

MICHAEL LACKERBYE

ABKHAZIAN STORIES

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Abkhazian Stories
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MICHAEL LACKERBYE

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SUKHUM
2009

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INTRODUCTION

Dear reader!

You have in front of you a book by the outstanding writer Michael Lackerbye, called 'Abkhazian Stories'. The author was an Abkhazian, and he was born in Abkhazia. That's why, before giving you a brief biography and description of the book's contents, I'd like to set out in writing some pre-history.

...More than fifteen years have passed since the Abkhazian / Georgian conflict of 1992-1993, which is and always will be engraved in the memory of all by the frightening word 'war'. Because of a powerful information blockade, most people are still unaware of the scale of the assault upon Abkhazia, which was the bloodiest conflict to date upon the territory of the former USSR, and was inflicted by the monstrous and criminal Georgian regime of Mr. Shevardnadze.

Nevertheless, the Abkhazian army was able to completely defeat its many times larger enemy, and on the 30th of October 1993 the Abkhazian flag was hoisted at the border with Georgia along the River Ingur. In October 1994 the Constitution of the Republic of Abkhazia was accepted, according to which the country became an independent democratic state subject to international law. In August 2008 Abkhazia was recognised by mighty Russia, and thereby received the opportunity for a peaceful existence and development. Following this recognition, world interest in Abkhazia increased dramatically.

The population of the country is slightly more than 300,000, living in 8,500 sq km (the population of Iceland in a territory the size of Cyprus). Abkhazians share their

country with Armenians, Russians, Greeks, Georgians, Estonians, Turks, and others. The predominant religions are Christianity and Sunni Islam. Abkhazians have every right to be proud of their country's ancient history, which is full of brilliant victories and dramatic events.

Much of this fascinating history has been investigated by academics at the Abkhazian State University, who during a comparatively short period have produced a large number of research papers devoted to the history, culture, folklore, economics, etc. of the country. Many of their findings have become well-known both in the former Soviet Union and elsewhere further abroad. Important books include: 'Abkhazians - who are they?' (Prof. U. Voronov), 'History of Abkhazia' (Profs. O. Bgazhba & S. Lakoba), 'Abkhazia - Hell in Heaven' (Prof. A. Argun), 'Obezians' (Prof. A. Papaskiri), 'People made from armour' (Prof. E. Bebia), 'Annals of war' & 'Abkhazian proverbs' (Prof. O. Shamba).

The University authorities are planning future publications which will enable foreign readers to find out more about Abkhazia and its inhabitants, who call their country Apsny. In the Abkhazian language this means the country of the heart and soul.

Abkhazians form one of the most ancient indigenous ethnic groups in the Caucasus and are closely related to the North Caucasian peoples: Abazinians, Adygs, Kabardinians, Circassians and Ubykhs. Their language is included within the Abkhaz-Adyg group of Caucasian languages. The great expert in Abkhazian language K. Machavariani emphasises that it is very flexible and sonorous, and can express feelings of high spirit as well as the most tender emotions, and also authentic sounds of nature such as the gurgle of running water or the whistling of the wind. Following scientific

research, this language has been identified as one of the oldest in the world. The Abkhazian alphabet consists of 64 letters with only 6 vowels!

The first mention of Abkhazians was in Assyrian inscriptions from the twelfth century BC. The ancestors of Abkhazians were creators of a megalith culture in the 3rd millennium BC, and at the beginning of the 1st millennium BC they created Colchis-Koban metallurgical province.

The forefathers of Abkhazians heard their first Christian sermons from apostles Andrey Pervozvanny and Simon Cananit, and Christianity was adopted in 530 - 550 AD under Emperor Justinian the Great.

During the 8th -10th centuries the Abkhazian Kingdom existed, the first king of which was Leon II.

In the 13th - 15th centuries, Abkhazia was absorbed into the political and economic sphere of influence of Genoa, and San Sebastian (Sukhum) became an important trade centre within the region.

In the 16th - 18th centuries, the Abkhazian Princedom was under the protectorate of the Turkish Sultanate.

From the end of the 18th century, under the sovereignty of Keleshbey Chachba, the Abkhazian Princedom was again strengthened, and with assistance from the Russian fleet controlled the Black Sea coast from Anapa to Batum. However, in 1808 Keleshbey was killed.

In July 1810 the Russian navy disarmed local troops and seized Sukhum-Kale. Sovereign Prince Aslanbey Chachba had to leave his fortress. The Tsarist authorities installed their own protegee Seferbey Chachba on the throne.

In contrast with Georgia, Abkhazia did not completely lose its statehood at that time. From 1810 to 1864, whilst incorporated within Russia, the Princedom retained its

status of autonomy.

Over many centuries, Abkhazia survived despite a lot of wars and invasions, but as a result of Caucasian conflicts in 1866 and 1877 more than half of the population left their motherland and became exiles (makhadjirs) in Turkey.

Starting in the 1870s, many Kartvelians and Mengrelians flooded into Abkhazia from West Georgia. As a result, the ethno-demographic situation sharply altered: in 1886 Abkhazians formed 86% of the population, but only 55% by 1897.

Following the collapse of the Russian Empire Abkhazia entered the Union of Mountaineers of the Caucasus and the South-East Union, and in May 1918 at the Batumi international conference the formation of a Mountain Republic was announced, into which Abkhazia entered.

On 26th May 1918 the Democratic Republic of Georgia was declared, which in June of the same year, with military support from the German Empire, occupied the territory of Abkhazia. Widespread resentment by the population of this action encouraged the establishment of Soviet power, and the creation of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia on 4th March 1921. At the end of the same year, under pressure from Stalin, a 'Special Alliance Treaty' was concluded. From February 1922 to February 1931, SSR Abkhazia was called a 'treaty' republic. Then due to personal efforts by Stalin the Treaty SSR Abkhazia was transformed into an autonomous republic. This question was discussed in Tbilisi, which led to a 9-day national protest meeting of Abkhazian people (18 - 26 February 1931).

On 28th December 1937 the then Chairman of the Government of Abkhazia, N. Lakoba, was poisoned at a dinner party at L. Beria's house in Tbilisi. Terror and

repression started straight afterwards, leading to the complete elimination of the Abkhazian political and intellectual elite. Abkhazian schools were gradually closed, primordial Abkhazian toponyms were replaced by their Georgian equivalents, Abkhazian writing was forcibly transformed into a Georgian calligraphic basis, etc.

From 1937 to 1953 tens of thousands of Georgians were resettled in Abkhazia from Georgia. As a result, the Georgian population of Abkhazia went from 6% in 1886 to 46% in 1989. Periodically there were mass meetings and demonstrations demanding the exit of Abkhazia from the composition of Georgia (1957, 1964, 1967, 1978 and 1989).

On 23rd July 1989 the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia readopted the Constitution of 1925, and accepted a new coat of arms and national flag.

On 4th August 1992 Georgia, having been newly welcomed into the United Nations, unleashed a war against Abkhazia and then occupied a part of its territory, which was not completely liberated until 30th September 1993.

Abkhazia is now a presidential republic, and its first democratically elected president was V. Ardzinba. On both 3rd October 2004 and 12th January 2005 S. Bagapsh was elected to this position.

And now we come to the author of this book, and some comments about his work.

Michael Lackerbye (1901 - 1965) was an outstanding Abkhazian writer, who made a large contribution towards the development of the national literature and increased the importance and authority of it both in the USSR and abroad. Although trained as a lawyer, he soon realised that his true vocation was writing, and he first produced film scripts and also libretti for locally composed operas. His

stories and novels began to be printed in 1940 - 1950 and he became known to Russian and other foreign readers because of his two books 'Abkhazian Stories' and 'Alamis', which appeared in Moscow in 1957 and 1961 respectively, published by 'Soviet Writer'. 'Alamis' was translated into 30 languages around the world, and Michael Lackerbye became moderately well-known. This edition of 'Abkhazian Stories' is the first translation into English of that book.

The main source of the writer's inspiration always lay in folklore - proverbs, legends, ancient songs, fables and casual tales. That is why his novels and short stories reflect the wisdom, traditions and customs of the people, which are always based upon *alamis*. This is a very powerful word in the Abkhazian language. Its meanings include honesty, glory, courage, hospitality and so on. Shortly speaking, *alamis* is an unwritten code of morals, duty and respect, passed from generation to generation. The Abkhazian poet V. Ankuab wrote: 'Not one house in the world is built without a foundation. Similarly, each nation has its foundation, which reveals the essence of its national character. The foundation of Abkhazian behaviour is *alamis*. That is why M. Lackerbye named his book of stories and legends as 'Alamis'. We could proudly declare this book to be an encyclopaedia of national psychology.'

For example, according to Abkhazian customs young people shouldn't speak loudly or create a hubbub in the presence of their elders. A daughter-in-law shouldn't speak at all in the presence of her father-in-law. Today some people consider these customs old-fashioned, but the centuries-old traditions can also be approached from another angle. When a new young woman joins her husband's family, it could be considered that keeping silent prevents any possibility

of saying the wrong thing and thereby causing ill-feeling, embarrassment, argument, etc., or as the Abkhazian proverb puts it, 'It is better to keep your tongue behind your teeth'. This custom is humorously explored in the story 'Antitsa'.

The basic concepts of honour and dignified behaviour, central to *alamis*, are further illustrated in the first story in this collection, entitled 'The Visitor'. The old man Hanashv Tsugba, rather than the murderer or his victim, is the central character in this moving tale, and his unusual yet strangely heroic actions in protecting his son's killer have been admired and respected as the epitome of moral righteousness for centuries in Abkhazia. This was stressed by Professor S. Inal-Epa, who first mentioned that the father's behaviour in the story follows the rules of *alamis* exactly. These ancient traditions, passed down the generations, still play an important part in modern Abkhazian life.

In 'Alamis' a young woman is told by her doctor that she has a terminal illness, and so she commits suicide by jumping under a train. To avoid her naked body being revealed to anyone after her death, she puts on a man's trousers before ending her life. She was thinking of *alamis* even in her final moments.

Most of the stories are rather short, but have a serious content and make the reader think deeply about the plot, the ending of which is often most unexpected.

All the stories without exception were derived from the memories of old people, who were telling what they saw or went through themselves. Life is displayed in front of us as it was lived 50 - 80 years ago, and the customs and traditions which survived through generations, and can be considered as historical documents, were confirmed by living witnesses.

The writer Juma Akhuba remarks: 'He was a real master of story-telling. An orally-transmitted story is one which is very close to the source of the folklore so carefully preserved by our older generation.'

The writer Michael Lackerbye died before reaching the age of 65. He was still working hard on new stories, plays and articles about Abkhazian literature. He is precious to all Abkhazians irrespective of age, and is becoming a part of his motherland's culture, the breath of its people. Wise Abkhazians say: 'Everything alive will die, but memory never dies.' The fond memory which grateful Abkhazians have of their glorious son will also never die, and this book, which is aimed at making his work more readily available to English-speaking readers, is good evidence of that fact.

Academician Oleg Shamba

*This book is dedicated to
Teacher George Bzhanian*

THE VISITOR

Old Hanashv Tsugba was sitting under a plane tree in a courtyard of the patskha* and sewing shoes from half-tanned leather for his only son, a young man named Temir.

The dog began to bark. The old man raised his head and saw a young person unfamiliar to him, who had jumped over the fence before having reached the gate. It was clear that he was in a great hurry. Having seen the old man, he rushed to him and in broken Abkhazian began to beg the old man to hide him. His pronunciation showed that he was Circassian.

‘I’m being chased!’ he nervously explained. ‘Save me, hide me! If they catch me, they will kill me!’

‘Come into the house’ Hanashv answered quickly, and took his visitor into the patskha. He put a ladder against a wall and pointed to an attic.

‘Climb up, lad! Settle down in a corner on a pile of wool. Don’t worry, you’ll be quite safe here.’

‘May your old age be peaceful!’ murmured the visitor gratefully, as he hastily climbed into the attic.

The old man went out into the courtyard and, having made sure that nobody was there, returned to the patskha. Standing at the foot of the ladder, he said ‘Don’t be afraid, lad! I couldn’t see anyone. Probably nobody noticed that you ran here. But tell me – who is pursuing you, and why?’

‘I’ve killed a man. His friends have followed me to take revenge.’

‘What did you kill him for?’

‘He insulted me - he whipped my horse during a race!’

‘Who have you killed? What’s his name?’

‘I don’t know. This is the first time I’ve been to this village...’

At that moment the dog again began to bark very loudly, and both of them froze in fear.

‘Be very quiet! I’ll go and see’ whispered the old man, and went out to the courtyard.

In the distance someone could be vaguely seen coming over a hill, with a crowd of people following him. The old man shielded his eyes from the sun with his hand, and started to squint. The line of people coming nearer to his house was already clearly visible, moving very slowly.

‘I wonder if they’re after him, the murderer?’ thought the old man, and decided he would protect his visitor as much as he could.

But then some people, having arrived before the others, opened the gate and came into the courtyard. A crowd rushed in after them.

Then Hanashv saw that a heavy burden rolled in a burka* and supported from different directions was being carried by some of the crowd.

At the sight of the familiar burka the old man could hardly remember to breathe, as if his heart had been pierced with a dagger.

From the crowd an old man called Abidge Ashview, wrinkled with age and his friend and contemporary, came forward and said: ‘Be strong, Hanashv! You have been overwhelmed by grief today. But there is nothing in the world that won’t eventually diminish. Remember what you always taught us: the stronger a person’s character, the more that person can endure, especially in a time of grief like

today, when an unknown Circassian has killed your Temir!’

On hearing this, the old man’s legs gave way. He clutched at his heart and would probably have fallen if people had not supported him.

The crying and shouting of women began to be heard in the courtyard.

For two days the lifeless body of his son lay on an ottoman in the patskha.

And for those two days, under different pretexts the old man went up to the attic to carry meals to his Circassian guest. On the third day, having buried the dead young man, Temir’s friends came back to join Hanashv in the courtyard. Till late in the evening they sat with the old man.

‘We know’, said one of them, who was Temir’s best friend and most inseparable companion, ‘even all of us together can’t replace your son. But we will share your grief with you. Every day we will come to see you, as though Temir were still alive, and we will help you in every way.’

‘We give you our word,’ added another, ‘that we will take revenge on the murderer. The Circassian is hiding cleverly. He escaped from us in the woods, and, probably somewhere nearby, someone is skilfully sheltering him. But we will find him and we will kill him. Soon, very soon you will hear about it. Perhaps that will comfort you a little.’

Their words, spoken solemnly and resolutely, sounded loudly in the patskha. Temir’s friends then left. The inconsolable old man looked around to make sure there was no one nearby, then filled a travelling-bag with food, pulled the ladder to the attic, and called the Circassian.

‘Come down, my guest! Come down! There is nobody here. They have all left.’

And when the Circassian had descended, the old man

passed him the bag with a shivering hand.

‘Take this’ he said. ‘Here are meals for two days. Hurry home, lad! It’s quicker to reach the mountain ridge through the woods. The night is dark, nobody will see you.’

The visitor bowed very very low in front of the old man and kissed the edge of his burka. Then he straightened up and, not having said a word, left the patskha.

THE INAPPROPRIATE MOMENT

Anyone who has lived in mountains knows how quickly after each sunset it gets dark in the gorges between rocks, especially in mountain valleys thickly covered with trees, and how black the night is there.

One such night had fallen on Waadhara mountain valley. It was so dark that you couldn’t see a stick under your nose threatening to pierce out your eyes, as the Abkhazians say.

Twenty-year-old Alyas Guny left the woods and silently crept to Gedlach’s manor. He climbed through a fence, was noticed by nobody as he ran across the courtyard and, having groped at the featureless back wall of a patskha, hid in dense elder bushes surrounding it.

All this he had managed very successfully, and Alyas sighed at how simple it had all been - at last he had reached his goal! It was time for him to take his revenge on Gedlach. Two days and two nights had passed since Gedlach Kapsh had killed his brother Gudisa, and that murderer had still not been shot. Too long a time for such a dashing dzhigit* as Alyas! However, the body of his brother had not yet been buried, and still the crying and wailing of women was being carried up to the skies ...

It would be fitting to kill Gedlach before the body was lowered into a tomb. Otherwise how would Alyas be able to attend the funeral of his brother? With what expression on his face? Alyas blinked and could clearly imagine the full reproaches and drilling stares of his relatives, directed towards him.

With good reason a song had been written about Seyd Argune from the village of Aatsy, and with good reason it glorified him. Seyd's brother had been killed one night, and during the same night he had taken revenge. He had not allowed the murderer to live until sunrise. Yes, that was a successful revenge, and it was celebrated in a song with good reason.

But about him, Alyas, no songs would be written. Surely he had hunted enough for Gedlach all those days and nights? Yet he had not been found, there was no sign of him. It was as though he had evaporated. He was neither at home nor in the woods or the village. He was cunningly hiding, damn him! He knew that if he was seen, he would be in for it!

It was necessary, however, to finish everything as soon as possible. Otherwise, the Aatsy girls would defame him in their songs, and would disgrace his name forever... Suddenly voices were heard in the patskha. Alyas listened and was inexpressibly delighted: he recognized Gedlach's voice. Gedlach was at home!

But how to entice him into the courtyard? It was impossible to shoot him while he was in the patskha, as he might wound the wife or children. After all, that too threatened to shame him...

Alyas cautiously made a crack in the branches of a wall and, having moved his eye to that crack, began to peer intensely.

In the patskha the twilight reigned. Dim reflections flickering in the centre of the room covered a stool and a bench which were hardly distinguishable from black silhouettes. Voices had ceased. Probably, the family had finished supper and had settled down to sleep.

Alyas decided to wait till the morning before doing anything further.

A painfully long night was in store. Without closing his eyes, Alyas carefully listened to every noise created in the patskha and in the surrounding gloom. He tried not to stir: the slightest careless movement could have aroused the master's dogs.

It was late at night when Alyas's attention was drawn by a rustle inside the patskha. Almost simultaneously the darkness was cut through by a thin strip of light. Alyas peered through the crack in the wall. In front of him, Gedlach was walking in his underwear, holding a lighted candle in his hand, and searching for something. Then having found what he was looking for, he sat down on a bench near the hearth, stuck the wax candle in front of himself on the bench, and, after arranging everything most conveniently, began to cut tobacco leaves. Alyas could clearly see the face of his enemy.

'Destiny has placed him before me' thought Alyas.

He quickly pushed the gun barrel in the crack, cocked and began to take aim...

'What are you doing, you madman? Put out the light right away!' the scared voice of Gedlach's awakened wife reached him.

'Go back to sleep, don't be afraid!' Gedlach answered her, 'Nothing's happening!'

'An instant earlier, an instant later, it's all the same'

thought Alyas, and with curiosity he began to listen to the voices in the patskha.

‘The more you shine the light’ his wife said hurriedly, ‘the more you can be seen in front of it. After all, if Alyas is wandering somewhere around here, it will be the right moment for him’.

‘You are mistaken!’ Gedlach contradicted her, ‘This will be just the wrong moment.’

‘Why?’

‘Don’t you think I know what Alyas has already been doing for two days and nights, hunting me to take revenge for his brother? I also know that Alyas is a brave and courageous dzhigit.’

‘That’s right!’ shrieked his wife.

‘Wait. Listen to what I tell you,’ Gedlach continued, having turned towards her. ‘I also know that Alyas Guny is famous as a true man of honour. Such a person would not shoot an unarmed man in his underwear who had just left his bed. So, you see, it is a most inappropriate moment for Alyas.’

And Gedlach continued to cut his tobacco. Alyas pulled back the gun from the crack, silently lowered the cock and, having spat in anger, left his place at the patskha.

ARGUNE SADYK

It was a dark autumn night, and against the walls of a patskha the rain beat unremittingly. Suddenly the courtyard was filled with the furious barking of dogs, and above this a shout reached Jarnaz:

‘Hey, master!’

Jarnaz Ash hastened towards the visitor and, to his great pleasure, recognized an old bosom friend.

‘Is that you, Kuchita? I’m so pleased! Welcome! Come in, come in!’ fussed Jarnaz, ‘at last you’ve remembered me.’

He brought his friend into the house and introduced him to his very young wife.

‘Make our guest welcome!’ he told his wife. ‘We have been friends from childhood, and were brought up together by our teacher Argune Sadyk, who was respected by everybody.’

The woman began to make supper, and the friends, having made themselves comfortable, started to recollect their childhood, and the advice and commands of old Sadyk. It was pleasant for them to talk about the past.

‘And how is Sadyk now?’ asked Kuchita. ‘I haven’t seen him for a long time, must be at least eight years.’

‘You’ve badly neglected the old man’ said Jarnaz. ‘But he always asks about you, and is interested in you. I often go to see him.’

‘Well, you are nearer,’ answered Kuchita. ‘After all, I live so far from him! It’s seldom necessary for me to go to this place. Even now I’ve only come for an important issue.’

‘If it hadn’t been an important issue, would you also not have remembered me?’ Jarnaz reproached his friend. ‘Or are you only here for business? By the way, what’s happening about your marriage with Nazira?’

‘That’s a business as well, Jarnaz. Her parents at last gave their consent, and now she, would you believe it, has gone obstinate!’

‘Why? Did she change her mind, is that it?’

‘No, she didn’t. But she is demanding the almost impossible from me.’

‘What?’

‘Jarnaz, have you seen the black horse belonging to Habug Arysh?’

‘Well, of course. After all it is the best horse in our district.’

‘Yes, Jarnaz. It also happened that at someone’s commemoration, during a display of trick horseriding, Nazira saw that horse. She was told a lot about how wonderful it is! And since then Nazira has hammered into my head only one thing: she won’t marry me until the horse becomes mine.’

‘If you manage to get that horse,’ Jarnaz said sympathetically, ‘I’d like to see you riding him. But surely Habug will never part with him for anything!’

‘I know,’ agreed Kuchita. ‘You should’ve seen what I offered him! He wouldn’t take it. He said he wouldn’t sell for the whole world. He is so proud of that horse...’

‘And he is proud all right. In all my life I’ve never had feelings of envy, but in Habug’s case I have, believe me. Because the horse is really good! Obviously! Well, what have you decided?’ asked Jarnaz.

‘To rustle the horse!’ replied Kuchita with great determination.

‘Habug will lose his mind,’ said Jarnaz. ‘He will go looking everywhere and won’t calm down until he finds his treasure.’

‘He won’t find it at my place,’ Kuchita retorted. ‘I will hide it so carefully even the devil himself wouldn’t find it! In private, I will get the horse to prance in front of Nazira. And then I will change that horse so much that nobody will recognize it. I will brand it differently. I will cut off its magnificent mane.’

‘No, it’s not a completely impossible scheme,’ agreed Jarnaz. ‘Only it’s necessary to steal the horse first.’

‘That’s why I came here, Jarnaz,’ said Kuchita and, having drawn near to his friend, continued in the tone of a conspirator. ‘You’re one of Habug’s neighbours, so you probably know all the entrances and exits at his manor. Take me with you. I will do everything you say. I will risk my life for that horse, but I will never give up!’

Jarnaz stayed silent for a long time.

‘No, I should go without you,’ he decided. ‘In such a business the fewer people the better. Habug carefully protects the horse. His dogs are vicious, they won’t allow anybody into the courtyard.’

‘You know best, Jarnaz. I’ll obey you in everything.’

Supper was ready by that time, and the friends sat down at the table. They ate and drank heartily, proposing toasts one after another for the young mistress Asya, for the stubborn Nazira, for their teacher old man Sadyk, for the success of their forthcoming business. After supper Jarnaz addressed his wife:

‘Make the bed, Asya! Look after our precious guest well. I’m leaving on an urgent matter and I’ll try to return by the morning. And you,’ he said to the visitor, ‘lie down and have a quiet rest.’

Jarnaz wrapped himself tightly in a burka, left the patkha, and silently disappeared into the darkness.

Jarnaz had a very difficult task in front of him! We are not going to tell you now all he had to do in bad weather not to be noticed in the village where Habug Arysh lived, nor how he deceived the dogs and got into the courtyard and stable. We will only mention that if Jarnaz undertook something, he always tried to do things properly from start

to finish. This was his nature. He was a courageous, skilful and successful dzhigit.

It was dawn when Jarnaz came back home. But when he opened the door and stepped into the patskha he was struck by an unexpected sight: lying in bed, Kuchita was snoring loudly, and near a window timid Asya was curled up in the corner crying quietly. Her long hair was in disarray, her clothes were torn apart, her bare shoulders convulsively shuddered, and tears were running down her cheeks.

Jarnaz's heart clenched painfully: he understood everything that had happened during that long heavy night. But he didn't say a word. He went over to the bed and vigorously pushed the visitor's shoulder. Kuchita opened his eyes and froze in terror.

'Get up, Kuchita!' Jarnaz said in a hostile voice.

Kuchita jumped up and hastily started to put his clothes on. In the room there were three people and how much each of them could have said! But they remained silent.

Jarnaz handed a whip to his visitor.

'Take it,' he ordered coldly, 'Arysh's saddled horse waits for you in the stable next to your own.'

Tormented with shame, Kuchita took the whip and left the patskha. When he had reached the courtyard, Jarnaz unexpectedly shouted:

'Wait, Kuchita!' Jarnaz approached him closely. 'I'll do nothing to you - you are my guest. I only want to ask you one thing: go to our old teacher Argune Sadyk and tell him everything that has happened tonight. That's the only thing I ask of you. Will you do it?'

'I will,' Kuchita answered quietly, and left the patskha.

When he got back home, Kuchita hid the horse in a reliable place and left again: he was going to old Argune

Sadyk.

...The teacher attentively listened to his former pupil. A pipe in his hand had gone out a long time ago. He listened and thought.

'Yes,' he said at last. 'Jarnaz did the right thing sending you to me, to me who brought you up. That you were capable of such a mean, disgraceful act is not only your fault. First and foremost, I'm guilty. Apparently I didn't manage to bring you up to be a noble person!'

Kuchita stood with his head hung low. His legs would hardly support him.

'Yes, Jarnaz was right to send you to me!' repeated the old man and his weak voice became stronger.

'It is me, only me, who is guilty, and I must be held responsible for your mean act!'

Then, taking out a pistol, Argune Sadyk resolutely put the barrel to his temple.

The young man rushed to his teacher, but it was already too late...

THE FATHER

Tarkil Shaab had only one son, named Ardashin. Shaab was an admirable person, clever, kind and fair. He was respected by everybody. But the son did not take after his father.

Having lost his mother early, Ardashin had been brought up by relatives. This numerous and aggressive clan* of Tarkils lived not far from present-day Novy Afon, in a small mountain village. Shaab's son was raised there until he was twenty years old. He often went to see his father, who

adored his son madly. Spoiled by him, and by his relatives, Ardashin had never been refused anything. But too many caresses and too much endless love will always lead to a lot of trouble.

Once a group of horsemen from the nearby village of Bzyb were passing Shaab's house, which was located by the sea in a village called Psyrtskha. They were coming back from a wedding, so everyone was tipsy and singing raucous songs. Any inconvenience caused to the villagers was being ignored.

Their behaviour angered Ardashin, who saw in this some disrespect to his father's house. Old Shaab Tarkil wasn't at home, as he had gone to see his relatives for a while in Samurzakan. However, the young man became furious and immediately ran out into the road in front of the horsemen and ordered them to shut up. But they didn't pay any attention and continued singing. So Ardashin snatched out a pistol and, without thinking for long, shot into the group of dzhigits. The bullet, fortunately, didn't hit anybody. Instead, it entered the head of one of the horses, the horse fell down to the ground, and an angry horseman fired back a shot which killed Ardashin on the spot.

The news about Tarkil Shaab's son's murder quickly spread around. All the people from Tarkil's clan rose to their feet in anger. Bzyb people were riding as quickly as possible to escape, but they were overtaken, disarmed and driven back to Psyrtskha. There they were locked in a cellar, and a messenger then rode to Samurzakan to give Shaab the sad news.

Ardashin's murderer belonged to the Tsvizhba clan, which was numerous and strong too. All Tsvizhbas capable of carrying a weapon rose to protect their relative. Armed

and on horseback, they rode to Psyrtskha.

The two clans involved collected on opposite sides of the river, seemingly at war against each other. On the right bank the Tsvizhbas, on the left the Tarkils. A bloody fight was about to begin.

But Shaab, on his way back, put paid to their plans. He asked what exactly had happened. Then, after a lot of thought the old man invited ten representatives from each clan into his courtyard. When all had arrived, Shaab ordered them to untie the Bzyb prisoners and to bring them to him, together with the murderer. Everyone was waiting tensely to hear what Tarkil Shaab would say.

And then he started talking.

'My beloved son Ardashin was responsible for his own death,' said the old man unexpectedly, 'but we are no less guilty, my dear relatives. We brought Ardashin up badly. With his character he wasn't likely to live long.' It was difficult for the Tsvizhbas to remain calm.

Shaab kept silent, and then turned to the murderer:

'Young Tsvizhba man, what's your name?'

'Ardashin' he said, in a very quiet voice.

'Ardashin?' the astonished old man asked. 'I will adopt you, Ardashin. I had my own Ardashin and he will appear again. Would you like to replace my lost son?'

'I'm an orphan!' exclaimed the young man as he rushed to Shaab. 'My father was killed when I was still a baby. I do not remember him. I promise to love you like my own father! With love and respect for you I will pay for the huge mistake I've made.'

And the young man began to kiss the old man's hands.

Then Shaab hugged him, shedding a few tears for perhaps the first time in his long life.

FUZZ*

‘No, I won’t go to see them anymore. It’ll end badly,’ Shaudid Hib repeated to himself for the hundredth time as he was coming back home from Mancha Harazia.

But another thought persisted in his mind despite himself:

‘You will go, you will go for certain. After all, you can’t not go, you haven’t got enough strength to resist - Shazina looks just so beautiful and seductive.’

Two emotions struggled within him: uncontrollable passion growing day by day for Shazina and a feeling of duty to her husband Mancha. Mancha was always so sincere and so trusting towards him. But Shazina’s charms gave no rest to Shaudid, and his passion flared with such force that he almost lost control of himself.

It was late when Shaudid approached his house. Everybody was sleeping. Without lighting a candle, to avoid waking anyone, he silently undressed and whisked himself quickly to bed. He could not fall asleep for a long time, as Shazina’s image continued to haunt him, and passion stormed in his heart.

‘What will happen?’ he asked himself, and gloomy thoughts one after another crowded into his overheated mind. He thought, decided and thought again. Before dawn, having reached a final decision, he at last fell into a troubled sleep.

Shazina and Mancha didn’t see him for some days.

They were surprised by his absence, as previously Shaudid had visited them every day under some pretext or another. At last he appeared.

After the usual greetings Shaudid said:

‘Maf Arstaa, a shepherd from Chagyam, told me that on Bagad Rock a huge bear is wandering, as big as a buffalo. I’ve decided to hunt it. Won’t you go with me?’ he asked Mancha.

‘With pleasure,’ was the reply. ‘For a long time I’ve dreamt of crossing daggers with such a notable visitor.’ Then he cheerfully promised Shazina ‘If I meet it, in the mornings you will be able to lower your feet from the bed and walk on a soft and fluffy bearskin. Can you imagine, it will cover all the floor in your room!’

‘Is that true?’ Shazina smiled craftily, then looked in alarm at her husband.

‘And if you won’t be able to cope with a bear?’

‘Don’t worry! Near Bagad Rock there is a bridge across a gorge where it will be very convenient to intercept an animal,’ Mancha calmed his wife. ‘Just get things ready for me as quick as you can! After all it will take us at least two days, won’t it?’ he asked Shaudid.

‘Yes, it certainly will.’

Shazina quickly collected everything necessary and saw the hunters off, having wished them every success in their venture.

It was midday when the friends passed Bagad bridge and reached the foothills. They did not halt there, there was no need for them to rest, and besides they both wanted to meet the bear as soon as possible, before it left for the mountains. So they began climbing.

‘It probably came here from Amtkyal,’ said Mancha. ‘Wild bears are found there.’

‘It’s probably from Zhurga,’ replied Shaudid. It took the hunters a long time to climb a steep slope.

‘These places are familiar to me,’ remarked Mancha.

‘I’ve often come here whilst hunting. You know, poplar seeds covered with hairy fuzz fly here from the valleys.’ He pointed at clouds of white fuzz shrouding a rock.

‘Poplars are blossoming in the valley below. Sometimes the fuzz floating here is so thick it prevents you from seeing any quarry.’

At last the friends reached a small stone platform. They leant their guns against a rock and sat down to have a rest. Around them rose wild steep slopes, here and there covered in moss and woodland. Far below in the valley poplars could be seen, and white clouds of fuzz ascended to the sky. At the foot of the gorge bubbled the Kodor river, with the noise of its rough waters echoing all around.

Mancha lay down and stretched his arms behind him.

‘Don’t reach out too far,’ Shaudid warned him with pretended concern. ‘You won’t be able to keep yourself from falling over the edge of the cliff. You could soon be in real danger, couldn’t you?’

But he thought to himself ‘and then it’ll all be much easier for me.’

‘Nonsense!’ answered Mancha light-heartedly. ‘I remember on the absolutely steep and naked cliff Ertsaha I tired out a chamois and took it alive. If I didn’t fall down that time, I certainly won’t now. This cliff is like a flat field in comparison with Ertsaha,’ he laughed.

‘Misfortune can appear even in a lump of dough,’ said Shaudid, remembering the Abkhazian proverb.

‘Here there will be no misfortune,’ Mancha answered calmly.

But misfortune nevertheless happened.

Late at night Shaudid brought Mancha’s wife Shazina the terrible news of her husband’s death. All the village

gathered upon hearing her wailing in the agony of grief.

Shaudid was sitting next to Shazina and mournfully telling the people: ‘He was following a chamois in the mountains. But before I arrived he’d fallen over a cliff and into a gorge.’

People went to the mountains and searched all around, but didn’t find Mancha’s body. They decided that he fell into a narrow crack between rocks in a ravine.

For a whole year Shazina grieved for her husband, and during that whole year Shaudid often went to see her. He was so devoted to his friend’s memory! He was so kind, so generous, he brought endless presents to the unfortunate widow and tactfully showed her so much attention!

