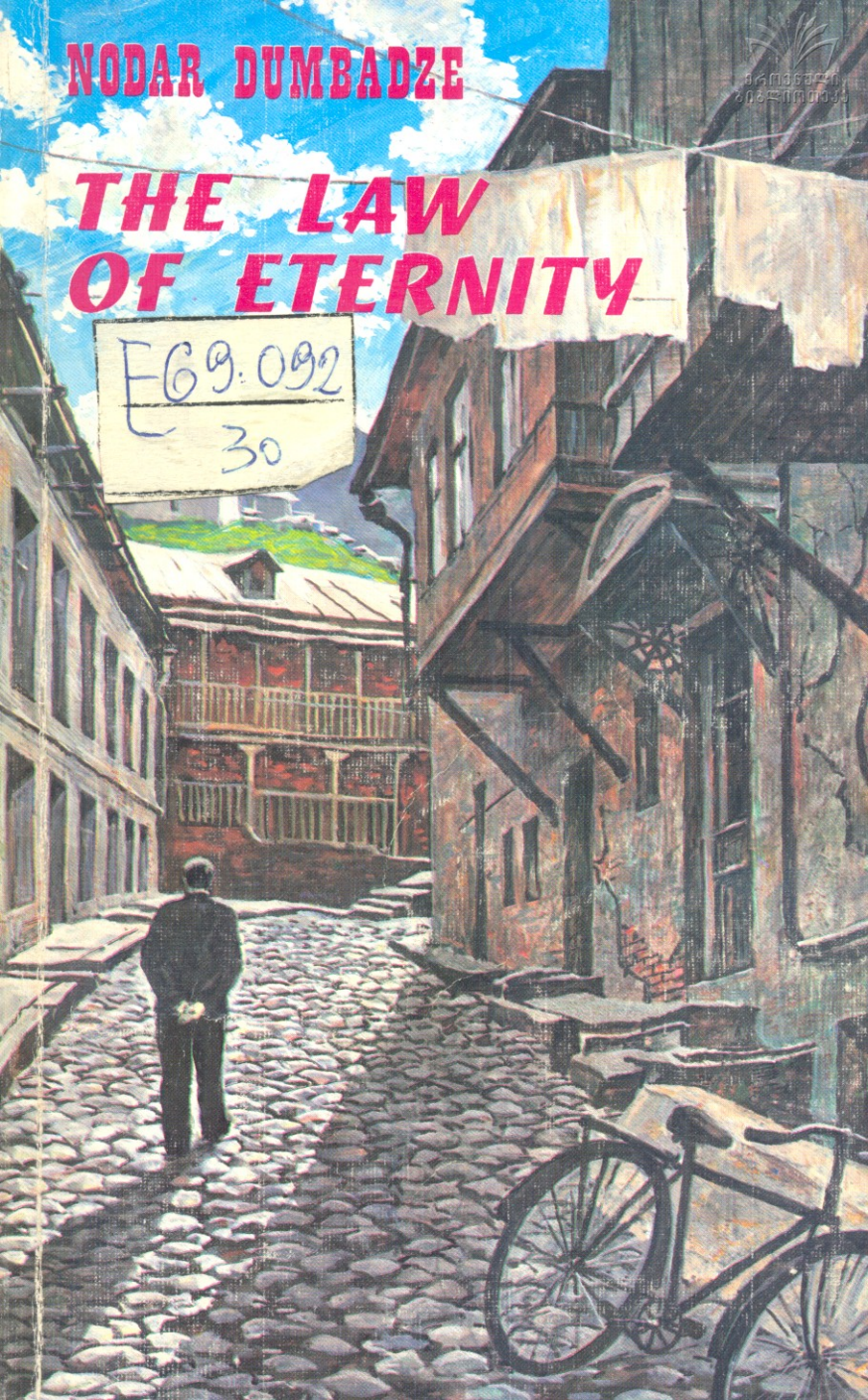
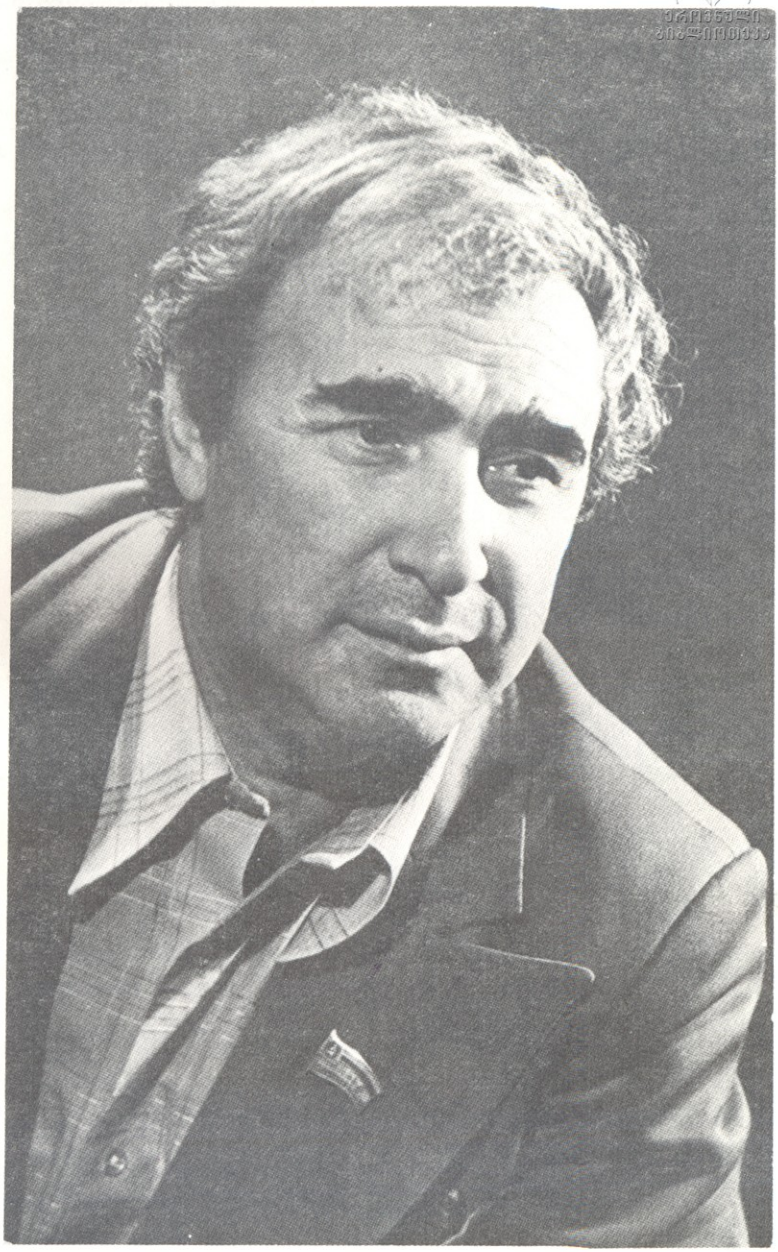
NODAR DUMBADZE

THE LAW OF ETERNITY





NODAR DUMBADZE

The Law of Eternity

A NOVEL

Translated by *Andrew Bromfield*

Raduga Publishers. Moscow

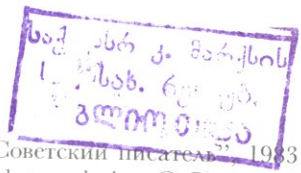
Designed by *Mikhail Krakovsky*

Нодар Думбадзе

ЗАКОН ВЕЧНОСТИ

Роман

На английском языке



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1

The pain began in his right shoulder. Then it crept across to his chest and halted somewhere under his left nipple. And then it was as though someone reached into his chest with a hard, calloused hand, seized his heart and began to squeeze it like a bunch of grapes. The hand squeezed slowly and thoroughly: one-two, two-three, three-four... Finally, when the heart had been wrung dry of its last drop of blood, the hand indifferently flung it aside. The heart stopped. No, first it dropped, like a sparrow drops when it has flown against the window-pane, throbbed, quivered, and then grew still. But when your heart has stopped, you are still not dead — your eyes gape in sheer terror at the agonising uncertainty: will your cursed heart start beating again or not?

"Now, sir! You mustn't curse your heart. You have to cherish it, blow on it gently like milk coming to the boil," said the doctor's assistant.

"Dear woman, spare me the literature! Help me!"

"Nadya, the analgin! The pain will go now."
"But he's already had some, doctor!"
"Cardiogram!"
Somebody took the patient in his arms.
"How is it?" asked the doctor.
"Very deep... I'm afraid it's too late..."
"Does it hurt?"
"Doctor, take away the pain ... or else kill me!"
"Bring the promedol!"

. . . . . .

Five minutes later:
"Well, is it a bit better now?"
The patient attempted to open his eyes for a glimpse of the person who had asked this naive question, but he could not. His eyelids seemed to be weighed down by cold, heavy discs of lead.
"Morphine!" ordered the discouraged doctor, and picked up the telephone receiver.
"Antelava, it's me. Make sure the monitor's free and prepare the defibrillator. Quickly!"
"A-agh, kill me, doctor!" pleaded the patient.
"Nitrogen!" ordered the doctor.
The patient felt the light touch on his face of a damp piece of gauze. Then his body was carefully lifted and placed in a boat...

...The boat rocked slightly as it floated across the calm, smooth sea. Suddenly the boatman grabbed a huge rusty nail, set it against the patient's chest and pinned him to the bench with a heavy blow of his fist.
"What are you doing, you monster?" groaned the patient.
"If I don't you'll fall into the water!" answered the boatman.
And then he pinned down the patient's hands and feet with more rusty nails, and jumped into the water.
"Don't go, dear friend, don't leave me," pleaded the patient. "Who'll pull the nails out?"

"They'll pull them out across on the other shore." The boatman's voice sounded a long way away. The patient could hear other dull voices from the shore, but he could not make out what the sound was — final words of parting, cries of warning, words of consolation, or the keening of his mourners.

Then the voices ceased, melted away into nothing. There was only the dull pain, the agonising uncertainty, the boundless sea and himself, nailed to the boat, forgotten by everyone.

"My God! My God! Why hast thou forsaken me?" whispered the patient, but immediately he realised it was not his voice which had pronounced the words, so God would not hear them.

And the boat kept on rocking smoothly on the light waves of the blue sea...

A thousand years passed, and suddenly the patient felt a jolt. And the sudden intense pain of the jolt transfixed him. The boat had reached the shore.

A huge crowd surrounded the boat.

"My God! Look how the poor man's pinned down!" someone said pityingly, as he dragged the boat out on to the shore.

"Take out the nails, I can't stand it any more!" pleaded the patient.

"Where's Yashvili?" asked one of the people who had met the boat.

"I'm here!"

"Pull them out!"

"They're in very deep."

"Then let's all do it together! Right... One, two, pu-ull!"

"Lord, help them, pull them out!" thought the patient, raising his hand.

"Don't move!" someone warned him and then immediately spoke to the other people with him: "Once more now, pu-ull!"

Another thousand years passed by. The people were pulling the nails from the patient's body with their teeth.

"How is it now?" asked the leader.

"Going up," answered his subordinates.

"What is it?"

"Sixty!"

"Okay, leave the pressure for a bit, work on the heart now!"

"Pulse fifty."

"Looks like he's pulled through!" said the one standing by the monitor.

"It's gone!" sighed the patient.

"What's gone?" asked the astonished doctor.

"The wheel has!" said the patient.

"What wheel? Where?" The doctor's voice quivered.

"Here, from off here, doctor!" the patient put his hand to his heart and smiled.

Sighing in relief, the doctor wiped the cold sweat from the patient's forehead.

"We seem to have saved him!" he said.

"Hmm, a heart attack at his age... A bit early, isn't it?" someone asked, taking a cigarette from a packet with trembling fingers.

The patient tried once more to open his eyes for a glimpse of the person who had asked this naive question, but he could not: the cold discs of lead on his eyelids had become even heavier.

...And then there came a marvellous, healing sense of intoxication — warm, light, pink. The pain disappeared. The healing intoxication came, and the patient set off once again, this time not across the sea, but down an endless, steep staircase. The only strange thing was — he was going down the staircase, but he seemed to be going up and up...

2

With his black blouse worn outside his trousers and belted round with a piece of string into which was stuck a plywood knife, Avetik Babayants limped into the yard, humming a tune. Following him came a woman with a barrel organ on her back, and running after her came a French lapdog. The dog's eyes gleamed like shiny little black buttons through the snow-white fringe that fell across its forehead.

Babayants's Itinerant Theatre stationed itself in the centre of the yard. Its lame master gazed round with a satisfied smile at the housewives who packed the balconies of the four-storey house, rested his left hand picturesquely on the handle of his knife, blew the ladies a kiss with his right, and announced his theatre's repertoire:

"Ladies and gentlemen of Tbilisi! Avetik Babayants, artiste of Georgia, and his field theatre bring you today a contemporary reading of his new tragedy, *Othello*. In the roles we have:

Othello — Avetik Babayants,

Desdemona — Maria Pavlovna,

Iago — the dog Stella.

"The overture on the barrel organ is performed by Maria.

"Tickets are twenty kopecks each, payable in advance.

"Get started, you fool!"

Maria began turning the handle of the barrel organ. Babayants began to sing to the hoarse strains of its music:

From Baghdad there flies a fly...
From Baghdad there flies a fly...
Aye-aye, aye-aye, aye-aye-aye...
If you're the kindest in the town,
Quickly throw your money down.
Aye-aye, aye-aye, aye-aye-aye...

The coins rained down, ringing on the cobbles of the yard. Like a swarm of hungry sparrows, the children rushed to gather up the money.

"Watch out, you brats, don't you even think of pocketing any!"

"There's coppers here too, Uncle Babayants!"

"Heat them up and stick them you know where, and give the silver here!"

"What about the ones with the tails up?"

"Give them to me, they sit in the pocket as well as the heads."

"Oho, look how much there is!"

"It's no more than your dad's wages!.. Hey, Maria, you bitch, get that money out of your bra!"

The gathering of tribute concluded, Babayants undid his belt and poured the money into the inside pocket of his trousers, then drew a newspaper from his outside pocket, unfolded it, placed it on the cobblestones and struck a match. When the newspaper had burnt, he carefully gathered the ash on to his palm, spat into it and crushed it with his other palm. Then with both palms he smeared it over his face, and before the eyes of a delighted audience he was transformed into the Moor of Venice.

"Stella, come out here!" ordered Othello.

The little dog ran up to him. Othello bent down and put his ear close to the little animal's shiny black nose. The dog Iago barked three times and stood on its hind legs.

"Oh!" exclaimed Othello, turning to the audience. "Iago says that my wife Desdemona is unfaithful to me with Cassio!"

Putting on a sad expression, he bent down again to the dog, which barked three times again, this time louder and more spitefully.

Othello was dumbstruck. For a minute or so he said nothing, assessing the situation. And suddenly he laughed loudly.

"Ha-ha-ha! No, no! You lie, you dog!"

Stella ran up to Maria, grabbed a brightly-coloured Baghdad shawl from her hands with its teeth and carried it across to the Moor. Othello glanced at the shawl and froze.

"Why, this is the very same shawl that I gave her last year!" he exclaimed in a tragic voice, and struck his head three times against the acacia tree. The startled sparrows took flight. "Maria, come out here," the Moor called Desdemona.

Othello's wife leant the barrel organ against the acacia and came across to him, hanging her head low.

"What have you done with the shawl I gave you?" asked Othello, staring searchingly at his wife.

"What are you nagging me for? How should I know where your shawl is? You more than likely lost it yourself or

stuck it away somewhere, and now you're pestering me," snapped Desdemona.

"O frailty, thy name is woman! Who have you betrayed me for? That scum Cassio?" In his fury Othello seized Desdemona by the throat.

"Go easy, you fool!" Desdemona tore herself out of Babayants's grip and lay down on a shawl which had been spread out on the ground beforehand.

Othello laughed loudly again, then he sank to his knees, placed his ear to Desdemona's breast and, convinced that she was dead, seized his head in his hands, horror-stricken; then he plucked out his plywood knife, stuck it under his arm like a thermometer, and stretched himself out beside the lifeless body of his innocent wife. The dog Iago, seizing his moment, ran up to the acacia, raised his leg and sprinkled the barrel organ leaning against the tree-trunk.

The tragedy was concluded.

"Bravo, Babayants!" they roared from the balconies.

"Bravo, Othello!" they thundered from the verandahs.

"Bravo, Maria!" roared the whole house.

"Bravo, Desdemona!" shrieked the women.

"Bravo, Stella! Bravo, Iago!" squealed the children...

The light was on in the dining-room. Three people were talking in low voices, almost whispering, as though they were afraid to wake some fourth person. The clock on the wall chimed twice.

"Hurry up, please, we've other places to get to," said the man.

"Olga, I'm relying on you. Take the child to my mother in Khoni."

The woman, who was packing linen into a suitcase with trembling hands, glanced imploringly at the other woman weeping in the corner.

"Don't worry, Aniko," sobbed the second woman.

"Tomorrow!"

"There's no need to write your will, madame," the man interrupted. "I told you, they'll ask you a few questions about your husband's case and send you home. And

the sooner you're ready to go, the sooner you'll be back."

"Have a heart!" begged the woman. "Have pity on the poor child!" Her hands were trembling, the lock of the suitcase would not close. The man helped her. He locked the suitcase and handed it to the woman.

"Hurry up now madame, it's morning already!"

"Don't you call me madame! If there's a drop of human blood left in you, have pity on me. Say I wasn't at home when you came. I'll disappear today, without trace, I'll vanish." There was a faint, almost imperceptible note of hope in the woman's voice.

"No, it's not possible!"

"Then wait a minute while I say goodbye to my son," requested the woman.

"Ah, you've already said goodbye three times!"

The woman went towards the bedroom, but the man was there before her and set his back against the door.

"Make an end of it! There's a proper way to do everything!"

"Just one minute!"

"No!"

"Don't you have a wife or children?"

"No, and I never shall, I'm a free man!" he smiled.

"You're a slave, not a free man! A miserable slave, a comedian and a scoundrel, that's what you are!" exploded the woman.

"Which of us is a slave and a scoundrel we'll find out where you're going, but now get moving, before I..." the man had turned pale.

"Before you what?"

"There's only one way to deal with traitors to the motherland!"

"Who are you to talk about the motherland? You tramp!"

"Remember what you've just said!"

"I shall!"

The man took the woman by the elbow and led her to the door.

"Olga!" cried the woman.

"Aniko! Dearest!"

For a minute there was silence. Then suddenly the two women burst into loud sobs.

"Oh curse this whole damn business! A fine place they picked to send me!" The man ground his teeth. "That's enough from you! I'm only human after all!" With an effort he swallowed the lump that had risen in his throat. "That's enough! Let's go!"

...The child was woken by the loud slamming of the door. He quickly stood up in his bed and looked across at his mother's. It was empty.

"Mummy," the child called.

No-one answered him.

"Mummy!" he called again, quietly. Then he went across to his mother's bed and lifted the edge of the blanket. The bed was still warm.

The fear rose from his feet, up through his knees into his belly, took a tight grip on his lungs and finally froze in the pupils of his eyes. Barefoot, in the long nightshirt that reached down to his heels, the child ran to the door and pushed it open.

Aunty Olga was sitting on the low ottoman in the dining-room, with her head sunk into her hands. Her shoulders were trembling. The child stood in front of her and asked quietly:

"Aunty Olga! Where's Mummy?"

The woman did not answer.

"Aunty Olga, where's my mummy?" the child asked again, touching the woman's shoulder with his thin, cold little hand.

"Bachana, your mummy..." stammered the woman.

"Where's my mummy gone?"

The woman took the child in her arms, pressed his head to her breast and put her hand over his mouth so as not to hear this terrible question. The child was silent, but from the movement of his lips the woman could tell that he was repeating the same question over and over again.

The child shuddered. Cold sweat streamed down his

body. His lips had turned blue and they were no longer moving.

"God of righteousness, can you not see what's happening? And if you see it, then where is your might?"

The exhausted woman sank to her knees before the child...

"The boy has a valvular defect and acute neurosis."

"How? Why, doctor?" asked Aunty Olga, astonished.

"The heart defect is acquired. Has he suffered any severe shock recently?"

"N-no!"

"How old is he?"

"Nine."

"Well now ... that's strange ... very strange..."

The train moved slowly out of Tbilisi station, like a green caterpillar. Aunty Olga undressed Bachana, put on his long nightshirt, settled him on the upper bunk and placed a large leather suitcase under his head.

"Sleep!" she said to the boy and sat down on the lower bunk by the window. Bachana turned towards the wall.

The overcrowded carriage was stuffy.

"What should you say before you go to sleep?" his aunt reminded him.

"Good night!" The boy smiled to the passengers and turned back to face the wall.

"Just look what a polite boy he is!" said a thin passenger in astonishment. "All mine can do is call each other bastards, and that's when I'm there with them!.. Who is he? Your son?"

"Yes."

"I see... But he's not at all like you. Probably he takes after his father?"

"Yes."

"I see... It's true what they say: like father, like son."

"Pull the blinds down now!" the conductor ordered in an imperious tone.

"What's happened?" asked Aunty Olga.

"It's the hydroelectric power-station at Zemo-Avchal," someone answered her.

"What of it?"

"They're afraid of sabotage," explained the same voice.

"Sabotage... Sabotage..." repeated Bachana, half asleep. "In the morning I'll ask Aunty what that is."

And the next moment his eyes were closed in sleep.

...In the night his mother came to him. She carefully took out the suitcase from under Bachana's head and put a soft fluffy pillow there instead. The boy stirred a little. His mother usually adjusted his pillow, so he did not even open his eyes, but curled himself up more tightly in the blanket.

"Put your head on the pillow, son," Bachana heard the whisper and felt the hand touch his neck. But why was the hand so rough? Mummy's hands were much softer. Maybe it was Daddy? Yes, probably it was Daddy, and of course he would put a present under the pillow.

"Whoo-oo!" hooted the train.

Bachana slept sweetly. And as he slept he had a marvellous dream... In the hall of mirrors in the Pioneer Palace the boys and girls were drawn up in ranks... Snow-white shirts... Crimson ties... Bachana was there among them. Today was a special day: Jose Diaz and Dolores Ibarruri were giving out caps with tassels to the Tbilisi pioneers — a present from the children of Republican Spain. Dolores Ibarruri, a tall, dark-skinned, beautiful woman, presented Bachana with a cap in the name of a little Basque boy.

"Be prepared!" said Ibarruri.

"Always prepared!" answered Bachana, saluting.

"Salute!" said Dolores Ibarruri, raising her fist over her head, then she stroked Bachana on the cheek and smiled warmly.

The train hurtled out of the tunnel at Tsipa, hooted as it went straight past the station at Marelisi (the crowd thronging the platform started back in fright) and dashed onwards.

"At this rate we'll be in Samtredia in less than an hour!" a passenger with a dirty bandage tied round his neck said in a hoarse voice.

"But is it stopping at Samtredia?" asked Aunty Olga in alarm.

"They hooked on a strange-looking carriage at Mtskheta," joined in the thin passenger, the one who had praised Bachana for being polite. "There were soldiers standing on the steps. I just happened to get off to get some water, and I saw it for myself."

And the train rushed on and on, shooting past the small stations and the halts.

"Samtredia in half an hour! Three minutes' stop." The conductor walked down the carriage, banging on the bunks with his keys.

"Your train's fairly flying along today," the thin passenger said to him, "perhaps we'll end up having to pay extra?"

"When you get there, then you ask the station-master!" snapped the conductor.

"But will he be there to meet me?" asked the thin passenger with mock naivety.

"If the government hasn't forgotten to notify him, of course he'll be there!"

"Well, I've no complaints about our government's memory... To this day they remember who I voted for in 1905 at the meeting in the Ilor church-yard..."

"Watch out! Hold your tongue and thank God I'm a bit hard of hearing!" the conductor shouted at him.

The thin man held his tongue. The train reduced speed.

"Excuse me, madame, aren't you getting off at Samtredia?" A young passenger gently touched Aunty Olga, who had fallen into a doze.

She started and opened her eyes.

"What?"

"I said Samtredia's coming up soon. Are you getting off?"

"Yes."

Aunty Olga jumped to her feet and dashed across to Bachana.

"Wake up, Bachana my love! We're getting off!"

Bachana sat up on the bunk.

"Hurry up, love!"

Aunty Olga was frantically pushing things into her bag.

The boy stretched his hand up to the head of his bunk and froze in fear.

"Aunty Olga, where's Mummy?"

"What do you mean, Bachana?" Aunty Olga's voice trembled.

The astonished passengers glanced by turns at the boy and the woman, who had turned pale.

"Aunty Olga, Mummy took the suitcase in the night! Where's she gone?"

Olga realised that the previous night's incident was about to repeat itself. She quickly lifted the child down to the floor, pressed him to her breast and put her hand over his mouth.

"Help me please, everyone!"

The train stopped.

The duty-guard at Samtredia station rang the bell three times. When the train that was standing on Line Two had slowly moved off and out of sight, he remained rooted to the spot: two people were standing in front of him on the empty platform — a woman with no coat, her hair untied and falling loose, her features twisted, and a barefooted boy in a long white shirt down to his heels. For a minute the duty-guard gazed at them dumbfounded, and then he mechanically tugged on the bell-string. In the deep silence of the night the bell rang out with a mournful note.

Dong-ng-ng... Dong-ng-ng... Dong-ng...

"Zosim," the station-master turned to his assistant, "do me a favour and put an end to that scoundrel's racket! He's turned up drunk for duty again!"

The woman and the boy continued to stand there on the empty platform. And the bell continued to chime out its mournful song:

Dong-ng... Dong-ng... Dong-ng...

3

The three-bed ward smelt of a mixture of iodoform, surgical spirit, camphor and the dampness of a freshly-washed floor. To avoid gagging, Bachana cautiously covered his nose with the blanket and then, equally cautiously, he felt his own pulse. His heart was pounding as it had in his childhood when he would screw up his eyes, lean his head against the wall and start to count:

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, e-eight, e-eight and a ha-alf, ni-ine, ni-ine and a ha-alf, ten!"

Bachana took his hand from his pulse and placed it on his heart. His heart was silent. Taking fright, he immediately felt for his pulse. His pulse was beating steadily. Then he slowly disengaged his nose from the blanket and the smell hit him.

"Window," said Bachana softly.

"What?" answered the next bed.

"Oho! Is he alive?" asked the other bed.

"What do they bring dead men here for? What is this anyway, a hospital ward or a morgue?" said the first bed in an offended voice.

"They say he's a writer," answered the second.

"A writer should be laid out up on Mtatsminda,* not here!"

Bachana could hear the dialogue between the neighbouring beds, but what he wanted most right now was air—pure, fresh air, and nothing more.

"...Window!" he repeated.

"He's not happy with something, either the air or the window," said the first bed.

"Air," said Bachana.

"Well now, dear friend, we are forbidden to get up or even to move," the second bed informed him, "so until the nurse comes you will have to be content with the same air breathed by myself and my friend Bulyka."

---

* A hill in Tbilisi on which stands a pantheon where famous public figures, writers and artists are buried.—*Ed.*

Bachana understood that Bulyka was the first bed's name. Now he should find out who the second one was.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"I think it's the very time for the Father here to make the sign of the cross over himself and give praise to the Lord!" replied the first bed.

Bachana squinted at the second bed and glimpsed a black beard streaked with grey. "Could it be a priest?" he thought, and repeated his question:

"What time is it?"

"Ten o'clock," answered the beard.

"And perhaps you'd like to know which century it is?" enquired Bulyka.

Hospital patients joke either just before they die or after they have recovered. Bachana could remember what century it was, right now he was interested in something else — the face of this man who had recovered. The head of Bulyka's bed was at Bachana's feet, so all he could see was a shiny bald patch.

Bachana smiled involuntarily, and, not wishing to offend his neighbour, he asked:

"What century is it then?"

"Ye-es, Father, he's obviously coming back from a very long way off," Bulyka addressed the second bed. "I never got that far away."

"But all you had was ischemic disease of the posterior wall. He's got more than a wall to worry about, he's got the ruins of St. Bagrat's Cathedral."

"Well, in that case for you, dear friend, it is now the first century of a new era!"

Bachana did not answer. He began to look around the ward.

A door. A bed. A bed. Two lockers with jars of yoghourt, bottles of medicine, fruit covered with a napkin. White walls. A large window. A common table with a water-carafe and withered roses. Under the first bed a white chamber-pot; what was under the second, Bachana could not see. He himself was number three. He had given enough study to the bald patch of his first neighbour. The second, the bearded one, seemed to have quite an attractive profile: high

forehead, straight nose, thick, grey-streaked beard... What date was it? What month was it?

Questions followed one another into Bachana's mind, and he could not find an answer to a single one of them. To hell with the questions anyway, at least he could find out what year it was!

"What year is it?" he suddenly blurted out.

"He's either raving or trying to make fools of us!" said Bulyka.

"No, he's just short of oxygen, so his memory's playing him false. I was the same way," answered the beard, "we should try to open the window."

The room suddenly began to fill up with the familiar pink mist, and Bachana was back again on the steep staircase.

"What's your name, friend?" Bulyka's voice came from a long way away.

"My name is Bachana, Bachana Ramishvili," Bachana tried to answer, but he said nothing — Bulyka was very, very far away.

"Leave him alone, he's falling asleep!" the beard replied in a barely audible voice.

"No I'm not, I'm not falling asleep, something's pulling me down the staircase! Help me, take me back up!" Bachana wanted to shout and he could not. The pink intoxication had set in and his tongue would not obey him. In order not to be deprived of the company of his neighbours once and for all, Bachana sat down on one of the steps.

"He's gone to sleep!" said Bulyka.

Bachana was not asleep. He could hear everything.

The rat crept out from under Bulyka's bed, stuck its nose up in the air, sniffed and twitched its whiskers.

"There she is again!" announced patient number two.

"Alone or with her family?" asked Bulyka.

"Alone so far."

"Look and see if our writer's died? You know, rats are drawn to the smell of corpses," said Bulyka, and cautiously raised his head to see the rat, but he couldn't manage it. The

squeaking of the bed frightened off the rat, which dashed headlong for its hole. Bulyka only caught a glimpse of the tip of its tail. "She's gone!" he said regretfully.

"She'll come back," patient number two reassured him, took out a lump of sugar from his locker and threw it on the floor. "She'll come straight back now, with her family."

"All the same, look and see if the writer's alive."

The beard turned his head towards Bachana's bed. He was lying motionless, his pale hands folded on his breast.

"His blanket is moving and his eyelids are trembling."

"If the blanket's moving, it means he's breathing; if he's breathing, it means his heart is working; if his eyelids are trembling, it means he's not asleep; if he's not asleep, it means he can hear us; if he can hear us, it means he should answer; if he's not answering, it means he's in a bad way..." concluded Bulyka. "My dear writer, are you alive?"

"I'm alive, I'm sitting on the staircase and waiting for you to take me back up," Bachana tried to reply. Alas, the effort was beyond him, and Bulyka was not able to read other people's thoughts.

"If he pulls through, if he comes back to us, then I'll believe in God!" said Bulyka to the beard.

"There, look, she's come back!" rejoiced the beard. "And with her family too!"

This time the rat had deigned to appear in the company of its mate and two baby-rats. It performed a lap of honour round the chamber-pot, then marched impudently up to the sugar. Not bothering to put itself out by dragging the food into the burrow, the rat summoned its household and they proceeded to take turns at nibbling the sugar-lump.

"She can sense that we're not strong enough to get up! Otherwise even a tiger wouldn't dare be so insolent with people present." Bulyka shook his head furiously. The rat turned its head, stood on its hind legs and fixed a curious gaze on the speaker.

"She even understands what we say, the villain!" said Bulyka in astonishment.

The language of the world of lifeless things
Is wonderful and secret,

Its signs beyond the ken of humankind.
But might our vaunted reason yet reveal
The hidden depths of wisdom
Known to that world since immemorial time?

"What's that, *The Knight in the Tiger's Skin*?" asked Bulyka.

"No, *The Knight* goes like this:

On hearing Avtandil the forest beasts came
flocking forth,
Listening close, in rapt amazement at his heart's
enticing warmth."

"Hmm, she lives better than a man does. Gobbles sugar she doesn't have to pay for, knows nothing about infarctions or stenocardia or tachicardia... And we recite poetry for her!.. Just look how plump she is, like one of your piglets!"

"Why not, the conditions here are right..."

"That's true!"

"If we examine the matter from the socio-historical viewpoint and set aside the question of unsanitary conditions, then logical and objective reasoning obliges us to acknowledge that rats appear under conditions of abundant foodstuffs. So I see nothing shameful in the fact... And in any case a rat is also one of God's creatures... It's a pity that it spreads the plague, though..."

"Now don't go getting excited and calling me a godless heathen, but tell me, please, why did your God need to create the rat, ah? He should at least have provided it with instructions! Just what is its purpose in the big wide world, eh? Can it play music? No! Does it drink wine? No! Does it repair shoes? No? Does it cook? No! So what does it do? It gnaws sugar, it gnaws the floor, it gnaws the earth, it gnaws iron, it spreads cholera and plague and all kinds of infections! That's your creature of God for you! Ha, the filthy vermin!.." Bulyka spat and turned to face the wall.

"You're a stupid man! God created the rat to convince ignoramuses like you of his omnipotence! And you'd better keep your mouth shut, or else God might just transfer your soul into that rat when you die!" threatened the beard.

"He'd only need one rat for that," said Bulyka in a changed tone.

"Throw the rat some sugar, I've run out," said patient number two.

"Perhaps I should offer her a sweet? Or might she get pimples?" asked Bulyka contemptuously, turning back to face his neighbour.

"Everything alive in the world is a creature of God," came the didactic reply, "and we should live in complete harmony..."

Having made an end of the sugar, the rats began to sniff at Bachana's locker but, not finding anything there to eat — Bachana had had no chance to acquire any food reserves — they migrated to the estate of patient number two. However, there was nothing suitable to be found here either, and then they set about gnawing at the leg of the locker.

"Why, be damned the lot of you!" patient number two suddenly screamed and flung his shoe at the rats with such force that the startled Bulyka clutched at his heart.

"Don't disturb our harmony, Father!" he said ironically, and placed a nitroglycerine tablet under his tongue to be on the safe side.

"What's the matter?" asked the doctor's assistant, who had come in after hearing the noise.

"Dear Zhenya," patient number two turned to her in his excitement. "Either protect us from these filthy creatures or give us a mouse-trap!"

"What do you mean?"

"Obviously not Vazhá Pshavela's poem by that name! Save us from the rats. We can't tolerate them any longer."

"What do you mean? Thirty years I've worked here and never seen so much as a single mouse."

"I'm not talking about mice. It's a matter of rats!" explained Bulyka.

"There are certainly none of them!"

"I wish to inform you that there are plenty of rats here!" patient number two repeated insistently.

"Whose shoe is that?" the doctor's assistant avoided having to reply.

"It's my shoe, dear Zhenya, mine, I tried to kill a rat with it!"

"Whatever happened to 'thou shalt not kill', Father?"

"That commandment needs no commentary from you, dear Zhenya, but in general a woman of your age should know the difference between a man and a rat!" Patient number two was offended.

"My age is no concern of yours!" exploded Zhenya angrily. "And I'm not responsible for rats! If you want medicine, let me know, and for mouse-traps and strychnine you can go to the storekeeper!"

"We have a writer in our ward now. He'll probably come round soon, see for himself, and write you up in his newspaper!" threatened Bulyka.

The doctor's assistant went over to Bachana's bed, sat on the edge and felt his lifeless hand.

"Ah, he won't be up to much..." she sighed.

"Open the window, please, not long ago he came to and asked for air," recalled patient number two.

Zhenya quickly jumped up from the bed, went to the window and threw it wide open. Air rushed into the room, fresh, invigorating air infused with acacia blossom. The smell of spring invaded the ward.

"Arise, come up!" a very familiar voice called to Bachana where he sat on the staircase, and he followed the call. The staircase led him out on to a small meadow surrounded by blossoming acacias and scattered with blood-red poppies. Among the poppies stood a snow-white colt with a luxuriant mane. It beat impatiently on the ground with its forefoot, as though beckoning Bachana to approach.

"Come, be seated on me!" Bachana heard. He mounted the colt, embraced its neck and nestled his head against it. Off flew the foal, its unshod hooves echoing hollowly. It bore Bachana along up to a white church and gave a neigh like the chiming of thousands of bells great and small. The gates of the church swung wide, and the Virgin appeared with the holy infant in her arms. "My Lord," thought Bachana, sinking to his knees.

As he came to, Bachana saw Zhenya, the doctor's assistant, in a white coat, taking his pulse. He could feel the blood

flowing through his veins and its movement slowing somewhere near his heart as it encountered an invisible obstacle. But the blood stubbornly forced its way through, pressing against the walls enclosing it. The current was growing stronger and more rapid. It was not flowing now, but pulsing, streaming and seething so that Bachana's temples began to ache. But this was a different pain, a special kind. And Bachana realised that the life which had left him had returned, had entered the room, sat on his bed and laid its hand on his chest. All this Bachana first felt, then heard, and finally saw.

"Hello!" he smiled in welcome to the life which had returned.

"Hello!" the word came back rapidly from Zhenya and his two neighbours. And this "hello" expressed it all — the surprise, the joy, the astonishment.

"Hello!" repeated Bachana, smiling at the people.

"You're back!" said Bulyka.

"I'm back!" confirmed Bachana.

"And where might you have been?" enquired Bulyka.

"Most likely in Bethlehem!" Bachana smiled.

"Seems he's not really back here yet!" said Bulyka, saddened.

"Oh, no, I'm really back!" Bachana reassured him. "How many days have I been here?" he asked the doctor's assistant.

"One day and one night," she said, adjusting his pillow.

"Thank you..."

"How are you feeling?"

Bachana pondered. His heart was beating irregularly, but not so weakly — he could feel his own heartbeat. He moved his hands and feet a little, but he could not feel his body. He was possessed by the light, pleasant sensation of free-falling flight. "This must be real weightlessness," thought Bachana.

"How are you feeling?"

"Like a cosmonaut!" answered Bachana, with the confidence of a seasoned interplanetary traveller.

"Is your heart bothering you?"

"It hurts a bit, but it's not the kind of pain I had when..."

"I know, " Zhenya interrupted, "now I'll give you an injection of heparin and morphine. Sleep, rest, don't talk and don't move. This evening the professor will come."

"Can I not move about at all?"

"Not at all."

"What if I shift just a little bit?"

Zhenya thought for a moment then quietly, but with deadly firmness and conviction, she declared:

"You'll die!"

Bachana swallowed hard. Then he submitted to two injections (Zhenya immediately applied a warm hot-water bottle to the spot) and calmed down.

"If you need anything, call me," Zhenya told him. "And you," she turned to the others, "take your seduxen — and sleep. They notice something in the other wards too, but they don't kick up a great fuss about it!"

She went out.

"I'll tell the professor everything!" Bulyka shouted after her, but Zhenya could not hear him.

"Before you returned to this world we had a slight disagreement here concerning a rat," patient number two explained to Bachana.

"What rat?"

"She'll pay us a visit soon, you'll meet her then... But now, allow me to introduce myself: Ioram Kandelaki, Dean of the Church of the Holy Trinity at Ortachala. And this is Avtandil Gogilashvili, otherwise known as Bulyka, a cobbler from Vakeh."

"And why Bulyka?"

"As a child I used to say 'bulyka' instead of 'bulka' for a bun. And so they nicknamed me Bulyka. You can call me that too," answered Bulyka.

"Pleased to meet you... And I'm Bachana Ramishvili, a writer."

"We already know that. But what brought on your heart attack?"

"I couldn't honestly say!" sighed Bachana.

"Maybe you overdid the old?" Bulyka raised an imaginary glass to his lips.

"No, not at all!" Bachana smiled.

"Not even a drop?" Bulyka was astonished.

"What do you mean 'not even a drop'?" It was Bachana's turn to be astonished.

"So you did! How much, roughly?"

"Well ... one, two, maybe three ... bottles."

"That's the kind of talk I understand! Good going!.. But now for the time being you'll have to switch to fruit juice."

"Not for the time being, for ever!" said Father Ioram.

"Don't say that! Better to do away with yourself!" cried Bulyka.

"Yes, it's fruit juice from now on. If you had drunk fruit juice before, you wouldn't be lying here now!" Father Ioram pronounced in a didactic tone.

"What about you? You didn't drink wine, so why are you lying there beside me, eh?" Bulyka asked, and grinned maliciously.

"Yes... It looks like that's the way it's going to be. Fruit juice," said Bachana.

"That's right, of course. I used to know a writer like yourself, I mended his shoes. Every time I used to get drunk, he croaked like a raven:

Bulyka, give up drink, my friend,
Or see your life in anguish end!

"But I didn't believe him, I thought he was crazy, like all poets... Now look at the mess I've landed myself in! Not thirty yet, and I'm an invalid... Curse the wine anyway," sighed Bulyka, "every night I dream of cigarettes, like beautiful women!.. And in general what's the point of living after this heart attack?.."

"After a heart attack fear takes hold of a man, an abominable fear! Are you afraid?" Father Ioram asked Bachana.

"I am. Very much afraid!" Bachana confessed.

"No need to be!" interrupted Bulyka. "You're still drug-

ged, and it will all pass in time. Do you have any visions? Do you see anybody?"

"Yes, I do see someone," Bachana answered after a short pause for reflection.

"It happens... And sometimes you'll even talk in your sleep... You'll give away all your secrets!.. Watch out if you have a mistress, be careful not to mention her name when your wife's around!"

"Thank you, I'll bear it in mind." Bachana smiled.

"In general," Bulyka continued, "clever people take a mistress with the same name as their own wife. For instance, now, when I was in the same state as you're in, something like a cosmonaut, it seems I kept remembering my mistress Sveta and calling her various pet names... It turns out my wife Sveta was sitting right there, by the bed and sobbing: 'Ooh! Bulyka-darling, I never thought you loved me so much!' And I just went right on babbling about my mistress... And if the women have the same middle name too, then the husband's really got it made!.. I still put my foot in it once though! Father Ioram here was there at the time..."

"How did it happen?" asked Bachana, his interest aroused.

"Seems while I was raving I blurted out something really stupid: 'Sveta, love,'— I was talking to my mistress —'Sveta, love, you know the first fruits go to the pig,'— by the pig I meant my wife,—'but never mind, if by God's grace I pull through and get out of here, then I'll marry you straight away!' When she heard me say that, it seems my wife raised a howl and set to banging her head on your bed — it was empty then. 'Ooh! My Bulyka's gone completely crazy, he doesn't even remember our wedding!' If only she knew that I was as much in my right mind as I've ever been!.. So..." Bulyka suddenly broke off and stared at Bachana.

Bachana was lying with his eyes closed, with a blissful expression on his face, breathing calmly and evenly.

"Ah, he's a really strange man, he goes back and forth so quickly," Bulyka complained to the priest.

"Leave him in peace, it's the morphine working. Let him get some sleep."

Bachana was going through the pink mist down the fami-

liar steep staircase, but this time he could clearly feel himself going up and up...

4

"There, son, there's your note. Go to the regional clinic at Chokhatauri and get your X-ray taken... I don't like the look of your gleaming eyes and your flushed cheeks!"

Bachana folded the sheet of paper in four and tucked it into his pocket.

"What's wrong with me, Uncle Evgeny?" he asked the doctor calmly.

"Have you had a temperature for long?"

"About a month, probably?"

"Do you sweat?"

"In the day-time my palms sweat, and at night I'm just swimming in sweat!" Bachana wiped his sweaty palms on his trousers.

"Do you cough?"

"Only sometimes, but then I bark like a dog," Bachana joked sadly.

"Have you noticed any blood in your phlegm?"

"There was a bit last week, about so much," Bachana indicated the nail of his little finger.

"Why didn't you say something sooner, son?" The doctor's voice shook.

"But what is it that's wrong with me?" Bachana began to feel worried.

