

KONSTANTINEH GAMSAKHURDIA
THE HAND OF THE GREAT MASTER

Foreign languages publishing house

Moscow

TRANSLATED FROM THE GEORGIAN BY Vakhtang E R I S T A V I

EDITED BY H. P E R H A M

DESIGNED BY V. ALEXEYEV

**Khekordzula's water nursed me.
By my hand was Mtskheta built.
They cut off my arm for building
Much too well. That was my guilt.**

PROLOGUE

On rest days, when people flock out of Tbilisi by car, I am in the habit of going to the racecourse. When the racing season is over a stall-fattened stallion is none the worse for a brisk canter along the Georgian Military Road.

The racecourse people are well aware of my inveterate passion for riding.

One day I went there as usual.

"Would you like to take Seira?" asked Noshrevan, the old groom.

"It's a superb horse tout I know from experience that it shies at cars."

"Navarda?" But Noshrevan himself added the information: "Navarda jibs at crossing bridges."

"What about Dardimandi?"

"The very thing! He's the quietest of the stallions and isn't afraid of cars or bridges."

And so I fixed on Dardimandi.

The Military Road is the most beautiful of the world's highways and Dardimandi the most distinguished of horses.

There is no better relaxation for me than riding. When a thin-faced, broad-breasted, strong-kneed horse cocks his ears and casts a glance at me, tired and drooping, the inexhaustible energy of my forebears reawakens in me. Then I feel as if I were reborn, as if I had yet to taste the joy of walking, skipping and running over the face of this wonderful Earth.

I fondled Dardimandi's small ears, no bigger than elm leaves. I looked into his sloe-like eyes and seemed to absorb some of the irrepressible vigour which Mother Nature has so lavishly bestowed on animals. On this occasion the usually staid Dardimandi became restive. Horses are mind-readers. They sense the mood of their riders.

I had ridden Dardimandi before. He held the title of champion of the swiftest Georgian stallions. He had spread the fame of our country to the racecourses of many big towns. Consequently, I held him in high esteem.

He had travelled by rail throughout the Soviet Union. He had become accustomed to the hooting of locomotives, the whirring of motor-cars, the chug-chugging of tractors.

But just as it sometimes is with a person so it is with a beast. If you treat it respectfully it thinks that you're afraid of it. "If not, why should he make up to me?" it wonders.

Dardimandi was getting impatient, and I, too, would not have minded galloping all the way to Karakorum without a halt, but I decided not to overtax his rare powers.

He rolled his lovely full eyes, flashing them at the shining passenger cars and the mud-spattered lorries. At every moment he seemed to be on the point of whisking me off into the far distance, so eager was he to eat up the miles ahead.

I could not blame the spirited stallion for letting the hot blood surging so wildly within him.

Between my eye and hand Tbilisi was gradually growing into a sizeable city.

St. David's Mount was like one huge bonfire. In the Stalin Park electric lights turned night into day. The street lamps on the Heroes' Bridge and the magnificent embankment watched themselves floating gently up and down on the waters of the Kura.

Fiery-eyed cars rushed past on the metalled road, roaring into the ears of the already excited horse. The shriek of factory sirens, the rumble of tractors hurrying to the countryside, the merry tinkling of bicycles made the usually sedate Dardimandi nervous and jumpy. He kept snorting and champing the bit.

Neither the snaffle nor the breastplate could hold him back. He stretched his swanlike neck and seized the bit.

I curbed him again; for a moment I would seem to have him under control but suddenly he would leap sideways, strain wilfully at the rein and start traversing.

By this time my arms had grown weary and I gave him his head, thinking that a short gallop would maybe calm him down.

Near the Digomi ferry he broke into a gallop, and I yielded unresistingly to the will of the impetuous stallion. Something with a thousand burning eyes seemed to be hot on our heels, panting and snarling.

Faster and faster went the stallion as if he felt that in this City of Engines there was no place for a horse and that it would be better to get away from it as swiftly as possible.

Once outside the boundary of Tbilisi I managed to slow him down to a trot.

As it was late when we came out of Tbilisi, my intention was to return home after having reached Avchala, which meant that I would not see my beloved Svetitskhoveli, the cathedral in Mtskheta.

And yet it is a delight to gaze on this work of art at all times.

In the morning the sun-flushed cathedral looks lizard green. At sunset it is golden, and when the eventide closes in and the starry sky looks down on it, it thrusts heavenward, full of dim harmony, to the very sky.

Enough for me to catch a single glimpse of the lofty one as the headstrong Dardimandi bears me on past its walls in full career!

Just as we got to Avchala the stallion took fright. As he drew level with a tractor coupled to a waggon, the unexpected rumble of the motor startled him and sent him bolting at breakneck speed.

I exulted in his frenzied career and gave him the rein.

The lights of the Zemo Avchala power station shimmered in the Kura. The blaze of this thousand-eyed *devi*,* the fabulous giant, beat full on the slopes of Zedazeni mountain, the domain of demons in the tales of the ancient Iberians.

It was near the Cross Monastery that I at last succeeded in curbing my courser.

Night was falling in the gullies of Zedazeni and Sarkineh.

Some raindrops fell on my face as we neared Pompey Bridge across the Kura. The sight of this road and the bridge is apt to set off a train of fanciful thoughts. Once the bridge was traversed by a Roman consul and his legions. And not only by him. Hordes of Saracens, Seljuks, Turks and Iranians swarmed over in his wake.

Today it is of no more use than its reflection floating on the water. It is no longer a connecting link between Today and Yesterday. It stands a speechless witness of the Past, quite useless to the Present, not even worth exhibiting in a museum, and, before long, the Kura will wash it away like some outlandish oddity unworthy of the Future.

Its role as a gateway to our capital has been taken over by the Heroes' Bridge, just as well as Mtskheta's supremacy has been usurped by Tbilisi.

But while I was still musing over this we were already in Mtskheta. The cloud-enveloped round of the sky rested on the pointed dome of the cathedral. Along the horizon hung amber-fringed clouds. Lightnings lit up the dim mountain crests from time to time.

At the battlemented walls of Svetitskhoveli begin the gloomy nights of the eleventh century.

I dismounted at the porch. A few shadowy figures were hanging about in the street nearby.

"Is Euphemus in?" I asked a bareheaded urchin. He shook his head as if to say that he had never heard of such a person being there. A kerchiefed woman came up to me.

"Ask the old man, over there, in the courtyard," she said.

I opened the postern and led the horse inside, into the dark temple court. In its left corner an apparition was sitting hunched up, on a flagstone outside an annex to the cathedral built against the wall of the courtyard.

On seeing me with my horse the apparition jumped up and approached me.

"Who may you be?" a surprised voice asked.

By the voice I knew it was Euphemus. He did not realize who I was until I told him my name.

The old man was glad to see me. He kissed me on the right breast as is the custom of the Mingrelians, took my horse by the bridle and led the way to a flight of wooden stairs.

Diminutive as he was before, Euphemus had become even smaller in old age. Thirty years before he had taught me chanting. At that time he had been collecting old hymns, ancient manuscripts, specimens of folklore, incantations, fairy-tales and old coins.

People of his kind can often be seen pottering about our museums and historical monuments. They feed, as it were, on the crumbs from the table of ancient culture.

Euphemus had been lingering in my memory as a fair-haired man embellished with a pair of moustaches glossy as the tassels of a corncob. Before me now stood a man with a whitened head and a beard as white and long as that with which primitive painters used to adorn the scriptural god on the walls of village churches.

Euphemus, as I have remarked, is one of those who are needed everywhere, and yet turn out to be superfluous. They are in constant quest of new aims of life but are unable to find their own self because it is they who invariably prove the truth of the saying:

"There be many chosen but only one who receiveth the gift."

There are some whom one notices on account of their very insignificance and for that reason Euphemus would catch my eye time and again. During the time I had known him he had been a teacher of singing in Old Senaki, the custodian of the Zugdidi museum, the manager of the first cinema in Kutaisi. He had acted as a supernumerary at the Kutaisi playhouse, giving an excellent performance as Nero's statue. Ten years previously he had toured Georgia with a folk-song ensemble. For some time he had owned a booth in Tbilisi dealing in old books. His shop was always well-stocked with the rarest folios and plates. One day I found his tiny bookshop had become a barber's saloon, and so I lost track of him.

A few days before my ride to Mtskheta, I had learned by chance that he was the care-taker of the cathedral.

Euphemus and I tarried long on the balcony.

From time to time a flash of lightning silhouetted the temple against the sky; in an instant all was dark again. Sometimes a mysterious tremor seized the sky, and next, in the dazzling glare of lightning, the Monastery of the Cross and the black-bristled mountains of Zedazeni and Sarkineh would burst on our eyes.

The wind had freshened and was driving the clouds to the East. The autumnal sky cleared up and the moon that rose above the cathedral was more brilliant than I had ever seen it before even in May.

I gazed silently on the temple slumbering in the dark and on the serried battlements around it. Bats were whirling a roundabout in the courtyard. The quietness was so intense and uncanny that Time itself seemed to have paused in its flight.

Over the temple was stretched Heaven's dark-blue canopy and against it the black outlines of the battlements stood out as though carved in jet.

But however magnificent the creation before which you stand, the most insignificant human being lays greater claim to your attention.

I asked Euphemus to tell me about his life. The story told me by this wizened old man in the gloomy shade of the temple was the tragedy of one who had been interested in many things and failed in every one of them thanks to his inability to concentrate his energies. This singular man who had been in the habit of changing his occupation three times a year had spent the last ten years at the cathedral. He informed me that at the moment he was keen on numismatics.

He got up, went into the room and brought out a little earthen saucer and a small purse full of coins.

"These coins I want to bequeath to the Museum of Georgia," he said.

He showed me ancient Colchian copper coins, silver of the times of Queen Tamar, Rusudan, Lasha Giorgi, David Narini and Heraclius II. All of them had been found by him on the sites of the old towns of Dmanisi, Uplistsikheh and Gelati.

Knowing his restless disposition I asked him if he intended to leave Mtskheta.

"Where should I go, my son, and to whom? During these twenty years I have conveyed to the grave two wives and all my children. I am already on the verge of my own dissolution. The only tie that binds me somewhat to this life is my indelible love for this temple. Here, in the sheltering shade of this beloved edifice, I while away the time. I have to see to this remarkable building. In my eyes, it is not a house of god, but the incomparable creation of a great art, which, as you see, has proved more durable than god.

"And thus I live, tottering around among the graves and ghosts of our ancestors. Repairs to the temple have been started this year. See that scaffolding there? There are a few more embrasures in the dome left to be glazed. Wild pigeons fly in through the openings, and so it is my task to cleanse from impurities the tombs of Vakhtang Gorgasal and Heraclius II. Have not my betters laid down their lives for this temple? For thirteen centuries it had to bear the brunt of the hordes of our enemies dashing against its walls.

"Abul Kasim, the Saracen, was the first to assault and profane it, to bring it to ruin and convert it into a stable for his camels. It was rebuilt. Then it was ravaged by the Seljuk Alpaslan. Once more it was built up. Then it was destroyed by Timur Lenk and demolished several times by Shah Tamaz and Shah Abbas.

"Afterwards, for a whole century, rain was pouring down through its leaking roof. And later, in modern times, nobody cared to repair it. Only the Soviet Government—long may it live!—had it roofed this year. They have restored the merlons on the walls. The scaffolding by the northern facade has not yet been pulled down. One of these days they'll set windowpanes in the openings of the cupola and, that done, the purpose of my staying here will be accomplished, and, perhaps, that of my existence. ..." (He concluded rather mournfully.)

"Tomorrow morning we shall climb up that scaffolding and I'll show you something which, I'm sure, will fill you with inspiration. In my opinion, my boy, *belles-lettres* must come out in defence of a wronged hero. A writer must bring to light a hushed-up deed of heroism.

"On the north wall there is an inscription and two sculptured human figures. Well, it depends on your eye and hand how you decipher an enigma which to this day has remained obscure, embedded in masonry for the interminable space of nine centuries."

* * *

I expressed my wish to pass that night on the balcony. I tossed restlessly on my bed till it grew light. Half asleep I heard the noise made by Dardimandi as he snorted, clattered with his

feet and sweetly crunched hay. ... Stretched out prone in the darkness I longed for the dawn, eager to unravel the promised mystery.

At daybreak the starlings broke into an ecstatic chirp. And then, high above my head, there rose up in all its majesty, gleaming in the sun, in the shimmering lizard green, Svetitskhoveli, the Temple of the Wonder-Working Pillar. Never before had I seen it more beautiful than on that morning.

I ascended the scaffolding on the north side. Some unknown artist had engraved on the wall a human hand holding a set square, and this inscription:

"The Hand of the slave Arsakidze, may his sins be forgiven." Nearby two strange men are carved in relief. One of them is a beardless youth clad in a Georgian *chokha*, and the other—an old man in Persian garb, with a scowling, evil-looking face.

When I got down Euphemus smiled at me with narrow-slitted eyes.

"The beardless youth is Konstantineh Arsakidze, and the old man with a hammer is his master, Parsman the Persian. Let me show you another portrait. It has reached our day, a washed-out image of itself."

He fumbled for a while in the breast of his coat and, finally, produced an ancient Georgian coin. It represented a horseman with a hawk on his right wrist, and bore the following inscription in capital letters: "King of Kings Giorgi—Sword of Messiah."

So much for that.

For more than one year this story has been fermenting in any soul, and, at last, strained from the last drop condensed in my imagination, the words have put on human flesh and out of the whirlwind of centuries gushed down on to paper.

I

That very year when Parsman the Persian, at orders of King Giorgi,* completed building the third church in Samtskheh, Georgia was infested by rook.

Like a thundercloud they darkened the East. Coming from Shirvan, they spread over Lower Kartli, swept up the river Kura and laid waste the crops as far as Basiani.

The King summoned Parsman and charged him to exterminate the birds.

At that time Tbilisi was in the hands of the Saracens. Parsman had lived there at the court of the Emir and had been brought from there as a war prisoner by Bagrat Kuropalat, Giorgi's father.

Parsman, the head of the stone-cutters and masons, was skilled in the occult sciences, deeply versed in the alchemy of the Arabs, an incomparable astronomer, a remarkable physician, and a wonderful prophet.

Dark stories were linked with his name by the superstitious. It was even said that he possessed a bridled serpent and astride it used to fly like the wind through the groves along the Aragvi.

For four weeks Parsman the Persian and his underlings were preparing drugs. When at last a certain magic potion had been made up, it was distributed among the village elders, who were told to have carrion soaked in it and tang in the trees.

The ravenous birds fell on the putrefying flesh and died.

Thereafter until the end of the year peace reigned in all the provinces of the country. A peace treaty was signed with the Byzantine Emperor. Padlon, Emir of Ganja, who had several times been defeated by Bagrat Kuropalat, began to pay tribute to the King. The Emir of Tbilisi, warned by that example, kept quiet. The Saracens still held precarious sway over the castle of Shuri.

* Giorgi Bagration the First—King of Georgia who reigned from 1014 to 1027 — *Tr.*

Giorgi took heart and went on inspection tours to, Abkhazia, Samtskheh and Kartli, built fortified towns and summer residences, and during the short period of peace made arrangements for waging prolonged wars.

On the first of September, New Year's Day, Giorgi was in Mtskheta with his retinue. Ere it was dawn the Catholicos of Georgia brought the King New Year greetings. He went to the King's bedchamber carrying a round wooden tray heaped high with gold, silver and garnets. Then he presented the King with a precious icon and the Holy Life-Giving Cross, brought from Klarjeti in a bejewelled reliquary.

From morning high officials of state kept passing into the presence of the King eristavis or governors of provinces, the Commander-in-Chief Zviad, the master of ceremonies, the secretary of state, the chief justice, the King's chaplain, his treasurer and his butler.

The chief falconer made him a present of three steel-coloured hawks, seven falcons from Lazistan and the gilded head of a wild boar. The master of the horse and the three eristavis each brought seven horses. Besides the horses, the eristavis presented the King with quivers containing various kinds of arrows: large ones for big game and others for beasts of prey and birds.

The shaggy-haired Eristavi Mamamzeh, who was called "Man Lion" because of his giant build and great courage, took a bundle of arrows, and fixing his keen eyes—greenish-grey like unripe grapes—on him who sat on the throne, said:

"May the Creator make long your reign, O King, and let these arrows pierce the hearts of those who are treacherous to your dominion! Accursed be the evilminded and those who plot treason against your throne!"

Taciturn by nature, Giorgi was a shrewd observer. His glance, like a sword-thrust, parried the stare of those grey eyes, and they wavered and leapt aside under the bushy white eyebrows like a pair of squirrels. Then the King turned his eyes to Zviad, the commander-in-chief.

With bowed head and unruffled brow Zviad stood listening to Mamamzeh's words. Lost in secret thoughts he stared down at the brick floor. His hairy right hand clasped the hilt of a huge sword. All others at the audience were without arms, only he wore a sword of damascened steel.

As soon as the levee had broken up and the banquet had begun, the King's game keeper, falconer and beater drove the horses presented by the eristavis to the King's reserve.

In pursuance of an ancient rite observed on New Year's Day, the horses were beheaded and the inclosure locked.

Night overtook the revellers. The link-bearers lit the torches, the lamp-lighters brought into the banqueting-chamber tallow and wicks of silk for cressets.

The King was desirous of making merry that evening but the moody silence of his commander-in-chief put him out of humour.

The assembly of the nobles and dignitaries dissolved when it was past midnight. Two link-bearers with lighted torches led the way for Catholicos Melkisedek, and one went before each of the three eristavis.

The King wished the guests good night, dismissed the torch-bearers and motioned Zviad to a nearby seat.

Deep silence brooded in the hall. The waxen tapers feebly flickered in the niches. The cheeks of the young King were flushed after the feasting but wine had failed to raise his low spirits.

For a while both were silent. From the palace garden came the screech of an owl. The sentinels were calling stridently in the starless night.

Giorgi lifted his head, looked hard at the lowered black eyebrows of the commander-in-chief and asked him about the cause of his ill-humour.

Zviad pleaded that he had been reluctant to be the bearer of evil tidings to the King on New Year's Day, but now that it was already past midnight he might break the news brought by his spies the day before.

Talagva Kolonkelidze, he said, the heathenish *eristavi* of the province of Kvetari, had forced the mountain tribes of Pkhovi and Dido to worship his gods. The Dzurdukians and other tribes had followed suit. Their combined forces had invaded the Aragvi Gorge, unexpectedly besieged the castles there and made their commandants surrender without fighting because the idolaters had their partisans inside each one.

Eristavi Mamamzeh's only son Chiaberi, having fought on the side of Kolonkelidze in the gorge of Gudamakari, had retreated without any losses and locked himself with a small force in the castle of Korsatevela.

Zviad did not conceal from the King that during the encounter only thirteen Pkhovians and seven Aragvians had been slightly wounded with arrows.

Thereafter Kolonkelidze was said to have raided the Aragvi Gorge with his troops, burned down the churches, smashed the holy images, hanged the Christian priests and monks from the belfries, and set pagan idols up on the hills. The inhabitants of the Aragvi Gorge had joined the Pkhovians and their followers and had spent the whole night worshipping the idols and sacrificing their sons and daughters according to the most ancient rites.

The mob, besotted with beer, was said to have been dancing before the idols and celebrating victory for three days and nights. This had been going on on the very day that *Eristavi* Mamamzeh set out for Mtskheta to attend the King's audience.

These latest actions of the rebels worried the *spasalar* not for their own sake—he was convinced that the King could easily deal with the situation. But the uprising interfered with the realization of some far-reaching plans Zviad had been cherishing—to fight the Saracens for Tbilisi in alliance with the Byzantines and thus to unite all Georgia under one sceptre. ... And now Chiaberi, who was known and respected in Byzantium, was among the rebels.

On hearing the news King Giorgi bowed his head. In his mind's eye he saw the false twinkle in Mamamzeh's eyes, greenish-grey like unripe grapes. How transformed he seemed to the King that instant! Was it Mamamzeh's old self, or Satan himself in Mamamzeh's body? Could he be a traitor? The man who had been the closest friend of Bagrat Kuropalat in his wars against the Emir Padlon? The man who had endured so many hardships with Giorgi himself in the battle of Shirimni?

Had Mamamzeh not been at Giorgi's elbow when the country of Heret-Kakhetia had refused to help him and when the treason of the *aznauris** had found so many supporters among the *eristavis*?

Eventually Giorgi recalled the first night of the battle against the Byzantines on the plain of Niali. The youthful King hewed down their commander, but no sooner did he turn his horse than a Greek trooper killed the armoured stallion under him and speared the calf of his right leg. Down jumped Mamamzeh from his horse, caught up the youth like a child in his mighty arms, placed him on his own horse, drew his sword and put the enemy to flight as a hawk scatters a flock of daws.

And on New Year's Day the same Mamamzeh, holding a bundle of arrows in his hand, had shamelessly sworn his allegiance to Giorgi.

He had long since been aware that neither Mamamzeh nor his son Chiaberi were true Christians at heart.

For the sake of appearance, to deceive the King, they had decked their castle of Korsatevela and its chapel with icons and crucifixes. For themselves, they had pagan shrines erected amidst oak forests in inaccessible mountains, and at them they used to make their devotions.

The spies had likewise communicated to the commander-in-chief the intelligence that Kolonkelidze, governor of Kvetari, Mamamzeh and Chiaberi had concluded a secret alliance against King Giorgi.

* Georgian noblemen.—*Tr.*

However, it could not yet be established who was behind them: the Emir of the Saracens in Tbilisi, or somebody else.

It was also reported to Giorgi that Talagva Kolonkelidze's only daughter, the fair-faced Shorena, had been betrothed while yet in the cradle to Mamamzeh's son Chiaberi.

The destruction of Christian churches was only preliminary, carried out to see how the land lay. In the spring, Chiaberi and Talagva Kolonkelidze would become father and son-in-law and with their united forces besiege Uplistsikheh.

Giorgi perceived clearly that in this case the religion of Christ would be his support.

And yet his own faith was wavering.

His hawks were being trained by Arab falconers. During his nightly talks with Parsman the Persian he listened eagerly to the teachings of Plato.

At night the King would observe the stars. Who knows, he thought, perchance they were the souls of those whose sun had set for ever.

Nevertheless, Giorgi was considered to be the defender of Christianity. "King of Kings Giorgi—Sword of the Messiah" was inscribed on the silver coins stamped at his mint.

* * *

King Giorgi and Zviad now understood the true purpose behind Mamamzeh's appearance at the audience.

This honoured guest had been sent by his son as a scout. Giorgi might have ordered his eyes to be put out, and have sent troops against Chiaberi and Kolonkelidze before the first snowflakes whitened the mountains, but the trouble was that Chiaberi had recently returned from Constantinople with a golden helmet and the title of "Archegos" conferred on him by the Byzantine Caesar for his assistance in the war against the Saracens.

Immediately after his return from Constantinople he had caused the King of the Ossetians to be poisoned and had forced the Ossetians to do homage to himself. He was famed throughout the Caucasus as a matchless warrior and horseman.

Spasalar Zviad was a cautious counsellor, nor was it Giorgi's habit to take hasty decisions on important issues, and they therefore agreed to have a talk with Miamamzeh the next day.

Moreover, they decided to dispatch disguised monks to Pkhovi to find out whether it was the Saracen Emir or the hypocritical Byzantine Emperor who had had a hand in the recent happenings.

II

That night there was a terrible cloud-burst, and from midnight it poured incessantly. The first cold of autumn set in. A wound received by Giorgi in the battle of Shirimni opened again. Yet he did not wish to violate the tradition of his ancestors and in spite of the sleepless night and the throbbing pain in his leg he called at dawn for a horse.

The keeper of the King's armoury brought a bridle and put the bit into the mouth of a gold-coloured stallion. A groom rushed up and fastened the cheekpieces. The keeper saddled the horse and when the King had mounted, humbly handed him a whip.

The King's messenger and the keeper of the armoury took the lead.

Giorgi gave his horse a stinging lash. The three eristavis, the master of the horse and the head of the huntsmen and the falconers followed behind.

The King's reserve rang with the blasts of bugles. The huntsmen and the beaters banged kettle-drums, filling the forest with a strange uproar.

The game had lured the hounds a long way off into the woods and their baying came from a very far distance.

Giorgi and his attendants wanted to move to another hunting-ground, but across the gully was a rocky precipice, while further on impassable swamps and tangled clematis blocked the way.

Though it was necessary to proceed on foot, riding had made the smarting wound in Giorgi's leg still worse, and he hesitated to dismount.

Mamamzeh suggested the following plan.

To the right, on the other side of the mountain opposite, there was a glen. The hounds would undoubtedly drive the quarry into it. On the west it was flanked by craggy steepes. When a beast is pursued by hounds it always chooses the easiest way of escape, avoiding crags. It was advisable, therefore, to meet the game at the entrance to the glen, where the hunters could not miss it.

Mamamzeh's advice was accepted. The swamp was bypassed, the maple forest traversed on horseback.

They approached the neck of the gorge. The baying of the hounds grew louder, the hubbub and clamour raised by the beaters increased. An oak spinney had not yet been passed by the horsemen when suddenly a rustling was heard in the undergrowth, and a wolf rushed out. Then came another darting along the gorge, and again there came a sound like horse's hoofs. A fiery eye gleamed through the tangle of clematis. Giorgi drew his bow and the first broad-headed arrow found its target. Something barked like a dog, gave a groan and fell with a heavy thud behind some hawthorn bushes hard by.

Eristavi Mamamzeh flung himself from his horse into the tangle of bushes and teasels, and crawled about for a long time amidst the intertwined clematis. Then Giorgi saw him emerging from the briars with a huge wolf on his back. In his long leather coat covered with burs he resembled some wild man of the woods.

He flashed his fine white teeth at Giorgi and exclaimed: "This one is yours and a thousand more to come, O King of Kings!" With these words he threw the dead beast at the feet of Giorgi's horse. The beaters resumed their drumming and the great bugle of the chief of the huntsmen resounded quite near.

A deer was bounding along, crushing the maple twigs underfoot, breaking through the undergrowth, swift as a gust of wind. The greyhounds seemed to be close at its heels.

The horsemen saw it turn to the right, having sensed the presence of man. It made for those very swamps which had been bypassed by the King and his retinue before they came to the neck of the gorge. Yet the noblemen were not disposed to pursue the deer themselves, being - unable to follow it on horseback. Giorgi was about to dismount when Mamamzeh seized his horse by the bridle.

"Walking will injure your wounded leg. Stay on your horse, O King," urged Mamamzeh, invoking the soul of his father, Bagrat Kuropalat.

The King sat quietly in his deerskin saddle, looking into Mamamzeh's greenish-grey eyes.

So much sincerity and parental solicitude was in his entreaty that Giorgi could not help being astonished. The Mamamzeh of former times came to his mind, the comrade-in-arms in the battles of Shirimni, Oltisi and Niali, the most devoted vassal of Bagrat Kuropalat and the playmate of his own youth. He recollected how he and Mamamzeh had fared when they were ambushed at the castle of Phanaskert.

A doubt now stole into Giorgi's heart. Perhaps the spies had been lying and Mamamzeh was guiltless in the uprising led by Kolonkelidze and Chiaberi?

Giorgi did not dismount, and he made up his mind to have a talk with Mamamzeh there and then, in private, as man to man, as between father and son; to learn from him the motives for Chiaberi's treason. The King hoped to discern from the expression on Mamamzeh's face, from the intonation in his voice what part he might have had in the matter. Was it not possible that Mamamzeh had come to the King on New Year's Day in order to expose his own son? The King dismissed the other eristavis, ordered the chief of the huntsmen to follow the deer towards the

swamps, to look for its tracks in the maple wood; as for himself, he announced that Mamamzeh and he would stay alone at the mouth of the glen.

Both turned their horses thereto. The King rode at a walking pace and was at a loss as to how to start the conversation. The words that swarmed tumultuously into his mind were either sweet as homey or bitter as the venom of an adder. Now and again he stole a glance at the man riding by his side.

And again he recalled the plain of Niali, the battle fought at Basiani, the episodes during the siege of the fortress of Phanaskert, and again he became tongue-tied.

Well, Mamamzeh was his guest. It was in Mamamzeh's arms that Bagrat Kuropalat had breathed his last. Had not Mamamzeh and Zviad carried the dead body of Bagrat to Bedia for burial? Was it credible that the same hands that had laid in state his father's corpse in the castle of Phanaskert were now whetting the sword against Giorgi?

All this seethed in Giorgi's breast. It was beyond his power to find suitable words to express his anxiety.

At that instant the blast of the great bugle was heard again, and the approaching din of the beaters frightened Giorgi's horse. The rider, roused from deep meditation, managed to pull on the reins just in time to stop his rearing stallion on the verge of a precipice.

The two hunters halted at the mouth of the glen and strained their ears.

Some beast was pressing his way through the dark wood, his heavy paws crushing the dry twigs with a loud crackling.

Giorgi spurred his horse into the depths of the glen, drew his bow and drove a large arrow, tipped with an eagle's feather, into the chest of a brown bear. The infuriated beast let out a roar, but loath to grapple with a horseman, ran to the rocky precipice, stopped for a moment at the brink, let out another roar and the next minute threw himself down.

Childish carelessness got the better of the King, and he started after the bear on horseback. At the edge of the crag he jumped from the horse and again bent his bow. This time he missed the bear, which had disappeared in the briars.

The King looked ruefully into the chasm, realizing that his bad leg would prevent him from pursuing the fugitive.

At that moment down leapt Mamamzeh from his horse, with the same agility as in the battle of Shirimni, tucked in the skirt of his long leather coat, sat down on it and with boyish eagerness slid down the steep slope.

Giorgi stood on the brink of the crag and stared at Mamamzeh's back shooting down the precipitous path until the tall rushes swallowed it up and a deep silence again enveloped the wood.

Giorgi blew his hunting-horn, summoning the beaters and huntsmen. They and the falconers had to go a long way round the crags. Finally the hounds found the bloody tracks of the bear in the reeds and lost them again farther on amidst some rhododendrons.

They sought high and low, in gullies and ravines, through rushes and briars, but in vain. Both the bear and Mamamzeh seemed to have been engulfed by the abyss.

"The biggest game has stolen away," whispered Giorgi to Zviad when they were left alone.

"I dared not detain him in the castle contrary to your wishes," said Zviad, "even yesterday his intentions were clear to me. His purpose was to spy on us, to find out how prepared we were for war. He was sure that nobody would lay hands on the King's guest and that on the second day of the new year, after the audience, the noblemen would be invited to a hunt, during which' it would be easy to make his escape."

Giorgi felt that Zviad was right but made no answer. He bitterly regretted that he had been too trusting.

The sun was sinking towards the West. Giorgi had already killed three stags, seven wolves, five jackals and three roes and yet the victorious hunter was downcast.

There was now only one expedient left: to let loose Kursha, his favourite bloodhound.

Kursha was big with young but nothing could make her stay at home when she heard the baying of the pack. When the hunting party had been about to leave she had set up such a piteous howling that Giorgi felt sorry for her and let her accompany them on the leash.

The chief of the huntsmen himself brought Kursha to the place under an ash-tree that had been struck by lightning, where all trace of the bear petered out. Subsequently not even drops of blood could be seen on the ground. Kursha turned to the left, sniffed about for a long time, circled round the place two or three times and then started off on the scent. The chief of the huntsmen had assigned three falconers and seven archers to her.

They traversed the King's reserve and found that the beast had broken through the inclosure. They passed through a thicket of reeds and entered an impenetrable oak forest; then Kursha stopped as they came upon the bear lying dead under an oak.

By the side of the bear, on the brackens lay Mamamzeh, the old man's hand still clasping his sword. His beard, white like wool, was spattered with drops of blood. The ferns and grasses all around were trampled down and smeared with gore.

Giorgi was greatly disquieted by this event. He told *Spasalar Zviad* confidentially that he would have preferred Mamamzeh to have escaped, as nobody would be able to persuade Chiaberi that all this had happened to his father while hunting.

After rubbing Mamamzeh's temples for a long time they brought him round, and twelve huntsmen had to exert all their strength to move the giant's body to the palace.

Giorgi called for Parsman. Not satisfied with this measure he demanded that Turmanidze be brought from the castle of Phanaskert.

Mamamzeh's first question when he opened his eyes was:

"Where am I?"

On being told that he was in the King's palace, he heaved a sigh, then rubbed his eyes and said:

"I wanted to present the King with the bear's skin. That's why I risked my life."

Then he related how the wounded beast had drawn him very far away. In the tangle of bindweed most of his arrows had gone wide of mark. When the last arrow had hit the bear in the belly, the monstrous beast had reared itself up and rushed at Mamamzeh. He had thrown aside his bow and closed with the bear in a hand-to-hand grapple.

III

For six weeks Turmanidze, the famous surgeon, treated Mamamzeh with the utmost care. On Saturdays either the King or the Catholicos visited him, asked after his health and went away. A monk, in charge of the King's bed, kept vigil in the sick-room. By the patient's bedside sat the King's chaplain and read the Psalter to him.

Mamamzeh listened attentively to the sermons of the priest, willingly committed to memory the verses of the psalms and in his heart laughed at the simplicity of the Jewish God.

On the last Saturday the King and Commander-in-Chief Zviad called on Mamamzeh. This time the visitors stayed long. Stories of battles they had fought and of old-time hunting were the topics broached by Giorgi.

"Just the right time now for a crane-hunt in the underbrush of the Aragvi aits," remarked Giorgi.

He was unusually affable that evening. And yet Mamamzeh's pulse was racing with apprehension, for at any moment he expected the King to drop his hunting stories and turn abruptly to the subject of Kolonkelidze's rebellion.

What then?

Then the King would fix his big brown eyes on him and ask:

"And what have you done, my father's comrade-in-arms, my most faithful vassal?"

What would Mamamzeh say?

He had his answer ready: a flat denial and then a deathlike silence. He would say that he had been travelling and could not possibly know anything. In any event, he was sure of his will-power, whether they were to throw him into the dungeon, chain him to the pillory or even burn out his eyes.

The King broke the silence, looked straight into his eyes and asked unexpectedly:
"Kursha proved the best dog, didn't she?"

These words set Mamamzeh's heart at ease, and made him rejoice. He answered in the affirmative, nodding his head.

Giorgi bent his head, staring at the brick floor as if he had dropped something and was looking for it there.

"Yes, the dog is a very faithful animal. . ." he said.

The word "faithful" pierced Mamamzeh's heart like a sharp nail. Obviously there was now only one step from a dog's faithfulness to Mamamzeh's and his son's perfidy.

Suddenly he grew short of breath. He made an effort to sit up and say something, but Giorgi forestalled him:

"Miserable beings that we are! In order to save our own life" (the King pronounced these words very slowly) "we are apt to sacrifice without scruples our most devoted friend."

Then again he fell silent and looked at the floor. In a moment, thought Mamamzeh, Giorgi was certain to mention Mamamzeh, Chiaberi and Kolonkelidze. However, the words which struck the ear of the astonished man were these:

"Do you remember how the Greeks besieged us in the fortress of Phanaskert and cut off water supplies for three months, and when famine sapped our strength we slew my favourite bloodhound Kuda and ate it?"

Mamamzeh drew a deep breath of relief and said: "Do I not? Kuda was indeed a fine dog; better, even, than Kursha."

The King rose abruptly from his seat and, with a casual "good night," was about to cut short his visit when Mamamzeh reached from his couch after the King and begged to be allowed to go home.

Giorgi noticed that as he spoke his lower jaw fell and began to quiver.

"Have you caught cold?" asked Giorgi.

"I am unwell, but if it accord with the King's will riding might do me good."

"You have been my guest. How could I have told you to depart?" Giorgi turned to the commander-in-chief.

"Tell the master of the horse to have the horses saddled early in the morning. Let them also take a cart with them in case his wounds open and make it impossible for him to ride."

Left alone the guest rose from his bed, took a turn or two in the hall as if testing out his convalescent limbs, then climbed to the terrace of the tower and looked out over the slumbering town.

The pale-bluish round of the sky was enclosed by the black-toothed battlements.

The churches began to strike their wooden gongs. From the palace church came the sound of chanting, and the courtyards of the monasteries teemed with black hosts of monks and nuns.

The challenge of the night-watch rang out from the tower at the Aragvi Gates.

Night was slowly descending on the hunchbacked mountain of Sarkineh. The wild plum and apple blossom was spread like snowflakes over the garden of the Catholicos. Nightingales were trilling in the bushes.

Eristavi Mamamzeh stood leaning on the railing, the thought of his coming departure bringing joy to his heart.

He looked towards the east. The moon was directly over the Monastery of the Cross.

On the Bridge of the Magi he caught sight of a moving, glittering streak. A company of horsemen in chain mail were passing across the bridge. He remembered that three days earlier troops had been sent to the castle of Kherki. His eyes followed the flashing of the helmets. They vanished behind the hill, then reappeared moving uphill. The riders were silent, all that was

heard was the clatter of hoofs, and occasionally the snorting of the stallions and the neighing of the mares.

Suddenly a longing for battle, for riding and fighting seized Mamamzeh. The troops crossed Samtavro Square and the guard opened the North Gates to let them out.

And then undisturbed quiet settled down. The pointed domes of the churches grew black, the stars began to twinkle in the sky. A feeling of restlessness took possession of Mamamzeh amid the profound silence—only the shriek of an owl came at times from the palace garden.

Mamamzeh had spent many months in Mtskheta and during that time neither the King, nor the Catholicos, nor the commander-in-chief had breathed one word about the uprising of the Pkhovians and Aragvians, nor had they mentioned the destruction of the churches. However, behind that outward show of politeness raged a terrible anger.

The previous month the King with his retinue had stayed in Uplistsikheh, and at night there had been a movement of troops between Kherki and Uplistsikheh. All night long Mamamzeh had heard the tramp of horses' hoofs. There had been an unusual bustle in the palace.

And now the army was on the move again. Maybe the King expected war with the Byzantine Emperor, or an attack by the Emir of Tbilisi.

Apart from all this, what had they done with Chiaberi? What had been Kolonkelidze's fate?

It was possible that both had had their eyes gouged out. Who knew, perhaps the castles, and towers of Korsatevela and Kvetari had already been razed to their foundations.

As far him, Mamamzeh, they would probably allow him to recover, he thought. That taciturn monk keeping watch by his bed looked so suspicious! He might be a spy! After mumbling his biblical fairy-tales and psalms he would be quiet and stare at Mamamzeh with his pea-coloured, forbidding eyes.

It was obvious that all along they had been waiting for him to regain strength, and this might possibly be the last night of Eristavi Mamamzeh.

"O night, dark as my soul! Advise me of thy secret counsels!" He wondered whither that company of armoured horsemen who had just crossed the Bridge of the Magi might have been going.

Chiaberi and Kolonkelidze had probably been imprisoned in Mtskheta, and one fine night the three of them would be beheaded.

The petty eristavis of Tskhra Tba had been treated by the King in the same way, hadn't they? First he had invited the father as his guest and made him swear allegiance. Afterwards he had ordered the son to be brought from the castle of Tskhvilo and had kept them both in the dungeon of Sanatlo. The next Passion Week he had sent his chaplain to the prisoners to administer the sacrament and thereafter both the father and the son had been decapitated and their bodies thrown into the Aragvi.

O, that King's chaplain! That black-cassocked raven! He had long since been odious to Mamamzeh. He was a real eavesdropper and abomination!

Giorgi had appointed him to spy on the distinguished captive, and his ominous croaking boded imminent death. During the first months when Mamamzeh's life was hanging by a thread, he had been wont to peep into the sick-room every morning. He would stare at Mamamzeh with his narrow-slitted, watery eyes, as if wondering whether Mamamzeh had already given up the ghost. It was his office to steal fox-like up to convicts sentenced to the pillory, to serve holy eucharist and then tell them how Jesus Christ had transformed water into wine at Cana.

"O night, dark as my soul! Advise me of thy secret counsels!" Mamamzeh roused himself from his brooding with a start. Two riders were careering at breakneck speed from the "fortress of Mukhnari, with flaming swords in their hands. They galloped across the square, past the palace and vanished towards the Bridge of Magi.

What was that? A vision? A revelation of a mystery? "O night, dark as my soul! Advise me of thy secret counsels!" Mamamzeh had heard distinctly the clatter of the horses' hoofs; why, then, were the sentinels standing motionless on their watchtowers?

Had Mamamzeh's eye and ear deceived him? Was it a strange dream?

No, they were horsemen, of real flesh and blood, grasping fiery swords.

Mamamzeh had as many battles behind him as years of earthly life, but up till now fear of death had been unknown to him.

For once he was startled. His legs gave way and he caught hold of the stone parapet, cowering despicably.

He pulled himself together, straightened himself up and again looked towards the square. He saw three horsemen galloping away, then three more, and then a whole detachment dashed into sight. They sped on at a tremendous pace, drawn swords gleaming above their heads.

No sound whatever was made by the riders themselves; all that was heard was the incessant drumming of hoofs.

As they came darting past the palace the brilliance of their shining swords against the surrounding gloom enabled Mamamzeh to catch glimpses of their gaunt faces, the flash of their helmets and the glitter of their coats of mail.

"O night, dark as my soul! Advise me of thy secret counsels!" The first two horsemen might have been Chialberi and his foster-brother Tokhaidze, who had fought their way into the town, thought Mamamzeh. They had possibly routed the troops sent from Mtskheta in the evening, and had just broken into the town. That was all there was to it.

And yet why were the sentinels silent, he wondered. Could they have been bribed beforehand?

... But those swords? Those flaming blades? Chiaberi might have brought the secret of shining steel from Constantinople. If that was the case why had he not made his father privy to it? Perchance he wanted first to have it put to the test. That reminded Mamamzeh of what Chiaberi had told him; namely, that the Caesar had put in prison a Turk from Bagdad who must have been a master of iron-cutting blades. Though condemned to death on the pillory he had never disclosed his secret.

...Yet how could the strongholds of Mukhnari and Gartiskari have surrendered to Chiaberi so submissively? Nor would the guard of the King's palace in Mtskheta have yielded to the enemy so readily if Chiaberi and his foster-brother had actually broken into the town. Had they laid siege to the citadel Mamamzeh would have been seized and put to the sword on the instant.

"O night, dark as my soul! Advise me of thy secret counsels!"

He hurried back to his chamber. The monk was sleeping tranquilly, his head resting upon his arms. The Book of Psalms had dropped from his hand to the floor.

Mamamzeh hastily encased himself in a cuirass, put on a casque, girded on his sword and by the secret stairs went down to the garden.

The instant he stepped into it he noticed two shadows steal close by him and disappear behind the trees.

He passed across Samtavro Square without meeting anybody. Then three tired-looking lancers passed him, their headpieces glistening in the moonlight. Their horses jogged wearily along.

When he lost sight of the lancers he looked back and saw a long caravan of camels. He turned aside to avoid them, and having noticed a wayside oratory, stopped there.

In front of the door of the oratory a group of Tagged people lay higgledy-piggledy. He drew nearer to them but could not make out whether they were beggars or pilgrims. The homeless paupers were fast asleep, except for one old man who was sitting apart on a flagstone, mumbling psalms.

Before the icon tapers were faintly gleaming. Mamamzeh glanced at Christ's face, which was contorted in an abject grimace. The sight did not please him.

He approached the man who sat on the stone and wished him "good evening."

The old man returned his greeting, and, beckoning him to be seated, shifted himself to the edge of the flagstone.

"Venerable pilgrim," said Mamamzeh, "let us exchange our clothes, if you please."

The old man rose, led the stranger to the tapers burning before the icon, looked him over from head to foot and saw that he was one of noble birth. Why does he want the rags of a pauper, he wondered.

"What affliction has been sent thee by the Lord, my unfortunate brother, that thou desirest the tatters of a poor wayfarer?" he asked.

"I was a pagan, brother. I've been baptized in Mtskheta, and converted to a new faith. Henceforth I will follow Christ, divest myself of all my worldly gains and wander about a homeless pauper. Didn't He, our Lord the Saviour, roam the earth like that?"

The old man looked hard at the noble features and stately bearing of the stranger. His words rang true.

The man doffed his threadbare cloak and hung it over Mamamzeh's arm; then he sat down on the stone, took off his worn heelless shoes and held them out to him.

Mamamzeh carelessly flung his casque on to the flagstone and unbuckled his cuirass. Then he stripped off his tunic of costly samite, handed it over to the old man, and taking his seat on the stone, pulled off his high-heeled riding boots made of morocco leather with the tips of the toes curved upwards like the prow of a Grecian barque, and placed them before the pilgrim.

"Whence do you come and whither are you going?" asked Mamamzeh.

"We are stone-cutters and masons from the fortress of Kveli. The King's church in the castle of Korsatevela is said to have been demolished by the heathens. Tomorrow Catholicos Melkisedek is going to send us there to rebuild it."

The mention of Korsatevela's name tore at Mamamzeh's heart. He was anxious to ask more about Korsatevela but checked himself.

As soon as he had finished dressing himself he made his departure. The old man was curious to learn who he was and from where, but before he could utter a single word the stranger had said good-bye and vanished in the dark.

In the gloom of the street called Princes' Baptism Mamamzeh caught up with the caravan.

Its owners turned out to be merchants from Javakheti on their way to the castle of Kherki, taking provisions for the garrison.

"Would you kindly let a poor traveller join you?" asked Mamamzeh in an obsequious manner. "I am afraid of the beasts prowling by night. I'll follow you on foot."

The head of the caravan asked him who he was.

"A mendicant monk from Tao. I am going on foot from the castle of Artanuji to Gudamakari to collect alms for the churches."

Still talking they came to the end of the street of Princes' Baptism. Not a sound was heard there either. From time to time Mamamzeh looked back.

Nobody was in sight and that gave him heart. It seemed, he thought, that his escape from the palace had gone unnoticed. Only a few miles more, and once beyond the castle of Mukhnari he would be safe. The darkness of the night would protect him like a fortress.

"O night, dark as my soul! Advise me of thy secret counsels!"

They found the gates of the castle of Mukhnari barred and bolted.

"They close the castle early now. Eristavi Chiaberi and Talagva Kolonkelidze are said to have forced the Ossetians and Dzurdzukians to render allegiance to them, and the King is fearful of an assault from the north," said the head of the caravan.

The caravan came to a standstill near the castle. Out of the darkness emerged the watchmen.

The head of the caravan saluted the commandant of the castle and asked for permission to pass. He apologized by saying that they had left Uplistsikheh early that morning but one of their camels had fallen on the way. It had taken time to unload him and transfer the goods to the other camels, and night had overtaken them.

"How many camel-drivers have you?" asked the commandant.

"Twelve, and a traveller who has joined us on the way. He seems to be a mendicant monk."

While they were conversing in this way Mamamzeh noticed two vague figures mingling with the caravan.

And when the captain of the guard ordered the castle gates to be opened, one of these two figures approached, laid hold of Mamamzeh and said loudly:

"This traveller is the King's guest. We cannot entrust him to you tonight."

The news of Mamamzeh's flight caused a great commotion in the palace of the commander-in-chief. The link-bearers tumbled out and lit the torches.

Zviad was awake, yet he tarried a long time in his bedchamber.

Mamamzeh's face turned pale when Zviad entered the hall. The captive was standing, his arms pinioned behind his back.

A frown on his hirsute face, the commander-in-chief sank down in an armchair. He ran his eyes over the beggar's rags worn by Mamamzeh.

"Who are you?" he asked indifferently, as if he did not know who was standing before him.

"Eristavi Mamamzeh," replied the prisoner with bowed head. Zviad rose from his seat and with his own hands placed an armchair for Mamamzeh. Then he made a sign to the lancers and they untied Mamamzeh's hands. The captive murmured something to express his gratitude and Zviad noticed that his lower jaw, thrust forward, began to quiver.

"Have you caught cold again, Chief of the Eristavis?"

"No, sir commander-in-chief; now I feel feverish," answered Mamamzeh and a bitter smile twisted his large mouth.

"Why did you run away? Has not the King given orders to escort you back to your domain?"

The eristavi was speechless for a while. Then he lifted his head and again looked at Zviad's fiercely lowering eyebrows.

"I myself don't know, my lord *spasalar*, why this happened to me. Perhaps it is owing to some strange delusion brought about by my illness. After you had left I went up to the terrace of the tower. I gazed on the town, and suddenly some strange riders galloped past me like the wind. First, two; then six three abreast, and, at last, a whole detachment. All of them held flaming swords in their hands, fire-throwing falchions.

"I accompanied Bagrat Kuropalat ten times in the battles with Saracens, I have fought against the Greeks by the side of King Giorgi, but never have I beheld aught resembling that vision."

"Ah, so! You would know who those riders were, and what their swords meant. This secret is known only to the King and to me, and to our masters. Traitors do not hold the secret. All this was arranged by me to find out whether you came here as friend or foe. Everything now is clear. By the order of the King you will go back to your province tomorrow. Try to persuade Chiaberi and Kolonkelidze to become loyal to the King, for otherwise we shall come and attack the castle of Korsatevela and then you shall understand who those riders were and what kind of swords they wielded."

And saying this the commander-in-chief bade the guest good night.

All through that night the blacksmiths in the street of Princes' Baptism were at work. They took red-hot swords from the anvils and handed them to horsemen standing by, who galloped away at a furious pace, tempering the glowing Indian steel in the cool air of the moonlit night.

Mamamzeh passed the whole of the night, until daybreak, at the window. Only when the bluish grey of the dawn overwhelmed rufescent Mars did he snatch a brief sleep.

Early in the morning the head of the King's messengers awoke him and reported that the horses were ready.

Two lancers escorted him into the courtyard and helped him into the saddle.

The master of the horse handed him a whip.

Mamamzeh asked him to convey his thanks to the King and the commander-in-chief with his petition to grant him the honour of receiving the Catholicos in the castle of Korsatevela at Easter and to send him icons and priests as well.

Only when the party had passed the fortress of Mukhnari and the King's messenger had spurred his horse northward did Mamamzeh reassure himself that he was being dispatched not to the other world but to his own estate.

Spring was encroaching on the mountains. On the banks of the Aragvi wild plums were abloom and larks were winging up to the heaven bearing the rapture of the rejuvenated earth.

IV

At the end of April Giorgi sent a message through his major-domo to ask Catholicos Melkisedek to call on him on Saturday evening after vespers.

Melkisedek was surprised when he saw the King's major-domo standing with bowed head in the middle of the hall. Previously the young King had been wont to visit the Catholicos in person.

In his secret heart Melkisedek was displeased with the King. He resented the fact that, unlike his father Bagrat Kuropalat, he neglected affairs of religion and morality.

It is a common practice with mankind: the dead are sometimes praised in order to cast a slur on the living.

Melkisedek made a point of lauding Bagrat Kuropalat with zeal. 'He used to say that Bagrat excelled in piety and this was the reason that God had looked benevolently on him and enabled him "to conquer the Caucasus from Jiketi to the Hyrcanian Sea."

In his mind the Catholicos reproached the King for having executed the petty eristavis. He believed, as the Georgian people had done erstwhile, that any guest was sent by God. Why then had the Christian king put his guests to death? Bagrat would have disdained to act in such a way.

He kept that precedent in mind and therefore exerted all his influence when Eristavi Mamamzeh, who had come to attend an audience, found himself in honourable captivity.

For many months an incessant and unseen battle was waged between the young King and the old Catholicos.

When the King set about tempering steel blades and making arrangements for war, Melkisedek passed the nights in prayer.

Zviad, the commander-in-chief, made great efforts to press the King to order that Mamamzeh's eyes be put out. Moreover, Zviad was eager to put himself at the head of the army and to wipe the castles of Korsatevela and Kvetari off the face of the earth.

Melkisedek tried to persuade Giorgi: "The Lord hath forbidden thee to take up the sword. Thou shalt guide the apostates to the way of truth with the Gospel and the Holy Cross, for, verily, to life eternal leads the Holy Life-Giving Cross, amid the virtue thereof dissipates the gloom in their hearts."

Giorgi did not set much store upon the virtue of the Life-Giving Cross, but not wanting eventual complications with Byzantium in consequence of his war with Chiaberi he inclined more and more to the advice of the Catholicos. On the other hand, Mamamzeh's great services to the throne of Georgia, his desperate fight with the bear and finally the entire personality of the mighty eristavi—all this together made it possible for Mamamzeh to get away to his mountains with a whole skin.

Spasalar Zviad was undoubtedly a believer in Christ, but he had never yet seen an enemy defeated by the mere power of the Cross; he therefore assiduously remonstrated with the King, affirming that as long as Mamamzeh, Chiaberi and Kolonkelidze carried their heads on their shoulders there could be no peace in their provinces. As for Tokhaidze, he thought it would be sufficient to have him hamstrung.

That Saturday the evening service was deliberately delayed by the Catholicos. He had a plausible excuse: collecting offerings for the agapae had taken much time and he could not find it in his heart to intrude upon the King so late.

V

The protracted evening service exhausted the old Catholicos. He suffered from heart trouble and his legs were swollen with dropsy. As soon as the service was over his vision grew blurred, and, but for the assistance of the bishop of Mtskheta, he would have collapsed.

Then the friends of his youth came up to him as usual: the monk Gayoz and Father Stephanoz, the prior. They each took him by an arm and led him to the monastery.

Melkisedek firmly believed that if a priest wanted to retain his influence over the community he had to eat and dress as did his flock, and should show himself to the people as seldom as possible.

"Otherwise they lose interest in you," he thought to himself. Accordingly, he rarely made an appearance before the congregation.

He avoided officiating at great parish festivals and Saints' Days. He even avoided solemn audiences at court on those days when foreign princes, ambassadors and governors of provinces presented themselves before the King. As for feasts and wedding parties at the houses of the nobility he never took part in them. In his opinion most of the nobles were heretics.

After the church service he usually put on the shabby cassock of an ordinary monk.

He took his meals in the refectory with the monks and novices, partaking only of boiled greens and such food as was permitted at the time of fasting.

That evening, too, he sat at the table between the monk Gayoz and the prior, eating his lentil porridge with a wooden spoon.

He had fasted the whole day, and now he relished the porridge. He asked for some more, and having received it from a curly-haired novice, was about to put the spoon to his lips when somebody a few paces from him asked in a loud voice:

"Is the Catholicos here?"

The Catholicos heard it, and whispered to Gayoz: "Do not say that I am here."

Before the aged monk could rise to his feet, someone wearing a black cassock had elbowed his way through the crowd of monks and novices. It was the King's chaplain. He rushed up to the Catholicos and, making an obeisance, slobbered over Melkisedek's right hand with his thick wet lips. Then, as if struck with awe, he stepped back in a flurry of agitation and said obsequiously:

"The King begs leave to invite Your Holiness to an audience."

The repeated invitation set Melkisedek thinking, and he decided that the King must feel uneasy about Parsman the Persian.

Melkisedek was greatly displeased with the presence of that "suspicious pagan" at the King's court—the more so since nobody knew exactly whether he was really a Persian, a Saracen or a Greek.

"Parsman the Persian" must have been his nickname. He knew to perfection every language and the laws of every creed: Georgian, Arabic, Turkish, Iranian, Greek.

Melkisedek had already given a piece of his mind concerning that "idolater" to Bagrat Kuropalat himself, but then the 45-year-old man had been baptized on the King's orders.

Parsman did not trouble his head about fasting and going to church, and the King's chaplain secretly informed the Catholicos that Parsman openly sneered at the Christian faith. He was said to make fun of the doctrine of the immaculate conception, and when intoxicated with opium used to say with a giggle that Mary had given birth to as many children as there were angels who could come together on the point of a needle.

This joke was ambiguous. If he were told that a great many angels could assemble on the point of a needle, he would reply: "You seem to be unaware that the stature of an angel is that of a man"; and if somebody said that no angel could rest his feet on the point of a needle, he would

answer: "You seem to be unaware that angels are incorporeal spirits." Then Parsman would expatiate on their being incorporeal to such an extent that his listener's head spun.

Like any other adventurer he was a good hand at a number of crafts.

His latest occupation was making sun-dials. He had been going about the provinces, setting up sun-dials, compiling lunar almanacs, participating in the revels of the gentry as a welcome wit, making the grey-haired *aznauris* burst their sides with laughter. He made a laughing-stock of every religion (in order to conceal his own creed). He quizzed men of every nationality (not wishing to reveal his own).

For a long time the Catholicos had been looking for any available pretext to demand from the King that Parsman be banished. It was the King's chaplain himself who had furnished him with such a pretext.

Parsman the Persian had recently taken to visiting a nunnery. For love or money he would inveigle youthful virgins to a dark lane near his home in the district of Princes' Baptism, behind a disused basilica, and deflower them.

The last one had been a girl in her teens from the castle of Phanaskert. He had taken a fancy to her and had raped her by force. She proved to be a relative of the King's chaplain.

There were no repercussions for Parsman when it was a question of seducing the daughters of serfs brought from Abkhazia, Klarjeti and Pkhovi, but the girl from Phanaskert was high-born. Here, at last, were found those waters in which the hated heretic would certainly be drowned.

Preliminary investigations into the case had been closed but as the church at Skhaltba had not yet been completed by Parsman, the Catholicos did not intend to proceed with the prosecution for the time being. He avoided meeting the King lest the latter should intercede with him on Parsman's behalf.

It was obvious that now there was no escape from the second invitation the chaplain had brought from the King. His feelings were somewhat tort by the summons, yet he made up his mind at once to frustrate the King's design in some way, and insist that the "unclean heathen" be punished.

VI

On entering the council chamber Melkisedek winced to see Parsman the Persian sitting with King Giorgi and *Spasalar Zviad* at one table.

A disagreeable smell struck his nostrils as he advanced to the middle of the chamber.

"It probably comes from that pagan," thought Melkisedek as he greeted those present.

All three rose instantly to their feet. The commander-in-chief set an armchair for him; the King asked him to be seated and everybody took his place except Parsman, who stood waiting for the Catholicos to invite him to sit.

Melkisedek's eyes rested on an embossed icon and the Wonder-Working Cross lying on the table.

Gioirgi inquired about his health, received his thanks and then said to him:

"I am told that Your Holiness contemplates visiting Mamamzeh's domain after Easter. If it be your pleasure, present to Mamamzeh this icon on my behalf (he looked at the embossed icon), and to Chiaberi—the Life-Giving Cross." Melkisedek made a mental note that it had been taken out of the reliquary.

"Command them in my name," continued the King, "to kiss the icon and the Cross in thy presence and to cease all intercourse with Kolonkelidze. We ourselves shall look after him" (saying this he exchanged glances with the commander-in-chief). "Command them to return to the Christian religion. Let Mamamzeh give his daughter Katai in marriage to Tarichidze, the *aznauri* of Tao, and not to Tokhaidze, that fox of a seneschal. Chiaberi shall not dare to marry Kolonkelidze's daughter Shorena" (at these words the King struck the table with his fist), "otherwise, before one month is over, we shall besiege the castle of Korsatevela with our troops, and Mamamzeh and Chiaberi shall lose their heads."

King Giorgi said this in a firm, quiet manner and by his steady gaze gave Melkisedek to understand that unless his orders were carried out no prayers and supplications on the part of the Catholicos would avail the apostates in the least.

The Catholicos bethought himself of the whisperings of the King's chaplain. "Even after Mamamzeh's departure troops are expected to be sent to the castle of Korsatevela."

The King's speech made him glad. His suggestions seemed to have been accepted by Gioirgi. Though broken in health, he would prefer a weary journey to bloodshed.

He raised his head and merely by the complacent expression of his face intimated his willingness. *Spasalar* Zviad sat scowling with wrinkled brows. Parsman the Persian was still standing, a grimace of weariness distorting his shrivelled hairless face.

VII

On the next day Melkisedek started on his journey to Korsatevela Castle, accompanied by a numerous retinue. Four bishops attended him, from the dioceses of Ishkhani, Matskhveri, Anchi and Mtbevi. There were many priests and monks, among them twelve experienced spies in monks' attire, assigned by the commander-in-chief. Their task was to investigate in detail all the secret comings and goings at Eristavi Mamamzeh's and to report to the King speedily, before Melkisedek's return.

At the head of the procession moved the cross-bearer, carrying the embossed image and the Wonder-Working Cross.

They were within three or four parasangs of Korsatevela when Eristavi Mamamzeh himself came out with a large retinue to meet "the Vicar of Christ."

As soon as Mamamzeh saw the Catholicos he dismounted and walked a distance of about an arrow's flight, escorted by his Seneschal Tokhaidze. As he drew near he doffed his casque and then kissed the hand of the honoured guest.

The hierarch rode on a mule decorated with little golden bells, and the road before him was strewn with palm branches. Bareheaded serfs, peasant housewives, children, women who in a fit of religious frenzy cried out prophesies, and beggars, who had all gathered beforehand in the hollows along the gorge, were now bringing up the rear of the procession, smiting their breasts and chanting "Hosanna."

Mamamzeh winked at Shavleg Tokhaidze. They remounted their horses and fell to the back of the procession.

The giant, clad in armour, sat on a bay gelding and now and then looked over the pricked-up ears of his huge horse at the bent and wizened old man riding the mule, at the host of monks and the empty trail stretching ahead before them. He was excited, and fidgeted in his saddle.

Suddenly he frowned and turning to Tokhaidze, who was riding by his side, asked:

"Why is Chiaberi late?"

"I fail to understand, Chief of the Eristavis. Chiaberi and his attendants were ready some time ago."

"It will cause us much trouble if Chiaberi becomes stubborn again and refuses to meet the Catholicos," said Mamamzeh, almost in a whisper. He lashed his horse with a loud crack.

At the same time a cloud of dust rose above the farthest bend in the road.

Shavleg Tokhaidze shaded his eyes with his hairy swarthy hand. His keen, glance immediately caught the bright glitter of helmets and armoury in the sunlit distance.

"They're coming! They're coming!" he exclaimed. Mamamzeh, too, cupped his hand over his eyes, but rheumy and weakened as they were after the injury inflicted by the bear, they could discern nothing.

"'Tis Chiaberi, Chiaberi, Chief of the Eristavis!" said Tokhaidze, and spurred his horse onward to meet his foster-brother.

But before the seneschal had gripped the reins and dug into his horse's flanks, Mamamzeh had charged him to tell Chiaberi to kiss Melkisedek's hand without fail.

Riders in helmets and coats of mail were approaching at a canter. As they rode up to the retinue of the Catholicos, a young man in a golden helmet drew ahead of the others, jumped down from his horse and threw the reins to the armour-bearer.

He took off his helmet, and his hair, the colour of ripe corn, covered his high forehead. He riveted his large blue eyes on the haggard, sickly face and small, glistening beady eyes of the Catholicos. Then he reached out his huge right hand towards the guest, bent his head and with a shudder of loathing mixed with contempt put his lips to the long skinny fingers. At that moment Chiaberi standing on the ground appeared to be much taller than the Catholicos Melkisedek on his mule.

VIII

The steep trail continued to go higher and higher, and Melkisedek was barely able to keep his seat on the mule. One ascent over, there began another. Having climbed to the top of one peak they would turn to the left and find another ascent ahead of them, and so it happened again and again.

At last there rose into view Korsatevela Castle and its battlemented towers capping its summit on which the head of the Church had for long seen nothing but clouds.

But now the prolonged ascent had caused Melkisedek's heart to palpitate so violently that he could see neither clouds nor castle.

On one side of Melkisedek rode Stephanoz, the monk, on a mule, on his other side was Mamamzeh, holding him by the arm. Melkisedek, pale as death, sat on his mule more dead than alive and was on the point of falling off at any moment.

They had already ridden up to the first tower when Melkisedek swooned and four monks had to take him from the saddle.

Bordokhan, Mamamzeh's wife, was a fanatic believer. From afar she had long since admired Catholicos Melkisedek. She was waiting for the Catholicos at the first tower, attended by her handmaidens and servants. When: the hierarch, gasping out his life, was being lifted from his mule, the women rushed to him. Some kissed his hands and feet, some the hem of his robe.

Melkisedek was carried into a carpeted and tapestried hall and laid on the *takhti*, a broad wooden bedstead, covered with rugs and embroidered cushions, which ran along the whole length of the wall.

Mamamzeh was in a state of great agitation, knowing full well that King Giorgi would certainly accuse Chiaberi of Melkisedek's death, which in its turn would undoubtedly aggravate the already strained situation.

In token of grief and despair, Bordokhan scratched her cheeks with her finger-nails till they bled. The dream of her whole life had been to see with her own eyes Melkisedek, the head of the Georgian Church. She had travelled to Mtskheta three times to set eyes on him and three times she had come home without doing so. Each time it was said that Melkisedek had gone to Uplistsikheh, Vardzia, or Artanuji, to build and ornament new churches.

God had now found her worthy of an exquisite happiness; Melkisedek, the Catholicos, had come to Korsatevela Castle. But lo! there he was, in death-struggle, beyond all hope.

Thirteen-year-old Katai looked in amazement at the sobbing mother and could not understand why she should be so agitated over the death of such an old bag of bones.

Like other Georgian housewives Bordokhan was an expert in the art of healing. She made up her mind at once and sent boys with fishing nets to the Aragvi to catch salmon fry.

Then with her elder sister Rusudan she rubbed Melkisedek's chest with a piece of moist linen until at long last they succeeded in bringing him to life.

Mamamzeh himself brought in a tray with the still green salmon fry on it.

Bordokhan rose, and with her own hands tore off the fins of the young salmon in the way she had learned from the *Karabadini*, an ancient collection of medical prescriptions. She made Melkisedek swallow twelve young salmon and in a few minutes the patient felt better.

Bordokhan fell sobbing on her knees at Melkisedek's feet and in a religious ecstasy began to cover with kisses the skirts of the old man's garment.

Chiaberi, disgusted at this unseemly sight, whispered to his father: "I'll hurry them up with the meal," and promptly left the hall.

The Catholicos staggered to his feet and looked about. There were no icons nor crosses anywhere on the walls. He recalled the information brought by the spying monks that the heathens of Pkhovi had plundered the castle of Korsatevela and melted down the gold and silver of the holy images and crosses to make ornaments for their daggers and scimitars.

He ordered the cross-bearer to uncord the travelling bags. Then he beckoned to Mamamzeh and told him to send for Chiaberi.

Chiaberi came in and whispered to his father: "Dinner is ready."

Little Katai, a towel hung over her shoulder, entered the room, followed by servants.

With her head bent forward she went up to the Catholicos and kissed his hand. Then she took an ewer from a handmaiden and waited on him while he was washing his hands, afterwards waiting on the four bishops in turn.

After the hand-washing Melkisedek held up an icon, handed it to Mamamzeh, who stood before him in a servile posture, and announced that it was a gift from the King.

Mamamzeh went down on his knees with a childlike simplicity, kissed the Catholicos first on the knee, then on the hand; thereafter he touched the embossed icon with his lips, with a pharisaical show of piety pressed it to his bosom, and then lifted it again to his lips.

Then the Catholicos summoned Chiaberi, who was standing motionless nearby.

As that giant with the golden curls knelt before him Melkisedek sulkily made a sign of the cross over him, took out of the reliquary the Wonder-Working Cross, looked attentively at the curly head, yellow as the ripe ears of corn, and pronounced distinctly:

"King of Kings Gioirgi, the ruler of the Abkhazians, Georgians, Rans and Kakhétians, commands thee, Chief of the Eristavis, Chiaberi"—as he said this he raised his hand aloft as though inspired from on high—"King of Kings Gioirgi commands thee—" he repeated the words resolutely but with a catch in his voice—"to repel the devil, to embrace again the Christian faith and kiss with awe this Life-Giving Cross," and with these words he put the cross to the lips of the kneeling man.

With a mixed feeling of contempt and aversion Chiaberi kissed first the cross and then the hierarch's right hand. As he rose to his feet Melkisedek caught just a trace of suppressed anger in his large blue eyes.

The assembly looked askance at this scene. Bordokhan on her knees in a corner of the hall was sobbing like a little child. The aged *aznauris* stood listening with religious faith to Melkisedek's preaching. He uttered a warning to everybody who had had any part in the rebellion of the Pkhovians to confess his guilt, threatening the contumacious with the wrath of the Wonder-Working Cross.

Crouching alone in a dark corner stood the infuriated Shavleg Tokhaidze, gnashing his sharp, feline teeth.

IX

At dinner the bishops of Ishkhani, Matskhveri, Anchi and Mtbevi sat on the right side of the Catholicos; on his left side sat Mamamzeh, and next to him Bordokhan and Chiaberi.

Shavleg Tokhaidze, the seneschal, and twelve *aznauris* from the Aragvi with their sleeves rolled up waited upon the guests of honour.

Mamamzeh helped Melkisedek to sturgeon, carp and smelt, for the Catholicos would not take anything but fish even after breaking his fast.

Then Mamamzeh offered the guest trout fresh from the frying-pan.

Chiaberi leant towards his father and whispered in his ear: "The wine tastes bitter. I'll have it changed." He left the hall.

For a second time Mamamzeh held out to Melkisedek a silver dish heaped with trout, praising the fish from the River Aragvi. The higher up the river the trout went, he explained, the more palatable it became. Spawning time was at hand and if his holiness would prolong his stay at Korsiatevela he would be served fresh roe and trout every day.

Suddenly he dropped this topic and started talking about the Life-Giving Cross.

"I am told," he said, "that it worked great wonders in Klarjeti. When the church in Imerkhevi had been ruined by the earthquake, everything on the altar was destroyed except the Life-Giving Cross, which remained intact in its precious reliquary."

The Catholicos, still eating trout, listened in silence to what was being said.

When Mamamzeh had finished the story of the Wonder-Working Cross, Melkisedek corroborated it with a nod of his head.

Mamamzeh did not continue this subject, though he had heard from the King's chaplain the details of how the Cross was restored to Mtskheta. He said almost under his breath: "Your Holiness, during my absence the accursed Pkhovians have burned down the churches. My son Chiaberi and Tokhaidze, the seneschal, led our troops against them and fought a fierce battle, but the Pkhovians were not alone. The enemy had the advantage, so our people had to retreat and lock themselves in Korsatevela. Then the godless heathens cut off our source of water, took our fortress by storm and looted the palace. They left us neither the icons inherited from our forebears nor a single cross."

Melkisedek bit off a trout's head, chewed it carefully for a while with his toothless gums, then took a fishbone out of his mouth with his trembling hand, laid it on the edge of the plate and, turning to Mamamzeh, said:

"All this was reported in detail to King Giorgi at the right time. Afterwards, the bear injured you. The King, out of respect for you as an honoured guest and sick man, has never mentioned it to you."

Thereafter the Catholicos took another sizable trout and ate its head as before.

With many oaths and vows Mamamzeh tried to cajole Melkisedek. He swore by the life of the King and the soul of Bagrat Kuropalat. He said that before Bagrat Kuropalat had breathed his last in Mamamzeh's arms in the fortress of Phanaskert, he had entrusted the fate of his little son Giorgi and that of the whole Georgia to him, Mamamzeh, and to Eristavi Zviad; that on his deathbed Bagrat had made Mamamzeh take an oath and that he, Mamamzeh, had been keeping that oath faithfully ever since. He assured Melkisedek that his wife Bordokhan and himself passed days and nights in prayer; that his wife, he himself, his son Chiaberi and his daughter Katai were dust beneath the feet of his holiness.

Before Mamamzeh had concluded his speech he noticed that a dish which lay before him was the object of wistful glances from Melkisedek. It had been picked clean of trout by the bishops of Ishkhani and Matskhveri.

Mamamzeh immediately broke off, and when he had offered Melkisedek a fresh plate of trout the Catholicos' beady black eyes met Mamamzeh's greenish-grey ones under their bushy brows and set them darting about.

Bordokhan noticed that despite Chiaberi's absence the wine was still not changed, and she was surprised that he was away so long. She made an apology loud enough for the Catholicos to hear and went out. His holiness reached for one more trout, and having bitten off and consumed its head, addressed the host:

"King of Kings Giorgi is gracious. Of a truth, he gives ear to my counsels. For it is forbidden by the Lord to take up the sword. The Christian kings and ministers of the Church ought by the Gospel and the Holy Cross to show their subjects the way to everlasting life, so that the power of the Wonder-Working Cross should illumine the darkness in the hearts of those who tread the path of temptation...."

At that moment Bordokhan burst into the hall screaming wildly: "Chiaberi is dying!" and rushed out.

All the guests leapt from their seats.

Before the bishops of Ishkhani and Matskhveri had time to conduct the Catholicos into Chiaberi's bedchamber Mamamzeh's son had gasped his last breath.