Shaudid managed to get her to like him. Gradually, after careful consideration he prepared his ground - and the day came when Shaudid declared his love to Shazina and asked her to marry him.

Shazina didn’t make her decision immediately. Devoted to her husband’s memory, she hesitated for a long time. But having considered advice from her relatives and friends she eventually agreed. A month later Shaudid brought into his house the woman he had loved for so many years.

Shaudid was an immensely tender and attentive husband, and Shazina became attached to him.

A year passed.

One day Shaudid fell asleep on the verandah. Shazina was sitting nearby watching him. Shaudid was sleeping restlessly, then muttered something and suddenly woke up.

In the air a lot of white fuzz from the poplars blossoming nearby was swirling around.

‘Lots of fuzz!’ said Shaudid, anxiously looking up.

‘Yes,’ echoed Shazina, having lifted her eyes to the sky.

‘Today for some reason there are a lot more of them than usual,’ repeated Shaudid even more anxiously.

‘Yes, a lot,’ said Shazina having smiled at him. ‘You even spoke about it in your dream. I was listening but could understand nothing, except for the word ‘fuzz’. You repeated it several times. Did you see fuzz in your dream?’

The woman stroked his forehead, as if wishing to banish a vision. Shaudid drew her to himself and kissed her...

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I dreamt about a fuzz.’

‘A fuzz? Only one?’

‘Only one,’ he answered and closed his eyes. ‘But big and very frightening.’

‘Why was it frightening?’ Shazina asked in surprise, gently stroking his face.

‘Don’t ask me, dear.’

‘Why not?’

‘You musn’t. This dream, or more correctly the fuzz, gave me unpleasant memories.’

‘Then by all means you should tell me everything,’ insisted Shazina.

‘But you will stop loving me, won’t you?’

‘I can stop loving you only for the present. For the past I can’t.’

‘But will you understand? Will you forgive me?’

‘I’ll forgive you. After all, it happened earlier, didn’t it? Before I became yours.’

‘Of course it was earlier. Besides, I did it,’ - Shaudid lowered his voice - ‘only because of my love for you.’

‘Even more! Please tell me!’

Shaudid closed his eyes.

‘I fell in love with you a long time ago,’ he said quietly. ‘Do you remember, Shazina, how often I visited you? I

went mad with passion for you. I was jealous and I suffered, seeing Mancha caressing you and you answering him... And then the time came when I realised that I couldn’t live without you, that if you didn’t become mine, I would go mad. And then I understood all the truth of the national saying ‘One never finds happiness till the other one dies.’ And I decided...’

He stopped, being frightened of his own words.

‘You decided? What?’ shrieked Shazina. ‘What happened then?’

Shaudid remained silent for a long time.

‘That night I told a lie,’ - he could hardly say this - ‘Mancha didn’t die by accident. We really climbed up the Bagad cliff and, feeling tired, we sat down to have a rest on a flat rock. Mancha was stretched out on his back. I used...’

Shazina shuddered. She took away her hands embracing her husband, and put them to her head.

‘And above the cliff, I remember it as if it were yesterday,’ Shaudid continued, ‘fuzz was flying... above the cliff and above us... ‘What did you kill me for?’ he asked, dying. ‘What wrong did I do to you?’ he said and looked into my eyes. I couldn’t bear his gaze and turned away. ‘I understand,’ he said, ‘I guessed... I mean, I wasn’t mistaken... You love Shazina... I knew, I saw it ... in your eyes... When you were coming to see us and you looked at Shazina... Now you have killed me... You think nobody will ever find out, don’t you? No, the fuzz, this fuzz will tell everything about me! You will never hide a crime like this, especially such a mean one... As the saying goes, ‘If people do not say anything, the leaves will.’ I will die, but you will see,’ - here the last spasms passed through his body, - ‘the fuzz will tell on you...’ He died and I pushed him over the

cliff and into the gorge.’

Shaudid straightened up and took a deep breath, as he had felt himself choking. Then he said:

‘Now I’ve had a dream that we were sitting together in the shade of a big poplar... And fuzz all around us... We were looking at them and admiring them... Suddenly one fuzz began to grow, flew up to us, and Mancha’s face looked out from it. In his big staring eyes I read ‘What did you kill me for? If people do not say anything, the fuzz will.’ And then the fuzz flew away, became small, and mixed up with the rest. I followed it with my eyes, but couldn’t distinguish it from the others and called out ‘Fuzz, Fuzz!’

Without lifting her head, Shazina sat silently.

‘After all, I did it because of my love for you... Passion dulled my mind. Only in such a way could I win your heart. Will you forgive me, Shazina?’ asked Shaudid in despair. He stretched his hands towards her, trying to hug her. But Shazina pushed him away.

‘Nobody could be forgiven for such a mean act!’ She stood up and went into the patskha.

Shaudid leant back on some pillows.

‘Stand up!’ shouted Shazina as she appeared on the doorstep with a gun.

‘Get what you deserve! I’m taking revenge for Mancha!’

BROTHERS

That day when it all happened, it had been pouring since morning. The mountains were shrouded by clouds until the evening, when they thinned out to nothing.

After such rain, mountains become so clearly visible

that it seems as if they are near enough to touch. The air is as pure and transparent as a blue diamond. At such times in the mountains, each animal rejoices in life, and chamois leave their secret hiding places in tight crevices and move to open glades and rocks to look down into the valleys. Hunters know about this and do not waste any time.

The brothers Kyazim and Sharakh were passionate hunters. The porch of their house hadn’t even had time to dry out before they left with their guns across their shoulders.

‘Don’t go far, boys, it will be evening soon!’ their mother shouted from a window.

But how does any hunter know whether he will be gone for a long time, and also which route he will use to come back home?

‘We will bring you the fattest chamois, mum, only wish us good luck!’ answered the younger brother, Sharakh, disappearing around the corner.

‘Good luck be with you, my boys!’ she called to her sons, but they were too far away to hear her.

Straight through the woods, the brothers went to the rocky mountain Konakchir, the highest and steepest of all the mountains in Abkhazia. There is a lot of game there, but only a very good walker, a natural mountaineer, can climb up its steep slopes.

The brothers quickly reached the foot of the mountain and ignoring long, sloping detours, started to climb along a narrow goat track. Often the track broke where there was a naked steep rock, and they had to edge forward or to jump from ledge to ledge. Soon the hunters reached those places which are often touched by clouds but seldom by the foot of any person.

Wild slopes rose above them, and the sides of precipices

abruptly fell. The brothers clambered along projections over the gorge, and if somebody occasionally pushed a stone, the noise faded below, without reaching their ears.

At last they came to a small stone platform created after a landslide. A very narrow footpath led from there along a steep rock to a woody slope - a favourite place for chamois.

‘The rock is clean,’ said Sharakh, looking straight ahead. ‘I’m sure that chamois haven’t come here yet.’

‘You are right,’ answered Kyazim. ‘They will come, we’ve outstripped them.’

‘They will appear from the woods,’ said Sharakh and he looked upwards.

But ahead, except for the elegant mountain fir trees seeming dark blue from a distance, nothing was visible. Sharakh lifted his eyes – above the path, here and there among shallow cracks in the cliff, tiny ledges were noticeable. He took a glance downwards - there, far below, a bluish mist lay and the Kodor mountain stream foamed furiously, washing the cliffs. The platform hung over a deep precipice.

‘At this place Maph Shoa died,’ Sharakh remembered. ‘He climbed along this footpath following chamois and fell over the cliff. Nothing was found, not even his bones.’

The brothers bent over a precipice. The wind tore their hoods and burkas.

‘Keep quiet!’ said Kyazim as he pricked up his ears. Through the whistling of the wind and the rustling of lizards, a light footfall reached him. He put his ear to the ground.

‘They are approaching!’ he whispered, pointing towards the woods.

The hunters hid behind the nearest rock. Some moments of eager anticipation passed. Every hunter knows this

feeling! Your blood boils, but your mind prevents any shaking of your hand. The calmer you remain, the greater the probability of success... The light footfall of the goats’ hooves was by then very close, and suddenly five chamois, each one more beautiful than the last, ran out onto a ledge. Brown, with a white line along the back, they were distinctly visible against the clear sky.

The chamois crowded on the brink of the ledge.

Sharakh, who lay closer to them, could see very clearly as one of the chamois turned to him sideways, as if testing his endurance. But he remembered the immutable law of hunting – the first shot belongs to the senior hunter.

Kyazim’s first shot was aimed at the chamois which Sharakh had planned for himself. The chamois jumped up and disappeared over the edge of the precipice. Sharakh immediately fired a shot and hit another, but there wasn’t time to aim properly – frightened by Kyazim’s shot, the other three animals ran back towards the woods. Therefore Sharakh’s shot was unsuccessful, as well as that of his older brother. The second chamois ran to the edge and also disappeared. Immediately Sharakh bent over the edge and could see how both chamois, somersaulting in the air and hitting ledges on the cliff, were falling downwards. They quickly decreased in size and disappeared into the mountain stream of the Kodor, over which shreds of an evening fog were already gathering.

Sharakh looked back. Kyazim was chasing after the escaping chamois along ledges towards the woods. Having run less than half the way, the animals rushed up a steep slope, clinging to it as only mountain goats are able to do. Kyazim did not lag behind, and Sharakh was ready to believe that his brother would tire out one of the chamois. It

separated from the others and rushed about from one steep crack to another, trying to get rid of its persecutor. Sharakh watched them with increasing excitement, but suddenly he noticed that visibility was sharply worsening and the mountain night was approaching rapidly.

‘Kyazim, come back!’ he shouted.

His brother continued to clamber after the chamois.

‘Come back, Kyazim!’ Sharakh shouted again. ‘It’s time to go down!’

No answer followed. But Sharakh could still hear his brother’s voice:

‘That damned chamois has disappeared like a devil, into a crevasse.’

The voice reached him from afar, and Sharakh could hardly make it out.

His brother’s dark form was hardly visible in the approaching twilight. And then he disappeared from view as the rising fog quickly shrouded the mountain in an impenetrable blanket.

‘Do not rush, Kyazim!’ shouted Sharakh, ‘wait till the fog lifts. Don’t stumble in the darkness.’

Cautiously he made his way along the ledge to the place where he had last seen his brother. Small stones from time to time tumbled from above, and he stopped. He guessed that Kyazim, groping his way, was inching downwards. Soon the stones stopped falling... The fog began to lift and stars appeared overhead. But Sharakh still couldn’t distinguish anything - the mountain night surrounded him.

‘Kyazim, Kyazim! Can you see the ledge?’ shouted Sharakh, leaning against a rock.

‘I can see nothing...’ came a faint voice from above.

‘How will you get down now?’

There was no answer.

‘How will you get down?’ Sharakh repeated even more loudly.

Even fainter was the reply he heard from above this time: ‘I don’t know.’

Sharakh’s heart froze in fear for his brother. ‘How well are you holding on up there?’ he shouted, and his voice trembled.

Again there was a long silence. Sharakh thought that his words had been carried away by the wind. But then Kyazim’s voice came down from above: ‘I’m on a small ledge... there’s only room for one foot... the other one’s in the air...’ These words came slowly yet abruptly. It seemed the words were separated one from another by a bottomless precipice.

‘What about your hands?’ shouted Sharakh. ‘Are they still strong enough?’

‘I am holding on by the fingers of one hand...’

Just then Sharakh thought he could feel the faltering breath of his brother and know the strain he was under.

‘Kyazim!’ he shouted anxiously, ‘will you manage to hold on till the morning?’

‘I don’t know... whether I’ll have enough strength...’

‘You must use all the strength you can, otherwise...’ Sharakh had not finished when he faintly heard ‘I’ll try, sing me a song... my favourite...’

Sharakh understood his brother immediately. Kyazim wanted, at a time when his life was hanging by a thread, the song about the glorious hunter Ozbakue who was always accompanied by good luck. But eventually he shot a very big 16-horned deer, which sliding from the cliff fell on Ozbakue, who was carried away with the deer over a precipice.

In the excitement of hunting Ozbakue hadn't had any time at all to think of death. Kyazim wanted this song because it could probably help him to strengthen his courage. Sharakh started singing and soon heard his brother echoing him from above.

When the brothers sang, a night bird which could see in the dark flew around the mountain. Having heard the hunters' voices, it froze for an instant and could see everything: at a deadly height over a precipice two people were nestled on the cliff. One was standing on a narrow ledge, whilst the other was hanging over him, clutching a slippery stone. Both were singing – the younger one looking up with a worried expression, the elder one having nestled his cheek to a rock, as if caressing it. The early morning wind was playing with their hoods as well as with the bottoms of their burkas and was carrying their song far away.

Sharakh sang for a long time, until he noticed Kyazim had stopped. After that Sharakh started singing a song of heroes.

Once again Kyazim joined in, but stopped even earlier than before. Sharakh then understood that his brother was getting very weary, his heart was telling him to rest, and now - worst of all - when he shouted to ask if Kyazim still wanted him to sing a song, he did not hear any answer.

Sharakh waited, listening, for ages. At last he heard a weak voice groaning from above:

'Sharakh! Sharakh! If I die, look after our mother... She is old... You will be her only support...'

'Don't surrender, Kyazim!' his younger brother interrupted. 'You must be strong and hold on till dawn. Then I'll cut off a branch from a grapevine and lower it to you from above.'

'Yes, if I last that long. My fingers have already gone numb, and I haven't got the strength to change my feet over.'

'Hold on somehow! The morning star has appeared! Take heart, Kyazim!'

At that time the night bird flew around the mountain for a second time. The flight of this bird is silent, and it always appears when death threatens, warning all living things. The first time it flew past, it had shouted a warning to the brothers, but then they had been singing and had not heard anything. Now they could hear a final caution in the voice of the bird.

However, Sharakh couldn't think about a night bird for long... Kyazim's voice reached him again, and this time it sounded like a cry of agony.

'Everything is over, Sharakh! I can't go on any more... I've been holding on with two fingers, and all my efforts have been useless... Why should I keep clinging on to a life I shan't see any more?'

Who can explain what then happened to Sharakh? They say that anyone else's soul is shrouded in a darkness in which nothing can be read, not even the soul of a brother.

Sharakh replied in a resounding voice, and the sense of his words was most unexpected, as though they had come from another person. 'Have I heard correctly?' he shouted. 'The game's over, and you're going to fall? Is that right? Well, at last! I'm so glad!'

The wind had dropped, and Kyazim could even hear the sound of Sharakh's dancing feet.

'That means you'll be destroyed and lost, like Ozbakue, and even your bones won't be found? That's good, I've waited a long time to be so happy!'

Sharakh spoke so loudly, and with such jumbled words,

that Kyazim could hardly shout strongly enough to be heard.

‘Hey, wait, what are you prattling on about? Have you gone mad? What are you happy about?’

‘What am I happy about? Your destruction! I’m rejoicing because it’ll bring me great happiness! I’ve been waiting for it, not daring to hope, whilst encouraging you. But now, when you say you have no hope of survival, I no longer need to hide my happiness. You will be lost, and I’ll get Habiba! Yes, she’ll be mine, Kyazim, mine!’

‘What?!’ roared Kyazim. ‘Say that again, perhaps I misheard you...’

‘No, you heard me all right. Your bride Habiba will be my wife. You stood between us, and stopped us being together. Because you are my older brother, I had to hide my misery. But now my hopes have at last come true...’

‘Shut up!’ interrupted Kyazim ‘you’re talking nonsense! I can see you’ve lost your mind through fear...’

The brothers argued until dawn. The fog cleared, so all the mountain ledges and tracks on the grey rock could be seen more clearly. And then Kyazim heard a voice above him: ‘Hold this, Kyazim!’

He raised his eyes and saw Sharakh, who lowered him a grapevine which had its other end tied to a big stone.

Kyazim pushed the vine aside and began to look for a way to get down, but could not find one.

‘Hold this, Kyazim’ repeated Sharakh.

For a second time the elder brother pushed the vine away, and only when Sharakh had offered it for a third time did Kyazim grasp it and reach safety on a mountain track.

The brothers were then face to face.

‘Kyazim, I think you understood me properly’ said Sharakh. ‘I saw that you were weakening, and remembered

a proverb old Adzin Hajarat always says, so I decided to anger you...’

But Kyazim didn’t understand his brother.

‘Unscrupulous devil!’ he cried, ‘Shut up! I don’t want to listen to you!’

‘Very well, I’ll be silent’ said Sharakh reluctantly, and he stopped talking.

Kyazim began to go downwards along a footpath. Sharakh followed him step for step as a younger brother should do. Kyazim stopped and took off a boot to shake stones out from it. Sharakh overtook him and could already see their family home with smoke rising from the chimney, and the big plane tree under which he and Kyazim had once played.

The first rays of the sun struck his face, and with a smile he turned round to his brother.

Noticing the smile, Kyazim remembered the previous night. He was overcome with anger, and went for his rifle... When the smoke had cleared, he could see Sharakh clutching his chest as he fell over a precipice.

‘All deceit’ thought Kyazim as he went home. ‘Habiba’s promises were only deceit. I had a brother, and now I don’t. And I could easily have died. Such is life.’

He stopped in confusion at his home, as though it belonged to someone else.

‘My boy, Kyazim, why are you standing there and not coming into the house?’ his old mother asked.

Kyazim trembled and entered into the house with a heavy step.

‘Where’s Sharakh? Hasn’t he been with you?’ asked his mother, starting to worry.

Kyazim stayed silent. His mother began to walk around

him, and her every word tormented his darkened heart.

‘Has he been hurt? Has he fallen over a cliff? Tell me!’

‘He was atrocious, and I did to him what one does to all such people.’

His old mother collapsed onto a bench under a plane tree and scratched her face until she drew blood.

Neighbours ran into the courtyard, together with Habiba. Kyazim told them everything that had happened.

‘I don’t know why Sharakh told you all that’ said Habiba, ‘but I can see now that you think badly of me. Our wedding won’t take place!’ – and she left.

Mother choked with anger:

‘You are atrocious yourself! You are a brother-killer! Go away!’ Her eyes then grew dim, and she fell weeping.

Kyazim saw the old man Adzin Hajarat amongst the neighbours. He suddenly remembered Sharakh’s last words, and he thought: ‘Why did my brother mention the name of this old man?’

As if in reply to his question Adzin Hajarat stepped forward and said: ‘Poor woman! A great misfortune has overtaken you.’ And addressing everyone, he repeated a proverb he often used:

‘From great grief a person loses power, but from great anger his power doubles.’

On hearing these words, it seemed as if something started to burn in Kyazim’s head. Only then did he understand the real and terrible truth. He stood up and plodded out of the courtyard. Nobody followed him.

He left for the mountains, and returned to the place where he had killed Sharakh.

Shepherds were grazing sheep nearby. They heard a shot, and something fell heavily over the precipice. They

approached and saw Kyazim’s dead body below. From the barrel of his rifle, smoke was still escaping.

DEAR GUESTS

‘You so often go to see your friends in Abzhuv, and stay for a while with them and have a good time... Why won’t you invite them to our place, in Waadhara? After all, they seem like decent lads, and if the distance here is not a hindrance to them...’

Thus spoke old Hajarat to his only son Daur.

‘You are right, father,’ answered his son. ‘All of them are good young men, and my dear friends. And most of all I like Machikh from the village of Tquarchal. As soon as I appear in that village he sticks with me all the time. He takes me to his place and doesn’t let me go home for ages. But how can I invite them here? I’m worried, father, in case I’ll be embarrassed in front of them. Will we manage to make them feel as welcome as they, in particular Machikh, make me feel?’

‘Don’t worry, lad’ old Hajarat calmed his son. ‘While I’m still alive you will never be ashamed. We will keep back nothing from your friends. We will do everything in our power not to offend them!’

‘They’ve promised to come, father! They will arrive as soon as they can. They are my best friends and I can’t wait!’

‘Good, good, lad! As soon as they arrive, we will bid them welcome!’

But Daur never saw his friends arrive. During a heated argument at a wedding he was killed.

Old Hajarat’s courtyard was soon full of the sounds of

crying and sad lamentations, but by nightfall all had ceased.

Then a noisy group of dzhigits approached the gate.

‘Is the host at home?’

‘Where are you, Daur?’

‘Come and meet your guests!’

But how could Daur rise from his deathbed?!

‘Why have you gone to sleep so early? In that case we’ll come another time!’ cheerful voices rattled in eager rivalry.

Hajarat’s neighbours, who had remained with him that night to share in the old man’s grief, did not know what to answer. One of the horsemen opened the gate slightly, and all the cheerful company rode into the courtyard.

Old Hajarat came towards the horsemen. Breaking mourning customs, he welcomed his visitors cheerfully.

‘Come in, dear guests!’ he said hospitably, ‘welcome! Daur isn’t here, but I am. Come into the house!’

‘And where’s Daur?’

‘Has he left?’

‘Will he return today?’

‘Come into the house!’ repeated old Hajarat. ‘You’ve come a long way, so you’re honoured and welcome guests. Tomorrow morning you will see my son. But for now, feast with me! As Daur’s father, I’m sure I’ll be able to honour his friends with dignity. What are you looking at?’ - he turned to the people who were spending the night with him in the house - ‘welcome my guests, take their lashes from them, take their horses to the stable... Here, here,’ said Hajarat, inviting the visitors into the house.

All night long Daur’s friends feasted on an abundance of good food and wine, laughed, and sang cheerful songs. And all night long old Hajarat talked with Daur’s best friend Machikh.

‘Daur told us that his father is a very good dancer. Will you dance for us?’ they asked Hajarat.

‘No, my friends,’ he answered, ‘my feet do not dance any more, I’m getting old...’

Early in the morning the visitors at last went to bed. They slept a long time. The sun had already risen when loud complaints and female crying were again heard from the courtyard and house.

‘What’s happened?’ asked the scared young men when they woke up.

‘I have done just what my boy Daur wanted,’ the old man told them. ‘He is no longer with us, but he had been waiting for you a long time and he wanted to meet his friends properly.’

TWO DOORS

‘I haven’t seen Mshvaga for more than seven years’ thought Shakhan Kupalba, as he approached the house of his childhood friend, ‘more than seven years! I imagine this will be quite some meeting!’

Absorbed by these thoughts, he arrived at the gate and looked to see whether the owner was around...

A cheerful picture met his view: a beautiful house standing on high columns, a spacious, grass-covered courtyard in which different poultry - turkeys, hens and geese - pattered about, and very young calves wandered. Behind the house there was a shed full of ears of corn. Nearby was a big orchard. Everything said that Mshvaga had a very successful farm.

‘Mshvaga was always accurate and hardworking’

thought Shakhan.

In the courtyard dogs began to bark furiously. On the verandah appeared a young woman, and without going down, she started to shout at the dogs.

‘Is Mshvaga at home?’ Shakhan called out, and not receiving an answer he rode into the courtyard. ‘Is Mshvaga at home?’ he repeated.

‘No!’ the woman answered abruptly, still standing on the verandah.

Shakhan slowly approached a hitching post and, having dismounted, tied his horse. He walked towards the house, sure that the woman, to show hospitality, would come down from the verandah to meet him halfway, but, to his surprise, she didn’t move at all. Then Shakhan turned and though the dogs continued to bark even more furiously, he approached a huge shady plane tree and took a seat on a bench fitted to the tree trunk.

The woman grudgingly went down from the verandah and, driving the dogs away, came to the visitor.

‘Good afternoon,’ said Shakhan. ‘Where’s Mshvaga?’

‘Who knows,’ the woman answered.

‘When will he return?’ - ‘He didn’t say.’

‘Is anybody else in the house?’ - ‘Nobody.’

‘There’s no shame in asking,’ said Shakhan, ‘and who would you be? Mshvaga’s wife?’

The woman stayed silent.

‘Well, that’s that! Very nice,’ he said. ‘You see, Mshvaga and I were inseparable during our childhood. But life pushed us apart: he is here, and I am far from here, and we haven’t seen each other for more than seven years. Business brought me to this area, and I couldn’t not visit him, not have a look at how he lives.’

She listened and remained silent.

‘It’s very hot today!’ said Shakhan. ‘I’m deadly tired, and simply dying of thirst. Would you be so kind as to give me a sip of water?’

The woman silently left for the kitchen and returned with a cup of water. It was warm and unpleasant to taste. The visitor splashed it out on the ground and returned the cup to her.

‘Thanks.’

She took the cup into the house, came back and continued to stand.

‘Would you like to sit down?’ he asked her and moved along the bench.

The woman neither sat down nor left.

Shakhan mumbled a few meaningless words - about weather, the corn crop...

‘Well, I’ve had a rest, it is time for me to go. I wish you all the best!’ he said for goodbye.

‘Have a good time!’ responded the woman, seeing him off to the gate eagerly.

When he was already out in the street, Shakhan stopped and said:

‘Yes, it’s a pity that I didn’t find Mshvaga. I would like to see him so much! Pass him...’ - he faltered, - ‘send him my regards. Tell him that Shakhan came to see him, but didn’t find him, and deeply regrets that. And also tell him that I’m sincerely glad for him; glad that he lives wonderfully, that he has organised his farm so well, and that everything is simply excellent. Only... the doors in his house aren’t so good... I must say that, and please excuse me for being blunt,’ he added, having noticed her puzzled face, ‘but you know, I’m a carpenter, I build houses... I’ve constructed a

lot of them. So, pass this on to Mshvaga - the doors in his house are not very well made, they don't suit it. Obviously, my friend didn't notice at the start and probably hasn't noticed till now. Only they are very bad...'

'Yes? We haven't paid attention,' she said, smiling for the first time.

'Well, it's obvious! From the outside it's more visible. After all, when you look at the sun you see nothing. However, will you excuse me? It's like the proverb: 'a bad guest only notices defects.' So, goodbye!'

And Shakhan left.

Late in the evening Mshvaga returned home and, to his great dismay, heard from his wife that in his absence Shakhan had come.

'It's a pity that you let him go!' he exclaimed. 'What did he tell you about himself? Where and how does he live? What does he do? After all, can you imagine, we haven't seen each other for more than seven years!'

'He was also sorry that you were not here. As a matter of fact, he is a carpenter,' she remembered, 'and he asked me to tell you...'

'What? What?' Her husband interrupted her impatiently.

'He asked me to tell you that our doors are unsuitable, so he said. He looked at them for a long time, and then said: 'Tell Mshvaga I'm happy that he lives well and he has organised his farm so effectively... Only one thing wrong here - the doors of this house are inappropriate.' Then he added: 'They don't match the house, and they are very bad.' And he asked me to tell you: 'Such a house deserves better doors.'

Mshvaga attentively examined the entrance door of the house but didn't discover any defects in it.

A year passed.

It so happened that affairs once more brought Shakhan to the area. Again he went to see his friend, hoping this time to find him at home.

But, as if to spite him, the farmer was once again absent.

'Hey, Mshvaga! Are you at home?' shouted Shakhan, approaching the gate.

A very young woman ran out to the verandah, and Shakhan immediately noticed that she wasn't the former one, but another. She hastily ran down the steps towards the visitor.

'Welcome!' she said, quickly opening the gate and inviting him to come in.

'Is Mshvaga at home?' he asked, riding into the courtyard.

'He isn't, but should return soon. Come in, come into the house.'

Similar to his first visit, it was very hot, and Shakhan was thirsty.

'No, thanks,' he answered. 'I'm all right here' and he went to the shady plane tree.

'No way' she said disappointedly. 'Will you come into the house? We, glory be to God, have a roof over our heads. If you really don't want to come in, then please sit down in the shade. But I assure you, in the house you'll feel no worse.'

In her voice there was so much cordiality that Shakhan smiled cheerfully.

'You've persuaded me!' he said. It was really nice inside, both cool and cosy. Shakhan looked around and noticed his friend's photo on the wall.

'Ah, this is how he looks now!'

Next to it was another photo, of two boys in school uniform, Mshvaga and Shakhan.

‘I haven’t seen Mshvaga for ages!’ said Shakhan sadly. ‘This photo was taken in Sukhumi when we were studying at a mountain school. I’d like to meet him so much - and again I’ve had bad luck, again I didn’t catch him! Excuse me for asking, but who are you in this house? Are you Mshvaga’s sister?’

‘No,’ she answered abruptly.

‘And where’s Mshvaga’s wife?’ asked Shakhan. ‘She who met me last year?’

The woman remained silent.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Shakhan. ‘After all, I live far from here and know nothing. Has there been any change in his life?’

After hearing this, the woman smiled.

‘Probably you’re his new wife, aren’t you?’ he asked openly. As a sign of agreement she hung her head.

‘My congratulations,’ Shakhan said delightedly. ‘Mshvaga is a remarkable person!’

But not letting the visitor finish his speech, the woman left. Shakhan noticed that she went to the kitchen. ‘She isn’t like his former wife,’ he thought.

He stood up and left for the verandah. Soon the woman appeared again. He asked for a drink.

‘One moment’ she said, then straight away ran upstairs, brought out a little table, and then fetched a bottle of red wine and a glass. ‘Help yourself!’ she said politely, ‘and now I will run for fresh water.’

She left for the kitchen and returned with a jug, but immediately poured the water out of it. Shakhan had time to notice that the jug had been almost full. Then she quickly went to a spring.

The wine satisfied Shakhan’s thirst. In front of him there also appeared a jug with fresh spring water.

‘Drink some more wine and don’t be anxious,’ the woman said. ‘The master will be back soon!’

And she bustled off to the kitchen again.

‘What a lovely person!’ thought Shakhan.

Soon she appeared and began to lay the table quickly.

‘I’ve been cooking so long today that I’ve starved you to death’ she said guiltily. ‘Will you forgive me?’

‘You needn’t worry’ answered Shakhan, ‘I assure you, I am already full. And anyway, why are you preparing only for me? Wouldn’t it be better to wait for Mshvaga?’

‘If he comes, it will be very convenient,’ she answered, ‘only why should you have to wait? Perhaps he won’t arrive all that soon. You after all have come a long way and are probably hungry.’

Shakhan indeed was very hungry. The dinner was prepared wonderfully well, and he ate with pleasure.

The sun had already set, but Mshvaga hadn’t returned. Shakhan had to leave, despite the woman’s attempts at persuading him to stay.

‘I regret it very much,’ he said, ‘but there’s nothing I can do. I’m very busy today and besides, tonight my companions will be waiting for me on the road to Tamish.’

‘Mshvaga won’t be happy with me,’ said the woman. ‘And he’ll be upset about your departure.’

‘I’d love to stay, but I really can’t. Goodbye,’ answered Shakhan.

The woman accompanied him to the gate.

‘Do you want me to pass anything on to Mshvaga?’

‘Tell him,’ said Shakhan thoughtfully, ‘that his childhood friend came to see him. Tell him that I’m very glad to see

that his life is going well, he has an excellent garden and beautiful house... Also tell him that what I liked the most in the house were the entrance doors. Yes, yes, pass this on to him, please. They match his house so well. You see, I'm a carpenter, I build houses... I've constructed a lot of them... So don't forget what I've told you: wonderful, excellent doors!

'I won't' she promised, glancing at the door in surprise. Shakhan smiled and left.

Late in the evening Mshvaga returned. He was very annoyed when he learnt that once again his friend didn't find him at home.

'He really is a remarkable person. He was always so sincere, sensitive and devoted to me. And what a clever head he has!'

'A clever head, you say?' his wife asked, then looked aside and fell to thinking.

'A unique clear head!' answered Mshvaga with passion. 'I remember he always liked to philosophise and to teach us something new.'

'As for me... Excuse me, please, I don't wish to upset you, but, you know, his words seemed not so clear and a bit strange to me...'

'How?' asked Mshvaga. 'Why?'

'You know, he began to mumble something about our doors... 'Tell Mshvaga' he said, 'that the doors in his house are what I liked most of all. Wonderful, excellent doors.'

'The doors?' her husband asked again.

'The doors. He asked me to pass this on to you.'

Mshvaga was worried. 'Try to remember, what exactly did he say? Did he like them or didn't he?'

'Yes, he certainly liked them! 'The doors,' he said, 'are

the best of all.' He, you see, is a carpenter, builds houses...'

'Do you mean he liked these doors? But last year he said that the worst thing about my house was the doors.'

Mshvaga lifted his wife up in joy. 'He was always so observant, my good friend Shakhan. He would say something allegorical, and we all tried to guess the meaning. This whole year I've been thinking what his words could've meant. Now I have understood! Haven't you?'

'Yes, I have' answered the woman, and hugged her husband.

MISFIRE

A young dzhigit Adamur had a bride named Aisha. The fame about her beauty and charm spread far and wide. Adamur had a younger brother, twenty-year-old Shakhar, who like Adamur had a reputation as a dashing and brave dzhigit. Shakhar's heart was burnt by the beauty of his brother's bride. Who could compare with Shakhar except for Adamur? Wasn't Shakhar the best groom-to-be in the area? But his brother, the stately Adamur, was the obstacle in his path, and he couldn't do anything but sigh secretly about Aisha.

Adamur knew what was happening in his brother's heart, but neither Shakhar nor Adamur ever started talking about it because the law of the mountains is strict, and any young man who has exposed his feelings or tried to reveal his innermost thoughts has a reputation as a mean and worthless person.

There was a war at the time, against enemies who had attacked Abkhazian settlements. Both brothers had spent

the night at the front line as guards. In the morning they were replaced, and they went off duty to the general dugout.

The brothers were walking along a narrow mountain footpath which twisted between rocks. As was customary for the more senior, Adamur went in front.

A severe temptation took hold of Shakhar. 'What if I were to kill him? Only one shot - and my brother will roll down over a precipice... Nobody will find out, and Aisha will be mine...'

Shakhar took out his pistol from its holster... Adamur was walking quietly in front of him. Shakhar aimed and pulled the trigger... A shot didn't follow, as the pistol misfired. But the light clicking sound reached Adamur, who quickly turned round - and understood everything. Shakhar hastily hid the pistol in its holster. Adamur calmly continued on his way.

Silently they entered into the dugout. Both were hungry and greedily snatched a meal.

When they were full and going to have a rest, Adamur took his pistol and, stretching it out to his brother, said:

'Take mine, Shakhar. It's more accurate and will not misfire!'

