called..."

"Correct! Do you see this dead body?" I asked pointing at Domenty.

"Asleep," said Rigoletto with a smile.

"He's Serapiona."

"No, not Serapiona, he's Domenty."

"I tell you he is Serapiona," said I and downed my glass at a gulp. All at once things began to whirl round me. The table, Rigoletto and myself climbed the wall. "We're falling," I just had time to think and screwed up my eyes. When I opened them, things had righted themselves.

"Do you know me?" I asked Rigoletto. "I'm Zuriko Vashalomidze... And do you know political economy?"

"Don't I!" he said. "Shall I bring the bill?"

"Sure!"

Rigoletto went away, then reappeared with a huge abacus and began ticking off the counters:

"Two *shashliks*—forty rubles, two loaves—six rubles, vodka, the greens, cheese... Three hundred rubles altogether..."

"Three hundred is too much... Fifty should be enough..."

"Are you in your right mind?"

"I say give me fifty rubles, that'll pay for a taxi. I don't feel like footing it..."

"Being funny, are you? Know how I deal with jokers?" A two-foot long knife gleamed in Rigoletto's hand.

"What, are you going to kill me?" I asked.

"Pay the bill!" the barman hissed.

"Search me! If you find a single coin on me—I'll stand you two bottles." Rigoletto grabbed me by the collar.

"Uncle Domenty! Comrade Domenty! Domenty! Get up, curse you, he's killing me!" I yelled.

Domenty opened his eyes, gave me an unseeing stare, waved a hand and laid his head into a plate.

"Let me go!" I pleaded. "I shall leave him as security. Isn't it enough?"

"No, it isn't," said Rigoletto. "Gimme the money and then you can be as funny as you like!"

"Very well," I said, "just let go of me."

Rigoletto let go of my collar. I took Domenty's briefcase and shook it out. It was empty. Then I searched Domenty's jacket pockets. There were four thirty-ruble bills in them.

"One hundred and twenty. You owe me one hundred and eighty."

I searched Domenty's trouser pockets. That yielded another one hundred and fifty.

"Thirty more!" said Rigoletto.

"You're a heartless man!" I protested. "Haven't you any children?"

"No!" the barman snapped.

"Then consider these thirty rubles as the tax for childlessness you've just paid," I declared and made for the door.

"Take this carrion away," Rigoletto shouted after me, "before I've carved him into *shashlik*!"

I realised Domenty wasn't safe there. I heaved him on my back and left Rigoletto's domain swaying under the weight.

That night Sophy and I shared our bed with Domenty. We slept soundly, without registering our residence, at peace with the world.

JOY

I've been living in Tbilisi for three years now. In the village they call me "that city trickster", and in the city I'm referred to as "bumpkin". Aunt Martha still regards me as an incorrigible defaulter, the house manager Domenty as a confidence man, my professors as a drifter, and only to Granny, Iliko and Illarion I remain the same Zuriko whatever education is crammed into my head, a scoundrel, a windbag and a heathen. Sophy does not care about my past, present or future. She sleeps in my bed, eats the remains of my meals, what more does a cat need to feel happy? Flunks go on dogging me, and my grant keeps accumulating somewhere in the University's strong-boxes waiting patiently for its rightful owner to claim it.

It's cold outside. Snow is falling, the wind is howling.

I am sitting in Aunt Martha's room. It is warm here. A round-bellied samovar is humming on the table. We are drinking tea unhurriedly and chatting peaceably.

"Your poor granny," Aunt Martha sighs. "If you received a grant, you bum, things would be much easier on her..."

"Aunt Martha, it's my birthday, don't poison it for me, for Christ's sake!"

“Cursed be the day you were born, you shameless cur!”

“Thank you! The same to you! *Alaverdi*, Aunt Martha!” I say and clink tea-glasses with my landlady.

“Loafer!” says Aunt Martha, hiding a smile and surreptitiously putting another lump of sugar into my glass.

It was a cold winter in Tbilisi. I liked spending evenings in Aunt Martha’s room. After we’d drunk all the tea we could hold, she would tell me various sad stories, always in the third person, but I knew they were episodes from her own life. I liked listening to sad stories. And Aunt Martha liked listening to my chatter. She would be convulsed with laughter, wipe away her tears and punctuate my story with “Damn you to hell!”

Today, on the occasion of my birthday, I act as story-teller. Aunt Martha stops sipping her tea and listens attentively.

“Now, do you know my Iliko?” I begin.

“Don’t I! You’ve told enough stories about the one-eyed devil!”

“Listen then... A tall sweet cherry-tree grows in Iliko’s yard, right by the fence. The tree is famous for having had four different varieties of sweet cherry grafted on it—shambala, May, late and white. So it bears fruit practically all through the summer. Iliko is very proud of his wonder-tree and cherishes it as much as his only eye. There is nobody in the village who would dare to climb the tree in the daytime, and nights Iliko sleeps on his balcony, hugging an antediluvian Berdan gun loaded with salt.

“Well, one evening Illarion and I went to the mill. We had to wait our turn for several hours, but time passed quickly in conversation. We were returning after midnight. When we were passing Iliko’s house, Illarion stopped.

“‘Let’s rest a little,’ he said and sat down under the cherry-tree.

“I had no objections.

“We sat there, smoking. When I had smoked my cigarette to a stub, I rose.

“‘What’s the hurry?’ Illarion asked.

“‘Why, you don’t intend to stay here till morning, do you? I’m damn sleepy.’

“‘Wouldn’t you like some cherries?’

“‘Course I would! But where would I take them?”

“‘What d’you mean where? There’re loads of them right above your head!”

“‘No, thanks. You must’ve forgotten about the gun!”

“‘Fool! His gun exploded in his hands the other day!”

“‘Never mind that. I’m not climbing this tree!”

“‘Are you suggesting that I should climb the tree, while you will help me eat the cherries?”

“‘And why not!”

“‘You rascal! Aren’t you ashamed of making a poor old man climb a tree?”

“‘Now, don’t you “poor old man” me!”

“‘All right, damn you, let’s both climb it together.’

“‘We finally agreed that I would get into the yard, reconnoitre the ground, climb the tree, and then signal to Illarion.

“‘It was quiet all round. I crawled to the cherry-tree, listened, raised myself gingerly, put my arms round the tree trunk and ... got stuck to it! Stuck like a fly to a roll of fly-paper! The entire trunk, as high as a man’s height, was smeared with a thick layer of some devilish concoction, which, judging by the smell, contained solid oil, manure, chickens’ excrement and a lot of other equally malodorous stuff... It took all my strength to prize myself from the tree. My clothes stank. I stood there, choking with fury and stench, and wondered how I should revenge myself on Illarion for leading me into this foolishness. Well, I had nothing to lose, so I climbed that tree and gave a long low whistle. At once Illarion’s shadow swung itself over the fence and crept to the tree.

“‘I heard him sniffing and asking,

“‘Hey, what’s all this stink?”

“‘Never mind,’ I answered in a whisper. ‘Climb up here.’

“‘Illarion spread out his arms, hugged the tree and ... froze still. For about a minute all was dead silent under the tree, then I heard a savage hiss:

“‘What is the meaning of this, Zuriko?”

“‘It means that God punishes a thief! Don’t you like the sauce?’ I said gloatingly.

“‘Zuriko Vashalomidze, if you’ve made up your mind to

spend the rest of your life on this tree, I don't mind. But if you get down, you'll have your throat cut like a Christmas porker!

“What for? It's your own fault!”

“What is my own fault, you son of a bitch? That I wanted to treat you, scoundrel, to some cherries? Serves me right, the old fool. All you deserve is muck!”

“Enough swearing now! I'm coming down, let me pass.”

“Zuriko, take pity on your sinful head, don't come near me!”

“Do you suggest I fly?”

“He'll drive me mad, this wretch! How dare you talk to me like that, you milksop! Have you stopped to think how I'm going to come home like this?”

“What about me?”

“You won't have to go anywhere any more! I'll lug home your dead body, d'you hear me?—your dead body!”

“Illarion reached out trying to seize me by my foot, but suddenly began to retch. The stuff was too strong for his stomach.

“I was down in a second.

“Why, Illarion, my dear, are you sick?”

“Don't you touch me!” he cried weakly, pushing me away.

“Mad with each other and poisoned by the stench that enveloped us, we forgot about vigilance.

“Suddenly there was the noise of something heavy falling on Iliko's balcony, and there came a heart-rending screech:

“Hey people, hold him! Halloo, surround him on all sides! Halloo!”

“Illarion and I made a dash for the fence, toppled it over in frontal attack and grabbed our sacks. A shot thundered.

“He'll think nothing of shooting a person dead, the one-eyed devil,” Illarion muttered as he heaved the sack on his shoulder.

“Don't worry, we'll make a getaway while he re-charges that gun.”

“Not bloody likely! That gun has two barrels!”

“How d'you know?”

“I lent him my own!”

“More the fool you!”

“Grab that sack, stupid oaf! Let's run for it!”

“Just as I picked up my sack and made after Illarion there

came another shot. Illarion dropped his sack, bent at a strange angle, clutched at me with one hand and at his backside with the other and let out a scream that made the windowpanes in Iliko's house rattle. I hurried to cover his mouth with my hand. Illarion squirmed as though stung, whirled like a top, squatted, jumped up, in other words, did acrobatics which would make any professional circus man turn green with envy. There was nothing for it but to leave the sacks to their fate, heave him on my shoulders and carry him home."

...Aunt Martha laughed until she cried. Weak with mirth, she rolled from the chair to the couch and waved her hands to make me stop. But it is no easy thing to stop me once I get going.

"Zuriko, my dear boy, don't leave me, don't let disgrace fall on my hoary head!' Illarion pleaded, gnashing his teeth with pain. 'Just you wait, Iliko Chigogidze, just let me lay my hands on you! I'll tear you to shreds!.. Save me, Zuriko, I'm dying!'

"Is it rock salt?' I asked.

"Laughing at me, you villain! Making fun of me, are you? Just you wait! I'll attend to both of you, blackguards! Oooo, God, will there ever be an end to this torment? I'm on fire!'

"Bear up, it will soon dissolve...'

"When will it? He stuffed me full of salt, the one-eyed devil!'

"I laid Illarion carefully face down, lowered his pants and examined the wound.

"Am I in a bad way?' Illarion groaned. 'Will I last till morning?'

"Nothing to worry about, Illarion,' I comforted him.

"Zuriko son, blow on the wound, perhaps I'll feel better,' Illarion implored me.

"For all of an hour I sat by him, blowing on the wound and cursing Iliko. Then we somehow made our way to Illarion's house. I laid him on the couch, put a wet towel on the now blue wound, then ran home and fetched Granny. We spent the rest of the night by the bedside of my wounded friend, who kept groaning and moaning piteously.

"Imagine playing a trick like that on a person, Olga!' Illarion wailed, gnawing his pillow. 'Ooo, you one-eyed devil, just you wait till I lay my hands on you! I shall, that I shall!'

“‘Didn’t he know it was you?’ Granny asked.

“‘That he didn’t! If he recognised me, your Illarion would be now lying on the ground with a bullet in his heart...’

“‘Serves you right too! That’ll teach you to rob other people’s orchards... And what did you think you were doing, you wretch?’ Granny turned on me. ‘Take those clothes off and go to bed this very minute... I’ll wash these stinking rags of yours. Perhaps they’ll dry by morning, and if not you’ll have to loll in bed all day, damned layabouts!’

“‘We only went to bed at daybreak.

“‘When it was full daylight I saw Iliko walking along the road. I watched him from the window with bated breath. He was carrying two sacks of flour on his back. The bigger sack he dropped down by Illarion’s gate and the smaller one he tossed over our fence. Then, cupping his hands to his mouth, he shouted:

“‘Illarion! Illarion! Can’t you hear me, dear?’

“‘Illarion was as silent as the grave.

“‘Zuriko! Zuriko!’ Iliko persisted.

“‘Why are you yelling your head off, you one-eyed devil?’ Granny shouted back. ‘What’s the idea of waking a child at this ungodly hour? What do you want?’

“‘Iliko feared Granny more than anybody in the world. So he lowered his voice at once.

“‘Nothing at all, dear Olga. I just wanted to find out if Illarion is at home.’

“‘Is my Zuriko his keeper? Go and see for yourself!’

“‘Iliko was silent for a moment, as though taking a long breath, and then burst forth:

“‘Are you there, you big-nosed devil? Just you go outside and show yourself. You don’t dare, do you? Thief! Robber! Stealing other people’s cherries, would you? Have you no shame? Well, how d’you like it lying flat with your backside up? Oh, you don’t like it? Perhaps you’d like some more salt in your ass? You wouldn’t? Come out, I tell you, show yourself! Oh, you can’t walk? Serves you right, bandit! That’ll teach you to steal from honest folk!’

“‘What’s the matter, Iliko, what are you cursing him like that for?’

“What for? He wanted to have a taste of my cherries last night, if you please! And he got his deserts. Both he and his pal!”

“What pal?”

“How should I know? Ask Illarion!” Iliko said evasively.

“But perhaps it wasn’t Illarion at all?”

“If it weren’t him, would he let me curse him like that without answering back? And then why should he suddenly wash his shirt and trousers? There they are drying on the railing! Look at the rich man, he has any number of pants to change in! Get up and come out, you big-nosed thief! Take your flour before I’ve changed my mind! Robber!”

“Triumphantly, Iliko strode down the road. After walking a few steps, he stopped, turned round and asked loudly:

“But where’s that scamp Zuriko? Can’t he hear me?”

“What do you want from him?” Granny asked, taking hold of a sturdy stick.

“Nothing much, dear Olga... I just wanted to ask him how he liked it lugging his big-nosed pal on his back last night?”

“At this point I could not contain myself any longer and ran out into the yard laughing.

“Granny grinned, Iliko guffawed. Only poor Illarion did not laugh: he went on lying on his belly, his nose in the pillow, gnashing his teeth with pain...”

...I finished my story. Aunt Martha rose, kissed me on the forehead and poured me another glass of tea. Then she opened her cupboard, took out a jar of walnut jam and put two black balls on a saucer for me.

“You will be the death of me, Zuriko! Bless you, and your Granny, and your Iliko, and your Illarion!”

“I’ll eat the jam in the morning, Aunt Martha,” I said picking up the saucer.

“Eat it now, I’ll give you more for breakfast,” Aunt Martha said in a kindly voice and pushed the jar over to me.

A miracle happened that night: Sophy was already in bed when I came in. She must have waited and waited, but I did not leave Aunt Martha’s room until two o’clock in the morning.

Sophy opened one eye, saw it was me and closed it again. I took off my clothes and lay down beside her. Several minutes passed in silence. At last I asked:

“Are you asleep?”

Sophy made no answer, just opened one eye, gave me a look, then closed it again.

“It’s silly, Sophy,” I said, “to sulk like that when you know I was at Aunt Martha’s.”