"I'll tell you when I've seen the X-ray."

"What's this illness called?"

"Infiltrate. In its more complex form, bronchoadenitis."

"And what is it in Georgian?" Bachana pressed the doctor.

The doctor did not answer. He sat at his desk and began aimlessly shuffling papers.

"What are the medicines for it?" Bachana asked again.

"Penicillin and sulphidine," the doctor answered without raising his head.

"Can I get them?"

"Yes, for ten thousand roubles in Tbilisi!" The doctor looked into Bachana's wide, astonished eyes.

"Where can I get that kind of money?"

The doctor shrugged helplessly.

"What other medicines are there, Uncle Evgeny?"

"What other ones? Butter, milk, fish oil, caviare, eggs, sugar, honey, warmth, and a mountain holiday in Bakhmaro. Those are your medicine!"

Bachana's throat went dry... Everything on the doctor's list cost twice as much as the medicines he had named. He stood for a long time, saying nothing, not moving, then he took the note from his pocket, carefully unfolded it, put it on the table and, still saying nothing, went towards the door.

"Where are you going, lad?" the doctor called to him.

"I'll cope with my own illness one way or another," said Bachana sullenly.

"Wait! Go to the dispensary and buy some hematogen. Take a teaspoon three times a day. It helps." The doctor took a ten-rouble note from his pocket and held it out to Bachana. "Here, take this..."

Bachana took the money and put it beside the note.

"My grandad will give me money. Thank you very much, Uncle Evgeny!" Bachana opened the door.

"Tell your grandfather to call in and see me."

"He's not well, Uncle Evgeny. It's hard for him to walk," lied Bachana.

"Then tell him." The words stuck in the doctor's throat.

"What shall I tell him?"

"Tell him that..." the doctor's voice broke. "Don't be afraid, son! It's not too late! You're a strong lad, what chance has this sickness against you?"

"What shall I tell my grandfather, Uncle Evgeny?"

"Tell him this!" the doctor suddenly exploded. "He should immediately sell everything he has — his house, his farm, his soul, his own flesh — and buy you some penicillin! Do you hear me? Immediately!"

The doctor dashed over to the table, grabbed the note and the money, tore them into shreds and tossed them up to the ceiling, then he turned to Bachana with a strange look on his face and shouted:

"What kind of a man am I after this? What kind of doctor am I?"

Bachana could not endure the doctor's gaze. He left the room.

"Aunty Agrafena, give me two bottles of hematogen. I'll sell some peaches in Chokhatauri on Sunday and pay you," Bachana asked the pharmacist when they were alone in the dispensary.

"What would you want hematogen for, lad? That's what people with consumption take."

Bachana shuddered, his palms began to sweat and he felt weak at the knees. No-one before had named the dreaded illness so loudly and directly in his presence.

"For my grandad... Evgeny advised him to take it. He says it helps with the weakness."

"Take it, son, take it. Only ... I have my doubts about your peaches."

"Why, is the medicine dear?"

"Nine roubles sixty a bottle."

"Then give me one bottle. I'll bring you the money on Sunday."

"What's wrong with you, son? Why have you suddenly gone pale?" asked Agrafena, concerned.

"Oh, it's nothing, I'm always pale anyway." Bachana took the bottle and left the dispensary; he had to sit on the rotten steps of the staircase to avoid falling.

"Hello, Uncle Glakhuna!"

"Hello there! Now I don't recognise who you are..." The farm manager screwed up his eyes.

"I'm Bachana, Lomkatsa Ramishvili's grandson."

"Well, well! Look how you've shot up, lad!" said Glakhuna in surprise. "How's your grandfather getting on?"

"Alright."

"Ye-es... You wonder how he keeps going ... losing such fine sons... Which was your father?"

"The eldest."

"Arkadi?"

"Yes."

"What a fine man your father was! At your age, he would tackle a bear with his bare hands! So what can I do for Lomkatsa? You wouldn't have come to me without a reason."

"Uncle Glakhuna, take me on as a shepherd at the farm..."

"You're not big enough yet, son, you couldn't keep up with the goats and the calves."

"But you say my father went after bear at my age?"

"Yes, but your father was strong as an ox, and you? The slightest breath of wind would send you flying. How old are you?"

"Fifteen!"

"What about your grandfather? Will he let you go?"

"If you agree, he will!"

"How could I agree? Your grandfather knows better than me what it's like to work as a shepherd in the mountains!"

"Please, Uncle Glakhuna, please!"

"I can't, son!"

Bachana's lips trembled and tears filled his eyes.

"Don't say no, Uncle Glakhuna!"

"Hey, what's got you so set on the idea?"

"I've got consumption, Uncle Glakhuna!" Bachana swallowed the lump in his throat.

"Quiet, you little fool! What kind of a joke is that?" said Glakhuna angrily.

"Uncle Evgeny told me... He said, if you eat lots of butter and drink lots of milk, and breathe the mountain air, he said, you'll be able to fight off your sickness..."

"God strike me!" groaned Glakhuna Kerkadze as he hugged Bachana. "And what if you catch cold in the mountains in the snow or the rain? And what if you die? What will I do then? How will I be able to look in your poor grandfather's eyes? It's not the mountains and the forest you need, my son, it's feather-beds and eiderdowns!"

"Don't say no, Uncle Glakhuna!" Bachana put his arms around Glakhuna and burst into tears.

"Alright, alright, my son! I'll take you with me, I'll feed you all the goat's milk you can drink! I'll cherish you like the

apple of my eye! In two months I'll feed you up so you'll be able to bring down a three-year-old bull with one hand! Quiet now, my son, don't cry. What's this sickness to us? We don't give a damn for it! Now stop crying, will you, you son of a bitch?"

Bachana had long since stopped crying, now it was Glakhuna Kerkadze who was crying like a little child, and there was no-one to calm him.

Twenty-three cows, two young bulls, twenty-seven nanny-goats, three horses and one hog made up the entire livestock, dairy and meat, in the possession of the Kvedoban collective farm in the summer of 1943. The hill-farm stood on the mountain pasture on the slopes of Mt. Chkhakouri, in the region of Bakhmaro. In the summer, in addition to the communal herd, the collective farmers drove their own cattle up to pasture; for the most part these were heifers and barren cows, for people could obviously not afford to part with a milking-cow for three or four months in those hungry war years.

The pitiful riches of a hundred and twenty farmsteads were guarded by two sheep-dogs and three men — the farm manager Glakhuna Kerkadze, Sipito Gudavadze and Iona Oragvelidze. Bachana was the fourth, but no-one took him seriously.

The only hog in the herd belonged to Glakhuna. And today this hog was destined to share the bitter fate of his emasculated brethren. The lusty, thoroughbred two-year-old naturally had no idea of what was in store. He rummaged delightedly in the garbage, and his strong, short snout tore open the earth like a ploughshare following a tractor. While the hog went heedlessly about his business, Glakhuna stood under the awning of the shed and sharpened a razor on a bridle hanging from a nail.

"I feel sorry for the hog, Uncle Glakhuna! Don't geld him!" Bachana said.

"There's no point in him roaming the woods looking for a girl-friend! You could gallop for a week here and not come across a single sow! We'll geld him, then he'll have nothing

to worry about but his food. He'll settle down and put on meat, you'll see!" Glakhuna assured Bachana.

"You know, Sipito here wanders around the woods on his own too, but we don't geld him!" Iona Oragvelidze interceded for the hog.

"Why, you parasite," Sipito retorted furiously as he emerged from the shed, "if only you'd been gelded in good time we wouldn't have your brilliant son and heir walking about the place. Seventeen years old, the dummy, and he can't tell an apple from a pear!"

"Dummy yourself! My boy fell off a tree when he was small, everyone knows that! But what about you! Never so much as slipped once, and you spent nine years in the first class! Or have you forgotten?"

"Glakhuna," Sipito turned to the farm manager, "let's get down to business, or this son of a bitch will be the death of us all! His tongue must've been dragged through cow-dung!"

"Glakhuna, tell me truly, which of us is right?" Iona appealed to Glakhuna.

"Both of you should have your tongues ripped out, and I'll see to it myself, as soon as I'm finished with the hog!" promised Glakhuna, then he drew the blade of the razor across his thumb-nail and went on, "That's enough playing the fool, catch the hog!"

"He's way too strong for us to handle! Look, he'll have dug through to China soon!" declared Iona.

"You go tickle his belly!" Glakhuna advised Bachana.

Bachana took out a handful of yellow maize from the shed and went towards the hog, snorting to call it to him.

Raising its snout, the hog caught sight of the maize and dashed towards Bachana, wiggling its ears in a funny fashion.

"Look at the fool, running to the scaffold!" Iona pitied the hog.

Sipito heated up some water and got some ashes, Iona brought the rope, Glakhuna folded the razor, stuck it into his belt, pulled out a huge cobbler's awl threaded with silk from his felt saddle-blanket and began to roll up his sleeves.

"Tickle him! Tickle him!" he called to Bachana.

Bachana squatted in front of the hog and began to scratch his belly. The hog was too busy munching the maize to pay any attention to Bachana. When he finished eating he suddenly stopped, closed his eyes and began to grunt with pleasure. For about a minute he indulged himself standing, then he folded his forelegs, rolled over on his side and froze.

"Ah, you stupid creature, you don't know what you're losing for the sake of a handful of maize!" said Iona, casting a loop on to the hog's hind leg. The hog didn't budge: he lay there with his eyes closed, grunting. Bachana was scratching his belly with both hands.

The hog only sensed something was wrong when Iona bound his second leg. He tried to jerk free, but it was too late. Sipito was sitting astride the hog's body. Iona was holding it by the ears. Bachana stood there, anxiously waiting to see what would happen. While Glakhuna washed the site of the impeding operation with warm water, the hog squealed softly. But when Glakhuna opened the razor and began to cut, the animal's heart-rending scream could be heard for miles.

"You should have covered up your mouth, God knows what infection you might breathe in the wound," said Sipito to Glakhuna.

"You keep your mouth shut!" snapped Glakhuna.

The operation continued. It seemed as though the hog's screams would split the heavens asunder and bring the mountains tumbling down.

"Just listen to him howl, damn him!" said Sipito.

"I'd like to see how you'd howl in his place!" answered Iona.

"You starting again?" said Sipito threateningly.

"Okay. But if I was Stalin, when the war's over I'd send for Glakhuna and order him to do the same operation on Hitler and the rest of his gang!" said Iona.

"I don't know about the rest, but I reckon there's no need to operate on Hitler. He's no wife and no children, they say he doesn't even have the urge," Sipito divulged the deep secret of the Imperial Chancellery.

"Eunuchs are generally vicious brutes... Remember Aga-Muhammad-Khan? The one who burnt Tbilisi? He was

another one of them... He hoped the sulphur baths would help... And when he got nowhere with it, he blew his top and ordered them to burn down the town," Iona in turn gave away the dark secret of the Khan's court.

"Well, friend, if the sulphur baths were good for it, then our Efrosinya would be the richest woman in the world — she's got a whole sulphur spring right there in her yard!" Glakhuna put in the final stitch, broke off the thread, wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his bloody hand and rose to his feet with a groan. "Let the hog go!" he ordered.

Sipito and Iona loosed the animal from its bonds and stepped aside. At first the hog could not believe that its hellish torment had come to an end, and carried on screeching. Then, feeling the pain ease, it leapt to its feet, stamped aimlessly for a moment, and dashed off abruptly towards the forest.

"Ugh! We're brutes, not people!" said Bachana. "It wouldn't have cost us anything to get him drunk on vodka before the operation!"

"Get me some water to wash my hands!" Glakhuna said to him.

"You've taken a sin on your soul, Glakhuna Kerkadze!" Sipito reproached the farm manager. "Now if he meets a sow in the woods he'll disgrace himself, the poor creature!" And Sipito gazed sadly after the running hog.

"Alright! You've had your joke, that's enough! Milk the cows, if there is anything to milk, and drive them out!" Glakhuna yelled at his comrades. "And you! Why are you standing there staring at the hog?" he turned to Bachana. "Go and milk Geno's goat today. Your goat's due to kid tomorrow. And listen here! You drink the entire pot, down to the last drop! I've noticed how you've been slacking! Getting too big for your boots! Watch out or I'll smash that pot over your stupid head!"

Bachana went off without a word to milk the goat.

"God grant you health and a long life, Glakhuna!" said Iona when Bachana was out of sight. "You've saved the child's life. He's a different boy! The picture of health!"

Glakhuna might not have heard Iona's words: he took a bucket and went over to the cows.

An hour later the cattle of the Kvedoban collective farm were scattered, lowing and bleating, across the green side of Chkhakouri.

In the evening the collective farm chairman Gervasi Patsatsia came up to the hill-farm with two members of the home guard armed with sub-machine guns.

It was cool. Hosts and guests sat around the camp-fire. The pine branches crackled merrily, giving off a pleasant smell of incense. A kid was boiling in the cauldron. The sheep-dogs barked as they circled the fire in anticipation of tasty bones as a reward for faithful service.

"What else is new?" Glakhuna asked the chairman, returning the newspaper folded in four.

"What else are you interested in?" Gervasi raised his head and stroked the holster of the mauser lying on his knees.

"We're not asking about the property left behind in the village," interrupted Iona. "You'll hardly have added anything to it... How are things at the front?"

"Things at the front are going badly for Germany!" Gervasi stroked his mauser again.

"Put it away, will you! You might just set it off!" growled Sipito, moving aside. "Well, what's happening with the Germans?"

"What's happening? They've shamed themselves at Smolensk and disgraced themselves at Moscow," Gervasi began to flex his fingers. "Where else have they made a mess of things?" he asked himself and then, unable to recall, he waved his hand. "In general Germany's shit itself, that's all there is to it! They can hardly hold on to Romania, Czechoslovakia and Italy..."

"But when will the war end? What does Stalin say?"

"He says soon, but he doesn't say when," Gervasi shrugged.

"He should say, it's easy enough for him, isn't it?" said Iona in surprise.

"You what? A war with Germany's not a simple matter like gelding a hog!" Gervasi came to Stalin's defence.

"Gelding a hog's no easy matter, either, Gervasi!" Glakhuna stood up for the honour of his own profession.

Sipito took the cauldron from the fire and drew the kid from the seething water by its leg. The air was filled with the appetising smell of boiled meat, onion and bay leaves.

"Right, lads, bring it over here!" ordered Gervasi.

The home guards dragged a wineskin up to the fire. Glakhuna handed round clay cups. Everyone in turn went up to Gervasi with his cup, took his portion of wine and went back to his place. Bachana went up too. Gervasi glanced inquiringly at Glakhuna, who nodded.

Gervasi took the first sip.

"There's a fine vine for you! May God bless your root!" he exclaimed with pleasure. And they took his exclamation as the first toast.

"God bless it!" everyone repeated, and drained their cups at a single draught.

Gervasi served them a second time. And again, before he served Bachana, he glanced over at Glakhuna for permission. Glakhuna gave it.

"Sure it's not too much?" asked Gervasi.

"Another three!" said Glakhuna.

"It's up to you!" the chairman assented.

"With this cup," Gervasi began, "let us drink for the health of our Party and its Politbureau under the leadership of the great Stalin!" He drained his cup dry.

"For the Party, for Stalin!" they all repeated, and took a bite of food.

"The second toast is for our government under the leadership of the great Stalin!"

They drank as one man.

A minute later Gervasi pronounced his third toast:

"For our Red Army under the leadership of the great Stalin!"

They seconded this toast unanimously too, but each in his own way:

"For the health of our army!"

"For the victory of the Red Army!"

"God preserve its soldiers!"

"May every bullet fired by our lads strike home!"

"For peace on earth!"

Gervasi raised his cup once more:

"And now, the great Stalin, leader of..."

"Gervasi," cut in Iona, "I've just about had enough. While I can still stand upright, let's drink for the boy! Stalin gets his fair share of toasts and benedictions. And he manages his business well enough, thank God, without your help!"

"You shouldn't talk like that, Iona Oragvelidze!" the chairman took offence. "It it weren't for our support..."

"Our support, dear friend, consists in raising strong, healthy young lads for the state!"

"Alright, you're right!" conceded the chairman. "Let's drink for Bachana Ramishvili! Listen, Bachana!.. Remember this day and this man." Gervasi put his hand on the shoulder of Glakhuna Kerkadze sitting next to him. "You should kiss the very ground he walks on, my boy! You must take the place of his son who was killed out at the front. No-one will set up a monument for our Glakhuna, no-one will give him a medal... You must be his medal and his monument! Just look around you and you'll understand, my boy: everything you can see in the world is yours! Millions of people are dying right now with bullets in their chests, and none of them is taking anything with him. It's all left to you and the others your age. At home the orphans and widows are sobbing and weeping bitter tears. The fields are left to lie neglected. The land is weeping for its lost masters. We're taking back everything those monsters have taken away. But will the old men like me have enough strength to put the ruined country back on its feet? I don't know... It's up to you and your comrades to do it. You have to bring the country back to life! And there's one great favour we ask of you: forget the words 'former village' and 'former town'. So that the generation which follows you will only know about the war from the stories you tell them!" Gervasi raised his hands wide to the sky and gazed around at the silver moon-lit mountains. "Love and cherish the beauty of your homeland! Your homeland is a holy shrine and you should pray at its altar on your knees. And not only pray, but defend it, gun in hand, from the dev-

ils who would defile our sanctuary. And one more thing, I always be the first to sacrifice at the altar of your homeland! That is my only wish and all I ask of you! Let's drink!" And Gervasi reverently raised his cup to his lips.

"Gervasi Patsatsia!" exclaimed Iona rapturously. "If what you've just said isn't something you read, but came straight from the heart, then may my arm wither and drop off if I don't vote for you as chairman again!"

"I didn't come here to canvas for votes," answered Gervasi, "and these two aren't here for nothing either!"

"What's the problem, Gervasi? Going to arrest us, are you?" laughed Sipito.

"The problem is... That villain's gone completely wild!"

"Who are you talking about, Gervasi?" asked Glakhuna.

"Manuchar Kikvadze, that's who!"

"Is it really that difficult to catch the scoundrel? It's three years now since he deserted, and you still haven't managed to grab him!" Iona turned to the soldiers.

"It's not so easy to catch a man in the woods!" one of them tried to defend himself.

"And what's more, he's cautious as the devil now," added the other soldier, "he moves on almost every day... He used to find shelter in the odd place, some people would help him — some because they used to know him, some because he threatened them... Now no-one wants anything to do with him. Even the road to Surebi's closed to him now — he raped two young girls and gave them some filthy disease. The mother of one of them has gone mad with grief, poor woman."

"What's her father doing about it?" burst out Sipito.

"He's at the front," the soldier shrugged.

"So that's your answer?"

"He just barely got away from us that time in Kvemo-Chala, then a week later he cut out Bondo Tskipurishvili's tongue because he suspected him of informing, although he hadn't done anything... Widow Kartsivadze refused to let him into her house, so that night he burnt it down... Yes, he's as dangerous as a mad wolf now."

"He has to die, I swear before God! And if you're not up to the job, give us guns and we'll do it!" Glakhuna Kerkadze

said suddenly, glancing for some reason at Bachana. In Glakhuna's eyes Bachana caught a glimmer of fire which made the boy's blood run cold.

"A few days ago Kikvadze was at the Nabeglava farm, he took a load of cheese. It's not impossible that he'll turn up here, so if you've anything to hand in to the state, bring it down to the village tomorrow," said Gervasi as he stood up.

"Serves you right! Why did you take away our guns?" said Sipito.

"Now's not the time to start debating the issue! Give us twenty rounds of cheese and two kids, we won't be able to carry more!" said Gervasi, then he turned to the soldiers: "Make ready, we have to be at the village by morning!", and he went towards his horse.

"Hey, if you take it all for yourselves, what'll be left for Manuchar Kikvadze?" Iona taunted him.

"You're a real pain in the ass," said the chairman, offended, "when have I ever eaten what belongs to the farm? I'm taking it for the nursery school, for your granddaughter! Or don't you believe me?"

"Alright, alright, I was only joking!" Iona was embarrassed. "But then... Your predecessor said the same thing, and then those kids were found frisking in his yard, weren't they?"

"Hmm! Maybe I should turn bandit and rip out your rotten tongue? Ah, you!" Gervasi gestured impatiently and began to tighten his saddle-girths.

"It's all ready," said Glakhuna, coming up to Gervasi. "We'll round up the horses today and bring the rest of the stuff down to the village tomorrow."

"Excellent! Well, be careful! Goodbye for now!" Gervasi leapt on to his horse.

"Gervasi!" Glakhuna called to him.

"Yes?"

"Leave us your mauser."

"And leave myself without a gun?"

"Two sub-machine guns is enough for you. And I'll bring back the mauser on Sunday."

Gervasi hesitated.

"There's no need to think on it, make up your mind!"

Gervasi reluctantly took off his shoulder belt and held the mauser out to Glakhuna.

"I'm not giving you it, mind! I want it back!"

"Not until you've heard it speak!" Glakhuna took the mauser from Gervasi and handed it to Bachana: "Here, put it in the saddle-bag."

Bachana lowered the mauser into the empty half of the saddle-bag hanging on the post of the awning, and Gervasi and the soldiers turned their horses and started them down the slope at a gallop.

Soon the three horsemen were engulfed in the mist. For a minute or so there was the irregular clatter of hoof-beats, then all was quiet. Down into the valley after the galloping horsemen sped the thoughts and cares of those left behind on the side of Chkhakouri.

"Now let's get the horses in here," said Glakhuna to his men, "I saw them this morning, they were grazing over that way, in the direction of Zoti." Glakhuna pointed with his hand. "You can be finished and back here in about two hours. Take the boy with you... And take a brand for light."

Sipito threw a rope over his shoulder, stuck an axe in his belt and lit the fire-brand. Glakhuna went off towards the shed.

"We could wait a bit, what's all the hurry?" Sipito yelled after him. "Why don't we go at dawn ... instead of wandering around in the dark?"

"Do what you're told, and stop arguing!" answered Glakhuna.

"You might go easy on the boy!" Sipito attempted to soften him.

"Nothing will happen to him! Let him get used to it!"

Sipito and Iona set off in silence along the pathway up the mountain. Bachana trotted after them like a little wolf-cub.

There was a pitiful bleating at the farm. Bachana's nanny-goat had gone into labour.

When they returned at dawn, the shepherds were horrified by what they found. The two sheep-dogs were stretched out by the dead camp-fire, shot in the head; the hungry animals, still not milked, were lowing and bleating in the cattle-

shed. There was no sign of Glakhuna. The shepherds hastily set about searching for him but his trail was long since cold. Bachana's palms broke into a sweat again. Sipito Gudavadze tried to say something, but he seemed to be struck dumb and could only mumble inarticulately before he sank to the ground.

"This is Manuchar Kikvadze's work!" exclaimed Iona Oragvelidze, leaping on to an unsaddled horse.

"Where are you going?" Sipito had to struggle to get the words out.

"We have to overtake him!" answered Iona, and set off at a gallop.

Bachana rushed over to the saddle-bag and felt it. The mauser was still there. Then he squatted by Sipito and put his cold hand on his knee.

"Don't go, lad!" said Sipito softly, wiping his soaking brow.

Bachana felt Sipito's knee trembling and realised that Sipito was more afraid than he was.

"Don't you be afraid, Uncle Sipito," he said.

Sipito forced a twisted smile and stretched out his trembling leg.

"I can't help it, son!" he said, and suddenly burst into tears.

Glakhuna staggered forward with the basket packed full of cheese on his back. Manuchar Kikvadze strode behind him with his gun cocked at the ready.

"Get a move on, Glakhuna! I don't like to be trifled with!" Manuchar urged on Glakhuna.

Glakhuna bit his lip.

The farm-manager was choking on his fury. How had this villain managed to creep up on him? How had he managed to shoot the dogs that Glakhuna was so fond of? How had he forced Glakhuna to go with him, and with a basket of cheese hoisted up on his back?

It was the blood that had really upset him, the dogs' blood! He'd seen plenty of blood in his time, but this blood — from a bullet — was something special! Shame upon you, Glakhuna! What on earth did you want the mauser for?

So you could hide it in the saddle-bag? Shame! Shame! And why didn't you make a dash for the gun? But then this murderer was standing right over you! And who could move faster than him, the bandit! Shame upon you, Glakhuna!

Glakhuna choked on his fury and his tears. "Break, my heart!" he prayed. But his heart did not break... Worse still, Glakhuna began walking faster. For shame, for very shame!..

There was a puddle ahead. The full moon was reflected in the puddle and it looked as though the moon was shining from the other side, through a hole in the ground. Glakhuna would step into the hole now and be swallowed up, disappear. But there was no hole in the puddle and Glakhuna ended up sprawling in it.

"Get up, you lazy oaf!" Manuchar shouted at him.

Glakhuna got up and looked at Manuchar.

"What's wrong, Glakhuna Kerkadze? Are you getting a little bit tired?" grinned Manuchar. "Well now! And what did your beggar of a chairman and those stinking soldier-heroes want? Thought they'd catch me, did they? Well, I was right there! Yes, I was there and I had all of them in my sights — sitting ducks! Why didn't they stick their noses into the forest, eh? Didn't dare, did they? Well now! The heroes knew that I'd ram their machine-guns down their throats!" Manuchar gave a coarse, hysterical laugh.

"You may laugh, Manuchar Kikvadze, but you're done for anyway!" said Glakhuna.

"We'll talk about that after the war! Now take the basket and get moving! You'll have time to wallow in the mud afterwards, when the bolshies send you for a free holiday at the spa at Tskhaltubo. For services to the Soviet authorities! Get moving!"

"After the war, you foul creature, if they haven't finished you off by then, I'll hang you myself from the highest plane-tree in Chokhatauri. I'll hang you, cut you into pieces and salt your rotten corpse! Ugh!" And Glakhuna spat in Manuchar's face.

Kikvadze was dumbfounded for a moment. Then he swung his hand in a sudden movement and felled Glakhuna with a mighty blow.

Glakhuna fell into the puddle. He got up, wiped the blood from his face with his hand and said in a hollow voice:

"Kill me if you like, you swine, but I won't go on with you!" And he sat down again.

"That won't wash, Glakhuna! Until you carry the cheese to where I want it, don't even beg for death!"

"Who are you fighting against anyway, you bastard? Tell me that much!"

"Against you, dear Glakhuna, and the bolshies! For twenty-two years you've been trampling my father's land. That's long enough! Now our turn has come!"

"What do you mean, 'ours'?"

"Mine and Germany's!"

"And where do you see the Germans?"

"They'll be here, Glakhuna, they'll be here! And then we'll hang all of you on the same plane-tree where you wanted to hang me! And your regional committee secretary will walk at the front carrying a red flag! And now get up!"

"As long as I'm alive I won't budge, when I'm dead you can carry me wherever you like! Walking this far with you is shame enough!"

Kikvadze realised that he would have to stain his hands with the blood of yet another victim.

"Then turn away and pray to God if you can... One way or another God created us all from the same clay..."

Glakhuna knelt and raised his hands to the sky:

"Great God! Today I promised you I'd kill this reptile and now it turns out that I am to die at his hands... Don't let this be, God! My life belongs to you, take it! If you exist and you can hear my voice, kill me! And if I am made of the same clay as this brute, I don't want to live!"

A triple echo rang out in the Chkhakouri forest. Glakhuna lay face down in the puddle where not long before he had seen the moon shining from the other side of the ground. And with remarkable clarity Glakhuna felt the earth open its breast to him and take him into its embrace, felt the opening close once more and the earth pass its immense hand across his eyelids drawing a dark veil over the sky...

Dawn was approaching when Sipito Gudavadze, Iona Oragvelidze, Gervasi Patsatsia and the two home guards brought Glakhuna's body to the farm. Without speaking a word, without shedding a tear, the five men waited for the sunrise.

And only when morning came did Iona notice that Bachana had disappeared from the farm.

"That's all we needed!" exclaimed Sipito despairingly, slapping both hands against his knees. "Bachana!" he shouted.

"Bachana!" shouted Iona.

"Bachana-a-a!.. Bachana-a-a!" the cry of alarm rang out.

The echo ricocheted from one slope to another, flew across to the gorge, skirted the cliffs and ravines, penetrated the forest, failed to find the boy and returned to the farm, to the grief-stricken, despairing men.

The first rays of sunlight saw a boy with a saddle-bag thrown across his shoulder emerge from the forest on to the path. He squatted by the spring, pulled off his leather stockings full of holes, turned them over in his hands, tossed them aside and lowered his swollen feet into the icy spring water. Then the boy washed his hands and face, stretched out on the dewy grass, put the saddle-bag under his head and gave a deep sigh. High up in the blue sky a hawk drifted in smooth circles.

"Ah, if only I had wings," thought the boy. "I bet you can see everything clear as clear from up there."

The boy closed his eyes and lay a long time without moving, thinking of nothing.

Suddenly a shower of stones rattled down the slope on to the path. The boy quickly rose and looked around. A lean, unshaven man with a protruding jaw was standing at the edge of the embankment with a gun in his hand. The boy's heart skipped a beat.

"Who are you?" asked the man.

The boy said nothing.

"Are you dumb or something?"

"I'm from Chkhakouri!" the boy forced out the words.

"Where are you headed?"

"To Zoti."

"Who to?"

"Relatives."

The man pondered. Then he fixed the boy with a piercing gaze and asked:

"The Kvedoban farm is up there opposite you. Have you passed that way?"

"No, the farm's a long way from us. I was going through the woods, past the farm, it's shorter that way." The boy licked his dry lips and asked: "Who are you, then, Uncle?"

"I'm a forester, on my way to the farm, I have business with the shepherds. And what have you got in the saddle-bag?"

The boy was taken aback—he didn't know what was in the saddle-bag. He stretched out his hand, thrust it into the near side of the bag, drew out a bottle corked with a cabbage-stump and stood it on the grass.

"What's that?" asked the man.

"Vodka."

"You're still wet behind the ears, and you drink vodka?"

"Just a drop!" the boy smiled. Then he drew out of the saddle-bag a round of cheese wrapped in a fern-leaf, half a maize cake and, finally, some boiled goat's flesh.

"Oho! We've got a bite to eat as well!" said the man, and began to make his way down the slope.

"Please join me!" the boy invited him and sat on the saddle-bag.

"So you've not been at the farm?" The man sat up close to the boy, placing his gun on his knees. The boy shook his head and sat on his hands to conceal their trembling. The man began eating without another word. When he had satisfied his hunger he turned to the boy:

"What are you waiting for? Am I supposed to eat alone?"

The man picked up the bottle and gave it a shake.

"That looks like rough stuff!" he said.

"Yes, it is," answered the boy.

The man wiped the mouth of the bottle with the palm of his hand, tipped it up to his mouth and began to cough.

"Damn! It's fire, not vodka!" he exclaimed, and buried his face in the crook of his left arm.

"Lord, give me the strength now, and then you can kill me!" thought the boy, and reached towards the saddle-bag. Then he quickly rose to his feet.

When he had recovered his breath the man looked at the boy and froze. The boy had a mauser in his hand and he was aiming at him.

"Stand up, Manuchar Kikvadze!" said the boy, his eyes fixed on the man's face.

Kikvadze wanted to stand, but he could not.

"Stand up, you scum!" repeated the boy.

"Who are you lad, and what do you want from me?" Manuchar had recovered his wits.

"Glakhuna Kerkadze!"

Manuchar was struck dumb.

"I am Glakhuna Kerkadze and I am going to kill you!"

The heavy mauser jerked in the boy's grip and he grabbed the weapon with both hands.

Manuchar fell to his knees and shook his head that was suddenly dripping with sweat, like the head of a bather emerging from a river.

"Don't be stupid, lad. You can't kill someone at your age." Manuchar's voice shook. "Don't shoot. How will you go on living if you're branded as a murderer?"

"What about you? How do you go on living and breathing?"

"I'm not alive, even if I am breathing."

"You're going to die, Manuchar!"

"At least tell me your name and why you want to kill me!" Manuchar implored him, and bit his lip so that the blood flowed.

"I told you! Glakhuna Kerkadze!"

Manuchar was still moving his lips, but the boy could not hear him. There was a roaring in his ears, his heart was bursting from his chest, huge sledgehammers seemed to be pounding at his temples. The boy thought he must be losing his sight as well as his hearing, because as Manuchar crept towards him his face became two faces, then three, and then melted away to nothing. Then the boy pulled the trigger.

He did not hear the sound of the shots, he did not count the number of bullets. He only felt the mauser trembling in his fingers that were locked tight on the silver-plated handle, and his wrists jerking. Afterwards, when the mauser had stopped jerking, the boy suddenly relaxed, his hands opened and the mauser fell with a thud beside the mutilated head of Manuchar Kikvadze.

The boy turned away from the body, sank down on the ground, buried his head in his knees and howled like a wolf-cub lost in the forest.

At midnight Lomkatsa Ramishvili was woken by a furious knocking at the door. He got out of bed, lit his lamp, went to the door and asked loudly:

"Who's there?"

"It's me, Bachana!" answered the person behind the door.

"You're not Bachana!" Lomkatsa didn't recognise his grandson's voice. His heart began pounding in alarm.

"It is me, Grandad, open the door!"

Lomkatsa drew back the bolt and opened the door. There in front of him stood Bachana, with his head bowed, his clothes tattered, his legs spattered with blood.

"Come in!"

Bachana did not move. Then Lomkatsa took him by the shoulder and led him into the room. He put the lamp on the table and sank on to a chair.

"What happened?" asked the old man in a trembling voice.

"I killed a man!" answered Bachana, and his chin quivered. Lomkatsa's face twisted and he clutched at his heart. There was a long silence. At last Lomkatsa recovered. Struggling for words he asked:

"Why did I read the Gospel to you for five years?"

Bachana did not answer. He stood there hanging his head and wiping his sweaty palms on his trouser-legs.

"Who did you kill?" Lomkatsa broke the silence with a question and braced himself for the reply.

"I killed the murderer of Glakhuna Kerkadze, Grandfather!"

Lomkatsa's pupils widened in astonishment. The old man wanted to stand, but his knees wouldn't support him.

"You killed ... Manuchar Kikvadze?" he asked in a whisper.

"Yes!"

Lomkatsa groaned as he forced himself to his feet. He went to the door, closed it firmly, then came back to his grandson and held his head to his breast.

"Does anyone know about this?" he whispered.

His grandson shook his head.

"There were two people I worshipped," said the old man quietly, "you and Glakhuna. One was killed by Manuchar..." Bachana placed his hot palm on his grandfather's calloused hand. It was cold as ice. "Think, my child, think carefully... Don't take blood spilled by others on your conscience. That's a heavy burden to bear," said Lomkatsa thoughtfully, and suddenly he seemed to feel his grandson's blood seething through the burning hot hand into his old man's veins, moving in a wave of heat, first to his chest, then to his temples. Lomkatsa gazed for a long, long time into his grandson's eyes, and the old man realised that the sick fifteen-year-old boy called Bachana was gone for ever. Lomkatsa could not endure his grandson's burning gaze and he looked away. He had guessed the unspoken question that lurked in the fiery eyes of the transformed person before him and realised that his grandson's entire future would depend on his answer to it. "You did right, my son! I would have done the same!" he said, and held his grandson tightly to him. Bachana was suddenly relaxed and soft, he slithered out of his grandfather's embrace and sat on the floor. "God Almighty, why was your vengeance taken through this child?" groaned Lomkatsa as he sank down beside his grandson.

When at dawn Sipito Gudavadze, insane with worry, burst into Lomkatsa's house, grandfather and grandson were still sitting on the floor and weeping—Bachana loudly, with violent sobs, Lomkatsa without a sound...

5

Professor Antelava entered the ward with the attending medical doctor and the doctor's assistant. Bachana was lying with his eyes closed, listening to the beating of his own heart. He was pleased—his heart-beat was strong now—driving the blood round to every part of his body. With each day that passed Bachana had felt his exhausted heart growing stronger and his mind clearer. He heard the professor come in, but, savouring the sweet delight of his return to life, he pretended to be asleep.

"Hello!" the professor greeted them.

"Our greetings to the honourable professor!" Bulyka raised himself on his bed.

"Good health to you!" replied Father Ioram.

"And how are we doing today?" the professor asked them all as he carefully read through the case records. "Good, we'll transfer you to the rehabilitation department soon!" he said with satisfaction to Bulyka.

"I'd prefer a free pardon! I feel fine, and I've been going to the toilet on my own feet for two days now, so if you don't mind I'd like to go home today!" Bulyka announced, and as though to demonstrate his recovery, he stuck his bare feet out from under the blanket.

"I warned you about that!" said the professor to the doctor.

"I can't tie him to the bed!" the doctor shrugged.

"That's just what you should do! You are not to get up, understand? Or is the bed-pan not to your liking?" joked the professor, and gently shoved Bulyka back down on to his bed.

"But Professor, I don't like having to disturb the good people here," Bulyka protested, grinning.

"Never mind that!" the professor reassured him.

"What's more, my conscience is bothering me. Half of Vake is probably going around barefoot because of me!"

"So you want all of Vake to go around barefoot, is that it?"

"Hmm... Sorry, Professor, I'll say no more!"

Bulyka took the hint and lay down as carefully as though the entire population of Vake were really anxiously awaiting his recovery.

"The Catholicos rang today to ask how you were. What shall I tell him, Father Ioram?" said the professor, turning to the Dean of the Church of the Holy Trinity.

The priest was touched by the Catholicos's concern, and tears sprang to his eyes.

"Tell His Holiness that thanks to his prayers the Almighty has not yet accepted my sinful soul," he replied.

"So we had nothing to do with it?" The professor feigned offence.

"You doctors are entrusted with the gates of hell. The Catholicos watches over the gates of heaven," said Ioram in self-justification, and crossed himself.

"No, Father, the road to the next world leads to one set of gates, and there we stand, the doctors. Heaven and hell are only sections of the next world, and it's up to God where he chooses to send anyone. Our orders are not to open the gates for people before their time has come. That's the way things are!"

Ioram cleared his throat awkwardly and said nothing.

"Is he still sleeping?" asked the professor, feeling Bachana's pulse.

"He sleeps round the clock!" answered the doctor.

"So much the better!" The professor took down the case-report hanging at the head of Bachana's bed. "Sedimentation rate's down, cholesterol level's down, that's good!" he commented with satisfaction. "Ah, we still have the extrasystoles? What are you doing about that?"

"Eraldin. The most effective..."

"Any pain?"

"Slight."

"Frequency?"

"About every half-hour, when he's awake."

"Continue the morphine!"

The professor carefully drew back the blanket and took a long, close look at Bachana's chest, then breathed a sigh of relief:

"Thank goodness we got away without an aneurism!"

Bachana opened his eyes.

"Hello, Professor!"

"Are you not asleep?" asked the professor in surprise.

"I don't sleep at all!"

"How's that?"

"I have dreams while I'm awake."

"What kind of dreams?"

"Sometimes pleasant, sometimes not so pleasant."

"Try to think of pleasant things before you go to sleep, then you'll have pleasant dreams."

"What do you think, Professor, am I safe now?" asked Bachana.

"That's what I wanted to ask you!"

Bachana was taken aback.

"Well, I think... It seems... I seem to be feeling better..."

"Then everything's fine!" The professor put his stethoscope to Bachana's heart.

"Well?" asked Bachana in a quavering voice.

"There's a good sound. It wasn't so good yesterday."

The professor was about to leave.

"If I live, I'll have two gold busts made of you!" Bachana smiled.

"Why two?"

"One I'll present to you, I'll put the other on my desk and pray to it."

"Gogilashvili's more practical than you, he only promised me one!"

"And a pair of diamond earrings for your wife. And, what's more, free shoe-repairs for the rest of your life!" added Bulyka.

"Well, God grant you health! And I'll go and warn my wife to get her ears pierced... And what do you promise me, Father Ioram?"

"A candle as big as yourself and my blessings for all eternity!"

"You know, after a heart attack people become forgetful, so..." The professor laughed. "Anyway, have you any other complaints?"

"Yes, we wanted to bring up the question of the rats. But

we were so pleased to see you, that we forgot about them..." Bulyka glanced stealthily across at the doctor's assistant.

"It's his chronic alcoholism, professor, he sees things!" the doctor's assistant put in hastily.

"Alright, I might have delirium tremens, but what about him? Is he seeing things too?" Outraged, Bulyka pointed at Ioram.

"They don't really do any harm," said the Father in a conciliatory tone. "They just come out and walk around, nibble a bit of sugar..."

"Send for the hospital manager!" ordered the professor.

"He's gone for the mouse-sugar," answered the doctor.

"What the devil does that mean, mouse-sugar? Have we got so many mice in the republican hospital that they have their own rations?" The professor was furious.

"It's poison, Professor!" explained the doctor.

"Arsenic!" The doctor's assistant clarified the point.

"This is outrageous!" The professor stormed out of the ward without taking his leave.

"Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned it?" Bulyka asked anxiously.

"It makes no difference, the fact's staring him in the face. In a little while he'd have seen for himself," answered Ioram. "There!" He threw a lump of sugar to the rat which had crawled out from under Bulyka's bed.

An hour later the senior physician entered with the hospital manager, a disinfector, two attendants, the attending doctor and Zhenya, the doctor's assistant.

"Where's the rat?" asked the disinfector in a stern voice.

"Here!" answered Bulyka, pulling back his right eye-lid with his finger.

"So, just stirring up trouble, are you?"

"D'you think I've been nibbling that sugar?" Bulyka pointed to the gnawn-over lump of sugar lying on the floor.

The attendants rushed to look under the bed, then went round the ward, stuffing all the chinks with arsenic.

"The poison's a bit old, but never mind. We'll wait till tomorrow, and if it hasn't done the job we'll bring in a cat," the disinfector reassured the patients, then he turned to the attendants: "Put some down in my office, too. The cursed

vermin have gnawed all the legs on the cupboard! Any other complaints?" he asked, turning back to the patients.

"Why doesn't America withdraw its troops from South Korea?" protested Bulyka.

"You lousy trouble-maker. Bet you write anonymous letters!" said the disinfector, and slammed the door angrily on his way out.

"Your own father writes those anonymous letters, and you're a rat!" Bulyka shouted after him.

Soon afterwards Zhenya returned to the ward carrying a syringe. She went over to Bachana's bed, pulled back the blanket and said under her breath:

"Some people should get their morphine in their tongues to stop them blabbing!"

"If it's me you're talking about, then I've somewhere else you can put the morphine!" responded Bulyka.

Zhenya did not deign to reply. She gave Bachana his injection, massaged the spot and left without another word.

A minute later she came back.

"There's a man asking for you," she said to Bachana.

"Who is it?"

"He says he's a close relative."

"Send him in, if it's alright with you."

Zhenya went out and came back with a short, blonde, freckled man with short arms.

"Five minutes, that's all!" Zhenya warned him.

"I'll only be a moment!" answered the newcomer and without waiting to be asked, he sat on the chair beside Bachana's bed.

"How do you do, Bachana!" He slapped Bachana on the knee.

"How do you do!" answered Bachana, astonished.

"Don't you recognise me?"

Bachana strained his memory, but he couldn't recognise the man.

"What about this way?" The man turned to show his profile. Bachana gave an embarrassed smile.

"Come on, now: Sukhumi, Chernyavka, the Venetian

Bridge, school thirteen, your aunts Maro, Nina, Tamara, your cousins Nellie, Zuleika, Dado, your cousin Koka..." The man bent down his fingers as he counted.

"Please, just remind me who you are, I remember my own relatives quite well," prompted Bachana.

"I'm Nugzar, Nugzar Darakhvelidze! Remember, Aunty Nina christened my sister Louisa..."

"For the life of me..."

"Ever since then that's what she's been called, Louisa."

"Glad to hear it, I'm sure."

"So I'm Louisa's brother, Nugzar Darakhvelidze!" The man finally clarified the whole business.

"What can I do for you?" asked Bachana.

"How are you feeling, dear Bachana? The people are concerned..."

"So-so..."