THE ONE WHO KILLED THE FALLOW DEER

In the village of Lata lived a hunter named Kerim Bagapsh, who was both brave and successful. Once he killed a fallow deer in the mountains. Kerim cut off a grapevine rod, tightly tied the deer's feet and began to drag it to his home in the valley. This took a long time, and he became very tired.

Evening fell, and his native village Lata was still far away. 'I'll spend the night at Tamshug Amchi's house' he decided, 'he lives nearby.' Kerim then began to look for a safe place to hide his bagged deer. Away from the road he found a convenient hole hidden from human eyes, dragged the dead animal there, covered it with branches, and threw leaves over everything. Then with a light step he quickly went to Tamshug's patskha.

Kerim had already entered into his old friend's courtyard when an unexpected thought came to him: 'I wonder whether Tamshug is a true friend? What if I test him? After all, a friend in need is a friend indeed...'

Tamshug was happy to see Kerim.

'Pleased to see you! Come in! You're always a welcome guest here!'

But Kerim, instead of going into the house, could hardly be heard as he whispered to Tamshug:

'I came to you today not as a guest, my friend. I'm in trouble... I've killed someone - my enemy - and now I need your help.'

'You've killed a person?' Tamshug's face froze in horror.

'Yes. I'll tell you everything later, but now please help me. The body is lying there, near the road. We must bury it, otherwise I'll be in deep trouble. We must dig carefully, so that no traces remain. We should hurry while it's still dark.

'You've killed a person?' Tamshug asked again in fright.

'Yes, yes! As you can see, I'm covered in blood. Let's go without delay! Grab some shovels... I can't manage on my own.'

'Listen!' Tamshug interrupted, 'of course I won't tell anybody... I'm your friend - you can rely on me... I'm ready to do everything... but... that means I'll also ...'

Kerim didn't finish listening to Tamshug, but abruptly turned and left.

'There it is, real friendship!' he thought bitterly.

Kerim went to Shaadat Ashview's house. Shaadat was his own age, they had been hunting together, and both got married in the same year.

'Will Shaadat behave the same as Tamshug?' Kerim suddenly wondered.

Timidly he came nearer to Shaadat's patskha. A dog began to bark, and the owner appeared. Kerim told Shaadat the same as Tamshug, and asked him for help.

'It's a very bad business,' Shaadat said sympathetically. 'But your trouble is my trouble. Who have you killed? And what for?'

'I'll tell you on our way there. Let's go quickly! We must hurry,' said Kerim.

'We'll have enough time,' said Shaadat on reflection. 'First tell me everything. Why are you hiding? Are you afraid people will find out who the killer was? Why do you want me as your accomplice, to be responsible for your crime?'

'Do you mean you won't help me?'

'But you want to involve me in your trouble! Me, who isn't guilty!'

'Farewell, Shaadat!' shouted Kerim, and he went on his way again.

He went through two more villages, as well as his native village Lata. He travelled from friend to friend, visiting all those he considered as being close to him, addressed all with the same request, and met with refusal everywhere.

It was really late at night when Kerim suddenly remembered something.

'And what if I try...' he thought to himself.

So he returned to the neighbouring village, then made his way to his brother Dakhar's patskha without being noticed. For ten years they had been enemies and had carefully avoided meeting each other.

Several years ago the elderly, gloomy Dakhar, known for his severe character, fell in love with the number one beauty in Lata, a girl named Hifafa. The day of the wedding had been decided...

However, Kerim also fell for Hifafa.

You can guess what happened... Hifafa chose the young, cheerful Kerim, not the gloomy Dakhar. Some days prior to the appointed wedding she ran off with Kerim to the mountains, and through a pass they got over to Circassia. They lived there three years, and then came back and lodged in Lata once again.

When after that the brothers met in the woods, Dakhar angrily told Kerim:

'You have shamed me! I'm not going to kill you, my brother, but never, you hear, never let me see you again. Also know that from now on I don't have a brother!'

Seven years had passed... Since then they had never said a word to each other.

Dawn was approaching when Kerim gently knocked at the door of his brother's patskha.

'Who's there?' called out a sullen voice.

On the doorstep stood Dakhar. He was already dressed. Dakhar always rose at first light.

'You?'

'Yes, me... your brother...' Kerim answered timidly.

'I don't have a brother!' Dakhar said abruptly.

'I beg you... listen...'

‘I don’t want to listen to you! Go away! I’ll set the dogs on you!’

Two huge dogs jumped out from a shed.

‘Go away, you worthless thing, or the dogs will tear you to pieces as they did that damned horse-thief who was hanging around last year!’

‘I’m in trouble, Dakhar!’ exclaimed Kerim, then added with a groan ‘I’ve killed a person...’

A mischievous snicker escaped from Dakhar’s breast. ‘It’s a pity that he didn’t kill you instead! And now, you contemptible fool, you’ve come here to tell me that you are a murderer?’

‘I’ve come to ask you for help...Save me!’ moaned Kerim, and told Dakhar what he had already told people so many times that night.

‘Faster, Dakhar, hurry up!’ he pleaded. ‘I’ll be lost if you don’t help me... It’s still dark, the dawn is still quite a way ahead, we’ll be in time.’

‘It’s a good job our father is already dead!’ said Dakhar in a low voice. ‘A murderer! You would’ve killed him with your shame. And where is... the body?’

‘In the mountains...’

‘A villain!’ shouted Dakhar in a temper, then he turned abruptly and entered into the patskha, but immediately appeared again. He was wearing a burka, and held a pointed walking-stick in his hand.

‘We will go through the woods, it’ll be closer. We should be in time.’

Having grasped two iron shovels, they set out with a fast step.

It was dawn when the brothers approached the hole where the killed fallow deer had been hidden. It took them

a while to find its exact location, but eventually Kerim scattered the leaves and branches and showed Dakhar the carcass.

‘Here, I’ve killed it, Dakhar!’ he said in reply to his brother’s puzzled look. ‘I didn’t kill a person. I only wished to find out who my true friends were!’

Kerim then told his brother all that had happened during that long and troubled night.

‘Now I know who my true friend is. You, Dakhar!’

‘Farewell!’ answered Dakhar.

Then he added: ‘You consider that you’ve found a true friend. But understand, you haven’t regained your brother!’

A GRANDFATHER’S ADVICE

In the meagre patskha of Knut Hapar the firelight flickered. A sad young woman sat near it, expecting her husband’s return. It was pouring with rain. Sharp flashes of lightning lit up the dwelling, and mighty peals of thunder shook it... Fear and irrational worry tightened the breast of the woman in alarm for her husband. Frequent close rumbles and dazzling flashes of lightning gave her no rest.

Hapar still hadn’t returned.

It had gone midnight when the habitual sound of her husband’s footsteps reached the woman’s attentive ears. The door opened, and Hapar barged into the room.

The woman hastily lit a candle - and was terrified: her husband was very pale, his eyes wandered, and a gloomy expression appeared to have replaced his usually bright and cheerful face.

‘Where have you been?’ she asked worriedly.

Hapar remained silent.
‘Where have you been, my love?’ she repeated.
As if having regained consciousness from a heavy dream, he answered listlessly:
‘There, in the woods...’
‘In the woods? Are you unwell?’
‘No...’
Looking carefully, she noticed blood on his burka and on his hands.
‘There’s blood on you, are you wounded?’
‘Let me wash my hands and change my clothes...’
She brought some warm water for her husband.
‘Has something happened?’
‘No...nothing...’ he said uncertainly.
‘What’s the matter? Tell me! What’s happened?’
But Hapar said nothing.
‘I’m begging you! After all, I’m your wife!’
Hapar raised his head. ‘And you won’t tell anybody, will you?’
‘Tell who?’
‘Look, Chimsa!’ said Hapar frowning, ‘if anyone finds out about this, we’re dead.’
‘My darling, what’s happened? Please tell me now!’ she urged him, ‘I won’t tell anyone!’
‘Listen, I’ve killed somebody.’
‘My God! Who?’ She was terrified.
‘I don’t know! I’ve hidden the corpse in the woods, in a ravine.’
‘We’re finished!’ his wife began to cry. ‘What shall we do now? What can we do?’ She went into a fit of anguish.
‘This is a disaster for us!’ lamented Chimsa. ‘And you don’t know who he was?’

‘No!’ answered Hapar sadly. ‘He attacked me, apparently trying to ambush me. I beat him off and probably broke his skull. It was so dark in the woods that I couldn’t really see anything. I’ve dumped him in a hole and I’ve covered him with branches. Tomorrow night I’ll bury the body in the woods. Only remember, Chimsa, nobody must know. You hear, nobody!’

‘Why are you telling me this?’ she said in despair ‘as if I don’t know that I mustn’t speak about it to anyone. I won’t tell anybody.’

Neither of them touched their meal at all, and they just went miserably to bed and to sleep.

The next day at daybreak Chimsa went to the local spring with a jug on her shoulder. Her neighbour Seyda was there collecting water.

‘You’re very pale! Are you feeling sick?’ she asked, having caught sight of Chimsa.

‘No,’ was the hasty answer. ‘I’m fine.’

‘Has something happened to you?’

‘No, nothing. Nothing at all!’

‘Well it doesn’t seem like nothing at all’ Seyda resolutely declared.

‘No, it’s the truth,’ Chimsa began to assure her friend. But her voice sounded so full of grief that Seyda sympathized with her and looked her straight in the eyes.

‘Please, dear, tell me what’s wrong with you?’

‘I’m terribly unhappy, Seyda.’ Chimsa broke her silence because she was touched by her friend’s concern.

‘Unhappy?’ Seyda (a passionate seeker after any kind of gossip) asked again.

‘Why?’

Chimsa sadly shook her head.

‘I can’t tell you!’ she whispered.

‘Why not?’

‘It’s a secret. Nobody must know it.’

‘You’re still young,’ Seyda said sympathetically, ‘you don’t know life. And what I’m going to tell you is that you shouldn’t hold a secret inside yourself. It’s very harmful. You’ll see, you’ll dry up just like I did; I also said nothing to nobody. And now what have I turned into? It all happened because I was a silly woman who concealed everything inside me. A secret dries a person up. But if you share it with somebody, your soul will cease to ache and your heart won’t pine. Sometimes it’s easier to keep a piece of burning coal in your mouth than to keep someone else’s secret.’

‘Not all secrets can be divulged,’ argued Chimsa.

‘Yes they can,’ retorted Seyda. ‘It’s only necessary to know to whom. I like you, as if you were my own daughter. After all, I’m related to you: your grandmother was a three times removed sister of my mother-in-law. You can trust me completely.’

‘Maybe,’ said Chimsa. ‘You mean it, you won’t tell anybody?’

‘As God is my witness, nobody!’

Chimsa moved closer to Seyda.

‘Tonight my husband killed somebody.’

‘Killed?’ Seyda’s eyes widened, ‘Who?’

‘I don’t know. He came home late yesterday, very tired, lay down and fell asleep. But will you promise not to tell anybody about it?’

‘Of course I won’t tell.’

Seyda pretended to be indignant. ‘How could you think such a thing? Don’t worry!’

And they went their separate ways.

As soon as Seyda came home and put the jug away, she immediately ran to her neighbour Hifaf and told her under strict secrecy her improbable news. Hifaf, of course, under strict secrecy informed her daughter-in-law Shefia, and Shefia always shared news with her best friend Hajguag, who also promised to keep the secret...

Hapar meanwhile got up, got dressed and left the house. He went to a rich man named Bamat, nicknamed The Miser.

‘Would you be so kind, Bamat,’ asked Hapar ‘as to lend me ten roubles for a month?’

‘When will you return it to me?’ snapped Bamat. ‘And with what interest?’

Hapar managed to bargain with Bamat, and he received ten roubles for a month.

Having returned home, Hapar started to have breakfast with his wife. But they didn’t even have time to eat the first dish before they heard their dogs barking loudly. Hapar opened the patskha’s door and was struck in amazement: the whole courtyard was crowded with people. Not only in the courtyard, but also behind the gate, in the street, there was a dense wall of villagers. In front of everyone was a foreman called Mkuab Lagustan.

‘Welcome everybody!’ shouted Hapar hospitably, but without hiding his surprise.

‘Let’s see whether you will be delighted at our arrival!’ the foreman responded for all. And getting unusually severe, added: ‘Keep to the point, Hapar! Where have you hidden the body?’

‘What body?’ asked Hapar.

‘Don’t pretend to us, Hapar!’ said Lagustan. ‘It’s spring, and we’re very busy. Don’t waste our precious time. Confess where you’ve hidden the body. Was he from our village?’

‘We know everything,’ added old Hib Shimaf quietly but distinctly, ‘all the village knows that you are a murderer. Last night you killed someone. You’ve hidden him in the woods.’

‘All we don’t know is who he was,’ added Shach Sangulia.

‘We’ll find out soon!’ the foreman said determinedly. ‘Take us to the woods, Hapar, show us the place.’

Hapar shrugged his shoulders.

‘I see you really know everything,’ he said frowning. ‘All right, let’s go. I’ll take you there. Come with us, Chimsa,’ he told his wife, ‘I think it’ll be useful for you to be there too.’

And ahead of the huge crowd Hapar Knut strode to the woods.

On the road they saw someone running towards them. It was Bamat. He could hardly keep his breath, being exhausted under the weight of his own belly. Having run up to Hapar Knut he pummelled him with his fists.

‘You villain!’ the rich man cried out. ‘I know everything! You’ve killed a man, and now you’ll be hung up! Do you think you’ll manage to avoid having to give me my money back? No, give it to me now! Do you want to ruin me?’

Hapar derisively smiled and, having stopped, took ten roubles from his pocket.

‘Take it!’ he said, ‘take it quickly. Or I might die not having given you your money.’

People looked at him with astonishment. Then the crowd came nearer to the ravine.

Together with the foreman Hapar approached the hole, and began to remove the branches covering it.

In the hole lay a wild chamois killed by him the day

before.

Hapar lifted his head. The same smile was on his face as at the time he met Bamat.

‘Forgive me!’ he said to everyone. ‘Excuse me if I’ve pulled you away from your work. I didn’t think of killing anybody. I’ve only killed this chamois.’

‘You’re laughing at us, Hapar, aren’t you?’ foreman Lagustan said angrily.

‘No’ answered Hapar. ‘The fact is, I had an idea to check the advice of my late grandfather. Many years ago my grandfather Gedlach told me: ‘Remember, lad, once and for all - not everything can be entrusted to people, not even to relatives. Beforehand, it’s necessary to check up on them.’ And my grandfather told me one more thing: ‘Don’t borrow money from a greedy person.’ As you know, I’m married and have lived happily with Chimsa for some years. And suddenly I had an urge to check up on my grandfather’s advice. The happier we were, the more I wanted to check it. The constant thought was in my brain: ‘Check it up, check it up!’ Last night, during a thunder-storm, I came across this chamois and killed it, but at home I told my wife that I had killed a person. She promised me faithfully to keep it a secret. Then I went to that well-known miser Bamat and asked him for a loan of ten roubles. Just now, when he found out about my ‘trouble’, he ran to grab back his money from me, having forgotten about everything else in the world. I’m sorry, my friends! I was only checking my late grandfather’s advice...’

‘Yes,’ concluded the very old and very wise man Lagustan, ‘nobody can keep a secret better than someone who doesn’t know it.’

ANTITSA

‘Five years of silence is more than enough, my darling daughter. I beseech you to start talking to me,’ old Jguanat was asking charming Antitsa, the young wife of his only son Tamshug. ‘Never in all these five years, since you have been in our house, have I yet heard your voice. Probably it’s as pleasant as you yourself are. So can you say at least one word, I beg you!’

But it’s not so easy to persuade an Abkhazian daughter-in-law to break customs established for centuries forbidding a woman to talk to her father-in-law. No matter how hard he tried, he was unable to get one word from her.

Jguanat Kove complained to his neighbour Makhaz Tarba:

‘It’s a silly custom. Silly people thought it up.’

‘No, I don’t consider the people who thought up such a custom silly’ answered his neighbour, ‘but if you insist on your opinion, we also have another ancient custom which could help you.’

And Makhaz Tarba reminded Jguanat Kove of this other custom - any request made in the presence of more than ten persons, and supported by them, should be fulfilled.

‘Oh, you’re right!’ said delighted Kove.

The next day the old man gave the order to kill one of his two bull-calves and to prepare a formal dinner party for forty people.

‘What’s the occasion?’ - his son was perplexed.

‘You’ll find out later’ his father said smiling, then he himself invited all his neighbours, relatives and friends.

By the middle of the day a large table had been crammed into Jguanat’s patskha and was covered with various luxury

foods and wines. The guests arrived one after another. To all questions from the curious (Why has this formal dinner party been arranged? Who is the hero of the festivities? Has the eighty-year-old widower Jguarnat decided to marry again?) the old man answered the same:

‘Later, later! You’ll find out during the party. For now, have a seat!’ And then, when the visitors had sat down at the table, started their meal and were already getting drunk after several glasses of wine, the owner of the house rose, holding in his hand a big filled horn*, and said:

‘My dear guests! I wish to explain why I invited you today. All of you know my daughter-in-law Antitsa. Her eyes shine like the stars, her kindness and obedience know no limits. I love her like my own daughter. But one thing gives me no rest. For more than five years she has adorned my house, but I’ve never heard her voice. Strictly following our old Abkhazian tradition, she doesn’t talk to me, her father-in-law. Liking and respecting her, I want her to feel at ease with me from now on - not like a daughter-in-law, but like a real daughter. Toasting her health, I ask her to comply with my one big request. I invited all of you today, my dear neighbours, family and friends, so that you could also support this request to my daughter-in-law Antitsa: let’s hope she will start talking to me from now on.’

And Jguanat drained the horn.

‘We ask! We ask!’ A chorus of guests supported his request.

Antitsa stood in the corner blushing shyly, inclining her head and showing her long black hair.

The host again filled a horn and stretched to pass it to his neighbour Makhaz Tarba. An honourable man, and respected by all, the grey-haired Makhaz lifted the horn in

gratitude and addressed Antitsa:

‘Listen, lass! I’m one hundred and twenty eight. And in all that long time I’ve honestly never known, never seen or heard, any Abkhazian daughter-in-law receive such a great honour from her father-in-law and his friends. ‘You will only see it if you never die!’ as the old proverb says. Well, if the kind and noble Jguanat has decided so, it means you’ve deserved it. And I, of course, join the request of my friend Jguanat and I too ask you to start to talk to him, even though he’s your father-in-law. I drink to your health!’

Everyone lifted their horns and they all asked the same thing. Then the guests continued to feast for a long time and only went home late at night.

In the morning old man Jguanat got up, got dressed and went out into the courtyard. Antitsa was milking a cow.

‘Good morning, lass!’

He welcomed Antitsa, anticipating the pleasure of hearing her gentle, tender voice when she answered.

‘Good morning, good morning,’ she replied.

The old man heard a note of incivility in her voice.

‘Well, what do you want to say?’ she added even more roughly. ‘Would you at least hold the calf back! You can see it’s hindering me...’

The old man was taken aback. It was difficult to believe this was the voice of his charming Antitsa. But he was not mistaken, he had heard it with his own ears. He approached the calf, which by the way was standing calmly and hindering no one, and pulled it back.

‘Where’s Tamshug?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know where the devil he’s got to, your Tamshug!’ snapped Antitsa. ‘He’s probably gone off somewhere. After all, he’s not such a sluggard as you!’

‘My dear daughter, are you in any trouble?’ asked the old man patiently, ‘or are you unwell? You don’t seem to be in very good spirits today. What’s happened?’

‘What can have possibly happened to me?’ the daughter-in-law snarled. ‘It’s not only me - you’re also absolutely healthy, but still you pretend to be sick.’

The surprised old man was upset and started wandering around the house, then lay down in bed and began to think about what had happened with Antitsa. It was as if somebody had suddenly swapped her. To change so sharply in only one night...

Jguanat tried to concentrate, but was far from properly being able to do so.

‘He just lays and lays, and does nothing!’ – he heard the grumbling voice of his daughter-in-law.

She appeared on the patskha’s doorstep.

‘How long are you going to lay there?’ she shouted, ‘Aren’t you bothered?’

It was unbearable for old Jguanat Kove. Having forgotten about his sick bones he jumped out of bed, put on his burka and hastily left for the courtyard. Going away from the house, for a long time he could still hear the spiteful voice of his daughter-in-law.

All day long he wandered around the fields and visited distant neighbours, and only as darkness was approaching did he come back home.

‘Listen, Tamshug,’ he whispered to his son before laying down to sleep. ‘I won’t live for long, I can feel it. And I would like to have some fun again tomorrow. I still have one more bull-calf. We’ll cut that one too. You and Antitsa will prepare a dinner, whilst I will be occupied with inviting the guests. Do you mind?’

‘Certainly not, father!’ his son answered in great astonishment.

Next day the guests, the same as were there two days before, again took their seats around the long table and started the meal. Some glasses of wine had been drunk already. Then the host, old Jguanat, rose again with the same big horn of wine, already familiar to his visitors, in his hand, and said:

‘Dear guests! Only the day before yesterday we, having been collecting around this table, asked my nice daughter-in-law Antitsa to start talking to me, her father-in-law. She complied with our request, and yesterday I had quite a pleasure hearing her speak. Today I have invited all of you here again to ask you to address my daughter-in-law Antitsa once more. I ask her, and I hope that you support me, to return to the custom of our grandfathers and to cease talking to me, her father-in-law.’

‘There we are!’ exclaimed Makhaz Tarba. ‘It appears I was right when I said that the people who thought up this custom were not so silly! But to understand that, it was necessary to kill two bull-calves,’ he grinned.

‘I can’t agree with you that it’s a good custom,’ said Jguanat Kove, ‘but in this situation I myself couldn’t have thought up anything better...’

A TRUE HERO

Bamat Kove began his story:

...I had a neighbour called Habib Bazba, glorified in the whole district as a very strong and courageous man. He lived simply, and made do with very little. A pair of

buffalos was all he had.

One night Habib’s buffalos got out from the courtyard unnoticed, broke the fence of a corn field belonging to our fellow villager Temir Kalgi and fairly ruined his crop of young corn.

In the morning Temir brought the buffalos back and began to abuse Habib in every possible way. Habib could easily have crushed the puny and frail Temir, but he only said to him from time to time ‘I understand you, Temir.’

But Habib’s wife was indignant: ‘How can you stand such insults? Demand an apology, at the very least!’

‘It’s all right,’ Habib calmed her. ‘The time will come when Temir himself will decide to apologise.’

The busy harvesting season came. That year the autumn was especially rainy. Everyone hurried to finish collecting crops as soon as possible.

One gloomy, rainy morning when Habib Bazba and his wife Asyat had just sat down to have breakfast, an unexpected visitor arrived. It was Temir Kalgi.

‘Will you excuse me, Habib’ said Temir after first greetings, ‘I got angry and spoke a lot of nonsense. If I offended you I’m sorry. Not without reason, people say that you should let your first thought remain with you, and the second be told to me. It’s a shame I only thought of those words rather too late. Please excuse me...’

Habib Bazba and his wife Asyat’s eyes met.

‘It doesn’t matter, I’ve already forgiven you’ said Habib.

‘Come to the table, have breakfast with us’ Asyat invited their visitor hospitably.

‘Thanks very much, but I don’t have the time,’ Temir Kalgi answered. ‘After three days of rain my corn is decaying in the fields.’

‘Why’s that?’ asked Asyat sympathetically.

‘I’ve got no animals to bring it back to the barn. That’s why I’ve come to you, Habib. Could you lend me your buffalos?’

‘That depends on what my wife says’ answered Habib, and smiling artfully he looked at her.

‘Well, that’s settled’ replied Asyat, having understood her husband.

‘We will lend you the buffalos and cart, and we will come to help. Is that all right?’ she asked her husband.

That very day working together they gathered all the corn from the field...

Bamat Kove had finished his story.

Among the listeners was the hundred and forty year-old Tarkil Jessib. He said:

‘He who took revenge in good time is called a hero. But he who could have taken revenge, but refrained and showed magnanimity to a defeated enemy and even helped him out of trouble, is called a hero above heroes, a true hero. Not every hero has the guts to become a true hero.’

CURED BY A BULLET

Respectable one hundred and thirty year-old Gij Eshba was singing and quietly striking his wrinkled fingers on the strings of an apkhyartsa (a traditional Abkhazian violin with two strings). He liked to gather people around himself, sing them ancient songs and tell them about the past.

Here and now, having sat in a circle, all were listening to him repeating again and again ‘The wound song’:

Waah-ry-dah...*

He is not a man

Who is not able

To hide his sufferings...

Waah-ry-dah...

He is not a man

Who with a sigh or groan

Will reveal his torments...

Waah-ry-dah...

Groans and sighs

Are women’s fate

They gain relief in them

Waah-ry-dah...

Heavy wounds

Are sent to us as an ordeal

To test our endurance and will

Waah-ry-dah...

If cowardice could save us

And bravery meant nothing

The hare would live the longest

Waah-ry-dah...

Death likes a coward

The clever bullet can choose

And will not miss that fool

Waah-ry-dah...

So sang old Gij Eshba, and having finished, he inclined his head towards the apkhyartsa, listening a long time to the echo of its strings, and as if having recollected something, he smiled.

‘At one time,’ he began, ‘it was considered unworthy for a man to groan or complain about pain. The most admirable young man was the one who was able to silently bear the

heaviest sufferings. To moan in a woman's presence meant offending her.

In our village lived the peasant Msoust Chukbar. Somehow in the woods he got a splinter in his foot. The foot had swollen and began to abscess. The pain was intolerable.

In the evening after supper Msoust was sitting by the hearth with his wife, who had already taken the children to bed. His swollen foot was so painful that he couldn't stop himself from moaning.

'Isn't it shameful for you to groan in front of a woman?' his wife flared up. She had been greatly offended.

Msoust was confused and didn't know how to answer her. He murmured that it was hellishly painful.

'Hellishly,' his wife imitated, 'but you aren't really wounded, not even by a bullet. After all it's only a splinter!'

Msoust felt insulted. To restore his dignity in his wife's eyes, he snatched out a pistol, put the barrel to his leg and fired without delay. The powder smoke and the ashes which had risen from the hearth shrouded him in a dense cloud.

'Good Lord!' – his wife was terrified – 'what have you done? Have you shot yourself?'

In despair she rushed to her husband, but through the clearing smoke she could see his smiling face.

'You wanted a bullet there, didn't you? You were right, you see, I feel much better!'

And it was true, the bullet had pierced the abscess, and Msoust sighed with relief.

TWO REQUESTS

Wah-ry-dah, seewa-ry-dah, ossa-wah-ry-dah...

'He who is weak won't help.

He who isn't sure isn't needed,

But the defeated don't surrender, no!

They fight up to the end!

The end of suffering won't come

If there is no end to patience.'

Utu spoke to people, sowing these words.

Sparks flashed, inflaming the force of the people.

People moved like an avalanche,

Sweeping all before them...

All Odishi blazed, and smoke filled the sky.

The fire burnt spiders' webs,

The prince's palace was ruined.

The darkness of centuries burnt down.

The centuries' night brightened...

It seemed as if daylight rose like a sunny bird.

But traitors, like snakes,

Cunningly pretended to be friends,

Then crept into our fighting teams, my friend,

And sowed contentions between our leaders,

Spreading discord they poisoned

The trusting hearts of the people.

The poison of contention weakened us.

We were not bound together in unity,

Utu was defeated, the banner was crushed,

And all of us were dispersed...

Let yesterday be lost, let today be our defeat.

Now Mingrelia is under ashes,

But the next day will be ours!

When a free wind starts to blow,
Coal sparks will flash,
And the fire lit by Utu will light up all the world,
And still there are and will be people.
Only their force was spilt and hidden.
The people are alive – the struggle continues!
Wah-ry-dah, seewa-ry-dah, ossa-wah-ry-dah...

This song was often sung by Temir Adzin's visitor, Mingrelian Alizbar Kvaratskhelia, accompanying himself on chonguri. He escaped here to this mountain village Jgyarda from the tsar's police and the 'black hundred' group of the Mingrelian princes named Dadiani. All knew that Alizbar Kvaratskhelia was one of the closest colleagues of national hero Utu Mikava, and had been his right hand man. Having severely suppressed the national revolt and having destroyed its leaders, particularly Utu, the tsar's police and Mingrelian princes declared that the person who killed or betrayed the rebel Alizbar Kvaratskhelia would receive a reward from the treasury of five thousand roubles.

But, devoted to the custom of hospitality and having already tasted the sweetness of the struggle, the hapless Abkhazian peasants from the village of Jgyarda did not betray their guest Alizbar. Time passed, and Alizbar became good friends with Temir Adzin, in whose patskha the visitor was concealed.

Together with Alizbar, Temir went to neighbouring villages to visit friends and acquaintances. In the village of Amzara, Alizbar was struck by the beauty of the young Ada.

No one girl had ever touched the heart of the brave Alizbar so much. He lost his calm, and became silent and sad. He hid his feelings from everybody, and if asked why he was so sad, he usually answered that he didn't feel

well. When Alizbar understood that he didn't have enough strength to cope with this situation, he decided to go far away from those places as quickly as possible and to never meet Ada any more.

Early one morning, after a sleepless night, Alizbar asked to have the horses saddled.

'I need to go to Odishi as soon as possible' he told Temir, 'and I may have to stay there for a while.'

'What for?' asked Temir in astonishment. 'After all, you wanted to stay for a while with me. Besides, you know that in Odishi a noose is waiting for you.'

'It is necessary!' Alizbar answered firmly. 'I had completely forgotten, I've got an urgent matter there.'

Temir was disturbed. 'Is there something here you didn't like?'

'Everything is excellent, my friend!' Alizbar hastened to reassure Temir, 'Very much so.'

'Don't upset me, please stay!' was the reply. 'You know how difficult it is for me to agree to your departure.'

But Alizbar was unshakeable.

A feast was arranged prior to his departure, then a noisy band of friends went to see off their guest.

Having let Alizbar go forward and accidentally having tarried, Temir lagged behind everyone and found himself near to Alizbar's bodyguard Tomah.

'Hey, Tomah, why is Alizbar leaving?'

Tomah didn't answer for a long time. At last he was persuaded to give an explanation – wine possibly loosened his tongue and smiling craftily he admitted to Temir that although Alizbar hid the true reason for his departure, he guessed that the reason was Ada.

'Don't be sad, my friend!' said Alizbar to Temir when

their horses were again level.

‘But I’m sorry for the girl,’ said Temir as though accidentally. ‘Your unexpected departure could shatter her completely.’

‘What girl are you speaking about?’ - Alizbar sounded disturbed.

‘About Ada,’ said Temir. ‘She likes you and admitted it to me – after all, she is my relative. She even asked me to persuade you to marry her.’

‘What? Ada?’ Alizbar asked again, without hiding his pleasure. ‘Ada... likes me?’ He stopped his horse.

‘Yes, Alizbar, Ada likes you and she is ready to marry you even today.’

‘Marry? Me? No, no, I can’t believe in so much happiness at all!’

‘Why? Don’t you like her?’

‘Of course I like her, my dear Temir! My problem is that I like her very much, she is wonderful, this Ada with the face of an angel. But what kind of husband can I be to her? My patskha has been completely burnt by the princes. I am lonely, an exile, an outlaw. What right do I have to think about love, about marriage?!’

‘I talked today to my father about it all,’ Temir answered seriously. ‘My father likes you and wishes to adopt you in place of Seyd, my late brother who was killed by the princes.’

‘No, no, my friend! That’s all very well, but not now...’ But Temir could see that Alizbar was already hesitating.

‘After everything I’ve told you, Alizbar, you must realise that you would have both a house and a family – me and my father, who ask you to stay with us. And Ada wants the same thing.’

Temir’s words broke Alizbar’s resistance, and he turned his horse around.

Some days later Temir’s big courtyard was full of guests. A covered canopy over the tables had quickly been constructed, and the wedding feast had started - one of those long feasts for which the village of Jgyarda, the highest in mountainous Abkhazia, was famous.

The bright, cheerful people of Jgyarda had fun with all their hearts. Drinking, eating, dancing... Far away the noise of the wedding feast could be heard, dancing alternating with shooting and the clanging of crossed daggers, and in the house, in the bride’s room, girls tried to cheer her up with songs.

At last, after three days, as night approached the girls took the groom to the bride and, having left them alone, departed.

Trembling, Alizbar entered Ada’s room. This girl of unusual beauty faced him, and this girl was his wife! A leather tape - a chastity belt - pulled together her high breast. The groom, by old Abkhazian custom, has no right to touch the bride before having cut this belt. Alizbar came to Ada. With the little finger of his left hand he slightly touched her breast as his middle and index fingers lifted the leather tape, and he was already moving the dagger to cut it when Ada stopped him.

‘I beg you, don’t do this! Don’t do it! Better kill me with that dagger!’

‘What are you talking about?’ Alizbar was struck dumb. ‘You don’t want to become my wife, is that it? Don’t you love me?’

The girl was silent.

‘Tell me the truth! Do you love somebody else?’

‘I love Temir... And Temir loves me...’ whispered Ada. ‘When he came for me I thought he was taking me for himself. Only now I’ve found out...’

Stunned, Alizbar lowered his hands and moved away. After some consideration he said (as though to himself) in a constrained voice:

‘Now I understand everything.’

And then, addressing the girl, he firmly said:

‘No, my darling Ada, don’t be afraid: you have given your heart to Temir, and you will also be his wife! From now on, to me you will only be a sister.’

Having said this, he bent down in front of the girl, kissed the hem of her dress and left.

It was a great surprise to the guests when the groom appeared amongst them again. Alizbar hastened to explain:

‘My friends! I’m not the groom here. The groom is someone else, and I was announced as the groom for a joke.’

‘What’s he talking about? What joke?’ - old man Tamshug, a relative of the bride, jumped up from his seat.

‘Now you will see the real groom’ said Alizbar, and he called to the young men serving the guests. ‘Bring Temir here. I need to talk to him immediately on a very important matter indeed.’

Temir was called.

‘Temir, my friend!’ began Alizbar when both of them were face to face within a circle of guests, ‘as a sign of our unbreakable and pure friendship, I ask you to comply with two requests of mine.’