Tokhaidze, leaning over the dead body, was laying it out.

"Woe is me!" roared Mamamzeh, and his gigantic frame slumped to the ground.

Melkisedek turned pale and looked hard at the dead man, whose fine blue eyes grew dull and glazed. Then he took up his corn-coloured Prayer Book and began mumbling the funeral service through his withered lips:

"Thou, O Saviour, hast given thyself up to be crucified with the evil-doers, hast been punished by the Life-Giving Tree, hast conquered death through death, wast three days buried in the flesh, hast cast out darkness with light. . . ."

Bordokhan wept her heart out over her dead son, and kissed his sunken eyes. From time to time she fell on her knees before the Catholicos, and embracing his knees, entreated him to raise her son from the dead as Christ had raised Lazarus.

Mamamzeh, mad with grief, beat his head with his clenched fists. His tears could flow no more.

Only Shavleg Tokhaidze stood, his arms folded on his breast. His blood-shot, bleary eyes were fastened on the Catholicos, while in his mind one phrase from the prayer that had just been read kept hissing like hot embers splashed with water:

".. . hast been punished by the Life-Giving Tree. . . ."

Whom had the Catholicos meant—Chiaberi or Christ, he wondered.

As soon as the requiem for the dead was over it appeared that all the guests and the members of the eristavi's household were firmly convinced that the Wander-Working Cross had worked a new miracle, having killed Chiaberi.

Mamamzeh was utterly shocked—he, too, implicitly believed in the miracle. In his opinion it was now the turn of Tokhaidze, Kolonkelidze and himself. However, after the loss of his only son, a speedy death seemed to the old man a desirable end.

He had changed, having gone to pieces within the space of a minute. Now he was ready to kiss the ground that Melkisedek and his smite trod.

That very night he begged Melkisedek to have him shrived, and confessed to him the part played by Chiaberi and himself in the Pkhoviain uprising.

X

The arrival of the Catholics (or, it would be better to say, of the Wonder-Working Cross) in Korsatevela Castle and Chiaberi's death struck the pagans with horror.

The Christians straightened their backs; the priests and deacons thrown into dungeons during the uprising were released.

Superstition took wing, spreading rumours about the coming of the Cross with the Catholicos, saying that idols fell to pieces and heathens died on its approach.

Catholicos Melkisedek was not known for his severity. He was famous through all Georgia as a builder of churches and an incomparably strict ascetic. As for the Wander-Working Cross, the mountain tribes knew its history.

Originally, as the "Battle Cross," it had been in the possession of Vakhtang Gorgaisal.* It had been borne at the head of the King's army when Vakhtang crossed the Caucasus "and the mighty mountains bowed."

Alans and Tsanars, Gilgivs and Galgais had woven strange legends about the miracles it was said to have wrought.

The Cross with its reliquary weighed nine pounds. Its height was three and a half cubits and its breadth one and a half.

* Vakhtang Gorgaisal—King of Georgia (V c), founder of Tbilisi —Tr.

It was said to have been made from the wood of the Wonder-Working Pillar in those times when the heathen tree-worship was assimilated by Christianity.

Throughout the centuries it had been to all parts of Georgia, from Nicopsia to Derbent.

According to one chronicler the Cross had vanished on the very day that Khazars took Tbilisi for the first time.

Ashot Kuropalat was known to have carried it in the ware against the Saracens. It was with him when he fled to Greece, and in Byzantium he had its casket ornamented with precious stones.

In the year 853, when the Saracens took Tbilisi and killed Kakhai and Tarkhuji, the Cross fell into the hands of Buga the Turk.

Fate smiled on the Wonder-Working Cross: when eristavis or kings who pinned their hopes on it won victories, the annalists glorified the Cross as being "ever victorious," but when they were defeated, the blame was usually laid on an insufficiency of forces, or on a strategic blunder made by some war-lord or king.

It is human to be more lenient to a deity than to a man in forgiving some failing, and it was just, this circumstance that had magnified the renown of Vakhtang's Wonder-Working Cross.

In the battles with the Arabs 50,000 Georgians had been killed in Tbilisi, and the Life-Giving Cross "was captured." The chronicler of those days did not impute the fault to the Cross.

When Buga the Turk marched with his troops against Mtiuleti, the natives of the district and the avalanches blocked his way and "countless Saracens perished by the sword" or were buried by the snow.

A native of Mtiuleti, who was hunting on the banks of the Aragvi, found among the corpses' of the Saracens and their rich spoils a casket, in which was the Life-Giving Cross entirely robbed of its ornaments. He took it to Bagrat Kuropalat, in the town of Uplistsikheh.

The annihilation of the Saracens in Mtiuleti was ascribed not to the brave highlanders and the avalanches but to the Cross.

Bagrat ordered the goldsmiths to mount the reliquary in silver and set it with jewels as before.

Few are the scraps of information that have come down to us from those obscure epochs. From a note in an old psalter found in Meskheta we learn that Bagrat Kuropalat once more carried the day "by dint of the Glorious Cross."

The Cross was said to have been carried before the army of Eristavi Tornike, who put to rout the Byzantines under Barda Scliaros.

Thereafter there was a lengthy silence in the annals concerning the Cross. When Bagrat III and his ally Gagik, the King of the Armenians, defeated Padlon, the Emir of Ganja, in the battle of Zorakert, victory was ascribed not to the alliance of fraternal nations but to "the power of the Glorious Cross."

Giorgi I took it into battle when he fought Basil, the Byzantine Emperor, but during the action at Basiani he lost faith in it, the cross-bearer having been taken prisoner by the vanguard of the Greek troops in a forest. Two years later a monk found the Cross in Taos Kari and took it to the bishop of Matskveri, who gave it to the Catholicos.

On New Year's Day the Catholicos conferred upon the King the blessing of the Cross. King Giorgi's heart once again went out to the miraculous Cross when it lifted from his head the threat of the war with the Byzantine Empire, dispatched Chiaberi out of this world, and put fear into the hearts of the Caucasian pagans.

Not only were the *aznauris* among the Tsanars and the Aragvians shuddering with fear, but also the Pkhovian *khevisberis*.*

Numberless people flocked to Chiaberi's funeral, most of them in order to see this wonderful Cross.

* *Khevisberis*— "elders of the gorges," chiefs and priests of Georgian mountain tribes. —*Tr.*

XI

The day following Chiaberi's death Eristavi Mamamzeh sent out messengers in mourning to his kinsmen.

The first messenger was dispatched to Kvetari with Chiaberi's shield and coat of mail.

Smiting his head with his fists and intoning a mournful dirge he drew near Kolonkelidze's castle of Kvetari.

Fair-faced Shorena, with scratched and bleeding cheeks that a short while before had been as white as an almond, with hair hanging loose, sobbed piteously, leaning her head on her father's breast.

Chiaberi had been brought up in Ovseti in the family of Takai, a nobleman. Takai had twelve sons.

When the foster-brothers of Chiaberi saw his sword they went to their mother, loudly crying and moaning. They embraced her knees and began to lament the dead.

Takai was blind. Having asked for Chiaberi's sword, he passed his finger along the edge of the blade, kissed the sword and shed bitter tears.

Talagva Kolonkelidze, his wife Gurandukht and Shorena, all in black, set out with an escort of three hundred mail-clad horsemen.

As they neared Korsatevela Castle, Shorena unbraided her tresses and burst into a terrible wailing. The mourners, dressed in black, followed her on horseback, chanting mournfully.

On hearing that Chiaberi's betrothed was approaching, the inhabitants of Korsatevela, old and young, ran out on to the flat roofs of the castle; guests, maidservants and serfs rushed in a crowd to the casements.

The horsemen, clad in black, were chanting a dirge and above its heart-rending drone rose the wail of Shorena, an unearthly treble.

The riders dismounted and helped Talagva's wife Gurandukht, Shorena and their handmaidens from the saddle.

Wildly screaming, Shorena entered the castle, supported on either side by her father and Konstantineh Arsakidze.

By this time King Giorgi and his suite had reached the first tower. Mamamzeh and Shavleg Tokhaidze, the seneschal, met the guests at the doorway of the tower.

Nobody expected King Giorgi's arrival, and yet most people had their eyes on Shorena, with her lacerated cheeks.

On the King's right hand was Queen Mariam, on his left Zviad, the commander-in-chief.

Mamamzeh rushed up to the King, kissed his right shoulder, and began sobbing in his arms like a little child.

King Giorgi, too, was moved to tears. That moment he felt real sorrow over Chiaberi's death. He called to mind Mamamzeh's old self, the friend of his father's boyhood.

Giorgi cast a glance at Shorena and then looked at her again, stealthily.

"It's wonderful," he thought to himself, "weeping makes everybody ugly, be it a child, a youngster or an old man. Only to a beautiful woman is it becoming."

Then he turned his eyes to Konstantineh Arsakidze, who resembled Shorena very much. He was dressed in a Pkhovian *chokha* and a rust-coloured coat of mail.

Was this youth Shorena's brother, he wondered. Then he recalled that Shorena was the only begotten.

Talagva Kolonkelidze went submissively up to the King and Queen, made his obeisance and stepped back.

The grief of the betrothed was overshadowed by the lamentations of the bare-headed blind Takai, Chiaberi's foster-father. The breast of his garment was torn to rags, his face bled where he had clawed at it.

The mourners in the castle met the sightless foster-father with a funeral lament. The old man tore the hairs of his beard, scratched his head and face with his fingernails and cried, "*Vahvu messerbun! Vahvu messerbun!*"*

At the sight of Takai grief welled up in Mamamzeh's heart. He put his arm round the blind man's neck, and led him, with the foster-mother and the foster-brothers, to where the dead man lay clad in a coat of mail.

Groping for the dead body, Takai touched Chiaberi's cold flesh, covered it with kisses from head to foot and again started beating his own head and chest with his fists.

Tearing at her dishevelled hair Chiaberi's foster-mother kept up her piercing wail, while the twelve foster-brothers lamented the dead man in the Ossetian language. The fact that this was incomprehensible to those assembled sent a still greater chill of horror running through them.

The moaning of the blind Takai cut King Giorgi to the heart in a surprising way. He embraced Mamamzeh and burst into tears.

Even the eyes of the fierce-hearted Zviad swam with tears as he listened to the soul-stirring lament of the sightless old man and the moaning of the aged foster-mother.

For a brief moment death seemed to have reconciled the mortal foes.

The blind foster-father sat before Chiaberi's corpse and bewailed him. He recalled Chiaberi's boyhood and youth; praised his athletic build, his sky-blue eyes, his lion heart.

"*Vahvu messerbun! Vahvu messerbun!*"

"Thou wast a roebuck, O soul of my soul! How then did jackals dare to assault thee? Thou wast a mountain wolf, what then had foxes to do with thee?! Thou wast a falcon, how then did the fowl crows dare to attempt thy life?! *Vahvu messerbun! Vahvu messerbun!* Take me to that Cross! I had rather that wretched one killed me instead of thee! What had death to do with thee! Oh that I had died that miserable death in thy place!" lamented old Takai, smiting his head with his hand, staring in front of him with his unseeing eyes.

Not understanding Ossetian, the Catholicos did not realize that old Takai was abusing the Life-Giving Cross. King Giorgi and Zviad, on the other hand, had been brought up in Ossetia, and at the mention of the Cross they pricked up their ears. They were even pleased that Takai had connected Chiaberi's death with the Cross.

Three thousand people came for the lamentations. Crowds of people from each mountain district of the Caucasus were arriving incessantly to swell the multitude. All the four towers, their terraces, the courtyard of the castle, and its attics and roofs, the great banqueting hall, the chapel and the parapets were filled to overflowing.

Children clustered in the branches of the poplars like flocks of sparrows. Beggars, mendicant monks and madmen tried in vain to gain a foothold.

Among the arrivals there were many who had never yet seen the King of Georgia, or the Catholicos of Kartli, Melkisedek, or such a beautiful bride as Shorena, weeping with such abandon over her dead bridegroom. But nobody gazed on the King, or the Catholicos, or on Shorena, with such amazement as on the Wonder-Working Cross which stood at the dead man's head.

They rose on tiptoe, craned their necks, got themselves crushed in the press. Their frightened, amazed eyes looked for the terrible Cross, the killer of the lion-hearted knight.

Those who stood far from it tried not to go any nearer; those who were drawn closer to it endeavoured with palpitating hearts to give it as wide a berth as possible. Only Zviad, the commander-in-chief, stood beside the Cross with his arms calmly folded on his chest, like a snake-charmer before a deadly snake. Now and then he cast a glance at Mamamzeh or at the blind Takai.

Mamamzeh wore a high conical fur cap and a long leather coat, both turned inside out as a token of mourning. He reminded Zviad strikingly of that Mamamzeh who had fled from Mtskheta disguised as a poor monk.

* "Woe unto my days!" —*Tr.*

There was one difference—this old man wore no human aspect. Measureless grief had bled white his once ruddy, youthful face.

XII

Chiaberi was buried in his family vault. The guests, mourners and kinsmen from remote places departed only on the third day.

The Catholicos, accompanied by the four bishops and his retinue, went to Gudamakari. The cross-bearer rode at the head of the black procession, holding in his hand the Cross.

Along the roads and at the cross-roads, in the streets and village lanes, countless throngs of people had come out to meet Melkisedek. Half-naked slaves, famished women and scrofulous children lay on the roads.

From various villages flocked lepers, epileptics and mad "prophetesses" who announced all kinds of dreams and revelations to "the Vicar of Christ" on his triumphant progress.

Plaintiffs and supplicants mounted the flat roofs of buildings, climbed up trees, clambered on to parapets and walls. The Catholicos would make a halt, hear the complaints, open the locked churches, appoint officiants, christen children, partake of the proffered meal and then continue his way along the steep paths.

The deciduous woods came to an end. The hawk-coloured mountain ridges seemed to support the blue dome of the sky. Startled by the tramp of the cross-bearer's mule, the eagles spread their wings and soared up to the clouds.

Barren craggy precipices loomed in the west behind the mountains bristling with dense fir and pine forests. Herds of roebucks trotted down to chalybeate springs, fearless of the black-robed army.

How could the meagre food offered at the doors of the small oratories in the barren mountains fill the pot-bellied monks!

It was .after Easter. In the villages no viands could be found except mutton and mutton dumplings, whereas bishops and "the princely brethren" among the monks did not eat meat. The Catholicos himself fed on dry bread and water. The novices and monks of subordinate rank, as well as the brethren of noble families, could not eat their fill, so whenever they were sent to nearby villages for provisions, and some ham or smoked pork came into their hands, they regaled themselves in secret.

At last they were so hard put to it that even in the villages, nestling in the rocky ravines, they failed to find anything to eat. The diet of both the Catholicos and "the princely brethren" had to be confined to wild garlic and wood sorrel.

The higher they climbed the more unbearable became the trail for Melkisedek. His heart again troubled the haggard, worn-out old man. He grew short of breath, and yet no fear of death entered the heart of the fanatical monk.

The mule broke down twice under him and was replaced by another, and now the third mule was gasping its last few breaths, labouring up steep trails as narrow as its own back.

The horses of three of the bishops died on the way. "The young brethren" avidly watched the dying horses in the hopes of treating themselves to the horseflesh, but to no avail. Three novices dismounted, offered their mules to the bishops and continued the journey on foot. Whenever Melkisedek swooned, the monks Gayoz and Stephanoz ran up to him, took him from his mule and rubbed his chest with wet linen. Then they cast a fishing-net into the nearest brook, caught a couple of trout fry and made him swallow them alive. The patient rallied again and continued his journey.

When they passed into the province of Kvetari a great multitude welcomed them with signs of utter submission.

Kolonkelidze had already arrived there, and at the mouth of Bokontsi Gorge he stationed his envoys to meet Melkisedek with kegs of honey and a herd of cattle to be slaughtered for meat, and to invite the Catholicos to the castle.

The terrified Pkhovians gaped fearfully on the Wonder-Working Cross held aloft by the cross-bearer, bared their heads, crossed themselves and kissed the skirts of Melkisedek's robe.

* * *

By the end of the first millennium people in Christian countries were expecting the Advent of Christ. The Byzantine Empire, Italy and France were trembling like aspen leaves. In Georgia, monks quoting *Ephut*, a book of prophecies, threatened people with the day of doom.

The very day that Melkisedek visited Korsatevela Castle, Eudaemon, the speechless hermit in the monastery of Nokorna, began to speak. He explained the delay of the Advent of Christ by the circumstance that the Catholicos had had to visit all parts of Georgia, that he was now proceeding to Pkhovi with the Life-Giving Cross to baptize the Pkhovians before Judgement Day and that he would strike the destroyers of the church with the wrath of God.

Talagva Kolonkelidze had been puzzling his brains about Chiaberi's death, and now Eudaemon's predictions made things clear to him. That was why he had ridden in haste to Kvetari to meet the Catholicos there.

As Melkisedek's procession approached the castle of Kvetari the wooden gong began sounding in the castle church.

Kolonkelidze, the *eristavi* of the province of Kvetari, accompanied by his retinue, met Melkisedek within twelve parasangs of the castle.

The armoured knights took off their helmets and knelt by the side of the road, and Kolonkelidze himself went up to the Catholicos with a halter around his neck. First he kissed the hem of Melkisedek's garment, then his hand, and at last he put his lips piously to the reliquary of the Wonder-Working Cross.

During the following week the awe-struck members of Kolonkelidze's household went about in a daze, expecting Kolonkelidze's death from day to day.

Dependants of his household kept watch by his bedside, while monks chanted hymns. When day broke the *eristavi* would cross himself, praising God for having been granted one more day of life.

In a surprisingly short time strands of silver crept into Kolonkelidze's beard and temples, and he felt strangely broken and cowed.

He searched high and low for the hereditary books of prayers, and having found them, had "the Hours" read to him in the morning and evening. He learned by heart the verses of the Psalter. He decorated the castle church with icons and ordered that a cross be put up over the bastion of the fort.

Meanwhile Melkisedek had the damaged churches and monasteries repaired, ordained officiants, made the monks christen over two thousand unbaptized adults and children and returned to Korsatevela Castle.

Talagva Kolonkelidze with his family and their attendants and a number of sacrificial animals went to the monastery of Nokorna.

Here he offered up a thanksgiving sacrifice to the holy image of Nokorna for having spared his life.

The Pkhovians were amazed at his having escaped the wrath of the Wonder-Working Cross.

The *eristavi* consoled himself with the belief that the rope he had put around his neck was the sole cause of his deliverance.

XIII

Bordokhan and Mamamzeh put on rust-coloured garments and moved into a dark pit. Two weeks passed and they dressed themselves in black sackcloth streaked with white. Day and night they lay face down on the naked earth and would not touch food or drink.

At length one evening Rusudan, Katai and Shavleg Tokhaidze after much entreating persuaded them to lay down on some hay and eat a little raw cole-wort.

For forty days kinsmen and friends gathered at sunset in the courtyard of the castle and then went weeping and lamenting to the family churchyard.

The disaster and the miracle wrought by the Life-Giving Cross made Mamamzeh a convinced believer in the faith of Christ. He gave orders to decorate the palace of Korsatevela and the ancestral chapel with icons and crosses.

He made the newly appointed priest and deacons administer agapae; he had a cross of stone set up on Chiaberi's grave. Tokhaidze looked with disapproval, yet did not dare to thwart the grief-stricken man.

At last Melkisedek came back from Pkhovi with the Life-Giving Cross and left it in the castle of Korsatevela.

Bordokhan and Mamamzeh would crawl on all fours to the Cross and implore it to grant repose for Chiaberi's soul. The terrified members of the household, the handmaidens and the servants did not venture to enter the chamber where stood the awesome Cross.

On the fortieth day the mourners came together again.

Thirty head of cattle and over one hundred sheep had been butchered. Fires burnt in the courtyard and over them beef and mutton was boiled and roasted.

Shorena came again, escorted by twelve mourners and Talagva Kolonkelidze.

King Giorgi arrived with a numerous retinue but without the Queen and Zviad, the commander-in-chief, who had gone to Uplistsikheh. The King was attended by three eristavis, his chaplain, his major-domo and the bishop of Anchi, instead of the Catholicos, who had been taken ill after his return from Pkhovi.

Accompanied by thirty mourners in black came old Takai, his wife and his twelve sons, Chiaberi's foster-brothers.

From the castle all the way to the pavilions pitched in the vast courtyard the black-clad mourners, chanting in deep bass voices, were lined up in two rows. Their interminable drone was unspeakably dreary. The drawn-out bourdon note of the dirge was heard everywhere and sounded for all the world like the bellowing of rams when they warn their flock of imminent danger.

Between the castle steps and the pavilions the female mourners moved to and fro, scratching their faces and wailing for the dead one.

Three pavilions stood in the courtyard of the castle.

In one of them lay Chiaberi's garments, his golden helmet, the gift of the Caesar, his armour, bows and quivers, shields and scimitars.

In the second pavilion stood his stallion, also a present from Byzantium, with curled mane and tail, caparisoned in black, who had borne his master in the battles with the Saracens.

In the third one were greyhounds, bloodhounds, hawks and falcons.

At the entrance to the first pavilion sat the ill-starred Bordokhan with bruised face. On one side of her was Takai's wife, Chiaberi's foster-mother, and on the other side Shorena. Chiaberi's betrothed had laid her head in Bordokhan's lap, and the latter sat there weeping and lamenting, and gently caressing Shorena's glossy curls.

When King Giorgi approached the women, Shorena lifted her head. Giorgi's face lit up at the sight of her amazing beauty—he was dumbfounded. Never before had he seen sorrow, grief and a plain mourning dress make a woman look so beautiful.

He went over to Bordokhan, kissed the shoulder of the grieving mother, and expressed his condolences with the mother, the nurse and finally the betrothed. That instant a strangely malevolent glance met the King's eyes; he felt as though it scorched his face.

The mourners continued to chant in their weird tones, and again the King heard Takai's convulsive sobbing and his cry: "*Vahvu messerbun!*"

He was deeply moved. He wiped his tears and went on to look at the stallion, who stood with ears cocked. The double scar from the wound received by him in the battle with the Saracens was still visible.

After Giorgi had come out of the pavilion, the blind Takai was conducted into it by the mourners and his sons.

The eldest son led him to the breast of the stallion. Takai spread his huge arms, put them round the horse's neck and cried out words of condolence:

"Gone is thy rider, gone to the kingdom of blackness! How can he cut through the darkness without thee?! How can he swing his sword without thee?! How can he rout the enemy without thee?! Grieve, horse, for thy master is no more! Grieve, horse, the hero Chiaberi is no more!"

The old man fell on his knees at the feet of the stallion and began to stroke its fetlocks, to kiss its hoofs.

This sight sent a shudder running through Giorgi's whole body, and he took refuge in the next pavilion.

Mamamzeh, weeping and bent double under the burden of his grief, followed the King. Giorgi ran his eyes over Chiaberi's breastplates and coats of mail, but when his eyes fell on the gift from the Caesar, the golden helmet, he was seized with his old feeling of hatred again. At that moment he heard anew the crying of the twelve foster-brothers and Takai's pitiable roar:

"Vahvu messerbun!"

Into Giorgi's mind came a vision of the blind old man weeping bitterly at the feet of his fosterling's horse, and tears welled into his eyes.

Mamamzeh stood nearby, stooping and leaning on a cornel-wood staff, and looking very much like a homeless pauper. Giorgi was overcome with pity for him and wanted to do something to console the old man. He put his hand on Mamamzeh's shoulder, but soothing words failed him.

When Mamamzeh noticed tears in Giorgi's eyes, his bent shoulders began to heave strangely. "He has forgotten his hatred for Chiaberi," he thought, and embracing Giorgi, kissed him on the eyes with a paternal tenderness.

Giorgi stepped into the third pavilion.

Buzzards, hawks and falcons were cowering sulkily on their perches. The hounds, scared by the drone of the mourners and lamentations, whined and howled. Only the old black greyhound, Chiaberi's pet, lay apart, and scarcely able to open her rheumy eyes, apathetically flicked away bluebottles with her tail.

As he passed by the first pavilion Giorgi glanced again at Shorena. Sorrow had transformed her face. Clad entirely in black she was radiant with an unearthly beauty. Today she seemed far more lovely than three years before when he had seen her for the first time in Mtskheta at the wake, in a Pkhovian dress, riding like an Amazon among the knights.

XIV

Mamamzeh and his wife Bordokhan stayed in the underground darkness till the next autumn. By then eleven months had passed, and it was time to send out messengers and invite mourners to the anniversary of Chiaberi's death.

That same night Mamamzeh had a bad dream.

He dreamed that he and Tokhaidze sat on Chiaberi's tombstone in the family graveyard and looked in sadness at the cross.

It was no longer the plain stone cross which the masons had erected by the order of Bordokhan. It was the Life-Giving Cross itself.

The Cross had struck roots into the soil and had grown as high as a man. A grape-vine, thick as a man's wrist, was entwined round it.

They looked closer and saw that it had put forth tendrils. Who had planted the Life-Giving Cross on Chiaberi's grave, wondered Mamamzeh. They drew nearer.

The vine began to stir. Suddenly it vanished, tendrils and all. In its place a gigantic serpent was twisting itself round the Cross. Then it began to stretch forth its head until, with a quiver, it darted its forked tongue at the cloudy sky.

Tokhaidze drew the sword given him by Chiaberi, and cut off the head of the evil one.

The head fell to the ground, opened wide its mouth and a sardonic laugh came forth. ...

Mamamzeh awoke, rose to his feet and walked over to the opening of the pit.

The dawn was seeping into their gloomy abode.

Tossing on her pallet lay the sick Bordokhan.

Mamamzeh called Shavleg Tokhaidze and told him of the dream. Then he asked Tokhaidze to take him to Chiaberi's tomb. They went across the courtyard.

The time he had spent in the darkness had strangely changed Mamamzeh's looks. His hair and beard looked like sooty wool, and he hobbled along clinging to his seneschal's arm with one hand, using the other to support himself on his cornel staff.

The ancestral tombstones were covered with moss and round them and the half-fallen stone crosses wound bindweed, hop and morning-glory. Poplar leaves were falling sadly to the ground.

Mamamzeh was surprised at his inability to find the new grave. On all sides lay the old mossy 'gravestones of his forefathers and their wives.

He came upon Chiaberi's grave quite unawares. He scraped away the fallen leaves with his stick.

"Who has stolen Chiaiberi's gravestone?" he asked in alarm. The dream has come true, he thought.

"I have taken it away," said Tokhaidze frankly.

Mamamzeh stared at him in stupefaction. It seemed to him that his dream was continuing.

"Is this not the stone from the grave of my grandfather Gvaram?"

"Yes, Eristavi of Eristavis! This is Gvaram's, thy grandfather's stone."

"And where is Chiaberi's, Shavleg?"

"I have hidden it, my lord."

"Why hast thou done it, Shavleg?"

"I deemed it necessary, my lord."

"How is that?"

"Who knows, Eristavi of Eristavis, what is in store for us."

"What nonsense is this, wretched man?"

"Caution is wisdom's mother, Chief of the Eristavis."

"Say plainly what you mean."

"I have much to say but one breath will not suffice."

"That is to say...?"

"Do you not know that King Giorgi has the heart of a ferocious beast? If the worst comes to the worst he may avenge himself on the dead when the living are beyond his reach."

Mamamzeh's legs gave way, he sank down on the gravestone, cupped his chin in his hand and silently looked at the ground.

"Dost thou not remember, Chief of the Eristavis, that when Khursi Abuleli fled to the Saracens, the King ordered his castle to be taken away from him, and the remains of Khursi's sons dug out of their family vault and thrown to the hogs and the dogs?"

"True, but the King made peace with us. He attended Chiaberi's funeral and was here on the fortieth day."

"There were other reasons, my lord."

"Namely?"

"He came to gaze on someone else."

"On whom?"

"Shorena, the daughter of Kolonkelidze."

"Can Giorgi be so evil-minded? No, I cannot believe it, Shavleg. Did he not weep wholeheartedly over Chiaberi?"

"Weep? Small wonder, my lord. It is the custom of murderers and drunkards. First they get themselves besotted with wine and blood and then shed tears."

"What do you mean, Shavleg? What murderers? Is Giorgi guilty of Chiaberi's death? Did not the wrath of the Wonder-Working Cross claim Chiaberi as a sacrifice?"

"The wrath of the Wonder-Working Cross, forsooth! How can you believe this fairy-tale, my lord! This rumour was circulated throughout the castle by those spies disguised as monks. If that Cross has the power to kill, why did it not kill first of all Talagva Kolonkelidze, the ringleader in the Pkhovian uprising?"

Mamamzeh fell silent, looking steadfastly at Chiaberi's grave as before.

"Say clearly what you mean, Shavleg!"

"Chiaberi was killed by King Giorgi and *Spasalar Zviad*, this is my meaning, Chief of the Eristavis."

"Cease thy blasphemy, Shavleg! You are without proof!"

"I can produce the proof, if it is your wish, my lord!"

"What kind of proof?"

"While Bordokhan, your wife, sits in the darkness, let us go to the Wonder-Working Cross. I shall bring everything before your eyes."

Mamamzeh's mind was in a tumult. Shavleg was going to reveal some horrible, unheard-of treachery, he thought.

He knew King Giorgi's fierce heart, but he had never conceived it possible that Giorgi could shed crocodile tears.

Under his care Giorgi had come to manhood. He was rude and haughty, but Mamamzeh had not thought him a hypocrite!

Rusudan and Katai were still asleep when Mamamzeh and Tokhaidze passed the great hall and, having entered Chiaberi's bedchamber, locked the door. Tokhaidze made straight for the Life-Giving Cross.

Tokhaidze had grown up in Mamamzeh's family as his own son and now the old man shuddered with fear as he saw him approach the Wonder-Working Cross so fearlessly. He wondered what Tokhaidze would do. He wanted to cry out, "Don't touch it," but curiosity restrained him.

Tokhaidze took down the reliquary from the shelf, set it on the table, opened it, took out the Cross, smelt it and laid it on the table.

"Please come here, Chief of the Eristavis, and smell the Cross!"

Mamamzeh staggered to his feet and reeled; then he took himself in hand, approached the Cross, and bent over to smell it.

"Do you smell anything?" asked Tokhaidze.

"Certainly, it reeks of something, but what of it? Perchance it is the smell of sweat, of human sweat, which is usual with crosses that have been handled and kissed over a long period. And if it has some other smell, too, what of that?"

"What of it? This Cross has been poisoned, my lord."

"You are out of your wits, Shavleg! Come to your senses, luckless wretch!"

"I beg leave to tell you that the Cross is poisoned. Only this and nothing more!"

"Be that as it may, but Catholicos Melkisedek would disdain to act so meanly. Is it believable that he was privy to it and deliberately had Chiaberi kiss the Cross?"

"Perhaps Melkisedek knew not of this thing. In any event, Melkisedek is nothing but a fool. This time he is the cat's-paw of the King and his commander-in-chief."

"No, Shavleg, thou art mistaken. We know, do we not, that Kolonkelidze kissed the Cross and escaped unscathed."

"Yes, I, too, was told of this, my lord. Last week, therefore, I sought leave of absence. I went to Kvetari Castle and learned everything in detail from Talagva Kolonkelidze himself. The fact is that he kissed only the reliquary. As for Chiaberi. ... Dost not remember that Melkisedek

in our presence told the cross-bearer to open the travelling bags in the great hall and that he himself uncovered the casket, took out the Cross and put it to Chiaberi's lips?"

Mamamzeh jumped up as if bitten by a snake.

"Your words have a ring of truth, Shavleg, but can we prove that the Cross was poisoned?"

"We need no sages, my lord. Chiaberi's black greyhound will find it out easily. In Chiaberi's lifetime this was his most faithful hound. She cannot live much longer, poor thing, so let her show her fidelity for the last time."

With these words Tokhaidze went out of the room.

Left alone, Mamamzeh was seized with fear. He fixed his eyes on the Cross. It looked like pig-iron. In places its ebony blackness had faded as a result of countless kisses over the centuries. It was discoloured in just those places where it had been kissed, in that very place where Chiaberi had put his lips to it for the last time.

Mamamzeh went up to the Cross.

Shall I kiss it and thus put an end to the nightmare called "my life," he wondered.

But he stepped back. First he wanted to convince himself fully of the perfidy of God and man. And afterwards. ... Afterwards his life would have a new aim—he would avenge Chiaberi.

Breathing heavily he went over to the window. From there he could survey the cemetery of his forebears, the ruins of the ancient oratory. Tokhaidze was hasty!... As long as Mamamzeh was alive no one would defile Chiaberi's tomb. He turned away and looked at Chiaberi's coat of samite, his chain mail and helmet, arrows and swords hanging on the wall.

"Would that I had been killed by that accursed Cross, my son, and that thou couldst have avenged me! Ah, if only it had been so!..." he groaned.

What had become of Shavleg, he wondered. Moments seemed to stretch out into eternity.

Just then Shavleg opened the door, bringing in the old black greyhound on a leash. She came nearer, writhing like the snake in his dream.

Tokhaidze took a slice of bacon from his pocket and rubbed it on the Wonder-Working Cross in the very spot where it bore marks of innumerable kisses. Then he pressed the cross to the hound's nose. The greyhound took a sniff and began to lick it with her blood-red tongue.

Tokhaidze put the Cross back into the reliquary.

"Byzantium is the source of this evil, of this Cross, my lord. Constantinople is a rotten city. Chiaberi and I learned a lot in the palace of Caesar Basil. Blinding, burial alive, crucifixion, poisoning, cutting off both hands, assassination—our Georgian kings were taught all this in the Byzantine Empire.

"Now the Greeks keep our King's son Bagrat there as a hostage. They will teach him worse things, and when he comes back we'll have to face all that...."

"King Giorgi himself displayed revolting cruelty in Oltisi. More than one thousand Greek slaves had had their eyes gouged out, two thousand Greek soldiers had been beheaded, three hundred prisoners of war had been buried alive.

"Constantinople is rotten to the core, a nest of dissipation, corruption and treachery. For three months Basil, the Caesar, was preparing for the war with the Saracens. Chiaberi and I were living in the palace, and became friendly with an Armenian from Ani, who told us all about it.

"At that time Ecumenical Councils were being held there. One of them lasted two months. This addle-pated Patriarch of All the East, and the priests, bishops, scholars and monks were arguing furiously, trying to decide how many angels could be placed on the point of a needle.

"At the palace of the Caesar preparations were being made for war, and the Saracens were at the door; yet old and young flocked to the sessions of the Council.

"Is God the Father lying or standing, can God beget a son without a father, can he create a mountain without a plain, or turn a whore into a virgin, such were the questions under discussion.

"They all talked themselves hoarse, and this was. ..."

The words died on Shavleg Tokhaidze's lips. Suddenly the greyhound fell, racked with spasms and clawing at the floor; then she raised her head and made an effort to rise on her

forelegs but began to totter round and round with her body curved into a ring. Yellowish foam appeared from her mouth, and she whined piteously.

Mamamzeh and Tokhaidze leaned over the dying dog.

She clawed the floor with her forelegs, and her hind legs began to shake violently. Then convulsions seized her whole frame, she let out a last law whine, stretched her neck, turned the whitened irises of her eyes to Mamamzeh and yielded up her breath.

"Do you see, my lord, that the faith of Christ was devised by the priests to blear the eyes of women and children?"

Mamamzeh beat his forehead with the palm of his hand and, groaning, sank into the armchair.

Tokhaidze left the room and returned when the corpse of the greyhound had been carried out.

Mamamzeh lifted his head.

"You are right, Shavleg! Right, by Heaven! None but women and children believe in the Cross!"

"Except, possibly, that dotard of a Catholicos and a couple of monks in Mtskheta...."

"Possibly...."

They were quiet for a time. Mamamzeh was the first to break the silence.

"Nor does King Giorgi believe in Christ and his Cross. During the battle of Basiani the Byzantine Emperor asked for peace. Giorgi sent him a peace treaty, and immediately after that sent Zviad with an army, which laid waste the province of Basiani and put the Greek troops to rout.

"Basil had not expected such perfidy from the Georgians. He ordered the peace treaty to be pierced with the point of a spear, lifted up the spear and exclaimed: 'Look, O Lord, at this writing and at their deeds!' Thereafter the Caesar took the Life-Giving Cross, planted it in the ground and cried out to his God: 'If thou deliverest me into the hands of mine enemies, I shall worship thee never more! ...' Afterwards our *aznauris* fought amongst themselves and we retreated. In our retreat we burned down the town of Oltisi. We were still in the town when the King was told that the house of God was aflame. Giorgi cast a look at the burning church and ordered Zviad to put out the fire. Then he spurred his horse. I was riding by his side. He leaned over to me and said: 'Who knows whether God does in truth exist?' And saying this he glanced for the last time at the blazing church."

Mamamzeh rose, took Chiaberi's helmet and sword from the shelf, laid them on the table and said:

"Swear, Shavleg, that you will help me avenge Chiaberi. You are his foster-brother. You ate 'oath-silver' when the two of you swore to be brothers."

"I swore an oath on his grave. We have no need for Christ's Cross, or for King Giorgi, Zviad, the *spasalar*, or Melkisedek, the Catholicos. Mtskheta and Uplistsikheh are just another Byzantium for treachery. The Greeks want us to reject our ancient gods and go to worship in their churches. They pulled down the oratories of our ancestors, and forced upon us their icons and crosses. The Greeks long to make us forget our language and thrust their language into our mouths, they long to make us forget our past history and learn theirs, to strip us of our national raiment and put on theirs. When we mention our gods and find fault with theirs, they call us 'heretics, sectarians, renegades.' That is why Kolonkelidze and I wanted to imprison King Giorgi and raise Chiaberi to the throne of Georgia. We should have taken Mtskheta, besieged Uplistsikheh, razed the castle of Tmogvi to the ground, and destroyed the castle of Phanaskert. We should have put the Queen in the convent of Bedia, made peace with the Emir of Tbilisi, restored Armazi and Zedazeni, and slayed the Catholicos and his black-robed spies on the grave of Kartlos. However, you were in Mtskheta. From the first I was against your going to Mtskheta to the audience on New Year's Day."

"Woe is me!" exclaimed Mamamzeh, striking his forehead with his hand, "If you had gone. Giorgi would have cut off my head! I should not have grappled with that accursed bear. I should certainly have run away during the hunt!"

"The King himself is Byzantium's enemy," said Shavleg. "But he is a muddler. He continually vacillates between Catholicos Melkisedek and Parsman the Persian. Some thought that Giorgi was worried about the icons smashed by Kolonkelidze. But it was Chiaberi's intention to marry Shorena that enraged him. It was at the feast of Mtskheta last year that he saw Shorena for the first time. Then he completely forgot that he was a king, that he needs must control himself. He left the Catholicos and the Queen in charge of his retinue and like a boy stuck to Shorana and Chiaberi. When we were about to leave, he rushed up to Shorena, helped her into the saddle, and then, hidden behind the horse, lifted the hem of her garment and kissed her on the calf. Chiaberi did not notice this for he was then mounting his horse. At Chiaberi's funeral I did not take my eyes off the face of the King, who kept looking stealthily at the weeping girl. He came again on the fortieth day in order to see Shorena once more."

Eristavi Mamamzeh got to his feet, grasped Chiaberi's scimitar, stuck its point into the rug-covered table and said:

"Swear, Shavleg, with me, that our sole purpose in life will be to wreak vengeance on King Giorgi for the shedding of Chiaberi's blood."

"I swear by the shrine of my forefathers that I will cut off Giorgi's head like that of a snake."

The dream has come true—this was the thought that flashed through Mamamzeh's mind.

The next day he dispatched Shavleg Tokhaidze to Kolonkelidze to inform him in detail about recent events. They agreed upon a plan: Kolonkelidze would begin first to destroy the churches and icons, then he would move into the Aragvi Gorge, and afterwards their joint forces would besiege Uplistsikheh and Mtskheta.

That same day Mamamzeh led Bordokhan out of the darkness of the pit, took off his mourning and told his wife that they should give Katai to Shavleg Tokhaidze in marriage.

Bordokhan started in surprise, instantly recalling the King's command as announced by Melkisedek. Hesitantly she dared to oppose her husband only with these words:

"What will the King say?"

"I myself shall give him an explanation."

XV

One moonlit September night the sentinel stationed on the tower of Mukhnari noticed a rider urging his horse towards Mtskheta at breakneck speed.

The sentinel stopped pacing the terrace and gave a low whistle.

Three shadowy figures carrying lances emerged from the gate of the fortress to meet the rider, whose armoured horse snorted and gasped for breath. The stranger made a request to see the commandant of the fortress, and the lancemen conducted him to the orderly room, looking at him in surprise. He wore a monk's cassock covered with burs. Even his cap, his hair and beard were likewise covered—he looked like a savage from the woods.

On appearing before the commandant he asked for a private talk.

When the commandant had dismissed the guard the man took off his high shaggy sheepskin cap, uncovering a glittering helmet. He doffed the helmet, wiped the sweat from his forehead and then unbuttoned his robe. Beneath it was a breastplate. The commandant, like the lancemen, was surprised at the sight of an armoured monk.

The unknown man leaned on his sword and made a request to be admitted into the town immediately for an interview with the commander-in-chief.

Zviad had returned from Uplistsikheh late that evening; nevertheless, wayworn though he was, they wakened him from his sleep as the mail-clad monk refused to report to anybody else what he had to say.

He turned out to be Serapion, the Father Superior of the monastery of Tskhra Kari, a spy in the service of Zviad. The latter asked him to take a seat and heard the following news:

Talagva Kolonkelidze had again led the armed people of Dido and Gilgi into Pkhovi, had again destroyed icons and crosses, burned down churches, hanged monks and priests from the belfries and hurled some of them from precipices. At night he had set fire to the church in Tskhra Kari. Serapion had let himself down on a rope from the crag and had fled through the woods when it was dark. The garrison in Kherki had lent him an armoured horse and he had made straight for Mtskheta with the important information. It was Serapion's opinion that Kolonkelidze intended to invade the Aragvi Gorge with considerable forces.

The spy was unable to say what Eristavi Mamamzeh was going to do, but he brought some interesting news: Tokhaidze and Katai, Mamamzeh's daughter, were now betrothed.

"This year Kolonkelidze, the eristavi of Kvetari, has an army twice as large as he had last year," said Serapion.

King Giorgi was in Uplistsikheh with his retinue, and the next morning Zviad set out for that town.

The King at once summoned the members of his Council.

Messengers and couriers were dispatched with the King's summons to the governors of the provinces. October 9 was fixed upon for mustering the troops and assembling.

The Council session lasted till midnight, and the councillors withdrew after taking a decision that Zviad should go to Pkhovi with large forces without delay. After six days the King would lead the royal regiments.

Zviad, the commander-in-chief, received orders to send out an advance party. It was to go round Kvetari to the north, block the mouths of the Pkhovi gorges and advance to the fortress of Torgva.

He was also charged to avoid unnecessary bloodshed, to take hostages from the commandants of the castles and chiefs of the gorges. The advance party was not allowed to take spoils but was to capture arms. It was also to demand the release of the detained priests and monks.

Zviad's troops were to follow the advance party and lay siege to the castle of Kvetari until the arrival of the King's regiments, for the King, aware of Zviad's blood-thirsty nature, was afraid of heavy casualties should Zviad attempt to storm the fortress.

The King knew as well that if they failed to draw Kolonkelidze out of the fortress by some stratagem he would shut himself up there and, with winter not far off, the beleaguering army would be left short of provisions and would not be able to hold out till the spring.

Zviad was delighted that his prophecies to the King and the Catholicos were coming true. Had he not said that nobody could straighten a dog's tail or make a crayfish move forward?

Zviad's original plan was to destroy a few Pkhovian fortresses, to burn down some villages and strangle the chiefs of the gorges. The terrified population would then readily give up hostages.

Should Kolonkelidze advance to meet Zviad, the latter would easily surround him in some ravine and annihilate his forces.

King Giorgi, the three eristavis and Catholicos Melkisedek did not approve this scheme. They were not in favour of aggravating the situation, being sure that in such an event the infuriated population would the more readily side with Kolonkelidze.

On October 9 the main army of the kingdom—the regiments from Tao, Klarjeti, Samtskheh and Lower Kartli—assembled in Uplistsikheh. According to the chronicler "the King raised aloft the luck-bringing standard of Vakhtang Gorgasal and handed it over to Zviad, the *spasalar*. He assured himself that the men-at-arms were prepared and their steeds in good fettle."

Before dawn the next day the army left Uplistsikheh and started on its march from Mtskheta to Gudamakari along the bank of the Aragvi.

Korsatevela Castle was bypassed on the left flank. Near the fortress of Largvi Zviad divided his army in two, entrusting the command of the northern party to Kakhai, the chief of the warriors from Samtskheh.

Kakhai was to penetrate to the right side of Mount Tsroli and capture the mountain passes of Pkhovi. Zviad's army was under orders to encircle the castle of Ochani. Should the commandant of that fortress offer hostages, Zviad would join with Kakhai's party and both would proceed to the fortress of Torgva, thus separating the land of Dido from Pkhovi.

XVI

The gorge basked in the genial warmth of the autumn sun. In the chalky clefts of the hillsides re-echoed the cries of partridges. They were moving in coveys up the slopes, rustling among the clumps of wormwood.

A covey would hop to the top of a knoll and stop short there; then the leading cock would start calling the others. Another covey would take off and follow him, and then another. The whole gorge re-echoed with their continual cries.

Along a narrow footpath in the depths of the gorge a youth in coat of mail was riding. A Pkhovian coat clothed his slender figure, a Pkhovian cap covered his head, a shield hung on his back, and on his left wrist sat a hawk. About a dozen quails strung by their feet on a thong hung from his belt.

The tired horse moved up the ascending path at a walk, wearily nodding its head. The keen round eyes of the hawk continually darted here and there as it listened eagerly to the partridges. The youth crooned light-heartedly to himself:

*Aralo, ariaraloo,
Aralo, ariaraloo. ...
An eagle, a wolf, a good youth
Can never be tamed,, in sooth. . . .*

On the far side of the gorge where a footpath ran up from the bottom of it a woman in a Pkhovian dress reined in her horse.

"Konstantineh, haa ... oo, Konstantineh!" she shouted. Screening her eyes with her hand, she looked out first to the west over the far-spread plain, and then to the gorge and shouted at the top of her voice:

"Konstantineh! Konstantineh!"

The young man went on singing in a carefree tone as he jogged up the steep path.

*Haraloo, hariaraloo. ...
The wolf will keep his wolfish way,
The gallant youth is ever gay.
Haraloo, hariaraloo. ...*

The gorge rang with the noise of a torrent, and the cries of the partridges grew more vehement. The youth continued his singing:

*Haraloo, hariaraloo. ...
A goodly youth is bold and gay,
An eagle eager for his prey
Will ever hunt upon a brae.
Haraloo, hariaraloo. ...*

The shriek of the woman startled the partridges that had settled on the upper ledge of the precipice and sent them tumbling downwards helter-skelter with still louder cries. From the ruins of a nearby chapel rose a flock of ravens croaking strangely. They flew high into the air, a chaos of flapping wings, like ink stains on the pure nacre sky.

The youth stopped singing and heard the cry of the woman:

"Make haste! Make haste!"

She waved her hand as she shouted to him.

The young man mended the pace of his horse but the hawk on his wrist prevented him from increasing it to a gallop. As the pitch of the woman's voice rose higher, he took hold of the hawk with his right hand and dug his heels into the sides of his mount. It was all the panting horse could do to climb the rest of the slope.

The woman urged her horse to the edge of the cliff, and looking down at the youth labouring up the ascent, called:

"Ride for all you are worth to Ochani Castle! Tell them the King's army is coming! Then run for your life to Kvetari, tell the eristavi to send help to Ochani."

The young man stretched out the hand in which he was holding the hawk to the woman. With his other hand he smoothed its feathers from the neck down to the tip of the tail and readjusted its wings, after which he showed the woman how to seat the bird on the left wrist. Then he untied the thong on which the quails were strung and gave it to her.

The hawk ruffled its feathers and fixed the woman with a glare from its amber eyes.

"I cannot follow you at a gallop, my son. The jars in the saddle bag would be smashed to pieces. Go by the short cuts over the Crow's Pass."

The youth stood on his saddle and caught sight of troops moving along the hillside on the opposite side of the gorge, their helmets glittering in the sun. Then he slid down into the saddle and spurred his horse.

The woman took off her kerchief, carefully wrapped the hawk up in it so that only its head was free, thrust it with difficulty into the breast of her coat, tied the thong with the quails to her belt and lashed on her worn-out nag.

XVII

Within sight of the fortress of Ochani Zviad again divided his army in two. At the head of one unit he put Phanaskerteli, a nobleman of Tao, while the other was headed by himself. Phanaskerteli was to go round the castle on its north side, where it was screened by the holy grove of the shrine.

Zviad knew beforehand that the Pkhovians would not dare to set foot in the sacred grove, whereas Zviad and his troops would march along the gullies and, having reached Ochani Castle, swiftly climb the plateau.

If the Pkhovians gave up hostages he would leave them alone; if not, the triangle formed by his unit and that of Phanaskerteli would close in on the enemy like a pair of scissors.

The castle of Ochani was bounded on the north by foothills, on the west and east by unassailable steeps, and on the south by a gently sloping tableland with a dry river bed at its base. Along the edge of the river bed stretched thin woods of elm-trees, with a tangle of briars and clematis here and there.

The gorge was deep, affording good shelter for a horseman. In places its edges were jagged with the footpaths worn by cattle and sheep.

The troops could avail themselves only of these paths if they attempted to climb to the tableland.

Zviad had fought many battles with the Saracens. He realized that if the attacking cavalry knew that there was a moat behind them this would put out of their mind any thought of retreat. Accordingly the Saracens dug trenches for this purpose. This time Nature herself had helped the commander-in-chief.

He ordered that every second trooper should leave his horse in the gorge and accompany on foot each mounted cavalryman with a lasso, spear or javelin.

Zviad was allowing for the fact that the Pkhovians and Didos had the advantage of riding strong-kneed mountain horses, and he made a point that the enemy's horses should be injured during the battle by means of spears, javelins or lassos.

Before the lad called Konstantineh had reached the castle the watchmen had apprised the commandant of the approaching army.

As soon as the garrison of the castle of Ochani noticed the enemy's troops entering the gorge, the alarm was sounded. Fires were kindled on the terraces of the towers and warriors sallied forth to meet the enemy as it tried to ascend to the plateau.

From the north the detachment under Phanaskerteli was stealthily approaching through the sacred grove, whereas Zviad's troops could not find concealment among the sparse clumps of elms.

In a moment the whole plateau was covered with Pkhovian and Dido horsemen. The Dido horsemen were first to attack, killing many of the advance party's horses. Elms and thornbushes hampered Zviad's warriors when they attempted to use their swords.

The gorge was narrow and was crowded with Zviad's army.

There were few footpaths running up the sides of the gorge and the King's troops were in each other's way. The Dido warriors met the attacking party at the tops of the paths and mercilessly hewed down man and horse.

Pierced with arrows and spears, the horsemen fell to the ground and rolled head over heels down into the gorge. The terrified horses reared and with loud neighing tumbled down from the verge of the chasm.

Suddenly a cloud of ravens darkened the gorge. Coming to roost in the elm-trees they started to croak in a blood-curdling way.

The riderless horses were neighing, the wounded moaning. The war cry of the Pkhovians and Didos rang out savagely.

Zviad's horse was wounded just as it emerged from the gorge. It fell, and Zviad's armour-bearer leapt from the saddle and instantly supplied him with a fresh horse. Zviad hurled his javelin at a gigantic Dido warrior and flung him down into the precipice.

The members of one wing of the Javakheti detachment, which was making its way up the slope, quailed and turned their horses' heads back into the gorge.

Seeing this, Zviad flew into a passion.

"Loudly did he cry to his regiment, the King's men-at-arms sounded the trumpets and rushed forth like unto wild beasts," says the chronicle.

The warriors of Samtskheh finished the ascent, came out on to the plain and spurred their horses. The Javakhetians, too, drew their swords and charged.

A great many Pkhovians and Dido warriors were killed that day. Around the castle of Ochani the dead lay row upon row.

The King's regiments again sounded the charge. Now the right wing shot ahead and gained the hillside leading to the fortress.

The Pkhovians were under Gudushauri, the Chief of the Gorge. He stood on the ridge of a mountain spur when he was told that the other detachments were passing through the grove of the shrine.

Knowing that the Pkhovians would not enter the sacred grove, he sent there a band of Didos. Kakhai's warriors used neither spears nor javelins. Emerging from the trees their cavalry rushed with drawn scimitars at the Dido horsemen, who met them in a clearing.

The Didos were amazed when the scimitars of Kakhai's warriors began smashing theirs to smithereens like so many icicles.

Just as Gudushauri was on the point of returning to the castle to reinforce the Dido troops there his detachment lost heart and took to their heels, making for the sacred grove. Thus emboldened, Kakhai's troops made straight for the donjon of the castle.

Gudushauri could see that if he went to the rescue Zviad would fall on his rear. He let out a terrible war cry, unsheathed his sword and at the head of five hundred horsemen charged Zviad's troops.

At that moment the warriors of Tao lifted their scimitars and engaged the courageous Chief of the Gorge at the top of the hill.

Then Zviad, the commander-in-chief, dug his spurs into the flanks of his titan stallion and hurled him breast foremost at the small Circassian horse of the Chief of the Gorge. Gudushauri swung his horse aside and slashed with his sword at Zviad, but his opponent caught the sword on his scimitar, and suddenly only the stump of the blade was left in Gudushauri's hand. Before Gudushauri could use a javelin Zviad had cleft him to the waist, together with his coat of mail.

Gudushauri's son Torgva made a dash after the commander-in-chief but his headstrong stallion failed him. His sword missed Zviad and only cut off the ear of Zviad's horse.

The Pkhovians, too, became convinced by now that the King's troops wielded swords that cut through bone and steel, and then they turned and urged their horses away.

After the gates of the castle had been broken open, the commandant immediately asked for peace and promised Zviad to deliver hostages.

That very night the commandant was beheaded and his corpse hanged from the parapet of the tower.

Zviad captured many suits of armour and demolished the fortress of Ochani.

Before dawn he started for Kvetari through the gorges without encountering any resistance.

The Pkhovians came out to meet him on his way, proffering bread and salt. The chiefs of the gorges, wearing halters around their necks, begged for pardon and peace.

The enraged Zviad ordered them to be hanged from the belfries with the ropes they had put round their necks in token of surrender.

On his march he took prisoners of war, hostages and arms from the commanders of the gorges.

Everybody believed that Zviad's intention was to take the castle of Kvetari. The commander-in-chief chose direct routes on purpose to put fear into the heart of Kolonkelidze, the *eristavi* of the province of Kvetari.

Kolonkelidze had been warned by his scouts of the coming of the King's army to Pkhovi before the arrival of Konstantineh Arsakidze. Three days earlier Mamamzeh and Tokhaidze had sent word that the King and Zviad were advancing with an army.

According to the original plan Kolonkelidze was to engage Zviad's troops in Gudamakari.

Mamamzeh and Tokhaidze had agreed to join the rebels provided Kolonkelidze managed to enter the Aragvi Gorge before the commander-in-chief.

Now that Zviad had proved to be the quicker of the two, Mamamzeh and Tokhaidze refused to take part for fear that on the way Zviad would level Korsatevela Castle to the ground.

Kolonkelidze supposed that Zviad's army would be much weakened by its fight against the armed insurgents rallied round the chiefs and commanders of the gorges, and by storming the strongholds in the mouths of the gorges and ravines. Later on, as the army approached Kvetari Castle he intended to sally out and engage in a decisive battle.

Should it fare ill with him he would shut himself up in the fortress of Kvetari.

He was hopeful for the winter, his ally. Left without provisions, the King's army would not be able to hold out till the spring.

But the taking of the castle of Ochani, the retreat of the Dido warriors, the blocking of the Pkhovi mountain passes by Kakhai, and the fact that the King's swords appeared to cut steel and bone, filled Kolonkelidze with terror.

He was about to send hostages to Zviad when couriers came from Uplistsikheh. They announced that the King with his retinue and his regiments was on his way to Kvetari, and that he was demanding hostages and a peace treaty of Kolonkelidze in order to be able to lead their joint forces against the "Khor-bishops" of Kakhetia and Hereti.

Talagva Kolonkelidze knew that "Giorgi was as fearless as a fleshless spirit" in battles with alien foes, whereas in his own provinces he shrank from bloodshed. It was true that Zviad always insisted on cruel measures, but on the other hand Catholicos Melkisedek had supported the King, counselling leniency.

Zviad has conquered Pkhovi and put to flight the Didos. The King recoils from bloodshed and will doubtless make peace with me. Thus ran the thoughts of Talagva Kolonkelidze.

Had the King not pardoned Mamamzeh and Talagva for their first uprising, sending out against the two eristavis only the Life-Giving Cross?

XVIII

King Giorgi's army took another direction. The King passed the night in the castle of Largvi and in the morning approached Korsatevela Castle, where Mamamzeh and Tokhaidze came out to meet him with numerous attendants.

Mamamzeh and Giorgi embraced each other "like father and son," Mamamzeh kissing the King on his right shoulder as usual.

Mamamzeh's wife, Bordokhan, entreated the King to stay with them till the next morning. The King promised to visit them without fail on his way back from Pkhovi.

"I am told, dame Bordokhan, you are going to give your daughter in marriage. So a wedding is expected," said Giorgi with a malicious smile.

Bordokhan's face turned red from embarrassment, yet she denied flatly:

"Katai is as yet too young to wed, my lord. She is only twelve years old!"

As soon as the breakfast was over the troops started on their march.

Scared by the impending advent of the wrathful King, the native population fled to impassable mountains, leaving the deserted villages to the care of stray dogs, old people and the sick.

The strangled chiefs of the gorges still dangled head downwards from the belfries. The churches were locked, for the monks and priests had either been murdered or had escaped to Mtskheta.

In the mouth of the glens and gorges lay the dead bodies of the King's heralds. Vultures pecked at the corpses, which had been torn by the teeth of wild animals.

The courier sent by Zviad overtook the King's regiments near Goimzvareh.

Zviad had written a letter to tell the King that Kolonkelidze had handed over the hostages, that the armed mobs of the Didos and the Galgais had been driven beyond the Pkhovi mountains, that Kakhai's troops had besieged the fortress of Torgva and that Zviad was awaiting the King's orders at Tskhra Kari.

Giorgi entrusted his courier Ushisharidze with the following message to Zviad:

"My command to go to Pankisi will mean that I am waiting for thee in Kvetari Castle; in this case come at once with thy troops."

After Goimzvareh had been left behind the cross-bearer took the lead. Then came twelve mail-clad knights escorting the royal standard and at a short distance behind rode the King, followed by three hundred lancers. More than two thousand men-at-arms marched behind the King's suite, but these had not yet entered Goimzvareh.

The narrow cart track leading downwards disappeared into the depths of a gorge. This was where impassable chestnut forests began. Now and then foxes ran across the path in front of the advancing troops.

Suddenly the King perceived some horsemen in coats of mail who appeared from behind some rocks in the gorge. The instant they had drawn level with the cross and the standard, they dismounted, and in observance of the knightly custom, did homage to the foremost riders and kissed them. Then, remounting their horses, they rode on towards the King's train.

The King recognized Kolonkelidze but the road was so narrow that he could not gauge how numerous was the eristavi's escort.

As they came within an arrow's flight Kolonkelidze and his attendants again got down from their horses and paid reverence to the King and his retinue with a greater show of obeisance.

When Kolonkelidze, with bent head, came up to the King and kissed his hand, the latter gave the perfidious governor a forced smile.

On seeing Mamamzeh riding beside the King, and behind him Tokhaidze, the seneschal, Kolonkelidze felt somewhat encouraged.

He ran his eye over the King's train, and regretted not having brought more troops to meet Giorgi, thinking that the latter was accompanied by only three hundred warriors.

This chestnut forest was an excellent place to lay an ambush in, he thought.

The track began to wind uphill, and now the front ranks of the rearguard caught up with the King's train. This threw out all Kolonkelidze's calculations—he was completely at a loss as to the exact number of the King's troops.

The tone and purport of the King's conversation were peaceable. Giorgi was quiet by nature, a bad orator, but fair-spoken and good-looking.

It was a calm and sunny afternoon. The whinnying of the horse's, the pleasant babbling of the rivulet running through the gorge, the hyacinth blue of the far-off lofty mountains, the vitriol blue of the cloudless sky, each and all put the King and his train into the best of moods. Between King Giorgi, Kolonkelidze, Mamamzeh and their attendants converse was so amicable that no one would have thought that they had come together in this gorge as enemies at war.

Kolonkelidze was a man of pleasing manners. He was small and lean but handsome, with a dashing air. His beard was tinged with iron grey, but there was a youthful expression in his face and his honey-coloured eyes shone with the fire of youth.

Sometimes the King cast a look at Kolonkelidze riding by his side. He called to mind that evening at the wake in Mtskheta when Kolonkelidze vied in horsemanship with his daughter Shorena. They had looked more like brother and sister than father and daughter competing in a playful contest.

Chestnuts were dropping on the road from the overarching boughs. Somewhere in the recesses of the gorge a stag was calling his mate. Martens skipped about on the spreading branches of the spruces.

The King intentionally quickened the pace of his horse, making Kolonkelidze keep step with him.

When they were a little ahead of the others, Kolonkelidze in a tentative manner started talking about the "deplorable misunderstanding." He shamelessly put the blame for everything on "the Dido and Pkhovian riff-raff" and as he spoke he did not once take his hazel eyes off Giorgi's face.

He mentioned the commander-in-chief with gratitude and praised him for having driven "that vile mob" beyond the Pkhovian mountains. At the same time he complained to the King in guarded words that Zviad had taken from him hostages and suits of armour, and had nevertheless ordered the chiefs of the gorges to be hanged, although they had come with halters around their necks in token of subjection.

The King reined in his horse, summoned a courier and ordered him to hasten to Zviad and tell him in the name of the King to do no harm to the chiefs of the gorges henceforth, to leave Tskhra Kari right away and await the King in Pankisi till the day after tomorrow.

The mention of Pankisi confirmed Kolonkelidze's hope that from Pankisi the King intended to go to war with the bishop of Hereti.

There was another thing, too, which made him optimistic—he had an idea that the King was secretly enamoured of Shorena.

He also knew the King and Queen were at variance because of the King's fondness for loose women.

He recalled what his wife had told him: the servants had noticed that at the service on the fortieth day after Chiaberi's death the King had been casting stealthy glances at Shorena.

All this had been borne out by what Tokhaidze had told him, namely, that Giorgi had ordered Parsman the Persian to poison the Life-Giving Cross, and thus to kill Chiaberi, his intention being to divorce the Queen and take Shorena as his wife.

At that moment Kolonkelidze felt almost sure that the King had arrived to ask for the hand of his daughter. He was not, therefore, altogether pleased at the presence of Mamamzeh and Tokhaidze.

If Giorgi were separated from his wife and married Shorena, Kolonkelidze would be ready to render assistance to the King in his war against the bishop of Hereti; new prospects would open up before the ambitious aristocrats if he became the King's father-in-law.

Everything was working towards that end, he thought, riding in high spirits at the head of his guests, who had come with hostile designs.

Kolonkelidze dispatched a messenger to Kvetari Castle bearing orders for his seneschal to make ready to receive the King and his train.

The guests were met by the commandant of the castle, seven commanders and thirteen chiefs of the gorges. Kolonkelidze's wife Gurandukht and his daughter Shorena, accompanied by attendants, welcomed the King at the castle gates.

Two hundred and fifty oxen, seven deer and over three hundred sheep were butchered that evening.

Before the meal the King and Kolonkelidze had a private talk, after which they summoned five Tao noblemen, the commandant and three commanders of the gorges to sit in council.

They adopted a resolution according to which the King and the governor of Kvetari, Kolonkelidze, were to set out for Pankisi the next day to attack from there the forts of Hereti.

The King himself put on Kolonkelidze's thumb a ring with a ruby. In addition, he presented him with earrings, a Byzantine knight's belt, a suit of armour, three armoured war horses, a banner and a spear. He concluded with him an inviolable peace treaty guaranteeing full territorial integrity to the province of Kvetari.

Afterwards Kolonkelidze showed the King the enclosure for deer in the courtyard of the castle. He had a whole herd of them within the walls of his castle.

"When we are besieged we slay them for food, and in peace time we breed them," said the smiling host to his guest.

A gleam of light came into the King's eyes at the sight of those beautiful creatures. As if a sudden gust of wind had swept through the many-branched forest of the antlers when the males and the females craned their necks to look at the newcomers.

The calves hid themselves timidly between the hind legs of the tame does, not yet having cast off their inborn wild shyness. Only one fawn, the loveliest of them all, tawny as a lion, with proudly arched neck, stood quite apart under a guelder-rose bush.

It did not budge as Giorgi walked over to it, but continued to gaze at him with its beautiful jet-black eyes.

Giorgi held out his hand to the fawn, calling softly: "Tpoochee, tpoochee. ..."

The fawn came quite close to him, looked at the outstretched hand and then began to lick it with its rough tongue.

"It's Shorena's pet, Nebiera. It's an orphan, so Shorena herself took it under her wing and brought it up," said Kolonkelidze.

Giorgi's eye fell upon the biggest and loveliest doe.

"I've got seventy milkers like this one. Twelve pairs of these will be sent to Mtskheta for Your Majesty the first thing in the morning," said the aristocrat.

Nothing in his life had ever aroused Giorgi's envy so much as this herd of deer, this herd and Shorena....

"Shorena will never belong to anybody else now that Chiaberi is dead, and as for the herd of deer ... the herd of deer.... Let's wait to see what will happen this evening," thought Giorgi and looked straight into Kolonkelidze's honey-coloured eyes.

That instant he could not fathom any treachery lurking there. It seemed as though Kolonkelidze really was going to send twelve pairs of deer to Mtskheta.

Then began the meal. The link-bearers brought in silken wicks and grease and lit the torches.

Giorgi was ill at ease, and hoped that Zviad would arrive before the meal started.

A sudden shudder ran through him at the idea that his courier Ushisharidze might have been taken prisoner by some chief of a gorge.

Ushisharidze had been tested by Giorgi over and over again in war time and the King knew that he would be sure to keep his secret, even though he were stretched on the rack. Nevertheless, if he did not get through, this would bring to naught all the plans prepared by Giorgi and Zviad.

If Ushisharidze failed to reach Tskhra Kari in time Zviad would take the King's coded message literally, would strike camp and very likely march to Pankisi.

If, on the other hand, the courier had reached his destination safe and sound, why was Zviad so long in coming?

Certainly, Pankisi was not far, but Giorgi could not foresee what foul trick the wily governor might play on himself and his attendants. Was it not possible that the wine or the venison were poisoned? Moreover, Giorgi was loath to eat bread and salt in his enemy's house.

Carousing began immediately after the meal. When the King's health had been drunk Shorena with her own hands offered Giorgi "the thanksgiving drinking horn."

That evening he liked the eristavi's daughter better than ever.

Shorena had grown to perfect womanhood, but the fullness of her shape, indicative of maturity, did not spoil the virgin slenderness of her waist. Her cheeks were still slightly tinged with yellow. Her mourning weeds had been replaced by a dress of dark-yellow Iranian silk shot with quail brown.

She had grown a little taller. The harmonious curves of her breast and hips reminded the King of the plumpness which at maturity is found in quails, those delicate creatures, fine of bone and rich in flesh.

The King kept stealing glances at the maiden sitting next to him, and his hawk eyes noted that the grieving bride had arrived at that stage when femininity overcomes grief and woman's coquetry uses even the mourning dress to display her beauty to the best advantage.

It seemed improbable that such lovely serene eyes of sea green could harbour any guile. Giorgi caught in them only the shyness of a silvan creature, the shyness he had noticed in the look of her fawn.

When he took the drinking horn out of her hands and glanced at their almond whiteness he thought to himself: "Even poison offered by such hands must be agreeable," and emptied the horn, immediately recalling the poisoning of the Ossetian king by Chiaberi in Korsatevela Castle.

No sooner had he drunk the wine than a strange feeling of alarm seized him who was "fearless as a fleshless spirit" (as the chronicler says of him).

A minute later he calmed down again. He was glad to be sensible of his hands and feet, to retain the faculty of moving them. He was seized with a desire to try out his voice and he said to Shorena:

"Talagva has shown me your fawn. Nebiera is a lovely creature."

Gratified that the King liked her favourite fawn, Shorena was at the same time surprised at his having kept in mind its name. She wanted to say something in reply but somehow she could not get the words out and she looked down at her hands in embarrassment.

It was long since the King had heard her voice, and so he continued:

"Talagva has told me the fawn is motherless. What has become of its mother?"

"At rutting time this year the mother ran away. Generally the does bear captivity better than the stags, but Nebiera's mother was an exception. A man from Didoeti brought her to my father

three years ago. We tried all we could to tame her, but in vain. I fed her by hand, gave her salt to lick, but all the time she was wanting to get to the woods.

"At rutting time the roaring of the deer is unbearable and I lie sleepless all night long. Nebiera's mother fretted more than any of the others. As soon as the mating season began she roared night and day, poor thing! She wouldn't touch any food, and finally, she refused even water. We were sorry for her, and thought she would die of grief. Then my father ordered the huntsmen to take her into the mountains, and see if she would drink the chalybeate water there.

"The instant she saw the wooded mountains she let out a terrible roar, dipped her mouth into a spring, and having slaked her thirst, lowed most mournfully, her eyes on the mountains. Then she cocked her ears and leapt from the verge of a precipice. ..."

"And the huntsmen?..." asked Giorgi.

"One of them let her go, but the other one, from Didoeti, did not let go the rope, and so followed her into the abyss."

"Which shows how hard it is to lose one's freedom," said Giorgi, and fixed the girl with his piercing eyes.

"Do you go hunting?" he asked.

"Of course!"

"What for?"

"Gazelle, chamois."

"Have you ever killed a deer?"

"Not yet."

"Do you go into the mountains alone?"

"No, with my father. If he is busy, I go with Arsakidze."

"And who is that?"

"My foster-brother."

Giorgi's cheeks were flushed with wine. The long ride on horseback had whetted his appetite and he had eaten his fill of the deer udder. (He was very partial to roast deer udder.) Sitting by the side of that radiant beauty he was in seventh heaven, and at that moment would rather have been a common knight than a king. He really began to wish then that his courier Ushisharidze had fallen into the hands of some commander of the gorge, and that Zviad had led his troops to Pankisi.

Just at that moment the second courier was shown into the banqueting hall. He made straight for the King.

Giorgi's spirits rose. The courier had probably brought the desired news, he thought, having evidently outrun the first courier, Ushisharidze.

The courier came over with bent head and announced: "Zviad will present himself directly."

Giorgi flushed, but managed to control his feelings.

Kolonkelidze sat at the other end of the table. A shudder ran through his body at the sound of the name of Zviad. At the same time he was amazed that Zviad had not gone to Pankisi. As this thought flashed across his mind Zviad himself entered the hall, escorted by thirty lancers.

Neither was this circumstance to his liking. Certainly it behoved Zviad to appear before the King in arms, but Kolonkelidze had never yet heard that armed knights should be allowed to enter into the presence of the King.

A moment later things became still worse.

The mail-clad knights halted at the door, while Zviad walked on, not towards the King but straight to the host; he stopped before him and addressed him in a firm, calm voice:

"In the name of Giorgi, the King of Kings of the Abkhazians and the Georgians, I command thee to hand me the keys of the castle."

Giorgi hung his head.

Kolonkelidze cast a glance at the King, who was sitting directly opposite him. He turned white, then red. He wanted to rise, but Zviad's huge hairy hand lay so heavily on his shoulder that he could not stir in his chair.

The Pkhovian knights jumped to their feet. The commanders of the gorges dashed for the door but they were without arms and Zviad's warriors blocked their way.

Shorena emitted an unearthly shriek and rushed to the King, who was already on his feet.

"Pardon my father for my sake, O King!"

When she failed to find even the slightest trace of compassion in his frowning face, her legs gave way and she slumped sobbing at Giorgi's feet.

He bent over her, took her up like a child in his arms and carefully placed her on a rug-covered couch. She lay in a swoon.

The King turned away to leave the room.

Then Gurandukht, Shorena's mother, fell on her knees before the King, her scratched cheeks bleeding, and embraced his knees.

"Don't destroy my family, O King! Pardon Talagva for the last time! We shall be your slaves, my husband and I, and my only child—for ever."