"You look fine, God grant you health! Your complexion's excellent. You've lost a little weight, true. I saw you recently on TV. The entire Party group was in stitches. You've a sharp tongue and no mistake! Ha-ha! Especially when you were talking about the antipodes! Yes, you looked a bit plumper then. But even now, touch wood, you look just fine, may your friends rejoice and your enemies pine!" The man slapped Bachana on the knee again.

"And how are you, and your sister Louisa?" Bachana enquired politely.

"Oh, don't ask! Dear Bachana, things couldn't be worse!" Darakhvelidze wiped the sweat from his brow.

"What's the matter?" Bachana was concerned.

"Well... It's a bit awkward in front of strangers."

"They're not allowed to get up, and I'm not either. So if you have anything to say, say it in front of them."

"For goodness' sake! We'll soon fix that!" Bulyka pulled the blanket up over his head and turned to face the wall. Father Ioram did likewise.

Darakhvelidze hesitated for a moment, then he took the plunge.

"It's nothing special, Bachana, just a question of your beautiful signature, that's all."

"You know they gave me morphine just now, tell me straight away, or I'll fall asleep."

Darakhvelidze glanced once more at the other patients with their heads under the blankets, and began:

"Well, you know of course, that ... that the situation in Georgia is a bit ... tense. In one place they've burnt down the opera-house, in another they've set fire to the department store... Somebody's supposed to have shot himself, and somebody else has slit his wrists. In general, the situation's a bit unsettled because... Because of the problems with selecting Party organisers. And the meat at the market ... there's not too much of that either."

"And how about the cheese?" Bachana smiled.

"You're joking, dear Bachana, I know that's your profession... But you know, we get meat and cheese from the cow."

"Have you developed a new breed of cow?" Bachana asked seriously.

Darakhvelidze looked fixedly at him, suspecting some trick, but Bachana never batted an eyelid. The man was reassured.

"No, I came for a different reason," he continued.

"Perhaps you've designed a fire-proof opera-house?"

Darakhvelidze broke into a sweat. He glanced suspiciously at the motionless forms of Bulyka and Ioram, hesitated, and then resolutely drew two envelopes from his pocket.

"I want to ask you, Bachana, to have a word with the Party leaders on my behalf, or write a letter to the Secretary of our District Party Committee."

"Why me?" Bachana was genuinely astonished.

"You're the very man! You're a humanist, a writer, a member of the Supreme Soviet and the Central Committee! Who else should I go to if not to you?" Darakhvelidze was no less genuinely astonished.

"Where is it you work?"

"In Abkhazia, in the tobacco-procuring business."

"What do you want me to write to the leadership about?"

"Everyone knows you and the secretary are inseparable, that you went to school together."

"Who sent you to me?"

"Someone who wishes our secretary well. One envelope is yours, the other you can hand on as you think best."

Darakhvelidze deftly thrust both envelopes under the pillow.

"What is it, have you been dismissed?"

"It's not such an easy matter to dismiss me, dear Bachana. But a little support never comes amiss. Even to the person who's trying to push me out!"

The morphine had begun to take effect, Bachana's eyelids were heavy and he did not feel like talking, let alone cross-examining this relative who had appeared out of the blue.

"Tell me in plain language what's going on," he said to the man, closing his eyes. The other realised he had to hurry, and he began speaking hastily:

"It's the commission he sent!"

Zhenya's head appeared round the door.

"By the way, you've already had twenty minutes!"

"Never mind, Zhenya, never mind. Let him stay a little longer, he's telling me an interesting story!" Bachana asked her.

"Yes," continued Darakhvelidze. "He sent an auditing commission! Twenty years I've worked in tobacco-procuring and no-one's ever dared to send a commission to inspect my work!.. At first I thought he was joking!.."

"And what did the commission say?"

"What did they say? They began to count up every single cigarette smoked in Abkhazia and Georgia. Then they announced that this year we must have mixed a hundred tons of dried grass into three hundred tons of tobacco! Who says so? People who never stick their noses outside their office doors! Don't they know that tobacco grows in the fields, and it's not surprising if a bit of grass gets mixed up with it? And anyway, is grass poison? Did you ever know grass to kill anyone? How can you call that sabotage? A cow eats grass all its life, and it doesn't die, does it? What should we feed it on, tobacco? The real sabotage is dosing people like you to death with nicotine! And that's not all! Then they announced, you see, that we were passing off the grass at the same price as tobacco and making millions out of it! Hm, a ton of grass costs

ten roubles at the most, where's the millions in that? And then they even said that we were wetting the tobacco so that it weighed almost twice as much! Smart-asses!"

"How many millions altogether?"

"Sales or stock?"

"Altogether."

"A lot."

"Yes, but how much?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Darakhvelidze tried to wriggle out of it.

"What else did the commission say?"

"Plenty! They even came to my house, if you please! Why have you got a two-storey house, they asked, poking their noses into all the rooms! What if there are two storeys? The standard ceiling height is two and a half metres, and the ceilings on my ground floor are only two forty-eight."

"What difference does two centimetres make?" laughed Bachana.

"What do you mean, Bachana? A bullet's no more than two centimetres long, but it fells a buffalo! And the bullet that struck down a certain man last year—I'll mention no names—was no more than two centimetres long either. There's no need to tell your friend that, that's just by the way. Then they counted eight rooms on the top floor. Ha! What kind of Georgian counts a hall as a room? I'm surprised they didn't add in the loggia and the billiard-room! Dear Bachana, my heart is as pure as crystal! Get your friend the secretary to leave me alone. Your word is law to him! And if my name is blackened, it's an insult to you!"

"Why to me?" Bachana opened his eyes.

"But of course it is! If someone said something bad about you, my close relative, wouldn't I feel insulted?" exclaimed Darakhvelidze.

Bachana began to run through all his close relatives, and was relieved not to find anyone resembling Darakhvelidze among them.

"The son of a bitch!" exclaimed his visitor furiously. "He arrests people for ten roubles, and he wants to sell my job for a million!"

"How much?" asked Bachana.

"Half a million!" Darakhvelidze reduced the figure.

"Do you really earn that kind of money?"

"What do you mean, how could I? I've never laid eyes on that land of money!"

Bachana fingered the envelopes under his pillow. Darakhvelidze averted his gaze.

"Let's talk about it when I get well," said Bachana.

"Don't be stupid!" Darakhvelidze blurted out, but then immediately corrected himself. "That is, you won't be up and about for a while, and my problem goes before the Party bureau the day after tomorrow. I could even be arrested... Just a couple of words from you, just a couple of words!"

Bachana took the two envelopes out from under his pillow and put them on his chest.

"How much is there here?"

Darakhvelidze beamed.

"Fifteen thousand. In savings accounts."

Bachana pondered. Darakhvelidze fidgeted impatiently on his chair.

"My dear Nugzar," said Bachana, following a lengthy silence. "Just here under my bed there's a bed-pan. Would you please hand it to me. I'm sorry, but it's urgent." Darakhvelidze hesitated. "Don't worry, it's quite clean."

Darakhvelidze gave way and bent down, picked up the bed-pan and held it out to Bachana, who took it by the neck with his enfeebled right hand.

"Would you just move aside a little, please," he asked Darakhvelidze. The visitor moved his chair one step away. Bachana judged at a glance the distance between himself and his visitor, and summoning up all his strength, he swung the bed-pan down on to Darakhvelidze's head.

The bed-pan shattered into tinkling fragments. Darakhvelidze slowly slid from his chair and collapsed on to his back on the floor.

"Was the pot empty?" asked Bulyka.

"Yes," answered Bachana.

"A pity!" said Father Ioram regretfully and called loudly:

"Zhenya! Zhenya!"

6

For seven days and seven nights Bachana struggled through the sun-scorched desert. For the first two days he walked, then he dragged himself along on his knees, and for the last two days he crawled on his belly. At last, finally drained of all strength, he fell face down into the scalding sand and felt the onset of death. He turned over on to his back, looked at the sun through dim, lifeless eyes, and for the first time in his life he was driven to reproach the lamp of heaven.

"Why have you condemned me to perish, Sun?"

And suddenly the image of a man appeared on the sun's disc. And his shadow fell on Bachana.

"Who are you?" asked Bachana.

The lean, barefoot youth with blue eyes gazed at him, and Bachana could not tell whether the sun was shining from behind the youth or his head was crowned by a radiant halo.

"I am your Lord and your God!" answered the youth.

"How can you prove this?"

"Is not my appearance unto you sufficient proof?"

"No! You are the hallucination of a man athirst in the desert!"

Bachana waited a long time for the strange image to disappear. But the youth stood there before him, calm and smiling, merciful, astonishingly familiar and beloved. Then Bachana crawled up to him and timidly reached out to touch the long, pale-pink wound on his bare foot.

"Cast aside all doubts," the youth smiled.

"I doubt, for I do not believe. I do not believe what my eyes see. I feel it all takes place far away from me. Tell me: were you really here on earth? And if you were, why did you forsake us?" Bachana asked.

"People rejected me, but I have never forsaken Man," the youth replied quietly.

"Prove this to me!"

"My presence here is the proof of this!"

Bachana ran his hand once more over the youth's bare foot.

"What are you, Lord?"

"I am faith, hope, strength, goodwill, the talent to love, and freedom!"

"But then how could Judas betray you for thirty pieces of silver?"

"Judas did not betray his Lord, he sold himself to the Pharisees for thirty pieces of silver. Such was his price, and for that price he was bought. The money under your pillow today was not your price, and therefore you did not sell yourself. And not having sold yourself today, tomorrow you will be valued at a higher price."

"And what if I do not sell myself tomorrow, or the day after?"

"Then you shall be exalted, and there shall come to pass that for the sake of which I was hung upon the cross..."

"Did you know that Judas would betray you?"

"Satan knew. God does not tempt man. God tests him. Judas was tempted by Satan, who bought him for thirty pieces of silver. But I tested Judas when I placed the rope in his hands."

"And you did not curse Judas?"

"No!"

"Why?"

"Judas saved eleven others from sin."

"Then why will you not rid him of the stain of eternal shame?"

"Because Judas is a being of Satan, and not of God."

"And so Satan has triumphed over you?"

"It would be so, had not Judas put an end to his own life."

"On the road to Golgotha, did you believe that they were leading you to crucifixion?"

"No."

"What were you hoping for?"

"I put my hope in the people."

"Did not the people barter you for a thief?"

"They did."

"So even here Satan triumphed over you?"

"No, for this was not a temptation, but a test."

"And the people failed this test?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"The people expected me to perform a miracle, and therefore they bartered me for a thief from whom they expected nothing... This was my second, premature testing of the sons of Adam, and it was my second error."

"What was your first error?"

"That I gave Man refuge in Paradise. Not through another's will, but by sweat, by blood and faith must Man come unto Paradise!"

"When did you first believe that you must needs be crucified?"

"When I saw standing before me my mother and my beloved disciple. And I spake thus unto my mother — 'Woman, behold thy son!' And I spake thus unto my disciple — 'Man, behold thy mother!' And he remained with my mother in my place, and my mother became for him the holy spirit..."

"What is your will?"

"Arise."

Bachana rose.

"Confess that the pangs of thirst torment you not!"

"The pangs of thirst torment me not!" repeated Bachana, and the thirst which had tormented him disappeared.

"Confess that the sun's rays scorch you not!"

"The sun's rays scorch me not!" repeated Bachana, and the heat which was draining his strength disappeared.

"Confess your faith in life and in your God."

"I confess my faith in life..." repeated Bachana, and he did not pronounce the words 'and in my God', for it still seemed to him that all that was happening was a hallucination.

Then said the youth:

"Tell me your inmost secret dream!"

"'Why was my being made to be a man, And not to shower down in drops of rain?..'" Bachana quoted from the verse of Vazha Pshavela, and then...

Bachana fell as a shower of rain, and up through the scorched desert earth grew grass—fresh, green and luscious...

Bachana fell as a shower of rain, and up through the scorched desert earth there rose flowers—beautiful, gay and fragrant...

Bachana fell as a shower of rain, and up through the scorched desert earth there burst a spring—cool, transparent and life-giving...

Bachana fell as a shower of rain, and suddenly he himself was transformed into a mighty oak in an oasis—huge, branching, girding the globe with its roots, thrusting its crown against the heavens... And from every country there flew flocks beyond number of song-birds, and sat upon the branches of the oak, and built their nests, and multiplied, and the great hymn of life rang throughout the whole world...

And then Bachana sank down upon his knees and bowed low to the youth and said:

"I have seen you and believed."

And then Christ spake unto him thus:

"You have believed, for that you have seen my face. Blessed are they who believe, and have seen me not..."

7

Bachana woke up. Bulyka was sitting on his bed, his legs drawn up under him, leaning back against the pillow and listening to Father Ioram, who was reading monotonously from the newspaper, as though intoning a prayer.

"Hello, friends!" Bachana greeted them.

"Well now, greetings to our new guest!" Bulyka said delightedly.

"How are you feeling, my dear Bachana?" enquired Father Ioram politely, setting aside the newspaper.

"Like the young Adam in Paradise before Eve made her appearance!"

"Are you not a bit lonely?"

"Not at all, all of Paradise seems to belong to me!"

"You're certainly no weakling, Bachana," declared Bulyka. "I've never seen such a clean knock-out. I counted to three hundred and he still hadn't opened his eyes!"

"Who?" asked Bachana.

"Oh, that's good! Almost despatches someone without benefit of confession, and then he asks who!" exclaimed Ioram.

"You were here, Father!" Bachana quipped, but he still felt a little awkward. He had almost forgotten the incident under the influence of the morphine, and recalling what had happened irritated him. "To be quite honest, I don't really remember very well what happened," he said, wiping the sweat from his brow.

"Don't worry about it, dear Bachana, we don't remember anything either. I was asleep and Father Ioram was saying his prayers. Isn't that so, Father?" Bulyka asked Ioram.

"In truth it is!" confirmed Ioram.

"So we can't be called as witnesses!" added Bulyka.

"But what really did happen?" asked Bachana in all seriousness.

"It was like this: when you smashed the bed-pan over his head and he fell down, Zhenya came running in. She gave him an injection of camphor and rubbed iodine on his head. Then he suddenly jumped up and began cursing and swearing."

"What about?"

"He kept yelling that you must have thought the money wasn't enough, otherwise why didn't you refuse it straight off."

"And what else?"

"He mentioned someone called Batsalashvili who you got appointed director of a restaurant and who paid a pretty penny for the privilege."

"What?" Bachana was baffled.

"Like I said. You set someone up as director of a restaurant and he paid you half a million roubles."

Bachana burst out laughing.

"What's so funny? That's what he kept shouting."

"That's not the point. You see, I actually did help one of my employees to get his relative—this Batsalashvili—appointed to that job."

"Aa-ah..."

"So it would seem, dear Bachana, that someone did take a bribe?" suggested Father Ioram.

"It would seem so!" agreed Bachana.

"I know a rogue to match that one!" recollected Bulyka. "He got my orphaned nephew into a college of commerce.

And he asked me for three thousand roubles. He said a thousand and a half thousand was for the director, a thousand for this person, three hundred for that person, and two hundred to him for his trouble... What could I do? I know my nephew inside out... Not long since I asked the blockhead what's left if you take five from fifty-five. Five, he said!"

"Well, that's right!" laughed Bachana.

"So that kind of answer cost me three thousand roubles! The swine took my money and ran!.."

"Did he cheat you then?" enquired Ioram.

"No... He got him in alright, but it was money thrown down the drain!"

"Then what are you accusing him of?"

"I'll tell you what! In December the director of this college calls me in and asks me, 'Citizen Gogilashvili, did you give three thousand roubles to Citizen Gvaladze?' Of course I confessed I had. 'Well, what a villain!' he yelled and thumped the table."

"Did he mean you?" Ioram was upset.

"Of course not me! He meant that swine Gvaladze!"

"Then he slandered the man!" Now Ioram was indignant.

"Not at all, Father, don't you understand? Gvaladze never gave him the money! So he got his claws into me instead. 'What do you take me for,' he says. 'The college of commerce,' he says, 'is not like your college...' What's it called, now, you know the one ... down by the bakery in Vake... The students spend all day and night looking through telescopes..."

"Topography!" put in Bachana.

"Yes, the college of topography. 'This,' he says, 'is not like your college of topography! It's December now. In January,' he says, 'you'll bring me three thousand roubles, or else,' he says, 'your cretin of a nephew will be out on his ear!..'

"Who said that?" Ioram was astonished.

"The director, that's who! Who else?"

"And then what?"

"And then what? Sveta and I consulted about it and she said to me, 'It would be better to double the money

and then maybe we could set him up as Minister of Trade...'"

"So the director was a bandit as well?" Bachana shifted uncomfortably in the bed.

"He certainly was, my friend!.. Do you require a bed-pan perhaps? You can use mine till they bring you a new one," Bulyka offered.

"No, thank you... I was just thinking, maybe I ought to have taken the money?"

"I don't know about that... Money's pretty dirty stuff," said Bulyka thoughtfully.

"Thirty pieces of silver were the undoing of mankind!" exclaimed Father Ioram. "Thirty pieces of silver!"

"You know, dear Bachana, I can read people's characters like those... What's that they're called? Phys? Physo?" Bulyka began.

"Physiognomists."

"That's the word! Only they read the face, and I read the shoes... I can always tell by looking at someone's shoes just what kind of animal he is... Take that oaf who came in to see you... As soon as I saw his shoes I knew he was a villain."

"How?" asked Bachana.

"In the first place, he was wearing patent leather shoes..."

"And I thought he was a professor," Father Ioram interrupted.

"When he came in, he wiped his shoes on his trousers..." Bulyka looked askance at Ioram. "A professor would never do that... In the second place, the soles of his shoes were worn at the front and the heels were quite new. That means they're for special occasions and he only puts them on to go and see the boss. It's obvious that when the boss is around he walks on tip-toe, that's why the soles are only worn at the front. Well, is he a villain? Of course he is! In the third place, as soon as he sat down he eased his feet out of his shoes. Why? Because they pinch, that's why! And why does a man wear tight shoes? To give himself a long-suffering expression, so people will think he's tormented by misfortune! So this is a real villain! In the fourth place his heels were three or four centimetres higher than normal. Why? Because he wants to

appear taller than he really is! A villain? No doubt about it! Then what else? Ah, yes, the most important thing — and this has nothing to do with shoes — the most important thing is that when someone tips a hospital bed-pan over a man's head and he doesn't go for their throat, it means he's not a man at all, but a base villain and a scoundrel!" Bulyka concluded his reading of Darakhvelidze's character.

"But what do you think a good man's shoes should look like?" asked Father Ioram, who was unsure of the soundness of Bulyka's reasoning.

"A decent man's shoes are worn equally along both sides, right and left. And he wears shoes one size bigger than his foot. Why? So that he can walk freely and easily without giving himself corns. Alright? And one more thing, if the backs of a man's shoes are bent and broken, it means either that he's wearing someone else's shoes, or he's simply an untidy slob."

"And what about children?" asked Bachana.

"Children are different. They move about a lot and their bones are still soft. It's hard to tell a child's character from its shoes."

"And you? Which way do your shoes wear?" Father Ioram unexpectedly asked Bulyka.

Bulyka was taken aback.

"Mine?"

"Yes, yours!"

Bulyka bent down and pulled out from under his bed a handsomely creased and crumpled shoe with the back trodden down, and turned it over in astonishment.

"Hmm, seems I'm a pretty thorough-going villain myself!" he mumbled in displeasure and flung the shoe back under the bed.

Bachana and Father Ioram burst out laughing. Bulyka laughed too.

"My dear Ioram," Bachana suddenly changed the subject, "have you ever had a dream of Jesus Christ?"

Father Ioram's jaw dropped and his eyes gaped in astonishment. Eventually he stammered out a few words:

"Dear Bachana... It doesn't happen like that... No-one

dreams of our Lord. God manifests himself to us. But he has not as yet considered me worthy of such happiness..."

"And you haven't heard his voice either?"

"That would also be a manifestation of God!"

"But to what end do you serve?"

"I serve precisely in order to draw closer to Him, to hear His voice, to behold His face!"

"In that case we shall have to swap professions."

"How do you mean?" asked Father Ioram guardedly.

"I saw Him an hour ago."

"Who?"

"Our Lord Jesus Christ."

Father Ioram's voice trembled:

"My son, remember the commandment, 'Thou shalt not lie!'"

"The man says he saw Him. It's up to you to believe him or not!" broke in Bulyka, and winked at Ioram as if to say, "Don't interrupt, let him tell us about it."

Bachana said nothing.

"What else?" Bulyka asked impatiently.

"He raised me from the dead and transformed me into rain which brought a dead desert to life. Then I turned into a mighty, leafy oak which blossomed in an oasis; and the birds sang a great song of the beauty of life..."

"My God! Heavenly Lord!" gasped Father Ioram.

"I very nearly said the same when I saw Him with my own eyes," said Bachana with a smile.

"You saw and you doubted? Doubting Thomas!" Father Ioram raised himself in the bed.

"In my dream I fell at his feet... But then when I woke up and saw you and Bulyka, I must confess I doubted."

"But do you not feel that you have been exalted?" Father Ioram was pale from agitation.

"You know, Father, your religion is far too mystical and divorced from life, it's unreal. Now if my dream had left some real, palpable result..."

"You sinner! He raised you from the dead, what could be more real than that?"

"I can't see any purpose in my resurrection. Have I really returned to life simply so that tomorrow everything can

start all over again? In order to die again tomorrow? After all, death is inevitable."

"But it's time!" shouted Father Ioram.

"What time?" Bachana was baffled.

"Time, the length of your life! The Lord has extended your time."

"Surely it's all the same when I die, today or tomorrow?"

"For you it is, but not for others!"

"For whom?"

"For those whose life depends on yours!"

"It makes no difference... Lots of people have died very young, but life still goes on..."

"What are you talking about? What do you mean, it makes no difference?" Father Ioram was offended. "What if Rustaveli had died in the cradle?"

"Another Rustaveli would have been born."

"When?"

"Some time or other."

"Precisely! Some time or other! But how much time would have had to pass first? Just imagine what society would have been like between Rustaveli's time and ours if it weren't for his genius!"

"Come now, there was a time when there was no Rustaveli, and people managed well enough."

"They lived without God in their souls!" Father Ioram took a sip from a small jug of milk to relieve the dryness in his throat. "Time is God! Understand that! You communists don't believe in God because you don't know the value of time! You squander time! Honour time, respect time! And if you're determined to create a new faith and a new religion, begin with time! Otherwise you'll get nowhere, for—I repeat—God is time!"

"They used to say God was the word!"

"The word, the deed and time are the single and indivisible trinity!" pronounced Father Ioram reverentially.

"If that's the case, then we're for it, Father. We value time, and the deed, and the word. In fact we value them no less than the church does."

"But there have never been so many deeds postponed

and so many people happily postponing them as you have now!" laughed Father Ioram.

"Oh no, Father, allow me to disagree!" Bachana parried. "Postponing the deed is your line of business! When did the Lord Himself promise Man Heaven? After death! Or have you forgotten?"

"Heaven in the next world has to be won by a life of righteousness. How could it be otherwise?"

"Of course, you call what is won by Man through his own labour and sweat, the grace of God... That's unjust, Father! Your religion demands too great a sacrifice from people!"

"Sinful words, my dear Bachana, a sinful error!" Father Ioram took offence. "The fundamental law of our religion is to give and not to take, to serve and not to rule!"

"Beautiful words, Father, and nothing more. Remember the dark ages of religious fanaticism and dogmatism, the Crusades, the Inquisition... And all in the name of God, to His greater glory."

"I'm not trying to prove that our religion is absolutely perfected," Father Ioram began to waver.

"Bravo, Father!" chuckled Bachana. "That's the first time I've heard anything of the sort from a minister of religion. What do you call that kind of opinion, a rightist deviation? Or is it leftist?"

"In the Christian religion there are neither deviations nor centre. There is only the zenith!" pronounced Father Ioram in a didactic tone, and raised his eyes to the ceiling.

"And where is it, this zenith?" asked Bachana, also glancing involuntarily upwards.

"The zenith is light. And when Man enters the kingdom of light he will overcome all restrictions and acquire freedom. But this will come with the perfection of Man's soul, and therefore his death is his approach to God." Father Ioram folded his hands prayerfully on his chest.

"And when they brought you in here all blue and scarcely alive, do you recall who you prayed to for help? The doctors, not God!" put in Bulyka.

"The fear of death is the fear of drawing closer to God," said Father Ioram, without looking at Bulyka.

"You're dissembling, Father! Maybe it was the fear that gave you the heart attack?" Bulyka winked at Bachana.

The priest cast a withering glance at Bulyka.

"Your religion, you miserable man, begins in your stomach and ends in the lavatory. Hell itself would reject a sinner such as you!"

"Of course, if I went there with a reference from you! Anyway, I'll let you have the lot, heaven and hell. I want to see communism."

"Be my guest, Bulyka," Bachana invited the cobbler. "We're kind-hearted, not only will we take you, we'll take Father Ioram as well."

"Oh no! Your zenith is too earthbound. I wonder what you'll do when you reach this communism of yours?"

"We'll see when we get there."

"And what if you don't see anything?" asked Father Ioram, not without a certain malice.

"My dear Ioram, how old is your religion?" Bachana answered a question with a question.

"Two thousand years!" There was a note of pride in Father Ioram's voice.

Bachana laughed quite sincerely:

"Ours isn't a hundred years old yet... And it has more followers than your religion has ever dreamed of. At two thousand years of age you want to try your strength with youngsters of a hundred years? You should be ashamed of yourselves! Have patience, and when we're two thousand years old, try glancing down on us from your exalted zenith. Then we'll be able to judge who's reached the greater height."

"It's hard to argue with people who don't believe in anything at all!" Father Ioram turned to face the wall.

"What does your religion give the people?" Bachana persisted.

"Spiritual nourishment!" answered Father Ioram, without turning round. "And yours?"

"Spiritual and material nourishment! But first of all—material. To make his way to the zenith, Man needs bread, cheese, butter, potatoes, tomatoes and meat. Isn't that so?"

"And where is this meat?" Father Ioram turned round quickly to face Bachana.

"That's no argument, Father! If there's none today, there will be tomorrow!"

"And incidentally, our religion does not forbid people to eat or to produce meat. It's a little awkward to speak of this, but... There was more meat before than there is now."

"Before there were only 500 million people living on earth, and now there are almost 4,000 million."

"Mmm... We gave up cannibalism too soon," Bulyka spoke after his long silence. "There'd be less people and plenty of meat."

"See what a cynic your religion has turned this man into!" Father Ioram pointed to Bulyka, who was about to answer, and had even opened his mouth, but the words stuck in his throat: the rat had crawled out from under his bed, together with its entire family, and sat in the centre of the ward.

"So much for the arsenic!" Bulyka broke the silence.

When he saw the rat Bachana was overcome, not by revulsion, but by curiosity. The rat went round all three lockers in turn as though deliberately seeking something out, and not finding anything, gazed at each of the three patients. But when Bulyka threw it a piece of sugar, it did not even glance at it.

"I can't understand it," said Father Ioram. "Either she's breakfasted very well or she's decided to go on hunger strike."

"We should call Zhenya, and get her to bring that cretin of a disinfector to see for himself the piglets we have wandering around here!" suggested Bulyka.

The rat once again made the rounds of the lockers, then went back to its family and told them something with funny twitching movements of its forepaws and whiskers. Her husband and the two little rats listened carefully, and the mother led her offspring under Bulyka's bed, where she obviously sent them home through the crack in the wall and then returned to her husband. They launched into a heated discussion.

"A family quarrel. Best if the children aren't present," said Bulyka knowingly.

Suddenly the rat started in fright to one side and sped off, running in crazy circles around the ward. Then it came back to the male and stood transfixed, breathing heavily, before him. And now the male set off on a wild dance around the ward. After a minute he ran up to the female and stopped still with his gaze fixed on her. For a long time both rats stood motionless, facing each other.

Bachana was seized by a terrible foreboding, and his heart began to pound in alarm... The two young rats appeared from under the bed. They ran up to their parents, but their parents did not appear to notice them. The young rats nuzzled their little snouts against them. The rats did not move. Their children began to tug first at one, then at the other with their paws. And suddenly they all sped off together and began dashing round and round the room, colliding with the lockers, the walls and each other, falling over and leaping back up.

"What on earth is happening to them? Have they gone mad or what?" Father Ioram crossed himself. "Bulyka, for God's sake, call Zhenya!"

But Bulyka had turned pale and was sitting on his bed, staring dumbfounded at the rats' wild dance.

"It's the arsenic... They've eaten the arsenic and now they're looking for water. But water will only kill them all the sooner," said Bachana.

"What about milk?" asked Father Ioram in a trembling voice.

"Put some down for them, Father!"

With trembling hands Father Ioram poured some milk into a saucer and put it on the floor. But it was too late. The crazed rats did not even notice the saucer.

"Strange, the young seem to be holding out better," said Bachana, and instantly, as though to refute his observation, one of the children flipped over on to its back with its paws in the air. A moment later the other young rat also fell.

"I can't bear to watch them!" groaned Bulyka. He put a nitroglycerine tablet under his tongue and covered his face with his hands.

"Lord have mercy!" exclaimed Father Ioram.

Sensing their misfortune, the rats gathered their wits and staggered over to their children's bodies.

"Zhenya!" yelled Bachana, involuntarily raising himself on the bed. The rats raised their heads and in the black beads of their eyes Bachana glimpsed a depth of pain, astonishment and despair that brought a chill ache to his heart.

"Zhenya!" he shouted again, and threw himself back on to the pillow.

"My dear Bachana! Bachana! My son!" Father Ioram twisted round in his bed. "Bulyka, see what's wrong with him!"

But Bulyka lay there with his head thrust into his pillow, hearing nothing.

"Hey, anybody! Help!" roared Father Ioram and attempted to stand, but a terrible piercing pain in his heart forced the old man back down...

A deadly silence fell on the ward. On the floor lay the lifeless bodies of the rats, and death lurked at the bedside of the scarcely-breathing patients, gazing greedily into their souls.

No-one heard the creak as the door swung open and the startled doctor and Zhenya burst into the ward.

"Well, are you happy now?" said Zhenya, catching sight of the dead rats. Then came the doctor's cry of alarm:

"Morphine, quickly! All three of them!"

8

Lasa Basiliya had found Tamara at the station at Ozurgeti. The girl was asleep on a bench, with her head resting on a small bag. Sensing someone staring at her, she woke up. Her huge blue eyes were hungry, her face was white as parchment, her beautiful red lips pouted gently and her straw-blonde hair tumbled down on to firm breasts. She sprang to her feet. Lasa took one look at her shapely figure and he was struck dumb...

...From that day on there was a new waitress in Lasa Basiliya's diner, and the number of customers tripled. The en-

tire male population of the village began to gather here. They sat and told funny stories, drinking incalculable amounts of sour Isabella. Their wives and parents had a struggle to drag their befuddled men-folk off their chairs.

"Tamara, my angel, another ten bottles!"

"Tamara, damn you, who made you so beautiful?"

"To hell with the change, one look from you is worth a million roubles!"

"Give me a smile, Tamara, and then you can slit my throat with Lasa's knife."

"Lasa, kiss the girl's feet. Without her you and your stinking diner would have been finished!"

"What a stroke of luck, Lasa! Now you can sell dog-meat if you want."

"Give me a kiss, Tamara, then throw me in the Supsa-river."

"Just look at those hips!"

"How come no-one's abducted her yet?"

"Coming up!"

"I don't know."

"A million's too much! What would I do with all that money?"

"Your wife's more beautiful than I am!"

"I'll kiss you when you're sober!"

"I love someone else, my darling!"

"Get your hands off! Lasa, calm this drunkard down!"

"Time, Lasa, close the place!"

It was the same every day...

Bachana went into the diner and sat at a table in the corner.

Outside steam was rising from the baking earth; in the diner the freshly-washed floor exuded a pleasant coolness. Lasa was in the kitchen, concocting something in a seething cauldron. Tamara was standing at the counter with her back to Bachana, drying glasses.

At this early hour the diner was empty. The customers usually gathered after mid-day. Bachana knew this, which was why he had come at such an unsociable time. He waited

for a little while, and then timidly cleared his throat. Tamara turned round quickly, and Bachana's heart skipped a beat. He lowered his head and began to cough — this time because he was overcome by nervousness. Tamara picked up a plate, a knife and a fork from the counter and came over to Bachana. Bachana could only see her fingers, long and beautiful, slightly reddened and swollen from the hot water. She set the plate on the table and looked her customer over in astonishment. It was the first time she had seen him.

"What will you have?" she asked.

Bachana raised his head.

"Some bread!" he said quietly, swallowing the lump in his throat.

"Is that all?"

"And some cheese."

"And some meat?"

"No."

"Wine?"

"I mustn't. I have an exam tomorrow."

"What in?"

"Physics."

"What class are you in?"

"These are my final exams."

"Aa-ah... Would you like some mutton soup?"

"I haven't got enough money for soup!" Bachana blushed.

Tamara went away and was soon back, carrying a tray. She placed bread, cheese, a bowl of soup and a glass of wine in front of Bachana.

"One glass is alright!" she smiled and sat down opposite Bachana. "What's your name?"

"Bachana."

"And what's your surname?"

"Ramishvili."

"My name's Tamara."

"I know!" Bachana raised his glass.

"Why haven't I seen you before?"

Bachana was embarrassed. He took a gulp of the wine, as though his heart was in his mouth and he needed to ease it back into place.

"People my age don't come to the diner."

"Then why did you come today?"

"I felt really hungry, so I came." Bachana took another gulp of the wine.

"Is it sour?" Tamara wrinkled her nose funnily.

"Your health!" Bachana drained his glass. "How much is that, please?"

"I'll tell you when you've passed your physics exam!"

"Tamara!" a voice called from the kitchen.

"Coming, Lasa!" called Tamara. "Back in a moment!" she said to Bachana, and ran off.

When she came back, Tamara was astonished to find that Bachana was no longer in the diner. The food on the table had not been touched.

"Hello!" Tamara greeted Bachana as she sat at his table.

"Hello!" he replied.

"Did you pass?"

"Yes."

"What did you get?"

"Just a passing mark," Bachana smiled reluctantly, "and that only out of respect for my grandfather Lomkatsa." He took a five-rouble note out of his pocket and put it on the table. "That's for yesterday's lunch."

Tamara did not even glance at the money.

"How many more exams have you got?"

"Tamara! Stop wasting time on that young whelp! Come here!" shouted Dutu Tsenteradze, who was sitting at a table in the far corner with four of his drinking-companions and was already merry.

Tamara ignored him.

"How many more exams are there?"

"Just one."

"When?"

"The day after tomorrow."

"Come in then."

"I'll come tomorrow too."

"Do. What shall I get you now?"

"Tamara! An infant has to leave its mother's breast, why

can't you part with this snot-faced infant?" Dutu shouted again.

Tamara went across to him.

"What do you want?"

"What else should I want if not your beauty? Stay here a while, with us!"

"I've no time! If you want something, tell me."

"Bring another ten bottles and sit beside me! I want to drink to your health!" Dutu grabbed Tamara by the arm. She pulled herself free and went to the counter.

"Lasa, give me ten bottles of wine."

Lasa began to get out the bottles. Dutu made his way towards the counter. From the way his eyes glittered it was clear that he'd already taken plenty of drink.

Dutu Tsenteradze was a militiaman. He was squat and broad-shouldered with long arms, and he had a defiant, confident manner. He went up to the counter and put his arms round Tamara.

"Leave the girl alone, Dutu, and get back to your table!" said Lasa with a frown.

"The girl doesn't object, so why should you get all hot and bothered?" Dutu snarled, and snatching up six bottles of wine as though they were toys, he went back to his place. "And by the way," he yelled at Lasa, "serving the wine is your job! If I see anyone going near this girl, he'll have no-one to blame but himself! I'll put his coffin at the door of the Archangel Gabriel Church! You've been warned!" Dutu announced for all to hear.

Tamara took over the other four bottles. Dutu forced her to sit down beside him.

"Sit down, girl, I want to drink to your health!" Dutu rose glass-in-hand and turned towards Lasa. "Lasa Basiliya! Aren't you ashamed to force this beautiful woman to wash dirty dishes? Give Tamara to me, and I'll sit her on a golden throne, and she'll live like Queen Tamar!"

"Which golden throne is that? The one your wife Taliko sits on?.. Look after your own affairs, you windbag! Not a stake or a tree in your entire yard, and your chickens have nowhere to roost at night! A fine knight-errant you are!"

The diner exploded with laughter.

"Lasa, don't stick your tongue out too far, in case I step on it by accident!" threatened Dutu.

Bachana stood up and went towards the door.

"You stop there, lad!" Dutu called to him. "What are you doing hanging around here? Can you see anyone else here your age?"

"I came in to eat," Bachana answered calmly.

"I know what you came in for! Here, drink that and get off home!" Dutu held out a glass of wine and a boiled chicken-leg. Bachana went up to the table, took the glass and the meat from Dutu and put them on the table.

"I don't drink."

"Then go!"

"It's none of your business whether I go or I stay!" Bachana's cheeks were glowing red. Dutu stretched out his hand to catch him by the ear, but Bachana swiftly stepped aside, and Dutu's hand was left suspended in mid-air. "You're drunk, Tsenteradze!" Bachana flung the words in the militiaman's face, and went to the door.

"Whose young pup is that?" asked Dutu, astounded.

"That's Lomkatsa Ramishvili's grandson!" answered Ushangi Kalandadze, who was sitting next to him. Dutu bit his lip. "Wasn't it him who killed Manuchar Kikvadze, the one your chief got a medal for liquidating?.. Better leave him alone..." Kalandadze whispered in his ear.

"It's not true," hissed Dutu. "I took part in that operation myself!" His face had turned crimson. "He's a young viper—and the son of a Trotskyist!"

"Come on, what harm has the boy done you? He came into the diner, didn't even eat anything, and went off again... It's no good, Dutu... You can't go crazy like that over some woman..." objected Afanasi Loria.

"Not some woman, you bastard! Not some woman, a goddess! Go down on your knees to her and pray!" Dutu slapped Afanasi on the shoulder with his bear-like paw.

Afanasi staggered. A tense silence fell.

"Dutu, did you win Tamara on your state bonds or something? Let the girl go, give us a chance to admire her too!" Mamuka Yashvili attempted to defuse the situation.

"I'll forgive your jabbering for today, but as from tomor-

row, don't you set foot in this diner again!" threatened Tsenteradze.

"Maybe you should join the army, if you're such a great hero!" laughed Mamuka. "Maybe you'd scare off Hitler for us!"

"And who'd keep order here? Who'd keep an eye on deserters like you?"

"Me, a deserter? I've still got a kilogram of shrapnel in my chest!" Mamuka pulled open his shirt. "And you call me a deserter! And you're going to keep order around here! You, the greatest idler and deserter of them all!" Mamuka seized a bottle from the table and went for Tsenteradze.

Bachana left the diner.

Only three months after Tamara's first appearance in the diner the village was buzzing with rumours. Like the swallows of spring they flew round every household and farmstead. Everywhere—in the tea plantations, in the fields, the vineyards, the orchards, the vegetable-plots, the bazaar, the office, the bath-house, the hairdresser's, the library—all the whispering and gossiping was of the young waitress.

"Did you hear, the day before yesterday Mamuka Yashvili and Dutu Tsenteradze nearly slit each other's throats in the diner, all because of that she-devil..."

"They say that good-for-nothing Dutu gave his wife a beating and sent her off to her father's place in Melekeduri..."

"Damn Lasa for finding that witch! They say he's put a child in her belly... See how much weight she's put on..."

"It's not his... It's that militiaman Dutu's..."

"Seems she even made eyes at Mamuka Yashvili, but his wife Darejan gave her a good thrashing!"

"That girl's as bad as Hitler! She's turned the whole village upside down!.."

"What makes that trollop so special anyway?.."

"Whatever it is, it beats me! They say Tornike Kintsurashvili went for Ardalion Gvaladze with a knife..."

"And what's our militiaman Dutu doing about it?"

"Dutu's one of her greatest admirers himself!"

"Never mind Dutu, now she's gone and turned that young boy's head too!"

"What young boy?"

"Lomkatsa Ramishvili's grandson, Bachana... She should be put away just for that, for attempting to corrupt a minor... The day before yesterday I saw the boy at the diner, and his eyes were like a madman's..."

Tamara lodged with Zosim Khintibidze. She occupied a tiny room at the end of the house, with a window overlooking the cart-track.

The village was asleep. Bachana tapped gently at the window. After a minute Tamara's startled face appeared. When she saw Bachana, her eyes flashed reproach at him. She bit her lip and gestured with her arms, then cautiously opened the window a little and whispered to the embarrassed Bachana:

"You too?"

"Let me in for a minute!" Bachana implored her.

"Haven't I enough trouble without you?" Tamara's voice trembled.

"Let me in!" repeated Bachana.

"Don't get involved in this dirty business, Bachana! Go home! What do you want from me? Why are you shaming me like this? What have I done? It's too much. Leave me in peace." Tamara burst into tears.

Bachana climbed in through the window, walked round Tamara and sat at the table. The girl lit the lamp and sat down opposite him.

"What do you want?" she asked piteously.

Bachana said nothing.

"Why did you come here?"

"Is it true what they're saying in the village?"

"What are they saying?" sighed Tamara.

"All sorts of things... Bad things..."

"And you believe them?"

Bachana shrugged.

"I came to..."

"To do what?"

"I came to..."

"Don't say it!.. I thought you were the one in the whole village with a pure heart! Don't say anything!"

Bachana swallowed a tear and suddenly blurted out:

"Get dressed!"

"What?"

"Get dressed now and come with me!"

"Where to?"

"I don't know."

"Where shall I go?"

"You've got to leave the village!"

"Leave in disgrace?"

"You've got to go! All any of them see in you is a woman, but I..."

"You?"

"Get dressed, I say! Collect your other clothes, and let's go!" Bachana's voice sounded so firm and convincing that he didn't recognise it as his own.

Tamara jumped to her feet, quickly pulled a suitcase out from under the bed and began stuffing her things into it. And Bachana went out on to the balcony and hammered on Zosim's door.

"Who's there?" asked Zosim's sleepy voice.

"It's me, Bachana, Lomkatsa Ramishvili's grandson."

"You've got the wrong door, lad!"

"No I haven't, Uncle Zosim. Will you come out please, and Aunty Maro too!"

"If you're drunk, be off home!" said Zosim angrily.

"No, I'm not drunk! Come out here for a minute!" said Bachana.

The door opened. Zosim appeared in his underwear. Behind him stood his frightened wife Maro.

"I'm taking Tamara away, Uncle Zosim, I want you and Aunty Maro to know that..."

"Take her and welcome... Did you wake me up to tell me that? She doesn't owe me anything, the room's paid in advance, so..."

"Uncle Zosim, have you ever seen Mamuka Yashvili, or Dutu Tsenteradze or Lasa Basiliya or Tornike Kintsurashvili coming out of her room?"

"What are you badgering me for, lad? Am I her keeper or something?"

"No, Uncle Zosim, you're a right-minded man! Tell me the truth!"

Zosim hesitated and scratched the back of his head.

"I won't lie to you, son. I've never seen anyone coming out! Dutu Tsenteradze turned up three times, dead drunk, and tried to force her door open, but she didn't let him in. Tornike Kintsurashvili came round twice, a bit under the weather, and went away empty-handed. You're the first one I've seen in her room at night." Zosim glanced into Tamara's eyes as she stood there with the suitcase in her hand.

"Then why do they say those shameful things about her?" asked Bachana.

"No-one ever heard a bad word about her from us, son!" Maro stepped forward. "Quite the reverse, we always said the opposite, but who would believe us?"

"Let's go!" Bachana took the suitcase from Tamara's hand.

"Where are you taking her off to at night, son? Wait till morning and I'll pack you up properly for the road," Maro fussed.

"What you've just said is all she needs!" answered Bachana. "Goodbye. Thank you," he added.