Temir slightly inclined his head, meaning that he was ready to execute those requests. The unwritten laws of the mountains are such that a refusal to a friend in solemn circumstances is equivalent to a complete break with him.

‘For my first request,’ said Alizbar, ‘accept Ada as your wife. She has told me everything, and I know you love each other. She is pure and chaste. Henceforth let her be a sister to me, and let our friendship remain as eternal and cloudless as the sky on a clear day.’

Temir inclined his head even lower.

‘And with this little finger,’ continued Alizbar, having lifted his hand, ‘I unintentionally touched her breast. I don’t want this to affect our friendship in the slightest. Therefore fulfill my second request – cut my finger.’

But Temir did not move.

So Alizbar pulled out his dagger and cut off his own little finger...

EFFULGENT ALZIRA

The young man Baslangur Sharmat from the village of Jgyarda was engaged to the girl Hamzhvazhv Argun from the village of Aatsy.

On the appointed day in the courtyard of Baslangur’s father a long wedding table was prepared under a canopy. Visitors began to arrive. About twenty dhzigits went very early to Aatsy to collect the bride. After their departure from Jgyarda the groom joined them - according to custom he should accompany the bride on her way, but he should not be seen either at his home or at the bride’s.

In the courtyard at the girl’s home in Aatsy another wedding table had also been prepared. Guests hadn’t started their meal, in expectation of the dhzigits sent for the bride.

Everyone was flabbergasted when it was discovered that the bride was nowhere to be found.

‘She’s fallen in love with another man,’ her best friend explained, ‘and she’s run off with him.’

Relatives and guests were all puzzled. But it was most upsetting, of course, for the groom...

In the courtyard of Baslangur’s father everyone was waiting for the escorts to return with the bride, and was also feeling starving hungry!

‘They’ve obviously been delayed through having a celebration there,’ the groom’s family told their guests, ‘but never mind, the party here will last for some days as well.’

The long night was coming to an end, and the dawn was already approaching. Silently and slowly, as if from a funeral, the dhzigits were returning home. But with what they would have to say, why was it necessary to hurry? To inform everyone about the humiliation?

Their route lay through the village of Eshera, home of a young man named Ferrat Amkuab. Ferrat knew that escorts had gone for the bride. After all, that morning a noisy group had passed through there. What was going on? Why were they coming back with their heads lowered, and not talking at all among themselves? Ferrat stopped them and asked what had happened. He became very sorry for Baslangur even though he was not familiar with him. After all, what can be worse than such a humiliation?

‘Wait, I won’t let you go any further!’ - he grabbed the bridle of one of Baslangur’s horses - ‘Call in at my place for an hour or so, have a rest, eat something, and then you’ll set off again.’

The hungry and miserable escort group willingly agreed.

Ferrat and his family began to prepare for their guests.

They killed a bull, as well as a lot of poultry. In addition, they brought out the best wine. The visitors also met Ferrat’s

mother and his sister Alzira, who had hardly reached eighteen years of age but was already very competent around the house. And what a beauty! Minstrels far beyond Abkhazia sang about the beauty and merits of the effulgent Alzira.

Breakfast was prepared and put on the table, but then Ferrat disappeared. His guests waited for him, wondering where he was.

Ferrat was in his sister’s room, and their mother was also there.

‘It’s better to kill me, Ferrat’ the girl said, ‘I don’t wish to leave for anywhere.’

‘I’m begging you! I don’t bear you any malice’ her brother tried to explain. ‘His friends say he’s a person with a perfect soul. You will be happy with him.’

‘Yes, but she doesn’t like him, and doesn’t even know him at all’ their mother interfered. ‘Besides, it’s still too early for her to marry.’

Alzira, having squeezed into a corner, sobbed.

‘I’ve told you everything’ Ferrat said firmly. ‘If you don’t want to, you don’t have to. But in that case I will leave the house today and I won’t return any more.’

He approached his sister and gently kissed her.

‘I repeat, Alzira, you would be happy with him.’

‘Don’t turn me out of the house,’ begged Alzira. ‘I wish to be only with mother and with you.’

‘Does that mean that I have to leave?’

At that moment the insistent voices of guests reached their ears:

‘Ferrat! Ferrat!’

‘He should go, Alzira,’ her mother said, ‘it’s very embarrassing in front of guests. Now I’m also asking you:

become Baslangur's wife. I know your brother - he will keep his word and will leave the house. In the end, no good will come of it for any of us. I can see his father in him - he was just as firm and resolute. At least spare your mother's feelings!

Alzira's tears dried up. She hugged her brother and let him know that she agreed. Ferrat joyfully kissed her.

'Have a seat, dear friends!' he exclaimed, as he appeared among his guests. 'I'm sorry I've kept you waiting a long time. But I had something important to do.'

When glasses had been filled and emptied several times, Ferrat stood up and, having filled a big horn with wine, lifted it high over his head.

'My dear guest Baslangur' he said, 'I like you. Would you do me a favour? I ask you to comply with my request.'

Everyone turned to Baslangur.

'From now on I wish to be on friendly terms with you. Let our friendship be sealed by family ties!' continued Ferrat. 'I hope you won't reject them. I offer you my sister Alzira as your wife.'

'Effulgent?!' – the word escaped involuntarily from the lips of one of the guests.

'Yes!' answered Ferrat, 'and she wants it to happen. I've already spoken to her. She is ready to go immediately with you to your wedding. My sister is no worse than that girl you fell for in Aatsy.'

'She's a hundred times better!' his guests shouted in support of him. 'Effulgent Alzira is incomparable. What happiness has fallen in your lap, Baslangur!'

Baslangur, still not believing what was happening, approached Ferrat and said:

'Ferrat! Only a person with a sensitive heart could've

done what you've done for me. However, effulgent Alzira doesn't like me, and doesn't even know me. I can't give my consent until I've heard from her own lips that she wants such a huge and unexpected happiness for me.'

'Come on, Baslangur!' Alzira's mother took his hand as he stood silently in front of her as a sign of respect for her old age - 'Go and ask her yourself!'

And she led him to her daughter's room. Here she blessed them and then left them together.

... At long last the people who were standing solemnly around the table in Baslangur's father's courtyard saw the groom arrive with his bride. Nevertheless, they were rewarded enough for their patience. The wedding celebrations lasted more than four days!

MARSHAN LASHV

In the village of Lata in the Dal gorge lived Marshan Lashv. He was a short man, rather ugly and blind in one eye. But he was brave, fearless and strong.

Circassian Atazhukh Mamatgery was his bosom friend.

Lashv was thirty years old when he decided to marry - in those days Abkhazians took their time over such things. Lashv liked the young beauty Marona and for two years he had been considered as her fiancée.

The wedding day was decided, but one month prior to the planned event the beautiful Marona gave her heart to another and eloped with him. Not with a stranger to Lashv, but with his best friend Mamatgery the Circassian!

Marona's flight wasn't a personal tragedy for Lashv alone. All his extensive family, all members of the Marshan

clan, considered that the insult was also aimed at them. In every possible way they reproached Lashv and demanded revenge. He was nicknamed 'the overthrown groom', and this shameful nickname stuck to him for a long time. He silently bore this insult but appeared in public more rarely.

But one night, not having said anything to anyone, Marshan Lashv disappeared from the village.

Atazhukh Mamatgery well knew that Lashv would take revenge on him. To steal someone's bride was an unforgiveable insult, therefore Mamatgery had undertaken safety measures - he had surrounded his house with a high stone wall.

However, Lashv managed one night to get over the high wall and get into the house of his rival unnoticed. He silently crept to Mamatgery's bedroom and knocked. The door opened. Before him in pyjamas stood the sleepy owner of the house, his former friend.

Mamatgery, having recognized Lashv, moved back in fright. Lashv went into the room - where Marona was quietly lying in the bed.

'Welcome!' blurted Mamatgery with undisguised horror.

'Let's see what welcome I've brought for you' answered Lashv as a smile touched his lips, 'I'm sorry for any trouble!' he said to frightened Marona.

'Put on your clothes!' he ordered Mamatgery. 'I can't speak with you while you are undressed.'

Mamatgery hurriedly got dressed.

'Listen,' Lashv told him, 'this woman has preferred you only because you're better looking than I am. Let her now see who is the stronger. Here are the terms: if I fall to the ground, you can do anything you want with me. If you fall, I will cut off one of your ears.'

Strong Mamatgery struggled against skilful Lashv for a long time. But eventually he weakened and was brought down by Lashv.

Then he obediently knelt and Lashv snatched out a dagger, and in front of Marona's eyes he cut off her husband's right ear.

'Farewell!' he said with a bow, 'My business with you is now finished.' And Marshan Lashv left.

After a few days he returned to his native village. His relatives still sneered at him, continuing to call him 'the overthrown groom.'

But now Lashv calmly bore all such insults.

Meanwhile Mamatgery sent some people to Lata to find out whether Lashv Marshan was bragging about his recent victory.

These Circassians arrived in Lata as if they were on a visit to relatives. Having then discovered that Lashv was still magnanimously accepting all sneers whilst keeping silent, they went back to tell Mamatgery.

What a surprise it was for the inhabitants of Lata when one memorable day a big group of Circassian dzhigits entered their village, and at the head of them was Mamatgery.

Everyone decided that this was an unprecedented impudence - an impudence equivalent to mockery. They all waited for the inevitable bloody reprisals.

Mamatgery stayed at old man Tapagv Aiba's place, and unexpectedly invited all the men of the village to a formal dinner party.

These surprised people were gathered in Aiba's courtyard, when suddenly Mamatgery appeared.

'I've invited you all here' he began, 'to publicly tell

you how Lashv Marshan washed off from himself the stain of an insult delivered to him by me. Having already revenged himself, he calmly accepted all sneers and has not mentioned a word about it. He was not proud of his revenge, and said nothing at all about me. And now I've arrived here to tell you how brave and noble Lashv is, and how he has washed off shame from all your Marshan clan.'

The Circassian pulled off the hood from his head and exposed a terrible scar in place of his right ear.

GARÇON, PRENEZ!*

Two students from the Georgian enclave in Paris arrived in Monte Carlo, the small resort which is located, as is well-known, on the Mediterranean coast, and is famous for its gambling house - a casino. One of these young men was the Abkhazian prince Giarg Chachba.

Late one night, walking along the boulevard they found themselves in front of that casino, which attracts all kinds of fans of easy money.

They went into one of the halls where chemin-de-fer was played, and the luxury amazed them. But the people, greedily crowding around the gambling table, amazed them even more. Gamblers were there, and also those who just passionately watched the games of others who in one night could become fantastically rich, or in one night were completely ruined.

The croupier announced an unprecedentedly big bank. On a table was a heap of paper money and under a glass cover a mountain of gold coins towered.

No one present dared to declare vas-bank*.

Giarg Chachba, in a snow-white Circassian outfit closely fitting his slim body, and in national high boots with soft soles, dexterously squeezed himself through a crowd of observers to a table. Everyone looked at him with curiosity - one of the crowd said 'Caucasian!'

Although usually indifferent to onlookers, the croupier raised his eyes and, obviously curious, he looked at the new arrival.

'Could I be of assistance?' he asked languidly, hardly moving his lips. The young man exchanged a glance with his companion, then took a hundred-dollar note from his pocket and threw it on the table. The croupier dealt the cards.

'You've lost' was all he lazily said, intending to add the money to the casino's takings, but the banker shouted loudly to a waiter, pointing with his chin to the banknote laying in front of Giarg:

'Garcon, prenez!'

A person in livery hurried to the table and seized the money. Blood rushed to Giarg's face, but he restrained himself. The game went on in a circle around the table until it was once again the young Abkhazian prince's turn.

'Could I be of assistance?' asked the croupier.

'You could!' Giarg quickly answered, as he pulled out two hundred dollar notes and threw them on the table.

'Are you sure?' asked the banker sarcastically, 'That money could certainly be useful to you.'

'Deal the cards!' Giarg shouted abruptly. The croupier did so.

And again Giarg lost.

'You're unlucky, Caucasian' the banker said with contempt as he stared at him. 'You could easily lose everything if you're too compulsive!' Then having nodded

to the footman, he repeated deliberately loudly: ‘Garcon, prenez!’

The liveried man grabbed the money as before, and with a low bow he departed.

Giarg almost forgot himself.

‘We should go! That’s enough!’ Niko, his fellow countryman, tried to persuade him.

The two young men had frequently heard stories about incredible luck. But now, in front of their eyes, they were witnessing what they had never seen before - someone was rapidly growing very rich. Ten times in succession the banker covered the partners’ cards and then, having beaten them for the eleventh time and so not expecting another big game, announced:

‘I’m finishing.’ He stood up with difficulty, looked at the crowd and without enthusiasm added: ‘However, if anybody else would like to...? Only one condition - the game mustn’t be for peanuts!’

‘That suits me! Not for peanuts!’ responded Giarg passionately.

‘For how much?’ asked the croupier unemotionally, though he quickly turned towards him.

‘Vas-bank!’ shouted Giarg recklessly.

‘What?!’ exclaimed the croupier. He had suddenly woken up.

‘Vas-bank’ repeated Giarg. He shivered.

‘Your guarantee?’

The young man carelessly put his business card in front of the croupier.

‘His Royal Highness Prince George Shervashidze,’ the astonished croupier slowly read word by word.

‘Prenez! Prenez!’ cried the onlookers.

A barely constrained hatred of that day’s lucky devil was contained in these words.

The croupier dealt the cards. Everyone stood rooted to the spot.

The banker hastily and confidently threw his cards on the table.

‘Eight!’

‘Don’t get too excited, mister banker!’ said Giarg slowly and with dignity, as he put his cards on the table – a three and a six.

‘Nine!’ someone cried out with undisguised pleasure.

‘He’s won!’ - lots of hands stretched towards Giarg.

‘Yours’ mouthed the banker as he turned pale.

‘Here you are’ smiled the croupier obsequiously.

‘Let’s go, Niko’ said Giarg.

He spoke to his companion in Georgian, then shouted aloud: ‘Garcon!’

When the man in livery appeared, the Abkhazian nodded to him and said: ‘Garcon, prenez!’

And both students left the hall with the crowd frozen in amazement.

ESMA-HANUM*

In one of the coffee houses in Trebzon two Turkish officials, Shukri and Osman, were sitting and talking.

‘Did you notice how obsequiously our Vizier* spoke to that rogue?’ Osman asked Shukri.

‘To Nuri the makhadjir*? Yes, effendi*, he is very artful and pushy, this former courier who is now the sheriff. I advise you to be on your guard - among the people there is

gossip that the Vizier is going to appoint Nuri the makhadjir in your place.'

'I know. I've been told about it. He's been aiming after my position for a long time. But he'll never see himself in the job, just like he'll never see his own ears.'

'The Vizier has already taken him into his circle and trusts him completely. I wonder how he's managed to charm the Vizier?'

'His sister. Haven't you heard? The Vizier is marrying his sister. One of these days there will be a wedding.'

'Oh Allah! If that happens, the only ruler here will be Nuri the makhadjir. He calls us nincompoops and numbskulls. He will expel us all and replace us with makhadjirs. Those ragamuffins swarm to him in crowds.'

'Yes, we must prevent this wedding by any means.'

'I wonder where the Vizier met Nuri's sister? People say she's still very young, lives in the steppes together with other makhadjirs, walks barefoot in rags and has never been seen here in the city.'

'Hmm... It's all Nuri's doing. Recently in the Vizier's office, whilst getting documents from his pocket he dropped a picture of her as if by accident. The Vizier became interested and glancing at it he immediately fell in love with this young girl.'

'You are right, effendi. We must stop Nuri the makhadjir.'

'I've already thought what to do.' Shukri looked around and, having made sure that there were no strangers nearby, whispered 'There is only one way to get rid of the problem – we must discredit Nuri by convincing our old fool that Esmā is a tart, and Nuri wishes to marry her to him to discredit him in the opinion of the Padishah*, so that he'll overthrow

our Vizier and Nuri can take his place!'

'Well... well...' said Osman, 'that's an interesting idea. You've got a clever mind, effendi. Only... who would manage to do it? Who would dare?'

'Me!' answered Shukri. 'Who else knows the Vizier as well as I do? And who else would manage to drum it into his stupid old head?'

'You! In that case our success is assured. Do it, effendi, and you'll be well rewarded.'

'This evening I'll talk to the Vizier.'

'Allah will bless you and your enterprise!'

That same day senior sheriff Shukri asked the Vizier for an audience.

'In connection with your forthcoming marriage, Grand Vizier,' he said confidentially, 'there's some gossip among the people.'

'Among the people? And what do I care about the people? What are they chatting about?'

'They're saying that young Esmā, Nuri the makhadjir's sister, is a well-known trollop who shamelessly trades her body...'

'What?' the Vizier shouted. He ran to Shukri and started to shake him. 'How dare you repeat that to me, you animal! You don't know what you're prattling on about! Nuri the makhadjir told me Esmā is young, beautiful and pure. She - my future wife and your future superior - is as chaste and pure as a dove. And you're talking rubbish.'

'Grand Vizier, I only say what I know for sure' answered Shukri calmly.

'Then speak more clearly! Tell me everything you know!'

'It's not very comfortable for me, Grand Vizier, to speak

to you about all this,' said Shukri hypocritically. 'But Allah can see my attachment and love for you, and at the very least my duty demands me to be frank with you.'

'Well then, don't hold anything back. Tell me everything you know.'

'I've been intimate with this girl Esma.'

'You?' the Vizier began to roar.

'Yes, me. Punish me, Grand Vizier, I've deserved it. This Abkhazian girl is very beautiful and seductive. The devil misled me and I didn't resist temptation. I rented a room in a dockside hotel, and she was my mistress there for a whole month. But Allah took pity on me and returned me my sanity. I understood then how disgracefully I had acted. Esma is the most shameless, unrestrained and completely degenerate woman.'

'Enough! That'll do!' the Vizier yelled as he helplessly fell into an armchair.

He sat silently for some minutes, then slowly lifted his heavy head.

'Just tell me one thing, sheriff Shukri. Why did Nuri the makhadjir have to lie to me so blatantly?'

'Why?' said Shukri in a confident voice. 'The reason's known to all of your associates, and only unknown to you because you're so kind, understanding and noble, but sometimes you're also too trusting, as you were with Nuri the makhadjir.'

'Speak more clearly, sheriff Shukri.'

'Haven't you really noticed that Nuri the makhadjir is terribly ambitious, and will stop at nothing?'

'Well, let us assume that is so. And what further?'

'He is apparently a little ungrateful for all that you have done for him, having promoted him from being a simple

courier to being a sheriff. And now he's already dreaming of replacing you!'

'Wha-a-at? What did you say? Replacing me?' Everything was becoming even more confusing to the Vizier following such shattering news.

'My agents have informed me' continued Shukri, 'that Nuri boasted time and again to his Abkhazians, his makhadjirs, that soon he will overthrow the Vizier, meaning you, just as he overthrew sheriff Shevket, and he will soon be ruler of the whole Trebzon area. Also, that the beautiful Circassian Aza, the new wife of Sultan Hamid, promised him her support. I've checked these reports, and they appear to be true.'

'That's interesting' said the Vizier, smiling bitterly.

Shukri felt triumphant. His enterprise had worked successfully. The Vizier had been subjugated.

'What do you suggest?' the Vizier asked timidly.

'Remove Nuri the makhadjir from your service, Grand Vizier, and as soon as possible.'

'Yes' said the Vizier, 'a lot has become clear to me. Thank you, sheriff Shukri, for your unselfish and devoted service. I will reward you adequately. And now accept my order: arrest Nuri the makhadjir immediately, tie him up and throw him in prison. Arrange his execution for Friday, after prayers.'

'Instead of the wedding?' asked Shukri sarcastically.

'Yes' answered the Vizier.

The news about the arrest and forthcoming execution of Nuri the makhadjir startled all Trebzon and the population of the Abkhazian makhadjir camp located far within the steppes. There young Nuri was especially liked, because,

working in the city, he constantly helped his fellow countrymen. His little sister, young Esma, loved her brother with all her heart and soul, as she had lost her father and mother in exile, and only Nuri remained to be a support in her life.

Together with her old aunt Shemekia, she overcame more than a hundred kilometres in one day to arrive on the morning of the dreaded Friday when Nuri's execution had been arranged.

At the nearest market the girl met an Abkhazian woman, also makhadjir, but living in the city.

She, it appeared, knew the secret of the Vizier's anger, as her sister was in his harem.

'As I was coming here to the market I saw how the Vizier and his assistants entered into the Nazimovsk mosque,' the woman said. 'With them there was also that nasty Shukri who informed on Nuri the makhadjir.'

'Yes?' flashed Esma, and in her lit-up eyes it could be seen that some happy thought had dawned on her. 'Oh, oh, I beg you, lovely woman, take me to this mosque and show me who is the Vizier and who is Shukri among them.'

They approached the mosque when the Vizier and his assistants had finished their prayers and were leaving.

'That tall one who goes first is the Vizier, and behind him, on the right, the short fat man is Shukri,' her companion informed her.

Esma looked closely at the men and, having tightly hidden her face in a veil, she ran up to the Vizier, knelt at his feet and clasped them strongly with her hands.

'Oh, oh, be kind to a poor orphan, our Great Vizier!' she begged.

'Who are you, woman, and what do you ask?'

'Listen to my complaint, oh magnanimous and fair Vizier. Your assistant sheriff Shukri, this one' - she pointed to Shukri - 'was with me more than a month in a hotel, and then threw me out, having paid nothing. He owes me two hundred lira. I'm dying from hunger.'

'Well?' the Vizier turned back to Shukri, 'what do you say about this?'

'Apparently, Allah has dulled the woman's brain, Grand Vizier,' answered Shukri very calmly. 'She spins total nonsense!'

'No, no! He, oh Grand Vizier, is deceiving you as well as he deceived me. Let him swear to Allah over the sacred Koran that he doesn't know me, has never seen me, has never lived with me and doesn't owe me the promised two hundred lira.'

The Vizier looked at Shukri severely. 'What do you say now, sheriff Shukri? Has this woman really gone mad or is she speaking truthfully?'

'I will willingly swear this over the Koran, Grand Vizier, only to completely remove your lingering doubts. Order someone to bring the Koran.'

'Yes, yes, yes! Let him swear over the Koran!' the girl shouted, even more strongly clutching the Vizier's feet.

'Sacred Mullah,' said the Vizier, 'please bring the Koran and accept an oath from sheriff Shukri.'

And when the Mullah had brought the Koran from the mosque, the Vizier ordered:

'Rise, woman! Lift your veil and show your true self to sheriff Shukri. Let him look at you and swear that he has really never seen you and does not know you.'

The girl jumped to her feet and tore the veil from her face. Her beauty was exceptional and stunning. The Vizier

could not tear his eyes from her.

‘Well, swear, Shukri! I’m listening to you’ said the Vizier, secretly envying the sheriff and being annoyed that this idiot, and not he, had owned such a heavenly creature for a whole month.

Shukri placed both hands over the Koran and solemnly said: ‘I swear to the great Allah that my eyes see this girl for the first time in my life and that I have never had any affair with her and I do not owe her any money.’

‘What do you say now?’ the Vizier demanded of the girl.

‘Oh Grand Vizier! Forgive me for any immodesty which I have been compelled to display. But Allah knows that I could not expose the mean and deceitful actions of Shukri in any other way. I am Esma, the sister of Nuri the makhadjir. This worthless person, sheriff Shukri, envying Nuri’s mind and abilities, has slandered both him and me. And you believed him. But now you are convinced that he deceived you. By executing innocent Nuri today, you will incur a sin for which you will never be excused. Release Nuri!’

The Vizier ordered the release of Nuri the makhadjir immediately and appointed him as a senior sheriff. Shukri finished up in prison.

Young Esma married the Vizier and began to be called Esma-Hanum.

THE FATHER-IN-LAW AND SON-IN-LAW

I was young then (smiling, Shkhangery Bzhanian - the favourite member of the collective farm - began his story) and hadn’t even reached sixty. I’m now already a hundred and forty eight, though I’m still vigorous and strong. But then I felt completely fit. At that time in our village lived a very respectable old man – may he rest in peace – Barganjia Abidge. He married his daughter Seyda to someone not well known locally, as this young man had arrived in our Ochamchira area from the distant region of Bzyb. Now the woods are almost all cut down, roads have been laid, and the train is used, and the car, but in those days all the coast was covered in dense forest, and to get to the Bzyb area of Abkhazia was a difficult job.

After the wedding Abidge’s daughter Seyda was taken away to her new family and a year later old Abidge decided to visit his daughter and son-in-law. All of us accompanied him: me, other fellow-villagers, Abidge’s friends and his relatives. His son-in-law received us properly with suitable honours. The feast arranged was glorious, noisy and cheerful, and lasted no fewer than ten days.

All that time Abidge watched his son-in-law most carefully, and we noticed that the old man was upset. As much as he tried to hide it from us, it wasn’t possible for him to do so. He thought about things for a long time, but eventually he decided to share his concerns with us.

‘I didn’t really know my son-in-law Danakai Jikirba earlier. Now I can see he is handsome, brave, noble and generous. People respect him. Besides, he is tall and stately. What is my daughter compared to him? She came into his house without a dowry, because I’m rather poor and

I couldn't prepare one for her. And on top of all that, the most terrible thing is that she's also lame. Well what kind of wife is that for such a remarkable dzhigit? It's all a great pity - how long will her happiness last? In addition, people will say that I, old Abidge, tried to get rid of my daughter, to place her more profitably. No, no, if I'd known him so well before, I would never have agreed. I've decided to take my daughter back home. And tell Danakai that I'll be the first to search for a new wife for him, who will be worthy of him both in looks and in mind. I'll even try to persuade Prince Nakharbey Chachba to allow his beautiful daughter to marry Danakai.' We tried to change the old man's mind, but without success. By the end of the day we had been compelled to concede, and at his request we began a conversation with his son-in-law Danakai.

We had arranged this conversation very seriously, as it is necessary in such cases to take him aside - according to our custom, a son-in-law can't talk to his father-in-law and we passed on the old man's decision. Danakai listened to us, thought a little and then answered thus:

'I haven't deserved such an insult. Only because he is my wife's father, and is a respectable old man, am I ready to excuse this insult, and that will be for the first and last time. I will not allow anyone in the world to mention any shortcomings concerning my wife. Apparently Abidge has forgotten that since the moment Seyda crossed the threshold of my house, she has been not only his daughter, but also the mistress of this house - my friend, my wife. Appearance means little, the soul of a person is more important, it can make any physical defect insignificant, and make anyone beautiful. My Seyda is clever and warmhearted - I adore her madly.'

HABIBA

I had heard a lot about the former beauty of Habiba Sharmat. 'If Habiba bends over a dead man he will revive. If Habiba looks at a flower it will blossom' - so it was claimed in songs.

Now I was her guest. Both my host and hostess had passed their hundredth birthdays a good while before, so the unusual warmth which radiated between them when they looked at each other was even more amazing, and I was struck by their mutual tenderness.

I was sitting one day with her and her brother Saatkery, when he suddenly said:

'Tell us, sister, how you married.'

Habiba was confused: 'Oh no, I really couldn't.'

'Yes you could' insisted Saatkery. 'It will be very interesting to our guest.'

I supported his request.

'Let him tell you' answered Habiba, keeping the custom of not mentioning her husband by name.

'He is busy in the garden' said her brother.

'It's inconvenient for me. Tell him yourself.'

Saatkery didn't hesitate to do so, and began his story:

Among the many enamoured with Habiba was Dochia Estat from Zugdidi, and that young man asked for her hand in marriage, but was refused and decided to take the girl by force. He trapped her in a corn field and pushed her to the ground wanting to rape her, in the hope that she would then agree to become his wife. Habiba struggled with him a long time, and having weakened, she snatched out a dagger from Dochia's belt and killed him.

The girl was tried and sentenced to six years in prison

and exile to Siberia.

Then from the public gallery, unexpected by everyone, a loud protesting voice was heard: 'Habiba is not guilty! I killed Estat! Judge me!'

Unbelievable turmoil arose in the court.

Chichin stepped forward. The whole room stared at him with interest. The young man assured the court that Habiba had been a friend of his since childhood and consequently she wished to protect him, hoping that the jury would acquit her, as she had committed the crime in self-defence...

Habiba shouted: 'That's not true! He invented it all. I killed Dochia!'

But the court nevertheless believed Chichin and sentenced him to ten years in prison and five years of Siberian exile.

Fifteen years passed. Habiba waited for Chichin, and when he returned they got married.

They have already lived happily together for more than one hundred years.

ATIRAS*

It happened in the 1870s, during the tragic days of makhadjirstvo*. None of the inhabitants of Dal wanted to leave and go to the hot steppes located on the border with Turkey. But through deceit and violence all of them were forced to emigrate from their motherland. Only a small group of heroes led by Adamur Adzinba, heading a peasants' revolt, decided to fight till the last drop of blood. On a very narrow strip of land in the Dal rocky gorge they remained to continue the struggle.

More than eight years had passed when the Turkish captain of a small vessel visited the exiles living in the steppes. He carried a box, and cried out:

'Hey, makhadjir Abkhazians! Who's here from Dal? There's a parcel for you. It was given to me in Ochamchira. I promised to deliver it, and I've kept my word. Take it!'

With great curiosity the Dal people surrounded the box.

'A parcel from Abkhazia? From our native land Dal?'

'What's been sent to us all the way from Dal? Who has sent it? Well, Daur, you're nearest, open the box!'

The young man Daur opened the box and started to pull out from it and hand one after another to the surrounding makhadjirs... women's head scarves. There were lots of them, those women's scarves. The whole box was full of them. The bewildered makhadjirs examined them carefully.

'What can it mean?' people asked. Then the oldest and wisest, Abidge Bgazhba, said:

'Shame on us! We abandoned our motherland. We aren't worthy of any better present. We, like weak women, have behaved cowardly. Being afraid of death, we deserted our native blossoming Dal and came here. Better death than such a shameful life... Let's return to Apsny*, to our native blossoming Dal, and wash our shame with blood!'

Then other voices were also heard:

'To Apsny? What will we do there? After all, our homes and farms are all burnt and ruined. No, it looks like we'll finish our lives here - it's clear that this is our destiny.'

Daur then took from the bottom of the box a sheet of paper, on which had been neatly written:

'To the brave sons of Dal, from the grateful motherland. Adamur.' The men blushed with shame.

'What humiliation! Adamur has compared us to women,

he has sent us female scarves,' they said in their sudden mood of severe depression.

But what could inspire these despairing people?

Suddenly someone found some big fern leaves in the box - atiras, in which the scarves had been rolled.

'Look! Look! Atiras from Apsny. Our own atiras from our native and distant Dal!' exclaimed Daur, having lifted high over his head a small bunch of the already dried-up branches of atiras.

People rushed towards him. They tore off atiras leaves, lifted them to their faces, smelt them, pressed them to their breasts, kissed them and cried...The most simple grass of Abkhazia - atiras, a weed with a sharp spicy smell, a fern which they had rooted out from their own soil earlier, had become most precious to them.

'Atiras from Apsny!'

'Our own atiras! From our native Dal!'

The smell of their motherland entered their hearts and got them into a fighting mood. It reminded the exiles of their true home, blossoming Dal. Vigorous shouting could be heard all around:

'Back to Apsny!'

'Back to Dal!'

'We stay here not one day more!'

The excitement of the people increased. When tents had been taken up and belongings were tied in knapsacks, Abidge Bgaghba solemnly said:

'It is better to be lost in a struggle for our motherland than to drag on leading a shameful life in a foreign country.'

He was supported by hundreds of voices:

'To Apsny!'

'To Dal!'

'Let's go back home!'

And the Dal makhadjirs, like an uncontrollable avalanche, returned to their native land.

WEDDING

Abkhazian Prince Alhas Chachba decided to marry his son Safar to Cecilia, the daughter of Prince Kotsi Dadiani. On the appointed day the guests gathered, and were feasting in expectation of the bride's arrival, which was planned for that evening.

Escorts were sent to get her, headed by Maan Hazan - a noble person who respected people and demanded equal respect towards himself. Two hundred tame and saddled horses were sent, following instructions from Prince Alhas, as a gift to the father of the bride.

Prince Kotsi Dadiani feasted with his guests at his palace, in expectation of the escorts' arrival.

The escorts led by Maan Hazan, having arrived at that palace, dismounted, entered a courtyard and approached the front door. The owner, instead of coming down from a verandah towards his guests of honour and inviting them into the house, shouted down from above:

'Ah! Madman Hazan, have you been sent by Alhas for the bride? Well, come up, come up to the verandah!'

Kotsi Dadiani's behaviour was not at all what was expected within a wedding ritual.

Offended by Kotsi, good-natured Hazan didn't go up to the verandah, but instead answered:

'It's a pity that we don't have time to accept your kind invitation, Prince Kotsi. We were passing by and, carrying

out the will of our Prince Alhas Chachba, have stopped only to give you his regards and to wish you a long life.’

Hazan winked at the people accompanying him. They all remounted their horses and left the courtyard. Kotsi Dadiani was confused. His guests became silent. His daughter was waiting in a wedding dress... And the escorts had left.

Having arrived in the village of Leah, Maan Hazan left a saddled horse in each courtyard - a gift from Prince Alhas Chachba. After distributing almost all the horses, he dropped in at Prince David Dadiani’s house. The Prince was poor, but had a daughter Masho who was even more beautiful than Cecilia.

Maan Hazan shouted to David:

‘Receive visitors - escorts from Alhas Chachba. He asks you to marry your daughter Masho to his son.

The prince became puzzled.

‘It’s a great honour for me,’ he answered ‘but today Kotsi is waiting for escorts for his daughter. What’s going on?’

‘But Prince Alhas, his son and all of us wish to take your Masho.’

... When Prince Alhas saw Masho instead of Cecilia, he was extremely surprised, but having found out how badly Kotsi Dadiani had treated his escorts, he said: ‘You’ve done exactly right, Maan Hazan. You’re a true Abkhazian. And the new bride is even more beautiful than Cecilia!’