Gurandukht kissed the King's garment and clung to his knees.

The King raised the eristavi's wife to her feet, gently but firmly forced her to disengage the skirts of his robe and said to her in a dry, off-hand manner:

"In war time the commander-in-chief has supreme command. Zviad acts on his own initiative, without seeking permission from me."

Zviad's lancers bound Kolonkelidze, his seneschal, three commanders and seven chiefs of the gorges,

Meanwhile, in the corridors and passages of the castle and on the terraces of the towers, hand-to-hand fighting was raging.

The corpses of dead warriors were falling into the courtyard, the frightened deer were bellowing. Doors were being smashed to pieces. From all sides came the clang of shields, the groans of the wounded, the cries of warriors as they were hurled from the battlements, the neighing of horses. In the corridors link-bearers were dashing wildly, hither and thither, there being a veritable chase in progress for them, everybody wanting a torch to tell friend from foe.

The hubbub and turmoil lasted till daybreak. Nobody could tell who would be the master of Kvetari Castle in the morning.

Before the planet Mars paled in the sky all the link-bearers had been killed, and there were no torches to be found anywhere. Left in darkness the warriors leaned against the walls and the battle ceased.

As soon as it was light the kettle-drum resounded in the castle. The besieging troops gave a flourish of trumpets.

It was only at midday that the three hundred Tao warriors who had penetrated into the castle managed to take the first tower by storm.

They seized the commandant and threw him from the roof of the tower.

By noon the remaining three towers were broken into by Zviad's troops and the King's regiments.

In the afternoon four stakes were driven into the ground in the courtyard of the castle.

Three warriors led the battered eristavi out of the prison and tied him to the stakes by the hands and feet.

Then appeared Sagira, the executioner of Tbilisi, a one-eyed man with a bushy beard, who looked like a wall-eyed buffalo. His face was furrowed by the scars of dagger wounds.

Sagira took from his pocket two round iron plates a little larger than a man's eye, fixed them on a spit and, having put it into the fire, waited imperturbably till they were red-hot. Then he took them up and, with the same imperturbable mien, pressed them to Kolonkelidze's eyes.

The eristavi of Kvetari showed amazing will-power.

His eyes sizzled beneath the red-hot iron, and blood and soot trickled down his flushed face to the iron-grey beard. Having burned out both eyes to their sockets, Sagira took off and cooled the iron discs, wrapped them up carefully in shreds of dirty cloth and put them back in his pocket.

In a moment Kolonkelidze's face had become monstrously swollen and altered. Now he bore no resemblance to the genial honey-eyed aristocrat of Kvetari.

At the command of Zviad the walls of all the four towers were pulled down. The King granted only one petition to Gurandukht: the donjon of the castle was left undestroyed, so that the blinded Kolonkelidze and his wife could end their lives there.

It was decided to take Shorena captive so that nobody should become Kolonkelidze's son-in-law and wreak vengeance.

They bound the hands of Konstantineh Arsakidze, Shorena's foster-brother, who had arrived in Kvetari Castle to warn of the coming of the King's army. About three hundred warriors were taken prisoner.

Shorena was allowed to take with her ten handmaidens headed by her waiting-maid Vardisakhar, as well as her father's whole treasury and the herd of deer. Only one milch doe was left for Gurandukht.

Shavleg Tokhaidze's hopes were blighted.

He had expected that Kolonkelidze would act cleverly, namely, that he would inveigle the King and Zviad into his castle and blind both of them. Thereafter their joint forces would annihilate the King's army.

Now he reproached himself for not having poisoned the King in the castle of Korsatevela at breakfast.

The poisoned wine had been ready but his heart had failed him, for he would have preferred someone else to have soiled his hands with the actual deed.

As they were making a steep ascent the girth of Mamamzeh's horse broke. Mamamzeh and Tokhaidze fell back.

Before Mamamzeh had changed the girth, Shavleg succeeded in whispering to him: "Let's invite the King and Zviad into Korsatevela Castle."

They broke into a gallop and caught up with the King's train.

Mamamzeh again invited Giorgi to spend the night at his house. He asked the same favour of Zviad.

The commander-in-chief was very tired. At first he consented, but when they came to the ruined castle of Ochani, the invited guests changed their minds. They thanked their host and made for Uplistsikheh, taking a short cut.

On arriving in Mtskheta the deer were pent in the courtyard of the castle, Shorena and her attendants were locked up in the castle of Gartiskari, and to Konstantineh Arsakidze a cell was assigned in the district of Princes' Baptism, behind the ruins of the old basilica where Parsman the Persian had taken up his abode at that time.

XIX

Giorgi the First was twelve years old when the regal crown was put on his head and the sceptre thrust into his hand.

It was in his early youth that he had first come into conflict with the Byzantine Emperor Basil the First. On returning safe and sound from the battle of Basiani he dispatched the Catholicos to Basil to negotiate a peace treaty, or "to set foot on his carpet," as they used to say in Byzantium in those days.

His son Bagrat he sent as a hostage to Constantinople. The Byzantine Caesar, like King Giorgi, had been continually at war with the nobility. The patrician Xiphos deserted Basil and allied himself with Nikiphor the Crookneck, son of Barda Phoka. Giorgi took advantage of the

opportune moment and started negotiation with the rebels, promising them help in their struggle against Basil.

Later the rebels quarrelled among themselves. Phoka was killed and Xiphus sent his head as a present to Basil, wishing to make peace with him.

Basil, in his turn, sent the traitor's head to Giorgi as an intimation that he did not trust the perjurer.

In the battle of Ukhtikeh Giorgi dealt Basil a crushing blow. The Greeks lost on the battlefield high-ranking strategi and katepans and thousands of warriors.

Considerable spoils fell into the hands of the Georgian army: field tents, camels, mules, catapults and battering-rams. The defeated barbarian of Macedonia had to retreat.

The day before the battle with the Saracens Komnin, the governor of the province of Vaspurakan, made his army take an oath that they would either win or die with their commander, to the last soldier.

Basil's spies falsely accused Komnin of having entered into a conspiracy with Giorgi, the King of Georgia, and of seeking the title of emperor for himself.

Basil ordered Komnin to be seized and blinded. Together with him seven other patricians had their eyes burned out.

Thereafter Giorgi was continually being informed by his emissaries that the Emperor was preparing for war, intending to launch an offensive by sea and land, and that he was hastily building warships.

In the heat of rivalry and the desire to retrieve the provinces torn from Georgia Giorgi overlooked the circumstance that Georgia and Byzantium had embraced one and the same religion, and he got in touch with Al-Hakim.

Al-Hakim had ascended the caliph's throne at the age of eleven. A ruthless persecutor of Christians, he became famous for his unheard-of cruelty.

One day, attended by a resplendent retinue, he would be cavorting in the squares before the gaping multitudes, while another day, athirst for "a divine revelation," he would be wandering in the desolate mountains of Maccatam, tormented by mystic hallucinations.

Another time he would give orders to his headsmen to execute people by the tens of thousands, while on another occasion he would lavish princely riches on his subjects. He longed to be proclaimed "a deity" by his "adoring subjects" and had his aspirations gratified only when the sect of the Druses declared his divinity.

The dynasty of Fatimids had been in the ascendant. The waves of the nascent Islam were dashing against the very frontiers of Byzantium. The infuriated Al-Hakim was exterminating Christians and Jews, never ceasing his fight against that "dog of a Caesar," Basil.

Al-Hakim declared a religious war on all Christian countries. Then followed the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, the burning of monasteries and churches on Mount Sinai, in Antioch and Egypt.

Catholicos Melkisedek did not like King Giorgi's alliance with the Saracens, nor did he share his views concerning a hostile policy towards Byzantium.

Melkisedek outwardly acknowledged Giorgi's authority but "the Vicar of Christ" was firmly convinced that "the King is the ruler of this world, whereas Christ is the ruler of heaven, the earth and the nether world."

Every year he would remind the King of the burning of the church in Oltisi by the Georgian army, laying the blame on the King's "atheism," or the "heretical influence" of Al-Hakim.

The Catholicos had persuaded King Giorgi to atone for the burned church by erecting three temples in Samtskheh. One had been demolished by a thunderbolt, and the two others, by earthquake.

That very year, on Easter Sunday, an earthquake destroyed the Cathedral of Svetitskhoveli, which had formerly been laid waste by Abul Kasim.

Melkisedek wanted King Giorgi to undertake to bear the cost of restoring the ruined temple as a compensation for the church in Oltisi.

Finally the King agreed. Parsman the Persian, the chief architect, had to submit three different designs.

According to his plan the new cathedral was to be a single-nave building whose four outer walls would be abundantly decorated with Iranian motifs in relief: winged horses, figures of dogs, ostriches, gryphons.

On the walls would be also represented the elements of Georgian paganism in low relief: bulls with tossed-back heads and raised tails, their flanks branded with signs of totem. In order to mislead the Christians crosses were placed between the horns of the animals.

In the friezes around the dome and the portal half-naked human figures, in Pandean exultation, held drinking horns brimful with wine, their hips covered with bunches of grapes.

Paired serpents were interlaced in cunning mimicry among the rosettes and openwork ornaments round the casements.

Inside the church, in all the four caissons even the wall painting representing high priests, angels and kings reflected Hellenic beauty and nudity.

All the three designs were of the same type, differing but in details. Melkisedek therefore rejected all of them and invited Greek craftsmen from Constantinople.

Giorgi's observant eyes noticed at once that to accept their designs would mean to return to that pseudo-Byzantine style of architecture which had been done away with by Georgian builders as early as two centuries before.

On the frescos, figured with hierarchs of the church, to be painted on the soffits, was depicted a gloomy desert. Pictures of Judgement Day and Hell breathed terrible threats against the indulgence of all human passions.

And from the vault of the dome the tortured, emaciated Nazarene surveyed all this.

One painting was particularly revolting to King Giorgi. With a halo around his head the Emperor Basil was handing keys to the holy fathers to be sent as missionaries to convert the East.

The sight of this fresco all but drove him into a frenzy, yet out of respect for the aged Catholicos he rose and left without saying a word.

The Catholicos began looking for other craftsmen and just at that time the Pkhovian uprising broke out.

The killing of Chiaberi by the Life-Giving Cross worried Giorgi and set him wondering. At the King's command Parsman had poisoned the Cross before his eyes. Nevertheless, Chiaberi had been killed and Kolonkelidze spared, although they had both kissed the Cross.

This gave rise to doubts.

Was Parsman's drug powerless and had Chiaberi really been killed by the Life-Giving Cross?

Naturally, Giorgi had not told the Catholicos about the poisoning of the Cross, nor had he asked the Catholicos about the exact spot where Chiaberi's and Kolonkelidze's lips had touched the Cross.

On top of this there had been another curious event. In his palace in Mtskheta Giorgi had a holy image of St. George, which had formerly belonged to David Kuropalat. It was made of chased silver and hung by a huge chain from the wall of his bedchamber because, according to an ancient belief in the families of Abkhazian kings, if an icon were not fastened by a chain it would break loose of itself and go elsewhere. Accordingly, it had been chained by David Kuropalat in Uplistsikheh and subsequently by Bagrat III in his palace in Kutaisi.

Before the rebellion of the Pkhovians one thing greatly troubled Melkisedek and the King's chaplain: they had seen that Giorgi was becoming more and more indifferent towards religious matters. For this they had blamed Parsman, and the case of the girl from Phanaskert had

confirmed Melkisedek's decision to banish Parsman from Mtskheta somehow or other. For this end it was necessary to strengthen King Giorgi's faith.

Just at the time when Melkisedek was returning in broken health to Mtskheta, when the Queen was going to Abkhazia and the King setting off with his army to punish the eristavi of Kvetari, one dark night the King's chaplain slipped into the King's bedchamber, broke the padlock, unchained the icon of St. George and carried it to Eudaemon, the hermit in the monastery of Nokorna. He strictly enjoined him to announce, but not before one month had passed, that the holy image had come to him of itself.

The King's chaplain had not miscalculated. King Giorgi was dismayed when on returning from Kvetari he was told about the "flight" of the icon of St. George from the palace.

He had his chaplain summoned immediately, shut himself up in his bedchamber and made the chaplain read the psalms to him the whole night through.

Before long the Catholicos recovered from his illness. As soon as he was aware that King Giorgi had resumed his devotions, he charged the King's chaplain to read to the King the Old Testament, especially the Book of Daniel, chapter 4, which tells how God punished Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, for having destroyed the temple of Jerusalem.

Thereafter Melkisedek applied himself to the task of inculcating the fear of God in the King's mind.

He assured the King that the Lord would forgive him "the sacrilege committed by him in Oltisi" if the King assisted Melkisedek to build Svetitskhoveli, the Temple of the Wonder-Working Pillar.

At that period Giorgi's whole attention was taken up by the question of repairing fortresses.

The castle of Tmogvi had been ruined by earthquake. A number of fortresses had to be restored: Klde-kari, Khanda-tsikheh, Ber-tsikheh, Bodovi, Kaberi, Kholot-Kviri, Atskhveri, the fortified town of Odzrakho, and Mgel-tsikheh.

Rebuilding the castles of Anaketi, Phanaskert, Bolo-tsikheh and Tukharisi was particularly urgent because Emperor Basil would first of all attack the fastnesses of Samtskheh and Tao.

Besides, Parsman had promised the King to repair the captured stone-throwers and battering-rams and construct new machines of the same pattern. All this needed immense sums of money.

At last, worn down by the persistent remonstrances of Melkisedek, the King undertook to place at the Catholicos' disposal slaves and funds to cover the expenses. Moreover, strange as it may seem, the King was haunted by a vision of the burnt church in Oltisi.

It began in this way.

XX

The horrors of bloody wars and uprisings weighed heavily on Giorgi's shoulders when he was still a youth.

It is commonly known that he who has not enjoyed boyhood, who has had to bear a man's burden early in youth, always feels regret for the untasted joys of boyhood and youth.

Such people are apt to lose their equilibrium and are always trying to make up for their lost opportunities.

Melancholy and misanthropy had stolen by degrees into Giorgi's heart. The drawn-out ceremonies of the royal audiences and the strict court etiquette had long since become wearisome to him, as had the tedious admonitions first of his instructor and then of Queen Mariam and Catholicos Melkisedek:

"You are King, so it is necessary. ..."

"You are King, it behoves you. ..."

"You are King, therefore you must. ..."

In such moments Giorgi longed to get rid of his kingship.

He often felt lonely for his son Bagrat and when depression stole over him he would take his courier Ushisharidze and one of King's armourers and, leaving Mtskheta, go beyond Sapurtsleh. There he left his horse in the care of his attendants and roamed the wilds, walking round and round some huge ancient oak, and seeking to find consolation in the seclusion of Nature.

Twice a year, during the rutting time of the deer, he would dye his beard with henna, put on hempen clothes and top-boots and call to him the playmates of his boyhood, low-born people: the shoemaker Kitesa Druidze, the groom Gabriel Kokhrichidze, the falconer Estateh Lomadze. On such occasions he was wont to call himself in jest Glakhuna Avshanidze.*

The friends would disappear for a whole week, hunting in the woods of Narekvavi and the undergrowth along the banks of the Aragvi.

He preferred sleeping in the open with the shepherds to the downy couch in his palace, and would rather have game roasted over a wood fire in the forest than the dainties of his royal repast.

Only in such hours did Giorgi believe that the world was not made for war alone.

Wild woods began no farther away than Gartiskari Castle. Dense, impassable forests covered the whole area of Sapurtsleh and Misaktsieri. On either side of the gully of Narekvavi stretched swamps teeming as far as the eye could reach with wild geese, cranes and herons.

As soon as the tired huntsmen called a halt to have a little rest, Kitesa took down from his shoulder a skin of wine and filled from it a capacious drinking horn. And it was only when Giorgi drank from that horn that the thought of being poisoned, which had haunted his mind since childhood, did not trouble him.

Nor was he annoyed in those woods by the impudent flattery of the courtiers, nor did an assassin lay in wait for him in some shady nook, nor would a plaintiff climb a tree at the sight of the King to present his petition.

On the present occasion they passed three nights sleeping by a fire kindled under a beech-tree. The migration of cranes had not yet begun and at peep of dawn an occasional cry from some lonely crane could be heard. From the fens came the honking of geese. Wood turkeys grazed in the stubble-fields. The rooks were invoking winter from the snow-clad mountains.

The huntsmen rose up before dawn. As soon as it was light the cries of the cranes made their pulses leap. A large flock alighted near the clearing and started pecking at the ooze.

That day each of them shot down three cranes. The sun stood as high as a spear shaft when they felt hunger.

"Glakhuna, it is your turn today. Go and kill a goose. Kitesa and I'll make spits and fetch kindling. Estateh will make a fire," said Gabo, the groom, to Giorgi. "But don't go far. We shall await you beneath this ash-tree."

Giorgi obeyed the order of the eldest huntsman and turned to the left, skirting the fens.

Left to himself, he was again besieged by unpleasant thoughts. Suddenly a whole flock of wild geese took wing before his very nose. He let fly an arrow but missed.

Other flocks of geese drew him on deeper and deeper into the woods. Time and again wild ducks and geese rose into the air with a shrill gobbling and quacking, as if they were making fun of the luckless hunter.

After a while Giorgi met a mud-bespattered herdsman and asked him the way, intending to return to his companions, though he was ashamed of his failure. He passed the swamp and was on the point of turning back to the ash-tree when a splendid crane took wing a few paces in front of him.

Its wings were the colour of a partridge, its breast was cinnamon-brown, its neck embellished with streaks of quail-brown.

* These names are derived from Georgian words meaning "poor son of wormwood." —*Tr.*

Giorgi shot at it as it settled in the reeds. It rose heavily and then again came down into the swamp before his eyes. He went nearer to let fly another arrow. The crane hopped off on one foot—splish! splash!—and vanished among the rushes. Then it rose again and this time flew a greater distance.

Giorgi ran after the bird. He was particularly fond of such cranes. On and on he waded recklessly through the slime of the swamps, through the waist-high rushes. The wary bird continued to move from place to place.

At long last Giorgi's arrow found its mark and he tied the bird to his belt. He looked round. The neighbourhood seemed unfamiliar to him. All around was an interminable tangle of rushes, brambles and briars.

His arrows had run short.

Wild boars were hustling through the reeds. Giorgi roused a hind, and with one mighty bound she plunged into the rushes and raced away at a tremendous speed.

From the top of the knoll where he stood he watched the hind fleeing for her life through the rushes. Only her ears were visible above them—one could have imagined that it was not a hind but some bird skimming the surface of the marshes.

Giorgi plodded on and on until he stopped by the edge of a lake swarming with pelicans, geese and cranes. At sight of him the wild creatures took off with a deafening noise, darkening the sky like a thundercloud.

His eyes followed the cranes, flying northward, and, suddenly, on the highest peak of the Caucasian Range, he saw a burning church wrapt in flames to its very dome.

Giorgi shuddered. He grew weak at the knees, and sweat began to drip from his temples.

He rubbed his eyes and looked again at the mountain. The sky-high conflagration was still blazing. The "house of God" was aflame as on that evening in Oltisi.

He crossed himself, and closed his eyes. When he opened them the burning temple was gone; there was only the sun-flushed mountain top. Then he set his face southward. He was not clear about the direction to be taken, being quite unfamiliar with the district.

"Haa-oo!" he shouted. But neither did a herdsman call in answer, nor a hunter chance to pass by.

In confusion he set off along the margin of the lake, thick with briars. A queer fancy persisted in running through his mind. He imagined himself as Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, who "was driven from men, and did eat hay as a cow, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven till the hairs of the destroyer of Jerusalem were grown like a lion's mane, and his nails like a lion's claws."

It was late in the afternoon when Giorgi dragged himself up to the ash-tree, his clothes torn to tatters and caked with mud. Burs stuck to his hair and beard. His cheeks were scratched with thorns.

The hunters were surprised to see how frightened he looked. Since his boyhood they had not seen Giorgi so pale and agitated.

"What ails you, Glakhuna?" asked Estateh.

"Did you meet a wood sprite?"

Giorgi shook his head, cast a glance toward the north and said: "On that mountain top, yonder, a church was burning a short time ago. Did any one of you see it?"

"A church?" repeated Estateh in surprise.

"You slept badly last night, Glakhuna. Probably you did but dream it. How could there be a church up there?!"

They took some food and again broke camp.

Giorgi was insistent that they should take the highway and then go hunting in Sapurtsleh. The others were desirous of shifting to the riverside groves of the Aragvi.

The night passed in the woods and weary wanderings through, swamps had aggravated the state of Giorgi's bad leg. He knew that hunting on the banks of the Aragvi meant wading in the

water, for it often happened that a bird wounded on one side of the river would fall on to the opposite bank. Nevertheless, he complied with his friends' wish.

It was a quiet autumn evening. The summits of the Caucasus hid their heads in the lap of the clouds. The mountains were like stairs connecting the earth with the heavens.

Light mists rose from the wooded aits of the Aragvi spreading over the violet meadows.

The huntsmen strung the cranes by the necks and started on their way. The friends were aware that Giorgi was unusually upset.

The first to emerge from the edge of the wood and run his eyes over the wide expanse of the Aragvi was Kitesa.

"Dost thou remember, Glakhuna, how, as a boy, thou didst wound a crane with an arrow, yonder, on that bank? It flew up and then fell in mid-river," he asked.

"Certainly, I do, Kitesa, I do," replied Giorgi sadly, and let his dimmed eyes rove over the banks of the river as if he were looking for his boyhood there.

"Well, thou wouldst not listen to our advice, Glakhuna. Plop! Right into the water and out after the wounded crane, while two other cranes hung over your shoulder! The water carried them away, too. Lustily you struck out after them, shouting all the time, not knowing which one to follow.

"Gabo and I leapt into the river too and swam after you. We caught you only below those oaks there. Then we pulled you by the ears into the shallows. The water had snatched away all the cranes.

"We took you in a cart to Mtskheta. How your tutor flayed us with his words! 'You mischievous rascals,' he shouted, 'had you drowned the King's son, you'd have lost your heads, forsooth!'"

"You have forgotten. Kitesa! It was I who on that day fished the cranes out of the river," remarked Gabriel.

"You're mistaken, both of you," broke in Estateh. " 'Twas the raftsmen who fished them out at Mtskheta."

"Hold your tongues, for goodness' sake! Don't quarrel over a pair of water-borne cranes!" said Gabo, smiling.

"The Aragvi has borne away our youth just like those cranes," said Estateh with a sigh.

"Was it the Aragvi or time?" Giorgi joined in the conversation. Estateh ran his eyes down the Aragvi and asked Giorgi:

"Didst thou notice a lad climb the tree on that two-humped hill yonder?"

A little while before Giorgi had observed a man who had run from one knoll to the other on a hill on the same side of the river as the huntsmen and climbed a maple-tree there.

At first Giorgi winced, thinking that he had been recognized and that the man was simply a petitioner. However, the lad had caught some bird in the tree, thrust it into the breast of his coat, jumped from the maple and disappeared.

"Who was the first to see that man?" asked Giorgi. " 'Twas I," replied Estateh.

"Where did he come from and where has he gone?"

"I know not," answered Estateh.

Giorgi was astonished. The sun was still high in the heavens. The knoll was entirely bare. The man had been dressed in a bright red-and-yellow *chokha* and had he made his way to the lower ground he could not have escaped the notice of the hunting party.

"Did you see him too?" Giorgi asked Gabo.

"I did."

"And you, Kitesa?"

"I too."

They were dumbfounded. Where could the lad have disappeared before their very eyes?

Giorgi had often heard from Parsman the Persian that the wood demons delighted in leading hunters astray in the woods, in bewitching their bows and arrows, and weakening their hands.

Estateh kept on assuring them:

"With my own eyes I saw him catch the bird and get to the top of the hill. Probably he slipped into some cleft."

Gabo was bold, but the thought of demons made his blood creep.

"Let us not chase a demon! Let's cross ourselves and go on to Sapurtsleh," he tried to persuade his friends, and then he told them a curious story:

"You remember, Glakhuna, do you not, that you sent me to the castle of Kherki on Saturday last?"

"I do, Gabriel."

"And you remember that when I came back, I looked so frightened that on meeting me in the stable you asked what ailed me?"

"I remember this, too."

"I did not tell the reason, did I?"

"No, you did not."

"Well, if you will not call me lily-livered, I'll tell you all about it. At dusk I rode on horseback from Kherki. A hundred feet from Gartiskari there is a sparse grove of beech-trees; and just at the edge of it there stands a huge oak-tree. You have also noticed that oak, Glakhuna, I'm sure."

"I have."

"You have surely remarked, too, that before one gets to the oak one has to ascend a steep path up the side of the precipice, and, in the meanwhile, one can see that oak for a long time.

"I had just reached that place and what do you think I saw? Out of the grove came a young man in red and yellow with a cockerel under his arm. He went round the oak three times and kissed it three times. Afterwards he cut off the cock's head, sprinkled the blood round about the oak, picked up the bird and vanished in the forest."

All were amazed at this story. They were about to continue their journey to Sapurtsleh but this time Giorgi was firm.

"Are we cowards? What harm can one demon do to four huntsmen?"

He said this to embolden the others, but at heart he himself felt afraid. They took the cranes from their shoulders, hung them from trees, got out their bows and began to climb the hill from four sides.

Giorgi was ahead of the others.

As he climbed the bare top of the knoll he saw a heap of cut ferns. With bated breath he closely examined the ferns but even his keen hunter's eyes were unable to discern anything whatever beneath it; however, he noticed a rod sticking out of the pile and, tied to the rod, a goldfinch.

From time to time the stick stirred a little and then the tethered bird would fly up and flutter over it. Then the goldfinch perched again on the stick, only to renew its hovering whenever the rod moved.

When Giorgi climbed to the very top of the knoll he found there under the pile of ferns a young man clad in a red-and-yellow *chokha* crouching in a pit deep enough for a man to hide in.

Clusters of burs clung to his coat, his hair was dishevelled, his chin and cheek-bones overgrown with a light down.

The lad in the pit paled and started when he saw four armed men standing over his head.

"Hey, there! Who are you, my lad?" asked Giorgi, surprised and delighted that there stood before him not a demon but a flesh and blood human being. He examined the youth more closely. Both his clothes and his face—except for the pockmarks disfiguring it—seemed familiar to Giorgi. He must have recovered from smallpox quite recently as his face was still not clear, which made it difficult for Giorgi to identify him.

"I'm a hunter, just as you are. What else might I be?" came the reply from the pit.

"If you are a hunter and not a wood spirit, why are you hiding in that hole?" asked Estateh.

"Some hunt in the pit and some in the woods. It depends on one's disposition, sir."

Estateh looked attentively first at the youth, and then at the bird. If the lad was a fowler why had he tied such a small bird to a stick, he wondered. He was not convinced that he was a real hunter and not an evil spirit.

The lad stared at Giorgi as if hypnotized by him. He, too, was trying to recognize Win by his eyes and voice, and yet he was puzzled by the red beard and beggarly clothes.

Estateh whispered to Giorgi:

"Beware, Glakhuna! That man is either a foul fiend or a thief escaped from prison."

The youth heard the name "Glakhuna," and thought to himself: "It seems that I'm mistaken," and looked again at Giorgi.

"Anyway, what do you hunt for, my lad?"

"Falcons, my lord," replied the lad.

"Falcons? How do you do it?"

"You see this bird, my lord? And here is the net."

Saying this he raised the rod with one hand and made the bird flutter as before. With his other hand he lifted up a long stick with a drag-net attached to it.

"A falcon is out hunting at this time. As soon as he sees a fluttering bird beneath him, he thinks: 'It's been trapped. I'll pounce upon it and carry it off.' I'm hiding in the hole under the ferns, and, on the instant, as he swoops down, I clap my drag-net over his head."

The hunters were astonished. They had never yet heard of anything like this.

Giorgi knew about fowling but his Iranian falconers caught hawks in another way.

"Where are you from, youngster?" asked Giorgi.

"I'm a Laz, my lord."

"If you are a Laz what are you doing here?"

"I'm King Giorgi's slave, my lord."

This answer surprised Giorgi still more. His warriors had never taken any of the Laz people prisoners. He recalled the prisoners brought from Ukhtikeh, but they were mostly Greeks. Among them there were also some Armenians, taken in Anatolia. The Greeks he had put to work as masons, the Armenians he had released. But a Laz? He could remember none.

Therefore he asked the stranger again:

"Were you brought here from Lazistan?"

"No, from Pkhovi, sir."

"What is your name, young man?"

"Arsakidze, sir."

"What were you doing in Pkhovi, unfortunate boy?"

"My father worked for the eristavi of Kvetari as a mason, sir."

"And where is he now?"

"He was killed by the King's warriors at the taking of Kvetari."

Giorgi remembered that the boy's name had been mentioned by Shorena on that terrible evening in Kvetari Castle.

He turned to Arsakidze again.

"Was Kolonkelidze really building churches?"

"For some time my father and I had been building churches but suddenly the eristavi changed his faith and started pulling down churches and building fortresses."

Giorgi fell silent. Estateh asked Arsakidze:

"What did you catch in that tree yonder a while ago?"

"A trained falcon of mine had flown away and I caught him."

With these words he took up from the bottom of the pit a falcon whose wings were bound with a strip of red sacking, and showed him to the huntsmen.

"Why do you need a falcon—the quail-hunting is over?" asked Giorgi.

"I hunt cranes with a falcon."

"Where did you learn these tricks, youngster?"

"In Lazistan we hunt for cranes with hawks, sir."

Giorgi was struck with wonder.

When Arsakidze had climbed out of the pit Estateh rushed up to him and with smiling face began to look him over from head to foot.

"Estateh, is this that same young man who killed a cockerel at the foot of the oak?" the King asked Estateh.

Estateh nodded his head.

"Yes, this is the same man."

Giorgi turned to Arsakidze.

"Now tell me, young man, why you killed a cockerel under the oak that day?"

"Last week I recovered from small-pox, so I sacrificed a cock to the deity."

"Where is this ritual observed?"

"In Lazistan, sir."

Arsakidze freed the falcon's wings, put a leather sheath on the thumb of his left hand and sat the falcon upon it. Then he passed his right hand from the bird's head down to its tail, soothing and caressing the savage.

With his fierce eyes the falcon glared at the strangers.

Arsakidze led the way, and the four followed him, eager for what was to come.

Before they had reached the pebbly bank of the Aragvi a crane rose from a nearby springhead.

Giorgi watched with childish delight as Arsakidze flew his falcon at the fugitive.

At first the crane proved to be the faster. It shot high up, stemming the rushing air with its outspread wings. The huntsmen were all eyes. The falcon dived and instantly overtook its prey. The crane darted sideways, outflung its pursuer and sped westwards. The falcon lagged behind for but a few seconds. With a sudden spurt he overtook the crane, seized it with his talons and dropped like a stone to the ground.

With a joyful yell the hunters dashed towards it. Giorgi forgot his aching leg and beat the others to the spot. Among the clumps of wormwood he saw the crane in its death-throes; over it with wings outstretched was the falcon, clawing at its dying prey and rolling its yellow eyes.

Arsakidze called to the bird, making soft and soothing smacking noises with his lips. He stole up to it, holding his breath, and began to fondle the falcon, stroking its head. Then he unhooked the middle claw and then the others, one by one. Next he produced from his pouch a chunk of meat, and putting the crane on one side, thrust the sop into the talons of the falcon.

Blood trickled from the crane's neck, which was curved and slender like that of an ancient pitcher. It flapped its wings and shook its feet spasmodically; a strange, feeble sound broke from its lacerated throat, a white film spread over its eyes and then, meekly, resignedly, it yielded up its life.

Giorgi walked beside Arsakidze, never taking his eyes off the falcon.

"Where did you catch this bird, young man?"

"In Sapurtsleh, sir."

"What kind of a hunter is a black falcon?"

"He is a good catcher, my lord, but hard to tame, obstinate, wilful and apt to fly away."

"And what about a rust-coloured one?"

"A rust-coloured one is wasteful."

"And a red one?"

"A red one is better than a black or a rust-coloured one, my lord. But the steel-grey is best of all. His body is larger, he can be trained quickly, he is manageable and obedient."

For a while Giorgi followed Arsakidze in silence. He was thinking of Shorena. He recalled the taking of the fortress of Kvetari, and the blinding of Kolonkelidze. Life once more became gall and wormwood. He remembered how he had caught up with the fair captive on the way. With her cheeks scratched she rode on horseback, and Arsakidze, his arms bound, rode by her side. "What a good-looking lad he was then! How shabby he now looks in captivity," thought Giorgi, and again turned to Arsakidze.

"Look here, my lad, what do you do in Mtskheta?"

"I'm a mason. I work with Parsman the Persian."

"What sort of a master is Parsman?" asked Giorgi.

"Parsman is an excellent master, though too wilful. He doesn't give two straws for what other people think. It's hard to work under him."

"Could you work on your own account, young man?"

"Why not, sir? Two years ago I built the church in Kvetari."

Giorgi had seen that church.

"Have you built anything in our parts?"

"This year I finished the church in Itvalisi."

Giorgi liked that church very much, too.

"Catholicos Melkisedek and King Giorgi are going to rebuild Svetitskhoveli, I believe. If you show ability the King might entrust that task to you."

"Who on earth would admit me to the King?"

"Come to the palace tomorrow. I shall introduce you to the King."

At these words the hunters smiled.

Arsakidze took notice of this and with a smile turned his eyes on the man whom the others called Glakhuna. He again ran his eyes over the man's plebeian garments and thought to himself: "This red-bearded man wants to make fun of me."

It was getting dark—twilight had descended on the groves beside the Aragvi. Not a sound was to be heard in the woods. Flocks of cranes stood out against the sky like dark shadows hurrying southwards, the laggards crying plaintively. One solitary star twinkled overhead.

Piles upon piles of clouds, gleaming red and yellow, could be seen in the distance on the peaks of the Caucasus.

When the sentry of the fortress of Mukhnari opened the gate to the huntsmen, Giorgi turned before entering, and cast a glance at the white-crested summits of the Caucasus. On the mountain peak the church was still ablaze.

He crossed himself in dismay and passed in without a word.

XXI

Parsman the Persian sat motionless on a carved settle, looking out over the part of the town known as Princes' Baptism, which had been heavily damaged during the recent earthquakes.

The feeble light struggling through the window cast high lights and shadows on his thin nose, which was hooked like the beak of a buzzard, and on his hairless, parchment-yellow face.

In a Persian hookah opium was smoking, gleaming with a greenish light. Wreaths of mauve-coloured smoke, thinned out into wool fibres, were lazily curling upwards to the stonework of the lofty vaults.

Judging from its embrasures and loop-holes, the hall must formerly have been part of a fortress, or an ancient pagan temple.

On the shelves was a litter of books, scrolls of parchment, mortars, phials.

In the faded wall paintings were winged lions scrambling for a kingly crown, a gryphon with upraised tail, holding in its jaws a man's foot, a knight on horseback with a halo round his head running his spear through the gullet of a dragon.

The white-bearded eristavi of Mtskheta, portrayed with a diadem on his head and a cross-hilted sword at his side, held in his hand a model of a church. Nearby on the wall hung sections and elevations of churches and fortresses, stone-cutter's chisels and set squares.

Through the window one could see the ruins of the district against the slate-coloured background of the mountains: houses demolished by the earthquakes of recent years, a roofless belfry, solitary chimneys towering over wrecked foundations. To the left stood a forest of snow-capped firs.

Parsman gazed at the fir branches bending under the weight of the snow. From afar they looked like the paws of some animal. He heard the cracking of twigs and the sound of icicles falling from the eaves of the belfry.

A hunchbacked woman came out of the wood, the snow crunching under her feet on the smooth-trodden path. It was the servant Tebronia, miserably bent under a bundle of firewood.

To the right ran the road to the fort of Mukhnari. A caravan was slowly winding along, its bells jangling, the mules snorting, the camel-drivers shouting harshly or cracking their whips.

After a while everything was quiet again. Then Parsman heard Tebronia stamping her feet in the hallway, shaking the snow from her dress.

The servant opened the door. Parsman cast a spiteful glance at her face, which was disfigured by a wen. The frost had turned it scarlet, like a boiled crayfish.

Her thick lips parted as she muttered something. She turned to the fire-place, and having raked up the embers, threw on a few sticks of wood.

Parsman turned his gaze from the woman and looked through the window once more.

A flock of ravens, perched on the belfry, croaked hoarsely.

Darkness was slowly creeping in. Tebronia, a burning fir chip in her hand, fumbled in the niches and lighted wax tapers one by one.

The tapers flickered and flared. From outside the croaking of the ravens could still be heard, and from time to time the jangling of the bells.

Suddenly the door opened. Parsman cast a searching glance through the doorway. The man who came in stamped his feet to shake off the snow and walked boldly towards Parsman.

He bowed to the host and greeted him with bent head: "Good evening, master."

Parsman recognized Konstantineh Arsakidze by his voice and motioned him to a three-legged stool.

The visitor thanked him, took a huge roll of parchment from under his arm and murmured:

"I have finished the designs for Svetitskhoveli. I was summoned to the King who has approved the drawings but has ordered that you should look at them. Tomorrow morning I am to submit them to the Catholicos."

Parsman made a wry face. He unfolded the scroll on the table, drew up the settle and, leaning with both hands on the parchment, began to examine it in silence. Then he told Tebronia to bring a torch.

She did so. Parsman raised his head and then spent some time jotting down figures, multiplying length by breadth, measuring the height of the walls, the area and the volume of the naves, the diameter of the dome, the number and sizes of the windows and doors.

"Melkisedek insists that it should be a three-nave church, does he not? What altitude have you planned?" he asked Arsakidze.

"Twice as much as the breadth. The Catholicos has ordered so, master," answered the apprentice respectfully. "The volume of the new cathedral is to equal the volumes of three churches—Oltisi, burned by the Georgian army, and the two churches in Samtskheh, built by you, master."

Parsman scowled.

"What did the King say?"

"The King gave us his approval yesterday, master."

"Perhaps Melkisedek thinks that three hundred Pkhovian war prisoners would suffice as labourers?"

"The King has deigned to promise two thousand slaves from Tao Klarjeti and forty skilled Greek stonecutters."

"What building material has been provided for?"

"The facings of the temple must be of Algeti and Dzegami stone and sky-blue slate."

"And the roofing?"

"Slates throughout."

"And the old material?"

"The old material will be used only for oratories by the order of the Catholicos."

"Have you masons?"

"Twelve are coming from Bolnisi."

"You will see how difficult it will be to pull down the old building. Only the north facade was completely destroyed by Abul Kasim."

"We've been ordered to remove the ashlers separately, one by one, so that the tombs of the kings and Catholicoses remain undamaged."

"I tell you that the mere demolition of the old building will take more than three months."

"His Holiness announced that in case of need one thousand slaves and fifty masons—Lazes—will be brought from Abkhazia."

Parsman fell silent. He bent again over the designs, laid out on the table, leaning on both hands, bringing his eyes quite close to the minutiae of the plan, scrutinizing, mumbling, calculating.

At length he straightened up, gazed intently at the corner of the room as if he saw a plan of the new temple on the wall there and was scanning it. Then he looked at Konstantineh's pock-marked face and said:

"Young man, tell the King that in my estimation we shall not be able to build such a gigantic church with our own resources even in ten years. The repairing of fortresses will have to be stopped, nor can we hope to construct stone-throwers and battering-rams during those years."

He rolled up the parchment and handed it to Arsakidze.

Konstantineh wished him good night and looked longingly at the blazing fire.

By the fire-place some metallic pots stood on a red-hot brazier. Their contents were seething and their lids rattling, letting out a disagreeable odour.

"It seems that Parsman is brewing poisons," said Konstantineh to himself and quickly made for the door.

Tebronia led the way, lighting up the dark passages and stairs with a torch.

Parsman took down the hookah, crammed some opium into it with his thumb, then lit it and set it fuming again.

Parsman sat for a long time in stupefaction, pulling greedily and staring blankly before him into the gathering gloom.

The wax candles flickered. From time to time the discordant jangle of caravan bells was heard outside in the darkness.

Tebronia came shuffling in with a bowl of wheat boiled in honey, but Parsman, who had passed a sleepless night, was already so intoxicated that he noticed neither Tebronia nor the bowl.

Suddenly he felt giddy. Yellow balls began to dance before his eyes as if tossed about by a juggler. Then he felt a pitching and rolling, such as one experiences on the back of a walking camel, or in a boat on a rough sea.

Sweat broke out on his temples. He rubbed his eyes with his fists. At last his excitement calmed down a little, his strained tendons relaxed, and he was just about to fall asleep when somebody knocked loudly. He roused himself and frowned. Tebronia, who was dozing by the fire, took the lamp and opened the door.

In the doorway appeared a hulking fellow. Parsman fixed him with his eye and recognized the apparitor of the Chief Justice.

The newcomer did not wish to cross the threshold. He thrust a scroll of parchment into Tebronia's hand and without a word strode off into the dark of the corridor.

Parsman unrolled the scroll and read the following writ signed by the Chief Justice:

"Summoned hereby to appear before Giorgi, the King of Kings of the Abkhazians and Georgians, Rans and Kakhetians:

"The accused: Chief Architect Parsman the Persian.

"The plaintiff: Rusudan Phanaskerteli.

"The prosecutor: the King's Chaplain Ambrosi. ..."

Parsman the Persian instantly sobered up, feeling creepy and chilly all over. He flung the scroll on to the table, drew the settle close to the fire-place, and sitting down, held out his palms towards the blaze. Suddenly a shiver ran through his body. He interlocked his hands tightly and stretched himself like one in a fit of ague. Then he loosened his hands, grasped the arms of the settle, stretched out his legs, and resting them against the edge of the hearth, fixed his eyes on the smouldering brands, which had been partly reduced to ashes and were still showing those light lines which mark the fibres of newly-split logs.

He saw the stack of burnt sticks crash down glowing like molten gold.

He reached over, picked up a log and fed it to the fire. He heard the sizzle of the wood as it caught light, and out of the cuts seeped foam like froth from the mouth of a rabid animal. By and by the sizzle changed into a thin moan....

Parsman sat there, still staring at the fire. Now he saw in it the infuriated face of Catholicos Melkisedek, now the pea-green, narrow-slitted eyes of the King's chaplain.

How many knights—Georgians, and Greeks, Saracens and Armenians—had Parsman encountered in single combat! How often had he thrown his steed fearlessly head on against the redoubtable strategi and ghulams, with his sword drawn or lance atilt!... And now this emaciated, puny old fogy—Catholicos Melkisedek—must take the life of a warrior of great experience, of a great traveller.

That year, on Christmas Day, Melkisedek had stood before the altar preaching to his congregation. Exaltation seemed to have made him taller, and his piercing beady eyes gleamed like embers in his pallid face.

He had been raving like a mad pythoness. He had threatened the congregation with the Gehenna of Judgement Day, calling on Christians to conquer their human lusts and passions, and on mentioning the sin of Sodom, exclaimed:

"Therefore, I do appeal to every man, great and lowly, rich and poor, king and prince, high and low born, priest and monk, churchman and layman, old and young, of every rank and every age to desist from that sin!..."

And afterwards he had held forth on how Athens and Rome, Thebes and Babylon, the lands of Ashur and Parsces had crumbled to naught because of that crime.

Parsman rose to his feet, took from the table the writ of the Chief Justice, sat down again by the fire and carefully read it through again.

The Catholicos charged him with the most heinous and unpardonable offence. Parsman had a thorough knowledge of Ecclesiastic Law. Sodomy was punishable in three ways in Georgia, as in the Byzantine Empire—by breaking on the rack, decapitation or blinding of both eyes.

Parsman would have preferred any kind of penalty to blinding. What could a blind architect do?

The accusation was twofold: "Defloration of a virgin and unnatural sexual intercourse."

The accusation was aggravated by Parsman's personal position. According to the laws of the country: "The scholars and the learned are subject to heavier penalties than the uneducated and ignorant."

Parsman looked through the summons once more, rolled it up and threw it on to the mantelshelf.

With his elbows propped on his knees and his face resting on his hands, he stared motionless at the fire. Tebronia was snoring, sprawled on a bench.

Silence and gloom had closed in upon Parsman's dwelling. Now and then there came from the road the cracking of a lash and the faint tinkling of the bells.

The burning ash logs whined mournfully, the iron pots bubbled, giving off their hellish fumes.

Eventually the last log had burned through. Reduced to ashes it still retained its shape, displaying light streaks, lines like thin threads. A little more of a blaze, a little more of a glow and it would collapse, disintegrate into a thousand glowing particles; and none of them would bear any resemblance to that log Parsman had thrust into the flames a little while before.

And what would be left of it? A few embers and a small heap of ashes, embers and ashes!..

Two more days and possibly his own body would dissolve, decompose as completely as that burned log.

Parsman gazed into the sinking fire and called to mind his sweet, oh, how sweet a boyhood!

The wax tapers were still flickering in the niches. He sat bent double on the settle, the gigantic shadow cast from his body towering on the wall. The two ends of the shawl knotted on his turban were silhouetted like the two horns of Satan.

He cowered by the fire between the shadow of his old age and the vision of his boyhood...

Look! A seven-year-old boy came running with bow and arrow in his hand!

In Parsman's mind arose the dark outlines of Tukharisi Castle.

In the attics of the castle Parsman used to chase pigeons, and in secret nooks and cellars "the incomparable archer" hunted rats. ...

The impassable wild woods of Shavsheti flashed across his mind, churches and castles overhanging the precipices, waterfalls pouring down from the crags, the sky-blue water of the Chorokhi, drag-nets for fowling, wicker baskets for fishing, green pastures, and the roar of bulls returning home at eventide, the chanting of the choirs of an evening, the gay processions with torches during Passion Week, the sun-flecked shadows seen through the narrow window of the castle chapel, the bats, pigeons, turtle-doves....

Alas! His own boyhood had flown away on their wings.

He recalled his grandfather Sumbat, a grim-visaged giant in rust-coloured armour, his roan gelding, hawks and falcons, bloodhounds and tawny greyhounds, his father Bakar, a knight with grey eyes and fair hair, and his mother Nanai, for ever lost in prayers, a sweet singer of hymns.

His crabbed, fault-finding tutor, the bald-headed, lame Vardan rushed into his recollections. His chin was hairless like the rump of a hen and he wore a spur on his right foot.

Vardan dogged the boy's footsteps like a shadow. He forbade him to go up into the attics of the castle, he did not permit him to peep into the cellars. He always muffled himself up warmly, and wrapped up his charge similarly.

He nagged the boy incessantly:

"Don't go into the woods, there are bears there in the daytime; at night wood sprites will bewitch you. Don't bathe in the Chorokhi, there are snakes and lizards there. Don't sleep on the bare earth, the bugaboo will torment you with nightmares. Don't eat raw fruit, it will upset your stomach. Don't lean out of the window, you'll catch a cold in the head. Don't look at the sun, it will hurt your eyes, for the sun was created by God, so no one should make so bold as to gaze on it...."

There was only one thing not forbidden to Parsman —that was prayer.

In the morning, before dinner, after dinner, in the afternoon, in the evening, before going to bed, the boy was obliged to say prayers. Day by day he had to learn psalms by heart.

Parsman's tutor knew how to depict with rare eloquence the terrors of the Last Day and the Advent of Christ.

One day there was a thunderstorm. Vardan was in the open, on his way home. Only at midnight did he manage to trot his mule into the castle.

The menials dragged him down from the saddle. He was pale, shivering with cold and dripping wet. Having seated himself by the fire he told Parsman that the storm had overtaken him in the woods. There had been thunder and lightning, the Evil One had struck his infernal anvil seven times, gnashing his teeth and howling, while he, Vardan, stood beneath an oak-tree, staying his orisons.

Vardan was laid up with a fever, and the boy was in high spirits hoping that in the event of Vardan's death he would be finished with all this cramming of the Psalter.

But his mentor got well and resumed his nagging. "Thou shalt not bear false witness, thou shalt not be double-tongued. Honour thy mother and thy father. Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself...."

He taught Parsman to write with a piece of charcoal on the shoulder-blade of a sheep.

Eventually, when he had advanced to youth, Parsman became fond of reading. He had ceased paying any attention to his instructor's grumbling. He would put a hawk on his left wrist, fling a bow over his shoulder and roam through the bushes on the banks of the Chorokhi.

He used to show his horsemanship on unsaddled stallions, accompany his grandfather and father on their hunting trips, join fishing parties....

And just as a distracted capon—the eunuch of the barnyard—who has been put in charge of a brood of ducklings, runs about on the bank and clucks in alarm fearing that his foster-children, who are gaily swimming in the pond, are going to drown on the instant, in just such a way would Vardan rage with fury whenever his pupil Parsman jumped on a spirited stallion, plunged headlong into the turbulent. Chorokhi, or passed the nights in the woods, hunting...

Meanwhile the youth was looking forward to taking part in wars. He had grown weary of the peaceful life in the ancestral castle of the House of Chorchaneli, where the swords of the warriors rusted in their scab bards and the sentinels watched day and night in vain from the battlemented towers....

It was only from his grandfather Sumbat that Parsman could hear stories about wars, battles, single combat, night patrols, sieges and stormings of fortresses.

He had acquired a passion for encasing himself in armour, for donning a casque, for playing with his grandfather's swords and his father's arrows, for horses, riding, fencing. ...

Parsman was 16 years old when his grandfather Sumbat presented him with a war-horse, a suit of armour, a helmet, a sword, a bow and a quiver of battle arrows.

Vardan, his tutor, saw that his prudent apothegms and admonitions were "like a voice in the wilderness." So he gave Parsman a new motto:

"Man is a fathomless vessel, which rolleth whither it listeth."

That very year Parsman Chorchaneli's dream was realized. Georgia's great patriot Joaneh Marushadze delivered the fortified town of Uplistsikheh over to David, the Grand Kuropalat.

King David summoned Parsman's grandfather Sum-bat together with other governors of the provinces and introduced to them Bagrat Kuropalat, saying: "This is the ruler of Tao, Kartli and Abkhazia, my foster-son. Obey him as your king. ..."

Sumbat Chorchaneli refused to do homage to the King, so King Bagrat seized him and had him beheaded. His corpse was hanged by the feet from the roof of the castle as a warning example to rebellious noblemen.

Thereafter Bagrat III came at the head of his army and besieged the castle of Tukharisi, intending to capture Bakar, son of Sumbat, and his son Parsman.

The alarm was sounded in the castle. The garrison troops of Tao came out and charged the King's forces.

Parsman, then in his teens, fought gallantly abreast his father, but the furious onslaught of the King's army forced the warriors of Chorchaneli to retreat.

They shut themselves up in the fortress. The siege lasted three months and at length their provisions ran out. Neither dogs nor rats remained to be eaten. Bakar Chorchaneli took his only son Parsman and one thousand of his best warriors and escaped through an underground tunnel.

The "fathomless vessel" began to roll. ...

The fugitives fled to the Byzantine Empire. At that time in the land of the Byzantine Emperor the uprising of Barda Phoka was beginning. Bagrat III, King of Georgia, had just received from the Byzantine Emperor the title of Kuropalat, and a green chariot, and consequently remained faithful to Emperor Basil.

The traitor Bakar Chorchaneli took the side of the seditious war-lord Barda Phoka.

The troops of the Byzantine patrician Joan Porteze beleaguered Phoka's castle and stormed it, using stone-throwers and battering-rams. Phoka made his escape while Bakar Chorchaneli and his one thousand Georgian warriors fought desperately for six months. Finally Porteze took the fortress. Most of the Georgians were killed, among them Bakar Chorchaneli, who was

decapitated. His son Parsman and three hundred Georgian war prisoners were driven to Byzantium.

And again the "fathomless vessel" began to roll on...

Parsman threw some wood on to the fire. A deep quiet reigned in his room, broken only by Tebronia talking in her sleep. The cries of camel-drivers came shrilling from the road. The jangling of bells again disturbed the night...

Parsman called to mind the terrible journey across the waterless wastes of Antioch.

The sun-scorched plains, the battlemented castles and towers on the horizon, the wretched hovels, the crowds of bareheaded slaves. ...

"Water!..." the Georgian prisoners beseeched their guards, but no one seemed to understand their language.

"Water!..." they implored the passers-by, the camel-drivers, the soldiers, but no one heeded their entreaty.

Parsman rode on the very camel in whose saddle bags lay the heads of his father Bakar and his majordomo. ...

Mosquitoes stung the helpless Parsman, whose arms were bound behind his back. His two-humped camel jogged on; he felt nausea, giddiness, thirst, yet he was among those who did not ask for water, for he yearned for a speedy death on those desolate plains. ...

They crossed Anatolia and there rose into view the Cross of St. Sophia glittering in the sky.

That "dog," Caesar Basil, had a prison close by the Hippodrome.

They singled out of the ranks of the prisoners seven Georgians and thirteen Arabs, shaved their heads and beards, pierced their nostrils, soldered fast chain collars round their necks, put irons on their feet and threw them into a prison cell.

One year of their torture was over when a Georgian monk visited Parsman and his six countrymen at Easter. He brought them some presents and consoled the captives.

After the visitor had gone away the starving prisoners fell greedily on the Easter pastry the monk had brought. It was Parsman who found a small file in his cake.

For three nights he filed away at his shackles until he managed to cut through his iron collar and fetters. Afterwards he set all his companions free.

They dug a hole through the prison wall, tied their chains together end to end and climbed down to seek refuge in the gloom of the night.

On the outskirts of Constantinople they fell upon some monks of the Monastery of St. John, who were working in their vineyard, and robbed them.

It had all been arranged by Parsman. On his orders the fugitives had stripped to the skin. Amazed at the sight of a party of naked men, the monks offered no resistance.

Parsman and his companions robbed the monks of their clothes and money, bought donkeys and set off for Antioch. They told inquisitive people that they were making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

The "fathomless vessel" rolled on and on. ...

This time Parsman toured Antioch, Cappadocia and Anatolia on the back of a donkey.

He went to Al-Hakim in Aleppo, who, it turned out, was quite well informed on the state of affairs in Georgia and had heard about the exploits of Bakar Chorchaneli.

Out of hatred for Bagrat Kuropalat, King of Georgia, and the Byzantine Emperor Basil, Parsman changed his religion.

He called himself Abubekr Ismail Ibn Al-Ashari.

Parsman was appointed commandant of the fortress of Aleppo when Emperor Basil besieged it with his forces. In these battles Parsman won great renown, and the Saracens called him "Al-Hakim's Right Hand."

During the second attack by the Greeks he displayed extraordinary fearlessness. The *duka*, the Byzantine commander, had besieged the fortress of Cairo and was battering the outer tower with a stone-thrower. The auxiliary forces under Al-Hakim and Parsman fell on his rear.

Riding an Arabian stallion, Parsman rushed like lightning into the midst of the Greeks, cast "Median Fire" at the stone-thrower, set it aflame and returned to Al-Hakim.

The *duka* had to beat a retreat.

The Saracens relieved the fortress but in the melee a Greek warrior struck Parsman with a javelin, which pierced his armour and wounded him in the shoulder-blade.

Although on the orders of Al-Hakim the best physicians treated Parsman, they were unable to restore his former health.

Al-Hakim assigned him an apartment in his own palace.

In Cairo Parsman studied architecture, alchemy and Persian.

He made the acquaintance of Hindoo fakirs, and from them learned to walk barefoot on the sharp edge of a sword. Sometimes he showed his skill in jugglery in the big market places, balancing a sword with its point resting on his eye and swallowing fire. At night he observed the stars from a minaret.

Then he became interested in the doctrine of Sufism. Later he returned to .art and built a mosque in Cairo.

On Thursday, May 2nd, the army of the Byzantine commander-in-chief again laid siege to Aleppo, bringing stone-throwers and battering-rams into action. The vanguard made a breach in the first tower. At the head of that vanguard fought the King of Georgia, and on the right flank, Byzantine patricians clad in armour from head to foot.

Al-Hakim had to yield hostages to the Byzantine domesticus and send an embassy to Constantinople.

Abubekr Ismail Ibn Al-Ashari was put in charge of the embassy.

The "fathomless vessel" rolled on again. ...

... A cock crowed in Princes' Baptism.

Parsman threw a few maple sticks into the fire. ...

By the end of May the embassy arrived in Byzantium.

The ambassador of Caliph Al-Hakim made his appearance in the palace of the Emperor wearing a black cloak and a turban of white shawl, with a black-sheathed dagger hanging at his belt.

The courtiers, being too punctilious, refused to admit the turbaned man with a black dagger into the audience-chamber.

Then Abubekr Ismail Ibn Al-Ashari announced to the Emperor's courtiers:

"Very well. I shall go and I shall never return. ..."

He went away well pleased at the thought of being left in full possession of 1,000 phials of musk, precious stones valued at 10,000 gold dinars, and brocades, samites, and 500 phials of Arabian myrrh.

He was looking out for a ship bound for India when the imperial messenger came to him and announced that he was invited to appear before the Emperor.

On his second arrival at the palace, the Master of the Ceremonies came forward to meet him and asked him to kiss the ground before entering the audience-chamber. Abubekr Ismail Ibn Al-Ashari refused to comply with this request and turned back.

His behaviour was reported to Emperor Basil. He laughed at the impudence of the .ambassador of the defeated Al-Hakim, saying that Al-Hakim was mad and was likely to send a mad ambassador. He gave orders to make the doorway of his chamber so low that it would compel the proud Arab to bow his head while passing through it.

Abubekr Ismail Ibn Al-Ashari was summoned to appear the next day.

When the ambassador, sporting his white turban and black dagger, presented himself again and saw the low-browed, hastily built doorway, he walked up to the threshold, turned round, and, bending his body, passed backwards through the door into the Emperor's presence. The doorway being narrow, he bumped against the door-jamb and gave the whole frame a violent shake.

The Emperor sat on a silver throne. On his right stood three patricians in golden armour, on his left three interpreters. A golden crown glittered on his head, he wore a purple robe

embroidered with pearls. Around his neck hung a jeweled carcanet, on his feet he had red buskins, wrought all over with diamonds and pearls.

The Arabian interpreter stepped forward, greeted the ambassador and asked him:

"What shall I tell the Emperor in your name?"

"Only what you hear me say," replied Parsman.

The Emperor laughed at this reply. Then he turned to the interpreter and said:

"It seems that the Saracen behinds of the ambassadors must be much stronger than their foreheads!"

Abubekr Ismail Ibn Al-Ashari did not give the interpreter time to translate these words. He addressed the Emperor in perfect Greek:

"Son of God, the Ambassadors of the Caliph to the Byzantine Emperor must needs have extraordinarily strong behinds as they have to expect many kicks."

From his mother, the daughter of an innkeeper, Basil had inherited a taste for ribaldry. The ambassador's words made him burst into a hearty laugh.

After Al-Hakim's emissaries had discharged their task, envoys from the inhabitants of Lulu were admitted. They apprised Basil of the intention of the city of Lulu to be converted to Christianity. The sanctimonious Emperor treated the envoys with uncommon kindness and gave them many costly presents.

The next day Al-Hakim's ambassador presented himself at the imperial court and declared that he was desirous of embracing the faith of Christ.

That day Emperor Basil held audience in the chamber known as the Golden Triclinium. He was delighted when he was told that the witty and audacious Arab desired to join Christendom.

When Parsman had enumerated his seven professions he was appointed Chief Architect.

Towards the end of the year a great earthquake occurred in Constantinople. Parsman repaired St. Sophia and several churches in Anatolia.

One fine day he mounted an unshod camel and stealthily left Constantinople for Cairo. Before long he decided he would rather go to Cairo, where he had earlier joined the sect of Sufis.

For a long time he wandered in Egypt and one day he read on the pyramid of Cheops the following inscription in Arabic:

*Leave the sect! Become the butt of hate!
Traitor Time shall leave thee unbetrayed!
Be a homeless dervish, live on alms!
Learn from seas to still the storms to calms!
Spurn world's fame and glory, hollow things!
Take as, thy reward the wrath of Kings!*

This verse, read by him in the desert, impressed him so deeply that he took up the life of a dervish. He tramped throughout Egypt, passing the night in alms-houses. Finally he came to Bagdad.

On the day of his arrival a terrible thunderstorm broke out in the city. A pillar of fire descended from the sky, followed by a shower of black rain. In the evening a sword-shaped comet appeared.

The panic-stricken population ascribed all these terrors to Allah's wrath and, prostrated on the ground, prayed fervently.

These events turned Parsman's thoughts to astrology and soon he was wholly engrossed in it.

He was already getting on in years when he began to feel homesick.

The Caliph of Bagdad sent him on a mission to the Emir of Tbilisi. Here he organized the first observatory and became known as Parsman the Persian. ...

When the Emir of Tbilisi engaged the forces of King Bagrat III at Digomi, Parsman was taken prisoner by the Georgian troops. (It was with the secret intention of visiting his birth-place Tukharisi that he had joined the Saracen troops.)

He passed a short time in a dungeon in Uplistsikheh, and on his release he was appointed by King Bagrat to the post of interpreter at court. One year later he was made Chief Architect on the orders of King Giorgi. ...

Somewhere in the neighbourhood of the fortress of Mukhnari a cock crowed again. Another took him up, and then the cocks of Princes' Baptism joined in.

Parsman sat bent over by the fire-place before a heap of ashes. Tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, or in a week what a miserable little brook would drown him, the man who had crossed the seas! he thought.

What a tiny, puny brook would overwhelm the experienced warrior, he who had travelled round the world, who had come back to his homeland and yet had no home.

Now he could say: "I am neither a Christian, nor a Judaist, nor a Moslem."

He was going to perish among his countrymen, an unbeliever, an atheist, a man who belonged nowhere.

And what for?

For a slip of a girl, for that scarecrow of Phanaskerteli.

At best he would have his head cut off somewhere, his corpse thrown out beyond Gartiskari into some gully, and none would appear on earth—neither storyteller, writer or painter—to convey Parsman's great passions to posterity. ...

Tebronia lay stretched out with her face upward, snoring placidly. The wen on her face looked like red scorpions sucking her cheek-bones.

Once again the cock crew, this time quite near the house of Arsakidze, the apprentice. He was answered by another cock, then a third, and a fourth. ... Parsman left off counting them.

"What a wonderful creature a cock is!" thought Parsman. "It is the only one of the animal world which always looks at the sky. It announces the coming of the sun, it struggles with the darkness and never sleeps at night. Even lions start at its weird cry. ..."

On his inner eye burst Melkisedek's visage with its thundering mouth. The Catholicos had reminded him of a cockerel stretching its neck towards the sky when he was preaching on that Christmas Day.

The fleshless, skeleton-like frame of the old monk irradiated an indomitable will-power. Between the thick-veined forehead and strong cheek-bones his eyes flashed forth the implacable cruelty of a tyrant. The diamonds on his mitre and his gold-embroidered chasuble sparkled in the quivering light of innumerable candles. They emitted just the same fatal brilliance as the gilt helmets and coats of mail of the Byzantine patricians in those moments when with drawn swords they used to make a set for Abubekr Ismail Ibn Al-Ashari in his rust-coloured armour.

With what a proud air Melkisedek was standing now, his head erect, his figure as unyielding as the royal standard of a victorious army!

... Parsman looked out through the window.

The darkened district of Princes' Baptism was asleep.

From far off came the howling of wolves. Suddenly the cocks again started their persistent, ear-splitting crowing and the moonlit dome of the heavens seemed to be trembling and ringing to those ominous cries. ...

XXII

The spring had come.

Patches of luminous white gleamed here and there on the dark-blue mountains. Green was creeping into the Aragvi Valley.

Almond-trees were in blossom.

On the meadows it was as though the colours of the wild pigeon, the wolf and the sea were struggling with each other for mastery.

The sun was taking leave of the gilt domes of the temples in Mtskheta when Konstantineh Arsakidze came slowly down the steps of a one-storeyed stone house behind which stood a partly ruined tower.

This small house had belonged to Rati, the Master of the Household of Khursi Abuleli.

Khursi had fled to the Arabs, taking with him his family, servants and major-domo. Only Nonai, the maidservant, was left behind.

When King Giorgi conferred on Arsakidze the title of Chief Architect he put him in possession of this house.

Around the house was an orchard and a garden laid out in Persian style with about ten beehives in it.

For many years old Nonai had lived quite alone in the deserted dwelling.

Insects and vermin are the first to avail themselves of the decay of a human household. Spiders had taken, possession of all the corners, cockroaches had filled the cupboards and niches, flame-coloured scorpions had broken their way through the mortar of the masonry and swarmed on the shelves and window-sills.

Nonai had waged war on them with unsparing zeal, but when she eventually heard about her master's death in battle, she set her heart on leaving the place and taking the veil in some nunnery.

Just then the young Laz was established in the house and Nonai was delighted.

Brought up by indulgent parents, Arsakidze had no skill in farming and housekeeping, so Rati's house continued to reel on the verge of ruin. The rafters had been dislodged, and the foundations cracked in the latest earthquake, while the slate tiles on the roof had been torn off in places by the wind. The fruit-trees were blighted by frosts and storm blasts. No one seemed to worry about it.

All day long Arsakidze was busy climbing up and down scaffolding, travelling in all parts of Georgia, superintending the building of fortresses and churches.

Tired and stained with lime he would come home late in the afternoon to snatch a hasty meal and again get down to business.

He sketched designs and corrected details drawn by others; distrustful of the stone-cutters he would occasionally himself use the chisel, mould the bas-reliefs, carve the ornaments on hard-grained stones or prepare sketches for wall-painting.

Nonai took care of the young man as if he were her own son. His helplessness and misery were breaking the old woman's heart. Always absorbed in his work he forgot to take his meals, and so she used to pursue him with a bowl in her hand, imploring her master, who was anything but masterful, to take a little refreshment.

On this evening, too, Nonai, who was weeding the kitchen garden, noticed Arsakidze stealing ghost-like out of the garden, and ran after him. "You haven't eaten properly today, my lord. At least have some wheat porridge," she entreated him.

Arsakidze was in a hurry, yet he humoured the venerable old woman, whose uncommonly solicitous manner reminded him of his mother. He had scarcely finished the porridge when Nonai bustled in with fried salmon.

"I'll be late," he pleaded as an excuse, taking to his heels. Coming out of the garden, he glanced at Parsman's house. "I must visit the sick master," he thought, and the next instant the gong struck in the Church of Princes' Baptism. Immediately it brought to his mind the King's chaplain, who the day before had rebuked him for missing church service. The priest had followed this by recounting some very ancient stories. He told Arsakidze that the Lazes had been the first Christians in Georgia and the Wonder-Working Cross had first been erected by them.

"If the heathen Pkhovians have not perverted your faith, you must be a praiseworthy believer," said the chaplain.

This polite admonition no doubt had a touch of malicious mockery. Arsakidze knew well enough that the King's chaplain Ambrosi was a wicked, malevolent scandal-monger.

Now, when after so much suffering fate was smiling on him, would it be prudent of the friendless prisoner from Lazistan to set "the powers that be" at defiance?

He was tired after the day's work and would have preferred his home above all else, yet he reluctantly took another direction.

The warmth of the March sun still lingered in the gullies and glens. In the small vineyards people were pruning the grape-vines. Here and there in the corners of the orchards dry twigs and vine shoots crackled loudly on the bonfires.

The grape-vines glittered with tears of joy, peaches blossomed, the buds on the saplings were already tinged with crimson. The red osier, whose pliable twigs are used for tying grape-vines, flamed like the "burning bush" seen by Moses.

The workers in the vineyards wished Arsakidze good evening.

Singing, shouting children were driving pigs and calves into the barnyards of the district. Behind them the tardy buffaloes lumbered ponderously. All the roads and lanes flowed with herds of cattle.

The buffaloes bellowed with heads upturned, the mares neighed, the loaded camels shuffled along nodding their heads, the foals gambolled on the muddy roads.

As soon as Arsakidze reached the top of the grassy knoll Svetitskhoveli came into view, and his eyes darted at once to his beloved creation.

It made the master's heart leap with joy. Two years before its base course could not have been seen from this place. Now a whole forest of scaffolding rose on all sides of the building: posts, girders, hooks, cross-pieces, ties, struts. ...

From afar the whole maze of triangles, squares, crosses, circles, spirals produced the impression of gigantic windmills, or storey upon storey built of toy bricks for *devis'* children to play with.

Perhaps only the master's eye could discern the majestic form of the future temple in the chaos of all these disorderly, irregular lines rising ever skyward.

Arsakidze felt that the King and the Catholicos had pitted him against one of the greatest masters. A modest, unobtrusive stripling had to wrestle with a time-tutored sage. His work was expected to outshine all the temples erected by Parsman in Samtskheh.

God knew that he had not craved for this. They had just picked up Arsakidze's name and flung it at Parsman as a stick is hurled at an overripe fruit.

Arsakidze felt that he had some worth as an individual, and not simply as a pawn in the conflict with Parsman. He had studied Parsman's work and realized that despite the architect's mastery of his art he was quite out of touch with the Georgian tradition. There was something remote and alien about the bare, cold-looking buildings he had erected. The cathedrals and churches he had designed with all their fanciful decoration, left the Georgians indifferent.

Arsakidze wanted to create something that would stand, like a monument, for centuries.

People thought Konstantineh Arsakidze haughty, and yet his was the gentlest nature.

Parsman's exhortation had gone to Konstantineh's heart:

"You must be wise and yet make people believe that you are a simpleton. You must be bold and yet pass for a coward. You must be a master in your craft and yet pretend to be a failure, for in this world nobody has so many enemies as a sage, a hero and a master."

He was very proud that he had ventured to build a cathedral at the confluence of the Aragvi and the Kura on a plain of soft soil.

From the east the Monastery of the Cross and the rocky diadem of Sarkineh and Zedazeni looked down at Svetitskhoveli, and from the north, from the peak of Kazbek, Eternity itself in its cuirass of ice.

Arsakidze was aware of these heavy odds against his creation, and therefore wrestled with this chaos of rough blocks of stone as did Jacob with his formidable God.

Two years earlier these blocks, these beams, these bricks lay piled in disorder on the ground, but the master's eye looked at them and the master's hand touched them and, behold! block stepped on block, brick clung to brick, walls arose shoulder to shoulder, arches spanned the openings, a dome crowned the mighty structure. Soon the master would go up to his work and separate perfection from chaos, the happy creator would call to his creation: "Let there be light!" and the mysterious harmony of stones would rise to the very clouds and stop there fixed to all eternity!

This would be a monument to Arszakidze himself, to his father and mother, to the whole of the people who had lived and fought in those troubled years—immortalized in stone in defiance of time.

"Blessed are they who have discharged their duty. Work is the greatest virtue on earth. Nothing adorns man so much as valour displayed in labour. Nothing can be greater than the pride that swells the heart when the fruit of one's work is fit to serve as an ornament of life and the world."

Lost in these thoughts the youth traversed the district. Beyond it began a desolate plain. From far away came the call of a cuckoo. Spring was advancing to the valley of the Aragvi so timidly that the cuckoo seemed to call on it not to tarry any longer in the glens.

The vigorous breath of spring had rejuvenated the ancient oak. The buds on its twigs had grown greenish-blue, here and there in the meadows violets were beginning to peep out. A wren was cautiously rustling the previous year's winter-beaten leaves under the dry tufts of symphytum. Caravans of brown ants crawled up the gnarled trunk of the oak.

Below, among the twisted and warped roots a crowd of black ants tugged away at a mummified yellow caterpillar. They hustled about tirelessly. Life triumphed at the very door of Death.

A shepherd was playing his pipe as he sat on the sward. Goats were skipping at the foot of sheer crags; kids frisked and bleated among the blackberry bushes.

In Samtavro Church the gong began to strike.

Arszakidze, anxious to be in time for the evening service, took a short cut across the graveyard.

The ancient cemetery presented a lamentable sight. The gravestones with their Georgian, Greek and Arabic epitaphs had been defiled by birds.

A flock of startled ravens rose from the stone crosses, and croaking angrily, flew to the oak forest.

Arszakidze continued his way through the rustling withered stems and leaves of danewort and symphytum. His gaze roved over the inscriptions and stone rams squatting on the tombs. Some of the epitaphs were still legible while others were obliterated by moss.

Georgians, Greeks, Saracens—all had succumbed to death and all lamented worldly vanity and implored forgiveness.

"Is he whom these dead generations are crying to a god of the living? Or is he the lord of death, the ruler of shades, the prince of the land of darkness?"

Arszakidze had come to the end of the graveyard and finished the ascent. The stems of danewort and symphytum reached up to his waist. Their wilted, winter-beaten stalks rustled with a hollow sound.