Sophy looked as though she would say something but did not know how: after all she was Sophy and not Murada, who could read my thoughts and could conduct conversations with me with his eyes about anything under the sun.

“Sophy,” I continued, “it’s my birthday today. D’you know how old I am?” Sophy did not know and did not seem to care. But she could see it in my eyes that I was in a good mood and she shared my joy in her own way: she turned her face to me and rubbed it against my cheek. I embraced her, and we fell asleep. All night long I dreamed of Granny, Iliko and Illarion, while Sophy probably dreamed of mice.

Day was breaking when somebody called out from the gate: “Hey, master!”

I was not the master of that house, so I made no response.

“Hey, master,” the man called again.

I could hear Aunt Martha get out of bed. Then her door creaked and her slippers shuffled on the balcony.

“Who’s there?”

“Does Zuriko Vashalomidze live here?”

“Who?”

“That scoundrel Zuriko Vashalomidze!”

Cripes! Holy Virgin! Aunt Martha! Sophy! Do you know what a miracle is? Do you know how your heart jumps with joy? No? And does the person who has just pronounced my name know it? But perhaps it is simply a telegram? No, it can’t be a telegram! But who is it? Quiet, Zuriko! Don’t rush out into the yard barefoot, look out of the door first! No, no, run to the gate! Shout, cry, laugh and sing with joy, Zuriko! Out there in the yard, with a huge sack on his back, powdered with snow and his huge nose blue from cold, stands—your Illarion!



Illarion remembers the day Zuriko was born as well as though it were yesterday. That day he made his last shot from his Berdan gun—soon after that they took it away from him. However it may be, Illarion is not likely to forget Zuriko's birthday: because there is no person in the whole world whom Illarion holds as dear as his little Zuriko.

And so he has come to see his pet, bringing him warm woollen socks, a wineskin, a bottle of *chacha* and some dried fruit. And also some money. The bonus he was paid for the silkworm cocoons—700 rubles. And he also brought a letter from Zuriko's Granny. Let's see what Granny is writing to her Zuriko?

"My dear Sonny! You're now a learned person, known to all of Tbilisi. A letter came from the University to your school. It says they've never seen anything to beat you in the capital. Who taught him, they ask. I knew you'd drive them all crazy, my dear! See that you don't smear the honour of our village. That's all I want from you, Sonny. Tomorrow you will be twenty years of age. Isn't that so? In a year's time I'll find you a bride, my boy. I've got to if I want to rock the cradle of your son before I die. After that you will bury me. But don't you dare cry at my funeral! Bury your old Granny with laughter and songs, my beloved! Death holds no terrors for me—I have lived a long life, it is enough... All is well in our village, thank God. Iliko's cow has calved. Lame Arkhipo has given up the ghost, we buried him last Sunday. Matryona has at last managed to marry off her pitch-black lass. Iliko and I are sending Illarion to visit you with some presents. Look after him well. The poor man is complaining about his eye. Please arrange for him to be seen by professors—they must cure our Illarion. This will be all, my boy. Mary and all the neighbours are sending their regards. And your grandmother Olga is kissing you with all her heart."

All day long Zuriko reads and re-reads this letter. He also reads it on the second day, and the third. He feels like crying and laughing and shouting and singing all at once. To hell with Tbilisi, his studies and the diploma! Zuriko is going to gather his belongings, and go back home, where Granny is waiting for him ... and so is Mary. He will go back! He will hug his kind old Granny, and then he will go to Mary and ask, "Are you cold?"

“Yes,” Mary will answer.

Zuriko will take off his sheepskin and put it on her chilled shoulders, then he will put his arm round her waist and they will walk across white untrodden snow until morning...

ANOTHER ONE-EYED DEVIL

Illarion has been living with me for a month. He does not like my room, nor my library.

“Balzac – *Shagreen Skin*, Romain Rolland – *Colas Breugnon*, Prosper Merimée – *Mateo Falcone*, Hugo – *Notre Dame de Paris*, Javakishvili – *Kvachi Kvachantiradze*, Dickens – *David Copperfield*, Galaktion Tabidze – *Selected Poems*, Omar Khayyam – *The Rubaiyat*, Gamsakhurdia – *The Abduction of the Moon*, Ilya ... Akaky ... Vazha ... Kazbegi ... Chonkadze...” * he mutters, fingering the books on my shelf, and then asks, looking at me wonderingly over his spectacles:

“Why haven’t you got anything by Egnate Ninoshvili?” **

“These are no worse than Egnate,” I reassure him.

“No worse? Which of them can compare with Egnate?”

“All of them!”

“Give me a name! Half of these are unknown to me.”

“Read the books, and you’ll come to know them,” I say.

Illarion looks at me ironically and leafs through the books casually.

... We spent a whole day wandering about the city and entering almost every shop along our way. Illarion stared longingly at a fur-lined red leather coat. Then he made a thorough study of a hardware shop. Illarion examined the files, hammers, saws and doorlocks tied to the counter. Then he inquired if they had a sprayer for vineyards and walked out without waiting for an answer.

* Ilya Chavchavadze, Akaky Tsereteli, Vazha Pshavela, Alexander Kazbegi, Daniel Chonkadze – classics of Georgian literature.

** Egnate Ninoshvili – a writer, who came from the same part of Georgia as Illarion.

We stayed longest of all in the shop selling hunting guns and fishing tackle.

“Have you got powder?” Illarion asked the shop assistant in a whisper, bending over the counter.

“No!” the shop assistant answered curtly.

“Small shot?”

“No!”

“Ezala?”

“What the hell is *ezala*?” the shop assistant asked irritably.

“Percussion cap, you wretch!” Illarion raised his voice as well.

“Keep a civil tongue in your head!” the shop assistant yelled.

“What are you yelling for like a wounded * bear?” Illarion demanded.

“What did you say?” the shop assistant hissed, blanching with rage. “Take this crackpot away before I kill him!”

Things looked grim, so I hastened to drag Illarion out of the shop.

“What are you going to kill me with, you wretch?” Illarion shouted, turning round in the doorway. “You have neither powder nor small shot!”

...Sometimes we took rides on the tram or trolleybus. Illarion usually bought the tickets, because I was a student and always short of funds. In the beginning Illarion was quite happy when the conductor after taking his money, winked at him, tickled his palm but gave him no ticket – he thought the woman was flirting with him. But when he received the same kind of treatment from a husky man-conductor, Illarion got mad and yelled for all to hear:

“Don’t you wink at me, give me the ticket before I bashed your teeth in!”

In the evenings we often went to the cinema. I also took Illarion to the circus, and to the zoo – hoping to see him in open-mouthed wonder. But nothing in Tbilisi made Illarion wonder, except three things: first, when did I do any studying; second,

* A play on words: in Georgian the words “wounded” and “castrated” are homonyms.

why the clown in the circus had green hair; and third, how could people make do without Izabella wine, leek and warmed up *mchadi*.

We spent the evenings free from cultural entertainment at Aunt Martha's round her pot-bellied samovar. Illarion told us all kinds of yarns, and Aunt Martha and I drank tea and laughed. Illarion liked Aunt Martha, and Aunt Martha liked my Illarion—she said he had the true aquiline nose.

I shared my bed with Illarion. Before going to bed he either read, or criticised what he had read, or asked me about city ways, or preached morals to me. Sometimes he managed to do all of this together. Sophy lay between us, listened to our conversation and purred blissfully.

Illarion had taken an immediate dislike to Sophy, the feeling was mutual. When she first saw Illarion in my bed, Sophy arched her back, raised her tail and hissed. Illarion retaliated by grabbing her by the scruff of her neck, opening the window and chucking her out into the snow. I explained to Illarion that Sophy was a member of our family, enjoying equal rights. I also tried to impress it on Sophy that Illarion was our friend. A temporary truce was established, but the two never reached real amity.

“Why don't you kick her out?” Illarion would inquire. “What a pest of a cat!”

“How exactly does she bother you?”

“Of course she bothers me if I don't dare to move all night long fearing I might squash the bloody animal!”

“Don't move then.”

“Would you have me stop breathing too?”

“Where else can she sleep?”

“She might just as well sleep under the couch!”

“It's cold under the couch.”

“Very well then, I shall sleep under the couch, and let her loll in bed.”

“Do as you like.”

To this Illarion gave no reply, but he grabbed the cat by the tail and flung her on the floor. Sophy mewed plaintively, crept under the couch and there waited for Illarion to start

snoring. Then she returned to her rightful place under the blanket. But Illarion took a long time to fall asleep.

...Illarion was ill. His left eye hurt terribly. It was illness, as well as love for me, that had brought him to the capital. Illarion was no coward, but he was afraid to see a doctor and refused even to consider going to hospital. But his eye grew steadily worse. At night Illarion was so racked with pain he was ready to climb a wall. I did my best for him, but all the comforting I offered did not help.

At last I decided that to wait any longer was criminal.

We dressed in our best, wrapped a bottle of *chacha* and a *kha-chapuri* cheese-cake in a newspaper and, on Aunt Martha's recommendation, went to Sololaki district to see a private practitioner. He was himself one-eyed, Aunt Martha had told us, but he was the best, the most famous eye specialist in Tbilisi, who had cured her sty within a mere month. We were quite surprised therefore not to see a queue of patients before his door.

"It looks as though he doesn't receive patients today?" Illarion groaned. "I shall die!"

"Don't you worry, Illarion, I'll beg him on my bended knees, and he will receive you," I reassured him.

I knocked on the door loudly. There was a crashing noise in the corridor, then I heard some whispering, then a door slammed within, there was another noise of falling objects and finally the door was opened. I saw a small frightened woman with feathers and down in her unkempt hair.

"Excuse me, please," I began, "I believe the esteemed Professor holds no reception hours today, but my uncle has come specially from the country, he has terrible..."

"Oh, that's what you're about," the woman interrupted me. "I thought you were meter readers."

The woman climbed a chair nimbly, produced a piece of wiring from the pocket of her dressing gown, pushed it into the electricity meter and jumped down.

"Well, what do you want?"

"We beg the esteemed doctor to receive us. We shan't leave until he does!" said I preparing to repulse an attack.

"Whyever not? Of course he'll see you. In a minute! Come on

in!" the woman began to fuss. "Who sent you? Please come into the room... Mamonty, Mamonty, some patients have come! Patients!"

The woman pushed us into a room, locked the door from outside and ran away, calling, "Mamonty! Mamonty!"

A moment later a tall unshaven man in striped pajamas burst into the room. One of his eyes was green, and the other red.

"Sit down," he said severely.

We looked round. The room had a bed, a desk and two chairs.

"The patient will sit here," said the man pointing to a chair, "and his friend here." And he pointed to the bed. Himself, he sat down on the other chair by the desk. We sat down as indicated.

"What is wrong with you?" the doctor asked.

"My eye," Illarion answered.

"What's the matter with it? Does it hurt?"

"What did you think! Can't you see for yourself? I'm going blind!"

"What did you do for it back in the village?"

"I washed it with tea, and with milk..."

"Did you ever try sugar?"

"Are you making fun of me?" Illarion demanded.

"Not at all! You must have more tea and milk than you know what to do with. Do you drink wine?"

"Who doesn't?"

"Too bad!"

"I drink good wine," Illarion assured him.

"Do you smoke?"

"Of course."

"Then give me a cigarette," the doctor asked.

"Give him a cigarette," Illarion said to me.

I produced a pack of cigarettes. The doctor took two. He pushed one into his mouth, and the other behind his ear.

"I'll smoke it after dinner," he explained.

"Take some more then!"

"Very well, just to please you I'll smoke two cigarettes after dinner," said the doctor, taking another cigarette from the pack and pushing it behind the other ear. A good thing he had only

two ears, or else Illarion and I would have been left without cigarettes for the rest of the day.

He had an unhurried smoke, then moved closer to Illarion and poked him in the bad eye. Illarion jumped.

“Does it hurt?”

“What d’you think?”

“Your nerves are in a bad state.”

“Of course they are! One can go mad from this pain. I’m ready to climb the wall.”

“Yes, an eye can do that to you... I remember before I lost my eye, the pain was something unimaginable! I tried to kill myself!”

“What was the matter with your eye?” Illarion asked commiseratingly and signed to me to produce the *chacha* and the *khachapuri*. I did.

“What is this?” the doctor yelled.

“It’s chilly in here, it would be nice to have a drink,” Illarion explained.

“Well, just one glassful,” the doctor consented and shook the bottle.

“*Chacha!*” said Illarion. “Sixty per cent of alcohol!” He took the small clay jug which stood on the desk, emptied the pencils out of it, filled the jug with *chacha* and offered it to the doctor.

“Your health!” said the doctor, downed the jug at one go, grunted, shook his head and bit into the *khachapuri* voraciously.

We drank too.

After the second round of drinks the doctor went on with his story:

“About my eye... What is your name?”

“Illarion.”

“And yours?”

“Zuriko.”

“Well... Doctors stood round me in a crowd... They gave me all kinds of medicines: this one is German, they said, that one is American, and this one is a folk remedy. None of them was any good!.. What did you say your name was?”

“Zuriko!”

“To Illarion’s health!” said the doctor.

“To doctor’s health!” said Illarion. We tossed off our third glassfuls. The doctor patted me on the cheek and again asked what my name was. I patted the doctor on the cheek and said my name was Zuriko.

“Well, dear Zuriko, the doctors stood round me in a crowd and made me swallow all kinds of medicines. But tell me, have you ever seen a sick man who was cured by a doctor?”

“No,” I said. “Never!”

“That’s how it is... I swallowed all their medicines, and then they shelled the eye out and glazed the hole. But they did a good job of it. Can you tell which is the glass eye? Look well!”

Illarion peered at the doctor’s eyes.

“Which is the glass eye then?”

“The red one!”

“By Jove! It looks an honest-to-goodness eye! And if you painted it green, nobody could ever tell.”

“True. Which of your eyes did you say hurt?”

“Doctor, you wouldn’t have two glass eyes, would you?” Illarion asked suspiciously.

“Word of honour, just the one! You can’t tell the difference, can you?” the doctor said joyfully.

“Let us drink the health of all who’re healthy,” said Illarion raising the jug, “and may God protect us from plague, doctors and other grief!”

“I am a doctor of medicine,” our host began, accepting the jug, “even though I have no diploma, and no plaque on my door. Still I am a doctor of medicine. Some people in the Ministry are displeased with me, they write anonymous reports and fine me, but I don’t care! My knowledge is always with me! Many dislike me. Sick people never like doctors! That’s common knowledge. But doctors always love sick people!.. Can one trust doctors? Not by a long chalk! If the doctors had their way, they’d drive the whole world into the grave! What’s your name?”

“His name is Zuriko, and stop drinking now, or you won’t have an ounce of brain left. They can’t be fitted into your skull like a glass eye, you know!” Illarion said severely.

“Nonsense! Modern medicine can do wonders, dear... What

did you say your name was?" the doctor asked Illarion.

"Never mind my name. If you can, tell me what's wrong with my eye, if you can't I'll knock you out and put you into this here bed, and that will be the end of it!"