TINAT AND ALMASKHAN

‘All of us are wise men when it is necessary to give advice. But when it is necessary to avoid mistakes, we are all children. Isn’t that so?’ Old shepherd Barskil Bagh asked

me this, smiling artfully, having stopped to sing a song about Tinat and Almaskhan whilst accompanying himself on an Abkhazian pipe called an acharpan. He managed to play the acharpan by holding it in the left side of his mouth, and singing out of the right side.

We were on the peak of the Kobchar mountain. Between snow, glaciers and rocks was a small meadow covered with bright wild flowers, from which there was a dense and sweet aroma in the air.... On the mountain slope goats were grazing.

‘Why were you talking about wise men and children?’ I asked.

‘I have remembered something’ answered Barskil Bagh, bending over the acharpan. Then he told me the history of the song about Tinat and Almaskhan - a history to which he was a witness.

... A nobleman called Maan Kamlat from Lykhny had a daughter called Tinat when he was over eighty years of age. About Tinat’s beauty people composed and sang songs not only in Apsny, but also beyond its borders. But no matter how happy a person is, time doesn’t stop for him. Twenty years passed...

The old father couldn’t stop admiring the beauty of his daughter. But he realised he would not live much longer, which is why Maan Kamlat decided to choose a worthy husband for her. He shared this decision with Lykhny Prince Safar Chachba. The prince was a bit silly, but this didn’t prevent him thinking that he was very wise, and able to teach everybody.

‘I will give you some good advice’ the prince said. ‘Announce throughout Apsny that you will give your only daughter, the beautiful Tinat, to the man who on the

traditional day of races in Lykhny will be recognised firstly as the best archer, secondly the best dancer, and thirdly the best dzhigit.

Kamlat Maan gratefully accepted this advice from Prince Safar, and himself added a fourth condition - the young man had to be liked by Tinat. Neither of them doubted that such a worthy husband for Maan's daughter would be someone from a noble family, of course.

One month prior to the racing holiday, across all Abkhazia Maan Kamlat's decision was announced. A huge area in Lykhny that day was packed with people. It was difficult to say which there were more of: leaves on the trees or people in the area.

Beautiful Tinat sat on the balcony of a princely palace near to her father and Prince Safar Chachba, observing the competition between the hopeful young men. Her eyes didn't stay long on anyone until... Suddenly her heart was hammering like a trapped bird, and in her eyes there was a bright glow. If there's any truth in the idea of love at first sight, Tinat had just fallen in love...

Not far below her, there was a young man who was leaning against a fallen branch from a plane tree, talking to friends. He was gazing at Tinat. She wondered whether he had been looking at her for a long time. Harmonious, graceful, he was very handsome, and Tinat could not tear him from her sight.

On a balcony near to Tinat there were respectable people, to whom the role of judges of this celebratory competition had been entrusted. The destiny of the girl depended upon them.

When the competitions began, Tinat's thoughts were completely occupied by that handsome young man. Who

was he? Where was he from? It was the first time in her life she had seen such a man! What was his name?

As though answering her question, someone among his friends shouted:

'Almaskhan, let's go to shoot.'

The young man shuddered. He took his place on the shooting range. Before shooting he turned back and, as though accidentally, looked towards Tinat, letting her know that he was devoting this shot to her. He started to aim, and her heart stopped in anticipation.

His shot was extremely well-aimed. Almaskhan hit the middle of the target. Nobody else was able to do this.

Tinat sighed with relief. Prince Safar called the young man up to him.

'Who are you, young man? And what is your name?'

'I am just a shepherd, your Highness. My name is Almaskhan.'

'Whose son are you? Where are you from?'

'I'm a son of Kalgi Jamal from Abgarhik.'

'Bring me my pistol!' the prince ordered. And when the pistol was brought, he passed it to Almaskhan:

'Take it, young man! It is a prize from me for your excellent shooting.'

Almaskhan thanked the prince, then left because the competitions were still proceeding.

And in the dancing Almaskhan won. He was either promptly pulled forward, easily rushed on tiptoe, or stayed frozen in the correct place... Everyone knew this dance, the dance of a wounded fallow deer, but there was something unique in each of his movements.

Prince Safar ordered new leather boots to be brought.

'Take them!' he said to the young man. 'In them it will

be even easier for you to dance.’

Tinat was happy. But unexpectedly, black clouds came and covered the sun: Prince Safar’s confidants started to whisper discontentedly about something and then the prince ordered that Almaskhan not be allowed to enter the fancy riding competition.

‘After all, he’s from simple peasants’ the prince told the judges. ‘It’s impossible to give him the daughter of hereditary nobleman Maan Kamlat!’

For a long time young men from noble families were showing their fancy riding in front of a palace balcony. Tinat didn’t look at them. Grieved, she had disappeared into one of the palace rooms. Her father, having noticed his daughter’s long absence, went to search for her. He found her in tears and, guessing the reason, returned to Prince Safar:

‘Your Highness, would you please allow this young man Almaskhan to enter the fancy riding. I, of course, will not give my daughter to him, a mere peasant, but I ask you to let him also show his ability on a horse.’

The prince complied with old Maan Kamlat’s request. Finding out about this, Tinat again went onto the balcony.

The best and most glorified dzhigits - from Bzypin, from Abzhua and from Samurzakan - with admiration and envy looked on at Almaskhan’s masterful display of riding, which surpassed all of their artistic efforts. Pride in him filled Tinat’s heart.

Again Almaskhan had won first place, and was recognised as the best dzhigit. The prince was compelled to present to him a horse with a golden mane.

‘But how is it possible to give him the daughter of a nobleman?’ Confidants of the prince were indignant.

‘It is unacceptable for us to become related to ignorant

peasants!’

Most worried of all was Maan Kamlat’s cousin Maan Ozback. He angrily shouted to Tinat’s father:

‘The blue blood of the Maans has been never polluted by dirty country blood up until now!’

During his long life in this world Maan Kamlat had seen unfortunate marriages and many severely ruined lives, and so he decided to protect his Tinat. He understood that she had grown fond of this young man and would not be happy with any other. Of course, it was a pity he came from a peasant family!

When Prince Safar asked Maan Kamlat who to name as Tinat’s groom, the old man answered that he would present his daughter to Almaskhan.

Confidants of the prince grumbled, and well-born Maans led by Ozback were indignant. The holiday came to an end, but the people did not leave Lykhny.

Night fell there.

To whom is the darkness of southern nights not known? About this, Abkhazians say: ‘It’s too dark to see a sharp stick in front of your eyes.’

Under cover of such darkness Almaskhan secretly climbed up onto the palace balcony, took Tinat (who had been expecting him) and placed her in front of him on a horse, then dashed away with her... When Tinat’s disappearance was discovered a pursuit was organised, but old Maan Kamlat only quietly grinned, proud of his daughter’s determination.

‘We shouldn’t have started this competition’ said a distressed Prince Safar to Kamlat Maan. ‘We have both behaved like children.’

‘It always happens,’ the old man answered him. ‘All of

us are clever when it's necessary to give advice. Then we even look like wise men. But when it's necessary to avoid mistakes, we appear as children.'

It was impossible to catch up with the loving couple. And to this day, to the sounds of the acharpan, the song about the beautiful Tinat and her beloved, the simple peasant and brave dzhigit Almaskhan, is sung.

ONLY THE HARE RUNS QUICKLY

When Arlan Wahaid went to war, his young wife Shazina sensed that she would soon be a mother. Wahaid stayed fighting in the long and difficult war for five years, and was then taken prisoner and forced to work as a farm hand for the Prince of Akhchips, who at last decided to release him after a further fifteen years. When Wahaid was leaving, the Prince said:

'I have no money to pay you, but I will give you one piece of good advice. I think it will be useful. Never make hasty decisions. A serious person solves nothing in a hurry - only the hare runs quickly.'

He then said: 'Always have a hot heart and a cold head.'

Wahaid's wife gave a birth to a son who, without a father for twenty years, grew into a strong and handsome young man. For a long time young Jegim believed his father was dead, and Shazina thought the same.

Arlan Wahaid arrived back in his native village at night. He didn't immediately enter into his house, but went around to the back, sat down and moved two planks of the wattled wall of the patskha apart, then glanced inside. His heart was pounding with excitement, and to avoid giving himself

away he tried not to breathe.

A thin wax candle and the small hearth lit the inside very poorly. Wahaid couldn't fail to recognize his beloved Shazina. Next to her, behind a rough table, he saw a tall and handsome young man. Shazina was feeding him supper and often hugged and kissed him.

'He is her lover!' was the terrible thought that struck Wahaid. He decided to leave immediately and never more to return. Then into his head confused by jealousy came the decision to kill the lover and to run away unnoticed.

Wahaid knocked at the door:

'I'm a traveller, and I've got lost. Would you allow me to spend the night?'

'Of course, come in!' both answered him at once, and hospitably offered him supper and shelter.

He refused supper despite repeated offers, and, having sat down far away from the hearth and candle so that his wife wouldn't recognize him, he began to look around. The young man came to him and offered a glass of wine, instead of water which the visitor had asked for. Wahaid was already putting his hand to his dagger, but at that moment the young man departed from him.

Suddenly Wahaid recollected the advice of the prince: 'Never make hasty decisions...' and he thought 'The whole night is ahead of me, I should follow the prince's advice. It's all I've earned for the last twenty years.'

His hosts were interested in him, who he was and where he came from. He invented a lot of stories about himself, and then asked:

'Have you two been married for a long time?'

'What?!' exclaimed Shazina. 'That's my son! My son who never saw his father. Before he had even been born,

he had already lost his father.’ She spoke through her tears.

The young man gently hugged his mother and began to try to calm her.

Arlan Wahaid didn’t hesitate. He came to his wife and embraced her. They stared at each other for a long time. The candle burnt down, and both of them just looked and looked...

Then Wahaid turned to his son and repeated this very helpful advice:

‘My dear son, never solve anything in haste. Only the hare runs quickly.’

LAYLA AND ADAMUR

Prince Elizbar Mkhaidze lived in Abkhazia, and one day his niece Layla arrived from Tiflis to stay for a while. Some days passed and the big, bright eyes of the Georgian girl had already enchanted many young Abkhazian men. She in her turn appreciated their intelligence, good manners and constant politeness, but her heart remained free.

And then the time came when she also fell in love. The prince was celebrating the birthday of his niece. Among those invited was a young man named Adamur. Layla fell for him at first sight, because she had often seen men like him in her maiden dreams. From then on, she could think of no one but Adamur. As the magnolia reaches for sunlight, so Layla reached for him. But Adamur looked at her with indifferent eyes, showing no interest in her at all. Did this mean she had a competitor? If so, who was she?

All that evening numerous admirers surrounded Layla, but all she was thinking about was Adamur, and she looked

for a reason to start talking to him. This reason soon appeared. One of the young men stopped Adamur as he was passing by:

‘Did you know, Amchi Hajarat presented his favourite horse Jarr to Taib Sharmat today.’

‘Jarr? That can’t be true! He wouldn’t sell it for any money! How did it happen?’

‘Very simply. Taib saw Jarr during the fancy riding, and without hesitation he said that the horse was very pleasing to him. And after that Amchi had to make a gift of it!’

‘That’s nothing’ said the other young man, whose name was Nuri. ‘Alhas Achba presented his complete summer residence to a Russian artist staying with him during the summer, the house with a garden on the seacoast in Gudauta! The Russian didn’t know the Abkhazian custom, of course. And by the time he did, it was already too late to refuse.’

Layla was delighted with the possibility of starting to talk to Adamur:

‘Tell me, how can you explain such generosity by Abkhazians?’ she asked.

Adamur, looking into her eyes shining like sapphires and appearing not to notice her blushing face, answered:

‘We have a certain custom. If you like anything very much, the owner must always present it to you. Therefore a visitor sometimes involuntarily forces the owner to present him with something that the guest found pleasing. If you praise something, it’s impossible after that to refuse it as a gift, because such a refusal is a big insult.’

‘But if something is extremely pleasing to you... and there are no ways of hiding your feelings - what can you do then?’

‘Then... Then it is necessary to take it!’ said Adamur.

They both laughed.

‘At this place, for example’ continued Adamur, ‘I yesterday carelessly praised this papakha* I’m wearing, and the owner immediately presented it to me.’

The girl had already noticed how the silvery shade of the papakha, hanging over Adamur's striking eyebrows, surprisingly suited his blue eyes.

Her heart was beating quickly. Her eyes and face were burning. Adamur was not blind, and surely he could see how charming she was? Layla overcame her confusion:

‘I see, Adamur, that people from Abkhazia are very generous. Why are you so greedy then?’

The young man was surprised. For some time he just looked at her questioningly.

‘I’m greedy?’ he said at last. ‘Why do you think so? Unless I have not given you what was pleasing to you?’

‘Yes!’

‘What?’

Layla looked down.

‘You’d like to take something which belongs to me?’

‘Yes!’

‘What?’ repeated Adamur in despair.

‘Your heart’ said Layla timidly.

HANIFA’S TRICKS

Together with my friend Kumf I often wandered through blossoming Alpine meadows. Here we once also met shepherds from a collective-farm. They were sitting in a circle asking an old man about something.

We exchanged greetings. The shepherds provided us

with traditional sour milk with snow. Then they again began to ask the old man:

‘Well go on, Esnat! Tell us! Please!’

‘Leave me alone,’ the old man begged. ‘After all, visitors have arrived. It’s not the right time. What will they think of us, chattering among ourselves like this?’

‘Nobody will say anything bad about us,’ he was reassured. ‘Your story will entertain our guests, and they will be grateful to you. Can you think of any amusing yarn about the levity of women? After all, you must know lots of them.’

They asked us to support their request, and we too began to ask the old man.

‘Well, I will tell you,’ the old man said in surrender ‘only this time I will speak not about women, but about how easily they can sometimes trick their husbands.’

‘All of you know’ he began ‘that sendis is an ancient Abkhazian game. It relies on the fact that it is possible for one person to deceive another better, and so more successfully. The deceived person loses whatever they play for, and the one who has deceived wins.’

Beautiful Hanifa, Shaudid’s young wife, played sendis very well. She often lied better than her husband, and he paid her winnings to her with pleasure.

Once Hanifa, in the absence of her husband, invited a lover home, but the husband unexpectedly returned. Frightened Hanifa only just had time to hide her lover in a chest.

‘Is someone here?’ Shaudid asked ominously.

‘No’ was Hanifa’s calm reply.

‘Then why is the table laid for two?’ her husband persisted ‘and whose is this half-full glass of wine? Who

hasn't finished smoking this cigarette? After all, you don't smoke.'

Hanifa turned pale and was silent.

'Where is he?!' cried her husband. A dagger glinted in his hand. 'I will kill him and you as well!' he threatened, and he started to ransack the house. He approached the chest and took hold of the lid.

'Sendis! Sendis!' Hanifa cheerfully exclaimed as she sat on the chest, having regained her self-control. She clapped her hands and her husband stopped as if rooted to the spot.

'Sendis!' she repeated. 'I have deceived you and have won this game of sendis.'

'You've done it most cleverly' said Shaudid. 'It all looked so plausible.'

'I thought a long time about it' the woman smiled. 'You can invent anything to win a beautiful dress.'

'Yes darling, you've won the dress, and tomorrow I'll buy it for you,' answered Shaudid, embracing his wife.

'Well, now let's go to the river, to have a breath of fresh air,' said Hanifa as she playfully pulled at her husband's hand. 'I think it's very hot in here.' And she dragged him away after her.

In the meantime, the lover easily got out of the chest and disappeared.

Another time Shaudid had once again come back home unexpectedly. He knocked at the door for ages, but Hanifa didn't open it. She again had a lover.

'I won't open it to you until Aunt Kama is here' she shouted. 'Go and bring Aunt Kama.'

'Aunt Kama?' - Shaudid was perplexed. 'But she lives at the other end of the village. What do you need her for?'

'What for! What for!' Hanifa mimicked. 'I can only

open the door if she is with you.'

The puzzled husband left to fetch Aunt Kama.

A lot of time passed before the voice of Aunt Kama was at last heard outside the door. Hanifa opened it and, crying and shaking with fear, pointed to the splinters of a broken mirror scattered around the floor.

'Aunt Kama! Aunt Kama!' she sobbed, 'you can see what I've done - I've accidentally broken the mirror which you gave me. My husband liked it so much... Now he will kill me... Protect me!'

'Don't be afraid, dear, don't be afraid!' Aunt Kama said gently. 'After all, he loves you.'

'Why have you just invented such a story?' Shaudid said tenderly. 'Not only have I never lifted my hand to you, but I've never even raised my voice. Why did you decide that I liked this mirror so much?' He embraced his wife and ingenuously said 'You're all the same, you women, very naive! If only you knew yourselves as well as I know you!'

Shaudid was sure that nobody knew female nature as well as he did.

Everyone laughed loud and long.

'Well,' the old man concluded 'there is still a mind in the fool who understands nonsense, but there is no mind in the one who is confident of his own wisdom.'

THE INHERITANCE

Rich Abukh Shyab had a son - a reveller and a squanderer. The father understood that as soon as he died, his boy would quickly spend all his wealth. For a long time, the father thought about how to help the son.

‘When I die, Jezim, live as you want’ he said. ‘There is only one thing I ask you to promise me - keep these three items,’ and he pointed to a stool, a rope and a hook twisted in the ceiling to hold a lamp. ‘Save them as a safeguard’ his father said. ‘I know that you will waste your inheritance. And when you are convinced that all your drinking companions who were pretending to be your friends have now abandoned you, and you remain absolutely alone, what you will need to do is to hang yourself, as the only way out. Then a stool, a rope and a hook will be useful to you.’

Everything happened exactly as Abukh Shyab had predicted. After his death his son, together with his friends, quickly wasted the family inheritance. When nobody wanted to know him any more, as he appeared to be without any further means, he arrived at the point of despair.

And then he remembered the three things which were still with him. Quickly having made the obvious decision, he climbed up onto the stool, tied the rope to the hook, tightened a loop around his neck and pushed away the stool with his foot...

But as soon as he hung himself, the hook immediately broke. And from the hole which appeared in the ceiling there started to pour down... gold coins!

The hook, it appeared, had been screwed into the bottom of a box hidden in the attic, where all the gold belonging to the dead Abukh Shyab had been stored.

Only then did the son understand the sense of his father’s last request. He had returned to help his son even after death, at the time when that son, having learnt poverty and loneliness, had come to the very brink of disaster.

From that time on, nobody could recognize Jezim as the wastrel they had known before.

JARRA

For Abkhazians, one of the most popular games at horse riding events was cheraz. It’s still played now, but very seldom. I always liked it. For cheraz they prepare a path on a flat platform about a hundred metres long and five or six metres wide, then cover it with water so that it becomes slippery. On both sides of this original skating rink, both riders and pedestrians stand. Participants in cheraz perform one after another.

A dzhigit should speed a horse and, rushing like a whirlwind, he must then stop it just before the skating rink - to give it, so to say, a full brake. The horse starts smoothly sliding on all its four feet. It is helped by the steel plates with which horseshoes are covered. Cheraz’s rules require that the horse slides along the whole skating rink to the end, remaining upright just as if it were on dry earth. A dzhigit should sit erect on the horse, keeping exactly as if he were stuck to that horse. Everything is most important here: how the horse slides and how well the horseman keeps his position on the back of the horse. Not so many couples in the game - both horse and dzhigit - manage to execute cheraz’s rules completely. Either a dzhigit will make a superfluous movement or a horse’s feet will turn in, or it will even fall and drag the dzhigit along behind it...

Everyone’s favourite was once kept in Lykhny, by old man Tlabgan Ahuba from the mountain village of Chlow. This man had literally eclipsed everyone on his handsome horse Jarra.

Jarra! Jarra! As if it were here now I can still see before me that jet-black horse! I’ve never anywhere else met such a horse. And the main thing was that in all kinds of dzhigit

activities, and especially in cheraz, he had no equal. And no matter how much money Tlabgan was offered for Jarra, he always answered: 'This horse is my only pleasure. I will not give him to anybody for anything on earth.' He was offered other perfect horses in exchange for Jarra, but he always refused.

A young man called Astamur Bartsits, from the village of Blabyrkhua, decided to acquire Jarra. The reason was that in competitions of cheraz his fiancée, the beautiful Shazina, also took an interest. She had said to him: 'You would become even more perfect, Astamur, more attractive to me, if you owned that horse.' So Astamur decided to get Jarra by any means. He was hot-headed and reckless, was Astamur. He offered the old man, in addition to money, two more horses, two oxen, a cow, and finally, a good silicon gun which had a very high value. But old man Tlabgan was unmoveable.

'No!' he interrupted, 'I won't sell Jarra for any price.'

This made Astamur even more hot-headed. He decided not to return home without Jarra. Eventually he realised that the horse needed to be stolen. But how?

Tlabgan's courtyard was protected by two huge malicious dogs. Jarra's owner also went outside from time to time during the night to check on the horse himself.

Astamur did not come back home for two months. His family had begun to worry. God only knows what his fiancée had thought. They sent someone to investigate, who returned and informed them that Astamur was alive and healthy. He was detained on important business, and would not be coming back until he had finished it.

Astamur really had been very busy. He had spent all his time spying on Tlabgan, following him everywhere he went,

and at night he wandered unobserved around his courtyard.

And at last his time arrived.

Following Tlabgan, he somehow overtook him at a crossing over the river Kodor. The old man dismounted as Astamur approached and greeted him:

'I ask you, respected Tlabgan, please take me on the horse with you across the river. I'm in a great hurry.'

The old man, not suspecting anything bad, answered:

'Why do we both need to go together? Sit on Jarra and cross the river, then send him back. I will wait.'

Astamur was beside himself with joy. He sat down on the horse, quickly traversed the river and then shouted from the opposite bank:

'Say goodbye to the horse, Tlabgan! I won't be returning it!' The old man was silent for a while.

'Well, young man, take him,' he eventually said, 'but if you still have any spark of decency in you, and you still remember the alamis,* tell people if they ask you by what means you obtained my Jarra.'

Having heard this, Artamur stopped the horse. Anything, even a hail of bullets being fired at him, would not frighten him. But those words from the old man forced him to turn the horse round abruptly. He again reached the river and started crossing back.

The old man watched him like hunters watch game falling from the sky after a successful shot.

Having crossed the river, the young man jumped off the horse and brought it to the old man.

'Take the horse, Tlabgan,' he said in a voice breaking with emotion, 'Forgive and forget all that has occurred between us.'

The old man smiled with relief.

‘A person governs his own destiny,’ he answered. ‘You have now dealt with this nobly, and I’ll reward you for it - I’ll give Jarra to you!’ He handed him the reins. ‘Take him!’

The young man’s heart was overcome with joy. He bent down and brought the hem of the old man’s Circassian coat to his lips:

‘Thanks!’

However, Astamur did not accept the expensive gift.

‘No, respected Tlabgan,’ he said after a short pause, ‘I cannot... Forgive me, but I know just how much Jarra means to you.’ And he left.

‘Live long, lad! Good luck be with you!’

BRIDAL APPROVAL

Old Koblukh decided to personally meet the girl with whom his grandson had become enamoured, and to decide whether she was clever or not. After all, the happiness of a family depends not so much upon the beauty of the wife, but more upon her mind. Not without reason people say:

‘The wife’s tongue can become a ladder from which misfortune falls upon the house.’

And so under some pretext or other he entered the girl’s house. He started chatting to her father:

‘I heard a casual conversation between two of my fellow travellers today. It seemed very strange to me. One of them asked the other, an old acquaintance of mine: ‘How many years to snow at the top? And how many years to a stream?’ And my acquaintance answered him: ‘Forty years to snow at the top and ten to a stream.’

‘Yes, a really strange conversation,’ said his host

thoughtfully.

‘If I may, father, I’ll tell you what they were speaking about,’ the girl said timidly.

‘Tell us, lass, tell us!’ Koblukh asked her.

‘Yes, tell us, if you have really understood,’ her father said. ‘You’re a clever girl.’

‘They were talking about our respected guest’ the girl answered. ‘The first wished to find out how long ago he turned grey, and how many years his eyes have been watering.’

‘That’s probably right,’ said a delighted Koblukh, ‘we were very puzzled over their words.’

The girl’s father smiled approvingly.

‘My neighbours have run into serious trouble, and nobody knows how to get rid of it’ the visitor then started to say. ‘Our Prince Jamlat - may he be three times cursed! - has decided to sell my neighbour’s son to Turkish merchants. To get at him, he called the young man, gave him a big stone and ordered him to cook it in three days, instead of a lamb, and to bring the meat to him. That time finishes tomorrow. His family will be heartbroken, but they can think of nothing they can do.’

‘They can think of nothing?’ the girl said indignantly. ‘Let him drag back the stone and say to the prince:

‘Certainly I will cook the stone. But you first kill it and skin it.’

Old Koblukh was convinced that the girl was clever.

Then he decided to test her endurance and invited her and her father to go with him on a visit to his friend who lived high in the mountains.

The father did not consider it polite to refuse his guest, and soon the three of them all left the house.

On their way the old man asked the girl: 'Go into those woods, lass, and bring a friend to me.' The girl understood him, and soon brought him a walking-stick. When they reached the beginning of a steep slope her father began to grumble that they still had a long way to go. Then the girl told him that she would cut their journey by half. And she began to tell them such an interesting story that they naturally overcame their tiredness from climbing and quickly reached their destination. So she had reduced their journey as promised.

Old Koblukh was then convinced that the girl would be a good wife for his grandson.

FINAL ADVICE

Jessib had long tried to persuade his grandson Chigits that he had to stop stealing and gambling. But it was all in vain. Having felt death approaching, the old man called his grandson to him for the last time.

'Soon I will leave this world' he said. 'Until now you have not obeyed me. I ask you to promise to carry out my last wish. You can continue to live as you did before. But find an old skilled thief, mention my name, and ask him to teach you how to steal successfully. Find also an old skilled gambler, and ask him to teach you how to play cards well. Each person should know their crafts.' These words bewildered the grandson, but he promised to follow his grandfather's final advice.

And when old Jessib had died, the grandson, keeping his given promise, found the 'king' of thieves. He was surprised at what he saw.

In the small room of the king of thieves there was almost no furniture at all. The owner lay on an old worn-out ottoman. On the floor was a cracked bowl from which it was obvious that no one had eaten for a long time. The visitor had to sit down on a bed which creaked ominously under him, just about ready to collapse.

'Don't be afraid,' the 'king' encouraged the young man 'it will hold you! A lot of people have sat on that bed. What has brought you to me?'

'My grandfather, dying,' said Chigits, 'advised me to find the most skilled thief I could, and to learn from him the art of stealing.'

The king of thieves cheered up considerably.

'Your grandfather gave you most useful advice. It's lucky you found me, instead of those milksops, small pilferers who spend most of their time in prison. Our business demands talent' he said with dignity. 'The thief without brains and skill is not a thief, but a suicide case, and that's all you can say about him. Come to me tonight as soon as it gets dark.'

'Thanks,' answered Chigits as he left. But he never returned.

Conditions in the thief's room had made a stronger impression upon him than all his grandfather's words. The poverty and dirt spoke for themselves. There it was - the 'happiness' of thieves!

Having left the old thief, Chigits went to visit the 'king' of gamblers. That man made an even stronger impression upon him: the gambler with dishevelled hair was kneeling and feverishly throwing card after card onto the floor.

The young man waited for an opportunity and then spoke about the purpose of his visit.

‘Oh, you were not mistaken!’ the gambler proudly declared. ‘I have played for more than thirty years.’

For an instant he left the cards and looked at Chigits through inflamed eyes. Then he again began to hazardously deal the cards, and invited his visitor to play with him.

But the young man offered his thanks and then hastened to leave.

He had understood that the old gambler had lived his life for nothing.

So wise Jessib rescued his grandson. The old man knew that life teaches much better than any morals.

LABOUR MONEY

‘You’ve already grown up,’ a father once said to his son, ‘it’s time to start to work and to earn yourself bread. Go and don’t come back, until you have earned at least a rouble.’

The young man grinned and left. He was lazy and did not dream of working. He loafed all the day long, and came back home in the evening. His compassionate mother helped him by giving him ten roubles.

His father tore up the money and rounded on him:

‘That money wasn’t earned by you. Go away and don’t dare to come into my sight again until you’ve really earned money with your own hands.’

The son was perplexed: who informed his father?

All day long he wandered around parks and coffee houses, not once thinking about getting a job and again relying on his mother. And his mother, of course, once again came to his rescue.

In the evening the idler once more appeared before his

father.

‘Take it, father’ he said, handing him the money. ‘I’ve earned it.’

But his father tore the money into scraps and again shouted at his son, repeating everything that he had told him the previous time.

The son was totally bemused as to how his father could again have found out the truth.

On the third day he at last decided to do some work. Strong hands are required everywhere. In the evening the young man was fairly tired when he returned home. He came to his father and handed over the money he had earned.

His father took it and wanted to rip it. But this time things were different. His son seized his hand and cried:

‘What are you doing? Don’t tear it! After all, I worked all day to earn it. I’ve got painful callouses on my hands,’ and he showed his palm to his father.

This time his father smiled and said:

‘Now I believe that you’ve earned this money. That’s why it’s so valuable to you.’

THE FIRST BOOK

*‘The power of words is colossal
Standing in the right place.’*

Bualo

This story was told to me by my compatriot and old friend Shkhangery Bzhania, a one hundred and forty year-old Abkhazian.

I’m not exaggerating - he actually was a hundred and

forty seven years of age or maybe more, anyway, not less. But even at his advanced age he was in good health, and I was once very envious of that.

I went up with him to the fourth floor of the Sukhumi hotel 'Abkhazia', where I was staying. On the third floor I felt a strong palpitation and stopped to recover my breath. The old man excitedly continued speaking, as always, about something entertaining. Not interrupting his speech, he overtook me by a few steps, looked back and, having cast a glance at my probably pale face, asked in alarm:

'What's happened to you? Have you hurt your foot?'

'No, no,' I answered, putting a hand on my chest, 'heart...'

By his astonished face I concluded that he didn't understand me. He had probably, in all his long life, never even thought of where his heart was...

When we came into my room the old man, at my invitation, sat in an armchair, and having seen a heap of carelessly scattered books on the desk he immediately started to examine them.

'You have books written in our Abkhazian language?' he asked with a keen interest.

'Well, certainly' I answered, and spread out in front of him some books by Abkhazian writers.

'They're very good!' he approved. Then he reflected further and asked 'Perhaps you also have the first Abkhazian book? The one which was printed before all others?'

I understood which book he was asking about, and smiled.

'No, my dear Shkhangery, that book is very rare. I've never even seen it...'

'But I have!' the old man said triumphantly, showing me

his wrinkled hands, 'and these fingers have even browsed through it!'

I became very excited.

'When was that, Shkhangery? Where? Tell me!'

Then during Bzhanias's story I was reminded of a memorable episode in the tragic history of our small but long-suffering country. It involuntarily made me think of an ancient legend about how some country, losing a war, asked a neighbouring state for help. In reply to this request, instead of armies or at least weapons their neighbours sent a sickly, ordinary-looking old man. This messenger was met in an unfriendly manner, having been seen upon his arrival as a sneer from the neighbours. But the old man didn't show any sign that he had noticed any snub, and at once began to read verses in front of a returning defeated army. Amazing in their vividness and force of belief, they poured into the hearts of the listeners deep feelings of true patriotism and a will for victory, and inspired by these magic verses the retreating armies found boldness and courage, then crumpled and destroyed the enemy hordes.

This legend had no direct relation to Shkhangery's story, but when he was speaking it suddenly came into my mind, perhaps because an episode in his story was concerned with the power of words...

'When was it?' Shkhangery thoughtfully repeated my question and, with half-closed eyes, kept silent for a while... 'It is my belief that not less than a hundred years have passed since then...'

And, after having again kept silent, he then continued: 'You have studied, and of course know from books, about those times when our princes condemned the people into exile. It was then.'

‘Are you speaking about the makhadjirs?’ I asked.

‘Yes...’ grief saddened his face, ‘among the makhadjirs I had been doomed to exile in Turkey. And from that tragedy I was rescued only by that book about which I have asked you. Our first Abkhazian book! After all, in life it often happens that an unexpected item can change the course of events, your destiny...’

From Shkhangery’s first words, pictures of that terrible time appeared in front of my eyes.

...When after more than three hundred years of Turkish sovereignty they had at last been forced to leave Abkhazia, local princes themselves and through agents began to spread false, ridiculous rumours that Russian laws were even more awful than Turkish, and convinced Abkhazians to move to Turkey. The princes wanted to make a profit from the sale of the country’s land.

But the people did not wish to leave their native land voluntarily, and resisted as much as they could. Using the excuse of ‘national revolts’, the princes created gangs of mercenaries and, with the approval of the imperial authorities, arranged attacks on the peaceful population, ruined and set fire to houses and completely devastated settlements, forcing peasants to abandon their native places. So Gagra was destroyed, and Gumista, Dal and all the area along the Military-Sukhumi road to the very ridge of the Caucasus became desolated. Makhadjirs left on Turkish ships, crossed the sea and died exiled in a foreign land...

The Abkhazian people at that time underwent a terrible ordeal... I have always remembered this meeting with old Bzhania. Here is his story, the story of an eyewitness and participant in the events of the 1860s to 1880s - years which left indelible wounds in the hearts of our people.

...It was a cold, dank autumn. For five days it had drizzled incessantly. It seemed as though nature itself was crying about the exiles leaving.

That day the turn of the Abzhui people - inhabitants of southern Abkhazia - had come. On the sloping sea coast at the mouth of the narrow mountain river Merkula a purple flag with a gold half moon and tassles flew above an oak tree in a glade. Here was the gathering place for peasants being moved to Turkey. And people were flowing down here from everywhere.

Peasants’ patskhas were burning in the distance. Along impassable dirt tracks carts carrying pitiable belongings were moving towards the sea, harnessed by oxen and buffalos.

On small fishing-boats and barges, rolling and pitching near to the coast, the wind inflated sails and tousled the clothes of already drenched people. Over the little vessels flocks of white-winged seagulls twisted, and their unceasing hoarse shouts sounded as if they were warning the makhadjirs about forthcoming disasters...