"Does your grandfather know what you're doing?" Zosim asked when Bachana was already outside.

"Yes, he does!" Bachana answered shortly, and took Tamara by the hand. "Let's go!"

They walked in silence. When they came out on to the highway, Bachana put down the suitcase, sat down on the edge of the road and rolled up a smoke. Tamara sat down beside him. After a short rest they moved on, and made their next halt just before the road began to climb the Nasakirali incline.

"Say something, please!" said Tamara.

Bachana drew out a small bundle from inside his jacket and placed it on Tamara's lap without saying anything.

"What's this?" the girl asked.

"My advance from the collective farm. Six hundred

roubles. Enough to get you started. Buy some flour..." Bachana's voice broke.

Tamara opened the bundle, glanced at the money, then carefully wrapped it up again, thrust the bundle back inside Bachana's jacket, buried her head in her knees and began to sob bitterly. Bachana made no attempt to comfort her or calm her. He waited for her to cry herself out, but she just went on. He said:

"It's good to cry... When I'm hurt or upset and my heart feels like stone, I go off into the forest, lie under a tree and cry... I cry out loud, like a baby... I cry all day, until my tears dry up and my heart is lighter... Then I feel better... Have a good cry! Get it all out. Otherwise you feel like you're dying... Don't be offended at people... It's not their fault... It's just that you're so beautiful, so incredibly beautiful... And our menfolk have just gone crazy with jealousy and started squabbling... I haven't slept a wink for three months for thinking of you... Who could have made you so beautiful, with those big, soft eyes? Everyone thinks your smile is just for him, that tender glance is just for him... And I thought so too. I know it's stupid! I know, but I love you, I love you so much... I can't live without you, I'll die." Tamara had stopped crying. She was listening in amazement to what Bachana was saying. He went on: "I'll soon be seventeen. It's not a lot, but it's old enough. I know you think of me as a child. But don't be surprised. I love you so very much... What can I do? Take the money, I didn't steal it. My grandfather gave me it ... for you... My grandfather is a wise man. It was him that sent me to you, he told me to take you away from here. If only you could love me ... but you're too beautiful, and I don't know what will become of you. I'm still too young to look after you and protect you. And I love you so very much... I haven't slept for three months, I think about you all night long..."

Bachana was choking on his own tears. He buried his head in Tamara's lap and howled like a wolf-cub lost in the woods, just as he had that time in the Chkhakouri forest.

Tamara pressed Bachana's head to her breast, and he felt his leaden heart grow lighter, felt it warmed and heated till it burst into flames. He embraced Tamara and showered

kisses on her breasts, her neck, her cheeks. He touched the salt moisture in her eyes and heard her agitated whisper:

"You are my darling, the joy of my heart... My brother and my father, my son... My sorrow and my pain... My desolation... My own sweet boy, my love... Where did you come from, how did you come into my life?"

And then their lips found each other and were silent, and their hearts spoke instead.

In their breasts silver bells were chiming, a harmony so sweet and sublime, they wanted nothing but to pray, simply pray.

"Great Lord God! Unite our souls and our bodies, let us be fused in the single, great, inexhaustible unity of life! God of justice, give unto me her blood, and let my blood be hers! Preserve us from sin and take the lives we offer you!.."

"Bachana, my darling, why did you come into my life? You are my joy and my sorrow. Don't... I'm a virgin..."

"Great Lord Almighty! Grant me strength! Let my reason not be clouded! Save me, Lord!"

They held hands as they walked along the highway. The forest was waking to the day and the birds were making ready to sing their hymn to the morning sun. The dogs began to bark in the neighbouring villages. Somewhere across the river a man who had risen at first cock-crow cursed the cow that had broken into his kitchen-garden. The sky began to brighten, the clouds above the mountain-tops turned pink and morning came to Nasakirali.

Bachana halted and set the suitcase at Tamara's feet.

"You go on now!" he said quietly.

Tamara looked at him for a long time before asking calmly:

"How shall we go on living?"

Bachana said nothing.

"What will you tell the neighbours?"

Bachana shrugged.

"Go," he forced out the word.

"Don't forget me..."

Bachana shook his head.

"I love you more than anyone in the whole world!"

"Don't get married... I'll soon be grown up..." sobbed Bachana.

Tamara sank to her knees before him and pressed her lips to his hands.

"How could you possibly grow up any more?" She embraced his legs.

Bachana carefully disentangled himself from her embrace, backed away a few steps ... and left her.

When he had gone about five hundred yards he glanced around. Tamara was still sitting there by the road and watching him.

And suddenly Bachana shuddered in amazement: he saw with astounding clarity Tamara's blue eyes, welling with tears. Nothing but her eyes.

Bachana entered the diner at noon. The overcrowded room was full of smoke and clamour. Lasa stood behind the counter, slicing cucumbers and tomatoes with practiced dexterity. He saw Bachana come in and froze with the knife in his hand. Silence fell. Joyful, astonished and startled faces gazed at Bachana, only one question in all their expressions. For a minute or so no-one ventured to break the silence. Lasa was the first to come to himself.

"There he is then!" he shouted, and sighed in relief, as though a ton weight had been lifted from his shoulders. The diner came to life and everyone started talking at once. And then Dutu Tsenteradze's mocking voice rang out amongst the clamour:

"Greetings to the ragged little bridegroom!"

Paying no attention to the militiaman, Bachana went up to the table where Tornike Kintsurashvili was sitting, and stood in front of him.

"What did you do with the girl? Take her to your grandad?" Tornike was tipsy.

"Tornike Kintsurashvili! Tell the people here, was she a dishonourable woman?" Bachana asked loudly.

"Ask Lasa about that. She served him as mattress and pillow!" laughed Tornike.

"Uncle Lasa, is this man telling the truth?" Bachana asked.

"May I never see another day dawn, and may this knife pierce my heart if I ever abused the girl in word or deed, or even in thought!" Lasa stuck the blade of the knife half-way into the counter.

Bachana turned back to Tornike.

"If you're a man, stand up, Tornike Kintsurashvili, and tell us how many times you visited her! Don't be shy, she won't hear you anyway!"

"Why should I account for myself to a snot-nosed kid like you!" exploded Tornike.

"Own up, how many times did she throw you out?"

"Nobody threw me out! I sobered up and went myself... There's Zosim, you ask him!" Tornike said more peaceably.

"Mamuka Yashvili, I'd take your word above anyone else's! Tell me why your wife Darejan got into a row with Tamara!" Bachana turned to Mamuka, who had been sitting in silence all this time, chewing on his lip.

"It was a stupid mistake... Dutu Tsenteradze's wife drove her crazy with her tittle-tattle," said Mamuka, without raising his head.

"You leave my wife alone, you louse!" shouted Tsenteradze.

Mamuka rose to his feet, but Bachana was too fast for him:

"And now own up anyone here who slept with her even once! You start, Dutu!"

Tsenteradze stood up. He stood up intending to throw this insolent pup, out on his ear, but Bachana took the militiaman's movement as an answer to his question, and grabbing the knife that was still stuck into the counter, he advanced on Tsenteradze.

"You're lying, you villain, you're lying! Three times you tried to break into her room, and three times you were sent off with your tail between your legs! You're a brazen, conceited braggart, Dutu Tsenteradze, and you spread foul lies about an honest girl so that you could boast in front of everybody! Am I right, Uncle Zosim, or am I wrong?"

"Right, my boy, I'll swear to it!" answered Zosim, pale-faced.

"How would you know, you blockhead?" Tsenteradze attacked him. "Did you pull my boots off for me?"

"The boy's right, everyone, I swear before God!" repeated Zosim.

"You're a louse, Dutu Tsenteradze!" Bachana hurled the words into the militiaman's face with a force of feeling he had never experienced before.

"I'll kill you, you young whelp! What kind of trial does he think he's holding here? Flinging mud at everyone! And who am I, a representative of the legal authority or an errand boy?" Tsenteradze grabbed hold of his revolver and went for Bachana menacingly.

"You're a monkey, Dutu Tsenteradze, that's who you are! And I don't give a damn for your revolver!" And Bachana moved to meet Tsenteradze. Running out from behind his counter, Lasa got between them.

"Then let me tell you, everyone!" shouted Bachana. "I was at Tamara's last night! She came to our town a virgin, and she left us a virgin! This is the truth, I swear on my mother!"

Suddenly there was the sharp sound of a blow, and to everyone's surprise, Dutu Tsenteradze fell flat on his back on the floor. Mamuka Yashvili went up to Bachana, rubbing the palm that was swollen from the blow, and with the same hand he stroked the boy's cheek.

"You're a fine lad, son! You get off home, and I'll deal with him."

Bachana walked unhurriedly towards the door.

9

On the twenty-second day the professor allowed Bachana to turn over in bed. Now he could lie on his side, propping up his head on one hand, and contemplate both his neighbours in all their glory. Then he was given physical therapy to do for two weeks, consisting of clenching and unclenching his fists. When Bachana was allowed to sit up—

which was on the twentieth day following the original ar-
nesty"—a girl came into the ward who was so incredibly beautiful that Bulyka dropped the jar of youghourt he was holding. When this angel with raven-black hair and green eyes sat on Bachana's bed, Father Ioram crossed himself and exclaimed:

"Perhaps now you'll believe in God, my dear Bachana?"

"I will, Father, if only it's not a dream!" answered Bachana, astounded both by the girl's beauty and her bold manner.

"Let it be a dream, if only she'll sit with me!" said Bulyka, and only then realised that he still had his spoon in his mouth.

"I'll get round to you!" the girl responded.

"I'm waiting for you, miss!" said Bulyka in invitation.

"Good morning, comrades! My name is Ketevan, Ketevan Andronikashvili. I'm the senior physiotherapist here!" the girl introduced herself.

"Really? Then what on earth do our doctors think they're doing, tormenting us with all these tablets and injections? One visit by a woman like you is as good as five injections, if not ten!" shouted Bulyka.

The girl gave a smile of satisfaction.

"Dear Bachana, look, she smiles! Reach out and touch her! If she doesn't disappear, then it's all real!" said Bulyka.

"With your permission!" Bachana touched the girl's beautiful fingers. "Rejoice, Bulyka, she's alive," he answered his friend, but he did not remove his hand. Then the girl cautiously withdrew her fingers from under Bachana's palm and felt his pulse. "Oh, my pulse won't make any sense at all! Give it time to settle down..." Bachana placed the girl's hand on his heart. "Feel how it's pounding!"

The senior physiotherapist removed her hand and pressed her small pink, beautiful shell of an ear to Bachana's chest.

Bachana gasped for breath.

"Doctor, do you want to kill me?" he whispered, casting an imploring glance at Ioram, who spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness and closed his eyes, as if to say there was nothing he could do.

After a minute the girl straightened up and asked in a serious voice:

"Do you feel any pain in the heart?"

"The pain was already gone, and until you came in, my pulse was normal, but now it's all started up again," sighed Bachana.

"Lord, have they given all the patients here the same script?" The girl frowned.

"What, do the others say the same?" asked Bachana in disappointment.

"The very same! As a writer you should show a little more originality!" the girl answered maliciously.

"What could be more original!" Bachana groaned piteously. "Here I am, a corpse, and I'm still talking to you..."

The girl laughed:

"Yes, that's original alright! And now let's get down to business!" She carefully raised Bachana to a sitting position. "Have you heard of Hatha Yoga?"

Bachana was taken by surprise.

"I read something when I was young. It's a system of Hindu philosophy, isn't it? The achievement of perfection of body and soul by means of special physical exercises... Isn't that it?"

"That's right," agreed the senior physiotherapist. "For the time being we'll just use the simplest Hatha Yoga positions, and you can worry about perfecting your soul when you get out of here..."

"Very well!" Bachana bowed his head submissively.

"Do you know what the 'lotus' is? You've probably heard about it at least? I hope you've seen a seated Buddha, haven't you? That pose is called the 'lotus'."

"I see."

"Let's try it then!" The girl rolled up the sleeves of her doctor's smock and pulled the blanket off Bachana. In his embarrassment Bachana tried to cover his semi-naked body with his arms. Paying no attention to him, the girl continued, "You do it this way: take your right foot and bring it up to your left hip..." Bachana obediently did as she said, and immediately realised how thin he had got while he was

ill: he couldn't have made that movement before to save his life. He was delighted at the unfamiliar feeling of lightness and freedom.

"Excellent!" The girl praised his effort. "Now take the left foot, draw it under the right leg and bring it up ... where?"

"To the right hip."

Bachana spoke the sentence in the voice of a diligent novice, and attempted to perform the movement indicated. But it wouldn't work! His left foot got stuck somewhere half-way, he felt a sharp pain in his liver and he broke into a sweat all over his body.

"Don't strain yourself!" cautioned the girl. "If you can't do it, go back to the starting position!"

Bachana stretched out both his legs and sighed in relief.

"Did it hurt?"

"Yes it did!"

"Never mind, you'll get used to it," she assured him, "now lie down and let your body relax!"

Bachana threw himself back on the pillow. The physiotherapist felt his muscles and shook her head in dissatisfaction.

"Relax! Relax! Let the tension go! Try the corpse position!"

"My dear girl, what are you saying! They've gone to so much trouble to raise him from the dead, and you want to turn him back into a corpse!" exclaimed Bulyka.

"India and Hatha Yoga are all very well, my daughter, but are there no other, Christian, exercises?" interrupted Father Ioram.

"The Christian exercises are all prayers, and you can't cure people with just prayers!" The physiotherapist was offended.

"But it's grand exercise, look!" And Bulyka crossed himself expansively several times with both hands. "Morning P. T."

"I'd curse you, you antichrist, but you're following the road to hell anyway!" said Father Ioram angrily, and he turned to face the wall.

The girl went over to Bulyka's bed.

"Please!" Bulyka moved over, leaving a space on the bed.

"That's alright, I'll stand." The girl felt Bulyka's pulse. "Your pulse is better... Shall we try the exercise?"

"You know, doctor, I already tried it, while you were putting our friend Bachana back in the corpse position... And I couldn't... So I won't be able to sit in the lotus position. But if you don't put your lovely ear to my heart, I'll end up in jail for killing your husband. That'll be much easier than doing the lotus!"

"I've never been in a ward where the patients think they're so funny! I'll send my assistant tomorrow, she can work with you!"

"Don't abandon us, and I'll sit on a red-hot frying-pan, never mind the lotus position!" promised Bulyka, but the senior physiotherapist left the ward, slamming the door behind her.

"And you said she was alive," sighed Bulyka.

"It was all a dream," added Bachana.

"I saw Satan in that woman's eyes!" Father Ioram suddenly turned to face Bachana and Bulyka as he broke his silence. "I tell you truly, Satan was laughing in her eyes!" and he turned back towards the wall.

Five minutes after the visit from the senior physiotherapist, the doctor's assistant Zhenya entered the ward carrying a tray. On the tray, swathed in snow-white cotton-wool, lay three gleaming syringes.

"Cardiological greetings!" Zhenya set down the tray on the table.

"Greetings to the cardiogram of the heart of Georgia!" replied Bulyka.

"Have you brought good news, Zhenya? Your eyes are sparkling!" said Bachana.

"A sensation!" Zhenya slapped the palm of her hand against the newspaper protruding from her pocket.

"Well then, quench the thirst of the poor wanderers in the desert!" Father Ioram extended his hands towards her.

"First the injection, then the sensation!" announced Zhenya categorically. "Let's get ready!"

All three turned over on to their stomachs at once and threw off their blankets. Zhenya began with Bachana...

"'Hover not above me, raven black, I am not yours!'" declaimed Bachana, rubbing the spot of the injection.

"Dear Zhenya, do you really have to drive the syringe all the way in?" asked Father Ioram, wiping away a tear with the corner of the pillow.

"Sorry, I overdid it a bit," Zhenya was embarrassed.

"Dear Christian soul, why do you have to overdo it with me? Aren't there enough godless heathens in the ward?"

"Patience in suffering," Zhenya said to calm the priest and went over to Bulyka.

"Show me the needle first!" whimpered Bulyka.

"There, look!"

"Good grief," whined Bulyka. "If that's a needle, then what's an awl look like?"

"Alright, I'm tired of haggling with you every day! Lie down!" yelled Zhenya.

"Why don't you try it and see how you like it? Lie down yourself, let's hear you howl! Go on, lie down!"

"Mind you don't choke on your own bite!"

"Just to spite you I won't let out a squeak!" announced Bulyka, and he bit into his pillow. Zhenya thrust in the syringe like a rapier.

"Is that all?" asked Bulyka, when Zhenya began to rub the site of the injection.

"That's it!"

"I'm a cretin, I should have gone in for medicine! I could make holes as well as the next man!" groaned Bulyka. Zhenya went towards the door.

"What about the sensational news?" cried Father Ioram.

Zhenya threw the newspaper on to the priest's bed. He grabbed the paper and began to search for his spectacles. Too impatient to wait, Bachana threw him his own.

"Mine are plus three too. Read it to us, Father!"

"Why, thank you!" Ioram began with the last page and the football results. "Huh, our 'Dynamo' lost to Yerevan's 'Ararat'!"

"And that's a sensation?" Bulyka waved his hand in the air. "I knew we'd lose!"

"What was the score?" asked Bachana.

"Two-nil!" answered Father Ioram, taking off his spectacles.

"That 'Ararat' team will drive me crazy," Bulyka slapped himself on the forehead. "They do nothing all year round but prepare to beat us! They don't give a damn if they lose to everyone else!"

"And our lads always play like a bunch of ninnies against 'Ararat'," blurted out Father Ioram.

"Bravo, Father! Where did you pick up that word?" Bulyka asked in astonishment.

"But we are all of us born of this world..." Father Ioram called Nikoloz Baratashvili to witness.

"If I had my way, I'd put nobody but Tbilisi Armenians in the team. You know what great players they are! They'd show 'Ararat' a trick or two!" fantasised Bulyka.

"Father, see what's on the other pages. What kind of a sensation is a football result?" said Bachana. Ioram unfolded the newspaper and froze, his eyes fixed on the first page.

"I don't believe it!" he exclaimed, and threw the paper and the spectacles over to Bachana.

"What don't you believe! Is it war?" asked Bulyka in fright.

"They've removed Nebiyeridze!" said Bachana, his face glued to the newspaper.

"Nebiyeridze? The one who..." Bulyka's eyes gaped wide in astonishment.

"That's the one..."

"Wha-aa-aa..." Bulyka shook his head in amazement. "Now all his people will come slipping and sliding down, like a ballet on ice..."

"I must confess, I never even imagined it possible..." said Bachana thoughtfully when he had finished reading, and he laid the newspaper aside.

"Just think! Yesterday he was... And all of a sudden... I don't understand, I can't believe it!" said Father Ioram.

"Was he removed, or relieved of his duties?" asked Bulyka.

"What difference does it make whether he was removed or relieved? The important thing is that the man was there, and now he isn't!" Ioram shrugged his shoulders.

"Of course it makes a difference!" said Bulyka, turning to face him. "What does 'relieved' mean? It means that a man's in difficulties, he's under pressure. So someone helps him out and relieves him. Take Africa, for instance... The people there suffer some disaster and they have to be given relief! But what does 'removed' mean? That's when a man is firmly seated in his chair and they unscrew him like a bolt or tug him out of the chair like a nail. Understand?"

"It says here he was relieved," said Bachana.

"That means he was having difficulties, so they relieved him."

"And his case has been referred to the public prosecutor's office..." added Bachana.

"Why's that?" asked Bulyka in astonishment.

"For failing to take measures against bribery and corruption, for protectionism and indifference to the complaints of the working people."

"Hang on, hang on. Is Nebiyeridze to blame for all that on his own?"

"That's what it says so far..."

"Well done, Nebiyeridze! He must have done an incredible job! And what was everybody else doing at the time, or don't they mention that?"

"And what were you up to?" Father Ioram interrupted Bulyka.

"You're asking me?" Bulyka was astonished.

"Yes, you! You're the working class. Where were you, what were you thinking about, when this man committed these outrages?"

"You're a political illiterate, Father! In the first place, I'm not working-class, but a petty artisan, and in the second place I was busy mending the shoes you'd worn out in Nebiyeridze's waiting-room."

"Well, it's none of my business." Ioram washed his hands of the affair. "Nebiyeridze is your Catholicos, and I, thank God, have my own."

"And what about the money you take for christening the children of all these bosses, is that alright?"

"You're a stupid man, Bulyka! That's God's work! If I were able to christen all the communists I'd be ranked with the archangel Gabriel himself in the next world!"

"Okay, let's admit that the affairs of the world are not your concern... But what about you, Bachana? Where were you all, what were you all doing about it?"

Bulyka transferred his attack to the writer.

"Who?" Bachana pretended not to get the point.

"You, you, the writers!"

"Us? Where were we?" Bachana's memory seemed to have gone blank. "Did we really just sit there and do nothing?" he thought, and unable to think of a reassuring answer, he said regretfully, "We were sitting beside you, my friend, repairing those worn-out shoes..."

"That's right!" Bulyka said delightedly. "And now tell me, what's going to happen to him?"

"He'll probably be punished..."

"What for?"

"They say what for."

"So it turns out that he knew nothing about what was going on, but he was in charge of it all?"

"So it seems..."

"Does it or doesn't it?" persisted Bulyka.

"Yes!"

"And now listen to what I think. If that's the way things really were, then he should be given a medal, thanked, set up with a good pension, kissed on both cheeks and sent on his way with a blessing and a firm handshake."

"What has he done to deserve that?"

"What has he done?" Bulyka sat up in his bed. "Let's say you're the respected writer and editor Bachana Ramishvili. You haven't got a clue which way is north and which is south. You've never seen the sea or a ship... Then one day they call you in and say, 'Comrade Ramishvili, there's your ship and its crew, its passengers and everything else that goes with it. We're appointing you captain! Take the ship and deliver it from Odessa to Arkhangelsk...' So off you set... You sail along for a day, two, three. The ship rolls, people are

flung from side to side, they're puking everywhere. Eventually you reach Arkhangelsk with a half-ruined ship... Now I ask you, since you, a total ignoramus in maritime matters, not only didn't sink the ship, but actually got it to its destination, don't you deserve a medal? You certainly do!" Bulyka answered his own question.

Bachana burst out laughing.

"Ask him why he's laughing, Father," said Bulyka, turning to Ioram.

"You're right, Bulyka, you're right! But when your ignoramus was appointed captain, he should have refused and said that he hadn't got a clue!"

"Maybe he tried to, and they wouldn't listen to him? Have a go, they said, we'll give you a hand... And so he had a go. And then, it's not so easy to turn down the captain's job. Especially since the one before him was no Nelson either... Don't you writers have the same problems, then?" Bulyka asked Bachana.

"Unfortunately we do, and quite often too," admitted Bachana.

"So what's the answer?"

"The answer is that everyone should do his proper job. Remember those apt lines of the blessed Rustaveli:

What fate has granted to a man,
Such is his consolation and his solace
The worker must work as he can,
The warrior wield his sword in battle fierce,"

Father Ioram recited reverently.

"My dear Ioram, you should have a haircut and join our faith — you'd make a good communist!" Bachana advised him jokingly.

"What faith? Communism?" said the priest in horror. "Earthly comforts and the denial of God! No, spare me that!"

"We-ell, you seem to have no real idea of what communism is, Father. Communism is precisely what you were just so good as to express in the words of Rustaveli! Communism

is the summit of human prosperity, it is the time when every person will be offered the chance to do what he is best fitted for, the work that best accords with his physical and mental abilities, that will afford him the greatest moral — if you like, spiritual — satisfaction!.. We communists have read your Gospel. You should read ours at least once, I swear on your God that it would do you no harm. As for concern for material things, for the stomach, as you were pleased to express it... What can I say? You're right! We are concerned with those things and we shall continue to be concerned with them! A man has to be provided for materially first of all! That is essential if his thoughts, his intellectual powers, his talents and energies are to be directed, not to the struggle for his daily bread, but to the achievement of more important, more exalted and noble goals! We affirm free labour and peace on earth, not competition, envy of your neighbour and bloodshed! And for this a man must have enough to eat, Father! That is our teaching and our religion! That is our God, an earthly and real God, not a fantasy floating up in the clouds!" concluded Bachana, and in order to conceal his agitation, he turned to face the wall.

Subdued, Father Ioram decided not to continue the argument.

"Well, may God hear your words, my dear Bachana!" he said quietly, and also turned to face the wall. Then, unable to restrain himself, he added: "And, by the way, you'd make quite a good priest too!"

That evening Bulyka had a visit from his wife Sveta, loaded down with provisions. She greeted everyone affably and gave them each something to eat, and then, folding back the blanket, she sat modestly at Bulyka's feet.

"How are you feeling, dear?" she asked her husband, who was glowing with pride and joy.

"Like a lion!" answered Bulyka, and to prove his point, he tore a leg off a boiled chicken, sank his teeth into it, and in the twinkle of an eye he held out a clean-gnawed bone to his wife.

"You"ll choke yourself, you devil!" she exclaimed in fright.

"Relax!" Bulyka tore off the chicken's other leg and went

on talking with his mouth full. "Well, what do you think of my wife, Bachana?"

"She's splendid!"

"Did you ever see such an Armenian beauty?"

"Never."

"That's because she's unique!"

"Of course! After all, you're a handsome specimen yourself," Father Ioram smiled ironically.

"And you should see my mistress! Now she's a real beauty!" Bulyka winked at his wife.

"You're full of nonsense," she said with a frown.

"Where are the children? Why haven't they visited their father?" asked Bulyka with feigned severity.

"Where should they be, Avtandil dear? Today's Saturday. Nestan's at her English class, and Tariel's having his piano lesson."

Bulyka glowed with pride.

"The way my daughter's going, Bachana, she'll be minister of foreign affairs! Does she speak Armenian? She does!" Bulyka began to bend down his fingers as he counted. "Does she speak Georgian? Naturally! Is she learning English? She is! Do they teach her French in school? They do. And then she's learning a bit of Kurdish from our yard-keeper Fizula's daughter, Gvanletsa... Now tell me, which of our ministers has known five languages? Tell me, Father!"

"You've a fine daughter, God grant her health!"

"And the boy? A Paganini!"

"Paganini played the violin, my love, and our boy plays the piano," Sveta corrected him, embarrassed at her husband's ignorance.

"Don't try to teach me! I know who played what! Paganini's my ideal, understand? I think I might just switch the boy over to the violin! What does it matter what I have to pay for? What d'you think?"

"Whatever you like, my dear, do as you think best, just don't get excited for God's sake! The professor said he'll have you on your feet in a week, and the week after that he'll let you come home. Only, he said, he has to do what we tell him."

"I'm doing what I'm told, aren't I? I take all the medi-

cines, and all the injections. Just look what they've done to my..." Bulyka jerked the blanket aside rapidly...

"Cover yourself up, for shame!" said Sveta, all of a flutter. "He's just as shameless at home, please forgive him."

"There's nothing to apologise for, we're all in the same situation," Bachana reassured her.

"What's more, my dear wife, the professor doesn't know that I've been walking for a long time now. Look!" Bulyka put his bare feet down on the floor, stood up and strutted around the room several times. "Now, what else shall I do?" He glanced around. "Right, Sveta, stand up!"

His astonished wife stood up. Bulyka put his arms round her waist.

"Don't! Don't you dare! Let go of her at once!" cried Father Ioram, but it was too late. Bulyka hoisted his wife up and gave her a smacking kiss on the neck. Sveta cried out in surprise, and blushed in confusion. Bulyka tossed his wife into the air a few more times, then put her back down.

"See that?" he exulted. "Sveta, bring my clothes, I'm leaving tomorrow! I've had enough lying around in bed!"

Bulyka sat on the edge of his bed. He was gasping for breath, but positively glowing with delight.

"What sort of stupid trick was that?" said Father Ioram angrily. Bulyka tried his own pulse. After about a minute of concentrated silence he smiled in satisfaction:

"That's it! Goodbye heart problems! Hello life!" And he embraced his wife.

"Stop your foolishness! What will people think!" Sveta pulled herself free and began to tidy her hair.

Ioram and Bachana tactfully averted their gaze.

"You seem a bit heavier than before! What could that mean, eh? What have you been up to?" Bulyka frowned and raised a threatening hand in Sveta's direction, but immediately winked at her.

"Lord! May my ears and his tongue wither and perish!" The woman fluttered her arms in total embarrassment. Bulyka laughed loudly and shouted:

"You can turn round, gentlemen, the show's over!"

10

The Sun was reclining on an immense silvery couch. The heavenly luminary's head, wrapped around with a seven-coloured rainbow, rested on the eternal snows of the slopes of Mt. Kazbek. His arms hung down feebly.

The Sun was gasping for breath.

The Sun was bidding farewell to life.

On their knees in an attitude of prayer, their hands outstretched, Bachana, Father Ioram and Bulyka were imploring the dying Sun:

"Do not abandon us, O Sun! Do not die, Great Sun!"

Their tears flowed in foaming torrents down the slope of Mt. Kavkasioni, thundering downwards to where the earth lay, swathed in pearly mist.

And the Sun reclined on the immense silvery couch, listening without reply to the prayers of the people sobbing at the head of his bed.

That morning the Sun had risen over Mt. Kavkasioni, and gathered himself to soar into the azure heavens, when he suddenly felt a sharp pain in his chest. He sank down on one knee, then on both, slumped against the slope of Mt. Kazbek and lay there motionless.

The whole of humanity gazed horror-struck at the heavenly luminary in his death agony. People crowded the streets and the bridges, the fields and the roads, the balconies and the roofs. The branches of the trees were bowed beneath the weight of the children who had clambered on to them.

"Do not abandon us, O Sun!" groaned humanity.

But the voices of the people did not reach the dying luminary of heaven. He could only see their hands outstretched to him, and their eyes wide with terror.

"Why are they so troubled?" whispered the Sun.

"They are imploring you not to abandon them!" sobbed Bachana.

"Too late..." said the Sun, and one of his eyes dimmed and died.

"Do not destroy us, O Giver of Life!" Father Ioram prostrated himself in prayer.

"What is troubling you, what is paining you? Tell us, Light of the Heavens!" sobbed Bulyka.

"The pain of the earth is troubling me," said the Sun. "The pain of the earth!"

"But these lie in your power, both the earth's pain and its life!" exclaimed Father Ioram.

"The earth is my heart, the only part of me that lives and breathes. All my other cells, all other parts of me have perished and died... Surely you people who worship me must know of this?"

"Who are you then, Light of the Heavens?" asked Bachana in astonishment.

"I am the ardent spirit of those who rest eternally in love... My life is fed by the souls of those who have died in love... And now the time has come for my life to be extinguished, for the wellspring of love on earth has run dry, for more people die of hatred than of love. Bring love back to life and I shall rise from the dead. I implore you, people, bring me the gift of life nurtured on people's love!.. Give me back the love that has been lost, and I shall return to you, O people!" The Sun began to breathe more rapidly and toss about.

"O Light of the Heavens! Do not abandon us, take pity on us! We will love each other, and turn our death henceforth to love! We will go, Avtandil, Father Ioram and I, and beg the people of the earth in your name to return their love to you! I believe humanity will heed your call, abandon its hatred, and once more give life to love on earth! Only give us the seeds of love and your blessing!" Bachana implored the Sun.

And then the Sun laid his hot hand on Bachana's head, and Bachana felt his body being flooded with the warmth of the Sun and a feeling of all-embracing love and compassion. The Sun shuddered, stretched for the final time ... and died.

Bulyka threw himself on the heavenly luminary's still warm breast and sobbed:

"Take me with you, O Sun! I cannot live without you! Take me to your bosom as you would take love! I implore you, O Sun!"

Bachana and Father Ioram watched in horror as Bulyka melted on the breast of the dead luminary of heaven, as he dissolved into rays of light and fused with the Sun and the effulgence of the rainbow.

...For twenty centuries before the birth of Christ and another twenty centuries after His coming, Bachana and Father Ioram bore the extinguished Sun through the world. With fervent tears they implored humanity for the love and charity which would restore the Sun to the orphaned sky and light to the benighted earth. In silence and with heads bared, humanity bade farewell to its own life, the Sun, on its final journey to the burial-ground of the heavenly luminaries, for no worthy resting-place for the Sun had been found on earth. And when Bachana and Father Ioram finally attained their goal and laid the Sun to rest in the tomb prepared for him from the pure-white clouds, then two black discs appeared on the surface of the dark heavens — one huge, the other tiny and scarcely visible in the shade of the first. Humanity, so long deprived of its heavenly luminary, gazed at them in astonishment. Bachana recognised the first disc as the Sun who had died, and the second as Bulyka, who had dissolved in love on his breast. And when he knew them, Bachana sobbed bitterly.

"People, love each other!" he cried with all his might, and fell face downwards on to the icy earth.

...Bachana could not recall how long he had lain there. But when he felt the barely perceptible, painfully familiar sensation of warmth, he turned over on to his back and looked up at the sky through eyes cloudy with tears. He saw that the great disc had turned copper-red. It was gradually growing hotter and brighter. The small disc was also reddening. And when the great disc reached the limit of its brightness, it became the Sun once more and shone as formerly in the vault of the heavens, and the small disc dropped from the sky and flew down like a meteor to earth.

Day came to the earth. The Sun shone over Mt. Kavkasioni — a little paler and weaker than usual, but as joyous and gay as before. The Sun was breathing. The Sun was alive.

"Glory be to Thee, O Luminary of Love! Glory be to

Thee, O Life!" Bachana sang in praise of the Sun. He laughed and he cried.

"Bachana! My dear Bachana! Wake up!" A frightened Father Ioram was shaking Bachana awake.

Bachana opened his eyes. For a long moment he lay there gazing wildly, not understanding where he was and what was happening. Then he came to and sat up in bed. His heart was pounding. The sun had already risen, but it was still twilight in the ward.

"What's wrong, my dear Bachana? All night you were thrashing about like one possessed, laughing and crying. Perhaps you had a bad dream?"

Bachana wiped his eyes and smiled inanely. Ioram went back to his bed and lay down.

"I did have a dream, my dear Ioram, and one that Copernicus himself would envy me."

"What was it that you saw?"

"The demise of the Sun!"

"What?" Ioram thought he must have misheard.

"I dreamt that our Sun died. And guess who was mourning him?"

"Who?"

"You and I, and Bulyka ... and no one else."

Ioram listened to Bachana for a whole hour without interrupting. Only when Bachana repeated the Sun's own words, he crossed himself fervently. Then he put his hands behind his head and fixed a thoughtful gaze on the ceiling.

"You've had a prophetic dream, my dear Bachana!" said the priest after a long silence.

"For the second time!" agreed Bachana.

Silence fell again. Suddenly Father Ioram leapt up from his bed and tip-toed over to Bulyka's. Bulyka was lying with his eyes open, still and pale.

"Avtandil!" said Father Ioram quietly.

Bachana was surprised. Ever since Bulyka had asked them not to call him Avtandil, they had never used that name. Why should the Father use it now?

"Avtandil!" Ioram repeated more loudly.

"Don't wake him, let him sleep... I'll tell him some other time," said Bachana.

"Avtandil!" Ioram shook Bulyka.

"He's sleeping very soundly!" said Bachana.

"Very soundly... You go to sleep too! Turn to face the wall and go to sleep!"

"How can I sleep any more now?"

"I said turn over and go to sleep!" ordered the priest, then drew his trembling hand down over Bulyka's cold face.

"What is it, Father Ioram?" asked Bachana in a strange voice, and his temples blazed hot at his terrible suspicion.

"Your dream has come true... The Sun has died!"

Father Ioram opened the door of the ward...

Bachana drew the blanket up over his head, thrust his face into the pillow, and sank his teeth deep into it in an attempt to stifle the wail rising in his throat.

. . . . . .

"It's astonishing how much a dead person with his eyes open resembles an empty apartment in which the owner has forgotten to close the windows," said Father Ioram, when Bulyka's body had been carried out of the ward.

11

Outside the chemist's on Melikishvili Street a group of slightly inebriated young men were conducting a lively argument.

The argument had started with *khashi*. Tsitska had maintained that *khashi* was the finest thing ever invented by mankind in the search for a hangover cure. He was supported by Koka and Koplik. Kopaka tended to support the claims of unsweetened tea. Bachana would only acknowledge the effectiveness of "Borzhomi" mineral water, whereas Berdzena preferred "Nabeglavi" water, and Datiko went for cognac and aspirin. The official count of votes, of course, gave vic-

tory to Tsitska, although each voter still reserved his own opinion. What's more, there was another group, who had claimed that the only radical cure for a hangover was the sulphur baths. This group did not take part in the voting, since their absolute majority placed them *hors concours*, and in any case, they were unable to participate, since they had remained staunchly faithful to their convictions, and were therefore at the time of the vote to be found in the most appropriate place — in the sulphur baths.

The argument moved on to wines, but it did not last for long — first place was awarded unanimously to the blessed Kakhetinskoye No 8. Then, of course, they touched on political matters. Final unanimity was not achieved, but it eventually proved possible to award placings to living politicians and generals as follows:

1. Stalin
2. Churchill
3. Eisenhower
4. De Gaulle
5. Zhukov

Montgomery was in close contention with Zhukov, but he got two votes less, and the British field-marshal therefore had to rest content with sixth place.

After politics it was football's turn. Things went smoothly here. Only one man in the whole world could match up to the sporting and moral standards of the lads from Vere — Tbilisi "Dynamo" 's Boris Paichadze.

They talked a bit about art too. As always, Berdzena's authority was supreme here: the laurels were awarded to Shota Rustaveli and Michelangelo, whom Berdzena referred to affectionately as Mikela.

...But when the lads were shaken to the depths of their sinful souls by the appearance of Guranda, the daughter of the Vere kerosene merchant Apollon Kavzharadze, who walked past displaying her swan-like neck and beautiful, high-set hips, the argument veered on to genetics.

"Just try denying the importance of genes after that!" Tsitska exclaimed ecstatically. "Just look at her, every inch an antelope! And what children she'll have!"

"Genes have got nothing to do with it! Dress me up and

feed me like her, and even I'll turn out handsome!" Koplik deftly flicked his cigarette butt into the rubbish bin.

"Mm-mm, she's certainly a fine girl alright! A thoroughbred!" Berdzena returned to the main theme. "It's just a pity that she smells of kerosene..."

"How on earth did you lot get into college? Cretins! Haven't you realised yet that there's no such thing as genes, species and races? All people are equal, and their development depends on the circumstances of their life and upbringing! It was racial theory that destroyed Hitler, and you want to go back to it, just because Guranda's so beautiful?" Koka pronounced didactically.

"And who says so? Our prince Amirejibi here! Come on, now, Koka!" Tsitska shook his head disconsolately.

"To hell with Amirejibi! I'm a materialist!"

"Not a materialist, a piss-artist! That's what you are," said Tsitska, and grabbed Koka's roll-up cigarette.

"Why are you all talking such nonsense?" Bachana suddenly exploded. "I'm like my father, and he's like his, my grandfather's like his own grandfather—that's all genes, isn't it? Doesn't that all show my pedigree?"

"Sure it does, but what a pedigree!" giggled Kopaka.

One person who could definitely not be accused of lacking pedigree was Kopaka. He was the spitting image of the portrait of general Georgi Saakadze, the one that was printed in the Georgian history textbook. An athlete with shoulders a yard wide, with nostrils that flared like those of an Arab stallion, and huge eyes, there was no-one to match him in fisticuffs in Tbilisi.

"Denying the existence of genes is most convenient for those who have no pedigree!" announced Tsitska.

"You mean Koplik and me are mongrels? Is that what you mean?" Koka was offended.

"Are you crazy or something? You're the one who claimed there were no such things as races, genes and species, and now you're getting snappy with us!" Kopaka shouted at him.

"Stop the row! Here comes Professor Imedashvili, we'll ask him!" Berdzena attempted to calm his squabbling friends.

"Who'll ask?" enquired Koplik.

"Kopaka. He's got the best pedigree!" said Bachana caustically.

"Why me? Let Berdzena ask!" Kopaka refused point-blank.

"No, I'll let Tsitska have that honour. Anyway, he actually looks like a diligent student!" Berdzena also declined to accept nomination.

"By all means, I don't mind!" Tsitska separated himself from the group and prepared himself to meet the professor, who was striding along unhurriedly with a black briefcase under his arm.

The professor walked past the lads without even noticing them. Tsitska dashed across to intercept him and greeted him respectfully:

"Good day, Professor!"

"Good day!" came the reply.

"I beg your pardon, Professor... We were having an argument about a certain topic, and ... we'd like to ask your opinion..."

"Right here in the street?" The professor glanced around in embarrassment and adjusted his spectacles.

"Please come this way!" Tsitska took him by the arm and led him towards his comrades. They politely stepped aside to make space for the professor by the crumbling plasterwork of the wall.

"Well, I'm listening!" The professor transferred his briefcase from one hand to the other.

"You see, Ekvtime Nikolaevich," Koplik began, "we were arguing about whether genes ... or species ... exist or not. Tsitska says that..."

"Who?" asked the professor.

"Tsitska!"

"What's a Tsitska?"

"Tsitska — that's him!" Koplik put his hand on his comrade's shoulder. "His name's David, but we call him Tsitska."

"I see. So what does Tsitska say?"

"He and Kopaka say that..."

"And who's Kopaka?"

"He's Kopaka!"

"Is that what his passport says, Kopaka?"

"No, his passport says he's Tengiz!" answered Berdzena.

"And who's this?" asked the professor.

"That's Berdzena!"

"A Greek?"

"No, he's from Guria."

"What?"

"He's Georgian."

"What's his name?"

"Mehrab."

"And yours?"

"Koplik."

"Thank God someone around here has a normal name! So what can I do for you, Koplik?"

"Like I said... They say that there are genes and species in nature, but Koka and me..."

"Ah, so we have a Koka as well? And is Koka * the jug empty or full of water?" asked the professor, and laughed at his own joke. The boys laughed, they were pleased that the professor found them amusing.

"And so you and Koka consider that races and genes do not exist, is that right?"

"Yes!" Koplik nodded affirmatively.

"You're right! The theory of races is anti-scientific and reactionary. It's a fascist theory. As for genetics, the science of the heredity and mutability of living organisms, then that's a somewhat different proposition..."

"Excuse me, Professor," interrupted Berdzena, "but what about pedigree animals? They breed improved kinds of horses, don't they? Over in the Alexandrov Gardens they hold special exhibitions of pedigree dogs, and give them gold medals!"

"What's your name?"

"Mehrab!"

"You see, my dear Berdzena, over a period of centuries, by means of natural selection, animals..."

"But isn't man a social animal?" Tsitska gave him no

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* The Georgian word *koka* means "jug".—*Ed.*

time to finish. "And don't we select and cross-breed and develop new strains in our agriculture?"

"Friends, friends, you're like a radio-set, you know how to talk but not how to listen!" The professor spread his arms wide and let his briefcase fall to the ground.

Bachana, who so far had not spoken, quickly picked it up, thrust it under the professor's arm and said modestly:

"We're listening to you, Professor."

"Aha ... what's your name?"

"Bachana."

"Well now, my dear Bachanas, Kokas, Kopliks, Berdzenas, Tsitskas and Kopakas, these questions cannot be answered out in the street... Please come to see me in my department between five and six, or at my flat, from ten in the evening until the morning, and we can talk to your heart's content. Does that suit you?" the professor asked the bemused group of young men.

"If you don't mind, we'll come to see you at home," answered Bachana.

"That's excellent!"

"Will they let us in?" asked Koplik, glancing down at his boots.

"Certainly! Just give your names and say the boys from Vere have come."

"Goodbye, Professor!" said Tsitska.

"Good day to you!" The professor tipped his felt hat slightly and went on his way. The lads bowed their heads respectfully.

"He's a nice man, even if he is a professor!" Tsitska summed up the discussion.

"Hey, lads, Mad Margo's coming!" Berdzena suddenly exclaimed.

Along the left side of the street, from the direction of the Vere bazaar, came Margo, famous throughout that region of Tbilisi. She was waving her hands and singing a jolly little song.