"Modern medicine can do wonders... Soon they'll be able to do more than put new brains into your skull, they will make you anew all over. They will bring a live man to see a doctor, put him into an armchair... The doctor will push a button—and there you are—take your dead body away! What did you think?"

"I know that much without you," Illarion snorted.

"If you know it, what are you afraid of? They'll gouge out your eye for you! So what? They'll put in a new and better one. What's wrong with a glass eye, tell me? You can take it out, put it into a cup of water, and go to sleep without a care in the world. Or say you're washing your face and the soap gets into your eye. A real eye hurts like hell from soap, and a glass eye is none the worse for it! Or better still: you're sitting by the fire-place warming yourself and suddenly—ouch!—a spark flies into your eye. A real eye can go blind from it, but a glass eye won't even feel any pain!.. I'll tell you something else..."

"Oh, you've told me quite enough!" Illarion said with a sigh. "What fool called you a doctor? You're a man of genius. I'm already wondering if perhaps I should gouge out both my eyes and put in glass eyes instead. Shall I?"

"Why not? Medicine is a great science, brother! To hell with real eyes! Long live artificial eyes!"

"Long live artificial eyes!" I caught up the doctor's slogan, then continued: "This man here is a person I hold dearest in the world, he is my Illarion, and his eye hurts."

"What eye?" the doctor asked with puzzlement, staring at me.

"The one we've been talking about," I said.

"Well, let's remove it then! In a jiffy! Babaleh! Bring me a knife and some boiling water!" The doctor hiccupped and laid his head on the table.

"What shall I bring you?" asked his wife, opening the door.

"Bring a bowl and place it in front of him," said Illarion.

“Good God! What is the matter with him?” Babaleh cried.

“Nothing much ... yet,” I said.

“Mamonty, wake up, Mamonty!” the woman wailed.

“I wonder what idiot christened him,” said Illarion.

“Mamonty! What kind of name is that? They ought to have called him Serapiona! What do you think, Zuriko, is Serapiona a good name for him?”

I smiled without answering. For some reason, bright flashes of light alternated with complete darkness, and the walls kept swaying.

“What have you done to him?” Babaleh flew at Illarion.

“Leave me alone!” Illarion snapped. “We haven’t done anything! If he can’t hold his liquor, he mustn’t drink vodka. He didn’t even examine me properly, the scoundrel.”

“Don’t worry, Illarion,” I said comfortingly, “I’ll examine you myself.” I took a pointer from the desk and poked at the table hanging on the wall. “What letter is this, my dear Illarion?”

“Which do you mean, my pet?” Illarion said.

“The one I’m pointing at!”

“Read it, idiot!”

“It’s an ‘A’,” I said.

“Ai,” Illarion repeated.

“Good! Uncle Illarion, you can see perfectly well! And what letter is this?”

“Which do you mean?”

“It looks like a snake!”

“Then it must be an ‘S’!” Illarion guessed.

“Come here, let me kiss you,” said I. We hugged each other.

“Get out of here, the two of you!” Babaleh suddenly screamed.

“Don’t yell, we’re going... Your mammoth is as much use to us as a dead body anyway!”

“Out!” Babaleh hissed.

“I’m a Gurian, and so are you-u-u...” Illarion struck up a song, put his hand round my shoulders, and we left the house of Mamonty Pzerava rolling cheerily...

That night Illarion had such excruciating pain in his eye that

we had to call the ambulance. While we were waiting for the car, Illarion did his best to cheer me up.

“Why are you so down in the mouth, silly? Don’t worry, nothing terrible will happen to me,” he said comfortingly. “But your Sophy will have a ball! She can now have half of your bed all to herself. Keep your pecker up, boy! Come on, do as I tell you!”

I stood in the yard, tears streaming from my eyes, looking at Illarion with deep pity. His voice was cheerful, and there was a forced smile on his face, but I could see his lips trembling and tears rolling down his wrinkled cheeks.

...Fifteen days later Illarion was discharged from hospital—minus an eye. He came into my room silently and sat down without saying a word. I asked him no questions, and he volunteered nothing. So it went on for a week. I attended the lectures assiduously, was the height of politeness with everybody, and after classes rushed home to Illarion.

Once, coming back from the University, I did not find Illarion in the room. I looked out the window and was struck dumb. It was a warm sunny day. Illarion was sitting in a chair under the mulberry-tree. Sophy—imagine!—was nestling in his lap. Illarion was looking up into the sky thoughtfully, smoking and stroking the subdued cat tenderly on the back as he talked to her in undertones.

I listened.

“Do you understand what it means to lose your eyesight, you silly animal? It means you cannot see the sun and the moon, the trees and the people... It means living in pitch darkness... Had I refused to have this operation, I would’ve lost both my eyes. Understand? No, you haven’t understood a thing, you stupid cat! Our Murada, he would’ve understood... You are a silly beast! Now, now, don’t sulk. Don’t you mind me... How am I going to return to my village now? All my life I’ve called Iliko a one-eyed devil... Wherever can I hide from him now? Okay, I’ll live here another couple of months... But I’ll have to go home in the end!... Perhaps he won’t notice? Not likely! He’s no fool to miss the difference between a live eye and a glass one! Shall I perhaps bring him a present—a nice glass eye, like mine? I’ll give it to



him and say: 'Well, old chap, it's the end of our leg-pulling... Push this thing into your socket and wear it as my gift... Now we are equal...' Do you think he will gloat at my misfortune? You think he will? Never say that again, cat! How could you even think it! You don't know my Iliko! The old man will be grief-stricken. You think not? How can it be when Zuriko, your shiftless master, and I are the two people he holds dearest in the world!.. Go and stretch your legs now, you'll never understand these things anyway..."

Illarion lowered the cat to the ground carefully and gave her a slight push. Sophy strolled to the window. Illarion turned to watch her, and I saw him crying.

I was crying too, crying and feeling glad that Illarion could not see my tears.

HELLO, ILLARION!

After the operation Illarion became restless. He had had enough of Tbilisi. March was approaching, and Illarion felt the pull of the village—where he was awaited by his old one-horned cow and his irrepressible squabbler of a rooster, where he was awaited by his native soil and his native sun, by spring, the season of life's awakening, of toil and hope.

I could not let Illarion make the trip alone, for he was still very weak after the operation. Besides, he feared his meeting with Iliko more than he feared death itself. So I went to our dean with Illarion's sad story and softened his heart to an extent of a two-days leave of absence for myself.

...The sun had just risen over the mountain when Illarion and I approached our village. Dogs, tired out with the night's vigil, were barking half-heartedly. Swarms of small birds trilled in the dew-washed trees. A gauzy mist lay over the village.

"Look, Zuriko, your Granny is already up and about," said Illarion pointing to a thin whisp of smoke that was curling out of our chimney.

I tore down the incline yelling at the top of my voice: "Granny! Gra-a-a-nny!"

My stooped Granny hastened out of the door, tying her faded headscarf on the go.

“Gra-a-a-nny!”

Granny shaded her eyes, peered into the distance for a few moments, then shouted something and, her arms spread wide, began running towards me.

“Zuriko! Sonny!”

We embraced. Then I picked her up and carried her towards the house.

“Sonny, my dear boy! At last! God, you look terrible! Nothing but skin and bones! I told you learning can kill a man. Oh Lord!”

“How are you, Granny?”

“Better tell me about yourself! Have you finished your studies?”

“Oh no, Granny, not yet! My studies have just begun!”

“Your poor Granny! Why must you study so much? Blast your teacher—what can he be thinking? You must explain to him that you have an old, sick and lonely grandmother, that she is pining for you—perhaps the monster will speed up your course.”

“I’ll tell him, Granny, I’ll tell him by all means,” I said soothingly.

Meanwhile Illarion had been standing behind my back, shaking his head and waiting patiently for me to put her back on her two feet.

“Hello, Olga!” he finally said.

“Illarion, dear, please forgive me! I lost my wits from joy. How are you? How is your eye?”

“What eye, Olga! I haven’t got it any longer.”

“What nonsense are you talking, you old devil?”

“But it’s true, Olga!”

“And what’s this? Isn’t it an eye?”

“This? Oh, it’s an eye in a manner of speaking... The same kind as that dried hawk has which hangs on the wall in Iliko’s house...”

“You mean it’s a glass eye?”

“Yes.”

“Good Lord! But don’t take it too much to heart, Illarion...”

We are with you, my dear!.. But why are you two standing in the middle of the yard? Come on in! You must be hungry after your journey!"

After we had breakfast, Illarion and I went to his place, took up observation posts by the window and began waiting for Iliko. He tarried quite a while. At last the gate gave a creak, and Iliko entered the yard. We watched him with bated breath.

"Illarion!" Iliko shouted.

"Go and meet the one-eyed devil!" Illarion wheezed to me and picked up a jug of water. I went out onto the balcony.

"Hello, Uncle Iliko! Come in, please!"

"Hello, professor!" Iliko answered, went up to the balcony, hugged me heartily, then stepped back and subjected me to a lengthy scrutiny. At last he shook his head with a mournful air and started hugging me again.

"My darling scoundrel! Well, out with it! How are you getting along? How are the studies? I bet you've driven all your professors crazy. Hey, what's this? A moustache?" and he pulled my moustache. "A real honest-to-goodness moustache?"

"Real enough."

"It can't be!"

"I tell you it's real!"

"A villain like you and wearing a moustache? There's no justice in this world, or you would have neither beard nor moustache! And where's Illarion? Hey, you, big-nosed devil! Show yourself!"

"Come on in, if you mean to stay, and if not, you can make yourself scarce!" Illarion responded from within.

Iliko went inside.

"Hello, Illarion!"

"Hello, Iliko!"

They hugged each other for a long time. Then Illarion invited us to sit down by a low table and brought some wine and pickled leek. The conversation lagged. Iliko was smoking in silence, I stole glances at Illarion, while Illarion sat frowning and started at Iliko's every movement.

"Well!" Iliko finally broke the silence, "why don't you tell me

the news? What are the prices in the city? Have you brought me some dry roach?" he asked.

"I clean forgot," I replied contritely.

"What were you thinking of, you brat?... Illarion, how does he spend the time there? Does he do any studying at all?"

"I don't know... At any rate I did not see him pick up a book once."

"He must study by heart. What year are you in, wretch?"

I grew angry. "Have you come here to question me?"

"What else must I discuss with you, bun, if not your studies? If you are a porter at the railway station, say so. We can then discuss the portering business."

"Yes, a porter."

Iliko looked at me from the corner of his eye, poured some wine into his glass and said in hurt tones:

"Well, let's drink to your homecoming then... You're a surly lot, I must say! I rushed here hearing my friends were back. They will tell me all the news and we shall have a nice chat, I thought. Instead you're sitting there snarling at me like a pair of wolves. To hell with you! I have always known this big-nosed devil could not tell his friends from his enemies. But I did not expect such treatment from you snotnose!"

I felt ashamed. Rising from my seat, I came up to Iliko and kissed him.

"Don't be sore, Iliko dear. We're simply very tired after the road."

"Shut up! I'm quite happy simply to see you... Or do you think I've come for the sake of this sour wine?"

"I know why you came," Illarion muttered.

"Finish what you've started to say, you spiteful old dodderer!"

"You've come to gloat, that's what! Very well, I am at your mercy now! Bite me, tear at me, torment me! Here I am! I can't run away!"

"Have you gone off your rocker, old man? What are you saying? Did they poison you in that city? Zuriko, what's the matter with him? When he left, he was a man of gold, and he's come back a nut!"

Illarion and I exchanged puzzled glances. Could it be that Iliko had noticed nothing? Did he have no suspicion of the truth? It looked as though Illarion's glass eye had passed the test. "Everything is okay!" we decided, and our spirits rose at once.

Illarion raised his glass.

"To our homecoming, and to our meeting, my dear Iliko!"

"That's more like it!" Iliko exclaimed with relief. "You nearly drove a poor one-eyed old man crazy! Who do I hold dearest in the world? Good health to you both!" And he gave us each a sound smacker.

After the third glassful Iliko started a song:

*I shall drown my bitter sorrow
In this horn that froths with wine.
I shall take my precious darling
For a walk when moon is high.*

"Iliko, dear man, you know how fond I am of you!" said Illarion, putting his arm round Iliko's shoulders.

"Yes, Illarion, I know that you love me like the apple of your eye," Iliko answered with a smile.

At the word "eye" Illarion stiffened. But Iliko went on singing unperturbed:

*Fill the glasses and let's down them!
Drink and spit on all life's grief!*

"To Iliko's health!"

"To our scoundrel!"

"To big-nosed Illarion!"

*Let me join the game of lelo,
I must win the cherished prize.
I shall bravely face my neighbours
Warmed by sweetheart's glowing eyes,*

Iliko went on singing.

Illarion pricked up his ears again, but Iliko, the image of innocence, had switched to another song:

*I'll join the dance beyond the village,
I'll wink a greeting to Black Eyes...*

Illarion choked on a bit of *choorchkheli* and started coughing. After he was done, he stared hard at his tormentor. But Iliko paid no heed and went on singing lustily:

*I'll be guided in the darkness
By the light of lustrous eyes.*

Eventually Illarion calmed down, reassured that he had managed to fool Iliko. He waxed so bold that he no longer addressed Iliko otherwise than "you one-eyed devil". Iliko did not seem to mind.

It was late at night when Iliko and I started for home. With our arms round one another's shoulders, we went down into the yard singing. Illarion saw us to the gate. Once outside the fence, Iliko suddenly turned round.

"Illarion!" he called loudly.

"What d'you want, you one-eyed devil?" Illarion asked.

"Don't forget to put your eye in a cup for the night!"

"What?" gasped Illarion.

"Nothing! You can wink at me as much as you like now!"

"Iliko Chigogidze!!" Illarion bellowed.

"Repeat my name often, so you don't forget it! But on the whole you've been lucky: you like hunting, and now you won't have to close your eye any more—just you walk around the village and shoot every dog in sight!"

"Iliko Chigogidze!" screamed Illarion, dashing forward. "Don't you lead me into temptation!"

"Take it easy, Illarion! You must be careful with that glass bit of yours!" Iliko warned him.

Suddenly Illarion became deflated. For a second he stared at Iliko dully, then turned round and dragged his feet towards the steps. There he sank down.



Iliko stood in the road for a while, then opened the gate, went back and sat down beside Illarion. He produced his tobacco pouch, rolled himself a cigarette and offered the pouch to Illarion. The latter did not so much as give it a glance.

"Here, take it," Iliko said softly.

Illarion took the pouch. They lit up.

"My heart bled when I learned about your misfortune," Iliko began. "As God be my witness... You and me, we are one person, Illarion... Your trouble is my trouble... I never wanted to offend you... After all, I am not offended when you call me a one-eyed devil... All right, you've lost one eye. So what? Kutuzov * also had only one eye, but he could see right through the ground he walked on. So you lost an eye—what of it? You and I won't give in even if we lose both eyes. We'll hold hands and tramp across the world. And if we cannot do it on our own, Zuriko here will guide us. Chin up, old man!" And Iliko slapped Illarion on the shoulder.