Muddy with rain, the waters of the Merkula had spread widely. It had taken a lot of effort to ford it and to get out to the glade. Hundreds of people had flocked there. Many were in tatters, through which could be seen their emaciated bodies...With melancholy they peered into the sea, all thinking only one thing: ‘What is waiting for us there, in a foreign land?’

In the glade there was an ominous silence, interrupted only by the noise of crashing sea waves and the scraping of rowlocks in boats carrying people to the ship.

‘Great grief always stays silent, lad,’ remarked Shkhangery. ‘It doesn’t burst into tears, but presses down

on the heart like a stone...' Then he continued:

My friend Hib Shaudid from the village of Gup, an indefatigable but trustful person, began to console the poor creatures. 'Hold fast, people! Take courage and be strong!' he beseeched them. 'Look at those barges! They were sent to us by the Padishah himself. Our glorious Prince Alybey went to him in Turkey, asked him to shelter us, and the Padishah promised us rest and peaceful work on our own lands. Together with Alybey was Maph. Listen to what he says about makhadjirs from Gumista who have already moved there!'

And, really, Maph appeared before us. We did not then realise that he had sold himself a long time before then to the cunning and artful Prince Alybey.

'Hib Shaudid told you the truth, brothers,' confirmed Maph. 'I swear to you that people from Gumista live on Turkish lands like they do in paradise. The Padishah has accepted them as his brothers.'

As soon as Maph said these words Prince Alybey, surrounded by his people, entered the glade.

'What are you waiting for?' he vehemently asked the crowd. 'Do you want the Padishah's vessels to depart without you?'

Hib Shaudid stepped decisively towards Alybey.

'Listen, Alybey,' he said, looking directly into Alybey's eyes as he continued to question him:

'You can see how exhausted we all are. The best sons of Apsny lost their lives in an unequal struggle. Our settlements have been reduced to ashes and we have been driven out from our native land. And who did all this? Our princes! You are a prince as well, but you have been brought up by us, and you shouldn't forget that. We want to believe

you. So answer me, thinking of the alamis, whether it is true that the Padishah calls us to himself like brother-Moslems? And can we believe him? What is waiting for us far away from our native Apsny?'

Again a heavy, disturbing silence fell.

Alybey started to speak, quietly and insinuatingly.

'My dear fellow-countrymen! If only you could understand how arduous it is to me to see your grief, the tears of your wives, mothers, children! I can't stand it! I'm afraid that soon mothers' breasts, dried up from grief and poverty, won't be able to give any milk to their children. You see, I know Russians well, their hatred of us Abkhazians, their severe laws. All of you will be lost here! But there, on the coast of Turkey, under the protection of the great Padishah, you will find a new native land! I want for you only happiness. Hurry, or you'll be late! You shouldn't remain here one day more. After all, I'll be there together with you. You can rely on my princely word!'

Hib Shaudid turned back and read in the eyes of the people that their doubts had started to disappear...

'We believe you, Alybey' he said, and began to collect his belongings and to call his family after him.

The others began to move also, following his example. But suddenly a loud distant voice was heard:

'Stop, people! Where are you going? To a shameful wandering around Turkey? To strangers? Haven't you seen them for a long time? Have you missed them? Do you wish to leave Apsny to an arbitrary destiny?'

All turned their heads towards a small mound at the brink of the glade and saw Taib standing there. The peasants knew him. Taib was one of those who bravely condemned princes and time and again put their mercenaries to flight.

The voice of Taib had begun to sound even more strongly:

‘Do not hope to find a haven of peace in a foreign land! Also remember that for us there is no earth and no sky more perfect than the earth and the sky in Apsny! Alybey is deceiving you! He is not a white crow among black, he is a prince the same as all the others, and he will ruin you!’

‘You’re not speaking the truth, Taib!’ screamed Maph. ‘Understand, to remain here is senseless! Come with us as well! Know this - if you stay here, you’ll be in for it...’

‘If you’re not afraid of death, threats don’t worry you at all’ answered Taib.

People again stood undecided. Who was right? Taib or Maph and Alybey? Was the prince a deceiver or a deliverer?

‘Maph! Adgur! Damei!’ - the prince suddenly called his helpers - ‘Where is my old mother? Where are my children? Bring them here!’

And when Alybey was surrounded by his family led by the grey-haired princess his mother, the prince put his hands on his children and lifted them high over his head.

‘You don’t believe me, do you?’ he exclaimed. ‘So let my mother and my children be the first to show you the way to your new homeland!’

And he passed the children to his helpers, and those at the front brought them to the boats. His old mother the princess, leaning on a walking-stick, also went with them.

This unexpected action by the prince overcame the doubts of the makhadjirs, and they began to pack up again.

But when people were already approaching the sea, a shrill child’s voice suddenly rang through the crowd and was heard by everybody:

‘I won’t go! Leave me alone! I don’t want to! I won’t

go anywhere!’

Then everyone saw a little boy of eleven or twelve years old with a knapsack over his shoulders. He was being strongly pulled by an old decrepit man and the boy, desperately resisting, continued to cry out: ‘Leave me alone! I don’t want to go to Turkey!’

‘Why don’t you want to?’ Hib Shaudid asked having quickly come nearer to the boy, and then he questioned the old man: ‘Is this your grandson?’

‘No,’ the old man said. ‘This disobedient boy was charged to my care by his father before he died. My conscience does not allow me to leave him here, but he refuses to go with me to Turkey.’

‘And what was his father’s name?’

‘Arysh Kamlat from the village of Tquarchal.’

‘Why don’t you want to go there, where everybody else is going?’ the boy was asked by Hib Shaudid.

‘I won’t go!’ he obstinately answered. ‘I want to go to a Russian school.’

‘You have obviously gone mad,’ his old guardian snapped at him. ‘Your school has been burnt. Where will you study?’

‘In Sukhumi!’ the boy answered. ‘I’ve been told that the Russians have opened a big new school there.’

‘The whole country has turned upside down, the end of the world is approaching, but he just wants to study!’ the old man abruptly burst out with malicious laughter. ‘It’s like in the proverb - ‘The army was at war, but Azamat ploughed the land...’

‘Let him plough’ the boy muttered gloomily whilst staring at the ground, ‘and I will study!’

‘Into a coffin I will be driven by this intolerable boy!’

the old man exclaimed and seized the stubborn little lad by his shoulder. 'This is the last time I tell you, Sharakh: to the boat! Without any more arguments!'

'I won't give in! Don't touch me!' Sharakh desperately seized his knapsack.

Shaudid and Taib came nearer to the arguing couple.

'Calm down, kid,' Taib said tenderly. 'Who needs your things? Do you imagine they have any value?'

'Hah! Value!' the old man grinned. 'One old coat, a pair of worn out shoes and a book!'

'A book?' asked Shaudid. 'What does he need that for?'

'You ask him! This pigheaded boy has only one single interest: from dawn till dusk, he's buried in that book, muttering different words.'

'In the Russian language?' asked Taib quickly.

'No, in ours, in Abkhazian...'

'In Abkhazian?' Shaudid was surprised. 'Does any book in our language exist?'

'Yes, it does. It's in his knapsack.'

Taib became agitated: 'Why didn't you say anything, Sharakh? Show us this book!'

The boy was mistrustful, and frowned as he looked at Shaudid, but he didn't utter a sound.

'Listen, my friend,' said Taib, becoming more and more anxious, 'I give you my word, nobody will dare to take your treasure away from you. And in case you didn't hear, I also don't want to go to Turkey. Believe me, I wish to study for the pure pleasure of it like you do, and I would go to school if I could. Allow us to have a look at your book!'

Having felt that Taib's words came from the heart, the boy began to untie his knapsack. The people who had crowded round them with interest observed how Sharakh,

having taken out the book, handed it to Taib. It was a small book with a beautiful drawing on the cover.

Taib cautiously took it, examined it from both sides, then opened, carefully looked through, closed and opened it again.

'Let me also look at it, Taib!' exclaimed Shaudid, and the book passed to his hands.

...Shkhangery Bzhanian interrupted his story and for about a minute steadfastly looked into space, as if peering into the remote past.

'It was then,' he said at last, 'I held that first Abkhazian book in my hands.'

Then he excitedly continued:

I'll never, never be able to forget it! Think about it - I was younger then than you are now, and I yearned to learn a lot and to understand things... You are lucky, you were born during better times and already in your youth you were able to become a scholar. But we then lived in darkness and reached for light, like fishermen on a rainy night who were searching for a lighthouse. But that light was hidden from us by our rulers the princes. In our homeland lived Turks and Persians, Greeks and Armenians, Georgians and Russians. Some of them were able to write in their native language and to read their own books. But we had neither an alphabet, nor books, nor anyone who was literate. Think of it, and you will better understand the excitement of those unfortunate makhadjirs when they saw the first book in their native language. All of them surrounded Sharakh more and more closely, a crowd arrived, and requests then came from everywhere to show the book, to be allowed to at least touch it. It was passed from hand to hand, and Taib and Shaudid warned everyone who took it:

‘Be very careful, friends! Don’t tear it!’

‘Don’t make it dirty! Don’t drop it!’

From the crowd exclamations were heard - ‘What a beautiful book! We want to know what’s written in it!’

‘We want to find out too!’ ‘So do we!’ others cried. ‘What’s the book about?’

Taib questioned Sharakh. ‘Can you read some words for us?’

‘I can!’ the boy fervently answered.

‘Read, lad!’

‘Yes, yes! Even just a few words!’

The boy assumed a dignified air. Being proud that he had become important in the opinion of adults, even old men, he pompously repeated: ‘I Can! I can read the whole book! Give it to me!’

A rumble of approval spread through the crowd. Not one of those people surrounding the little boy was able to either read or write. Only he among all of them was able to, only he, Sharakh, the son of the killed Arysh Kamlat.

‘Give the book back to him!’ someone shouted.

‘He will read the printed words to us!’

‘In our own language!’

And the book floated back to him across a sea of human hands. Shaudid picked the boy up and put him on a tree-trunk stump so that he was visible to all.

‘Ap-sua an-ban - the Abkhazian abc-book...’ Sharakh read the syllables on the front of the book loudly and distinctly.

‘Further, read further!’

‘Open the book and read further!’

And Sharakh, thumbing through the abc-book, read the Abkhazian alphabet, letter after letter, and then passed on to

words. The crowd listened to him in intense silence; native words familiar for a long time now began to be heard in a new fashion, as if bewitching people.

When Sharakh stopped, some old man exclaimed emotionally:

‘I honestly never thought I would see anything like that before I died...’ Then, having squeezed through the crowd to the boy, he asked: ‘Who has written this book? Do you know, lad?’

‘Yes, I do know’ the boy said, ‘A Russian. He is a general.’

‘A Russian? A general?’ said Shaudid, surprised.

‘You’re telling fairy tales, boy!’ the elderly peasant mistrustfully shouted.

‘It’s not a fairy tale!’ The boy was getting agitated. ‘I saw this general!’

‘You? With your own eyes?’

‘Yes, yes!’

‘Where?’

‘In Okhum school before it was burnt... He stood so close to me that I could touch his gold buttons!’

‘The general? A Russian?’

‘I’m telling you - a Russian!’ And the boy, being afraid that he would be interrupted again, started to rush his words: ‘He talked to us for a long time in our language like a real Abkhazian, he knows everything, he was at war with the Turks to throw them out from our land and he wants to build a school for local children. That’s the sort of person he is!’

‘Just think of it - a Russian’ the amazed people exclaimed. ‘It means that he is a real hero. How surprising!’

Here Shkhangery Bzhanias again interrupted his story and, having lit up a pipe, asked me: ‘Looks like you know

a lot about this Russian general?’

But I had to disappoint him. Unfortunately, I knew too little about the person to whom each Abkhazian should feel great gratitude. I only knew that among the people he was known everywhere as General Bartolomei. He was a participant in one of the Russian-Turkish wars, a representative of the progressive Russian military intelligentsia, and obviously close in his views to the Decembrists. Undoubtedly he was a gifted linguist, and a really enthusiastic scholar.

‘You don’t know much about this Russian general,’ grinned Shkhangery Bzhania. ‘That boy Sharakh knew more than you do!’

I was confused by his reproachful tone. The old man observed me.

‘Well, what do you know about the last Ubykh?’

This question again puzzled me. I knew that the Ubykhs were one of the Abkhazian tribes, speaking a special dialect often not understandable to other related tribes. I also knew that in the nineteenth century the Ubykhs were forcibly moved, one and all, to Turkey and died out in severe poverty on foreign soil. But I knew absolutely nothing about the last Ubykh.

‘The most important thing happened because of him on that memorable day!’ exclaimed Shkhangery. ‘After we heard about the Russian general, we all wanted to find out what he talked to the children about at the school. On little Sharakh, as if from a bag, questions from the excited people started to fall down, and, as far he as was able, he told us what he remembered. It became clear that this general, whilst compiling the abc-book for us, visited all our tribes’ villages, and had long talks with the inhabitants,

then wrote things down on paper. But he couldn’t find any living soul from the Ubykh tribe. He would have to go to Turkey to find them! However, he accidentally found out that somewhere high in the mountains the one and only very last Ubykh was living out his final days. He was an elderly, sick person riddled with bullets from battles against princely tyrants, a worthy son of Apsny. Besides, nature blessed him with both wisdom and the ability to speak beautifully. When the general found him and asked why out of all his tribe he alone had decided to remain in Abkhazia, the Ubykh answered him in verses. And the general wrote down those verses and printed them in the abc-book, including them on a separate, final page...’

‘So read these verses to us!’ Taib shouted to the boy.

‘Yes, yes! What answer did that venerable Ubykh give to the general?’ asked agitated Shaudid.

‘Read them! Read them!’ came from everywhere. ‘Why don’t you read them?’

‘Because all of you keep interrupting me every time’ the boy answered.

‘Don’t be stubborn! Obey these adults!’ his old guardian shouted at him.

And in the following silence the child’s ringing voice began to sound again.

(‘I don’t now remember all those verses, though they were short,’ continued Shkhangery Bzhania. ‘But to all of us it seemed as if the boy didn’t speak, but sang...’)

‘Apsny! Apsny!’ he read in a heart-felt manner.

‘You can’t invent a fairy tale more beautiful than reality. My native country! Nobody will ever force me to leave you! Better destruction on your fragrant, fertile land than only a shameful exile. A foreign land is more terrible than death!’

I remember that Sharakh was interrupted by one of the women sobbing. Following her, a lot of other women burst into tears and children began to whimper. And then... Then I saw what I've never again seen in all my long life and I know I never shall see again: men's eyes were moist... Both Taib and Shaudid, plus Sharakh's old guardian... Can you actually believe it?! Tears in the eyes of Abkhazian men!

At that moment Prince Alybey approached the crowd.

'Well, why are you waiting?!' - he could hardly contain his rage. 'How long do you think the ships are going to wait? What is this boy muttering?'

'He's reading us a book in our native language' answered Adlay Shyab from the village of Chlow.

'Hmm!' the prince grinned. 'Couldn't he find a better time? He can finish reading it to you in Turkey.'

'Let him finish reading it here!' said Shyab.

'No, no!' the prince snapped as he pulled a face. 'We haven't time for entertainments now! Hurry up! Time won't wait for us!'

'It will wait!' said Shyab firmly, and added: 'Did you say 'an entertainment', Prince? The first Abkhazian book? For us it is a great joy. Why don't you want to share this pleasure with us? Unless you aren't an Abkhazian?'

'How dare you?!' snarled Alybey. 'Listen, Adlay Shyab, I've always considered you a worthy and clever person. Show an example to these unreasonable people, go to the boats and then they will all follow you.'

But Shyab didn't move from his place. 'Let the boy first finish reading it to all of us, up to the end!'

'I will not allow that!' the prince thundered, and he stepped towards Sharakh to pull the book from his hands. But immediately Taib, Shaudid and other men screened the

boy, and the prince saw furious faces before him.

'Well,' he mumbled, 'if you want it so much, let him read it. Only quicker, you puppy!' he shouted at Sharakh.

And that youngster again began to read the proud answer of the last Ubykh. But the prince had frightened him, so now his clear voice was trembling, and because of that the verses excited the crowd even more strongly. I repeat, they were short, but their words - beautiful, noble, courageous - called on people to love and to struggle, and poured hope into our hearts. They struck our senses like wine, our thoughts cleared, and they made us feel much braver. They came to an end with the same words with which they had begun, and when Sharakh repeated 'A foreign land is more terrible than death!' the air was filled with enthusiastic shouts of 'Well done, lad!' and 'Thank you!'

The prince suddenly changed. His face became crimson, he began to shout imploringly 'Go to the boats, go quicker.' Having recovered his breath, Alybey then threateningly said 'If you remain here, the Russians will shoot you down like dogs, together with the boy! And I won't stop them!'

And then grey-haired Adzin Eskhak from Jgyarda village stepped forward. Silence fell immediately. Adzin Eskhak was famous across all Abkhazia for his wisdom, justice and kindness, and the people respected and liked him.

'That's a lie, prince,' he began with stately calmness, 'The Russians will not shoot us down...'

'And you?!' the breaking voice of the prince exclaimed, 'You, Adzin Eskhak, contradict the prince?! Why were you so silent earlier? I always believed in your wisdom, and heard myself that you do not oppose this resettlement on Turkish lands. Isn't that so?'

'It is so,' the old man said, looking at the prince eye to

eye. 'I did not oppose it, it's true...' He went silent, then suddenly, putting his hand to his heart, he lowered his grey-haired head in front of the crowd. 'I am very guilty before you, my friends...'

These words from the noble, aged man surprised many people. Exclamations were heard:

'No, no, Adzin Eskhak!'

'You cannot be guilty before us!'

'Of nothing and never!'

'I am guilty!' repeated Adzin, and he straightened to his full height. 'My conscience bleeds, Abkhazians! It is very true that misfortunes are cowardly - they never come alone. They have fallen upon us one after another, they have dulled my reason, have weakened my heart. I have felt that we have no more power to struggle, and I submitted to destiny: what must come, will come... But humility, when no desire remains in the heart, is the first sign of hopelessness. When a person loses his spirit, his horse cannot gallop... That's what happened to me as well. But today, in the book which this nice boy has shown us, the words of the brave Ubykh have poured a new power into me, and my blood has begun to seethe. So I tell you: remain at home! A foreign land is more terrible than death!'

The rumble of approving exclamations was carried all over the glade.

'Be silent, old man!' the prince cried out, 'Don't listen to him, Abkhazians! Or didn't you know that in their old age people grow stupid, like small children?'

'That is correct, Prince,' said Adzin Eskhak. 'It happens, that old men turn to children. But the lips of children frequently speak the truth. And this truth has been brought to us today by little Sharakh Kamlat!'

The old man took the boy down from the stump, put him near to himself, took the book from him and put a hand on his head.

'Here is this great truth!' he said, lifting the book high. 'It has shown the way to us, just as a sunbeam makes its way through black clouds. Also, I repeat, Prince: the Russians will not shoot at us. If they wished to destroy us, why would they print books in our language and build schools for our children?! The Mountain school in Sukhumi is the first spark. It may be the only light burning now, but it will light other sparks... We should cherish this school as the apple of our eye, and make sure it won't be burnt by princes together with Turks, like Okhum school has been burnt. Who will save it if we abandon our native land?! You, Prince, promise us paradise on the lands of your Padishah, don't you? Why have you allowed Turks to violate us, to trade simple people like cattle, to steal our daughters for the harems of Trebzon, Samsun, Istanbul?! What have the Turks brought to us, except shame and trouble to our native land? What will there be for us on their lands? Poverty and an unworthy death. No, no, Abkhazians, stick with the Russians! Hold on to them tightly!'

He stopped to catch his breath, and Taib, using the moment of general silence, jumped onto the stump.

'Adzin Eskhak told you the truth!' he exclaimed. 'There are people in Abkhazia who fought in wars together with Russian soldiers against the Turks. According to them, Russians are brave, kind and magnanimous. They have scholars who wish all the best to our people. It was one of them who made the first Abkhazian book. Excuse me, Adzin Eskhak, if I interrupted you...'

'It's nothing,' said Eskhak, 'after all you only stated the

truth. And now I have nothing more to add. I'm remaining with the Russians!

'Then I will stay also!' Sharakh's old guardian exclaimed.

'So will we!' 'And us!' cried the crowd, and people moved with their belongings away from the coast.

Little Sharakh pulled the hem of the old man's Circassian coat.

'Let's go from here, let's get away' he began to fret, looking around for the enraged prince.

'Don't be afraid, lad,' Azdin Eshhak said tenderly. 'I will take you to the Mountain school.'

The boy cheered up and began to carefully replace the book into his knapsack.

...Shkhangery's face was lit up by a smile, and, having been excited whilst sharing his memories, he became silent. The old man rose from his armchair, and deep in thought again began to touch books on the table. Then he lifted his eyes to me and said:

'Now you should do your best to let everyone know why the inhabitants of Tamysh, Kutol, Jgyarda, Gup, Tkhina and Chlow did not become makhadjirs like Tsebelda and Gumista people did, and were not driven into a foreign land to die a cruel and disgraceful death. We were rescued by the first Abkhazian book...'

When my honourable friend had left me, I still continued to think about the book compiled by a Russian general who was also a scholar, and about the verses of the last Ubykh. Again I remembered the ancient legend about a poet whose lines stopped an army from wavering and gave them the enthusiasm they needed for victory, and I fully realised the power of inspiring and truthful words.

BOA

'You're right!' confirmed one of the old men when Damei Arlan finished his story. 'The best thing in life is a good wife and the worst is a bad wife. You told us about a good wife, I'll tell you about a bad one, if you like.'

We agreed, and Jansukh Smir began thus:

My story will be a short fairy tale, but I think that it isn't the fruit of an idle invention. There are wives afflicted with an obligatory passion to contradict their husband over everything. Even without any advantage to themselves, and of course without any point. They become obstinate, arguing for only one reason - to contradict. Their husbands are unfortunate, but it's difficult to help them. They themselves chose such a burden...

There lived in one village just such a husband and wife. They often argued, and always because of her character.

Once the husband, named Kerim, went to the village barber Shaban and had his head shaved completely bald. Having come back home, he said to his wife:

'Look how well Shaban has shaved me!'

She looked at his totally smooth head and rather derisively said:

'Pah! He hasn't shaved you, he's simply sheared you like a ram. And he's done it very negligently. Look in the mirror - odd tufts are sticking out all over the place, just like on a sheep. Simply ridiculous! He has absolutely mutilated you...'

The husband was dumbfounded to hear such an outburst, and stroked his head, as smooth as a pumpkin, with both of his hands.

'Shaban sharpened his razor - I saw him do it myself'

he said, but his wife stubbornly stuck to her belief.

‘Well, that’s enough! I have got tired of arguing with you, just stop talking about it’ he begged. ‘I’m going out. I’ll take a walk in the fresh air.’

And, having thrown a hood over his head, he started to leave the house.

‘What do you want to walk alone for?’ his wife asked. ‘Let’s go together!’

‘Only on one condition’ he warned. ‘We will not argue. All right? I’m getting tired of these disputes.’

‘You may have got tired of arguing, but I haven’t’ she vigorously replied as she walked alongside him.

When they were crossing the bridge over a deep swamp, she started on him again.

‘Is it my fault your hair was cut so badly?’

He was silent, and his wife continued to prattle:

‘Most likely, you offended the barber somehow and therefore he cut it so that everyone would laugh at you...’

The husband stoically continued to keep silence.

‘After all, he’s made a real laughing-stock of you now! That barber has dared to inflict you with such an insult, and you just suffer and don’t say anything!’

‘It’s not the barber, it’s you who mock me all the time. For Pete’s sake stop it! I was shaved. Do you understand - shaved!’

‘Your hair has gone, it was a haircut!’

‘I was shaved!’ shouted Kerim, stopping and clutching his heart.

‘It wasn’t a shave! It was a haircut!’ - his wife was not appeased.

‘I was shaved!’

‘Haircut!’

‘Shaved!’

‘Haircut!’

If a stone is heated strongly enough it could suddenly burst (Jansukh made this comment), and this was also true of Kerim’s patience. He seized the inveterate nagger and threw her into the middle of the swamp...

At first she disappeared under the filthy mud, but soon rose up again, shouting ‘Haircut!’ and also giving him the two fingers. But she was unable to keep above the water for very long. The swamp dragged her down again, and this time she did not resurface.

Kerim went to the end of the bridge and then, full of pity and repentance, he looked back at the swamp. Suddenly he saw a huge boa creeping out of the mud. The snake slithered up to him and spoke:

‘What kind of person do you call that! I can’t live with such a woman in one swamp, she just won’t stop arguing. She even argued about me wanting to eat her, so I’ve left her alive...’ Moaning and groaning, the boa then crept away to the nearest woods.

After a week Kerim heard in the street a desperate female shout, and then a raucous noise. When he went outside, he saw some peasants armed with axes and spades, who had surrounded a boa and were going to kill it. Running up to them, Kerim shouted ‘Leave it, don’t kill it! Release that boa, I beg you: it once did a kind deed for me.’ The people granted Kerim’s request and reluctantly let the boa go.

When they had all disappeared, the boa told Kerim: ‘In gratitude for my rescue I will grant you a wish when you require one. But understand - I can execute your request only once. Don’t ask me for a second time.’ Then the boa again crept away into the woods...

About one month passed. Then for some reason, in the middle of the day in the village a heart-breaking female shout was again heard. People ran to the spot, where a About About one month passed. Then for some reason, in the middle of the day in the village a heart-breaking female shout was again heard. People ran to the spot, where a terrible sight awaited them: compressing a girl by winding itself in rings around her, the boa was going to swallow her. Kerim ran up and began to ask it to release the girl. The boa unclenched its rings at once, not having damaged its victim at all, and there and then slid out of sight. The parents of the girl and all the witnesses of the incident thanked Kerim profusely, having found out that he had such power over the monster.

A little more time passed, before people came running to Kerim's house with the news that the boa had once again appeared in the village and, having seized one of the girls, was going to eat her.

'You have power over the boa, force it to release this girl,' they asked.

'I no longer have any power over it, and I can't help you' explained Kerim. But nobody believed him. Embittered by his refusal, the people seized Kerim and dragged him to the boa.

Upon seeing Kerim, the boa spitefully hissed. 'You've come to ask me for a second time? Have you forgotten about my condition?'

'No, no, I remember that!' Kerim answered at once. 'I haven't come running to you for that. Rescue me! My wife is pursuing me... She's got out of the swamp and she's running here!'

'Here?' - the boa hissed in fear - 'that woman is coming

here?' Its eyes stuck out of its forehead in terror. 'She saw that you were coming here?'

'Well, yes, certainly! She'll be here any time now... Where can we disappear to?' Kerim asked anxiously with pretended fear.

'Get away!' the boa hissed, releasing the girl. 'I'm leaving... And you two are on your own from now on. If you follow me, I will swallow you straight away.' It made the threat and then quickly escaped back into the swamp.

'As you can see, even the boa could not tolerate the character of that woman!' the story-teller concluded.

Everyone burst out laughing.

'And so I submit,' said Kotash Asadz, 'that if destiny has doomed you to a life with a silly and talkative wife, don't argue with her! After all, it would be useless. And when she advises you to do something, listen to her politely and then do the opposite. It'll all take care of itself...'

'In this world there are far too many talkers,' Abzagu Adjir continued. 'Some grind on and on about everything they think they know, and some don't know what they are really talking about.'

The conversation was then joined by the senior wise old man Shkhangery Bzhanian, who had been silent until that time.

'We should not argue in vain,' he told everyone. 'My life's experience has helped me to firmly establish that to learn to speak takes one and a half to two years. And to learn to keep your mouth shut, - not less than sixty years!'

THE WILL

Old man Kumf had a big family. He carefully brought up his children, giving them all his time and energy. His three sons each got married, but with their families they continued to live in their father's house. Recently Kumf had grown ever more decrepit. Often he couldn't even get up to eat, and so remained hungry. But his sons behaved as if they hadn't noticed, and his daughters-in-law hurried by, not responding to his calls.

The ingratitude of his sons deeply depressed the sick old man. Once, having felt death approaching, he called his youngest son to him and whispered in his ear:

'My dear son! It seems to me that you are the only one among your brothers who really likes me and takes pity on me. Therefore I've decided to bequeath you and only you all my property.

After my commemoration, quietly leave the others and go into the garden, dig out a hole under the big root of the oak tree, and there you will find a jug full of gold and my will. But remember: you must do this only on the forty-first day after my death. That is an obligatory condition...'

These words from his father had the desired effect: the youngest son and his family started to look after the old man strenuously, not disregarding his slightest desire.

Next day the old man called up his middle son, and also informed him secretly about the will, according to which it seemed as if all the inheritance had been left by him to this brother only. And on the third day the same thing was secretly whispered by the old man to his eldest son...

The sons began to look after their sick father in eager rivalry, each trying to outstrip the others in fulfilling his

requests.

But even old Kumf could do nothing to stop the inevitable. His illness got so bad that soon he died.

Whilst conducting the traditional funeral ceremony, and then again during the commemoration which by custom is held on the fortieth day after death, all three sons paid their overdue respects to their father.

At night, when the visitors who had arrived for the commemoration had left, the youngest son took a shovel and began to make his way cautiously to the treasured oak. Imagine his amazement when he found both his brothers, with their shovels, there as well. All three were very confused, but eventually agreed to cooperate with each other. They began to dig a hole together under the roots of the tree. In the hole there really was a jug. It was empty, except that at the bottom of it lay a piece of paper. On this paper was written:

'My children! All my life I have doted upon you and helped you with all my might, but, it appears, I haven't managed to generate in your hearts any respect and love for your parents, any kindness, any pity for people. Therefore do not forget about educating your children to have a sense of duty to you, so that you won't remain lonely in your old age, and won't have to endure the heartbreak which is being endured now by me...'

ADJIKA*

Elderly spouses Jegim and Drimsada Shlar didn't have any children for a long time, which made them both extremely sad. But at last a daughter, who they named Anifa,

was born to them. The father and mother cherished their daughter and could not stop admiring her. And to tell the truth, she was very beautiful. The girl was protected against the slightest trouble. From day to day she only danced and sang songs, but never thought to do any work in the house.

When Anifa grew up, her parents were horrified to realise that their daughter was able to do nothing. Years passed, and the time came to think of her marriage. But how could Anifa marry? Everyone in the area knew that Jegim's daughter was extremely beautiful, but was able to do nothing around the house and would undoubtedly be a useless housewife. Anyway, not one of the local young men wished to propose to her.

Her parents didn't know what to do, but at last found a groom for their daughter in a distant district at the other end of Abkhazia. They quickly celebrated a modest wedding, following which they sent their daughter to live with the family of the husband.

But, having given away Anifa in marriage, Jegim and Drimsada continued to think about her future life with a sinking heart.

For a start, she certainly wouldn't be able to cope with housework properly. They worried that their idle daughter might be returned to them, causing a scandal...

At last her father decided to go and visit Anifa. He went unexpectedly, and it so happened that on his arrival in the courtyard nobody appeared. Jegim quietly, but with a deep sense of foreboding, entered into the house.

The scene which appeared before his eyes pleasantly surprised him: in the house everything was in the utmost order. Anifa warmly welcomed her father, and there and then started bustling around doing some household jobs. She

worked so quickly and efficiently that Jegim was literally amazed. How his lazy daughter had changed! But what had changed her? He didn't want to ask, as the fact that there had been such a change was good enough in itself, and anyway he was sure that the answer would not take too long to appear.

Then, when her husband's family left the room, Anifa ran up to her father, handed him a mortar with lumps of salt, pepper pods, and lots of different herbs in it, and quietly whispered, as though to an accomplice:

'My dear father, pound all it as quickly as possible, do it loudly, and make adjika. In this house the rule is - you don't eat if you don't work. Start pounding, father!'

And Jegim obediently started to pound adjika in the mortar, having understood at last the total sense of this rule.

JOHN PRIESTLEY AND SHKHANGERY BZHANIA

Celebrated English writer John Priestley arrived in 1946 in the Soviet Union. He visited Abkhazia and decided to meet local old men, about whom he had already heard a great deal in his homeland. Accompanied by his wife, a translator and two Georgian writers, he was brought to one hundred and forty seven year old Shkhangery Bzhania, who lived in Tamsh village forty kilometres from Sukhumi.

When a car dropped the visitors near Shkhangery's small house, it appeared that the owner wasn't at home, as he was collecting grapes.

'I'd like to see him while he's working,' Priestley said, and the visitor's wish was certainly satisfied. Priestley was brought to a mighty walnut tree fifteen metres high, around

which, like a python, a thick grapevine was twisted. In Abkhazian villages which are buried in greenery, there isn't any tree without such a 'grape loading.' The interlocking branches of this giant were so intensive that it was impossible to define what it had most of - nuts or grapes. Nuts and grapes! It wasn't necessary to make churchkhela,* sitting on a tree, you could eat it in a primordial manner.

The chairman of the Village Soviet, who brought the visitors there, raised his head and shouted:

'Climb down, Shkhangery! You've got guests!' and, being confident that nobody among the visitors knew the Abkhazian language, added: 'You've got too many visitors. They'll distract you from your work. They'll only bother me and you!'

Then, to the visitors' surprise, somewhere from above, from the top of the tree, a vigorous and affable voice came:

'Welcome! I'm always glad to have guests. But where's that fidget the boy? Escaped again somewhere! Then you, Tarash, take these grapes, and I'll come down immediately.'

And everybody could see how on a long rope a basket full of juicy black 'Isabella' grapes slowly began to descend. When the basket reached the ground, the chairman of the Village Soviet lifted it and poured the grapes out into a big trench hollowed in a log. The empty basket returned upwards and did not reappear. Instead, a man came down. Having clasped the tree trunk with both hands, he inched himself downwards, and when about two metres from the ground, he easily jumped off.

It was one hundred and forty seven year old Shkhangery Bzhania, one of the oldest men in Abkhazia.

He amazed all his guests by his smart appearance: he was tall and thin. He was wearing a short working coat. An

open face. Sharp, clever blue eyes. A good-natured smile.

Having exchanged greetings and been introduced to the visitors, the owner hospitably invited them into his house.

'I've journeyed to your beautiful country' - Priestley addressed him through the translator - 'to have the pleasure of meeting Abkhazian people.'