The steamer sails across the sea
To distant foreign lands,
It will return with gifts for me
To grace my darling's hands.

"Make way! Here comes Margo from Vere!" she called out from time to time, interrupting her song and then continuing:

You and I can dance together
The lezginka and the tango.
Gather round, good people all,
To admire the lovely Margo.

Margo was drunk. The passers-by who knew her greeted her with a smile, then turned away, shaking their heads in pity as they walked on. Those who did not know her hurriedly moved from the pavement to the roadway in order to avoid an encounter with a woman who was drunk and clearly insane.

When she drew level with the lads, Margo pressed both hands to her lips, then spread them wide, like wings, as she blew them a kiss.

"Humble greetings to the lads from Vere from drunken Margo!"

"Hi, Margo!" The boys raised their hands to her in greeting.

"Well, my darlings, hangover again, and mouse-shit in your pockets instead of money, eh? Come to my place, my dears, come on, my loves, let's go down to the Tants-Geurka and I'll stand you a beer!" Margo drew several three-rouble notes out of her bodice and waved them about in the air. "Come on, don't be shy! Tomorrow it'll be your turn to stand me a drink!"

"Margo, love, go on home and have a rest... We've already had a drink," Kopaka said to her.

"Da-arling boy, where can I go, where can I lay my weary head? Take me as your own! Crazy, insane Margo needs someone like you to look after her! Who could take care of me better than you?.. Take me for your wife! Have pity on me! I dream of you all the time, my bright star! Let me embrace your manly chest at least once! Or am I not worthy of you? See what a fine figure I have, and what fine underwear I have on!" Margo rested one hand on her hip

and with the other she raised her dress to display snow-white underwear trimmed with lace. "Tomorrow I'll put on the crepe-georgette!" She crossed the road quickly and went up to the lads.

"Go on, Margo, go and rest!" Kopaka put his arm round the woman's shoulders.

"It's all the same to me, boys! I'll marry any of you! I love you all the same! What are you grinning at, Berdzena? You're the only one I don't want! You're too spoilt, you'd make my entire life a misery. But Tsitska now, he's different! He's an intellectual..."

"But you said you loved us all the same," put in Bachana.

"Are you here too, my poor little orphan? I'll come to see you, I definitely will! I'll bathe you and brush your hair, and wash your shirts, and iron your trousers, and then go away again... Just look at the state of you. You take a good look at yourself in the mirror."

"Alright, Margo, that's enough... Look, there's a crowd gathering... Let's go, my dear, I'll see you on your way..." said Kopaka, taking the woman under the arm.

"Oh, damn the bloody crowd! Long live the lads from Vere!" Margo put her arms round Kopaka, sank her head on to his breast and began to sing:

Come, my darling, walk with me
The great wide world twice round...

At the corner Kopaka said goodbye to Margo and let her go. He waited for a minute or so to make sure that she was going home, then went back to his friends.

"Come on, Kopaka, you're not at a funeral!" Tsitska yelled at him when he saw his doleful face.

Margo lived at the end of Petriashvili Street in a damp semi-basement room with two small windows. Four wooden steps led down into the room from the yard. Her entire wealth consisted of a table covered with a bed-sheet, an iron

bedstead with rusty nickel-plated knobs, a cupboard, two chairs, an iron and an ironing-board. The twin doors of her room bore an inscription in chalk—"Mad Margo"—the work of the local children. She wasn't offended by the inscription and she didn't rub it out.

"In the first place, it was written by the hand of an angel, and in the second place, it's the truth."

Margo had lost her father at an early age, and was her mother's only daughter. Beautiful, and with a wonderful figure, she had grown, surrounded by the love of the entire neighbourhood, more lovely with every passing year. The people of Vere were proud of their local beauty. And so things continued until that ill-fated day in 1936, when an unprecedented flood swept through the city and carried away half of Nakhalovka, uprooted and carried off the mills from Peski, and drowned people in the basements of the sulphur baths. On that day Margo's sun was extinguished, and the wheel of her fate began to run downhill.

That year the old women of Vere had made a match between Margo and Vano, the bastard son of the master goldsmith Gogia. In accordance with the unwritten law of the city a viewing of the bride was to be arranged—the girl had to appear in the baths before her future mother-in-law and sister-in-law, naked as the day she was born, so that there could be no deception, and the bridegroom could not be palmed off with a girl who had any blemishes. The mother-in-law, the sister-in-law and Margo's own poor mother would pay dearly for imagining that the merits of a girl like Margo needed to be assessed! When Margo ran along Petriashvili Street like a startled antelope and then walked on along Melikishvili Street, the salesmen and customers crowded the doorways of the shops, gaping in rapture to see her pass.

That Sunday morning they led Margo into the communal female bath-hall. And when the girl had undressed and stood, white and graceful as a marble sculpture, before the flock of ravens pressing round her, with her head held proud and high, and her jet-black locks tumbling on to her firm breasts, and when the old women, astonished by the beauty of the bride, had whispered together in approval

with their slobbery, toothless mouths—then the flood-waters inundated the baths. The panic-stricken women rushed shrieking for the door, and instead of pulling it open inwards, the whole crowd piled up against it and closed off their own exit. In an instant the turbid, muddy water had filled the underground chamber. The cries and the wails were stilled... And the people who shortly came rushing to the rescue realised that there was no-one left to save. And then someone noticed a girl with terror-crazed eyes clinging to a grille in the ceiling of one of the basement rooms. They broke out the grille, but for some time they were unable to loosen the grip on it of the girl's rigid hands.

Margo spent a month in hospital. She couldn't remember anything—neither the death of her mother and her future in-laws, nor even the fact of that terrible flood, as if nothing had happened that day. All the doctors' attempts to bring the girl to her senses were confronted with vacant, stubborn silence. Then she was transferred to a mental clinic, where she spent half a year. Finally she began to speak, but everyone realised that the girl's reason was irrevocably clouded. And all this time the scoundrel Vano did not visit his bride even once, made no inquiries as to what would become of her, did not send her a single rouble...

When she returned home, Margo sat in her room for a week without letting anyone in. One morning the neighbours heard singing coming from the room. They broke the door down to get to her. Margo was sitting at the table, on which stood two bottles of "Saperavi", one empty, the other full. She smiled at them and began to sing:

You and I can dance together
The lezginka and the tango.
Gather round, good people all,
To admire the fair Margo.

Her neighbours and friends, all up to their eyes in their own worries, gradually began to forget Margo's tragedy. And she herself grew used to being alone. But though she was abandoned by everyone, she did not go out begging for charity on the street.

She began to take in laundry and ironing from well-to-do families. The money she earned was quite enough to feed herself. And then somehow, imperceptibly, she grew fond of wine, but she always dressed neatly and cleanly, and changed her underwear every day. When she got drunk after having been paid, she would wander around the street, singing her favourite songs, and pulling up her dress for the passers-by, as if to say, see what beautiful underwear I have on. And she would name the customer that it belonged to.

With time the pernicious effect of the alcohol began to tell. Margo's face lost its former fresh, rosy complexion, and became covered in wrinkles. And now only the old residents of the quarter shook their heads disconsolately at the sight of this prematurely broken, drunken woman, wandering about the streets and singing, as they recalled her youth and her beauty, her proud bearing and the gleam of her agate eyes.

Until the inhabitants of the quarter grew quite used to Mad Margo's ways, there were some who were willing to taunt the unfortunate woman. That was when Margo learnt her unprintable language. She would station herself in the centre of the roadway and unleash such a torrent of choice abuse at her offender that passers-by would stop up their ears and shy away. But Margo only had to see a child in the street, and she would instantly cease swearing and calmly make her way home.

"No-one has the right to offend the ears of an angel, not even God himself!" she would say.

And another thing: not once in this distressful existence did Margo compromise her maiden honour and dignity. Any inhabitant of Vere who knew Margo could swear on the Bible that she was as pure and chaste as an angel...

That evening Margo came to the house where Bachana lived.

"Are you home, my little orphan?" she shouted, entering the room without waiting for a reply. Bachana was sitting at the table and studying economic planning—on Wednesday he had an exam.

"What's wrong, Margo?" he asked, setting his notes aside.

"Give me what you have for washing!" answered Margo, and began leafing through the notes.

"What washing! All I have is what I have on!"

"You'll find something," Margo persisted.

Bachana opened the cupboard and threw out on to the floor two worn-out shirts and a pair of threadbare trousers.

"Wash them carefully, for God's sake! They're falling apart as it is!" he said, and stuck his nose back in his notes.

"Are your notes really so interesting that you can't tear yourself away even for a minute?" asked Margo, opening the cupboard on the wall.

"They're very interesting, and what's more I've got an exam coming up!"

"Little idiot! If it was interesting, they wouldn't pay you to study, they'd make you pay instead!" said Margo, and slammed the cupboard door in annoyance. "What on earth do you keep this empty crate in your room for? Throw it out in the yard! Do you have anything to drink here?"

"Valerian drops."

"You can give the drops to your professor before the exam!"

Margo bent down and began to gather up the shirts and the trousers. When she straightened up, she clutched at her stomach and grimaced:

"The damn thing's always at me!" Then she unfolded one of the shirts and shook her head: "What is this, a shirt or a table-cloth? It's got the entire menu of the Tants-Geurka on it! Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

"I am, Margo love, terribly ashamed, but what can I do?"

"Get married, you fool, get married!"

"Oh yes? And what will I feed my wife with?"

"Eat each other!"

"Okay, I'll do that!" Bachana promised.

"I'll bring your things tomorrow evening! Get your five roubles ready!" Margo went towards the door. Suddenly she stopped, and pulled up her dress to display her beautiful crepe-georgette drawers. "Now, try to guess whose underwear I have on!"

Bachana shrugged.

"The minister of culture of transport of foreign affairs!" announced Margo proudly as she left the room.

She did not come "tomorrow evening". "She must have gone on a spree and she's sleeping it off," decided Bachana, and set off to visit her himself.

The door of the basement room was open and the light was on. Margo was lying on the bed in a pink embroidered nightdress. Her face was flaming red, her eyes glittered brightly.

"A-ah, my little orphan, I knew that you'd come." She smiled at Bachana, then pulled a thermometer out from under her arm. "Look at that, what does it say? I can't see anything, I've got yellow spots in front of my eyes..."

Bachana glanced at the thermometer and froze in horror: the thread of mercury read thirty-nine point nine degrees.

"What's wrong with you, Margo?"

"I don't know, my dear... Some swine keeps stabbing me, drilling into my belly with a hot spit. Wine did no good, or vodka... I stood it all day long. Then this evening I collapsed. What does it say?"

"A lot." Bachana put the thermometer on the table.

"How much, though?"

"Thirty-eight."

"Your shirts and trousers are on the table. I managed to finish ironing them, thank God. Open the cupboard there and get the vinegar, dilute some with water, moisten a towel and put it on my forehead. My head's on fire. That's all my poor old brains needed."

Bachana did as she asked.

"I'm going to bring someone," he said.

"Who?"

"A doctor!"

"Who cares about a mad woman like me, when normal people die for lack of attention?" Margo smiled.

Without another word Bachana went out and dashed as fast as his legs would carry him down Petriashvili Street.

The lads were standing outside the chemist's shop, arguing loudly about something.

"Margo's dying!" Bachana blurted out breathlessly.

"What d'you mean, dying? She was here yesterday, wasn't she?" asked Tengiz in surprise.

"She was, but now she's dying!" repeated Bachana.

"Rubbish! Talk sense, will you?" Koplik shook him by the shoulders.

"I tell you she's dying!"

"What's wrong with her?" asked Tsitska.

"A pain in her belly, a temperature of forty!"

"What could that be, Datiko?" asked Kopaka.

"I don't know, Tengiz. We need a doctor, a surgeon."

"Let's go and get Shatirishvili!" cried Koka.

"Shatirishvili's a bastard! He won't raise a finger without being paid, and he's probably already asleep by now!" said Berdzena, and spat disdainfully to one side.

"Never mind him! I'm going for Vakhtang's father, Ignati. He's a man who knows what's right!" shouted Tsitska, and dashed off.

Five minutes later the lads tip-toed down into the basement room and silently stood in line beside the bed. Margo was tossing about restlessly. When she saw the lads she raised herself up on her elbows in amazement, then threw herself back on the pillow and burst into sobs. Then she laughed a nervous, happy laugh.

"My darling boys... I was sure you would come, and I was right. My dears... Move over, don't stand there as if you were at a funeral. May all your sicknesses fall on Mad Margo..."

"Don't be afraid, Margo, Tsitska will have the doctor here in a minute," Tengiz forced out the words.

"What do I want a doctor for? I'm not going to die now. The pain has gone, and my temperature's come down." Margo tugged the damp towel from her head, tossed it into the corner and clapped her hands. Bachana moistened the towel and placed it back on the sick woman's forehead.

"My little orphan, was it you that got the boys all alarmed? Tell them you're sorry! This moment! Imagine! What patient could dream of having such visitors, let alone

someone crazy like me? Hey, Margo! Well done, Margo!" She began to cry. The lads stood there hanging their heads, uncertain what to do with their hands or where to look. When she had calmed down a little, Margo called Bachana over to her: "Up there on the cupboard there's a small wooden box. Give it to me. That's it!" She set the small box on her breast, pondered for a moment, then raised it to her ear and shook it, smiled joyfully and raised the lid. In the box lay cheap rings, bracelets, earrings, all kinds of glittery baubles.

"This priceless stone was brought from the capital of Afghanistan, Kabul, especially for Queen Tamar..." Margo drew out a two-rouble brass ring with a piece of blue glass. "It's my present to you, Kopaka. When you get married, put this ring on the middle finger of your wife's right hand. Tell her it was a present from Margo. And tell her that if I was any younger, she wouldn't be marrying you at all... Bless you! Take it!"

Tengiz took the ring, and Bachana could see his jaw twitch as he held back his tears.

"And these are for your wife, Prince Koka Amirejibi, earrings of Indian coral... They will suit a woman with a pale complexion, black hair and green eyes. Take them, don't be shy!" Into Koka's outstretched palm Margo lowered a pair of toy earrings worth a few kopecks.

"This golden bracelet is for you, Berdzena! Made by Daghestani master craftsmen. A bracelet like this is for a tall, full-breasted woman with black eyes... Take it!" Berdzena reverently accepted from Margo's hands a flat oval of metal cut from a tin can, and fled from the room without saying a word.

"And this is for me!" Margo held up to her bosom a string of ten-kopeck pieces. "Through all my youth I was never parted from this necklace, and I can't give it away... Don't be offended! Bachana, come here!"

Bachana went up to her.

"For you I have this Persian emerald. And you marry a poor orphan girl, no-one else will understand you. Take it, and may God grant you happiness!" Bachana took from Margo a light-blue button threaded on a wire. "You give out the rest," said Margo.

Bachana went round all the lads, holding the small box in his hands, and each of them took out one item without looking.

"I'm tired... And he's still poking and stabbing away with his hot spits..." groaned Margo, and threw her head back in exhaustion.

"Hold on, Margo, the doctor will be here any moment! Don't be afraid!" Koplik told her, holding his own chin to stop it trembling.

"Who said I was afraid? I've been longing for this day to come, like the dawn. Come, death, come to me, torment me no longer!" Margo closed her eyes. The tears streamed down her cheeks.

"He's here!" someone shouted.

The professor and Tsitska came in together. The professor nodded to everyone in greeting and went straight to Margo's bed. He sat on the chair that was offered to him, felt the sick woman's pulse, then placed his hand on her blazing forehead.

Margo opened her eyes.

"Hello, my dear!" said the professor with a smile.

Margo brushed her hand across her eyes and stared at the newcomer.

"God grant you health, Ignati!" she answered, also smiling.

"You know my name?"

"Who doesn't? Half of Georgia owes its life to you!"

"Not quite so many!" joked the professor. "Now tell me, my dear, what's bothering you?"

"Just the fact that these ruffians have disturbed you in the middle of the night!"

"Don't you worry about that," the professor reassured her. "It's my profession, and I catch up on my sleep during the day. Tell me where it hurts."

"I'm burning up, doctor, as though I was on fire."

"When did this start?"

"This morning... No, yesterday or the day before... Before, the vodka took the pain away. Today I had to lie down."

"Right, pull back the blanket!" requested the professor.

Margo glanced at the lads, then at the professor.

"I may be crazy, doctor, but I still have my shame."

"We're all more or less crazy, and yet we feel no shame for anything," mumbled the professor, and drew back the blanket himself. The lads turned away. The professor began cautiously palpating the patient's abdomen with four fingers, asking: "Does it hurt here? How about here? Or here?"

Margo bit her lip and said nothing. And only when the professor had finished his examination did she groan:

"It hurts everywhere, doctor. It hurts so much I want to die..."

The doctor threw off the blanket, bent Margo's right leg at the knee and slowly pulled it up towards her belly. Margo shrieked.

The professor quickly rose to his feet.

"Is there telephone here?"

Tsitska looked inquiringly at Margo.

"Dugladze has one," she groaned.

"Call the ambulance service right away. Tell them you're calling from Ignati Jikia and they're to come here immediately!"

Tsitska ran off.

"Am I in a bad way, doctor?" Margo sat up a little in the bed.

"Don't move, my dear. You mustn't stir!" The professor laid Margo back down and patted her gently on the cheek. "Why didn't you come to me sooner?"

"It's alright doctor, dying's a celebration for me. Don't you trouble yourself."

The professor seated himself at the table, rested his head on his hands and fell silent.

Koka slipped some money into the pocket of the professor's jacket. Without looking at Koka, the professor took the money out and placed it on the table. Then he took a bundle of ten-rouble notes out of his inside pocket and put it beside the other money. He stood up and went out. The lads followed him.

"Is there any hope, Professor?" asked Berdzena.

The professor shook his head.

"None at all?" asked Tengiz.

"One percent."

"What's wrong with her, Professor?"

"Peritonitis... Ruptured appendix... And she's been walking around with it for more than two days. Can you imagine?"

Fifteen minutes later the ambulance arrived. They put Margo on a stretcher and carried her out. As she was leaving her room, she turned to the lads:

"Farewell, my darling boys!" Suddenly she sat up on the stretcher and implored them prayerfully: "Don't go to the sulphur baths! I beg you, never go there! That's my final request to you!"

The body was borne out on Tuesday, from the autopsy room of the same hospital to which Margo had been taken on the day of the flood in 1936.

Petriashvili and Melikishvili streets, the whole of Vere, were packed with crowds of people, made up more of curious onlookers than friends.

The coffin smothered in flowers was carried up the Vere hill on wooden poles by eight young men with another eight walking beside them ready to take over. Ahead of the coffin drove a car decorated with flowers. There were so many flowers, it was as though a huge living bouquet were making its own way towards the cemetery.

On Melikishvili Street the traffic was halted for a while. The buses, the cars and the trams stood absolutely still. On the corner of Petriashvili Street the lads halted the procession for five minutes. One car-horn sounded, then a second, and a third, then suddenly the whole quarter was filled with continuous claxon-calls.

"What's all this, the second coming?" shouted the driver of a car which had got caught up in the cavalcade, sticking his head out of the car-window. "Are they going to make us wait forever?"

"Sound your horn!" said one of the local lads to him.

"Why?" asked the driver in surprise.

"Because you have to!"

"Why do I have to?" said the driver stubbornly.

"You just do!" And the young man pressed the horn himself.

"Get your hands off. You'll flatten the battery!"

"That's okay. We'll give you a push!" answered the young man, without taking his hand away.

"What kind of big-wig are they burying? Why do I have to sound the horn?" The furious driver stuck his head out of the car again.

"We're burying Mad Margo from Vere."

"Who?"

"Listen, do what you're told, before I break your hand!" the young man shoved the driver's head back into his car. "Okay?"

The driver realised that the young man was not joking, and pressed on the horn with all his might.

The young man went up to another car. A minute later the horn of that car sounded too. The driver waited until the young man had gone before snorting:

"Burying Joan of Arc, are they?"

"No, they're burying Mad Margo!" answered one of the men in the procession as he walked by.

"Mad! Is this the way they bury a madwoman?"

"That's the way we do it!" answered a Vere man who was standing close by.

"Bravo, well done! Who would mind dying in a quarter like this?" exclaimed the driver delightedly.

That evening the Tants-Geurka tavern was crowded with the lads from Vere. The tables were spread with modest fare—bread, cheese, wine and radish. They did not elect a master of ceremonia.

When everyone was seated and a deathly silence had fallen on the basement-hall, Tsitska rose, filled a glass with wine, poured out a few drops on to a piece of bread and spoke:

"For the grief of our quarter, for the tears and the joy of our quarter, for the lost beauty of our quarter!"

Everyone stood and drained their glasses in silence.

That day in the basement-hall of the Tants-Geurka, not another word was spoken, not another glass of wine was drunk.

"It's not very good, Ramishvili..." The professor leafed reluctantly through Bachana's book of matriculation papers. "What's the problem?"

Bachana made no reply.

"What's wrong with you, Ramishvili?" asked the professor when no answer was forthcoming.

"I was ill, Professor, I didn't have time to prepare..."

"You weren't ill, you were wasting your time on that madwoman! Do you think I didn't see you yesterday, walking behind her coffin like some blood-relation?"

"She wasn't mad, Professor," protested Bachana.

"And who was she anyway? King Irakli? The whole quarter went absolutely crazy! The traffic couldn't move for two hours!"

"She was just ill, Professor, unbalanced!" Bachana felt the taste of salt in his mouth, and he rose.

"Where are you going?" asked the professor in surprise.

"I'll come back some other time," answered Bachana quietly.

"Was she somehow related to you, then?"

Bachana said nothing for a long time, then he looked at the professor and said:

"She was my sister."

The professor stared intently into Bachana's eyes. Bachana was unable to bear his gaze and he lowered his head. There was silence. Then the professor closed the matriculation book, held it out to Bachana and said:

"Off you go, Ramishvili!" He stood up himself and went across to the window.

Bachana put the matriculation book in his pocket and went out.

"Well? What'd you get?" The students crowded round him.

Bachana did not answer. He went along the corridor, down the stairs, came out into the university garden and sat down on an empty bench. Bachana sat there alone for a long time, unaware of anybody or anything. Then he took his matriculation book out of his pocket and opened it out of idle curiosity.

...It was the first full mark of five that Bachana had ever received.

He slammed the book shut, and when he opened it again, he could see nothing.

His eyes were filled with tears.

Bachana wept.

12

Following Bulyka's death, the professor ordered that no-one else should be moved into the ward with Bachana and the priest, and the empty bed should be removed, so that it would not inspire them with gloomy thoughts. However, the empty space proved far more depressing than the empty bed.

Each morning when they woke, Bachana and Father Ioram involuntarily turned their gaze towards the spot where until recently Bulyka's bed had stood, and their hearts were wrung by memories of the time spent together. And then later, during the day, they would pause in their conversation almost every minute, in anticipation of some buffoonery or humorous remark from Bulyka.

So it went on for about two weeks. Then time began to tell, and Bachana and Father Ioram gradually grew accustomed to Bulyka's absence.

One morning Father Ioram asked Bachana an unexpected question:

"Dear Bachana, they'll probably bury you in the Didube pantheon, won't they?"

Bachana laughed at first, and then he began to feel anxious:

"What's wrong, have you had a bad dream?"

"I have, but not about you—about myself," Father Ioram answered sadly.

"In that case, you should have asked where they'll bury you, not me... You're being cunning, Father!" said Bachana dubiously.

"Maybe I am... If you're going to be buried in the pantheon, maybe they'll find a place for me in the churchyard there..."

"Well, according to that principle I should be buried in the yard of the Writers' Union building. But if you can set yourself up as the dean of Didube cathedral, then we could well end up side-by-side in our graves!"

"Your place in the pantheon must be assured, or you wouldn't joke about it like that!" concluded Father Ioram.

"You're wrong, Father!"

"Why?"

"Because the Didube pantheon has been overcrowded for a long time now. And there's no way to squeeze me in there... Except maybe standing upright... But I'm sure of one thing at least—neither of us will be left unburied."

Father Ioram sighed deeply.

"What was the dream you had, Father?" inquired Bachana.

"It was horrible!.. All the dead whose funeral rites I ever performed and whom I admonished on their departure for the next world, were gathered in the churchyard at Ortachala, waiting for me to come out."

"Well then? Did you go out to them?"

"Like a wretched, faint-hearted coward I hid behind the altar. To think of it makes me want to howl in shame or kill myself!"

"Suicide, Father, is the highest possible demonstration of an individual's autonomy. But unfortunately it is forbidden by your religion, which regards it as the greatest of sins and the ruination of the soul," Bachana declaimed.

"As far as I'm aware, your side also has little time for suicides," responded Father Ioram.

"Well now, our ideas on some things coincide. That's why I said you would make a good communist," Bachana reminded him.

"And I, if you recall, suggested that it might well be the other way round!" parried Father Ioram.

"Don't try that, Father, or I'll turn your entire parish into communists!"

"I should think so! A communist, and a writer to boot! That's worth a hundred priests! My only hope lies in the transmigration of souls. Perhaps next time you appear in this

world you will believe in the true God!" Father Ioram crossed himself.

"A writer, Father, is the people's faithful dog... I don't believe in the transmigration of souls, but if such a thing does exist, then my soul will undoubtedly be reborn as a dog. So when I am dead, be kind and loving to stray dogs, and don't throw stones at them. One of them might just be me!"

"It's a real pleasure to listen to you, Bachana! But if the soul of every deceased writer were to take up residence in the body of a mongrel, life on earth would become truly unenviable!" Father Ioram smiled ironically.

"Not really, especially if your souls were to assume the form of wolves."

"Why wolves?"

"A shepherd who hides from his own flock can scarcely lay claim to being a lion!" said Bachana, suppressing a smile.

Father Ioram squirmed in his bed. Unable to find a reply, he turned away, offended.

"But don't worry," Bachana went on, "your dream's a good omen. You'll live to be a hundred!"

Father Ioram relented.

"Tell me, please," he said, "what ... hmm, position in your administrative hierarchy would correspond to my ecclesiastical order?"

"How many souls are there in your parish?"

"We don't keep accounts of the faithful."

"Alright. Then what's the church's income from donations?"

"Well, how shall I put it... In any case, it's not enough to repair the church."

"Then what money do you live on?"

"The state supports us."

"What? The communists give financial support to the church?" exclaimed Bachana.

"What of it? They've deprived the church of its parish income, now let them shell out a bit..."

"I see... In that case, Father, your ranking would correspond in our administrative hierarchy to the manager of a village club."

That was a very precise definition of Father Ioram's social position.

"Are you joking?"

"No, why?"

"I graduated from the seminary!"

"Most of the managers of our clubs have higher education, or secondary specialised education at a minimum! And they have fine titles too! Honoured Worker of the Arts, Honoured Cultural Worker! Do you have even one Honoured Priest of the Republic? If so, I've never heard of it!" Bachana was openly sarcastic.

Father Ioram looked depressed.

"Don't be so sad! Come and join us, and I promise to have you appointed instructor to the Regional Party Committee."

"My dear Bachana!" Now the priest was really offended. "What did you come here for? To corrupt the Orthodox clergy or to recover from your heart attack? You come and join us, and I'll appoint you deacon of a church if you like!"

"Why are you angry, Father? If your doctrine is true, then after I die, I shall be entirely at your disposal. Deal with me then as you may think best!" laughed Bachana.

"Oh no, my friend. We shan't meet in the next world!" said Father Ioram sharply.

"And why not?" asked Bachana sadly.

"I'll tell you why not. To use communist terminology, your political record does not provide any basis for recommending you for heaven! You're going straight down the road to hell! Understand?"

"What about our friendship? Won't you pull a few strings for me?" Bachana appealed to the priest's pity.

"You're much too dainty a tit-bit for Satan! I don't think my patronage would be of much help to you..."

"Not even if I take communion?"

"Will you confess your sins?"

"What if I haven't any?"

"Of course, how could you have? The world is yours and you think that everything you do is true and right!"

"Blessed are those who believe, Father Ioram. We believe in our cause," Bachana replied seriously.

...The doctor's assistant Zhenya came into the ward. Bachana and Father Ioram instantly threw off their blankets, turned over on to their stomachs and exposed the areas destined for the syringe. Zhenya laughed loudly:

"Cover yourselves up, comrades! This time I've come with empty hands. You have a visitor, my dear Bachana. I don't suppose you want to receive anybody like that?"

"A visitor? What does he want?" Bachana asked cautiously.

"She's inquiring after your health. Shall I take the bed-pan away or leave it here?" Zhenya asked, laughing.

"So it's a woman?"

"Yes. Says she's related to you..."

"Then leave the bed-pan!" said Bachana, in anticipation of one of his typical visitors.

"Right you are!"

Zhenya went out, and immediately an energetic middle-aged lady with grey hair entered the ward, bearing under her arm a voluminous file. She stopped in the middle of the room to glance around, hesitated for a moment, and then went over to Father Ioram's bed.

"Good morning! I'm Nina Saneblidze, a friend of your family!" she announced and seated herself uninvited in front of the priest.

"A friend of the family?" inquired Father Ioram.

"Yes. In 1915 and 1916 your father Akaki and my father Lazar were students together in the industrial college."

"Who is it you wanted to see?" asked the astonished priest, with a glance in Bachana's direction. Bachana indicated with a doleful grimace that he wanted Ioram to continue the conversation.

"Why, I came to see you, of course!" answered the lady, no less surprised.

"Do you know me? Have we met?" Ioram began to work himself into his role.

"Good heavens, it's not that hard to recognise you! All day long you hear nothing else on the radio and the television but Bachana Ramishvili, Bachana Ramishvili! Of course, you have changed a bit. You've grown a beard."

"Yes, it's a little chilly in the ward..." Father Ioram ran

his hand through his beard and pulled the blanket up to cover himself more warmly.

"Of course! You can't take any chances when you're ill!" the lady agreed.

"Mm ... mm ... Did you want to discuss something with me, dear lady?" Ioram's patience was exhausted.

"Yes. How are you feeling?"

"Thank you. I'm much improved... And may I inquire as to how you are?"

"Me! I'm a lost woman, I'm sunk, burnt-out, done-for!" the lady blurted out.

"And how can I help?" Father Ioram inquired.

"Help? Not just help, save my life!" the lady insisted.

"Do you think I can?" Father Ioram was doubtful.

"What? You, Bachana Ramishvili? Ha-ha-ha!" the lady laughed affectedly. "Just one word from you, one letter, one phone-call..."

"What exactly is your request? Please explain it to me!" Father Ioram suddenly felt that his conversation with this pushy woman was beginning to resemble Bachana's recent exchange with the rascally tobacco-procurer.

"On the second of August, in broad daylight, my son was shot down in public!"

Father Ioram was dumbfounded.

"Who? Where?" he spluttered.

"By a corrupt and unscrupulous idiot. In lecture-hall one-oh-seven in the university..." the lady declaimed in a tragic tone and then added swiftly: "You don't think anything's changed now he's gone, do you?"

"Now who has gone?" Father Ioram was bewildered.

"Him!" The lady rolled her eyes up to the ceiling. "He shot us down, the scoundrel, me and my son!.. My poor child had to be carried out of the hall... Three years! Three years I had him tutored in three subjects—Georgian, English and History! Seven hundred roubles a subject! All for nothing!"

Father Ioram gave a sigh of relief when he realised that Saneblidze junior was alive and well.

"What about school? Did he not go to school?"

"Did you go to school? What did you ever learn there?"

Father Ioram was unable to find a reply and he bowed his head in silence.

"He asked the child to recite Avtandil's testament!* What a swine! He should try asking his own pupils, the ones he took seven hundred roubles from for classes! Avtandil's testament! Rustaveli himself didn't know it by heart, or why would he have bothered to write it down!"

"I think that's going a bit far!" protested Father Ioram.

"Why? You don't think he's read the damned testament himself? That corrupt wretch!"

"Why do you think that?"

"There's no need to think about it! Just one look at the scoundrel's rotten ugly face is enough to convince anyone!"

"I find it hard to believe." Father Ioram stood his ground.

"I'll bet you!" The lady held out her hand.

"What will you bet?" Father Ioram took up the offer, entering into the gambling spirit.

"Whatever you like! In any case, children who know Rustaveli off by heart, and everything about world history and English, have no business being in the university at all! It's the ignorant ones who need educating! That's obvious!"

"Very well. But what are we to do?" asked Father Ioram, interrupting the propagandistic flow of new propositions concerning general and higher education.

"You must help me!" the lady announced.

Father Ioram looked to Bachana for support. Bachana, however, had gagged himself with his towel and could do no more than shake his head.

"In what way?" the priest asked despairingly.

"Go and see the minister of higher education."

"But I'm hospitalised."

"Ring him or write to him..."

"What should I write?"

"Write that the boy is a relative of yours, an outstanding student, and a good sportsman... What else?"

"I don't know," groaned Father Ioram.

"Here's a certificate from his school. He came third over-

* Avtandil is the hero of Shota Rustaveli's epic poem *Knight in a Tiger's Skin.— Ed.*

all in the school games. He jumped three metres in the long jump, and one metre seventeen in the high jump."

"In that case, better send him to the college of physical education! My comrade here is a sportsman, he'll help you!" Father Ioram indicated Bachana, who pulled the towel from his face and nodded in confirmation.

"What are you talking about? What college of physical education?" The lady cast a disdainful glance at Bachana. "I'm raising a son, not a goat!"

"Why do you say that, dear lady?" Bachana took offence. "Our famous sportsmen all graduated from the college of physical education — Dumbadze, Gokieli, Khnykina, Jugeli..."

"Are you a sportsman?"

"Yes."

"And you had a heart attack too?"

"Yes."

"Serves you right!"

Bachana laughed:

"Why, thank you!"

The lady attempted to make amends for her tactlessness:

"May God grant you health!"

"You believe in God?" asked Father Ioram delightedly.

"What has he done to help those who do? You help me, and you'll be my god and my saviour!"

"I cannot, on my life," sighed Father Ioram.

"You're a Soviet deputy, a member of the Central Committee, an editor, and you can't help? Then who can?" The lady was genuinely baffled.

"My dear lady, have you not read the Central Committee's resolutions on protectionism?" asked the priest.

"What protectionism? I'm asking for my own son, not for somebody else's!" The lady launched her final assault.

"No! Especially since he's already failed! Let's not talk about this any more!" Father Ioram pronounced firmly.

"Very well," the lady conceded. "Then help me with another matter."

"What other matter?" Father Ioram was startled.

"You're related by marriage to the chairman of the Pervomaisky District Executive Committee, aren't you? Well,

we have a little accommodation problem. Our neighbour has been given a four-room flat in Sololaki. What on earth he's done to deserve it, we don't know. We want to take his room. Our son has written from the reformatory to say he's decided to get married. His time there will be up soon. We have to do something about it, don't we? It's true that someone else is claiming the room, but in all fairness it should be ours. If we put in a doorway and add a side stairs, then we could combine our kitchen and the loggia of the other room with our next-door neighbour's two rooms. We've already found him a two-room flat on Tsereteli Prospekt. It's a bit far out, and it's smaller by four metres and fourteen centimetres, but then we're paying for the repairs, and my husband will put him a phone in for nothing. And next door lives a woman who's very sick, and has no family. God grant her health, she'll be dead soon. Last year she adopted my husband, so we feed the poor thing and look after her. If we don't get our youngest son registered in her room straight away, then it will be gone, won't it? And all our work will have been for nothing! Just one phone-call from you is all that's needed! We'll pray for you day and night!"

"It really is very awkward for me to refuse your request, but... I don't know the chairman in question." Father Ioram wiped the sweat from his brow.

"But he certainly knows you!" the lady exclaimed.

"I doubt it," said Father Ioram, and cast Bachana a glance which was an eloquent plea for assistance. Bachana took pity on the poor priest, caught up in such a long, drawn-out discussion and intervened.

"I know for certain that they are not acquainted!"

"I don't believe it!"

"I swear on my mother!" Bachana placed his hand on his heart.

"Perhaps you'll help me?" the lady said, turning away from Father Ioram and looking hopefully at Bachana.

"My only connections are in the college of physical education."

"Well, next year my youngest son finishes school. He's an excellent swimmer, he brings back rocks from a hundred metres out from the beach at Bokuleti! Please, give me your

name, and I'll come to you next year." The lady took a notebook and pencil out of her handbag.

"If I'm still alive then."

"That's true. I have such cursed bad luck. But give me your name in any case."

At this point Bachana gave the whole game away. Forgetting the rules they had been playing by, he answered with unconcealed pride:

"I am Bachana Ramishvili!"

The lady's jaw dropped in astonishment, and the pencil froze in her hand.

Bachana broke into a cold sweat.

"What did you say?"

"That's right, I'm Ramishvili!" Bachana repeated.

"And who's he?" The lady pointed at Father Ioram.

"The Dean of the Church of the Holy Trinity at Ortachala, Ioram Kandelaki."

The lady's hands had dropped down to her sides, her face had turned grey.

"And this man asked me if I believe in God!"

"You understand, I am, of course, partly to blame, but..." Father Ioram attempted to justify himself, but an awkward silence fell in the ward as the woman rose to her feet.

"Is this the way you show your humanism?" she asked, casting a withering glance in Bachana's direction.

Bachana shrugged without speaking, and put a validol tablet under his tongue.

"Comedians!" the lady exclaimed furiously, and left the ward.

"Well, now ... that went badly," said Father Ioram.

"It certainly did. And it was all my fault. Do forgive me."

"I forgive you, because I'm equally to blame, but most of all I feel sorry for you! Is there not a single person on the whole earth who is simply concerned for your health?" Ioram's voice was so laden with genuine sympathy, that even Bachana began to feel sorry for himself. "You must be approached by so many people, and have to help so many!"

"It's easy for you, people come to you on their knees,

looking for just one thing—the salvation of their souls," Bachana gestured despairingly.

"How long have things been like this?"

"Since I became editor of a newspaper. If I ever get out of here alive, I'll drop all that! I'm not a human being any more, Father, I've been transformed into the chairman of some philanthropical commission. Everyone's sick to death of my constant requests."

"Philanthropy is God's own work," said the priest.

"I agree, and all my life I've tried to do good for people, but... This lady, for instance... Do you think she deserves any sympathy?"

"A hypocritical sham!" Father Ioram replied with conviction.

"And what do you think of swindlers like that when they come on their knees, with candles, to beg God's mercy?"

"My dear Bachana, we have one clear advantage over you: our suppliants petition the supreme authority for assistance directly."

"I know, Father, I know! You work with a formula that's universal, all-embracing and doesn't involve you in any responsibility: 'It was God's will!' or 'God did not will it so!' It's a very convenient formula, no doubt about it! But we have to work with a complex and absolutely concrete formula: 'This is legal, and that is not!' And we have to fight, you understand! Fight, not pray—to root out lawlessness and establish legality. You commit the culprit to the judgement of God, but we have to bring him to trial! You have an easy life, Father Ioram!"

The priest made no reply. He pulled the blanket up over his head and said nothing.

"...Nevertheless, a man must attempt to sow the seeds of good," he said after a lengthy silence.

"But sometimes it's not that easy to guess what fruit those seeds will produce... If you're interested, I could tell you a real story that actually happened to me once, though it sounds more like a fairy-tale."

"Please do! I'd be delighted to hear it!" Father Ioram disentangled his head from the blanket and made ready to listen.

"Well, one day my secretary opened my office door and said:

"'Bachana Akakievich, there's a monkey waiting to see you!'

"'Send him in!'

"In came this small monkey and held out a cold, moist hand (the sure sign of a flatterer and a rogue, that!), placed on the desk several sheets of paper covered with scribble, retreated into the corner and gazed at me with eyes full of expectation.

"I glanced through the sheets of paper. They were a jumble of witticisms, aphorisms, double entendres, jokes and so forth—the sort of stuff that is usually published on the back pages of the Sunday editions under the heading 'Only Words...' The jumble wasn't too bad, pretty good, in fact, for a monkey.

"Perhaps, as Darwin's theory suggests, this monkey might even become a human being some day," I thought, and I published a few of his witticisms. One of them, I remember, went like this: 'One must have a really high fever to go looking for a thermometer in our chemist's shops!'"

"Not bad!" laughed Father Ioram.

"At the time I thought so too... Then the monkey came back again, and nobody recognised him. He was dressed like a man, or even better. He'd brought an assortment of jokes and aphorisms. When I started reading them I knew immediately from the style that they were the monkey's.

"'Listen,' I said, 'aren't you the monkey who was here just recently?'

"'Yes,' he said, 'I am. I want very much to become a man, and I'd like to ask you to help me.'

"'Well now,' I said, 'you must understand that man is created by labour. You must go and work hard, and be patient!'

"'I know,' he said, 'I've read all about that. But I'm from a very impatient species of monkey. And anyway, most people already take me for a human being.'

"'Alright, have it your own way,' I conceded. 'I'll print another couple of your jokes and aphorisms, but what good will it do you? You'll still be a monkey, won't you?'

"'But please don't give me away!' he begged, then he thanked me and left.

"I'm a good-natured man. I felt sorry for the monkey, especially since he was so good at mimicking human speech and behaviour, and I printed a few of his 'works'. Let him enjoy himself, I thought, what harm can he do? And so our monkey began to make his way as a man..."

"But surely someone must have noticed that he was really a monkey, and not a man?" said Father Ioram, interrupting Bachana.

"Believe it or not, Father, nobody did! It's easier to spot a man who has turned into a monkey than a monkey who has become a man... Not long ago three monkeys escaped from our zoo. The militia called an urgent meeting to work out the best plan for capturing the monkeys as soon as possible. The meeting dragged on somewhat. Then one militiaman stood up and spoke:

"'Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel, let's finish up here, or the monkeys will get mixed up with people and we'll have a hell of a job to identify them!'"

"Then what happened?" asked Father Ioram impatiently.

"Two of the runaways were captured alright, but they're still searching for the third one to this day... Right, I'll continue with my story. Our monkey came back to my office again a few years later. And this time he brought some of his stories! When I read them I was appalled.

"'What's this you've cobbled together, you miserable ape? What's this garbage you've brought me?'

"'I don't know what you mean,' he said, offended. 'As a critic I think very highly of my own stories!'

"'What's that?' I was astonished. 'You're a critic now, are you?'

"'Yes, I am,' he answered proudly, 'I'm a critic and I have a degree, I give lectures on the radio and the television, and for the *Knowledge* Association, and also in a certain institution of higher education.'

"I felt sorry for the poor students who had to listen to a monkey's lectures, but what could I do? I wasn't the head of department or the rector, so I couldn't kick him out. And

I had no moral right to, anyway—it was me that had set the monkey on his way in the world of people!"

"But you could at least have told people that this lecturer was a monkey!" Father Ioram reproached Bachana.

"I did tell them, Father, I did, but it was already too late. 'You're a monkey yourself!'—that's what they said to me."

"Serves you right!" blurted out the priest.

"So it does!" agreed Bachana.

"But what did you do?" Father Ioram was seriously concerned.

"All that I could do—I gave him back his stories."

"And what did he do?"

"He kicked up a row! 'It's because I'm not a member of the Writers' Union,' he said. 'But I will be soon, and then we'll see what's what!' I was tempted to tell him that the Writers' Union was no place for a monkey, but I kept my mouth shut..."

"Why did you, my dear Bachana?" Father Ioram raised his voice in protest.

"Because, my dear Ioram, I had previously lent my support and given references for even bigger monkeys than this one..." Bachana fell silent.

"And did you ever meet again?" asked Father Ioram, satisfied with the previous answer.

"Of course we did! He became a member of the Writers' Union and we even became quite friendly. He drank my health, referred to me as his father, no less... And then when I was nominated for election to the Soviet, he apparently paid a special visit to the Secretary of the Regional Party Committee to thank him."

"But this is insane!"

"Exactly! Apparently he went in to the secretary and said: 'On behalf of the writers of Georgia, the reading public, the employees of the newspaper edited by our dear Bachana Ramishvili, and his innumerable friends, I should like, dear Nikolai Petrovich, to express our heartfelt gratitude for the fact that he has been accorded such a signal honour. Only a principled communist as noble and bold as yourself could possibly judge Bachana Ramishvili exclusively on the basis

of his personal human qualities, and disregard his past history...'