The shepherd's pipe grew louder, and the call of the cuckoo more insistently frequent. Both the pipe of Pan and the cuckoo's call seemed to be invoking the spring, yet it had already come down even to this place of desolation and weeping, for out of the roots of danewort and symphytum young stems had sprung up and tender plumules pricked their tiny green ears and smiled at the sun.

The vernal warmth made the earth stretch itself drowsily. Before long all the buds would burst forth with leaves and the luxuriant vegetation efface those mossy gravestones and stone crosses, those inscriptions complaining of vanity and announcing death.

Arsakidze felt his mood changed. Once more he cast a glance at Svetitskhoveli. He ran up the turf knoll with as light a step as if he had been reborn.

He strode on with a firmer tread, saying to himself:

"Art is in itself immortality. ... Only a great master cannot be caught by death. A thousand years will sweep away everything I see around me, only the Temple of the Wonder-Working Pillar will remain, like Jacob wrestling with God and death."

His own thought sent a thrill through him, and he quickened his pace along the path leading to the church.

The church gong tolled again. ...

The churchyard was full and people were crowding outside the gates. Women with infants in their arms screamed as they squeezed through the gateway. Stallions tied to hitching posts neighed. Grooms were walking the horses of the nobility.

Beggars, jugglers, ventriloquists and buffoons swarmed round the portal amid the discordant noise made by the chanting choir, the shouting and crying children and the neighing horses.

At the entrance Arsakidze asked an old man if all these people had come to a wake.

"No, there is no wake today," answered the man, "these crowds have gathered to hear Catholicos Melkisedek preach after vespers."

Although Arsakidze did not like the peculiar odour that assailed one in an overcrowded church, he wanted to get inside in order to show himself to the King's chaplain; that done, he would consider his duty performed.

Although the church was already full up everyone was trying to get in. Men, two by two, brought out women who had fainted in the crush inside.

A soul-stirring sweet chanting was being wafted from the choirs. Arsakidze was fond of chanting and attended church service with the sole purpose of hearing it. On the present occasion, however, there was such a hubbub inside the church that the choristers' voices could be heard only by fits and starts.

The evening service was over when Arsakidze succeeded in advancing to the middle of the temple.

The Catholicos had already begun his sermon. By a queer coincidence Melkisedek spoke about Jacob's wrestling with God.

"... And Jacob sent over the brook everything he had and was left alone there and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day.

"And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh, and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint as he wrestled with him, and Jacob said: 'Let me go, for the day breaketh,' and the man said unto him: 'What is thy name?'

"And he said: 'Jacob.' "

Melkisedek quoted this passage by heart.

Thereafter he declared in a firm, steady tone:

"The officiating priests and clergymen should expound this passage with special care because heretics and sectarians put an infamous construction on the subject of Jacob's wrestling with God. Priding themselves on their earthly fame and honours, they dare to match themselves with the Creator, to struggle against God."

Here the Catholicos lifted his voice and added with a sarcastic smile: "These wretches forget that God broke the thigh of Jacob, who presumed to wrestle with his lord."

The candles were flaring in front of the iconostasis, gold threads glittered on the cope of the hierarch, diamonds sparkled on his mitre.

Melkisedek's cheeks were flushed. His piercing hypnotic eyes were fixed on the multitude crowding on him.

For a moment Arsakidze thought that Melkisedek looked only at him. He became somewhat alarmed. Had the old man guessed his recent thoughts, he wondered.

He looked point-blank into Melkisedek's face, but unable to bear the keenness of that intense gaze, he bent his head.

Konstantineh felt sick with the crowd pressing on him on all sides. His nostrils caught the mingled smell of human sweat, frankincense and myrrh.

He made for the door, drifting rather than walking. Before he had left the temple, Melkisedek finished preaching.

A veritable scrimmage began everywhere. Like a huge sea all present, old and young, surged on to the altar, yearning to kiss the shrivelled hand of the hierarch. But as the crowd had a thousand mouths while Melkisedek had only one right hand, a terrible press ensued.

The people who had been waiting outside endeavoured to wedge themselves through all the four doors of the church.

The dean's pulpit was overturned.

Suddenly a woman screamed. The dead body of a little child crushed in the melee appeared over the milling clamouring crowd, borne on the hands of two young men.

Arsakidze averted his terrified look from the tiny body, its head a shapeless mass, and put forth all his strength to elbow his way to the exit. Worn out, angry, with the breast of his coat ripped, he managed at last to squeeze out into the courtyard.

At that time Arsakidze was in the habit of comparing every church with the future Svetitskhoveli. He had walked round the Church of Samtavro twice at dusk, measuring its length and breadth by paces. It turned out that Svetitskhoveli would be larger by about 10 parasangs, which had greatly gratified the master.

Such has always been the lot of every artist.

A horse tied with a rope to a picket walks round it night and day, cropping off a mouthful of grass here and there, nibbling or resting, but all the time circling round the picket like one hypnotized. Likewise an artist never loses sight of the object of his work, whether he takes a walk or makes merry. Even when he strolls about at leisure his mind's eye never ceases to circle around his creation.

By now the moon had risen.

Arsakidze stood in the shade of a linden-tree, looking out over the sleeping town. Suddenly through the north door slunk out the King's chaplain and in the darkness ran against Arsakidze.

"Good evening," murmured Arsakidze, but the priest was so absorbed in his thoughts that he did not hear the greeting. He seemed to be looking out for someone in the temple court. Craning his neck he made after a group of women who had just emerged from the church.

The chaplain's conduct aroused Arsakidze's curiosity. He hastened after the priest.

Of a sudden he caught sight of some women servants in Pkhovian dress escorting a lady through the courtyard.

When he drew nearer Arsakidze recognized the cornel-coloured kerchief of Vardisakhar, Shorena's waiting-maid.

"Perhaps they are attending Shorena," he thought, and caught up with them. Then he went one or two paces ahead of the servants and looked back over his shoulder.

Shorena was walking along with bent head, avoiding the steady stare of the curious. Her face was covered with an embroidered diaphanous crimson veil.

Two servants with fire-pans went by her side. Her cheeks had a yellow cast and Arsakidze was not certain whether it was the reflection of the fire or the complexion she had acquired in captivity.

Arsakidze noticed that Vardisakhar had recognized him. She looked at him twice but the youth averted his gaze. The next instant the shadow of the King's chaplain was before his eyes.

Arsakidze stepped aside and mixed with the crowd. He moved at a slow pace, now watching the group of Pkhovian girls, now the black-robed figure.

The desire to set Shorena came over him again. He wanted to overtake the Pkhovian women and whisper at least "good evening" to Shorena.

Strange rumours had of late been circulating about her. Some said that she had stolen away at night from the fortress of Gartiskari and, disguised as a young-knight in armour, escaped to Pkhovi, where she was making arrangements for a new insurrection.

Others would have it quite another way. They affirmed that the King had been keeping Kolonkelidze's daughter in the castle of Uplistsikheh, where she was pining away in a dark cell.

Arsakidze had even heard that the Catholicos had sent her to the convent of Bedia, where she had taken the veil of a nun.

He left the crowd behind and again the black cassock of the King's chaplain blurred his view.

It was a fine evening sweetened by the fragrant breath of the spring. Stars twinkled among the branches of the linden-trees and the moon rested on the black-bristled back of Sarkineh.

The sight of the Pkhovian women threw Arsakidze into a strange confusion. It brought back to his mind his sweet boyhood, the joys of his youth, so rudely broken off.

The crowd of people returning from church was moving slowly along a narrow lane. Sad meditations prompted the youth to seek seclusion. On one side of the street he saw some ancient ruined building and he took refuge in its shade.

He was plodding on with downcast eyes, full of painful reflections, when someone nudged him. He looked round and started with agitation when in the sheeted form of a woman he recognized Vardisakhar. She threw back her veil and gave him an enigmatic smile. Trembling like an aspen leaf she did not once take her eyes off the distant group of Pkhovian women.

"Where have you been? Why have you not been seen in Mtskheta?" asked Arsakidze.

"We were in the castle of Gartiskari."

"And now?"

"The King was sorry for us and had us transferred to Khursi's palace. They say we are there temporarily. The Catholicos is going to send us to Abkhazia."

Arsakidze felt as if he were in a dream.

"Our chaplain, the monk Atanaseh, has told us all about you, that the King met you while hunting and elevated you. Shorena is delighted. Have you any news from Pkhovi?" Vardisakhar rattled off in one breath, her jaws quivering as if she had a fit of ague.

"No, I haven't yet heard anything from Pkhovi," replied Arsakidze.

The woman stared at the youth with a stupefied air. Casting his eyes at the passing crowd, he seized the dazed woman by the arm.

"Listen, Vardisakhar, listen. My house is near yours. Do come to see me when it is dark one day. Ask after Nonai, the servant of the former master of the household Rati. Well, go now. Methinks the King's chaplain is spying on you."

The woman covered her face with the sheet, and keeping close to the shaded wall, tripped away into the darkness.

Arsakidze experienced a strange relaxed feeling in his limbs. He fell back. "I'll cross the graveyard," he thought when he was alone.

With their golden eyelashes the stars winked thoughtfully in the violet sky.

Arsakidze pictured to himself Vardisakhar's full lips and her eyes shining with passion. He recalled the high Pkhovian sky, and the sweetness of Vardisakhar's soft and warm body. An amazingly intense longing seized the youth. But all that belonged to the past.

He walked faster. The Pkhovian women were no longer visible in the moving crowd. No, Vardisakhar had also slipped into the past like a shadow. It was Shorena into whose eyes he longed to look, be it only for a moment. It was the face of the playmate of his youth that he longed to see at any cost. Could he meet her now, he would defy the King's chaplain. He would pass closely by her and wish her at least "good evening."

Before a little chapel the muddy lane became so narrow that the jammed crowd had to halt. Arsakidze took advantage of this circumstance.

His eyes fell again on the cornel-coloured kerchief. And again he caught a glimpse of Shorena's embroidered veil by the flickering light of the fire-pan.

Arsakidze remarked, too, that the women of Mtskheta who were crowding round Shorena were staring with curiosity at the eristavi's daughter and her attendants.

Konstantineh was clothed as a Pkhovian. Would he dare to approach the Pkhovian women? That was likely to attract attention and do harm to the women.

The youth's determination weakened again. .

Two young women, one kerchiefed, and the other veiled, were following the group of the Pkhovian captives, whispering to each other. The veiled woman put some question to the kerchiefed one. Arsakidze did not catch the question, he heard only the answer.

"That is Shorena, Kolonkelidze's daughter."

"She looks like a queen, doesn't she?"

"She's not far from being one."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you know she's the King's concubine?"

The words pierced Arsakidze's heart like sharp nails. He wanted to rush at the foul-tongued tattler and fling in her teeth:

"You are a liar!"

However, he controlled himself, and staggering back like one bitten by a snake, ran plump against the King's chaplain who had been walking behind him. Arsakidze stepped silently aside and vanished down a dark side-street.

XXIII

The news that the Chief Architect had been summoned to appear in court gave rise to a great deal of talk in the palace of Mtskheta. The real state of affairs was known only to two or three persons. Nevertheless, people of all ranks, high and low, were demanding that Parsman be punished, particularly the partisans of Queen Mariam and Catholicos Melkisedek. Everybody hated Parsman, all the more so for his notorious "paganism" and his Mohammedan attire.

Nor had he been to the Queen's liking from the very start, but being very interested in church building she saw none to replace Parsman. So she had to put up with "the man with a barbarian visage and a diabolical creed" (as the King's chaplain called Parsman).

The dream of Queen Mariam was to convert the whole of Georgia to church and convent, and not only Georgia, but Armenia and the whole world as well.

As soon as she had come back to Uplistsikheh she had been told that the King and the Catholicos had promoted a young Christian from Lazistan.

The Queen was very glad to hear this although she had not as yet seen either Arsakidze or any of his work.

Then and there she had been informed about the aged Parsman's love affair with a girl of Phanaskert. Though she loathed the girl as much as she did any member of the high nobility, she, too, demanded Parsman's punishment.

It was St. George's "escape" from the palace in Mtskheta which had saddened Queen Mariam most of all. She thought it portended some tremendous calamity. On returning to Mtskheta she had persuaded the King, the Catholicos and the King's chaplain to send to the monastery of Nokorna many heads of cattle as propitiatory offerings to St. George at his new abode.

Crowds of the Pkhovians, Tsanars and Galgais had flocked to the monastery of Nokorna that day.

The Catholicos himself had officiated at the altar. After service he had preached for a long time. The King had gone down on his knees and put his lips to the incensed deity. After that the Queen had crawled on all fours up to the icon, bedewed it with her hot tears and implored the saint to keep her family in his good graces as before.

The King's chaplain was at a loss as to how to report to the Queen in detail the actual circumstances of Parsman's case. He would have to use such coarse words that he did not dare to utter them.

Queen Mariam, the daughter of King Senakerim of Armenia, had brought with her into the palace of the Georgian Kings an ascetic spirit quite alien to it.

Mariam kept a watchful eye not only on the observance of religious rites in the royal palace, but also on the activities of the monasteries and churches, on the morality of the hierarchs, bishops and priests.

The King's chaplain Ambrosi was her all-seeing eye and all-hearing ear. She watched the clergy, the King himself, his viziers and governors of the provinces. King Giorgi maintained a persistent silence concerning the Parsman affair, being fully aware that if he expressed any opinion on this matter it would be tantamount to giving a verdict before the trial.

Zviad, the commander-in-chief, also kept his counsel. He, too, was anything but friendly to Parsman, but on the present occasion, as usual, military considerations were paramount in his mind. He was aware that Georgia's relations with the Byzantine Empire were going from bad to worse day by day. The "Komnin conspiracy" was followed by terrible persecution, directed primarily against the Georgians.

The title of "vestarch" was known, as a rule, to have been conferred by the Byzantine emperors only on Georgians and Armenians; however, in recent years, it had been given by Emperor Basil only to Armenians.

The nobles of Klarjeti who had fled to Constantinople as long before as in the days of David Kuropalat had been imprisoned there, though quite innocent, on the charge of the "Komnin affair," which had been trumped up by the Emperor's informers.

Such an atmosphere helped to create irreconcilable contradictory opinions in King Giorgi's household.

Both the Queen and the Catholicos were so blinded by superstition that they saw in the Byzantine Emperor not Georgia's enemy, but rather a supreme being of Christianity who, being the Emperor of Rome and "Pontifex Maximus," was second only to God.

Senakerim, King of Armenia, too, deluded by the uniformity of religious rites with the Byzantine Empire, handed over his kingdom to Emperor Basil.

Zviad understood that the "Komnin conspiracy" was only the whetting of the sword pointed against Georgia.

At such a crisis the question of searing Parsman's eyes was not an easy one to solve.

True, they had found a builder of churches, but except the King and the commander-in-chief, no one knew that only Parsman possessed the secret of the iron-cutting steel. Nor did he intend to reveal the secret to anybody else.

Apart from all this, to the best of Zviad's knowledge, there was nobody in Georgia or in Asia Minor who could excel Parsman in the science of fortification.

King Giorgi had ordered the trial to be put off three times. At last the 27th of March was fixed as the day on which Parsman was to appear in court.

The King had the summons served only on the Chief Justice, the abbess of the convent, who was Verkhaulidze's daughter, and on the King's chaplain. ...

He had forbidden the three of them under the severest penalty to mention Phanaskerteli's case to anybody before the verdict had been proclaimed. Even Queen Mariam was to be left in the dark as to the circumstances of the judicial proceedings.

Thereafter he sent his major-domo for the Catholicos.

The messenger called on Melkisedek three times and each time he found that the Catholicos was ill.

The King himself was supposed to preside over the trial. But it would doubtless be improper for him to stop the legal proceedings or to have Parsman pardoned, inasmuch as the application of the plaintiff, the girl from Phanaskert, was already on the files of the court.

At length he thought of paying Melkisedek a visit in person and yet he began to waver, fearing a refusal on Melkisedek's part.

This would bring into the open the struggle that had been going on between them in secret.

In view of the fact that important privy affairs of state were to be discussed with the Catholicos, Commander-in-Chief Zviad offered to act as the King's deputy.

King Giorgi and Zviad talked in whispers for a long time. Zviad was advised by the King to explain to Melkisedek everything in detail and to conduct the talk in strict confidence.

The commander-in-chief noticed that the King seemed to be out of sorts and asked him the cause. Giorgi pleaded that he had spent a sleepless night.

After the consultation was over Giorgi took down some opium and was in the act of lighting his nargileb when a courier who had just arrived from Byzantium came in.

They opened the scroll and read the following: "The monk Zachariah who set out on a pilgrimage from Tao to Jerusalem was seized by the domesticus of Antioch and turned over to Basil. The Emperor put him in prison."

Zachariah was said to have been accused of presenting Komnin with a pair of red buskins sent by King Giorgi and of congratulating the traitor in the name of King Giorgi on the rank of an emperor.

The monk Zachariah had undergone prolonged torture in the effort to make him confess that King Giorgi had really sent red buskins to Komnin. He had been promised an immediate release and a bishopric in Caesaria. The monk gave a flat refusal, after which they had once more thrown him into his cell and let loose rats on him.

Being sick of the endless inquisition he pretended to have lost the power of speech. Then they had his tongue cut off. They made fun of the old man, saying: "If you are dumb you have no need of your tongue."

On hearing this King Giorgi flew into a rage. He jumped to his feet, and banging the table with his clenched fists, shouted:

"Basil wants to gobble up Orthodox Georgia like Armenia, but as long as I breathe, that dog of an emperor shall never see his wish accomplished."

Never before had Zviad heard the King speak in such a way. "Is Melkisedek so blind that he can't see this? Nor does Queen Mariam see this danger!"

On the one hand the news pleased Zviad, for it would help to break down Melkisedek's obstinacy.

Just as Zviad was about to leave, the door opened and the Queen entered the chamber.

Her slenderness gave the tall, thin-faced woman the appearance of being still taller. She looked pale and worn.

Her dress was of black Chinese brocade. A carcanet of large diamonds sparkled in iridescent brilliance around her slender neck in which the tendons were strangely tensed. Her eyes with their slightly swollen lids glared angrily.

Zviad made his obeisances to the Queen, who greeted him perfunctorily.

Either her travels in Abkhazia or the unpleasant tidings at home seemed to have greatly affected the Queen.

She returned Zviad's salute with a forced smile. A thick coat of cosmetics could not hide the finely drawn crow's feet around her large, melancholy eyes.

She walked across to the bedchamber with an unusually loud rustling of her skirts.

From the way the door slammed behind her it seemed that high words had passed between the royal couple, Zviad thought.

Giorgi did not speak for a long time, staring at the niche where a silver crucifix was hanging between two candlesticks.

Suddenly he turned to the *spasalar* and said:

"I wish to tell you, Zviad, that although advisers are constantly pressing about me I have to rely on my own judgement whenever it comes to deciding on the more important matters. They talk a good deal in the Elders' Council, but with me they keep their mouths shut."

"My late vizier Varzabakur was the only-one who said nothing at the Council meetings but in private told me the whole truth.

"I have noticed that lately you, too, have been trying to talk as little as possible."

The *spasalar* sat as if petrified in the gilt armchair, listening to Giorgi with bowed head. But when Giorgi paused he gazed fixedly into the King's eyes and said.

"You are right, sire, in that I find it easier to draw my sword than to speak, let alone to give advice. Indeed, speech is often more of a weight—I should say stronger—than the sword.

"I have so many matters to attend to that I seldom have a chance to read, yet I have always known that books are our wisest and most fearless advisers.

"Not so long ago, I read in an old book that an adviser who first tries to guess what the King would be pleased to hear and then comes forward with his advice is worse than the worst enemy, for a flatterer who imagines that by his mouthings he fulfils his duty towards his sovereign is apt to do more harm than he who says nothing.

"I do not know what your viziers advise when alone with you, but in the Elders' Council they generally say what is likely to please your ear.

"A monk confided to me what the Beelzebub, Parsman, had told him. 'You must never tell the truth either to a king or to a child,' he said, 'because their mind is set at ease only when flattery or falsehoods tickle their self-esteem.'

"But Solomon the Wise said that a king's intention does not harden into resolve until he has conferred with his retainers.

"To seek someone's advice is to trust him. I think I have proved with my own blood to be worthy of such trust, sire; I was wounded more than ten times in battle. Is it not so?"

The King looked up.

"It is so, Zviad," he said.

"Since it is so, sire, suffer me to advise something that will hardly please you very much."

The King stared at the *spasalar* in surprise. He had never heard Zviad speak so eloquently.

"Very good, Zviad, tell me the whole truth," he said, smiling.

Zviad scratched his chin, cleared his throat, and went on:

"It occurred to me on more than one occasion to submit to you my opinion of Byzantium, sire, but you always speak of the Emperor Basil in such harsh terms that I could not bring myself to do it. Besides, I have deep faith in what my late father used to say to me. 'Never offer advice either to a prince or to a noble,' he said, 'unless you are bid.'

"You know better than we do, sire, that for many centuries Georgia has had two neighbours of the same religion—Armenia and the Byzantine Empire. We joined forces with them to fight 'the Khazars, Saracens, Persians, and other enemies of our land, did we not? You will admit that it is as easy to estrange old friends as to win new enemies. Is it not so?"

Giorgi nodded.

"It is well known that nothing brings people together more closely than country and kinship," Zviad continued.

"There is one more thing—faith—that links us together by close bonds."

Zviad glanced at the crucifix, and added:

"Had it not been for our alliance with our coreligionists, we should long since have been drowned in the all-engulfing sea of Islam, should we not?"

"Let us also think of the late King David Kuropalat, the first unifier of the original Georgian lands. He helped the Emperor more than once by leading his troops both against Barda and against the Saracens. Thousands of Georgians drenched the soil of Syria and Mesopotamia with their blood in those wars.

"Nor was it for nothing that your father, the late King Bagrat, allied himself with the Byzantines and was repeatedly aided by the Greeks. Is it not so?"

Zviad paused for a moment—he had an impression that Giorgi was about to object; but as the King did not speak, he said:

"Last but not least, we must think not only of the past, but also of the future. Armenia fell fighting against superior forces, our common enemies. And who else will help us tomorrow or the day after, in the forthcoming battles against the infidels, but Byzantium? We have the young Christian Rus in the north. But who will help us in the south?"

"As for the Emperor Basil, I would say this: Ships come and go, and some of them perish by accident, but the sea always stays where it is, no matter how much it rages. Is it not so, sire?"

"If we were to compare the Emperor to a ship, then the people would be the sea. There are all sorts of things to be found in the sea, and sometimes one sees offals floating in it, but its depths hold untold riches that I shall not even attempt to list.

"I often hear you deriding the Catholicos and our voracious bishops for their obsequious attitude to everything Byzantine, and I laugh with you, sire. Neither do I approve of their servility. But it seems to me that we ought to respect, and indeed to borrow, all the good things that the Armenians and Greeks can offer. We should not, however, borrow from them anything bad, for we have plenty of bad things of our own, do we not, sire?"

As he fell silent Zviad saw Giorgi's eyes flash and his lips twitch. Now he felt absolutely certain that the King was going to object. But suddenly the door swung open and Queen Mariam came in. She picked up a burning candle from the niche and went to her bedchamber, without, however, shutting the door with a bang as she had done before.

Giorgi cast a glance at the half-open door and got up. He paced the hall, closed the door, and resuming his seat, fixed his eyes on the crucifix with an only candle burning in front of it.

Zviad bowed to the King and wished 'him a hesitant "good night."

Giorgi was so absorbed in his smoking that he did not notice Zviad taking his leave, until he was within a few steps of the door. Then the King raised his head and called after him:

"Zviad, come back! Sit down here!"

Zviad was surprised. It was contrary to Giorgi's habit to call back his envoys after he had given them their final instructions.

Zviad approached the King, who was sitting by his nargileh with such a stupefied air that it looked as though he had forgotten he had called Zviad back.

The commander-in-chief stood motionless beside the King, observing the signs of his silent suffering. Giorgi's hair had fallen in loose strands on his forehead. His cheeks were hollow, his face sunken.

Everything, even his dishevelled hair, bore witness to the storm raging in the soul of this usually quiet, fearless man.

Zviad cleared his throat to remind the pensive King that he had called him back.

The King lifted his head and invited Zviad to take opium. Zviad thanked him, but not being an opium smoker, he declined.

Giorgi motioned him to an armchair. He was silent for some time. ... Then he fixed his blurred eyes on Zviad and said:

"Zviad, what will you answer if Melkisedek questions you about Shorena?"

Zviad was perplexed by this question.

"Whatever the King, my master, commands me to say."

Giorgi hung his head and repeated:

"Whatever the King commands.... Hem!"

"Why do you say this, O King of Kings!?"

"It is of no account. ..."

After a short pause he continued:

"Yesterday the Queen turned on me. ... That scandalmonger, the chaplain, appears to have been partly responsible. ... Queen Mariam must have told the Catholicos everything. If Melkisedek insists on Shorena's expulsion, on her being sent to Abkhazia and taking the veil at the convent of Bedia, don't consent on my behalf, not by any means! But if. ..."

He broke off again, and resumed after a little while: "But should the Catholicos prove too stubborn, tell him in my name that Shorena shall be given in marriage to Girsheli, the owner of

the castle of Kvelistsikheh, my mother's nephew. Try, however, not to bring the matter to such a pass. But if there is no other way out, comply with him. Say that Gurandukht has already sent Shorena her dowry and the King has given his permission. Say that she shall be married to Girsheli, the owner of Kvelistsikheh. Tell him this, and then let us wait and see...."

XXIV

Twilight had already descended on the mountains of Sarkineh when *Spasalar* Zviad stepped into the garden of the Catholicos.

The sunset glow was fading on the blossoming branches of the peach-trees.

From somewhere nearby came the shrill cries of peacocks.

The moment served Zviad's purpose: to steal unnoticed into the Catholicos' palace.

A tame deer skipped across the path, and then stopped under an almond-tree, cocking her ears. She cast a glance at Zviad and playfully bounded off towards the outhouses. Gigantic sheep dogs, barking furiously, rushed out at the newcomer.

Zviad knew from experience that dogs did not usually touch him, but these closed in upon him in such a tight ring that he had to fend them off with the scabbard of his sword, shouting at them the while.

He loathed to draw his trusty old sword against the curs, but he was in such a fix that he was on the point of doing so when servants ran out of the wooden outhouses and beat the dogs off.

The door leading to the balcony opened and the King's chaplain popped out his head, withdrawing it the next instant.

This encounter upset Zviad. To think that I had to run across that fox of a priest, he said to himself.

He was sure that Ambrosi would guess why he had come and would inform the Queen that same day.

The King and the commander-in-chief wanted to arrange things in such a way as to leave the Catholicos with the idea that he himself had foreseen the eventual complications, and had from political considerations stopped the persecution of Parsman, inasmuch as matters of morality and religion were under his jurisdiction.

As Zviad set foot on the bottom step of the staircase, the King's chaplain again put his head out.

He greeted the guest with a smile: "Come in, if you please, my lord Zviad."

Zviad, without relaxing his habitual frown, answered with a reluctant and casual "good evening" and quickly passed through the open door.

The King's chaplain led the way through three chambers. Everything around was redolent of frankincense and myrrh, and wax tapers gleamed before rows of icons in the niches. Crossing himself at the icons and groping his way among the pieces of furniture scattered about in disorder, the commander-in-chief followed the priest.

The door of the bedchamber stood open. Before entering Zviad caught a glimpse of Melkisedek's pallid face against a huge pillow.

By his head sat Father Stephanoz, the superior of the monastery, Metropolitan of Mtskheta Razhden, and Gayoz, the monk.

Three link-bearers stood behind the guests. Here, too, countless tapers flickered before icons and crucifixes.

As Zviad made his obeisances and put his lips to Melkisedek's hand, he became convinced that Melkisedek was not in the least ill.

He understood that this "illness" signified nothing but Melkisedek's unwillingness to meet the King for the time being.

Zviad was endowed with such bushy eyebrows and long eyelashes that at first glance he appeared to be asleep, yet he was a great hand at guessing other people's innermost thoughts.

Now it was clear to him why the Catholicos had missed the Council convened three days before by King Giorgi to discuss ways and means of procuring building materials and workers for Svetitskhoveli.

When greetings and mutual inquiries about health were over, Zviad felt ill at ease.

He cast about for some suitable opening but failed to find it at that moment.

The King's chaplain was standing nearby, looking with an ingratiating smirk at the commander-in-chief while his pea-green eyes seemed to say to him: "Tell us what you've come for and have done with it! Anyway I know everything without so much as your telling it."

The rest of the monks were sitting around the bed like so many church crows. These black-robed shapes seemed to keep watch and ward over silence.

Father Stephanoz, a black-bearded Goliath, was wheezing like a buffalo with a sore throat, snuffling through his warty nose, long and broadening out like a trumpet, and time and again stroking his beard, which reached to his puffy paunch.

The Metropolitan Razhden, his beard in wild disorder, was wearily blinking his bulging eyelids like one drugged with opium. Monk Gayoz, an old man with a goatee, a snub nose and protruding ears, sat with his mouth tightly compressed.

The Catholicos made a sign to the King's chaplain and he flopped down on a folding stool, so that he resembled a squatting squirrel.

His look had that wary watchful expression which is peculiar to a shrewmouse just emerged from her hole in the field.

Zviad felt uncomfortable, and stroked his bristly chin with the palm of his hand, a habit of his when excited.

He did not know what to say or do.

If he asked the Catholicos for a private talk it would for certain hurt the feelings of everyone present.

At long last he put together a few phrases and blurted out:

"I've come to you, Your Holiness, at the King's command. His leg is ailing again, or he would have visited you in person."

As he said this he pulled himself up as if to rise and then added:

"The King sends me to Uplistsikheh tomorrow morning...."

At that moment the Catholicos cut him short with:

"Lord Zviad, I'd like to have a short talk with you." The guests rose and made for the door.

Zviad, who was particularly averse to the forthcoming talk taking place in the presence of the King's chaplain, noticed that the latter saw the others out without showing any signs of going himself.

For a while Zviad stared, as if fascinated, at Melkisedek's haggard face. He became aware that the Catholicos, as well, did not care to open the talk before the chaplain had gone.

No sign of life throbbed on Melkisedek's face. Sky-blue veins, as delicate as the rootlets of mustard, meandered from his cheek-bones up to the temples.

He lay with his face upwards and his arms folded on his breast. His long, wrinkled hands resembled those of a dead man. His finger-nails were tinged with blue, and on the back of his hands thin veins stood out prominently, looking like those usually seen on an unripe tobacco leaf.

If for a moment he had closed his eyes, smaller than beads and blacker than the night, he could have been taken for a man three days dead.

His faded beard of wolf grey, thinned out between his chin and the underlip, was reminiscent of the hair of a dead man.

Melkisedek lay still.

He pressed his bloodless lips together so tightly that it seemed as though he would never open them again.

Zviad was pleased that no words would pass those lips in the presence of the link-bearers.

At last the King's chaplain came in, kissed Melkisedek's hand and left the chamber.

The Catholicos made a sign to the link-bearers and they too withdrew.

Melkisedek lay a little while without speaking, gazing at the east wall as if he were entreating the icons ranged there to give him counsel. At last in the dusk of the chamber his voice was heard:

"Twice has King Giorgi invited me, yet the state of my health prevented me from presenting myself before him and announcing to him what I am about to tell you now, my lord Zviad."

Zviad fidgeted and stroked his chin again, listening intently, because the very expression on Melkisedek's face proved that he had to say something really important.

"My health, lord Zviad, has been sorely afflicted. Thus willed the Lord. Neither do I wish to be the witness of Georgia's ruin; instead, I would rather have my eyes put out and my ears stopped, though they be gifts from God.

"For blessed are they who die before they have seen with their own eyes their native country laid waste by the despoiler.

"Blessed are they, too, who prefer to be gathered to the spirits of their righteous ancestors than to be alive among degenerate compatriots.

"Woe is them whose jeremiad resounds amidst the ruins of the temples and castles of their Fatherland.

"Paganism is pressing hard upon Christianity. At such a time, if we fail to maintain our firmness in faith and moral purity, the fortresses you are building, Zviad, assisted by the King, will prove of no avail whatever.

"The vault of our country will fall down upon our heads. Our Christian world will become the prey of the despoiler and even the fire-throwing swords that the false pagan Parsman is tempering by the King's order will prove powerless.

"For everywhere reigns the ail-seeing eye of the Maker and even one grain of mustard cannot fall against the will of providence."

Zviad expected that after this long preface Melkisedek would come at last to the point of his speech.

He listened with bated breath, but suddenly Melkisedek mentioned Bagrat Kuropalat, and as usual, began to expatiate upon his merits.

According to him, everybody, great and small, looked up to Bagrat, and that enabled him to unite Georgia. Nor had there been any other king since Vakhtang Gorgasal who had erected as many churches as he.

"Bagrat," said Melkisedek, "was the truest Christian King, and that is why Emperor Basil, the supreme father of Christianity, awarded him the title of Kuropalat and the green chariot."

It was quite obvious at whom these ambiguous words hinted. Their whole purpose was to lay blame on King Giorgi by inferring that Bagrat's son Giorgi preferred war against the Byzantine Empire to the titles of Kuropalat and Nobilissimus.

The mention of Basil sent Melkisedek into a fit of coughing and Zviad recalled how he had failed to kill Basil in the battle of Ukhtikeh.

He had thrown his horse at him in a hand-to-hand fight, and yet had not been able to find it in his heart to lift his hand against a Christian Emperor, running his sword, instead, through the patrician Basilisk Kuleib.

The coughing had exhausted the Catholicos and rendered him speechless. Once more he compressed his obstinate bluish lips, gathering strength to renew his harangue.

Zviad availed himself of the pause, and sliding the palm of his hand down his chin, managed to suppress his agitation. Zviad was totally devoid of eloquence. Even an ordinary conversation was a considerable strain on the powers of this taciturn man. When he spoke his face worked spasmodically, his nostrils dilated, he clenched his fists menacingly, he was at a loss for words, and being excited, used disjointed questions.

"If Emperor Basil is indeed the supreme father of all the Christians, as you have deigned to say, Your Holiness, why did he subject to torture the monk Zachariah, who was completely

innocent? He was not our spy, was he? Nor did King Giorgi send red buskins by him to Komnin. He was making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for his salvation, isn't that so?"

This piece of news visibly upset the Cathoiicos. The Metropolitan of Mtskheta, newly arrived from Byzantium, had just before Zviad's coming told Melkisedek about the condition of the Georgian churches in the Byzantine Empire, mentioning in passing the imprisonment of a certain monk named Zachariah.

Agitation coloured Melkisedek's cheeks. His reply to the commander-in-chief was curt:

"The monk Zachariah is not orthodox, he's an Armenian."

"An Armenian?" repeated Zviad, with a sarcastic smile. "Zachariah, the monk, is a nobleman of Artanuji, who belongs to the House of Arishiani. Nobody has heard, Your Holiness, up till now, that it is Armenian."

This information completely baffled the Catholicos. According to the Metropolitan Razhden it was Zachariah Darishiani who had been tortured in Constantinople. He was highly displeased at being caught in negligence towards his own flock, and by whom, of all men! By *Spasalar* Zviad, whom Melkisedek considered to have had a hand in the burning of the Oltisi temple. He flew into a passion and mentally cursed "that dotard," the Metropolitan Razhden, who had confounded Arishiani with Darishiani.

And yet the discomfiture did not abash the Catholicos. He "sharpened the sword of reprobation" and fearlessly turned against King Giorgi, though in an indirect way.

He did not omit to mention that King Giorgi was a blood relation of his, who at the age of 12 had been left in his charge by Bagrat Kuropalat of blessed memory.

After much circumlocution he at last reached the point of his speech.

He said that Giorgi was fond of loose women, that he had put out Kolonkelidze's eyes, moved his only daughter to Khursi's house and was keeping her as a concubine.

Although the King had given Zviad some warning, he was taken aback by this rebuff on the part of Melkisedek. It made Parsman's case recede into the background.

King Giorgi had consulted Zviad about moving Shorena from Gartiskari. On that occasion, too, Zviad had tried to dissuade the King from this act, but the King had pleaded the necessity of repairing the castle of Gartiskari.

Zviad remembered this circumstance and used it to set Melkisedek's mind at ease to some extent. As for keeping a concubine, Zviad affirmed that he knew for certain that in this respect, as well, the King was quite innocent, and that he must have been slandered by evil tongues.

He added that it would be better if His Holiness were able to verify the information given by some ecclesiastics before he relied on it.

These words deeply affected the Catholicos. He realized that the commander-in-chief was hinting at the King's chaplain. If the Metropolitan of Mtskheta could have confused Arishiani with Darishiani, was it not possible that the King's chaplain was liable to blunders? Why not, indeed—thought the Catholicos.

That the castle of Gartiskari needed repairs also seemed reasonable enough.

Having perceived some softening on the part of the Catholicos, Zviad straightened himself up and began to approach his main target from afar.

Stroking his chin, he announced that he had to impart to His Holiness some very important things in confidence.

"Your Holiness, the days of Parsman the Persian are numbered. The King and I, the dust beneath your feet, are resolved to put an end to that false man, and yet we fear that he may take offence at some trifle and flee to the Saracens, that's possible, isn't it? And sell our military secrets to the Saracens, perhaps. The Saracens are at our door, Your Holiness, aren't they? Parsman is likely to escape like Khursi Abuleli, don't you think?"

The mention of Khursi Abuleli made Melkisedek's blood run cold. He himself had anathematized Abuleli for "communing with Satan." He was seized by another fit of coughing, and Zviad took advantage of this second interval to begin in a low mysterious voice:

"Still the main point, Your Holiness, is...."

Having looked round and satisfied himself that with the exception of the saints in the icons nobody was listening to him, he continued loudly:

"We have to find some way to wheedle out of him the secret of the swords which cut iron and bone. That unholy man uses a certain Indian steel of unknown properties and adds to it a strange Arabian powder. Bagrat Kuropalat of blessed memory subjected him to tortures three times, threw him into a dungeon, threatened to have his tongue cut off and ordered each of his fingernails to be torn out, and yet not one word could they screw out of the hardened wretch."

Zviad stopped short, looked in Melkisedek's eyes, and confident that he was being listened to attentively, took heart and added:

"Among the captive women brought from Kvetari there is a servant known by the name of Vardisakhar. She is the tire-woman of Kolonkelidze's daughter. We intend to marry her to old Parsman. That infidel loves loose women. Who knows, perhaps that woman will manage to cheat him out of his secret."

Melkisedek was far from being naive. Zviad had not yet fully succeeded in convincing him that the King was not keeping Shorena as his paramour. The repairs of Gartiskari he thought to be only a plausible pretext. In addition he knew that King Giorgi had attended the "fortieth day" of Chiaberi's funeral in order to take a look at the "harlot."

And the King's chaplain had not concealed from him the quarrel between the King and the Queen on account of that woman.

Melkisedek held Queen Mariam in high esteem, speaking of her as "equal to the saints and zealous in church building."

It was clear to him: even if that "great temptress" were locked in Gartiskari Castle, she would be a menace both to the Queen and to the morals of the country.

Therefore Melkisedek seized the suitable opportunity promptly and said:

"I could give the King a good advice, lord Zviad."

Zviad cocked his ears.

"If you really desire to bewitch Parsman, I'd advise you to make that godless infidel marry Kolonkelidze's daughter. She is a real enchantress. She is said to have driven people much younger than Parsman out of their senses."

Zviad understood that Melkisedek's shaft was aimed at the King, nevertheless he stood his ground.

He made another attempt to leave Kolonkelidze's daughter out of this affair in some way or other. Pie gave his chin a more energetic stroke and replied:

"In any case, she's an eristavi's daughter, that woman, Your Holiness, isn't she? She can't be wedded to a Saracen or a Persian, can she? Besides, Vardisakhar is famous for her witchcraft. The daughter of a base-born cobbler, she became a concubine of the King of the Ossetians. When Chiaberi killed the Ossetian King by treason and took his castles, he captured this woman and made a present of her to Shorena, his wife-to-be."

After a short pause Zviad cast a glance from his large eyes under their overhanging eyebrows at Melkisedek. He saw that the Catholicos remained unconvinced.

"As for Phanaskerteli's daughter, this matter, too, has been settled beforehand, Your Holiness. The King has spared the life of Dachi, the youngest son of the Eristavi of Tskhra Tba. We shall give the daughter of Phanaskerteli to that wretch in marriage. We already have Dachi's consent. Whereas should the prosecution against Parsman proceed, the bridegroom would be put to shame, and Parsman's death would not in the least put to rights this deplorable affair."

The Catholicos was decidedly against any execution or burning out of eyes. Up till now he had demanded that Parsman be banished, but now, under the influence of Zviad's reasoned arguments, he came to the conclusion that Parsman's banishment would play into the hands of the Saracens.

He agreed to the plan of the commander-in-chief. Through his intercession the King would order the Chief Justice to suspend legal proceedings temporarily. Melkisedek still cherished the hope that such leniency would cause Parsman to turn to Christianity.

Zviad thought their talk had come to an end.

With his arms folded on his breast, with set countenance Melkisedek looked at the icons. Suddenly he turned his face to Zviad.

"All this is very good, my lord Zviad, but ... nevertheless ... a thing of the greatest moment has to be arranged ..." he said and darted his coal-black, beady eyes at the other.

"You are sagacious, lord Zviad, and know, without my saying it, what a heavy burden the Lord has laid on me in this world. Three days ago Queen Mariam came to see me. She sat in that armchair, over there, shedding hot tears, and complained to me of the King's depravity. She told me that she had set her heart on taking the veil at the convent of Bedia.

"You are aware that some day the Church of Georgia will canonize Queen Mariam, but if she became a nun at the present time it would doubtlessly be detrimental to our state.

"Therefore, lord Zviad, I demand that the King compel Kolonkelidze's daughter to take the veil at the nunnery of Bedia."

Zviad was nonplussed. Seeing no other way of retreat-he gave up the idea of resistance, and unhesitatingly, conveyed to the Catholicos the King's message, namely, that Gurandukht intended to give the hand of her daughter to Girsheli, the owner of Kvelistsikheh, and that the King had already given his permission.

This was considered a prudent measure by Melkisedek, who withdrew his demand.

It was past midnight when three link-bearers accompanied the commander-in-chief out of the garden.

Zviad dismissed the slaves and looked up at the star-spangled sky. Somewhere near the Bridge of the Magi a male pheasant was calling.

XXV

After Easter Queen Mariam looked eagerly forward to the arrival of the master of Kvelistsikheh in Mtskheta. She did not like her husband's kinsmen, especially Girsheli, but on this occasion he was her last hope.

The Queen did not doubt that as soon as Girsheli was betrothed to Shorena, Giorgi would immediately part from "that woman of lust," and the evil tongues would be deprived of their pet topic.

The spring spate came on at last, and that year the rivers Aragvi, Kura and Ksani were turbulent. Queen Mariam's hopes were checked, nor did anyone else expected the guests to arrive for some time.

No one had seen the owner of Kvelistsikheh in Mtskheta since his boyhood.

Everybody, high and low, praised him. He was known to have been kept with his three *aznauris* for seven years as a prisoner of war by the Saracens. One day, on the festival of Bairam, it happened that the Georgian captives were being conducted to the Caliph's palace.

The Georgians fell upon their guards, disarmed them, took away their war-horses, and having fought their way out of the country, returned to Kvelistsikheh a year later.

On Low Sunday at midnight seven knights in coats of mail, with a big escort, rode up to the watchtowers of Aragvi Gates.

They said that they had crossed the swollen Kura near Kvakhvrel, and that Girsheli's armour-bearer Kachaburaisdze had been carried away by the river. The attempt of the *aznauris* to save him had proved futile and at last the eristavi himself had risked his life to rescue his armour-bearer. His horse had been swept away by the current, but Girsheli, swimming broad stroke, had reached the half-dead man, thrust him like a baby under his arm-pit, and took him to the bank; then he struck out again after his horse and recrossed the river on horseback.

No less dangerous had been the crossing of the Ksani.

The next day Melkisedek celebrated the service of thanksgiving. Once again the whole population of Mtskheta started talking about Girsheli's courage.

In the afternoon, when the King, the Queen, the Catholicos and the bishop of Chkondidi with their entire retinue were sitting in the Great Hall, a warrior of stupendous stature in silver chain mail without any arms, his spurs clanging, came in, attended by seven mail-clad *aznauris*.

He made straight for the Queen, went down on one knee before her and kissed her hand; then he put his lips to Melkisedek's hand, embraced King Giorgi and kissed him on the lips. When he walked up to the commander-in-chief Zviad, the latter, tall though he was, turned out to be shorter than the newcomer by a whole cubit.

There was a bearish awkwardness in all his movements. The scars left by sword strokes on his cheeks disfigured the young man's handsome face. He had a deep rumbling voice. He seldom laughed, being very modest in his deportment.

The Queen did not take her eyes off the guest. When he had put his arms round the King, her keen eyes noticed that Giorgi gave his relative a rather cool greeting considering that Girsheli had just arrived after a long absence.

While crossing the rivers Girsheli had caught cold. He was coughing but made light of his indisposition.

Strange stories about Girsheli had reached Queen Mariam's ears: it was rumoured that he shunned the female sex for some reason, and that he was excessively addicted to wine and opium.

The Queen assigned to the guest her most beautiful maid-of-honour. When Anchabaidze's daughter was introduced to him, he became strangely confused, his large, protruding ears turning as red as a cock's comb.

He could scarcely string a few words together.

The Queen accounted for his embarrassment by the fact that he had become unused to the company of ladies during his long sojourn among the Mussulmans.

The dinner began with the ceremonies common at the court of the Abkhazian kings.

A ravenous appetite gnawed at the way-worn traveller. The savoury smell of the roast venison, the salmon fried on stone platters, the steaming lamb's shoulder-blades and stewed poultry made his mouth water, yet, being by nature well-mannered and modest, he tore off the meat in small pieces, as a deer nibbles at fresh buds.

He was even embarrassed at having to eat in the presence of ladies.

Everyone saw that the guest was not quite at home during the meal. He himself was surprised at the deep silence maintained by the feasting party.

Both the royal couple and their retinue were having their dinner with such an air that one would have thought that everybody at the table there was at loggerheads with the others.

After the meal the wine-drinking began.

The master of ceremonies was ordered to fetch the capacious drinking vessels of King Bagrat, and there was no lack of wines from Ateni, Khidistavi and Mukhrani.

Girsheli, who had been kept in the Mohammedan country long enough, was dying for wine; nevertheless, being aware that at the King's palace excessive drinking was not indulged in, he restrained himself as best he could.

The King did not relish the meal, but he drank copiously of the wine. From time to time he invited Girsheli to drink.

Girsheli, pleading his indisposition, would then put the goblet to his lips and sip a little, savouring the wine.

That day the feast broke up early, and none was more glad than Girsheli.

The King conducted the guest into the palace garden, where each shrub, each tree called back to Girsheli's mind his boyhood.

It was just in that rose garden that the King and he had chased butterflies, in the grove of fruit-trees yonder they used to set snares and spread fowling nets, in the hollows of those linden-trees they had watched the nestlings of the owls. They had been wont to climb these pear-trees, pluck peaches from those trees, under these walnut-trees they had waited for the ripe nuts to fall.

The pears were now twined in mistletoe, the branches of the peach-trees were withered and dried, the walnut-trees were hollow. The fig-trees had been cut down, and young shoots had replaced their ash-grey trunks.

They had often destroyed magpies' nests in yonder aspens and had shot arrows at turtle-doves alighting on those apple-trees.

Once, beneath this lime the King and the eristavi had sat on a donkey armed with shepherds' crooks and imagined themselves knights in armour.

Girsheli remembered the time they had brought the baby thrushes from yonder mulberry-trees.

A happy boyhood was peeping out of each hollow in each tree, from under each shrub. This was no longer the rose garden of their boyish joys. It was rather a grieving garden of sorrow.

They passed the falconers' house.

Hawks and falcons were dozing on their perches. The Chief of the Huntsmen brought Giorgi and Girsheli a number of dogs of various breeds. They surrounded the King. Girsheli was delighted with this sight. The greyhounds bayed merrily, the sleuth-hounds whined.

A black greyhound speckled with yellow leapt up at Girsheli and soiled his doublet of samite with its paws.

Giorgi rubbed the hounds behind their ears, put his hand into each dog's mouth, felt their soft ear lobes, cleared their eyes of rheum.

When the dogs were driven away, Girsheli asked his host:

"Where is your hunting leopard, Giorgi?"

"My cheetah went mad. We treated him for a long time, giving him the juice of the black henbane. At last he got too vicious, quite unmanageable, and one day attacked even me. The terror that struck my heart that moment has lingered in my body even to this day. It happened when I was walking in this garden without coat of mail or any arms. Ushisharidze, the courier, came running and drove his spear through the rabid creature."

"Where did you get that hunting leopard from, Giorgi?"

"It was a present to my father from the Byzantine Emperor."

"So now you go hunting without it?"

"Now I have not one but two of them. A Persian brought them last year when they were little cubs."

Two slaves led a couple of guepardes out of an outhouse. The male had a fine spotted coat. He bore a strong resemblance to a tiger. The beast's elongated, slender-flanked, graceful body, like that of a racehorse, was supported by long sinewy legs. His tail was longer than his body and light whiskers glistened around his tawny chops.

He was moving with his head to the ground, blinking languidly with his yellow-dotted feline eyes.

The female stopped nearby, stiffened her outstretched tail and looked, snarling, at the stranger.

Seeing the King, the male jerked his leash.

"Let him go!" commanded the King.

When the beast came close to them Girsheli grew uneasy and reached stealthily for his scimitar. Reassuring him, Giorgi bent over the gueparde and chafed him behind the ears. The beast closed his eyes voluptuously.

Giorgi chuckled and began to stroke the back of the motionless male. Suddenly the gueparde slipped from under his master's hand and made for Girsheli, growling. The slaves rushed up and dragged away the enraged beast.

"Where are they from?" asked Girsheli.

"They were brought to me from Hindustan. The Hindus call them cheetahs."

"Al-Hakim had twelve cheetahs larger than these," said Girsheli. "They were quite tame. They walked about in the Caliph's garden and harmed no one."

"Now I'll show you something you have never yet set eyes upon."

And, indeed, when they had crossed the palace garden and approached the deer fold, Girsheli was amazed.

He had been in Persia, but neither in the hunting park of the Fatimids, nor in the zoological garden of the Shah had he seen as many deer as these in one place.

He reproached Giorgi for neglecting them.

"These deer I seized from the father of Shorena, your intended, from the eristavi of Kvetari," replied Giorgi, fixing Girsheli with his steadfast look.

On hearing Shorena's name Girsheli's ears grew scarlet. To conceal his agitation and embarrassment he grasped the stakes of the fence, craned his neck, and leaning over the fence, began to scan the forest of antlers.

The dams looked particularly pitiable. They had shed their winter fur and were now quite hairless. On some of them; there was in places a sparse growth of down like the tender blades of frost-nipped grass that spring up on the meadows in February when it is neither winter nor spring and the mountains are still piebald because the snow is melting.

The young were cowering against the dry masonry of the inclosure and dozing with drooping heads. Poor things, they were shivering even in the rays of the sun!

"The fact is," said Giorgi, "that these deer have been reared from infancy in the mountains. They are well cared for here, nor are they short of food, but the climate of Mtskheta disagrees with them."

The Chief of the Huntsmen opened the wickerwork gate and the King led Girsheli into the inclosure.

From all sides came the smell of animals and dung. Girsheli glanced at the young.

"It seems they have caught cold, poor things!" he said.

The appearance of the stranger disturbed the bulls. The King drew his attention to the most beautiful among the dams.

"This is Shorena's pet, Nebiera. She was brought up by Shorena herself," said the King.

"Does she still take care of her?" asked Girsheli.

"Up till now the eristavi's daughter lived in Gartiskari. At present she lives in Khursi's house. When she becomes your bride she'll decide herself whether she'll look after her Nebiera or not. Shorena's chaplain, the monk Atanaseh, told me that she's longing for Nebiera."

Girsheli had not yet seen Kolonkelidze's daughter. He stared at Nebiera so fixedly that he might have been trying to form some judgement of his fiancée from the shape of this beautiful, lion-coloured creature.

Giorgi dismissed the Chief of the Huntsmen and the slaves, saying that he and Girsheli themselves would lock the inclosure.

When they were left alone he, too, looked at Nebiera. He recalled those few happy moments passed in Kolonkelidze's house that dreadful night when his soldiers had scaled Kvetari Castle. He turned again to Girsheli.

"Don't think that Shorena is any ordinary girl. She's an archeress and a huntress."

"A huntress?"

Girsheli had heard many things from his aunts about Shorena's beauty and he could not imagine that this rare beauty was good at archery and hunting.

A passionate longing to see his future wife came over him. He was on the point of asking to be shown his intended one, but he remembered that Gurandukht, Shorena's mother, was due to arrive in Mtskheta, and in her absence he would not be allowed to meet Shorena. The request stuck in his throat and instead he said:

"To tell the truth I was dying for wine at dinner today, but I was shy of the Queen and the Catholicos."

Giorgi felt ashamed, realizing that Girsheli must have noticed his coolness. He gave Girsheli a simile, slapped him on the shoulder and said:

"Fine! Let's look back on old times and have a drinking bout."

Then he looked Girsheli up and down and added:

"If you want to have a real carousal we shall have to change our attire."

Girsheli wore a doublet of samite and over it a silver coat of mail. What better clothes could he have put on for a visit, he wondered in surprise.

"No, I mean we shall have to disguise ourselves as low-born people."

A smile flashed across Girsheli's face. There was nobody among the King's courtiers whose clothes would fit him.

He asked Zviad for his largest leather hunting coat, yet even that proved too small for this *devi-like* man.

Then the King bethought himself of his courier Ushisharidze, but Girsheli's gigantic body looked ludicrous in the borrowed garment. Even Ushisharidze's clothes turned out to be short for him.

At last they found Mamamzeh's leather coat. On leaving Mtskheta Eristavi Mamamzeh had left it behind, already faded and with much of its pile worn off.

XXVI

When the King had dyed his beard with henna, Girsheli stared at him in surprise.

"Do you know, Giorgi, you remind me in a queer way of Al-Hakim. The Caliph used to wear just such a reddish beard. The Saracens would take you for his blood brother."

"My father assisted the Caesar in his war with the Saracens. It is said that my father was a lover of women. Who knows, perhaps he knew the Caliph's mother."

Girsheli smiled.

"I forgot to tell you that the very night when we made away with our guard, Caliph Al-Hakim went out for a walk, never to return."

Girsheli added:

"So now you can proclaim yourself deity of the Saracens."

Laughing they walked upstream along the bank of the Aragvi.

"God forbid, Girsheli, that you should repeat that to anybody. The Catholicos would charge me with heresy for even such a trifle."

They stopped for a short while.

Huge waves rolled down the infuriated river, carrying trunks of pine-trees, lumps of ice and drowned sheep.

The swollen river had borne away a team of yoked buffaloes, and only heads and necks of the unfortunate animals could be seen above the water. They bellowed most piteously, casting their eyes towards the river banks.

One of the pair would occasionally toss up his end of the yoke, and then the other buffalo would be overwhelmed by the water.

"So are sometimes two men tied together with one yoke by Fate," said Giorgi, and Girsheli replied:

"And in the long run it drowns either one or the other."

"It can drown both of them together."

Some young men stripped themselves on the gravelly beach and struck out after the water-borne animals.

"In our youth we more than once swam across the Aragvi in such spate. I dare you to do it now!" said Girsheli to his cousin.

Giorgi remembered the never-ending competition with the friend of his youth.

"Why not! If you could cross the Kura the day before yesterday, why can't I get the better of the Aragvi?"

"To tell the truth the Kura was not so swollen that night," said Girsheli, and then added after a moment:

"There was one low-born man who used to be our better."

"Who? Druidze?"

"No, I think it was Gabo. What was his family name?"

"Gabo Kokhrichidze. We are just nearing his house," said Giorgi and looked again at the river.

The young swimmers had by this time overtaken the buffaloes. Giorgi, being fond of buffaloes, was glad of it.

He often wondered why the lowing of these powerful brutes sounded so melancholy.

He put the same question to his friend.

"Do you not think," answered Girsheli, "that the strong have to bear more sorrow in this world? That is why the lions, tigers and leopards are always surly while squirrels and mice always scamper about merrily. In Arabia I used to listen to the lions roaring. They would come out into the open desert and thunder there in a frightful way. It sounded like a strange wailing, making one's blood run cold."

They followed the bank in silence.

Girsheli pointed to a house.

"Do you remember, Giorgi, how we gave our tutor the slip once on Low Sunday. Some sots treated us to wine, then a hunchback thrust his company upon us and took us down into the basement of that very house, over there, to the whores. Some elderly men hooted us off shouting: 'What do you want here, with the whores, you callow chicks!' They shooed us out, and we slunk away in disgrace."

On hearing this Giorgi went off into a fit of laughter.

This time women were sitting on the flat clay roof of the house, looking down at the turbulent rushing of the river

A few lads were pulling fishing nets out of the water.

Giorgi and Girsheli stood on the edge of the bluff looking on.

One fisherman spread out his net and instantly salmon and trout started dancing on the gravel.

"Let's go shares in fish," shouted the women from the roof to the youth.

As they walked along Girsheli surveyed the streets and lanes, looked attentively at the orchards and the flat roofs.

One by one he recalled the events of his boyhood. The fights of the cocks and rams, the masquerades, the carols on Christmas Eve and at Easter, the times he had stolen away from home on moonlit nights, his tutor's scolding, fishing in the Aragvi with nets or harpoons, building snow towers and battering them down.

Beguiling their way with such recollections they came to the district of Princes' Baptism.

When they reached Khursi's house, Girsheli urged Giorgi with youthful eagerness.

"We look like lowly born, don't we? Let's have a peep into the courtyard. Let's catch a glimpse of the Pkhovian girls from afar at least."

The sweet remembrances of youth had rejuvenated Giorgi, too. He wanted to do something like this himself but not in company with Girsheli.

The guest persisted with the same theme:

"Do let me cast just a glance at Shorena, be it ever so quick."

"He might put a false construction on my refusal," thought Giorgi, and led Girsheli into the garden of Khursi's house.

It was dark on the balcony.

He wished with all his heart to find the inmates absent.

Suddenly the dogs began to bark.

A Pkhovian woman came out into the garden to meet the newcomers. She was short, with a pock-marked face.

"Good evening," she greeted them.

They asked after Shorena.

The woman gave a start.

"The monk Atanaseh has taken Shorena and her attendants to the wake to Zedazeni. Only Vardisakhar stayed at home as she was ill. Would you like me to call her?" she asked.

Neither wished to see Vardisakhar, so they turned back without delay.

The woman was very curious to know what village they were from and why they made inquiry about her mistress.

They told her that they were travellers from Klarjeti, old acquaintances of Kolonkelidze.

"Then wait a bit, please, they'll come back before long," entreated the Pkhovian.

"We'll come again soon," said Giorgi.

They left the garden and turned into a lane.

When they were going by the King's stables Girsheli asked the King to show him the colts whose praises he had heard before.

On entering the stables they felt that peculiar smell which is not unpleasant to lovers of horses.

Seeing their master the war-horses started neighing.

Giorgi loved these steeds immensely. They had shared with him the hardships and perils of many a battle.

They had as many scars as the still young body of their master. Giorgi used to say in jest:

"Well, we who are men kill one another of our own free will, but why on earth do we punish these innocent creatures?"

He went up to each horse in turn, and fondled their ears, their manes, stroked their fetlocks, kissed their eyes, called each of them by endearing names.

And these beautiful, faithful animals enjoyed his caressing, whinnied, snorted, nodded their heads lovingly to their master.

Giorgi turned to his guest.

"I say, Girsheli, if you ever drove me off my throne some day, I'd be sure to apply for the post of a groom, and look after the horses and be the happiest man of all."

The owner of Kvelistsikheh was gazing with admiration at the war-worn geldings, at the stallions with sword-scarred breasts, the Arabian colts and the Tekke mares.

He turned to the friend of his youth.

"Do you know, Giorgi, in battles it was the horses for whom I was sorry most of all. I remember thinking to myself in a battle: 'If it spare my horse I'm ready to stop the enemy's arrow with my own breast.' When the waters of the Kura carried away Kachaburaidze it was his horse that aroused my pity. I risked my life for the horse. I gave mine to the groom and swam after my armour-bearer and his horse."

They walked across the stableyard.

A torch was flickering in Gabo's house. It was an ordinary, rustic *darbazi* with its ceiling supported by a single huge column. A few pieces of gammon blackened all over with soot hung from the rafters.

Gabo was pottering about in expectation of the guests.

Over the blazing hearth in the middle of the room a goose was hooked to a chain hanging from the ceiling. A woman sat by the fire. The goose was slowly turning, its fat dripping into an iron platter placed under it on the ground.

The woman was alternately dipping a feather into the fat and basting the goose with it.

There was a delicious smell in the hut which made Giorgi's and Girsheli's mouths water.

Besides King Giorgi's friends they found there only one stranger, a man called Undilaidze, a shepherd from Javakheti.

"Well, boys, I wonder what you make of my guest," said Giorgi, addressing his friends.

Neither Gabriel, nor Kitesa, nor Estateh could recognize the guest.

The King did not wish the strange shepherd to learn Girsheli's identity and so he said to the others:

"All right. Be seated. First of all let's drink some wine and then I'll tell you where this man comes from."

Gabo clambered up into the garret and took down a three-year-old smoked fat-tail of sheep. Poverty reigned in the room. Rags of shoddy hung on the walls, Bolsters and thin mattresses worn to tatters lay heaped in the corner. Three cradles stood by a bedstead, the babies mewling piteously.

The tiny boy cried most helplessly, then he began to hiccup, and at last went off into a fit of coughing. Then he crowed like a cockerel.

The women were busy laying the table, and nobody bothered about the children.

Giorgi walked over to the little one and tried to soothe him by putting his forefinger on the child's chin and repeating several times:

"Ah-goo, Ah-goo!"

The sheep's fat was dropped into the pot. Boiled sheat-fish was served up as the first course. The fragrance of the pot-herbs assailed the hungry Girsheli and whetted his keen appetite even more.

Giorgi settled down by the hearth, took the feather from the woman's hand and began to dip it into the melted fat and then slowly grease the goose.

"How many children have you, aunty?" Giorgi asked the woman.

"I? Two."

"Twins?"

"Yes, twins," answered the woman, embarrassed.

"May they grow up in peace."

He dipped the feather again into the platter, passed it over the goose and again asked the woman:

"And whose is the third one?"

"My sister has come to see us. That little one is hers. Poor child! He has whooping cough."

Girsheli was ravenously devouring fish. Estateh kept fetching jars filled to the brim with wine from the *churi*—a huge earthen jar sunk into the ground.

"I've been to dinner at my cousin's today; he's left me half starved, the beggar!" said Girsheli as he rolled up a sizable piece of flat white bread, soaked it in the gravy and crammed it into his mouth.

At the sight of the moist wine jars Giorgi felt thirsty.

Girsheli held out another bowl of wine to Estateh, saying:

"Here's to our Glakhuna!"

Giorgi took the vessel from his guest, raised it and said:

"First let's drink the health of my guest Ikunkelidze!"

Girsheli smiled, but kept silent.

"This man has come to Mtskheta to get married. He has crossed the Kura in flood. Such is the rule of the brave: face dangers for the beloved!"

Glakhuna looked about him and being satisfied that all the women were gone, added:

"No, boys, it's not true. He's got a whore in Mtskheta and risked his head for her."

Gabriel noticed that Glakhuna was competing with the stranger in drinking. He whispered to Estateh:

"Pour out some brandy into that Goliath's drinking horn or else he'll outdrink all of us."

Then he turned to Giorgi.

"Eat more, Glakhuna, because that wine is insidious, mind!"

Glakhuna tore off a leg from the goose. Girsheli ate in silence with great relish, tearing the meat-with his wolfish teeth, gnawing the bones, licking his greasy fingers.

The others munched with no less appetite. The sight of them excited Giorgi's hunger, too.

When toasts had been drunk in honour of all the revellers and the members of the family Giorgi glanced at the stranger, Undilaidze. Being sure that he was dead to the world, Giorgi lifted up an ox's horn and announced:

"Good people, allow me, too, to propose a toast. You remember, don't you, the playmate of our youth, my mother's nephew, Girsheli?"

"Of course, Glakhuna. We used to catch fish in the Aragvi with him," cried the three.

"Well.... He is said to have run away from the Arabs and to have arrived in Kvelistsikheh at Easter. To Girsheli's health, boys. You must remember that he used to try conclusions with us in drinking. If he were here with us now, we'd make it warm for him!"

"Right you are! Would to God he were here!" bawled out Gabo, bursting into a hearty guffaw.

Girsheli bared his beast-like fangs, emptied his drinking horn and began gnawing at the goose's rump. Suddenly his face flushed. Lurching strangely he let fall the fat piece of meat into his bowl.

He felt nausea, yet he pulled himself together and clasped his knees with both arms.

Gabriel filled an ibex horn brimful with wine and said:

"According to the rule let's drink King Giorgi's health."

The horn was passed round and the revellers went on silently with their eating.

Estateh broke the silence:

"I wonder what the luckless King Giorgi is eating just now."

"I suppose he's eating fat-tail the same as we are. He can't afford anything better," said the shepherd jokingly.

King Giorgi, who at that very moment was eating the smoked fat-tail, laughed and wiped the fat from his moustache with the palm of his hand.

He was afraid that the shepherd might recognize him and gave a wink to Gabriel, which meant another ox's horn for Undilaidze. The master of the feast refilled the drinking horn and proclaimed:

"I propose: the health of your family!"

The horn of Mukhrani wine finally put the Javakhetian shepherd to sleep. His head slumped and he fell into a stupor.

Girsheli was also bemused with wine. He drank steadily, at the same time watching the bowls and horns being emptied by Giorgi.

"A drinking bout with me will be the death of you, Ikunkelidze!" exclaimed Glakhuna and in a breath emptied the large bowl and handed it over to Girsheli.

The latter gave him an ingenuous smile.

Kitesa, Estateh and Gabo looked on in amazement. They had never seen the King drink so willingly.

Girsheli was already conscious of his intoxication.

He began trying to persuade Giorgi to stop carousing and go to have a peep into Khursi's house.

Giorgi was aware that if they left off drinking Girsheli would be bound to drag him to see the Pklrovian women. The drunken man would be unable to control himself when he saw his betrothed, and the whole country, would know about it.

Giorgi made a sign to Gabriel to find some pretext for continuing the revels.

They had already finished drinking to the peace of the deceased, they had drunk to the memory of friends fallen in battle. At last they had toasted the Spirit of the Place.

Then rose the old huntsman Estateh.

"Pledge me in this: Godspeed to that milter who is making his way up the Aragvi this evening and bravely fighting his way through the turbulent waters..."

This toast annoyed Giorgi.

This milter put him in mind of Girsheli. He was angry, but kept quiet.

The ox's horn was making the round again.

Giorgi took the vessel from Girsheli, and having emptied it to the bottom, turned it upside down on the nail of his thumb.

Now it was Kitesa's turn.

"Pledge me in this: Godspeed to that female deer who has been shut up by King Giorgi in the fold and who in rutting time roars for her soul's mate."

The toast called to Girsheli's mind Nebiera, and the latter made him think of Shorena. He leaned on his kinsman's shoulder and whispered in his ear:

"If you don't come with me right away I'll go alone and see the Pkhovian maidens."

Jealousy stung Giorgi's heart.

"Wait a bit, I'll come in a moment," he said, and having filled the ibex horn to the brim, he raised it and said:

"I give you: Godspeed to that stag who in the forest of Sapurtsleh is now following his mate and if another bull edges in, will gut his rival."

The toast to the stag knocked Girsheli off his feet.

Feeling his stomach turn over, he jumped up and rushed out of the room, but in the darkness stumbled over the corn-bin. The giant measured his length on the earthen floor.

Four sturdy men had difficulty in lugging Girsheli into the shed. They laid him on a heap of straw and covered him with a felt cloak, but Gabriel's cloak barely reached the knees of the Goliath.

Presently Girsheli let out a mighty snore.

Giorgi turned to his friends and said:

"Do you know, boys, who that man is? He's Girsheli, my mother's nephew."

"Man alive! Had you told me in time I wouldn't have fuddled him so unmercifully," said Gabo ruefully.

All three of them went up to the sleeping man and kissed him.

"You know, boys, the man seemed familiar to me but the scar on his face put me off the track," said Estateh.

It was already getting dark when those three accompanied their guest home. Giorgi expressed his wish to go into the stables and when they went in he ordered Gabriel to saddle the gold-coloured stallion.

Gabriel stood as if rooted to the spot with amazement. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, I never! To saddle at this late hour!"

Glakhuna flew into a rage quite unusual for him.

"King Giorgi bids you! Saddle the horse at once!"

Gabo, grumbling, lay hold of the saddle.

Estateh and Kitesa gaped stupefied at the King.

Quiet and civil by nature, he had rarely shown such grim obstinacy.

At last the eldest of them, Kitesa, plucked up courage and dashed up to the King, saying:

"If you don't tell us where you're going we shan't do your bidding."

"Hold your tongue! Estateh, bring me Ushisharidze, right away, jump to it! I have to go to Zedazeni this evening!"

There was general amazement.

"The Aragvi is raging madly! Just imagine going to Zedazeni tonight!"

The grey-haired Kitesa fell on his knees before Giorgi.

"You may kill us, all three of us, but we won't let you go to Zedazeni tonight!"

Gabriel put down the saddle and, kneeling before the enraged man, exclaimed:

"We'll cross the Aragvi in your place. We'll do anything, whatever you bid us!"

"No, you cannot go in my place."

"Then do with us what you will. We won't saddle the horse for you, Glakhuna."

With these words Gabo carried the saddle back to its place. Kitesa, still on his knees, implored Giorgi in the name of their lifelong friendship not to trample on Gabo's "bread and salt." As a last resort he began to implore Giorgi by invoking the soul of his mother.

Giorgi loved his mother more dearly than anybody else on earth. The mention of his mother calmed and softened his strangely grim obstinacy.

"All right! Get along with you, all of you! Let me alone!" announced Giorgi in a firm voice. Then the drunken man kissed each of his friends in turn.

"You're our master. May your road be strewn with roses," replied Kitesa.

XXVII

Giorgi walked along muttering some incomprehensible words. To his friends watching him from a distance he seemed to be uttering threats against somebody.

They followed him, hiding themselves behind the stone parapets, keeping him under constant surveillance, waiting to see where he would go.

Glakhuna walked across the market place and turned to the left towards Khursi's house.

He stepped into the courtyard and stood still.

Seeing this the three friends became convinced that the rumour spread in Mtskheta about King Giorgi being in love with Kolonkelidze's daughter was true.

They looked at each other and went back, leaving the King alone.

Giorgi went into the orchard, looked up at the moon rising from behind the mountains of Zedazeni.

The blossoming peach- and apple-trees seemed white with snow. A light northern breeze set the tops of the trees swaying gently.

The shadows of the branches, cast like embroidered patterns, trembled on the ground. Moving along the garden walk he felt as if the whole earth were reeling in the breeze.

The smell of the earth, the smell of the previous year's roots, the fragrance of the peach blossoms rose all around like incense.

Drunkenness made him more audacious. At this moment he made light both of the Queen and the Catholicos. Nothing mattered now, not even what the evil-tongued gossips at the palace would prattle.

The chandeliers were ablaze with light in Khursi's house.

Shorena must have returned from Zedazeni, he thought.

"I could defy now even my father, Bagrat Kuropalat, if he rose from his grave, let alone Girsheli," he said to himself almost audibly.

The sky was so high! The stars twinkled, their violet eyelashes quivering so gently! Never in his life had Giorgi felt so happy.

The Queen had been all but forced on him by his tutor and the Catholicos, just as some neighbour's homely daughter is palmed off on a poor low-born youth.

In the long run he had grown sick of the too compliant maids of honour.

He had never loved Queen Mariam. He had never yet tasted the sweet wine of true love.

He gazed at the white-gleaming fruit-trees. Love, wine and the fragrance of flowers steeped his heart in delightful warmth.

Once more he looked up at the windows.

He was sure that Shorena had arrived because the sky was so high, and the stars, too, were closing and opening their violet eyelashes with such a languid tenderness....