Illarion rose, went inside and soon returned with a parcel wrapped in a newspaper.

"Iliko!" he said in a low voice.

"What is it, Illarion?" Iliko asked in an even lower voice.

"Here's some dried roach. It's good with *mchadi* and Isabella..."

"I am partial to roach," said Iliko.

"I knew it and so I brought you some," said Illarion.

"I was sure you would..." Iliko took the parcel, rose and started for the gate unhurriedly.

"Wait, I'll see you home."

"Do."

They went out of the gate and started down the road. I followed them with my eyes until their figures dissolved in the dark.

* Mikhail Kutuzov (1745–1813)—the general who commanded the Russian army in the war against Napoleon in 1812.

ZIRA

Student years are the happiest in a person's life. One has to live a student's life for a few years to appreciate the taste of a crust of rye bread rubbed with garlic; to understand the psychology of one who rides in trams without a ticket; to taste the sweetness of a "satisfactory" mark earned in the sweat of one's brow; to know the joy of having your grant renewed; to feel the enervating weakness in your knees before an exam; to enjoy the coolness of daybreak after a sleepless night spent over text-books; to find out the true worth of friendship; and, finally, to feel the pride of yesterday's barefoot urchin risen to the status of a respected citizen, a student of the State University... However, it will forever remain a mystery for Iliko, Illarion, my lecturers and even myself how I had managed to pass the entrance examinations and be enrolled at the University. The only person who has always had unshakeable faith in my phenomenal gifts is my Granny.

It's wonderful, studying at the University! A student is not obliged so much as to open a book for months on end—nobody will reprimand him or give him a bad mark; a student may miss five, ten, fifteen lectures—nobody will tell him to bring his parents to the dean's office... At the lessons—here they are called lectures—he is one of a hundred or two hundred others like him. Some of them write, some doodle, some chat in undertones, some solve crossword puzzles. There are also such who neither write, nor doodle, nor chat—they sit still daydreaming. Why they don't do it at home or in a park nobody can tell. Quite a few go to sleep. In other words, lectures are an excellent institution, they are just right for people like me. But, like all good things on earth, they have a serious defect—sooner or later the term draws to an end. The programme has been covered. The lecturers smile maliciously. The students find themselves in deadly peril. The season of tropical fever sets in—examinations.

We do our cramming in groups, in the flat of some one of us. We gnaw at pencils, learn by heart whole chapters from text-books, write cribs, pack our heads full of volatile knowledge, come to the examination red-eyed from lack of sleep and weary

from intense study, take the card, read the questions, gasp, tremble, babble something incoherent, then stretch out our necks in trepidation—Is it “unsatisfactory”?—and seeing the cherished, the long-awaited three “3”, break into a blissful smile and walk out of the room reeling...

My friends and I are sitting in my room cramming for the examination in economic geography. Zira acts as examiner today. Nestor, Otar, Khvtiso and Shota are the examination commission.

“Student Vashalomidze! Where is tin mined and which country has the largest reserves of this mineral?” Zira asks severely.

“Tin or copper?”

“Tin!”

“I imagine the largest reserves of tin belong to our village tinsmith Ali, but I have no idea where he mines it.”

“He’s playing the fool again! If you don’t want to study, go away and let us get on with the work!” Nestor says irritably.

“What d’you mean go away? I pay two hundred and fifty a month for this room!”

“Damn your shameless hide!” Aunt Martha responds from her room. “Have I had a brass farthing from you this last year?”

“Vashalomidze! Answer your second question. You know nothing about tin,” Zira says with a smile.

“Dear lecturer, I beseech you...”

“Zuriko, stop clowning!” Otar barks at me.

“All right... The second question is machine-building in the United States of America... The USA is made up of states. Don’t imagine however that these states are like the ones Otar gets in when somebody contradicts him...”

“Zuriko, really! Be serious!” Zira says getting peevd.

“The United States of America has well developed machine-building. Ford alone builds ... I forgot how many machines in a year... They say there are five cars per every person—man, woman or child—in America... You see a car in the street, come up to it, open the door...”

“The door opens automatically!” Shota corrects me.

“Sure. Then you press a button and a cigar pops out, you

press another button and a box of matches pops out, you press a third..."

"And a roast piglet pops out," Shota develops my thought. "You press a fourth, and a hot *gomi** pops out, you suck the drain tube and wine pours into your mouth, or *tkemali* sauce. You turn the starter and there's soda water and chocolate. You step on the gas—and out pours the tuneful 'Mravalzhmier'**..."

"Who will sell a car like that?" Nestor marvels.

"You will if you need money!" says Shota.

"Aren't you tired of all this nonsense?" Zira asks in exasperation.

For a moment we are chastened and fall silent. Then I go on:

"They say that if all of Ford's gold was smelted into a belt, you could girdle the entire globe with it."

"I could do with just the buckle from that belt... What splendid teeth it would make!" Nestor says dreamily showing his black teeth in a smile.

"Who wants teeth?" Shota says with a sardonic grin. "Now if I had that gold..."

"What would you do?" Nestor asks.

"First of all I would burn all notebooks and textbooks. Then I would go to our dean, put my student card and examination book on the table before him, bow to him nicely and walk out... No, I'd leave him a pound of gold—for postage stamps. Let him write to me if he misses me. And then pardon, goodbye, adieu, addio—I put my cap on and that's the last he will see of me!"

"What else?"

"What d'you mean 'what else'?"

"Perhaps you'd lend me a thousand rubles? I owe a lot to Aunt Martha," I says.

"Why should I? It's no concern of mine!"

"Aunt Martha! Did you hear that?"

"I heard, sonny!" Aunt Martha says: "You're all birds of a feather—layabouts and scapegraces."

* A maize flatcake.

** A Georgian drinking song.

“Answer the third question!” Zira reminds me.

“I am not prepared for it,” I say with embarrassment.

“Any questions?” Zira asks the members of the commission.

“I’ve got one,” says Otar.

“Out with it!”

“I offer the esteemed commission my apologies, but I’d like to know whether this moron really intends to take his examination the day after tomorrow?”

“I refuse to answer!” I protest. “There’s no such question in the programme!”

Then it’s somebody else’s turn to be examined.

We part late at night.

Otar, Nestor and Shota live on the University campus, Zira lives in Machabeli Street. She is a pretty girl, blue-eyed, pale and tall. Most of our crowd are in love with her, but she is not in love with anybody and does not let anybody see her home – except me. We spend hours sitting in the garden, talking endlessly or saying nothing at all. We look like lovers, everybody says.

Zira and I are walking slowly down Rustaveli Avenue. Night watchmen dozing by the shops start up and eye us suspiciously, to fall asleep again almost at once. They have no idea how beautiful Tbilisi is at night. All is silent. Only now and then a rumble of a tram comes from far away, or a sleepy whistle of a traffic cop.

“Zuriko?”

“What, Zira?”

“Do you like walking at night?”

“Yes.”

“Aren’t you afraid?”

“No. Are you?”

“I am.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“What if we are ... held up?”

“There’s nothing they can rob me of – surely not these worn rags!”

“They can strip me naked.”

“Then I’ll close my eyes.”



“Is that all? A fine protector I’ve got!”

“Very well, I’ll look at you in the nude. Will that do?”

“Please, don’t make fun of me. I know that you village lads are very strong but also very cowardly.”

“The only thing I fear is a knife.”

“Me too. And a gun.”

“Aren’t you afraid of mice?”

“I am!.. Zuriko! See those two men coming our way?”

“Yes.”

“They’re drunk. Let’s cross to the other side of the street!”

“It is cowardly.”

“Please, Zuriko, let’s!” Zira clings to me pleadingly.

“Don’t be silly! It’s cowardly.”

The two men stopped before the Kashveti church and hugged each other in the time-honoured maudlin way of all drunks. Then one turned back, and the other continued towards us.

We stopped. Zira was trembling. My legs felt wobbly.

The man came up to us, looked sullenly first at Zira and then at me, pushed his hand into his pocket and suddenly roared:

“Hey? Got a smoke on you?”

“Sure I have, please!” I bleated and offered him a pack of cigarettes.

“Matches!”

“Please!” I struck a match with shaking hands and brought it to the stranger’s very nose.

“I quit smoking yesterday,” the man declared, “and I haven’t touched a cigarette ever since... I’m not going to smoke now, I’ll just make-believe. A man must be as good as his word!” He lit up and drew in with relish.

“Do you smoke?” he asked me.

“No, not at all!”

“Good lad! I smoked for twenty years, and now I’ve dropped it. Nobody will make me put a cigarette in my mouth again!” he said, pocketed my pack and went on, reeling.

We continued on our way weakly.

Zira became gay all of a sudden. She leaped over the shadow of a plane-tree, then another and a third. So, leaping, she reached the Intourist Hotel and then started skipping.

"Try and catch me!"

I ran after her, overtook her and seized her firmly by the Shoulders.

"Oof, I'm tired."

Zira lowered her head on my shoulder. I put my arm round her neck and with my free hand lifted her chin and looked into her huge blue eyes.

"I wish this night lasted forever," Zira breathed.

"Why, Zira?"

"It's just ... that night is better than day."

Zira removed my arm, threw her head back and gazed into the star-studded sky. Then she took my arm.

"You must be in love with somebody, Zira. Who, tell me!"

"I love the sky, I love the stars, I love that there watchman, I love this tree!" Zira ran up to a plane-tree. "Don't you believe me? Shall I kiss it?"

Zira hugged the tree trunk and kissed it.

The sparrows which had been sleeping in its crown woke up and twittered in alarm. Zira listened to their hubbub, then turned to me.

"I love sparrows too!"

"You're a funny girl."

"Perhaps. And what kind of boy are you?"

"I believe I am funny too."

"No, you're simply stupid!"

"Thanks!"

"No, stupid is not the word. You're deaf and blind! Isn't that so? Let us see."

Zira came up close to me, looked me full in the face and asked:

"Can you see me?"

"Perfectly."

Zira took my hand, pressed it to her heart and asked:

"Can you hear it?"

I could feel the fast beating of her heart, and her hot breath was on my face. Suddenly I embraced Zira, held her close and kissed her lips.

Again we were walking down the plane-tree alley.

“Zuriko?”

“Yes, Zira?”

“I love you!”

“It’s not true!”

“Yes, it is, Zuriko!”

“It’s not true, Zira, and let’s not talk about it...”

Zira fell silent and leaned against a tree. I stood in silence too, leaning against a wall. So we stood for a long time looking at each other. Finally Zira came up to me, buttoned up my shirt, stroked my eyebrows and started down the street again. I trudged after her.

Suddenly Zira looked round. Tears were glistening in her eyes. She came up to me, kissed me and ran away.

...For a long time I stood stock-still, listening to the whisperings of leaves on the lovely plane-trees.

I started walking home. A late tram caught up with me near the Children’s Theatre. I jumped on. The conductor, who had been dozing in his corner, started, opened his eyes and told me to go front. I went front. Then the conductor shouted to me to come back and buy a ticket. I came back and told him I had no money. He did not believe me. I turned my pockets inside out to show they were empty. Then the conductor told me: “Jump off the same way you jumped on.” I jumped off and found myself face to face with a traffic cop.

“Good morning,” I said to him with a foolish smile.

“Papers, please!”

“What do you want my papers for?”

“I tell you, show me your papers, citizen! Let’s see what kind of a bird you are.”

“Why bird?”

“Stop talking back!”

“Why are you shouting at me?”

“Pay a fine!”

“I have no money...”

“Then come with me to the station. You’ll pay it there all right.”

“D’you think I’ll inherit a fortune on the way to the station? I tell you I have no money.”

“Stop talking back!”

Four people were sitting on a bench at the police station. At the sight of me the lieutenant on duty screwed up his eyes and said: “Nabbed again?”

“You’re wrong, sir, I’ve never been inside a police station before!”

“Stop talking back!”

“See what kind of a scoundrel he is, boss! He’s been swearing like a trooper all the way here!”

“It’s a lie, sir! I never said a rude word to him!”

“Silence! I will attend to you after I finish with this lot,” said the lieutenant and turned to an unshaven red-nosed man, one of the four sitting on the bench.

“How many promises have you given me?”

“Why, I give you as many as you ask. Who am I to argue?”

The red-nosed man rose and I sat down in his place. “My” policeman left.

“Very well then, just tell me what you have been up to this time.”

“Who? Me? I haven’t been up to anything. Don’t you listen to him. Calling himself a teacher too! What kind of teacher is he? You can’t trust him with a dog, let alone children. A teacher! Pah!”

“Please protect me from this foul-mouthed drunk,” said a tall thin man rising from his seat. “As for my professional competence, you may inquire at the district department of education.”

“You, keep a curb on your tongue!” the lieutenant shouted at the drunk.

“And why is it all right for him to question my professional competence?”

“But he never mentioned your profession!” I interfered.

“Never mentioned? And who called me a drunk?”

“Indeed, that is not nice,” I said to the teacher.

“Young man, you have no idea what an ugly customer he is.”

“Ugly customer yourself,” said the drunk.

“I shall say nothing about him beating his wife—that, after all, is a family matter. But he drinks like a fish, yells his head off, and never gives his neighbours a moment’s peace.”

“Is that true?” I asked the drunk sternly.

“What if it’s true? You’d do the same in my place! For twenty years—can you imagine it, twenty years—this dry stick has been calling me a drunk! As though I didn’t know it myself! Why must he remind me of it? He says I am a hooligan. Don’t I know it without him? And now he has thought up a new word—cretonne ... no, cred... cren...!”

“Cretin,” the teacher prompted him.

“That’s right, cretin. And as though that is not enough he also calls me a gorilla!”

“Did you really call him a gorilla?” I asked the teacher.

“But you don’t know him, young man! He’ll drive a saint crazy! Our nerves are in shreds! All of us, his neighbours, are at the end of our tether!”

“What neighbours? Why doesn’t anybody else complain?”

“They are afraid of you!”

“They respect me, that’s what. And they love me.”

“Here, I’ve brought a complaint. Signed by all the tenants of the house.”

“They’re gorillas themselves! And you too!” The red-nosed man turned his back on the lieutenant and appealed to me. “Let’s talk it over sensibly. Why does a man drink? Because he’s miserable. If he’s miserable, his nerves are in a bad state. And when a man’s nerves are in a bad state, he can’t help shouting. To listen to him, a man is not allowed to have a drink or to shout a little in his own house... How d’you like that?”

“Of course a man can have a drink, but...”

“Thank God, at last there is somebody with a bit of sense,” the red-nosed man exclaimed joyously.

“Do you call that having a drink? He swills wine by the bucketful! For all we care, he may swallow rat poison, but why must the neighbours suffer? Just look at him—his red nose speaks for itself.”

“Hear that?” the drunk complained. “Now he is insulting me in front of witnesses!”