"'What past history?' the astonished regional secretary apparently asked.

"'Oh, nothing in particular! It is simply pleasant to see that you pay no attention to insignificant matters such as the fact that Ramishvili's parents were repressed, that he even spent some time in jail himself when he was young ... through a misunderstanding, of course... But you know yourself, a political record is a political record... Or for instance, the fact that in a recent edition of the newspaper edited by Ramishvili, the word "bolshevik" was replaced by "menshevik". In all this I can see your humanity, your firmness of principle! Closing your eyes to facts like these, placing such great faith in someone who is still really quite young and relatively inexperienced, taking a gamble, so to speak — only the highly experienced and principled leader that we know you to be, Nikolai Petrovich, is capable of that, and I cannot find the words to thank you as you deserve. Thank you and thank you again!' — that's what the monkey said to the Secretary of the Regional Committee..." Bachana concluded his story.

"But where is he now?" asked Father Ioram, managing his dried-up tongue with some difficulty.

"I don't know. He could well come visiting me tomorrow."

13

Before the question of Bachana's acceptance as a candidate member of the Party was put to the bureau of the Regional Party Committee, he was called to the Committee for interview.

Bachana entered the Party educational centre, bowed slightly in greeting to the three men sitting at a long table, and took a seat at the end of the table.

"Comrade Ramishvili, today's meeting is a formal interview, with only one purpose: the Party has to know exactly who it allows to join its ranks. Therefore, if you have no ob-

jection, we shall ask you a number of questions. Perhaps you will have questions for us too," said the man at the right of the table, who had Bachana's file in front of him.

"By all means. Let us follow procedure," replied Bachana, and he felt his heart begin to race. This interview was like an examination, with the notable difference that the examiners could ask questions on any subject they chose.

"First of all, let's introduce ourselves. We are all old Bolsheviks. My name's Alexander, Alexander Iordanishvili," said the man who had started the interview. "And my friends here are Vano Bandzeladze and David Managadze."

"Pleased to meet you!" Bachana half rose from his seat.

"Please sit down!" Iordanishvili's voice was low and rich, he had a pockmarked face, a hooked nose and brown eyes. "I'd like to know why you haven't joined the Party before this."

Bachana had been expecting this question, and he had the stock answer ready: I felt I wasn't ready to serve such an exalted cause, but now, when I have gained a thorough understanding ... and so on... But he gave a different answer:

"They wouldn't accept me!"

"Why?" asked Bandzeladze, a man with a ruddy face, a flat nose and small, very mobile eyes. Bachana found himself quite unable to tell what colour they were.

"It's all in my application..."

Iordanishvili opened the file and glanced through Bachana's application, but he said nothing.

"My parents were repressed..." Bachana added.

"They've been rehabilitated now," said Iordanishvili, glancing at his friends.

"Then how were you accepted into the Young Communist League?" inquired Managadze. The head he turned towards Bachana was huge and shaggy, like a Caucasian sheep-dog's, and the expression of his eyes was somehow very kind and considerate.

"I concealed the fact that my parents had been arrested..."

His interviewers exchanged glances of astonishment.

"Yes, but... Surely they knew about it in school?" asked Managadze.

"Of course they did. And the Secretary of the YCL Committee knew."

"And he said nothing?"

"No."

"Why?"

"He was a good friend of mine. The war was on, and times were hard. People didn't join the YCL just to look good then. My friend knew that..."

"Who else knew?"

"Everyone... Except the Regional Committee."

"And no-one gave you away?"

"No, no-one did!" Iordanishvili answered for Bachana, and put his file aside.

"Do you think you would have been accepted into the YCL if they had known that your parents had been imprisoned?"

"No, I wouldn't!"

There was silence in the room.

"Tell me," began Bandzeladze, "did you ever feel, or do you still feel, any resentment for what happened to your parents?"

Bachana knew that he should answer no, what resentment could there possibly be! But he preferred to tell the truth.

"I did!" And he drew a cigarette from its packet with trembling fingers.

"Please, give me one too!" Managadze, no less agitated, held out his hand. Bachana handed him the box of cigarettes and the matches.

"And then, afterwards? Did the resentment pass, or?.." Bandzeladze asked as he took a cigarette from the packet.

"It did ... but then, years later, it returned," Bachana lit up his cigarette.

"When was that?"

"When they were rehabilitated. After my parents were rehabilitated, I didn't feel any joy, just bitterness." Bachana extinguished his cigarette, and immediately lit up another. "Because we'd suffered so many years of undeserved grief, humiliation and deprivation."

"Where are your parents now?" asked Iordanishvili.

"They're no longer alive."

"And you carry these feelings with you into the Party?" asked Bandzeladze.

Bachana pondered the question. Bandzeladze nervously chewed on his cigarette. The silence dragged on until finally Bachana spoke:

"I know that history is full of paradoxes. It's human to make mistakes ... or have them forced upon you... People correct their mistakes, some sooner, others later. And some leave this life still sincerely convinced that everything they ever did was right, and their mistakes have to be corrected by the generations that follow. The people who caused my pain have paid in full, they're no longer alive. Now people my age, my generation, are taking charge of things, and I have no right to seek vengeance. In fact, I am obliged to work together with them to make sure that such mistakes are never made again. Especially since I believe in their cause and regard it as my own. And the most important thing is that a writer has no right to take a subjective view of things! If a writer loses his sense of objectivity, then his work isn't worth a farthing!"

Bandzeladze nodded his head to express his satisfaction. Iordanishvili asked another question:

"Do you know Lenin's letter to the communists of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, Daghestan and the Gorskaya Republic?"

Bachana thought for a long time before answering:

"Alexander, will they accept me as a Party member if I don't know this letter of Lenin's, or others?"

Iordanishvili didn't know what to say. Bachana continued:

"Are you asking me about what you know yourself, or about what everybody has to know?"

"About what it is best to know, comrade Ramishvili... This letter was addressed to us and our friends..."

Bachana felt very awkward. He stood up and was about to say something, but Iordanishvili was too quick for him:

"Goodbye, comrade Ramishvili!" he said, and also stood up.

Bachana shuddered. He had the terrible feeling that all was lost, and he felt a sharp pain in his chest. He sat down and clutched at his heart.

"What's wrong?" asked Managadze in alarm.

Bachana made an effort and forced himself to his feet:

"It's nothing, David, it will pass... It has already!" Bachana smiled.

"Tomorrow at one o'clock your application will be discussed by the bureau. I think everything will be alright. But do read that letter if you can find the time," Iordanishvili advised him.

"My dear Alexander, the letter 'To the communist comrades of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, Daghestan and the Gorskaya Republic' was written by Lenin on April 14, 1921, and on the eighth of May of the same year it was published in the fifty-fifth issue of *Pravda of Georgia*..."

"Well, you're a strange man, Ramishvili!" Iordanishvili said. "Goodbye!"

"Goodbye, and thank you very much!" Bachana shook hands with all of them and left the Party centre.

At one o'clock Bachana was called into the office of the First Secretary of the District Party Committee. As he entered he bowed in greeting to the bureau members seated at the table which extended from the desk, and glanced at the long row of chairs standing along the wall, wondering which one he should sit on, or whether it was the done thing to sit down at all in situations like this.

"Please take a seat!" said a familiar voice.

Bachana raised his head and for the first time he noticed the District Committee's young Secretary. He was screwing up his right eye and smiling at Bachana. Bachana sat down in the middle of the row.

"I don't think any explanations are required," said the Secretary, rising to his feet. "We all know Bachana Ramishvili. Today he becomes a member of our great family. I'll run through the application, the biographical details and our recommendations..."

"No need!" someone said.

The Secretary set Bachana's file aside and addressed the company:

"Are there any questions?"

"I have a question," said one of the members of the bureau.

Bachana felt an unpleasant cold sensation in his chest.

The Secretary cast a fleeting glance of astonishment in Bachana's direction.

"Yes?"

The short silence that followed seemed an eternity to Bachana.

"Tell me, please, comrade Ramishvili, why are you joining the Party?"

Everyone turned to look at Bachana. He stood up, wiped his face with his handkerchief and made ready to reply. What ought he to say to these people who were deciding whether or not he should be a member of the Communist Party? Bachana knew the kind of answer that was given in these cases: he was in total agreement with the Party rules and its programme, he was prepared steadfastly to implement all the Party's instructions, prepared to sacrifice himself in service to the cause of the Party, he wished to take an active part in the construction of communist society... He knew all these propositions off by heart, but to state them now seemed unnecessary, ludicrous. To do that did not prove you were a communist. And anyway, he could not see anyone among the members of the bureau who could block his application... Instead, he suddenly said:

"I want there to be as many honest people as possible in the Party!" and he sat down.

A whisper of surprise ran round the office like a breath of wind. Then there was silence. Bachana kept his head lowered. He heard the secretary speaking.

"Comrades, I have known Bachana Ramishvili since we were children, and I can tell you that he is a communist to the marrow of his bones. I regard him as already a communist, and so I support his application. All those who vote that Bachana Akakievich Ramishvili should be accepted as a member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, please raise your hands."

Then something happened which was probably quite unprecedented in the history of any party: together with all the others, Bachana Ramishvili raised his own hand.

14

The dry, fluffy snow had been falling heavily on Tbilisi for two days. All transport had come to a standstill. The streets were abuzz with merry laughter, the startled exclamations of people who had slipped, the shrieks of girls who were bombarded with snowballs and the loud laughter of the boys. The air had become pure and clean, remarkably light, with a special sweetness. Like the snow queen, Tbilisi strolled its own streets, dressed in white, flaunting its prematurely white locks.

It was already after nine in the evening. Bachana was strolling unhurriedly through the Vake park, his hands thrust into his pockets and his collar turned up against the cold. He walked along thinking of nothing in particular, through the enchanted curtain of snow, feeling the pleasant sting of its coldness against his face. At the corner of Mosashvili Street Bachana ran up against a woman who darted round the corner. Both of them started in surprise. For a few moments they stood there, pressed up against each other and Bachana had time for a good look at the woman's huge, sparkling eyes. Then he swiftly stepped aside to make way for her and apologised:

"I beg your pardon, madame!"

It suddenly occurred to him that the woman was too young to be called madame, and he added:

"I'm sorry, miss!"

"That's alright!" she replied calmly, and went on her way.

Bachana looked after the woman's retreating figure and thought:

"If there's any justice in this world, if there's any such thing as intuition, then she has to turn round!" The woman turned round. Bachana walked slowly towards her, and she

walked towards Bachana. When they came close together, they stopped, and Bachana, catching his breath, said:

"Hello!"

"Hello!" the woman replied, holding out her hand.

Bachana quickly pulled off his glove and took the woman's hand in his. It was soft and warm. Bachana looked into this stranger's eyes and realised that she was as agitated as he was.

"Where are you going?" Bachana asked the first question that came into his head.

"Home," answered the woman, putting her hand into the pocket of her fur jacket.

"You are very beautiful!" Bachana blurted out, blushing.

"I know," said the woman calmly.

"I suppose that's a very pleasant feeling, to know that you are beautiful?"

"Not necessarily!" The woman shrugged.

"It must be! At least, I always enjoy looking at a beautiful woman!" Bachana spoke more confidently.

"So I noticed!" the woman smiled.

"Perhaps I'm boring you with my foolish rapture?" Bachana was suddenly self-conscious.

The woman shook her head.

"You look just like Bachana Ramishvili!" she said.

"I know I do!" answered Bachana joyfully, and his heart was filled with pride.

"Do other people tell you so too?"

"Almost all my friends!"

"The resemblance is amazing!"

"So amazing that even my passport says that I'm Bachana Ramishvili!" laughed Bachana.

The woman glanced at him suspiciously.

"Take your cap off, then!"

Bachana removed his white-dusted cap and knocked the snow off against his knee.

"My God!" exclaimed the woman. "You really are Bachana Ramishvili!"

"What's your name, my girl?" Bachana made bold to ask.

"My daughter's name is Maya."

Bachana was embarrassed.

"I suppose she's only a year or two old?" he said, attempting to conceal his awkwardness.

"She's seventeen!"

"I don't believe it!"

"I swear on her life!"

"But what is your name?"

"Maria."

"You are very beautiful, Maria!"

"So are you..."

Bachana blushed.

"I swear on my daughter's life!" the woman repeated.

"Either you have no daughter, or your oath is insincere!" said Bachana in annoyance.

"No, it's the truth!" the woman answered seriously. She turned round sharply and walked away.

"Wait!" called Bachana. The woman stopped. "I'll see you home!"

"I live a long way away."

"Where?"

"By the Vorontsov Bridge."

"That's a fair distance alright. Please allow me to escort you..."

"No, I want to walk alone!" The woman tossed her head back, presenting her beautiful face to the falling snowflakes.

"Aren't you afraid?"

The woman shook her head and walked away.

For a long time Bachana gazed, spellbound, after her retreating figure. She walked with a stride that was free and proud, and neither the old fur jacket with the worn-out collar nor the patched boots could conceal the sublime beauty of that slender figure. Bachana only came to himself when she turned a corner and was lost to view. "You cretin! You could at least have asked what her surname was!"

He set off at a run to Chavchavadze Prospekt, but the woman was already nowhere to be seen. She had disappeared, like a snowflake that lands on the hot surface of an outstretched palm.

Bachana went home. He shook the snow from his coat,

felt for the key under the mat outside the door, found it and let himself into his room, and for the first time in his life he felt the terrible, boundless emptiness that surrounded him...

15

That day Bachana had two visitors, one normal and one quite abnormal. Actually, this only became clear afterwards, and at first Bachana took both his visitors for perfectly normal people.

Bachana was sitting at the desk in his office and correcting a satirical article about the dark intrigues, the debauchery and the petty tyranny of the director of a fur factory. The article was very caustic and very well written. It would definitely be the highlight of that issue, even a minor sensation, so nobody knew about it except for Bachana and the author. The plot of the article was almost plausible too...

Two ladies were travelling in a compartment of an international train. They quickly got to know each other, and they soon fell into the kind of conversation that usually springs up between people undistinguished by any particular gift of intellect. When they had hung, drawn and quartered all their common acquaintances, and even some individuals they did not know at all, and when they had lit a red lamp over the door of one of the republic's most highly respected female citizens, one of the ladies was suddenly seized by a fit of coughing, and began to choke. The train's doctor was quick to reach the scene and somehow managed to bring her round. When she was asked what could have brought on this sudden seizure, the exhausted lady pointed to her travelling-companion's fur coat on the hanger and groaned:

"The fur ... it's cat's fur..."

"What fur?" The doctor was baffled.

"It's an allergy... I'm allergic to cat's fur..."

"I see... We'll have to remove the coat..."

"Have you gone crazy?" fumed the owner of the coat. "What do you mean, cat's fur? That coat's sable! I paid four and a half thousand roubles for it!"

"However much you paid for it, we still have to take the coat out for at least a few minutes..."

After a long argument the conductor bore off the coat, and the poor woman immediately began breathing freely, her cough gone as though by magic...

That was what started it all. Once the end had been accidentally picked up in the train, the ball of thread unravelled faster and faster, until it led to the fur factory. And behind it followed people who had nothing at all to do with the railways or the practice of medicine, but who knew all there was to know about the different kinds of fur and what they were worth...

And now the director of the fur factory stood there in front of Bachana, smiling with his watery, bloated eyes. Bachana still did not know who this man was, but the visitor's very appearance, with a corpulent figure like some crudely-trimmed tree stump, gave a very clear impression of brazen self-confidence.

"Hello!" he said, seating himself uninvited in the armchair in front of Bachana's desk.

Bachana set the article aside and prepared himself for whatever his visitor had to say, but his visitor said nothing. A full minute passed.

"I'm listening!" said Bachana finally.

"No, I'm the one who's listening!" said his visitor, grinning.

"I'm afraid I don't understand..."

"I'm the director of the fur factory!" said the visitor, fixing Bachana with his yellow, watery eyes.

"There's obviously something wrong with his gall bladder," thought Bachana, and he said:

"What is your name?"

"Sandro Maglaperidze. You should know it!" The visitor's voice was low and hoarse.

"I've never heard it before!" Bachana lied. "But that's not important. What business brings you here? I didn't invite you..."

"I've come in connection with the hullaballoo that's been created about my factory... And I want to advise you not to pay any attention to the idle chatter of ignorant and

stupid people. If you want to know something, then ask me yourself!" said Maglaperidze in a didactic tone.

"I don't know what you are talking about... I don't know anything at all," Bachana replied.

"You know everything. Unfortunately... Thanks to my own employees... Well, I'll settle things with them myself."

"What brazen insolence! How dare he talk to me like that?" thought Bachana, but he restrained himself and calmly replied:

"I repeat, I do not know what you are talking about. Perhaps you would like to explain?"

"Gladly! Only I won't explain what you know, but what I know!"

"I'm listening!"

"Tomorrow's edition of your paper is to carry an article entitled 'Knight in a Cat's Skin'. It would certainly do the author of this idiotic satire no harm to actually read the great Rustaveli's *Knight in a Tiger's Skin*. He might come across these highly instructive lines:

From caring thought taken for friends, what harm
has ever sprung?
What friends are we if to their aid we hasten not
to run?

or these:

When in old age one rose does fade and wither,
Then in its place there blossoms yet another.

"I trust you are acquainted with these lines," Maglaperidze added with a smile.

"Are you going to have me removed from my job then?" responded Bachana, also with a smile.

"By no means, my dear Bachana! I simply wanted to caution you: are you certain that tomorrow's article will be to the liking of the comrade from a higher authority who monitors my area of production?"

"How do you know what's in the article?"

"I just do, my dear Bachana. The article says that I am

a money-grabbing swindler, that I have a mistress... Then there's some silly little humorous allegory about an allergic woman and a fur-coat... In a nutshell, my dear Bachana, think of your own interests! You are not as firmly seated in that chair as you might think. Believe me, I know from experience."

Bachana went red with indignation, but he asked, as calmly as he could manage:

"So what do you advise me to do, comrade Maglaperidze?"

"First of all, take it easy. Mind you, I won't pretend that I'm not concerned myself. Coming to you like this is very humiliating for me! In such cases I usually send my bookkeepers to the editors concerned. You're the first editor I've petitioned in person! Take note of that!"

"Well, I am honoured!" Bachana bowed his head humbly.

"Irony is uncalled for, dear Bachana, I came here because I respect you... And in any case, irony is my speciality."

"In that case you're wasting your time!" answered Bachana.

"You must withdraw the article!" Maglaperidze announced categorically.

"Can't be done!"

"You'll be getting a call from someone it's not wise to refuse."

"God himself could call! The type's been set up, and to stop it now would cost the state fifty thousand roubles. So let's not waste any more time talking about it."

"How much?" laughed Maglaperidze.

"Fifty thousand roubles!" said Bachana emphatically.

"I'll cover the loss."

"The state has no need of your handouts!"

"The state, my dear friend, consists of people like you and me, and if people do not support each other, the state will collapse. Surely you must understand that?"

Bachana was infuriated by the self-satisfied smile that never left this brazen rogue's face.

"If by mutual support you mean fraud and corruption,

then you are profoundly deluded, my dear Sandro! Not everything can be bought!"

Maglaperidze rose to his feet.

"You are an inexperienced young cockerel, dear Bachana. You've only just learnt how to crow — be careful not to strain your voice before your spurs have grown!"

"I'll bear your advice in mind."

"One last thing. Somerset Maugham says that in addition to the five well-known senses, there is one more, the sixth, without which the others are not worth a farthing..."

"What sixth sense is that?" laughed Bachana.

"Money, my dear Bachana, money!" said Maglaperidze, still smiling the same smile.

"Despite all that, the article will be in tomorrow morning's paper, and then the appropriate authorities will react accordingly."

"And your paper will expect an answer?"

"Certainly!"

"I pity you, my dear Bachana, I really pity you!.."

Maglaperidze went towards the door.

"Scoundrel!" Bachana was about to shout after him, but the factory director was more agile than Bachana thought, and he swiftly pulled the door closed behind him.

The second visitor entered the office an hour later, as though he had been waiting for Bachana to calm down. He was exquisitely polite, and appeared perfectly respectable. His eyes seemed to radiate good-humoured intelligence.

"Good day, Mr. Editor!"

Bachana stood to shake the hand which his visitor proffered and asked him to sit down. The visitor thanked him, removed his hat, placed it beside his briefcase on the table in front of the desk and only then seated himself in the armchair offered.

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Galaktion Georgievich Mtvaradze, and I work in the Central Statistics Office."

"Pleased to meet you... To what do I owe the honour?"

"I do apologise for bothering you, and taking up your precious time... However, knowing how ready you are to

help people I will make so bold as to occupy your attention for just half an hour."

"By all means, take an hour if need be!"

"In order to make this rather strange story—that is, I emphasise, strange to *you*—less burdensome for you, I'll start with the bare facts of the matter. Only I ask you most especially not to interrupt me and not to ask questions unless it's absolutely necessary. And would you please ask your secretary not to let anyone in while we are talking."

Bachana pressed the button of his electric bell and his secretary glanced into the room.

"Yelena Sergeyevna, I'm out. I'll be back in half an hour."

His secretary nodded and shut the door behind her.

"I'm listening," said Bachana to his visitor, and picked up a pencil.

"No, no, please don't take notes!"

Bachana set the pencil down to one side.

"The fact is—I am a humanoid!"

Bachana started in surprise.

"What? What did you say?"

"That's right, I am a humanoid!" repeated Mtvaradze.

Now Bachana understood everything. But he had promised not to interrupt his visitor, so he gritted his teeth and said:

"I see. Please go on!"

"My people, the inhabitants of the planet Homos, came to the Earth from Andromeda Nebula and sowed the first seeds of life here. The length of time that has elapsed since then is beyond the grasp of human reason, so I shall not burden you with the mathematics of it... And so, we brought life to the Earth... This was the most important cosmic experiment ever carried out. It was successful, life arose on earth, and it brought forth its fruits."

"One question!" Bachana raised his hand.

"Only if it's to the point!" Mtvaradze cautioned him.

"Tell me please, Galaktion Georgievich, exactly when and how you yourself arrived on our planet."

"I knew you would want to ask that... The fact is that our civilisation has virtually eliminated or reduced to zero the

conceptions of time and distance. For us these categories have the value we wish them to have. Do you follow me? This means that we can be instantly wherever we may wish to be, and have no need of spaceships, flying saucers and other technical means of conveyance. As for myself, I didn't come to you from anywhere else. The expedition which brought the seeds of life to earth programmed in our periodical appearance, in order to regulate the development of life. This method allows organisms to decide for themselves which route they will take to perfection..."

"But in that case, how did you discover that you are a humanoid?"

"We are informed of that when the time comes by means of bio-currents from the scientific centres of Homos."

"And when were you so informed?"

"Very recently, only last Sunday. I went to sleep as a man, and woke up as a humanoid."

"I understand," said Bachana.

"No, you don't understand anything! And what's more, you think I'm a madman, but you're trying not to show it. Thank you for being so tactful."

Bachana was embarrassed.

The humanoid continued:

"The basic aim of the experiment was to determine whether civilisation could be developed on alien planets."

"And what conclusion have you reached?"

"It is possible!"

"Thank God for that!" Bachana was delighted.

"But your civilisation develops unevenly, in a zig-zag motion. It's similar to a human cardiogram. You often suffer because you make a large number of quite unnecessary moves. Humanity is constantly nervous and hesitant, and when your species development takes a clearly wrong direction, then there are wars, epidemics, famines, spiritual impoverishment and catastrophes..."

"Why do you not set us right, why don't you show us the true road? How do you actually show your human attitude towards us?"

"The cosmic law forbids interference. Each living organism must attain the highest form of civilisation unaided."

"That's unjust, Galaktion Georgievich! Since you were the ones who started the experiment, you must assist its correct development."

"And so we do, in essence. Our assistance consists of hindrance. Do you understand me? We prevent humanity from taking a wrong turning. We destroy those seeds which are developing incorrectly, in the wrong direction."

"What forms does this assistance take?" Bachana asked with genuine interest. By this time he was really arguing with a genuine humanoid on behalf of deluded humanity.

"We have twice saved your people when they had lost their way: at the time when lewdness and depravity had ruined Sodom and Gomorrah, and at the time when a global flood threatened to destroy the whole human race. You explain these calamities by the wrath of God, that's your affair, it's all the same to us whether you call dinner supper or you call supper dinner." Mtvaradze smiled condescendingly.

"Surely that is not the sum total of your assistance to humanity? What about spiritual help? Or moral help? Why don't you want to make us purer and more moral?" Bachana began to feel genuinely sorry for himself and his fellow-human-beings.

"But we do! At various stages in the development of human society the humanoid genes are activated and they strive to influence humanity's fundamental moral nature—in a positive sense, of course... We regard such interference as both desirable and permissible."

"Galaktion Georgievich, could you name some other humanoids apart from yourself?" asked Bachana.

"Gladly! I can't recall them all, of course, but I'll name a few: Homer, Cervantes, Beethoven, Rustaveli, Shakespeare, Goethe, Leonardo da Vinci, Boccaccio, Archimedes, Giordano Bruno, Joan of Arc, Tolstoy, Pushkin, King Parvanaz, King David the Builder, Abraham Lincoln, Faulkner, Hegel, Kant, Lenin, Blok, Einstein, Charlie Chaplin, Galaktion Tabidze, Vazha Pshavela, Akakii Tsereteli, Ilya Chavchavadze... It's not possible to list them all..."

"Tell me, Galaktion Georgievich, in your opinion is modern humanity developing as it should, along the right lines?"

"These are difficult times for humanity!" sighed Mtvaradze. "If it had listened at the time to the advice of the humanoids I listed, your affairs would be in much better shape... But ever since people turned their gaze to space we humanoids have been able to hope. Mankind has discovered within itself a remarkable source of energy—curiosity. Yes, yes! Thanks to this very quality which you yourselves have abused so badly, you have been able to overcome the monstrous force of the Earth's gravity and venture forth into space..."

"And you think we are no longer threatened by floods or a catastrophe such as Sodom and Gomorrah?"

"Only if you cease to pay attention to the teachings of the humanoids I have named and consider them outmoded. Therefore you must protect the achievements of civilisation, protect the creations of the finest minds of the past! They were achieved at the cost of so much labour, so much blood and tears!" Mtvaradze glanced at his watch and stood up.

"I've gone through all the essential points. And I am infinitely grateful to you for your attention!" He placed his hand on his heart and bowed his head low.

"One more question, Galaktion Georgievich. Why did you choose me to approach? Why did you share your secret with me?"

Mtvaradze's face lit up in a radiant smile of goodwill, and for the first time Bachana detected a morbid gleam in his eyes.

"Does my name really mean nothing to you? Galaktion is the Galaxy! Mtvaradze is the Moon! Tomorrow I return to my home planet of Homos... I have fulfilled my mission here on Earth. And now I must perform my final duty and inform you, dear Bachana Akakievich, that you are a humanoid!"

Bachana felt a strange sensation in his heart and a tickling in his throat.

"Farewell, my friend and brother! You have been informed of your mission on the Earth!"

Galaktion embraced Bachana and pressed him to his breast, then he turned and walked quickly out of the office.

...Bachana did not hear his secretary come in and place

a pile of papers on the desk. He was standing by the window, smiling inanely, and tears were streaming down his cheeks.

Bachana was unable to sleep at all that night. The first thing he did when he reached the office in the morning was to ring the Central Statistics Office.

"Hello, can I help you?" asked the pleasant young voice in the earpiece.

"Statistics Office?"

"Yes."

"Could you tell me, miss, whether Galaktion Mtvaradze works there?"

"Mtvaradze? That madman? Excuse me, who's asking?"

"I'm a friend of Galaktion's."

"Galaktion disappeared without trace a week ago..."

Bachana's hand holding the receiver froze.

"Hello, hello?"

Bachana put the phone down.

16

Bachana Ramishvili was born on July 14, a date marked in all the calendars of the world—not of course as Bachana's birthday, but as the day of the fall of the Bastille, the day on which the French Revolution was born.

Bachana was smiling as he looked at the calendar that lay in front of him and thought about things...

French people born on the fourteenth of July celebrated their birthday with great festivity, but who knew about Bachana's birthday? Nobody. Probably they knew in the personnel department, where they kept Bachana's file, and in the passport office at the militia station. But knowing was not the same thing as remembering... Bachana's birthday had last been celebrated when he was nine years old. His schoolfriend Vakhtang Elbakidze had given him a remarkable self-propelled red fire-brigade car... All those years ago! Since then the fact of Bachana's birth had only been remarked on three times:

"Curse the day you were born!"—when he started smoking.

"You might as well never have been born!"—the first time he got drunk.

"How did a monster like you ever get born?"—when he lost his bread ration card.

These words had been addressed to him at different times by different people, but he had never felt any resentment, for he understood only too well that in the first two instances they were motivated by concern for his health, and in the third case by fear of inevitable starvation. He felt a profound gratitude to these people who had remembered his birthday and who were no longer alive. He repaid them for the kindness they had showed him by visiting the cemetery regularly and laying violets, roses and carnations on their graves.

...And now the day was here. How many people born on this day would be given flowers, and how many graves of people who had died on this day would be decorated with flowers. How many new-born infants would open their eyes for the first time today, and how many people would close their eyes for ever... Bachana imagined a huge spinning merry-go-round, as large as the tree of life itself. Thousands of faces flashed by—familiar and unfamiliar, smiling and sad, astonished and ecstatic, gloomy and joyful, tormented and happy... Tired and stupefied people got down from the toy ships, cars, aeroplanes and horses, and their places on the merry-go-round were taken by others... Bachana felt as though he had just got off the merry-go-round and his head was reeling. He stood up, staggered over to the window and flung it open. A gentle evening breeze rushed into the room. Then Bachana went across to the door and glanced out into the corridor. There was nobody in the newspaper offices. Unable to think of any better way of celebrating his own birthday, Bachana had let all his astonished and delighted staff go home early.

He went back to the desk, sat down and took out of the drawer the first piece of correspondent's copy that came to hand. It was called "Why Do Bats Sleep Hanging Upside Down?"

The telephone rang.

"Why would anyone want to ring at this hour?" thought Bachana in astonishment, as he picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

The receiver said nothing.

"Hello! Hello!"

There was a rustling like someone's breathing in the receiver. Bachana waited no longer for a reply, put the phone down and turned back to the manuscript. It was a good question, why did bats sleep hanging upside down? Bachana did not read the manuscript though, he somehow felt he wanted to discover the answer to this apparently worthless question for himself. Probably it was because... In his physical education classes as a child, Bachana had many times won his instructor's praise by hanging upside down on the horizontal bar, but it had never given him any particular pleasure. Once at Kobuleti he had spent a good fifteen minutes in that position while the fisherman who had pulled the half-drowned boy from the water struggled to pump him out, and Bachana always recalled this particular hanging upside down with revulsion. What then could it be that attracted bats to such an unusual posture? He couldn't work it out. Bachana was on the point of referring to the manuscript lying before him for an answer when the door of his office swung open and an incredibly beautiful woman walked in.

"I've come!" said the woman.

Bachana could not believe his eyes. It was Maria, right there in front of him. Bachana tried to ask her to sit down, but his tongue would not obey him, he tried to stand up, but his legs had turned to rubber, he tried to smile at her, but his face seemed to have turned to stone. For a long moment he was deaf and dumb. The woman stood quite still, pale, with uplifted breasts, red blotches of agitation showing on her neck.

"I phoned you!" she said quietly.

"I know!" Bachana suddenly came to. "I heard your breathing."

"You weren't at home, so I rang here."

"What can I do for you?" Bachana asked mechanically.

"Let's go!" said the woman.

"Where?" asked Bachana in astonishment.

"Wherever you like!"

Bachana was absolutely astounded.

"Please sit down!" he managed to say with an effort.

The woman carried on standing there. With her slim figure, crimson lips and black hair, dressed in a green blouse and snow-white skirt, she was like the breath of spring that had come in through the window.

"Let's go!" she repeated, gesturing nervously with her green handbag.

Bachana stood up, and noticed for the first time the green shoes on the woman's finely-moulded legs.

They went out without another word being spoken.

On the street Bachana hailed a taxi.

"Where to?" asked the driver.

"Anywhere you like!" answered Bachana, and glanced at the woman. She smiled.

They drove up along Komsomol Lane and then took seats on the verandah of a small open restaurant.

The waiter put the menu in front of Bachana and went away.

"What shall I order?" asked Bachana.

"Fried potatoes."

"What else?"

"Nothing else."

"Wine?"

"If you like."

"Cognac?"

"No."

"A bottle of 'Tibaani', then."

"Alright."

While he was waiting for the waiter Bachana lit a cigarette and offered one to Maria.

"No thanks, I don't smoke."

Silence fell between them. Bachana smoked and looked at Maria. Why had she come to him? Was it business? Or did she want to get to know him better? Or... But that was impossible, there was no way she could know that it was his birthday! Then what could have brought her to Bachana? Should he ask? Somehow Bachana felt reluctant to ask that question. And it had nothing to do with considerations of

tact: Bachana was afraid of extinguishing the tiny spark of hope that had glowed in the depths of his heart since the day he met this strange woman.

At last the waiter came back, and Bachana gave a sigh of relief.

"What can you offer?" he asked.

"You name it!" said the waiter.

"In that case we'll have fried potatoes and a bottle of 'Tibaani'."

The waiter was crestfallen.

"Lamb kebab, veal kebab, roast chicken, fillet of beef, chakapuli, abkhazura, muzhuzhi, tataryakhny, nadugi, mchadi, fresh cheese, nuts ... take your choice!"

"Do you have lark's tongue? Roasted?" Bachana joked.

"Not roasted, boiled if you like!" grinned the waiter.

"Then bring us everything!"

"Nuts and 'Tibaani'," said Maria.

The waiter nodded dutifully and went away.

"Maria, does your husband know where you are?" Bachana was surprised to hear himself blurt out the stupid question.

"I don't ask you, because I know you're not married," replied Maria, with a smile.

"You're not married, then?" Bachana drew an illogical conclusion.

"Not now," said Maria.

"Why not?" Bachana asked, and realised he had asked another stupid question.

The woman said nothing.

"That is, I wanted to ask whether your daughter has a father," Bachana attempted to smooth over the awkward moment.

"She has a father and a husband!" answered Maria.

Bachana took out another cigarette. The waiter came back empty-handed.

"Sorry sir, there's no kebab left. I can't recommend the chicken—it's incubator chicken. It seems they didn't bring any fillet today. We're out of 'Tibaani', and champagne too. The only wine we have is 'Saero', and we have Swiss cheese, or Rostov cheese, and radish..."

Bachana was staggered.

"I thought you said we could name anything we wanted!" said Maria.

"You can, but we still have to find it!"

Maria laughed so loudly that all the other customers in the restaurant turned to look at her.

"Where's your manager?" Bachana asked the waiter.

"He's not here at the moment, sir. As soon as he comes back I'll bring him over to you!"

"Either this waiter's an idiot, or they've recognised me and hidden the stuff they bought at the market," Bachana thought to himself, and turned to Maria:

"Let's get out of here! I don't feel like celebrating our first rendezvous with radish and 'Saero'."

"What difference does it make?" responded Maria. "Let's take whatever he has. We can look at each other... And remember this evening for ever..."

The worm of doubt stirred once again in Bachana's mind. "What does she want from me? Who sent her? Why did she come to me? Could she really just have wanted to see me?" When he raised his head to glance at Maria, she was watching something behind him. Bachana followed her gaze and saw the waiter standing in front of a thick-set man, listening to him and nodding his head servilely, like some mechanical toy.

"They're cooking up a plot against you!" Maria said to Bachana.

"If they're planning to take you away from me, then I won't let them," laughed Bachana, grabbing a bent knife from the table.

"A knife like that won't be much use to defend me with!" Maria smiled.

"Then I'll use my teeth!" answered Bachana, and he glanced towards the waiter, but he and his fellow-conspirator were gone. "Maria, I just have to ask you, why did you come to see me? What do you want?"

"Have I asked you for anything?" Maria retorted.

"You've set me a very difficult riddle... Either tell me the answer or kill me on the spot!"

"The riddle's very simple. Tomorrow I fly to Kutaisi.

And before I fly anywhere I always say goodbye to anybody I'm really fond of. That's all there is to it."

"But why?" Bachana was confused.

"How can I put it... Somehow I always think something is bound to happen to the aeroplane. And that I'm seeing the people I love for the last time." Maria lowered her head.

"And am I one of those people?" asked Bachana in astonishment. Maria nodded without looking at him. "What have I done to deserve this ... such..."

"If only I knew!"

"And are you fond of many people?"

As he waited for a reply Bachana's heart began to pound.

"Until today there was only one—my daughter Maya. Now there's another—you."

"Either I'm dreaming, or this woman is the devil incarnate!" The thought flashed through Bachana's mind. Maria suddenly raised her head and said in an agitated voice:

"I know you think I'm mad or I'm an adventuress. But I honestly didn't want all this to happen! I've been struggling with my own feelings for a whole year now. Never mind, I'm a strong woman! I'll get up and go!" Maria stood up.

"If you go, I think I'll die!" Bachana touched the woman's cold fingers, and she believed him. Bachana realised she did, and kissed her hand.

"Thank you!" said Maria, and sat down.

The waiter appeared, carrying a huge tray loaded with all manner of delicacies.

"What's all this? Where's it from?" asked Bachana in surprise.

"The manager arrived, and when he saw you, he ordered us to open up the special reserve supplies."

"Who is your manager?"

"He'll be here in a minute!"

"Does he know me?"

"Does he know you! He almost fired me! But I'm not to blame, sir, it's not written on a man's forehead who he is and where he's from. I'm very sorry!" The waiter bowed and darted off.

Bachana brightened up. He uncorked the champagne with a loud pop and filled their glasses to the brim.

"I'd like to share a secret with you, Maria."

"No, the first toast is mine!" Maria raised her glass.

Bachana became all ears.

Maria waited for the foam to settle in her glass, then she looked through the glass at the gold crescent moon that had risen over the old fortress of Narikala. Bachana followed her example. At first the moon shook and trembled, then it gradually filled the entire glass and dissolved in the amber liquid.

Bachana felt as though he was holding the cool, amber moon in his hand.

"Today the moon is fourteen days old," said Maria quietly. "Everyone knows exactly when the moon rises and when it sets, the day of the full moon, and the day of the half-moon. But no-one on earth knows when the moon first appeared, when it was born. I drink for the health of people whose birthday no-one remembers."

Maria clinked glasses with Bachana. The moon in Bachana's glass trembled once more, then it dissolved into transparent amber liquid. Maria and Bachana drained their glasses, and when Bachana looked back at the sky, he could no longer see the moon. It was hidden in the clouds.

"We've drunk the moon!" he exclaimed, exulting childishly at the strange coincidence.

"God grant you the long life of the moon! Happy birthday!" Maria set down her glass. "You were talking about a secret when I interrupted you," she reminded him.

Bachana suddenly felt he wanted to weep on the breast of this strange woman.

"I only wanted to say that you are exceptionally beautiful, Maria. May I kiss you?"

The woman only smiled in reply. Bachana stood, leaned across the table and kissed Maria's immense, moist eyes. And at that moment he saw the thick-set man who had recently been talking with the waiter coming towards their table.

"Good evening!" the man greeted them in a hoarse voice.

"Good evening!" replied Bachana.

"Pardon me, my dear Bachana, I'll only disturb you for one minute."

"Please take a seat. This is my friend Maria."

The man bowed gallantly, kissed Maria's hand and sat down.

"Don't you recognise me, my dear Bachana?" The man took three packs of "Winston" from his pocket, pushed one across the table towards Maria and one towards Bachana, leaving one for himself.

Bachana took a close look at the man, and something stirred vaguely in his memory, but he was unable to pin it down, and he answered awkwardly:

"Your face is familiar, but I'm afraid I can't recall where it was we met."

"I'm Sandro Maglaperidze, from the fur factory..."

"Aaah!" exclaimed Bachana. "A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since then! Where are you now, my dear Sandro? How are you getting on?"

"I'm not making out too badly, thanks."

"If you've joined us in order to reproach me with the past, then please don't do it today. Today is the birthday of the French Republic, and mine too!" said Bachana merrily, and he proffered Maglaperidze a brimming glass.

"Not at all! There's nothing to reproach you with! Quite the contrary, I came to thank you, my dear Bachana! How old are you today?"

"Forty-five!"

"My God! So much enjoyment still ahead of you! So much love!" Maglaperidze glanced at Maria. She blushed in embarrassment. "Congratulations, my dear Bachana! God grant you happiness! You couldn't commit a malicious act, even if you wanted to!"

"You think so?"

"But of course! After that article was published I became a very popular man! Everyone in Georgia knew me!"

Bachana laughed:

"I wouldn't wish my worst enemy that kind of popularity!"

"You're wrong... Popularity is popularity. Remember Herostratos*... Your article resulted in the triumph of truth and the unmasking of evil."

"I don't doubt it."

Bachana had an unpleasant foreboding that a sense of gratitude was not what had brought Maglaperidze to his table.

"Yes, indeed. The investigative agencies who took an interest in the article established that the woman involved was a swindler and a fraud. And the man you sent the article to, so that he could take the appropriate measures, proved to be a true patriot."

"In what way?" asked Bachana, regretting that he had asked Maglaperidze to sit down.

"You reckoned that removing the article from an edition that was already typeset would have cost the state fifty thousand roubles, didn't you? Well he cut the loss to twenty-five thousand."

Sensing that Bachana had not followed his drift, Maglaperidze made things clearer for him:

"His response to your article was very simple: he did nothing."

"Are you trying to tell me that you bribed him, with twenty-five thousand roubles?"

"Why call it a bribe, my dear Bachana? An expression of gratitude to someone who had helped you out when you needed it! Even today are we not still guided by the moral code of Rustaveli? Remember Avtandil's words to the Vizier:

Wearisome this life without a friend to ease our pain.
In times of need a friend will boldly hasten to our aid."

"I see that you have worked out your filthy philosophy very thoroughly and researched all your sources," Bachana remarked acidly.

"Oh, classical literature is a marvellous thing. I read Rustaveli religiously every day, like the Gospel. And by the way, I read your works too, and I learn a lot from them.

---

* The man who burnt the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus in order to win eternal fame. *Ed.*

What a beatiful lady-friend you have, my dear Bachana," Maglaperidze abruptly changed the subject. "This is the first time I have ever seen such a beautiful woman wearing no jewelry!"

Bachana was taken by surprise and could find no answer.

"No doubt your wife has more than enough jewelry to adorn herself?" Maria asked Maglaperidze, and took a sip of wine to mask her agitation.

"She does quite well. But I wasn't thinking of wives. There are women who enhance the beauty of our lives, so to speak, outside the home."

Maria blushed violently, but she said nothing.

Bachana decided to return to the main theme.

"Did your life just go on as before after the article was published?"

"Of course not, my dear Bachana! In the first place, our plant burnt down. The old electric wiring was to blame. In the second place, my Vizier retired and went into commerce. He took me on, and we set up a new group of restaurants. Built up the new business on the smouldering ruins of the old, as Rome was rebuilt after Nero burnt it down, ha-ha-ha!" Maglaperidze sniggered repulsively.

"Yes, I can see now just what a clever and dangerous crook you are, my dear Sandro. And if there's ever an opportunity, I shall certainly return to your case," said Bachana seriously.

"Now that's an answer I didn't expect from you! I assumed that time would have taught you to take things more steadily and sing in tune. And here you are still crowing away... Surely you must know what they do to cocks that crow out of season?"

"Are you threatening me?" said Bachana, pale with indignation.

"Doesn't it disgust you to talk with this scum?" Maria suddenly asked Bachana. Maglaperidze leapt up. Maria also rose to her feet.

"Clear off!" said Bachana in a barely audible voice, turning to face Maglaperidze.