'Well how did you find our people?' asked Shkhangery.

'I can't judge them yet,' Priestley answered. 'I only got here recently, four days ago.'

'But you should have realised one notable character trait of my people already,' the host commented.

The visitor was confused, and having exchanged glances with his companions he asked perplexedly: 'What trait?'

The old man gave a crafty smile. 'Taste!' he answered. 'This country chosen by our people as their residence is pretty good, wouldn't you agree? There is a lot of sun, fruit, flowers, wine!'

Then Shkhangery looked searchingly at his visitor:

'You're an educated person. Can you tell me, what is the distance between the truth and a lie?'

Priestley shrugged his shoulders and answered:

'I believe that the distance is very big. Do you agree?'

The old man shook his head. 'No, I believe it's only four fingers wide!'

And to confirm his words he put four fingers to his temple, between an eye and an ear.

'What you see with your eyes is the truth, but what you hear is often a lie. Not all the gossip you hear can be believed. Do you agree?'

'Yes, that's right!' Priestley said.

'And one more question,' continued Shkhangery. 'Why has nature given each person two eyes, two ears, two feet,

two hands, but only one mouth?’

‘It’s interesting to listen to you,’ Priestley commented.

‘I will give you the answer myself,’ said Shkhangery. ‘A person should see a lot, hear a lot, walk and work a lot but speak only a little. This opinion and I have already stuck together for more than a hundred years.’

Priestley greatly admired the old man.

‘Tell me what, in your opinion, is the secret of longevity? I too wish to live a long time.’

‘If you don’t shorten your life, it will be long!’ replied Shkhangery without hesitation.

A WITCH

Tsaba studied in the city of Ochamchira. In the summer, on vacation, the girl went to her home village to see her grandmother.

Old women like her grandmother often came and told different fables about devils and witches. Tsaba’s studies in the city were not in vain, and she knew that really there are neither devils nor witches, and that old women believe in them because they are illiterate, ignorant. The girl often started disputes with them, trying to educate them. She was completely supported in this by her friend Shesia.

However, the old women did not give in. They usually shook their heads and said:

‘Don’t argue with your elders! In our village lived a damned witch called Hamzhvazhv. She lived a hundred and five years. She was time and again seen astride a wolf. She was ugly, and she had an evil eye: as soon as she looked at a dzhigit riding a horse, he immediately fell off. She ruined

a lot of people! And now it is impossible to go near her tomb at night - if anyone approaches it, she will drag them off into it with her.’

The girls laughed. ‘Isn’t it a shame that old women still believe in such bosh?’

Tsaba said: ‘If you wish, tonight I’ll go to her tomb and from there I’ll shout to you.’

‘No! No way!’ the old women answered. ‘We won’t even go near it. And we don’t advise you to. She’ll certainly drag you down into her grave. But if you decide to go, take a stake with you and drive it into her tomb. We’ll go there in the morning and check up if you were really there or not.’

Tsaba studied in Ochamchira. How could she be frightened of a witch?!

The girl took a stake and went that night to the cemetery. Shesia wanted to accompany her, but Tsaba insisted that she would go alone, so that nobody could suspect her of any cowardice.

She had already come near to Hamzhvazhv’s tomb when she suddenly felt a pain in her chest.

‘But what if’ - the thought flashed into her mind - ‘what if Hamzhvazhv really was a witch?’ The girl tried to push away this thought, but it drilled into her brain more and more insistently. Tsaba felt very frightened. Nevertheless she approached the tomb...

Tsaba didn’t come back home. What happened to her we only found out the next morning, when her grandmother and other old women went to the cemetery, to the grave of the witch. With her hands spread out on the tomb, Tsaba laid motionless.

The old women called out to her - Tsaba didn’t respond. They began to wail that the damned witch had ruined

the unfortunate girl. They rushed back to the village and collected people...

It appeared that, whilst driving a stake into the tomb, Tsaba unintentionally got it entangled in her clothes. She wanted to stand up, but felt that something was pulling her to the ground. The girl was frozen in horror, and she died of a heart rupture.

But the old women stood by their belief. They shouted that the damned old witch Hamzhvazhv was guilty of causing Tsaba's death.

Then Shesia came forward, and vehemently insisted:

'A witch is not the reason. Witches don't exist. Our unforgettable Tsaba was right when she argued with you. But she was killed by fear. If she hadn't felt fear, she would have driven the stake in without having got it caught up in her clothes. And if it was caught up, she would have easily freed herself of it. Tomorrow night I'll go to Hamzhvazhv's tomb and prove that Tsaba and I were right.'

And Shesia kept her word. She hammered a stake into Hamzhvazhv's tomb, then came back home again.

And after that, the old women for the first time in their long lives doubted in the existence of witches.

THE WAKE

It was a hot springtime. Everyone was busy in the fields. Our bus was going from Gagra to Gudauta.

At midday we passed through a big village. In one of the courtyards I saw a crowd. Women dressed in black were crying uncontrollably and scratching their faces.

Being curious, I asked my neighbour in the bus what

had happened.

'Apparently someone's died, and those people are mourning him, or perhaps it's a commemoration,' he quickly answered.

'And it's at the height of the working day, isn't it?' I was surprised. 'Looks like the whole village is there.'

'Yes, you are right,' sighed my neighbour, 'but there's nothing to be done, such is the custom. Of course, it all delays work quite a bit. Everybody always needs to be fed and given something to drink...'

Then he suddenly burst out laughing and told me an amusing story. It's well worth hearing.

...Last summer here in Sukhumi we had an intolerably hot spell, and I decided to spend a holiday with relatives, in a little high mountain settlement called Akhutsa. My friend Jansukh from the regional centre Ochamchira also went there. Once we were at school together.

Every day we went wandering in the woods, observing animals' lives - squirrels and martens - and we collected grapes, figs, cornel and laurel cherries. From hollows in lindens we got honey. We enjoyed the fresh mountain air, and admired crystal-clear glacial springs and waterfalls.

But nevertheless Jansukh and I started to be bored. From our own experience, we became convinced of the truth of the old proverb 'a person can manage without everything except for people.'

'You know what?' my friend said to me one day, 'Let's go down to see some people! Today, I've heard, in the village of Ashta someone died, and people will go there, of course, to mourn over a dead man.'

As is well known, in Abkhazia some people live a very long time - a hundred or even a hundred and fifty years.

Someone's death isn't an event only for their family, but for everyone who has found out about their death. That's why so many people were coming.

Rituals of mourning and commemoration remind one of an original theatrical show, with the obligatory participation of all present.

Jansukh had time and again participated in such commemorations. I, alas, still had not the slightest idea about this kind of ceremony.

'There'll be a lot of people there' Jansukh persuaded me. 'We'll look around, meet some girls. Girls from Ashta are famous for their beauty...'

So we then dressed up in traditional Circassian clothes which relatives lent us, and solemnly set off for Ashta. On the road my friend asked me:

'And are you good at crying?'

'What's the point in crying? I've got more used to laughing.'

'Well, I'm very good at it!' - not without a certain pride he reproachfully looked at me.

'All right, I can't, I can't,' I admitted.

'I'm asking you seriously,' he said, 'will you be able to mourn over a dead man?'

'No, I won't be able to.'

'Why ever not?' - he sounded surprised.

'Why should I? Nobody in my family has died, and I've had nobody to mourn...'

'All my family and friends are alive too,' Jansukh reminded me, 'but I've mourned over dead men about whom I knew nothing.'

'How so?' - I was perplexed - 'Surely such hypocrisy is offensive both to the living and the dead?'

'But everyone always does it who comes on a commemoration' replied Jansukh.

I looked at him and thought 'I don't have that much skill. To do that, it's necessary to be an actor.'

As though guessing my thoughts, my friend said:

'I'll teach you what you should do. Pay attention!' he exclaimed, then he plaintively raised a howl. He began to hit his chest and bang himself on the head, and then started to loudly cry out any mournful words he thought of which expressed grief.

A decayed tree trunk was lying on the ground. Jansukh sprawled over it, as people do over a dead person.

'Oh, oh, how unhappy I am! Why have you died, instead of me?! Oh, oh, oh!'

I was amazed by what I saw and heard. And he then shouted even more loudly. His voice echoed powerfully around the woods.

'And now it is necessary to lift your hands like so. Get them higher!' And Jansukh lifted his hands to the sky and began to roar: 'Oh, Oh, O-oh!'

'Now,' he said, 'hit your head with your hands' and he vigorously slapped himself on his head and then again lifted his hands up to the sky.

I suddenly had that strange feeling that eyes were staring at us from somewhere. I turned around, and there on a footpath through the woods were two people - an old man and woman.

As they came nearer to us, they politely asked:

'What's happened? Who has died?' They began to look around.

We became a bit lost. Telling the truth would mean offending a custom which they adhered to. But Jansukh

found the answer.

‘Our grandfather, our kind, lovely grandfather has died! Oh, oh, oh!’ he started to howl again.

‘A grandfather, did you say? But whose? Whose grandfather?’ the old man tried to find out.

‘Yes, a grandfather. Our lovely grandfather!’ sighed Jansukh tongue-in-cheek.

‘Has he died?’ the old man asked me.

‘Yes, he has’ I confirmed.

‘Are you sure? Are you sure?’ the old man asked again and again, and then hysterically cried out: ‘Oh... Oh... Oh!’, at the same time making big and terrible eyes as if this news had struck him like a thunderbolt on a clear day. Then he forcefully thrust his alabasha - a walking-stick with a sharp iron tip - into the ground, took off his hood and hung it there, lifted both hands to the sky and, striking himself on the head and chest, began to mourn over our imaginary dead grandfather...

Whilst doing all this, he threw reproachful glances at the old woman. Then she also raised a howl. Her heart-breaking shout could have been heard, of course, both in Akhutsa and in Ashta, if a dense thicket of wood had not been surrounding us. The old woman so diligently scratched her own face that blood spilt from her cheeks. And, strange to say, from her eyes genuine tears flowed profusely. The Abkhazian proverb speaks the truth: ‘There are tears which deceive not only others, but also the one who cries.’

‘And where is he?’ the old man asked me.

‘He’s gone to Akhutsa’ I answered cheekily.

‘How could he have gone?’

‘He just went. He didn’t want to stay here with us,’ I aggravated my mistake even more.

‘One moment! Wait a little, take yourself in hand, don’t be lost in grief, it sometimes happens,’ the old man said, and he began to calm me down, having decided that I had gone crazy. ‘Your grandfather, you say, has gone to Akhutsa?’

Jansukh came to my rescue.

‘No, not the grandfather, but this... how do you call him... the messenger,’ he explained tongue-tied.

‘But I’m asking about your grandfather,’ the old man said, still standing with his hands in the air. ‘Where is your grandfather lying?’

‘In Ochamchira’ answered Jansukh firmly.

‘In O-cham-chi-ra?!’ exclaimed the old man. ‘Your grandfather is in Ochamchira and you’re mourning over him here, in the woods?’ An amused smile flashed in his screwed-up eyes.

‘Has he really guessed?’ I thought with horror. But again Jansukh found the right thing to say.

‘Even in the woods we are feeling pity for our grandfather.’ I sighed with relief.

‘That’s very praise-worthy,’ the old man approved. ‘How old was your grandfather?’

‘A hundred and twenty three years old,’ answered Jansukh smartly.

‘He died rather too early, of course’ the old man sympathised. ‘But there’s nothing to be done. No matter how long a day lasts, the night will come eventually.’

‘Each person born must necessarily die,’ the old woman confirmed.

‘It is not necessary to grieve so much,’ the old man consoled us.

‘How can we not grieve?’ moaned Jansukh in a whining voice. ‘Our grandfather was so kind, so good.’ He cautiously

pushed my hip.

I understood him. Raising my hands to the sky and slapping my palms on my head, I roared:

‘Oh! Oh! O-o-oh! I am unfortunate!’

‘My brother liked our grandfather very much and he is grieving terribly now,’ said Jansukh, looking at me.

The old man came and began to comfort me. From his many kind words I remember the following:

‘When you are in mourning and grieving heavily, just remember that you also will die one day. If you do that, then what seemed to you a big misfortune will become only minor, and not worth your attention. That’s what clever people do. And those who do not adhere to this wise rule and give full vent to their emotions don’t live long.’

When the old couple eventually left us, we laughed with all our hearts.

‘You played your role excellently,’ Jansukh praised me. ‘Now you’ll be able to participate in a real wake.’

At last we approached the house of the deceased man.

A big flat courtyard stretched like a green carpet in front of a small house, which was standing behind on high stilts and was full of people. They stood in two rows, attentively looking at the ‘acting’ guests who were carefully and precisely demonstrating their skills at mourning. At the door there was a little table on which you had to place your hat, and then you grandly passed into the house of the deceased to perform a ceremonial mourning routine.

I’d been subdued by the solemnity of the occasion. Seizing the moment, I slipped into the crowd. Jansukh went in together with someone. They safely cried all the way from the little table to the deceased and then returned back.

My friend found me and began to reproach me:

‘You hide in vain. Be brave! Go in together with somebody.’

I refused. Then Jansukh said:

‘You should understand that you won’t find a better opportunity to learn this custom. Nobody knows you here, nobody will condemn you.’

I tried to suggest that everyone had presumably already cried and there was nobody there for me to go in with.

‘Why don’t you go to the marquee?’ some obviously tipsy person asked us. ‘The wine is wonderful!’

‘Yes, it is indeed. I’ve already tasted some,’ confirmed Jansukh’s acquaintance standing near us. ‘Sixty buckets of perfect ‘Hvanchkara’* were brought from Kutaisi. Astan is a good fellow!’

‘Astan would have been a much better fellow if he had thought more of his sick uncle’s treatment and less about wine,’ another voice interrupted him. ‘After all, the old man had pneumonia. Doctors could have cured him. Astan had left the old man, borrowed money from all his neighbours and gone to Kutaisi for wine. And don’t forget, when he departed the old man was still alive.’

‘Why didn’t you advise him to take care of his uncle instead?’ asked Jansukh.

‘We really did try! But Astan said: ‘I’ll be dishonoured if mourners come and there isn’t any wine.’ So instead of saving the old man, he went to get some.’

From the crowded marquee, drunken voices could already be heard.

‘Well, why don’t you go the marquee? Come on!’ said a tipsy man pushing in front of us.

‘Our guest hasn’t cried yet,’ said Jansukh, pointing to me.

‘Why?’ the drunk asked, puzzled.

‘You see,’ Jansukh began to explain, ‘he only arrived today from Blabyrkhua, he got here late, everybody had already cried, and he was the only one left who still hadn’t done so. He is young, inexperienced, shy...’

‘Well, we can easily fix that. I’ll find him a partner.’

‘Everyone has already cried,’ said Jansukh, trying very hard to stop him.

‘That doesn’t matter! It’s possible to cry more than once.’

‘How can that be so?’ Jansukh was surprised. ‘Is it possible to cry a number of times?’

‘Certainly it’s possible!’ Jansukh’s acquaintance confirmed. ‘It’s possible to be ‘deeply moved’ and to cry a second time. With a good friend it is possible to perform, so to say, for the company a third time. And with a visitor from afar it’s no sin to cry together even for a fourth or fifth time, is it?’

At that moment the gate opened and some dusty old man came in. It was plain to see that he had arrived from quite a way away.

‘Here’s the very partner for you!’ Jansukh’s friend said. ‘I know him. He’s Makhmed from the Gudauta area. He doesn’t miss a single commemoration anywhere throughout Abkhazia.’

‘Who doesn’t know Makhmed the chatterbox?!’ cried a semi-drunk guest. ‘He’s like a raven: wherever they have a wake or commemoration, there he is. He loves to chatter after drinking wine in a marquee. That’s why he was nicknamed Makhmed the chatterbox.’

‘But he is a great master!’ someone responded.

‘A master? A master of what?’ I became very interested

in knowing.

‘Of what? Mourning, that’s what!’ it was briefly but clearly explained to me.

And then I saw how the new visitor approached the little table, took off the hood from his head, put it neatly on the table and began to prepare for his performance. And near to him already was our semidrunken acquaintance, who was pointing towards the marquee and whispering something to him, which was obviously about ‘Hvanchkara’.

Jansukh pushed me and whispered:

‘That man is the most suitable partner for you, he’s got tired from the road, so cannot cry for long. Go with him and do everything that he does. Don’t miss such a golden opportunity.’

‘Oh well, what the hell!’ I said to myself, and resolutely came to the little table. Having taken off my hood, I stood near to the old man. ‘It’s probably easier, even on a scaffold, if you aren’t alone but together with somebody as a pair,’ I just thought at that moment.

Two men came to us, they were so-called ‘directors’. They stood behind us holding our waists, and led us forward. These people, as I found out later, had been doing that job all day long. They showed us the way to the deceased.

We began to go or, to speak more correctly, to act...

‘Oh! Oh! O-o-oh!’ my partner began immediately.

I followed his example and in a similar tone to him I also yelled:

‘Oh!Oh! O-o-oh!’

The old man beat himself both on his chest and his head. I did the same to myself. We slowly moved between rows of spectators. Suddenly my partner slightly slowed down, and having looked through his fingers he whispered

to someone as he was passing.

‘I need to talk to you. Wait here, I will soon return!’

We moved further, approached the small house which stood on stilts, and climbed a short flight of stairs to the narrow balcony. We were directed to the room where the deceased lay.

I promptly copied each word and each movement of my partner: I roared, beat myself on the chest and on the head...

We had already cried and shouted to our hearts’ content, and I assumed that it would now be possible to leave. I began to observe my partner through my wide-spread fingers as I came close to him hoping to whisper: ‘That’s enough, it’s time to depart.’ But far from it! The old man, having been deeply moved, fell suddenly to his knees and began to kiss the deceased, though only through a bedsheet with which his face had been hidden. Then he started to lament even more loudly and also beat himself more furiously. What could I do? I had to kneel too. But I never kissed the deceased. I admit I’d had to pretend from time to time in my life, but only on that day did I understand: it is easy to hide hatred, more difficult to hide love, and even more difficult to hide indifference.

Mechanically, as happens with actors, I allowed myself an ad-lib: I buried my head in the deceased’s chest, clutched his medals and began to ‘sob’ even more inconsolably... It helped that I’d already started to feel angry. I was angry with myself that I’d so easily yielded to Jansukh’s persuasions, was angry with him that he’d involved me in this ridiculous charade in the first place, and was angry with my tireless partner.

Mourning women, standing around the deceased all in black and with dishevelled hair and also scratched and

bleeding cheeks, were all very touched by my ‘grief’. And according to custom in such cases, they began to express their sympathy for me. Having rushed from their places, they started collecting around me and embracing me. One of the women, in her ecstasy, banged her head against mine with such force that sparks flew in front of my eyes. I consoled myself with the thought that my head probably deserved it.

The female mourners were all crowding round me. Among them were some beautiful young women. And they, I’ll tell you in secret, reconciled me with the miserable position in which I found myself. Such a carousel around me, I was later informed, was an expression of special honour which only the best mourners receive. The deceased, it appears, didn’t have any closer people than my partner and me. That’s why the gathering watched our every step with such interest.

As I’ve already said, everything was going very well, but my old partner wasn’t appeased in any way. And he stuck to me as though I was on a leash.

At last we went from the house to the balcony, and I sighed with relief. We came down to the little table at the gate. But, having passed through the courtyard, my partner unexpectedly turned to the left. I decided to go directly to the table, but suddenly felt the firm hands of the ‘director’ on my shoulders: He let me know that it is impossible to finish a game without a partner. I had to follow him.

The old man approached a saddled horse tied to a hitching post in the corner of the courtyard. From the back of this ordinary-looking animal hung a big horse-cloth with a long fringe. I understood that it was the deceased’s horse. The old man began to stroke its saddle and to lament over

the horse which had lost its owner. I stroked the saddle from the other side... I became exhausted and was dripping with sweat, but had to continue the game which had already become intolerable for me. If there had been another gate nearby, I would've run away.

Having mourned over a horse, we went to the cherished little table. What a pleasure! It's possible to become happy not from enjoyment but from having ceased suffering.

So, the mourning ceremony had ended, and now my only desire was somehow to get away from there as quickly as possible.

'I'm very happy with your debut!' said Jansukh as he appeared near me. 'But why didn't you leave the deceased's room for so long?'

'We were rehearsing the next scene,' I answered with a serious face, and then angrily added: 'Go away, or I can't vouch for your safety!'

'You are angry unnecessarily. It's all gone as well as it could have.'

'Let's leave here,' I begged him.

'We won't go anywhere!' Jansukh snapped.

'As you wish' I said. 'You can stay here, but I'm leaving immediately.'

'Don't be foolish! First of all, it's impossible to leave, not having sat in the marquee: you have to eat and drink something. And secondly, you are now the centre of attention here. A lot of people have asked me who you are. I've told them that you were the favourite nephew of the deceased and that he was your favourite uncle, that you have specially arrived today by plane from Blabyrkhua... Look, make sure you don't let me down!'

'Have you become crazy?!'

'Not yet, but I will if you run away and cause a scandal. Listen, now people will start to come to you and express their condolences... Make a sad face and frequently put a handkerchief to your eyes. But the main thing is - be silent. There is nothing better than silence. That, my friend, is a perfect rule always used by clever people. I've often repented for having spoken, but never repented for having stayed silent. So, be silent! In your position it's a way out.'

Having looked around, I noticed that those present were really staring at me. People began to collect near us. My partner was also there. In fear I thought:

'And what if he starts asking me about the deceased? What will I tell him?'

But something unforeseen happened: a man ran into the courtyard and started to shout.

'Those of you responsible for tobacco! What are you thinking about? Lift your heads and look what kind of clouds are approaching, it's certainly going to rain...'

People from different ends of the courtyard rushed headlong to the gate.

As for me, I was of course going to use all that turmoil and disappear, when a man lifted his hand.

'Dear guests and hosts!' he said loudly. 'Don't blame those who have left you. If the rain defeats us, all the collective-farm tobacco will be lost. Our respected Sagyasa spent all his long life working, and as all of you know, he didn't like idlers or careless people in general. If Sagyasa were here now, he would approve of our action and would excuse us, and you please excuse us as well! Do not consider our leaving to be any disrespect for the deceased.'

And that man then quickly ran through the gate to catch up with his companions who had already left.

‘Tell me,’ my old partner whispered in my ear in a conspiratorial manner, ‘who is it you and I were mourning?’

The question stunned me. And then and there I decided to stop the unworthy game.

‘I don’t know,’ I answered, shrugging my shoulders.

‘How don’t you know?’ The old man hadn’t really believed me. ‘Which Sagyasa was he speaking about?’

I repeated that I didn’t know. The old man was extremely puzzled.

‘Who has actually died here? Not Kove Aaisa, but someone called Sagyasa?’

‘I don’t know either of them!’ I said, which shocked him even more.

‘Perhaps you haven’t understood me?’ The old man was very persistent. ‘What was the name of the deceased: Aaisa or Sagyasa?’

‘What I don’t know, I don’t know,’ I said, making a helpless gesture.

The old man stared at me wide-eyed.

‘If you didn’t know either of them why did you roar so violently?’ he asked.

‘Because you roared,’ I answered.

‘But you were just so zealous... And I only followed your example,’ he said.

‘My example!’ I retorted, ‘but which of us knelt first and even began to kiss the deceased? It was you if I remember, wasn’t it?!’

‘After you hit yourself on the head and began to bang it ruthlessly. Then, my dear boy, we all decided that you had lost your senses. Even the women who saw you left their places and began trying to calm you.’

Then I understood that I had overacted.

‘I couldn’t bang myself as hard as you did,’ continued the old man, ‘therefore I knelt down...’

‘And why did you go to mourn... a horse?’ I pressed him. ‘I only repeated what you did.’

The old man just looked at me, gave a contemptuous sneer and then, waving his hand at someone, he left me.

A minute later I saw how he suddenly started to hug some man, then he happily exclaimed:

‘Oh! Oh! Oh! Aaisa, are you... alive?’

‘Well of course I’m alive. So what?’ the man replied in great astonishment.

‘You see, I was at a commemoration in Chlow. Coming back from there, I noticed a wake here. How could I ride pass not having cried? And when I came to this gate, I suddenly remembered that in Gudauta I’d been told that you had been badly wounded whilst hunting.’

‘That’s right,’ the fellow the old man had named Aaisa answered. ‘A bear scratched me badly, but I have now recovered. So what?’

‘After all, your courtyard is next to here, and I got confused...’

‘Ah that’s it!’ guessed Aaisa. ‘You decided that I’d died?’

‘Well,’ the old man lowered his head guiltily. ‘I’ve mourned you. That means that now you’ll live long.’

Everyone began to congratulate Aaisa. I congratulated him as well.

‘Well let it be so, I was mistaken and mourned you, Aaisa,’ the old man said having looked at me, ‘but it’s interesting to know who was so assiduously mourned by this young man? He admitted to me (my former partner spoke to all the people surrounding us) that he doesn’t know either Aaisa, or that deceased man.’

I hung my head, which had become heavy with shame. 'And what is surprising,' he raised his voice, 'is that during my long life I have cried at more than enough commemorations, but this is the first time I've met such a sincere mourner as this! I was seriously afraid today that he would break his head.'

All eyes turned to me. I couldn't stand it any more.

'Yes, I cried really sincerely,' I said firmly, 'cried from disappointment that there is a lot which is false, ridiculous and offensive in this old ritual of holding a wake. We should have given it up a long time ago!'

My words were similar to an exploded bomb. All around sprang into movement, everybody became agitated... Some blamed me, accusing me of blasphemy, whilst others supported me and approved completely.

Jansukh rushed up to me.

'The Moor has made the business - the Moor can leave' he cheerfully quoted.

And so we left. If several minutes earlier I had been ready to disappear from there secretly, I now left openly with my head held high. My conscience was clear. I had said things that many others think but - alas! - are often too scared to speak aloud.

...My companion stopped talking. His story had greatly shortened our journey from Gagra to Gudauta.

LEDDA

One day, passing through the woods, Jessib heard a plaintive yelp coming from some bushes. Having moved branches apart, he saw a dog. Its appearance was awful -

its fur hung in shreds, and hideous blood stains covered its paws and back.

Jessib thought that the dog was wounded; apparently, someone had tried to shoot it down. He liked animals, and he felt pity for the unfortunate dog. It stopped whining, and just stared at the man with its eyes full of sadness and hope.

Jessib cautiously lifted the dog and carried it home. Having washed its wounds, he began to treat them with special herbs. Less than a week had passed before, to everyone's astonishment, the dog began to make a quick recovery. It grew a new shining light-grey coat, became vigorous and cheerful, and followed its new master everywhere.

Once, Jessib went to a neighbouring village on business. The dog as usual either ran after him or quickly overtook him. Suddenly it rushed to one of the local people, joyfully started running round him and wagged its tail.

Having stopped, the stranger exclaimed in amazement:

'Isn't this Ledda?! My lovely Ledda! How did you survive, you poor creature?' He bent down and stroked the dog's back.

Jessib came to the stranger and told him how he had found the dog in the woods and cured her.

'Ledda was my favourite dog,' the stranger said. 'She became ill, and we were frightened that she had rabies. I took her away into the woods... Believe me, I couldn't aim... my hand wouldn't stop shaking. That's it. But you pulled her through. That means she was not fated to die...' He again tenderly stroked Ledda, then looked at Jessib and quietly said: 'I, of course, will pay you for your trouble, and take the dog myself. Ledda, you'll come with me, won't you?'

Jessib shook his head.

‘I don’t need your money. I cured the dog out of pity. Let her decide who she wants to go with...’

‘All right,’ the stranger mumbled, ‘Let her do that.’

The three of them reached a fork in the road together, where it split into opposite directions. Jessib turned right, the stranger went left. The dog became agitated, and started turning round and round. The two men walked away silently without looking back. At last Ledda, as if she had finally made up her mind, briefly yelped and rushed after Jessib. Having caught up with him, she walked along beside him with dignity...

THE SYMPHONY OF LAKE RITSA

The things that can happen in life! This incident was told me by my childhood friend Seyd:

...When we got married, my Aisha and I, we were very young. We had such a passionate love that many envied us.

We lived on the sixth floor in a building without a lift. But believe me, the climb didn’t matter to us at all.

As soon as Aisha looked out the window and saw me coming back home she, like a nanny-goat, ran down towards me and we walked back upstairs into our little room and never tired of kissing each other... We never quarrelled, and gave in to each other over everything to avoid the slightest reason to argue...

Aisha studied music and played the piano. She knew that I like to listen to ‘The Symphony of Lake Ritsa’ by Andrew Balanchivadze. It was strange! This piece of music, extremely subtle in its perception and in which an inescapable grief about a lost love is expressed, hardly

matched our mood. But for some reason I liked it very much, and Aisha always played this symphony with great tenderness and feeling.

We didn’t have - alas - our own piano, but a long time earlier we had decided to get one as soon as possible.

One day we saw the announcement: piano for sale. That day was cold and windy. Besides, Aisha didn’t feel well, and that’s why she asked me to go and look at the piano.

I went to the specified address. The door was opened by a small woman with a turned-up nose. I explained that I’d come about the announcement, and the hostess invited me to come into the room.

The piano was quite decent, with a good tone. Having sat down at the table, we talked about the quality of the piano, its price and the reason for selling. Suddenly a man with a repellent look came through the door without knocking.

‘Fedya, let me introduce you to our visitor,’ the woman told him, ‘we are finishing our conversation now.’

The man named Fedya sat down near the door and, gloomily getting accustomed to me, he significantly murmured: ‘So, so...’

Having agreed with the hostess about the piano and left my address, I said goodbye and got out.

I didn’t return home at once, I had to go and see one of my fellow countrymen, so I got back late.

The next day I met trouble. When in the evening I came home from work, Aisha didn’t meet me as usual. Sitting at the window, she was sobbing uncontrollably and crumpling an envelope in her hands. I thought that it was a letter from Baku, where her relatives lived, with a sad message and I asked in alarm:

‘What’s the matter, darling? Has something happened

to your father?’

Instead of answering she burst out crying even more strongly and handed me the envelope, from which a note dropped out. I picked it up and saw at once that it was addressed to me.

‘Citizen S...!’ rough clumsy lines said. ‘Aren’t you ashamed, having such a beautiful wife, to be attracted to another man’s woman? I’ve been tracking you down for three months, and at last today I managed to catch you at the scene of the crime, together with Dinna. For Dinna I left my family. I love her and I won’t concede her to you for the whole world.’ In the note there were some more similar offensive phrases. Instead of the signature there was an illegible flourish.

In the beginning I understood nothing, but when I reached the phrase ‘All your conversations about the piano were only to take me in’ I understood that Fedya had probably assumed that I was someone else. Having loudly burst out laughing, I said to my wife:

‘Darling, this is the silliest misunderstanding! I will explain everything to you.’

I wanted to caress her, but she pushed me away.

‘I don’t think so! Everything’s clear to me now. All these three months you’ve been going somewhere for a long time in the evenings. Everything is over between us forever!’

Vainly I tried to bring her to reason, long and passionately I tried to convince her of my innocence, but Aisha didn’t wish to listen to me. Then, furious at her injustice, I left home.

I lodged with my friend. Melancholy constantly tormented me, but my pride suffered more than anything, because I’d been condemned so undeservedly. There was

nothing to say, both of us were proud and excessively obstinate...

About a year passed. Once, one of Aisha’s friends informed me that Aisha was leaving for her father’s home, and would like to return my personal things to me.

I went to Aisha. My heart was aching. I still continued to love her... On the way, having remembered that she liked chocolate, I bought her favourite ‘Gold Label’ and decided to put it secretly into her bag.

If people really love each other, they can guess the slightest wish of their beloved, and they know what is pleasant to them, and what isn’t, what they want and what they don’t want.

When I came, my things were already packed. We frostily said goodbye, and I saw her off to the car. After she had left I decided to wander around the streets, to dispel my melancholy. Putting my hand into a pocket, I found a packet of Turkish Delight, which I had liked since childhood. She knew it... So that’s what happened at our mute farewell. Both of us slipped the other their favourite sweets.

...The roads of life led Aisha far away from me.

Many years passed. We went through the Great Patriotic War, knowing nothing about each other and, perhaps, not being interested in each other any more...

Recently I returned from Moscow to my native Abkhazia. Once, in the high mountain village of Waadhara I met an old acquaintance, and he invited me to stay the night at his place.

His little house stood on a mountain, and also on very high stilts. We walked upstairs to a spacious balcony stretching lengthways all along the facade.

‘I suppose a mountain wasn’t enough for you, that’s why

you put your home on these stilts!’ I joked.

‘From here the sea is better visible’ he answered simply. Then, having arranged things conveniently on the balcony, we passed on to a conversation about business and the plans of the local collective farm.

The evening arrived. In the sky a full moon had already risen, shining through the trees, and a narrow strip of light cut across the smooth surface of the distant sea.

Suddenly the evening calm was unexpectedly broken by the sound of a grand piano. From the next room a melody could be heard from... ‘The Symphony of Lake Ritsa’. Everything immediately stirred up in me. It seemed as if, somewhere very close nearby, Aisha was playing.

With a sinking heart I asked my friend:

‘Who is that playing, apparently here behind the wall?’

‘Ah, that’s the best foreman on our collective farm! Her team recently received a big award for their citrus fruits, and a medal at the Moscow exhibition. She also, as you can hear, plays wonderfully. Her husband supervises the poultry section of the farm. By the way, that half of the house belongs to them. If you like, I’ll introduce you to the lovely couple. They’re very hospitable people...’

My excitement grew. I didn’t dare ask any more questions.

Having sought their permission, my friend brought me into his neighbours’ room and introduced me. My heart and hearing had not deceived me: as soon as I stepped into the room, my eyes met Aisha’s! More than twenty years had passed, but it seemed to me she had not changed at all. Love struck me with all its former force, and I involuntarily shuddered. She shuddered also...

Having apologised for my unexpected intrusion, I said

that the fault lay in ‘The Symphony of Lake Ritsa’, which I had always liked and still continued to like.

‘Could I beseech you to play it once again?’ I asked.

‘With pleasure!’ she answered, sitting at the grand piano. Whilst playing, she quietly hummed the familiar melody.