Dreams and fairy visions had intoxicated the whole world.

This was the first time since his youth that Giorgi had entered the courtyard of Khursi's house. The doors of the stables stood open, the outhouses had been pulled down, only the majestic flight of stairs remained intact.

From somewhere came the hoarse cries of Indian parrots.

He managed to get halfway up the stairs without meeting either the slaves or dogs.

"A fine thing, the way that old addle-pate, monk Atanaseh, guards the Pkhovian prisoners!" thought Giorgi.

He regretted now that he had not slipped disguised into this house before.

There were only a few steps left for him to mount when suddenly a tame cheetah stepped out of the passage and halted at the top of the stairs.

A phosphorescent light gleamed in the eyes of the beast. Giorgi was surprised to find that this beast was still alive.

He went up two more steps. The cheetah moved gravely forward to meet the stranger. Giorgi had no armour on, and he involuntarily grasped the hilt of his sword.

At that moment a woman ran out of the house after the beast. The sight of a strange man made her start.

Meanwhile the cheetah stepped up to Giorgi and sniffed his knees like a dog.

He held out his left hand intending to stroke the beast, though doubtful of the reception it would give him. Simultaneously he arranged his sword more conveniently in his right hand.

"Don't be afraid, my lord, he won't do you harm," called the woman standing at the head of the staircase.

Giorgi was embarrassed to think that the woman imagined him faint-hearted.

He went into the corridor and saw there a woman in a cornel-coloured kerchief who seemed familiar to him.

"Good evening," he greeted her.

"Whom do you wish to see, my lord," asked the woman.

"The mistress of this house."

"The mistress of this house?" repeated the woman, and after a short pause added:

"She has gone to the Saracens."

"Who lives in the house at present?"

"We, the Pkhovian prisoners."

"Who are you, my good woman?"

"The tire-woman of the eristavi's daughter."

"And Shorena? Where is your mistress?"

"Shorena and her servants have been taken to Zedazeni by our chaplain."

"What is your name, please?"

"Vardisakhar, my lord."

Giorgi had heard of this woman. He looked her carefully up and down.

"And who are you, my lord?"

"I'm the King's courier, Glakhuna Avshanidze."

The mention of King Giorgi threw the woman into confusion.

"Come in, please," she said humbly, and led the way to the central hall.

In the four corners of the hall candles were burning in shoulder-high candlesticks of pure silver. In the niches wax tapers were feebly flickering.

Deer's antlers and skins hung on the walls. Round about stood open travelling sacks, trunks and boxes.

In the middle of the hall stood a small silver table with a parchment scroll on it. Vardisakhar conducted the guest to the table, and invited him to be seated in an armchair.

Without standing on ceremony, he began to scan the scroll.

"What is this?" he asked Vardisakhar.

"This is the eristavi's daughter's *Book of Dowry*."

Vardisakhar subjected the visitor to close scrutiny.

Judging from his clothes she concluded that he was low-born, so she spoke freely to him.

She seemed to have been inspecting Shorena's dowry and it had thrown her into ecstasy. She began to show Giorgi everything piece by piece.

She prattled with the King in a ready manner, praising her mistress.

According to her, Shorena was gentle-hearted and fair of face, she treated with equal kindness the highborn and the low-born; in her a womanly gracefulness was blended with the lion-heartedness of a true knight.

Fate had proved treacherous towards her masters. The spies had reported to the King against Kolonkelidze, charged him quite falsely with high treason.

Zviad, the commander-in-chief, the destroyer of Kvetari Castle, who had burned out the eyes of the guiltless, unfortunate eristavi, she overwhelmed with abuse.

She accused Zviad of having murdered Chiaberi, Shorena's bridegroom.

"And then the King himself wished to wed her, but Melkisedek and the Queen did not allow him. And yet God looked after Shorena...."

Then Vardisakhar passed on to her own life. She told Giorgi that once she too had been happy; that the King of the Ossetians had courted her (she concealed, however, that she had been his concubine, and that Chiaberi had poisoned him).

Suddenly she dropped her chattering and asked:

"Still, what is your business with Shorena, uncle?"

"I've been ordered to deliver the message to her personally."

"If it is so, wait a little. I believe they'll appear before long." Giorgi himself wondered what he, an unwelcome guest, would have to say if Shorena actually came in at that moment.

From Vardisakhar's prattle he drew the conclusion that she had not yet heard about the rivers being in flood. Among other things she said that she had not looked out of doors for a whole week, having been busy counting and packing Shorena's dowry.

They were expecting Gurandukht's arrival the next day. Saying this she led the guest to the open travelling bags.

She showed him with awe various sacred vessels. There were icons in casings of embossed gold, crosses in silver caskets studded with jacinths, rubies and sapphires.

She took out a cross of the holy tree ornamented with oriental pearls, the Bible and the Psalter illuminated with coloured miniatures, and cases for them made of chased gold.

Out of a trunk of ivory she produced ear-rings of filigree gold chainlets with pendants set with balas rubies and Nishapur turquoises.

Wonderful carcanets hung with pink amethysts she put round her neck, and rings with red, yellow and roseate jacinths on her fingers.

She got out looking-glasses inlaid with gold, and began to try on the ear-rings, putting them to her cheeks, and slipping the rings on her fingers.

She thought that their splendour would dazzle the eyes of the shabby "low-born."

Whenever the jewels and gems shone for a moment on Vardisakhar, their brilliance enhanced still more the loveliness of her face, at the same time seeming to emphasize Giorgi's plebeian appearance.

Then she opened a trunk ornamented with crosses, and exhibited golden goblets, silver bowls, trays of embossed silver, pitchers with slender necks curved like those of cranes.

Giorgi took up a golden goblet. On it were represented a herd of deer, males and females following each other, and each couple separated by strange figures of men with wolves' heads.

On a large pitcher was depicted a hunting party, archers shooting at pheasants, heads of the bloodhounds, gracefully arched backs of fleeing gazelles. Other pitchers were ornamented with shoots and leaves of grape-vines shaped by the master with a painstaking thoroughness.

Then she produced high golden baskets for toilet requisites: bowls for grinding cosmetics, combs, gilt tooth- and ear-picks, crystal-handled tongs for hair-waving, snake-like twisted hair-clamps.

Giorgi scrutinized all these objects with studied attention. He took them one by one from Vardisakhar, examined them closely, and praised everything.

She unpacked felt carpets, Chinese and Indian damasks, extensively embroidered with gold thread, silver "ewers for the bath-house, coloured embroidered bath towels, chemises fringed with pearls and crimson rubies.

Giorgi watched her take out *sheidishes* of rose, vermilion and the colour of the pomegranate flower. They were followed by shirt fronts, coloured slippers and shoes sewn with pearls.

Giorgi took up a pair of *sheidishes* which were iridescent like a pheasant's neck. On their legs deer's heads were embroidered with twisted silk threads. Another pair was wrought with patterns of leaves and bunches of grapes.

Vardisakhar displayed dresses made of Chinese and Indian silk damask shot with orange and sea green, dresses of flowered Kerman wool; golden belts and heavy girdles, white, black and reddish; ladies' warm coats, yellow, green, violet, with fringes of strung golden beads, the colour of the woodcock; leather coats with gold-threaded braids and fringes of strung pearls.

Before Giorgi were displayed articles of bedding, cushions, coverlets, valises, huge travelling carpetbags.

Kerman rugs lay about, together with gold-threaded bolsters, pillows and mats.

Afterwards Vardisakhar showed him horse's harness: saddles mounted with gold and strewn with gems, saddle-cloths of deerskin with gold-threaded borders, silver breastplates, war-horse's armour, Byzantine, Georgian and Persian, head-stalls, reins, saddle girths with silver buckles.

She was holding in her hand a cap stitched with seed-pearls when suddenly she put it on and smiled at her guest.

"Now I'll be an eristavi's bride, for a moment, at least." Next she muttered sadly:

"Alas! There was a time when Fortune smiled on me, but the round of the heavens hath wheeled wrath on my head!"

Giorgi looked at her intently.

He remembered Zviad's words that she was said to be a cobbler's daughter. He gazed fixedly at her, wondering how such a fair woman could have been born to a cobbler's wife.

He glanced at her cap sewn with pearls and the quail-coloured silk dress.

Giorgi recalled that this very cap and this quail-coloured dress had been worn by Shorena on the evening she had been introduced to him at the gates of Kvetari Castle.

The woman that stood before him was queenly, indeed.

Nearby lay the hunting leopard, its head on its paws.

Vardisakhar's face was slightly freckled, but white as apple blossom, and she had corn-coloured tresses.

The quail-coloured silk was very becoming to her, though obviously another's property, being too tight for her full breasts and hips. The bodice, just where the teats stretched the silk, was somewhat worn.

Perhaps she really is a witch, thought Giorgi. He asked her a premeditated question:

"Whom is the eristavi's daughter going to marry?"

The woman kept silent. She was amazed that a man living in Mtskheta could be ignorant of the forthcoming marriage while the whole town had been gossiping all day long about it.

"Tell me whom," Giorgi repeated.

"By the order of the King she's going to be wedded to Girsheli, the master of Kvelistsikkeh," answered the woman, uttering Girsheli's name with a timid respectfulness.

Giorgi started up.

At that moment he firmly believed that he had lost Shorena for ever. The word "Girsheli" stuck into his heart like a sharp nail. He asked insidiously:

"What sort of a man is Girsheli, I wonder?"

"He's a hero, a great archer, an eristavi of the first rank, a nephew of King Giorgi's mother."

Vardisakhar intended to enumerate other virtues and merits of that knight, but the guest cut her short with a new question:

"The eristavi's daughter is happy, no doubt?"

"My mistress did love another, Archegos Chiaberi, but what can she do now? We are King Giorgi's captives. Who has given us, poor souls, the right to choose whom we like?"

"So that you'll do whatever the King bids you, won't you?" Giorgi said playfully and cast his eyes at her high bosom.

The woman caught his glance and in her confusion was at a loss for words.

"What a pity I am not King Giorgi!" said the visitor with affected grief. He looked again at her heaving bosom, and again smiled at her, this time more boldly and more lasciviously.

"And what would you do if you were King Giorgi, I'd like to know?"

"If I were King Giorgi, I'd keep you as my paramour." And with these words he stepped up to her, looked hard into her troubled eyes, and passed his right hand over her breast.

Vardisakhar blushed.

"Take your hands off, you wretch!" she cried out angrily, and slapped Giorgi's right hand with her left.

Giorgi changed his right hand for his left, still continuing to caress her. In the next instant he put his right hand round the woman's waist and pressed her to his chest.

He felt the softness and warmth of her body.

Uncontrollable desire possessed the inebriated man. Claspng the woman tightly in his arms he bent her head backwards, endeavouring to touch her red and sensuous lips, but the woman bent back like the supple branch of a fig-tree.

Then she straightened herself, and giving the man's chest a violent push, exclaimed:

"If you are truly sent by the King, behave as befits the King's messenger, you dolt!"

Nobody had previously dared to address such words to King Giorgi.

Indignation, wine and lust got the upper hand of him and he cried out:

"I myself am King Giorgi!"

The woman gave him an arch smile.

"Of course, your beard is just like Giorgi's."

The visitor laughed and seized Vardisakhar again. The struggle did not last long. Locked in his iron grip she began to weep.

"Let me go or I'll scream!" she cried.

Giorgi removed his arms. Vardisakhar pushed him again with her hand against his breast. He staggered backwards and almost fell stumbling over the cheetah that was lying there. The beast bounded aside and stood glaring at the stranger and snarling in a most terrifying way.

The phosphorescent glare reminded Giorgi of his own cheetah that had gone mad. Quick as lightning he drew his sword and floored the beast, piercing it through the heart.

The sight of the blood shocked the woman. Giorgi wiped his sword clean, sheathed it imperturbably, and again approached Vardisakhar.

He was now almost certain of his victory over the frightened woman.

She began to wriggle and cry, but the arms that were squeezing her body were too strong. The drunken man covered her cheeks and neck with kisses. Then ripping open her blouse he bit her nipple.

Vardisakhar let out a wild scream, and when Giorgi, startled, released her a second time, she swung back her right hand and gave him a hearty box on the ear.

The drunken man came to his senses, and his face turned scarlet.

He stepped over the sprawling carcass of the cheetah and strode out into the night.

XXVIII

Starlings had returned to Mtskheta.

Konstantineh Arsakidze watched them from the balcony. The plane-tree really swarmed with them.

Twilight was falling softly.

Arsakidze could still descry the blackness of their plumage scattered here and there among the leaves and glistening like the armour of beetles. The birds were incessantly twittering and babbling in chorus.

They were not likely to stop. Glad to come together again they seemed to be telling each other curious stories of strange lands.

Konstantineh was tired after the day's work. Leaning against a pillar he looked on and listened.

He had an odd sensation, as if before long he would be able to understand the mysterious language of the birds.

He was keenly conscious of his utter loneliness.

Recollections of his boyhood came to mind.

The starlings had been wont to gather in spring just by his window and spend the night in the maples. They would bring vernal joy into the mountains.

And this recollection brought with it the image of his mother, all in black, fussing about in their courtyard, within its walls of dry masonry so often to be seen in Mtiuleti. He imagined he could see the ravens in the nearby firs, seeming to invoke the night with their insolent cawing. Starlings bustled noisily in the maple foliage.

In his mind's eye Konstantineh could see quite clearly the flock of black sheep, and hear the bleating of the lambs.

In his mind he followed the black figure of the old woman.

His mother potted about. She panted after a sheep, trying to catch it.

Before she had finished milking the dam a yearling butted in, and falling on its knees, began to worry the empty udder.

Konstantineh remembered how he had helped his mother at milking. He used to drive the sheep into the byre or, grabbing them by the ears, he would drag them to his mother sitting on a tree stump. He fancied he could hear their discontented bleating.

He saw his mother fussing over the hearth.

She was kindling a fire with the dry bark of a cherry-tree.

She was setting milk for cheese. ...

Then she began to pray. ...

She commended her only son to the saint of the icon.

Then the old woman went to bed, hoping to see her son in a dream at least.

Arsakidze heard somebody calling him by his Laz name "Uta."

The starlings quietened down.

In the garden silence reigned.

The moon had not yet risen.

Like black chimeras were the silhouettes of the lindens, plane- and pear-trees.

Arsakidze liked to gaze into the night when the world was shrouded in gloom and only some slight sound indicated that life was still pulsing on earth.

It seemed to the lonely man on the balcony that he heard his mother say to him in the Laz language:

"Take some milk, Uta."

Closing his eyes he strained his mental powers, striving to understand what else the distant image of his mother was saying to him.

But the mind was powerless.

He regretted now that he had not taught his mother to write. She had to send him greetings from far away by word of mouth.

Sometimes she sent him chestnuts, medlars or wild pears, picked by her motherly hands, a pair of Pkhovian leggings, multicoloured socks or a Pkhovian *chokha* with embroidered skirts.

And these things brought with them so much love and warmth that they meant a lot to the tired master.

His mother had sent word that she had fallen ill and feared lest she should breathe her last in the absence of her son.

"The news has come to Kvetari that you have met King Giorgi. The King must have a mother; he must love her. Adjure the King by his own mother's salvation, entreat him on my behalf to allow thee to come to see your mother. How I long to set my eyes on you, be it only once, that I may bless you before I die, and that done, I will yield up my breath without

complaint. May then God receive my soul. If I knew the way, if I knew the path to you, I would come myself somehow or other. I could work somewhere near you. I would not spare myself. I would come hobbling along on my swollen legs. I cannot ride a horse as I did of old. But if I come who will attend to your father, who sleeps all alone in the Pkhovian earth? Who will sacrifice meat-offerings for his soul's salvation, who will order service for the repose of his soul? So it is better if you yourself come to see your old mother." These were the words brought to Arsakidze from his mother by Bodokia, the mason.

Bodokia, a Laz, had a Pkhovian wife. But she objected to going down to the valley and leaving the bones of her ancestors. So Bodokia himself visited Pkhovi once every three months to see his family.

After Parsman the Persian had been deprived of his rank and honours, Arsakidze was appointed the King's Chief Architect.

He would have to ask the King for permission to go to Pkhovi. Yet he was reluctant to do so.

He longed to see the old woman, too, but the business of building Svetitskhoveli had been dragging on interminably.

The higher the structure rose, the more complicated became the master's work.

In winter the scaffolding would collapse, causing heavy casualties among those working on the building. The death of some skilled mason would seriously impede the daily routine of the work.

To replace a labourer was relatively easy, but to find another mason was a far more difficult thing.

Konstantineh was aware that it was good to begin well, and still better to end well.

His work was going on under Melkisedek's patronage, but in the main the Catholicos put obstacles in Arsakidze's way. Frightened at the way Parsman had worked, he was apt to see "paganism" in each trifle. Enamoured of the lifeless Old Byzantine schemes the old man could not help waging war against Georgian motifs.

As for Arsakidze, he had studied at a Greek school in Byzantium but after becoming an independent craftsman he had turned aside from the way of his tutors.

(It is always so: he who has never been an apprentice shall never be a master. Neither shall he who always hangs on the lips of other masters.)

Melkisedek looked with suspicion at non-Christian masters. He preferred an untalented Christian master to a gifted Persian or Arab.

Melkisedek's never-ending interference and instructions all but drove Konstantineh mad. He personally hated those masters who knew only how to cross themselves.

Melkisedek used to send Arsakidze some bungler professing to be an orthodox Christian, with a recommendation that he be put to work.

Real masters hate bunglers meddling with art, and Arsakidze was relentless with these "botchers."

For their part, they resented his scoldings and ran to the King's chaplain, or even to the Catholicos himself when he came to the construction site.

They slandered Arsakidze, complaining that "this heathenish Pkhovian" persecuted the Orthodox Christians and promoted his own countrymen.

The previous year falls from the scaffoldings had killed the mason Gariselaidze, the sculptor Kvelaidze, the carver of ornaments Kvirikaidze, the King's painter Otobaia, the sculptors Rostomaidze and Tsvergrdzeldize.

That year a wall had tumbled down during an earthquake and crushed more than a hundred artisan slaves. Out of 300 Pkhovians only 60 were left alive.

Unwholesome food and epidemics had decimated the numbers of those working on the building.

Over the stack of corpses some hedge priest would hurry through the funeral service, then they would be loaded on to an ox-cart and dumped into a pit outside the town walls, and neither a man, a tombstone, nor a word would preserve their memory. Arsakidze saw all this.

His heart was sore but he did not dare to raise his voice.

To leave the temple at such a time and go to Pkhovi would be treachery towards his work.

The price of mastering art is one's heart's blood. If one does not devote all one's powers to that cruel idol nothing worth while shall come out of one's hands.

Night settled in the orchard of Rati's house.

The stars burst into bloom and the western edge of the sky reddened.

The moon hung over the Monastery of the Cross.

From far away came the whine of the jackals.

In the garden cats were miaowing.

Suddenly Konstantineh started in the darkness. Nonai was pulling him by the sleeve.

"Do come and eat a little, my boy."

He sat a long time in Nonai's room by the fire after reluctantly taking a few spoonfuls of wheat grain boiled in honey.

He thanked Nonai and rose to wash his hands.

A casual glance at his finger-nails reminded him that his foot had slipped on the scaffolding that morning. He had gripped a post and broken all the nails of his right hand.

He whetted his knife and set himself to trimming the nails. Nonai got up and presently brought him a book in a frayed binding.

"There's something written there about trimming nails," she said. He turned over the pages and read:

"If someone trims his finger-nails on the Day of the Monster let him expect a quarrel with his sweetheart.

"If on the Day of the Cow—some unexpected joy awaits him.

"On the Day of the Hare—a quarrel with the loved one is to be expected. On the Day of the Serpent—a bite from a scorpion. On the Day of the Horse—large bribes. On the Day of the Lion—fulfilment of desires."

Konstantineh looked up, smiling at his servant.

"Whose book is this, Nonai?"

"Parsman the Persian one day presented it to my late master Rati."

Arsakidze sat long by the hearth.

He read the *Lunar Calendar*, holding it close to the fire-light.

Nonai was asleep on a bearskin in a corner of the room. She was talking in her sleep.

A small pebble flew in through the window.

On hearing the sound, Arsakidze looked about him; then he resumed turning over the leaves of the *Calendar*.

The second pebble fell on the floor at his feet.

He rose and went out into the garden.

From the grove of oaks came the voice of a horned owl.

He was about to turn back when he noticed a white-veiled, shadowy figure under the linden.

As he drew near it he saw by the moonlight that it was Vardisakhar.

He led her up into the hall.

Vardisakhar seemed alarmed, and was gasping as if she were short of breath.

"Put out the lights," were the first words of the visitor, "somebody may find us here."

Arsakidze thought this request strange.

He brought an armchair for her.

Vardisakhar looked round at the shields and hauberks hanging on the walls.

And again she asked the youth:

"Put out the lights, please."

"Why should I put them out? Nonai, Rati's maidservant, is sleeping. Who else might come to my house at the dead of night?"

Arsakidze drew up another armchair and sat down beside her.

Vardisakhar had become still prettier in captivity.

After an approving look at his former girl friend he put his arm round her neck and kissed her on the cheek.

The woman did not resist. He hugged her round the waist, pressed her closer, pushed back her head and clung passionately to her full lips, sweet as the honey fresh from the honeycomb.

Konstantineh undid her wheat-coloured tresses, which were bound three times round her head.

"Let's sit on the *takhti*," pleaded the youth.

"I'd rather stay here," replied the woman with determination.

And although the youth repeated his entreaty, Vardisakhar would not yield.

Konstantineh bent over her, lifted up her plump form without an effort and laid her by force on the broad wooden bedstead.

The woman struggled to her feet.

" 'Tis better to be seated," she declared.

Arsakidze took a seat by her side as before.

This time Vardisakhar shrank from his embraces, and he grew angry. Suddenly she fell on her knees before him, put her head in his lap and burst into passionate, childlike sobbing.

Konstantineh did not ask the reason why.

"Meeting me after so long a parting has moved her to tears," he thought.

He calmed her with caresses and flattering words.

She asked for water.

As soon as she had drunk her fill, she cheered up and started chattering in her own way.

She told him that Shorena had been to Zedazeni and had returned from a perilous journey the day before. Her mother Gurandukht had met her on her return home.

"Mother and daughter folded each other in their arms, sobbing loudly. Stones would have melted with pity at sight of them. Soon there will be an engagement."

Vardisakhar extolled Girsheli, the lord of Kvelistsikheh.

Arsakidze instinctively did not like the man. Nor was he pleased at the way Vardisakhar praised him. However, he listened silently to the prattling woman.

"Yesterday I saw Girsheli sitting on a horse," she went on. "Riding on horseback became him very well. He was with King Giorgi. They were attended by peerless knights clad in armour from top to toe. Giorgi excelled Girsheli, the owner of Kvelistsikheh, in handsomeness, in stature and build. The King was in a suit of gilded armour, and the eristavi in a silver-plated one."

Arsakidze was very jealous by nature, particularly of Vardisakhar. To that day he could not forgive her the fact that she had been a kept woman of an Ossetian king.

"Still, who's more to your liking, Vardo, the King or Girsheli, the eristavi?" he asked in a mocking tone.

Vardisakhar did not seem to feel the mockery.

"To tell the truth, King Giorgi is. I don't care for hulking fellows."

Arsakidze frowned but did not say anything.

They heard a noise coming from the balcony.

The host went out.

It was the dog, which had been left in the corridor. He let it out and again barred the door.

Vardisakhar was standing when he re-entered the room.

"I've got to go home now, because Shorena won't go to bed without me. I undress her." she said.

"Wait a little!"

Konstantineh walked over to her.

He made her sit down again on the *takhti*, took a seat close to her and, pushing aside a strand of her hair, kissed the lobe of her ear.

Vardisakhar resumed her prating.

"I'd like to tell you a secret. Gurandukht. Shorena's mother, confided it to me on oath."

Arsakidze became interested.

"Was it so important what Gurandukht told you?" he asked.

But Vardisakhar turned obstinate.

Arsakidze kept on insisting.

"Then swear that you will never reveal it to Shorena."

Arsakidze took a treble oath.

"Would you believe it," began the woman mysteriously, "Shorena never was your foster-sister."

"Then who was?" Arsakidze interrupted her in surprise.

"Mzekalai, the child of Kolonkelidze's concubine."

"And where is Mzekalai?"

"She died in the cradle."

Vardisakhar paused, looked round and went on:

"Thus ...Mzekalai was thy foster-sister."

"Why then have we been told that we were foster-brother and -sister?"

"Probably they knew what the custom was in Pkhovi ... Gurandukht may have been afraid. ... That's why she assured you that you were related by being fostered by one nurse."

At these words Vardisakhar looked at her lover with a roguish smile as if asking him with her eyes whether he was glad to be Shorena's foster-brother no more.

Arsakidze was amazed at the news, and did not even grasp the meaning of the woman's smile.

"Shorena has been brought up in the *eristavi's* castle in loneliness. No *aznauri's* children were near her. The slaves could not make friends with a noble. From your childhood you two grew up together, and that is the reason why you were called foster-brother and -sister."

With these words she gave the young man another inquiring smile. However, in his face she could read nothing but wonder.

She got up, preparing to go.

"It's so long since we last met! Why are you in such a hurry, Vardo?" he exclaimed, and looking into her eyes, added:

"Perhaps you have cast your eyes on some other man?"

An instantaneous blush suffused the woman's face.

That blush, too, seemed suspicious to the youth, and he remembered that when she was praising King Giorgi a strange light had shone in her eyes.

He hugged her once more.

"Blow out the light," she beseeched him again.

He answered resentfully:

"No, I won't do it."

He encircled her waist tightly with his right hand while with his left he unbuttoned her blouse.

"Don't ... don't ..." implored Vardisakhar, "let me go home just today ... I'll steal away from my mistress some other day ... I'll come to stay all night if you like.

"Some other day?..." reiterated the youth still more angrily. He seized the struggling woman and forced her on to the *takhti*, which was covered with rugs.

Now he had lost all control of himself. ...

Greedily he kissed her throat, her honeyed, fevered lips.

The woman's body was quivering. Her eyes glittered, the lips under his kisses became the colour of ripe cornel ... She continued to wriggle in his arms.

He clasped both her hands, and when he leaned forward to reach her breast with his lips, he let go her hands and jumped up.

"What's that on your breast?"

The woman coloured and lay quite still.

The youth bent over her and looked hard at the woman's breast until the thought flashed through his mind that it was the mark of human teeth.

He shrank back and shouted at her in mad fury:

"Harlot, whore!..."

Vardisakhar started up, adjusted her blouse and said imploringly:

"Don't insult me, please, please! I'm guiltless. I swear by your life that I've never shared my love for you with anyone else!..."

"Don't swear by my life! Swear by your own! You strumpet!" he cried, stamping his feet in impotent rage like a naughty child.

"Keep your temper, be quiet!" entreated Vardisakhar. "Be calm, I'll tell you everything."

"What more can you tell me than I have seen with my own eyes!"

The woman stood up and as she intended to button her shirt she became aware that in his insane jealousy Konstantineh had torn off three pearls.

"Where are my pearls?" she asked.

Arsakidze found them and thrust them into her hand.

"A present from your new lover, eh? You wouldn't be likely to leave them here. I know you're greedy for presents."

"Shorena yesterday gave me this chemise with pearl buttons."

Konstantineh smiled sarcastically.

The woman added quietly:

"If you don't believe me, think what you please."

The coolness of the woman again sent him into a rage.

"Tell me at once whose bite this is, or else you won't leave this house alive."

Vardisakhar flounced up to him and pressed her hand to his lips.

"Hush, you madman! Be quiet! Don't wake up the servant! Just a moment! I'll tell you immediately!"

"I'll tell anybody who comes that you're false and dissolute."

Vardisakhar put herself to rights; then she leaned back in an armchair with her arms crossed on her breast and recounted what had happened to her three days before.

"It was the King's courier who came to Khursi's house. It was he who did this."

"I wish you had been slain by that courier!"

The woman sat sobbing piteously.

Arsakidze continued to abuse her.

"If you are not a whore why did you let in a stranger, and you quite alone?"

"Only think! Could I, a slave, shut out a king's messenger?! Moreover, I was not alone. The handmaid Melania was at home, but, unfortunately, she was asleep."

"If you do not tell lies tell me the name of that courier."

The woman thought a little, raised her head, looked into the young man's eyes and said hesitatingly:

"Glakhuna Avshanidze."

Arsakidze started.

"That's why you praised King Giorgi, you whore!" were the words rising to his lips, but he checked them on the tip of his tongue, thinking to himself: "That's even worse. If it were King Giorgi he would not have confined himself to biting."

Now he did not doubt that his *tsatsali** was faithless to him.

He flung at her the wrathful words:

* It is customary among the Georgian mountain tribes for a young man to have a girl friend called *tsatsali*. —Tr

"Get along with you, instantly! Out of my sight, for good and all, you strumpet!"

Vardisakhar burst into tears, knelt before him and began to kiss his knees.

"Don't cast me aside, I'm innocent, quite innocent!"

"If you don't go away I'll go myself, at once!" he shouted.

The infuriated woman leapt to her feet exclaiming:

"I'm going, but mind, I'll take my revenge!"

When Arsakidze saw her out and down the stairs he noticed by the light of the moon that Vardisakhar's shoulders were quivering.

This came to pass on Friday, on the Day of the Monster.

XXIX

Arsakidze did not sleep a wink that night.

Dogs were barking under the linden-trees—some intruder must have alarmed the house.

He got out of bed, buckled on his scimitar and stepped out into the garden.

Nobody was in the orchard. The dogs surrounded their new master, wagging their tails, pawing him, frisking and fawning.

The flowers and bees were asleep.

A curious droning sound came from the apiary, as though these much-loved insects were humming some tune in their sleep.

From afar, from a long way off, came the solitary cry of a male pheasant. Somewhere in the valley of Tsitsamuri he was bravely combating the night.

White clouds, white all over, shimmered on the mountains. These clouds, these olive-coloured mountains were so diaphanous that one expected them any moment to lift and dissolve into the ether.

Down, below them, the Aragvi dale resembled the Black Sea slumbering in some bay of Lazistan.

Arsakidze stood lost in remembrance of the sea and his childhood. ...

He went back into his chamber and ungirt his scimitar.

No, sleep would not touch his eyes. ...

His mind was disturbed by Vardisakhar.

... Her treachery? It was not unexpected. Much more amazing was it that Shorena was not his foster-sister! Was Mzekalai his foster-sister? He remembered now his mother mentioning time and again that name. Once she even had a memorial service celebrated for Mzekalai.

He lay on his back in the darkened chamber, his thoughts still on Shorena.

... When by the end of June a new queen bee makes her appearance in the beehive, all the males rush in a body after the fleeing queen. ... Like them all his thoughts took wing and flew in pursuit of Shorena.

Vardisakhar had told the truth.

Now he recalled all the particulars. After Mzekalai's death Arsakidze's family had moved to Lazistan. They had sojourned there five years, and had spent ten years in Constantinople. Afterwards they had returned to Pkhovi.

He remembered the time he had met Shorena as clearly as if it were the day before. She was then a hoyden with curly hair falling about her cheek-bones. She used to romp about, whistling like a boy. She rode bareback, clutching the mane of the horse.

Arsakidze made up his mind to see Shorena without fail in the near future. Since Gurandukht was in Mtskheta it would not be difficult.

As was his wont in Pkhovi he would visit Kolonkelidze's family without a formal invitation, without standing on ceremony, but simply as a foster-brother calls on his foster-sister. However, he reminded himself that he had too much to do that week, and that would prevent his making a visit. What then? Could he not meet Shorena alone, face to face?

To be sure he could not ask Shorena herself about their relationship, having sworn an oath to Vardisakhar. (The fact that she had deceived him did not release him from his obligation.) All the same, he would have to find out somehow or other whether Shorena knew of the secret.

In truth, something extraordinary had happened: with one blow the friend of his childhood stood transformed in his eyes.

He recalled the night in the church of Samtavro. after the evening service.

He had caught sight of the raven-black cassock of the King's chaplain.

Veiled, with head bent, Shorena had walked on among her attendants. Her face wore a quaint expression of inner pain.

She shunned the throng of inquisitive women.

A sorrowful pallor seemed to envelop her face, her shoulders, her figure.

The church-goers gloated over her, yet she moved on haughty and noble, bearing with a proud air the burden of her cruel destiny.

At this thought a double vision rose before him: Vardisakhar at Shorena's side.

Merry, talkative, buxom, lascivious, enjoying life, ever thirsting for wealth and complaining of her fate, this woman had been made only for lust, for bed.

... It was just like her: she was about to lose her lover and yet she cried over her three lost pearls, the greedy soul!

Arsakidze recalled, too, how Vardisakhar used to dance attendance on Kolonkelidze, the *eristavi* of Kvetari.

...Kolonkelidze was a voluptuary. He was always after the chamber-maids, the kitchen-maids and the girls helping with the poultry, women who always stank of dough, grease and the hen roost.

Poor Gurandukht, his wife, had had a hard time trying to put all his bastards out to nurse.

Once Arsakidze himself had come unawares upon Kolonkelidze as he was pinching the sturdy bare arms of Vardisakhar, whom he had squeezed into a corner of the laundry. And she was sniggering. ...

When the images of Shorena and Vardisakhar rose in Arsakidze's mind side by side, the ex-concubine of the Ossetian King was instantly obscured by the luminous beauty of Shorena.

Vardisakhar's hands were somewhat large and rough like those of a man. When she combed back her hair, yellowish, rather large ears came into view. Then, too, she had a deep chesty voice, somewhat resembling a man's bass ... whereas Shorena was as delicate as the wings of a seraph and as sad as the sorrowing angel on the wall of the Kintsvisi church.

Her voice was clear and sonorous like the small silver bells attached to the *khevisberi's* banner. Her whole nature was as soft and warm as some costly fur... .

Arsakidze turned over towards the wall and closed his eyes, trying to fall asleep. He had to mount the scaffoldings early in the morning.

From far away came the jingling of the caravan bells and the cracking of the whips seemed to rend the blackness of the night; however, they could not drown the sound of the Aragvi. A bird began to sing—it could hardly be a nightingale for it drew the sound too long. It was calling its mate through the dark, thought Konstantineh.

Dogs began to bark somewhere. Then silence fell again. He heard Nonai calling the fowls. A tremulous ray of light passed through the window. ... At last sleep began to weave its gossamer across his closed eyelids.

He had a dream. He was walking through cornfields on a serene autumn day. The heavy ears of wheat brushed his knees. All around him poppies were flaming. Here and there guelder-rose and hawthorn bushes shone red with their berries. A huge, many-branched oak stood on the plain. Wild pigeons sat in its branches cooing sweetly....

Water raced down the irrigation canals from the grassy hills, and the drought-cracked earth drank it up avidly.

Clappers had been set along the ditches. High and clumsy, they were nodding their heads like tired camels. Whenever the water filled a scoop at the end of the beam, the beam rose,

emptied the scoop and fell down with a loud bang on a wooden chump. Then it righted itself, the scoop filled up again, the beam rose once more and tipped out the water. The incessant banging on the chumps resounded far away in the fields.

There were countless clappers there. ... They stretched away over the cornfields as far as the eye could reach. The whole valley rang with the endless banging.

And how amazing it was! In spite of the frightening noise of the clappers the ripe cornfields were full of bears. The beasts wallowed about, roared, and trampled down the crops.

Arsakidze walked on and, lo and behold, there stood Shorena on the other side of the brook.

She jumped it with the agility she had been wont to display when hunting in her native Pkhovi.

She was coming to Arsakidze, parting the sea of ripe wheat. She wore a snow-white dress and a *sheidishi* the colour of cornflowers.

The ears of wheat bowed to her, the poppies likewise gracefully bent their heads.

All at once wild pigeons darted from the oak-tree and perched on Shorena's shoulders, cooing softly.

On seeing Shorena two bears began to growl. One was the colour of ripe chestnuts, the other like withered ferns.

They rose on their hind legs and with a roar strode manlike towards Shorena.

Arsakidze hurried on cutting through the waves of wheat. He was anxious to be in time to rescue her, to hew down the beasts with his sword, to save his sweetheart.

He tried to pull out his sword but someone had bewitched it. The spikes of corn entangled his feet, his legs were becoming as heavy as though they had been plunged into a sea of pitch.

The two bears did not cease their roaring, they crushed the golden heads of corn and red poppies with their paws. They were on the verge of falling upon Shorena and tearing her to pieces.

"Harai!" shouted Arsakidze, but his voice failed him.

"Harai!" he cried, and struggled through the corn-field, nay, through the sea of pitch. The spikes of wheat stuck to the skirts of his coat, he could not stir from the spot...

Both the bears lay down and Shorena set her foot on the head of one of them. The edge of her *sheidishi* became visible—on it were vine leaves embroidered in gold thread. Then she leaned over the two bears and began stroking their heads.

Arsakidze, benumbed and dazed, watched his dearest friend caress the beasts. ...

The pigeons sitting on Shorena's shoulders were chanting the most dulcet psalms. ... The red poppies bent their stalks, the golden ears of wheat bowed down to her, paying homage to the desired bride.

The bears at her feet, overcome by awkward timidity, languidly closed and opened their eyes. ...

Just at that moment Nonai woke him up. A pale light filled the room.

"Get up, my lord. Scorpions have broken through the mortar in the wall."

XXX

Fear was foreign to Arsakidze.

"To hell with the scorpions! Let me sleep!"

"If you don't believe, I'll show them to you, my lord!"

Saying this Nonai showed him two scorpions on a wooden spike.

Arsakidze was surprised.

"I killed one in my room yesterday, and the other this morning at your bedside."

Arsakidze got up.

They lit the lamps and set themselves to fumigating the house with sulphur. They searched the walls of the great hall, the parlour, the bedchamber, the servants' room, looking for 'holes, but they could not find any scorpions.

Nonai took up a lamp and went down into the cellar in search of them. Everything there was covered with cobwebs and smelled of mildew.

Along the walls hung rusty chain mail and helmets, armour pieces for men and horses, saddles, cuisses, brassards, breastplates and hauberks, various kinds of arrows, antlers of stags and horns of ibex, spears, war clubs and maces, rusty scimitars.

The basement was full of bats hanging from the ceiling upside down. The lamplight startled them, and they began to squeak and to fly round and round, dashing against the ceiling and the walls, some of them plopping down and flapping their wings in the dust.

In one corner there stood an old Persian cupboard inlaid with nacre. It was littered with scrolls of parchment, fragments of icons, old-fashioned bracelets, ladles and goblets.

Arsakidze was fond of old curiosities. He forgot the search for the scorpions and applied himself to rummaging in the cupboard. He took each thing in his hand, dusted it, examined it and deciphered dates and inscriptions.

Among the goblets he discovered a curiously shaped object entirely covered with dust and blackened wax.

It turned out to be a branding iron of brass with a fox's head carved upon it.

Arsakidze held it close to the lamp but no date could be detected on it.

"What's this, Nonai?" he asked.

Nonai fell silent, staring blankly at her master, and pressing her clenched hand to her lips.

Arsakidze insisted.

"It is not discreet to speak ill of the dead," she kept repeating.

Arsakidze adjured Nonai to explain to him what that iron with the fox's head meant.

At long last the woman revealed her secret.

"It happened in the year of the plague. I had just been brought to the house from Abkhazia. On Friday, the third of February, in the afternoon, the earth shook three times.

"That year Gartiskari Castle was damaged. In Uplistsikheh the halls of the King's palace were utterly destroyed. King Giorgi had gone to war. I forget with whom he fought.

"Three weeks later there broke out the pestilence. It took off many lives among the monks of the monastery. It killed the Metropolitan of Mtskheta.

"By and by the plague reached the garrison troops. Within one month it laid low about one thousand warriors at the castles of Kari and Mukhnari in the Aragvi Gorge. The soothsayers foretold the Second Advent of Christ. The hermit Antimoz, likewise, began to prophesy.

"He announced to the people that there were heretics in Mtskheta, and that it had incensed the Lord.

"Khursi Abuleli with his major-domo Rati was denounced to Catholicos Melkisedek.

"Khursi could not be apprehended because he had been hiding with the people of Mtiuleti before fleeing abroad to the Arabs. The lowest hedge is soonest got over, as the saying goes. So the mob, armed with flails, broke into Rati's house. For a short while the unfortunate man took refuge in yonder tower. It was at that time that they pulled down the roof of the tower, and setting fire to it, forced him to come out.

"They were for stoning him, but Melkisedek took him under his protection.

"Then the King's chaplain Ambrosi came out. 'Let's brand that devil's meat,' he suggested.

"The ill-starred man was dragged into this very cellar.

"The branding iron was made red hot, and they seared him with the fox's head as a heretic and Satan worshipper."

"Well, do you think, Nonai, that Rati was really guilty of some crime?" asked Arsakidze.

"Do I?...I'm an unlettered woman, can I understand that much? Yet as to the devil, though I was in Rati's service for 10 years. I never set eyes on any devil in this house."

Arsakidze was silent. He took up the branding iron again and began to examine it more closely.

Nonai burned sulphur in every nook and corner.

At breakfast Nonai started to talk about the scorpions.

She said that Rati's son, the luckless Vacheh, had been stung by the scorpions in the cellar.

"From olden times there was a curse upon Rati's family. It was said that every descendant, from the third generation, was doomed to be stung by a scorpion."

These words made Arsakidze smile in imagination, yet he listened to the old maidservant to the end.

"Rati's son came back from hunting late after dark. He entered the cellar and began groping about in the darkness. Just then a scorpion got at him."

"And this occurred on the day of the Monster," added Nonai mournfully and concluded with some advice to Arsakidze:

"You are in King Giorgi's good graces, my lord. Ask him to change your lodging. If you take me with you, well and good; if not, may God protect you wherever you are. I am doomed as it is, my lord. There were many who were offered this palace, but nobody could abide in this accursed house. You are your mother's only son. I'm sorry for you, sir. You are so young and fair!"

Arsakidze smiled.

"Alas! My kind-hearted Nonai! A fortune-teller foretold for me death by the sword, so that the venom of a scorpion can do me no harm."

Arsakidze rose, preparing to leave.

Nonai entreated him not to go to work that day as she had had a bad dream.

"I on the contrary, had a good dream," he said, smiling.

On leaving home, however, he made the sign of the cross.

Fog lay on the orchard. The branches and twigs stood out like ornaments of jet. The verdure had lost its fresh tints, the valley looked discoloured. Pearls of dew trembled on the tender eyelashes of the flowers.

Mist had enveloped the mountains.

Mist had been moving down from the inaccessible peaks of the Caucasus, leaving its native gorges, creeping down the Aragvi Gorge and filling the whole world with gloom. ...

When Arsakidze started off along the high road he heard the jangling of bells. The camels were shuffling on tardily through the mist like a caravan of odd monsters. The foot travellers passed by wearily, resembling quaint shadows.

The palaces of the King and the Catholicos, their enclosing walls, their castles and towers, stone buildings, caravansaries, and arbours became invisible.

Even the silhouettes of the forts on the horizon had vanished.

And yet high above all these palaces, castles and arbours lost in mist, rose the Cathedral Church of the Wonder-Working Pillar looking down at them.

The mist could not obliterate its stately shape, and at this hour when buildings and trees, people and animals, flowers and leaves, each and all had been robbed of their pristine beauty and freshness, Svetitskhoveli seemed more majestic than it really was.

The mist had effaced its minor defects, leaving the whole unchanged, and from a distance the temple looked completed. The master viewed his work through the perspective of time with a feeling of joy.

"When everything is washed away by the rain, when every sound is swept away by the wind, Svetitskhoveli will grow still more in greatness.

"What else is the duty of the master on earth except to struggle with the mist of evanescence? What else, indeed?"

By this time the mist had crept over the mountains of Zedazeni and Armazi and advanced towards Tashiri and Tashiskari.

At the gates of the temple he met with the ghastly news: while slating the dome the mason Stephanoz Karaidze, having slipped and tumbled down from the giddy heights, had yielded up his soul.

The eyes of the King's Architect fell on an appalling sight—a hideous mass of brains, hair and clotted blood. Arsakidze ordered the mutilated body to be placed inside the temple.

Coming out of the temple he was besieged by slaves from Samtskkeh. They complained of being fed only raw colewort which left them quite incapable of working.

The foreman reported to him that thirteen slaves had deserted the day before.

"I must speak to the chief purveyor, perhaps he will improve their food," thought Arsakidze and turned back with a feeling of nausea.

At the gates of the outer wall he encountered a mason with bandaged jaws.

The previous night, the man said, the Lazes had beaten up the Greek workers.

Arsakidze called for the mason Bodokia, the Laz. He was known as an honest man.

The old man confirmed that the Lazes had set about the Greeks, adding that the Lazes were to blame. One of them, a young slave called Tsataia, had snatched away a Greek's ration of lentil porridge. The owner of the porridge had objected loudly and Tsataia had knocked him down. Other Greeks had stood up for Tsataia. The Lazes had rushed to the support of the Laz and had sorely belaboured the Greeks.

Arsakidze gave his fellow countrymen a severe reprimand before he left the temple court.

The sun had already edged up from behind the mountains. It was still as yellow as the yolk of an egg.

Little by little the mist was blown away. For a short time the air seemed as troubled as the River Aragvi during the spring spate.

The battlements of the castles became visible along the horizon. The roofs of the towers, palaces and caravansaries could be seen on the skyline. At first their outlines appeared to be drawn with charcoal, but by and by the dark welts on the glassy background melted away.

For a while blue and violet struggled with each other in the round of the sky. The partridge-coloured, fleecy clouds scattered through the sky turned madder orange, and at last the invisible painter touched them with lily white.

The foliage burst into bright green and small birds set up a delightful drowsy twitter.

In the palace garden peacocks were screeching.

Arsakidze waited till noon for the chief purveyor. Then he was told that the man was on his way from Uplistsikkeh, and that if Arsakidze returned shortly he would be sure to meet him.

The sleepless night had given him a headache.

"Let me take a turn in the garden. Perhaps it will do me good," he thought.

Nightingales were trilling in the foliage of the wild plums. Since the previous night the fruit-trees had been shedding their blossom. The buds, swollen with the juices of the earth, were smiling under the sun. The fallen petals drew a delicate pattern of snow-flakes on the ground. Some were still fluttering gently down through the air. In the garden gazelles were running about.

"I'll have a look at Kolonkelidze's deer," he said to himself, and took the path leading to the pen.

At the wattled gate of the enclosure he found three maids of honour. The Laz did not know any of them.

"We're attending the eristavi's daughter," said one of them, the pock-marked.

Shorena herself had gone into the pen. She was fondling Nebiera, kissing her eyes. The tawny deer stood as one fascinated, staring with affectionate eyes at her nurse.

The human being and the animal seemed to understand each other without words. Nebiera's nostrils were distended. At the sight of a stranger a shudder passed over her, and she began to drum on the ground with her coal-black hoofs. Only then did Shorena look round.

The cheeks of the young woman reddened like poppies. Her eyes flashed sea blue.

"Uta!" she cried out joyfully.

It was not just a name given him in boyhood; it was sweeter than the mere remembrance of his childhood. It contained his mother's caresses, a lament for his father, the murmur of his native sea of Chaneti, the joys of his youth in Pkhovi.

At this word there again came to life those happy minutes when they had first met in Pkhovi and when neither of them had realized what it meant to be a man and a woman. And now?

Now this was not the voice of a foster-sister, but the call of a woman.

Arsakidze ran up to her, but did not dare to embrace her as before. Blushing, he kissed both her hands.

Shorena seemed surprised. However, she did not say a word. She kissed the young man on the right cheek.

She noticed at once that his face was slightly pockmarked, and asked in an alarmed voice:

"What's the matter with you, Uta?"

Arsakidze forgot that there were pock-marks on his face, and he thought that Shorena was surprised because he had not hugged her.

"What do you mean, Shorena?"

"What has happened to your face, Uta?"

"I had small-pox in Mtskheta."

"Who took care of you, poor boy?"

"I lay in a cowshed, all alone, outside the town. A nun treated me out of charity."

Arsakidze surveyed Shorena's attire.

She wore a cap with a diamond in it, a short fur coat of marten, a chin-band fringed with strung pearls, and an iridescent *sheidishi* embroidered with gold thread.

Suddenly his previous night's dream flashed into his mind: poppies and wheat paying homage to Shorena. Her hair was the colour of wheat, in her eyes shone the blue of the sea of Chaneti.

He was amazed at his dream coming true so soon. And on this morning, too, she was delicate as the wings of a seraph. Her voice was sonorous (silver bells on the banner of a chief of the gorge!)

When they came out of the fold Arsakidze read surprise in the ladies' faces. They seemed to wonder why this unknown Pkhovian in a lime-bespattered coat greeted *eristavi's* daughter so warmly.

They went ahead of the others.

He asked Shorena who the maids of honour were.

"I was invited to visit the Queen, and she sent her ladies with me to see *Nebiera*."

A blissful smile was to be seen on Arsakidze's face.

Birds were warbling cheerfully in the dewy green, greeting the sun, which had safely emerged from the sea of mist.

Arsakidze remembered that the star-gazers were expecting a solar eclipse on that very day. On this occasion *Parsman the Persian's* forecast had proved false.

Arsakidze walked beside Shorena.

Pleasurable were her breath and her voice. There was a tenderness and primitive innocence about her, more attractive than the vernal fragrance of the earth.

Ever and anon she addressed Arsakidze by his Laz name. She chatted with "Uta" as in former times, as with her sworn brother, her foster-brother.

One circumstance greatly surprised him. She did not breathe one word about her engagement. Neither did she mention *Girsheli*, the master of *Kvelistsikheh*.

This called to his mind *Vardisakhar*.

"Next week we're going to marry off *Vardisakhar*," she said.

Arsakidze caught her searching look. It said: "I know everything that happened between you."

The young man read this clearly in her look.

He asked with an indifferent air:

"To whom will you marry her?"

"To Parsman the Persian, by order of King Giorgi."

After a short pause she added:

"She gave her consent to my mother only this morning. Formerly she kept saying that she would enter some nunnery, or drown herself in the Aragvi."

Konstantineh saw Shorena as far as the King's palace. At parting she said:

"Come to see me, Uta, at Khursi's house."

He went through the alley of chestnut-trees. Each moment brought before him Shorena, her voice.

He still seemed to feel her breath.

She still seemed to be walking by his side, to be calling him by his Laz name, reminding him of his childhood, of the short-lived gaieties of his youth, his affectionate mother, the high Pkhovian sky and the glittering sea of Chaneti.

Again in the distance he heard Shorena's voice, again her sea-coloured eyes flashed before his eyes.

Her glance was guileless, her voice as blissful as the chimes of heavenly bells.

Indeed, Shorena was worthy that the poppies of the fields should worship her, the golden ears of corn bow to her, the most ferocious beasts lie prostrate before her, the world's desire... .

He felt as if at that moment an entirely new being had entered his mind. She bore no resemblance to his Pkhovian foster-sister. This was a woman newly born for him on this beautiful spring day.

And something other puzzled him, too:

"Vardisakhar ...wedded to ... Parsman the Persian?"

Was it not this spring that the Chief Justice had summoned Parsman to clear himself of a certain hideous charge?

And now the viziers had taken a decision to settle him down to married life. The whole royal household interested themselves so closely in this marriage that Parsman might have been some high-ranking eristavi.

"I'm certain that woman lied about Glakhuna Avshanidze.... Has the royal palace become so short of maids of honour that King Giorgi has to rape the ex-concubine of an Ossetian King? And yet I doubt whether old Parsman has enough teeth to bite with.... Where could Vardisakhar have heard the nickname 'Glakhuna Avshanidze'?" thought Arsakidze.

At that moment an ever-lasting hatred for Vardisakhar entered into his heart.

He regretted those sweet nights under the sky of Pkhovi, he regretted having spent his first youthful passion on that shameless harlot. ...

XXXI

The chief purveyor turned out to be a sullen man who received the King's Architect with a morose manner.

He was wearing a doublet of hare's skin. A wizened, toothless old man, sitting in a huge armchair, he blinked his lupine-coloured eyes sleepily and stared suspiciously at Arsakidze from beneath his bushy white eyebrows.

He wheezed like a wind-broken horse, listening to Arsakidze. When the architect had finished his report the old man raised his head, leaned his jaw on his hand and asked with a sour face:

"You say the Lazes and the Greeks quarrelled about the lentil porridge?"

"That's right," affirmed Arsakidze, hoping that the slaves' food would be changed.

"It follows that the porridge was tasty, doesn't it?"

Saying this the purveyor passed the flat of his hand down his white moustaches, thick and twisted like sheaf-bands, and interrupting Arsakidze, said with a sardonic smile:

"You ought to know, young man, that well-fed slaves are good for nothing. These castles, these churches, these palaces have been built by hungry slaves."

He looked hard at Arsakidze and asked:

"You're a Laz, aren't you?"

Arsakidze answered in the affirmative.

"If you're a Laz you must know that if you overfeed a racehorse it will be outrun without fail. If you surfeit a greyhound it will never catch a hare. Take a wolf. If he were not roaming with an empty belly even a ewe big with young would outstrip him. If people eat their fill, be sure, young man, that they will give up both religion and labour, and then we shan't have any castles or churches. Hee, hee, hee!" sniggered the old man, displaying two canine fangs.

Arsakidze stood speechless. He was hard pressed for time, yet did not dare to stir from his place. The chief purveyor took hold of his coat clasps:

"You're a Christian, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am," affirmed Arsakidze.

"I'll tell you one thing more, young man. What I have said was not of my own invention. Our Lord the Saviour taught people the same thing.

"He himself was starving in the wilderness, and he made his disciples hunger, too. You remember, I'm sure, that with seven loaves and five little fishes he filled thousands of people?"

"Being a Christian, you should know, young man, that there are three things which should be taught the people by their leaders: hunger, prayer, and toil. As for war, it is the nobles who lead slaves to war."

XXXII

At the gates of Svetitskhoveli Arsakidze was met by Bodokia, the Laz mason.

"I've been waiting for you, master," he said.

"There's no new mishap, I hope?"

"The carved block of stone has to be lifted to the northern wall."

Arsakidze quickened his pace. He knew which block Bodokia meant.

On the Cathedral of the Wonder-Working Pillar there remains to this day the model of the temple. Just beneath the model a carved ashlar is set in the wall. It has a three-armed cross on it with an inscription in capital letters:

"By the will of God this vessel of the holy myrrh hath been restored by order of Melkisedek, the Catholicos, by the grace of Christ. O Lord, have mercy on us, thy slaves, the four masons. Amen."

This block of stone had given rise to much annoyance at the hands of the Catholicos. Three times he had disapproved the carved ornament, but at long last he had accepted the fourth time. So Arsakidze had forbidden the masters to insert the stone without him.

This event took place on Friday. Melkisedek intended to inspect the construction site the next day, and the masons were therefore in a great hurry.

The masons were aware of Melkisedek's capricious nature and consequently did not entrust the job of lifting the block to the slaves. They themselves went up the scaffolding.

When the block had been raised by means of a pulley old Bodokia was the first to try to loosen the noose and disengage the stone, but it proved too heavy for him.

The three remaining masons stood nearby, but the damp fog had made the timbers so slippery that they could not get a firm foothold and were unable to help Bodokia when he needed it.

The stone felt slippery, too. Bodokia's hand slipped from it, yet he was quick enough to press his chest against it. He grasped the block again but was unable to hold it up.

Arsakidze stepped forward and clutched the block in his arms so vigorously that he turned red in the face. The masons, too, changed their places, but none of them managed to maintain his footing on the wet scaffolding.

For a long time Arsakidze quite on his own held the tremendous weight, which could be lifted by no less than four men, while the others were powerless to lend him a hand.

How could he let go the block? It would injure old Bodokia standing by, and would be broken to pieces.

After great efforts and with the help of the exhausted Bodokia the three masons succeeded in inserting the ornamental ashlar into its bed.

But at that moment Arsakidze's face took on a ghastly appearance and he reeled. When he was brought down he could not straighten himself, and fell to the ground, his back bent like a bow. He was put on a stretcher and carried home by twelve masons.

Nonai set up a piteous wail.

"Yesterday I had bad dreams. My lord did not believe me, and look at him now!"

That day Melkisedek was in Uplistsikheh. King Giorgi sent his major-domo to see the sick man.

They called for Parsman the Persian but he pleaded indisposition. They dispatched an express messenger to Uplistsikheh, but Turmanidze, the renowned surgeon, had gone to Tmogvi the day before.

For a fortnight Arsakidze was on the very brink of the grave. Nonai fretted helplessly. She gave the patient "black syrup," the juice of rhubarb and pomegranates, salad of Solomon's-seal and horse-radish.

The patient showed no signs of recuperating.

Arsakidze had no doubts that he was dying. He was tormented by the haunting thought that the temple would be left uncompleted.

He had spent his whole life in toil and wandering in foreign parts. A couple of churches built in Tskhra Kari and Itvalisi could not perpetuate his name, they were not worthy of the people that had fed and nurtured him.

The master knew that the muses haunted virgin forests and tenantless mountains but if the fruits of their inspiration failed to reach great cities no master would become famous.

The Cathedral of the Wonder-Working Pillar was the most outstanding creation of his youth and manhood, built in the very heart of Georgia in a conspicuous place. It would serve to unify Georgia in her struggle with foes from without.

What a lot of toil and suffering had he endured for this great work, and now Death was going to stop him for ever!

He was sorry for his decrepit mother, who was so devotedly guarding his father's bones buried in the cold earth of Pkhovi.

He had a mind to send Bodokia to Kvetari and yet he could not bring himself to release from the work his cleverest and most experienced mason, his best assistant in building the temple.

Nevertheless he longed for his mother to come while he was still alive. Perhaps her love and prayers could snatch him from the clutches of Death.

And there was one more hope which he cherished in this impracticable world. To see Shorena, to see her only once again! To be able to enter Khursi's house of an evening, to see her there, to hear her lips utter his Laz name "Uta"!

Turmanidze arrived in the very nick of time.

The surgeon opened the vein in Arsakidze's right arm and bled him profusely. He made him take cooling drinks and instructed Nonai to pound the leaves of the wild endive and give the patient its juice to drink in ample doses. He made her soak cool towels in camphor and bandage them round Arsakidze's body.

Within three days the patient felt better.

The surgeon gave instructions that for two months the architect was not to mount the scaffoldings, to get on a horse or to make any kind of violent movement.

In another week Arsakidze was able to walk by himself.

He sat all day long on the balcony of Rati's house, feeble and wan, and gazed from afar on his beloved creation.

Every morning Bodokia came to receive directions-and advice from the sick master, and almost every morning from his balcony Arsakidze saw Shorena riding out to hunt.

She rode King Giorgi's gold-coloured stallion. Two attendants and two deacons followed her on horseback, as well as falconers with hawks.

On either side of her rode King Giorgi and Girsheli mounted on war horses. Twelve mail-clad knights escorted the King and the *eristavi*.

An ox-cart carrying King Giorgi's cheetahs brought up the rear.

The hunting leopards were covered with embroidered satin cloths. Slaves, walking behind, held the ends of the leashes.

Arsakidze could see from his balcony that Shorena talked cheerfully with the King and Girsheli.

Girsheli's betrothed wore a leather hunting coat decorated with gold thread braids and fringes of strung pearls. On her feet she wore morocco boots. The legs of her pomegranate-coloured *sheidishi* reached down to the silver stirrups.

XXXIII

When loneliness set Arsakidze's heart afire he would take canvas and paints and paint something for himself...

One day, in the afternoon, when he was reclining on the *takhti*, three monks came up the stairs of Rati's house.

They asked for the King's Architect. Nonai bustled in and reported that some monks wanted to see him.

"Show them in," said Arsakidze.

When the guests entered the parlour and doffed their capes Arsakidze recognized in one of them Catholicos Melkisedek.

The master began to rise, but Melkisedek did not allow him to stand up, himself drawing a chair to Arsakidze's bedside.

He sat down and began to inquire kindly about the patient's health.

Melkisedek was wearing a monk's cassock made of shoddy and quite threadbare. He held in his hand a forked staff.

The guests did not stay long.

"I must be in time for vespers," said Melkisedek.

He got up and made a sign of the cross over the patient.

He said to Arsakidze: "Today we shall pray God to heal you, my son. God willing, you will recover soon and finish Svetitskhoveli. We are expecting very honourable guests from Byzantium for the consecration of the temple."

That happened on Saturday evening.

Arsakidze was amazed. "How mild was Melkisedek," he said to himself. The usually querulous, wayward old man seemed so fair-spoken and amiable!

At work he was unbearable, fault-finding, cruel, sometimes extremely wilful.

The bricklayers and masons dreaded him as a thunderbolt.

When he passed by the workers on his rounds of inspection the two thousand men became so still that one would think a buzzard had swooped down on a flock of finches.

Nor did anybody know at what time or by what gate he would step into the temple court. In his shoddy faded cassock he could hardly be distinguished from an inferior monk.

When everybody was convinced that Melkisedek was in Uplistsikheh he would that very day put in his appearance in the temple. A rumour would be spread about that he was ill, to the childlike joy of the working men, and behold, that very evening he would walk up to the scaffolding.

All were amazed at the agility with which the little shrivelled old man with swollen legs scrambled up and down the scaffolding.

Nonai came in to administer medicines to the patient. She brought him hot milk and shuffled out of the room.

Silence settled in the hall and Arsakidze lay on his back for a long time thinking of Melkisedek.

What a stern expression his face had worn after the evening service at which he preached in the Samtavro Church, expounding to the congregation the meaning of Jacob's wrestling with God!

This curious passage in Genesis had surprised Arsakidze from his boyhood. In his early youth in Constantinople he had often marvelled at the boldness with which the writer of those lines depicted man's struggle with God.

A strange desire to paint Jacob's single combat with his Lord came over him.

The scene to be painted rose before his inner eye so vividly that he grew afraid lest it should become a hallucination.

He turned over in his bed restlessly two or three times. If it had not been night he would have got up and started drawing.

Nevertheless he got out of bed, took his stick and went down into the garden.

All around was sleeping.

Through the yellowish gauze of a cloud the moon, encircled with a violet halo, shone dimly.

Arsakidze stood under a linden-tree, glad to find his sinews strengthened by a fresh influx of vigour.

Ten days more and he would be able to walk without a stick. Then he would go to see Shorena, without fail.

He looked over the slumbering orchard. Nature seemed to be singing in her sleep. The black masses of the trees, the dozing flowers, the dewy grass, each and all were softly crooning. The humming of the bees seemed like a sweetly chanting choir. The mountains stretched along the skyline were singing, too, while the Aragvi, lost in the sea blue at their base, gave the burden to their song.

A male pheasant in the valley of Tsitsamuri was bravely combating the night. ...

Arsakidze got up before daybreak.

For this day the *Lunar Calendar* foretold:

"An auspicious day for the fermentation of wine, planting of grape-vines, weddings, hunting and travel, everything lucky...."

He put away the *Calendar*, took up his stick, then put it down again, got up and walked to the balcony without the stick.

He looked out over the garden.

A goldfinch was joyfully chirping amidst the greenery.

He longed again for life and creative work.

He came back home, got ready his painting materials, prepared the pigments, made fast the canvas.

Then he dashed off a few lines on the canvas, mere outlines of the camels and their calves standing on the other side of the brook, Jacob's two wives, their two maidservants, and the camp of his eleven sons.

He was just about to sketch Jacob's lonely figure in the foreground when Nonai announced that a turbaned old man was at the back door asking to be admitted to the King's Architect.

Arsakidze guessed who this turbaned old man might, be. Yet he was so absorbed in his vision that he hated the idea of seeing anybody at that moment. His face-twitched with disgust.

He would be accused of haughtiness if he refused to see his visitor, he thought, and ordered his servant to usher the guest in.

Arsakidze was surprised at the appearance of Pars-man the Persian, who came in at the back door.

The old man with the wrinkled hairless face, his back bent double, stepped into the chamber, leaning on a crutch with a silver-mounted cross-piece, as stealthily as if he were hiding from something. On entering he greeted Arsakidze and having sat down into an offered armchair addressed the following words to him:

"Be so kind, young man, as to tell me if the building behind the house is a tower which belonged to Rati."

The question sounded strange to Arsakidze.

"Perhaps he's been fuddled with opium since the morning. But no, it doesn't seem so," he said to himself. He answered politely.

"You're right, sir. It is a tower."

"Dear me, at first I thought it was a bakery."

He gripped his crutch with both hands, and" gazing intently at the ground, said:

"Old age is bad, indeed, my son. Is it worth while to live when one can't tell a bakery from a tower?"

"That tower has lost its roof; perhaps that's why you couldn't make it out, master."

"Alas! I'm no longer a master, my son. Now I inject rhubarb with a clyster into the King's falcons and administer opium to the hawks suffering from cramp: when 'botchers' become masters, masters have to see to the clysters."

Arsakidze guessed what was behind these words. He knew from experience the old master's habit: never to say anything in a straightforward way. He always spoke in a roundabout manner, leaving himself a hole to creep back into. His sayings were like a keen two-edged sword, and they slipped through the listener's grasp like eels.

"Why did you, master, ask about the tower?"

"You should know, young man, that when a man grows old he's likened unto a child, for it's common with the children to ask questions about things which they themselves know perfectly well. Old people and children are alike in another respect: they are talkative. The child is not shy of saying something foolish. It seems to suppose, perhaps subconsciously, that when it grows up it will say clever things.

"The same with an old man. He often pretends to be silly, because he knows from experience that kings are hostile only to wise men, and that nowhere as yet has a fool been hanged by any king, even by a stupid one. And, besides, even stupid kings understand that should they hang fools there would be no one to pay taxes or fight in their wars.

"You must also have heard that none fights so bravely in other people's wars as a fool. I've always been such a fool, a brave fool in another's battle.

"As for the tower, yes, I have remembered. In that tower King Giorgi kept Rati imprisoned. The major-domo Rati was a clever man. He knew perfectly well that he who goes into a king's service should put up behind his house a prison for himself, because the king's favours are like unto the wind which bloweth where it listeth, now upwards and now downwards."

Parsman let fall his crutch. He bent down, took it up and cast his eyes at the stretched canvas.

"It seems I came at a wrong time. I see you have taken advantage of your leisure to paint."

"It's of no account, master. I wanted to paint some trifle for myself. I have not done any painting for a long time."

"Who taught you painting in Byzantium?"

"The chief of painters Aurelius Alostos."

"Aurelius Alostos? A Greek from Rhodes, isn't he? You seem to have an eye for painting..."

"That's right. He was a Rhodian."

Parsman repeated the painter's name. He stared at Arsakidze, blinking with his reddish eyelashes as if to conceal the twinkling of two evil stars, though not even a mind-reader could have discovered his secret intentions.

"I'll tell you what, lad. The dearest thing for an artist is not what has been ordered by Catholicos Melkisedek or King Giorgi, but what he has done at leisure. Keep in mind, too, that leisure and fantasy are the real parents of inspired creation."

Arsakidze grasped the inner meaning of this sentence. He had drawn only a few lines on the canvas. Parsman's words meant that these few lines were better than the Cathedral Church he had built. But what opinion could be formed about his talent from a few casual lines? It was clear that Parsman was laughing at him.

Arsakidze was upset but dared not say anything insulting to his aged guest. In spite of his Greek education Arsakidze remained a Laz, and nowhere are old people held in such high esteem as in Lazistan.

"Yesterday I was 75 years old. However, I've settled down to a married life. I got married only the day before. I go to my grave empty-handed, my son, because all the time I've been doing what the Caesar, the Caliph and the King of Georgia wished me to do."

These words were surprising, too. He had had talks with Parsman many times over the years and never had Parsman breathed a word about his own life.

Arsakidze had learned only one thing by hearsay about this extraordinary old man. That woman with the wen, Tebronia, was not in reality his servant. She was his illegitimate daughter by a nun from Tsinari.

The convent had kicked out the pregnant nun. She had gone to the house of her brothers. After she had been delivered of an infant disfigured by an ugly birthmark, they put the new-born baby in a sack and laid her at Parsman's door at night.

Parsman had brought up his natural daughter and kept her as his servant, calling her Tebronia.

Parsman rose from his seat, walked up to the outstretched canvas, leaned on his crutch, and after examining the drawing once again, said:

"The artist may possibly know beforehand that nobody will cast even one look at his picture, but he must not lose heart. Our nobles prefer the droppings of their hawks to paintings, the merchants prefer carpets and the Byzantine patricians horses.

"The bishops say that artists are heretics, inasmuch as they compete with God in inspiring a soul into inanimate things. Neither will you sell your picture in Constantinople because the high-born and the low-born there demand from the painter that he portray Emperor Basil sitting on a white horse and piercing a dragon through its gaping jaws with his spear.

"Nor will any of the Mussulmans buy your picture because a true Mussulman won't set his foot in a house where there is a picture or a dog.

"I have a parchment at home which says: Woe to him who shall draw a living creature. On Judgement Day the likenesses painted by the artist shall come to life, detach themselves from their pictures, and surrounding the painter, shall require from him a soul. And the artist who fails to give away his own soul will be cast into the everlasting fires.

"Believe me, young man, the best painting is that which cannot be sold at present either in Uplistsikheh, or in Constantinople, or in Cairo, the very picture for which a soul will be demanded some day from the painter."

Parsman took leave of Arsakidze, wishing him a good morning. He did not ask him anything either about his health or about Svetitskhoveli. Before leaving he said only this:

"A falcon of King Giorgi's is ill. I have to give it a rhubarb enema."

As soon as Parsman had left Arsakidze resumed his painting.

Arsakidze completed the picture in three weeks, for the physician did not permit him to go to work yet.

Having finished the painting he placed it in the middle of the hall and gazed joyfully at what he had painted for his own amusement.

In the background there loomed dimly in the twilight camels with their calves, the two wives, their two maidservants and Jacob's eleven sons, while on the other side of the dried-up brook Jacob was wrestling with a tremendous phantom.

Jacob's God had a shaggy beard shimmering like a rainbow. Round his head shone a bright halo. He wore a hauberk scintillating like fish scales, and his wolfish eyes flashed fire.

XXXIV

The time of convalescence prescribed by the physician was not yet over when early one morning Arsakidze hurried on to the construction site.

The masons and labourers were glad to see him.

Bodokia blocked his way, entreating him to refrain for the time being from mounting the scaffolding.

Arskidze did not obey and slowly began to climb the ladders. He closely examined the ornaments of the cornices, the paintings on the ceilings, the bas-reliefs on the facades.

It cost him a great effort to reach the dome of the temple, and there he halted, arms akimbo.

Bodokia was quick to notice his paleness.

"Do you feel poorly, master?" he asked.

Arsakidze did not mention that he felt a pain in the kidneys.

"It's nothing," he said, grasping a pine timber.

That day he had dinner with the masons and stayed on the scaffolding till dusk.

No sooner did the gong strike in the church of Samtavro than all the labourers filed away home. He walked alone round the temple, scanning his beloved work in the twilight.

Dead tired, he felt a pain in his groin, and yet he was seized with a strong desire to see Shorena.

The evening was quiet, very quiet. The tops of the cypresses were gently swaying to and fro. Sparrows twittered in the green of the poplars.

The streets were deserted.

He walked across the churchyard. The rustle of the stalks of symphytum and burdock sounded lifeless and dull.

The sun was taking leave of the Caucasus. A blackbird hid in the green ivy.

Some owlets flew to the oak grove, the weaker of them alighting on the nearest and lowest branches.

They were funny, these sulking creatures. Light had not yet left the world and they were unable to see Arsakidze.

They sat puffed up, their fiery eyes bulging curiously.

One would imagine that the newly-fledged brood had already absorbed all the sorrow of this world.

As he came on to the high road Arsakidze met a few barefooted children. These urchins with open shirts were singing merrily, opening their mouths like chanting angels on the frescos.

A whole legion of monks were marching towards the monastery of Samtavro. A queer smell was wafted to Arsakidze, the same as he had been accustomed to smell in dark cells and refectories, redolent of frankincense, morocco and human sweat.

The black-cassocked crowd walked with an apathetic air. The tramp of their sandalled feet resounded along the high road. They moved westwards like grim phantoms, their gigantic shadows trailing behind them.

They appeared to be returning from the monastic vineyards, some holding pruning knives, some carrying spades or billhooks; others bore on their backs bundles of grape-vine branches. Burs and thorns clung to the skirts of their robes.

The grim-visaged crook-backed old men moved on with mincing step while the evening breeze ruffled their white beards and billowed the skirts of their black cassocks. They looked joylessly at the setting sun. Their robes were faded; around their necks hung rosaries.