"Do not be ruled by female caprice, my dear Bachana. The prostitutes forced the Macedonian warriors to burn

down Persepolis, the world's most beautiful city," said Maglaperidze, boring into Maria with the hateful gaze of his yellow eyes. And suddenly, before Bachana knew what was happening, Maria had drawn back her hand and delivered a mighty slap to Maglaperidze's face. Everyone in the restaurant turned at the sound of the blow, but it all happened so quickly that no-one saw anything. A deathly silence fell at Bachana's table. Bachana suddenly felt the table beginning to tilt upwards from Maglaperidze's side. He pushed down on it with all his weight. Maglaperidze tried as hard as he could to overturn the table, but he couldn't manage it. The silent duel continued for about a minute. The swollen veins stood out on their foreheads, their eyes were bloodshot.

"Don't you dare!" whispered Bachana, and his whisper was so ominous that Maglaperidze suddenly seemed to give up. His face assumed its former expression, the smile returned to his eyes. He stepped back from the table and addressed Maria:

"Thank you, my lady! I shall never forget the great honour you have done me."

Maria said nothing. She was as white as chalk.

"Clear off, Maglaperidze!" said Bachana, astounded at how calm he felt.

Maglaperidze turned sharply and walked away.

Bachana and Maria stood there for a minute, stunned by what had happened, then they sat down again at the table. There was a long, drawn-out silence. Bachana was the first to break it:

"Maria, show me your plane-ticket."

Maria opened her handbag and rummaged in it with trembling fingers until she finally found the ticket and held it out to Bachana.

Without even looking at the ticket, Bachana tore it up, tossed the scraps of paper into the ashtray and set them alight.

"Don't leave me, Maria!" he said in a quiet voice, when the ticket in the ashtray had completely burnt away. Maria gave a barely perceptible nod. Bachana filled their glasses and called the waiter over.

"The bill, please!"

"Everything's already paid for!"

"Who paid?"

"Our manager!"

Bachana laughed.

"So much for the fall of the Bastille. Here's to you, Maria!"

They clinked glasses. Maria stood up, went over to Bachana and kissed him on the cheek. Then she went back to her seat, sank her face into her hands and began to sob violently.

Towering up on the top of the mountain, the Shavnabada church appears like a shepherd wrapped in a heavy felt cloak, shading his eyes from the sun with his hand as he surveys his flocks of sheep grazing on the banks of the Mtkvari, the Algeti, the Mashaveri and the Khrami. Spread out at the foot of the mountain, the towns of Rustavi, Bolnisi, and Marneuli are like huge sheepdogs, breathing smoke and fire.

Mt. Shavnabada is astoundingly beautiful in the spring, shrouded in mist, its domed peak reaching up to the very heavens.

Sunday. A car toils its way up the narrow cart-track. Swaying like a drunk, it halts at each turn, and retreats to gather the strength to scramble up the next stretch of the incline. The car has stopped again at the final bend before the church.

Bachana found first gear and let out the clutch. Gravel and sand spurted from under the car's rear wheels. Bachana increased his pressure on the accelerator and the wheels span frantically. There was a smell of burnt rubber.

"I'll get out," said Maria.

"Stay there. It's only skidding because it's too lightly loaded," Bachana explained.

He let the car roll back a bit, then slipped it into gear and stepped on the accelerator. The car rushed forwards.

"There now, we're here."

Bachana parked the car under a tree.

Maria got out, kicked off her shoes and ran a few steps across the grass barefoot. She stopped in the middle of the

church-yard, flung out her arms, stood on tip-toe and spun round, calling out like a little girl:

"How close we are here to God!"

Then she squatted down in front of the church, buried her face in her knees and froze motionless, like a pilgrim who has fallen into an ecstasy of prayer.

Bachana took their provisions out of the boot and laid them out on the table that had been built under the tree, then he went over to Maria, sat down on the ground beside her, put his arm round her shoulder and said with a laugh:

"Say a prayer, Maria!"

Maria knelt, raising her hands in the attitude of prayer, closed her eyes and began to speak in a whisper:

Thou art the hope of all my hopes,
Peace of my soul, my heart's own light,
Thou art the glimmering of my star,
My ray of golden sunshine bright.
Thou art the spring of life eternal,
The angel watching over me.
My only prayer to God I raise,
To be eternally with thee.

Maria said no more.

Bachana knew these lines of verse by heart, but never once had he pondered their meaning and their similarity to a prayer. And now he felt strangely at peace, and a sensation of warmth flowed over his entire body. He drew Maria to him and asked:

"Is that a prayer or a wish?"

"Aren't they the same thing?

Darling sun, shining brightly,
Do not hide behind the hill,
Warm the maiden standing here,
Save her from the wintry chill.
Speak to her in words of love,
Take her in your swift embrace,
Or your darling will not linger,
But seek some other handsome face."

Nature itself seemed to have heard Maria's words: the huge disc of the sun rose from behind the mountain and took the church in its fiery embrace, drinking up the mist from the slopes of the mountain in an instant, as though it were milk.

Maria pressed herself to Bachana's breast and began to speak, and again her words sounded like a prayer:

"Don't ever leave me, Bachana! Don't leave me, my only hope! Where have you been all this time? So much unhappiness you could have saved me from! Since the first day I saw you I have wanted nothing else! Nothing else but you exists for me! I worship you, I pray to you: never ever leave me, never send me back to my past! I don't want to go! I'm weary of it all! See, I come close to you, I can reach out and touch your hand... I'm here with you. Don't leave me!" Maria began to cry.

Bachana's heart ached as he listened to this agitated woman's impassioned confession, and he tried to reassure her.

"What's wrong Maria? What makes you think that I will leave you? Don't be foolish! Don't cry, my love! I shall always be with you!"

When Maria had calmed down, Bachana carefully laid her on the grass, rose and walked towards the church. He felt no less disturbed and agitated than Maria.

The church was filled with damp twilight. Bachana looked around him.

Walls corroded by damp... Not a single icon or fresco... A tattered icon-screen... In the corner a rickety little wooden table covered with some threadbare green material, with a warped candlestick and an icon of the Virgin sketched by some eccentric hand... Three candles in the candlestick, almost entirely burnt away... On the table a bundle of thin wax candles, and beside them a crumpled three-rouble note...

"Hey!" called Bachana.

"E-e-ey!" replied the echo.

The doves that had been cooing somewhere in the niches under the dome of the cupola fluttered into the air and followed each other out through the narrow windows. Bachana began to walk round the church. The eastern wall was sooty

from candle-smoke at about the height of a man. In places the walls were decorated with long lists of the names of tourists, in alphabetical order, with their addresses and the dates they had visited the church. On the wall by the altar, under the solitary, half-obliterated fresco of Christ the Redeemer, Bachana read a pitiful piece of doggerel, in which the author challenged the Almighty:

I don't believe in Jesus Christ, the spirit of this place.
See him here upon the wall, a filthy God without a face.

The signature under the versicle was "An atheist Young Communist". A reply had been scratched slightly lower down on the wall:

If you have no faith in God, and are filled with
self-content,
What was the purpose, my young comrade, of your difficult
ascent?
As I walk this thorny path I have woes enough to bear,
Without an atheistic critic adding in his share!

The signature was "Jesus Christ".

Bachana laughed loudly. In this contest by correspondence, the Heavenly Lord clearly had the better of the atheist poet.

When he came out of the church, Bachana could not see Maria.

"Maria, where are you?" he shouted.

There was no answer. "Why did I leave her alone?" thought Bachana, and he set off at a run around the church.

Maria was sitting at the table spread with food beneath the tree, conversing with an old man. Bachana walked over to them.

"Where did you get to? You gave me a fright!" He turned to the old man: "Hello!"

"God grant you health!" The old man removed his round felt cap.

"Shall we take breakfast?" Bachana asked Maria.

"Definitely! I'm starving!" agreed Maria. "And our friend will join us."

"Why not! I've got a little something too!" The old man untied his bag and drew out some home-baked bread, "gouda" cheese, boiled meat, pickled garlic and half a bottle of vodka. Bachana brought a bottle of wine from the car.

"First, my children, we'll take a little glass of vodka!" The old man took a tiny drinking horn out of his bag, blew into it, filled it with vodka and held it out to Bachana:

"There, try the mulberry vodka, and say a few words!"

"For our joy and our enemies' woe!"

Bachana drained the horn and said nothing for a minute or so, then he exclaimed in satisfaction:

"Oh yes, that's marvellous vodka!" And he reached out for the garlic.

The delighted old man poured a drink for himself.

"Where there is joy, there is grief. Let us drink for them both, may we live long in good health! To life!" He drained the horn and ran his hand over his unshaven face, then he poured out vodka for Maria. "Now you say something, my daughter! God has made you so beautiful, your speech must be beautiful too!"

Maria took the horn.

"How old are you, uncle?"

"A-ah," the old man gestured vaguely, "past the seventy mark!"

"May God grant you as many years again!"

"That's a bit too much, but thank you all the same! I won't pretend I don't love being alive. I'd like to live a bit longer!"

Bachana smiled.

"What's your name, uncle?" he asked.

"My name's Georgi, Georgi Tushmalishvili."

"Where are you from?"

"That village way over yonder."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Grazing the animals." The old man pointed across to

the opposite slope where two cows and three sheep were grazing.

"Are they yours?"

"They are."

"Do they bring a good income?"

"What income? They can hardly keep themselves fed!"

"Then why do you keep them?"

"You know, for the odd drink of milk and ball of wool, and a bit of meat every now and again. I could do with twice as many—as it is they'd scarcely make a wolf a decent supper."

"And do you give anything to the state?"

"Yes, I do..."

"What do you give?"

"What I said—a drink of milk, a ball of wool, a piece of meat."

"And what if you did have twice as many animals?"

"That's an easy question, son! If I had more, I'd give more. What else would I do with it? Either the state or the bazaar."

"Don't you work on the collective farm, Uncle Georgi?"

"How could I, son, at my age? My children do, of course. And they tell me to give up grazing the animals. Say I'm shaming them. Say I should be sitting at home and taking it easy, and they could buy the meat and the wool for the levy in the shop! Did you ever hear the like? And where's the meat in the shop to come from? They don't think about that, stupid oafs."

"Uncle Georgi, is there no-one in charge of this church?" Maria asked suddenly.

"Yes, there is an old woman from the village. Her name's Maria too. She painted the icon that's on the table in the church. She's not well, the poor thing, she's lucky if she can get up here once a week."

"And who's been burning the candles?" asked Bachana.

"I have, who else?"

"And where did the money on the table come from?"

"What do you mean? I put it there. For the candles."

"Do you believe in God, Uncle Georgi?" asked Maria.

Georgi pondered the question. He looked the church

over from top to bottom, scratched his head, and looked at the church again.

"How shall I put it? To be honest, I don't exactly believe... But when you're up here alone all day long without another soul, you can't help thinking about God."

"And what do you think about him?"

Georgi looked at the church again.

"What do I think?.. I think that when people destroy other people's holy places, then they should replace them with shrines of their own, bigger and more beautiful than the old ones. Take this church now... We don't know who it belonged to, or who built it. At the feast of Teletoba people come here from all around—Armenians and Tatars and Greeks and Russians... Not to mention the Georgians. They come and they pray. But I reckon people are better off praying in the open fields than in a church like this. God can hear your prayers better. But it's disgusting for a man to be in that ruin, let alone God... The whole point is, the church has been abandoned with no-one to take care of it, and what have they built in its place?"

"I don't follow you, Uncle Georgi."

"There's nothing to follow! Before, son, if a man came to the church, he had to climb up the hill and bow his head to come in at the gate. He had to remove his hat in front of the church and light a candle inside. What am I telling you all this for? You've probably got an education, you know it better than I do. And then, look at our Village Soviet, stuck in a rented house that's half-ruined, and people go in there swearing and spitting, never a thought of removing their hats. If you ask me, the Soviet should be the tallest and the most beautiful house in the whole village. Do you think people didn't know how to build houses higher than the church in the old days? Of course they did, but they didn't dare! They didn't have the right! And now if you look at the farm chairman's house and the Village Soviet, it's like Mt. Kazbek and that little hill over there! Mitka the driver has a garage three times the size of our club! Who's going to go to pray in a Village Soviet like that? No-one, that's who! It's not as though we're beggars, either. Thank God, the village is well enough off! There's plenty of bread and wine and vegeta-

bles! What's the difference between a man and a pig? A man eats what's on the tree, and pig eats what's underneath it! The whole point is that you have to attend to every job at the right time! If you're too late, then the fruit drops off the tree and the pigs get it! I tell the chairman of the Village Soviet, 'You're supposed to be in charge, you're Soviet power! Get moving, you son of a bitch, and put up a real house, so it will be a pleasure for a man to go into the Village Soviet!'— 'How can I,' he says, 'with no money and no resources?' 'What the devil d'you mean, resources?' 'I mean bricks,' he says. Did you ever hear the like? He's got no bricks. So where did the bricks come from for Mitka's garage and the farm chairman's palace? Alright, so he can't get any bricks, but surely he could shave, or grow a good Christian beard and put on decent clothes? So that people would show him some respect? He could, the son of a bitch, but he doesn't give a damn! My cow carries more authority on the village than the chairman! And that's because she's always washed clean, and she gives eight litres at one milking! That's why! Or maybe I've got it all wrong? You tell me!" The old man concluded his speech and poured out the wine.

"You're right about everything, Uncle Georgi," answered Bachana, "but tell me honestly, did you ever mention this even once at a meeting?"

"I said it once."

"When?"

"How old are you?"

"Over forty."

"I was only thirty at the time, and I nearly ended up you know where..."

"Things are different now, Uncle Georgi!"

"Then it's time for someone else to say it... I've done my bit."

"You said you wanted to live a bit longer."

"Ah, you young folk are quick with the words! You're just in no hurry to get down to business! You wouldn't be from the Regional Committee, would you, son?"

Bachana laughed.

"No, Uncle Georgi, I'm a writer and I edit a newspaper."

"An editor! Then you write all about this in your paper!"

"I certainly will!"

"I doubt it..."

"Why not? I'll just write: this is what Georgi Tushmalishvili thinks."

"So you want to pin it all on me?" said the old man cautiously.

"Not at all! I'll say that I agree with some of your ideas."

"Only some of them?"

"Yes."

"Half of them?"

"Yes, I think so, half of them."

"Then write that, half of them!"

"I will!"

"Well, we'll see," said Georgi doubtfully, and he turned to Maria. "Will he write it?"

"Yes!" Maria laughed.

"Are you two just friends?" Georgi asked suddenly.

Maria was embarrassed by the unexpected question. She shrugged and glanced at Bachana.

"We love each other very much, Uncle Georgi, and we came up here to get married. But there's no priest, so who will marry us?" Bachana answered, laughing.

"Why do you need a priest? If you love each other, then I can marry you," said Georgi, rising to his feet. "Come on, stand up both of you! What's your name?"

"Bachana."

"I know yours — Maria."

Georgi raised up his arms to the sky, a glass of wine in his right hand.

"My dear children, Maria and Bachana! May the morning dew be fragrant myrrh unto you, may the sun in the sky be a wedding garland for your heads, may this ancient church and your native land bear witness to your love. I, Georgi Tushmalishvili, give you my blessing, even as the Almighty blessed Noah and his children. Go forth and multiply! And may your offspring bring glory to our homeland! May love be with you all the days of your life! Be faithful to each other, support each other in times of trouble! Amen! And don't forget to invite me to the wedding!"

Georgi drained his glass dry, wiped his lips on his sleeve, went up to Maria and Bachana and kissed them both loudly in turn.

"Now let me hear any priest claim that he gives the wedding blessing better than Georgi Tushmalishvili!" Georgi added, laughing and thumping himself in the chest.

"Thank you, Uncle Georgi!" said Bachana to the old man. Maria stood there, her head bowed in silence.

"You'll have beautiful children! Make sure you have plenty!" Georgi picked up his bag.

"Are you going, Uncle Georgi?" Bachana asked regretfully.

"I have to, or else the animals will get into the collective farm orchard, and the watchman will skin me alive! Goodbye, my children! Keep an eye out for me if you're back here again, I'll be somewhere around..."

"Goodbye, Uncle Georgi! God grant health to every man or woman who gives you sympathy and support out here in this desert!" Bachana and Georgi shook hands firmly, and the old man walked away. When he had gone a few steps, he suddenly turned round and called out in an offended voice:

"Are you angry with me then, Maria? Didn't I marry you well enough?"

Maria dashed over to Georgi, flung her arms around him and began to shower kisses on the old man's stubbly face. Then just as quickly she turned and ran towards the church. Bachana gazed after Georgi's retreating figure, and followed Maria.

Maria was kneeling at the table. Three candles were burning before the icon of the Virgin.

Bachana listened to her whispering for a long time. He could not hear the words, but he realised that Maria was praying. Quietly placing ten roubles beside the crumpled three-rouble note, he tip-toed out of the church.

17

When Bachana entered the compartment, there were already two passengers sitting there, engrossed in conversation. One of them was clearly from the country while the other, a little younger, was a city man.

Bachana greeted them, slung his briefcase up on to the luggage rack, sat down and buried himself in his newspaper, but even as he read he could not help listening to his companions' conversation.

The country-dweller spoke loudly:

"No, Roland, a man with a gun and a weeping mother are not what we want at all! What we want is a monument so moving that even a man with a heart of stone would weep to look at it!"

"In that case, my dear Khuta, you need Leonardo da Vinci or Michelangelo!" replied the young man.

"The man who did the monument in Marneuli was no Michelangelo, you know the one — 'Heroes of the Future'. But what a monument, eh? When I saw those two naked little kiddies carrying that great huge sword, I was moved to tears, I can tell you! Do us something like that and you'll be our Leonardo da Vinci!"

"I don't know... You looked at my sketch, and I thought you liked it, or didn't you?" asked the young man in an offended voice.

"Yes, I approved the sketch at the art committee because you'd already promised to change it. If you hadn't, you wouldn't have been paid. A promise is a promise! And we don't want any guns and tears!"

"You don't want any bells on withered trees! No naked youth saddling a lion! No wounded eagle! No soldier grinding a serpent under his heel! When it comes down to it, what do you want?" Roland spread his arms wide in exasperation. "How am I supposed to express the theme of the Great Patriotic War and all the soldiers who were killed?"

"How old were you during the war?" asked Khuta.

"I wasn't even born then!" answered Roland.

"Then show us that!"

"What?" Roland did not understand.

"Just that, the fact that you haven't got the slightest idea what war is all about!"

"How can I possibly do that?"

"Very easy! Not long since my grandson, little Khuta, dug out my old front-line helmet and he did ... you know ... he did his little business in it, the son of a bitch! First off I gave him a clip on the ear, and then I felt ashamed of myself. Would you believe I couldn't sleep all night?"

"But nobody ever puts up monuments like that! And anyway, did a sculptor ever try to teach you how to grow maize?"

"Not so far, but if a sculptor turns up who knows something about maize, then I'm willing to learn from him. What do you think, my friend?" Khuta suddenly addressed Bachana.

Bachana set his newspaper aside.

"I beg your pardon, I'm not sure what you were talking about," Bachana lied. He had realised that neither side would give any ground and decided not to interfere.

"The fact is..." began Roland, "I got this commission from them ... that is, from the collective farm ... in the village of Sakitsiao. Mister Shelia here is the chairman of the farm. They asked me to create a memorial to the Great Patriotic War. And now when I've already started work and spent the money, they want it done differently! But how can I do that? There's no way to do anything better for the money they've allocated! If they give me the money I'll build them an Eiffel Tower! When it comes down to it you can't do anything without money. Leonardo da Vinci worked with Cesare Borgia for the sake of money, he worked with the vilest man in the world, who didn't even respect his own mother and sister, he..."

"Stop! Not another word!" Khuta banged the table with his hand.

"What's wrong?" asked Roland in astonishment.

"You can't say things like that!" answered Shelia, a little more calmly.

"Like what?"

"Like that! When you're talking about the war,

you can't talk filth like that, you shouldn't even think it!"

"What did I say?" Roland blushed.

"I can't repeat those words, and I advise you not to!" Khuta took out a cigarette and lit it.

"I beg your pardon!" Roland stood up and left the compartment.

"My dear Khuta," said Bachana to the farm chairman, "really, what can he do if too little money has been allocated for the memorial?"

"I'm sorry, I don't know your name."

"Bachana Ramishvili."

"Very well, my dear Bachana, what does that mean, too little money? We haven't asked him to erect some gigantic structure. All we wanted was a small memorial, but a good one. The best things can come in small packages!"

"But if you can't get what you want, then you should give the commission to someone else!" advised Bachana.

"Oh yes? And what will I tell the people at home? The money's already been spent! I'm taking him to the village now so that he can sort the mess out himself! And if he doesn't, then I'll take him off to the tea plantation, and he can work away there for me until he's paid off all the money he was given! I know his sort. You know I had to deal with Tarasi Daraselia's son, and he was a real tough nut, God knows!" Khuta Shelia smiled at his own words and offered Bachana a cigarette. Bachana took it, but did not light it.

"Then what kind of a memorial would you like?" he asked.

"One that someone walking past wouldn't have to ask about. One that will just make him stop and think. That's the kind of memorial we want!"

"Well, that's a really tall order!" laughed Bachana.

"I agree, but some jobs are much easier. Not long since we built a new stock farm. I called in an artist and asked him to decorate the place. And you know what he did? He painted all the walls with cows and pigs and goats and little piglets! 'What's all this?' I asked him. 'You're the first farm chairman I've ever met who doesn't know his animals!' he answered. 'You son of a bitch,' I said, 'aren't there enough

animals around the place without you daubing them on the walls too?' 'What should I paint then?' he asked. 'First you wipe off what you've done,' I said, 'and then we'll decide what to do next!' "

"And what did you do?"

"Nothing fancy. I told him to draw some kiddies—a little boy and a little girl, with no clothes on, holding glasses in their hands. A green meadow with flowers. Lots of bright flowers. A cow in the meadow. And the kiddies with the glasses in their hands are asking the cow to give them some milk. That's all."

"And what's the cow saying?"

" 'You bring me some grass, and I'll give you some milk,' that's what the cow is saying!" Khuta answered, laughing. "And the picture turned out grand. You know sometimes I even go down there just to admire it. He did a good job, the son of a bitch! All this talk about Leonardo da Vinci! You draw any way you like, as long you draw what I want! Isn't that right, Bachana?"

"Probably... But surely you agree that an artist can have his own ideas on the subject? Art is a complicated business."

"That's just it, we're talking about art. But what could be simpler than drawing a cow? I learnt how to do that in second class from Anton Gugunava. That was our drawing teacher. And he could draw cows you'd think they were alive, you wanted to try milking them! But this Roland... He's stuck on this idea of a man with a gun! If I wanted a man with a gun I'd stand a real man there and stick a real gun in his hands! We're not exactly short of idlers back in the village!"

Khuta puffed on his cigarette and Bachana lit up.

Roland must have got fed up of standing in the corridor, or else he was no longer offended—he came into the compartment and sat in his place without speaking.

"What's wrong, son, feeling hurt? No reason to take offence at what I said!" Khuta stroked Roland's head with his calloused hand, then, turning to Bachana, he went on: "Our young folk like everything handed to them on a plate! When my son left school, he married a woman with two children!

Too lazy even to do that for himself! How many children do you have, Bachana?"

"I'm not married."

"Oho, that's unforgivable, my dear Bachana!"

"How many do you have?"

"Just one, the one I was talking about. But that's not my fault. My wife died young, bless her. She was gone when I got back from the front. And this son of mine... He's not a bad lad, but he just doesn't think like me when it comes to family. I tell him: 'These two are yours alright, but they're not your own,' I say. 'Have at least one child of your own! The cattle are better than you,' I say. 'Look at our goat now, she's had three kids!' 'But a goat,' he says, 'has nothing to worry about: it eats nothing but grass, and it doesn't need any clothes at all.'"

"He's right, too," intervened Roland.

Khuta turned towards him.

"And how many children do you have, counsel for the defence?"

"I'm thirty years old, my dear Khuta, I have three children and my wife's expecting a fourth!" Roland answered gloatingly, and turned away to face the window.

"Well done!" Khuta clapped his hands. "That's my kind of talk! A hero-father! I'm sorry if I upset you!"

"No need to mention it." Roland dismissed the matter with a wave of his hand.

"I'm sorry, son, forgive me!" repeated Khuta.

"Don't, please," said Roland in embarrassment and he changed the subject by asking Bachana a question. "Where are you headed for, dear Bachana?"

"Sukhumi, on a business trip."

"You're lucky. You can go swimming in the sea."

Bachana smiled and nodded.

"And what about our business, my dear Roland?" Khuta attempted to broach the topic again.

"What business is that?" Roland feigned surprise.

"Why, the monument."

"I've made up my mind, dear Khuta! Only I've decided to do it my way, not yours!" said Roland firmly in an angry voice, and he turned back to the window again.

"How do you mean?" Khuta asked cautiously.

"The way I said! A soldier standing there with a helmet and a gun! His young wife clinging to him! Barefooted! And she's surrounded by four naked and frightened little children! That's how!" Crimson in the face, Roland placed his clenched fists on the table as though preparing for a fight.

"What did I tell you?" Khuta leapt to his feet, overjoyed, and kissed Roland on the forehead. "Didn't I tell you so, Bachana? Our young folk are too lazy to think for themselves! They want everything handed to them on a plate! But all they have to do is just use their brains a bit, and they can move mountains! You've just seen it for yourself!"

Bachana was recalled from his trip to deal with urgent business at the newspaper office.

The Central Committee instructor phoned his hotel.

"The Secretary says you must be in his office tomorrow at ten o'clock!"

"What's it about?" asked Bachana, but the phone was already beeping in his ear.

The discussion with the Secretary of the Central Committee was brief. It was not really a discussion at all — the secretary spoke and Bachana listened. He had nothing to say, anyway. He could not have imagined anything worse: in broad daylight, in the newspaper office, a member of his staff had been caught in the act of accepting a bribe!

Bachana called an emergency Party meeting at two o'clock that afternoon. In addition to the members of the editorial board and the newspaper staff, the meeting was attended by the Central Committee instructor and the man from the Ministry of Internal Affairs who had carried out the operation.

The Secretary of the Party Committee opened the meeting:

"Before proceeding to discuss this matter, I would like to request comrade Shalva Khelaya of the Ministry of Internal Affairs to tell us the precise circumstances under which the incident of the bribe occurred."

Khelaya cleared his throat, straightened his black tie and began:

"Two months ago our department was informed that a member of your staff, Shota Tsuladze, was extorting money from citizen Kaloyan, concerning whom an anonymous letter had been received in your offices..."

"Comrade Khelaya, you were informed two months ago, but you are only telling me about it now?" exclaimed Bachana in astonishment.

Khelaya hesitated for a moment before replying:

"You see, comrade Bachana, we had to confirm the reliability of our information and we decided not to alarm you prematurely or disturb the newspaper's staff and the suspect himself unnecessarily."

"And now the 'suspect' is in jail and we're all in disgrace. Do you think that's better?" asked Bachana.

"Yes, but ... that's the way things have turned out. But the facts are quite clear: Tsuladze was caught red-handed."

"What interests you most, comrade Khelaya, preventing the passing of a bribe, or arresting the culprit?" Bachana could scarcely control himself.

"Comrade Editor, I hold you in the highest esteem, but I can't understand why you are defending a colleague who took a bribe," replied Khelaya.

"Who will defend him if I don't?" asked Bachana in surprise.

"It's the innocent who should be defended!"

"However guilty Tsuladze may be, you are at fault!"

"Comrades, I believe you invited me here simply to inform you of the facts. If you want to expel me from the Party instead of Tsuladze, then please say so!" said Khelaya, offended.

"I beg your pardon, I got carried away."

Khelaya opened up a file and took out a sheet of paper.

"Here is the anonymous letter addressed to you at the newspaper office, Bachana Akakievich."

"How do you come to have it?"

"It was found on Tsuladze when he was detained. After receiving the bribe he was supposed to destroy it in Kaloyan's presence."

"May I see it, please!"

Bachana held out his hand.

"By all means!" Khelaya handed him the letter.

"Could you please read it aloud?" asked a member of the editorial board.

A glance at the piece of paper was sufficient for Bachana to recognise the anonymous letter and his own instructions written on it.

The letter was short, and written in large printed letters. Bachana could feel that he was much too agitated to read it out. He handed the letter to the Secretary of the Party Committee.

"You read it!"

"Dear Editor!" said the letter. "There are dark goings-on on Urbneli Street. Gayoz Konstantinovich Kaloyan (who is the manager of a shop), lives at number 571 with his lady-friend Kseniya Gavrilovna Vartagava (a cashier at the same shop) and they are attempting to kill Kaloyan's wife Lily Gerasimovna Amanatidze by methodically adding dosages of various poisonous substances to her food. She is at present in hospital as a result of poisoning. Dear Editor! How long will these terrorists be left at large? How long can this murky business remain shrouded in mystery? I beg you to expose these degenerate killers swiftly with the sharp edge of your pen!

"Yours sincerely,

A true humanist."

"Are there any instructions from the Editor on the letter?" asked the same member of the editorial board who had requested that the letter be read out.

The Party Secretary read:

"Comrade S. Tsuladze. Please hand on this letter to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. B. Ramishvili."

No-one spoke. Bachana took the letter from the Secretary and gave it back to Khelaya.

"Tsuladze did not hand on the letter to the ministry!" said Khelaya emphatically.

Bachana made no reply. He understood everything now, he could see just how things must have developed. Khelaya continued:

"Shota Tsuladze did not transmit the anonymous letter to the ministry. He visited Kaloyan at his home and told him what was in the letter. Of course, Kaloyan denied everything. Vartagava also denied everything alleged in the letter. But Tsuladze informed them that the newspaper would have to pursue the matter, and left. Hoping to avoid the unpleasantness of official procedures, Kaloyan offered Tsuladze five hundred roubles if he would destroy the letter. Tsuladze did not accept the offer. Then Kaloyan doubled his offer. Tsuladze demanded two thousand roubles. This sum clearly proved to be beyond Kaloyan's means and he wrote to us, stating that Tsuladze, an employee of the literary section of this newspaper, was attempting to extort money from himself and his colleague by means of blackmail... An operational group was set up and Kaloyan was given two thousand roubles to hand over to Tsuladze. Of course, the money was marked. And Tsuladze was put under observation."

Khelaya took another sheet of paper out of the file and continued:

"On the seventeenth of September, at three o'clock in the afternoon, in entrance number two of the house in which the 'Bogatyr' department store is located, a meeting took place between Kaloyan and Tsuladze. According to Kaloyan's statement, Tsuladze refused to accept the money on the grounds that the Editor was demanding that the matter should be investigated and the material published in the newspaper."

"I beg your pardon, comrade Shalva, but were you aware that Kaloyan's statement did not correspond to the facts?" inquired the newspaper's executive secretary.

"No, at that time we still did not have the anonymous letter with the Editor's instructions."

"In that case, the Editor himself was under suspicion throughout the whole operation?"

"No, not for a moment. Tsuladze was saying that the Editor was demanding the investigation."

"Why do you think Tsuladze felt he needed to say that?"

"To raise the stakes."

The executive secretary had no more questions. Khelaya continued:

"Ten days later we repeated the experiment. The meeting was set for the grounds of Cherepashy Lake, in one of the buildings of the ethnographic museum. Tsuladze refused to take the money again, citing the same reason... However, he did promise Kaloyan to try to persuade the Editor to hand the business over to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. After that Kaloyan would have to plead his own case. On the twenty-seventh of October, knowing that the Editor was away on business and Tsuladze would be willing to act more boldly, we tried the experiment again. And this time our expectations were justified. At ten o'clock in the morning Tsuladze accepted the money from Kaloyan in the premises of the newspaper offices!"

"And you have proof of that?" asked the Central Committee's instructor.

"We have. The money was recovered from Tsuladze. He confessed. But yesterday he changed his initial testimony and stated that he took the money as a loan."

Khelaya closed his file.

Bachana sat at the table as though thunderstruck, saying nothing.

"Comrade Shalva," he said finally, "you said that Tsuladze refused the money twice and only took it at his third meeting with Kaloyan. Can you please explain to me why you had to repeat the experiment three times? Is it not conceivable that the man had come to his senses, realised his mistake and renounced his criminal intention? Did you not think of that?"

"You are not acquainted with the nature of our work and therefore you attempt to explain the matter on the basis of your own noble outlook. But things are not the way they seem to you. If Tsuladze had not begun to bargain with Kaloyan from the very beginning, then perhaps we might have believed he was an honest man. But he was obviously dragging things out in order to raise the stakes!"

"But Kaloyan had brought him exactly the sum of money he had asked for! Why didn't he take it?"

Khelaya squirmed on his chair.

"It still seems to me that he was raising the stakes. That's why we tested him three times."

"I don't know what you mean by testing him. To my mind it was deliberate temptation."

"Our purpose is to eradicate crime!" declared Khelaya.

"I thought it was your purpose to expose culprits, not to tempt people into crime!" answered Bachana. "If you'd informed me about all this in time, I'd have sacked Tsuladze and the crime would have been averted."

"Comrade Bachana, we don't have the time to play nursemaid to blackmailers."

"What about Kaloyan?"

"Kaloyan's case is being investigated by another group... And you know what he can expect if the contents of the anonymous letter are confirmed..."

"Thank you for your report, comrade Shalva!" said Bachana, standing. Khelaya said his farewells and quickly left the office.

"What do you think, comrades?" the Party Committee Secretary asked them all.

"May I speak?" the Deputy Editor raised his hand.

"Certainly!"

The Deputy Editor stood up and glanced through the papers lying in front of him. He had evidently prepared what he wanted to say, but nevertheless was still nervous.

"We have here with us a representative of the Central Committee and I am therefore obliged, as a communist, to be absolutely frank. Today we will, of course, expel Tsuladze from the Party, but this should have been done some time ago, and it would have been done, if Tsuladze had not enjoyed the patronage and protection of our Editor... Tsuladze has defiled the sacred title of Soviet journalist! Our entire office has been compromised in the eyes of the public. Therefore I repeat: the entire responsibility for what has happened rests with comrade Ramishvili. It was Ramishvili who made his friend Tsuladze a member of the editorial staff, although he had no significant experience, who protected him until the very last moment, and even today, you must have noticed, Ramishvili has attempted to make excuses for him... It is precisely this 'educational' work by our editor that has got us into such an unseemly situation. What is this Tsuladze, when it comes down to it? A poor friend—although

I was never one of his friends—a poor son, a poor brother, a poor father, a talentless writer, and, most importantly, a taker of bribes!.. That's who Tsuladze is! I was always opposed to him joining our staff, and he would not have done so if I were Editor... I myself have reported to the Central Committee and the Ministry of Internal Affairs that Tsuladze was taking bribes. I therefore reject all responsibility for what has happened and demand that comrade Ramishvili be held totally and fully responsible."

The Deputy Editor took a snow-white handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his sweaty forehead and chin. Then he carefully raised the creases in the legs of his trousers and sat down.

While the Deputy Editor was speaking, Bachana saw scenes from his student years in his mind's eye. Bachana recalled their friendship—his, his present Deputy Editor's and Tsuladze's, how they had performed together in the student theatre, their meetings in the university club, the way they had shared their last scraps of food in the student canteen that was known ironically as the 'Science Restaurant', the trips they had gone on together to Udzo and Shiomgvime monasteries, the time all three of them had fallen in love with the same girl... And when he recalled all this, Bachana wanted to weep, to weep so loudly that he would be heard by everyone who could remember his own youth.

"Has anybody else anything to say?" asked the Party Secretary.

"I have a question for comrade Givi!" said one of the workers in the literary section.

"What question?" asked the surprised Deputy Editor.

"You said you knew that Tsuladze was taking bribes. How many years had you known that?"

"Five or six!" answered the Deputy Editor without thinking.

"Then why did you recommend him for Party membership last year?"

The Deputy Editor turned pale, licked his suddenly dry lips and said:

"The question is irrelevant. I can't remember whose applications I supported and when."

"Givi Davidovich, surely you are joking, you can't be serious?" asked the astonished Central Committee instructor.

"Why, do you remember everybody you've ever recommended for Party membership?" The Deputy Editor answered a question with a question.

"Certainly I do! Of course!" The instructor spread his arms in amazement.

"I have a question," said the Party Committee Secretary. "Let us allow that you do not recall when you recommended Tsuladze for Party membership. But why did you take him on a business trip only a month ago, knowing that he took bribes?"

"I had to obey the Editor's instructions!"

"The Editor had nothing to do with it! He was on leave at the time! You arranged the trip for yourself and Tsuladze!"

"Yes, I went with him to make sure he wouldn't get up to no good on the trip," replied the Deputy Editor, trying to wriggle out of it.

The employee from the literary section laughed loudly. The Secretary tapped the table with his pencil.

"May I ask another question, please?" asked a member of the editorial board. "Givi Davidovich, you said that you yourself had informed the Central Committee and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Tsuladze's misbehaviour. Can you explain to us why these bodies failed to act on your information?"

"That was under the old leadership. Many of them no longer hold official positions and others are no longer alive..."

"But why did you not inform the new leadership?"

"I don't see the point of the question," the Deputy Editor replied challengingly.

"The point is this, my dear colleague: if the leadership had learned about everything from you, but failed to react, then that might to some extent alleviate our common guilt. That's all!" answered the member of the editorial board.

"I do not feel the slightest guilt and I don't need any special indulgences!" said the Deputy Editor curtly and coldly.

The discussion continued. Everyone was unanimous in

their profound regret at what had happened and in demanding Tsuladze's expulsion from the Party.

Bachana's turn came. He stood and began to speak in a voice that was very calm, but cracked.

"My friends, almost everything that has been said here is the truth. Shota Tsuladze and I have been friends since we were young. We went to university together, we strolled the streets of Vake and Vere together. He was always an excellent comrade, a loving father to his children and a good son to his parents. I asked him to come and work here not because he was my friend, but because he has a sharp mind and a remarkable talent as a journalist. But I clearly lacked the experience, the ability and the authority to influence him as I should have, to monitor his actions and his behaviour. To be frank, I regard this incident with Tsuladze as a psychological anomaly. I do not intend to try to evade responsibility. I agree with my Deputy Editor, the entire burden of responsibility must be mine, and I am prepared to accept it..."

Bachana sat down and asked for a glass of water.

The pain began in his right shoulder. Then it crept across to his chest and halted somewhere under his left nipple. And then it was as though someone reached into his chest with a hard, calloused hand, seized his heart and began to squeeze it like a bunch of grapes. The hand squeezed slowly and thoroughly: one-two, two-three, three-four... Finally, when the heart had been wrung dry of its last drop of blood, the hand indifferently flung it aside.

18

That day Father Ioram had a visitor. Their conversation was brief, obscure and frightening.

"Father," said the visitor, following the initial words of greeting, "the friends who saved your life that night would be grateful if you would forget their names!"

The visitor was sitting with his back to Bachana, who could not see the expression on his face. But from the expression on Father Ioram's face Bachana could tell that the stranger was some kind of criminal.

"Am I to forget the cross too?" asked Father Ioram.

"And the address!"

"But the ambulance service has the address," said the priest, who had turned pale.

"The ambulance picked you up on the street, and they were called from a public phone box."

"So nothing at all was left to chance?"

"No."

"But what about the cross?" repeated Father Ioram.

"I don't know what cross you mean."

"Yes you do!"

"I only know what I've already told you!"

"How much did you pay that scoundrel for the cross?" Father Ioram's voice quavered.

"I tell you quite frankly, all this talk about some cross or other means absolutely nothing to me. If this is one of the symptoms of your illness, then I'm afraid I am unable to be of any assistance. If you wish to buy a cross, or perhaps to sell one, then say so and I will do what I can for you. No need to be shy, we never count the money."

"Who do you mean, 'we'?" asked Father Ioram.

"We!" answered his visitor curtly.

"And who are you?"

"I'm an intermediary."

"I don't wish to speak with you!"

"Nor I with you."

"Then goodbye."

"I can see no point in our meeting again, so I bid you farewell." The visitor stood up.

"Are you trying to intimidate me?" asked Father Ioram, and from his voice it was clear that he was already frightened.

"No, we're giving you a warning!"

Up to this point Bachana had listened in silence to this strange and absolutely incomprehensible dialogue, but the stranger's final words had exhausted his patience.

"Would you come over here, please, young man!" he said. Bachana was not at all attracted by the idea of talking to this impudent villain, but he wanted very much to remember his face. The stranger slowly turned towards Ba-

chana and asked with an affected politeness which emphasised the irony of his words:

"Are you addressing me?"

Bachana shuddered. The stranger had no face! All the features were in the right places—the eyes, the ears, the nose, the lips, the chin... And yet the man was absolutely faceless, his features expressed absolutely nothing, not a single feeling, not a single motion of thought or spirit. Bachana realised it was impossible to remember such a person, that people like this sought out the people they wanted to see, the people they were interested in. Bachana screwed up his eyes in an attempt to create in his memory an image of this extraordinary visitor, but in vain—the stranger's face evaporated as though it had been an apparition.

When Bachana opened his eyes again, the man was no longer in the ward.

"Who was that?" Bachana asked the priest. "I've never seen a man with such an expressionless face!"

"That was no man. It was Satan himself."

The heart attack that had put Father Ioram in hospital was his second. And let the reader not think that this serious illness had overtaken him while he was reading the immortal *Decameron* or the description of Belshazzar's feast preserved for posterity by the prophet Daniel. Father Ioram had been the victim of a totally unforeseen incident.

In 1970, in Paris, the emigre Georgian Prince Saurmag Amirejibi had died at the age of ninety. In his will the prince had requested that his remains be transported to Georgia for a funeral service in the Church of the Holy Trinity at Ortachala, and that a gold cross decorated with emeralds, which he had kept beside him until his very death, should be donated to the church as a tribute to the icon of the Virgin.

Amirejibi's great-granddaughter, Ketevan Andronikashvili-Miroliubskaya carried out the nostalgic prince's behest. He was buried in the Kukii cemetery and the cross, together with the will and the appropriate documentation, was handed over to Father Ioram.

In addition to a description of the cross and an indication

of its value, the documentation contained a statement to the effect that the cross had belonged to Gurandukht, the sister of King Vakhtang Gorgasal, the founder of Tbilisi, and that the sixteen-year-old Gorgasal had hung it on her neck with his own hands when he had liberated his sister from captivity after routing the forces of the Alans and the Khazars.

It is hard to tell how closely this information corresponded to the actual events, and in what way the cross had become an Amirejibi family heirloom, but it was certainly immensely valuable, especially to the Ortachala church, which was pitifully poor and could scarcely make ends meet, and Father Ioram accepted the gift as an expression of God's superlative favour.

Since that time, once a year on the Feast of St. Mary, Father Ioram had reverently removed the cross from the safe in which it rested on a snow-white satin pillow, and laid it before the icon of the Mother of God.

The parishioners would press their trembling lips to this miracle of craftsmanship, which gazed at them from the dark depths of the fifth century with its astonishing emerald eyes, and Father Ioram and deacon Avel Arjevanidze would observe the parishioners with no less agitation, lest an excess of religious ecstasy move someone to seize and carry off the holy relic, which was valued by French antiquarian experts at two hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

So things continued until 1973.

A year before then, in the second week after the feast of St. Mary, when Father Ioram was sitting in his cell, and reading for the hundredth time, with tears of emotion in his eyes, the story of Joseph and his brothers, the door of the cell was flung open, and deacon Arjevanidze appeared unannounced and unexpected and greeted his superior merrily:

"Hi there, Ioram!" He hiccupped loudly.

He proceeded to thump the stunned cleric on the shoulder and began to disrobe in front of him. First of all he took his cowl from his head and flung it on the stone floor, then he threw off his surplice and flung it down in the same manner, and finally he tore the huge silver cross from his chest, flung it in Father Ioram's face and burst into Mephistophelean peals of laughter.

"Begone, Satan!" whispered the frightened Father Ioram and he spat on the floor.