“Well, there’s no denying that your nose is red,” I said.

“So what? The colour of my nose is my own darn business. I may paint it green without asking anybody’s permission.”

“Young man,” the teacher said to me, “can you tell me your name...”

Before I had time to reply, the lieutenant banged his fist thunderously on the desk. The glass tinkled in the windows. Dead silence descended on the room.

“Who are you to ask questions here, snotnose?” the lieutenant bellowed. “Get up and take off your cap!”

“Why are you angry, sir? I’m trying to help you!”

“I don’t need your help! Get out of here this minute,” he said to the red-nosed man, “and see that I never have another complaint from your neighbours!”

“In a moment, Inspector. I have a request to make... I am a peaceable man, never hurt a fly in my life... Tell him not to call me a gorilla!”

“Out!”

“I’m going!”

The drunk made for the door. As he passed me, he whispered in my ear.

“I’ll wait for you outside. When you come out we’ll have a fine party.”

“Get out before I’ve changed my mind!” the lieutenant yelled.

The drunk made himself scarce. The teacher laid his complaint on the lieutenant’s desk, gave me a courteous nod and went out.

Suddenly the door was flung open and Aunt Martha burst into the room. The lieutenant jumped up in amazement and went towards her.

“What’s the matter, Aunt Martha? What are you doing here?”

“My boy’s got lost! My boy hasn’t come home!”

I shrank into a corner.

“What boy, Aunt Martha?”

“My lodger, Zuriko Vashalomidze!.. He left and he hasn’t come back! I’ve been round all police stations and hospitals.

He's vanished into thin air! Help me, son, ring up somewhere... If my boy comes to grief I'll go mad! My dear boy, where can you be? Woe to me! Ring up somewhere, son, please do!"

I sat in my corner listening to Aunt Martha's lamentations, and my heart was brimming with joy. Somebody missed me, somebody was worried about me! Aunt Martha, a grumpy old woman, was running about the city looking for me as though I were her son or close relative.

I could not hide in my corner any longer seeing her so upset. I came out and embraced her.

"I'm here, Aunt Martha!"

"For heaven's sake! Where have you sprung from? Have you no shame, rascal? Here I am raising Cain all over the city, and he's sitting here chatting. How did you get here, scamp? Tell me this minute!"

"I just walked in as I was passing by, Aunt Martha..."

"What did you arrest him for, son?" Aunt Martha asked the lieutenant.

"I don't know, Aunt Martha. One of my men brought him in..."

"You don't know? What do you know then? What are you sitting here for? They bring a child in, and you don't even ask what for! Does he look like a robber or murderer? Or a hooligan?"

"Aunt Martha..."

"Don't you Aunt Martha me! Come home this very minute, you scamp! Tell the lieutenant you won't do it again and let's get out of here! You'll get your deserts at home."

Aunt Martha hustled me out of the police station. I just had time enough to wave to the lieutenant on duty who looked after us open-mouthed. On the way home Aunt Martha never uttered a word. When we reached the door of our house I turned to her and kissed her cheek.

"Leave me alone, bum," she said and wiped the cheek. Then went into her room and turned the key in the lock.

There was no point in going to bed.

Dawn was breaking over ancient Narikala.*

* Narikala is an ancient fortress in Tbilisi.

PLEASURE TRIP

Our trade union organiser occasionally extended his activities beyond the collection of dues. When elections began to loom on the horizon, he would sometimes organise an excursion. Usually the word euhemistically denoted a visit to the cinema or theatre. But this time we were going on an honest-to-goodness excursion – to Shiomgvimeh Monastery.

Aunt Martha gave me four potato pies for lunch. She did not supply any bread explaining that civilised Europeans never ate bread with potatoes and macaroni. The shortage of food was generously made up for with all kinds of admonitions and warnings.

In the University yard my fellow-students were waiting for the bus. We did not have to wait long – not much longer than an hour. When the bus did come, we took our seats promptly, and the driver began to start the engine. It made a gargling sound, sneezed and died.

“Come and give me a hand,” the driver asked me.

I got out, went in front of the bus and started wrenching the crank. The engine remained silent.

“Get out everybody!” the driver commanded. Everybody got out except Zira.

“Let’s give it a push! Now all together, go!”

“One-two-three!”

“All together!”

“Here it goes!”

“Come on!”

The bus shook, the engine sneezed a couple of times and started.

“Back inside!”

We took our seats again. The bus shuddered and was off.

The pleasure trip had begun.

I was sitting next to Zira and glanced at her surreptitiously from time to time. She pretended I was not there. Nestor was fondling the wine cask which Otar had brought along. Otar was talking to our guide. Shota was humming a song. I sat quiet as a

mouse blowing the smoke from my cigarette towards the trade union organiser, so as not to inconvenience Zira.

“Can’t you blow the smoke the other way, Vashalomidze?”

“Which way?”

“As long as it’s not into my face... Have you paid your dues incidentally?”

“Yes.”

“When was it?”

“Yesterday. Have you forgotten?”

“I don’t seem to remember.”

“You know what! Either cut out your tonsils, or do something else to improve your memory, and don’t come bothering people a hundred times about your stupid dues!”

The trade union organiser rose and went into the back of the bus.

The bus was now driving along the Military Georgian Highway.

“Look to your right,” the guide began his lecture. “This is the Mtkvari River.”

“Is that so?” Shota exclaimed. “Are you sure it’s the Mtkvari?”

Nestor burst out laughing and turned to Otar.

“Otar, isn’t it time we had a bite? I’m hungry.”

Everybody laughed.

“How many meals do you have every day?” somebody inquired.

“As many as come my way. Why don’t you offer me something?”

“Look to the right,” the guide continued his travelogue. “This is the hydroelectric station. We get our electricity from here... Further right up the mountain we see Jvari * Monastery. It was built in the remote historical past, but has still not gone to ruin.”

“Do you happen to know when it *will* go to ruin?” Zira asked. The guide sensed a trap and wisely refrained from answering.

* Jvari Monastery near the town of Mtskheta, built in the 6th century, is a major monument of ancient Georgian architecture.

After a pause he went on:

“An amusing and beautiful legend is associated with this monastery... A monk lived there... I’ve forgotten his name. He was a hermit who had fled the vanities of everyday life... When he had occasion to go down to Mtskheta, he would hold onto the chain that was stretched along the steep path. Well, one day, as the monk was going down holding onto the chain, he saw a maiden of heavenly beauty bathing stark naked in the Mtkvari and Aragvi...”

“One maiden bathing in two rivers at once?” the driver asked sceptically.

“Look to the right – this is the place where the two rivers flow together.”

“Well, go on with the story!”

“The monk stole a glance at the naked girl...”

“He looked, the old billy-goat, did he?” the driver said gleefully.

“He did. And mind you, in those times, monks were not allowed to look at naked maidens...”

“So he broke the rules?” the driver said.

“And what happens when you look at a naked girl you all know. The poor monk felt dizzy, let go of the chain and tumbled headlong into the river. And he got drowned,” the guide concluded mournfully. That was the end of his amusing and beautiful legend.

“Is that all?” the driver asked.

The guide nodded.

“All ruin comes from women, cards and wine...” the driver said. “The other day I was driving along Rustaveli Avenue and saw – an angel! She had no wings, but otherwise she was an angel, as God be my witness. True, she wasn’t quite naked... ‘Young lady,’ I called after her, ‘Look round!’ She looked... And I felt as dizzy as that monk. The next moment there was a crunch – I had collided with a Volga. The cop appeared out of nowhere, as he always does. The traffic cop is our god. Only God descends from heavens, and the traffic cop springs up from under the ground... Well, the rest would not be interesting to you,” the driver concluded his sad and instructive legend.

“Look to the right!” the guide came to life. “Before you is Svetitskhoveli.* Its architect had his right hand chopped off by the order of the tsar.”

“Why so?” Nestor asked.

“An intrigue... Somebody informed against him...”

“Must’ve stolen some building materials,” said the driver.

“Why is the cathedral called Svetitskhoveli?” Zira asked.

“It is called Svetitskhoveli because... You don’t mean to say you really don’t know why?”

“I don’t.”

“A pillar used to stand here...”

“And where did the animals come from?” Nestor asked.

“Wild animals lived in the woods around here,” Shota explained.

“Look to the left!” announced the guide. “This is the grave of our national hero Arsena Marabdeli.”**

“Arsena? I know him!” the driver exclaimed and went on to recite:

*Our Arsena mounted Lurja,***
A fine horseman in the saddle...
Many precious gems he gave her,
Earrings, necklaces and bracelets...
All the booty rich men yielded
I divided among paupers.*****

By midday we approached the village of Dzegvi. We were ferried across the river and then walked up the slope of Mount Shimgvim. I tagged after Zira, but she never once gave me a

* Svetitskhoveli is a cathedral in the town of Mtskheta, a monumental structure dating to early 11th century. Its architect was Arsakidze. The word “svetitskhoveli” means “life-giving pillar”; the word “tskhoveli” also means “an animal”.

** Arsena Marabdeli—Arsen from Marabda, real name Arsen Odzeshvili, was a popular hero who fought against serfdom. Born about 1800, killed about 1842.

*** Lurja is the name of a horse.

**** The driver has jumbled together disjointed lines from the folk poem “Legend about Arsena”.

glance. After that memorable night she had been avoiding me. I was very fond of Zira and wanted to be friends with her. Moreover, I was sure Zira did not really want to quarrel with me for good. But she fought shy of me.

“Zuriko!” Nestor shouted. “Leave the girl alone! Can’t you see she is not interested? Come and help us!”

I joined the boys who were taking turns to carry the wine cask and were all in a lather.

Zira walked ahead of us. Every so often she would bend down and pluck a flower. I am very fond of flowers. I can look at one flower and see a meadow teeming with flowers, or I can spend a whole day walking in the fields and never see more than one flower; I can lie on my back for hours and look into the sky and see it bedecked with flowers. I love flowers, and I can’t stand to see them plucked. I hate flowers that have been plucked – they remind me of a funeral wreath...

In the monastery garden we met a young and jolly monk. He looked eagerly at the wine cask and then inquired who we were. On hearing that we were University students he looked dismayed.

“YCL members?” he asked.

“Every one of us,” the trade union organiser said.

“I cannot allow you into the church. Atheists are not permitted to enter the House of God.”

“I’m two months in arrears with my YCL dues. Will you let me in?” I asked the monk.

“Sure!” he said with a smile.

“We haven’t come here to pray, we’ve come to see a historical monument!” the trade union organiser said huffily.

“And who will you be?”

“I am chairman of the trade union committee.”

“Very well then, you all may go in. Only please take off your headgear, wipe your feet and don’t write anything on the walls!”

The monk went to the church door, unlocked it and opened it wide. Then, making the sign of the cross, he walked inside. We followed him.

The church wrapped us in the heavy smell of incense and wax

candles. Pale strips of daylight penetrated through narrow windows and formed a criss-cross pattern on the floor, barely dispelling the mysterious murk. Furrowed faces, huge wise eyes and thin crossed arms of past centuries gazed down on us from the dark walls.

“What is the meaning of this picture?” Nestor asked.

“It’s the Resurrection of Christ,” the monk answered.

“He wouldn’t have much chance of resurrection today!” said Shota.

“I knew I should not allow YCL members into the church,” the monk said plaintively.

“Stop your whining, pal!”

“I’m no pal of yours! You should call me Father!”

“And what shall I call my real father?”

“Whatever you like...”

“You are not a saint by any chance, are you?”

“All is in God’s hands...”

“And what is this picture about?” asked Zira.

“It shows Judas betraying Christ.”

“That’s how it is: you can’t even trust your own brother, he’ll sell you out for chickenfeed, to say nothing of thirty pieces of silver,” the driver said with a sigh.

“There is no God!” the trade union organiser suddenly announced.

“Isn’t there? I heard he lived up there in the sky,” Zira said with mock seriousness.

“There are only airplanes up in the sky,” the driver contributed.

“Are you sure there is no God?” our guide asked with an ironic smile. “The other day I walked along the street and a brick dropped on the pavement missing me by no more than an inch. Can you imagine it? Had I made another step, even half a step ... do you still think there is no God?”

“If there was God, that brick would have hit you on your stupid head!” I said and stalked out of the church.

I don’t know how the theological argument ended, but everybody left the church hellishly hungry and clamouring for food.

We spread a cloth on the grass near the church, each placed

his provisions on it, and we fell to. We decided against electing a toastmaster—let each make a toast and speak his mind.

The first toast was proposed by the driver.

“I am an unfortunate man,” he began. “Every time people sit down to eat, drink and make merry, I am wrecked with thirst because we, drivers, ought not drink... Suppose I drink of this here wine and drive the bus off the road into a precipice?.. Of course I may say the brakes were faulty or such like ... it won't be easy to check. But I won't deceive the traffic cop. He'll just come up and say, 'Let's smell your breath, buddy! Aha, you've been drinking. I am writing it down: the driver was under the influence of alcohol.' And that will be curtains for me. Your Sarkis will land up in the tallest building in Tbilisi...”

“Which? The eleven-storey house?” asked Otar.

“Prison!”

“Why, isn't there a taller building in Tbilisi than the prison?” I asked.

“No, the prison is the tallest of all,” the driver said. “You can see Chukotka from its windows.”

“I get you.”

“You don't get nothing. Well, your health!”

Toasts followed one another. We drank to friendship, to love, to cultural monuments, to scientific discoveries, to our ancestors, to parents—there's no enumerating all the toasts.

The monk at first refused to drink, but after the fourth toast volunteered to officiate as cup-bearer. Each time he poured us some wine, he would suck at the rubber hose like a hungry calf. Towards the end of our repast he asked the floor. Hiccupping and swaying, he delivered the following monologue:

“In this monastery Shah Abbas of Iran... Do you know why the twenty-kopeck coin is called 'abaz'? The Shah cut the heads of twenty times ten Georgian monks! Why did he do that? Two hundred monks—it's not so little... And the Shah's grandmother was Georgian! Yes... A monk sat in a pit there, refusing to eat or drink... Why so?”

“Look here, pal!” Shota exploded. “Are you a monk or a lecturer? Why do you pester us with your whys? How the hell can we know why. Tell us yourself!”

“I’ll tell you... I’ll tell you all... It’s really very simple... Who are we drinking to? Let’s drink to God! Why? Let us wish Him health, happiness, a hundred years of life and the fulfilment of all his wishes! To this house! Let God grant the master and mistress a happy life... Twelve sons and twelve daughters... Jesus Christ had twelve apostles... I’m a monk... Why? Hic-cup!”

The monk fell asleep without providing an answer to his last “why”. But I knew it. There could not possibly be a woman in the whole wide world who would agree to marry that direct descendant of the ape-man. So all that was left to him was to join the fraternity.

It was now my turn to propose a toast. I filled the glasses and began:

“Long live the sun!”

“What sun?” Shota grumbled. “It’s night already!”

“But I see the sun!” I insisted.

“Good lad!” Otar said approvingly.