The young monks, black-bearded and broad-shouldered, strode along with a firm tread. A suit of armour, a sword around their loins and spurs on their feet would suit them better than those threadbare robes. Strong-kneed and broad-shouldered, these giants would be good at storming battle towers. Their ruddy cheeks glowed, their tapering moustaches and luxuriant beards seemed to be rippling in the breeze. Their eyes were downcast as they strode along on their long legs.

Among the monks was a sprinkling of beardless, wizened men, small-headed, short-necked, bandy-legged; those who take from childhood into after-life a womanish squeaky voice and vacillate continuously between Hermes and Aphrodite; who are hated by women like the plague, because their arms are too weak to swing a sword, to get a plough working, to reap corn, to hurl a javelin, to grapple fiercely with a foe. They are impotent by nature, hairless, old in childhood and childlike in old age.

Arsakidze looked scornfully at these sluggish, thin-voiced, hollow-chested, broad-hipped poltroons.

In the rear of the column marched beardless novices, pale striplings, long-necked, fair-faced, broad-chested and tall. They too would have looked fine charging on blooded horses and swinging spears.

There were also little boys among them, curly headed and slim as reed stems. Their sallow faces had a waxy tint.

Arsakidze looked at them attentively, one by one. The cassocks of the young men had also the same smell of wax, frankincense and stuffy dark cells.

"The paupers of Christ," flashed across his mind. A shudder ran through him as if he had never yet seen whole legions of monks in Uplistsikheh, Trebizond and Constantinople. The tramp of their feet died away in the distance and suddenly Arsakidze heard the clatter of horses' hoofs.

From the mountains herdsmen were driving a drove of King Giorgi's horses. Barefooted slaves sat on unsaddled mares. There were stallions with manes covered with clusters of burs, each being led by two men who held them by a rope. The war-horses neighed. Foals were frisking and leaping along, following the swollen-bellied mares.

A wolf-coloured stallion tore himself away from two men, and flinging one of them aside like an empty bottle gourd into the dust, rose on his hind legs and put his hoofs round a tawny mare led by a bald-headed old man.

A moment later a number of buffalo-drawn carts wrapped the road in a cloud of dust.

The buffaloes were plodding along two by two, drawing creaking carts roofed with black felt cloaks. These last descendants of the behemoths were snuffling, emitting a melancholy sound as if they were bemoaning the dead night they were carrying to the capital.

"Making love is easy only to the carefree," thought Arsakidze and slowed his pace.

Near Khursi's house he looked round. Two or three dim human figures were still lingering near the bystreets. He waited for them to pass and stepped into the fruit garden.

Full of agitation he went up the staircase.

What a simple thing it had been for him to visit Kolonkelidze's family before! He himself wondered at his present excitement.

The central hall was still open, and a couple of lamps flickered there.

Right by the threshold sat the maidservant Khatuta. A sock with knitting needles had fallen on to her lap.

Arsakidze greeted the woman but received no answer. He glanced at her eyes. The sleeping woman looked like someone dead.

On entering the hall he coughed softly but he met nobody there, either.

On the walls hung antlered heads of stags. Sorrow dwelt in their blackened lacklustre eyes.

On the pegs around he noticed iron casques, treble-linked chain mail, bows and arrows.

He passed cautiously by the closed trunks and travelling bags. The back door stood ajar.

He walked up to the threshold and peered into a small chamber. An unexpected scene confronted him.

Seven chiefs of the gorges sat around the table scattered with Pkhovian sweet cakes. Arsakidze knew all of them: Murochi Kalundauri, Mamuka Balachauri, Martia Bagatur, Zezvai Misurauli, Berdia Beburauli, Ushisha Gudushauri and Shiola Apkhanauri.

At the head of the table sat Gurandukht.

The chiefs sat in iron casques, their lizard-coloured armour shining in the flickering light of the lamps. With their heads hung low they listened to Shorena.

"... I am a woman yet I cannot forgive King Giorgi the scorching of my father's eyes. Do not start the uprising without me. I shall appear at the wake of St. George of Fountain Head.

"I shall put on my father's coat of mail and helmet, gird on his sword, mount his war-steed and with banner in hand ride at the head of the warriors.

"O Pkhovians, you shall see then who is courageous among men and women.

"Fortunately King Giorgi did not destroy the main castle. You must somehow finish the work on the battle towers.

"My father's mistake was that he let Zviad's legions enter Pkhovi and that having invited the King he did not gouge out his eyes before Zviad came.

"Let us not repeat his error, O Pkhovians. We shall meet Zviad's army in Gudamakari."

Then rose the eldest of the chiefs, Murochi Kalundauri.

He said that Mamamzeh and Tokhaidze had been traitors. There had been an agreement that they would attack Zviad in Gudamakari.

Kalundauri's words alarmed Arsakidze. He saw that Shorena was being drawn into a dangerous undertaking.

He could wait no longer. Throwing the door wide open he stepped boldly into the chamber.

The mail-clad chiefs of the gorges jumped to their feet. The smell of sheep mingling with that of grease struck his nostrils.

Murochi Kalundauri greeted Arsakidze kindly. Arsakidze, in similar manner, kissed his right breast.

Murochi asked Arsakidze about his health, whether he had a wife and children and what he was doing in Mtskheta.

Gurandukht was upset, yet she greeted him warmly.

She made a sign to a servant, who instantly brought in cakes and dumplings.

Then she rose and went into the hall. As the door had been left open, Arsakidze heard her scold the maidservant Khatuta.

"If you don't announce the coming of the guests what's the good of your sitting by the door!"

The sight of the dumplings and the chiefs of the gorges recalled to Arsakidze's mind the happy evenings that he had passed at Kolonkelidze's castle.

Shorena sat down by his side.

"Only yesterday did we hear about your injury. Vardisakhar told us that you had been sent by the Catholicos to Klarjeti. I was going to visit you yesterday, at Rati's house, but suddenly the *khevisberis* arrived."

Now Martia Bagatur leant over closer to Arsakidze and said:

"Last week I saw your mother at the wake. She had brought meat-offerings for the Angel of Tsveti and ordered the priest to hold a service for the repose of thy father's soul. Your mother

sends you her best wishes and kisses. Day and night she commends you to the graces of the Angel of the Place, to the hero of Kopale of Karatisi and Pitsale, the leader of the hosts.

"She implores you to ask that infidel King Giorgi to give you leave to visit your mother, perhaps for the last time."

After supper three women with torches accompanied the chiefs to their bedrooms.

Murochi Kalundauri did not want to go to rest.

"Jaundice prevents me from sleeping," he said. He sat down next to Gurandukht and they began to talk in whispers.

Shorena chatted with Arsakidze in a most friendly way.

Time and again she uttered his Laz name, and caressed and embraced him.

"It seems you are no champion. How could four men's load break your back? I thought you strong as a lion who could fight a whole legion single-handed."

She brought her face nearer and nearer to Arsakidze's face and as her perfumed breath caressed his cheeks he became more and more excited.

Before long the Chief of the Gorge Kalundauri was also led out of the chamber by Gurandukht and two attendants. Shorena put her hand on Arsakidze's shoulder and whispered in his ear:

"Do you know, Uta, Vardisakhar is going to Pkhovi, to a wake. She takes with her Pirimzisa, our handmaid. They're going to steal away tonight."

With these words she fixed a searching look on Arsakidze.

The Laz frowned, indicating by his silence that henceforth he was not interested in Vardisakhar's comings and goings.

Shorena leaned her cheek on the palm of her hand and said in a melancholy voice:

"Do you know what, Uta, I long to go to Kvetari, too. O, could I but once more see my ill-fated father and be shown the mountains of Pkhovi from the roof of our tower! ..."

She was about to say something but at that moment Gurandukht came back into the room.

The glittering ripples of the sea of Chaneti shone in Shorena's sea-coloured eyes. Her curls scintillated with that yellow hue which tints the newly-hatched brood of a pheasant.

The chieftains of the mountain had left behind them the smell of sheep and melted grease but Arsakidze's keen sense of smell still caught the fragrance of the hair of his heart's desire.

When the link-bearers saw him to the wicket of Khursi's house, the master looked up at the star-spangled round of the sky and in his heart became audible the words sweet as honey and intoxicating as wine:

"As the hart panteth after water brooks, so my soul panteth after thee...."*

It was past midnight when dazed with sadness he returned to Rati's house.

Somewhere in the oak grove the young of an owl were calling....

On the plain of Tsitsamuri a cock pheasant was still bravely battling with the night. ...

XXXV

Queen Mariam, preparing for her journey to Byzantium, left for Abkhazia on Whitsunday.

The ceremony of Girsheli's betrothal had taken place the week before. For some reason Gurandukht was putting off the marriage. Sometimes she said in excuse that she was waiting for the arrival of Shorena's dowry from Kvetari, sometimes she pleaded that she was expecting her brother Dachi, a "lesser eristavi" of Tskhra Tba.

Giorgi had already seen Shorena's dowry in Mtskheta, nevertheless he admitted the probability that there were more items of her dowry hidden in Pkhovi.

He himself was far from being displeased with the decision to put off the marriage till the end of the autumn.

* From a psalm of David. — *Tr.*

On the contrary, he wished to have it postponed till after the Queen's departure for Byzantium. Somewhere a spark of hope still glimmered faintly. Yet at times it seemed to him that everything was lost.

The autumn was not far off. What next? A dreadful, unbridgeable abyss yawned ahead. It was painful even to think of it... He increased his consumption of opium and wine. He had changed in a queer way, and; had recently taken more to hunting and feasting.

The King sighed for a battle.

Oh for a war with the Arabs or Greeks, so that Girsheli and he might perish together like a team of yoked buffaloes drowned by the swollen Aragvi! But his dreams were unrealizable. Georgia needed peace.

During Girsheli's sojourn in Mtskheta Giorgi ordered his cousin to be watched incessantly, especially in the evening, wanting to have exact information of all the comings and goings of the lord of Kvelistsikheh.

Yet there was one comforting circumstance: Shorena treated her fiancé with cool indifference, and was much more affable towards Giorgi. That was the reason why the King arranged many parties, feasts and hunting trips. ...

Nor did Gurandukht let the betrothed meet each other in private, which gave the amorous King boundless joy.

On the first day of July Girsheli was summoned to Kvelistsikheh to settle some affairs of his domain.

Before two weeks were over the impatient bridegroom returned to Mtskheta.

On the very evening that the master of Kvelistsikheh presented himself to the King, *Spasalar* Zviad appeared at the palace without summons.

Giorgi felt a strange agitation when, sitting alone in the audience chamber, he heard Zviad's ponderous footfalls.

Zviad was followed by the chief of the King's servants, who offered him a chair. Zviad in his impatience refused to take a seat but with unusual anxiety reported at once to the King, whose face had turned white, that he had received bad news from Pkhovi.

"The chiefs of the gorges have started work to restore the watchtowers of Kvetari. Kolonkelidze sees nothing with his burnt-out eyes, however, and he is said to act like a deaf man as well.

"Kolonkelidze has quarrelled with the traitor Eristavi Mamamzeh. Should the Pkhovians rise up in arms, Mamamzeh and Tokhaidze would not in any case help Kolonkelidze.

"The Didos and Galgais have turned their backs on Kolonkelidze. This spring their combined troops raided his domain and drove away his cattle.

"There is another unpleasant rumour: by the end of the autumn Katai, Mamamzeh's daughter, will be wedded to his Seneschal Tokhaidze."

King Giorgi knew Talagva Kolonkelidze's character very well. Regardless of his wife and daughter, who were kept as hostages in Mtskheta, the desperate eristavi of Kvetari would not shrink from any danger if it were necessary to face it to get his revenge.

When Zviad had finished his report the King stared hard into the *spasalar's* face and said:

"What next?"

"With your permission, my lord, I think troops must be sent at once to Pkhovi; Kolonkelidze must be seized immediately and the traitor's head cut off before he's reconciled with Eristavi Mamamzeh and the Didos. Isn't that what we must do?"

The King sat with bent head and was silent.

Zviad took the King's silence as a token of consent and went on with more confidence:

"We must apprehend right away the ringleaders of the new mutiny, all the seven *khevisberis*, too, mustn't we?"

Zviad was about to declare that they also must be decapitated, but after having read out the list of the chiefs of the gorges, he saw that King Giorgi did not lift his head, nor look at him, nor utter a word. ... Zviad understood that the King's silence did not mean his acquiescence.

Giorgi was amazed and shocked by the tidings.

War?

Certainly, he had wanted a war; not a civil- one but with external enemies. The King loathed fratricidal, feuds.

Besides, he knew that Shorena was an extremely courageous and determined woman. If it became necessary to send troops against the blinded eristavi, who knew what his only daughter would do.

Girsheli's marriage was hardly likely to take place now. This circumstance did not trouble King Giorgi. Much more important was the necessity to imprison Shorena in the castle of Gartiskari.

On the other hand it seemed to Giorgi that Zviad's vigilance always drove him to exaggeration.

He knew that too much watchfulness was apt to breed imaginary dangers. He used to say to Zviad:

"If your informers always told the truth they would starve to death, sure enough."

At last Giorgi raised his head and dismissed his *spasalar*, saying:

"I'll answer you tomorrow."

He made up his mind to go to Pkhovi in disguise, without troops and attendants, as a hunting, merrymaking knight, in order to see everything for himself on the spot and thus prevent useless bloodshed.

There was only one thing that held him back—he could not leave Girsheli alone in Mtskheta. True, Shorena treated her betrothed rather indifferently, but who could foretell what might happen between them after a few days?

King Giorgi's maxim was: Let no one trust informers or women to the end.

That very night he revealed his intention to Girsheli.

"I intend to go to Pkhovi but how can I leave thee, my guest, alone here," he said..

Girsheli was always athirst for adventure and danger.

Besides, he wished to see his future wife's native country, to hunt ibex on the way and to go on a little spree somewhere at the wake.

They spent that night in one bedchamber as of old when they had been children. Lying in bed they recalled the past, laughing and joking.

That night they made a decision to steal away from Mtskheta without letting any of the courtiers know that they had left for Pkhovi except Zviad. They decided to take with them worn and torn clothing, to dye their beards with henna, and travel without any retinue. These arrangements filled the heroes of the clandestine escapade with boyish eagerness. They were to be attended only by two trustworthy men, the courier Pipa Ushisharidze and Gabo Kokhrichidze, the old groom.

The Arabian or Tekke horses were unfit for the mountains, so they had to ride on common saddle-horses of the local breed.

Before it was light four disguised riders left Mtskheta, wearing iron casques and rust-coloured chain mail. Cheap felt cloaks were rolled up and tied to the cantles.

They started on their journey talking cheerfully, letting the groom and the courier ride well ahead of them.

The colossal stature of the courier Ushisharidze amused Girsheli, himself a very tall man.

The mail-clad giant sat on a small Abkhazian horse. His head was covered with an ancient helmet (of the times of Kuropalat's reign), whose edge was chipped with sword-strokes. In his hand he held a spear. His feet almost touched the ground.

"Glakhuna, what's your courier's name? I always forget it."

"Pipa," answered Giorgi.

"Who the devil thought of naming- a man of his inches Pipa?" asked Girsheli, bursting into a loud guffaw.

"I called him so when a boy. His baptismal name is a Greek one, Anaximander. The Metropolitan of Mtskheta, Maximeh, gave him that name at his christening. You know that I hate anything Byzantine."

They had not yet reached Sapurtsleh when a stifling heat descended on the earth. The leaves of ash-trees, alders and osiers shrivelled.

The panting horsemen urged on their horses, which were bathed in sweat, along the sun-cracked road.

Pipa put a few gourd leaves on a string and covered his helmet with them. Gabo said jokingly that Pipa could be put up as a scarecrow in the fields.

Buffaloes, gasping for fresh air, were lying in the puddles amidst the riverside bushes, mooing sadly at the sight of the travellers.

Sheep dogs with lolling tongues darted up to the very feet of the horses. Wild pigeons, huddling in the foliage of straggling oaks, were softly cooing...

From time to time as they cantered along the horses tugged at the reins, wanting to slake their thirst.

The buzzards, out hunting, swept high and slowly circled in the clear sky with a mournful screech as if complaining to the heavens about the misery of the sun-scorched earth.

In the boundless blue the outlines of the castles, the churches and ruins of ancient masonry stood out as if painted there. Lizards scampered across the road. Snakes, rearing their heads, clung stealthily to the ledges of the greyish-brown chasms. The Aragvi leapt over the boulders and the rumbling echoes hurled themselves at the rocky banks.

They halted by the river to take a rest. There Gabo opened a skin of wine, and they breakfasted and drank a little.

They started off again with a view to reaching Gudamakari at dusk.

Suddenly the roof of a church flashed into sight on the mountain top; far away white walls of a monastery came into view.

As they neared the village a whole legion of barefooted nuns came out of the cornfields.

The women, with black kerchiefs wrapped around their heads, wore widow's weeds powdered with dust.

"How can they bear such heat dressed all in black, I wonder," said Girsheli.

"Women bear heat better than men," replied Giorgi.

A nun at the head of the procession was carrying an image of Lazareh made of clay and draped in white linen. The others held flour sacks and white haversacks.

The barefooted nuns walked on, singing in chorus:

*Lazareh has come anigh,
Staring with his fiery eye....*

Giorgi and Girsheli kept to the right-hand side of the road, stealing glances at the nuns.

Girsheli leaned over from his horse and whispered in Giorgi's ear:

"There's nothing more horrible in the world than a gathering of ugly women. Just look at the crook-backed, lop-sided figures of those wretched creatures!"

And, indeed, frightful shapes were crawling along in the dust, like badly whittled wooden dolls, loose in the hips, bandy-legged, with flat sides and small heads, some broad-shouldered, some as thin as laths, others short-legged or tall like a scarecrow pole.

"There are pretty ones among them, too," said the lord of Kvelistsikheh in a low voice. "Look at those walking along by the side of the rocks! Are they not comely?! They caught my eye long ago when they turned on to the high road."

They spurred on their horses and came abreast of those who marched in front. The women looked stealthily at the mail-clad knights, their cheeks flushed with the oppressive heat.

Sorrowful eyes, blacker than the night, shone beneath their kerchiefs. Girsheli caught sight of others, too. Fair-haired, ruddy, slightly freckled women with full breasts and hips, and straight thighs, tall like the staff of a banner.

The sun-heated King and eristavi watched the swaying of roundness and softness, the swinging of their broad hips, hidden by the blackness of their weeds.

Feet white and small like doves were tripping along in the dust. ...

Giorgi leaned over to Girsheli and said in a whisper:

"Who has cursed these fair women with the curse of constant mourning, keeping their loveliness for blight, waiting for death to cut them down?"

"Knowest thou, Glakhuna, that gazing at the veiled women in the land of the Saracens would almost drive me mad? The white grapes basking in the sun get pleasant tints of yellow, and the black shade of the veil beautifies a woman's face in the lands of the Mohammedans just in the same way. The glimpses of this curious yellowness, caught by chance on the cheeks of the veiled ones, has always agitated me immensely. Some of the Mohammedan matrons are loose, too. Sometimes you're walking along a narrow side-street in the evening, and the sea breeze flaps the veils and skirts of their dresses. A woman with her face veiled whisks past you, and if you are to her liking she will aid the breeze and lift up her veil for an instant, as if casually, and show a face more beautiful than a rose of Iran. I mean, Glakhuna, the rose which is the first to bloom in the gardens of Ecbatana in May. Don't think that it is red! No, it is the colour of ancient ivory like the sceptre of Bagration you once showed me. Just of that colour, Glakhuna. I like women with just that complexion, Glakhuna. They're kept in the shade of a veil and seen rarely, very rarely."

"Say it briefly, Girsheli! Brevity sometimes adorns what one has to say. You like the complexion of your wife-to-be, Kolonkelidze's daughter. The selfsame complexion, eh?"

Girsheli nodded to the archly smiling Giorgi and put spurs to his horse, which was balking at a small bridge.

They finished the ascent. The nuns turned to the right and like a flock of rooks blackened the slope of a hill, high and conical as a Kalmyk hat.

Up the hill rode about a score of armour-clad knights. As they approached the four horsemen they called out:

"Who are you?"

"We belong to King Giorgi," answered the four.

According to the ancient custom of the knights they dismounted and, having saluted each other by kissing, continued on their way.

Giorgi continued the conversation broken off by Girsheli:

"If you're such a great lover of those who bloom in the shade of the veil, that knock-kneed scoundrel Pars-man is not a bad hand at it, either."

"What d'ye mean, Glakhuna?"

"I mean that Parsman became a frequent visitor to the Mtskheta nunnery and deflowered the prettiest virgins there. He begot a bastard by Sharvashidze's daughter, and as for the slaves' daughters, well, it goes without saying. ... Finally he had seduced a daughter of Phanaskerteli's. She had cheeks like old, very old ivory, too, the same that you are fond of, Girsheli."

"And then ..." asked Girsheli eagerly.

"And then ... a fig for our laws! Don't you think our laws are made only for fools, my dear friend? The clever know how to saddle the fools with their own guilt. Though Catholicos Melkisedek moved heaven and earth to inflict the severest punishment on Parsman."

The King set spurs to his horse. Girsheli could not help putting another question:

"And what did you do, Glakhuna?"

"What could I do? Parsman the Persian is the best builder of castles in the whole of the East. Could I have his head cut off because of some ugly chit of a girl? On the contrary, we've rewarded him. Zviad kept bothering me, asserting that Parsman knew some useful secrets and that we ought to wheedle them out of him, so we gave him a wife. Do you know who?"

Girsheli reigned in his horse.

"Who?" he asked.

"Who but Vardisakhar, the tire-woman of your betrothed Shorena. I know how voracious you are. If you saw that woman you'd without doubt put off the marriage until the next autumn."

Girsheli showed signs of interest. He grinned and then asked with youthful frivolity:

"Well, where's the woman now?"

"I also have my eye on her, Girsheli. If I get hold of her somewhere I won't wait for your blessing, you'll see!"

Giorgi stopped his horse, looking round for Ushisharidze and Kokhrichidze.

The fields were teeming with huge crowds of people. At their head moved priests with banners. They were carrying icons to the river, to dip them into the water.

Barefooted women chanted the song of Lazareh. Lads were throwing water at the girls in the village lanes. The lasses screamed and took to their heels.

Giorgi peered over the hedge into an orchard.

"Look, Girsheli, Trebizond dates are already blossoming in this village."

Girsheli, red-faced and stupefied with heat, still had his eye on the barefooted women.

The wind-broken Abkhazian horse gasped for breath under the weight of Girsheli's gigantic body.

They had already ridden into the fortified village.

Asses were loudly braying on the hill top Lanky lads astride the asses laden with jars of water urged them on, their feet all but brushing the ground.

XXXVI

In the white-domed church a gong began to sound.

Flocks of bleating sheep streamed down the flume-like paths, reminiscent of muddy torrents rushing down the mountain slopes. Ewes and rams fell helter-skelter into the water.

Bulls plodding slowly home bellowed, mares with blown bellies whinnied, barefooted women chanted plaintively, as they walked about the village with a clay Lazareh in their hands:

*Lazareh has come anigh,
Staring with his fiery eye. ...
Give us rain, O Lord on high!
End the drought, or we shall die!*

The tired riders sat silently on their foaming horses, watching the barefooted women, their sun-browned bare calves. Surfeited with maids of honour they longed to kiss those wind-burned cheeks. ...

They plunged into the depths of the gorge. At the villages the tax gatherers would stop them and sentinels would challenge them from the battlements.

Armed horsemen with lances would surround them, question them, ask in whose service they were.

"We are King Giorgi's liegemen going to Didoeti to buy horses," was their answer each time.

They would pay tolls to castellans and assistant chiefs of the gorges and ride on over the land of Pkhovi.

Their horses laboured wearily up the precipitous paths.

Once they saw on a bluff of the Black Aragvi a castle with four towers.

Kokhrichidze went to great lengths trying to persuade them to slip into the castle. He said he was acquainted with the grooms there who would shelter them for the night somehow or other.

Glakhuna gave a flat refusal, preferring to wait for the dawn somewhere in the pine forest.

There the coniferous woods began. Waterfalls tumbling down from rocky precipices made a pleasant sound. From out of the misty chasms rose vultures. Mountain wolves howled in the glens.

Passing through a gorge the riders lost their way.

"It's time to hide our armour and spears, or else they'll make it hard for us to go farther," suggested Giorgi.

Ahead of them were high cliffs coloured like the skin of a cheetah.

When Girsheli and Pipa had got into their rags, Glakhuna and Gabo burst into hearty laughter. The disguised knights in their tattered clothing looked for all the world like a pair of scarecrows.

It was already impossible to travel on horseback. Time and again the girths of Girsheli's and Pipa's saddles would snap asunder.

At last they dismounted and began to drag along their horses by the reins.

Girsheli's gelding was barely jogging on, and Pipa had to push it from behind while Girsheli tugged at the reins.

They came to a plateau overgrown with rhododendrons. Wood grouse were piteously crying in the shrubs.

The travellers succeeded in shooting a couple of them.

They made a fire and roasted the game. Gabo had some arrack in a skin.

Three Pkhovians in armour rode up to them.

They asked the four travellers what village they were from and what they wanted in Pkhovi.

Glakhuna held out to the eldest of the Pkhovians a horn full of the liquor.

"Please, tell me, uncle, who rules now in Pkhovi?"

"Eristavi Kolonkelidze."

"Why, is he not blind?"

"He's blind and yet he sees better than him who blinded him."

"And who *has* blinded him?"

"That son of a bitch, King Giorgi."

The master of Kvelistsikheh could hardly suppress a smile. He helped himself to the rump of the grouse and started gnawing at it with his sharp teeth.

No sooner had the Pkhovians ridden away than Giorgi turned to Girsheli.

"Look here, Girsheli, were other kings to wander in disguise like me, they, too, would hear just such praise day and night."

They followed a footpath through the pine forest. When it was dark they kindled a fire, fixed nosebags to their horses' heads and spread out their felt cloaks on the ground.

The dead-tired men took it in turns to sleep. The watchmen nodded drowsily till midnight. The Plough went its way across the heavens.

Suddenly a strange noise, like a shrill caterwauling, came from the bushes.

Girsheli drew his scimitar and dashed into the undergrowth after the beast. For a while he pursued a black shape through briars and bindweeds. When he caught sight of a flash of phosphorescent light he slashed at it with his scimitar. Silence fell again in the woods. Girsheli came back empty-handed and sat down to warm himself at the smouldering embers.

"Had a waking dream, Girsheli?" asked Glakhuna.

"I think they were male cheetahs fighting in the dark."

Pipa and Gabo woke up, too, and strained their ears. The caterwauling now came from the glen.

"The cheetah is the fiercest beast," began Girsheli. "Every beast fears man, doesn't it? When we escaped from Egypt we met a tiger in an oasis. He was in the habit of plaguing an Arabian village. We seven Georgians slayed three tigers in one week. Even a lion won't attack man wantonly. But an Egyptian cheetah breaks into human dwellings not only at night but in

broad daylight, carrying off children. One day a cheetah tore a mullah with his ass to pieces in Aleppo."

"Are there cheetahs in Pkhovi?" asked Gabo.

"Cheetahs prefer to choose for their lairs just such tawny cliffs, such precipices as we have seen. They make their lairs in the caves of the broken cliffs. If they have cubs somewhere nearby we shall have to say good-bye to our horses tonight." "

"Is it possible that cheetahs dare assault horses?"

"Horses? Why, they sometimes jump on to an elephant's back. Particularly dangerous is the female cheetah. She is the most daring of animals."

The deeper they penetrated into inland Pkhovi the more difficult their journey became. At the spur of a mountain they would come across a fastness; at the mouth of each gorge they were met by the toll gatherers. They gave away a lot of money to bribe the assistant chiefs of the gorges.

Ever and anon they were interrogated by guards and informers.

It had already become unsafe to pass themselves off as horse-dealers going to Didoeti. Giorgi was convinced that the Pkhovians treated the people of Didoeti as their enemies.

Once or twice they tried to get in touch with Zviad's spies, but they learned that the spies had run away to Uplistsikheh.

The roadside cliffs took on the colour of a hawk.

They passed the second night in a cave and after some deliberations agreed to travel thenceforth not together but in pairs. If they were asked about their identity each of them would give a different answer. The King and the eristavi were to say that they were King Giorgi's slaves, who had escaped from the dungeons of Uplistsikheh.

The groom and the courier were ordered to avoid making acquaintance with women and drinking wine. They were not to accept invitations to dinner and were to feed themselves on the way at their own expense.

At a cross-roads they parted, having agreed to meet at the forthcoming wake.

Each was to take a kid to the saint's shrine as a sacrificial offering.

Giorgi was aware that the Pkhovians meted out benevolent treatment to any stranger who came to their shrine with an offering.

Pipa and Gabo were told to abuse King Giorgi and his Commander-in-Chief Zviad for all they were worth whenever the talk touched upon them, and in this way to probe the mood of the Pkhovian population. They were also to use opprobrious language when speaking of Catholicos Melkisedek, Eristavi Mamamzeh, the tribes of the Didos and Galgais.

Having hidden their horses in the nearest wood, Giorgi and Girsheli started off for the shrine on foot.

The lord of Kvelistsikheh had never yet been in Pkhovi. He stared with curiosity at the shrines of the Pkhovian saints and their priests at the rude roadside oratories built of stone.

He looked with pity at the women who were near their time, shut up in dungy cowsheds at the edge of the village.

By and by the wished-for temple came in sight.

Giorgi and Girsheli bought kids and went separately into the courtyard of the shrine.

Girsheli peered wonderingly into the interior of the shrine with its vault and pillars decorated with ibex horns.

He watched Giorgi from afar, trying to imitate his behaviour.

He stood gaping at a group of madmen brought to the "place of atonement." The banner-bearer set the staff on the neck of an insane man, the priest said incantations, jingling with the bells of the banner and commending the lunatic, whose hands and feet were bound, to the saint.

The courtyard was crowded with armed Pkhovians in hauberks. A large standard rested on a stone altar in front of the oratory.

By the standard stood a *khutsi*, the chief celebrant of the Georgian mountain tribes.

King Giorgi knelt before the altar. Facing the East he held in one hand the kid, in the other a burning taper.

At the command of the priest the supplicant knelt on one knee. Then he lifted his head and ran his eyes across the vault of heaven.

"May the Lord increase thy might, Saint George! Use Glakhuna Avshanidze for thy victory, let him serve thee, grant him thy favours unstintingly! May the Lord make thee victorious!

"Glory be to God, glory to the sun, to the angels attending on the sun! I entreat thee, oh, conqueror of the ruthless foe, of bitter death...."

Then the *khutsi* began mumbling something in such a low voice that neither Girsheli, who stood nearby, nor the kneeling King could understand anything of his prayers.

The *dasturi*, or the assistant chief of the gorge, took Giorgi's kid and laid him sprawling on the ground.

The priest cut the throat of the sacrifice.

The *dasturi* filled a bowl with warm blood. At a sign from the priest Giorgi dipped his fingers in the blood. He "purified" his hand and put the blood on his forehead and cheek-bones.

Giorgi left the "purifying altar" and began watching Girsheli's purification from nearby.

The supplicant's face had such a piteous expression that Giorgi could hardly suppress a smile.

At last Gabo and Pipa made their appearance.

Pipa's kid slipped out of his hands, and the giant crawled on all fours trying to grab the bleating, wriggling, animal.

Girsheli and Giorgi looked on, doing their best to control their mirth.

Finally the ceremony of meat-offering and purification came to an end. The participants in the celebration settled themselves in groups in the shade of the ash-trees.

The four were eager to come together but did not dare, and as if they had fallen out with each other, lounged about separately among the crowd of the saint's worshippers.

The jangling of the banner bells ceased. *Dasturis* brought from the brewery consecrated beer and served it out to the pilgrims sitting cross-legged on the grassy knolls.

Shultis, the servants of the shrine, threw chunks of boiled meat straight on to the grass.

A young, broad-shouldered, red-haired Pkhovian with grey eyes and a scarred, ruddy face took his seat next to Giorgi. His name was Goderdzi Kalundaauri.

Time and again he looked at Giorgi's sword, asking him who he was and where he had come from.

In passing he asked Giorgi in a civil tone whether he had come as a spy sent by King Giorgi to Pkhovi.

At the mention of King Giorgi Glakhuna Avshanidze made believe to get very angry.

"May St. George strike King Giorgi and all his spies dead! I accidentally killed a priest in Uplistsikheh and had to languish in a dungeon for three years!" he exclaimed.

Goderdzi Kalundaauri expressed his sympathy with the guest. In his turn he told the other about himself, adding that he had numerous ill-wishers.

He turned out to be the son of the Chief of the Gorge Murochi Kalundaauri.

He offered Giorgi beer and boiled sheep's tripe in broth. Afterwards he, in his turn, started abusing King Giorgi.

"We'll never forgive him the destruction of Pkhovi," he said.

Before long a round dance was started.

Intertwining their arms the drunken men in the hawk-coloured hauberks shuffled awkwardly round and round like hawks with wings outstretched.

They danced in two rows, at the same time chanting in two voices.

The leader of the choir would intone in a high voice:

Who is he we praise today?

This is Saint George's day.

The whole choir repeated the lines in a deep bass. Then the leader of the second row intoned:

I owe Kaji's folk a debt.
Christ's kind mother, wouldst thou know?
Kaji's gammer once I met
When she was akneading dough.*

The leader of the first group took up.

*Stay with me, George, stay!
Make me not the dead one wail!
No, he cannot run away
For he wears a coat of mail.*

Keeping time in a slow measure they danced, the large mail-clad men in helmets, the youths straight and tall like the Pkhovian pines, drawing nearer and nearer to the shrine.

There the choirs would line up again face to face and start turning to the right, the skirts of their *chokhas* flapping in the breeze.

The armour clanked, St. George's slaves chanted in deep voices.

Having finished the dance they would sit down to feast under the ash-trees. In their place others would stand up and join in the round dance row by row.

At last all the men went away, making room for the women. Clad in beautiful Pkhovian dresses they began the dance, their silk kerchiefs and silver-braided red and yellow skirts fluttering.

In one group of dancers Giorgi caught sight of Vardisakhar. It seemed to him that he also recognized Shorena's other attendant, Pirimzisa.

Vardisakhar hopped clumsily about. The Pkhovian headgear, ornamented with silver braids and crosses and set on her head without a kerchief, was becoming to her.

Her full high breasts shook. Even a stranger's eye could see that she had become unused to doing the Pkhovian dance.

Kalundauri filled a horn for Giorgi. The guest emptied it and again fixed his eyes on the dancing women.

He wanted to know where Vardisakhar and Pirimzisa would go after the dancing.

The beer went to Kalumlauri's head too soon.

He reproached the guest:

"Kakhetian, it seems that you have come here to gape at our girls."

Giorgi replied with a grin and again emptied his horn.

Meantime Girsheli was with some besotted Pkhovians.

Three old men sat around him swearing loudly at the King.

"Who ever heard that the Pkhovian eagles and ibex could be fettered? None of the kings has ever managed to do it, neither shall King Giorgi accomplish it. Giorgi has made the snake-coloured St. George wrathful. He'll never escape the wrath of the Saint. The snake-coloured George will break the King's neck. If we get our hands on the King and his commander-in-chief, we shall hang them both from the belfry."

Girsheli raised his head and noticed from afar that Giorgi and the red-haired Pkhovian were abusing each other for all they were worth.

Suddenly they jumped to their feet and drew their swords.

* Fabulous evil being of the Georgian folk-tales. —Tr.

They began moving in circles round each other. Suddenly they cried out a piercing challenge and dashed at each other with swords uplifted.

The Pkhovians leapt from their seats and made a ring round the combatants.

Girsheli rose unhurriedly and looked round. Ushisharidze and Gabo stood in the crowd with paled faces.

With a shrill cry Giorgi lunged at Kalundauri's coat of mail.

The Pkhovian's hauberk proved strong. Kalundauri swung his sword. Giorgi warded it off with the shield. Sparks flew into the air.

Giorgi challenged again.

Kalundauri sprang at Giorgi with a wild cry:

"Stand fast, white-livered Kakhetian!"

Giorgi stepped back, shielded himself again and then, with an ear-splitting shriek, attacked his foe fiercely.

The Pkhovian leapt aside, fending off the sword which had crushed down on him with the speed of lightning, but just at that moment his shoes, made of plaited thongs, slipped on the sward and he fell on one knee.

Giorgi stopped and gave his adversary to understand that he would not fight one who had lost his footing.

The brave Pkhovian stood up, lifted his shield above his head, warding off Giorgi's sword, and with the other hand dealt a blow on Giorgi's casque....

The hauberks, casques and the flashing swords clanked and clashed with a curious sound.

Girsheli looked round at the faces of the crowd.

The Pkhovians, "purified" with the consecrated blood, were lurching from side to side like thirsty hawks, their hands, cheeks and foreheads besmeared with blood. They glared with ill-boding eyes at the alien fighting with their fellow countryman.

The screeching hawks were athirst for blood!

Should the red-haired Pkhovian fall dead, the whole tribe would instantly bare their swords. The four men would have to come to grips with a whole legion.

Girsheli changed his place, and stepping in between Ushisharidze and Kokhrichidze, gave both of them a pinch in the arm, meaning: "Be ready!"

Ushisharidze's and Kokhrichidze's faces were ashen.

Girsheli, likewise, turned pale, reaching with his hand for the hilt of his sword.

The next moment Giorgi or the Pkhovian was bound to fall, and then Girsheli would have to tear apart the armed and milling multitude, and flashing out his sword, grapple with the whole tribe like a hunting leopard rushing recklessly at an elephant.

This time the Pkhovian was the first to attack. Giorgi's shield clanked. The point of the sword cut through its edge and blood gushed from Giorgi's arm.

A ferocious roar broke from the crowd of onlookers.

When in the circus of the Egyptian Caliph a cheetah, let out of his cage, is cut up by nine warriors after a fierce fight, the rejoicing multitude, high and low, breaks into the arena and scrambles for the dying beast to "purify" their spears in its blood. In just that way, thought Girsheli, the Pkhovians are at any moment going to draw their swords to purify them in the blood of the outsider.

A shudder came over him. He took a step forward, and riveted his look on the amazing sight.

The King threw aside his shield and lifted up his sword, blood trickling from his left arm. His face became still more appalling. He let out a deafening war-cry, and warding off his adversary's sword with his own over and over again, soon pressed him step by step against the front ranks of the mail-clad Pkhovians. The whole crowd raised a terrible roar....

The serried ranks broke up. A few men outran Girsheli. He was about to bare his sword, forestalling all the others, when he beheld Kalundauri holding in his hand only the hilt of his sword, his face white as death.

Giorgi gave the Pkhovian a smile, his teeth flashing in a smile of unusual kindness. He ran up to his disarmed antagonist, put his bleeding left hand on the Pkhovian's shoulder and with the other held out to him his own sword.

"Let's be sworn brothers from now on, Goderdzi," he said, and the adversaries embraced each other.

In a wave of excitement young and old pressed round the stranger's gift.

The Chief of the Gorge Murochi Kalundauri was the first to approach his defeated son.

He took the sword from Goderdzi and began to examine it closely. He had never yet seen anything like it. He thought it was stained with blood, and wiped it with the skirt of his *chokha*. But reddish and greenish lightning kept playing in turn along its blade, which gleamed like molten gold.

At the base of the hilt were carved crosses with bent arms, and in the middle a winged youth and a wolf's head.

The Chief of the Gorge noticed also an inscription.

Giorgi began to be afraid that someone might read it:

"King of Kings Giorgi—Sword of the Messiah."

But he calmed down when he realized that there was nobody in the crowd capable of reading the inscription.

"Who gave thee a Gorda with a wolf's head, young man?" asked the old chief.

"I fought with the Arabs. I killed their chief and took his sword," answered Giorgi.

The Pkhovians were delighted to see a warrior who had fought the unbelievers.

Many of them drew their swords, and passing Giorgi's sword across the edge of their blades, saw to their unspeakable amazement that the stranger's Gorda cut the Pkhovian blades like cheese.

The Chief of the Gorge Kalundauri invited Giorgi to his house.

They dressed his wounded arm, gave blessings, and made him drink beer out of a horn ornamented with seed-pearls.

Then came the high priest of the tribe and pared off some silver into a horn brimful with beer. Goderdzi drank of it and passed it to his sworn brother. They wound up the ceremony by eating up the parings of the "oath silver."

Girsheli, Gabo and Pipa were likewise invited by Kalundauri to feast with them.

"You are also strangers. Let all strangers sit at dinner together," he said.

Throughout the feast the guests poured away their beer stealthily.

When the Pkhovians had got quite drunk and set up a mighty snore under the ash-trees, the four guests slunk away from their hosts one by one. Gabo and Pipa were ordered to get the horses ready and wait for the King and the *eristavi* in the sacred grove.

The servants of the shrine were dead drunk, too, sprawling on the ground under the ash-trees.

Coming out of the temple court Vardisakhar and Pirmzisa ran across Girsheli and Giorgi.

Vardisakhar recognized Avshanidze, the "King's courier." Nevertheless, she greeted the guest of the Pkhovians with appropriate politeness.

The intoxicated Girsheli, remembering the King's words, did not take his eyes off the plump attractive woman.

Vardisakhar also identified Shorena's fiancé, but was surprised at his shabbiness.

It turned out that Vardisakhar was greatly displeased with her mistress for having married her off to old Parsman. This was one of the reasons why she treated Girsheli kindly, and she started playing the coquette with the amorous young *eristavi*.

At an opportune moment Girsheli passed his arm through Vardisakhar's and the four made for the sacred grove.

Pirmzisa went with Giorgi shyly, reluctantly. She liked the handsome young champion, yet, embarrassed, clung to his side, silent and trembling like a young dove.

"Why did the *khevisberi's* son quarrel with you?" she asked Giorgi. "Vardisakhar and I watched your combat from afar."

"I looked at you and therefore the Pkhovian insulted me," lied Giorgi.

Pirimzisa was flattered by this answer. She wished to say something more but a feverish thrill of excitement rendered her speechless.

On entering the beech forest Avshanidze kissed her.

The first couple vanished in the thicket.

Girsheli took Vardisakhar up like a little child.

At first she put up a weak resistance but by and by grew quite still. The breathing of the powerful man was pleasing to her.

Girsheli put her down among the ferns.

The woman made a further attempt at resistance but the fevered lips of the man took away her breath.

Giorgi and Pirimzisa lay beneath a huge beech-tree. Tears of ecstasy ran down her cheeks....

Giorgi heard the whistle of the courier.

He gave the girl a last kiss and realized for the first time that the girl smelt of sheep.

The new moon, crooked like the horn of an ibex, was shining just over the forest of the shrine.

From far off came the snorting of their horses.

After seeing the women to the end of the village, the knights mounted the horses.

"Competing with me will be the death of you, Girsheli. Be careful!" said Giorgi to his cousin. The master of Kvelistsikheh looked up, smiling, at the crescent moon.

XXXVII

His travels in Pkhovi convinced the King that a new uprising was not to be expected soon.

"Your scouts have exaggerated the threats of the *khevisberis*," he said to Zviad, the commander-in-chief. "We've reconnoitered the castle of Kvetari twice. Gabo stole in. He passed one night in the stables with the grooms. He's made exhaustive inquiries about the rebuilding of the towers. He's been told they expect an assault from the people of Didoeti, so they're going to repair the castle. I think, Zviad, we've got to bribe one of the grooms in some way. We also learned that Kolonkelidze had got a remarkable horse. It's able to carry its blind master along the ledges of the sheerest precipices in Pkhovi. If we succeeded in bribing the groom we'd know all about the comings and goings of Kolonkelidze."

Zviad was silent. The King went on:

"I'm not sure, Zviad, that Talagva Kolonkelidze is really at loggerheads with Mamamzeh and Tokhaidze. As for the menace from the Didos, this story must have been invented on purpose in order to divert our attention from the fact that they are restoring the castles and the battle towers."

The King's interpretation did not seem credible to *Spasalar* Zviad. He was sure that the danger of mutiny was close at hand, yet he did not dare to contradict his lord.

XXXVIII

Peace reigned in the regions governed by the *eristavis*.

Queen Mariam's sojourn in Abkhazia and Catholicos Melkisedek's departure for Klarjeti made life at the King's palace delightful.

Strange sores broke out on the body of the King's chaplain. The heart's desire of the King, as well as of the whole royal court, Mtskheta and Uplistsikheh, was to see the malicious chaplain fall a prey to those sores, produced, perhaps, by leprosy.

Giorgi and Girsheli either went hunting in the environs of Uplistsikheh or held secret revels in Mtskheta.

Revels were followed by hunting, hunting alternated again with feasts, races, spear-throwing and polo.

Dachi, the eristavi of Nine Lakes, and his wife Rusudan arrived at last in Mtskheta.

Phanaskerteli's daughter had grown to womanhood. The monastic sallowness had gone from her face, her breasts had filled out and her hips become rounded. A few scarcely visible birth-marks on the upper lip of her small round mouth looked uncommonly attractive to young men.

She blinked her long eyelashes with voluptuous languor, went about without a veil, smoked opium on the sly and fawned on King Giorgi like a young filly.

Giorgi and Girsheli used to get Eristavi Dachi drunk easily enough and, afterwards, take out his wife by turn.

The wits of Mtskheta made rhymes on this matter, deriding the wife of the Lord of Nine Lakes who had not slept with her husband even nine nights.

To throw dust in her husband's eyes she pretended to devote most of her time to prayers. So, leaving her to her icons and orisons, he himself stuck like a bur to Girsheli and Giorgi.

In drinking-bouts he was easily beaten by them, but in spear-throwing he was inferior to none.

Dachi did not trouble his head at all about his niece's, Shorena's, coming marriage.

He had picked up beforehand all the court gossip, learned by hearsay that King Giorgi had his eye on Girsheli's betrothed.

Accordingly, he gave his niece the benefit of his experience:

"I hear such rumours that you'd better give up all thought of marriage and take the veil at the nunnery of Mtskheta."

During his stay at the palace Dachi became keenly interested in training falcons after the fashion of the Lazes. He looked forward to the time when he would introduce the new mode of hunting into his domains.

Bursts of guffawing and the sonorous laughter of women did not cease on the palace terraces till late into night.

Noblemen, bored by a peaceful life, flocked to Mtskheta, followed by courtesans from the provinces, by the young wives of aged eristavis and high-born widows.

They had arrived in Mtskheta hoping to receive a blessing from the Catholicos. In the absence of Melkisedek they abandoned themselves to merry-making.

To the amusements of Giorgi and Girsheli a new one was added.

A native of Saingilo had brought from Hereti two hunting leopards for the King.

That very day Giorgi and Girsheli had let loose the first training bird for the yet untaught falcons in the King's garden.

The King had called for Konstantineh Arsakidze specially for that occasion to help with training falcons as it is practised in Lazistan.

"Hawking be damned!" thought Konstantineh angrily. He had to complete the Temple of the Wonder-Working Pillar by the time of Melkisedek's return from Klarjeti.

Melkisedek would bring with him Byzantine guests from Artanuji. The cathedral church was to be consecrated within a few weeks at the latest.

Furthermore, it was not to the liking of the architect to be the King's hawker as well. The creator of a great work of art is apt to develop a feeling of self-respect stronger than that of a king.

The news of the arrival of the cheetahs spread like lightning throughout the King's palace.

Guests, maids of honour and knights gathered in the palace garden.

Giorgi and Girsheli came, too, iron-grey falcons sitting on their shoulders. They themselves wore sand-grey chain mail.

The King gave his falcon to Arsakidze, walked over to the Ingilo and asked him:

"How do you catch those hunting leopards, uncle?"

"We dig out a pit, Your Majesty, in lonely mountains. Then we cover it with twigs and put a puppy nearby. We tie a long cord to a fishing hook and pass the hook through the pup's ear.

"The hunter, lying in a safe ambush nearby, holds the other end of the cord. The puppy sits by the pit, my lord King, all night. The hunter, his mouth covered with a moist cloth, watches it from his hiding-place. From time to time he pulls at the cord. The hook sets the pup a-whining. The leopard is very fond of dog's flesh. He picks up the scent, he knows the voice. He begins to creep up on his belly, and then, with a sudden bound, he swoops down on to the pup. The loose twigs can't hold him, and flop! the beast finds himself in the pit."

"And then?" asked Giorgi impatiently.

"Then we bind him and take him home blindfolded. We beat him and then make him hungry, and then do it all over again."

"In Egypt they catch cheetahs with nets," remarked the master of Kvelistsikheh.

In compliance with Girsheli's persistent request Anchabaidze's daughter and the wife of Eristavi Dachi were sent to bring Shorena.

The King had ordered that Parsman be summoned as a wiseman and charmer.

The Ingilo sat on the ground holding in one hand the ends of the two leashes, and in the other a whip.

Whenever the cheetahs snarled at the throng of strangers pressing around them, the man cracked his whip as in the way that cart-drivers frighten buffaloes.

In the King's garden full-blown Iranian roses had already unfolded their petals, some of them blood-red, some white as the core of the almond, others yellowish, not just light yellow, but the colour of the most ancient ivory.

Poppies bloomed there, and safflowers, and narcissi, various kinds of carnations, so many-coloured that words could not describe them all.

There were many species of Indian flowers, violet, bright yellow, vermilion, blue, azure, butter-coloured, iridescent like the neck of a pheasant, coloured like a peacock's tail.

The flowering wistaria and other climbers of many species were trained against the arbours.

In the shade of one of them a group of courtiers and guests was gathered, among them some beauties from various provinces.

There was the only daughter of the lord of Tmogvi Castle, the delight and hope of her mother, a fair-faced, full-breasted maiden, whose eyebrows were arched like bows, and the hands long and milk-white as angels' hands in the frescos painted by the artists of those days.

Khatuna, the youngest daughter of Sharvashidze, was there, a blue-eyed woman whose slender figure was pliant like a reed stem.

Then there was Tutai, Vardanidze's widow, a small woman, still tempting and heart-stirring.

Among them, too, were the three daughters of Gvaram Abuleli, one fair-haired, one dark and one "sun-faced" (as the young men described her).

Even in the circle of the most beautiful women Tsokala, the wife of the master of Tskhivilo Castle, still held her own. Hers was a faultless figure but her fish eyes gave her an obtuse expression which induced King Giorgi to call her "Fish-Eyed Cow."

She was plump with high hips and firm breasts. Her looks and manners were provocative.

Tsokala had another name, too. The King's chaplain Ambrosi called her the "Apocalyptic Harlot."

She was a very remote relation to the King, and it was rumoured that the "Fish-Eyed Cow" was the King's secret concubine.

It was, indeed, suspicious that Tsokala used to come "on pilgrimage" to Mtskheta just at those times when Queen Mariam left for Abkhazia or Klarjeti to visit the monasteries.

"Fish-Eyed Cow" was accompanied by her eldest daughter Natia, shy as a young chamois, a maid newly burst into full bloom.

Natia had inherited her mother's body but her eyes shone like sapphires.

She lifted and lowered her long black eyelashes so gently that one would liken them to a pair of black butterflies that slowly opened and closed their airy-wings.

"That lass has a drunken look. That's why I like her," King Giorgi blurted out one day, fuddled with opium.

The chaplain's and other gossips' opinion on this matter was as follows: the "Fish-Eyed Cow" was the King's paramour. She had aimed at queenship but her fish eyes had thwarted her plans. Now Tsokala's heart's desire was to see her daughter Natia ascend the throne.

As soon as the fair-faced daughter of Anchabaidze, the "moustached" Rusudan (wife of the owner of Nine Lakes) and Shorena, Kolonkelidze's daughter, approached them, the bevy of beauties were instantly obscured by Shorena.

She is looking somewhat sad, thought the King.

Amidst the loveliest flowers and women her beauty shone like the rose of Ecbatana.

Shorena greeted the society gathered in the bower. She did not cast a look at the King or Girsheli. She took no notice of the knights in their gold-embroidered satin doublets; but she stole a glance at Konstantineh Arsakidze, who stood ghost-like among the glittering mail-clad youths.

Dressed in the plain Pkhovian *chokha* he seemed to be something not of this world among all those florid, sturdy men.

The "Fish-Eyed Cow" cast a wicked glance after Shorena and then looked stealthily at Giorgi. She noticed the King's agitation.

Not only the women, but the knights as well, avoided coming near the cheetahs. The male was lying, the female stood at his side.

Shorena's face brightened up, and she went fearlessly up to the female. The beast and the woman had something in common.

Arsakidze started, fearing lest the beast should do any harm to Shorena.

Reddish and yellowish streaks ran from the female's head to the tip of her tail. Her skin, ornamented like a gold-threaded coverlet, was sprinkled with small red and yellow spots, but the maculae and rings on her coat were much smaller than those of a tiger.

The chops of the female, the belly and the inner sides of the legs were straw-coloured, and the tail more variegated than that of the male. Rings, which resembled the Pkhovian silver-braided circles, alternating with other whitish rings, ran down to the straw-coloured tip of her tail.

The beasts had smaller eyes than a tiger, and when the male cheetah rose to his feet Shorena noticed that both had long, sinewy legs.

She ran her hand over the female's back. The beast closed her eyes and began to purr as a cat does when it nestles snugly in its mistress' lap.

The knights frowned to see a woman outdo them in courage.

Now the King himself walked over to the beasts. He was glad that they met him too without snarling at him.

Giorgi was displeased with his old guepardes. They had grown moody and often did not allow the hunters to touch them. Sometimes they were quite unmanageable and could not be coaxed out of their cage. Since they were always fretful they did not relish their food. After hunting they had to be caught by lasso. The chief of the hunters pleaded their age as an excuse, saying that in old age they became apathetic. Before the Ingilo brought the new cheetahs Giorgi was resolved to discharge the chief of the hunters.

The absence of Parsman upset Giorgi.

The old man had perhaps fallen ill, he thought. But of all the days why just that day?

He did not know that Parsman had delayed his appearance deliberately. Now that he had been deprived of his title of Chief Architect he was after the post of Chief Hunter.

Aware that Giorgi had no trainer of cheetahs at the palace, Parsman began to put on airs.

At long last Parsman made his appearance.

He did reverence to the King, saluted the guests and boldly approached the cheetahs. He rubbed the male behind the ears and stroked the female's back.

Then he turned to the King and said:

"Sire, these are Persian *palangs*. The Hindus call them *honigas*, sometimes *kerkals*. The Egyptians—*gnoes*."

"If I'm not mistaken, the Hindus call them cheetahs, too," broke in the King.

"Yes, they're also called cheetahs by the Hindus. They are of many kinds...."

Parsman had read much about these beasts in Arabic, and in Cairo he had learned just a little about their training. So he asked the Ingilo:

"Have you taken them out to hunt, man?"

"I've taken them to hunt *jeirans*, sir."

"And chamois?"

The Ingilo scratched his head and replied hesitantly:

"Not yet, sir."

"Who trained them, man?"

"We used to get a woman to sit beside the blindfolded beasts, sir. All night long she would shout in their ears or tell fairy-tales, thus getting them used to the human voice."

Parsman turned, smiling, to the King:

"Your majesty, the cheetah is the only animal that is able to stand a woman's prattle for a long time."

Saying this he glanced stealthily at Phanaskerteli's daughter, now the wife of the owner of Tskhra Tba Castle.

The "Fish-Eyed Cow" scowled. For some reason she liked to pose as a champion of the female sex.

She put her mouth close to the King's ear and whispered:

"Why, Giorgi, do you take so long about strangling that old viper?"

Phanaskerteli's daughter took offence, too, but she held her peace because her husband, Dachi, stood at her side. She avoided even mentioning Parsman's name in his presence.

The old man perceived that his joke was rather rude. He tried to propitiate the matrons with a pleasant smile, and looking once more at the King, added:

"The hunting leopard is wicked like a woman, and, woman-like, is fair, soft and warm. That beast has another feminine trait but I fear our beauties will be wroth with me, so I'll tell you, my lord King, some other day, and it be your pleasure."

Giorgi gave the old man a grin, and addressed Girsheli:

"What do you say, Girsheli? Shall we take these beasts out to hunt today?"

Girsheli thought a moment and then replied:

"I'm afraid, Giorgi, they'll run away, as they're still wild. Suppose we wait and watch them a week, eh?"

Giorgi consulted the Ingilo.

"Take me with you, my lord King. Cut off my head if the hunting leopards I have trained run away."

Yet Girsheli's words sounded more credible to the King.

They set to making arrangements for a chamois-hunt the same day.

Girsheli maintained that cheetahs resented being transported in an ox-cart, saying that in Egypt they were driven in a chariot.

In the palace of Uplistsikheh there had been stowed away from olden days the green chariot which the Emperor Basil had bestowed on Bagrat III together with the title of Kuropalat. Giorgi hated that chariot as much as he hated the name of the Byzantine Emperor.

In his youth Giorgi had been wont to carry his hounds about in the chariot. At last Melkisedek put his foot down.

"You shall respect a Christian Emperor! If you do not wish to mount Kuropalat's chariot, do not defile it, at least, with your hounds."

The King ordered that very chariot to be brought out.

According to the rule the guepardes' eyes were bound with red silk and they were placed in the chariot.

As all the hunters were scared Ushisharidze undertook to sit beside them.

Only one unpleasant circumstance damped the joyful ardour of the hunting party: just the night before the Ingilo had been seized with a bad fit of fever.

This time Shorena was eager to go hunting, and she asked Arsakidze to keep her company. She added that King Giorgi had requested that Arsakidze take with him the falcons trained after the Laz manner.

At first the King's Chief Architect refused.

"In a few days I must finish the temple. I have no time for hunting. Besides, I can't combine the duties of a flattering courtier with the work of an architect. If the title of Chief Architect means Chief Falconer too, I'll become an ordinary mason again as soon as I've finished building the temple."

Arsakidze saw that his knowledge of falconry after the Laz pattern had got him into trouble, but there was no way out. He submitted to Shorena's wish.

The King and his retinue, the noblemen, courtiers and guests, left Mtskheta before daybreak.

Ushisharidze sat in the green chariot beside the two blindfolded cheetahs, holding their leashes.

The chariot was decorated with flowers and leafy boughs.

King Giorgi, Girsheli, the master of ceremonies, Shorena, Arsakidze, Dachi—the governor of Nine Lakes—and his wife Rusudan, the "Fish-Eyed Cow," her sapphire-eyed daughter and Parsman the Persian rode behind the chariot.

Parsman continually spurred on his small Abkhazian horse, always endeavouring to be at the King's side with a view to obtaining the new post by expatiating on hunting leopards.

Now he cajoled the King, now he praised the cheetahs from Saingilo. Near them three eristavis and seven mail-clad knights, mounted on Arabian geldings, were displaying their horsemanship.

Bringing up the rear, the chief of the hunters, the master of the horse, ten hunters, three falconers and Estateh followed a cart loaded with skins of wine and edibles.

The falconers carried falcons trained in the Laz fashion, wrapped in silk "shirts"—one bird for the King, one for Shorena and one for Girsheli.

King Giorgi was in high spirits. He tirelessly urged on his gold-coloured stallion. He derived particular pleasure from the fact that he was managing to make a laughing-stock of the gift from the Caesar, the green chariot.

He turned to Girsheli and his betrothed and said: "The price of the Caesar's green chariot is rising by leaps and bounds. Previously Estateh, the falconer, used to put the hounds in it, and now, look, beasts of the blood royal are travelling in it. Surely, you know, Girsheli, that in Caesar Basil's veins pulses the blood of tavern-keepers."

Girsheli smiled and glanced at his future bride. Riding was becoming to Shorena.

Parsman the Persian had again caught up with the King and now broke into the conversation:

"I dare say, Your Majesty, that the hunting leopard is indeed of the blood royal. Moreover, I can tell you that a gueparde was believed to have been the foster-mother of Bacchus. A Greek tradition says: "A gueparde was said to have suckled Bacchus, the son of Zeus and Semele."

King Giorgi was still talking to Shorena about the green chariot and Emperor Basil, so that he did not even hear Parsman's words.

Parsman looked round and found that only the "Fish-Eyed Cow" was keeping him company, as she, too, had set her heart on riding beside the King. However, being an

inexperienced rider, she had failed to manage her Tekke gelding properly. So it was she to whom Parsman addressed the words meant for the King's ear.

Yet "Fish-Eyed Cow" heard nothing of his speech, either. She was exasperated with jealousy, seeing that King Giorgi had been conversing with Shorena all the way, ignoring the presence of Tsokala and her sapphire-eyed Natia.

XXXIX

Swamps overgrown with reeds and rushes stretched into the distance.

The green chariot was now being followed by six hunters who helped the horses to get across the marshes.

Pheasants rose from among the tall flags of the valley. Frightened wild boars scurried off, crashing through the reeds.

In the tangles of bindweed young pheasants were crying piteously.

At last they reached a plateau covered with symphytum which cut into the mountains like a bay.

On three sides it was closed in by the hills, to the south it was bounded by vast open steppes.

The King's Chief Hunter rode up to the King and reported:

"We must send the beaters up the mountain sides. When roused, the quarry will make for the plateau and the beaters will follow it. Between the plateau and the valley we must station the cheetahs to intercept the game."

The chief of the hunters regretted that it was impossible to use the greyhounds to hunt chamois that day as cheetahs were fond of dog's flesh. If they saw greyhounds they would leave the chamois alone and give chase after the hounds.

The horsemen waited in silence for a long while. At last they heard the blasts of the great bugle coming from the north. The beaters, having climbed the mountain slopes, started banging their kettle-drums.

Male pheasants flew up from out of the thickets of symphytum and danewort, and from afar the hunters admired these lovely birds. The boars fled to the woods.

Deep silence fell upon the plateau. Not a breath of air stirred. In the distance the tops of symphytum bushes could be seen swaying. Soon Giorgi and Girsheli noticed two birds flitting towards them across the plateau. No, they were not really birds but the ears of two chamois.

Giorgi was afraid they might notice the hunters and hide in the bushes.

Girsheli, on the other hand, asserted that as they were fleeing from the hillsides towards the plateau, they were bound to come out into the valley.

Suddenly Giorgi caught sight of the chamois leaping out of the sea of symphytum and galloping over the open plain. The foremost animal had scarcely covered one hundred stadia when Ushisharidze stripped the red silk cloth from the guepardes' eyes.

The male and his mate darted at an amazing speed after the fleeing chamois.

The King, Shorena, "Fish-Eyed Cow" and her daughter, Girsheli, Arsakidze, Dachi and his wife, all the attendants, urged on their horses to a breakneck gallop.

The horsemen could barely keep their eyes on the fiery streaks speeding across the straw-coloured steppe.

Both cheetahs were steadily gaining on the chamois, which seemed to be winging their way along.

The cheetahs tore on over the plain like lightning. No swifter creatures had ever traversed this steppe.

The horses strained after them, too, at such a pace that their bellies seemed to be brushing the ground, and yet they were always at least a hundred cubits behind the cheetahs.

At first the chase was led by Giorgi and Girsheli, but soon Girsheli's horse began to flag, and Shorena's Tekke mare overtook the gold-coloured stallion.

Arsakidze set spurs to his Arabian gelding and was soon within a deer's leap of the two.

Shorena's mare and the gold-coloured stallion were racing along side by side. Giorgi was delighted that next to him was the "Rose of Ecbatana" flying like the wind. At that moment he thought neither of the cheetahs nor of the hunted chamois.

The male gueparde was the first to overtake the buck. Two more leaps and he would spring on to his victim's back. Just at that moment the chamois swerved to the left (as a hare side-steps the hound). The cheetah failed to follow suit and dashed on. Before he had turned back the chamois had gained ground. The other chamois likewise sprang aside from the female cheetah and drew her off to the right.

Eristavi Dachi, the master of ceremonies, master of the horse, and about five riders started after the animals that had gone off to the right, while the King and the others galloped to the left.

A few women fell back.

Suddenly the "Fish-Eyed Cow," filled with envy, let out a strange screech right in her horse's ear and, dashing ahead at a furious pace, caught up with Kolonkelidze's daughter. Shorena's mare gave way to Tsokala's gelding.

The sight of the "Fish-Eyed Cow," his quondam paramour, overtaking him like a sin of his youth pursuing his manhood, sent Giorgi into a fury.

Shorena and Arsakidze were now galloping abreast, recalling the joys of their youth in Pkhovi.

For a moment there arose in Arsakidze's heart a burning desire to outride the King and to show him how a Laz could bend his horse to his will. But even at the height of his excitement he saw the impropriety of such a thing.

By that time the male gueparde had again overtaken its prey. The buck darted aside as before, but on this occasion the gueparde proved more cunning. It made a dazzling vault through the air and alighted on the back of the chamois.

When the hunters dismounted, the victorious beast, with the neck of its prey in its mouth, was greedily sucking its blood with a ferocious growling, which sounded something like "hurrrahkh, hurrrahkh. . ."

The men dared not approach the beast.

"Now then, Girsheli, go up to him ..." said Giorgi, smiling, to the lord of Kveli Castle.

Girsheli hesitated and turned pale.

Giorgi smiled again and went a few steps ahead of his cousin.

"Hurrrahkh ..." growled the gueparde, still more fiercely.

Giorgi cracked his whip and shouted at the beast.

It let the chamois go and once more from the gueparde's blood-dripping mouth came the fierce "hurrrahkh."

Giorgi went up to the chamois, ripped open its belly with his dagger and flung the steaming entrails to the beast.

Two riders came galloping over the steppe.

They were Eristavi Dachi and the chief of hunters. Both looked pale.

"What's the matter, my knights?" asked Giorgi.

"The other gueparde has caught the chamois but allows no one near her and is now devouring the game herself. She's well-nigh ripped Eristavi Dachi's thigh to shreds," reported the Chief Hunter.

"Fie on your courage if one female could frighten so many mail-clad knights!" said Girsheli jokingly.

"The cheetah frightened my husband, too," said Phanaskerteli's daughter, also in jest and hardly suppressing a smile.

Girsheli blushed. The words "my husband, too" stung him to the quick (particularly the last word). Nobody had ever insulted him so!

The hunters remounted.

That one word "too" had put Girsheli out of sorts.

The King and Shorena galloped on in front. The others, too, urged on their horses over the plain. Nobody cared to offer his own thigh to be ripped apart by the blood-maddened cheetah.

Giorgi rejoiced to see the usually melancholy Shorena enjoying the chase so much. ...

Availing himself of the opportunity he said to her:

"I want to ask you a question, Shorena, but I implore you beforehand not to be wroth with me."

"Say whatever you wish, my lord. Was there ever a time when kings were shy of their slaves' anger?"

"Who knows which of us is the slave!"

Shorena smiled and waited in expectant silence.

"Tell me frankly, Shorena, how do you like your betrothed?"

The woman's answer was instantaneous.

"Well, Girsheli would be a good knight if he didn't look just a little like a stork."

The King beamed; he cast a glance at Shorena riding next to him and was about to put another question to her when she added:

"The master of Kveli Castle seems to be a coward, too."

Giorgi reined in his horse at once, looked back, and seeing that their attendants were far behind them, said point-blank:

"I can set you free from Girsheli if it is your wish."

Shorena paused a moment, then said softly:

"Your will be done, my lord, in this too. But I know that even kings cannot circumvent the will of providence."

The King spurred on his horse, and they rode on to the plateau, which was overgrown with ferns.

The hunters, armed with lances, had by that time brought the gueparde to bay on the very brink of a precipice.

The blood-bespattered beast stood with its forelegs on the torn body of the chamois and roared in a terrifying fury: "Hurrrahkh, hurrrahkh...!" its eyes flashing the searing fires of the deserts.

Parsman the Persian was also there, but he too dared not go near the cheetah.

Giorgi helped Shorena down from her horse.

Parsman rushed up to the King and said:

"Allow us, O King, to have wine brought at once. The cheetah prefers wine to blood. As soon as she's drunk we'll catch her with our bare hands, like a mere duckling."

Giorgi did not reply but with a gesture of annoyance said loudly enough for the knights to hear him: "Let the bravest among you go up to her," and looked at the cheetah.

Out of the group of the knights stepped Girsheli and waving the red silk wrapper in his left hand, he gripped the hilt of his sword with his right hand and made straight for the gueparde.

Girsheli was only a few feet short of the dead chamois when the gueparde sprang up and snapped at his right shoulder.

The women screamed in chorus, the men drew their scimitars; the female cheetah let go of Girsheli's lacerated arm, and tracing a fantastic arc through the air, jumped from the edge of the chasm and vanished like a phantom.

The wounded knight was laid in the green chariot and the now mateless gueparde was put in a cart.

The frowning knights and women started back in gloomy silence on their way to Mtskheta.

Shorena looked upset. She deliberately fell behind the King, in order to ride silently side by side with Arsakidze. When the two reached Khursi's house. Shorena said to the young man:

"I'll come to see you, Uta, tomorrow evening."

Girsheli had been put to bed in the great hall. Fortunately Turmanidze happened to be in Mtskheta.

The surgeon pronounced that the wounds inflicted by the cheetah's teeth were not serious, the knight's steel armour having saved his life. Turmanidze promised to set the wounded man on his feet in two weeks.

The King led Parsman into his bedchamber, dismissed the monk in charge of the King's bed and motioned Parsman to an armchair.

The old man was in a great state of perturbation, fearing that the King might hold him responsible for the loss of the female cheetah.

However, his lord did not seem to be in bad humour and this gave Parsman some hope.

The King sat down, wiped the sweat from his brow and said:

"Look here, Parsman. Tell me now what you wanted to say in the palace garden that day."

But Parsman's shrewdness failed to read the King's mind.

"Did you not say that cheetahs have one more peculiarity?" the King prompted him.

"I wanted to say that even a tamed hunting leopard is apt to run away...."

"What do your words mean?"

"Some women are like cheetahs in this, Your Majesty!"

The mention of cheetahs brought to mind Kolonkelidze's daughter, and the King understood the inner meaning of Parsman's simile. He dismissed the old man and sat silent for a long time.

XL

Girsheli did not recover till after the two weeks, and without him Giorgi felt rather lonely. No hunting parties were arranged now, nor any feasts.

The hawks and falcons yawned on their perches. The lonely cheetah roared day and night, getting quite out of hand.

The peacocks screeched querulously in the palace garden, while in the deer's enclosure Nebiera lowed plaintively yearning for the Pkhovian mountains and their chalybeate springs.

Giorgi used to go out and see for himself which of the deer was lowing so piteously. On finding out which it was he wondered that in a herd of deer, too, a child could so strikingly take after its mother, and remembered Kolonkelidze's female deer which preferred, of her own free will, death to captivity.

Lasting rains set in, which was quite unusual for that season in Mtskheta.

Queen Mariam arrived in Uplistsikheh from Abkhazia.

A letter came from Melkisedek in which he announced that he was bringing with him the guests from Byzantium, and would be in Mtskheta within one month.

The guests left the palace; the merry women, too, went away.

Tsokala, alias "Fish-Eyed Cow," took her sapphire-eyed daughter Natia to Nokorna in order to present the two of them to the "Chained Giorgi" at his new residence.

Dachi and his wife Rusudan set off for their castle because while Tsokala stood in awe of the Queen, the "moustached" Rusudan was afraid of Catholicos Melkisedek.

It poured all day long, and at night would clear up a little. The King and Parsman usually went up to the flat roof of the tower and watched the moon because the luminary was circled by a storm cloud shaped like some monster. Parsman's *Lunar Calendar* also boded no good.

The sores on the King's chaplain's body showed no favourable signs.

Formerly Giorgi would not have worried if the chaplain had contracted leprosy, but now that the sores had slightly blackened fear stole into Giorgi's normally fearless heart.

Turmanidze had left for Artanuji, and so Giorgi called for Parsman to come in the evening.

On Saturday Giorgi passed the whole day at home, now reading Psalms, now smoking opium or leafing through Parsman's new *Lunar Calendar*. He was out of sorts and felt a twinge of compunction at being the cause of what had happened to Girsheli.

The rain ceased in the afternoon. A fit of sadness came over him, together with a desire to roam the valleys again, to wander round and round. He ordered Pipa Ushisharidze, the courier, to be summoned to him.

He charged the courier to tell Parsman to visit the King's chaplain and then report back to him immediately on the state of his health. In addition he instructed the courier to get two horses ready.

"This evening we'll take a ride to Sapurtsleh, the two of us."

When Parsman entered the King's bedchamber he found the King lying on his back with closed eyes and hands folded on his chest. His face, wrinkled here and there, looked care-worn, and the strands of grey in his dishevelled hair seemed more conspicuous than usual.