"This very minute!" promised Arjevanidze, and while the priest crossed himself with a hand which suddenly felt heavy as lead, he began to anathematise the entire Christian world.

"Curse the lot of you, and you, priest, and your father, and your children and your holy spirit, and your rotten lousy church! May you all be damned, and my own stinking soul too! Here, take it, I hope it chokes you!" The deacon drew in a deep breath, then blew out the air from his lungs with a whistle and a hiss. The cell was filled with the sickening smell of garlic and vodka. "Take it, and much good may it do you! I'm leaving, you can keep the crow's feathers!" He spat on the cowl and the surplice and tossed them up into the air with his foot. "And you can hang that ton weight of a cross on your own neck and jump in the Kura, see if you can count all the stones on the bottom."

"Come to your senses, you fool! Do not tempt the wrath of God! If the Almighty should hear your blasphemy, he will take away your tongue, you wretch!" reasoned Father Ioram, attempting to pacify the raging deacon.

"Why should he hear me now when he hasn't heard me for twenty years? Your God's deaf, Father, deaf! He sits up there in the clouds full of his own importance. He should come down here for a bit and visit the Khechinashvili clinic, they might cure the old man in there! And my advice to you, Father, is this, throw away that overall and pay some attention to the flesh! It's more important than your soul! I'm leaving you! I don't owe anyone here anything! If you want my soul, here, you're welcome!" And Arjevanidze blew out another long, noisy breath. "But I'll take my flesh with me! Ciao!"

The deacon thumbed his nose at the priest and blew him a kiss, then he went round all the icons in turn, sticking out his tongue, swollen from pepper and vodka. He stuck his hands into his pockets and struck up a merry little song as he quit Father Ioram's cell.

Father Ioram was found lying unconscious. But this was

not a heart attack. The priest's stout heart had withstood the shock this time.

The heart attack came a year later, on the eve of the feast of St. Mary, when he opened the safe and took out the satin cushion, and instead of the cross he saw lying on it a robust and succulent radish. Father Ioram scarcely had time for the thought that in order to confirm his faith and devotion to her, St. Mary could have chosen to perform a less upsetting miracle, before his legs gave way under him and he crashed to the ground. This time it was a real heart attack.

Father Ioram's first heart attack was naturally followed by Arjevanidze's arrest. However, the case never reached the courts. It was discontinued following the first confrontation between victim and suspect. A week after Father Ioram left hospital, the investigating officer brought Arjevanidze round to his house. He sent the escorting militiaman out of the room, seated the former deacon by the priest's bed, stationed himself by the table and began to take down a record of the proceedings.

"Citizen Kandelaki, do you have any questions for the suspect Arjevanidze?" was the first question he asked.

Father Ioram's chin trembled and tears filled his eyes.

"Confess, you devil, you spawn of Satan, tell me who you sold the holy cross to!" he said to Arjevanidze.

"Officer, the words you have just heard spoken in our church language are worse than the choicest obscenity in yours! I ask you to describe the behaviour of this ... this saboteur of communist ideology as petty hooliganism!" Arjevanidze pronounced in the tone of a man whose finer feelings have been offended.

The investigating officer paid no attention to Arjevanidze's demand and continued by asking him:

"Tell me, Arjevanidze, do you have any witnesses to the fact that you did not commit the theft of the cross?"

"My witness is God!" said the suspect, raising his arms to the heavens.

"Don't you dare even pronounce that holy word!" The priest sat up suddenly in his bed.

"Don't play the fool, Arjevanidze!" the investigator

shouted at the former deacon. "We can't call God as a witness, name some living person!"

"Certainly. The priest Ioram Kandelaki!"

"Me!" Father Ioram almost fell off the bed.

"Yes, you!" confirmed Arjevanidze.

Father Ioram was entirely lost for words in the face of the former deacon's brazen effrontery. Arjevanidze continued:

"Ask him, officer, ask this slanderer, how long after I left the church the cross disappeared."

The investigator turned to the priest:

"When did you discover the disappearance?"

"About a year later. I only ever took the cross out of the safe for the feast of the Virgin. But that doesn't mean a thing! He could have stolen the cross before that!"

"Now ask him where he keeps the key of the safe."

The investigator repeated the question.

"Here!" Father Ioram fingered the chain hanging round his neck.

The investigating officer wrote down: "The key to the safe was always kept on a chain around the victim's neck." And he asked another question:

"What condition did you find the safe in? That is, was it open or had it been forced?"

"It was closed."

"And you opened it yourself?"

"I did."

"Did you ever loan your keys to Arjevanidze?"

"Never!" answered Father Ioram, and he realised that that was the end of everything.

"Think carefully what you're saying, Father. Perhaps you're not feeling well? If so, we can postpone our discussion." The investigator felt sorry for the priest.

"Under no circumstances!" Arjevanidze leapt to his feet.

"Tell me, Father," the investigator went on, "did you ever part with the key?"

Father Ioram merely shook his head. Not even in the bath had he ever removed the chain with the key from his neck.

"But could anybody have stolen the key from you to make a mould?"

Father Ioram felt it might have been possible. But he was not certain of it, so he preferred not to answer the question. He tried a final appeal to Arjevanidze's conscience:

"Confess, you Judas, if you have a scrap of honour left in you. Who did you sell the cross to? How much did you get?"

"Judas yourself!"

"Where did you get the money to build a house in Gldani? I couldn't replace two tiles on the roof of the church, and you..."

"The house belongs to my father-in-law. And as for the church, it's a miracle it's still standing with a bandit like you in charge!"

The priest turned blue in the face. The investigator yelled at Arjevanidze:

"One more comment like that, and I..." He could not think of anything else he could do to a man who was already under arrest on suspicion of theft, so he just wagged his finger at Arjevanidze in warning.

"But you checked the documents for the house yourself, didn't you?" asked Arjevanidze. The investigator nodded. "Then why are you threatening me? Instead of defending the interests of an honest man, are you going to take the part of the minister of a religious cult?"

The investigator was taken aback.

"What about the car?" put in Father Ioram.

"Citizen Kandelaki!" said the investigator. "The investigation has studied every aspect of the case in detail. So please stick to the point!"

"Do you mean that the car is not relevant?" asked the priest, crestfallen.

"An investigation is being conducted into the disappearance of a cross, and the car is of no relevance, especially since it belongs to Arjevanidze's brother-in-law."

"I've no more questions!" sighed Father Ioram, uncorking a bottle of validol pills.

"Do you have any questions?" the investigator asked Arjevanidze.

"Any questions?" Arjevanidze stood up. "As a man who has broken with religion of his own free will, and a member of the presidium of the atheists' society, whose portrait hangs

on the Red Board of Honour in our society's building, I wish to demand, categorically and officially, in the first place, that this obscurantist be brought to justice for his malicious slander and subjected to exemplary punishment. In the second place, that I, as the innocent victim of slander, should be immediately set free. And in the third place, that the criminal Kandelaki should be made responsible for the reimbursement of the losses I have incurred as a result of enforced absence from work! That's all I have to say!" Arjevanidze wiped the foam from his lips and sat down.

"Who bears responsibility for what will be decided when justice takes its course; that's not what I'm asking you! Ask citizen Kandelaki any questions you have!"

"Very well!" Arjevanidze stood up again. "I want to ask this shady individual, this antichrist, what he has done with the property of the Georgian people, that unique relic, the cross of Queen Gurandukht!"

The investigator glanced inquiringly at the priest.

Suddenly there flashed into Father Ioram's mind a scene from his distant youth...

...He was travelling to the stadium on a number ten tram. As they passed the Dezertirsky Market someone slipped his hand into his pocket. Ioram grabbed the thief by the arm, but before he could utter a word the thief delivered a resounding slap to his face and shouted loudly:

"Shame on you, lad! To look at you anybody would think you were a cultured, upstanding young man, you look like you come from a good home! And you go picking my pocket! Shame on you!"

Everyone in the tram rounded on Ioram, showering him with reproaches and threats. There was nothing left for him to do but jump off the tram while it was moving.

As he recalled the incident Father Ioram could feel that his cheeks were burning and his eyes were wet with tears.

"What do you say to that, Father?" asked the investigator.

Father Ioram got out of bed and went, barefoot and in nothing but his underclothes, into the other room, where he took down from the wall his grandfather's huge dagger. He crossed himself, drew the dagger from its scabbard and raised

it high above his head with both hands, then he rushed like a madman into the room where the investigator and Arjevanidze were sitting.

"Die, Satan!" cried the priest as he brought the dagger down with all his strength on to Arjevanidze's head. The former deacon managed to throw himself sideways, and the dagger whistled down through the air, slicing the back of the chair in half.

Father Ioram threw down the dagger.

"Go!" he pronounced in a sepulchral voice. He fell on the floor and began sobbing loudly.

The investigating officer realised that it would be impossible to continue the interrogation and draw up a report. He had to leave, before blood was spilt in this room full of icons. And realising this, he hastily quit the apartment of the Dean of the robbed Church of the Holy Trinity in Ortachala, in the company of the suspect.

The second heart attack, as a result of which Father Ioram was now lying beside Bachana in the hospital, had happened quite recently, only two months ago, in the house of an official known to many, to which he had been invited to perform the funeral service for the official's deceased father-in-law, at night, and in secret, of course.

Father Ioram did not even get as far as the coffin, he was struck down when he stepped inside the door and there in the plunging décolleté of the lady of the house he saw ... the cross of Gurandukht, sister of King Vakhtang Gorgasal.

When he came round in the ambulance, instead of the cross that was the object of his desire, Father Ioram saw before his eyes a huge red cross on a white medicine chest, and all the way to the hospital, instead of the scent of incense he endured the sickening smell of sal-ammoniac and camphor.

Having learnt his lesson from the bitter experience of his first heart attack, this time Father Ioram spoke not a word concerning the cause of his illness. He turned his back on the workings of justice and decided to entrust his fate to the will of the Almighty. He believed that sooner or later the culprit would be overtaken by the punishment of God.

Only one thing still tormented poor Father Ioram: why had he, and not some other, been chosen by God to be subjected to these ordeals? Why was it his fate, and not some other's, to endure such excruciating torment and suffering? Father Ioram could find no answer to these harrying questions...

Bachana watched Father Ioram in astonishment. Since the strange visitor had been to see him the priest had changed beyond all recognition, and had almost completely stopped making conversation. Not only Bachana, but Father Ioram himself found it impossible to decide whether it was apathy, melancholy or fear. But undoubtedly a miracle of sorts had occurred: the priest had totally forgotten the address of that house and the name of its owners. He had forgotten this as thoroughly as if his faceless visitor had taken a knife and scraped clean the corner of his memory which contained the events of that terrible night.

Father Ioram related the true story of his illness to Bachana as though in a confessional, a week before he left the hospital. But no matter how Bachana implored Ioram, no matter how hard he tried to persuade him to name the present owner of the cross, he could not break down the priest's resistance: Father Ioram refused point-blank to answer.

Tbilisi was in the grip of an influenza epidemic, and a twenty-day quarantine had been declared at the hospital. On the professor's orders even close relatives were not admitted to see the patients, let alone chance visitors. The hospital workers wandered the corridors like ghosts, their faces covered with masks of gauze. The professor personally made the rounds of the wards three times a day. The hospital was like a fortress under siege, sealed against entry even by a bird on the wing. Bachana's amazement therefore knew no bounds when one morning the door of the ward swung open and there on the threshold, smiling from ear to ear, stood his childhood friend Vakhtang Ambokadze.

"Vakho!" Bachana raised himself up in the bed.

"Greetings, dear Bacho, president of the simpletons!"

Ambokadze put down a bundle of considerable dimen-

sions on the common table, went over to Bachana's bed and embraced him in his huge arms, then he carefully laid him back on the pillow and said in a tone which brooked no argument:

"Lie there and don't budge! The professor told me that you're not allowed to move! How d'you do!" he said, turning towards Ioram.

"Good health to you!" replied the priest.

"How did you get in here?" Bachana could not believe his eyes.

"Nothing to it! Some people get into banks and carry off the money! It's no big deal to get into your ward!" laughed Ambokadze.

"Where did you come from?" Bachana continued to interrogate his friend.

Ambokadze glanced at Father Ioram.

"Yes, let me introduce you," Bachana recollected his duty as host, "this is my friend Vakhtang Ambokadze, and this is a friend I've made here in the ward, the Dean of the Church of the Holy Trinity at Ortachala, Father Ioram Kandelaki."

"Oho, so priests have heart attacks too? Even though they enjoy the protection of our Lord himself?" Ambokadze gave a broad smile and shook Father Ioram's hand firmly.

"Now sit down and tell me about yourself! What wind blows you this way? How did you happen to remember me?"

Ambokadze set his chair at the head of Bachana's bed and sat down. He gazed at Bachana for a minute or so, shaking his head before he answered:

"Well it's like this... I arrived. I saw a few of the lads and they said, 'Bacho's all set to check out.' "

"What?" Bachana had not followed him.

"They said you were getting ready to die. 'What do you mean, die?' I asks them. 'Just that,' they answer, 'had a massive coronary, folded his hands across his chest, and he's dying!' 'Can't be,' I says. 'The swine's just pretending, it's all a set-up job! He won't dare die without saying goodbye to me!' So I came over to see you. Malkhaz came with me, but they wouldn't let him in, he's hanging about outside."

"And how come they let you in?"

"I went straight to the professor. 'Dear professor,' I said, 'let me in to see Ramishvili, I haven't seen him for fifteen years!' 'And who are you?' asks the professor. 'Just someone who wants to see him badly!' 'Well, if you want to see him that badly, in you go, it's alright!' A fine man! I've never met such a kind-hearted professor in all my life."

"Liar! What story did you spin him?"

"What, what? I told him I was a poor orphan-boy..."

"You're a real rogue!" laughed Bachana.

"You're right. Now tell me how you're feeling. How's the heart?"

"Well, I seem to have pulled through."

"That makes two of us then. Listen, the professor gave me a strict limit of three minutes. I've got some medicines here." Ambokadze picked up his bundle from the table.

"Hang on, never mind the medicines!" Bachana interrupted him. "You can have three minutes of my time as well. Tell me where you've been, what you've been doing, how long you've come for, what you're going to do. Can I help you at all?"

"I don't need a thing, except for you to get well!.. There's no-one on earth who can help Vakhtang Ambokadze..."

"Okay, then sit there and let me look at you!"

"Keep looking, my friend, but if the professor turns up, you'll have to do the explaining!" Ambokadze warned Bachana.

"Okay!" agreed Bachana.

"Well then... You remember that last business..." Ambokadze gave Ioram another glance out of the corner of his eye.

"Go on! Go on! He's one of ours!" Bachana smiled.

"Well you remember the time I dug that tunnel up on Loktinsky Hill?"

"Where's that?" asked Father Ioram in astonishment. He had grown up in Tbilisi, and he had never heard of any such tunnel.

"You can't see it from your church, Father," explained Ambokadze, and went on: "The bonus for that job was supposed to be six to twelve thousand. Since there were two of us, Bajajgana and me, they gave us six thousand apiece and

threw in a trip to Arkhangelsk. I was there for four years. You know the way I am, I can't live without work! I cut down half the taiga and rendered great service to the wood-processing industry! Then I took part in a marathon race. There were ten of us running. From Arkhangelsk all the way across to Karaganda..."

"On foot?" asked Father Ioram in astonishment.

"Sometimes on foot, sometimes by train."

"That's still quite an achievement!" said the priest.

"Only three of us made it to the finish, and for that we got another two thousand bonus. So six and two is eight... Then I moved to Moscow, and some friends asked me, as a famous tunnel specialist, to help them with a big job they were doing. I dug a remarkable tunnel, but the far end of it collapsed, and the three of them were killed. I was the only one left alive, so I got the whole bonus, all seven thousand of it. And a trip to Sverdlovsk... Seven and the other eight makes fifteen, right?"

"Right!" agreed Bachana.

"And now I'm in Tbilisi. I got here three days ago. I'm not working yet, but they do say it wouldn't be too hard to find a few jobs for me here. On the other hand, I was thinking... Maybe I should retire, eh? I'm tired, brother, I'm tired..." Ambokadze sighed deeply.

"That's the best possible thing you could do!" Bachana was delighted at the idea. "Retire! Make up your mind and do it! I'll do whatever you like, if only you'll make up your mind! Please! If you've no house to live in, stay with me! Vakho, my friend, promise me that you'll retire!" Bachana's voice was trembling.

"What are you saying, Bachana Akakievich, how can a man like this retire? He's stronger than a pedigree bull!" exclaimed Father Ioram.

"My line of work's too tough, Father!" Ambokadze gave a bitter smile. "I've spent thirty of my forty years behind closed doors or underground..."

"Of course," agreed the priest, "building tunnels is no easy job, but it's noble work!"

"If there was any chance of you agreeing, I'd be quite happy to swap professions with you!" laughed Ambokadze.

"Vakho, this is the second time you've talked about this!" Bachana reminded him.

"It's all over now! I'm tired! And I'd like to die, as Yetim-Gurji said, at home in Tbilisi! Remember that?

Hello again Tbilisi, my dear old home,
I'm back again to stay, never move to roam."

"Remember, now, Vakhtang, a promise is a promise!"

"Yes, Bacho, a promise is a promise!" Ambokadze stood up. "Ah yes, the medicine!" He unwrapped his bundle and tipped out on to Bachana's bed a heap of ampoules, tablets and powders. "There's atheroid, intensain, that's panangin, there's cordaron, peritrat, persantin, that's eraldin, pulsenorma, and this is a medicine for madmen, valium!"

"Vakho, you're the one who's gone mad! Where did you get these medicines?" Bachana gaped in astonishment.

"Do you hear that, Father? All my life people have done nothing but ask me that stupid question — where's it from, where's it from? What the devil does it matter! Just take it!"

"Yes, but these medicines are expensive, very expensive," said Bachana thoughtfully, and began sorting through the boxes and the ampoules as cautiously as though he had some great treasure trove before him.

"The person who paid for them can worry about that, it's not your problem!" joked Ambokadze. "Did you have a heart attack too?" he asked the priest.

"Heart attack, and every other sickness known to man!" sighed Father Ioram.

"In that case, since you're in the same ward, and you eat the same bread, half of the goods belong to the good father here. The law's the law! Now I'm off, my time's up! And I don't give a damn for your flu!" Ambokadze embraced Bachana and pressed him to his chest. "Goodbye, Father!" he said to Father Ioram and walked quickly to the door. In the doorway he turned and gazed intently at Bachana, his strangely beautiful eyes filled with sadness.

"Be careful, now, Bacho, don't you even dare think of dying."

Ambokadze laughed loudly and slammed the door behind him.

"Who is that noble Christian, my dear Bachana? I didn't even have time to thank him!" asked Father Ioram.

"Well now, Father! He's a professional thief!" answered Bachana, and he swallowed the tears that had suddenly sprung from his eyes.

19

Bachana stopped the car at the side of the road. The hills and the fields of Samadlo lay beneath a deep blanket of snow. There was not a soul to be seen. Light clouds of white smoke were rising above the houses of a distant village. They drifted up towards the pure blue sky in a complex pattern of tracerywork. The naked trees standing here and there in the fields were like lovers shrivelled by grief, still stretching out their arms to one another although all hope of meeting had been taken away from them.

Bachana got out of the car and began to check the tyre. Maria threw off her fur-coat and also got out. Without saying a word, she ran off across the snow-covered field.

"Where are you going?" called Bachana.

Maria did not answer him. She ran on, sinking up to her knees in the snow. In her high red boots, with a broad, brightly-coloured shawl on her shoulders, she was like some huge flower. Bachana gazed with joy and pride after this living blossom making its way across the snow, for he knew that it belonged to him and him alone.

Maria suddenly bent down, scooped up snow in both of her hands and sprinkled it on her head.

"Bachana, come here!" she called.

Bachana took off his fur jacket, tossed it into the car and began to follow Maria's trail. Suddenly he wanted to run, to wallow in the snow. When he reached Maria he took her in his arms, lifted her up and spun her round, then they fell together into the snow and dug down into it. Flushed and excited, they went on tumbling over each other, panting and laughing, their ears and eyes filled with snow. Finally their

energy was exhausted and they threw themselves on to their backs and lay quiet. Maria lay there with her arms spread out. Her raven-black hair was strewn across the snow, beneath her open blouse her bosom was heaving. She was like an antelope at bay that had fallen in the snow.

Bachana gazed in rapture at Maria's beautiful face, and could restrain himself no longer. He placed his palms over the small, frozen shells of her ears and pressed his burning lips to hers. Now they breathed with one breath, the same life moved in them both. They lay there a long time, listening to the loud beating of their wild hearts.

"Get up!" Maria suddenly said, pushing Bachana away from her.

Bachana rose to his feet.

"Turn round!"

Bachana did as he was told. And when he turned back again he could not believe his eyes: Maria stood there before him, naked, like a vision of some immaculate angel of divine beauty. Bachana screwed up his eyes and then opened them again. Maria was lying in the snow and seemed to be asleep. He swiftly dropped to his knees before her, put his arms under her shoulders, kissed her breasts and whispered:

"What are you doing, you little fool, you'll catch cold!"

"Two years I've waited for this, my love. And now my waiting is over. Now I have the sun here with me. What cold are you talking about?" said Maria, and she put her arms around Bachana.

...Then the sun descended to earth. It made its way across the snow-covered field of Samadlo and covered the two descendants of Adam with a warm blanket of white, it lay by the head of their bed and lulled them until the sweetest sleep closed their eyes and then it returned to its place in the transparent mirror-vault of heaven.

...Bachana leapt up and glanced round in fright at the snow-covered field glittering in the rays of sunlight. They were alone — Maria, Bachana and the sun.

Bachana rushed over to the car and got Maria's fur coat, then he ran back to Maria, wrapped her in the coat, hoisted her up in his arms and carried her to the car.

A minute later they were already on their way downhill

towards Tbilisi, along a deserted road. Bachana remembered the lines of verse that Maria had recited in the churchyard at Shavnabada:

Darling sun, shining brightly,
Do not hide behind the hill,
Warm the maiden standing here,
Save her from the wintry chill.
Speak to her in words of love,
Take her in your swift embrace,
Or your darling will not linger,
But seek some other handsome face!

Maria sat on the back seat and wept. But this was not the weeping of a woman who has been humiliated and abused. It was something entirely different, a final farewell to something that Bachana knew nothing about, something that was entirely beyond his comprehension. He realised this intuitively and he made no attempt to comfort Maria in her weeping.

...The boy and the girl on the way home from the boarding-school at Kodjor, school-bags slung across their shoulders, stood rooted to the spot in amazement at the unusual sight that met their eyes.

"Look, Natia!" exclaimed the boy, pointing. In the Samadlo field the snow was ablaze with a transparent blue flame.

Editor's intuition told Bachana that the letter stuck behind the door handle was anonymous. He put the letter in his pocket, opened the door, went into his room, sat at his writing desk and only then opened the envelope.

The letter was indeed anonymous and, what's more, it was illustrated with pornographic photographs.

Hundreds of anonymous letters had passed through Bachana's hands. But the one he was reading now was by far the most brazen and vulgar that he had ever come across.

"Dear Bachana Akakievich!

"Allow me to congratulate you on the installation of the

new red lamp above your door. A famous debauchee and mentor to all of Tbilisi's prostitutes has found in your person yet another milch cow (for, alas, we can scarcely call you a bull!). Is it any wonder that this woman, a fragrant bouquet of venereal diseases, nourishes you so generously with her 'love'? For her, love is the cattle-cake that is used on dairy-farms to increase the milk yield of the cows. But let this 'milk' run dry, dear Bachana Akakievich, and it will be too late to take down the red lamp adorning your home, by the light of which you are now reading this letter. Anonymous though it may be, it is dictated by genuine pity for you. Be wary of your reputation!"

Bachana set the letter aside and wiped the cold sweat from his brow. While he was reading the letter he seemed to hear a familiar voice, a very familiar voice. The letter was apparently written in a female hand, but Bachana could feel a firm male fist hammering home each word of this barbarous screed, like a nail driven into his mind. Hammering in each word so firmly and deeply, that Bachana would never be able to rid himself of them. But that voice! Where had he heard it before, when? God, if only he could remember! But Bachana couldn't remember, and he began to look through the photographs. More cynical and repulsive photographs could hardly be imagined! And yet... To doubt their genuineness would have been to acknowledge the forger's genius. There was a mist before Bachana's eyes and a pounding in his temples. And just when he felt the end of the world had come, a sudden ray of hope illuminated his infernal darkness. One of the photographs showed Maria in the nude. And it was this photograph that delivered Bachana from torment and unmasked the forger: Bachana did not recognise Maria's body. The woman with Maria's face in the photograph was not Maria!

Bachana threw the photographs on to the desk. He remembered Maria kneeling before the icon of the Virgin, and in his mind's eye he saw the virgin snows of the field of Samadlo, and suddenly he felt that he hated the entire world. Spiritually broken and emotionally drained, he reached out for the telephone, to ring a friend and unburden himself, but he could not recall a single number, he could not even re-

member whether he had so much as a single friend. Bachana put down the receiver.

A week after Bachana had received the anonymous letter, he and Maria were sitting in a tiny booth in the Soganlug restaurant. Their table held two bottles of wine, a skillet with fried potatoes and a bowl of shelled nuts — Maria's favourite dishes.

Bachana was not speaking. Maria had elected herself master of ceremonies and was talking non-stop — about poetry, history, art, animals, dolphins, stars, flying saucers, love, immortality, reincarnation. Bachana drank. If he agreed with Maria he nodded, if he disagreed he did not argue. He sat in silence, looking into Maria's huge eyes, that were aglow with the light of love, and he drank. Maria had not failed to notice Bachana's state of preoccupation, but she asked him no questions, and only broke off from time to time to say:

"Are you listening, my love?"

Bachana nodded, and Maria went on, while Bachana thought his own thoughts — not about Maria's past or future, not about her sincerity or faithfulness, her beauty and her intelligence. He was tormented by only one terrifying question — whether or not to show her the anonymous letter that lay in the inside pocket of his jacket, burning him like a piece of red-hot iron.

Maria poured out a glass of wine and suddenly asked:

"Why don't you ask me about my past?"

Bachana started.

"What did you say?" he asked, playing for time to think of a reply.

"I asked you whether you're interested in my past? We've loved each other for three years now, and not once have you asked what my life was like before you."

"It doesn't matter to me, so I don't ask," answered Bachana, avoiding her eyes.

"That's not true. It matters a great deal to you, but still you don't ask! Why? You're waiting for me to tell you everything, is that it?"

Bachana lowered his head.

"You're afraid, my love. And you're right. I'm afraid myself." Maria took a sip of wine and nervously moistened her dry lips. "I'm more afraid than you are. Not of losing you, but of remembering the past."

"Maria, let's not spoil the evening," Bachana asked her.

"It's already spoilt. Since this morning. What's happened my love, tell me, please. I can tell something has, I can feel it."

"Nothing, I swear!"

"You're too quick with your oath!" Maria smiled. She raised her glass, looked at the light through the wine and quietly proposed a toast: "Let's drink to the first one of us to die!"

"Please, Maria, don't turn the evening into a funeral service. You were in such a good mood, what happened to you?"

"Drink!"

Bachana drank. Maria poured out more wine.

"And now listen to me... I've died and been resurrected five times in my life. The first time I died in fear and was resurrected in loneliness. The second time I died in loneliness and was resurrected in pretence. The third time I died in pretence and was resurrected in heedlessness. The fourth time I died in heedlessness and was resurrected in hatred. The fifth time I died in hatred and was resurrected in love. And now I live in this immense, all-embracing love, and I tell you that I shall die in love, and this shall be my final death. After this death I shall never be resurrected. I shall disappear, dissolve in eternal love. And so it makes no difference to me when I die. I'm not afraid of death. I drink for my sixth and final death!"

Maria drained her glass and looked into Bachana's eyes.

Bachana looked at this amazing woman, not knowing what to answer. There was a long and awkward silence. Bachana felt as though the room had been divided in two, with Maria in one half, and himself in the other. Maria's part was airy and warm, filled with life and love, while he was sitting in an empty space, a terrible, frightful vacuum. Desperate to avoid suffocation, he quickly rose, went round the table and sat be-

side Maria. He put his arm round her and nestled his head against her bosom as though it were the eternally-green tree of life. Maria kissed his hair and asked, very calmly:

"Tell me, what's troubling you so?"

Bachana drew out from his inside pocket the envelope containing the anonymous letter and the pornographic photographs, and with trembling fingers placed it before Maria. She looked at it for a long time before picking it up and opening it. First Maria looked closely at all the photographs, then she read the letter.

Although Bachana never took his eyes off Maria's face, he could not detect the slightest movement there. But when Maria finished reading the letter and raised her huge eyes to look at him, Bachana realised what a fatal error he had made. Instead of indignation, revulsion or hatred, he saw in Maria's eyes only a profound pity for two insignificant human beings — the author of the letter and himself.

Maria stood up.

"Loneliness corrupts a woman, my love. And a man too. So try to make sure you are never lonely..."

An hour passed as Bachana sat in the restaurant, then two hours, and three, but Maria did not come back. This exceptional woman's pride had far exceeded Bachana's expectations.

"Your ... er ... companion left quite some time ago," the embarrassed waiter finally plucked up the courage to inform him.

"Yes, yes, I know!" answered Bachana, disconcerted.

"I beg your pardon, but the restaurant's closing. Would you mind..."

"Of course. I'm sorry... How much do I owe you?"

Bachana paid without looking at the proffered bill. The waiter went out.

Bachana tore the letter and the photographs into tiny pieces, tossed them into the ashtray and set fire to them with his cigarette-lighter. The scraps of the photographs flared up first, and for a minute Bachana sat there watching the human figures distending, melting and disappearing as they

were transformed into ashes. The ashtray reminded him of a miniature Hades. And when the flame caught the anonymous letter, Bachana once again heard that familiar voice, and he froze. The letter spoke with the voice of Sandro Maglaperidze.

20

Father Ioram was discharged from hospital on Monday, but he absolutely refused to leave until Tuesday.

That was a night which Bachana would remember for the rest of his life...

At about midnight Father Ioram got out of his own bed and tip-toed across to Bachana's. Bachana pretended to be asleep.

"Bachana Akakievich!" whispered the priest.

Bachana did not stir. Convinced that his friend was asleep, the priest went down on his knees.

"Great God!" said Father Ioram, crossing himself. "Our Lord and Saviour! Holy Virgin Mary! Here before You lies God's slave Bachana Ramishvili and knows not that he is Your son, Your soul and the instrument of Your mercy... Do not be angered at him for doing Your work in the name of others. Do not be angry, for he knows not that the god in which he believes sprang from Your bosom by Your will... Protect and defend him, Almighty God, and grant him long life until he is called before Thee, for the longer he lives on this earth, the more goodness and mercy he will sow in this world of Thy creation. Surely it matters not to Thee in whose name peace, justice, honesty and kindness are established on earth? And if fate should decree that Thy name be spurned, but Thy cause perpetuated for all time, so be it, Lord... Wherefore, Holy Trinity, didst Thou plant the seed of life and breathe into man an immortal soul? Assuredly not for Thine own vanity, not for the glory of Thine own name! Surely Thou dost not deny the sons and daughters of Adam the renewal of their soul and their intellect?..

"Great and mighty is the god he serves, for it is impossible to believe in the cause to which one has dedicated oneself if God does not will it so... Bachana Ramishvili lies here be-

fore Thee, and I, the dust beneath Thy feet, a grain of sand in the vast infinity of Thy mercy, kneel to implore Thee—have mercy upon this Thy rebellious servant!.. If Thou hast foredoomed him, then take in his stead my flesh and my soul, for I knew not how to oust the other god in him and turn him to the path of Thy faith!"

Father Ioram rose and made the sign of the cross over Bachana three times, then he took the small cross from his own neck, placed it carefully under Bachana's pillow, and went back to bed...

For a long time Bachana was unable to get to sleep. And when he woke, Father Ioram was no longer there. He had left the ward at first light.

A week later, when Bachana was leaving the hospital, and saying goodbye to the doctors and nurses, they were all moved almost to tears. The ward doctor and Zhenya actually did cry, as though they were sad to see him recovered and fit to leave the hospital.

The evening before, Zhenya had come into the ward. She put three white carnations into a jar and sat down on a chair. Thinking that she had come to say goodbye, Bachana waited with a smile. But Zhenya said nothing.

"Go on, Zhenya!"

Zhenya hesitated, confused.

"Then I'll start!"

Bachana got up, went over to the young woman and kissed her hand.

"Dear Zhenya, I should really have brought you the flowers, but I hope that my kind sister of mercy will forgive her uncouth and ungrateful patient for his lack of refinement."

"Bachana Akakievich," Zhenya interrupted him. "While you were ill, a woman came here every day. A very beautiful woman... And she asked after your health. Yes..."

Bachana gasped for breath.

"What woman, Zhenya?" he asked, although he knew perfectly well.

"She made me swear not to tell you."

"What's her name?"

"I don't know. She came every day and she cried and cried... Can't you guess who she is?"

"I can, Zhenya."

"She loves you very much. She left a letter and asked me to give it to you the day you left the hospital. Here it is."

Bachana took the letter and began to toy with the carnations in an attempt to conceal his agitation.

"She loves you very much, Bachana Akakievich!"

"Thank you, Zhenya!"

"She's a very good and beautiful woman, Bachana Akakievich!"

Tears suddenly sprang to Zhenya's mascara-lined eyes.

"It's you who are good and beautiful, my dear Zhenya!" Bachana kissed her hand once more.

Zhenya hastily leapt to her feet and went out.

Bachana reclined on his bed and opened the envelope with trembling fingers.

"My Darling!

"Now, when God has answered my prayers and granted me the gift of your life, without begging for your sympathy or forgiveness, I wish to unburden myself to you concerning the sorrow and the grief which I used to think would flood the reservoir of mankind's woe and misery, but which turn out to fit quite easily on this simple sheet of paper.

"Twenty years ago I was the cleverest and most beautiful child in the world. And the worst-raised... My parents spent all their wealth on making me unhappy. I never acknowledged anyone's protection, I never needed anyone to look after me, at school or out on the street. And when one day I did get into a car with some self-appointed 'chaperones', my whole life was shattered and my name ruined for all time. I cannot describe what happened then. This is the first time I have ever mentioned it, to God and to you. I was crucified in the Tsivgombor woods, and to this day my youth hangs there on that charred wooden cross.

"After that I lived my life, laughing and dancing... Right up to the present. And suddenly I stopped. I recollected the existence of God, and I crossed myself. And now I kneel before you to implore you to accept my sacrifice, to accept my soul that has suffered the torments of hell, that all these years

has been yearning for you. I bless the hell in which I suffered for the path through it has led me to you."

If the doctors had taken Bachana's cardiogram at this moment, his stay in hospital would have been considerably prolonged.

Bachana took two seduxen tablets imploring his heart to calm down. Then the familiar pink mist enveloped him and he fell asleep. It was the first time since he became ill that he slept without dreaming.

When he had said goodbye to everyone in the morning, Bachana went downstairs to see the professor. He found him sitting at a huge desk, examining something through a magnifying glass. At first Bachana could not make out what the professor was doing, and when he did understand he went cold all over: on the desk in front of the professor lay several different models of artificial hearts, in various colours. Bachana felt so unwell that he sank down on to the chair by the door. The professor raised his head and looked at Bachana in amazement. When he recognised him, he put down the plastic heart he was holding, stood up and went over to him.

"I'm very glad indeed to see you, Bachana Akakievich, especially since you come visiting on your own two feet!"

They shook hands.

"What's wrong?" asked the professor in alarm. "Your hand is as cold as ice!"

Bachana could not tear his eyes away from the artificial hearts lying on the desk. Realising what was the matter, the professor hurried over to the desk, pulled out a drawer, and swept the models into it with a single movement of his hand.

"Please, could I have some valerian drops," Bachana gasped.

The professor took a small bottle of valerian drops from a little cupboard, poured a few drops into a glass, added some water, and handed the glass to Bachana.

"Drink that, and for God's sake, don't worry about anything!"

The professor felt Bachana's pulse.

"Nothing to worry about, it will all be gone in a moment!"

Bachana gradually grew calmer.

"Am I alright, Professor?"

"There's nothing seriously wrong... How do you feel?"

"Better, thank you."

"Excellent... Please, come and sit over here, in the armchair. Let's talk about pleasant matters."

The professor seated Bachana in the deep, soft armchair, where he sat for a while without speaking, and then asked again:

"Is that really possible, Professor? An artificial heart?"

"Believe me, it is... A calf has already lived for four years with an artificial heart. You ought to be pleased, not upset... Heart transplants have not produced the results that were expected, and since your condition affects the blood vessels rather than the heart itself, after a certain time any healthy transplanted heart can suffer myocardial infarction and coronary insufficiency. So far the artificial heart is the most promising answer. Even Christian Barnard has admitted that. But we'll talk about that some other time!" The professor dismissed the topic with a wave of his hand. "I must confess that I was offended — I thought you had already been discharged and had left without saying goodbye." He laughed and slapped Bachana on the knee.

"That's why I called in. First of all, Professor, I want to say how grateful I am for all your care and attention. And secondly, I wish to apologise for all the sleepless nights you spent at my bedside. And finally, I want to bless your profession and your wonderful healing hands!" Bachana wanted to embrace this wonderful man and kiss him. The professor's tired eyes sparkled with good-humoured intelligence.

"There's nothing to thank me for, but I thank you for your praise!"

"I don't know how I can possibly repay you. No recompense could be adequate for what you have done for me. So I ask you to let me cherish you and love you as a brother."

"Thank you!" The professor was touched and embarrassed by Bachana's words. "Thank you!" he repeated, and mechanically pulled out the drawer of the desk. However,

recalling Bachana's reaction, he immediately slammed it shut again.

Bachana laughed loudly.

"You see, you're already used to the idea!" exclaimed the professor, and began to laugh himself.

"I have no choice in the matter!" Bachana shrugged in resignation.

"You won't need one of those, if you follow all my instructions to the letter!" said the professor, placing his huge hands on the top of the desk.

"Yes sir!" Bachana replied meekly.

"Cigarettes are out! Wine and vodka are out! Fatty foods are out! Late night at work are out! Women are out!"

"And you call that living?" asked Bachana gloomily.

"Myocardial infarction minus these prohibited activities equals life!" the professor spelled out the formula for Bachana's continued existence.

"But for how long?" asked Bachana, in the voice of a drowning man clutching at a straw.

"For the first two years it's obligatory, for the next two it's preferable, and for the two after that it's voluntary. I don't wish to frighten you, Bachana Akakievich, but you must realise that you suffered a massive myocardial infarction, and you can't afford to take any chances at all. If your heart is cared for properly, it will be fully restored to normal functioning and will serve you well for as long as it has already served you. But you must take care of your heart, you must cherish it. The heart likes to be cherished."

"I understand you, Professor. And now I must say goodbye." Bachana rose to his feet.

"Goodbye, Bachana Akakievich! Forget all about our hospital and God grant you may never again have any cause to see me! As a doctor, of course," added the professor.

"I carry away with me a sense of intense gratification. These last two months, Nodar Grigorievich, have been as important to me as all the rest of my life!"

"I don't understand you."

"A man should be seriously ill at least once in his life. It allows him to make a calm, sober analysis of the road he has

travelled so far, to re-evaluate it... The hospital has given me a quite invaluable opportunity to do just this."

"It doesn't seem to me that the road you have travelled requires any further analysis or re-evaluation."

"Do you think so?" Bachana smiled.

"From the sidelines, at least, it would appear so!"

"During the two months I spent in your hospital I made a whole series of astounding discoveries!"

"What did you discover?"

"The law of eternity!"

"What?" exclaimed the astonished professor.

"The law of eternity!" repeated Bachana.

"Mm ... mm... In that case, I suppose this law must have some concise formulation!"

"Of course!"

"Perhaps you might be so good as to share it with me? I assure you, Bachana Akakievich, that I have no intention of appropriating it or claiming joint authorship!" joked the professor.

"The essence of the law, Nodar Grigorievich, is that ... a man's soul is a hundred times heavier than his body. It is so heavy that one man cannot possibly carry it. And therefore while we are alive we must all try to help each other, try to render each other's souls immortal: you help me with mine, I help someone else, he helps another person, and so on for eternity. So that any man's death should not condemn us to a life of loneliness."

The professor listened in amazement as Bachana spoke.

"That's quite a complex law you've discovered, Bachana Akakievich!" he said after a lengthy silence.

"Yes it is!" agreed Bachana.

"And you hope it can be put into practice?"

"Certainly, otherwise there'd be no point in being alive, and I for one would actually already be dead."

Bachana held out his hand to the professor, who stepped closer to him, and Bachana impulsively hugged him to his breast.

"Yes," said the professor in an emotional voice. "An artificial heart wouldn't suit you at all. You wouldn't be able to live with an artificial heart. You're an odd character!"

When he felt the professor's hands gently patting him on his shoulders, Bachana knew that the law of eternity was operating.

Bachana released the car that had been sent for him.

He crossed the tram lines on Klara Zetkin Street, came out on 25th February Street and went down it towards Plekhanov Avenue.

During his two months in hospital Bachana had grown unaccustomed to the noise of the city: he felt a little dizzy and weak at the knees. He walked very slowly and carefully, while Tbilisi went about its normal tumultuous life, bustling and shouting, hooting, groaning and laughing.

Like two rivers, people flowed in opposite directions along Plekhanov Avenue. The citizens of the town were carried along in the two streams like logs set afloat on a river. They collided, stopped one another to speak of one thing or another, argued and gesticulated wildly, separated once again, and were borne away by the seething current.

Bachana went across the pedestrian crossing and found himself part of this current of humanity. He tried to skirt round other people without interrupting his own forward movement. He turned off the avenue on to Marjanishvili Street, where he was taken up by another current of the immense human river. Bachana could feel his heart-beat, so long unaccustomed to the rhythm of the street, gradually adapting to it, as he himself gradually grew accustomed to the pulse of city life. Finally his heart found the forgotten rhythm and floated along with all the others, cautiously as yet but with ever bolder confidence.

He stopped at the advertising column of the Marjanishvili Theatre. The next day the theatre was opening its new season with the premiere of a play by one of his friends—*Saints in Hades*. Something in Bachana's chest seemed to thaw, and a pleasant warmth flooded over his whole body. "Saints in Hades!" he repeated to himself with a smile.

At the bridge Bachana began to feel tired, not in a painful or alarming way, but with a pleasant and gentle sense of

fatigue. He stopped a taxi and sat in the back on the right-hand side.

"Where to?" asked the driver.

"To Maria's house," answered Bachana.

"Who?" The driver turned to him in astonishment.

"Maria!"

THE END

REQUEST TO READERS

Raduga Publishers would be glad to have your opinion of this book, its translation and design and any suggestions you may have for future publications.

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When the Georgian writer Nodar Dumbadze (1928-1985) entered literary life more than twenty years ago he brought with him his own heroes and his own well-defined theme — the difficulties of his war-time childhood. His first short novels *Granny*, *Iliko*, *Illarion and I* and *I See the Sun* earned him wide recognition in the Soviet Union and abroad. His later works *White Flags*, *The Law of Eternity* and *La Cucaracha* have been equally successful: they oblige the reader to ponder seriously upon a wide range of contemporary problems.

The Law of Eternity occupies a very special place in Dumbadze's work. To a certain extent it can be regarded as autobiographical, closely reflecting as it does the author's own experience of life, literature and society. The hero of the novel is a writer and journalist, Bachana Ramishvili. In confronting other people's social and moral attitudes, he is led to discover the "law of eternity", the law which states that human kindness is the ineradicable bond linking people together, the bond without which life cannot be eternal.

..."The essence of the law ... is that ... a man's soul is a hundred times heavier than his body. It is so heavy that one man cannot possibly carry it. And therefore while we are alive we must all try to help each other, try to render each other's souls immortal: you help me with mine, I help someone else, he helps another person, and so on for eternity. So that any man's death should not condemn us to a life of loneliness."

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