“I can see the sun! And you must see it too, unless you’re stark blind!”

“Of course we see it,” Nestor said looking at the moon.

“No, this is the moon,” I protested, “but you must see the sun!”

“You’re simply drunk!” said Nestor.

“I am Shio Mgvimeli!” *

“You’re Zuriko Vashalomidze!” said Nestor.

“And you are Serapiona!”

Nestor did not know who Serapiona was, so he did not take offence.

“I’m going home!” I said rising.

“Off you go,” said Otar. “That path is the shortest cut.”

“Are you coming with me, Zira?” I asked.

“Why should she come with you?” Otar asked.

“None of your business!” I snapped.

“Will you really go with this fool?” Otar asked Zira.

“I am staying here,” Zira said.

* Mgvimeli is the pen-name of the prominent Georgian children’s poet Shio Kuchukashvili.

"With me?" asked Otar.

"With everybody."

"Is Otar everybody?" I asked jeeringly.

"Why Otar? There's also Nestor..."

"Nestor is asleep."

"So she's staying with me," said Otar.

"You'll fall asleep, too, in a minute," said I.

"No, I won't," said Otar and yawned.

"Yes, you will!"

"Shall I go to sleep, Zira?"

"Why not, if you feel sleepy?"

Otar lay down on the grass and fell asleep at once.

"Go to sleep too, Zuriko... Put your head in my lap..."

"Zira, I'd like a glass of wine."

"Here you are," she said giving me a glass.

"You're a pretty girl, Zira!"

"I know..."

"And I'm an ape!"

"I know..."

"Why do you love me then?"

"I don't know..."

"Hurray to not knowing! Hurray to unsatisfactory marks!
Hurray to Iliko, Illarion and my Granny!"

"I'm sick of your Illarion!" Otar muttered, waking up.

"Come with me, Zira," I said.

"Where?"

"Nowhere... Come along."

"I'm afraid."

"Don't be afraid!"

Zira followed me hesitantly.

"Zuriko!"

"What, Zira?"

"Why do you keep silent? I am so ashamed... You love me,
don't you? Why don't you admit it then?"

"Zira, you're a girl in a thousand!"

"You said *that* already!"

"You can't love me, Zira... I'm drunk now, and when I'm
drunk I speak the truth... You... I... You're a beautiful girl... I
don't want you to love me... I'm not worthy of your love..."

“Shut up, Zuriko!”

“I am a scoundrel!.. I never thought you might fall in love with me. You don’t know how bad I am... And you’re so good... I have...”

“Don’t say anything, Zuriko!”

“No, I must tell you... I have... a girl... There, in the village... I love her more than anyone in the world... She is more precious to me than life itself... You’re better than she, a thousand times better. But I love her. She is my sun, my star... Her name is Mary... You must know about it...”

My voice broke. I had a bitter lump in my throat. Unable to utter another word, I lowered my head and fell silent.

Zira stood stock-still. There were no tears or reproach in her wide-open blue eyes—only amazement. Suddenly, shaking off her stupor, she came up to me and slapped my face with all her strength. I did not move. Then she covered her face with her hands, and, hiding it in my chest, started sobbing.

I put my arms round Zira and led her back to the glade. There I sat her down beside Otar, who was still asleep, kissed her hands and went away without saying a word.

I came up to an old bell-tower, mounted the stairs to the upper platform, breathed in the fresh night air and yelled as loudly as my lungs permitted:

“Oho-ho-ho!”

“Ohho-ho!” came the echo.

I touched the bell. Dust lay on it in a thick mossy coating. I struck its pig-iron side with my fist. A hollow lingering sound swelled up. Suddenly I felt dizzy. The world began to spin around me. To keep from falling I clutched at the rope.

“Nou-u-u!” the bell groaned.

I pulled at the rope again, and again.

“Nou!.. Nou! Nou-u-u!” sang the bell.

The sounds at first rolled in separate silvery drops, then merged together and floated in continuous waves, filling the monastery yard, the night, the entire moonlit world.

I stood on the platform of the bell-tower, listened to the bell’s song, saw the sun and barely held on to my consciousness.

FIREWOOD

Illarion and I were sitting in the shade of the damson-tree chatting peaceably. Illarion loved to discourse upon science, politics and literature. He had his own idea of every one of life's phenomena, and his head brimmed with original theories. The only authority he recognised was me. But even my opinions were often received with a sceptical mien.

"Where did you read that?" he would ask ironically. I'd name the source.

"Well... After all, books are also written by people. Don't you place too much trust in them..."

A two-hours lecture finally convinced Illarion that the Earth is round. He did also admit that if you bored right through the globe you will find yourself in America. The one thing he failed to understand was why people had not been boring the Earth to make a short cut to America.

This time Granny was taking part in our conversation, sitting nearby on a tree stump with her knitting.

"All right, sonny, you say that animals appeared before men did. But who milked the cows and the goats then?"

"Nobody! Part of the milk was sucked by the calves and the rest just went to waste..."

"Hear that, Illarion? Milk went to waste!"

"That's nothing, Olga. Ask him how work made man out of monkey!"

"Tell me, son!"

"What is there to tell! Just take a look at Iliko and Illarion and you can see for yourself!"

"Mind your tongue, you snottose! Look at yourself—in the well if you haven't got a looking-glass!" Illarion snorted offensively. "Go on, tell your Granny what your wise professors have rammed into that thick-witted head of yours."

"You won't understand a thing anyway."

"Ashamed, are you?" Illarion said with a smirk.

"Tell it yourself then, Illarion!" Granny begged.

"What is there to tell! Just a lot of nonsense. To listen to him, the monkey grew hungry and began to dig up the land..."

“Is that so? And what then?”

“Well, it could not dig lying down, so it stood upright on its hind legs.”

“Is that true, sonny?”

“He’s lying!”

“So you mean you never said it?”

“Did I put it like this?”

“I wish you did. I didn’t understand half of what you said.”

I gave a resigned wave with my hand. Illarion went on.

“Well, so the monkey took the spade...”

“And where did she get a spade?”

“I forgot to ask. Hey, blockhead, where did your monkey get a spade?”

“Why, don’t you know? It went to the shop and asked Otsoya to show it the spade that cost eighteen rubles. And what did you think?”

“Was Otsoya also a monkey then?” Illarion asked.

“As for Otsoya, he has remained a monkey to this day,” Granny interposed. “He sold me a kilo of nails the other day and they were a good two hundred grams underweight, and he short-changed me as well!”

“Greetings, neighbours!”

We looked round. Iliko stood smiling at the gate. Illarion gazed at him intently and asked:

“Tell us in all frankness, Iliko Chigogidze: have you come as a friend or as an enemy?”

“You needn’t worry, I have no intention of soiling my hands on you,” Iliko answered. “I came to ask my neighbours for a bit of advice.”

“Come in then.”

Iliko came up to us, wished us a good day politely and sat down on a log. He produced a tobacco pouch, poured out some tobacco and put the pouch back in his pocket. Then he fumbled in his other pocket and took out a different pouch which he offered to us:

“Like a smoke?”

Illarion took the pouch, opened it, smelled the tobacco and gave it back to Iliko.

“You ought to take your medicine three times a day, Iliko, perhaps it will cure you.”

“Peppered again?” I asked.

“No, plain straw,” Illarion answered. “Well, what did you come for?”

Iliko did not even deign to look at him. He turned to Granny and began:

“What’s the point of talking to him, dear Olga. You can see he oozes poison. Not that you overflow with sweet syrup yourself, but you’re a wise woman. Tell me what shall I do. Shall I leave the village for good, or shall I kill a person and go to jail?”

“Goodness gracious, what are you saying! Whatever has happened?”

“You’ll find out in a minute... Do you think it was an easy thing for me to float logs down the Gubazouli? Zuriko here helped me, he knows...”

“Well?”

“Somebody has been stealing my firewood! Imagine! Some dirty thief has been pinching my firewood! And I just can’t catch him red-handed! I haven’t slept several nights running!”

“Holy saints! You are not going to kill a man for an armful of firewood, are you?”

“I’ll strangle him with my own hands if only I catch him, the bastard!”

“What can I advise you, Iliko? You can’t pronounce a man a thief until you’ve caught him at it.”

“But I *have* been robbed!”

“That you have.”

“Very well then!”

Iliko rose and strode to the gate.

“Why don’t you stack up the firewood in your bedroom?”

Illarion cried after him. “Or better still, make your bed on the stack!”

“Thank you for your kind advice, Illarion! Whatever would I do if not for your help, poor wretch that I am,” Iliko shouted back.

That evening Iliko dropped by again and brought along a magnificent rooster with long spurs and a bright-red comb.

"What's this, Iliko?" Granny exclaimed in surprise.

"Can't you see it's a rooster?"

"But what's wrong with him?"

"There's nothing wrong with him. He hasn't had a day's illness since he was a chick. He's a splendid fighter and generally a first-class rooster. The only thing he can't do is bark, but he's as fierce as a dog and doesn't let anybody into my yard. I want to give him to your Zuriko as a present."

"My poor hens will be delighted!" Granny cried in mock despair.

But Iliko was no longer listening. He took me aside and began whispering in my ear:

"Zuriko, my dear, be my saviour!"

"What are you on about, Iliko?"

"Haven't you brought some primers from town?"

"Yes, I've brought some."

"How many?"

"Thirty or so."

"Give them to me, and I'll be your devoted slave!"

"You're not planning to blow up the bank, are you?"

"Don't ask me questions! Just give me those primers at any price at all!"

"Tell me what it's all about, and you can have the primers."

"You won't betray me?"

"How can you, Iliko!"

"You won't be my undoing?"

"Never!"

"Give me your word of honour!"

"Iliko, you ought to be ashamed!"

"Very well, then, come along..."

Till morning Iliko and I sat by the firewood stack, drinking wine and drilling holes in the logs. Inside we put some dynamite and a primer and then closed the hole with red clay.

Iliko was in the best of spirits.

"He's as good as caught! Of course I know who steals my firewood, but you can't accuse someone until you've caught him red-handed. Now I shall catch him. I am a genius, Zuriko!"

"Sure nobody's going to get killed?"



“Don’t you worry, nobody will be killed, but he will have his behind roasted!”

“So long as nobody is really hurt...”

“Zuriko Vashalomidze! If so much as a soul gets wind about the primers, I’ll cut my own throat, and my death will be your doing! Remember this!”

I gave a solemn oath to hold my tongue...

...A week later Illarion and I sat in his yard watching *chacha* being distilled. A huge copper cauldron was gurgling merrily, and hot fragrant *chacha* was running briskly from the spout.

Illarion likes strong *chacha*. From time to time he dipped his finger in it and shoved the finger into the flames. If a blue flame flared up, that meant the *chacha* was good and strong. If there was no flame, it meant we needed more “raw materials”.

Time passed quickly. We put round tumblers under the spout, then cooled them in cold water and sampled the fiery liquid with relish. Sitting like this by the cauldron, you drink your *chacha* slowly, with eyes closed, until the trees begin to sway and you start bawling songs, talking all kinds of nonsense and laughing for no reason whatever.

I was sitting by the spout, Illarion was by the fire. We savoured the *chacha*. The trees were already swaying, we laughed for no reason, sang and laughed again.

“Peace and abundance to this house!”

“Peace to the newcomer! Have a taste of my *chacha*, Iliko!”

Illarion offered the guest a tumbler. Iliko sipped the *chacha* with a knowledgeable air, smacked his lips, screwed up his eyes in pleasure, then put the tumbler down slowly and pronounced with satisfaction:

“Some *chacha*! Will knock a bear off its feet.”

Illarion smiled contentedly.

Iliko took me aside and whispered hurriedly:

“They’ve been taken!”

“Who?”

“The logs, stupid! You can expect the explosion today!”

“Really?”

“As God be my witness! Well, I’ll be going now. Keep a sharp look-out!”

Iliko went, giggling and rubbing his hands in anticipation. Illarion scowled.

“What did the one-eyed devil want? Couldn’t he say it out loud?”

“You’ll know soon enough.”

“Still...”

“We’ll laugh our fill tonight.”

“Tell me what it’s all about!”

“I could tell you, but better have some patience... It will be more interesting that way.”

“So you’re in cahoots with the one-eyed devil! I spit on both of you!”

Illarion went off in a huff—to bring more firewood. I filled the tumbler with *chacha* again.

“Sucking away like a hungry calf!” Illarion shouted. “Why must I bother with this drunkard? Move over there!”

We changed places. The firewood burned merrily. Sparks flew up. A new log was licked with a fiery tongue, crackled, went up in flames, a bit of clay flew off and...

“Down, Illarion!” I yelled.

“What’s the matter?”

“Down, I say!”

Illarion threw himself flat on the ground. There was a blast, then another, and a third. The cauldron jumped up and overturned, its contents pouring into the fire. I wanted to shout, but my mouth was full of ashes. Volleys followed one another. Live coals and fountains of sparks were flying up high into the sky.

The cannonade lasted several minutes. When all was quiet again, I lifted my head and looked round. Illarion lay with his face buried in the ground and did not move. I ran up to him and turned him over. He opened his eyes, passed a hand over his ash-smearred face and groaned weakly:

“What was it, Zuriko?”

“Damn and blast you, Illarion Shevardnadze! Why on earth did you have to steal firewood from Iliko? Couldn’t you at least tell me?”

“What’re you talking about?”

“About logs! The ones that were stacked in Iliko’s yard! Why

didn't you tell me, you big-nosed devil? I stuffed them with primers with my own hands!"

"Zuriko Vashalomidze! So you've sold me out to Iliko Chigogidze! Get out of here while you're in one piece, or I'll do something so terrible the stones will howl!"

"Hey, master!" somebody called.

"Who's there?" Illarion roared.

"It's me, Iliko. I've come to ask your advice. Somebody's been stealing firewood from my yard. Perhaps you'll help me catch the thief?"

"I'll murder you!" Illarion bellowed and dashed to the gate.

Iliko came again in the morning. He stole into Illarion's yard like a fox, examined the site of yesterday's catastrophe, shook his head sadly, then sat down under a tree and, with an angelic smile, began prizing the primers out of the logs which had not had a chance to explode.

TREASURE

One would think that a village chap studying in Tbilisi should greet June as the best month in the year. The exams are over, the grant for the three summer months has been received, and he can go home with an easy heart. Ahead is the summer, nocturnal raids on the neighbours' orchards, fishing and hunting expeditions... There had been a time when I, the pupil of a village school, rejoiced at the coming of summer. But ever since I became a University student and a city-dweller, June lost all attraction for me. Judge for yourself—what is there to be happy about? All through the summer the Damocles sword of autumn examinations in the subjects I failed in spring hangs over my head. The threes (satisfactory marks) in my examination book have to be changed into fives (excellent)—for without this precaution I would never dare to face Granny. Then there are Illarion's and Iliko's charged hints about my grant ("Have you refused your grant again, Zuriko?"). Besides, Illarion loves to expatiate, in Granny's presence, on my thirst for knowledge, my application and the difficulty he had had, while living in Tbilisi,

in tearing me away from textbooks. And then, going back to town, I have to change all the fives into threes again!