‘I like that wonderful symphony,’ said Aisha, having finished playing, and then she added sadly: ‘and, obviously, I will like it till the end of my life.’

Only we two understood the real sense of those words. And it remains our secret forever. That was so, is so, and always will be so...

THE VANISHING CORN

The train left Sukhumi, heading for Moscow... When it entered into a tunnel near the village of Eshera, an old Sukhumi engineer who was travelling with us in the same compartment suddenly said:

‘There’s a rather entertaining story connected with the place where this tunnel was built.’

And here’s that story as he told it to us:

...It was more than thirty years ago, when there was still no railway here, only a main road, that one spring a peasant from Eshera named Kerim Avidzba was sowing corn in a small field. Mahmed Tsveyba came by along the road from another village, and stopped for a rest. He greeted Kerim and asked him:

‘That higher field near yours, the one the other side of the road, why is it empty? Haven’t you had time to plough it? After all, it’s excellent soil!’

‘There’s nobody around to plough it’ answered Kerim.

‘You can do it if you want, we’ll be neighbours. I’ll be only too glad if you can.’

‘Why’s that?’ asked a surprised Mahmed. ‘In all your collective farm, isn’t there anybody who could plough it?’

‘That ground belongs to the road management, not to the collective farm. Anyone who wants to can work it. It is only necessary to ask permission and to observe the rule not to sow too close to the roadside. Do you want me to help you?’

Before long Mahmed, with Kerim’s help, had received permission, ploughed the field and sown it with corn. He then left for his home village before the first weeding was necessary. In two weeks or so he returned, earthed up shoots of corn and left again. Before even another half a month had passed, Mahmed arrived for the second weeding, and then, having asked his friend Kerim to look after the corn, he left for a month and a half. After all, there was now nothing to do until the harvesting.

‘Don’t worry,’ Kerim assured him, ‘Nothing will happen to your field, all will be as it should be. Although I’m going for a month into the mountains, to stay with some shepherds, your field will be looked after by my family.’

They left things like that, and Mahmed departed with a quiet soul.

However, upon returning some six weeks later to the Eshera field, he was shocked to see that instead of his corn there was... ordinary grass. Of corn there was no trace! He looked all around to check on the rest of the place: there was the road, there was Kerim’s corn, there was the sea behind Kerim’s field... His crop was pleasing to the eye - high stalks, and on each one were four or five ears of corn. In such corn a horseman could take cover. You couldn’t hope

to see a better crop...

Nevertheless, where was his corn? Where had it got to? Or maybe he had only dreamt that he came here to make use of this field?

Mahmed noticed Kerim coming towards him, affable and smiling. Mahmed greeted him and, gradually, he cautiously asked:

‘Tell me, my friend,’ - he pointed to the field where his corn should have been - ‘did somebody hoe there about a month and a half back? Or so it seemed to me?’

‘What do you mean, it seemed?’ Kerim was surprised. ‘You ploughed there, then you sowed corn.’

Mahmed was delighted: his mind hadn’t left him, so that was all right. Having grown bolder, he asked:

‘Where then is my corn?’

‘Alas, that I do not know, that I really do not know!’ answered Kerim.

Discouraged, Mahmed started wandering around the village asking everybody if they knew what had happened to his corn. It seemed like a miracle: the whole crop had disappeared from the face of the earth! People shrugged their shoulders, were perplexed and felt sympathy for him, but nobody could really explain what had happened to Mahmed’s field.

This mystery became widely known. Scientists and journalists arrived in Eshera, and various theories were elaborated.

One hundred and twenty year old Koblukh Smir, the local beekeeper, recollected that about one hundred years before, on a dark and rainy night in that very place, a big area of land, including the whole manor of Prince Tsamba, had slipped into the sea. Very few people had been rescued

then. He wondered whether the same thing could have happened now to Mahmed's corn field?

This story and the old man's assumption coincided with the conclusions of the scientists.

'Then it appears that your corn has sunk, and this is mine! After all, your field was closer to the sea' said Mahmed to Kerim.

'I can see now that you really have gone completely barmy' replied Kerim calmly. 'My field is standing in place. Where yours disappeared to, God knows. If someone's corn has gone to bathe in the sea, it's obviously yours!'

'Hmm... In your opinion then, my corn jumped over yours?'

'Who knows? Perhaps that's what happened...'

Mahmed went to court, and completely losing his temper he exclaimed:

'My field has been stolen! My corn has vanished!'

This local court called and interrogated witnesses and experts, investigated the scene of the disappearance, and established that due to mysterious underground movements in this place there was a sinking of the coastline and a large area of land just slipped into the sea. It was not possible to precisely establish who exactly had possessed this site, Kerim or Mahmed. Having considered all relevant circumstances, the court decided: 'the crop from the remaining corn field is to be halved between the two squabblers, as both have worked the land.'

THE PROMISE

There were three of us in the compartment - two men and one very interesting woman of average age. The evening wind rustled the window curtains, and it became cool. We were all hastening to the south, longing for the Black Sea coast, where I was born. So all of us tried to speak only about pleasant topics. We spoke about friendship, about love, about honour, about Abkhazian alamsis*...

Unexpectedly, the woman rose from her place and started to walk back and forth excitedly within the compartment. Looking at us through perfect turquoise eyes, she said:

'I am assured that each of us has on our conscience at least one outstanding promise, even though it could be easily fulfilled. I was lucky enough to know a person who fulfilled his promise under totally improbable circumstances, and consequently I will never forget him for the rest of my life...'

We asked her to tell us about this person, and one of us even asked: 'Was he your first love?' She quietly answered:

'No, he wasn't. I've only seen this man twice in my life. Love is not the right word, respect - no, not that either. Most likely, it's worship for the greatest nobility of soul...'

She sat down again and continued to speak, constantly staring out of the compartment window at the darkening sky.

'Last year I went with my husband to Sukhumi. As well as enjoying the captivating scenery of Abkhazia, we very much hoped to meet some of the Abkhazian people, who I still didn't know at all and about whom I'd heard such a lot of flattering remarks...

At the entrance to the hotel 'Abkhazia' where we were staying, a friend of my husband came up to us and

introduced his colleague - a dapper young Abkhazian who spoke Russian well and appeared to be a pleasant and witty conversationalist.

In front of us on a board there was a poster giving details about the final performance by the regional opera and ballet company, who were on tour there, of the opera 'Daisy'.

We started talking about theatre, about this opera. I knew it had been very highly praised in Moscow. But, as we were told in the hotel, all the tickets for this final performance had been sold long before our arrival.

'What a pity, I would so like to have listened to 'Daisy', I couldn't keep from saying regretfully.

'I will help you' the young man said.

'Do you promise?' I asked.

'Yes,' he answered seriously. 'I promise to get you tickets for the opera and to bring them here, to the hotel, an hour prior to the beginning of the performance. I can't do so any earlier. I must leave immediately for my home village - there is an urgent matter I must deal with...'

We thanked him and went up to our room.

Two days passed. The performance was due to take place that evening. My husband and I had already dressed for the theatre, and were waiting for our new acquaintance to arrive.

I was getting worried - he was already half an hour late. At last I saw him hastily approaching our hotel. Soon he knocked at our door and entered. Having apologised for his delay, he invited us to go with him. In the lobby of the theatre he handed us our admission tickets.

'Aren't you coming with us?' my husband asked.

'Please excuse me, but I'm afraid I can't go' he said very unhappily.

'Why not?' I was interested to know.

'My mother died at home today,' he answered in a saddened voice.

Since then I've often wondered why I didn't immediately express sympathy for him. Instead, I just blurted out the first question which came into my mind:

'Then why have you now come here?'

'Because I promised you' he said, and then, once again having apologised, he said goodbye to us and left the theatre.

I was amazed at this call of duty by a person who had just suffered such a huge loss. When he left, we watched him walk away for a long time. I no longer had any wish to go to the theatre... I thought about the man's willpower. Just think, managing under such terrible circumstances to find it within himself to fulfil what was in effect a trifling promise, in spite of the fact that such a terrible event had suddenly occurred, such an irreparable tragedy - the death of his mother!

'What extraordinary will power!' she concluded, and turned away from the window.

Having remained silent until then, the passenger sitting in the corner of the compartment began to speak: 'And please remember, this young man didn't find anything extraordinary about his action. He simply not could act any differently. And this will power was given to him through alamis, the moral code of the Abkhazian people. I am Russian, but I've lived more than thirty years among Abkhazians in the mountain village of Lata. I too have grown fond of the Abkhazian people for the nobility of their souls, for their alamis.'

'Well, and did you never meet him again?' I asked.

'In a few days we left Sukhumi, and I never saw any more of him. But that young man and his act of kindness I

will never forget!’

The woman became silent and it seemed to me that her eyes were moist... We too were silent, as the train approached the station, and green and red lights started gleaming through the window.

THE BUS

The comfortable bus, rushing from Sochi to Tskhaltubo, stopped in Gagra. An old Abkhazian woman and a young man both got on. When it departed, passengers noticed that the seat next to the old woman was free, but in spite of this the young man continued to stand, holding onto a hand-rail. Many parts of the main road until Gudauta were under repair, and the bus was bouncing over potholes here and there... The young man could hardly keep his balance, but persistently refrained from taking a seat.

‘Why are you standing? That seat is free’ the passengers informed him.

But he only smiled gratefully and continued to stand. All the bus looked at him in bewilderment, as nobody understood the reasons for such obstinacy. The passengers were surprised that the old woman did not invite him to sit down, though she obviously knew him and from time to time even spoke to him.

I was sitting just a short distance from them.

‘Would you like to sit down on my seat?’ I asked, offering my place to the young man, ‘I can see you’ve got tired, and I can take the free one.’

He thanked me and sat down. And he continued sitting until we reached Sukhumi.

‘Why has he been standing till now?’ one of the passengers asked me.

‘The traditional moral code of Abkhazians, called *alamis*, invariably demands a respectful attitude towards your elders, especially your wife’s parents,’ I explained as well as I could. ‘Apparently, the young man is a son-in-law of that old woman. He can’t sit near her, only some distance away.’

My explanation caused a bit of an argument. Some considered the behaviour of the Abkhazian son-in-law as out-of-date, and they seemed to think that such an old-fashioned and unnecessary custom should have been rejected a long time ago. Others disagreed.

‘I like the custom,’ one of the passengers said. ‘I’ve got a daughter, who is almost a bride. I hope that my future son-in-law will respect us, her parents, like this fellow does. And I think,’ he added firmly, ‘that the Abkhazians are quite right in saving this custom.’

A FILM STAR

Sometimes I envy a person who is able to remain idle, doing nothing, being quiet and motionless, apart of course from any consideration of the fact that we all rotate willy-nilly together with the Earth. Doctors advise us to relax, but I unfortunately can’t. A state of calm has been beyond my ability since childhood. Let’s take, for example, dreams. It seems that here you may stay really idle, at least for some hours in the day! But I can’t manage this: when I sleep I also dream that I’m working physically, doing something extremely useful and important. But at the same time, in

my dreams I understand that in practice everything goes wrong. And I wake up after such a dream feeling especially tired and defeated.

Brainwork pursues me everywhere too - both in my dreams, and in reality. I like, for example, to read people's thoughts. Dr. Messing, involved in the investigation of telepathy, at least saw in it some material benefit: he was paid for his experimental sessions. I do it without any compensation, but, as a matter of fact, with great pleasure.

For example, I sometimes go by underground or in a trolleybus and so as not to remain without any activity, I start reading somebody's thoughts. I look attentively at my neighbours and I try to guess their age, profession, character... I admire some faces, they can even give me aesthetic pleasure, whereas others provoke disgust. In spite of the fact that I don't know them at all, I'm ready to bet about the degree of meanness of which they are capable...

Such mental activity in a way shortens my journey and entertains me, calming my impatience or road rage. And I receive considerable satisfaction from cases where it is confirmed that I have read someone's thoughts correctly. Sometimes such cases do happen, and sometimes they are really amusing.

Here is a case, which happened to me in Moscow. When I got onto a trolleybus at Pushkin Street and took a seat, the girl central to this story stood near me. She was slim and pretty enough, but there was something unpleasant about her birdlike face, and this feature drew my attention. She continually glanced at the passengers who were reading newspapers, but didn't look at those who didn't hold one in their hands. I was amused by her affected air of importance. I clearly read her thoughts - she was extremely proud of

something... I wondered what it could be.

When a passenger opened a newspaper, the girl closely watched each movement of their eyes, and in most cases felt triumphant... I turned towards my neighbour, and glanced at his open 'Evening Moscow'. And on one of its pages I spotted a photo of this very girl, and even managed to read the blurb underneath it lavishing praises on her talent and asserting that the new young film star promised much in the near future, and so on and so on.

I looked at the girl even more attentively, and noticed that her eyes especially glowed when somebody, right there in the trolleybus, cut out a picture of her from their newspaper. And I have to admit that many did this. I couldn't understand why this was so. Was her face really so pleasant to people? Although she was rather attractive, wasn't she being overestimated a bit too much?

At that time her thin voice suddenly turned to the elderly passenger standing nearby.

'Do you know who you just cut out? Me!'

'Her pride's finally got the better of her,' I thought. The old man understood her in his own way.

'Is that me you're speaking to?' he asked. 'What have I cut out from you?'

'I saw it myself, don't deny it!' she shrieked with a little petulance.

'Looks like you're not all there,' he grumbled, pointing to her forehead. 'You're confusing me with someone else. I haven't cut out anything from you!'

The girl blushed. Her tongue went numb. The passenger continued to grumble something about the young having no respect....

'You haven't understood me...' she uttered quietly, in

a constrained voice. ‘It seemed to me that you cut out my photo from the newspaper...’

‘What photo?!’ he exclaimed in astonishment, and having taken the newspaper cutting from his pocket he unfolded it in front of her. ‘I cut out the lottery table, look!’

Was that all? Not believing her eyes, she bent down and stared at the cutting.

‘And I don’t need your photo at all,’ continued her neighbour. ‘I could easily live for a thousand years without seeing either you or your photo!’

This comment was, of course, far from polite, but apparently it came from the man’s heart. The girl was extremely confused. Having pouted her lips at the insult, she immediately left the trolleybus, maybe even not having yet reached her stop. Her vainglorious superiority vanished into thin air.

This meant I had guessed correctly! The girl was proud beyond measure, and was punished for it.

FRIENDS

All the village of Kutol was already sleeping, including Kolgi Makhaz with his young wife, when at the door of their patskha somebody cautiously knocked.

Makhaz jumped out of bed and ran in his underwear to the door. When he opened it he saw someone behind the threshold. In the darkness he couldn’t make out the man’s face.

‘Welcome! Come in!’ he invited the visitor. The host wanted to go back into his room to slip on some clothes, but the guest stopped him.

‘Wait a bit, that’s not necessary! It’s me, Beslan. Come out for a minute, I’ve got some business for you.’

‘Beslan?!’ exclaimed Makhaz happily, recognizing his childhood friend. ‘Come in, quickly! I’ll wake up my wife.’

‘No, no, don’t bother! Nobody knows about my arrival here. It’s much better if she doesn’t find out. And also, I’m very much in a hurry.’

‘So what’s this all about?’

‘First slip something on, then I’ll tell you.’

Makhaz was going to go back into the patskha to get dressed properly, but he was stopped by an unexpected creaking of the bed. The host and his visitor froze, waiting.

‘It’s my wife. Don’t worry, she won’t wake up,’ Makhaz reassured his friend.

‘For the sake of our friendship, I beg you,’ Beslan said, ‘even if you won’t be able to help me with my trouble, please make sure that nobody knows about my being here.’

‘All right,’ Makhaz calmed him. ‘Don’t worry, it’s not cold, only it’s not very convenient to stand here in only my underclothes. So tell me...’

And the friends moved away from the door. Makhaz listened attentively to Beslan.

‘I’ll do everything I can by all means,’ he said when Beslan finished. ‘I’ll ride immediately on your horse. And you wait at my place. That’s best, only the point is... How do I put on my clothes without waking her?’

They both reflected.

‘I know,’ suggested Makhaz, ‘you quickly take off your clothes, and I’ll put on your things and go. And you quietly go in - to the right of the door there is a bed. You lay down and wait.’

‘Good’ said Beslan.

In Beslan's clothes Makhaz left on horseback, and Beslan in only his underclothes silently opened the door. He slipped in, then carefully closed it and at that moment the door squeaked loudly. Beslan halted in fear... When he was convinced that the noise hadn't woken the woman, he began to creep silently to the right as Makhaz had specified to him, groped for a bed in the darkness, lifted a blanket and sighed with relief as he lay down.

But in the bed someone began to move.

Beslan froze in horror: was she really near to him, under the same blanket? Makhaz's wife? The beautiful young Usha?! He found himself trembling. What should he do? Jump out? Run? But he would certainly hit something in the darkness and that would wake her up... What then? All would be found out - and he would be lost! It was better to lay and wait. After all, Makhaz would only be gone for a few hours. He would return by the dawn...

But - his heart burnt like coal as he sensed Usha's body so close to him. He remembered his last meeting with her, at Makhaz's recent wedding... How charming she was! 'And what, if...' He tried to drive such immoral thoughts from himself - a temptation from the devil - but they became ever more demanding and didn't give him any rest. He cautiously turned away from the woman and, having buried his head in a pillow, tried to fall asleep.

Suddenly the woman turned her face towards him, her gentle warm arms twisted round his neck, she nestled all her body against his and began to kiss him eagerly. Beslan pretended to be sleeping. But the woman snuggled up to him closer and closer.

'Makhaz!' Usha gently whispered, having brought her lips to his ear. 'Makhaz, turn to me. Don't you want my

caresses? Come on, wake up.'

Beslan didn't move, and soon Usha fell asleep again.

At last he heard her gentle, even breathing. The hours till morning seemed to him to be an eternity.

Before dawn, Makhaz returned. Having dismounted from his horse, he quietly knocked at the patskha's door. Beslan immediately ran out to him.

'It's all done,' Makhaz informed him cheerfully, 'don't worry.' He started to undress quickly.

Beslan got into his clothes, thanked his friend and hastened away.

Makhaz got up late; his wife could hardly wake him up. Having put her arms around his neck and caressed him, she said:

'Darling, are you ill? You've never slept so deeply before. Has something happened to you? I tried to wake you for such a long time last night, but you just wouldn't wake up. I caressed you, and you did nothing but sleep. Slept so strongly that I took pity on you and also fell asleep. And now I've hardly been able to wake you. Are you sick?'

'No, I'm not. I'm absolutely healthy!' exclaimed Makhaz joyfully, and he passionately kissed his wife.

AMUSING STORY

The things you can hear, sitting with a cup of fragrant 'mocca' in a cafe facing the 'most dark blue' Black Sea!

There this garrulous character once sat down near me. For a solid hour he chatted on about this and that, and then after all that time he asked me to listen to one more, as he put it, 'rather amusing' story. Keeping my customary

politeness I didn't object, though I admit his manner of expressing himself grandiloquently and loading his speech with empty phrases like 'so to say' and 'you know' rather irritated me somewhat.

'... You, so to say, are local' he began, 'and I think you know that our wedding and funeral ceremonies are, you know, held by many even now as they were in olden times, so to speak. And they do it on such grandiose scales, you know, and spend such huge and magnificent, so to speak, monetary resources, that for one family to cope with all the expenses is simply, you know, beyond their ability. Not occasionally therefore in such an, as the ancient Romans expressed themselves, festive gathering our fellow villagers quite often feasibly participate, collecting donations to facilitate the financial position of the obligatory organizers of the relevant ceremony.'

Here I can sort of present to you, so to speak, one such story, which is, to tell the truth, not exactly usual. But this feature gives it, as they say, a special flavour.

Perhaps you've heard, or maybe not - at our place Majarka, near Sukhumi, so to say, the mother-in-law of my, you know, neighbour Kerim Haragua not so long ago fell asleep into an eternal dream. Kerim is a respected person, worthy, not very young, and he lives in a proper two-storeyed house surrounded by a big tangerine garden. In a word, so to speak, a reliable person. A custom is a custom, and his fellow villagers collected and handed over to Kerim four thousand two hundred roubles to help him to commit adequately to the earth his much-loved mother-in-law.

However people had not even had time to take the coffin from the house before suddenly in front of them, as if he had risen from under the earth, stood the other son-in-law

of the mother-in-law, who lived in Samtredia, and he sort of started to shout: 'I will not allow my precious mother-in-law to be buried in any Majarka! I have arrived to take her away to Samtredia and to bury her there near to her late beloved brother-in-law.'

It is necessary to mention here that this son-in-law was more sort of senior than the one from Majarka and besides, you know, he was married to the elder sister. Therefore the son-in-law from Majarka, as a dutiful Abkhazian, had to concede and even, so to speak, had to present the son-in-law from Samtredia together with their mother-in-law a coffin as well, a perfect chestnut coffin. They carried the mother-in-law in this coffin to Samtredia. And the son-in-law from Samtredia was a very sort of solid person too - a small, so to say, but his own business, a two-storeyed house with, moreover, a basement floor, a great load of bay leaves for sale, a 'Volga' car and so on and so forth.

Therefore his friends too, so to say, were not stinted, and he collected for the funeral as much as six thousand seven hundred roubles in, of course, the new scale of, you know, prices, and...'

'Excuse me,' I interrupted the story-teller, 'but your son-in-law from Majarka, did he return their donations to his fellow villagers?'

'No, no!' he began to smile. 'That's not possible! It's against our tradition to return donations... But you listen to what happened, and I guarantee you will so to speak laugh out loud. The fact is, surprise surprise, that the poor mother-in-law had also once had a son.'

'A son?' I repeated.

'Yes, a son. A real, natural, so to say, son. He lived in, you know, Kutaisi. It appears he had long been daggers

drawn with the son-in-law from Majarka, and consequently had decided to turn his back on them. But when he found out that his mother was being buried in Samtredia, he immediately rushed there at rocket speed, so to speak, and appeared at just the moment when her coffin was being lowered into the tomb.'

'What are you doing?' exclaimed the Kutaisi man. 'How dare you?! I will not allow the ashes of my dear mother to be buried here! I will commit my mum to the earth with all necessary honours only with us, in Kutaisi, near to the tomb of my father!'

Well, you know, the son-in-law from Samtredia had to concede his deceased mother-in-law to her offspring, so to speak, you know, to the actual son. And so the troublesome old woman was dragged further, to Kutaisi.

And her son, by the way, appeared even more authoritatively placed and better off than the Majarka and Samtredia relatives: this man sort of occupied a responsible post at some factory and erected for himself a magnificent residence in which both houses of both sons-in-law could have been located, so to speak. In his courtyard he had two cars, a 'Volga' and a 'Moswich.' He bought the 'Moswich' for his, you know, young daughter and for her he was still building another house, you know, preparing her dowry... In a word, he was very much a very solid person, a millionaire, so to say, in the old scale of prices...

For such a person his Kutaisi relatives, friends and, so to say, simply acquaintances collected for the, you know, the funeral no less than seven thousand nine hundred roubles. I, you know, I was there - I was invited by the Majarka son-in-law - and I heard the list of all the gifts being, you know, announced in public... I even remember

one ridiculous comment that was made there. When they loudly called out the surname of one of the contributors and his, so to speak, payment of ninety seven roubles, someone quietly but distinctly uttered: 'They should have made it a hundred!' The person reading the list grumbled: 'And what if I bring the three roubles instead of him?' Everybody, you know, burst out laughing, but the mother-in-law was lying, so to speak, nearby in the coffin. It all became simply, you know, embarrassing...'

At first I listened to the story with interest, even though it seemed ridiculous to me. But then, and especially towards the end of it, I somehow lost my temper.

'Yes, but after all, what the hell was it?' I indignantly exclaimed, no longer caring about being polite. 'It was a robbery in broad daylight! Those devils just transformed the death of the old woman into a profitable business. We shouldn't laugh, we should cry bitter tears!'

'Here, what do you er...er...?' drawled my interlocutor, sounding deeply puzzled.

He was obviously disappointed in my opinion. I invite the reader to decide where in this, so to speak, amusing story there is, you know, laughter, and where there are tears. It seems to me that laughter is not present in it one little bit. What do you think? (You know, sort of, so to speak...)

STRONG SENSATIONS

Being called by the chairman to the Village Soviet, Nuri saw there on the verandah a group of unfamiliar men and women who looked like holidaymakers.

Some of them were dressed, even by resort standards,

rather extravagantly. The chairman introduced him to the visitors and said:

‘I’ve called you, Nuri, because you are our best hunter and you know the roads to the mountains very well. You’ll be a guide for our visitors. They say that they’ve had a good rest at the seaside, but don’t think that’s enough, and before returning home they wish to receive, so they said, stronger sensations. Well, take them through Konakchir rocks and show them the most beautiful places which will grasp their spirits.’

‘Oh, yes, yes!’ confirmed one of the women, dressed in something halfway between a bathing suit and a housecoat, ‘make sure it grasps our spirits!’

‘And I’m longing for strong sensations,’ said another woman fervently supporting her. She was dressed in trousers and had a superfashionable hairstyle which climbed steeply like a rock rising above her head, ‘I want such sensations as I will remember all of my life.’

‘When do you want to go?’ asked Nuri in a business-like manner; he did not like to delay the execution of his allotted duties.

‘Tomorrow!’ the tourists answered excitedly.

At dawn Nuri came to the hotel, where he was already expected, and the group departed. He led the visitors along a steep slope following a precipice. Far ahead rose the formidable Konakchir rocks.

All day long the holidaymakers clambered up steep slopes and got tired to the point of exhaustion. The walk in the mountains was enjoyable, though as one of the women declared, they hadn’t felt any special sensations yet... The tourists were already planning to return to their hotel when suddenly around of one the footpath’s turns a loud shout was

heard, followed by its echo through the narrow gorge.

They were being ambushed. A man wrapped up in a burka approached them, with his face half-hidden by a hood, and he ordered them to immediately put their watches and other valuables, and also any weapons, onto a nearby stone. If anybody tried to resist they would be thrown at once over the precipice, the man with a big moustache warned.

Behind his shoulders, four more similar-looking mountaineers in traditional clothes were seen.

There was nothing to be done. Nuri was the first to unfasten and put his pistol on the stone. The women looked at him a little contemptuously, and took off their watches. The men obediently rummaged through the pockets of their trousers.

Soon on the flat stone a small hill of gold watches, earrings, rings, bracelets, and cigarette cases had grown...

‘Now go downwards, without turning around!’ the apparent leader shouted. ‘The first one who turns back will get a bullet in the forehead. Forward march!’

They all went back along the narrow footpath in single file, not raising their heads and hardly breathing from the start through fear.

‘Tell me, is it far to the nearest village?’ a fat man behind Nuri asked him, barely audibly, when they were already a long way from the scene of the robbery.

‘We’re very close, it’s just behind this gorge,’ the guide answered. ‘The bus goes from there, and we can return to the hotel on it.’

The bus stop did indeed appear nearby. But the bus itself wouldn’t arrive for another half an hour. Nuri suggested they went to a friend of his who, he told them, lived there, near to the bus station, and would be glad to meet them.

Nuri's friend really welcomed the travellers into his small house, sympathised with them, and invited them to have a rest.

'Take a seat, please, relax with a glass of wine and a slice of hachapuri, our traditional cheese pie' the host said. 'Nuri has told me about everything. We've already taken measures, and most likely we will find the robbers...'

But the visitors were gloomy and exchanged sad glances. Nobody touched their meal.

'Then maybe you will come in here?' The owner invited them into the next room. What a surprise awaited the visitors when, having come into that room, they saw all the things taken by the gangsters on a table!

'He arranged it all' - smiling, the owner of the house pointed to Nuri as he spoke - 'He persuaded some friends to stage an attack, but a real one has never happened in this region during my lifetime.'

'But why did you do it?' The holiday-makers were really amazed.

'So that you would remember our rocks and me, your guide, for a very long time' answered Nuri, looking straight at the woman in trousers. 'After all, you wanted strong sensations that would grasp your spirits, or at least that's what it sounded like... In this way I tried to meet your wishes. Perhaps this all went a little too far, and in that case please forgive me!'

... 'What could we do?' One of the women members of that holiday group, a good friend of mine from Moscow, finished her story about the incident.

'Nuri interpreted our words in his own way. In the mountains, everything is much too ordinary for him, a mountaineer. There, he most likely doesn't feel very strong

sensations. So consequently he thought up an original plan involving a robbery.'

'So, it all came out well in the end,' I concluded. But as if in response to my comment her face darkened and she became thoughtful.

'If I'm honest, for me - not absolutely...' she mumbled quietly, as if to herself.

'Why?' I became interested. 'Unless you weren't returned something from the stolen items?'

'No, that watch is still on my wrist even now. I left something else there...'

'What exactly?' 'My heart... One of the imaginary robbers was painfully handsome!'

ALAMIS

On a hot summer day I was walking along the main street in Gudauta. An old man was sitting on a green bench in a blossoming garden. He was gloomily looking at each passing female holidaymaker. He sneered angrily whilst looking at women slowly walking by in their summer dresses, which were sometimes rather provocative for the centre of the town. I took a seat on the bench next to him. There was something in his appearance which caught my interest. Suddenly turning to me he said: 'What shamelessness!'

I laughed and said: 'You see, it's useful for health to walk like that.'

He stubbornly repeated: 'Shamelessness!'

I realised that it was senseless to argue with him. I couldn't find any reason to make him change his mind and

decided to leave, but a tear suddenly came into his eye, which halted me.

‘Are you crying?’ I asked him, as I was worried.

He quietly said: ‘It was forty years ago. My younger sister - beautiful Chimsa - damaged both her eyes. We lived in Ochamchira then. She was only sixteen. We tried all imaginable places and all possible doctors, but nothing helped, her eyes could not be cured. With each passing day the colours of the world were getting darker and darker. She could see less and less...

When she finally realized that her destiny was complete blindness, she chose a moment when I wasn't with her and jumped under a train. It was in Odessa, where I had taken her to a famous eye doctor. I came back to find our house full of unfamiliar people. Somebody had recognised her, and her mangled body had been brought back home. I overheard the conversation taking place:

‘Why is she in a man's trousers?’

‘Isn't she wearing underwear?’

I recognised my trousers. Women took off her clothes. Yes, she was wearing fine snow-white underwear.

‘What's the reason for that? Why has she put on a man's trousers?’ puzzled people were asking. I was the only person who understood why my sister had done so. It was *alamis*! Thinking that the train running her down might expose her nakedness, she put on my trousers...’

The old man became silent, then slowly turned towards me and said: ‘Are you surprised that before undertaking such a step she thought about her nakedness? *Alamis* is stronger than death!’

I wasn't surprised. I was looking at the old man with deep respect and sympathy for his grief.

GLOSSARY

adjika – seasoning for a meal, made from pepper, garlic, salt and different spicy herbs

alamis – an unwritten moral code of honesty, duty and respect, passed from generation to generation

Apsny – a term of endearment for Abkhazia

atiras – a pungent wild fern

a burka – a felt cloak (a traditional long wide Caucasian woollen coat)

churchkhela – a sausage-like sweet, made from nuts covered by solidified grape juice

clan – widespread family members

a dzhigit – a title for a skilful and brave horseman in the Caucasus

effendi – a term of respect

fuzz – poplar blossom

Garçon, prenez. – Waiter, take this.

hanum – a term of address to a married woman in some Orient countries

a horn – a hollow animal horn used as a drinking vessel

Hvanchkara – a local red wine

a makhadjir – an exile. In the 1860s to 1880s Abkhazian peasants were often forced to emigrate, mainly to Turkey.

a padishah – a king

a papakha – a tall hat made from lamb fleece

a patskha – a traditional Abkhazian wattled log cabin

vas-bank – all the money in a card game

a vizier – a high executive officer

wah-ry-dah – chorus of an Abkhazian folk song

ABKHAZIAN ALPHABET

А а	/ɑ:/	И и	/i:/	ҭә ҭә	/tpv /
Б б	/bə /	К к	/kə /	У у	/u:/
В в	/və /	Кь кь	/k'i /	Ф ф	/fə /
Г г	/ghə /	Кә кә	/ku /	Х х	/hə /
Гь гь	/g'i /	Қ қ	/khə /	Хь хь	/h'i /
Гә гә	/gu /	Қь қь	/kh'i /	Хә хә	/hu /
Ҝ ҭ	/gr /	Қә қә	/khu /	Ҳ ҳ	/h /
Ҝь Ҝь	/gr'i /	Қк қк	/kgə /	Ҳә ҳә	/h'iu /
Ҝә Ҝә	/gr'u /	Кь кь	/kg'i /	Ц ц	/ts /
Д д	/də /	Кә кә	/kgu /	Цә цә	/tsf /
Дә дә	/db /	Л л	/lə /	Цц цц	/tz /
Ц ц	/d'zh /	М м	/mə /	Цә цә	/tzv /
Ць ць	/d'izh /	Н н	/nə /	Ч ч	/t'sh /
Е е	/e /	О о	/o:/	Чч чч	/t'ish /
Ҏ Ҏ	/t'ch /	Ӡ ӡ	/əvu:/	Ш ш	/shə /
Ҏь Ҏь	/t'ich /	П п	/pə /	Шь шь	/sh'i /
Ж ж	/zh /	Ҧ ҧ	/pf /	Шә шә	/shv /
Жь жь	/zh'i /	Р р	/rə /	Ы ы	/i:i /
Жә жә	/zhv /	С с	/sə /	ь	
З з	/z /	Т т	/tə /	ә	
Зз зз	/dz /	Тә тә	/tv /		
Зә зә	/dzv /	Ҧ ҧ	/t /		

ь - symbol, makes previous consonant sound mild
ә - symbol, sounding after consonant like /u / or /v /

MAP of ABKHAZIA



MAP of BLACK SEA REGION



1. South Ossetia
2. Nakhichevan Region (Azerbaijan)
3. Nagorno-Karabakh



1. The Lackerbye family home in Merkheul
2. Michael Lackerbye
3. His mother Mina Eshba



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Skhangery Bzhania, believed to be about 147 years old, surrounded by his family. This photograph was taken in 1947 by the noted British author J. B. Priestley, during his visit to Abkhazia.