At the head of his bed stood two silver candlesticks.

A few wax tapers flickered faintly, casting wax-coloured reflexions on the King's face.

On the table stood a nargileh, and there was a smell of opium in the room.

The King opened his eyes, looked up at Parsman, and at that moment heard distinctly the fierce "hurrrahkh, hurrrahkh..." of the lone gueparde.

He ordered Ushisharidze to set an armchair for his guest.

"Have you seen the chaplain?" he asked Parsman, who was sitting down, puffing and wheezing.

"Yes, my lord King, I've seen the sick man."

"Mind, you must tell me only the truth, today at least."

"Have I ever told you lies, my lord King?"

"Only fools tell the truth to kings, Parsman."

"Right. And yet one should devote at least one day to telling the truth, my lord King."

"Then let today be the one."

The King laughed and Parsman was delighted.

"Do you think the priest has leprosy?"

"No, my lord, it doesn't appear to be leprosy."

"The plague, maybe?"

"I don't think those sores betoken pestilence."

"So you assure me that tonight you have come to tell me only the truth?"

"My old sinews always carry me about, O King, as a messenger of truth."

"What can I say to that, Parsman?"

"You may say whatever you wish, Your Majesty!"

"Where have you been so long? Proclaiming since daybreak the truth to the world, eh?"

"I was counting the fish, going up to Gudamakari to their nocturnal wedding."

"How many of them went up there this evening?"

"Just as many as the words of truth I have to tell you, my lord King."

"Still, how many all told?"

"As many as the questions my lord will have to put to me."

"Won't those words of yours pass by like the fish, old man?"

"No, they won't. My words start slowly in silence and drop into the listener's heart late, as does the opium smoke passing through the tube of the nargileh. They get to the listener's heart late and affect it still later."

The King raised his head, and glancing at the two candlesticks, said to his guest:

"Your fascinating words have often lulled me to sleep, Parsman. If I fall asleep this time, too, stand up, take those candlesticks and pass through the small hall. Once through the door servants will meet you in the corridor. I've been told today that the palace's stocks of fat and tallow have run out. Give them the candlesticks. Tell them not to wake me up before Pipa, the courier, comes."

The King fell silent.

After a short pause he turned to the old man.

"You have cleverly shown the resemblance between man's words and opium. Now show me how they differ!"

"How they differ?" repeated Parsman. "Opium affects only him who smokes it, whereas a word addressed to one person very often affects a thousand other people like a stone thrown indirectly."

"What's that? Throwing stones indirectly?"

"Once, in my childhood, I was fond of smashing earthenware jars. My playmates and I used to line up a number of empty jars along the wall of the stable. Then we would fall on them, battering the wall with stones. The stones bounced off the wall and played havoc with the jars. When the tutor caught us red-handed we swore that we had never thrown stones at the empty jars."

The King remained silent for a while and then asked: "Why do you talk in a whisper this evening, Parsman? It's true I'm somewhat bemused with opium, yet I think sleep is still far off. Besides, your talk is so wise that I shall probably stay awake for a long time."

"I had an instructor, a philosopher, in Cairo. The name of that sage was Abubekr Ismail Ibn Al-Ashari. He himself tramped about as a madman, and nevertheless taught wisdom to others. At Al-Hakim's palace he was well known as an occultist and a master of whispered talk. It was he who instructed me: great truths must be spoken by you in a whisper into the ear of great men, whereas what you have to blurt out at games of hazard in the noisy market places should be shouted out at the top of your voice as is done by the sellers of water and honey in Cairo in order that the cobblers may hear them and buy their goods."

"Well, I'll ask you one more question, but let your answer be quick and straightforward."

"I never speak in a straightforward manner, Your Majesty, because a roundabout speech always goes straight to one's heart. Had we thrown stones straight at the empty jars, the tutor would doubtless have given us a smart whacking. It is said that in ancient times there stood in Athens a statue of a deity believed by the Greeks to be prophetic; yet it never said anything openly but always in ambiguous hints."

The King yawned, closed his eyes and then turned again to Parsman.

"And now tell me, Parsman, how do you like Arsakidze, the architect?"

"Arsakidze, the Laz, is not bad, but his painting is better than his building. The fact that he was appointed by Melkisedek reminds me of a curious story...."

"It was not the Catholicos who has appointed him, but I myself."

The old man gave a start and was silent. From the palace garden came the roar of the male cheetah: "Hurrrahkh, hurrrahkh...."

"Don't be afraid, Parsman, today you can tell me anything with impunity."

"It is the habit of kings that if they pardon a truth-teller one day, they'll make him atone for it threefold after three years."

"Neither in three days nor in three years... I swear."

Parsman still hesitating, Giorgi smiled at him.

"Now then, Parsman, what does Arsakidze's appointment remind you of?"

"It is said that when the devils had extirpated all the priests in Hell, God appointed a crow to act as a priest there."

The King burst out laughing. Parsman felt encouraged.

"And what about the newly-built cathedral?"

"No sentence can be passed on a book until it has been copied by others a thousand times, nor can a newly-built temple be judged until earthquakes have tested its worth over a thousand years."

"You continue to talk in riddles, Parsman."

"It is still my opinion, Your Majesty, that the best book has not yet been written by anybody. As for the best temple such has not yet been built on earth."

"Tell me now something about my viziers. Which of them do you like best of all, Parsman?"

"Only him who will some day tell the truth to his master."

"Well, and who is that one?"

"I think that each of your viziers is afraid of you. You, my lord, know better than I do that the counsels of flatterers have never yet done any good to any King."

The King threw himself face downwards in a fit of uncontrollable laughter, wiping away with his hand the tears that were rolling down his cheeks.

Parsman was becoming bolder and bolder.

"There is a shortcoming common to kings: to expect cowards to become useful viziers is as fruitless as to expect the Aragvi to flow backwards."

"No doubt that is also true!"

"If it is true, then what must a king do? No king has yet been made wise by his clever viziers. If he chooses viziers who'll have no fear of him, they themselves will some day be reaching after the royal throne!"

The King confirmed the truth of these words, too. Then, with a smile, he asked Parsman again:

"What other peculiarities have kings?"

Parsman paused for a while, hesitantly.

"The opium I smoked this afternoon has already taken a hold on me but the effect of your words is still imperceptible. You know, Parsman, that I'm very kind-hearted when I'm drunk."

"You're as kind-hearted when you're sober, my lord King."

The King, without paying any attention to the last words, continued:

"One day some drunken low-born killed my horse under me in Mtskheta. I was glad to have got off with a whole skin. Moreover, I myself was drunk, and disguised as a low-born; so I let the drunken man go unharmed."

"I've heard this story, too, Your Majesty," answered Parsman smiling.

"Come, now, tell me what other traits of character are common to kings."

"Haughtiness is the worst shortcoming of kings. The king in every country is alone and unequalled. It is evident that an isolated man can never be perfect. The higher his status the more clearly he sees that solitude makes the greatest sage seem always but a madman."

"Go on, go on!..." said the King, smiling with his opium-blurred eyes at the old man. "What then?"

"And then the solitary one looks round, and seeing no one equal to himself, suffers the costliest jewel of humanity—modesty—to slip out of his hand."

Both fell silent. From the palace garden came again the fierce "hurrrakh, hurrrakh" of the lonely beast.

"You should never confound real modesty," continued Parsman, "with the humility of a slave or a sycophant, nor with the submissiveness of the wretch who kisses the latchet of his master's shoe. Woe unto the man who forgets that everybody is the Son of God. It is common to both kings and fools to think themselves superior to others, and therefore whosoever tries to match them shall surely lose his head. But he who is supercilious towards even the least of men, is really haughty. If I met the Messiah on the road and he told me that I was better than somebody else, I should reply: 'Thou art not the Messiah.' Kings and lions become arrogant in solitude and pine away in their haughty loneliness."

Parsman again heard the roar of the male cheetah.

Evening was already peering into the casements of the great hall. Parsman looked at the King's couch.

Giorgi lay with closed eyes. The light of the waxen candle cast a lifeless yellowness on his face. He looked more dead than alive.

"He's fallen asleep," thought Parsman.

He got up, took the candlesticks and with bated breath tiptoed out of the room.

He had scarcely reached the corridor leading to the small hall when Ushisharidze came into the King's bedchamber.

The King rose and said to the courier:

"Parsman the Persian has just stolen the silver candlesticks. Catch him, Pipa, and give the old dog a couple of good kicks."

As Giorgi and Pipa came down the staircase they found Parsman the Persian sitting there. He rose, and going up to the King, said:

"Did you not promise, Your Majesty, not to punish me for telling the truth?"

The King raised his eyebrows as if in surprise.

"Is it, indeed, for truth that you have been kicked? You have been punished today for stealing the candlesticks."

Parsman was dumbfounded.

The King laughed and said to the old man:

"You are fond of equivocal words, Parsman, and kings are wont to give equivocal kicks."

And yet on that evening Parsman had concealed the truth from King Giorgi. He had recognized the presence of the "black death" from the sores of the King's chaplain. He had likewise told the King a lie about Arsakidze. In this connection read the following parable:

Once upon a time three musicians appeared in the evening in the square of a town.

They struck up sweet strains of music.

The people crowded around them and started merrily dancing round.

They were delighted with the harmonious sound of the flute, the violin and the bagpipe.

A deaf man approached the musicians. He heard neither the music nor the words.

How stupid are these people! thought the deaf man. Three men are moving their hands in a silly way. One has stuck a piece of reed into his mouth, the other holds a piece of wood and is rubbing it with a stick, the third has put an inflated bag to his mouth, and the huge crowd is wheeling madly round them.

When an envious man who has failed in his own craft pretends not to see the magnificence of the work created by the master, rest assured, reader, that he is like the man whose ears were deaf to the sweet music of those three musicians.

XLI

At first the clouds were ash grey but when the moon rose over the Monastery of the Cross they grew yellow. Then the quivering moonbeams started their play in the sky, the mountains became dark blue, tints of wild pigeon touched up the clouds and the sky.

Arsakidze saw all this from the veranda. Afterwards the murky colours chased out the light ones.

By and by the trees, the spires of the churches and the roofs of the castles blackened all around. Far away to the west a streak of molten gold lit up the horizon for a moment.

And just at that moment from the watchtowers of the castles came the first clarion call.

It was the signal for changing the sentries.

Twilight descended on Rati's orchard. The evening poured its sombre tints over the flowers and grasses, the trees became black shadows and the man on the veranda felt chilly.

He rose and went into the room.

Nonai had already lit the candles.

Tiny moths were dancing round the flames in the hall. '

In the orchard an owlet was hooting.

Arsakidze sat for a long while listening to the call of the lonely creature.

Larger moths now whisked into the hall. They had dark, almost black wings edged with red and yellow dots. They flitted round and round the lamp.

Arsakidze could not bear the sight any longer. He got up and went again out on to the veranda to be alone in the darkness.

He was aware that he had changed within a very short time. He had become impatient and restless, like Eros born of an eager mother and a wilful father.

The day seemed unwilling to fade, the sun to set in darkness and the evening to become night, as though the very heavenly orbs had suddenly altered their customary course before Arsakidze's eyes.

And yet the most significant thing was that he who had grown up in solitude was unable to bear it any longer.

The owlet, born in the darkness, was complaining of it in the orchard.

Thank heaven, his beloved creation was nearing completion. Otherwise what heart could be strong enough to serve equally well both love and art?

So had it always been from the beginning of time: one shrine cannot house two idols.

In his restlessness he again moved elsewhere, and went down into the garden.

Night had already entered Rati's house but his heart's desire was nowhere to be seen.

It had rained three evenings in succession. Now the evening was clear and yet she had not come.

He leant against a linden-tree, alert for the slightest sound.

The orchard was silent. The leaves did not stir, the lonely young owl was still calling piteously. That was all he heard in the darkness.

Standing with closed eyes it suddenly seemed to him that he was listening to Shorena's voice. He felt as if she were holding him by the buttons on the breast of his *chokha*, saying in a whisper:

"What has made you so sad? Look, I've come, Uta." He opened his eyes and looked up at the moon. Then he closed them again. Faint with endless waiting he grew unconscious of the flight of time.

The years, like sea waves after a storm, ebbed away. Uta again became a boy. The days of his boyhood came back—the blissful days when the credulous soul believed the myth that the sun and the moon had been foster-sister and -brother. They had fallen in love with each other.

Their parents had punished them, and the girl had changed into the sun, the youth into the moon. Becoming fire, they had flown into the sky.

Thousands of years had rolled by like a flicker of an eyelid. And the lovers, the children of one foster-mother, were still seeking each other even to this day.

Thus the sun and the moon were love.

And so it is: whosoever has experienced love has tasted death. If there be a god somewhere in this world, he also must be love, thought Arsakidze.

He roused himself with a start.

Was it the wind rustling in the branches of the orchard? Or was it the owlet complaining of its loneliness?

The flowers and grasses were sleeping soundly, only the bees were chanting in their sleep, or was it love singing in the heart of the man?

Roses and wistarias bloomed in the dark. The bunches of grapes carved by the artist's hand in the stone of Tedzami were distinctly discernible on the wall of Svetitskhoveli.

"Love herself is the god of this world." And as this thought flashed across his mind he heard the rustling of a woman's dress coming from among the tall grasses.

A veiled shadow was hurrying towards him, looking snowy in the moonlight.

"Why have you been waiting for me here, Uta?" asked the woman.

Shorena's delightful voice struck his ear in waking reality and he once more heard from her lips his own Laz name, a name by which nobody had ever called him in his solitude. He was seized with a desire to kneel in the wet grass, to fall at her feet, before his heart's desire, before the one who, regardless of gossiping tongues, had visited the poor master to resume the friendship of their youthful days.

He controlled himself and reached for her hands to kiss them.

On entering the hall they saw the black moths still flitting round the burning candles, rushing into the flame and, their wings singed, falling to the floor, tossing and flinging themselves about there in a most pitiful way.

Bats were wheeling their dizzy ring dance under the very vaults of the hall or darting about in pairs in the spacious hall.

Shorena took off her veil. She had neither her pearl cap on her head, nor the diamond carcanet around her neck. She was not wearing her dress of Chinese silk, nor her *sheidishi* of the colour of a pheasant's neck.

She was dressed in a dark Pkhovian coat as plain as the everyday garment usually worn by her servants.

She looked pale and sorrowful like the angel in the wall-painting of Kintsvisi.

Only now did Arsakidze understand that her diamond caps, her brocade dresses, her silk *sheidishi* and jewels were but a facade to be used at the dissolute court of King Giorgi.

And Shorena wore them in order to prevent other people from perceiving that she herself was like her pet Nebiera, who lowed at the time of rutting in her inclosure, like a deer panting for Pkhovian mountains and the springs of sour water. And her sombre garb seemed natural to him because mourning was more becoming to her than the diamond necklace and many-coloured samite robes.

Shorena was trembling with fear.

"Is there anybody else in the house besides you, Uta?" she asked.

She looked around, and seeing nobody, fixed her eyes on the painting.

She gave a start when she realized that it was the lamed Jacob wrestling with God.

"Who else might be here but me?" asked the young man. "Nonai is asleep in her room. There are only God and me in this luckless, dark house."

"What God? What are you saying, Uta?" asked Shorena in surprise.

She looked again at Jacob's God, picked up a candlestick and took it close to the picture, which she began to scrutinize.

"This old man's face resembles Catholicos Melkisedek, I saw him myself that evening when he spoke about Jacob's wrestling with God. And Jacob is your likeness, Uta!"

The artist kept silent. (This is what happens with a real master. He will never be the first to reveal his creation.)

He offered his guest an armchair and sat down by her side.

"I feel as if I see you in a dream, Shorena. What a long path, a path of how much suffering had we to traverse to get to know each other at last! All my life, madman that I am, I have been in search of God in Pkhovi, in Chaneti and Byzantium. And only today, Shorena, did I understand that, after all, life on this earth has been arranged by its master quite well. Whatever happens to man in this world helps him to find his god and at last himself. Believe me, Shorena, man's highest duty lies not in searching for the god of the paupers. He himself must become a rival of God the Creator."

"Uta! Your words frighten me!"

"You're not as faint-hearted as the other women. You have never resembled anybody else of your sex, and that's why I loved you before even I had grasped the sense of the words 'a man and a woman.' You approached the King's cheetah before any of his knights did. You are such a saint that even the fiercest beasts dare not harm you. If love be God, you, your own self, are my love and my god. That is why I felt you standing by my side when I was engaged in single combat."

Shorena sat on the edge of the *takhti*, listening to Arsakidze with bent head.

She showed no sign of surprise and it seemed to Arsakidze as though the spirit of silence had taught her all this a long time before.

He passed his hand gently over her head as one would caress a sulking child.

The woman raised her head quietly and turned her sorrowful eyes on him.

A moan broke from her lips.

"I am as lonely as you, Uta, as a lonely, storm-beaten tree. I have always been with you, Uta, yet you have never noticed this. Sometimes you would throw yourself completely into your art, sometimes you would take up with loose women or go hunting."

"What! Have I ever rejected you?"

"Do you not remember, Uta, when Chiaberi was coming to Kvetari for our betrothal, I asked you to take my father's horses and flee from Kvetari at night?"

"I do, but I thought then that you were my foster-sister."

"And who has told you the truth?"

"I have sworn to keep the secret."

"I know. I know who could have told you. Now it matters not."

"Did you know that my real foster-sister was Mzekalai?"

"I knew but had I told you about it I'd have opened my heart to you. It is not proper for a woman to anticipate the man in confessing love."

"So you did not love Chiaberi? I thought it was only a maiden's fear of marriage and nothing else."

"God had, probably, no hand in creating a woman, Uta. It's the lover's heart that chooses his beloved one for him, whereas for a woman the husband is chosen by the parents and by circumstances. I had only one alternative at that time: either King Giorgi or Chiaberi. I knew, too, that our mothers had been married to men whom they had never loved before marriage. I was as sorry for the Queen as one woman can be for another. On the other hand I've never longed for happiness built on other people's misfortune. Just for this reason I agreed to become Chiaberi's wife."

"And now?" broke in Arsakidze in confusion.

"And now everything is too late. We'd better not arouse the love of our youth. Girsheli told me that a cheetah, suddenly awakened, is something terrible. I think that awakening one's early love is still more dreadful. Girsheli or Giorgi? I should say: neither. Girsheli reminds me of the pole of a clapper set up in the fields to frighten away the bears. As for King Giorgi he blinded my father. I'd rather be the wife of death than of him.... My Uncle Dachi gave me a good piece of advice: You should take refuge in some nunnery, he said, and that's the right thing to do. There is another way out, too, but let it be for the time being, Uta."

Arsakidze fell on his knees before her, then rose, and putting his arm round her neck, kissed her. Sweet like the first sin of youth were her lips....

From the castle of Mukhnari resounded a trumpet.

The woman prepared to go.

"I have to leave you now, Uta. Farewell!"

Arsakidze embraced her. Her breath was as delicious as the breath of the Earth in the Month of Roses.

"I'll sacrifice everything to you. I'll give away my heart's blood for you, Shorena, my last breath, but don't cast me aside!"

She forced Arsakidze's hand to release her and said firmly:

"The trumpet has sounded again, it is late, Uta."

XLII

They walked slowly along the narrow lanes. The poor hovels of the district of Princes' Baptism were asleep. Here and there in the gloom tore packs of dogs in heat. Out of her covert of clouds came the moon, branded with dark-grey spots.

Arsakidze followed Shorena at some distance.

When they reached Khursi's house, he halted and looked about. Not a soul was stirring.

He approached Shorena and began to kiss her hands.

He entreated her not to leave him in utter loneliness.

And like the ringing of celestial bells resounded Shorena's voice:

"So be it. I shall visit you tomorrow evening, Uta. If there is no rain I shall certainly come."

Arsakidze returned through the same lanes. On the flat roof of a mud hut sat a dog. In the moonlight its black figure looked like some statue cast in iron. With its head raised to the moon the lonely creature was howling in blood-curdling fashion.

Arsakidze shivered as he listened to the ghastly howling.

He quickened his pace and looked up at the moon.

"I wish I could howl at the sky, too," he thought.

The moon seemed to be draped in violet muslin, and shafts of reddish light shone across the vault of the sky. He had never seen such a moon.

He groped his way along the dark side-streets, reproaching himself for his past adventures.

Finally he met her who should have received his first love. Having already been sacrificed herself, she was offered his last love when he was already doomed for his youthful sins.

Raindrops fell on Arsakidze's fevered brow. He groped on through the darkness. Moisture trickled down his cheeks.

No, those were not the tears of one condemned. It was drizzling slightly and the moon was out of sight. In the earth-coloured furrows of the clouds solitary stars were twinkling (here and there).

Arsakidze walked bare-headed, his cheeks moist. His heart was weeping, but his eyes were wet with rain and not with tears.

"Such is my destiny. My love has always been lavished on that which was doomed. I have loved those colours whose formulas are already forgotten by dyers and painters; those ornaments in stone which even the oldest stone-cutters are now unable to carve; those garments which nobody cares to wear, and now fate has made me love a woman who has been condemned by fate," such were the thoughts 'passing through his dazed mind.

He stopped short, realizing that he had lost his way, and retraced his steps out of a blind alley.

Before his mind's eye rose again that image of beauty, the object of his passionate longing.

With what a courageous, unflinching steadfastness was she facing the end of her blameless life! Quiet and pure like a turtle-dove.

"Only one road is left to me, the road to a convent. But what convent would accept me if King Giorgi is against it? They will not leave my doomed body alone even in a convent." These had been Shorena's words as they had passed Rati's garden. These were the words spoken by one who had such a tender heart, who had been inspired with a soul of such spotless purity!

"There is another way out but I'll tell you of that anon," she had said to him.

He was well aware that this other way was as gloomy as that leading to the convent with its locked gates.

What assistance could Arsakidze render to her whom he had loved before he understood the essential meaning of manhood and womanhood? Must he follow her to Pkhovi and fight side by side with her in the ranks of the rebels?

He would not try to dissuade her from her purpose, for he knew that she would not understand him. He detested the King as much as she did, but he was afraid that as a result of the uprising Georgia would be rent asunder. The country had to be united, not divided. Nevertheless, at times he wavered. Possibly the next king would be better than Giorgi, he thought. But he might go back to the old heathen ways, which would be the country's undoing. And then where were the rebel's going to find forces?

The terrible night in Kvetari Castle came back to his mind, when Zviad's warriors had flung the chiefs and the commanders of the gorges from the towers like so many kittens.

Undoubted defeat and destruction were awaiting Shorena.

And what about the temple of Svetitskhoveli?

It was to be consecrated before long. Should he, a roan released from prison on parole, take sides with the rebels?

He would be breaking his word of honour. King Giorgi was ruthless, and should Parsman act against him, too, he could possibly persuade the King to pull down the temple. And the temple was his greatest achievement, and belonged to the people.

Shorena was a woman, a young woman, she was ignorant of all this. It was pleasant to go to war, but no warrior, even a victorious one, had ever come home from war with the same warlike feeling.

The rain became a downpour. Arsakidze was drenched to the skin but those anxious thoughts still kept turning in his mind.

At last he was home.

A terrible thunderstorm broke. There was lightning—the mountains would heave up for an instant into the light-flooded sky, and then everything around would grow dark again. A rough wind swooped down on the orchard. Century-old linden-trees groaned under the furious blasts. The wind was raging in the garden, rampaging through the nearby oaks.

He lay prone on his bed. Rain had ceased to lash his cheeks, but tears, real tears wet his eyes and the pillow.

XLIII

Konstantineh Arsakidze was awake all night. He listened to the pattering and splashing of the rain, fearful lest the bad weather should last the whole day and prevent Shorena from coming to see him.

He was glad when the sun's first beams touched him caressingly while he was still in bed.

Off he hurried to the construction site without breakfast. But even the sight of his favourite work was unable to rouse him to his former zeal.

He answered the masons' and painters' questions perfunctorily, and that day everybody was surprised at his conduct, at his negligence and carelessness.

Bodokia asked him several times: "You're ill, master aren't you? Are your kidneys still troubling you?"

In the stone-cutters' workshop Arsakidze found Tavkhelidze, in a sweat, chiselling the likeness of a winged lion in the stone of Tedzami.

The stone-cutter was toiling away at a difficult piece of work. His chisel would not obey his trembling hand.

The lion's body was carved quite well, but the master's eye noticed that the "Christian master" had failed to shape the wings correctly.

He had carved them out crudely, and the stone lacked the softness of the outspread wings one usually feels even without touching them. Arsakidze took the chisel from Tavkhelidze.

"Have a little rest, uncle," he said

He had to engrave those tiny grooves which are usually visible on the raised wings of a bird.

The stone proved to be uncommonly stubborn. Whenever he struck the chisel with the hammer the stone threw off sparks like flint. It seemed as if the enraged stone were beating off the artist's attack with its last fire. Arsakidze saw that the chisel in his hand drew lines as bad as those of the "bunglers."

The old stone-cutter perceived, too, the obstinacy of the stone and the master's failure.

Sweat broke out on Arsakidze's forehead. He wiped it off with his handkerchief and then proceeded to hammer at the chisel with relentless violence, but the stone continued to defy his efforts.

As luck would have it Bodokia came in just at that moment and told Arsakidze that the masons wanted his instructions concerning the placing of an ornamental ashlar over the lintel of the portal.

In his heart Arsakidze was glad that the mason's request had saved him from disgrace.

The ashlar was lifted and put in position without a hitch.

The King's Architect left the masons.

Oh, how he longed to be left unmolested, to belong only to himself for just one day!

The shamefaced master roamed aimlessly round the temple.

He looked at the decorations on the doors and windows, the bas-reliefs of the facades, the ornamentation of the cornices with such an indifferent air that they might have been made by some other people and not by himself.

What unflagging energy must have been displayed by the master! What a mighty power had subdued in so striking a way the stubbornness of the stone!

His soul seemed to have lent to the marble its warmth, and the costliest furs their softness to the granite.

The leaf ornaments and rosettes suggested to the mind the resiliency which is felt in triple-linked silver chain mail, or silk fabrics interwoven with braids.

The surfaces of some of them rippled like the rhythmical lines of the vine shoots, the tendrils of creeping plants, the curving backs of gazelles, or cornfields swaying under the breath of the sea breeze, or a sea of golden ears of wheat when the wind skims over it at sunset.

The minute details of loops and scrolls, the various forms of the plants were executed with elaborate thoroughness and finish, reminding one of the young tendrils of the vines, or those tiny, barely visible fibres which run through the inner side of the vine leaf.

Their forceful curves suggested the apparent elasticity of antlers.

Man's eye was charmed by the wonderful precision of the circles intersecting the sides of the scrupulously identical squares. Each of the circles, equal in size, was embellished with various skilfully done ornaments. Taken in the mass they seemed to be quite alike, but viewed separately they could be seen to be completely different kinds of rosette.

And the whole nature of the many-sided universe, spread flat on the surface of the stone, was expressed with such delightful harmony and mellowness that God himself might have grown envious.

Not so Long ago these blocks of stone under the master's hands had been docile as wax, pliant as the branch of a grape-vine, yielding as the surface of a cornfield, and now behold! Even the stone of Tedzami, so extremely ductile, so longing for a chisel, was now resisting the master, flashing forth fires at the man who had become possessed by Eros.

Let nobody wonder at this, for Eros is the deity of the idle. He prefers a banqueting hall to a stone-cutter's workshop. Arsakidze gave some orders to Bodokia, and like a lazy slave, slunk away from the construction site earlier than usual.

In a vineyard just outside the town some vinegrowers were drinking wine. They invited him to join them, offered him some cheese and fresh vegetables and treated him to a jar of red wine.

Then the vinegrowers set to work again, while Arsakidze, somewhat tipsy, went out of town towards Sapurtsleh.

He walked on singing and declaiming strange verses, while tears trickled from his eyes.

The wind beat him in the face, he walked on and on, singing, the unsought tears rolling down his cheeks. And the drunken man could not discover the cause of his tears. Was it the wind or love?

What a heartless vagabond is Eros! He turns dauntless kings into weaklings, and great masters, whose firm hands could carve rosettes and bunches of grapes in stone, he changes into bunglers. He befuddles them and drives them mad.

He sends them out to roam in fields and meadows and gather poppies for their sweethearts.

XLIV

Arsakidze wandered in the meadows and valleys for a long time. Sun-burned and wind-beaten, he returned to Mtskheta by the evening, bringing home an armful of poppies and wheat ears.

To begin with there was a fine drizzle, then the sky shattered its scimitar of lightning on the mountain tops, and peals of thunder shook the earth.

Hail thrashed the flowers and fruit-trees in the garden mercilessly.

Arsakidze paced the rooms restlessly, while Nonai with scared face followed on his heels, wondering that her master could go without dinner for so long a time.

When the servant began to light the lire-pans, Arsakidze told her that he did not need them, having spent a sleepless night.

After he had dismissed her he threw himself face down on his bed and, listening to the splashing of the rain, thought:

"Will she come? Won't the rain prevent her from coming? If she comes what should I say to her?"

Two things were put on the scales of the balance, both equally dear to him: Svetitskhoveli and Shorena. This evening would decide which of the two was the more weighty.

Both of them demanded from him the same thing— his whole self.

Was Shorena claiming only his life? She wanted him to go back on his word of honour, to abandon his finest creation.

And he asked himself:

"Wouldn't it be better if the rain never ceased and if Shorena did not come either today or tomorrow, or ever after? And if she did not say any more about that 'other way out'?"

Arsakidze felt that the other road was as hopeless as any other which could open up before Shorena.

Suppose Arsakidze were to agree to her proposal, it would be far from easy to escape from Mtskheta.

No suspicious movement in Pkhovi could pass unnoticed by the sharp eyes of Zviad's scouts. King Giorgi, himself, had doubtlessly assigned spies to the traitor's daughter. Would the guard let them out of Mtskheta in the daytime? After sunset the gates of the fortress were barred and bolted.

He recalled the story about the arrest of the disguised Eristavi Mamamzeh. Arsakidze knew that the Pkhovians were not unanimous. Murochi Kalundauri and Ushisha Gudushauri were secretly at war with each other; as for Talagva Kolonkelidze, the chiefs of the gorges gave him only temporary support.

Even were Zviad's army to be defeated, the chiefs would for certain behead the blinded eristavi, because only common hatred of King Giorgi had made them Kolonkelidze's temporary allies.

In the event of the rebels' victory, no less than in the event of their defeat, there would be the devil and all to pay. In both cases Shorena would perish. It was inevitable.

This was his train of thought when he heard his dog barking. He jumped up and ran down the stairs.

Shorena was very pale as she entered the house. . . .

She wore a fur-trimmed hunting coat, and morocco top-boots, which were dripping wet.

He helped her off with her coat and cap.

Her golden hair fell loosely on her dress of black Chinese silk.

A soul of stainless purity looked out of her 'clear, radiant eyes, but they seemed sad.

Her mouth, which was the colour of a pomegranate flower, was captivating. Her upper lip, slightly raised, was as lovely as that of a pouting child.

Raindrops glittered on her cheeks. Nobody looking at that beautiful face would fancy that tears could have burned those cheeks of ancient ivory.

It was horrible for Arsakidze even to imagine that this dearly beloved being, his heart's desire, had been ruthlessly condemned by fate.

He walked over to her, kissed her on the forehead, embraced her and pressed her to his heart. Her body was soft as the costliest fur, her breath fragrant as a summer evening in a vineyard when Trebizond dates blossom among the grape-vines and poppies.

"How strong you are, Uta!" said Shorena.

"I was strong before my love for you scorched my heart," these words were on the tip of his tongue but he kept silent.

"You are a sculptor, though. Who else should have strong arms if not a sculptor doing combat with stone?!"

"Would that fate had given artists the strongest hands of all, but—alas, other people's hands are much stronger!"

He praised her black dress of Chinese silk.

"If I tumble from my scaffoldings or the scorpions sting me to death in this accursed house, I ask you, Shorena, to mourn for me in this black dress with your wheat-coloured tresses undone."

"What scorpions? What does it mean, Uta?"

"I was joking. What on earth would scorpions be doing in Rail's house?" he said to calm her.

Then he put his arm around her and sat down on the *takhti*.

Taking a huge bunch of poppies and wheat he scattered them at the feet of his beloved and recounted his dream.

"As soon as I finish the temple I'll paint my dream," he added.

"Alas! I shan't see your picture!" said Shorena calmly but sadly.

Then she began to speak in an agitated voice about the temple.

"Why do you clamber up that treacherous scaffolding? The other day it almost cost you your life. You have already finished building the temple, haven't you?" and she added: "King Giorgi and Catholicos Melkisedek are wicked, they won't appreciate your services."

"Am I building the Temple of the Wonder-Working Pillar in expectation of their favours? I am building for Georgia, and I'm ready to sacrifice myself for her."

"Is stone dearer to you than life, Uta?"

"Why, is Svetitskhoveli mere stone? It was stone not so long ago, but now it is more immortal than the souls of a hundred thousand mortals."

"And still it is dearer to you than anything else, Uta."

Arsakidze felt that Shorena was jealous of his love for the temple. He put his arm round her waist, held her tight to his bosom and kissed her on the neck, adorned with a string of pearls.

"Do you love me, Shorena?" he asked in a whisper.

Shorena looked at the friend of her childhood with her sea-green eyes, but the youth failed to find any answer in them. They were as misty as the sea after a storm.

Arsakidze hung his head, and Shorena understood without words the cause of his sadness. - She passed her hand over his hair. The youth started, the touch of her hand having sent an electric thrill through his body. He looked into her eyes and said:

"I am not worthy of your love. You are right. My destiny is to love and never to be loved. If you were safe I could be satisfied with that little, but you are in danger, and therefore my love for you makes me anxious."

Shorena blushed.

"Who has told you my secret, Uta? Perhaps Vardisakhar has come to you?"

Konstantineh set the alarmed girl at ease.

"I have not seen Vardisakhar for a long time. Do you remember my coming to your house that evening? Khatuta, your maidservant, had fallen asleep, at the door, and I couldn't help overhearing your talk with the *khevisberis*."

Shorena bent her head and then looked straight into his eyes.

"I have not come to you, Uta, to demand a sacrifice. I know without your telling me that you are incapable of making it. I am unselfish in my affections. I have never loved in order to receive recompense for my love. I am well aware of the barrier which Fate has raised between us—a stone wall as high as your temple."

"Shorena, I'm willing to lay down my life for your sake."

She glanced at him and Arsakidze realized that the girl believed him.

"Were it necessary for your happiness, I'd probably sacrifice my Svetitskhoveli," said Arsakidze, and in the same instant somewhere in the innermost recesses of his mind there flashed the thought: "It's not; quite true."

In Shorena's eyes he read the same thought. The word "probably" had cut her to the quick.

"But the main trouble is," he added hastily, "that people, substituting one injustice for another, think that such substitution may give them relief. I extol neither King Giorgi nor Catholicos Melkisedek but I'm not sure that seven chiefs of the gorges could make better laws than one king, be he ever so cruel. So that if the Greeks or Saracens besiege Georgia's fortresses tomorrow, I'll put aside my chisel and go, sword in hand, to fight her enemies. There hasn't yet been established on earth an order of things to everybody's liking. The chiefs of your mountaineers still smell of sheep's fat. You know, too, that if a flock of sheep is not guided by a bell-wether it will end up by falling into some precipice.

"Suppose your plot is successful and Zviad's forces are defeated, is it not likely that on the very next day the same atrocities will take place as in the castle of Kvetari on that memorable night? Or that the Saracens will invade our country? What will then become of all of us?"

The girl listened to Arsakidze with her elbows resting on her knees, and the palms of her hands pressed against her face. Then she rose and said quietly:

"You know, Uta, that sometimes one's mind is closed while the door of the heart is open. Perhaps what you say is reasonable but my heart is closed to your words. I promised the chief of the gorge to arrive in Pkhovi on the Day of St. George of Fountain Head, and to wait for Zviad's troops there, and perhaps for my death. I've come here not to ask for help. 'Tis long since life separated our paths. Nor have I any right to demand your devotion, as I have never made any sacrifice for you. Had I refused to be Chiaberi's wife, had I not waited until you would come to your senses, until you learnt by chance the truth about our foster-mother, I would have had more right to say to you: 'Let's flee from Mtskheta and take the lead in the Pkhovian uprising.' I failed to sacrifice everything for the sake of my love, and so did you. Both of us have been punished by fate. Love does not forgive apostasy, and inflicts a severe penalty on renegades. Such people are always solitary in the world. There's no one so pitiable as a lonely soul, Uta."

Arsakidze listened to Shorena in amazement. He rose to his feet and looked at her. It was not a woman but the goddess of wisdom herself speaking with Shorena's childish lips.

They embraced each other and with countless kisses endeavoured to call back the sweetness of their childhood in Kvetari, and make up for the days and years of loveless solitude and fruitless suffering.

Then they heard again the fanfare of trumpets from the fortress of Mukhnari.

"It's too late, Uta."

They crossed the garden and went separately through the darkened lanes.

When they had reached the wicket gate of Khursi's house Shorena said:

"I'll come to you, Uta, before I leave."

On entering his house Arsakidze put out the lights, forgetting to chase away the bats.

He turned restlessly in his bed. The bats squeaked, something rustled in the corners of the room.

Sleep would not touch his eyelids. He tossed from one side to another, turned his pillow, changed his position and thought:

"What's happened to the scorpions? Can't they crawl out of their chinks and make an end of me? Damn it all!"

XLV

King Giorgi had got drunk the night before. Now he was awakened by the roar of a stag. The monk in charge of the King's bed chose an opportune moment to tell him the news:

"The King's confessor Ambrosi is dying."

Giorgi knit his brows and muttered:

"God shall destroy lying lips and a garrulous tongue."

He turned to the wall and went on dozing.

Girsheli learned from Philadelphos, the monk who was treating him, that the King's chaplain was dying of the plague.

The lord of Kveli Castle was greatly alarmed by the news. He had survived the plague twice during his captivity in Egypt. At first the terrible disease had been brought into Cairo by foreign caravans, the second time by rats from the Indian ships.

Fleas had carried the contagion into the fortress where 30,000 captive Greeks and 10,000 Georgians had been kept. In one month all the Greeks perished, and only nine out of all the Georgians were left alive.

The plague had probably been brought into Georgia by the Arabian troops sent to the Emir of Tbilisi, Girsheli decided.

Before daybreak he was already up, though his wounds had not yet healed.

He began to shower the monk with questions:

"Ambrosi was bitten by a flea, wasn't he, Father Philadelphos?"

"I don't know, my lord eristavi."

"Did his stomach turn?"

"I did not hear so, Chief of the Eristavis."

"Where did the first sore appear?"

"In the arm-pit, as far as I know."

These words made Girsheli sick at heart.

"It's the plague, Father Philadelphos, and no mistake! What size was the first sore?"

"About the size of a laurel leaf, sir!"

"Did you see the Father confessor during his illness?"

"I saw him only once, my lord eristavi."

Girsheli stepped backwards as if he had seen a mad dog-

"Don't come to my house any more, Father Philadelphos," he said to the monk, and then cried after him: "and send the master of the horse to me."

The master of the horse was surprised at the sight of the lord of Kveli Castle. The usually grave and fearless knight was strangely transformed by fear, and he was pacing the room back and forth with a heavy shuffling tread like a fettered bear, mumbling inarticulately.

He began to tell the master of the horse about the terrible epidemic.

"My life hung twice by a hair in Egypt. Had I not escaped from the Saracens, I should doubtless have fallen a prey to the plague."

Suddenly he broke off to give orders that his horses be driven home from the pastures, his *aznauris* woken up and the horses saddled.

That morning Giorgi was due to leave for Uplistsikheh in order to bring back the Queen to Mtskheta, yet he put off his trip for three days, realizing that his departure would alarm the inhabitants of Mtskheta.

His first thought when he learned about the pestilence was of Shorena.

He had heard that the plague breaks out first of all among the poor, and Khursi's house was just within the poor district.

At first he made up his mind to move Shorena and her mother Gurandukht to the palace, but remembering the Queen and the Catholicos, thought better of it.

He scolded his bedchamber servant for not having informed him that his chaplain had died of the plague.

The pestilence scared the population out of their homes. Crowds of people ran out of workshops, monasteries and forts. Slaves, monks and warriors thronged the streets and squares.

In accordance with the advice of the old-timers, old and young were hunting rats. They scalded the cellars, the mud huts and the corn-bins with boiling water. But nobody knew a remedy for fleas and it was found impossible to do anything about them.

Girsheli did not wait for dinner, although the King had asked him to stay.

"The plague will first fall on the slaves and the poor. Why should it come to the palace?" argued Giorgi.

And, indeed, it turned out that the first case of plague had occurred in the district of Princes' Baptism. A shoemaker of that district had fallen ill with it.

The mother of the sick man had rushed out into the street and, as chance would have it, had met the King's chaplain. She entreated him to administer the holy sacrament to her dying son, and feeling pity, the chaplain had followed her.

The shoemaker died the same evening. On the next day Ambrosi had been smitten with the plague....

As a host Giorgi was obliged to make an attempt to detain his guest but in his secret heart he was delighted at Girsheli's departure.

Once more he had surpassed his cousin in bravery. The eristavi had been afraid to approach the infuriated gueparde without a naked sword—that was natural enough, but when the experienced hero insisted on taking to his heels before the fleas of Mtskheta, Giorgi could only smile.

Giorgi made fun of the lord of Kvelistsikheh but Girsheli was now in no mood for joking.

Without even seeing his betrothed, who lived in the plague-infested district, he said good-bye to the King and, accompanied by his escort, made his way hastily out of Mtskheta.

Giorgi was, of course, not quite unbiassed in his judgement. He knew perfectly well what the word "courage" meant. He was aware that there had never been a knight who had never quailed, and that there had never yet been a sage who had not talked nonsense at least once.

Giorgi himself had more than once amazed the enemy by his fearlessness on the field of battle, and yet whereas Girsheli was afraid of cheetahs and fleas, Giorgi's heart would go pit-a-pat with fear at the sight of snakes and rabid animals. While hunting he would often stop aghast before the twisted roots of some ash-tree or ivy, imagining them to be snakes. He saw them in his dreams and experienced great dread. Mad dogs terrified Giorgi more than the Byzantine stone-throwers.

The barking of a village mongrel sent his hand to the hilt of his sword. A rabid animal put terror in his heart. Many times had he inquired of Parsman whether he knew of any cases of buffaloes, horses, bulls or wolves going mad.

When the commander-in-chief presented himself to the King, Giorgi said to him with a smile:

"The owner of Kveli Castle has fled from the fleas of Sanatlo. Don't think, Zviad, that Girsheli ran away from the Saracens! It was the Egyptian fleas that put fear into him!"

Zviad gave a sarcastic smile.

"I always thought that the stories about his heroism were overdrawn, Your Majesty."

Emergency measures were taken that very morning.

Medicine-men and physicians were summoned from other parts of the country. Runners were dispatched to Uplistsikheh with a warning to the Queen not to return to Mtskheta.

Turmanidze, the famous surgeon, was recalled in all haste from the fortress of Tmogvi.

The King sent for Parsman, but the "thief of the candlesticks" did not appear, pleading illness.

After the kicks he had been treated to on the King's orders he had not made an appearance at the court.

An order was issued that Ambrosi's body be burned with quicklime outside the town walls.

The commandants of the fortresses were ordered to stop at once any communication between the garrisons of the forts, to forbid Mtskheta to any caravans, to keep the gates of the forts and towers under lock and key day and night.

The commander of the fortress of Mukhnari was imprisoned because it was discovered that two days before a warrior had died of plague in the fortress. The centurion had concealed the fact and the dead man had been given a Christian burial.

Sitting on his gold-coloured stallion, Giorgi made a tour of the squares with his retinue, showed himself to the people, who had established themselves in the open, visited various fortresses, monasteries and workshops and tried to set everybody at ease.

"Take heart and even the plague won't beat us!" he tried to reassure the people.

As the King and his attendants were passing Khursi's house, they saw some slaves walking a few saddled horses in the courtyard.

"Whose horses are these?" asked the King.

"Kolonkelidze has sent six horses for his family, sire." Giorgi could not help glancing at the veranda, where female slaves were bustling about.

He mentally wished a good morning to his beloved.

"I'm ready to die of the plague if it leaves you unharmed," he thought and spurred on his gold-coloured stallion.

Dogs were howling on the flat roofs of the hovels in the district of Princes' Baptism.

XLVI

During the awful time of pestilence Nonai forgot about the scorpions. She fussed about, poured boiling water on the furniture, carpets, rugs and mattresses. She threw it into chinks and basements. Her imagination pictured rats and fleas in every nook and corner.

She entreated her master:

"Don't go to work, my lord! Plague is the enemy of the poor. Don't sacrifice yourself to the house of God He has—may the Lord have mercy on me!—many churches and you are the only son of your luckless mother. You are the only light of her eyes."

Bodokia came out to meet Arsakidze and to report to him that three hundred Lazes had refused to start work. Their example had been followed by the people of Samtskheh and Bolnisi, and the Greeks.

"The plague will carry us off as it is! Let's have at least a little rest before we die!" they said.

The slaves had left the workshops, come down from the scaffolding and, sitting or reclining in the shade of the temple, were playing on the *panduri* and singing. Youngsters crowding around the old men were listening to old-time tales about the plague.

On catching sight of Arsakidze, slaves jumped up, and masons and overseers took heart.

The Lazes surrounded their countryman.

He addressed them with the following speech:

"Lazes! It's true that the time of pestilence has come but bear in mind that it threatens everyone alike. You see, Lazes, I am with you in these days of calamity. Plague or no plague, nobody shall escape death, and nobody knows the hour of its coming. Death is as mindless as the vermin that have on this occasion ushered it in, the rats and fleas.

"Judge for yourselves. Lazes, is it not better to meet death while doing our duty than to perish in idleness? Let all men know, too, that death triumphs much more easily over lazy-bones and cowards than over those who are courageous and diligent. And what will the Iberians, our brothers, think of us? Let your elders remember whether we have ever let down the Iberians in wars against the Saracens or the Greeks?

"If the plague, spread by rats and fleas, makes you traitors, will it not be a disgrace to all of us Lazes? Is there anything more hateful than dastardly men betraying their own blood brothers?"

"That is true! The master is quite right," cried the elders.

Arsakidze was the first to ascend the scaffolding and after him went Bodokia. Then followed all the older Lazes. The young people were ashamed and also began work. The people from Samtskheh and Bolnisi rose from where they had been sitting. Nor did the Greeks want to bear the disgraceful name of cowards.

At dinner-time the workshops were deserted, the workers left the scaffolding.

Barracks built within the courtyard of the temple served as their dwelling. In front of the barracks fires were burning. Lentil soup was bubbling in huge cauldrons over the fires and around them stood hungry slaves making up to the cooks with childlike ingenuousness.

Nearby a Laz with reddish hair sat on a large boulder and hummed a love song, thrumming his *panduri*. Arsakidze had already heard this song in his childhood:

*Sea-green are thine eyes, my sweetheart!
Like the sea thou art.
Shouldst thou wed another wooer,
Shouldst thou wound my heart,
I will stop my spring-time ploughing
And the seeds discard,
Swim across the swollen rivers,
Bid my love depart.
Then behold my hate, O traitress,
When thy home is charred,
When the man whom thou hast favoured
Gets my deadly dart!...*

Arsakidze, lost in thought, walked about among the people gathered outside the barracks. He had observed that fear of death sometimes makes people thirst for poetry and music. The red-haired Laz continued to strum his *panduri* and hum in a melancholy tone. The poem was long, the lover's threats innumerable. Each stanza began and ended with the same lines:

*Sea-green are thine eyes, my sweetheart!
Like the sea thou art.*

Arsakidze could not put the verse out of his mind, could not forget it. He thought of Shorena.

Yes, Shorena was restless as the sea. ... For some reason Arsakidze was sure that not only would the plague spare his beloved but that she would be saved from the danger that was threatening her.

The town gates of Mtskheta will be barred day and night, he thought to himself. In three days the festival in honour of St. George of Fountain Head will be held in Pkhovi but the chiefs of the gorges will be waiting for Shorena in vain.

But was it only this that menaced her?

Girsheli was such a madman! He would chafe at the tediousness of being locked up in Mtskheta. He might take it into his head to have his marriage celebrated there and then, in the plague-stricken Mtskheta.

What should Arsakidze do then?

The red-haired Laz sang:

*When the man whom thou hast favoured
Gets my deadly dart!...*

Arsakidze plunged again into deep musing.

Suppose Shorena accepted Girsheli's favours, would lie, Arsakidze, muster up as much courage as the youth in the song?

Two slaves went up to a cauldron brimful of lentil soup, and passing a stick through the holes at the sides, carried it with difficulty to the barracks.

Arsakidze was still listening pensively to the song of the Laz, wondering what the result of the lover's threat would be, when Aristos Bodokia touched his elbow-lightly.

"They've already set up the iconostasis. Now I want to consult you, master, about the altar rail," he said.

They were by the iconostasis when Ugrekhelidze, the mason, came running up to them.

"There's plague in Barrack One," he cried, his face pale and twitching.

The Chief Architect and the masons rushed to the barracks.

Labourers were running frantically out of the doors.

A sore had broken out in the arm-pit of the slave Tsatai.

The labourers who had been lying on their bunks had been seized with panic when they heard about it. Just at that moment the cauldron of lentil soup had been brought in. The labourers had bumped into the kitchen slaves, knocked them off their feet and overturned the cauldron.

The ill-fated kitchen slaves, their hands and feet scalded, rolled about on the ground screaming for help. The crowd outside blocked access to the barracks, and no one dared go in.

Arsakidze heard the cries of the injured men and began to elbow his way through the throng. The masons stopped him.

"Don't go there, master! Plague is there!" they cried.

Bodokia detached himself from the group of Lazes and went into the barracks after the Chief Architect.

They lifted the scalded men and carried them into the courtyard one by one. Others were afraid to come near them, and Arsakidze and Bodokia alone stripped them of their clothing and sprinkled their burns with salt.

No sooner had Arsakidze washed his hands than King Giorgi, *Spasalar Zviad* and the archbishop of Mtskheta with retinue entered the inclosure, having come to inspect the temple.

The King's major-domo approached Arsakidze and told him that the King wished to see him.

Arsakidze replied that he had just been in the infected barracks and could not therefore approach the King.

The major-domo soon returned and repeated the King's order.

Arsakidze went to the King but stopped at some distance from him and did his obeisances.

King Giorgi smiled.

"Do you think, Laz, that you're braver than me, eh?" he asked, and going nearer to Arsakidze, pressed his hand. "You, a Great Master of Architecture, have proved yourself to be the bravest of all!"

XLVII

As Arsakidze was about to leave Giorgi glanced at him. He felt sorry that the master wore such a threadbare Pkhovian *chokha*.

The King whispered something into the ear of his major-domo, who stood behind him, and the latter walked over to Arsakidze and slipped a small purse into his pocket.

Hearing the clink of the coins Arsakidze turned red and for a while stood in confusion. He intended to run after the major-domo and return the money but the latter had already joined the King's entourage.

A week from that day Aristos Bodokia, the stone-cutter, did not come to work. Arsakidze knew him to be not only an obliging and industrious worker but a fearless man as well. The King's Architect could not imagine Bodokia to have been frightened by the plague and to have run away.

Two days passed, and Arsakidze began to feel really worried.

"Suppose Bodokia himself has fallen ill with the plague," he thought.

He knew by hearsay that Bodokia lived somewhere on the outskirts of the town in the slums inhabited by the very poor.

Arsakidze had sent for him twice but each time he had been told that stone-cutter Bodokia's dwelling-place could not be found.

Finally Arsakidze sent an old mason, a native of Mtskheta, to search for Bodokia.

The mason came back late at night and reported that Bodokia's wife had died, leaving seven little children in the care of his blind mother-in-law, so that the unfortunate man was obliged to look after the children and cook for them.

Arsakidze asked the old worker whether it was the plague that Bodokia's wife had died of, but the man was unable to tell him.

Arsakidze was now hard put to it without Aristos Bodokia, his "right hand," and at length he decided to visit his assistant in person.

On Saturday, after his work was over, Arsakidze went home, got out the purse the King had given him and spread the gold pieces out on the table. Among them were Iranian dirhems, and Georgian and Greek gold coins.

The artist examined them carefully. Some of them had been executed with consummate craftsmanship. A number of them showed the famous Vlakhern Temple, others were stamped with the image of a horseman holding a falcon on his left hand or with a crescent and lions. Arsakidze picked out ten gold pieces, and putting back the rest, started off.

In the district in which Aristos lived Arsakidze ran across an old bald-headed deacon and asked him the stone-cutter's whereabouts. The deacon scratched his head, thought a moment and said:

"You've got to cross that small bridge, young man. Then keep going to the right of that hillock, over there, and then you'll come to a gully. There, near an old chapel, live all kinds of craftsmen: stone-cutters, cobblers, slaves and other ragamuffins. As far as I know, there by the chapel dwells your stone-cutter too. A few steps short of the chapel you'll see a fenced-in courtyard. There stand stone images of angels and tombstones."

"Father, how far is the stone-cutter's house from here?" asked Arsakidze.

The deacon pointed to the north with his short arm and answered:

"It's quite near, my boy. Close at hand. But keep your eyes open! You'll be attacked by wicked curs on the way. Have your sword at the ready. Just look how they've torn my cassock!"

Arsakidze thanked the old man, and passing over the small bridge, took a lane winding first between stone buildings wrecked by earthquakes, and then between wretched hovels and shacks roofed with half-rotten shingles and thatch.

Some of the stakes in the fences were topped by horses' skulls, and horseshoes had been hung on the ragged hedges.

Time and again dogs sprang out at Arsakidze from under the tumbledown hedges. He did not care to ward them off with his sword, so he picked up a hefty stick, and wading knee-deep in the mud, fought his way through the settlement.

Barefooted children and half-naked paupers, yellow with malaria, gaped wide-eyed at the "queer chap" who had a long sword and yet beat the dogs off with a muddy stake.

The way turned out to be much longer than the short arm of the bald-headed deacon.

Arsakidze was beginning to lose hope—he saw no gully, no chapel, no angels of the stone-cutter Aristos.

"When did Aristos take up carving angels and cutting tombstones?" he wondered.

He went on making inquiries of the passers-by and many of them confirmed what the deacon had told him. Arsakidze was at last persuaded that Bodokia did extra work at home.

"Want has compelled him, that's certain," he thought.

Bodokia did not like to go around snivelling about his poverty. On the very day when the King presented his Chief Architect with 35 gold pieces, Arsakidze had offered Bodokia a loan of ten gold coins, but the latter gave a flat refusal, saying:

"Your *chokha*, master, is so shabby that you'd better buy a costly tunic such as the courtiers wear."

The farther Arsakidze went the more wretched looked the huts on either side of the road.

It was evident that these poverty-stricken people were not frightened by the plague. They went on quietly working in their orchards and vegetable plots. Here and there one could even hear singing.

Lazy buffaloes wallowed in the mudholes. Loaded asses brayed by the mill. At the gates in the hedges emaciated cows were lowing to the accompaniment of incessant yelping from the dogs.

At last Arsakidze arrived at the chapel, and there he again asked the whereabouts of the house of Aristos, the stone-cutter.

An old woman who was dragging a bundle of dry twigs along stopped and pointed to a small white stone house which looked like a palace among all those ram shackle hovels.

Arsakidze was amazed. Bodokia always wore a threadbare torn coat. And now the picture that came in sight was wholly unexpected.

A sizable vineyard and orchard had been laid out around the house.

Sheep were moving about restlessly in the fold. Buffaloes and small donkeys walked to and fro among statues of the angels carved in white stone.

Nearby Arsakidze noticed a workshop. At its entrance blocks of basalt, marble busts, monuments and shoulder-high crosses stood or lay in disorder. A few stonecutters were squatting on the ground, and the measured strokes of their hammers reverberated far away through the neighbourhood.

Arsakidze stopped by the gate and began to call for the master of the house.

Finding that the stone-cutters did not hear his shouting he opened the wicket and resolutely stepped into the yard.

He cast a look at the sepulchral figures of the plump, thick-buttocked, bandy-legged angels, at the statues of pot-bellied bishops and noblemen in dalmatics, the carved sheep's heads and bas-reliefs of saddled horses.

Arsakidze was horrified when he saw all this. He was shocked that master mason Bodokia, who with such perfect skill carved angels holding trumpets in their graceful hands for the bas-reliefs of Svetitskhoveli, who wrought in stone beautiful rosettes and bunches of grapes, the curving backs of the racing gazelles and antelopes, could waste his time on such rubbishy trash.

Arsakidze walked up to the stone-cutters and greeted them. A grey-haired worker raised his head, wiped the sweat off his bald pate with the sleeve of his shirt, and without answering the greeting, asked the newcomer:

"Whom do you want, sir?"

"Aristos the sculptor," answered the guest.

The stone-cutter rose, walked over to the porch of the house and cried out:

"Master! Hoy! Master!"

Meanwhile Arsakidze, having examined a few angels, walked over to the bust of a certain portly bishop. At that moment he felt on his shoulder a heavy hand.

He was nonplussed when instead of the lean, pale-faced Aristos Bodokia a white-bearded florid giant presented himself to him and bawled out:

"I am Master Aristos, sir."

The host started a conversation without waiting for the guest to utter a word:

"How now, sir? How do you like my bishop?"

Arsakidze stammered out:

"Well, I'm at a loss how to put it...."

"I suppose you wish to order a posthumous bust for yourself, eh?"

"No, sir, I'm not going to die as yet. ..."

Arsakidze looked hard at the host and perceived that he had taken a drop too much.

The host realized that he had gone a little too far, and added hastily:

"God forbid! You are so young! But perhaps you'd like to perpetuate the memory of your grandmother or mother-in-law?..."

Arsakidze smiled.

"Both of them are still in good health, sir."

"If so, what d'ye say to a drink of wine?"

"No, thank you, I don't drink wine, sir.... You see, some little misunderstanding has occurred. I was looking for master Aristos Bodokia and people have directed me to your house. Excuse me for troubling you."

"Master Bodokia! Well, I declare! He's my namesake and that's as far as it goes. What kind of a sculptor is he? He works as a stone-cutter at Svetitskhoveli. I haven't yet seen his work but I'm told that he's imitating me. However, I don't care. Imitations are no credit either to art or to themselves. He'd better mould pots or burn bricks. Fie upon a master who can't eat his fill! He lives at the back of the chapel, in a tumbledown shack. His wife died the other day of fever and hunger, and we, his neighbours, had to collect money to buy a coffin. He's close-mouthed and stuck-up. I've invited him more than once to take some wine with me, but he's always in a hurry. A great master, indeed!"

Arsakidze was disgusted at the big talk of the tipsy long-legged fellow, but he nevertheless pulled himself together and answered politely:

"You're mistaken, sir. I know the sculptor Bodokia very well. He's a real master."

The merry host guffawed.

"It's you who is mistaken. Real masters never starve. What is not changed into gold is mere trash. Only gold leads to fame. None, even a blockhead, has ever paid gold for dung."

Arsakidze hated arguing with fools but this time he could stand it no longer.

"Do you know what? Sometimes even dung paves the way to gold. I'm sure you've made this discovery yourself. If you manure the vineyard with dung you get a bigger yield next year and sell it."

The host stared at Arsakidze a moment and then said: "Who are you, sir?"

"Why do you want to know who I am?"

"Well, I'm curious. You don't look like the people around here."

"I'm a mason. Master Bodokia's assistant."

"Aha! That's why you're praising him so high! He's anything but a good master. Last year he got an order from a bishop to make an angel. Between you and me, the bishop wanted the angel to bear resemblance, slight though it might be, to his deceased paramour. She was a stout, portly woman with swollen breasts. Bodokia toiled at it all the year round and at last brought forth such a sickly, skinny angel that the bishop just spat on him and afterwards gave the order to me. A good master must be able to guess his customer's wishes and gratify his taste, or else he'll starve to death. Be it known to you that I am a pupil of the great master Parsman. I helped him to build the church in Samtskheh. In my youth I was a dunderhead, too. I used to plague myself too long over each trifle. It's a matter of common knowledge that Catholicos Melkisedek is a miser, so nothing came of my toil. In my spare time I also executed orders for bishops and courtiers, but I failed to please them for a long while. One day Parsman, being the worse for drink at the time, whispered in my ear: 'Stop playing the fool, you blockhead. If a sculptor can't satisfy his client's taste he won't get anywhere.... Falsehood has always been priced more highly than truthfulness. Faint-hearted kings and aristavists made their way to fame through flatterers and liars. If you wait till the noblemen and bishops develop a refined taste your very bones will turn to dust. Those sculptors who work for immortality are fools. If you wish to be a welcome guest at the banquet of life don't overwork yourself, and, this is the main thing, you must flatter and tell lies as much as possible. In order to produce a genuine work of art you'll have to toil and worry to such an extent that no production of yours will ever be worth it. Tell lies and flatter and you'll make money, and money is the only ladder to fame.' This is what Parsman the Persian told me. It seems that you did not like my angels.... Upon my honour, I don't like them, either, but they are to my client's liking. And how do you like that sleeping princess and the serpent?" He pointed to a bas-relief which represented a sleeping beauty with a snake at her feet.

"Yes, that looks like real art," said Arsakidze.

"Well, I did it in my youth. I worked ten years on that thing," the man informed him. "It has been lying here many a year and nobody wants to buy it. I've decided to put it up on the tomb of my first love—a girl who died of a snake-bite in Samtskheh."

The host once more invited Arsakidze to try his wine, but he refused on the pretext that he felt unwell. Then the ruddy-cheeked giant saw Arsakidze to Bodokia's cottage, took leave of him and wished him good health.

* * *

Infuriated dogs dashed about behind a low gate. Arsakidze called the master but nobody answered. He peered into the courtyard.

On the porch of the little wooden house an old woman in black sat by a cradle trying to soothe a crying baby.

Close to the veranda a boy was holding a goat by the horns, while a tiny girl was milking her; another half-naked little boy was squatting close by, imploring the girl:

"I'm hungry, Tamriko, let me suck her just a little bit...."

The old woman cried out:

"Have patience for a little while. When we boil the milk you'll have your fill."

Wooden sabre in hand, the third boy was galloping about, pursuing a cockerel whose hackles were raised in anger.

The fourth boy sat astride a he-goat. Startled poultry were rushing madly hither and thither.

The old woman shouted:

"Who's there? Silence the dogs!..."

At last the goat-rider dismounted, walked over to the gate and opened the wicket without so much as answering Arsakidze's greeting.

When Arsakidze went up to the porch and the pockmarked old woman began to speak with him, he realized that she was blind.

She asked the newcomer in a polite manner who he was and what he had come for.

"I'm master Bodokia's friend, I want to see him," said Arsakidze.

"Woe has befallen us, my son," said the old woman. "My daughter died last week—don't be afraid, not of the plague, although, God forgive me, it would be better if she had died of the plague and it had taken us all to boot. She died and left me, wretched blind woman that I am, in charge of those poor tots. My poor son-in-law doesn't go to work. Day and night he's searching the village for a woman to suckle the baby. But, judge for yourself, my son, who will come here to share our hunger? Our milch buffalo died the other day. Our underfed goat is our only hope."

A lump was rising in Arsakidze's throat. He leaned over to the old woman and whispered:

"Put out your hand, granny! Give this to master Aristos. I owed him ten gold pieces. I've brought my debt."

The old woman burst into tears, and stretching out the palm of her hand, moaned:

"Oh, what saint has sent you to us this evening, my son?"

"Never mind, granny! Cheer up, cheer up. Hand this over to Aristos!"

"But, still, who are you, my son?"

"He knows, granny.... Good night!"

With these words Arsakidze hastened to the wicket.

After two days Bodokia came to work and told Arsakidze a strange story. Namely, he said that a certain good man of God had brought him ten gold pieces. With this money, he, Bodokia, had managed to find a nurse for his orphaned baby and to settle his other domestic affairs.

Arsakidze expressed surprise at this extraordinary occurrence and did his best to divert Bodokia's suspicions from himself.

One evening, to the west of Mtskheta there appeared in the sky an unknown spear-like star. Parsman the Persian observed the star for a long time from the terrace of his house and only when it had disappeared behind a cloud did he go down into his room.

Vardisakhar was undressing herself.

He went up to her and pinched her bare arm.

"Listen and bear this in mind: if the King sends his courier for me again, tell him that Parsman has fallen ill with the plague."

"The King left this morning for Uplistsikheh." said Vardisakhar.

"Who told you?"

"I was at Samtavro. The monks there spoke about it."

"Have they celebrated high mass at Samtavro today?"

"The Metropolitan officiated...."

"What did Razhden prattle about?"

"He said that for our sacrilegious practices the Lord had visited us with the plague, that there were in Mtskheta many infidels and heretics who mock at the Christian faith."

Parsman guessed whom Razhden had been hinting at.

"What did he charge the heretics with?"

"He accused them of doubting the mystery of the immaculate conception." Vardisakhar herself disliked heretics and infidels. She abused them.

"If I found out who those heretics were I'd stone them," she used to say.

"Is the maidenhood so valuable a thing for a woman? You, for example, were not a virgin when I married you and yet I like you better than any virgin." said Parsman.

Vardisakhar flushed.

"Even better than Phanaskerteli's daughter?"

"Don't go out into the town tomorrow, Vardo. You know, the plague has broken out among the workers at Svetitskhoveli. One Laz is already dead. I know you'll be glad if death takes all the Lazes. Is it true, Vardo?" he asked, looking into her eyes with an inquiring smile.

He put his finger on her chin right on the spot where there was a dimple. Old Parsman was fond of that dimple.

"'Tis a brand stamped by the hand of Eros," he thought to himself.

But his caress left her unmoved. She raised her eyebrows, bent like a bow, undid the pearl clasps on her silk chemise and answered:

"I'm a Pkhovian, and I don't wish others to avenge me. I won't give up the Laz you mean even to the plague itself."

"Hee! hee! hee!" tittered the old man, leering at her breast. "The King's courier bit you in the breast, Vardo, didn't he? How well are his cheetahs and couriers trained! They bite just those whom he would have bitten himself. What do you say to that, Vardo?"

The woman's frown became still angrier. She covered up her bare breast and stretched herself out on the couch.

For some time she lay still, then she yawned and turned to the wall.

Tebronia lay prone by the threshold, snoring.

Parsman looked up at the sky, then drew his bed close to the window, and half-recumbent, began to gaze at the starry sky.

The spear-like star came out again.

XLIX

The sun-dial on the Temple of the Wonder-Working Pillar showed seven o'clock when the earth shook for the first time.

Arsakidze, being on the scaffolding, was the first to feel the shock. He hurried down and with his arms outspread began to shepherd the masons towards the exit.

On the scaffolding, set up along the western wall, crouched a cat lying in wait for pigeons. Suddenly it let out an anxious miaow and with lightning speed jumped down to the ground.

Arsakidze told the labourers and masters to stop work at once. That same instant the earth shook for the second time.

The third time the earthquake was so violent that it seemed to Arsakidze that the temple, at which he was staring at that moment, leaned forward.

There was a deafening rumble and the stone wall of the temple court cracked in three places.

The Lazes and the people from Samtskheh rushed out into the courtyard with fearful shrieks and, falling on their knees, began to pray.

The sheep which were being lazily driven along the road by a woman set up a hideous bleating, and the whole flock instantly dispersed in all directions. The dogs howled. The cows lowed plaintively

The forts of Aragviskari and Mukhnari sounded the alarm, and the warriors ran from their quarters. The beating of drums resounded in the squares.

In the churches the gongs were struck several times. Monks and nuns came rushing out of their cells.

From everywhere came sounds of sobbing, supplication and the solemn chanting:

"Our hopes are in thee, O Lord!"

Svetitskhoveli had stood firm and Arsakidze's thoughts now turned to Shorena.

He was out of breath with running when at last he reached the district of Princes' Baptism.

Women were rushing about in Khursi's house.

Gurandukht was speaking with an old man. Arsakidze recognized in him Znaura, formerly a deacon of the chapel at Kolonkelidze's castle.

Three saddled horses stood near the stables, tied to a hitching post. Shorena was stroking the ears of a straw-coloured stallion.

She alone looked calm.

Shorena, Gurandukht and Znaura were to leave for Zedazeni that morning.

Gurandukht, still trembling with fear, told Arsakidze about the third shock. She had fallen from her bed while Shorena had been watching Znaura saddle the horses in the stable.

Shorena ran forward to meet Arsakidze. She greeted him and told him how piteously the horses had neighed during the earthquake.

Suddenly a bareheaded Pkhovian servant burst into the courtyard and ran straight towards Shorena.

"The deer... one buck and two does ... have broken through the hurdle and fled from the fold. We've pursued them all over the palace garden but they wouldn't let us get near them," he gasped out.

"Has Nebiera fled, too, Bagatur?" asked Shorena.

"Nebiera took the lead, being the first to jump the hurdle, my lady. I was within the inclosure when the third shock came. The way the deer bellowed could have melted the very stones to tears."

"Bring round the horses, Znaura!" said Shorena, turning to the deacon. "Uta and I are going to catch the deer."

Bagatur informed her that the escaped deer had already left the palace grounds and had been seen cropping the grass in the oak wood.

Gurandukht did not want her daughter to go alone with Arsakidze.

"Take the deacon. He's an old hand at hunting," she suggested.

Shorena went into the house and soon brought out bows and arrows for Arsakidze and herself.

"I have my sword," he declared, but, nevertheless, he took the bow and the arrows from Shorena's hands.

The inhabitants of the district had carried all their household belongings into the street. The women wept, the babes mewled in their cradles.

Old people were picking broken pieces of furniture and crockery from among the ruins.

Bewildered servants and courtiers were running about in the royal palace. In the King's bedchamber the ceiling had fallen in and hurt the monk in charge of the King's bed. Carpets, rugs, trunks, caskets, church utensils, horse trappings, countless articles of the Queen's toilet, her fur coats, boots, dresses of silk and Chinese brocade were being dragged down the stairs....

Bagatur conducted Shorena, Arsakidze and Znaura out of the palace garden into the oak grove and showed the place where the deer had last been seen cropping the grass.

The ground was wet after the rain and the riders were able to follow the fresh track easily. They saw a red-headed warrior coming towards them, carrying a saddle.

"The earthquake has destroyed the stable and crushed my horse," he complained. He was asked if he had seen the deer.

"Beyond that field there begins the beech forest and beyond it the town wall. It has been demolished for a distance of one hundred cubits. The deer must doubtless have passed through the breach," answered the redheaded warrior.

Shorena was still hopeful.

"The deer were panting for the fresh grass," she said. "Oh, how I want to overtake them! Anyway, I'm sure I'll catch Nebiera. She won't run away from me,"

As soon as they had passed the town wall Shorena lashed her horse.. . .

Arsakidze doubted whether they would catch the fugitives.

"It's true that they're tame, but having once tasted freedom they won't suffer anybody to touch them," he thought.

Never mind, it was such a keen, joy to race full tilt at the side of his beloved one!

"We'll have a little ride, some relaxation, and then Shorena will see that her scheme is utterly impracticable and she'll return home," he decided.

Mtskheta was still visible in the distance. Arsakidze cast a glance at his favourite work and then spurred on his horse. Joy flooded his whole being. Had they not saved their lives, escaped from a terrible danger?

They met a cart-driver.

"Yes, I've seen two deer fleeing for their lives along the road to Narekvavi," he said in answer to their questions, "they darted quite close by my cart, crossed the ploughed field and took that cart-track over there...."

"Males or females?" asked Znaura.

"One cow and one bull," was the answer.

The tracks ran direct north.

They followed them and before long struck the highway.

Nature, unlike the works of man, had suffered no damage from the earthquake.

A hare, immobile as a stone image by the roadside, was squatting on his hams, touching his mate lying close by with his paw. His other forefoot was stretched out towards the edge of a nearby wood, as if he were inviting her to take a walk there and have a bite of some luscious herbage. Frightened by the tramp of the horses they both bounded off over the tall grasses.

A pair of foxes came out of a copse, the vixen leading the way. Now and again she would look about cautiously and then turn to the male as if encouraging him: "Now then, move faster!"

Shorena examined the road closely. The hoof-prints ran in a straight line along it.

From the edge of the forest rose a flock of wild pigeons and with a noisy fluttering of wings made for the oak wood. A flock of grey partridges ran through the tall foxtail and then took wing. Red-legged partridges rushed towards the edge of a gully, and hiding among the rocks there, started clucking.