But since the only place where I really belong is my village, and the people I love best in the world are Granny, Iliko and Illarion, I have to bear up with all this and go to them...

So here I am striding along the meandering path that leads to our village. The earth, the grass and everything around is wet from a recent shower. I myself am drenched to the skin and keep slipping in the mud. The path goes steeply uphill. I hasten my steps, scale the hill almost at a run and suddenly my village opens to view, lying in the valley as in the palm of my hand. My knees give way and I sink on a boulder, a lump in my throat. There I sit for a long time, swallowing tears and waiting... At last I see Granny go out of our house. She is more bent than she was last year, but she moves briskly enough. I jump up, grab my weightless suitcase and run downhill shouting at the top of my voice "Gra-a-anny!" In another minute we hug each other. Granny is the first to speak:

"So you're alive, Sonny?"

"He's dead but he won't admit it!" Illarion contributes sarcastically, materialising from thin air.

"You must be hungry, Sonny," Granny says.

"Never mind, I'll feed him up during the summer—together with my Serapiona," says Iliko rubbing his hands gleefully.

"Well, tell us what's new in Tbilisi! Have you been struck dumb? It's not an examination," Illarion says and, without waiting for my answer, asks Granny:

"What wine shall I bring, Olga?"

"All that you have!" Granny answers.

"Have you filled your suitcase with lead?" Iliko grins, tossing my suitcase up easily.

"A load of books more likely," Illarion says with a smirk.

"No more books!" Granny exclaims. "No more studies! He must rest now! Just look at him—he's as thin as a rake!"

"Of course, Olga, you're quite right," Iliko giggles. "Poor child! Killing himself with study!"

"You should see his library," Illarion says. "When you enter his room, a book is sure to drop on your head, followed by a

brick. All the money his poor Granny sends him he spends on books!"

"Sonny!" Granny cries in dismay. "How can you do that to yourself? I won't have you starving! What do you want with all those books? Buy food with the money, or else I won't send you any more!"

"Illarion Shevardnadze, stop this fooling!" I say in alarm.

"We are only thinking of your own good. Of course one must study, but not to the detriment of your health!" Iliko says.

"Granny, lay the table quickly for God's sake! Perhaps these venomous old men will stuff their mouths with food!" I cry.

"In a minute, Sonny!"

A few minutes later we sit round the table eating a wonderful dinner.

"May I come in?" a familiar voice comes from the balcony.

"Come in whoever it is!"

Mary walks in, glowing with happiness and shyness. She is wearing a pretty new frock.

"Can you lend me your sieve, Granny... Hello, Zuriko!"

"Hello, Mary!" I say and rise from the table.

"There it is on the wall behind the door, child," Granny says.

"Here, sit down, Mary!"

"No, I must go."

"See the girl home," Iliko tells me.

"Oh no, there's no need," Mary protests.

"Yes there is," Illarion says with a smile.

Mary says a hurried goodbye and leaves, forgetting all about the sieve. I follow her. Granny, Iliko and Illarion come out onto the balcony.

I catch up with Mary and we walk together in silence, feeling four kindly eyes on us.

...On the third or fourth day after my arrival Iliko came into our yard.

"Where are you, scamp?" he called.

"What do you want with him?" Granny asked from inside.

I was lying on the couch, taking it easy.

"I have a request to make, Olga! I want to dig up the earth in my vineyard, but I haven't the strength to do it on my own.

Lend me your scamp for a couple of days before his muscles waste away from doing nothing all day long.”

“May your tongue waste away, Iliko! No, my dear, Zuriko is no longer the lad you could have at your beck and call. He’s a University student!”

“Wrap his feet in a rug! Drape a shawl round his shoulders! A student, pah! I’m simply concerned for his health—it won’t do for a young man to go to seed. But if that’s how you feel, why should I bother?”

“Stop pestering me, Iliko!”

“Blockhead! You like wine, don’t you? Would I go to all this trouble for myself, you ingrate?”

“I’m forbidden to work. The government has sent me here for a rest cure, is that clear? If somebody sees me working and lets drop about it in the city there will be a terrific to-do.”

“Don’t worry about that—I’ll put a wig on you. The devil himself won’t recognise you in it!”

I had no choice but to comply.

All day long Iliko, Illarion and I sweated and slaved in the vineyard.

“Come at sunrise tomorrow,” Iliko ordered when we knocked off. We nodded and dragged our feet home. For a while we walked in silence.

“That won’t do!” Illarion suddenly declared. “We must think of something, or else that bloody vineyard will be the death of us!”

“So it will,” I confirmed. “There is enough work there to last us a hundred years.”

“Think of something then! You’re an educated man now.”

“What can I think up? Iliko is hard to fool...”

“You’re right there...”

I stayed at Illarion’s till quite late. A small clay jug with delicious chilled wine stood on the table, we sipped the wine and racked our brains for a way to shirk Iliko’s gally drudgery.

“I found this jug in the earth,” said Illarion filling our glasses. “I nearly went mad with joy thinking I’d found a treasure!”

“There was no treasure?”

“No... The jug was full of earth...”

“In the old days people who were shipwrecked would put a message in a bottle or a jug, seal it and throw it into the sea,” I said.

“And what happened?”

“Well, somebody fished out the bottle, read the message and thus found out about the fate of those shipwrecked people...”

“What did you say?” Illarion cried eagerly. “A message? In a sealed jug? Excellent!”

“What’s the matter with you, Illarion?”

Illarion had jumped up, upsetting the little table, hugged me, kissed me on both cheeks, then danced about the room guffawing lustily and rubbing his hands.

“Just you wait, Iliko Chigogidze! I’ll play a trick on you the like of which the world has never seen! A message, eh? I’ll write you a message you’ll not forget in a hurry!”

I watched Illarion’s antics in amazement. He ran out into the next room, brought a sheet of paper, an inkpot and a pen, put it all on the table and shouted to me:

“Sit down, Zuriko! Sit down and write! No, first crumple the paper!”

“Illarion!”

“Crumple it, I say!.. That’s right. Now smooth it out!.. That’s right! Now write!”

Illarion lit a cigarette, leaned against the wall, closed his eyes and began to dictate:

“I, Levarsy Chigogidze, am writing this letter on the brink of death. I have known little joy in my life. I denied myself the last crust of bread, saving money for a rainy day. I have undermined my health. Now I am at death’s door. My only consolation is that my labours have not been in vain. By the apple-tree under the boulder I have buried a jug with gold. God willing, one day my boy will find it. Or perhaps he won’t. May God protect my Iliko. Amen.”

The insidious plan conceived by Illarion was now clear to me, but I had my doubts.

“Do you think he’ll believe the letter? ‘Why should he have

buried the gold in the ground?’ he will say. ‘Why not give it to me straight?’”

“But poor Levarsy died when Iliko was only several months old! He couldn’t have given him the gold.”

“Then why didn’t he say about it to his wife?”

“Because Kakano died even earlier, in childbirth.”

“Then everything is fine. He’s sure to swallow it, hook, line and sinker!”

We rolled the letter up, wrapped it in a rag, sprinkled some water on it and put it into the jug. Then we sealed the jug and went out...

The next morning we reported for work exactly at the appointed hour. Iliko gave us each a glass of *chacha* and a pickled tomato with a piece of cold *mchadi*, and we set to.

The sun had risen high, but we were still slaving away. I cast worried glances at Illarion—what if our scheme fell through?—when suddenly Iliko’s spade struck something hard. Iliko swore, lifted the spade, examined it and drove it in again. There was the sound of smashed pottery. Iliko lowered himself on one knee and began to rummage in the loosened earth. At first he fished out the neck of a jug, then the rest of it, and looked at us wonderingly.

“What’s this?” Illarion asked, all innocent surprise.

Iliko did not answer. He pulled out the rag and unfolded the letter with trembling hands.

“Let me read it,” I volunteered.

“Keep off, I am literate myself,” he snarled and began reading aloud: ‘I, Levarsy Chigogidze, am writing this letter on the brink of death. I have known little joy in my life. I denied myself the last crust of bread, saving money for a rainy day. I have undermined my health. Now I am at death’s door. My only consolation is that my labours have not been in vain. By the apple-tree...’”

He choked and began to cough.

“Read on!”

Iliko, who had grown as pale as a ghost, swallowed and gave Illarion a wild look.

“What does it say, tell us!”

I reached out for the letter, but Iliko pushed my hand away, brought the paper close to his eyes and croaked:

“By the apple-tree, on the boulder... I’ve sat day and night... And so my life passed... May God protect my Iliko... Amen...”

Iliko folded the letter with trembling hands and put it into his pocket.

“I can’t understand it,” said Illarion. “Why did he have to bury this letter? He could have left it on the table...”

That was more than I could bear. To keep myself from laughing and so spoiling the entire hoax, I said I was terribly thirsty and ran down to the spring.

There I threw myself to the ground and laughed until I was weak. When I returned, Iliko and Illarion were sitting on the grass smoking.

“Here he is!” Illarion greeted me and rose. “Let’s get back to work!”

“Let’s knock off for today, Illarion,” Iliko said. “I don’t feel well.”

“What’s the matter with you?”

Illarion felt Iliko’s pulse. Iliko looked as sick as he knew how.

“Go and lie down, Iliko, and we’ll do some more digging.”

“No, Illarion, have a rest too.”

“There’s no time for rest, Iliko!”

“I tell you, go home!”

“To leave you here all by yourself? A sick man? Never!”

“That won’t do,” I added.

“Why this sudden craze for working, you son of a bitch? I tell you, go home, blast you!”

Iliko was losing patience.

“But day has just begun, Iliko!” Illarion said charitably.

“Are you deaf or what? I tell you—go home and leave me alone!”

“You mustn’t be left alone.”

“Illarion Shevardnadze! For Christ’s sake, go!”

“What about the vineyard?”

“It’s no concern of yours!”

“What’s come over you, old man?”

“Leave me alone!” Iliko bellowed, thoroughly exasperated.



“Get the hell out of here! It’s my land! I do what I like to it! Hear me?”

“As you wish... Shall we come tomorrow?”

“Not tomorrow, nor the day after tomorrow, nor in a week! I don’t need your help! Get lost!” Iliko screamed beside himself. “Clear out!”

We hurried away in jubilation.

...We were barely able to wait till next morning, when, consumed with curiosity, we crept up to Iliko’s house. The huge boulder under the apple-tree, which a dozen hardy men could never have moved, had been rolled away. In its place there gaped a black hole. From its bottom clods of earth came flying up and the sounds of panting could be heard.

“He’s at it,” Illarion whispered.

“Must have been at it all night,” I said.

“Iliko!” Illarion called.

There appeared from the hole first the hands, then the head tied with a scarf and finally the rest of Iliko.

“What do you want? What the hell have you dragged yourself here for?”

“I’ve come to see you... I thought perhaps you were ill... And here you are... What *are* you doing, Iliko?”

“I’m digging a well.”

“A well? But you have a well, and an excellent spring too!”

“So I have. And now I am digging another well! Do you object?”

“Aren’t we going to work in the vineyard?” I asked.

“Go away!” Iliko shouted, climbing out of the hole. “Away with you, pests!”

Gasping with restrained laughter, Illarion and I dashed out into the street.

...Iliko spent an entire week digging. The hole under the apple-tree became a deep pit. Finding nothing there, Iliko started on another hole. Several more days passed. Iliko presented a sorry sight. He became gaunt, had grown a bristle and could barely walk with fatigue.

“That’s enough!” Illarion declared. “He’ll drive himself into the grave... We must end it tonight!”

When night came, we lay in ambush not far from the apple-tree and awaited with bated breath the triumphant consummation of our great hoax.

It was near midnight when the door creaked. We saw Iliko creeping to the hole as stealthily as a partisan creeps up on the enemy's outpost. Another minute, and he disappeared in the hole.

We crawled to its very edge. In the darkness of the pit we could hear panting and the crunching of shovelled earth. Suddenly there came the sound of iron striking something hard. We dashed for the cover of some nearby bushes. Several minutes later Iliko scrambled out of the pit with a big clay pot in his hands. He sat down under the apple-tree, made the sign of the cross, opened the lid and put his hand inside... Suddenly his face was distorted by a grimace of disgust and he jerked his hand out and sniffed at it. It was smeared to the wrist in the very same devil's concoction which Illarion and I had come in contact with on an earlier occasion and in somewhat different circumstances.

For a long time Iliko sat motionless, with his head bent. Then he began to speak in low tones, as though to himself:

"You've got the better of me, Illarion Shevardnadze! You've put me to shame before the whole world. You've made me dig two wells to get at this here foul thing!" He gave the pot a hard kick. "Very well then! Let it be so! I know you're hiding in the bushes nearby, laughing your head off... Laugh to your heart's content—just as long as you do not show yourself to me! If you do I shall kill you! I'll carve your guts out! And where is that bastard Zuriko? With you of course! Where else can he be?... On the other hand, I've got no one to blame but myself... What a stupid fool I've been! My penniless father—to believe that he had a treasure to hide! Oh, if only I could smash this pot on your infamous heads, I would die in peace!.. Let me calm down a bit and then come and enjoy your victory. But don't you dare show yourselves to me now! I'll murder both of you! And if I don't kill you, I'll kill myself, don't tempt me to commit a deadly sin!"

Iliko rose and went to his house. Suddenly he turned to the bushes where we were hiding and said:

“I’ll expect you to report for work in my vineyard tomorrow at sunrise! Just you dare to be late, you loafers!”

...We got out of our ambush, found a couple of spades and spent the rest of the night digging up the vineyard of our dear old scold Iliko.

PAKIZO

Granny, Iliko, Illarion and I are the joint owners of a cow. Her name is Pakizo. She is as old as my Granny, or at any rate as Iliko. For five years Pakizo had been refusing to fulfill the function of motherhood. We gave her the most nourishing fodder, made her drink all kinds of potions and medicines, but nothing helped. Pakizo refused to bring any more calves into this world. Nevertheless, she continued to supply us with milk, and so we forgave her this absence of progenitive instinct. According to the rules of our partnership, Pakizo took turns living with Granny and me, Iliko and Illarion. She was equally fond of all her masters, but she was an extremely absent-minded cow. She would walk into any yard where the gates were open and allow anybody at all to milk her.

This summer, though, Pakizo took a turn for the worse. She stopped giving any milk, lost her appetite, grew thin and, most important, seemed to have lost her mental faculties. She barely recognised Granny, Iliko and Illarion, and treated me as a complete stranger. In short, the cow had reached the end of her lifespan. Even her coat became grey. At first we tried to make a present of her to one another, but seeing there were no takers, gathered for a round-table conference.

“All things have a limit,” Granny began. “So does a cow’s lifespan. But what are we to do with her?”

“Let’s sell her,” said Illarion.

“What are you going to sell? Bones? What possible use can they be to anybody?” said Iliko.

“Why bones? Meat!”

“Where do you see any meat?”

“Let’s sell it to the state, as part of meat procurement,” said Illarion.

“They won’t accept her.”

“You may be right...”

“Perhaps they’ll pay something for the hide?”

“I wish she died of old age,” I said.

“The last thing I want is the bother of burying her!” said Illarion. “Let’s take her to the procurement office and see what happens.”

We began preparations for the trip early in the morning. I brushed Pakizo, Illarion gave her a salt drink, Iliko force-fed her some fresh grass, Granny rubbed her knees with warm water. By two o’clock in the afternoon she was smart-looking and full like a wineskin. We led her out of the gates solemnly. It was some three kilometres’ walk to the procurement office. Before we covered a hundred metres Granny cried:

“Wait, let’s go back!”

“What’s the matter, Olga?” Iliko asked. “We can’t stop her now that we’ve got her walking!”

“I’ve forgotten to milk her!”

“Zuriko, bring a barrel!” Illarion shouted.

I ran back home and brought a tea glass. Granny, Iliko and Illarion took turns milking Pakizo, while I held her by the horns to keep her from falling. At last they gave me the glass, filled with a frothy liquid.

“We’ll divide it later,” Iliko giggled, giving the rope a jerk. Pakizo reluctantly moved a leg.

We left the village behind and were now on the highway. Suddenly Pakizo dropped first on one knee, then on another and gave a plaintive moo.

“What, saying your prayers in the middle of the highway?” Iliko said reprovingly.

“Let her rest a bit,” Granny said.

“We shan’t get there in a week at this rate,” Illarion grumbled.

“Let her have a sniff at that there bottle,” Iliko said to me.

I pushed the bottle with smelling salts under Pakizo’s nose.



She snorted, shook her ears, but did not raise herself from her knees.

“Give her a blood-letting!” Iliko ordered.

Illarion produced a knife and slashed one of the cow’s ears. Pakizo jumped up and raced ahead.

“After her, you youngsters!” Granny commanded.

“Hold her, or she’ll fly away!” Iliko chortled.

“Really, Iliko,” Granny protested. “What if somebody steals her?”

After a sprint of some twenty yards, Pakizo stopped, relieved herself on the grass by the roadside and lay down.

“Too bad! If she goes on like this, there won’t be any live weight left,” said Iliko.

Pakizo closed her eyes. So we had to slash her other ear. She jumped up at once and started running so fast she soon disappeared round the bend in the road.

We squatted down and had a smoke, then walked on unhurriedly. The road ran straight after the turn, but Pakizo was nowhere in sight.

“Where’s the cow?” Granny cried in alarm.

We hastened our steps. When we turned the next bend we finally saw Pakizo. She was taking a rest in the shade of the roadside bushes.

“Get up, Pakizo!” Illarion suggested.

The cow gave him a glance as much as to ask:

“Are you all there, pal?”

“Come on, get up!” Iliko said.

Pakizo ignored him.

“Don’t you feel like getting up, Pakizo?” Granny asked her in a kindly voice.

The cow gave a negative swish with her tail, laid her head on the ground and closed her eyes.

We stood around contemplating her in despondent silence.

A passer-by came along. He stared at Pakizo for a long time, then asked sympathetically:

“Dead, is she?”

“She’s sleeping it off,” Iliko answered.

The passer-by gave us a wary look and hastened on his way.

“Come on, you can get up now,” Illarion said, bending down to the cow.

“Get up, damn your hide!” Iliko cried in exasperation. Pakizo never twitched an ear.

There was nothing for it but to lift her by sheer force.

“Stand up in front, Illarion!”

“Give her a push-up!”

“Hold onto the leg! Not that leg! Another!”

“Now pull her by the tail!”

“Should’ve taken some Valerian drops along!”

“Heave her up!”

“Hold onto the tail, Olga!”

“Take her leg! Move it forward! Right! Now another! Off she goes!”

“Hold out a little longer, Pakizo!”

“You’re not all that old really!”

It was dusk when we finally reached the procurement office. At the gate Pakizo began to sway, obviously ready for another lie-down.

“Salts!” Illarion hissed. “Where are you looking, Zuriko, damn you!”

“I’m sick and tired of this damnfool business!” I snarled and tossed half a bottleful of salts into the cow’s nose.

Pakizo shot into the yard.

“Put her on the scales! Quick!” Illarion whispered to me, and went to the man in charge.

“Good afternoon! We’ve brought a cow...”

“Name?”

“The cow’s?”

“The master’s!”

“Vashalomidze, Chigogidze, Shevardnadze...”

“Name!”

“The masters’?”

“The cow’s!”

“Pakizo.”

The man approached Pakizo and gave her a long look.

“What do you think it is?”

“Why, isn’t it a cow?” Illarion asked.

"It's a cow's shadow!"

"She is a bit on the thin side," Iliko admitted.

"Why is she lying on the scales?"

"What difference does it make? The weight is the same, lying down or standing!"

"Perhaps she's dead?"

"What are you saying, sonny? Didn't you see her racing into the yard?" Granny expostulated.

"She played and frisked all the way here," Illarion confirmed.

The man came up to the scales, bent down, touched Pakizo and said in a low voice:

"This cow is dead."

"It can't be!" Illarion protested. "She must be dozing!"

"I tell you she's dead! She does not breathe!"

"Would you like her to snore, perhaps?"

I came up to Pakizo and touched a vein in her throat. She was dead all right.

"Take her out of the yard," the boss ordered.

We dragged Pakizo out of the yard and sat down by the roadside, mute and depressed.

"See you don't leave her out on the road!" the man shouted from inside the yard. "Bury her or take her back home!"

...Stars were coming aglow in the sky when Illarion finally broke the silence.

"We must bury Pakizo..."

"What about leaving her where she is and doing a bunk?" Iliko suggested.

"We can't!" Illarion said indignantly. "A dead body must be given a decent burial."

"Let's inform the relatives of the deceased. Write out the telegrams, Zuriko," Iliko instructed me.

"Think this a laughing matter, you one-eyed devil!" Illarion blew up. "I will have you know that this cow was dearer than my own mother to me—I was nursed on her milk!"

"What shall we do, Olga?" Iliko asked Granny, who had been shedding quiet tears.

"We must bury her, but where? And where shall we take the money?"

“Indeed,” Illarion said musingly.

A barefoot urchin came into view on the road. He hopped along whistling a merry tune.

“Come here, lad!” Illarion called out to him.

The boy came up.

“What’s your family name?”

“Simonishvili.”

“Where do you live?”

“Over there...” the boy pointed into the darkness.

“What do they call you?”

“Marat.”

“And has your father got many such... Marats?”

“Six girls and a boy.”

“Congratulations! Do you see this cow?”

“Is this a cow?”

“None of your lip! This cow has helped raise a hundred loafers like you—with her milk, cheese and butter. See? Don’t think she is just a stray. We are her masters. Of course she’s dead now, but all the same she’s better than many a living cow! In some countries cows are considered sacred animals... What is that country called, Zuriko?”

“India.”

“That’s right. They pray to cows in India... A cow...”

“Just tell me what you want, Uncle, it’s time I was going,” the boy interrupted him.

“I don’t want anything. This cow must be buried... Here’s a tenner, run home, bring your sisters, fetch a couple of spades and bury the cow. Is that clear?”

“Ten rubles is not enough!”

“Here’s another ten!”

“It’s still not enough...”

“Here’s five more!”

“Not enough...”

“Here’s another three!”

“Not enough...”

“What d’you mean ‘not enough’, you wretch? Twenty-eight rubles is not enough for one dead cow?”

“To hell with her then,” said Marat and made to go.

“Stop! Come here, whelp! How much do you want then?”

“Fifty rubles!”

“Fifty rubles?” With a gnash of his teeth, Illarion counted out five tenners. “Bury her tonight, hear?”

“Tonight is too late. I’ll get rid of her at daybreak tomorrow...”

“Not get rid but bury, wretch!..” Now look me in the eye and remember. Tomorrow morning I’ll come here and if I don’t find a grave in this here spot, I’ll set fire to your house! Is that clear?”

“Yes,” said Marat and vanished into the darkness.

...A week later I was standing on the balcony of our house reading out to Granny, Iliko and Illarion a summons from the local sanitary inspection, which had just been brought by the watchman of the village Soviet:

“To Citizens Vashalomidze, Chigogidze and Shevardnadze. On the nth of July you left the dead carcass of a cow on the central district highway, which action entailed the danger of an epidemic and also resulted in the spread of an offensive smell, causing the justified indignation of the local inhabitants. The fine of 300 rubles has therefore been imposed on you.”

The paper was signed “Chief doctor of the district sanitary inspection.”

“I think this fine must be paid by Illarion,” said Iliko after a moment’s silence.

“Why Illarion?” asked Granny.

“Because this cow was dearer to him than his own mother and he was nursed on her milk,” answered Iliko.

“And who was it suggested taking the cow to the procurement office?” Illarion snarled.

“You did,” I reminded him.

Illarion did not utter another word. He went home, locked himself in and stayed in his room till evening.

Meanwhile Iliko and I set off along the highway, stopping every boy we met and asking his name in the sweetest tones. But though we walked all of twenty kilometres we never met one who bore the name of Marat...

I am no longer the village lad Zuriko. I am now an adult person with a higher education. My diploma says that I, Zurab Vladimirovich Vashalomidze, have been qualified as an economist and that my diploma is valid in all republics, cities, and villages of the Soviet Union. On my lapel I sport the University graduate's badge. And I was not a bit sorry that I had had to puncture a hole in my brand new suit to screw it on.

I am on my way back to my native village, where Granny, Illarion, Iliko and Mary are all awaiting the new luminary. I shall come home, plant a new vineyard and three years later will harvest the first crop of Tsolikauri grapes. I shall live and work in my village, I shall have a house and in the yard will live a dog called Murada. I shall have my Mary and twelve children, eleven sons and one daughter—pretty blue-eyed Zira. I shall often go to town and bring back presents for my wife and children, and also books. I shall bring presents to Granny, too, such nice ones that she will cry with joy.

I shall bring presents to Iliko and Illarion, such nice ones that they will not dare to laugh at me. I shall go to visit Aunt Martha and will bring her presents from Granny, and Aunt Martha will also weep from joy.

And then I shall invite them all to live in my house—Iliko, and Illarion, and Aunt Martha. We shall all live together. I shall have very many children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. There will be a great lot of us, a whole village. And later there will be even more of us, and some day the whole world will be us. We shall never die and will live forever.

Such were my thoughts as I strode along the path leading to our village. The path went steeply uphill. I reached the top, sat down on a boulder and looked down at my village, lying in the valley as in the palm of my hand. I saw our yard. There was smoke curling over our chimney, but I could not see Granny in the yard. I sat and waited for a long time, and finally started running down the slope.

“Granny!” I cried entering the yard.

There was no answer. I raced up the steps. All was silent. I entered the room. It was in semi-darkness. Granny was lying in

bed. I bent down to her. She was asleep. I tiptoed out onto the balcony and met Iliko and Illarion there.

"Hello!" I said to them smiling broadly.

"Hello," they answered listlessly.

"What's the matter with you two?"

"She collapsed yesterday... We thought she would not last till morning... Didn't you get the telegram?"

"What telegram?"

"She was in a bad way ... dying..." Iliko forced out.

I dashed to the door.

"Let her sleep..."

I sat down obediently.

...Granny slept till evening. Suddenly she opened her eyes and stared at me. She looked at me for a long time and then asked softly:

"Illarion, am I dreaming or is it really my boy sitting there?"

"It is I, Granny!" I said and knelt by the bed to embrace her.

"So you've come, my dear! Your heart must've told you your Granny was in a bad way... My last hour has come... Have you given the child his dinner, Iliko?"

"Yes, we have, Olga."

"Did you give him some wine?"

"He didn't want any..."

"Why didn't you, Sonny? Go and have a glass... It'll do you good. And mind you give the neighbours enough to drink at my wake..."

"What are you saying, Granny!"

"Now, now, don't let me see your chin tremble... Little silly!.. I've come to the end of my journey... And quite right too... Seventy-three years is a lot... I've had enough... Still, I haven't had my fill of living, may Good Lord forgive me... Such is the human heart, it seems. I'd like to live some more..."

"Why, Olga, you'll outlive us all," Illarion attempted a joke.

"Illarion Shevardnadze, first wipe away your tears and then crack jokes... Have you finished your studies, Sonny?" she asked me.

I produced my diploma. Granny stroked it caressingly, then asked Illarion to read it out to her. Illarion read it and gave it

back to her. Granny was silent for a long time, and tears were trickling down her temples. Then she handed me back the diploma and said:

“Now sit down and listen to me, Sonny... I shall not live till morning. I thank the Lord that he let me see you the last time. I have not made any will, but all that you see around is yours...”

“I don’t want anything if you are not with me!” I cried and laid my head, sobbing, on Granny’s bed.

“It’ll all come in handy, Sonny... Have your cry, do. Why not? A grandson must weep by the death-bed of his grandmother... And now enough, enough crying, Sonny.” Granny stroked my head. “Hold on to these two, Sonny. You are all Illarion and Iliko have in this world. Love them and obey them...”

Iliko and Illarion were sobbing like children, their faces turned to the wall.

“Please, leave me alone with my boy...” Iliko and Illarion did not budge. “Get out of the room, you one-eyed devils! Whoever has heard of it, bewailing somebody who’s still alive?!”

We were left alone.

“Bend down, my boy, I want to kiss you...”

I bent down to Granny. She showered kisses on my forehead, my hair, eyes, face, and hands. Then she embraced me and held me close for a long time.

“Give me a glass of wine!”

I gave her some milk. Granny drank it in silence and then said:

“Now pour me out some wine...”

I poured her a glass. Granny took the glass, sat up in her bed and raised her hands to the ceiling:

“God the All-Merciful, Virgin Mary, Mother of God, I entrust my boy to you... Cherish and protect him... Keep all ills away from him... Prolong his life and the lives of his progeny... Amen...”

Granny drank some wine and gave me back the glass. Then she said in a serene voice:

“Put out the light and go...”

I obeyed. When, several minutes later, I came back, Granny was no longer breathing.

I bent over her and peered a long time at her dear beloved face. Somebody entered the room and stopped behind my back. I heard the sound of breathing and I knew that this breathing would accompany me through life. I did not look round, but I knew that it was Mary, my Mary, whose presence illumined the dark room. Then I looked round, to see that light, and in its rays I saw my Iliko, my Illarion and my Granny...

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Granny, Iliko, Illarion and I was the first book written by Nodar Dumbadze (1928-1984), a major Georgian writer, winner of the Lenin Prize.

The book, which has a strong autobiographical element, tells about the wartime childhood of an orphaned Georgian boy and about his youth and studies at Tbilisi University. Its tone is one of mixed nostalgia and humour, and it abounds in uproarious anecdotes, distinctively national in mentality and situation.

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