Mother Fox, grown fearless from hunger, stopped on a grassy knoll and with watering mouth considered the situation. She could not decide whether she should follow the grey

partridges, or go round the rocks, crouch in the grasses, and then fall unawares on the red-legged ones.

The riders entered a thin grove of saplings, where the deer's tracks were clearly discernible.

In Arsakidze's opinion the third deer had turned aside taking a fancy to the fresh green shoots.

The tops of the beech saplings brushed the riders' feet. The morning rain must have reached the copse: before long Shorena's *sheidishi* became quite wet.

Arsakidze was sorry about this.

"Why did you put on that nice pheasant-coloured *sheidishi*?"

"How could I know that there would be an earthquake and we'd have to pursue Nebiera?"

"At your side I'm ready to search for the unattainable even to the world's end," he thought, but instead he exclaimed:

"Just think how strange it is! Roofs have crashed in on the people whereas here not a single leaf has fallen from the tree!"

Shorena made no answer. She was looking out for the tracks of the deer.

Arsakidze looked at her. A light pink had tinged her cheeks; her marvellously small ears were rosy.

At the edge of the grove Shorena was the first to catch sight of the deer; the stag and the doe were grazing in a clearing. She recognized her lion-coloured Nebiera and instantly urged her horse to a gallop.

At the first sound of horses' hoofs the deer bounded off.

Arsakidze knew from experience that any attempt to overtake a deer on horseback, even on a plain, was bound to come to nothing. So at first he did not urge on his horse, and Shorena, mounted on her gelding, easily outrode him.

When they were within a hundred feet of the fugitives, Nebiera gracefully arched her neck and threw out her breast, the stag flung back his antlers, and the two darted off at lightning speed.

This amazing sight threw Arsakidze into ecstasy.

"No doubt the male chose his mate when they were still in captivity and now he has seized the occasion and eloped with her," he thought, and with a loud whoop, he rushed ahead after his beloved.

They had left the steppe behind them, and now the ground was furrowed by the plough. The horses were straining every nerve, and Arsakidze feared that Shorena's horse might lose its footing.

"It's no good chasing them," he said imploringly to Shorena.

They got over the plough-land and travelled through brushwood. Suddenly they were stopped by a gully.

Shorena reined in her horse and looked back. Znaura had fallen a long way behind. At last they could see him jogging along wearily over the plough-land.

"I say, Uta, don't idle away the time. Go back, if it is your wish. Znaura and I will proceed farther, and if we don't catch up with the deer beyond that forest, over there, we'll turn back, too."

Arsakidze's feelings were hurt.

"How could you imagine, my dear, that I would leave you alone in the forest and go home?"

"All my life I've been yearning for the impossible, Uta.... Days on end you are scrambling up and down your scaffolding. Do devote this one day to me, Uta! I have such forebodings, such dreams!... Khatuta says that my dreams bode ill.... When I see an open field a strange agitation comes over me ... I long to go to the world's end and never to come back."

"I'm willing to give you not only one day but my whole life to the last breath, my heart's desire." This was what Arsakidze wished to say, but instead he said:

"One day? I'm ready to give you my whole life, but...."

"But what?" she asked.

"But there are words which must not be uttered in vain.... Only those words are valuable which are followed by deed and sacrifice. Words without sacrifice are as empty as scentless flowers, as beams without light, or a sun without warmth."

They rode on in silence. After a while she resumed the talk:

"I believe, Uta, that if Nebiera had recognized me she wouldn't have run away. I alone am to blame. I should not have galloped. I should have approached her slowly and then I'd have caught her."

Meanwhile *Znaura* came up to them and began to complain about his horse:

"It's begun to balk, the wolf's meat!"

Some wood grouse flew up from the field. *Arsakidze* shot an arrow and one of the birds turned in the air and fell. *Znaura* picked up the still living bird and with a thong tied it to his belt.

On his head the deacon wore a shaggy high Pkhovian cap, as ruffled and rugged as a vulture's nest. His borrowed sword all but reached the ground. His sheepskin coat, its fur turned outside, was all torn. And when he adorned himself with a grouse *Shorena* and *Konstantineh* could not help smiling.

A few buzzards rose unhurriedly from the carcass of a cow killed by bears. Crows had been watching them from a nearby oak, and no sooner had the riders passed by than they fell on the carrion.

The forest of deciduous trees came to an end. Then began thick scrub, beyond it a field, then a steep ascent, broken by gullies and precipices, and after that an even plain.

Somewhere far in the distance a stag was roaring. Buzzards were tracing circles in the sky.

The horses, walking side by side, entered a coniferous forest. *Arsakidze* glanced at the girl. He wanted to be closer to his beloved, to draw her to himself and kiss her ear, as flushed as a field poppy, but at that moment they heard the cracking of dry twigs.

Arsakidze reined in his horse. A she-bear stood upright on her hind legs in a wild pear-tree. With one of her forefeet she held on to the trunk, with the other she was shaking a branch. Beneath the tree her cubs were munching the fallen fruit.

On seeing the horsemen she threw herself down growling angrily and accompanied by her young, disappeared behind the rocks bordering a gully.

The riders passed through the forest and again beheld the open plain.

They passed by some creaking ox-carts, carrying three small coffins for children.

The earthquake had destroyed some stone buildings in the village, and the dome of the church lay on the ground. *Arsakidze* thought of the Temple of the Wonder-Working Pillar, a triumphant giant among the damaged churches.

The riders came to a lake, in which the sun's disc was mirrored. Like a sudden burst of applause resounded the flapping of wings of ducks and geese as they rose and flew northwards, screening the horizon.

Near the lake the deer's tracks disappeared. Suddenly they heard a roar from the north.

"It's *Nebiera*," cried *Shorena*.

"There are many deer besides *Nebiera* in those mountains."

They put the horses at a trot.

"Was there an earthquake in Pkhovi, I wonder? How does my poor father feel now?" *Shorena* asked sadly.

They finished the ascent, and the lathered horses slowed down to a walking pace as they crossed a plateau.

The sun was setting behind a mountain ridge and seemed to be blinking lazily with its brass-coloured eyelashes.

Znaura, who was riding in front, pointed to the left.

"The *Alan* settlements," he said. Then he pointed again in the same direction and, turning to *Shorena*, said:

"There's the road to Pkhovi."

"To the north?" asked Arsakidze.

"This cart track runs straight to Korsatevela Castle. Do you see those white clouds over that mountain younder? Just beneath them is a castle with four towers. That is Korsatevela."

At the word "Korsatevela" Shorena became obviously confused. She shaded her eyes with her hand and gazed towards the castle. Then she turned her horse to the right.

Arsakidze looked at the cart track running to the left.

"The deer's tracks run to the left," he said smiling.

"I'm not as good a huntsman as you, Uta, but still I can tell the tracks of a deer from those of an ox."

"How far is Pkhovi?" asked Arsakidze.

"Quite near, sir," answered Znaura. "We'll have to go round that mountain, north of it, ride a little through the gorge, cross another mountain, follow the Black Aragvi and right there by the cross-road we'll see the first Pkhovian fort."

At that moment six horsemen rode up from the left to the fork in the road.

A beardless man in armour was caracoling in front. His upper lip was split by two huge incisors, sharp as the tusks of a boar. With the face of a eunuch, goggle-eyed and tusked, he looked more like an ugly beast than a human being. On seeing him Shorena gave a start, recognizing him as Bokai, the foster-brother of Chiaberi. She had identified the others, too; those were also his foster-brothers: Azara, Gabidai, Zazai, Jibredai and Tsoi.

Bokai fixed his gaze on Shorena. He drew rein and cried something in the Ossetian language to the rest of the party. Shorena distinctly heard the name of Chiaberi.

Shorena and her companions took the road to Pkhovi.

The horsemen stood a long time at the fork and Shorena heard their noisy dispute. By now Arsakidze's ear, too, caught the oft-repeated name of Chiaberi. Bokai was the noisiest of them all—he seemed to be scolding his younger brothers for some reason. Then all of them lashed their horses and galloped off towards the castle of Korsatevela.

A shadow of sorrow fell across Shorena's face, but when Arsakidze asked her about the cause of her sadness, she pleaded some trifle.

Konstantineh rode at her side in silence. Now he recalled that he had seen the tusked Bokai and his brothers at Chiaberi's funeral. But he thought it strange that they had not greeted Shorena and her fellow-travellers after the Alan manner. "Listen, Shorena, I don't advise you to go to Kvetari Castle. Has not the King forbidden you to enter Pkhovi?"

"Only me? You, Uta, are forbidden Pkhovi, too. Well, just see me to the first watchtower, and then Znaura and F will go on alone. I'm sure there'll be a moonlit night and nothing untoward will happen to us. The danger you hint at has already passed. I'll simply call on my father and return to Mtskheta the day after tomorrow."

"What danger do you speak of, Shorena?"

"Znaura has brought me the news. Your expectations, Uta, were justified. The chiefs of the gorges have betrayed my father. It appears that my father himself is to blame: he refused to make it up with Mamamzeh, a condition on which the *khevisberis* insisted. They intended to get the better of Giorgi by joining forces. I foresaw this long-ago ... but I gave my word and if the town gates of Mtskheta hadn't been locked, I'd have certainly gone to Pkhovi."

Shorena relapsed into silence.

"So there's nothing to be done, my dear. As the saying goes, fate travels in an ox-cart and yet, try as we may, she will overtake us," Arsakidze said.

"You're right, Uta. Fate goes by ox-cart. So I've made up my mind to surrender, though some little hope still glimmers within me. Girsheli was frightened away by the fleas of Sanatlo. Would to God the roofs of King Giorgi's palace in Uplistsikheh had crashed down upon Giorgi's head! Old-timers told me that the palace in Uplistsikheh had collapsed once before."

Shorena looked depressed and helpless.

"I'll go with her to Kvetari, hide her in the mountains for a while, and then flee with her to Lazistan," flashed through Arsakidze's mind, but suddenly he remembered his word of honour to Giorgi.... "But then Svetitskhoveli is not yet completed."

He set spurs to his horse to chase away the troublesome thoughts. . . .

Arsakidze rode silently up the steep path pondering with envy on the courage of the stag who had carried off Nebiera.

L

Six horsemen rode at full gallop to Korsatevela Castle. When they reached the narrow path skirting the gorge fast riding became extremely difficult. Chiaberi's foster-brothers were hurrying to a wedding party. Bokai was in a great hurry, too, but for another reason, and did not spare his roan stallion.

His younger brothers looked forward to the forthcoming revels at the nuptials of Tokhaidze and Katai. The brothers were good singers, and the youngest of them, Tsoi, could play skilfully on the *panduri* and sing verses of his own composition.

As soon as the impetuous Bokai rode up to the first tower the guard threw open the gates. He jumped neatly down from his horse and walked, limping, to the main entrance of the castle.

All his five brothers followed him. They, too, were limping slightly, their legs being numb from the long ride.

Fires were burning in the courtyard of the castle, and over them oxen and cows were being roasted whole. Kitchen-boys were turning the spits, looking askance at the newcomers.

Tokhaidze came hastily down the steps of the citadel, rushed up to Bokai, put his lips to Bokai's right shoulder and then greeted all the other brothers in the same manner.

Bokai called Tokhaidze aside to talk in the shade of an oak.

Through the loop-hole of the tower Katai saw them squat beneath the tree and whisper for a long while.

Tokhaidze reascended the stairs, went into the house and called Mamamzeh to come out.

Bokai kissed Mamamzeh on his right shoulder, then with his huge hands he lifted a large stone lying nearby and threw it under the tree. Mamamzeh sat down on it. Bokai squatted next to him and they began to whisper.

"So there's only Znaura the deacon with her?" Mamamzeh inquired loudly of Bokai.

"No, there's another man with her, in the Pkhovian *chokha*."

"Is he dark?"

"No, he's fair. I'd say even red-haired."

"Tall?"

"No, of middle height."

"Pock-marked?"

Bokai answered in the affirmative.

"It must be Arsakidze," remarked Mamamzeh.

"Doubtless, it's Arsakidze," Tokhaidze affirmed.

"Bind them all and bring them here. Kolonkelidze's daughter is said to be in love with her foster-brother. I'll teach her how she should mourn for Chiaberi. I'll put her in such a prison that she'll forget for ever what the sunlight is," said Mamamzeh in firm tones.

"And what about King Giorgi?" stuttered out Bokai.

"Listen, Bokai. It is my rule in battle to be always the first to attack. King Giorgi won't forgive us Tokhaidze's and Katai's marriage, as it is. And, furthermore, this will be a chance to avenge Chiaberi," Mamamzeh added, with a glance at Tokhaidze.

LI

It was still a long way to the Black Aragvi, and Znaura's horse was tired. The rider walked behind her, goading her on and cursing for all he was worth.

Arsakidze did his best to raise Shorena's spirits but in vain. The nearer they drew to Pkhovi the more impatient Shorena grew.

The deacon on his worn-out jade was a drag on them. The grouse hanging head down from his belt was gasping out its life. Sometimes the thong with which it was tied became loose and then the deacon would squat down and draw the knot tighter, swearing all the time at his victim.

Shorena would rein in her mount and look impatiently back at Znaura. Once she even said to Arsakidze:

"Let's leave Znaura behind and go on alone."

But they did not know the road.

They bypassed the mountain in the north of it. Farther on the road had been washed by the rains and they had to continue their course through the gorge which was cluttered up with big rocks reaching to the horses' bellies.

Beyond the gorge precipitous paths wound over the mountain slopes.

Shorena and Arsakidze were now riding at a walking pace.

Suddenly the swish of a lash rent the air and they heard a shrill yell behind them.

The pursuers had seated Znaura on his horse and two riders were ruthlessly whipping the nag and the rider.

Arsakidze turned his horse and took the bow from his shoulder.

Bokai, who was facing him, shouted:

"Surrender!"

Arsakidze let fly an arrow at him.

Bokai swung his sword but missed and wounded Arsakidze's horse.

The Ossetians could hardly rein in their stallions. Znaura, astride his jade, was jogging along among them, hindering any effectual attack.

Shorena shot an arrow at Bokai. He fell from the saddle, hanging from the stirrup by his foot and sweeping the dust of the road with his hands as the horse bolted.

Arsakidze jumped from his horse and hid behind it.

Two brothers of Bokai galloped past Arsakidze brandishing their swords. They killed Arsakidze's horse and darted off after Bokai. Znaura engaged the other two, wielding his sword like a stick.

Shorena hurled her horse at Azara but he evaded her, being averse to fighting a woman.

He swung his sword at Arsakidze, who had already been wounded in the leg. Arsakidze struck back at him with his sword, and cut off his right hand.

Shorena threw her horse in front of Zazai to head him off.

The youth gripped her hand but their horses drew apart.

The young Alan rushed past Arsakidze, lifted his sword but missed, failing to pull up in time.

Taking advantage of the general confusion, Znaura escaped from Tsoi and galloped after Shorena.

Tsoi attacked Arsakidze. The Laz warded off the blow but the point of the enemy's sword wounded him in the left shoulder. Arsakidze staggered and fell from the crag into the gully. Tsoi let out a wild whoop, jumped from his horse but was at a loss as to where to tie it to. At last he thought of hitching it to the bridle of the dead horse, yet he had not the courage to climb down into the gully and, moreover, was sorry for the brave youth. He sprang into the saddle and dashed off after his brothers.

Arsakidze, bleeding from two wounds, rolled down the bluff for some time, catching at the bushes, until he found himself at the bottom. He lay there awhile dazed.

Then he staggered to his feet, unbuttoned his coat, took off his shirt, tore it into strips and with great difficulty bandaged his shoulder and leg.

Leaning on his sword he clambered up to a foot-path. He trained his ears. Somewhere a lonely horned owl was calling, while in the scrub a wood grouse was moaning plaintively.

"I'll meet the riders and fight them to the bitter end," he thought.

Znaura's shaggy cap and the dead grouse were lying on the foot-path.

He walked on and on, leaning on his sword, bleeding, and athirst for blood.

Suddenly he heard the clattering of hoofs. Hiding himself in a clump of hawthorn he waited for the foe with drawn sword.

Dusk was falling in the gorge. In the West sheet lightning lit up the clouds from time to time.

Arsakidze saw three riders moving down the slope, leading two horses by the bridle. He looked more closely at them: they were armed with spears, and did not look like the Alans. Bokai and his brothers had no spears.

Arsakidze caught the sounds of the Georgian language. Leaning on his sword he left his hiding place and stepped forward to meet them. "Beyond the gorge we saw a group of horsemen riding at a walk towards the castle of Korsatevela. Three of them were carrying a dead man, while two held a girl who was screaming and wriggling in their hands. A bald-headed old man without a hat was running behind them," they told Arsakidze.

It turned out that the lancers belonged to the garrison of the fortress of Largvi.

They knew the King's Architect, seated him on a horse and made for Mtskheta.

LII

The plague being on the wane, Giorgi had returned to Mtskheta.

Meanwhile Zviad ordered the Chief Architect to be brought to the palace on a litter. After the detailed account given by Arsakidze it became clear that Mamamzeh's presumptuous action was nothing less than a declaration of war.

That same morning a courier was dispatched to the lord of Kvelistsikheh.

In the evening the King convened his council. They took a unanimous decision to send troops to Korsatevela within a week to raze the castle to the ground, so that no memory of the house of Mamamzeh should remain henceforth. On the next day Zviad's scouts brought fresh news. Murochi Kalundauri and five chiefs of the gorges had taken sides with Mamamzeh and only Ushisha Gudushauri remained faithful, together with Kolonkelidze, the eristavi of Kvetari. Thus, it was evident that not only the Tsanars and Alans backed Mamamzeh, but also the chiefs of the gorges with their armed bands.

The Tsanar nobility, both those who possessed fortresses and those who did not, took their families, movable property and cattle to shelter behind the walls of Korsatevela Castle. The approaches to the fortress had been fortified. Shorena, Kolonkelidze's daughter, and the deacon Znaura were put into dungeon.

The monasteries and churches had again been destroyed and many priests had been tied to the tails of horses.

On the same day Zviad sent out a new party of scouts to the mountains. They were charged to approach Korsatevela from the north and present themselves to Mamamzeh "as masons looking for a job."

Ushisharidze was given a purse of gold and ordered to get, at any cost, the key to at least one of their watch-towers.

On Saturday Kakhai appeared with his warriors from Samtskheh and by noon Girsheli arrived with a thousand picked lancers. Later on, in the evening, two thousand Shavshetians entered Mtskheta.

On the next day the troops went into battle.

The King's great standard was carried in front, while at its side, on armoured horses, rode the cross-bearer and Metropolitan Razhden in battle array.

Girsheli was leading the right flank, the companies of warriors from Samtskheh were following Kakhai, while the left flank was commanded by Zviad.

Giorgi left Mtskheta later. His retinue was followed by three thousand Abkhazian archers, six hundred spearmen from Kartli and a number of stone-throwers.

On Giorgi's head glittered the gilt helmet of the Bagrations, the royal dynasty of Georgia, and on his body—the silver armour of Salmansuri.

Girsheli hurried his troops on recklessly, sparing neither man nor horse. The lord of Kvelistsikheh had set his heart on getting ahead of Zviad's and Kakhai's warriors.

The fortress of Korsatevela came in sight at dusk. Four scouts met Girsheli's legion.

Tokhaidze had hired them as masons to restore the lowers wrecked by the earthquake. They reported that the narrow approaches to Korsatevela Castle had been fortified, that in places they were blocked with huge rocks, and in other places intersected with deep trenches, that Tokhaidze with the Alan rebels intended to engage the King's army at the approaches to the castle and that six thousand Tsanar, Pkhovian and Alan warriors were defending the castle.

It was getting dark when Zviad caught up with Girsheli's troops.

The master of Kvelistsikheh was burning with impatience, and kept urging an immediate onslaught.

The *spasalar* proposed that the attack be put off till the next morning, and Girsheli and Zviad had some high words. Kakhai, the commander of the warriors of Samtskheh, joined in their dispute, and, as the eldest *eristavi*, he succeeded in persuading Girsheli to have patience.

Soon the King appeared at the head of his legions and all the host camped for the night in the forest.

At dawn a heavy mist filled the woods.

Girsheli's companies were the first to offer battle.

At the approaches to the castle the Shavshetian warriors saw an uncommon sight: men in black felt cloaks were standing motionless in the clearing, suffering the enemy to approach them at close quarters. Girsheli's men began to shower them with arrows, but the men in black cloaks did not budge an inch.

Girsheli's companies and Zviad's troops launched a general attack.

But where was the enemy? Instead of him the attacking forces came full tilt against a number of scarecrows dressed in felt cloaks and wearing the shaggy conical caps of the mountaineers. Having overturned this barrier, the warriors advanced, laughing and joking, but suddenly they were fallen upon by the Alans who had been concealed in the trenches.

Girsheli, Kakhai and Zviad launched the offensive from three sides. They put the rebels to rout and drove them into narrow gullies which served as approaches to the castle.

On the left and on the right rose high crags. Mounted warriors could not climb them, whereas the Alans and the Pkhovians jumped up and down them like goats, showering rocks and arrows on the entrapped men-at-arms of the King. The rebels emitted wild battle-cries, brandishing burning torches and frightening the horses.

The Shavshetians sounded the charge. The rebels rolled huge rocks down from the crags, crushing the attackers. Maddened with fright the horses tumbled with their riders down into the chasms.

The warriors of Samtskheh and Shavsheti were thrown into confusion, and the front ranks began to fall back. Then the three commanders, drawing their swords, shouted: "Long Live King Giorgi" and rushed at the enemy.

An avalanche of rocks crashed down from above. In an instant the riders and the horses were in gory confusion, buried alive by splinters and fragments of rock.

Girsheli's horse was killed under him. A piece of flint had struck Kakhai in the mouth, and blood spurted out, staining his white beard.

Girsheli fought on foot at the head of his troops.

Old Kakhai continued imperturbably to spear the Alans and hearten his warriors from Samtskheh.

The blood-bespattered riders moved uphill, fighting their way with spear and sword.

They were assaulted by a troop of Alans with drawn swords. Girsheli's squadrons wavered and then began to turn back their horses. At that moment King Giorgi came to the rescue with his troops and the retreat was checked.

Now the Abkhazians and Kartlians were leading the attack. Giorgi drew his trusty sword and set spurs to his gold-coloured stallion.

Just where the gorge widened the Alan and Tsanar nobility dashed out of ambush under the leadership of the Ossetian prince Tuzarai and attacked Giorgi's troops. Tuzarai, a giant in coal-black array, sat on a raven war-steed. He galloped up to Giorgi with his sword lifted high, but one stroke of Giorgi's sword cut off his gauntleted hand.

Using their lances the Abkhazians and Samtskheans beat the Tsanars and Alans back to the walls of the fortress where Tokhaidze, heading a band of Alans, met King Giorgi. The King's warriors cut the swords of the mountaineers like straw.

The Alans retreated. Tokhaidze was slightly wounded, and three *aznauris*, about one hundred horsemen and *Khevisberi* Misurauli Zevvai fell on the field of battle.

Tokhaidze returned to the fortress and locked the gates.

Giorgi sent emissaries to parley with Mamamzeh.

"Let's stop the useless bloodshed," they urged Mamamzeh. "The King will pardon your treachery once more, because you were Bagrat Kuropalat's friend. He promises to leave intact the citadel for you and your wife Bordokhan."

From the fortress came the answer:

"Let the Queen come to us. We shall trust you if the Queen Madam swears on the icon of the Saviour."

Zviad replied that the Queen was ill and had stayed in Uplistsikheh.

Giorgi ordered screens to be built at the approaches to the fortress, and under cover of them stone-throwers started battering all the four towers.

Then Mamamzeh sent out mediators.

"If Catholicos Melkisedek comes to us we'll believe him without his swearing an oath," they announced.

"Catholicos Melkisedek has left for Artanuji," answered Zviad. "Instead of him Razhden, the Metropolitan of Mtskheta, will come to you."

A tent was pitched outside the first tower.

Out of the fortress emerged the grey-haired, stately Mamamzeh.

Razhden, without armour or helmet, holding a cross in his hand, went forward to meet him halfway.

Mamamzeh went down on his knees, leaning with one hand on his sword. He kissed the cross and then touched the Metropolitan's hand with his lips.

After talking briefly they parted, Mamamzeh returning to the fortress while Razhden reported to the King:

"Mamamzeh asks pardon for himself. The Alan and Tsanar noblemen must also remain unpunished. Furthermore, he asks that his daughter Katai and her husband Tokhaidze should be proclaimed owners of Korsatevela Castle, and, moreover, that Kolonkelidze's daughter should be given in marriage to the youngest son of the King of the Alans, and the castle of Kvetari handed over to the bridegroom as Shorena's dowry.

"Put on your armour!" said the King to the Metropolitan and left the tent. He detailed three hundred warriors to guard the roads leading to Korsatevela Castle and sent five masons to cut off the water supply to the fortress.

Girsheli declared that he would take the first tower before midday. Zviad did not like this, but kept silent. At the King's command they raised the royal standard. Beating drums, Girsheli's troops began to storm the tower.

The owner of Kvelistsikheh drew his sword, many times stained with the blood of the Saracens.

Aznauris issued from the castle to meet him at close quarters. Girsheli rode at the head of his Shavshetian warriors, who mowed down the enemy.

In the castle of Korsatevela the alarm was sounded. Fresh forces continually came up to help the Pkhovians defending the first tower. Once again a horse was killed under Girsheli. His armour-bearer brought him another one. Girsheli instantly jumped into the saddle, gave a war-cry and dashed at the Pkhovians.

From the roof of the tower a shower of rocks, spears and arrows poured down on the assailants. Arrows shot from above passed through the mail-clad warriors and stuck in the earth.

The attackers advanced over the corpses of their comrades. The wounded rolled downhill, their breastplates dented and broken, their helmets burst like gourds.

King Giorgi grew pensive and gloomy, unable to decide in his heart which would displease him more, Girsheli's victory or his defeat.

Zviad reported to Giorgi:

"The lord of Kvelistsikheh asks for reinforcements."

The King recalled how Girsheli had boasted in Mtskheta. He had said that if he took Korsatevela he would marry Kolonkelidze's daughter the very next day.

Giorgi recalled another thing, too: while hunting with Shorena he himself had offered to free her from Girsheli.

"I think, Zviad, that Girsheli should not lose so many people in the first assault," he said in a low voice to the *spasalar*.

He wanted to add: "Don't give him any help," but he set his teeth and after a short pause added:

"Call him back at once. We'd better think things over in the morning. Meanwhile Ushisharidze may get us the keys to the fort."

"I think so, too, my lord King. Eristavi Girsheli is a brave knight, but one should look before one leaps. If you wish I myself will lead our troops at daybreak and before the sun is up I'll hand over the first tower to you."

Girsheli was enraged when he was told that the King had commanded him to retreat, and decided to compete with his cousin to the end. He remembered the King's boastful words: "Girsheli, trying to compete with me will be the death of you."

The wilful knight was loath to retreat for fear of the King's mockery.

Once more he rallied his troops. The Shavshetians again began to beat the drums and Girsheli renewed the attack.

The Alans and Pkhovians began to waver. Brave youths, tall and straight as the pines of the Caucasus, laid down their lives at the gates of the fortress. Tokhaidze drew back and again barred the gates of the tower.

Girsheli ordered the commander of the Shavshetian warriors to break in.

The iron bolts and bars were burst asunder with crowbars, and the first to break into the tower was the enraged *eristavi* himself. The Chief of the Gorge Murochi Kalundauri met him with naked sword. The courageous old man threw himself at Girsheli but the *eristavi* did not step back this time, either. He had no time to swing his sword and stabbed his enemy in the groin.

The *khevisberi* fell to the ground, but the next instant his son Goderdzi sprang on Girsheli. With the sword presented by King Giorgi he cut clean through Girsheli's sword and with the second stroke clove the knight, armour and all, in two.

The gates of the tower were closed again. The King's army began to beat a retreat.

* * *

Darkness separated the combatants.

The King's legions pitched their tents round the fortress, kindled fires, occupied all the approaches to the castle and cut off the water supply of the besieged.

At midnight a spindle fell at the feet of the sentinels. Attached to it was the key to the first tower.

The same spindle with a letter was sent back in which the King inquired about Girsheli's fate.

The spindle returned with the information that Girsheli had been cut in two by the sword of Goderdzi Kalundauri, the Pkhovian.

The King lay awake all night. He called to mind his youth passed with Girsheli and their constant rivalry. Then he recalled Pkhovi and his "sworn brother" Goderdzi, and had to own to himself that his cousin's death did not grieve him at all.

He heard sentinels challenging in the darkness and the horses munching their fodder with relish. He lay in his tent with closed eyes, lost in thought.

By the time the first cock-crow was heard from Korsatevela Castle Giorgi had made up his mind that provided they could save Shorena he would marry her within ten days.

In the camp of the King's troops the tattoo was sounded. This time Mamamzeh offered unconditional surrender, asking only for pardon and peace. Giorgi made no reply. The King's legions began to batter the towers with stone-throwers.

Soon on the roofs of the citadel and the four towers appeared Mamamzeh's warriors. They were holding crosses, shouting:

"Long live King Giorgi!"

Other warriors, too, showed the attacking troops wooden crosses, crying:

"Long live King Giorgi!"

Giorgi was disposed to put an end to the bloodshed but Zviad convinced him that this was merely a stratagem invented by Tokhaidze.

"They want to inveigle us into the castle and then stone us and chop off our heads."

The King gave the command to storm all the four towers. Thanks to the key thrown down by Ushisharidze the first tower was taken that same day.

The commandant of the fortress came out to surrender to the King. He held out the keys to three towers and threw himself on the ground at Giorgi's feet.

"And where's the key of the first tower?" asked the King.

"It has been stolen, my lord King."

Giorgi realized that the commandant himself had been bribed by Ushisharidze.

"Have the traitor's head cut off and sent as a present to Eristavi Mamamzeh!" he ordered Zviad.

Mamamzeh, who had locked himself up in the great hall of the citadel, was stupefied when they brought him the commandant's head.

He invited Giorgi and Zviad to the hall. He fell down on his knees before the King, kissed his knees and implored his pardon.

The King asked him:

"Have you received my gift, Eristavi?"

The Eristavi thanked him.

"As a rule, Chief of the Eristavis, I don't leave the heads of traitors on their shoulders. You wanted to find out the strength of the swords that cut iron and bone. Well, test one of them on your own head!"

"Take him out!" ordered Zviad.

Soon Mamamzeh's grey head was raised on the top of the tower.

Then they put a noose round Tokhaidze's neck, tied the ends of the rope to two horses and drove them in opposite directions.

On the same morning were hanged the four chiefs of the gorges: Shiola Apkhanauri, Berdia Beburauli, Martia Bagatur and Mamuka Balachauri.

Korsatevela Castle was levelled to the ground.

Shorena's head had turned grey in the dungeon, but this only added to the beauty of the beautiful.

She was brought back to Mtskheta and placed in the care of her mother Gurandukht.

It was a hard task to put together Girsheli's body, cut as it was to pieces by the Pkhovians. It was lamented according to the ancient rites and buried at Samtavro under the altar, right where kings, catholicoses and eristavis were interred in those days.

Catholicos Melkisedek was beaming with joy: the Temple of the Wonder-Working Pillar had been completed before the arrival of the Byzantine guests. He was so weak after the long journey and his illness that he looked more dead than alive when the monks took him off his mule. Nevertheless, that same evening he made his appearance in the temple court.

He blessed the masons and carpenters whom he met on his way, and was very sorry to hear that the King's Architect had been badly wounded.

With him the Catholicos brought many offerings collected among the believers of Klarjeti, Samtskheh and Javakheti.

He decorated the temple with gold and silver. At his orders the icon called "Svetitskhoveli," the altar gates and the iconostasis, where the gift of the Emperor Basil—a richly gemmed icon—had been placed, were encased in gold.

On his own behalf he made an offering of holy images painted with gold and antimony and sown with pearls.

The icon of the "Chained St. George," wonderfully ornamented by some unknown master, had been brought from Nokorna with great solemnity. It had been artistically embossed with the dragon scales and the chain links of a Salmansurian cuirass. The temple was furnished with articles of church decoration, a great many religious books, chronicles and candelabra adorned with gold, silver and precious stones.

Melkisedek endowed the cathedral with several villages, too, which he had received by deed from Bagrat Kuropalat himself.

Melkisedek himself, had drawn up the *sigeli*, that is the deed of grant or patent, and made out a minute list of the furnishings of the temple, cursing beforehand with unheard-of severity anyone who dared change or take away any of those valuables.

People from all the provinces, from Nicopsia to Derbent, had flocked to Mtskheta to attend the ceremony of the consecration of the temple.

Neither the temple nor its court nor the town of Mtskheta itself had space enough to accommodate all the worshippers.

High mass was celebrated by Catholicos Melkisedek and twelve bishops, and the service was performed in Georgian and Greek.

Giorgi, who hated everything coming from Greece, listened to the Byzantine bishops with a frown, though they prayed and chanted very movingly in their beautiful language.

At the end of the service the wizened old man with the wolf's eyes took up his stance before the iconostasis.

At first he seemed to speak perfunctorily, the words smouldering on his lips like embers under ashes.

Melkisedek went over biblical myths which had been heard a thousand times but he treated them with such fascination that the awed congregation, old and young, listened spellbound.

He mentioned in passing that Queen Mariam, equal to the apostles and great in her zeal for the Temple of the Wonder-Working Pillar, had fallen ill on the very eve of starting on her journey to Jerusalem.

He wanted to speak about the accident which had befallen Arsakidze but was not bold enough to mention him in the same breath as the Queen's name, so he turned again to the biblical myths, recounting the story of Exodus and pointing the moral by stating that every nation should live in its own country and be as free as God.

He touched very tactfully on the relations between Georgia and the Patriarch of Antioch, and reproached the Arabs for having cut off Georgia from Antioch.

In conclusion the Catholicos thought fit to say a few words about Arsakidze:

"The accursed Alans have inflicted a grievous wound on the builder of Svetitskhoveli, the Great Master Arsakidze."

And the Catholicos went on to hurl a terrible imprecation at the Alans for having killed "the illustrious Eristavi Girsheli."

No sooner had he finished his sermon than Konstantineh was brought into the aisle on a stretcher.

The master let his eyes run around his creation, arrayed in gold, silver and gems. His eyes filled with tears, but he controlled his agitation and said in a whisper:

"Let there be light!"

Melkisedek looked at the master's waxlike face, kissed him on the forehead, and then, passing by the icon of the Virgin Mary—the Emperor's gift—and a number of other images, walked up to the icon of "the Chained St. George," lifted it with both hands and raised his voice in prayer:

"Saint George, heal Great Master Konstantineh!"

And following him, all the people inside and outside the temple cried out:

"Saint George, heal Great Master Konstantineh!"

Shorena and Gurandukht stood among the wives of the eristavis. When Kolonkelidze's daughter saw the drawn face of Arsakidze and when the whole temple rang to the thunderous cry: "Heal the Great Master," she felt a lump rise in her throat. She knelt and, hidden by the brocade robes of the maids of honour, burst out crying, offering a prayer to Saint George to heal her friend.

Gurandukht's eyebrows curved angrily when she heard Shorena's sobbing. She feared lest the King should see it, because Giorgi had already sent her word in secret, informing her that as soon as the Queen departed to Jerusalem he would marry Shorena.

This was the cause of her agitation and displeasure.

"The future queen should not trouble St. George for the sake of a mason, and a Laz at that."

LIII

The great royal standard flew outside the palace portals.

On that day the governors of the provinces with their families, the Byzantine patricians, metropolitans and bishops were invited to dinner by the King.

Catholicos Melkisedek, Commander-in-Chief Zviad, Metropolitan Razhden, the bishops of Ruisi, Anchi, Matskhveri and Mtbevi occupied their usual places on the right-hand side of the King's throne. To the left stood the Byzantine nobles: Katepan Nikiphor Kasavila, the patrician Christopher Delphos, sebastos Theodor Lampros (all the three in silver armour but without swords), metropolitans Kamakha of Amora and Joann of Smyrna, bishops Epiphanius of Rhodes and Roman of Trebizond, and twelve Georgian hermits.

At the King's command the *mandaturt-ukhutsesi*, that is, the chief of the King's bodyguard, delivered his mace to the *amirejibi*, the master of ceremonies.

The *mandaturt-ukhutsesi* took up his position before the King's throne.

The King ordered the meal to be served.

The *mandaturt-ukhutsesi* brought in the bread. The Catholicos, the *spasalar*, the manager of the King's household, the courtiers and the guests rose to their feet.

King Giorgi invited the Catholicos to partake of the meal.

Melkisedek blessed the meal, said grace and broke the bread.

The chief of the bodyguard and the master of ceremonies set the *tabakis*, long short-legged dining-tables.

Then the royal banqueting service of gold and silver, and the goblets of the House of Bagrations, made of pure gold, were brought in.

The master of ceremonies offered the first dish to the Catholicos. The bishop of Rhodes waited on the Georgian and Byzantine nobles and bishops.

The lord of the bedchamber sat next to the chief librarian, beyond them sat various officials and dignitaries, and at the end of the table were seated the master of the horse and the major-domo.

The chief of the cup-bearers—a red-cheeked man with long moustaches and a shaven chin—stood aside. Whenever new dishes were served he tasted them on the palm of his hand. Likewise, he was the first to try the wines.

Katepan Nikiphor Kasavila was a much-travelled man, who had journeyed from Cathay to Erin—and yet he gaped in surprise at the gold and silver candelabra in the corners of the banqueting hall, the King's goblets and bowls, the golden trays and ladles, the Chinese and Iranian dishes. He made mental notes on the solemn ceremony of banqueting at the court of Giorgi the Abasgus, as Giorgi the First, the King of the Abkhazians and Georgians, was called by the Byzantines.

Kasavila had previously had a general idea that Georgia was an almost barbarian country, although when he was accredited as ambassador to the court of the Saracen Caliph he had been surprised to find that the Georgians did not eat with their fingers as the Mussulmans did, and that during meals they behaved with dignity and decorum.

The Byzantine bishops continued to argue about the Easter calendar even at the King's table.

At that time in Byzantium a heated dispute was in progress among the theologians as to the best mode of compiling a calendar according to which both the Christian and the Judaic Easter would coincide.

Metropolitan Razhden was a passionate disputant. On this occasion, too, he longed with all his heart and soul to take part in the debate, but knowing that the King hated it when the Georgians argued about Byzantine affairs, he transferred his passion to the sturgeon on the table before him.

King Giorgi had given him the nickname of "Crocodile" because of his gluttony, and, in truth, he reminded one of a crocodile. He had an uncommonly long nose, a wide mouth and scaly, pimply skin.

The inquisitive Katepan Kasavila counted more than a hundred different courses.

Kasavila himself, like the other Byzantine guests, tackled various sweet dishes with great relish but avoided tasting the Colchian titbits, highly seasoned with pepper, vinegar and garlic.

Before finishing the fish they were already leering with their oily, beady eyes at the sucking pigs and fat turkeys, cooked on spits.

Joann, the metropolitan of Smyrna, who had just returned from Antioch where he had fought with sword in hand against the Saracens, attacked the Aragvi salmon with such courage that even the great eater "Crocodile," alias Metropolitan Razhden, had to give him best.

A bone stuck twice in the metropolitan's throat and as neither of the two bishops sitting next to him knew Greek, Parsman, who had been invited to the dinner as an interpreter, came to the rescue. He gave the metropolitan a crust of bread and the metropolitan swallowed it to push the bone farther down his gullet.

Though Giorgi spoke both Greek and Arabic, only Georgian was spoken at his court.

The King himself ate without appetite. He seemed to have caught Shorena's ill humour.

Pale and speechless, she sat between "Fish-Eyed Cow" and Gurandukht and in her ethereal beauty shone amidst the stout wives of the governors.

After the church service Shorena had intended to go home—she had a headache and would rather have had a good cry all alone—but her mother Gurandukht had threatened "to comb her hair for her" at home if she refused to attend the King's banquet.

Giorgi was chafing at the behaviour of his Greek guests, and especially at Kasavila's curiosity, which was decidedly bad-mannered. Whenever Kasavila put a morsel from a new dish into his mouth he would invariably ask Parsman to tell him how to cook it.

When they brought in the crayfish cooked after the Colchian fashion Kasavila had no doubts that it was quite impossible for crayfish to be served with pepper.

So he boldly thrust a piece into his mouth and, having burned himself, unceremoniously spat the morsel out into the palm of his left hand.

"In what river do you catch peppered crayfish?" he asked Parsman.

Parsman answered jokingly.

"King Giorgi breeds these crayfish in the rivers of Colchis to burn the tongues of over-inquisitive guests."

Kasavila laughed very much when he learned that "peppered crayfish" were not bred that way in the rivers but were simply stuffed with their own meat spiced with pepper and garlic.

Kasavila helped himself to edibles with his left hand as only two fingers were left on his right one.

He even boasted that two years before, at the banquet of no less a person than Pope Benedict VIII, he had also eaten with his left hand.

The circumstances under which he had lost his fingers were as follows:

When Emperor Basil commanded that the Bulgarians taken prisoner in the battle of Cetinium be blinded, the supervision of the operation was entrusted to Kasavila.

One of the Bulgarians declared that if he were allowed to speak to Kasavila face to face he would reveal a great secret.

When the Bulgarian was brought before the senator, he sprang at Kasavila. The senator swung his right hand at the infuriated prisoner, but the latter caught hold of it and bit off three fingers.

For this "exploit" Kasavila was awarded the title of Katepan.

Afterwards he used to brag:

"I defeated the Bulgarians at Cetinium and blinded 15,000!"

LIV

After dinner the Katepan and the King took a turn in the palace garden.

Kasavila kept bothering the King with endless questions, and Giorgi's vexation increased because he was compelled to listen to each query twice—in Greek and in Georgian.

Having received evasive answers about the condition of the fortresses and armed forces, the katepan began to ask questions about the King's horses and hawks.

It was evident that he had already been primed by somebody on all these matters. Even the name of the King's pet dog Kursha was known to him.

"Fish-Eyed Cow" with her daughter Natia—the sapphire-eyed maiden—was assiduously following the King about.

She caught up with him and the katepan near the cage with the cheetahs. Kasavila stopped chatting about the cheetahs and looked closely at Natia, after which he stared at her mother.

He turned to Parsman.

"Who is this beauty? Perhaps it's the King's daughter? They're as like as two peas."

Parsman made no answer. Tsokala blushed.

Giorgi's blood boiled.

"I fear this two-fingered katepan is about to pick my pocket," he said in Georgian, "the Byzantines are thieves. They've stolen their religion from the Jews, their language from the ancient Greeks, Cetinium from the Bulgarians, the territory of Basiani from the Georgians and Ani from the Armenians! Everything they possess is ill-gotten, except their conscience which they have no use for."

"What is the King saying?" inquired the talkative katepan of Parsman.

"The King says," answered the interpreter in Greek, "that as soon as his son Bagrat comes back home, he will hand over the throne to him and present himself to the Emperor in order to make a pilgrimage to the holy places in the Byzantine Empire."

The King could hardly suppress a smile.

"Fish-Eyed Cow" had a smattering of Greek, and now she was seized with a fear that her plans would be frustrated. The King and Queen, she thought, would leave for Byzantium as soon as the King's son Bagrat came from there.

When they approached the deer's inclosure, the katepan's spirits rose again.

"He's going to worry me out of my life with questions about the deer," thought the King, and wanted to withdraw, but he noticed Shorena standing silently at Gurandukht's side.

Kolonkelidze's widow left Shorena alone with the King.

Giorgi felt that his love for Shorena was growing from day to day. Generally cynical with women, he was shy of Shorena and when speaking with her became excited and tongue-tied.

But the wine he had drunk at the banquet put heart into him.

"Why are you lonely, Rose of Ecbatana?" he asked her.

The compliment left the girl unmoved. She bowed her head in silence.

The King ascribed her silence to shyness.

"Perhaps you grieve for Nebiera?"

Shorena wanted to say that besides Nebiera she had some other cause to be depressed but she preferred to hold her peace.

"If you do what I wish, Shorena, I will order my chief huntsman to catch your Nebiera even today," said Giorgi kindly.

"What do you want of me, my lord King?" answered Shorena almost angrily, and then looked sadly at the deer.

"Your love!" he answered.

"I think you should be content with what you have already snatched away from me, my lord. You have deprived my father of light, and myself of liberty. As for my heart ... it has long since belonged to another...."

He was embarrassed, and felt an urge to find out right away who that "other" might be.

Chiaberi and Girsheli were not alive. Who else could this rival be?

Fortunately for Shorena "Fish-Eyed Cow" came up to them and started a conversation about the deer.

Begging the ladies to excuse him the King returned to Kasavila.

The katepan asked Parsman to show him the King's famous dog Kursha.

She was lolling idly with empty, sucked-out teats, and her three pups were romping with three wolf cubs.

Kasavila was surprised to see how amicably the cubs and pups played with each other.

Parsman explained that he had put the cubs to Kursha and she had suckled them.

After the consecration of the Temple of the Wonder-Working Pillar and Arsakidze's being awarded the title of Great Master, Parsman's hatred for his rival increased still more. Approaching the King, who was walking by himself, he whispered to him with a smile:

"The pups and cubs are foster-brothers and -sisters, Your Majesty."

Giorgi saw that Parsman was hinting at something important.

"Speak out, old man! What do you mean?"

"I have made up my mind never to tell you the truth—neither direct nor in a roundabout way, my lord King—as long as there are still many candlesticks left in the palace."

"I swear by my mother's blessed memory, I'll never punish you for telling the truth!"

Everybody knew that the King never swore lightly by his mother's memory.

"I've already told Your Majesty that your viziers are cowards. They'd rather report to you only pleasant things, while imparting bitter truth falls to the lot of the 'candlestick thief.'"

Giorgi seized Parsman by the elbow and quickened his pace so that Kasavila and the others could not overtake them.

"You'd better abandon any thought of marrying Shorena, my lord King. Everybody at your court knows that she's Arsakidze's mistress, but none dares to tell you about it."

Giorgi shuddered. That fellow Arsakidze had again crossed his path! The master had become too impudent!

After the consecration of the temple Melkisedek had had a talk with Arsakidze and the King had already been informed of its purport. The Great Master had expressed his regret that the King did not endeavour to unite Georgia and was leaving Tbilisi in the hands of the Arabs, that he cared more for hunting than the affairs of state. Arsakidze had even mentioned the misery of the people. The spy had failed to overhear exactly what had been said, but Arsakidze was supposed to have made some reference to the duties of a king and the desire of the common people to live in peace and unity.

"He has the impertinence to teach me what I should do," the King had thought in indignation. He had decided to wait and, perhaps, to speak to the master. And now came the question of Shorena!

"Listen, Parsman, you shall, under pain of death, fetch me the proof."

"Your Majesty was in Uplistsikheh during the earthquake. On the pretext of pursuing the deer Arsakidze that day carried off Shorena. Fortunately, the Alans held them up in Pkhovi. The King's Architect recovered a long time ago—Turmanidze's balsam did him good. But he's still keeping to his bed: it's just a pretext to enable Kolonkelidze's daughter to make trysts with her lover."

The King turned white with rage.

"I don't think the Laz could have the impudence to defy me!"

"To defy you?" smiled Parsman. "Why, he defies not only the kings. The day after the earthquake I called on him. I thought he was ill, and wanted to visit him. It turned out that he had fled to Pkhovi, so I didn't find him at home. But I saw a picture painted by him: it shows Jacob wrestling with God. As a matter of fact, his God has Melkisedek's eyes, whereas Jacob is the likeness of the painter himself. But this is not all, my lord King! He has painted Shorena, the eristavi's daughter. She stands in a field which is strewn with poppies. Wild pigeons are perched on her shoulders. At her feet lie two bears—one honey-coloured, the other brown. The brown one resembles the deceased Girsheli, the owner of Kvelistsikheh. As to the other bear, Your Majesty can easily guess who he is."

All this sounded very convincing to Giorgi.

"If this evidence is not sufficient for you, my lord King, I have irrefutable information that Shorena visits him at night, and if an observant eye searched Rati's house thoroughly, it might easily detect there other proofs as well."

The King wished to interrogate Parsman on some other questions, too, but at that moment "Fish-Eyed Cow" and the katepan interrupted them.

LV

Emperor Basil, aware that he was near his end, sent Giorgi's son Bagrat, who had been kept in Byzantium as an honourable hostage, back to Georgia. He was escorted by Katepan Dokian and a large retinue.

The heir apparent to the Byzantine throne, Constantine, dwelled outside the palace.

The Emperor wrote a letter to him, inviting him to the palace, but it was intercepted by high officials of the court.

The Caesar repeated his summons several times without receiving an answer. Then he had his horse saddled and started off himself in search of the heir apparent.

The courtiers knew that Constantine was that day feasting with courtesans.

When Basil appeared on horseback in the streets of Constantinople, people hid themselves in cellars, while the frightened courtiers sent runners in all haste to fetch Constantine.

Basil conducted his drunken brother to the palace known as "the Golden Banqueting Hall," seated him on the throne, put the Emperor's red buskins on his feet, placed the imperial crown on his head, and falling on his knees before him, did homage to the new Caesar, Constantine IX.

That same week the new Emperor dispatched couriers with a body of soldiers in pursuit of the katepan and Bagrat. The pursuers overtook them on the borders of Tao and delivered the Emperor's message to Katepan Dokian.

"By the will of God, Caesar Basil of blessed memory, our beloved brother, has died"—wrote Emperor Constantine—"and if Bagrat, the son of Giorgi, King of the Abkhazians and Georgians, be still within the precincts of our dominions, seize him, bring him back and let him appear before us."

The noblemen of Tao, Mtskheta and Kartli led forth their troops to meet Bagrat. The Byzantines tried to use force of arms but the King's troops put Katepan Dokian and his retinue to rout and conducted the King's son in safety to Mtskheta.

A great feast was held in Mtskheta to celebrate the occasion, and Melkisedek officiated at a thanksgiving service at Svetitskhoveli. All Georgia rejoiced—from the Caucasian Mountains to Basiani.

But even this joyful event could not gladden Giorgi's heart. Again he took to opium and spent almost all his time hunting.

Turmanidze's medicines did Konstantineh Arsakidze a great deal of good. He was already able to walk about in his room with the aid of a stick.

Khatuta brought him a letter from Shorena: "If the weather is fine on Saturday morning Mother will go to Zedazeni, and I shall come to you in the evening."

For a long time Gurandukht had been preparing to make a visit to Zedazeni. But many Saturdays had passed and Shorena had still not come to Arsakidze.

In spite of the physician's prohibition Arsakidze had been up all day, putting the last touches to his picture *A Dream*. By the evening he was feverish, and Nonai hurried out to call the physician. The sick man lay alone. His mouth was dry, and he was thirsty.

Parsman had repeatedly egged on his wife to steal Shorena's *sheidishi* from Khursi's house, but Vardisakhar still hesitated.

On the Thursday before, Parsman had a headache, and Vardisakhar went to Gurandukht to ask for some remedy. Kolonkelidze's widow happened to have gone with Shorena and her maidservants to the church of Samtavro. Only Khatuta remained at home.

Vardisakhar sent her away to draw water, and being left alone, found Shorena's *sheidishi*.

It was twilight when Vardisakhar entered Rati's house. Nonai was still away and so the candelabra had not yet been lighted.

She stole on tiptoe to the sick man and pushed the *sheidishi* under the head of the bed.

Delirious, Arsakidze imagined that his servant Nonai had come in.

"When is the physician coming?" he asked.

"Soon, he'll come soon," muttered Vardisakhar, and slipped noiselessly out of the room.

It rained on Saturday but Arsakidze was not aware of it. In the evening Shorena stole away from her mother.

She burst into Arsakidze's room, panting, but did not remain long.

The King had told her mother of the rumours circulating at the palace about Shorena and she had chastised her, called her bad names—"whore" and "a mason's kept woman."

Seeing the state of the patient Shorena asked Nonai to send Bodokia to Pkhovi for the architect's mother. She thought that his mother's caresses might help cure Arsakidze.

"I can't stay with him any longer," she said plaintively. "If I can, I'll come next Saturday."

She kissed the burning cheeks of the sufferer and went away with tearful eyes.

No sooner had Shorena left the garden than a shadow whisked past her. Somebody had been watching her. The stranger mounted the stairs noiselessly and slipped into Rati's house. Nonai was in her room boiling the simples.

"Water," moaned the patient.

The stranger gave him water, looked carefully round the room, fumbled under Arsakidze's pillow and pulled out Shorena's pheasant-coloured *sheidishi*.

The spy took it to the King and reported that he had met Kolonkelidze's daughter in Arsakidze's garden. He gave a detailed description of the two pictures.

Mad with jealousy, the King decided to take vengeance on his rival.

That very evening Melkisedek paid a visit to the King. When the Catholicos learned that Arsakidze had painted a sacrilegious picture, he was appalled at what he considered to be heresy and he refrained from extending his protection to the Chief Architect.

The next day Melkisedek left Mtskheta to accompany the Byzantine guests. The King summoned Parsman and again appointed him King's Architect.

Parsman demanded that the Temple of the Wonder-Working Pillar should be pulled down, promising to build a new one in the shortest possible time, but the King would not agree.

He ordered that Arsakidze's right hand be cut off. As the one-eyed executioner of Tbilisi, Sagira, was removing the hand of the sick master, his only eye swam with tears.

LVI

On the next day, in compliance with a secret epistle from Metropolitan Razhden, the daughter of the governor of Kvetari, Shorena, was received into the convent of Bagineti.

She was given the name of Shushanika, because in such cases the first letter of the novice's name had to be left unaltered.

The punishment was not unexpected as far as Shorena was concerned. She supposed that the King was angry with her and had taken his revenge on her for refusing to become his wife.

She took the penalty calmly, for she was sure that she would never have been given in marriage to a lowborn Laz. At the same time her life in Mtskheta had become unbearable.

Gurandukht Kolonkelidze's conduct was anything but dignified. She had been willing to go to any lengths to marry her daughter to the King and when she saw her plan frustrated, she consoled herself by beating and abusing Shorena.

Shushanika liked the situation of the convent. The whole expanse of Mtskheta could be seen from there, as if spread out on the flat of the hand. Around the convent grew cypresses, which in the twilight looked like gigantic candlesticks of jet supporting the starry sky. How remote were the court gossips and the venomous hissing of the governors' wives.

The summits of the Caucasus—the majestic colossi of sapphire—looked down on her. In the morning and at sunset clouds as pure as the innocent dreams of children used to veil them.

Shorena also became fond of the bright cleanliness of the cells. Having been brought up in Pkhovi her religious feeling was not very keen, but now she listened with pleasure to the chanting and herself sang in the choir at vespers. Together with the other sisters she did the cooking, tidied up the cells, mended the worn robes and scrubbed pots and pans with her delicate almond-white hands.

One day a grey-haired nun, sister Ephemina, went up to her and snatched a copper kettle out of her hands.

"It's a pity to spoil such hands on a dirty pot like that!" she said.

"The young should serve the old," answered Shorena.

"You are not younger than I. Both of us are greyheaded!" exclaimed Ephemina playfully.

She embraced Shorena and kissed her on the cheeks, kissed her prematurely whitened head and pressed her like a child to her breast.

Ephemina was pock-marked and homely, but pure in heart and a woman of many sorrows.

Fate had been harsh to her from her childhood.

A slave-trader had bought her in Klarjeti and sold her to an Iranian in the slave market in Uplistsikheh. A Georgian wine-merchant had bought her in Iran. Many years later he had arrived at Mtskheta on a pilgrimage and had come to an untimely end.

At that time Ephemina was already past the prime of life, and at length she had found peace in the Baginetti nunnery.

Shorena became attached to her with a filial tenderness.

Sometimes the new nun hid herself in the shade of the cypresses and gazed at Mtskheta spread out below. Her only desire was to learn something about the health of her beloved Uta.

But women's tittle-tattle did not leave Shushanika alone even in the seclusion of a convent. Old and young nuns gossiped about her beauty and her prematurely white hair.

She told no one about her past life but the idle imagination of the nuns kept on spinning its own yarn. It was rumoured that Shushanika had been a peasant woman in love with a ploughman, but had been wedded by force to a governor. The ploughman was then supposed to have tried to make away with himself in despair, while Shushanika had fled from her old husband.

The humble nun was constantly plagued with questions, pursued, spied upon, and when found alone, hugged and kissed.

The plain black robe was becoming to Shorena. In it she resembled still more the grieving angel of Kintsvisi.

One evening after prayers Ephemias and Shushanika sat beneath the cypresses. A short distance in front of them grew a poplar on the verge of a fathomless abyss.

They gazed in silence at the play of the setting sunbeams on the dome of Svetitskhoveli. The dome was covered with sheets of gold and the sunbeams reflected by them gladdened the eye.

A garrulous young nun intruded on their privacy.

She cast a look at Svetitskhoveli and then turned to the elder nun.

"Do you know, Mother Ephemias, what has happened in Mtskheta?"

Ephemias had long since severed all her ties with the outside world, so the tone in which she asked the tattler was rather indifferent:

"What exactly has happened there?"

"Well, they say that the builder of that temple, a Laz, loved a very beautiful girl, the daughter of an aristocrat. But King Giorgi himself wanted to marry her. However, the silly girl preferred the poor builder to the King. The King found this out. The lovers were caught red-handed. The girl ran away but left her *sheidishi* under her lover's pillow. King Giorgi was wild with anger and ordered the builder's hand to be cut off...."

Shorena went as pale as death.

She remembered that a fortnight before she had actually missed her pheasant-coloured *sheidishi*.

For a while she sat quite still, then she rose and walked laboriously, like a sleep-walker, towards the edge of the precipice.

"Where are you going, Shushanika?"

Shorena made no answer.

On the edge of the abyss she made the sign of the cross and threw herself headlong into the depths.

At first she flew downwards with her arms stretched out in the attitude of the flying angels in the church frescoes of those days, but a moment later she turned over in the air, and dashing her head against a rock, drew her last breath.

LVII

Plague broke out again in Mtskheta.

Father Stephanos, Superior of the monastery of Samtavro, died.

That same week Vardisakhar fell a prey to plague.

At the funeral of Father Stephanos Metropolitan Razhden delivered a sermon.

"There are too many infidels in Mtskheta. That is the reason why plague does not leave our town," he said, and openly proclaimed Parsman the Persian "head of the infidels."

The enraged mob seized Parsman and would have stoned him to death but for Father Gayoz, who managed to curb the rabble by offering instead to brand Parsman as a "disciple of Satan."

The ancient copper die with the fox's image on it was heated red-hot and stamped on Parsman's forehead.

King Giorgi was then in Uplistsikheh.

From the very first Prince Bagrat had conceived a dislike for Parsman. He would even have liked to have him hanged, but had refrained from doing so because nobody in Mtskheta could match Parsman in treating sick hawks. Yet even this advantage did not save Parsman: one of Bagrat's hawks happened to fall ill. Parsman gave it an enema, but the hawk died.

The young ruler flew into a passion and issued orders for Parsman to be flung into prison.

And so, "the fathomless vessel" started rolling again.

The prisoner ran off to the Arabs, but near Digomi he was overtaken and seized. He endured cruel tortures, but although they tore out his finger-nails, he did not betray the secret of tempering the iron-cutting steel.

He met with his death while undergoing torture.

Thus, in accordance with the proverb, he who had been wont to steal wine was caught stealing dregs.

During that period Bagrat received a letter from Byzantium.

One evening after supper it led to the King abusing the Byzantines. Bagrat replied to his father:

"One should be more guarded in speech, father. It's not the first time that you have vilified the Emperor and Byzantium. You should know that Parsman misinterpreted your words to Katepan Kasavila, but afterwards, before the departure of the Byzantine guests, he conveyed to the katepan the true purport of your speech. Kasavila reported it to the new Caesar, which accounts for his attempt to detain me."

The King's colour mounted.

"The Byzantines have depraved you!" he cried. "Parsman did the right thing in flinging the truth in Kasavila's face!" (Oh, if only I could put Parsman to death for the second time, he thought in his heart.)

On the next day Metropolitan Razhden entered the King's chamber.

"The Crocodile" looked about, and seeing nobody-else there, told the King how Shorena had ended her days.

The King rose and without saying a word withdrew to his bedchamber. He dismissed the chamberlain and locked the door. Then he dyed his beard with henna and put on the clothes of a commoner.

In the evening he had Ushisharidze summoned to him.

Nobody saw them leave the palace and take the horses from the stable.

The first week the King's household thought that the King had gone hunting in Sapurtsleh. Then they imagined that he had returned to Uplistsikheh. Couriers were sent everywhere. Messengers were dispatched to Abkhazia, Tmogvi and the fortress of Phanaskert.

The King could not be found.

Then they began to search for his corpse in the Kura and the Aragvi. In vain! The King and his courier Ushisharidze seemed to have "Been spirited away.

The King's son, or, in point of fact, now King Bagrat IV, recalled only one circumstance—namely, that on that fateful night somebody had kissed him in his sleep.

"I wanted to see if it was my father, but sleep overcame me," he said.

The courtiers remembered that Caliph Al-Hakim had disappeared likewise without leaving a trace, and drew the conclusion that King Giorgi had followed his example.

Avshanidze and Ushisharidze roamed the wild woods of Trialeti for one month. They passed the nights in shepherds' cabins, and sometimes in a deserted hut in the village of Itsro.

For fear of being recognized they shunned people.

One morning, lying in a shepherd's tent, Glakhuna was aroused by the lowing of a deer. He had been dreaming as if he were in his palace in Mtskheta, so he turned over on to his other side and went on dozing.

The deer bellowed again. The King started up, and woke Ushisharidze. They took Kursha and went in the direction from which the deer's roar was coming.

Ushisharidze saw a stag and shot at it but missed. Glakhuna ran after the doe—she was lion-coloured and resembled Nebiera.

The huntsman and the hound chased the deer until noon, when she fell badly wounded to the ground.

When Glakhuna walked over to her he saw her lying with her forelegs flexed, nosing the earth and labouring for breath.

The huntsman was about to give her the finishing stroke with his dagger but she was so lovely and helpless that he sheathed his weapon once more.

He went to the edge of a bluff and called Ushisharidze but there was no answer. Glakhuna climbed a tree and began to shout and whistle but all to no avail.

"I'll carry her myself," he thought.

He put his arms round the beast, lifted her and managed to cover some distance. Suddenly he felt a sharp pain in the abdomen and collapsed.

He tried to rise but no longer had the strength to do so.

Then he put his head on his mortally wounded but still warm trophy.

"Death has come," he thought.

He remembered Shorena and the few blissful moments spent with her in the castle of Kvetari.

At last Ushisharidze came running to the King, took him up in his arms and carried him to the village of Itsro, leaving the doe in the forest.

Having put the king to bed in the hut, Ushisharidze began to massage Giorgi's abdomen but soon perceived that it made the pain worse.

A death-like pallor suffused Giorgi's face. His eyes were closed. Then a slight flush tinged his cheeks and he opened his eyes.

"Is there anybody else in this hut besides you?" he asked.

"Nobody, my lord King."

"It's good, Pipa, that nobody will witness my death but you."

"What are you talking about, my lord? It's too early for you to die."

"No, Pipa, my last hours have been counted off. The wrath of Saint George of the Serpent has struck me. I am leaving this world. And, Pipa, tell everybody what I am about to say—tell everyone who asks about me, tell my son Bagrat, Zviad, the *spasalar*, tell the last cobbler... I've committed many sins, Pipa, as a king and a man. I was bold and faint-hearted. I set at nought the Byzantine Emperor and was afraid of snakes. I was conceited and given to drinking. Had the noblemen not deserted me in the battle of Basiani, I'd have taken Emperor Basil prisoner. I gave my childhood and my youth to Georgia, but the Georgians called me "the Abkhazian," and by the Abkhazians I was considered to be a Kartalinian spy, I who was a Bagration, a Laz."

Giorgi closed his eyes and was silent for a while.

His face twitched painfully and became still more death-like.

Then he exerted all his strength, roused himself and continued:

"When you go back home, Pipa, kiss Zviad for me, and say on my behalf that he was right after all in what he told me about the Armenians and the Greeks. Perhaps my worst mistake was that I did not appreciate his counsel... It's likewise true that I did not traverse the old and tested path by which David Kuropalat and my father Bagrat led our people. I even looked for an opportunity to make an alliance with that feather-brained Caliph Al-Hakim, thereby stirring up

bad blood between Georgia and the Byzantine Empire...Tell Zviad to caution my son Bagrat against taking the wrong road, to advise him to seek alliance with peoples of our own blood and faith, tell Zviad to stand by my son in his struggle against the licentious governors, in his endeavours to unite the Georgian territories.... As for the people. ..."

Giorgi breathed his last before he could say anything about the people.

LIX

Woe unto my womb that gave birth to thee!
Woe unto my nipples that suckled thee!
Woe unto my lips for they called thee and
thou didst not answer!
Woe unto mine eyes that wept for thee!

From "A Mother's Lamentation"

Day by day Arsakidze's health went from bad to worse. The sick man asked Nonai to call Bodokia, and she spent a long time searching for him.

At midnight Bodokia came. As he entered the sickroom on tiptoe Konstantineh seemed to be asleep.

As Bodokia kissed him on the forehead, Konstantineh's eyelids parted a little and he said:

"Take the key from under my pillow and open yonder green trunk. Find there a purse and give it me. ..."

Bodokia silently carried out his wish.

"Look, I shall not need to order a costly suit.... Take ten gold pieces and give them to my mother in Pkhovi. Bring her here, tell her that I am unwell and would like to see her.... Give five pieces to poor Nonai.... Ten pieces to your children—may they grow up and prosper.... They'll hardly live to see the time when light conquers darkness, but their great grandchildren shall.... Hasten to Pkhovi...."

Bodokia kissed the sufferer once again, and stooping, went out of the room. Nonai noticed that his shoulders were quivering, and as she closed the door after him she heard him sobbing in the dark.

Night had pitched her tent of black felt in Rati's garden. Into the house, too, she had sent her harbingers.

The rose of dawn had not yet come. The August heat lingered even in the darkness. Black moths with painted wings danced round the only lamp.

The sick master was tossing in his bed, seeing neither the moths nor the bats which were flitting under the ceiling. Their wings singed in the flame of the lamp, the moths were falling to the floor.

But the night kept sending out one forlorn hope after another and the moths went round and round the flame. Shadows flitted about the room.

Only the pheasant in the valley of Tsitsamuri was bravely doing combat with the night.

Arsakidze raised his head, dazed with fever. Into the window peered the dome of the sky—dark-blue as the Black Sea in the hours of calm. Stars shone in the darkness, blinking with their golden eyelashes.

Nonai was boiling herbs in her dark hole and when tears blurred her eyes she wiped them away with the hem of her skirt. She grieved that Konstantineh's mother was absent from his bedside.

An owlet hooted in the night.

The sick man moaned in a low voice:

"Water...."

The water was by his side, but he had only one hand, the left one, and it was disabled by a wound.

He saw a river flooding its banks—no, it was not a river, it was a sea, a blue sea. And weren't they goldfish frisking in the sea?

A Laz village appeared on the seashore, a small Laz cottage and poplars so tall that they reached the very sky.

Afterwards mountains came to the fore, the beautiful Pkhovian mountains. Waterfalls plunged down from the crags. ... But nobody would give him a drink!

In a small courtyard enclosed by a stone wall a little old woman in black was fussing about. Her head was covered with a black kerchief.

In one hand she held a knife with a black hilt. She stuck the knife into the throat of a black sheep and blood gushed forth. Arsakidze yearned to draw near and slake his thirst but his mother kept away her dear Uta. Water poured down from the high crags, the mighty Pkhovian waterfalls thundered on the rocks but the air all around was stifling hot, sultry.

Thirsty kites were dashing themselves desperately against the pitiless scorching sky.

"Water!..." Arsakidze continued to implore in a feeble voice, but even his mother would not allow him to drink his fill, and childlike, he burst into tears.

Suddenly he grew afraid lest they should notice his tears, and raising with difficulty his left hand, he screened his eyes.

Then he took leave of the mountains and the sea, he said good-bye to his dear childhood and bitter youth.

Suddenly it seemed to the sick man that something rustled in the corner above his head, something dropped on to his wet cheek and bit him.... Was it a beetle? He started. He was seized by a fit of ague.

A new vision rose before his eyes: wolf's eyes flashed in the darkness.

A dim shaggy shadow drew nearer and nearer. The wolfish eyes shone quite close, demanding his soul.

But the artist refused to give up his soul to the old man with the wolfish eyes.

The long-bearded old man grappled with the master and kept wrestling with him in the gloom. Then he grasped him by his wounded thigh and numbed it.

The master did combat with him, with the god of death, for a long, long time.

And the pheasant still fought with the darkness in the valley of Tsitsamuri....

At last day broke. A sheet of light spread in the East.

The sky strewed the mountains with red poppies, shafts of violet light poured down like Pkhovian cataracts from the Pkhovian mountains.

Shorena stepped out of the picture. She wore a dress made of Chinese silk, her golden tresses fell around her shoulders. She walked on and on over the field of flowering poppies and pelted Konstantineh with wheat ears.... Poppies and wheat ears!

Then his heart's desire knelt three times before the Great Master asking him for his soul.

Tears began to roll down Konstantineh's cheeks—it was impossible for him to give his soul to his sweetheart because his soul belonged to the Temple of the Wonder-Working Pillar. ...

Arsakidze's mother arrived from Pkhovi.

When she saw her son stung to death by the scorpions she turned to stone....

* * *

Rain poured down on Georgia, thunder rolled and the sun rose above it for a thousand years after that day.

For a thousand years the legend of the mother who was turned to stone was handed down from generation to generation

In my boyhood I saw in Mtskheta a stone about the height of a man. People used to say of it:

"That is the mother of Konstantineh Arsakidze."

And, indeed, the stone did bear some resemblance to a woman in Pkhovian dress.

Years passed by....

I had to work hard to reveal in the living word the mysteries immured in stone.

POSTSCRIPT

I believe the reader will not think a few words by the author about his novel *The Hand of a Great Master* to be out of place.

Over more than twenty centuries the Georgian people have achieved renown in arms, literature and architecture. Nobody doubts Rustaveli's greatness in the poetic constellation, but we pride ourselves no less on our great masters who have built Bolnisi, Jvari, Svetitskhoveli in Mtskheta, Bana, Oshki, Tsugrugasheni, Tsromi and Gelati.

The thought that those who created such masterpieces have remained in the shadow of oblivion has always grieved me deeply. This is what compelled me to tackle the popular legend about the hand of Konstantineh Arsakidze. I have attempted to tell the story of a great master, to glorify his work and mourn his tragic end.

Some critics supposed that the hero of my book was Giorgi, and not Konstantineh Arsakidze. The very title refutes such a supposition.

Events centre around the story of the cut-off hand, of the doom hanging over the fettered master who had to live and work under a tyrannical state power.

Some wondered that instead of describing external wars I concentrated on the uprisings of the rebellious feudal lords and the suppression of these uprisings. I must confess that I did this on purpose. The fate of every state is determined by its internal political situation. World history furnishes ample evidence of this. Internecine feuds were the cause of the fall of ancient Greece, Rome, the Byzantine Empire, Georgia under Tamar's children Rusudan and Giorgi Lasha. So I place the home affairs of Georgia under Giorgi I in the centre of my novel.

Noteworthy remarks have been made by the critics concerning the personality of Parsman the Persian. I must declare that first of all Parsman the Persian re presents in the history of Georgia the forerunners of the *condottieri*. Never once did I intend to idealize this adventurer.

That the role of Konstantineh Arsakidze is a counter-balance to Parsman the Persian throughout the novel is obvious. On the one hand we have a gifted but unscrupulous mercenary, Parsman, a man without kith and kin. On the other hand—his antipode—a still more talented son of the common people, Arsakidze.

The immortal work of art is the product of his self-devotion and zeal, inspired by the love for his Homeland.

I have somewhat revised this edition of the novel with a view to making its characters more representative of the ideas of their time and more intelligible in the light of contemporaneity.

Konstantineh Gamsakhurdia

Moscow –
December 1955

TO THE READER

The Foreign Languages Publishing

*House would be glad to have your
opinion of this book and its design
and any suggestions you may have
for the future publications.*

*Please send them to 21, Zubovsky
boulevard, Moscow, U.S.S.R.*

Printed in the union of soviet socialist republics